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UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
***FIRST PERSON* SERIES**
Speaker: NAT SHAFFIR

REMOTE CART

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning 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 today. This is our 15th year of the *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is Mr. Nat Shaffir whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2014 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation with additional funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are very grateful for their sponsorship. I'm pleased to let you know that today Mr. Louis Smith is with us.

[Applause]

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

Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the Museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card that you'll find in your program today or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater when we close the program. In completing the card you will receive an electronic copy of Nat Shaffir's biography so that you can remember and share his testimony after you leave here today.

Nat will share with us his firsthand account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If we have time at the end of our program, we'll have

an opportunity for you to ask Nat a few questions.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Nat is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

Nat Shaffir was born Nathan Spitzer on December 26, 1936, in Iasi, Romania. In this photograph we see Nathan with his parents and his sisters, Sarah and Lily. The arrow on this map of Europe points to Romania.

Near Iasi, which is shown on this map, Nathan's family owned a dairy farm. In 1941 the fascist Iron Guard confiscated the farm and all the cattle because Nathan's family was Jewish. The family moved to a neighborhood of Iasi where Nathan's father, Anton, was able to keep cows and his mother Fanny bartered dairy products in exchange for tutoring their children.

When Anton was sent to do forced labor in early 1944, 8-year-old Nathan helped his family continue to make dairy products. After Iasi fell to the Russians in the summer -- excuse me, the spring of 1945, Anton returned to his family. The Spitzers would stay in Romania for several more years before immigrating to Israel.

After moving to the United States in 1961, Nat got a job as a dental assistant with plans to be a dentist but a job offer to work for a major toy manufacturer began Nat's long career as a businessman and entrepreneur starting several successful import/export companies. He then opened an internet company selling home healthcare products. In 2005 Nat retired, but that lasted six months before he accepted an offer to be Executive Director of a

synagogue. Following that, Nat opened a home care agency in Maryland, Personal Health Care Providers, which he operates today.

Nat and his wife Merryl live in Silver Spring, Maryland, having moved there in 1986 from North Carolina. They have four children: Deborah, Ari, Michael, and Ilana. Nat has a son Jeff from his first marriage. Nat and Merryl have 11 grandchildren.

Nat started volunteering here at the museum in 2010, first at the Information Desk, then the Donor's Desk where you will find him on Mondays. He is also a guide for the Permanent Exhibition often leading groups from such places as the FBI and Homeland Security. Nat speaks Hebrew, Yiddish, German, and Italian. In his spare time he loves building things in his workshop, gardening, baking bread. And Merryl told me he is a great cook. Merryl is here with Nat today as is their daughter Deborah. If you would let people know you're down here.

[Applause]

With that I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person* Mr. Nat Shaffir.

[Applause]

Welcome, Nat. Thank you so much for being willing to be our *First Person* today. I'm glad that we have a large crowd. We'll go ahead and get started if you don't mind.

>> Nat Shaffir: Thank you. Welcome.

>> Bill Benson: Nat, you were not yet 3 years old when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939 starting World War II. But before we turn to the war, tell us what you can about your family and your community in those years before the war began.

>> Nat Shaffir: Ok. As you saw on the map where Romania was, Romania was the border between Romania and Hungary. There was a small patch of land called Transylvania. That's where my family came from. My father was the youngest of six and my mother the oldest of 11. They stayed in Romania until my father married my mother. From there they moved to a small area close to Lasi called Bucium. They opened up a big dairy farm at that point. The rest of the family did remain in Transylvania.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little about the dairy farm and who they served, how they made ends meet with the dairy farm.

>> Nat Shaffir: My father and two brothers, actually, when they left Hungary they opened this big farm in Romania. They served primarily for the Romanian Army all their dairy products and for the community of the same area.

>> Bill Benson: The little community you lived in was Bucium?

>> Nat Shaffir: Bucium. It's a small agricultural village, small agricultural area.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what your home was like from what you know. As you say, it was very rural. You had no electricity. I don't believe.

>> Nat Shaffir: No.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that.

>> Nat Shaffir: Well, life was normal, what we considered normal at the time. Again, without electricity, without indoor plumbing, but we were pretty happy. We didn't know anything different. Being a young child, my sister a little older, we did have certain chores to do but life was ok.

>> Bill Benson: Life on the farm.

>> Nat Shaffir: Exactly.

>> Bill Benson: Was your family religious?

>> Nat Shaffir: Yes, my family was religious.

>> Bill Benson: In Bucium, which was a small community, was there much of a Jewish community there?

>> Nat Shaffir: Not a big Jewish community but at least had three families, two brothers of my father plus some other ones as well.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your sisters. When were they born in relation to you?

>> Nat Shaffir: My sister, two years apart. My sister born in 1934, and my younger sister was born 1938.

>> Bill Benson: You told me that at that time you don't believe there was really a lot of anti-Semitism, at least that your family was aware of, in that area.

>> Nat Shaffir: It was not anti-Semitism. When my parents moved to that location, for 20 years they lived in that area in Bucium. And my father was pretty much dealing with and helping out other farmers as well. For 20 years they were trading with these people. There was no problem whatsoever with any anti-Semitism.

>> Bill Benson: As you had said to me, your life was modest but you had what you needed and everybody was relatively content at that time in that community.

>> Nat Shaffir: That's correct.

>> Bill Benson: Before we move on, you told me you had three different birth dates.

>> Nat Shaffir: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that.

>> Nat Shaffir: Well, obviously when I was born, to be recorded into the official record, my father and my mother had to travel to the large city. Sometimes it took a week. Sometimes it took a month. Sometimes it took a couple of months to record our date of birth. So my father actually put our date of birth into a Bible stating exactly the date when we were born. So many times the Bible got misplaced. At one point my mother told me that I was born December 28, 1938. And one point I was born December 29, 1937.

And finally the reason what happened, I had an uncle, which later I'll tell you a little bit about, he came to Israel one year in July and his children wished him a happy birthday. And my mother who was alive at the time says, “What happy birthday in July? When you were born, there was snow on the ground.” So what he did, he send away to the Romanian government to request the birth certificate. And he got it back exactly mother was correct. He was born in February, not in July. So I did the same thing. I send away to the Romanian government to get a copy of my birth certificate and finally received it after so many months. Received my birth certificate saying that I was born December 26, 1936.

>> Bill Benson: Thanks for that.

>> Nat Shaffir: So now I have two birthdays. My children sometimes miss it a little bit.

>> Bill Benson: You get to celebrate twice? That's the question.

Although World War II began with Germany and Russia's attack on Poland in September 1939, it wasn't until 1941 that the lives of your family and other Jews in your

community near the city would change dramatically. What can you tell us about that period between the war beginning in Europe in September 1939 and the events that led up to the fall of 1942? Really that two-year period, what do you know about that?

>> Nat Shaffir: As I mentioned, we lived in this farm for probably 20 years. All our farmer friends, farmer neighbors, were pretty good with us, the farmers as well. We also had a neighbor, a priest. And he would come by to the house once a week asking my father for donations for the church and also ask for dairy products for some of the neighbors that couldn't afford.

One time in 1942, the end of 1942, he showed -- that same priest showed up with two policemen, armed policemen, and two Iron Guard soldiers. The individual who was in charge of these four people told my father that we have four hours to vacate the property and move. They told us that we could get one horse and one cart, one wagon, whatever we can carry and put in that wagon for the next four hours, that's what you're going to have.

First of all, my father asked this policeman, he said, “Look, I've known your family for so many years, known you since you were a little child. Can't you do something about it?” He said, "That's why we're giving you four hours." Otherwise we wouldn't give the four hours.

>> Bill Benson: Before we continue talking about that because that was the fall of 1942, you had lived for two years after war began in Europe -- do you know what affect the war was having, if any, before you actually were forced to move? I think the government began imposing anti-Semitic measures right away, beginning with the war.

>> Nat Shaffir: The Iron Guard was very anti-Semitic, actually did the dirty work for the Nazis.

Germany never occupied -- never came into Romania itself. But the Iron Guard did everything for the Nazis, whatever they asked to do.

>> Bill Benson: I think you told me that immediately there began to be tension generated by the Iron Guard and others between Jewish families and non-Jewish families that had not existed before.

>> Nat Shaffir: That's correct. Actually what happened is they tried to impose a lot of power on individual citizens. For instance, I remember one situation where my father hired one individual to cut wood for us. He came with two people. My father said, “I only hired you.” So he picked up his ax and says, “How many did you hire?” My father said, “Three of you.” So you get the information of what happened with the Iron Guard.

>> Bill Benson: Do you know if your family or your community was aware of what was happening to Jews elsewhere in Europe in the first couple of years of the war?

>> Nat Shaffir: Not at that time. There was no newspapers, no radios. No information came to us until later on, probably when we were already in the big city of Lasi.

>> Bill Benson: As you were explaining to us, in the fall of 1942, suddenly denounced by this priest and you've got four hours to move.

>> Nat Shaffir: Right.

>> Bill Benson: So what happened?

>> Nat Shaffir: My mother, after my father couldn't convince to stay there, my father took the three children, the three of us, and said get dressed quick, put on as many clothes as you can. Two shirts, two pair of pants, couple of pairs of socks. The only thing she was able to take,

she took some blankets, pillows, cooking utensils. She took some food that was available for her at that point, some dried meats and things like that to be stored through the winter, all the cash that we had at that time and all the jewelry. And we were escorted to a ghetto area in the city of Iasi.

>> Bill Benson: When I first talked you, you said that when that happened, it was like a “bolt out of the blue.” Those were your words. And the family was truly stunned. That's one of your early memories. You remember that yourself personally, don't you?

>> Nat Shaffir: Yes, I do. All of these bad memories you remember very well and very clearly.

>> Bill Benson: And you were I think forced to just take one cart.

>> Nat Shaffir: That's all, one cart and one horse. Actually the two policemen and the Iron Guard came on horses. They actually escorted us to make sure we don't vary, hide, or go somewhere, someplace else. So we were actually escorted to a ghetto area where most of the Jewish people lived at that particular time.

There were houses in this particular area, single family homes and maybe some house has four and five bedrooms. Once they put us into this ghetto, this area, each family received one room. So in the family that housed maybe four bedrooms, four families living there.

>> Bill Benson: What were the conditions like there?

>> Nat Shaffir: Conditions were pretty bad. Again, there was no electricity, no running water. There was other things, rations, but we never received those because those were pretty much sold on the black market. But we received the ration for bread every two days, received a

quarter of a bread per person. So a family of five would receive 1 1/4 bread.

>> Bill Benson: Loaf of bread for two years for the entire family.

>> Nat Shaffir: Correct. The bakery was outside the ghetto. You could not travel outside the ghetto unless you had a reason to go, like going to the bakery or go to the kerosene station to get the kerosene. All the time you had to wear a yellow star identifying us as Jews. Anybody who did not have the star and was caught outside the ghetto was punished very severely. The Jewish people were lining up every two days to get the bread portion for the two days. The regular population of the city would just come and buy whatever they needed.

>> Bill Benson: As you just said, you were able to go out for bread. You had mentioned to me that it was considered an open ghetto. What does that mean?

>> Nat Shaffir: There were 600 ghettos through the Holocaust. Some of them were closed ghettos. Some of them open. Closed ghettos were primarily either barbed wire enclosure or walls enclosure. Ours was a six-block radius that people were not allowed to leave that area. Some people actually did leave, risked their own lives to go out and tried to smuggle in food to the ghetto. Some of them were successful. Some of them were not so successful. Those who were not were eventually shot.

>> Bill Benson: As you told us a few minutes ago, the Iron Guard did the dirty work for the Nazis. Tell us a little bit about the Iron Guard, who they were.

>> Nat Shaffir: The Iron Guard was a fascist group of people. The leader at that time aligned with the right-winged people of Germany, the people from Italy. And then he actually did all the dirty work that the Germans requested of him to do. The Germans couldn't occupy every

country in Europe. So what they did, they appointed some of the individuals, some of the officers of some of the armies to do their dirty work. For Romania it was the Iron Guard.

>> Bill Benson: You would remain in this ghetto in Socola for three years, almost three years, until the end of the war really. Tell us what life was like for you during that time and what was happening to other Jews in Romania and in Lasi while you were there in Socola.

>> Nat Shaffir: In Romania, it was not a city. Actually had other ghettos as well, but in Romania, Lasi itself, where we were, things were, I would say, normal. But men between the age of 20 and 40 were taken to work every day, railroad station, unloading crates of ammunition for the Army or doing, quote, manual labor. They would leave in the morning and come back at night. Women primarily did work in hospitals. My mother worked in hospital as a nurse. My older sister who was at that time a little bit older worked as a maid and as a babysitter for some officers of the Iron Guard. The rest of us, I was in charge primarily of going out and staying in line and getting the bread portion of the day and also once a week kerosene that we were having under the ration program. I would say there's nothing else that we were able to do there.

>> Bill Benson: Right. I think as early as 1941, there was a major Pogrom conducted against Jews in Lasi. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

>> Nat Shaffir: July 31, 1941, 10,000 people were taken out and actually murdered. At the same token, same time, there was two trainloads of people were loaded in Lasi and would travel to Calarasi, approximately 150 kilometers, back and forth for three days; people without bread, without food or water. And when they come back after the three days, they came back

to Iasi half of the people on the train were dead. So there was a big, big Pogrom in 1941.

>> Bill Benson: That included some people that were from your family and from the ghetto that you were in.

>> Nat Shaffir: Correct.

>> Bill Benson: Did you lose any of the family members in that particular Pogrom?

>> Nat Shaffir: We did lose some neighbors, number one; some cousins. But also what happened, later on some of these men were actually taken away for slave labor, later on. The men were not able to come back on a daily basis anymore.

>> Bill Benson: As you mentioned, there was rationing. You could only get limited amounts of bread, do it every other day. In that time, how did your family make ends meet? How was it possible to do that?

>> Nat Shaffir: As long as my father was there, we still had some cash available, he was able to buy things from the black market. After he was -- after he left in 1944 until he actually came back -- he was shipped out east, helping repair railroad tracks for the Germans. So at 8, 8 1/2 years old, I got a job, being the head of the family and taking care of three people: my mother and two sisters, which was pretty hard. This probably must have been my worst year of my life. In the situations like that, one grows up very fast. I must have grown up probably 15 years in a matter of this year.

One instance, if I might add. When we were lining up for kerosene, we had these coupons. We lined up, some on Mondays, some on Thursdays. The attendant of the kerosene station would advance five people from the line, take their coupons out from the

ration card, and pump the gas out. Most of you -- I see a lot of young people here today. Most of you would not know that. But to be able to pump gasoline in those days, you had a pump with a handle. You keep moving the handle back and forth that would fill up a cylinder which would consist of five gallons. And then the hose would put into one of the cans. The flow of the gas would go in, that's the five gallons.

The individual was pretty much a lazy guy, a drunk. But he had the power to tell us what to do, what not to do. So he'll advance five people, take your coupons out and go rest in the booth. Sometimes he'd light a cigarette and let the rest of the people wait. Then all of a sudden something hit me. I said, well, this could be something that could help me a little bit. I came to this individual one day. His name is Grigory. Said people remember names, numbers. Remember Grigory. I actually gave him a title, Mr., or Sir. I said, “I'd like to help you.” Now, here --

>> Bill Benson: You're 8 1/2?

>> Nat Shaffir: 8 1/2 years old. He looks at me and says, "You're going to help me, you little Zhidan?” Now, Zhidan is a derogatory word for a Jew. I said, “Yeah.” He said, “How are you going to help me?” I said, “I tell you what. You look tired and probably sick. Why don't you stay in the booth. I'll collect the coupons, bring it in to you. You take the coupons from the ration card. I'll pump the gas. And when my turn in line comes, I'd like a little extra kerosene.” He didn't say anything. He says, “I'll see how you do.”

So two weeks, the next two weeks, I'm pumping the gas for the people. One day he says to me, “Next week bring an extra can with you.” So he gave me sometimes one extra

gallon, sometimes two extra gallons. The most I ever see was three. And once I received that extra kerosene, I was able to trade some of that with other people. Because two things were a commodity, kerosene was one and bread was the other.

Later on, after a while, I became friendly with him also. Sometimes I used to go and stand in line early in the morning. Then I realized early in the morning, being among the first ones, wouldn't be good for me because this individual, Grigory, might want to hire another one to do the same thing. So I kind of stayed late, come into the end of the line, so I can do all the pumping of the gasoline for the entire line almost.

So one day when my father left, was taken away, deported in 1944, I found a bottle of Slivovitz, which is a plum brandy, in the house. I wrapped it in some rags. I came to him, I said, "Dominick Grigory, I got a present for you." I opened up the rags. He saw the bottle of Slivovitz. His eyes lit up. He said -- I said to him, "You know, what I would like for that, I would like you to give me a ration card for a family." He said to me, "Are you trying to bribe me? Because if you do, I can have you shot." I said, "I know that."

So for two weeks we didn't say anything to each other. After two weeks, he came to me and gave me a ration card for four people which means I was able to get additional five gallons of kerosene on a Thursday and I was able to get a loaf of bread again for my family. And that loaf of bread I was able to trade for eggs, potatoes. So you can imagine, 8 1/2 years old trading with black marketeers or smugglers.

>> Bill Benson: When I think -- we may have a chance to talk about this later. Later, you would become a paratrooper. You were a very brave little boy, so it's no surprise you became

a paratrooper. And you had a successful life as an entrepreneur. That clearly was also one of the things that you exhibited at a very early age.

>> Nat Shaffir: I must say one thing, though. When I first started to trade -- the first time I asked for gasoline to trade, came to the area where people were trading, everybody knew each other. One individual came over and says, “What do you have?” I says, “I have some extra kerosene and I have half a loaf of bread.” He says, “I'll give you three eggs and two potatoes for that.” I accepted. Later on I found out that the rate for this amount of gasoline and the bread was at least four eggs and three large potatoes. So I never dealt with this individual anymore since that time because I figured that he cheated me. He saw a little kid. He cheated me, and I never traded with him again.

>> Bill Benson: During that time were you able to, and your sisters, were you able to get any education?

>> Nat Shaffir: That's one thing my mother always insisted, on education. So whatever we had left over from the trading, she would get teachers in the community, in the ghetto, to teach the three of us and a couple of others. She would trade dairy products, whatever she had, to give the teacher that was an elderly person, primarily, to teach us.

>> Bill Benson: So in effect home schooling you.

>> Nat Shaffir: Because we couldn't go to school anymore. The schools were closed for Jewish people.

>> Bill Benson: Right. At some point your father somehow managed to get some cattle. Tell us about that.

>> Nat Shaffir: Back in Bucium, my father had some of these farmers that he was dealing with.

Before I get to that, I want to say something else. Some word got back to him from some of these farmers. And they said, “Why don't you wait” -- usually Thursday morning was market day. And the farmers would leave 12:00 midnight with the caravan of different carts and different wagons to go to the market and bring their products. So these farmers somehow got word to my father and said, “Why don't you wait on the outskirts of the ghetto and watch the last two wagons.” Always the last two wagons. A sack would fall down. Inside you would find some potatoes, some meats, some bread, some cheeses. These farmers would actually leave my father because my father helped them out in the past, would drop off certain food for us. That took for a while. After a while, word come back to him and said we have a problem because some people realizing what we are doing and we are afraid for our lives and we are no longer going to be able to drop off any of this food.

I'm sorry. What was the question?

>> Bill Benson: Your father was able to obtain some cattle.

>> Nat Shaffir: Yes. Some of the farmers, since they were able to move easily back and forth so my father bought 35 cows.

>> Bill Benson: These were farmers he had been friendly with.

>> Nat Shaffir: For 20 years. So we housed them in the outskirts of the ghetto. There was a big lot or big field. That's where we were able to do it, taking that part, whatever we were able to manufacture -- not manufacturer but produce this milk, able to trade and try to get certain

things.

But once he left, I could not do anymore of that. My mother started to help with that, although she didn't have much time to do it because she worked in the hospital most of the time.

>> Bill Benson: But she somehow managed the cattle as part of your survival there. You told me -- of course, you had gone out to get the bread rations. Your mother was very afraid of your sister going out and doing that.

>> Bill Benson: That's right. Because once you got out of the ghetto, was a free for all. Some young hoodlums would probably pick my sisters, especially older sister. So my father always told me -- the day he left, the last thing he says, "Nat, take care of the girls." So I was the only one to go out and do whatever needed to be done. Not once did I come back with bloody nose, but I threw some punches myself.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Came back with the bread sometimes.

>> Nat Shaffir: And with bread.

>> Bill Benson: Your father had some brothers. Were their families with you in Socola?

>> Nat Shaffir: They were in Iasi but not in the same ghetto. There was different ghettos, different groups of streets. They were not in the same place. Not that far.

>> Bill Benson: Were you able to have any connection with them?

>> Nat Shaffir: Very little.

>> Bill Benson: Very little. Would the Iron Guard come into the ghetto?

>> Nat Shaffir: There were some policemen come in. We knew exactly when they were coming in because word would come out. For those who were dealing and trading, they knew exactly when they come. So they kind of advanced notice. They would come and said they needed extra man power for the specific jobs that they had.

The day that my father was taken away, two days before there were signs all over the city saying you must report, people between the age of 20 and 40, must report to the synagogue yard. Failure to report is punishable by death. Some people tried to run away and hide. Those who did, the Iron Guard would take the family out to the main square of the ghetto and shot. And they were told not to take them away from there so other people could learn a lesson.

>> Bill Benson: The bodies there.

>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: When your father was taken away for forced labor, do you know where he went and what he did?

>> Nat Shaffir: He went on the border between the border of Germany and Poland. He was fixing the railroad tracks that were bombed by the ally forces. And then later on he was further into Poland, towards Russia. They were laying railroad tracks so the trains would keep going.

>> Bill Benson: Dangerous circumstances.

>> Nat Shaffir: Very hard work as well.

>> Bill Benson: Did your mother have any contact with him when he was gone?

>> Nat Shaffir: No. Didn't have any contact whatsoever for almost a year and a half.

>> Bill Benson: Were you allowed to continue practicing your religious beliefs while you were in the ghetto?

>> Nat Shaffir: We weren't allowed, per se. We did pray. But not in matter of going to a synagogue or anything like that. But we were able to pray among us.

>> Bill Benson: You had told me that there was a public bath you could use because you didn't have running water. There was no electricity. There was a public bath you were allowed to use from time to time.

>> Nat Shaffir: The public bath was divided by two ways. One day a week men were able to go there. And one day of the week women were able to go. Obviously only once a week.

>> Bill Benson: Of course, you were the man of the family. You were out bartering and getting the goods that you needed to survive, but you were still a kid. What did you do as a kid during that time? Were you able to do anything for fun or recreation while there in the ghetto?

>> Nat Shaffir: There was no fun whatever. The best you could do was hope for the best and try to make maybe a good deal with somebody. Try to survive from there. Really tried to survive and make sure my family survives.

>> Bill Benson: I was struck when you told me one time when we talked, you said to have anything to play with, I think you played marbles with walnuts.

>> Nat Shaffir: With walnuts, right. Dig a hole. Pushed it with walnuts.

>> Bill Benson: And I think rags for a soccer ball.

>> Nat Shaffir: Right. You make due whatever you can. You make due with certain things. It was a hard life. It was a very hard life.

>> Bill Benson: And that would go on until you were liberated by the Russians.

>> Nat Shaffir: By the Russians.

>> Bill Benson: And when you were liberated, your father was still away on the forced labor detail that he was on. Tell us about the events leading up to the liberation and what was happening in Iasi and what you knew was about to happen.

>> Nat Shaffir: There was many bombardments through 1943, 1944, probably by the Russians, maybe some by the Americans. But three days before the Russian invaded Romania, there was tremendous bombardment day and night. All the people from the ghetto would go into the fields. They dug up a lot of bunkers, covered with timber. That's where they stayed through the entire bombardment. So three days before they came and liberated Romania, there was tremendous bombardment. The fourth day was always quiet. We looked out from the slat from underneath the bunker and we see these soldiers dressed in long gray coats with fur hats and a red star on their hat. And one of the individuals that was in the bunker says these are Russians. And right away they says we are liberated. And everybody was very happy. But nobody dared go out of the bunker still at that time.

Later on, the next day, we were able to go out. The Russians actually brought food, stuff, sardines and all kinds of things they gave us.

>> Bill Benson: Prior to the liberation but during the bombardments, you were, of course, forced to blacken all of your windows. Tell us a little bit about that.

>> Nat Shaffir: The Romanians thought the Jews actually are signaling the pilots where to drop bombs. So they would leave a light, for instance, a candle light burning into a certain

room so you could see it through the windows. Now, the allies primarily tried to bomb the armies, the depots. They said the reason -- what you have to do, you have to black out or darken the window so no light would shine through so the pilots couldn't see exactly where to drop their bombs.

>> Bill Benson: And if you didn't do that, the penalties were severe.

>> Nat Shaffir: Very severe. Many times -- the reason that the people obeyed, because what they did, they shot people on the street. They shot people because they didn't obey the Iron Guards' wishes. People know. We saw it. We saw people getting killed in front of me. Because for whatever reason, they did something wrong.

>> Bill Benson: So when you were in the bunker and you realized that these were Russian soldiers and eventually you came out, do you know if there was a sense of it really is over for us now or because there was still obviously war going on around you, a fear that the Iron Guard or the Germans would, you know, counterattack and you would be right back in the same situation? Do you know when there was a sense in your community that, whew, we really are safe now?

>> Nat Shaffir: When the Russians came and all of a sudden we realized we don't need rations anymore, we can get whatever we want. Jobs were available to work for the Russian armies. We didn't see the Iron Guard anymore because most of them were either captured or ran away. So all of a sudden we realized we can leave the ghetto without having the yellow star pinned to our chest and were able to go to different places. Then we realized we were pretty much secure.

>> Bill Benson: So the Russians were relatively decent to you?

>> Nat Shaffir: In the beginning they were very decent. They gave us food. They did whatever they can. Later on we found out under the Communist regime wasn't so great because the Russians were anti-Semites as well. Although we were able to go to school, but children who were doing well in school were allowed to join the Communist young party or the youth, Communist youth, which was called the pioneers. Well, Jews could never join that club strictly because of the Jewish people.

>> Bill Benson: I'm hoping we can talk a little more about that but at some point your father did return. Will you tell us what you remember about that?

>> Nat Shaffir: Some people returned. The ones who were taken away the same time my father was taken away, some said we saw your father a month ago or six weeks ago. He was actually shipped closer west. My father was a pretty strong individual. So we thought labor probably wouldn't kill him, starvation would. So people said, well, we saw him this such and such date. So we know if you saw him six weeks before that, chances are we're probably going to see him. And that's how later on he made his way back to Iasi. Obviously was very, very happy about that.

>> Bill Benson: You told me he literally just one day walked up. Here he is.

>> Nat Shaffir: Showed up. There was no communication, obviously. So we didn't know where he is. He couldn't communicate with us. The only communication was people that came back from the same area that had slave labor, they would come back and say, yes, we saw him or we didn't see him. So that was the only communication.

>> Bill Benson: And you remember him coming back.

>> Nat Shaffir: Oh, yeah. Yeah. He was obviously very skinny.

>> Bill Benson: But he was there.

>> Nat Shaffir: He was there.

>> Bill Benson: What about his brothers?

>> Nat Shaffir: Both brothers came back later on. And then actually one brother was able to leave Romania before we did under the Communist regime. And one stayed and never left, died in Romania. He couldn't leave. He couldn't leave Romania at that time anymore.

>> Bill Benson: At one point when the war was over and your father is back, sounds like there is an attempt to re-establish kind of a normal life, people getting jobs, tell us what your father did to get himself reestablished at that time. And also tell us at what point do you think the enormity of the Holocaust really became known to your family and to your community, whether you really knew what had happened throughout Europe.

>> Nat Shaffir: First thing obviously we moved out of the ghetto and got another house, another apartment. One day my father said to me why don't we go back to the farm and see what's happened with our farm. We came back there, and what happened is the farm was divided into four. One of the four -- 25% of the farm, one of the four portions, the owner was the priest's brother-in-law.

>> Bill Benson: The priest who denounced you.

>> Nat Shaffir: Correct. So we realized what the priest did was actually something financially beneficial for him. And that's what he did.

So the farmers that actually helped, dropped off the sacks of food from time to time came to us and said, “I would recommend that you no longer come back here because they're going to kill you.” So we never saw the farm again. Till many, many years I filed claims for it. Still pending.

So obviously there was no way of going back to where we came from. So my father did whatever he was able to do. Immediately he realized in 1947 that this is not a place for us to be anymore. So he tried -- we tried to leave. But it was very hard to get exit visa from Romania under the Communist regime. Finally, later on he was able to bribe a high official to get an exit visa to Israel.

>> Bill Benson: Until that point, because he couldn't get his farm back, what did he do to be able to feed a family and take care of a family?

>> Nat Shaffir: Since he dealt with the Iron Guard Army, he tried to make contacts with the Russian armies. Did the same thing. So he would try to figure out ways to actually deal with these people. They were a captive audience pretty much. He dealt with them for a while. We were able to go back to school but not really much else.

>> Bill Benson: When did you begin to fully grasp the losses to your own extended family and know the extent of the Holocaust?

>> Nat Shaffir: I think it was probably maybe six months later. Again, there's no phone calls, no individuals that came from this area. Started to know that Germany invaded Hungary in March of 1944. Between April 15 and July 9, 1944, 440,000 Jews were deported from Hungary. 33 of these 440,000 were part of my family. These 33 individuals, aunts, uncles,

cousins, grandparents. So most of them, the young ones and the old ones, they were all shipped to Auschwitz and Treblinka, to the gas chambers. Once they arrived to Auschwitz, within six hours these people were dead. The other ones were able to work. The stronger ones were sent to slave labor camp.

My grandfather and two of his sons, my uncles, were working in a camp. My grandfather actually starved to death a month before liberation by the Americans. Two of his sons, two of my uncles, survived. One was 21 and one was 22 years old. They were sick. There were malnutritions. Each one weighed 65 pounds at age 22. So you can imagine what they looked like.

What the people did at that point, they put them on ships to send them to Sweden to recuperate. Both of my uncles shipped to a sanatorium to Sweden. One of these two uncles died on the way to Sweden. And only one survived and eventually was able to immigrate to the United States. That's when I found out what happened to my family.

>> Bill Benson: Of all that were deported, I think one returned.

>> Nat Shaffir: That's the uncle that I mentioned, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: You and your family, as you began to tell us, lived then under the Communists until 1950, another five years. Tell us a little bit more about what life was like for you on the communists. Obviously as you were saying your father knew this was not a place you could stay. He was compelled then to try to find a way to get you out.

>> Nat Shaffir: First of all, there was no more Jewish freedom. No freedom of religion. The communists did not believe in freedom of religion. So if you had to pray or go to synagogue,

you had to go primarily to make sure that nobody sees you.

Again, the Russians themselves didn't do well for the Jewish people. They did a lot of things that people could not imagine, that after the war was over people would still do certain things. The Iron Guard, some of the top echelon officers, eventually were part of the government of Romania.

>> Bill Benson: So even though they were fascists, they became part of the Communist government?

>> Nat Shaffir: Correct. [Inaudible] was one of them. We know what he did for the Jewish people. So it was pretty tough, pretty hard. Freedom of movement was ok, but not too far. You couldn't go that far. Schooling was ok, but, again, we were not included among the children.

>> Bill Benson: You started to tell us earlier that as you were doing well in school but you were not able to join the activities that other students could participate in, there's a pioneer program you started to talk about.

>> Nat Shaffir: Children that did well in school -- I know my younger sister was probably top in her class. I was not as good as she was. I must have been third in the class. We were not allowed to join the pioneers. That hurt a lot because we were looked down at. Because these kids, because they're not part of pioneers -- and the pioneers had a red scarf or a red tie identifying them as a Communist youth. Since we did not walk around with that red scarf, they know that we are dumb or we didn't do much, well, in school.

>> Bill Benson: And the combination of all of those things, your father then begins to try to get

you out. How did he get you out?

>> Nat Shaffir: First he applied for exit visas. Every time he applied, the visas were denied for various reasons. And then finally he was able to bribe an official. He gave us an exit visa. From there we went from Iasi, traveled to the seaport of the Black Sea. There we waited for a ship to take us out. The only way we were able to leave Romania at that point was in a cargo ship. I remember we actually -- most of the people leaving there, there was a big hull where they carried grain or any other commodities. That's where they took from us Romania to Israel, took us approximately two weeks to get there.

>> Bill Benson: How did your father manage to get enough to bribe?

>> Nat Shaffir: My mother still had some jewelry, some of the cash. That's probably how they were able to bribe the right people.

>> Bill Benson: And I remember you telling me a little bit about they had one large wooden trunk.

>> Nat Shaffir: Right. It's like when you go to camp. They build a large wooden trunk and in there our possessions. And the possessions were blankets, pillows, some things that today you wouldn't think were of any value. But that's what we had. That's what we took.

>> Bill Benson: That was your possessions. What was it like to land in Israel?

>> Nat Shaffir: It was great. First of all, the freedom that we had was enormous. The first time I saw an orange. I never knew what oranges looked like or tasted like. So once we got to Israel everything was pretty new and everything was great. Schooling was fun. You lived among Jewish people. Things were really great. And then my father was able to do certain

things. My mother became a nurse again. Things were good. In Israel things were good.

>> Bill Benson: And your father got back into the dairy business.

>> Nat Shaffir: Correct. And then he was dealing various things. My father was an entrepreneur as well. He always was able to make money.

>> Bill Benson: I think you were initially living in some very limited circumstances.

>> Nat Shaffir: Once you arrive, you lived in an absorption center. There we were able to get from the state of Israel, able to get a cot, a blanket. Food was given to you on a daily basis. You go in a certain area where they had a dining room and kitchen. You get your food for the day.

>> Bill Benson: You said it was sort like a tent city.

>> Nat Shaffir: Tent city. Right. Then you get that. You take it back to the tent. You make do with that.

Again, my father realized that's not a way to live as well. So he tried to get out of there. And later on we were shipped to another location where we lived in British barracks, which was stone barracks with metal roofings. And then there we had maybe two families per barrack. So we were able to -- a little more humane. People were sitting on their beds and eating. My father, first thing he did, he got some wood together and made a table. Especially my mother, she always wanted to make everything proper. So instead of eating on the bed, we'll have a table.

>> Bill Benson: And your dad was an incredible handy man. Made the table.

Did any of your other extended family members -- did they remain in Romania?

>> Nat Shaffir: One of the brothers, father's brothers, stayed in Romania, and a sister. The rest were killed or murdered. The sister later on came to Israel. One of the brothers came as well. Actually, he came before us. And the rest of the family remained there. Some of the cousins eventually came back to Israel as well.

>> Bill Benson: Nat, in 1955, you joined the Israeli Army and became part of an elite paratrooper unit that fought in the Suez Canal in 1956. You were wounded, which is remarkable enough that you were wounded and you're here with us today, but there's another twist to it, if you will, that I would like you to share with us.

>> Nat Shaffir: After I was wounded in my knee, they took me from the fighting fields back into the cities. They took me to the hospital where my mother was a nurse. That's the first time she saw me being in a wounded soldier. And my mother was the nurse there so that's -- that was a way of meeting my mother.

>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind, I think we've got some time to turn to our audience and see if they have some questions they'd like to ask of you.

>> Nat Shaffir: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: If not, I'll come back with a few more. But I think we've got a lively audience here. Hopefully -- we've got a hand up already. Got a couple. What we would like you to do is use the microphones. Sonia is here. I think Emily is coming down here with microphones. Wait until you get the microphone. Try to make the question as brief as you can. If need be, I'll repeat it just to make sure we all hear the question. And then Nat will respond you.

A gentleman there.

>> Did your father ever talk about the specifics of his forced labor? Did he ever talk with the family about the things he had to do, the trials he went through?

>> Nat Shaffir: A lot of people really didn't talk about it. We knew that he was in slave labor camp. We saw when he arrived how skinny he was, knew he suffered from malnutrition. But he never really spoke a lot about it. Actually, recently my 11th grandchild was born and they named her after my grandmother. And my son asked me, “What do you know about your grandmother?” And I said, “Absolutely nothing.” That was bad. That was really tough on me, not to tell my son what I know about my grandmother.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. I think we've got one right here. Yes, sir? Oh, go ahead. Use the microphone if you can. Ok?

>> Who were the people being gassed?

>> Bill Benson: One more time?

>> Who were the people being gassed?

>> Bill Benson: There were people being gassed. That happened to Nat's family.

>> Nat Shaffir: The people that couldn't work or that the Germans did not think they could contribute anything to their society. So there was primarily young children who couldn't work, their mothers, and old people.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you for asking that.

Yes, sir?

>> What made your family leave Israel and come to the U.S.?

>> Bill Benson: What made you leave Israel and come to the United States?

>> Nat Shaffir: After I finished the Army, I tried to do something. I did not know what I wanted to do. My uncle that survived the Holocaust living in the United States at the time. I asked him if he would mind sponsoring me to come for a visit, to come as a visitor to the United States. And he did. Visited here for a while. I realized the potential of the United States, what a great country it is. I eventually changed my visitor's visa to a permanent resident. After that I eventually got my Green Card and decided to stay.

>> Bill Benson: I'll take advantage of the question, though. It wasn't as easy as that.

>> Nat Shaffir: No, it wasn't as easy as that. First of all, because I came in as a visitor's visa, I had to leave the country and come back again. Literally for two weeks. Come back again under different visa as a request for permanent resident. It took approximately three years to become -- to get my Green Card although I was able to work at the time and do things but not really a permanent resident of the United States at that time.

>> Bill Benson: All right. We've got a question right here, a young lady.

>> You mentioned earlier that you were involved with the synagogue. I was just wondering what you do.

>> Bill Benson: Oh, we mentioned that you had been the Executive Director of the synagogue.

>> Nat Shaffir: The Executive Director of the synagogue. That's pretty much handling the synagogue or the daily activities, management primarily.

>> Bill Benson: And that was relatively recently.

Do we have other question? Right here.

>> As you have conquered some very serious trials, what advice would you give to us as we

endure our own personal trials?

>> Bill Benson: You endured many trials. What advice would you offer to young people as they face their own trials?

>> Nat Shaffir: Well, you need to be committed. If you're committed enough, you probably could do anything that you want to do. The commitment and stick to this commitment.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. I was going to ask you -- I know that you've not returned to Romania. But you were considering it recently. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah. My son Jeff, which is a colonel in the Reserves, he does a lot of things with the European Armed Forces. So he was in Macedonia a while back. Must have been a couple of months ago, six months ago. He's involved with NATO. So he said, “Dad, how about meeting me and we'll travel back to see where you grew up.” Somehow -- it was a great idea, but somehow we couldn't manage timewise. But hopefully one day I might still go back. Although, the memories were so bad that I don't look forward to it. Some people that went back that I understand were there, they said there's nothing really to see. But nonetheless, the houses are still standing. But the memories were too bad for me to actually wanting to go back.

>> Bill Benson: So it would take some unique circumstances.

>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah. But maybe my kids will one day take me to see -- show them where I was born, the year I was born. Maybe they'll figure it out.

>> Bill Benson: Now that we've pinpointed that.

Well, I think it looks like -- oh, one more question. Then we'll close our program.

Yes, sir?

>> You said there was a priest that gave you up to the Iron Guard. Did that priest repeat that to other farmers and other people that were around where you lived?

>> Bill Benson: The priest who denounced you to the Iron Guard, do you know if he was doing that to other Jews in the community?

>> Nat Shaffir: He must have. We didn't stick around to find out. But when he came with these officers and the guard pointing to us as -- these are the Jews, probably would take them to other places because these people probably wanted to know where other Jews lived as well.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. I'm going to turn back to Nat in just a few moments to close our program. I want to thank all of you for being with us. Thank you.

We will have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. So I invite you to return either this year if you can or in future years. The Museum's website will have information about *First Person* in 2015.

I'm going to turn to Nat for his last word because it's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* gets the last word. Before doing that, I want to mention two things. When Nat's done, you can stay behind for a few minutes to chat with anybody. If you have a question that you think I should have asked or I'd just like to say hi, Nat will be available to do that. So please do that. But I'm also going to, when Nat's finished, ask you all to stand because Joel, our expert photographer, is going to come up on stage and take a photo of Nat with you as the backdrop. It's just a lovely effect. So if you don't mind, we're going to have

you all rise for that occasion.

Nat?

>> Nat Shaffir: I'd like to leave you with a quote from Martin Mueller who said, "First they came for the people, obviously the Nazis. I did not speak out. I was not a Nazi. Then they came for the trade unions. I did not speak out because I was not a trade union member. Then they came for the Jews. I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me and nobody was left to speak out for me."

My point is this. Every one of us here knows sometimes at some point things are done wrong and we keep quiet. It's very important we do not remain silent because people that remain silent -- you see what happened to those millions of Jews that were murdered in Germany. Even today we have people in Darfur being killed, Sudan. We must say something. We cannot remain silent.

Thank you.

[Applause]

[The First Person event ended at 11:53 a.m.]