

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON: ALEX SCHIFFMAN-SHILO
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>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Good morning and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Jennifer Ciardelli. I work in the Museum's Levine Institute for Holocaust education, and I am honored to host today's *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mr. Alex Schiffman-Shilo whom we will meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here at the Museum. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend decades, and we are grateful to the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation, for making this 17th season of the *First Person* series possible. We also thank Alex, for being willing to share his individual account of the Holocaust with us today.

The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of this season's *First Person* guests. Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the museum can complete the Stay Connected card that you were handed today or speak with a museum representative after today's program. In doing so you will receive an electronic copy of Alex's biography so that you can remember and share his testimony after you leave today.

Alex will share his First Person account for about 45 minutes. If we have time at the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask Alex a few questions, and we will also make a group photo. Joel will take the photograph with Alex in the front and everybody in the back. You may have seen some of them. It makes a great photograph.

To get us started today, I wanted to provide a little intro framing to help set up Alex's situation. We begin with this portrait of Alex in his Cub Scout uniform.

Alex was born in Strasbourg, France in 1933. The arrow on this map points to Strasbourg, right on the border with Germany.

Alex's parents had emigrated from Poland. His father was a traveling salesman and his mother was trained as a Hebrew teacher. The family moved to Paris in 1938. So the family moved to France in 1924, Paris in 1938.

When the Germans invaded France in 1940, Alex's family moved to the South of France, where the collaborationist Vichy government took power. Alex's family ultimately moved to Villefranche-de-Rouergue, the town where Alex's great Uncle Max also lived. And we'll hear more about that.

When Alex's mother fell ill, Alex's Aunt Cylli, took care of Alex and his sister. We see in this photograph, came to take care of the family.

Throughout the war, Alex and his sister, Madeleine, were able to attend school and summer camp and lived a relatively normal life until September 1943, when the German crackdown on Jews

there intensified. Alex, Madeleine, and Cylli were able to escape to a nearby forest until the worst had passed. After the war Alex and his family were able to return to Paris.

At the end of the war, a number of years later, Alex moved to Israel. While there he served for two years in the Israeli Defense Forces and he went on to have a successful career as an agronomist who worked for the United Nations on international agricultural projects, which took him around the world to many different countries.

Alex moved to the United States in 1989, where he continued to work on international agricultural projects. And even after retiring, Alex continued to translate documents and contribute to that field.

Alex is married. He has three children, five grandchildren. And he volunteers at the museum on Mondays and Thursdays.

So with that I'm going to invite Alex up to the stage and we'll get started with our conversation. So, please.

>> [Applause]

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Good morning. Before we start, there are quite a few volunteers who are Holocaust survivors. We have a monthly gathering. And it happens that the monthly gathering is today. So when you go out and you go where the classrooms are, you can just peek in and you will see some of the faces you just saw on the screen.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: I think it's one of the real privileges at the museum, that we get to interact and you give your time to the museum.

All right. You ready?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Great. We thought it would be great to start with some memories up of your life before the war started. So the war starts in 1939. You were born in 1933.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: The end of 1933. For six years, something like that. I was born on just the German border of France, the eastern part of France. You just cross the river, the Rhine River, and you're in Germany. We stayed in Basel until 1938. My father was a traveling salesman. And he decided that the town was too off center to travel. It was an extra 200 miles or more to go. So we moved to Paris in 1938.

Then two things happened. My mom got breast cancer. And the war came. We moved first to a little town where the manufacturers my father used to represent, were located. We stayed there a year. Then we moved further south to another town called Villefranche-de-Rouergue. It's about -- for whoever knows, Toulouse, it's about 60 miles north of Toulouse.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And you hear more of that.

Tell us more about your father. He was born in Poland. He's a war veteran.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. My father was a war veteran. He fought, as we could say, on the wrong side, meaning on the Austro-Hungarian empire. Spent two years on the Russian front and two years in the Italian front. World War I, I should remind you, the Italians were allies with the allies. They fought against Austria. So my father was on both. He was wounded once. But he survived.

My father was in communications. But in these days communication was telephone. And telephone implies wire. And wires imply to put wires, to lay them down, and also to repair them. And they are a very easy target to snipers from the opposite side. My father thought -- he was wounded but they had many casualties.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And he survived the war. And then he moved back. Then he moved to France. When did he meet your mother?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Oh, they were from the same village. They knew from almost birth, I would say. But after World War I, he went to France. Then he went back in '24 and married my mother. They came back to France. And my sister was born in '26.

By that time they still were poor. They were naturalized French, including my sister. In '28 my sister was 2 years old. I was born a Frenchman.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Your mother was trained as a Hebrew teacher.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. My mother was trained as a Hebrew teacher but she never had the opportunity to teach. She had to help my father make a living. She worked as a seamstress. My sister -- I was too young but my sister told me she remember our mother sewing, you know, zippers, zippers, and zippers. Hundreds of zippers just to make a living. She was paid by the piece, not by the hour.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: So thinking about your life, again, before the war started in Strasbourg and then Paris, what do you remember about those days? Again, you're a young child but did you go to school?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: In Strasbourg, I remember almost nothing. The only thing I know, because -- a few years ago, I have address where we lived, the house is still there. I know that it's 13 [Speaking Non-English Language]. Anyway. So the house is still there. This is what I remember. Then I remember coming to Paris and going to elementary school, to kindergarten, near the house. And that kindergarten also still exists. I know exactly where it is. It still exists.

They told me some funny things. For two or three months I started to speak a mixture of German and French. The mixture was not one word of this and one word of that. The mixture was in the middle of the same word.

>> [Laughter]

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: A French beginning with a German ending.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And so in terms -- your family is Jewish. Do you remember religion playing an important role? Did you go to synagogue? What was that like?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: From what I heard, my mother use to the keep a kosher house. My sister told me that. After the war my father couldn't care less. But, he insisted -- about keeping kosher. On the other hand, he insisted after the war that his son, me, would go to Jewish high school to get a Jewish education. And I went to the Jewish high school near Paris. That high school still exists today.

One little story. Years later, in Israel, I went to the French bookstore and here is the former director of the high school. But my first job was some job in the slaughterhouses. I was so dirty and stinky that I didn't dare say hello. I regret it to this day because I should have done it. Anyway.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: So thinking back, war started in September 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. But they wouldn't invade France until May 1940. Did you have an understanding that war had started? What was that time period like in France?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: The French call it, that period, they call it the "Phoney War." Because there was a state of war and there was no fighting. But then the French had then a reputation for the previous war. So they fortified all the borders with Germany. And the Germans went through Belgium. And that border was not guarded at all. So within three weeks the French Army collapsed.

I remember that we took -- we went to the south. I remember we took a taxi from Paris some 60 miles. Then we boarded a train south. It's among the few things I remember.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And why you ended up --

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: It's a small town more or less in the middle of France. We landed there because my father's manufacturers, the people he used to represent to sell -- my father used to deal with leather goods, like women handbags, etc. The manufacturers were in that town. So it was kind of natural to go there. Later on we went further south where an uncle of my mother lived since the end of World War I. He was the youngest, our Uncle Max.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: What do you remember about Uncle Max?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Oh, I remember many things. [Laughter]

He had a fur business. He used to sew furs and to sell jackets, coats, and other things. When he was a young man, he also worked at the butcher's. So he made, during the war, the most delicious sausages and hams. This I remember.

My Uncle Max, even before we came, lost his son during the war. His son was killed fighting the Germans. And one thing I remember is one day at the end of the war, one day I came to my Uncle Max -- I was a child. I would just knock at the door and come in. I came in. I see his wife sobbing very quietly near the radio. The radio was announcing the names of the French prisoners of war who were repatriated. And the poor woman, her son wasn't coming back.

And from that radio I remember also something. Although it was forbidden, we used to listen to Radio London. It was a broadcast called -- the Frenchman speak to Frenchman, [Speaking Non-English Language]. I found out after the war was, for those of you who know music, was Handel, the opening.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: A German composer.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Born in Germany but lived in England most of his life and what the music was for the British pleasure when they were on the Thames.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: To clarify, the war started in France, 3/5 of France is occupied or overtaken by the Germans. And then Vichy, the part that you moved to, it maintained its own government but it was a collaborationist government.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Oh, yes.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: So you moved there to escape the German occupation and still -- what was daily life like? Could you feel that the war was going on?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Personally, I didn't feel it. But I know from one or two things, and things that I learned later -- one day -- around 1942, more or less, there started to be rumors of what's happening in Eastern Europe for the Jews.

And there's another thing, my grandparents sent a few letters. One letter said -- the last letter said we have to go, we are leaving, we ever to go, we don't know where we are going.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And your grandparents at this point remained in Poland.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: They remained in Poland. Today we know exactly what happened. They were marched to a nearby forest and were gunned down in a common grave, directly. So we learned that only after the war.

I want to say something else about my Uncle Max. It will come back.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: When you moved, did you move -- there were a few other families that you moved with.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes. There was my mother's elder brother moved with us. He had a manufacturing business. He succeeded to bring his machinery to where we are and he kept on going until -- this I discovered only very recently. He was forbidden -- he got a letter from some authority, Vichy authority. The Jew has no rights to own a business. At that time my uncle gave the business a kind of handover to a friend of his. And then he got a second letter that he has no right to work there. I gave both letters, copies, to the Holocaust Museum.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And that's an example of anti-Jewish legislation that started to permeate that environment.

You had a story about a Polish-Jewish family in the town.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. Across the street -- we were French citizens. So somehow maybe we were protected, although my Tante Cylli was a Pol, and how she survived, she never talked about that. She kept it in the dark. But that Polish -- across the street was a Polish family, Stochi family. And they had three sons. Two sons were with me, in the same classroom, with the same teacher. One day they vanished. They were very poor. They were relocated to the east. The irony is that the father, he's known to have said that "At least my children have something to eat."

I checked recently in the Holocaust museum in Paris, in the memorial. They are on the list of families who were deported but they didn't survive. That's what the archives says.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: You mentioned your Aunt Cylli. She arrived because your mother fell ill.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Tante Cylli was the youngest. She was a dentist by training. But she was still a Polish citizen. She came to our house to help my mother -- her ailing elder sister. One day -- I know my mother used to call her at night to help, etc. Until one day she didn't call and my mother was gone. That was 1941 in May. Then Cylli took over.

Cylli was a little authoritarian, I must say. [Laughter] I always say jokingly, she had a lie detector here. [Laughter] We kept very close relations, in fact, until she passed at the age of 90 and something.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Wow. And what do you remember? You were quite young then when your mother passed away. Do you have memories of what that change meant?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: What it meant? Yeah. I had a few memories. First of all, at the very, very end, her face was kind of distorted a little bit. There was a change in her. Then she passed. The burial was in Toulouse. I did not go to the burial. Then my tante took over. My sister was a teenager. As much as my tante was authoritarian, my sister did not accept the authority. My sister one day screamed at me. She said, you know, she is not your mother, she is your tante, not your mother. I went along much better.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: But your sister was seven years older than you.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes. But still very good relationship. My sister became a dentist because my tante advised her to go. My tante was a dentist. She said go to dentistry; it's good. So my sister went.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And during this time you continued to go to school?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I didn't miss one day of school. Then I cross-checked. I asked my tante. The only thing I asked her: Did I miss a day of school? She said no.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Wow. And in this environment it's quite unusual, especially in a collaborationist government where there were neighbors or folks who turned against --

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: We were in a little town. The town was not against us. They were not hostile. They knew we were Jewish. Once or twice somebody called talking about me saying [Speaking Non-English Language]. "Little Jew boy." But that was it. It stopped there.

The picture you have is myself, myself in the Cub Scouts. You can see that the tie is as good as this tie on me.

>> [Laughter]

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I was a Cub Scout. I went to summer camp. The head counselor of the camp was from another town. And the first day he summoned me and another Jewish boy. He said flatly, "These ones, I don't want them." And then his deputy, who was the math teacher in our school, said, "They go, I go." End of story. We stayed.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: What a powerful testimony to the choice of individuals. It actually makes me think of our "Some Were Neighbors" exhibition, which, if people haven't had a chance to see -- this is going to sound like a shameless plug for the museum. But there is a great exhibition that explores the role of ordinary people. It features people such as that, right? We don't know the motivation for why he stood up but he did and it made the difference.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. Now, I want to say another thing. My father had an ID. He was a French citizen. He had an ID with a stamp "Jew" in it, a red stamp "Jew." Ok. My father had a family to support. His job was to visit clients. And there was no guarantee -- I understood that only after the war, long after. There was no guarantee when he boarded the train on Monday morning that we would see him on Friday or Saturday. There was no guarantee. We knew exactly his itinerary. And at one instance -- they are linked, the two stories. You might have read or somebody read there was a rebellion of the SS troops in the town where I was. The rebellion was crushed.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: That was in the summer of '43, I think.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah, September '43. And the rebellion was crushed. There were actually soldiers from Croatia, not German. They rebelled against the officers. They killed a few officers. The rebellion was crushed. The German imposed curfew. They explained -- they put poster, German and French, explaining the curfew. The last line said "Don't be influenced by the British and the Jews." We saw the Jews say better to go in hiding for a couple of days. This is what we did.

That's another story. How did we pass the checkpoints, but we did pass. We took a train to three more stations further north and we stayed there maybe a week, maybe 10 days. The problem was, my father didn't know anything about that. And the problem was to take my father out of the train before he arrived to our town. So my sister and me went to the train station. The train arrived. There's no time to run inside the train. This was steam train. Steam trains stop very, very, very slowly. And suddenly my father appears at the window. So my sister and me, we ran after the train. It was possible. And we shouted to him, "Go out at the next station." This is what he did.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Was that the first time you saw the presence of soldiers in your town? Were they always around? German soldiers or the SS?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: German soldiers at the very, very, very beginning. There were regular soldiers. And I remember that because I could speak a little bit of Yiddish, which is a mixture of German. I directed one of the soldiers to buy some tobacco somewhere, or some cigarettes. I remember. Then they vanishes. And they came back later. When they came back, I don't remember exactly but they were there with the rebellion of the Croatians.

Here's one word to add. Himmler, the head of the SS, valued the Muslim soldiers, Croatian soldiers. Most of the Croatian were Muslims. And he valued them, and, therefore, he tried to erase the whole story of the rebellion. But it was broadcasted at Radio London two months later, the BBC.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: When you fled with your sister, was that when you went into the woods and you had a cousin --

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes, yes. This is when we went, my sister and my aunt, and a friend, Italian Communist, we went to my mother's cousin who was living in the woods and was making a living of producing charcoal. He lived literally in the woods. I mean, his bed was marked with a few stones. His mattress was leaves, near a tree. We went to a little farm just nearby.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And that's where you stayed for a few days?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah, a few days, maybe eight, 10 days.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And when you returned to the town?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Everything was normal.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And there were a couple of times you had to stay with a science teacher?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Two nights, my sister and me stayed with the science teacher. The reason I don't know. But I know that the French police, not exactly the police, the gendarme -- the gendarme is like a trooper. They warned Jewish families that they had instruction to run them up and to arrest them. But they warned us one day before. They did it maybe twice. Maybe more. I don't know.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Which is interesting. The story in France, people sometimes think, oh, it was the Germans who were rounding everybody up but, in fact, this was French policemen who were involved. And you were very fortunate to be in a situation where the gendarmes gave you that warning.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Recently, only very recently, shock. The President of France admitted that the roundup in February 1942 or March 1942 was only French policemen, exclusively. He said there was not one German soldier. They just admitted it recently.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: So how did you -- in June 1944, D-Day happens; the United States goes to the shores of France. How did that impact your experience?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: First of all, there was a rumor from mouth-to-mouth, mouth-to-ear, however you look at it, that the allies came. What we call in French [Speaking Non-English Language], the invasion. This happened, oh you know it, on June 6, 1944. It was a rumor -- don't forget, we were in the South of France. It's about a good 300, 400 miles from the beaches of Normandy. There was a rumor the allies are coming, the allies are coming. At the same time, there was an SS Armored Division who was South of France, they were rushed to the front. They went across, some of them, across our town here and there. When they saw a nice house, they did target fighting or target firing and target exercise on them. But besides that -- maybe you heard what happened. Maybe some of you heard about that. That was a massacre by German troops in a French village in the center of France. Maybe these were part of that same division. We know they were part of the same division.

Now, the sad thing is -- I mean sad. When Hitler invaded France, he re-annexed the last Province of France before you go to Germany. You have the Rhine River, the Black Forest is on the other side. Hitler re-annexed. Therefore, they became German citizens. They were drafted into the German Army. They were eligible to volunteer in the SS.

Why do I tell that to you? Because the people who perpetrated the massacre were [Indiscernible]. Now, after the war, [Indiscernible] came back to France. The president gave blanket amnesty to all who fought in the German Army and therefore they didn't prosecute the German

soldiers. The commander of that unit was a German. And he was killed later on in combat with the British.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: How much, during this time, 1943, '44, was your family or the community aware of what was going on throughout Europe and in particular what was happening in the east?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah, we were aware. We knew two things. There were rumors. Maybe I told you that just before. There were rumors about what was happening to the Jews in Eastern Europe. One day I came back home and I said to my parents, you know, today I spoke with my friends -- I was 9, 10, something like that. I spoke to my friends and they said, "These poor Jews in Eastern Europe". And my sister and my aunt said, "Shhhh. Don't talk about that." Ok. So I didn't talk anymore.

My father had a map of the Russian front. And he was following the progress of the Red Army, of the Russian Army, on the eastern front.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: When did you know -- so then D-Day, what you just described, the shelling of nice houses in the summer of '44. When did the war end for you? When were you aware that it was done?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I don't think we have a precise date besides the official day, May 8, 1945. I don't know exactly. I have a relative who was killed in the liberation of Toulouse in August 44, meaning two months after the invasion.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Can you speak a little bit about that relative? What did you know? That was your cousin?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: He was my mother's first cousin. He was a Communist. He was born in Poland. In the same village. He went to then it was Palestine. From Palestine, he fought in the International Brigade against Franco. I'm sorry, I'm sure many of you don't know all of these details. But Franco was the ruler of Spain and he was a fascist. The word fascist, I think, comes from that. I'm not sure. Maybe from Italy. But he was a fascist. He ruled Spain. One good thing he did, he decided -- he was not involved in World War II. It would have been natural for him to be with the Germans because the Germans helped him to seize power. The German Air Force exercised the kind of training in dive-bombing in Spain during the Civil War. And Franco didn't reciprocate. He stayed neutral. He did not drag Spain in the war.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And your mother's cousin?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: My cousin then went to France. He was in what they call -- in the French underground, a special group which was foreigners. He was killed at the liberation of Toulouse.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: He received a plaque, didn't he?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: There is a plaque in Toulouse where he fell. He is called Commandant Philippe, meaning Major Philippe, his war name.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: You had another family member who was involved with the resistance, who was a doctor?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. [Inaudible]

>> [Laughter]

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: On my father's side, one of my cousins was a doctor who was in the underground. He was an MD, medical doctor. He was taken prisoner by the German because, according to the medical ethics, he couldn't leave wounded people, wounded patients but the Germans wouldn't have it and they executed him. I have on my computer the notice, the family notice of his passing.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And that was just a day or two before the hostilities --

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Two or three days -- he was executed some 10 or 12 others of his group, one or two days before they were liberated.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: What did you come to learn after the war about other family members, family members that you had lost? There was another uncle who had stayed in Poland?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. That was my father's youngest brother. He didn't leave Poland. He didn't leave that village. We know that he survived the war. We don't know if his family survived. He was married, had two daughters. We don't know if the wife and the daughter survived. He survived but

in 1947, two years after the war, he went to a Ukrainian peasant to reclaim his watch. I guess he gave his watch for food or for money or for whatever. And the peasant killed him to keep the watch. This is well documented. We know that for sure.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: So at the end of the war your family was able to move back to Paris. Can you speak about that?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes. My father moved back to Paris. After the war my father moved back to Paris. For sentimental reasons, he insisted on having his former apartment. The apartment we had before the war. Because also -- because my father faithfully paid the rent, the apartment belonged to the City of Paris. He faithfully paid the rent until August 1943, when they locked the apartment and they took -- they, all the French, all the German, took all the furniture. They stole everything. And my father, for sentimental reasons, wanted his apartment. Ultimately he got it.

But at the end of the war my father was worn out, kind of worn out. He had to rebuild his business. The normal trek would have been, before the war -- you are a traveling salesman. Then you settle. You open a little store in the same branch as you were traveling salesman. That part of the program didn't take place. And after the war he still went on traveling, traveling until he retired.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: And immediately after, you mentioned at the beginning when you returned to school, while you had gone to French schools, now you returned to --

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I went to a Jewish high school. The school still exists.

Just a curiosity. I know you cannot translate jokes into another language. The school is [Speaking Non-English Language] school. It was 11 street of abandons. So after the war we nicknamed it [Speaking Non-English Language], which is the school of the empty stomach in the street of suffering. [Speaking Non-English Language].

I spent three years there. This is where I learned the basics of the Hebrew language, especially the grammar.

Now, linked to that, many years later I went to Tel Aviv in a French bookstore, and here, in front of me, is the headmaster of that school. I did not dare say him hello because my first job in Israel was to work in a slaughterhouse and I was dirty and stinking, you name it. I regret to this very day I didn't do it. I just should have said hello, it's me. I'm sorry what I look like. It's unusual. I didn't do it. Anyway.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: So, at this point, so then -- eventually you moved to Israel. Eventually you moved to the United States. Is this a good time to stop and see if our audience has some questions for you?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Ok. We can open this to questions. What we'll do is -- we have time for some questions. And then the tradition at *First Person* is to always give our survivor guest the final word. So we'll take questions and then we'll hand it back over to Alex. He will be the last voice we hear from today and then we'll do the photograph and invite you folks to come up and shake his hand, ask a question if you haven't had a chance to.

We have runners with microphones on either side. So if you have a question, you can just raise your hand and we'll get a microphone to you. We'll go from there.

So questions?

>> Hi. Thank you for telling your story. We appreciate that. And also, sorry for the losses that you've had.

I would like to know -- you talked about your father fighting on both sides of the World War I. Is that usual? How does that occur?

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: I'm sorry, I have to repeat the question so everyone can hear and we can get a recording. For the recording.

The question is regarding Alex's father during the First World War who fought on both sides, was that usual?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: It wasn't both sides. The Italians were allies of the French and the British. My father fought in the Austrian Army on the eastern front against the Russian and the western front against the Italians. Yes.

- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: Great. Other questions? A question in the back.
- >> When and how did you get your experience -- your expertise in agriculture?
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: How and when did you get your expertise in agriculture?
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Well, I am a graduate from the agronomy school in Paris. It's still there. Not far from the garden of Luxembourg, which is a huge park in Paris. It's still there. I'm one of the alumni.
- Now, I never worked in France. I worked -- after I completed my studies I went to Israel. First I joined IDF for two years and then worked at the Ministry of Agriculture.
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: How did you choose that profession?
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: At that time I was kind of idealist.
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: At that time? [Laughter]
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I loved life. Agronomy was a -- agriculture was a good profession. But I never lived in the -- just a few months before I went to the military.
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: Other questions? Right here. Wait for the mic. Sorry. Thanks.
- >> What made you decide to move to Israel?
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: It was a good Zionist. I still am.
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: What made you decide to move to the United States in 1989?
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Decide is a great word. Anyway.
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: What led to your move?
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: What led me. Yeah. I met my second wife in Haiti. Then we got married. We -- I was working for the United Nations. I worked in Haiti, Nepal, Rwanda, and Jamaica. And after Jamaica I got a job in Haiti. And my wife is American. My wife says, stop, you go to Haiti if you want but I'm going to the United States for a doctor degree. And she learn it in Washington. I followed her at the end of my job in Haiti.
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: Where is your family? You have three children.
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Three. We are dispersed all over the world. My son lives in Israel with two grandsons. My elder grandson is now in the military. My second grandson is a big name, I think, in the Boy Scouts or something in Israel. [Laughter] My elder daughter lives in Australia. And she has three children. And with my second wife, we have a daughter who is an attorney in New York.
- Any other?
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: Are there any other questions?
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: There was a lady here also. You wanted also to ask a question. Sorry. The lady -- just behind the previous. Not you. Ok. Ok.
- >> [Laughter]
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: We'll go to the woman right here and then to the gentleman behind.
- >> What was -- I'm hesitating how to ask you. What was your family language that you talked at home when you were a young child? First, then in Paris and France?
- >> Jennifer Ciardelli: What was your mother tongue in Strasburg.
- >> It's hesitating because your mother's might have been Polish but you might have --
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: My parents used to speak Yiddish among them. Maybe that was the very, very first words I ever uttered were in Yiddish. But when I was 5 or 6, we moved to Paris and within a few months the Yiddish was gone and the replaced by French. As I told you before, I had a mixture. And the mixture wasn't the same word sometimes.
- >> But in the family you spoke French with your parents?
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I spoke French. Don't forget, my mother passed when I was 7. I used to speak French to my father. He used to speak French to me, with my sister also. We spoke French. My father spoke perfect German. He even told me once he came to a station in Paris and wanted to buy some tickets and he didn't pay attention. Switched to German.
- >> [Laughter]
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: He told me that.
- >> Did he speak German in [Indiscernible]?
- >> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I guess so, yes. I cannot know.

>> Thank you.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Was there a question still in the back?

>> It kind of relates to what she said before. How many languages do you speak currently?

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: How many languages do you currently speak?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Three. Broken Yiddish, as you can hear, French, which is my mother language, and Hebrew because I lived in Israel 18 years. But French, I can tell you, sometimes if you don't practice, even if it is your mother language, you forget words. And sometimes I have to look for a word I forgot or when somebody says something to me, I understand perfectly and said, oh, I forgot that word. I understand the meaning but I forgot the word.

Yes.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: The gentleman in the maroon shirt.

>> I was wondering if you had some sort of journey of bitterness and unforgiveness that you had to work through in your story, you know, to forgive the people that committed these atrocities and things like that.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Is there a journey of bitterness and wrestling with how to forgive or deal with those who perpetrated these events?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I don't know. It's hard to say. The only thing I can say is a few weeks ago I went to Auschwitz. I had to see it. I wanted to see it. Before that we went to Krakow in Poland. I went with my son. It's a very nice city. It's a city where you still feel the influence of who was then Wojtyła, who became Pope Paul II.

Then I went to Auschwitz. It's a hard experience. It's a very hard experience. We are a generation -- I am -- today the people you meet are the generation after. Ok?

Another thing, I had a little incident -- not an incident. In France when I was a student, I went to Sweden and to Denmark hitchhiking. On the way back, hitchhiking, I wound up in the town of Cologne in Germany. I was there with my backpack, 4:00 a.m. some ridiculous time. And there were two policemen came to me, two young guys, German policemen. They did a joke asking what kind of [Indiscernible] is that 4:00 a.m. in the streets of city. But I saw the color of the [Indiscernible], which is what we call in French [Speaking Non-English Language]. It is gray-green. I got goose bumps. But that was a long time ago.

Also, I had a weird feeling once. I switched once, plane, in Frankfurt, Germany, coming from the United States going to Israel. And there was a special waiting room in most of the airports. It was a kind of confined room. And here was a young German security man was there just in case something bad happened. It was a kind of weird feeling.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: So, thank you for the questions. In a moment I will hand it to you so that you have the opportunity to leave us with your final thoughts.

Before that, I would like to thank everybody for spending this past hour with us. A reminder that if you have time pad, have it stamped, if you have a completed Stay Connected card, hand those in.

Please do stick around. Joel will come up on stage immediately after for our photograph. If you have additional questions or you would like to greet Alex personally, he will remain on the stage and you can come see him here.

Thank you very much. And Alex?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: The last word -- I mean, every time I have another last word but [Laughter]. Two weeks ago or three weeks ago I was in France and we traveled through a village, a little town. It is a one-street town uphill. And on top of it is one of the most beautiful churches in France. It's a real jewel. It's worth the trip from Paris, about two, two and a half hours driving. It's worth it. But this is not the subject.

Coming down, I noticed an entrance to a kind of convent, to a nunnery. And there was a nice English-speaking nun inside. And outside was a sign. The sign said that in this place two nuns -- it gives the name -- helped to rescue and to help Jewish children in 1942 and in 1944. And therefore these nuns in that place were awarded the title of righteous among the nation, which is given in these

circumstances by the state of Israel. So that plaque is outside. I went there before but never noticed it. Now I noticed it. It's comforting to see that. We will never be thankful enough to these people.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Thank you, Alex.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: You're welcome.

>> Jennifer Ciardelli: Thank you for talking with us today. --

>> [Applause]