

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 17th year of the First Person program. And our First Person today is Mr. Peter Gorog, 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. And I'm pleased to let you know that Mr. Louis Smith is here with us today.

[APPLAUSE]

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 volunteers here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. We end right, smack dab in the middle of the month. We hope that you can join us at another time.

And our museum's website provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. The address is www.ushmm.org. And it's also listed in your program. Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card that you will find 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 Peter Gorog's biography so that you can remember and share his testimony after you leave here today.

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

Peter Gorog was born into a Jewish family 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 an office manager at a publishing house, while his mother, Olga Schonfeld, worked as a hat maker and raised Peter. This was the last picture of the family together Peter was three months old.

Peter's father was conscripted to work in the Hungarian forced labor battalion beginning in 1940, because as a Jew, he was considered undesirable for armed service by the Hungarian government. Here is a photo of the forced labor battalion. The arrow to the top left side of your screen points to Peter's father, Árpád.

In 1942, Árpád was sent to Ukraine to work with a labor battalion, and he died in Ukraine. Peter and his mother remained in Budapest during this time. In March 1944, German forces invaded Hungary. Peter 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, or police, arrested Peter's mother and put her in a jail. This is an historical photograph from October 1944 of Jewish women in Budapest arrested by Hungarian police.

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

In 1946, Peter's mother made plans for them to emigrate to the United States. This picture is from their passport. In 1949, while they were waiting for their visa, the Communist government of Hungary closed the borders. Peter grew up in Hungary.

In 1980, Peter defected to the United States. He worked for more than 30 years at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. And here you see Peter, just before his retirement from NASA, hard at work, sending off a satellite somewhere.

Although Peter's mother had attempted to emigrate to the United States after the war, they were unable to leave and lived under the Communist government until Peter's defection in 1980. While in Hungary, Peter 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 Peter to remain and work in the United States following his defection, until he received his green card and later became a United States citizen.

Peter, who retired in 2014, spent 34 years in the computer field in the US, spending most of his time at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, where he worked on such 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, Peter 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. In February, Peter graduated from a five-month docent training course and became a tour guide for the museum's permanent exhibit. Since then, he has been leading tours for US law enforcement groups and students from many states. He describes his work as very emotional.

Peter and his wife, Georgie, live in Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC. They have four daughters-- Sarah, Laura, Anna, and Alana. They lost their daughter Juliana when she was just two years old. Peter's daughter, Veronica, from his earlier marriage in Hungary, lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and her two daughters, Monica, age 8, and Catalina, age seven. They are a very close-knit family.

And I'm pleased to let that today, Peter is accompanied by his wife, Georgie, their daughter, Alana, and father-in-law, John Walker. And they're sitting right here in front of us.

After his First Person-- after his first First Person program last year, Peter is now beginning to speak publicly about his Holocaust experience. He's been sharing his family's history with military, high school, and college groups. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Peter Gorog.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you, Peter.

Thank you.

Peter, thank you so much for joining us today, and for your willingness to spend an hour with us, which is too short of a time to cover all that you could tell us, but we'll try to get through as much of it as we can. World War II began when Germany and Russia invaded Poland in September 1939.

Before you tell us about what happened to you and your family during the war and the Holocaust, tell us first a little bit about your family, your community, and your life prior to the war beginning. And not yours, because you came a little bit later, but tell us what you can about your family.

A little bit of context-- I will not go back to 2,000 years of Jewish history in Hungary, but I would like to highlight the last 100, 150 years, when my great grandparents, grandparents, and my parents lived through. From 1867 to 1914, the beginning of the First World War, that era is called the Golden Age of Hungarian Jewry. Because the first time in history Hungarian Jews were emancipated.

They gained full citizenship in Hungary. They were able to go to higher education institutions. They became leaders of the industries. Many of the famous Hungarian writers and composers were Jewish. So Jewish life in Hungary thrived until 1914, when First World War started.

Hungary, unfortunately, throughout history, was on the losing side of the war. And after the war, and the Versailles Treaty, which redraw the borders of Europe, the Hungarian territory was significantly narrowed down. About 35% of the Hungarian territories were given to the neighboring countries-- Romania, Yugoslavia, Soviet Union. And also, about 35%-36% of the Hungarian speaking population became citizens of other countries.

This resulted in such a tremendous bitterness in Hungary. And unfortunately, following the war, just one year after the war ended, there was a Communist revolution in Hungary, which lasted only three months. But most of the Communist leaders were Jewish. So the Hungarian population equated Communism with Jews. And that resulted in a serious restriction on Jewish life.

The first anti-Jewish laws in Europe were enacted in 1920, the so-called numerus clausus law, which restricted the students in higher education institution to 5%, the Jewish participation in college and university life. This was the background of the time when my parents were born, both of them, in 1907.

My father's family, he came from a conservative Jewish family. They were observant, but not very much. So my mom came from a very Orthodox family. My great grandfather was a rabbi. And they got married in 1937. In 1939, Second World War started. In 1940, my father was conscripted to the forced labor battalion. And the rest is the story which we are about to describe.

A couple more questions about that time, prior to the war. Because of those numerus clausus laws, your father was directly affected by that, in terms of his career choices.

That's correct. After high school, my father wanted to be, like a good Jewish boy, a lawyer. And at that time, the Hungarian education system was a little bit different from what we have here and what they have now in Hungary. After high school, you went to a specialized university. If you wanted to be a lawyer, you went to a university specialized for engineers. And law school started after high school also.

My father applied. He was rejected. And the rejection-- the reason for the rejection was that they had a quota of the 5%, and he didn't make the top 5% of the Jewish applicants. The applicants for law school were-- about 40% of the people who applied were Jewish. And, unfortunately for him, he couldn't continue his studies. He became a clerk at a publishing company.

And your mother started her own business, right?

She started her own business. She-- according to what she told me, she never wanted to go to college. She was very good with her hands. And she became a hat maker for ladies. And in the '20s and '30s, hats were a big deal. And she made a good living. And actually, I think probably she earned more than my father did.

And, Peter, you said to me that up until the start of the war, your family really had a normal life. And it was just a normal life. They did all kinds of things. They interacted with their non-Jewish friends and neighbors. Tell us a little bit about that. They kayaked, they--

Yeah, that's correct. Until the war started in, again, 1940-- 1939, and Hungary entered into Second World War only in 1941, life was relatively normal. There were anti-Jewish laws already. From 1938 to 1941, they enacted at least three anti-Jewish laws, very similar to the Nuremberg laws.

These laws restricted Jewish participation in government jobs. First, they just set a quota. Next law said no Jewish person can work for the government or public sector. They restricted their numbers in various professions. Like the number of law licenses or doctors licenses were restricted, only 5%. Because 5% was not a magic number. It was approximately the proportion of the Jewish population within the great Hungarian population.

Later on, the anti-Jewish law declared Jews as a race, just like in Germany. Jews are not a race. It's a religion or an ethnic group. Nevertheless, this had a great effect on many peoples' life. Hungarian Jews were, especially in cities, very assimilated. Many of them went to synagogue maybe once or twice a year. Many of them converted to Christianity. They weren't forced, they just wanted to be like everybody else.

So when this racial law was enacted, everybody who had at least one Jewish grandparent was declared Jewish. So it didn't matter that grandparents converted to Christianity, parents were born into a church and baptized, the person-- again, the third generation, they were born into a church and baptized, it did not matter. They became part of the Jewish community. And, unfortunately, all the discriminatory laws apply to all these persons.

Peter, in a year-- a little more than after the year began, in October 1940, that's when your father was conscripted into a forced labor battalion. Tell us what you know about that and what it meant for you and your family.

Well, I was born in 1941. So by the end of the war, I was only four years old. I have many-- not so many, but quite a few personal memories. Everything you hear today is coming from my mom's diary. She had three of this kind of notebooks. And she put her thoughts during the war, especially after my father was taken to the forced labor camp.

Her purpose was not really writing a diary. She wanted to preserve her memory to tell my father everything what happened in our life, especially in my early, formative years. So her hope was that my father would come back, and she was able to refresh her memory.

Also, she preserved all the postcards which my father sent from the forced labor camps. And those are the thoughts of my father between my birth until he sent her last postcard before he perished. So from these sources, what I can reconstruct is that we had a relatively normal life. In late 1940, my father was taken away. I was born in March 1941.

My father was released from the camp for a week, I believe, or two weeks. That was the time when the picture was taken of the whole family. That was the last time he saw me. And from there on, what we know about my father, that his battalion was taken to Ukraine when Nazi Germany invaded, in 1941, Soviet Union.

The Hungarian troops went in. One reason was because they wanted to get back all the territories which were taken away from the Hungarians after the First World War. And that's where my father perished, among the 40,000 Hungarian Jews who died in forced labor camps.

And your mother during that time, even though she got the postcard, she didn't know where he was because of the censors.

That's correct. These postcards had no place of origin because that was a military secret. So what we know, only the number of the battalion he served with. And we do from the official document the Hungarian Department of Defense sent to my mom in 1943, that he was declared a missing person in 1943. Because the last time they knew about my father was January of 1943. And that time, his battalion was in Ostrogozhsk, Ukraine. It's about the mid-section of Ukraine.

So with your father gone, and then, of course, your mother learning later that he had perished there, now your mother is caring for a very, very young infant boy. How did she make-- at that point, how did she make ends meet? What were you-- what was she able to do to keep you going as a family during that time?

One interesting thing we have to mention here, that Hungary was not occupied by Nazi Germany until 1944. Therefore, what happened to the Jewish people during the Holocaust era, most of the things which happened happened because the Hungarian government brought all those anti-Jewish laws. And they were the ones who persecuted the Jews. It wasn't Nazi Germany.

Hungarian Jews were not sent to the Nazi killing camps, like Auschwitz and others, Dachau, until 1944, when the Germans came in. But the Hungarians took care of their own Jews, and their treatment wasn't very nice.

We lived relatively normal life in Budapest. My mom worked. Women still wore hats. We had the money for the apartment. She even had enough money to hire a maid while she was working. This maid took care of me. This one has changed also. Because in 1943, there was another law which prohibited non-Jews working

for Jews.

My mom gave a good job to a young 19-year-old country girl, who took care of me. She was devastated because she lost her job. My mom was devastated because she had to juggle her work and taking care of me. So I actually grew up in a hat-maker shop, at least the first few years.

Other aspects of life, again because my mom was so protective, and she took so care of me that I really don't know what was going on out in the real world. I don't remember of being hungry, or thirsty, or not having a nice dress because my mom did everything she could to shelter me. And she did a good job. I can say that.

This one changed in 1944, when we had to leave our apartment, and we had to move to the--

Let's talk about that then now. So after-- really from 19-- the beginning of the war, until March 1944, as difficult as things were, and, of course, you lost your father during that time, things turned profoundly worse when the Nazis occupied Hungary in March of 1944. Tell us why that happened and then what that meant for you, your mother, and your community.

It happened for at least two major reasons. Number one, the Germans were defeated in the Soviet Union and the Russian Red Army pushed the Germans back all the way to Hungary. By 1944, the Russian troops entered to Hungary, and the Germans were fleeing from the Russians. And so the occupation almost happened by an accident.

But actually, it wasn't an accident. Because by that time, the Hungarian government realized that the war was lost, and they wanted to get out. And they started secret negotiations, first with the Allies, but the French, American, and the British government. They said Hungary is being occupied, or will be occupied, or liberated by the Russians. You have to negotiate with the Soviet Union.

Reluctantly, they started. The Germans learned about it. They-- when they moved-- moved into Hungary in 1944, March 19, they forced the governor of Hungary to appoint a Nazi-friendly government. And that changed everything.

Adolf Eichmann came with 600 German Einsatz troop into Hungary. And they started to deport the Hungarian Jews to the infamous concentration and killing camps. First, they did the countryside. Within three months, about 400,000 Hungarian Jews out of the 800,000, those of mostly who lived in the countryside were shipped to mostly Auschwitz, Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen, and other concentration camps. By the summer of--

450,000 within a matter of weeks were deported.

That's correct. And, again, we have to stop a little bit here because the Hungarian government, up until now, did not, or haven't recognized and acknowledge the Hungarian involvement of the Holocaust. They say until 1944, Hungarian Jews were not deported. The deportations started in '44 after the Germans came in. So we have to blame them.

Unfortunately, that's not true. Because it was the Hungarian police who rounded up the Jews and moved them, first, to ghettos. Then they moved them to the railway station, put them on freight cars, and shipped them to the concentration camps.

And once that began, on March 19th, 1944, you were immediately pretty much forced right out of your home. But your mom began making a series of decisions. Tell us what your mom did and where you would go because of the decisions that she was making.

Yes, after the German occupation, the anti-Jewish laws became slicker and slicker. In '44, April, we had to put on the yellow David star. In the summer of 1944, they forced the Jewish population to move out from their apartments and to move into so-called designated houses.

Those houses were marked with a yellow David star also. The non-Jewish population moved out from those apartment buildings, and Jewish families moved in. Sometimes two, three families sharing a two-bedroom apartment.

When we had to move out from our apartment, my mom realized that it wouldn't be a good idea to move where Jews are already concentrated. Because she either knew or just perceived that once the Jews are collected at certain places, it would be very easy to move them to another place, which would be concentration camp. So she decided not to move into any of these designated houses.

But she had a few-- actually, quite a few non-Jewish friends. And one of them offered that we can go to her apartment. So for a very short time, for a few weeks, we were staying with this non-Jewish family. Actually, I can say it was a Christian family, because I do know they had a big cross on the wall and Jesus' picture. So I assume that they were Christians.

And that's where we were until a "good" neighbor, in quotation mark, reported us to the police, that we were hiding there. And the next day, two policemen showed up at our door. I remember that moment when my mom was arrested. Because we were sitting at the breakfast table. I was really tiny. They didn't have child seats, so I was sitting on two or three phone books or other thick volumes.

And they came. They took my mom away. I didn't know what happened. The host family explained, or at least they tried to put me at ease, that, oh, it's nothing. They're just going to ask a few questions. I didn't know that most of the people who were arrested and were taken to that jail-- it was an infamous jail in Budapest, the so-called Mosonyi Street Jail where she was taken-- that very few people left alive.

My mom, because of her bravery, and because of her natural smartness, she was able to get out of the jail by using the very document the Hungarian government sent her to tell her that my father died. My mom took that paper with her, and she claimed to the jail warden that she was a war widow. War widows had a very special treatment in Hungary. During the war, when there was rationing, they got a little bit more food, better treatment at certain places.

Unfortunately-- well, my father wasn't part of the official Hungarian army, so my mom was not a war widow. Only just regular soldiers widows were war widows. But fortunately for her and for me, when she showed that paper with the signature of the defense minister of the Hungarian army, and a big stamp on it, they believed that that's an official document, that my mom was a war widow. And they panicked that they made a big mistake, so next day, they let her go.

And, of course, you can't go back to the home you were in now. And that's when you said your mother did another major act of chutzpah at that point. Tell us what she did then.

The chutzpah is the best word. That's a Yiddish word for being brave, but it's brave beyond what you would do using your natural senses. Because we were reported in the police that we were hiding, and the next place we should have gone, according to government regulation, was the Budapest ghetto. And again, my mom, by all means, wanted to avoid to go to the ghetto, so she went to visit another Jewish friend of hers, who lived in so-called protected houses.

In 1944, a Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg, came to Budapest, sent by the American War Refugee Board and financed by the American government, to save as many Hungarian Jews as possible. He did two major things. Number one, he gave false Swedish documents to many Hungarian Jews, so-called Schutzpass.

And the other was that he bought up 32 apartment buildings in Budapest. And once he bought them, they became the property of the Swedish government. And according to international law, the Hungarian government had no control over those houses. So the Jews who moved into those houses were protected, at least for a while, from being deported to the concentration camp.

So my mom went to visit one of her Jewish friends in one of these protected houses. She decided on the spot that she's going to stay. We weren't officially invited into that house, but my mom said, sorry, we're

going to stay here. And it caused some tension, my mom told later. Because, again, that was actually a three-bedroom apartment, but there were already three families in it. And we stayed in the living room until we had to move again.

And Peter, during that time, of course, the Allies were bombing Budapest and the war was really being concentrated where you were. The deportations ended for a while in July or August of the summer, but resumed again in October 1944. And then things really got incredibly more frightening for you at that point. Because your mother had been in this protected house with you. That would all-- that would all change.

Yeah, and there was another factor. In October 1944, a far-right Nazi party took over the Hungarian government, again with the protection and encouragement of Nazi Germany. And this far-right Nazi party was called the Arrow Cross. They had a military unit. And these personnel, first, surrounded all these protected houses, and they didn't let people in and out.

And in October, when the Nazis took over the Hungarian government, they didn't care about international laws. They went to these houses. They rounded up all the Jews. And again, my mother prediction, that once the Jews are in one place, they could be very easy targets, became a reality. And one by one, families were removed from all apartment buildings.

And when it was our turn to move-- and many of these people didn't even get to the railway station, and they weren't even deported to Germany. Many of them were led to the shore of the Danube, and they were just shot there into the river. The river washed away their bodies. Today, there is a very touching document in Budapest along the Danube, with empty bronze shoes, remembering the people who had to take off their clothes and shoes before they were shot into the river.

When it was our turn, and the Hungarian Nazi military personnel came into our apartment building, it was either divine coincidence, or again, very hard to explain how we escaped from being deported or taken to the Danube. Previously, we, little boys, were playing in the inner courtyard of this apartment buildings. The way they are built in Budapest, that every apartment building has an inner court where there was even a playground. At least, we played there, as far as I know.

And, of course, these Hungarian Nazis were there with their weapons, "protecting us." Actually, protecting that we wouldn't escape. And they made fun of us by-- we were being boys. We were pretending that the handle of a broom was a rifle, and we were shooting each other. And these Nazi thugs said it would be more entertaining if we would use their weapons.

Fortunately, they removed the ammunition. But here we were, little Jewish boys with yellow stars on our clothes, and pretending shooting each other, not knowing that in the outside world, Jewish people with yellow stars were shot with real rifles.

Going back to the event, what happened in the apartment. When we were rounded up, these Nazi thugs came in. And one of these young guys-- they were 16, 17 years old, because everybody over 18 was already conscripted in the Hungarian army. We became friends, according to what my mom told me later, while we were playing in the courtyard.

And this guy just had mercy on me. And he told to his colleagues that leave this family alone. I know little Peter, and he's a good guy. Let them leave-- or stay here. As soon as they left the apartment--

Because they were going to go to the next apartment and take the next family.

Exactly, that's what happened. My mom realized that we cannot stay even one more day. We left these protected houses. And finally, in October, we moved into the Budapest ghetto.

So now you're in the Budapest ghetto. And still many thousands of Jews concentrated there. This is, of course, later-- late in the war for Hungary. Budapest soon comes under siege from the Russians and the Allies. And there you are, living in this very, very, very compacted part of Budapest. Tell us about that.

A little bit of the ghetto-- it was set up in the traditional Jewish quarter of Budapest, around the Great Synagogue of Budapest. It was walled-- nobody in, nobody out. By that time, the Allied troops and air forces regularly bombed Budapest. We spent most of the time in bomb shelters.

Food was rationed, but even we couldn't get our rationed food because food was short supply. Water, sometimes we had water. Sometimes we didn't. Electricity was out most of the time. That's where we spent most of our days, in the bomb shelter, as far as I can remember.

Again, I don't know where my mom got any food, but I don't remember being hungry or thirsty. And, again, my mom came from a very Orthodox Jewish family. We had to keep the Jewish dietary laws, so we couldn't eat anything made out of pork. But that laws were not obeyed during these circumstances.

Actually, I think in Jewish laws, there is an exception. When you save life, you can break the law. So when my grandmother found a piece of bacon somewhere, we gladly ate it.

You said your diet, to a large extent, was potato skins.

Yeah, that's another thing. In this country, potato skin, I wouldn't say a delicacy, but it's a regular fare. In Hungary, at that time, and I think until now, you gave it to the pigs. That was not eaten. But during the war, we ate anything and everything which was edible. And potato skin was one of the things we survived on.

And as you had explained to me, the water source became if you could get water out of hydrants on the street. But if you go outside, there's everything from snipers and bombing. And I mean, you're in the midst of warfare there. And the conditions are really terrible. And on top of that, it was-- that winter of 1944 into 1945 was an especially harsh winter. So things are frozen.

Yes, that's correct. And, again, with hindsight, I just don't know how people could survive. And unfortunately, many people did not survive. Many of the victims of the Holocaust did not die in concentration camp. They died of starvation, not getting medical attention, not having access to medications. And people were dying really left and right.

My grandparents, they survived the war, the Holocaust. But a couple of months later, they died. Because they were so weak that a common cold took them.

Tell us about being liberated. What do you remember about that?

About the liberation, very briefly, the Soviet army came into the Budapest ghetto in January 18, 1945. We were liberated. The word liberation means different things to different people. And I stop here just for a second because one lesson we learned from the history, that what happened during the Holocaust, depending on the political situation, can be explained one way or the other.

There is no explaining the way that the Soviet troops liberated Hungary from Nazi occupation. Today, historians, Hungarian historians, say that one occupation was replaced with another occupation. That's true in certain sense. Allied troops occupied Germany, Austria, France. And for a limited time, they were the so-called occupation forces.

But for us Jews, that was a liberation. It was a liberation because we were not threatened by taking us to concentration camps or killing us on the streets of Budapest. I remember the first Soviet soldiers who came in, and they gave us candies. Other people have memories, Soviet troops came in, and they raped their daughters. It happened also. So, again, depending on what side of history you stand, you explain certain events differently.

So once the Soviets are in, you can literally emerge from your hiding places in the cellars in the ghetto into a devastated city. What did your mom do then?

Well, we went back to our original apartment. Our apartment was given to an ethnic German family, who happened to be-- many of the ethnic Germans joined the Nazis when they came into Hungary. This family

was a very friendly family. They preserved our apartment. We left our apartment with one suitcase and a handbag. And everything else was left. And everything was intact.

And when we came back, they said, we're going to go to our next place. We went back to our apartment. My mom tried to pick up where we left. Unfortunately, there was no demand for hats anymore. People was happy to have what they already had. They definitely didn't order custom made ones.

So she started to work as a seamstress. Also, we had no income. In order to buy the very limited supply of groceries and everything, you needed money. The inflation in Hungary in 1946 was horrible, a dozen percent. The last time they didn't have enough room on the banknotes for the zeros because the inflation was just such a thing.

Anyway, what people did at that time, that whatever they could save during the Holocaust, valuables, they went to the countryside, and they bartered for food. So whatever family jewelry we had or whatever was valuable, my mom took it, took the train. We went to the countryside. We came back with some food.

And slowly, life returned to normal, if you can call it normal. There were no more air raids. There were still bodies on the street. People ate-- at that time, we didn't have a lot of automobiles, so goods were carried with horse-drawn carts. And many of those horses became victims of the bombing. And there were those carcasses lying on the street. And people just carved as much as they could, and cooked it, and ate it.

Anyway, it's a long story from there until 1980, when I defected.

It's a very-- with many major events-- with many major events for you. Your mother did try to get out of Hungary fairly early after the war and was unable to for a good while. Tell us tell us why that-- well, in fact, she wasn't. Tell us about those attempts.

My mom had eight siblings, and two of them were lucky enough to get out of Hungary before the war started. An aunt and uncle of mine came to the United States in 1938 and 1941. And they lived in Baltimore. And after the war, they wanted us to join us. We applied for a Hungarian passport. You saw the passport pictures. And we applied for an entry visa to the United States.

Unfortunately, at that time-- and if you visited the permanent exhibition, you heard a little bit about it or saw that there was a very strict quota. There were just a very limited number of emigrants, especially Jewish emigrants, allowed to come to the United States. So we had to wait in line until our turn.

Our turn didn't come until 1949, when the Hungarian government closed the borders. And even if our number came up, nobody in, nobody out in Hungary again. And so I grew up in the Communist system. In 1956, there was a revolution. It lasted only 10 days. The borders were open for a very limited time. 200,000 Hungarians left Hungary at that time.

I and my family wasn't among them. My mom remarried in 1953. My stepfather was a Holocaust survivor, the very few who survived Auschwitz. He had the number on his arm. And just one thing to mention, if we have time. That unfortunately, Holocaust history was not taught in Hungary when I grew up. Hungarians had good reason why they didn't want to talk about it.

And unfortunately, the survivors didn't talk about either, because of their experience they went through. So I saw the number on my stepfather's arm. I asked him what it was. And he said, oh, it's nothing. And he died without ever telling us-- to me and my stepbrother-- history how he survived Auschwitz.

Peter, in just the little bit of time we have left, a couple of questions. From what you've told us about your mom, it's evident-- you refer to her smartness. She was incredibly brave, resourceful. After the war, how did she do?

Well, she worked hard. Again, she was good with her hands. She worked as a seamstress for a while on her own. Then all the private enterprises were taken over by the government. She was forced to work in a-- I think it's cooperative, what it was called at that time. She made female dresses for the rest of her years,

until she retired.

She worked hard in two shifts, 6:00 to 2:00 or 2:00 to 10:00 in the evening. And she made enough money that we had food on the table and clothes to wear. And, again--

Because of-- I'm going to jump ahead a little bit. Because you had two relatives get to the United States, in, I think, 1980 or so, you came to visit-- you came to visit them. And that's when you made the decision to defect and stay put, right?

Yeah, that's the end of the story. I was naive for a while. And because I didn't know anything better, I thought that life, it is what it is. What we experienced in Hungary, I was able to go to university. Tuition was practically nil. I got a good education. I got a good job. I went to concerts and theater. So I had a relatively good life.

However, after a while, you realize that good life is not about food, or going skiing, or to a concert. And you realize how oppressive the Communist system was. And because of my job, I was able to travel to Western Europe, which was a tremendous privilege. We were not allowed to go to Western Europe.

So when I personally saw that what we were told, that dying capitalism was not really dying, but it was thriving, I realized that we are really brainwashed. And the relative comfort we had in Hungary really did not satisfy me, because of many reasons.

Number one, everything was controlled by the government-- all the media. What we see-- what we saw on television or theaters were approved by the Hungarian government. So we didn't get any modern thing which came from the West. And that was very frightening.

And also, although we didn't touch on my spiritual involvement, because of the war and the circumstances, I didn't get a Jewish education. I became later interested in Judaism on my own. I became aware of what Israel was, and Israel was not the Israel I read about in the newspapers or saw on the television. And all this propaganda became just unbearable at one time.

And I said, enough is enough. And in 1980, I came to the United States. And I never went back. I still have the plane ticket from JFK to Prague, to Budapest. And one day, maybe I'm going to frame it.

We're out of time. And unfortunately, I think you know that we've had to make this a very short session. There's so much that we-- both during the war and certainly after the war, that we're not hearing from Peter. And we're out of time to ask a few questions. But Peter, it's our tradition that the First Person gets the last word.

And so when Peter finishes, I have two requests of you. One is we're going to ask you to stand when he finishes, because Joel our photographer is going to come up on stage and take a photograph of Peter, with you as the background. But also, Peter is going to stay behind for a while. So that's an opportunity to please come up here, ask him any question you want to ask him, get your picture taken with him, or just say hi, whatever you would like to do when we're done.

And we'd also like to remind you that we do First Person programs each Wednesday and Thursday through the middle of August. The website will have information about the program in 2017. So we hope you can return.

I want to thank you for being with us. Before Peter gives us his last word, I want to say thank you for being willing to share this with us. And I wish we'd had three or four more hours to spend with you, but we'll take our hour.

I wanted to read a couple of my excerpts--

Can I interrupt for just a second?

Sure.

When you come up here, if you can just glance with Peter at the postcards from his father. They're astonishing. He tries-- on one little page, he tries to write so tiny to cover every inch of it. And just tell us-- be sure you tell us how your father addressed your mother in those. Little squirrel?

Yeah, that's a Hungarian term of endearment, a little squirrel-- my little squirrel. That was my mom. And anyway, maybe another occasion we will have time to go into those details. So maybe one day, when I finish translating into English, and I put on a blog or the museum website, you'll have a chance to see for yourself.

First of all, thank you for coming. And thank you for participating in this program. I believe this is a very important program. Although the Holocaust is a unique event in history, the consequences are universal. And this museum is all about the history of the Holocaust for the purpose that it will never happen again. And that's the motto of the museum, never again.

But there is another sentence there-- what you do matters. And so for me, doing these First Person conversations and talking to students and other groups, the major purpose is that we are getting older. I may not look 75, but I am 75. And I am the youngest of the survivor volunteer group. Most of the people in their early or late 80s. So we don't know how much longer we can give our personal testimony and make sure it never happens.

So that second sentence in the motto-- what you do matters-- it's you, in the audience, you, the visitors of this museum, and people in school, to make sure that this history will be preserved, interpreted in the right way. And that's very important. Because Holocaust denial is alive and well. And especially with the internet, their audiences are just really endless.

So I just want to encourage you, what you heard here today, what you experience in the museum, what you can find on the internet, use it. Use it every time when you see discrimination. Really discrimination is one thing how the Holocaust started, that there were discrimination against, not the Jews, interestingly enough, but Communists and trade unionist, and then the Jews.

And we know what discrimination might lead to. And unfortunately, genocide has happened since the end of Second World War. Millions died in Cambodia, and Darfur, and other places, where ethnic and religious animosity is just over-boiling.

And what we can do is to raise our voices every time when we see bullying or see discrimination. And be aware of propaganda. There are-- and again, with the internet and 890 channels on television, propaganda is all over the place. And again, Nazi propaganda was instrumental in the annihilation of 6 million Jews. I think that's all I wanted to say and all we have time for.

[APPLAUSE]