Wednesday, May 06, 2015

11:00 – 12:05 pm EDT

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
"First Person" Series
Interview with Peter Gorog

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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. We are in our 16th year of the "First Person" program. Our "First Person" today is Mr. Péter Gorog, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2015 season of First Person is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

"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 of our "First Person" guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. The museum's website, at 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 will find in their program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater. In doing so, you will also receive an electronic copy of Péter Gorog's biography so that you can remember and share his testimony after you leave here today.

Péter will share his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, there will be an opportunity for you to ask Péter some questions.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Péter is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

Peter Gorog was born in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, in March, 1941 as Péter Grünwald. He changed his family name in 1962 to Gorog. The arrow on this map of Europe points to Hungary. on this next map, the arrow points to Budapest.

Peter's father, Árpád Grünwald, worked as office manager at a Publishing House, while his mother, Olga Schönfeld,was a hat maker and she raised Peter. This was the last picture of the family together. Peter was 3 months old.

Péter's father was conscripted to work in the

Hungarian Forced Labor Battalion.here is a photo of the Forced Labor Battalion. The arrow to the left points to Péter's father, Árpád.

Around December of 1942 Peter's father was taken to Ukraine where he died.Péter and his mother remained in Budapest during in time. In 1944 German forces invaded Hungary. Péter and his mother were evicted from their apartment and went into hiding with a Christian family. A few days later a neighbor denounced them, the Hungarian gendarmerie arrested Péter's mother and put her in jail. This is a historic photograph from October 1944 of Jewish women in Budapest arrested by Hungarian police.

Two days after her arrest, Péter's mother escaped and she and Péter moved into an apartment safeguarded by Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. Later they fled to the Budapest ghetto where they lived with some of the Péter's other relatives until the end of the war. In January 1945, Budapest was liberated by the Soviet Army.

In 1946, Péter's mother made plans for them to emmigrate to the United States. While in 1949 while they were waiting for their Visa, the Communist government from Hungary closed the borders. Péter grew up in Hungary.

In 1980, Péter defected to the United States. He worked for more than 30 years at NASA's Goddard space flight center in Greenbelt, Maryland. Although Péter's mother had attempted to

emigrate after the war, they were unable to leave until his defection in 1980. While in Hungary, Péter was eventually able to attend University and he earned a master's degree in electrical engineering. He was part of the team that built the first computer designed completely by Hungarians. His education and experience made it possible for Péter to remain and work in the U.S. following his defection until he received his green card and later became a U.S. citizen.

Péter who retired in 2014 spent 34 years in the computer field in the U.S., spending most of his time, as I said, at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center where he worked on major projects as LANDSAT

The Hubble Space Telescope, the Space Shuttle, and the James Webb Telescope, which is to be launched in 2018.

Following his retirement last year, Péter became more actively involved with this Museum and began volunteering here. He translates documents written in Hungarian and video testimonies of Holocaust survivors and eyewitnesses. He describes his work as "very emotional."

Péter and his wife Jorgy live in Maryland just outside of Washington, DC. They have four daughters, Sarah, Laura, Anna, and Ilana. They lost their daughter Juliana when she was just two years old. Peter's daughter, Veronika, from his earlier marriage in Hungary, lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and her two daughters Monica, age 7 and Katalina age 5. They are a very close-knit family.

I am pleased to let you know that Péter is accompanied today by Jorgy and their daughters Laura, Anna, Ilana, and Laura's husband Robert Walburn.

If you wouldn't mind, raise your hand so you know where you are right you down there. Thank you.

Péter is just now beginning to speak publicly about his Holocaust experience having previously spoken only at his children's schools.

With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Péter Gorog.

(applause).

>> Péter Gorog: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: Péter, thank you so much for joining us. For you to be our "First Person" today, you have so much to share with us so we will start right away. World War II began, of course, with Germany and Russia invading Poland until September 1939. Before you turn to the war years and the Holocaust, tell us a little bit first about your family and their life before the war.

>> Péter Gorog: Let me give just a little historical perspective. I won't go back 2,000 years but maybe 100, 150. In the mid 18th century, the Jewish population of Hungary enjoyed the freedom, actually so much so that many Jews from other parts of Europe fled to Hungary.

And this was the nature of Hungarian Judaism lasted until the First World War when everything ended. Unfortunately Hungary was under the losing side of the war. Hungary lost about 60% of their territory and 3,000 Hungarians ended up beyond the Hungarian border which caused tremendous stress and trouble for Hungarians in general and for Jews specifically.

My parents were born in 1907, both of them. They were born into Jewish families. My father was born into a (inaudible) Jewish family. It is very similar to conservative Judaism. Here it is more liberal than the conservative one.

My mother was born into a very Orthodox family. My great grandfather was a rabbi in a small town in Hungary that is now part of Slovakia.

They agree up in a family, here we would call middle class families. They went to high school. My father, he aspired to be a lawyer. Unfortunately he wasn't able to fulfill his dream because after the war in Hungary, they enacted a law which was the very first anti-Jewish law in

Europe even before the famous Nuremberg laws which restricted the participation of Jews in higher education to the percentage of the general population which was about 5%.

>> Bill Benson: So no more than 5% of the law school student body could be Jewish?

>> Péter Gorog: That's correct. And unfortunately my father never got into the University or law school.

My mom, she was always good with her hands. She was a very smart woman. But she didn't want to go to college or university. So she went to trade school and she became a hat maker, milliner. Which was very fashionable during the '20s and '30s and she made a very good living.

>> Bill Benson: You described to me that she was sort of the black sheep of her family.

>> Péter Gorog: I didn't know that it was going to come up.

(laughter).

Yes. In a way, she was, as I said -- she grew up in a very Orthodox family. They kept all the dietary laws. And among the customs were that Jewish women before their wedding, they go through a ritual bath. And my mom went to hers the day before the wedding, not remembering or thinking about that in the morning of the wedding she has to go to this ritual bath where she was immersed in the water all the way down. And she had to go do it over again.

>> Bill Benson: Do it over again.

>> Péter Gorog: But she observed Jewish laws but not as much as her siblings I came to know. It had an effect on me as I grew up and I was searching for my identity.

>> Bill Benson: Péter, how large of an extended family did you have?

>> Péter Gorog: My mom had eight siblings. Of the eight ones survived the Holocaust, two emigrated to the United States just before the war. My mom and two of my aunts. The rest of them, one died of sickness even before the war. And the rest of them died after the Holocaust.

On my father's side, unfortunately, I don't have a lot to say about them because my father died in 1942. So one of his brothers -- two of his brothers, one survived but the family just lost the connection during and after the Holocaust with them.

>> Bill Benson: Before the war began, I think you told me your father eventually joined your mother in the business. Is that right?

>> Péter Gorog: Yeah. That's correct. He was a clerk in a publishing company. They thought maybe the hat-making business would be good for them working together. And my father started to study hat making, believe it or not. And he was very good at it. But that never came to fruition either because at the end of 1940, even before I was born, he was taken to the Forced Labor Battalion.

>> Bill Benson: Péter, of course, the war began in 1939 September. But the full brunt of the war and the mass deportation of Jews from Hungary didn't really get underway until 1944. Nonetheless, conditions worsened for Jews in 1939 and got increasingly worse for your family and other Jews in Hungary from then on. And then, of course, as you said, your father was taken for forced labor in 1940.

Tell us what you can about the circumstances for you and your family once the war began and then about your father being conscripted into the Labor Battalion.

>> Péter Gorog: My parents got married in 1936, and I was born in 1941. My father was taken to the forced labor camp at the end of 1940, before I was born. He was released for two weeks after my birth. And that picture was taken during that time.

I obviously don't have personal memories, but I know about Hungarian history. I know about the anti-Jewish laws they enacted starting from 1938 where they restricted the number of Jews who could work even at private companies. No government jobs for Jews. Actually the numbers were

restricted in many professions, lawyers, doctors. They couldn't be editors of newspapers or any media.

Later on, they enacted operational laws just like the Nuremberg laws in Germany, namely that everybody was qualified as Jewish whose at least one grandparent was Jewish which caused a lot of problem and caused a lot of lies because it is part of the Hungarian history that Hungarian Jews start to assimilate as much as they could. They changed their German surname to Hungarian surname as I did later on.

They did actually voluntarily converted to Christianity. So when the war came and all these Jewish laws -- Jewish males between age 18 to 50 were taken to forced labor camps, these people tried to prove that they were not Jewish and they submitted all kinds of petitions to the government to declare them Christians. Some of them were born into families which were already converted to Christianity. So they were baptized in churches, and they had their baptism certificates. Nevertheless, it didn't save their lives.

The reason I know it, I'm working with documents in the archives where these petitions are stored. And I'm translating them. And through the petitions, there is a stamp that says "rejected, rejected, rejected." Knowing what happens to these people, it is a very hard thing.

That's why as our family's concerned, my father went to a forced labor camp. My mom worked as hard as she could.

>> Bill Benson: She was able to continue her work during that time?

>> Péter Gorog: That's correct.

>> Bill Benson: Okay.

>> Péter Gorog: And actually she could even afford to hire a maid who took care of me while she was working. This one didn't last long either because another law came out which prohibited non-Jewish people to work for Jews. This one affected my mom obviously and also affected a young girl from a village who lost her job and her livelihood.

My mom had to cope with the situation as much as possible.

>> Bill Benson: Did she know where your father was when he was taken for forced labor?

>> Péter Gorog: Yes and no. My father was able to send postcards. The postcards were obviously censored and they didn't let him write anything about the circumstances where he was.

So I can only follow his movement from the Hungarian archives where his battalion was recorded from time to time. So unfortunately I do know that my mom didn't know much about him because at one point, after I was born, my mom started to write a diary. She wanted to remember everything which happened to her and happened to me so at the time when she hoped that my father would return she would be able to recount the family history. Fortunately she preserved that diary. And I'm in the process of translating it. And if the museum needs it, I would donate it.

My mom also preserved all the cards my father sent back from the forced labor camps. So we have a glimpse of their life, what it was at that time.

>> Bill Benson: And you actually have all the postcards, including what you think is the very last one that he was -- he sent to her?

>> Péter Gorog: Yes, I do have. And if time permits, I will just give you a glimpse of what happened to them at that time. This is the card, the last one my mom got. It's dated 1942 December 10.

And just a couple of quotes from the card, if I may.

>> Bill Benson: While you're looking for that, I was struck by how neat and small your father's handwriting was.

>> Péter Gorog: You can see obviously he had to jam as much information as possible. And

it's interesting, I didn't notice that aspect of the card.

I will have a little problem with Hungarian terms of endearment, translating them because they might not come out well in English. But stay with me.

My dear little squirrel -- (laughter) -- my golden little Péter, he wrote the card to both of us. I got your cards and they caused me great pleasure and I ask you to write as often as possible because every line is a very special holiday for me. Your cards are full of longing for me. And can you imagine how much I long for you and for our home. But for the time being, we have to be very patient. We have to wait and trusting the good Lord. I cannot emphasize how much you have to take care of your half.

And then she goes on and on. And the last two paragraphs -- and that was the last two lines my mom read from him: I wish you a Happy New Year, a better one than the old one. I hope that the boys are doing well. And I send my kisses to the ladies. Those are the wives of the friends. To dear Péter from Árpád who loves you a lot.

>> Bill Benson: Thanks for reading that for us, Péter.

Knowing because they were censored and you couldn't know actually a lot about what his circumstances were like, generally what were they forced to do when they went to these Forced Labor Battalions? What were their work conditions like?

>> Péter Gorog: Well, what we know about them for those who survived and eyewitnesses and documents, they had very hard lives. They were so-called (inaudible) units for the regular Army. And they had to do all the dirty work for the Army. They were the ones that had to dig the ditches, to build roads, to clean buildings. And they were the ones who once they got to Ukraine, Hungary joined the Nazi Germany in the invasion of the Soviet Union number 1941. The Hungarian Army and the Forced Labor Battalions were taken to Ukraine. And they were the ones who were forced to walk through the mine fields before the regular troops just to make sure there are no more ammunitions there. And some of them lost their lives by doing that.

They were under (inaudible) because they had the regular Army got first and whatever left over they had, that went to the forced labor camp.

Also, during the brutal Russian winter, they -- some of them had regular clothes when they had to march and they had to march a lot. Those who were weak, they just followed the line. And they either left them there or they shot them so they don't have to suffer any longer.

They were treated by the Hungarian officers very brutally also. They were slave laborers. That's what I can tell.

>> Bill Benson: Your last postcard is December 1942. When did your mother learn about your father's death?

>> Péter Gorog: Well, she did not learn -- well, she was notified by the Hungarian government with an official form which came later on in her life that was an official notification that my father disappeared during the wartime activities in Ukraine sometime in February 1943.

My mom got the last postcard from the camp from a mutual friend who notified -- or told her that he hasn't heard from my father and many of the friends who were in the same battalion since February. And this card was dated in April. So the most likely time of his disappearance, his death, is February 1943.

From the diaries I have, I got the sense that she didn't believe this news. She hoped and hoped that maybe my father survived and he was taken by the Russians as prisoner of war and sent to Siberia which wasn't a pleasant place to be. Nevertheless, my mom hoped he would return.

Unfortunately he didn't, just like the 40,000 other forced laborers of the 100,000 that were taken to Ukraine during the war. So 40% of them never returned. Some of them really were taken

as prisoners of war, and they were released after the war in 1946, 1947.

>> Bill Benson: Péter, so with the loss of your father, your mother would continue to care for you and do all she could to protect you until -- and these conditions as awful as they were, things turned dramatically, profoundly worse in March 1944 when the Nazis occupied Hungary.

Tell us what changed so dramatically and what that meant for you and your mother.

>> Péter Gorog: The situation for Jews were increasing even before March 1944 when the German troops marched into Hungary and actually occupied Hungary. Restrictions became stricter and stricter. They had to forfeit their valuables. There was an order that Jewish families had to give their jewelry over to the banks. They got a receipt that the bank took it for, quote-unquote, safekeeping. But that was just the preparation for taking them away for good.

Food was in short supply for everybody. It was rationed, but rationing was even worse for the Jews who by that time were under curfew, not just during the night but during the day. They were allowed to leave their homes for a couple of hours a day to do their official business or do some kind of shopping.

1944 March, the German troops came in. The Hungarian government was still in charge. And the prime minister was more German friendly. Numerus Clausus laws were enacted. One which affected us was that Jewish people had to leave their homes and move either to the ghetto which was set up in mid 1944 in the traditional Jewish area of Budapest or certain designated houses where Jews could live. These houses were marked with a yellow Star of David. The Hungarian game is Védett Ház marked by a star, and that's where most Jewish families moved to. My mom, as I said earlier, she was a smart cookie. She knew moving to these houses or to the ghetto would mark her forever for the next step. So she tried to go into hiding. She had a very close friend, a Christian friend, and she was a Christian, not just a non-Jew in every sense of the word. And this family took us in for a couple of weeks until a neighbor reported us to the police.

And one day the Hungarian gendarmerie which is a strange organization. It is somewhere between the Army and the police force. They had a very distinctive uniform. They had very distinctive hats with a cock feather on it or two cock feathers. These are my first real memories, not just what my mother has told me from the diaries or the postcards.

One morning there was a knock on the door at the apartment where we stayed. And two of the gendarmeries came in and took my mom away. I remember that we were around the breakfast table. I was sitting on a chair with two big books on it because booster seats weren't available at that time. And the families didn't have children, by the way.

Anyway, my mom was taken away. I really didn't know what it meant. The family obviously took care of me while my mom was away. And they encouraged me that my mom will come back, she will come back. And she did because of her wit, because of her determination to survive and make sure that I would survive.

She was taken to an infamous jail, infamous for many good reason in Budapest. The so-called (saying name) jail where people were collected, mostly Jews, just before they were taken to Auschwitz or the next concentration camp.

When my mom got to the jail, she immediately started protesting that they arrested her against the law, that she was protected because she was a war widow.

My mom wasn't a war widow because only people who were part of the regular Hungarian Army and who died, their wives were declared war widows. And there were certain privileges for war widows. They got a portion -- when food was portioned, they got higher portions.

>> Bill Benson: Higher rations.

>> Péter Gorog: Rations, sorry. And other privileges.

My mom wasn't a war widow because my father was taken to a forced labor camp with the Army. So the official people I mentioned earlier which came from the Hungarian Ministry of Defense said that Árpád Grünwald disappeared blah, blah, blah here and here and there was a big stamp on it.

The guards were uneducated. Maybe they had four or five years of elementary school. At most -- they couldn't even read what was on the paper but they saw the big stamp. So they thought they did something wrong by arresting my mom. They went to the command, and he called my mom in. My mom told him also that I'm a war widow, you must let me out.

He couldn't read the document, but he couldn't figure it out. Or whatever the reason was, maybe just divine Providence, he let her out.

>> Bill Benson: So through her courage and just her quick thinking, she is able to get out of there. And then -- now she's got to do what to do. You told me she then did another major act of chutzpah at that point.

>> Péter Gorog: Yes. She came back to the apartment where I stayed. And obviously we couldn't stay any longer because of all those good neighbors. My mom didn't want to try her luck again.

So she called a friend of hers who ordered to live in the so-called protected houses.

What happened in 1944 on the verge of the U.S. government and financial support of Jewish organization, a Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg went to Budapest for the very purpose of saving as many Jews as possible. What he did and some other mutual embassies in Budapest, they issued false passports. Actually, they weren't false passports. The passport was an original Swedish or Swiss passport, to Hungarians so they can prove that they are foreign citizens and they cannot be arrested and persecuted.

He also bought up some apartment buildings which according to international law was under the protection of the Swedish government and was treated as Swedish territory. No Hungarian authorities could enter these houses without the permission of the Swedish embassy.

And as many buildings as he could buy up, these buildings were in the ghetto. This was, quote-unquote, fancy part of Budapest where (inaudible) lived close to the Danube actually. And people who moved to these houses were secure for a while because no Hungarians, no Germans entered into these buildings and could arrest. They could not take them away.

So my mom called this friend of hers who had this document, who already moved into an apartment. And she told her that there was one three bedroom apartment which was by Hungarian standards huge. And there were two families living only in the two bedrooms and there was another one unoccupied. So my mom took me, one suitcase and these papers and the necessities and we moved into one of these Wallenberg Houses.

Life there was -- well, I was 3 1/2 years old. So if you ask me what I remember or what my memory is, I was an ignorant little boy, did what little boys do. I didn't have the sense of terror and horror what was going on outside the walls. And because of the love of my mom, that's the only thing I experienced. And that was enough for me.

Life in those protected houses was relatively calm. The houses were surrounded by -- there was a parliamentary military group party called the Hungarian Arrow Cross which in October 1944 actually with a coup d'etat took over with the Germans and these people belonged to party and parliamentary group, were young people, 18 to 20 years old. They were in black uniform or black shirts and black trousers. And they were guarding these protected houses which meant that they could not enter to the house without permission. They didn't have the permission. So we were safe.

This one changed overnight when the Arrow Cross took over the Hungarian government.

>> Bill Benson: This was now probably October 1944?

>> Péter Gorog: That's correct.

>> Bill Benson: And if I might just interject for a moment, you had told me earlier that initially the Hungarians and the Nazis had pretty much deported all of the Jews from the countryside. And now their attention was focused on Budapest. And there had been an extraordinary number of deportations. I think somewhere around 450,000 Auschwitz in about six weeks.

Then it stopped until the coup d'etat in October. Now you had been protected up to that point.

>> Péter Gorog: Yeah, that's correct. Historians and political parties are explaining the history of Hungary during the Second World War and during the Holocaust. And it is a history that's unfortunately more or less supported by the current government, that the Hungarians were not complacent in the extinction of the Hungary Jews. The facts are unfortunately different. When the Germans came in to Budapest with 600 of the so-called commando, I think that was the name, people couldn't deport in two months, 400,000 Hungarian Jews from the Hungarian countryside.

When you see the documents, when you visit the Web site of the Museum, you can see videos of eyewitnesses and survivors. Hungarian Jews were arrested, were taken to ghettos set up in different cities as a first step of taking them to Auschwitz and other concentration camps.

All of this happened with the help of the official Hungarian police force and gendarmerie. They were the one who took the properties and valuables of these people while they were deported.

As you said, they started at the countryside. 400,000 out of the 800,000 Hungarian Jews at that time in the middle of the month ended up in Auschwitz-Birkenau and other places.

By September/October, they turned to Jews of Budapest, the remaining Jews of Budapest because, mind you, already many of them died or were in the forced labor camps.

Also, another sad fact of Hungarian history, when the Germans occupied Poland, they asked for -- I don't know exactly the Hungarian government to deport 15 or 18,000 Polish Jews who lived in Hungary, many of them who were born in Hungary but they never gained Hungarian citizenship. So they were still Polish citizens.

Those 18,000 Polish Jews were forced to leave Hungary. They were transported to Ukraine where there was a camp, infamous camp where 50,000 out of the 80,000 Polish Hungarian Jews were practically butchered and killed.

>> Bill Benson: Péter, October 1944, you and your mom are still in the Wallenberg House protected as much as possible. But all that changed very dramatically.

Tell us now what happened. Because from there you would be forced out, your mother would leave with you. Tell us what happened and then from there you went into the ghetto.

>> Péter Gorog: Yeah, this time the new Hungarian government and the Arrow Cross, they couldn't care about international law anymore. And they started to go into even the protected houses. And Jewish people, Jewish families were sent away. As I said, these houses were very close to the Danube. Most of them were marched down to the bank of the Danube. They were lined up --

>> Bill Benson: Taken out of the Wallenberg Houses?

>> Péter Gorog: They were forced out of the Wallenberg Houses. They were taken to the bank of the Danube where they were shot. They fell in the river. They didn't have to care about even the dead bodies. Those who fell on the shore, they were thrown into the river. And they systematically went through the houses and emptied the apartments one by one.

One day there was a knock on our door. And this Nazi -- Hungarian Nazi, thugs, came in and told my mom to get out and line up in front of the building.

One of these young guys intervened, and he told to his comrades or colleagues that "leave

them alone, I know them. She's the mom of little Péter." He knew me by name. How did he know me by name? Because we had nothing better to do while we were in those houses. We were playing in the inner courtyard of this apartment building. And what the little boys played, we played the English translation would be police and robbers or something like that. We made weapons out of broomsticks and other junk.

And we just shoot other boom, boom, puff, puff. And these thugs were sitting there in the doorway of the house. He saw us --

>> Bill Benson:They're watching to make sure you don't leave, they're watching you do this.

>> Péter Gorog: That's correct.

One got this crazy idea that why don't you give them our own weapons and they can play with real weapons.

Being 4 1/2 years old, we were excited about having -- (laughter) -- a real weapon. Fortunately will, they were humane enough and they took out the ammunition. So we just aimed real weapons at each other and went boom, boom.

So we kind of got acquainted with each other. Some of them probably had little brothers at home and they looked at us as will their little brothers, except we had the yellow stars on our coat. Anyway --

>> Bill Benson: Spare this one family, this mom and son.

>> Péter Gorog: That's correct. This is because we built what you call a relationship the previous few days or few weeks. This relationship really saved our life for another day because we didn't know who would come the next day.

So on that day, we left the protected houses and we moved into the Budapest ghetto which by that time was built up around the great synagogue of Budapest, beautiful big building, completely restored by now.

That was a traditional Jewish quarter of Budapest. According to Jewish customs, on Saturday you walk into the synagogue. So there were synagogues in walking distance for everybody.

The ghetto was walled by that time. You could go -- or those who were permitted, could leave with permission. That's where we lived.

By that time, that was October, November, December of 1944. Budapest was surrounded by the Russian troops. They came from the east. They were chasing the Germans all the way back to Germany. By that time, they reached Budapest. Budapest was under attack. Air raids were daily occurrences.

We have to -- we had to go down to the basement of the apartment buildings. The way the apartment buildings were built at that time was an unfinished basement with dirt floors. And there were wooden stairs for every apartment where people stored a few of their wood they used for the furnaces in the apartment.

That's where we stayed most of the time during this time. Even when the siren called the air raid off, there was no reason to go upstairs again because we just couldn't -- didn't know when we have to come back.

>> Bill Benson: And you told me that the shelling and bombing was just relentless. So you were down in these basements with wooden floors -- I mean, dirt floors, the conditions were horrific.

>> Péter Gorog: The conditions were horrific. I remember that we had a blanket on the floor. That's where we sat and played. We ate if we had food. At that time, food was very scarce. Water was not there most of the days. And we lived practically underground for 2 1/2 months.

While we heard this bombing, again, for me, I didn't know what it meant. I didn't know that the house next to us were bombed and everybody died, even who were under the building. By luck, by

divine Providence, we were saved.

>> Bill Benson: After being four months in those conditions, you were liberated by the Russians. Tell us what liberation meant.

>> Péter Gorog: Well, liberation meant that we could take the yellow Star of David from our coats. It meant that there was no daytime curfew. It meant that we could move back to our apartment.

I don't know if I mentioned, when we were forced to leave our apartment where my parents live from 1936 to 1944, a German family moved in and took over the apartment. It was our luck that they preserved practically everything, the furniture. I grew up with the same furniture my parents bought after they got married. Not many Jewish people were that lucky because unfortunately Jewish properties were looted as soon as their families moved out, as soon as they had to give up their shops and businesses.

So getting back to normal was a different normal, what you would call normal today. But it was something which resembled a normal life.

We moved back to our apartment. This family on their own willingly moved out so we had a place to live. Food was still in short supply. Stores were empty. Other food was rationed. But you couldn't even use your rationing teacup because there was no food. So what happened was that people in the cities carried their valuables, jewelry, clothes, whatever they could barter and took the train to the nearby villages or some villages were not nearby. but their belonging for food, eggs, bread.

>> Bill Benson: And your mom did that?

>> Péter Gorog: My mom did. Because there was no nanny, she took me and I remember going to the railway station where the trains were so jammed that people were traveling on the top of the train just to get out of the city and get some food.

>> Bill Benson: And, Péter, when you were in the ghetto, you were in there with several other relatives. I think several grandparents. Tell us what happened to them.

>> Péter Gorog: Yes, we moved into my grandparents' apartment which was a one-bedroom apartment which meant one bedroom, one family room, and a kitchen. And we were there with two of my aunts, my maternal grandparents, my mother and I and my cousin. That's where we lived. We survived. My grandparents survived. They were not victims of the Holocaust in the sense they were not killed during the time of Holocaust. But because of starvation, because of the lack of medical facilities and opportunity. They died a couple of months after the war.

>> Bill Benson: And you attribute that totally to how awful the circumstances, they just couldn't survive after the war.

>> Péter Gorog: Yeah, they were so weak, so malnourished that I think they had a common cold or something like that which caused them...

>> Bill Benson: Did any other family members survive, Péter?

>> Péter Gorog: As I said, one of my uncles and my aunts left Hungary. My aunt left in 1938.

>> Bill Benson: Before the war.

>> Péter Gorog: Before the war.

My Uncle Lester, he stayed in Hungary until 1941 where he was taken to a forced labor camp. He was on leave and he never went back.

He was lucky enough to have entry to the United States because he was born what was then part of the Hungarian empire but by the time of the war, it was part of Czechoslovakia. So he was on the Czech quota system which was relatively short. He was able to get an entry Visa.

He left Hungary, he followed through the Nazi-occupied Europe and he boarded the last ship

which left Lisbon to the United States.

>> Bill Benson: To the U.S. And we won't be able to get into it, but he and your aunt became important to you when you came to the United States in 1980, if I remember correctly.

>> Péter Gorog: That's correct. In 1980, I came with the excuse to visit them. I visited them, and I never returned to Hungary.

>> Bill Benson: You decided to just stay.

>> Péter Gorog: I decided to defect from Hungary and stay in the United States. And they were instrumental in the first few months providing food and shelter and helping me to get used to American life. As long as they lived, we stayed in close contact.

>> Bill Benson: Let me ask you just a couple more questions, Péter, before we close our program in just a few minutes.

From the little bit you've been able to share with us, obviously you just touched the surface. But it's clear that your mother was brave. She was smart. She was resilient. She was resourceful. But that continued -- that didn't end with the war ending. She continued to do what she could to try to get you and her out of the circumstances you found yourselves in in Hungary. But she was not able to at that time get you out of the country.

Tell us a little bit about that.

>> Péter Gorog: Yeah in 1946, she decided we should leave Hungary. There was no future for us. Her siblings lived in the United States. She applied for a visa, entry visa. She got her Hungarian passport. You saw the pictures at the beginning from that passport.

And while we were waiting for the Visa, the Hungarian government and the political system were taken over by the Communists with the help of the occupying Russian forces. Hungarian borders were closed. Nobody in, nobody out. And so we were will stuck there. My mom was hired as a seamstress for the rest of her working life. Worked in two shifts. I hardly saw her most of the time. But we always had food on the table. I always had clothes. And I'm very grateful.

>> Bill Benson: And, Péter, the last question for you today is: You were planning to go back to Hungary because you'd really like to learn what you can about where your father was. Just say a little bit about that.

>> Péter Gorog: Really unfortunately I have no memory on my father's side. The only thing I can do at this point to translate the cards and try to stitch together his life, the last two years of his life is from the postcards and get documents from official Hungarian archives which would at least give me some kind of history of his life.

>> Bill Benson: Because today you really learned nothing more than you knew then about his circumstances?

>> Péter Gorog: Well, obviously I learned a lot from my mom who shared a lot and fortunately about two years before my mom died, I did a video interview with her just about the Holocaust and family history. And that one is still waiting for transcript and translation for the rest of my family. That's how it happened.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to turn back to Péter in just a moment to close our program. And as I said, we only got a glimpse. Of course, what we are not hearing about is what Péter went through in the subsequent years, for the Hungarian revolt in 1956, the Prague spring in 1968 and his decision to defect. You just heard a little bit about his career. But he's made these amazing contributions to our nation since then.

So, Péter, thank you for being here. I want to thank all of you for being our audience today. I want to remind you we will have a "First Person" program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. I hope you will be able to return at some point and join us.

It is our tradition at "First Person" that our "First Person" gets the last word. And before I turn to Péter for the last word, I'd like to do a couple of things. One is when Péter's done, Joel, our photographer, is going to come up on the stage. You saw those gorgeous photographs at the beginning. He's going to come up here and take a picture of Péter with you as the backdrop. So at that point, I'm going to ask you to stand so we can get a picture of Péter.

And then Péter will stay on the stage. We didn't have time for you to ask him any questions. So if you'd like to come up here on to the stage after we're done and ask him some questions or say hi or get your picture taken, please do that. Absolutely feel free to do that.

So on that note, I'll turn back to Péter.

>> Péter Gorog: I wanted to close with a picture projected. Unfortunately because of technical difficulties, I couldn't. So you have to use your imagination. And also you can this over, you can Google Hungarian Jews arriving to Auschwitz. In the picture, you would see Jewish people just embarking from the cattle cars. They were taken to Auschwitz after four or five days' trip. 60, 80 people in a cattle car lining up on the platform and waiting for something. They didn't know what they were waiting for.

You can see the grim expression of mostly women and many children. During the Second World War, about will 1.5 million children died. Out of this 1.5 million were Jewish children. You can see the Jewish children on this picture with the yellow stars completely oblivious what would happen in the next 24, 48 hours.

What happened was that they were gassed. They were cremated. And they are not with us anymore.

I wrote to them and I wrote to the memory of my father and the many Jews who perished during the Holocaust that this would never happen again. It is my responsibility to tell my story and the story of the Holocaust. And it is everybody's story in this auditorium and outside this auditorium to make sure that this one will never happen again.

The Museum has a local mantra: Never again. What you do matters. And the "you" is in big bold letters you can see outside the building.

What you do, what I do, what we all do matters, that the Holocaust will never happen again, not to the Jewish people, not to the people in Sudan or Cambodia or Kosovo. Because unfortunately (saying name) did not learn from the Holocaust and the Holocaust since then. And it's our responsibility to make sure that it will never happen again.

(applause).

(Program concluded at 12:05 p.m. ET).