Wednesday, June 19, 2013

1:00-2:02 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

FIRST PERSON: RITA RUBINSTEIN

Held at:
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW
Washington, DC

(Remote CART)

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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 Mrs. Rita Rubinstein, 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*. I'm very pleased to say Mr. Louis Smith is here with us today.

[Applause]

Thank you, Louis.

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 *First Person* guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue until mid August. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests. Rita Rubinstein will share with us her *First Person* account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If we have time toward the end of our program, you will have an opportunity to ask Rita a few questions.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Rita is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction. We begin with this portrait of Rita, shown here between her Aunt Bella and her cousin, Bayla Shulwolf, who perished in the Holocaust.

Rita was born Rifka Lifschitz in 1936 in Vascauti, Romania. The arrow on this map points to

Vascauti.

Here we see an engagement photograph of Rita's parent, Tabel and Avraha. Rita's father ran a dry goods store and small factory with his sister and brother-in-law. The small factory had looms to weave native Ukrainian clothing that was then sold in the store. The house on the right side was the store as well as the family home.

In 1940, the Soviet Army marched into Vascauti and drafted young men, including Rita's father, into the army. When Axis troops invaded the Soviet Union the next year, Romanian soldiers entered Vascauti and told all the Jews to prepare to leave within 24 hours. Rita's family was able to bribe Romanian soldiers who took the family to a ghetto in Transnistria. The area known as Transnistria is shown on this map. Once there, a village family took Rita's family in. Rita was able to attend a small class, but during the three years the family lived in the ghetto they faced terrible hardships. After they were liberated the family was eventually able to return home.

After the war, Rita attended a Ukrainian school in what had become communist Romania. By obtaining false papers, Rita, her mother and her aunt were able to travel from Romania to a displaced persons camp in Germany that was administered by the US Army. Here we see Rita in her Purim costume.

Rita arrived in the United States in 1949 with her mother and her mother's husband, an Auschwitz survivor, whom she met in the displaced persons camp. They settled in New York City. Rita married Nathan Rubinstein in 1959. She graduated from Brooklyn College in 1960, then she and Nathan moved to Maryland, where Rita began teaching elementary school in Olney, Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC.

She left teaching to have and raise their three daughters, Nina, Sheri and Rene. When the girls were older, Rita began teaching at a Yiddish Hebrew school, then later became its principal. After retiring from the school, Rita became a private tutor for bar and bat mitzvahs, including for adults who haven't had their bar and bat mitzvahs.

Nathan passed away at age 58 in 1995. He had lost most of his family during the Holocaust, but he survived with his parents in Siberia. After the war, they came to the United States. After service in the US Army, Nathan began a career as a scientist at the Johns Hopkins Applied Research Lab in Baltimore, with a top secret clearance.

Their three daughters have a combined eight grandchildren. Daughter Nina is an industrial psychologist with two children. Daughter Sheri is an attorney with four children. And Rene is a pediatric nurse at Johns Hopkins Hospital with two children. Several grandchildren just reached major education milestones, and I hope I have this right, with two graduating from college, just this May, one from high school and her oldest grandchild, Sammy is on his way to medical school. Sammy is here with his mother Nina. Sammy, Nina, if you wouldn't mind waving a hand here. Also with us today, Rita's daughter Sheri and her daughter Toby, who will be a freshman at the University of Michigan in the fall. There you go. Thank you.

[Applause]

Rita is very active in the community. 14 years ago she formed a singing group, “The Happy Matzah Balls,” which still performs at area nursing homes, senior centers and such places as the National Institute of Health and the Catholic University of America as well as here at the museum. She also sings with the Gaithersburg Community Chorus and her congregation choir.

Rita is a volunteer at a local hospice, and has traveled to Israel to do volunteer work for the Israeli army, and volunteers here at the museum as well by translating documents and videos of survivor experiences during the Holocaust from Yiddish to English. She is speaking more publicly more frequently about her Holocaust experience, including recently at a high school and an elementary school.

With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Rita Rubinstein. [Applause]

Rita, thank you so much for joining us, being willing to be our *First Person*. We have an hour and a great deal for you to share with us. We'll start. Although World War II began with Germany invading Poland in September 1939, the war didn't come directly to your community in Romania until 1940. Before we turn to the war years and your life during the Holocaust, tell us what your family's life was like, their community, and even your early years before the war began for you.

>> I came from a very happy, loving family. My mother came from a small town. She was the eldest of eight children. Two siblings had died before the war. She was the first to get married, first to have a grandchild. I was the only grandchild. So you can imagine I was a little spoiled and adored. But it didn't last very long, only four years of my life.

My father was one of four children. His mom was widowed in World War I, so the older two immigrated to the United States way before World War II. They were 16 and 18 and worked in sweatshops, like I'm sure many of your relatives had as beginnings.

We lived -- when my mother married, we lived in a two-family home that we shared with my

father's sister and he established a sort of textile business. He had weaving looms, and they had a dry goods store where they sold costumes that the local Ukrainians were wearing.

>> Bill Benson: Before you go any further, since you mentioned that, tell us about the photograph.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, if you look at the new exhibits, "They Were Our Neighbors, Our Friends," as you come in on the right-hand side, the second picture has been blown up for one of the photographs that I have of my father, his sister and a brother-in-law who came to visit from the United States. It is on the right-hand side, and it's the second picture. It has no captions, but you will see native costumes, and in the back you will see Europeans wearing bow ties. My father was one of those with the hat on.

>> Bill Benson: In fact, that exhibit, "Some Were Neighbors," is right outside our door, to the right. You walk into the front part, the second picture on the right.

>> Rita Rubinstein: My father's mother lived with us. Thanks to her, my first language really was Yiddish. Most of the people in our town spoke German to their children, Jewish people, but they thought it was more intellectual. However, my grandmother insisted that they speak Yiddish with me.

My mother worked in the store. She loved being a businesswoman. She had a nanny for me. We had a very modern house: We had electricity. We had a radio. We had bathrooms. There were no washing machines.

>> Bill Benson: That was unusual, wasn't it? Your house was unusual for the time?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Very unusual for the time. They hired a washer woman who came to do our laundry. Times were very good. I had lots of toys, a doll carriage, lots of friends, played with my cousins, who shared the house with me; my aunt had two children.

I recall, of course, I have to go back a while, like 72 years, my father taking me to services. He was modern Orthodox, but everybody was Orthodox, but we did not wear any special costume. He just observed the Sabbath and went to services. Very pious, very charitable, as were my grandparents. My grandparents also owned a dry good store and they had an orchard.

>> Bill Benson: Your father had a terrific voice, right?

>> My father had a wonderful voice, which my mother said I inherited from him. He loved to do services. I do too. I volunteered about 18 years. I did mother's day and did Friday night services for them. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Germany and the Soviet Union attacked Poland in September 1939, launching World War II. It would be some months later, however, the war came to Romania, when the Soviets occupied your hometown of Vascauti. That was in 1940. Although you're not yet 4 years old, very young, tell us what you can about that time, that period when you were under the Soviet occupation, what that meant for your family and community. You were very young.

>> Rita Rubinstein: It was short-lived. We were limited. I was no longer playing in the streets. We had to close the store. My mother's sister was lucky, she came to visit my mother -- well, she worked there for a year. She was with us, and when she wanted to go back home, she was no longer allowed to, which was her good luck.

>> Bill Benson: Will you tell us more about why that was her good luck later?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, I will. The Russians a short while later took the able-bodied men and drafted them into the army. My father was amongst them, and not my uncle for some reason. That was the last time, when my father left on a train and the Russian uniform, that I saw my dad. I will get

to it later how we found out when he died. I was 4 and never was to see him again.

It was a difficult time. Everything really changed. The mood was sad. My father, at the time we didn't know where he was going, but at least I know that he fought against this.

>> Bill Benson: Maybe this will be a time to just mention what you brought with you.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, I will. Since you mention it now, what you see is a prayer shawl. That's the only thing that brings me close to my father. His spirit is with me. He's there for every one of my grandchildrens' bar and bat mitzvahs, when a boy and girl turn 13.

My mother, amazingly enough, I don't know how, but she held on to it hoping that he would return after the war. I have it and wear it for the high holidays. My late husband used to wear it. Now I wear it for the high holidays. It's present on a chair. All of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, it's amazing how it lived through the war.

This is sterling silver. I always felt the only thing I had clean. My father was presented with this. It's customary for the parents of the bride to present their future son-in-law with a prayer shawl. That's what my grandparents did. Let's see, 78 years old. Pretty well preserved. It's very close to my heart. I know the museum had wanted it, but I said, I'm sorry, it has to be inherited by my grandchildren, hopefully my future great-grandchildren.

>> Bill Benson: After we hear more from Rita, what happens after this, the fact that your mother was able to hang on to that during that time just seems to me to be extraordinary. Just extraordinary.

>> Rita Rubinstein: It's very close to my heart.

>> Bill Benson: With your father gone now, off to fight for the Soviets against the German -- or at the time with the Germans initially -- no, no, against the Germans, what did your mom do, and who was

with you at that point once your dad was gone?

>> Rita Rubinstein: My grandmother was with us, my aunt, and my father's sister and her family, and also an older later -- older, probably in 40s 50s then. Young to me now. They were with us.

Shortly after the Romanians came back. That was -- I'm going too fast?

>> Bill Benson: That was June 1941?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Correct.

>> Bill Benson: German turned on the Soviets at that point. The Romanians came in, allies of the Germans.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Definitely. Times were really bad. They announced they were back. They came marching into the street. In fact, my cousin, who was about five years older than I, looked through an attic window, and suddenly we had --

>> Bill Benson: Looked through at the marching Romanians coming into town.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. With a bayonet. Said, There's a spy here. We children were so frightened. We hid under the bed. They came in with bayonets.

>> Bill Benson: Thinking there was a spy?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Finally, my mother and aunt were crying, "He's only a child." They pulled him out, "Please leave us alone." They left. To show everybody that they were back, they took 20 Jews at random and they shot them. One of the 20 was an engineer who happened to work in the same office with my Aunt Bella.

In September of 1941, they announced to all of the Jews that we had to be ready to leave within 24 hours. We could not -- didn't have time to think what should we take. So of course,

my mother took the Torah, a few of my father's suits. I was bundled into layers of clothing. I had a knapsack on my back.

My mother took some bedding, because we always took some bedding. And she was bundled up. Whatever we could carry. We were told to meet in a marketplace, and from there we were taken away. Didn't know where we would be going.

>> Bill Benson: When you were forced out and you gathered the few things that you were able to take with you, I think you told me you were able to hide some things in the house.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. My mother hid pictures. Pictures are very precious commodities to survivors. Survivors very often ask me, or people who suffered tragedies like recently, the fires and the floods, they lost the pictures, but they still had family members. We were lucky we did send some pictures to my family that we had here, but for the most part my mother hid albums of pictures and she also had hidden money in the attic.

Talk about hiding, my grandmother, may she rest in peace, she had money sewn in her undergarments, underwear. She said "We never know. This might save our lives." She certainly was right. I will come to that later.

>> Bill Benson: Now you're forced, with 24 hours' notice, to leave. Where do you go?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Tell me, where shall I go? We were taken by train to a holding place. We were on our play to Transnistria, but most of the people were off to death camps. That cousin you saw a picture of, she was in that death camp. And family members died there. My uncle found out, my father's brother-in-law, that some Romanian soldiers would get bribed and would take some of the

Jews to a ghetto. Even though they took the bribes, many of the children were thrown into the Nester.

>> Bill Benson: The river?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, very large body of water. My uncle found out where my grandma's family was going, they were going to Transnistria. So with the money my grandmother had, he bribed the Romanian soldiers and they took us there on barges. A Romanian soldier was holding me. I was blonde at the time. I guess he saw the anguished look on my mother's face and tears in her eyes, and he said, "Don't worry. I'm not going to harm your child. I have a little girl just like that at home." That was one time I was lucky.

>> Bill Benson: Had your uncle not bribed them, you would likely then have been sent to a death camp?

>> Rita Rubinstein: We were being sent to a ghetto, to Transnistria. The ghetto was called Shargorot. People were taken from there to labor camps. My aunt was to be picked up by two soldiers. There was a possibility for us, it was not strict, to go to a market, but we had no money. She would sew for Christians after she came back. Some people sent some clothing, she'd get money, so we could have bread once in a while, and some soup and potatoes.

>> Bill Benson: You're now in Shargorot.

>> Rita Rubinstein: In Shargorot. How did we live in Shargorot? A Jewish family was forced to take us in. Conditions were very, very primitive. Remember what I told you about my good home life? Here there was a clay, really like a clay hut. It had one bedroom. They were a family of four. A potbelly stove. No electricity, of course. And that stove would act as we cooked on it, whatever they

had, and also people slept on it, because it gave us warmth in the winter. The winters were bitter cold.

There were no bathrooms. We all used, excuse me, a pail, to eliminate. It was bitter cold and very hard for us children. And hunger. You saw death in the streets. We were the lucky ones, because somebody took us in. The one bedroom, there were four people, and we came with nine people.

>> Bill Benson: On top of the four they had?

>> Rita Rubinstein: On top of the four. But these conditions were good compared to Auschwitz and Dachau. That's why it took a long time to speak to anybody. I thought, I'm not privileged enough. I lost a lot. I lost my home, my childhood, I lost my family.

The living there was very, very difficult, but a child always likes to play, so we would find rocks in the street. My mother made a rope, a jumping rope. A little kindergarten class was formed where I learned songs, and I was thrilled to be able -- we learned some Hebrew letters and words. When I was able to bring a piece of bread and oil, it was a treat. I was able to say, in Hebrew, that I had bread and oil yesterday.

>> Bill Benson: You described to me, and you were in Shargorot for three years, living in the circumstances you described, it was -- as hard as things were, there were some good times in there, in the middle of those hard times. You were just describing one of those.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right, right. But a lot of bad times.

>> Bill Benson: For three years.

>> Rita Rubinstein: A lot of bad times. What really kept me going, I was never separated from my

mother. She kept us and herself very clean. It was about a mile away from the house she had to go to a river and wash clothes. I remember this incident, because certain things you remember. I went with my cousin. We had a little rag doll made for us. Suddenly, my cousin said to my mother, "Oh, I see a little girl in the water." Well, this little girl was I. I didn't know how to swim. My mother didn't know how to swim. I guess I fell in.

So my mother took a sheet she was washing, and she threw it in and picked me out of the water, but I was so traumatized I could not speak for several days. They had a -- witchcraft. They called some woman, and she said something like "Abracadabra," whatever, she broke an egg on my forehead. I couldn't speak. My mother was really concerned. Then suddenly, I guess her witchcraft worked, I started speaking again.

>> Bill Benson: Otherwise, this girl happened to notice you out in the river, you would have drowned otherwise?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right, I would have drowned. My uncle got very ill. He had typhoid fever. They stayed with us only about a year. Then conditions were very bad. They had to leave. They left for another labor camp. Later we connected back in --

>> Bill Benson: That was your uncle, his wife and a couple kids, two children?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Couple kids and his brother.

>> Bill Benson: Five of them?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Yes. They left. My grandma, in the meantime, who was with us, my father's mother, she was very ill, and in the Jewish religion, and I think in Muslim also, it's customary to wear white. These are called shrouds. She was sewing these shrouds. I was a child, I asked,

"What is this?" She said, "When I die, I want to be buried in it." She had a little packet of soil, and she said that soil is from Israel, and it's customary for us to be buried with soil from Israel.

She's the only one of my relatives who has a gravesite. And she was buried at Shargorot. That was very hard for me to see. I loved my grandmother. She said, "Light a candle for me." They did not take me to the cemetery. Suddenly, she was gone.

She grieved for her daughters, and my father, who we never saw again.

>> Bill Benson: Speaking of your father, do you know if once your father left, do you know if your mother ever heard from him while he was gone, initially?

>> Rita Rubinstein: No, she never heard from him at all, never a letter or anything at that point. That was quite painful. I realize now how strong she was.

>> Bill Benson: To not only keep going, but take care of her family as she did.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right, right. That's how we spend the years there, cold, hunger, but it could have been a lot worse.

>> Bill Benson: When I talked to you, you talked a lot about remembering the hunger and people starved to death. How were you able -- do you know how your mother was able to get food?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, with the help of her sister. She was very handy.

>> Bill Benson: She was doing knitting?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. That brought us some food on the table. But I remember seeing dogs too, and to this day I'm very afraid of German shepherds. In fact, a friend of mine used to have to put her shepherd in a kennel, because he would jump on me and I had recollections of them chasing

Jews. I'm afraid of German shepherds. I know they're wonderful dogs and beautiful, but it's something that stays with you.

>> Bill Benson: In early 1944, the Soviets came back. They came back into Shargorot, the Romanians left. Now your town is under Soviet occupation, as they're moving westward. What's life like now that the Romanians are gone, the Germans have been pushed back, you're now back living under the Soviets, but the war is still going on?

>> Rita Rubinstein: But liberation took place first.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that.

>> Rita Rubinstein: 1944, the sounds of war got very close, and the people we lived with, they took their family and took us along with them. A family member had a subbasement. You heard the bomb. You knew something was up. Either the end of war or the end of us. So we were there, and a 12-year-old boy could not stand it anymore. He got anxious, and he ran outside to investigate what was happening.

He got back, and he told us that there were Russian streets -- I mean Russian soldiers in the streets, drinking and dancing and carrying on. People thought he was hallucinating.

Then we said, OK, let's go out and see what's really happening. When we came out, we saw that, indeed, it was true. So we cried tears of joy, that finally we started preparing for our journey home to Vascauti.

>> Bill Benson: The Soviets eventually said you're free to go, you're liberated?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. Then we took military trains that took us to -- it wasn't easy. We didn't get to my town so easily. Bella, my mom's sister, went out to see what's happening in Vascauti. She

found a woman who had been a teacher in her small town. She was the daughter of a priest. Her husband was a Ukrainian national leader. He connected us with a Russian soldier, and this Russian soldier took us on a military train. He helped us to get to the town. But when we got there, our home was occupied by the Russian military, and they used it as a warehouse for grain.

My mother begged them to, "Please let me in the house. I just want to retrieve pictures." They gave her a very hard time. She said, "My husband fought in your army. Please let me in." At that point, she didn't know that he was already gone.

They finally relented and let her in, and she retrieved the photos that I have. The money was gone, but that didn't matter. We were poor, but we had our lives.

>> Bill Benson: But they weren't going to give you the home back?

>> Rita Rubinstein: No, no, no, we weren't allowed. My great-grandparents were living in -- they had a house there too. This soldier, even though it was occupied, insisted that the people let us have one room. So my mother and I and her sister had one room, and we were able to settle there. I started to go to school there, a Ukrainian school, first grade. It was about a mile and a half of walking in the woods.

There they indoctrinated the little children to love Stalin and Stalin's picture and to kiss him before we went to bed. I had to recite a poem in Ukrainian. I learned Ukrainian, of course. I walked to the school with my cousin.

>> Bill Benson: You're what, 8 years old, I think, at this time, right?

>> Rita Rubinstein: 7 or 8, yeah. Right. You're right. And it was kind of difficult. At that period in time my mother also met some people from the village where her parents were. The Ukrainians,

these weren't Christian Ukrainians, she asked them, "What happened to my parents?" My grandfather had a long beard, they were very pious, and they gave my mother a blow-by-blow description how her parents met with their deaths.

In fact, today is 72 years. That's my grandfather. The memorial candle I put up yesterday. Yesterday would have been 72 years for my grandma. With farm implements this same Ukrainians, as you will see the exhibit "My Neighbors, My Friends" the same neighbors whom my grandfather gave credit to when they asked at Christmas time, they needed presents, he said, "Don't worry about paying me." They turned on him. They had him watch how they really murdered my aunt and uncle and my grandmother. They kept him to the end, then he was killed the following day. They didn't leave anything out. Here was my mother in her 20s, survived with her child to hear that about her parents. Unimaginable.

My father's best friend came back from the war, and so we asked him what happened to my father. And he said -- he gave us the exact day when he was killed while fighting. So at least I have the knowledge that he fought the enemy, and he died fighting. He of course didn't have --

>> Bill Benson: When you were liberated in early 1944, and then as you just told us your mother learns what happened to her parents, your other set of grandparents and your father, do you know at what point -- because the war would continue in Europe until May of 1945, almost a year and a half later. Would you -- do you know when your mother and the family began to realize the enormity of the Holocaust, the enormity of what was happening to Jews elsewhere in Europe?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yeah. First of all, there were very few of us. The Russians had invaded that part of the country. Russian curtain we felt would set in, and it did in 1945. It was very hard to get

out. My aunt at that point was working in a Russian bank. We stayed there about one year, until 1945.

>> Bill Benson: When did your uncle return, the family that your aunt and uncle --

>> Rita Rubinstein: I don't have exact dates, but shortly after, because we immigrated. We went together --

>> Bill Benson: They came back much later than when you were liberated?

>> Rita Rubinstein: They got out, right.

>> Bill Benson: Here you are living under the communists now, being indoctrinated with loving Stalin. So your mother and your Aunt Bella, you were able to escape from communist Romania. How did you do that? Do you know how they made that happen?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. We had documents that were falsified, saying that we were born in Poland. It was hard, but the underground, somehow they did it. And we got on a train. My aunt was not on the train. The Russians were not ready to give up on her. They wouldn't let her go, actually. Then finally, when the train was about to leave, she was allowed to leave. But our journey was a long, long journey. It took us three months from our town in Romania to get to Germany. Because the song, there was a song written "Tell me where shall I go? There's no place for me. To the left, to the right? Every door is close to me." That's how it felt. Our goal was to reach Germany, where they set up this displaced persons camp.

>> Bill Benson: That's why you wanted to get to Germany, of all places, because they had displaced persons camps?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. That were set up by the joint distribution, and run by the United States

government. We did have a holding place before we immigrated to wherever, of course the United States and Israel. This was before Israel was declared independent. That's why we didn't have a country yet.

>> Bill Benson: Question for you. When your mom was able to get the papers that said you were Polish, why was that significant? Was it because then you weren't Romanian and they couldn't keep you? Is that the idea?

>> Rita Rubinstein: . Right. What was also significant, all people are not bad. Thank God we had -- I wish we had more. I can't say a lot, but we did have some righteous gentiles, and in the Holocaust Museum in Israel there's a special forest, trees are planted in their honor, and they should be, because they really saved lived.

This one soldier, he knew our family because his mother was a midwife and helped to deliver some of my grandmother's children, but he didn't reveal our identity.

>> Bill Benson: He knew who you were?

>> Rita Rubinstein: He knew we were not Polish.

>> Bill Benson: He was a Russian soldier?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Ukrainian. There are some good apples, to. A lot of bad apples, but there's some good in people. If you would only speak up. We could have been arrested. If he revealed our true identity, we would have all been arrested. We would never have gotten to Germany.

>> Bill Benson: Going to Germany, you specifically wanted to get to the American sector.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, in German the war was over at that point. And what I wanted to bring out, we went to Poland, we traveled at night. We went to Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic. We

went to Salzburg. We crossed many borders. We posed as Greeks, speaking Hebrew. It was really miraculous. We were hungry. We were tired. But people took us in. There was somebody from Israel who helped us also to go through the borders. They had their ways. They knew how. My Aunt Bella met her future husband on our journey. They were also traveling. Their goal was to go to Germany.

>> Bill Benson: Actually on the trip itself?

>> Rita Rubinstein: On the trip, correct.

>> Bill Benson: When you finally make it to Germany, you go to a displaced persons camp, and I think you spent three years at the displaced persons camp.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Displaced persons camp was paradise to us. We were finally free, not labeled as "The Jews." Conditions were not wonderful, because we were in barracks. We had one room, but we had food, we had canned food. We didn't know about the tuna fish; we were afraid to open it and eat it. We would barter. My mother remarried there, and he would bring a can of tuna fish. The Germans liked it. They would give us a chicken now and then, some eggs. We got food in the camp, but it wasn't the greatest. You have to make it on your own.

>> Bill Benson: I think you told me that the locals with whom you wanted to get fresh produce, they liked the canned Spam. So you would swap Spam for fresh food.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right, exactly. We children -- you know, children are here, you say, Oh, do we have to go to school? We were so happy that we finally had a school. We missed all these years of schooling. I went to a school that was established. There were not many children, unfortunately. Hitler took care of that.

I remember going on trips, putting on plays. That's when I started singing up on stage. One incident which got to my mother, she was sitting in the audience as I was singing a song on the stage. A woman said to her, "I wonder if this child's mother is alive listening to her." Of course, my mother burst into tears. She said "Yes. I am the mother." She said, "You are so lucky. I lost two children in the camps." You heard so many of those stories.

The camp too I started speaking Polish, because some of my friends were hidden. They were good Poles too, hidden either in convents or hidden in Christian homes. Sometimes they didn't want to give the Jewish children up. But they only spoke Polish. So I was forced to learn that language too. When people met my mother on the street they started speaking Polish to her. "I'm not from Poland. I'm from Romania." As a child you pick up languages, and I was very happy there, believe it or not.

Then a lot of us were very sick as a result of the poor nourishment we received during the war. I was diagnosed with having TB. I was put in a sanitarium, only able to see my mother once a week. My mother had left me with many children. She came back a week later, she couldn't find me. She said, "Where is my daughter Rifka?" They said, "We had to put her in quarantine." I had a very bad case of TB.

At that time they rationed, they gave out streptomycin to people who had TB of the bones, and I had it of the lungs. They said I would need surgery to collapse the lung, unless I got the streptomycin.

Also, I wanted to bring out, in that hospital there were a lot of anti-Semitic nurses. Every time I went for a test, they would give me a tissue and say "You'll need it. This is going to hurt." I said "No,

it won't. I will not need it. I am not going to cry. This too shall pass."

They were hard times, but thank God there was a very kind doctor, Danish. She said to my mother, "Don't worry. She will be fine." What scared us, we knew we would have to pass very strict exams before being allowed into the United States. They had Ellis Island, but they didn't do the exams on Ellis Island. You had to be examined before you went on the boat. That is if you met the quota. There was a certain quota from Germany. They allowed some people from Romania. We had to wait a long time.

>> Bill Benson: You were in the TB sanitarium nine months?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You remember that vividly?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. I had surgery. My mother brought the streptomycin as well every three months -- I mean every four hours. I would get it for three months.

>> Bill Benson: Did she have to get the streptomycin herself?

>> Rita Rubinstein: No, it was sent -- yes. Sent by my relatives.

>> Bill Benson: Your relatives in the US sent it, right?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right, right. They were hard times, but those times I remember very well. I will never forget May 15, 1948, when Israel was declared independent. All the children in the school, we stayed up all night long singing and dancing. Finally, the Jews had their homeland. We had a place to go. If we had had that place before the Holocaust, then 6 million would have been alive.

We waited. I got back home -- incidentally, Eisenhower visited our camp, and a friend of mine played the piano for him. I happened to be in the sanitarium when he visited the camp.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember that, even though you were in the sanitarium?

>> Rita Rubinstein: A lot of weddings took place, a lot of births. It was life reborn, really.

>> Bill Benson: Why did you come to the United States? Why was that your destination?

>> Rita Rubinstein: My aunt was in a different quota, because she married my uncle. They left early. She left while I was in the sanitarium. She got to the United States in about 1947.

>> Bill Benson: You had two aunts already living in the United States, right?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Whom I never met. My mother had uncles also come here way before.

>> Bill Benson: OK.

>> Rita Rubinstein: So they wanted to go, because when Israel was declared independent, that's where I wanted to go, but she said no way, because my only sister --

>> Bill Benson: Is in the United States?

>> Rita Rubinstein: She's the only one that survived and made it to the United States. When we were finally given permission to enter the United States, which was in 1949 --

>> Bill Benson: You're 13 I think now?

>> Rita Rubinstein: No, I wasn't 13 yet.

>> Bill Benson: Not 13 yet, OK.

>> Rita Rubinstein: My birthday was December.

>> Bill Benson: Just short of your 13th birthday. OK.

[Laughter]

My math was a little off here.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. OK.

>> Bill Benson: 12, almost 13, now coming to the United States?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. We were so happy. We didn't go on a luxury liner. It was not a cruise. But as it happened we went on an army transport, the General Haan. Years later I discovered from my husband that when he was shipped through Germany, he was a soldier, they drafted him early because his parents wrote him -- we didn't have any documentation. His parents thought he would be saved if he would be written four years older. He was only 16 when he was really drafted.

My mother wrote me two years younger. I changed it. Now I'm going legal. I changed it. But unfortunately, I lost my husband at 58. I said I'm no longer 1938. All my documents were 1938. All my friends thought I was two years younger than I really am. But I came out, I came clean, and I told them. That was the only lie I told. Even my family, my children didn't know, grandchildren. I revealed my true identity.

The journey was horrible. I wanted to point out, we were right near the engine room, and they were bunkbeds. My mother and I were sick the entire journey. It was September; the ocean is quite turbulent. But when we reached the harbor of New York, I just can't describe the feeling to you. It was this unbelievable. We cried for joy, just seeing the symbol of freedom. Finally, we are free, and we're free to practice our religion. You don't know how lucky you are. We can criticize the United States, but we have the freedom to criticize. And other places in the world you don't. Here the statue was there welcoming us.

>> Bill Benson: You remember the Statue of Liberty?

>> Rita Rubinstein: I will always remember that. My aunt and all my relatives, my aunt had to take us in. Housing was very hard to get. We lived with her, her baby and husband for about three

months. They put me in a 7.SP, 7th grade special class. Don't ask me why. I didn't know a word of English.

I like to tell this story. They gave me an IQ test, two, three months later. How frustrating when you don't know a shoemaker from a dressmaker. I surprised them and passed it. In high school the principal called me in, he said -- what did I do? I knew I was a good student. He said, "I want to commend you. Your IQ has risen so much. "

[Laughter]

I said, "You know what?" They didn't have bilingual education then. I said, "You didn't know it, but you gave a frustrated person who didn't -- a young child who did not know any English an IQ test." It's a wonder I passed it. I said, "Of course I've improved. I know English well." You learn the language very rapidly without the bilingual education.

>> Bill Benson: You said to me that your mother was overly protective of you when you came to the United States. Will you say a little about that?

>> Rita Rubinstein: First, she didn't want to talk about the past too much. She was afraid of losing me. I can see why.

>> Bill Benson: Surely.

>> Rita Rubinstein: She was always afraid for me to try new things. She always jeopardized my diet. "Oh, my child, you starved enough." Very protective of me. I was very lucky to have her. I wouldn't have survived without her, as a young child. Very, very lucky.

>> Bill Benson: She had to have been incredibly resourceful to help get you through all that you've described for us.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Her sister was a great help for us too.

>> Bill Benson: When did you lose your mom?

>> Rita Rubinstein: My mom, it's already 21 years. She died at 79.

>> Bill Benson: She'd be 100 years old this year.

>> Rita Rubinstein: She would have been 100 this year. She was born in 1913, yes.

>> Bill Benson: We have time for a couple questions from our audience. We'll come back to you for the closing remarks, absolutely. We have time for a couple of questions. What we'd like to do is hand you a mic, if you have one. Try to make your question as brief as you can. If I think not everybody heard it, I will repeat it. Then Rita will respond to it. Raise your hand, we'll get you a mic. Then we'll go from there. Anybody have a question to ask? If not, I have tons. Oh, all right. Absolutely. Louise?

>> Can you hear me? When you were living with the family in the ghetto, the people that lived in the house, were they nice to you?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Very nice. They are very good people. They had very little. They shared -- they didn't share the food with us, but they shared their house. When my uncle was so sick, he had the typhoid fever, they even gave up their bedroom for him, because he was contagious. They were very, very caring.

What was very interesting, since I work for hospice, I met one of my patients who happened to come from Shargorot. I got so excited.

>> Bill Benson: From the same period?

>> Rita Rubinstein: From that town where we were in the ghetto. He actually was born there.

>> Bill Benson: Wow.

>> Rita Rubinstein: So he was able to fill me in on what happened to the Jews there. He was very excited that somebody spoke Yiddish and sang Yiddish. Unfortunately, I didn't have him for very long. That was truly by coincidence.

>> Bill Benson: Amazing.

>> Rita Rubinstein: I know people often ask me, "How do you still believe?" Sometimes I wonder, Why was I selected? How come I survived and how come others didn't? Some questions stay unanswered, but I think there's a reason, and I think that's why I always wants to help people and become involved. It's very, very important. Speak up for human rights and be there; speak up for bullying. I'm speaking to the young people. If you see any injustice, it's up to us.

>> Bill Benson: Any others from the audience? One back here.

[Audience question.]

>> Bill Benson: The question is: What sustained your mother? Was it her faith? What sustained her?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, the will to live, to live for her child, to raise me. Also, I think she believed in God, but she was very Orthodox before the war. She was no long -- yes, she kept kosher, but she did not -- she was not as pious as she was. She said, if my pious grandparents and kids, really, my aunt was seven years older than I, the youngest won, if they could meet us, where was God? I still believe there was a reason. I do believe. I do believe in a higher power is watching over us, I hope.

>> Bill Benson: If there's no other -- do we have another question? Yes, one back here. Great. We'll get the mic to you.

>> I notice that you mentioned Danish doctor. And in the sanitarium.

>> Bill Benson: The Danish doctor was the tuberculosis sanitarium. The Danish doctor.

>> I happen to be Danish, not born here in America. But isn't there a special relationship between the Danish people and the Jewish people? Talking about when Hitler first took over Denmark to get the Jewish people out, and there was very little, as I understand, very little loss of any Jewish people getting out. I'm told that the Gestapo or the German soldiers would check the fishing boats, and there would be Jewish people in the fishing -- in the holds of the fishing boats, but they didn't want to get their boots dirty getting out in the holds.

>> Bill Benson: The gentleman's question, it might not be one that you're able to answer. The question is really the role of Danes and their resistance to the Germans and whether or not -- how many Jews they were able to protect or save. I don't know if that's something you want to speak to.

>> Rita Rubinstein: I can't.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. But yes, it was a Danish doctor that cared for you in the tuberculosis sanitarium. Absolutely.

>> Rita Rubinstein: She was an immigrant too.

>> Bill Benson: OK. One more? Did I see a hand? No. OK.

>> Rita, I'd like to thank you. Through your experience, strength and hope, because through your sharing your testimony, and you really touched my heart, and you showed me something that I probably would never have gotten if I hadn't heard from you. I just want to thank you for that.

[Applause]

This is my husband Paul. I just want to say thank you from the bottom of my heart, Rita. I am an emergency room nurse in Rhode Island. My first experience with the Holocaust survivor, I had no idea what was on the man's arm. But he was a survivor of Auschwitz. That was in 2007. I asked what exactly was the tattoo. It was half of a triangle, and it had a bunch of numbers.

From that day of 2007 when I treated that man, I grew such a strength for the Jewish nation and the survivors of the Holocaust. That's the reason my husband and I are here today. It was an honor and privilege to be in your presence. He would not speak of what happened to him, but he did tell me what it was.

To be in your presence today, we are so honored to be here. Continue to share your story of hope for your nation, because people need to hear about the truth of what happened, and the animosity against your people. I just want you to know, though I am not Jewish, I hold your country and your people in the highest regard that there ever could be, because you are God's chosen people.

I feel honored to be in your presence. Thank you for sharing your story, because there's not many more survivors left, and this is a great privilege to be in your presence, and we thank you very much for that.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Thank you.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: We're going to wrap up in a moment. If I could thank you all for being here. We'll

close in a moment. I want to thank you for being here, remind you we'll have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. Hope you can come back this year. If not, look to next year for *First Person* program, if your travels bring you to Washington, DC.

It's our tradition here at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. So I'm going to turn back to Rita to close the program. Then when Rita is done, she'll step off the stage. If anybody wants to say hi to her, chat with her, hug her. If you want to, sure, absolutely.

>> Rita Rubinstein: I'll stand up. OK. I thank God that we survived one of the darkest periods in history. I'm grateful to the United States for opening its doors to us. It is the greatest country in the world. We should appreciate the freedoms that we have and opportunities. I'm proud to be a US citizen.

I thank our men and women in the military for the sacrifices that they have made in protecting our freedoms. We must remember the past and find courage in the future. Never stand silent. Always speak up when you witness bullying and prejudice.

Unfortunately, there are genocides going on in the world right now, and hunger too. Help those in need. Always take a stand. When you save one person's life, it's as though you have saved the world.

I am dedicating today to my grandparents who were brutally murdered by their neighbors 72 years ago, and yesterday my grandma, aunts and uncles, and in their memory, memory of my family, my father, the 6 million, 1.5 million children, I will continue to tell my story. Now all of you will be able to pass it on to your children and tell them that you met a survivor, and the Holocaust really happened, because in 20 years we will not be here. If I make it, I'll be 96. Who knows?

I hope and pray that none of you will experience war and hunger. None of you. And loss of families. May we enjoy shalom, which is peace in the world.

God bless you all, and God bless the United States of America. And thank you for listening.

[Applause]

[Program ended at 2:02 p.m.]