

Wednesday, May 29, 2013

1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

**UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
ALEX SHILO**

REMOTE CART

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**ROUGH DRAFT TRANSCRIPT
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>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 14th year of the *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is Mr. Alex Shilo whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2013 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring *First Person*.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue until mid-August. The Museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Alex Shilo will share with us his *First Person* account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If we have time toward the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask Alex a few questions. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Alex is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. And we begin with this portrait of Alex in his Cub Scout uniform.

Alex was born in Strasbourg, France, in 1933. The arrow on this map points to Strasbourg.

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Alex's parents emigrated from Poland. His father was a traveling salesman and his mother was trained a Hebrew teacher. The family moved to Paris in 1938.

When the Germans invaded France in 1940, Alex's family moved to the south of France, where the collaborationist Vichy government took power. Alex's great Uncle Max also lived in the Villefranche-de-Rouergue, the town where Alex's family moved.

When Alex's mother fell ill, Alex's Aunt Cylli, who we see in this photograph, came to take care of the family. Throughout the war, Alex and his sister Madeleine were able to attend school and summer camp and lived a relatively normal life in Villefranche until September 1943 when the German crackdown on Jews intensified. Alex, Madeleine and Cylli were able to escape to a nearby forest until the worst had passed. After the war Alex and his family were able to return to Paris.

After two years' service in the Israel Defense Forces and more than 16 years in the Ministry of Agriculture, Alex worked for 10 years for the United Nations and the Inter-American Development Bank on a number of international agricultural projects. He left Israel in 1978 to work in agriculture in Haiti for the United Nations. From there he worked in Nepal, Rwanda, and Jamaica and then back to Haiti on an irrigation project, and as a consultant in other countries such as Madagascar.

After moving to the United States in 1989, Alex worked for consulting firms on projects associated with the World Bank and USAID, which took him mostly

to western Africa. Although retired now from his international agricultural work, he continues to translate technical documents from English into French. Alex is also fluent in Hebrew.

He met his wife Amy while living in Haiti. Amy, who is from Brooklyn, earned her Doctorate at George Washington University and is now Director of Counseling Services for an Arlington, Virginia, high school. Alex and Amy live in Washington, D.C. Their daughter Hallie will graduate at the New York School of Law.

Alex has two children from his first marriage. His son Mati, a computer programmer, is married, has two children and lives in Israel. His daughter Hamutal married a native Australian in Israel and they moved to Australia a few years later where they live with their three children. Mati and Hamutal both served in the Israel Defense Forces. Alex's grandson, Tomer, was drafted into the Israeli military at the end of 2012, making him the third consecutive generation in the family to serve in the military.

As a museum volunteer, you will find Alex at the information desk on Monday mornings. He led tours of the recently closed special exhibition "State of Deception," and he is scheduled to be trained to lead tours of the new special exhibit, "Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration and Complicity in the Holocaust" that opened in April.

With that, I ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*
Mr. Alex Shilo.

[Applause]

>> Alex Shilo: Good afternoon, everybody.

>> Bill Benson: Alex, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our *First*

Person today.

>> Alex Shilo: You're welcome.

>> Bill Benson: You have so much to share with us. We should probably start right away.

And hopefully we'll have time for questions from our audience.

Before we turn to your life during the Holocaust and during the war years, let's start, first, with you telling us what you can about your family, your parents and you in that time before war began in 1939.

>> Alex Shilo: First of all, my parents and the whole extended family, we came from an area which was then in Poland called Galicia. Galicia today is in the Ukraine. They lived in a small town. And in that town there were about 9,000 people living there, a population of 9,000. 1/3 were Poles, 1/3 were Ukrainians, and 1/3 were Jews. Most of my relatives left that town between the wars. And I must say, generally speaking, whoever left the town survived. Whoever stayed perished, including my grandparents.

So they came mostly to France. And since then the family has developed and extended, produced many doctors, lawyers, engineers, university professors, etc., etc. One agronomist, that's me.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your father in his day.

>> Alex Shilo: My father was the fourth of a series of five brothers. The last brother stayed in Poland and perished. Incidentally, after the war but still perished.

My father was -- the normal track was for these new immigrants to start to be all traveling salesmen or to sell different things on markets, one open air market

to another open air market. My father was a traveling salesman.

First we lived in Strasbourg. And then in 1938, when my father wanted to move to Paris, which is more central and was more helpful in order to travel in 1938, but in 1940, the Germans invaded France and we were compelled to leave Paris and to go to the so-called free zone where an uncle of my mother lived, had lived for decades. We went in that little town.

Well, my father, before the war, he tried hard to learn French.

After the war my mother died --

[An internet crash occurred. There were no captions from 1:06 p.m. – 1:08 p.m.]

>> Bill Benson: Can you tell us what life was like in Paris in that year before the war began?

>> Alex Shilo: I think we had a good life. It was a good housing project. In these days they already had an elevator. They already had a shower in the house which, for France, I won't call it a novelty, but almost. I think we had a good life. But then war came and we had to leave.

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, war came in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland, but the full effect.

>> Alex Shilo: The line to protect chance, which was -- the German tricked the French. They invaded through Belgium. Within three weeks they were in France. They were almost in Paris within three weeks. And, of course, many people in Paris, including my family, we ran away. I remember, I think we took a taxi from Paris, about 60 miles to reach one of the last trains

leaving for the south.

>> Bill Benson: When they invaded France and then came to Paris, you were about 6 or 7 almost.

>> Alex Shilo: 1933, yeah. Something like that.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember that yourself?

>> Alex Shilo: Very vaguely. Very vaguely. We went first to a small town, Issoudun, where my father had some manufacturers. And then we moved further south where my mother had an uncle living there for decades.

>> Bill Benson: When you were in Issoudun for a short period of time, I think you went to school.

>> Alex Shilo: I went to a school, pre-K. It was pre-K. We were three families together. With four children in the same school and everybody was telling home what bad things the other kid did. Quite usual.

But then two families moved. The First Family moved back to Tunisia. Yes. One of my mother's sisters moved with her husband. Her husband was a surgeon. He's a doctor. He moved to Tunisia with his daughters.

>> Bill Benson: Were they able to stay in Tunisia throughout the war?

>> Alex Shilo: They stayed in Tunisia throughout the war. I know my uncle was in a lot of trouble. First of all, knowing German, he was the kind of representative of the Jewish community with the authorities. And the authorities, the German kept asking for money and money and more money. And from what I heard, he was in really big trouble at the very end.

Ultimately they were liberated by the British somewhere in 1943.

>> Bill Benson: So your family moves from Issoudun further south into Vichy, France, to Villefranche. Why did they go to Villefranche and would stay there for the remainder of the war? Tell us about your life in Villefranche and why they went there.

>> Alex Shilo: We went there because an uncle of my mother lived there for decades. He had a special story. He left the little village in Villefranche for France before World War I. And when the war started -- and then he was an Austrian national. When the war started, he found himself as a young boy --

>> Bill Benson: By himself?

>> Alex Shilo: By himself. He found himself an enemy national in enemy territory. See, he was assigned to live in a town near. He met his wife. He got married and then went just nearby. This is why we came there. He was established there for decades.

>> Bill Benson: So you had some semblance of family there.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah. They were just living next door to us.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little bit about what Vichy, France, was. You had escaped Paris which was occupied by the Germans, crossed into another part of France, Vichy, France. Tell us what that meant.

>> Alex Shilo: Vichy, France. We didn't feel it because we were so lucky to be in a small town. We were maybe 15 Jewish families. Everybody knew we were Jewish. But they were not hostile. Now, Vichy, France, had rules, had laws. My father had to travel with a stamp "Jew" on his ID, on his ID card. And I realized only much later that when my father took his

train to visit his clients on Monday morning, there was no guarantee we would see him on Friday or Saturday. There was no guarantee.

Now, we were lucky enough because we are French. But in my class, I think in 1941 or 1942, there were two kids, a family of Polish-Jewish immigrants -- or refugees. I wouldn't call them immigrants, refugees. And two were in my class. And one day they vanished. They had been taken to be relocated. That's what we learned.

The irony is that when that family was relocated, the father said -- allegedly said, "At least my children will have something to eat." Now, we know today what was the relocation. That was a very bitter irony.

>> Bill Benson: During that time that you were in Villefranche, your mother became very ill. Tell us.

>> Alex Shilo: She died quite early. She died in 1941. My Aunt Cylli came, was my mother's youngest sister. She came first to help my mother. My mother used to call her at night when she was in pain or when she needed help. And one night she didn't call her. And my mother was gone. Then my aunt took over to raise me. Therefore I always had a kind of special relationship with my tante. My tante passed away. She was 93.

>> Bill Benson: What do you recall about losing your mom so young at that time?

>> Alex Shilo: At the very beginning I was kind of not affected. I didn't understand it. The day my mother passed away, my tante had me dressed at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning, threw me out. "Get out." "Go to the street." And it was a Catholic holiday. It was May 2. I think May 2 is God's festival or something. I think it's something like that. I saw people very happy.

People asked me, what are you doing so early? I said, oh, my mother died. That's all.

I didn't go to the funeral. They didn't take me. I started to feel it about the year -- a year later. Then I started to feel it. And I had a special relationship with my aunt and my sister who was much older than me, seven years. Reminded me once or twice, maybe brutally, you know, Cylli is not your mother.

>> Bill Benson: You mentioned this Polish-Jewish family. There were other Polish-Jewish families in the same town?

>> Alex Shilo: Refugees. There were some 15 families.

>> Bill Benson: That were Jewish.

>> Alex Shilo: That were Jewish. I remember exactly the names.

>> Bill Benson: You said that the town's people weren't hostile.

>> Alex Shilo: They were not.

>> Bill Benson: Yet there was so much collaboration going on. Why do you think that was? Why were you able to live relatively openly?

>> Alex Shilo: I don't know. They just were not hostile. They were nice people. Here and there you heard something, ehh, the little Jew boy. But that was it.

I had one incident. I was in the cub scouts. And I went to summer camp twice. The second time, the camp was with cub scouts from other towns. And the head of the camp summoned me and two others, who were Jewish. And he said, "I don't want them."

>> Bill Benson: To you?

>> Alex Shilo: To us. "I don't want them." And then one of the counselors, who was also the math teacher of the school, said, "If they go, I go." End of story. That was it.

In that account, we were very, very, very lucky. Very lucky. And sometimes -- in this museum, between these walls, I don't consider myself to be the typical survivor. I don't consider myself. But still I am.

Later on, about when the Croatians started.

>> Bill Benson: Before we come to that. Of course, you remembered the incident with the anti-Semitic camp director, but you also told me you had another memory of the camp. I think that was related to the music. You talked about the little -- the music from the camp. I don't know. You sang a song for me one time that you learned in the camp.

>> Alex Shilo: I sang it at the very end.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. Ok.

Even though you felt relatively safe, you didn't have many incidents like that, there were a few times when you did have to go hide, where you had to go elsewhere. Tell us about those times.

>> Alex Shilo: That was September 1943. There was a small garrison of German soldiers who actually were Croatian soldiers, people from Croatia. And they set up a mutiny against their officers.

>> Bill Benson: So they were part of the German Army.

>> Alex Shilo: They were part of the German Army. They set up a mutiny. And needless to say, the German Army crushed that in the most brutal way. I remember I was at the friend of

my tante. When that mutiny started, I started to walk home. I was 9 years old. And shootings here and there. I came back home, my tante was frantic. She did not know if she had to give me a hug or a spanking. But that's not the story. The story is the Germans imposed curfew. And they put posters in French and German explaining the curfew. The last sentence of the poster said in German and in French, don't be influenced by the British and the Jews.

The Jews succeeded to escape, a little luxury in itself. We went to three short train stations further, took the train. We went to a cousin of mine who was living in the woods. He made a living by producing charcoal. So we went to my cousin. The problem was to get my father from the train. We knew exactly which train he was. My sister and me, we went to the train station. And the train has, what, 10, 12 cars. Stops two minutes. There's no time to go in the train and to run through. What to do?

The train starts to move. And my father climbs out the window of the train. So we ran after the train. This is a steam train so they start slowly. And we started to shout to him, dad, go back at the next station and come back. And that's what he did.

We came back to Villefranche I suppose 10 days later when things cooled down.

>> Bill Benson: To go back a little bit, when you first went to Villefranche, of course, that part of France, Vichy, France, wasn't as heavily occupied by the Germans. By 1943 things had changed. Tell us what happened there. Why was there a German Army unit stationed so closely at the Croatians' mutiny?

>> Alex Shilo: No. France is divided in 90 districts. Every school child will tell you that. We had to learn by heart. That was a mental exercise, what was the main town and what was the secondary towns of each district. You ask me today, I still can recite it.

>> Bill Benson: All 90?

>> Alex Shilo: All 90.

So, there were -- in the head town of the district was a German garrison. And a very small one, maybe 30, 40 guys, not more in our town. But the mutiny happened at 6:00 in the morning. And at 10:00 you could see the German reinforcement coming down hill.

At the very, very beginning, the German occupied all France and then they retreated. I remember the beginning of the war we saw German soldiers from the regular Army. And even I could stutter a little bit of German and a little bit of Yiddish, and I could somehow tell them, tell a soldier, where he can buy cigarettes and stuff like that.

>> Bill Benson: Your father, as you mentioned, was on the train working when you got him from the train. He was still continuing to see his clients and travel but at tremendous risk to himself.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah. I said at the beginning, my father had his ID stamped "Jew." A red stamp. I remember it exactly. When they took the train, there was no guarantee we would see him back. And I know that my father went through maybe twice, three times, control. And maybe they let him go because he was French. I don't know. But it was sheer luck.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us the little incident you described to me where at one point you did go

stay -- I believe that occasionally you were warned by gendarmes that there might be a raid by the Germans. So you would go hide. And sometimes you went to a school teacher's house.

>> Alex Shilo: What happened was the gendarmes, equivalent of the troopers here, the gendarmes warned my uncles, my two uncles, go into hiding. We have others to rescue. Come back when things will cool down.

My sister and I, we went to the science teacher's. I remember exactly. He had two daughters. Both were between – age-wise-- between my sister and me. And we slept there in the town. I think I went to school even, from their house.

After a few days we just came back home. But they were nice enough to take us.

>> Bill Benson: I remember you telling me he had some comic books.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah. He had comic books. The book was about the botellas and the capellos. Botellas is a boot, and the boot is Italy. And the capellos were the helmets. And these, of course, were the Germans.

>> Bill Benson: Kind of a contraband way of making fun of the Germans and the Italians.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Shortly after D-Day, of course, June 1944, you continued to stay in Villefranche. Shortly after the invasion, the D-Day invasion, a German armored unit passed through your town and started shelling. Tell us about that.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah. I guess you know what the SS are. The SS were the elite German troops, not only the elite, the most loyal to Hitler and the most fanatic. And they were ruthless. So one part of these troops went through our town. In the heat of being called to the north to

counterattack the D-Day, here and there they shot some shells. They saw a nice house in the countryside, one shell. Another house. But they went through our town.

Now, unrelated to us, one of these units went through a town called Oradour-sur-Glane. We didn't know it at that time. It's more or less in the geographic center of France. They were sure there was some French underground there, which was a mistake. They mistook the name. They sealed the city. They rounded all the men. They separated men and women. They brought the men to barns. They shot them. They put all the women and children in the church. They sealed the church. They threw a few grenades, and they set the church on fire. One woman survived. There were 641 dead this day. One woman survived. After the war -- wants to become the President of France decided to keep the village as it was. And even today you can see. It's in the center of France, Oradour-sur-Glane.

>> Bill Benson: You told me that just one day the Germans disappeared. Tell us about that.

>> Alex Shilo: Well, we didn't see. You know, after D -- don't forget, after D-Day the war was not over, even in the south of France. I have two cousins of mine. One was my mother's cousin. One was my cousin. They were killed in August 1944. D-Day was June 1944.

August 1944 in the fight to liberate -- I brought here -- I don't know if you can see it. This is a plaque where he fell. And his name, Zef.

>> Bill Benson: That plaque calls him a "Hero of Liberation."

>> Alex Shilo: Hero of the liberation. The other one is the death notice of a cousin of mine who was a doctor in the underground. And being a doctor, he established a small field

hospital. And when they were denounced, he could not leave the hospital because there were people wounded there. And he told to his captors, I'm a doctor, I have to take care of them. They wouldn't have it. They executed him one day before the town was liberated. This is the death notice the family got later.

>> Bill Benson: Alex, at what point did you, your family, realize that you were liberated? That for you the war was over? When did that point come?

>> Alex Shilo: I think things started to be just quiet. Quiet. We learned -- I remember exactly when Zef was killed. We knew it the same day. We learned it the same day. We were 60 miles from that place, the same day or the next day.

His son was in our town. Zef used to come from time to time.

When Zef joined the French underground, he had two children, a girl and a boy. The little boy was with a nanny in our town. I remember exactly the place. I was with Zef when he brought his son to the nanny. Was maybe a year old. Something like that. And from time to time Zef used to come to visit his son.

>> Bill Benson: Alex, before you start to tell us about life after liberation and resuming -- trying to get a normal life back, I know you wanted to tell us about something you learned fairly recently about, I believe, one of your mother's brothers.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah. My mother's elder brother was in the same town as we were. He had a little workshop, a little manufacturer. He produced belts, leather belts. At some point he had machines, one or two workers, I don't know. And at some point he got an order to sell his factory. Jews could not have factories. Now, this order didn't come from the town. It came

from some headquarters.

Ok, so he sold it. The sale was eviction, more or less. And my uncle was one of the workers of his own factory. But they learned about that. And in 1943, February 1943, they got a letter that the new owner has to fire the Jew. That's written.

[Speaking French] The previous owner, the Jew was freed. And you have to do it otherwise bear the consequences, etc., etc.

This is a copy. I got this a few weeks ago from my cousin.

>> Bill Benson: And the letterhead --

>> Alex Shilo: Oh.

>> Bill Benson: It's in French, but it says this is the commissioner general for the Jewish --

>> Alex Shilo: The general commissioner for the Jewish question. Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: You just got that a few weeks ago.

>> Alex Shilo: And my question was to my cousin, how did you make a living after? He didn't answer. I didn't get that answer. I guess they found a way to somehow.

>> Bill Benson: Speaking of making a living. Alex, you're liberated now in your part of France. Your father tries to get back a sense of normalcy for the family. What did you do then once the war was over, for you, knowing the war is continuing and will continue for the next eight or nine months?

>> Alex Shilo: I think my father just went on working, went on working his own job until the very, very end of the war, after 1945, after the Armistice. I went to Jewish boarding school.

>> Bill Benson: After the war. Did you go in August of 1944, when you were liberated, were

you able to resume school at that time?

>> Alex Shilo: Oh, yes. That was my first year in high school. High school in France today might be different. But in France in these days you had elementary, high school. Elementary six years, high school six years. That's how it worked.

So I just started first year of high school. English, Latin, you know, whatever. But I went normally to school. And the year after we came back to Paris, and my father insisted that I go to a Jewish high school to get the Jewish education. And I must say to this very day the education I got in this school is the base of my knowledge of the Hebrew language, the grammar and all of that I learned.

>> Bill Benson: After your father, your sister, you and your Aunt Cylli, you all survived, tell us about other members of your family. You've already shared with us about two cousins who were members of the resistance. What about other members of your family?

>> Alex Shilo: Other members were basically my grandparents, my mother, father and mother. Now I know that it is 1942. But it was hard for me to pinpoint exactly the dates. Don't forget, both countries were under German rule. So you could send letters. The post -- the postal service was working. We received -- I remember, two letters we received. I remember that very vividly. The first letter said don't send parcels. They arrived empty. The last parcel they got, they said we got the parcel, there were a few grains of rice in it. The second letter, we got it -- now I know exactly. I couldn't remember. We have to move. We have to go. We don't know where we are going. Today we'll know exactly. They were marched all through the woods, all through the cemetery. And there was a huge pit already

dug. They were told to take off their clothes and they were gunned down directly in the pit. These were the Jewish population of that town, of Dolina, including my grandparents.

How I know exactly the date, I have a relative who survived the war. He didn't talk anything. He lost his first family in the same town, in Dolina. He survived after many, many hardships and rebuilt his life. He lived in Israel. Had a great career, etc. And age 86 he decided to write his memory. I got the memories. And from there I know a few details.

My cousin also, the relative, lost his wife and a small daughter, 5 years old in the same massacre, in the same day.

>> Bill Benson: And that you learned --

>> Alex Shilo: I learned the date from reading the report. But my cousin in Israel never spoke about that period, all of that period, until he had a grandson who was 12, 13, who was already in the age where he can understand. So he opened a little bit. And then he decided to write his memoir.

I gave one copy of the memoirs in Hebrew, I gave it to the museum.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your Uncle Max. He had a radio after the war. Right?

>> Alex Shilo: Uncle Max was my mother's uncle. Uncle Max was the one who came to France --

>> Bill Benson: The 13-year-old?

>> Alex Shilo: That's him. He came back. He boarded the train, by the eastern train station.

He heard -- he had no money. He didn't know French. He heard some people speaking Yiddish on the platform. And he said, you know, if you pay me a little bit, I will carry your luggage. This is how he started his career in France. So I think more or less they a little bit adopted him. But the war started. And he was an Austrian citizen in France. So he was assigned to be in that big town.

Now, in Villefranche, he had the radio. A radio in France, you could have a radio. It was not very frequent. It was forbidden to listen to. You could listen to only radio Vichy, the French broadcaster. To listen to England was forbidden. Second, it was always, how do you call it -- they tried to interfere, to make it less audible.

I remember exactly what the British radio said. They said, "Here is London. Frenchmen are talking to Frenchmen." [Speaking French]
The signal was, ¶ bum, bum, bum, bum¶ which in morse, morse language, is the letter V, victory. The same sign as Churchill. I remember it started exactly with that.

Now, one sad thing at the end of the war. Maybe this is what you relate to. After the war was over I come to my uncle. We listened to the radio. And I see his wife sobbing. Quietly. You know, sobbing and crying. What happened was the radio was broadcasting all the names of the French prisoners of war who were liberated and coming home. Now, my uncle and my tante had a son who was killed in 1940. He was a young officer in the French Army. He was killed in April or May 1940. And, of course, her son was not coming back.

On the other hand, I remember exactly the exhilaration in the

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town, in the little town about the end of the war. I remember even the nice lady who tried to sing, a big gathering. Here and there she missed a few tunes. I remember that.

>> Bill Benson: You had told us earlier that your father had paid his rent on your apartment in Paris into the future a couple of years. And then after the war he went to get the apartment back.

>> Alex Shilo: My father kept paying the rent in Paris, in the apartment, until the Germans sealed the apartment and stole whatever was in. But after the war, we came back to Paris. And my father wanted for sentimental reasons, his apartment, his apartment. There was a legal battle because the actual dweller to whom the apartment had been given was a French veteran, an invalid, a war invalid. And I remember even there was a picture in the newspaper showing that French invalid with an arm missing. But after the legal battle, my father headed back. And this is actually where he spent his last -- more or less his last day.

>> Bill Benson: You told us a little bit earlier that for your father, though, after that he had a tough time after the war.

>> Alex Shilo: Well, my father was worn out. He was a widower. He didn't care much about life. My father had a great time with his daughter and my sister. Because he has two granddaughters. He saw them growing. I'm not here for confession, but I was maybe not the ideal son. I went to Israel. My father didn't come to -- he was already too old and too worn out to come to my first wedding. But my sister told me that when my father passed away, he had pictures of my children in his wallet.

>> Bill Benson: Alex, I'm going to move forward to a couple of things. You got a great

education. You became an agronomist. You lived and worked in Paris. But in 1959 you moved to Israel. Soon after you arrived, joined the Israeli Army, and soon after you joined the Israeli Army Eichmann was tried. Will you tell us about that?

>> Alex Shilo: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I joined the IDF almost upon arrival in Israel for one simple reason. I wanted it behind me. I wanted it to be over. I wanted to start a real life. Real life doesn't start in the military, but I spent two years. I remember exactly. February 1961. March. 1961. That day, in the camp, we had nothing planned. We were sitting on the walls. It was the day of the opening of Eichmann's trial.

Now, Eichmann, for those who don't know, was the man in charge of the solution to the Jewish problem. In short, he was in charge of the mass extermination. He was caught by what is known today to be the Mossad, brought to Israel to trial. That was the opening of the trial.

I remember, we were sitting in military gear on the walls, listening to the small radio. We heard the opening of the trial. And the first question -- it is a criminal trial. So the first question you ask, are you Mr. So-and-so? You have to identify the accused. So, are you Adolph Eichmann? The question was translated into German. And you could hear, I remember until now, his voice. He said, [speaking German]. "Yes, indeed." You could sense through the radio a shiver in the courtroom. We got the right guy.

>> Bill Benson: Alex, you served your time in the Israel Defense Forces. Then you were called back into the reserves, I think during the six-day war. Tell us about that.

>> Alex Shilo: I was actually -- we were first in what's considered the West Bank, territories,

call it as you want. We helped the fighting in the northern part of the West Bank. And then we are called to upper Galilee. I used to work as an advisor. It's a wonderful place, one of the best places in Israel, one of the most beautiful places. But we were under the nose of the Syrian who were on the Golan Heights. And during these 19 years, not my years, but 19 years there was not a week or something without any shouting -- any shooting. Not shouting. Any shooting from the Golan Heights. And I remember we were there. I was in artillery. We were taken to upper Galilee. We stopped. You could see the buses taking the infantry to the north. Taking, taking, taking. One person after another. It was pretty. There was almost -- I wouldn't call it a shiver, but an exhilaration. We we're going to the Golan Heights. And this was the brigade going to the northern part. And in the middle -- so we gave them artillery support.

I don't know how many of you have been in the military, but artillery support is very -- it's a very important part when you want to assault a position. And we also gave artillery support -- there was a battalion of tanks going -- climbing the Golan Heights. And just to tell you the intensity of the fire of the battle, 26 tanks went, started, two arrived unharmed on the top. All the others were all destroyed or harmed. They could be repaired, maybe. But two arrived.

>> Bill Benson: Alex, your Aunt Cylli, she was so important to you, living with you in Villefranche, particularly after your mother died. What happened to your Aunt Cylli? What became of her?

>> Alex Shilo: She got married. Her husband was an ex-prisoner of war. He was a musician. He was a trained cellist. He played the cellist. He couldn't make a living out of that, so he

started to play contrabass, bands, in the nightclubs. He was a very, very sweet man.

Now, I had a very special relationship with my tante. During the war she took me to the movies. One of the movies was "The life of Hector Berlioz," a very famous French composer. Fast forward, 2005. So my tante was 90, almost. I went here to the Kennedy Center. A friend of mine got an award, something. And the orchestra, one of the music schools in Washington, started to play a piece, a very famous piece. The next day I called my tante. I said, you remember -- [humming] "Of course." We sang it together, almost. She passed away two years later. I had a ticket to go to France. And my sister called me, said, Alex, too late. Cylli passed away. I didn't go to France. I had nowhere to go.

>> Bill Benson: We have time for a few questions from our audience. So why don't we turn to our audience and see if anybody has a question for you. We're going to hand the mic to you, so please wait until you have the mic to actually ask the question. Try to make it as brief as you can. If I think not everybody heard it, I may repeat the question. But otherwise Alex will respond to your questions.

>> Alex Shilo: I like just to make one -- audience don't know me. I don't know the audience. Audience don't know the Museum. I consider myself -- I am a survivor. But I am not the typical survivor. I wouldn't like you to get the wrong idea. I'm not the typical. People suffered much, much more than me. Much, much more. Don't have that idea. I'm not the typical survivor. That's always --

>> Bill Benson: But as you've said to us, not only what you went through, but the family. And you lost so many other family members as well.

Ok. Let's see if we have anybody who would like to ask a question here. We have one right here. We're going to bring a mic to you. It's going to get passed down from your right.

>> Prior to the war and the German occupation, was anti-Semitism very prevalent in France?

>> Bill Benson: The question is, how prevalent was anti-Semitism in France prior to the war?

>> Alex Shilo: As a matter of fact, I cannot answer that. You know, I was too young. I went to kindergarten. I cannot remember -- I'm sorry to disappoint you. This is a question I cannot answer.

>> [Question Inaudible]

>> Alex Shilo: I assume. I forgot to say something. In 1943, we started to hear rumors of what was happening in Eastern Europe. And I said once, coming back home, I said, you know, I spoke with a friend. My tante and my sister said, Alex, don't talk about it outside. Don't talk. Not at school, not with friends. Don't talk.

>> Bill Benson: And the other important point, you were just so young.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Wouldn't know because of your age. Absolutely.

Any other questions?

We're going to wrap up in a few moments anyways, but do you have another question? That would be great.

I'm going to ask you, eventually after moving to Israel in 1959 and you would stay there for I think almost 20 years --

**ROUGH DRAFT TRANSCRIPT
NOT A VERBATIM RECORD**

>> Alex Shilo: 18 years.

>> Bill Benson: Eventually you moved to the United States. What brought you here?

>> Alex Shilo: Oh.

[Laughter]

The answer in two words, my wife.

[Laughter]

The story is, in 1978 I got an offer through the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture, got an offer to go to Haiti for the United Nations to work in agricultural advisory service. They needed somebody who speaks French, knows agriculture, and works as an advisor. I had all three. I got the job. In Haiti I met my second wife. And then jobs kept coming and coming, one after another. After Haiti I spent two and a half years in Haiti, three years in Nepal, on a vegetable seed project, one year in Rwanda. This was before the genocide. And one year in Jamaica. And after Jamaica I got an offer to go to Haiti for 18 months. And then my wife said, stop, you go to Haiti, I go back to the United States. She's American. I go back to the United States. I want to make -- to work towards a doctor degree. And that's what she did.

>> Bill Benson: Alex, I think your father passed away in 1969.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Your aunt -- or your sister passed away a few years ago.

>> Alex Shilo: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Did you spend time with each other talking about what you went through

during the war? Both in terms of your immediate family but as well as your extended family, was it something you talked about very much?

>> Alex Shilo: I said before I was not the ideal son. I didn't have many conversations with my father. My sister, maybe a little bit more. But we spoke about other things.

>> Bill Benson: Your sister stayed in France. Didn't she?

>> Alex Shilo: Yes. My sister was a dentist. She had two daughters. Now she has three granddaughters. We didn't speak a lot.

When I tried to cross-check after with my aunt, she confirmed that I did not miss one day of school. That's for sure. I asked her. And she said, yes, you did not miss one day of school.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to turn back to Alex to close our program in just a moment. I want to thank all of you for being with us. I remind you that we will have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday through the middle of August. So hopefully you can return for another program either this year or next year.

After the program is over, Alex is going to step off the stage here. So if you'd like to ask him any questions or just go up and say hi, please feel free to do that. He'll stay behind.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. So on that note, I'd like to turn back to Alex to just close with his closing thoughts.

>> Alex Shilo: The closing thoughts are mixed feelings. I came to Israel in 1959. We already had two wars behind us. During my time we had three wars. My son, in the Air Force -- when

he was in the regular Army, in the Air Force, he was -- during his time there were two major operations. One of them was the destruction of the nuclear plant in Iraq. If you remember that. It was Iraq. My grandson is now in the Air Force. On one hand, we're proud. It's a family tradition. The parents went. The grandparents, the parents. And now they are going. There is no question that they will serve. On the other hand, it's sad. After three generations -- and we don't see the peace. I'm absolutely -- I have very little hope that my grandson will not be involved in some military operation. I have very little hope.

Peace, peace process? Forget it. Forget it. It will take, if we're lucky, one generation. If we are not lucky, two, maybe three. That's sad.

On the other hand, we survived the Holocaust. We survived the wars. And there is a saying in the Book of Samuel, it is said that the eternity of Israel will not cheat or something like that. Yeah, will not lie. That's what I wanted to save that for the end.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

>> Alex Shilo: Thank you very much.

[Applause]

[The presentation ended at 2:00 p.m.]