

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM  
FIRST PERSON SERIES  
FIRST PERSON RITA RUBINSTEIN  
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Remote CART Captioning

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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. We are in our 17th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Rita Rubinstein, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2016 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship. I'd like to acknowledge Mr. Louis Smith who is with us in the audience, right here.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: *First Person* is a series of 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 twice-weekly until mid-August. The museum's website, listed on the back of your program, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. The address is [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org).

Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the Museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card in your program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater. In doing so, you will receive an electronic copy of Rita Rubinstein's biography so that you can remember and share her testimony after you leave here today.

Rita will share her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Rita questions.

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

We begin with this portrait of Rita, shown here between her Aunt Bella and cousin, Bayla Shulwolf, who perished in the Holocaust.

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

Here we see an engagement photograph of Rita's parents, Tabel and Avraham.

Rita's father ran a dry goods store and small factory with her sister and brother-in-law in this house, pictured on the right, which also served as the family home. Their factory had a few looms to weave native Ukrainian clothing that was sold in the store.

In 1940, the Soviet Army marched into Vascauti and drafted young men, including Rita's father, into the Army. When Axis troops invaded the Soviet Union the next year, Romanian soldiers

entered Vascauti and told all the Jews to prepare to leave within 24 hours. Rita's family was able to bribe Romanian soldiers, who took the family to a ghetto in Transnistria. The area known as Transnistria is shown on this map.

Once there, a village family took Rita's family in. Rita was able to attend a small class but during the three years the family lived in the ghetto they faced terrible hardships. After they were liberated the family was eventually able to return home.

After the war, Rita attended a Ukrainian school in what had become Communist Romania. By obtaining false papers, Rita, her mother, and her aunt were able to travel from Romania to a Displaced Persons Camp in Germany that was administered by the U.S. United Nations relief organization, and HIAS.

We close our slide show with this photo of Rita in her Purim costume.

Rita arrived in the United States in 1949 with her mother and her mother's husband, an Auschwitz survivor whom she met in the Displaced Persons camp. They settled in New York City. Rita married Nathan Rubinstein in 1959 the same year Nathan entered the University of Maryland for his Master's degree. Rita graduated from Brooklyn College in 1960 then joined Nathan in Maryland where she began teaching elementary school in Olney, Maryland, just outside of Washington DC. She left teaching to have and raise their three daughters, Nina, Sheri, and Rene. When the girls were older, Rita began teaching at a Yiddish Hebrew school then later became its principal. After retiring from the school Rita became a private tutor for bar and bat mitzvahs, including for adults who haven't had their bar or bat mitzvah.

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

Their three daughters have a combined eight grandchildren. Daughter Nina is an industrial psychologist with two children. Daughter Sheri is an attorney with four children and Rene is a pediatric nurse at Johns Hopkins hospital with two children. Four of Rita's grandchildren are now college graduates. Her oldest grandson just completed his first year of Dental School at the University of Maryland. Rita plans to attend the graduations of two other grandchildren next spring; one from the University of Michigan and the other from high school. Rita's daughter Sheri is here with Rita today, as is Rene's daughter and Rita's granddaughter Chelsea, and Rita's cousin Cheryl Silverman. They are all with us right here in the front row.

Rita is very active in the community. 17 years ago she formed a singing group, the Happy Matzah Balls, which still performs at area nursing homes, senior centers and such places at the National Institute of Health and the Catholic University of America, as well as here at the museum. She also sings with the Encore Chorus. Rita is a volunteer at a local hospice and has traveled to Israel to do volunteer work for the Israeli Army. And Rita volunteers here at the museum, as well, by translating documents and videos of survivor experiences during the Holocaust from Yiddish to English. She is speaking publicly more frequently about her Holocaust experience including recently at granddaughter Chelsea's school and Roland Park School for Girls in Baltimore.

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

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Rita, thank you so much for joining us and being willing to be our First Person and having several of your family members in attendance with us today. You have a great deal to tell us so we will start right away.

Although World War II began with Germany and the Soviet Union attacking Poland in September 1939, war didn't come directly in your community in Romania until 1940. Before we turn to your life during the war and the Holocaust, let's start first with you telling us a little bit about your family and their community and your early life before war actually began for you.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Ok. That's going back a long way. As you heard, I'm 79 now. Going back to age 4, I have fragmented pieces of memory but I do remember some happy times, thank God. You know, as a human being, we try to block out the bad. Remember the bad, too, of course.

I had a wonderful family. My dad, mother, lived with us. We shared a two-family home. He was doing well. He had two sisters in the United States who emigrated when they were only 16 and 17 because my grandmother was a widow, left with four children after World War I. So she sent the other two to the golden land where you could find gold. But they wound up working in sweatshops. So we did have some family whom I never met. My mother had not met either. And her two younger children were left with her. And then they did well. They had a textile machine, weaving room. They would weave native costumes, as you mentioned, and scarves.

My mother stood in a store. They had a store, two-family house. It was a modern house. We had a radio. We had electricity, not running water yet but we had a nanny for me. My grandmother lived with us. My father's mother. And then his sister and two children and the grandmother -- my uncle's mother lived with them as well. So we had two older -- we were all together in the one house.

It was a very happy time. I had a doll carriage, dolls, lots of friends. I was the first grandchildren. My mother was one of eight children. Unfortunately only two of them, she and her sister, survived. My grandparents lived in a small village not far from us. We would frequently visit them. They were doting grandparents. I had aunts and uncles and aunts only seven years older than us.

>> Bill Benson: So a very large extended family.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Large extended family. My grandmother, who lived with us, didn't want me to make use of the doll carriage too much. She says, "Don't take it out so much." Unfortunately little did we know that I would not use it for very long period of time.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little bit about your mother and father. What do you know about your father?

>> Rita Rubenstein: My father was a wonderful -- what I heard because I don't really recall. I do recall that he would take me every Sabbath to temple. He loved to perform services. Of course, he had lost his father but he did a lot of good for people. In the dry goods store, if somebody could not afford an item that they like, he would get them credit. Said "Don't worry. Pay me when you can." Very charitable.

>> Bill Benson: Had a lovely voice, you told me. Right?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Oh, yes. He had a wonderful voice. They wanted him to conduct services. He also served on the ritual committee. So I tried to follow in his footsteps. I guess I love to sing and that's where I inherited that from him.

>> Bill Benson: You definitely continued that.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: One of your grandfathers served in the First World War. Is that right?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. He was killed then.

>> Bill Benson: Do you know anything about his service?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Not really. No.

>> Bill Benson: What languages did your family speak?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Ok. Well, this was Austra-Hungary before I was born. Then it became Romania. I was born in Romania. So a lot of the Jewish families spoke German to their children but my grandmother, may she rest in peace, she insisted that her granddaughter would speak Yiddish and thanks to her that I did speak Yiddish. And I learned how to read and write it later on in D.P. camp. So that's where I have the love of Yiddish as well, thanks to her. They also spoke German, Romanian. I did not speak Romanian at all because I had not gone to school there.

>> Bill Benson: Rita, of course, war began when the Soviet Union and Germany attacked Poland in 1939, beginning World War II. It was some months later, though, before war directly affected you and your family when the Soviets occupied your hometown of Vascauti in Romania in 1940. Although you were not yet 4 at that time, tell us what you can from what you've been able to gather and learn and fragments you remember about the time under the Soviet occupation of the first time that you were occupied by the Soviets.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Well, our happy family life really changed. We had to close the store. My mother's sister had been with us. That was her good luck. She was with us for a year. She was seven years younger than my mother.

>> Bill Benson: Bella?

>> Rita Rubenstein: The only surviving sister. Right. She worked at a tax office. I was no longer free to play in the streets. They took all the -- they conscripted all the able-bodied men into the Army. And, of course, my father was one of the able-bodied men. That was the last time I was to see him. I was 4 1/2 at the time.

>> Bill Benson: So he's conscripted into the Soviet Army?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Into the Soviet Army. For some reason my uncle was not. That was the last time I saw my dad, when he left with the Russian Army. But at least I have the knowledge that he was fighting against the Germans. He was in their Army.

I have -- well, we'll talk about that.

>> Bill Benson: We'll come back to that later.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell me -- many other men were drafted into the labor brigades and into the Army. Your father was just 36 or 37 years of age at that time, I think. Now it's your mother and your aunt. Your father's gone. Do you know how they were able to make ends meet during that time?

>> Rita Rubenstein: There was a black market. They used to barter, you know, have exchanges. It was a tough time for us.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things I know you're going to talk to a little bit later is about what you brought with you, the prayer shawl that was your father's.

>> Rita Rubenstein: That was my father's.

>> Bill Benson: I know we'll come back to that. You mentioned that it was Bella's good fortune that she was with you. Say a little bit more about that. Why was it her good fortune?

>> Rita Rubenstein: The reason it was her good fortune, my grandfather also owned a dry goods store as well as an orchard. He had many friends, Ukrainian friends. And they, too, would come -- he was a very pious man. My grandmother worked very hard. She had eight children. She did everything from scratch. Even her jams were made from scratch, everything. All of that changed, of course, when the Ukrainian neighbors who were friends, they thought -- there's a special exhibit, in fact. They turned on us. We did not know that until after the war. After the war my mother wanted to know what happened to her family. They described to her the horrible death that they met. They used harm implements. My grandfather had to witness how they brutally murdered my aunt and uncle. Telling that to a survivor, my mother was 28 at the time, to hear the horrible death that they met. It was -- needless to say.

>> Bill Benson: I think we're right around the anniversary date of when that happened.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. Yes. And he was left till the end. He had to witness how they murdered, not killed but really murdered, his family and then they murdered him, a horrible end.

>> Bill Benson: June 22, 1941, 75 years ago today, Germany and its allies turned on the Soviets and Romanian troops, Germany's allies, occupied your town.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes, they did.

>> Bill Benson: And that's when things really turned profoundly worse. Tell us -- you remember, as I understand, when the Romanian troops marched in.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that time and what happened once you were under the control of the Romanians and the Nazis.

>> Rita Rubenstein: I do remember the march. In fact, my cousin, who was seven years older than I, he was adventurous. He went up to the attic and looked outside. He was watching them march. A soldier noticed that somebody was looking out. They came in with bayonets. They said, "Ok. You have spies here." Here was my mother, my grandmother, and then my aunt and uncle. We did not know what to do. We were really frightened. The kids all went under the beds. They said, "Look, we didn't mean any harm. He just looked outside."

>> Bill Benson: Just a little boy.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. He was just a little boy. He was about 9 or 10, not even. Yeah. So that was first taste of it.

Then they took -- my aunt was working, as I explained before. They took 20 Jews out in the courtyard, at random, really; just because they were Jews. They wanted to show everybody their strength and what they would do. They shot them simply because they were Jews. And one of them worked in the same office as my aunt. He was an engineer.

In September of '41, an announcement was made to all the Jews that we had to be ready within 24 hours to leave our home and only could take with us whatever we could carry, nothing else. My mother had hidden what was dear to us. That's why I have some pictures, some of my friends who are survivors have no pictures of their youth. She put photographs and some money in the attic but in the floor of the attic. My grandmother -- I remember that. She had money sewn in her undergarments and I said, grandma, what are you doing that for? She said, "You never know. It might save our lives." And, indeed, she was a wise lady. It did save our lives. I do remember being bundled up in layers and layers of clothing.

>> Bill Benson: So take whatever you could carry. So you put lots of clothes on.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Exactly. And bedding. And they had it in sacks. My mother held on to my father's suits and his prayer shawl. It's amazing that's the only thing that did survive the war. So it has a lot of meaning to me.

>> Bill Benson: When they told you to be prepared to leave in 24 hours, do you know if you had any idea where they intended to take you?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Actually, no. But word was that they were supposed to take us to a death camp. We were taken by a train. We were in a holding place. My uncle had overheard some people. We were supposed to be in the death camp.

>> Bill Benson: Who was with you at this point?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Oh, at this point, ok, there were nine of us.

>> Bill Benson: Nine of you. Ok.

>> Rita Rubenstein: My aunt and her children and husband and her mother-in-law, and my Aunt Bella, my mother's sister, my mother, my grandmother, and myself. So there were nine. And we were all together.

>> Bill Benson: And you had heard that you were going to end up going to a death camp.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. Of course our life was in danger because they could have shot us. This was at night that we snuck out. They took us across a river on barges. There were many soldiers, even though they took the money, that's where my grandmother's money --

>> Bill Benson: Go back over that. Your uncle, this is where he bribed soldiers?

>> Rita Rubenstein: He bribed them with the money that my grandmother had.

>> Bill Benson: So to avoid going where you thought you were going.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Right. They were going to take us to Transnistria, Shargorot, a ghetto. In one special place you had restrictions. You could only go out at certain times. But I'll explain the conditions there.

Let me get back to the point.

>> Bill Benson: Your uncle bribes.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. We snuck out at night. We were on a barge crossing the Dnieper River. A soldier was holding me by the hand. I was a blond, brown eyes at the time. And the soldier -- there were some righteous -- thank God there were righteous gentiles. There were always good people. I wish there had been more. Some more people would have been saved. He looked at my mother's anguished face and said, "Don't worry. I have a little girl just like that at home and I will do no harm to your child." He meant what he said. We thank God, crossed the Dnieper River and it was ok. So that was first time she almost lost me. But one of a few times.

>> Bill Benson: You had explained to me before that there were other children on barges who didn't make it.

>> Rita Rubenstein: They were thrown into the river. They didn't know how to swim. I did not know how to swim either. So if the same would have been -- would have happened to me.

>> Bill Benson: So thanks to your uncle using the money that your grandmother had hidden, as you described, you were able to make it across the river. And now you're in Shargorot. And you would remain there for three years in the ghetto of Shargorot.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Although life there was very, very, very hard, you remember there were actually some good memories of that time, too. Can you tell us? Tell us about that time. You spent three years there.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Well, there was a Jewish family.

>> Bill Benson: Ok.

>> Rita Rubenstein: There were Jews there, in the ghetto. They were forced to take us in. They were very kind to take us in. This was so different from what we were -- it was a clay hut, really, one bedroom heated by a potbelly stove, very primitive conditions. They had no bathroom. It was bitter cold. Excuse me for saying, but we had to use the pail. They were a family of four. And nine of us came. So there were 13 in that small hut. We were rationed. We had no food. There, too, was a black market. My aunt had wonderful abilities as a knitter and would sneak out on the black market to bring us a little piece of bread, potatoes.

The nutrition was not very good, to say the least. And how we managed in that house, I don't know. And my uncle developed Typhus. They left us after about a year because it was just too hard to be together. We didn't have enough food. They went to a different labor camp.

At that ghetto there were soldiers, Romanian soldiers that came and took my aunt every day to work in the field.

>> Bill Benson: Aunt Bella?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yeah. I don't know why they didn't take my mother. She never shared it with me. She did not like to speak about her experiences too much. She didn't want me to tell my children. "Oh, why pain them?" I said it's important that they know what life was like and how lucky we are in this country to have everything.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things you shared with me was you remembered the sense of always being hungry.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Always hungry.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Always being hungry. Mentioned a little kindergarten class was formed.

>> Bill Benson: In the ghetto?

>> Rita Rubenstein: In the ghetto. That's where I had my first experience with Hebrew. I was thrilled to death when I was able to tell them that today I had a piece of bread and oil. But children, children always find playthings. My mother made us a rag doll. What saved us, really, was I was never separated from my mother. I was very fortunate. I saw death in the streets.

>> Bill Benson: People literally starved to death and you remember that.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Starved to death.

She went to the river, which was at least about a mile, to wash our clothing. Cleanliness was very important. We found little pebbles. They made us a makeshift road.

>> Bill Benson: Those were your play toys?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Those were my toys. Once I went to do laundry with my mother with my cousin. I guess the doll clothes that they made for us. I fell into the river. My cousin said, "Oh, look, Aunt Tabel, there's a little girl in the water." She didn't know how to swim. I didn't know how to swim. She threw in a sheet and I hung on to it. It was such a traumatic experience I could not speak for at least three days. And they had some witchcraft performed. Some woman came. She cracked some eggs on my forehead.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember that?

>> Rita Rubenstein: I do remember it. It was very weird. She said --

>> [Laughter]

>> Rita Rubenstein: "Don't worry. She will speak." I started speaking again.

>> Bill Benson: So it worked.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Who knows? Yes it did work. It did work.

>> Bill Benson: During that time after your father had been conscripted into the Soviet Army, do you know if your mother had any contact, had any word from him, any idea where he had gone?

>> Rita Rubenstein: No. We had no inkling whatsoever.

>> Bill Benson: Once he left he was gone.

>> Rita Rubenstein: And my grandmother was really beside herself. She was very ill. At the time, I don't know if you know this, some people who are not Jewish probably don't know, but we are buried in shrouds. And my grandmother had a little sack of soil, because we're supposed to be buried with a little soil from Israel. And I questioned -- you know, as a child you question why is this, why is that. Why are you having these white things sewn? She said, "I'm not going to be here long. You're my grandchildren. I want you to light the candles when I'm gone." She's the only one that really died in actual death there and the only one that I have a gravesite for.

>> Bill Benson: And that's in Shargorot?

>> Rita Rubenstein: That's in Shargorot, which I've never gone back. I really have no desire to. Those memories were not good memories. But I remember that. I remember her death.

Of course, the ritual committee came. They had to prepare her, put on the garments. I saw all of that. But at that time they did not take me to the cemetery. They felt I was too young. I saw a lot. It was a great loss. That I remember. And I remember lighting a candle for her. So there were hard times but we were with very kind people. As poor as they were, out of the goodness of their heart, they really took us in.

>> Bill Benson: And it sounds like during that time in the ghetto with this kind, good-hearted family, that everybody tried to make the best of having a community as much as you could under those circumstances.

The Soviets came back to Shargorot, however, in early 1944, but this time they were considered liberators.

>> Rita Rubenstein: They were liberators.

>> Bill Benson: They were.

>> Rita Rubenstein: We started hearing -- to this day I really can't stand a lot of noise. And another point, I am very afraid of big dogs, like German Shepherds, because I used to see them chase Jews. It was very frightening.

In fact, here in the United States I had to ask my friend who had a German Shepherd to please put him in a kennel because really --

>> Bill Benson: So frightening.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. Very frightened. Certain things stay with you. I can explain why now. I've gotten better. One of my daughters had a dog, a golden retriever. They are much gentler. I got used to it.

>> [Laughter]

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. It was very, very hard.

When the front came, the Russians, we heard a lot of bombing. The proprietor of the little house that we were in went to a neighbor because the neighbor had a cellar. He said if there's bombing here, we need to go down into the cellar. So we were there quite a number of people. A 12-year-old boy could not stand it anymore. He had to see what was happening. So he ran outside. And when he came back, he was all excited. People thought: He's hallucinating, what's going on? He said, "No, no, no. There were Russians drinking in the streets and we are free. The war is over." And then we started believing him. And everybody went outside. And, indeed, the war was over.

>> Bill Benson: For you. For where your community was.

>> Rita Rubenstein: For us but not in other parts of the world, no. Because, as you know, the Hungarian Jews were taken much later.

>> Bill Benson: But where you happened to be, the good fortune of the Soviets arriving and liberating you.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Right.

>> Bill Benson: As you said, the war is over, free to go. What did that mean, "Free to go" for you and your family?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Very hard. We didn't know where to go, really. Every door there was a song -- to the right every door is closed to me. Although I was born in Romania, I didn't feel like a Romanian because I was robbed of everything. However, they wanted to go back home. My mother wanted to hear what happened to her family, what happened to her husband. But the Iron Curtain started setting in then, too. The Russians were taking over. They had schools that were established there. So we had a difficult journey to get there.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember how you even got there?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Well, from what my aunt had told us, she knew somebody, not Jewish, somebody from the government, a mother. So she helped her do some research where we could go safely because sometimes if you returned -- I know from my husband's stories and friends of mine, when they returned home in Poland, the Poles said, "What are you doing here? We thought you were murdered." Because they took over their home and they would murder the survivors. So you had to be lucky. That was also good luck. And a lot of some good people, thank God for them, the righteous gentiles.

So it was --

>> Bill Benson: And plus trains weren't running normally.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Right. We went on a military train.

>> Bill Benson: A military train.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. A military train. We went back home. We went back home. We could not go into our house. The Russians had used it as a silo. They had grains there. And my mother begged them. She said, "I just want go in the attic." "My husband fought in your Army." At that point she did not know yet that my father was killed. So finally they were convinced. And because of the soldier, he also let us into my maternal grandparents' house. They owned the house but there were other families there but they let us have a room there. Housing was very hard.

>> Bill Benson: But you were not allowed to take your home back.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Oh, no. No. But they did allow my mother to go in. She retrieved the pictures.

>> Bill Benson: Which is why you have the photographs.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Of course, the money was gone but that's ok, we had our lives.

>> Bill Benson: And a few pictures.

>> Rita Rubenstein: And our pictures. And my aunt started working in a bank there to sustain us to bring food on the table. My mother would also go with my aunt and they would sell things to put food on the table.

>> Bill Benson: Even though it's still wartime and the Soviets are moving on, moving further west, were you able to resume school? You're now about 7 years of age, school age. Did that sort of sense of normalcy begin to return?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Sort of, yes. What happened was I went to a Ukrainian school run by the Russians. We were indoctrinated to Stalin's victor. I remember walking to school. It was bitter cold.

Also, they did not celebrate Christmas as such but they celebrated Father Frost. They would have a big celebration. Then they had us recite poetry. I had to memorize a poem and recite that. I remember that. I was a good student. I was just in first grade.

We saw that things were not good. And that's when my mother also discovered what happened to her parents. And my father's friend, best friend, who also had been conscripted into the Army --

>> Bill Benson: With him?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Came back. He knew exactly when my father was killed. But at least I had the knowledge that he was fighting against --

>> Bill Benson: He was killed in action.



>> Rita Rubenstein: I knew. I had the date.

>> Bill Benson: Do you know if at that time if your mother and the other adults, did they begin to have a sense of the enormity of what had happened during the Holocaust, what had happened to Jews throughout Europe?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Oh definitely. Yes. We found out the horrible things that happened, and for our whole family and extended family. They were either murdered or they starved to death. They couldn't exist, working hard labor, just on a piece of bread and black water that they called coffee, potato and water.

>> Bill Benson: Were any of our other family members able to make it back?

>> Rita Rubenstein: From extended family? No.

>> Bill Benson: No?

>> Rita Rubenstein: No. Just my aunt, my father's sister, and her family two children. They survived. And the grandmother. Their grandmother. Mine died, as I said before. My mother and my aunt.

Then we had to find a way to get out of town because we saw the hand writing on the wall. The Iron Curtain was setting in. Where would we go? We had to get out. So we had falsified papers saying that we were born in Poland. And when we were about to leave, my aunt who was still working at the bank --

>> Bill Benson: Bella.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Bella. They would not allow her, until the last minute, to go on that train. It was not a luxury train. There was also another incident there, a wonderful young man who is looking over documents and all. He knew who we were because his mother had been a Christian young man. His mother was a midwife to my grandmother and helped deliver some of her children. But he didn't disclose the fact that we were Romanian. He looked away and let us go on the train. He could have and we wouldn't have been able to leave. The last minute they allowed my aunt to come and we went on the train.

>> Bill Benson: They thought you were going to go to Poland?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Actually, we did.

>> Bill Benson: You did go to Poland. Ok.

>> Rita Rubenstein: We had a long journey. That journey I do remember. Because we hopped on trains, on trace cars, on coal cars. It took us three months to get from Romania to Germany.

>> Bill Benson: Via Poland.

>> Rita Rubenstein: To go to different borders. We posted Greeks, posted different nationalities. They would search us and send the children. As Greeks we asked for Mayan, water in Hebrew. They didn't know the difference. So they passed us up quickly.

>> Bill Benson: So after three months you made it into Germany. Why Germany?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Ok, in Germany -- that's a good question.

>> Bill Benson: Yeah. Why Germany?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Because they established Displaced Persons Camps in Germany. That's where survivors wound up. In fact, in some of the very same barracks where the SS were trained we had these quarters. But at least we had shelter. But life was reborn. There were many sad, sad stories, parents who lost children and children who lost parents. I went with them to school.

>> Bill Benson: And you did, too.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Oh, yeah. Some of them were hidden in convents. Some of them were hidden in homes, Polish homes. And then the parents, some parents, came back or some relatives came back. Some of them thought they were Christian, didn't want to leave but then they did.

That's when I learned how to speak Polish. Some people approached my mother and started speaking Polish. Why are you speaking Polish to me? I don't speak a word of it. Well, your daughter speaks Polish. But as a child, you're forced to.

I made some wonderful friends. Believe it or not, those who said, oh, school, do I have to go to school? Loved school. We were like sponges. We were missing that period. I don't consider that year in the Ukraine school as very memorable but here we learned history and had wonderful teachers.

There were about a hundred of us. There were a lot of marriages. People who lost children. It was so sad. I loved to perform. I was on stage there and learned how to sing and perform. My mother was sitting in the audience and there was a woman with tears in her eyes. She said, "I wonder if this child's mother is still alive to see her." And she said, "Yes, I am." She said, "I lost a little girl like yours. You're so lucky."

But as a result of our having lived through the war with the wonderful nutrition we had, I have horrible teeth. I'm a dentist. So dream. And a lot of us because we didn't have toothbrushes. We really had nothing.

>> Bill Benson: No nutrition.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Right. Our nutrition was terrible. We had health exams in DP camps.

>> Bill Benson: You were there for three years in the DP camps.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Three years. Made some wonderful friends. We went on different trips with the school. But a lot of us were found to have tuberculosis. And I was one of them, unfortunately.

Here, you have to remember this was in '46, '47. I was in the camp from '46 to '49. And '47 my mother was told that I had TB and I had to go to a sanitarium. I was about 9 at the time when she left me. She left me with other children. It was not nearby. It was an hour drive by train. I only saw her once a week. When she came back, I was no longer with other children. I was quarantined. I spent nine months there with some nurses who were still very anti-Semitic. They would tell me whatever tests they were going to do, "You're going to cry." "It's going to hurt." And I said, "No, I will not cry." I gritted my teeth and tolerated the pain.

I remember they had a wonderful social worker from HIAS came at least once or twice a week. She brought me different art projects. Our family learned -- we got in touch with them in the United States. They would send packages. They couldn't, unfortunately, until the last minute send the medicine I needed because they would only give streptomycin to people who had TB of the bones and I had it in my lungs. So they had to perform surgery. And while they were performing surgery, my mother came with the streptomycin.

>> Bill Benson: From the family members that were in the United States sent it?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. They had sent it.

>> Bill Benson: You were there for nine months.

>> Rita Rubenstein: I was for nine months. It was a difficult nine months.

>> Bill Benson: Yes.

>> Rita Rubenstein: But there were kind -- there was a kind Danish doctor. She told my mother, "I survived TB. I have a family. I will see your daughter survives as well."

>> Bill Benson: And in your first Displaced Persons Camp, I think that's where Bella met her husband.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Actually before. We were traveling in secret. We were in Poland and many different places. She met him. He was a very fine, fine person. She emigrated -- there was of a quota system then, how they let people in. You had to have a sponsor. So she got to go to the United States while I was in the sanitarium. He was here earlier. She came in '47. We had to wait until '49. And especially we had -- you all heard about Ellis Island. That was before they used to give people exams and then they held them on Ellis Island. But after the war, you had to pass all the health exams before you boarded the ship to go to the United States. And we were very -- my mother was very frightened because I had TB if they saw any sign. But thank God I passed that.

>> Bill Benson: You described to me -- you said, "My mother was a survivor and a strong lady." Tell us a little more about her. She was a strong lady. She got you through extraordinary difficult times.

>> Rita Rubenstein: A lot of difficult times. Imagine yourself at 28 having lost your parents, having heard that you lost your husband whom you were married happily for a just seven short years. That's why my parents never had another child because Hitler's speeches were heard even the year that I was born. They knew a younger child would not have made it. They didn't know what was waiting for them but they felt they shouldn't have any more children.

To save my life she would do anything. She went on the black market with her sister-in-law and did a lot. She was told a widow should not come by herself to the United States, and that's when

she met my step-father, who was an Auschwitz survivor and lost his wife and child. He was considerably older, 15 years older.

But my time in DP camp, I really remember it was a happy time. Even though we had just one room built we had the freedom. Education. I even took some piano lessons, I remember. And the Germans -- we use to the get canned food. We never heard of canned tuna but the Germans did. So my mother and my step-father, they would give the Germans farmers the canned food and they would in turn give us --

>> Bill Benson: You fresh food. I chuckled the first time you said we had this canned spam.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: They would happily take it.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Absolutely, spam, which is, of course, not kosher. At that point you ate anything that you could get.

>> Bill Benson: So 1949 you come to the United States.

>> Rita Rubenstein: I just wanted to make one point about the DP camp. General Eisenhower, he was only general then, he came to visit.

>> Bill Benson: To your camp?

>> Rita Rubenstein: To our camp. But unfortunately I was in the sanitarium. But one of my friends, whom I'm still in touch with now, she played the piano for him and everybody was so thrilled that General Eisenhower, who later became president, was visiting.

Yes? I'm sorry?

>> Bill Benson: So you come to the United States. Again, now you're in a new culture, a new language. What was that like for you and your family, your mother?

>> Rita Rubenstein: First of all, let me describe how I felt -- we did not go on a luxury liner. We went on an Army transport. It was called General Haan. We slept in bunk beds, right near the engine room. My mother said, please take the top bunk because if you get sick this way nobody, you know, you don't have to worry. Of course, the people beneath me did.

>> [Laughter]

>> Rita Rubenstein: My mother and I were ill the entire journey because September the ocean is very, very rough. We could not eat anything. Half a grapefruit somebody would bring down.

The day that we landed in New York was one of the happiest days of my life, seeing that Statue of Liberty.

>> Bill Benson: You remember that?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Oh my God. That's when my mother and I went up on the deck. At last we were free, in a democratic country. I just can't describe it. We had family waiting for us, whom I had never seen before. We had a wonderful, wonderful reception.

It was hard because I was green, didn't speak a word of English. At that time there was no bilingual education. We also waited for quota. We were poor enough to get welfare but we did not want it. It was a shame to do that. My step-father did house painting. This is a country of opportunities. It was sink or swim. They put me in a class -- I was 12 when I arrived and they put me in a class that they were giving French. I don't know what they were thinking.

>> Bill Benson: They figured you already spoke so many languages, I guess.

>> Rita Rubenstein: I was given an I.Q. test. Later in high school I was called in to the principal's office. I said, "What did I do?" I knew I was a good student. He said, "I've never seen anybody improve so much on an I.Q. test as you have". And I said, "You took a green horn who was here only three months. I didn't know the difference between a shoe maker or a tailor and you gave me this test. It's a wonder I even passed it." I said, "Now that explains why my I.Q. went up so much."

>> Bill Benson: To make sure we have time for a few questions, just one more question. You said when you came to the United States --

>> Rita Rubenstein: Is that yours or mine? [Mic popping]

>> Bill Benson: Ok. Thank you, Sonya.

Your mother was very protective of you. Will you say a little bit about that? She was overly protective in some ways.

>> Rita Rubenstein: I couldn't go ice skating. I couldn't do many things because she was afraid.  
[Mic popping]

Now I'm afraid of the microphone.

>> Bill Benson: She wouldn't let you ice skate. She protected you so much.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Right. I didn't have a bicycle. I didn't have a lot of things. But I had my life, my freedom. I loved the United States. I am very patriotic. The flags are out all the holidays. You don't know how lucky you are to be in a country where we can speak what's on our minds. We can criticize. I know our candidates are not always great.

>> [Laughter Applause]

>> Rita Rubenstein: But at least we have the freedom.

>> Bill Benson: Yes, we do.

If you're ok, why don't we turn to our audience and ask if they have questions to ask of you.

>> Rita Rubenstein: And then my final statement?

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. To close the program, I'm going to turn back to Rita and she will give us her concluding thoughts. But we have time for some questions from you.

Before we do that, I'd like to ask you to stay with us so that you hear Rita's concluding remarks during the Q&A period. Stay with us. We have microphones that will be coming down the aisle. If you have a question, please wait until you have the mic. Make the question as brief as you can. I'll repeat it just to be sure everybody hears it. Then Rita will answer your question. And we won't have questions about the elections.

>> Rita Rubenstein: No. No.

>> Bill Benson: So right in the front row. You have a question? Why don't we get the microphone down you. I think we got one. Here we go. Got a microphone coming right here in the front row.

Thank you.

>> My dear cousin, why didn't you and your mother join our other aunts and uncle with your children to go to Israel instead of coming to the United States? I'm just curious.

>> Bill Benson: Why Rita and family didn't join other family members and go to Israel and came to the United States instead?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Because my mother's only surviving sister went to the United States. In fact, I forgot to mention that when Israel was declared independent, I remember staying up all night, around a bonfire because at last we had a place to call our own, where to go to. But my mother said no. And my cousin was very Zionistic. He started to turn the channel; he said, "I'm not going to the United States" even though my aunt had two sisters here. He said, "I wanted to go to my country." So that is the reason they went to Israel and I went to the United States. I wanted to be on the exodus. I told her since I'm half an orphan. And she said, "My only child, you're not going anywhere."

I'm very glad I made the choice to be here. Of course, I have a special love for Israel. Thank God -- if we had been in Israel then, so many of the Jews would have been saved.

>> Bill Benson: I know you want to share with us.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes. The only thing. I feel such closeness to it. My father's prayer shawl which amazingly -- I don't know how my mother managed to carry it with her all through the war. My late husband used to wear it every holiday. And I, too. It's been present at every one of my grandchildren's bar and Bat Mitzvah. And whenever I wear it, I feel close to him. I feel like his spirit is with me. It's beautifully made. I found out there's sterling silver. It's removable. I will always cherish it. His memory is always with me but I feel a special bond by just having this. This one thing. My inheritance. Amongst other things, genes.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely.

Do we have any questions? See if we have anybody else who has a question.

Right back here.

>> After you moved to the United States, did you ever go back to Europe to visit?

>> Bill Benson: After you came to the United States, did you ever go back to Europe and have you visited or been back there?

>> Rita Rubenstein: No. The only place, Italy and Spain. I can't bring myself to go to Germany. I don't blame the new generation but I just can't see myself spending money there. I know Israel has wonderful relations with Germany. I don't want to go back. I really don't have good memories other than the very beginning of my childhood.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. Thank you for that.

Another question right here. I think there's two. We have time -- just these two questions.

Let me just mention, too, when Rita finishes with her closing remarks, Rita will stay up here on the stage. So if anybody would like to come up and ask Rita another question or just, you know, say hi, shake her hand or get a picture taken with her, please absolutely feel free to do that.

Is that ok?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: All right. These last two questions then we'll close up the program.

>> [Question Inaudible]

>> Bill Benson: The question is about your aunts and uncles killed by gentile neighbors.

>> [Question Inaudible]

>> Bill Benson: They were killed by neighbors, your grandparents.

>> Rita Rubenstein: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: By the same people that had been their neighbors.

>> My question is after years of starvation, when you did come to America, what is your favorite food?

>> [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: After all of those years of starvation and poor nutrition what is your favorite food?

>> Rita Rubenstein: I love sweets, of course.

>> [Laughter]

>> Rita Rubenstein: You can see. In fact, my cousins here in the United States said because of you we have to eat everything off our plate. Because your cousin after starving.

>> [Laughter]

>> Rita Rubenstein: I have a tendency to prepare way too much food. My kids always complain about that.

>> Bill Benson: There's nodding in the front row.

>> Rita Rubenstein: I never had enough so my refrigerator is always full. And if I'm going to have dinner for five or eight, I think another five could drop in.

>> Bill Benson: I could get in line?

>> Rita Rubenstein: Absolutely.

>> Bill Benson: I want to thank all of you for being with us today. I remind you we will have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. So we hope you can come back and join us. The website will have information about *First Person 2017*.

With that I'd like to turn to Rita to close today as a program.

>> Rita Rubenstein: A senior moment. Thank you. Can I use this? Oh. Ok.

Ok. I thank God that we survived one of our darkest periods in history. I'm grateful to the United States for opening its doors to us. It's the greatest country, as I said, in the world. We should appreciate the freedom that we have and opportunities. I'm proud to be a U.S. citizen. I thank God our men and women in the military and thank them for the sacrifices that they have made in protecting our freedoms. We must remember that. We must remember the past, find courage in the future. We don't want our past to be our children's and grandchildren's future.

We should never stand silent. Always speak up when you witness bullying, prejudicium. Hate is never, never right but love is always right. Always do the right thing. Always take a stand. When you save one life, it's as though you have saved the world.

I'm dedicating today to my grandparents who were brutally murdered by the neighbors, 75 years ago, to the memory of my father, the 11 million people -- it wasn't just Jews who were killed -- and the 1.5 million innocent children and their only crime was being Jewish.

I will continue telling my story. Now all of you will be able to pass it on to your children and to your grandchildren. You can say you actually met a survivor because there are some deniers. Some people say the Holocaust did not happen.

I hope and pray that none of you will ever experience war and hunger. Unfortunately there is hunger in the world now. Remember what happened in Rwanda and Syria. My heart goes out to all of them.

May we enjoy shalom which means peace in the world. God bless you all. God bless the United States of America. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

>> [Applause]