UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON ALEX SCHIFFMAN-SHILO
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>> Ronald Coleman: Good morning, everyone. It is my honor to be your host for today's public program *First Person*. We know that you have lots of choices about where to visit when you come to Washington and we are thankful that you have made the choice to come to the museum today and for joining us to hear Alex's story. For today's program I will have the privilege to talk with Mr. Alex Schiffman-Shilo, whom we will all meet very shortly.

This is the 18th season of the *First Person* program. It's one thing to learn about a subject like the Holocaust through movies or through books--- and I'm a librarian so I'm not disparaging that at all -- but it is something entirely different to learn about it from someone in their own words. This experience is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation. The museum is grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of conversations with Holocaust survivors who share with us their first person account of their experiences. Each of our *First Person* guests also serves as a volunteer here at the museum. And these programs continue twice weekly through mid-August. So if you live in Washington or you're planning to be here for a little while, we encourage you to visit the website, www.ushmm.org, to like us on Facebook, or follow us on Twitter to learn about upcoming *First Person* guests and other public programs here at the museum.

Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the museum after today is encouraged to fill out a Stay Connected card in your program or speak with a museum representative afterwards. When you sign up with Stay Connected today, you will receive an electronic copy of Alex's story so that you can remember and share his testimony with others who are not able to be here today.

Alex will share his first person account for about 45 minutes or so. And at the end, if we have time, we will give the opportunity for you to ask questions of Alex. Then as is the tradition with the *First Person* program, Alex will have the last word for the day.

The museum is, first and foremost, a memorial to the victims of Nazism and the Holocaust but it is also an educational institution. It's one that challenges visitors to think about the difficult questions that this subject poses to us as individuals and collectively as communities and groups. These questions do not always have straight forward answers.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Alex is one individual's account of his experiences during the Holocaust from his personal perspective. This is not a comprehensive history of the Holocaust, not a lecture, it is not even a comprehensive story of one aspect. It is one person's story.

To help introduce Alex and his story we've prepared a brief slide presentation. This is Alex in his Cub Scout uniform. We are privileged to have a Cub Scout -- or a Boy Scout troop with us today. And Alex has offered, afterwards, to perhaps sing the Boy Scouts song that he remembers from a child.

Alex was born in a city called Strasbourg, France, in 1933. The arrow on this map points to Strasbourg. It's right on the border with Germany. If there are any students studying the European history, you may recognize the region name. This region was traded back and forth over the centuries. After every war, it was France, then Germany, then France. After World War I it was part of France but it was very close to the border.

Alex's family had emigrated to Strasbourg from Poland in the 1920s. His father was a traveling salesman and his mother had been trained as a Hebrew teacher. The family left Strasbourg and moved to Paris in 1938.

When the Germans invaded France in 1940, Alex's family joined the tens of thousands of people who fled to the South of France where a collaborationist government called Vichy France had been set up. You can see the line where the German-occupied north zone divided between the northern zone and the collaborationist southern zone. We'll hear Alex's story about where they visited and what that meant to his family. But I will also point out the annexed part; had they not fled, they would have been caught up in Germany proper.

When the Germans invaded France in 1940, they fled south to a town near Toulouse called Villefranche-de-Rouergue. And I apologize to my high school French teacher for mispronouncing that. That is the town where Alex's family eventually moved.

Alex's mother fell ill and Alex's Aunt Cylli, who we see in this photograph, came to help take care of Alex and his family.

Throughout the war, Alex and his sister mad Madeleine were able to attend schools and even summer camps. They lived a relatively normal life, even after the Germans invaded and occupied all of France in November 1942; that is, until September 1943 when a German crackdown on Jews in the town intensified. And Alex can talk about why that happened and what that meant for his family.

Alex, Madeleine, and Cylli were able to escape in a nearby forest. After the war, Alex and his family returned to Paris. A few years after that Alex moved to Israel where he served for two years in the Israeli Defense Forces and went on to have a successful career as an agronomist or agricultural scientist. He worked for the United Nations on international agricultural products which took him to many different countries around the world. He moved to the United States in 1989 where he continued to work on international agricultural projects. 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.

You've heard enough of his story from me. Let's hear the story firsthand from Alex himself. Please join me in welcoming Alex Schiffman-Shilo to the stage.

>> [Applause]

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Thank you for the introduction.

>> Ronald Coleman: Sure.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I see we have many scouts here. The picture -- can you put back the picture?
>> Ronald Coleman: We've already been closed. Sorry.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Well, you could see I was in uniform and the beret, in the middle was the sign of the Cub Scouts in France. And you can see in the middle of it a little wolf. The wolf was because our Bible was “The Junglebook.” You had mother wolf and father wolf. And we gave names, nicknames. Of all the names possible, I was given the one of Mowgli, who was the little boy who was adopted by the wolves. I remember myself crying every time I read about the death of mother wolf.

Now, the two stars is just after a few years, one or two years you get one star, after another year you get the second star. This is the veteran you are.
>> Ronald Coleman: That picture, you were older, probably 9 or 10.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: 9 or 10.
>> Ronald Coleman: So that was not when you were in Strasbourg. What do you remember about your early life in Strasbourg?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Very little. Very little. What I know is more what my sister told me. I had a sister, passed away. She was seven years older than me. She told me a few things. She said that my mother, for instance, was a certified Hebrew teacher but she never taught. She had to help my father to make a living. She worked as a seamstress. She worked very hard.
>> Ronald Coleman: And your father was a salesman?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: My father was a traveling salesman, meaning he had clients -- he represented manufacturers of leather goods like women's bags and handbags, etc. He had clients which he visited regularly. So that was his profession.

Now, during the war -- I'm sorry --
>> Ronald Coleman: No. It's ok.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I understood only after the war that my father -- we were all French citizens. My father had a French I.D. with the red stamp Jew on it. I understood only after the war when he boarded his train on Monday morning, there was absolutely no guarantee we would see him on Friday or Saturday. There was no guarantee. I understood only later, after the war. But that was his job. He had a family to provide for, to support, and he did his job. At the end of the war I guess because of that my father was not -- not very old. He was under 50. But he was worn out, a widower traveling during all the war, for the whole duration of the war, under the threat of being arrested.
>> Ronald Coleman: Was your family very religious? Were they observant?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I was told that before the war my mother kept a kosher house. After the war my mother was not there and because -- maybe because of the war we didn't keep any kosher. But my father insisted that I attend Jewish high school. At the time I protested but I am very grateful to him because in the Jewish high school I learned Hebrew. And if I know well the Hebrew grammar, it comes from there.
>> Ronald Coleman: Did your family -- what language did they speak when you were young?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: My parents, I guess, used to speak Yiddish. I know that I spoke a kind of German. And when we moved to Paris, the French came. Even that transition was kind of funny because I used to speak sometimes the words which was half German, half French, the word itself.
>> Ronald Coleman: So your family moved to Paris in 1938. That was before the war started. Did they move because the threats that they had heard?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: No, no. Simply it was more central to France. And my father was traveling. Normal path for immigrants like my father was, first of all, for a few years you represent a few firms, you have your own clients and you travel. After then when you have a little bit more money, you open your own business. That was the normal path. And that was the path my father's elder brother went through, the path he followed. But the war caught up and my father couldn't go in that path. At the end of the war he had to kind of rebuild his clients. He was worn out, not old but worn out.

Later in his life he had the joy of having two granddaughters from my sister. And he was also happy because my sisters with a dentist and she had a very successful career. She had a happy marriage two daughters. My father was very happy.

To say that he was happy with me, I don't know. This is a serious point. I decided I would not serve in the French military. That was a time of the war in Algeria. I was a Zionist in all the time but if I had to serve in the military, I preferred to serve in Israel. So I left France. I was a draft dodger in France. I don't hide it. I'm not especially proud of it but this is what I did. This is a fact. And I served two years in the IDF. And for seven years I couldn't come back to France until there was an amnesty. Then I took advantage of the amnesty. I came back to France to visit my father.

>> Ronald Coleman: That's in your later life. When you first moved to Paris, though, you were only 5 or 6 years old. Right? What do you remember of your life in Paris? Did you start school?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I went to a school, which I guess still exists. I know exactly where the school is. And I know exactly the apartment where we were. The surprise was I remember the gates -- we lived in a project, in a housing project. I remember the main door to the apartment building. And I remember it was a big, big, big door. And when I came back after the war, suddenly the door shrank. [Laughter]

>> Ronald Coleman: You got larger, I believe, is what happened.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Right.

>> Ronald Coleman: So what was your life like? Did you have lots of friends? Were they Jewish?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: In France I went first to Jewish high school. And then three years in the French secular school, public school, public and secular. At school we had good friends. But once out of the school no friendship. We didn't go to each other. I went once to a friend from school, a schoolmate as we called him, because I forgot something or I wanted to learn something about the homework and something. I had a feeling of uneasiness from him when I came to his house. Most of my friends weren't Jewish, from the Zionist movement.

>> Ronald Coleman: Your family lived in Paris in 1939. This is when the war broke out, when Germany invaded Poland in the east. You were very young, obviously. You might not remember or heard much about the war.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I was born in `33, `34, the real war -- you may know that World War II officially started in September 1939 and the French called it the Phoney War. Why the Phoney War? Because there was no war. Until April, 40, when the Germans suddenly invaded France and bypassed the French fortifications which were on the border, they attacked Belgium and then went to France further north. They beat the French in a matter of three, four weeks. Until then it was called the Phoney War because there was no war.

>> Ronald Coleman: And your family, they fled immediately.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I think it was in `40, I think. I remember that we had to take a taxi from Paris, about 60 miles south of Paris because the trains were not working. I think the

bridge -- there was a bridge there, a big bridge. To me it was almost immediately destroyed. So we took a taxi. We crossed the bridge and we took the train to the South. It must have been somewhere beginning --
>> Ronald Coleman: Did you travel with just your family or were there other families in the community that traveled with you?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I don't know if it was with another family but my mother's brother's family, his wife and son, my cousin went to the same town. And also another sister, they went with two daughters to the same town. It was in the center of France, more or less geographical center of Frances. I can remember the families together because we went to the same school, the four of us, my sister, me, and my cousin and female cousin. Then some left for Tunisia and the other two families went [Indiscernible].
>> Ronald Coleman: Why did you go to that town?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: One good reason. My mother's uncle was there. My mother's uncle immigrated from -- then it was Austria to France. He was 15, something like that. He made the kind of living in Paris. That's a whole story.

At some point when World War I started, he found himself -- no. When World War I started, he was, himself, an Austrian citizen, meaning enemy citizen. He was assigned to live near that little town where he met his wife. And after this he settled there.
>> Ronald Coleman: Your family, it sounds like they were very fortunate they had family.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: We went to him. We called him Uncle Max. We went there. At the beginning of World War II, he lost his son. His son was killed as a young officer in the French Army, fighting the Germans.

And one very painful thing I saw after the war. I could go to the house freely, just knock on the door, open, come in. And I found they had a little radio. They were listening -- I found his wife sobbing quietly. And the reason was that the radio, at the end of the war, the radio broadcasted the names of all the French POWs who were released and were coming back home and her son didn't come back. He was killed.
>> Ronald Coleman: How did the rest of the town treat you? Were they hostile toward you?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: No. In that little town everybody knew we were Jewish. We were some 20, 25 families. I don't remember exactly how many but something like that. The population was not hostile. The gendarme, which is the equivalent of the troopers, when they had once or twice -- they warned us, warned the men, that they had to go into hiding for a couple of days. Because they had orders to arrest them.

Now, during the summer we went to the countryside, a little Hamlet in the countryside. To this day I don't know if it was for a vacation or if it was to hiding or if it was a mixture of both. I don't know.

One thing I remember. In September `43-- one of your questions. In September there was a rebellion inside the German Army, the German occupation troops. It was a rebellion by Croatian soldiers against their officers. That rebellion was crushed by other German troops with utter brutality. That's another detail. And they put a curfew on the town. They put posters explaining what the curfew was. And the last line said: Don't be influenced by the Brits and the Jews. And we saw the Jews and said, maybe you should go into hiding for a couple of days.

So we succeeded somehow to bypass the curfew and went away for a couple of days. The program was to take my father out of the train before he comes back to the town. We knew exactly the itinerary, we knew which train he would be in. My sister and me went to the nearest station to where we were hiding. The train came, stopped two minutes. In two minutes

there is no time to go through the train. And the train started to pull out. And here my father shows up at the window. So we, my sister and me, we ran after the train. These were steam trains. They start very, very slowly. We ran after the train. We told him, Dad, papa, turn back next station. And so he came. I guess that when we left, somebody left him a note that we have to go. So we picked him up.
>> Ronald Coleman: This was 1943. So you were 10 years old at this point. By that point the Germans had occupied the rest of France for close to a year. Do you remember feeling in danger before the poster that you saw?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: No. I don't. I don't know. One thing -- my parents didn't tell me everything. That's obvious. That's obvious. One day I came back -- in `42, something like that, we started to hear rumors from what's happening to the Jews in Eastern Europe. Another thing was we got postcards from my grandparents. And the second postcard said: We are leaving; we don't know where we are going. That was important. Today we know exactly where they were. They were marched to a nearby forest and they were told to undress and they were gunned down in a trench. Today we know. Almost immediately after the war we knew it by survivors.

So we started to hear rumors. One day I came back home, said to my parents, you know, today I spoke with my friend at school, the poor Jews, what's happening to them in Eastern Europe. And my aunt then said, "Don't talk about that." That's it. So I didn't talk about that later.

I remember that we went into hiding for a few nights to the science teacher. For me it was an adventure. And to this day -- I didn't have the curiosity to ask why. I remember that I went to school from his house. We were there two, three days. I remember all the funny details.
>> Ronald Coleman: Just to step back for a moment, your mother passed away in May 1971. And so your aunt took care of you.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: My aunt was her younger sister. She came to take care of her sister. And after this she took care of us. She stayed with us.

One other problem with my tante was -- and to this day I don't know how she managed -- she was not French. She was a Pol, Polish citizen. Although she was a dentist and she graduated from a French university, she had no right to work. She was a Pol. How she survived all of that, I don't know. Maybe also she didn't want to talk about it.
>> Ronald Coleman: That underscores how important it was that you had French citizenship.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Sure.
>> Ronald Coleman: Were there other Jews in the town that did not have the citizenship?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes. Across the street from us there was a Jewish family, the Stochi family. They had three boys, three children. Two were in my class at school. And one day they vanished. They were relocated in Eastern Europe. And two years ago I went to Paris to the Holocaust memorial in Paris. I found their name on the wall among the people who were deported. Then I went to the archives and they didn't survive. That's what I know.
>> Ronald Coleman: So you, your sister and your aunt went into hiding in 1943. How long were you in hiding?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Oh, that time maybe 10 days. Not very long.
>> Ronald Coleman: And you were in the forest.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: In the forest. My mother's first cousin, he was a character. Asriel was living in the woods but literally in the woods, his bed was marked by stones and he had leaves on which he used to sleep. We went to him for I guess a week and then we came back.
>> Ronald Coleman: So if you had not -- I'm asking a what if question, but had you not gone into hiding, do you know what might have happened to you?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: We don't know. That was when they had these posters and wrote on it don't be influenced by the Brits and the Jews. So we went to Asriel for maybe 10 days, something like that.
>> Ronald Coleman: Then you came back home and your father stayed with you. Correct?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes. Yes. My father. He still was traveling.
>> Ronald Coleman: So he did not stop working the whole time?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: As far as I know he did not stop working. Which might explain that after the war he was worn out.
>> Ronald Coleman: So 1944, obviously history students will know this, the Americans and British forces land on Normandy. Were you aware at this point?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: The news swept over France by word of mouth. I don't think it took 24 hours until it reached us. And we were some good 400 miles away, a good 400 miles away. Swept maybe didn't take 24 hours.
>> Ronald Coleman: When did the war end for you?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Oh, I'm sorry. On the other hand, there was the SS. In the German Army, the SS were the elite division, an armored SS division in the south of France. And when the allies came, they were rushed to the north. And part of them went all through our town or nearby our town. And I know that -- in one case I think that I know of, they saw a nice little villa and they made the target drill, target exercise. They blew up the villa.
>> Ronald Coleman: Did you have any interactions with the German soldiers then or any other time?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: At the very beginning they occupied all of France. There was regular soldiers. I remember one instance a soldier asked for cigarettes and I answered him in some broken German to go to the nearest store here. I was maybe 8.
>> Ronald Coleman: When did the war end for you? When did you have a sense that it was over?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: That's a good question. Paris was liberated in August. And Toulouse was liberated in August also. That was more or less the end of the war.

I -- there is no precise -- more feeling than the precise date. We heard that Paris was liberated. We heard about the invasion. And we saw the Germans and the Russians to the front.
>> Ronald Coleman: Your family returned to Paris. Was that immediate?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I think in 1945. And then I went to my father, first rented a room to start to rebuild his clientele. And I went to boring school, which opened I think in `46. I stayed there for three years.
>> Ronald Coleman: You mentioned that you had a cousin who had been killed at the very beginning of the war. Did you have any other relatives from France --
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I lost, in France, two relatives. One was killed at the liberation of Toulouse. And to this very day there is a plaque there. [Speaking Non-English Language], Major Philip, his war name, and they give the date.

Another one was my cousin who was a doctor, an MD. And he was in the underground. He had a little clinic for wounded people who were in the resistance. He was taken prisoner. He said as a doctor, "I could not leave my patients". And the Nazis wouldn't have it. They executed him.

>> Ronald Coleman: You mentioned the story of your grandparents and their fate. Were there other relatives in Poland? How did you learn about what happened to your distant family?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: We learned by one who lost his family. And he himself, that day, was in another town. So he survived. He wrote a book about his memories. He wrote in Hebrew. I translated it into English and French, French for the family, English for the museum. I have a few copies here, how he survived. But we know that from him. Haim lived a very long life after him. He passed 1991, `92.

>> Ronald Coleman: How did you get into agriculture?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Well, I was a good Zionist. I thought agriculture was a good profession to have in Israel.

Another thing, I went to a youth movement which educated you to go to Israel not only to go to Israel but to join a Kibbutz. Today they almost don't exist anymore.

>> Ronald Coleman: So you moved --

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I moved to Israel. First thing I did was to enlist in the IDF. I served two years in the artillery corps. Then 15 years in the reserves.

>> Ronald Coleman: And then you -- did you immediately then start working for the United Nations or did you work in Israel?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: No, no. Oh, I'm sorry. I worked at the Ministry of Agriculture, first in a department which was a kind of school which taught students from Africa to come to Israel and to learn about agriculture about other subjects, etc. And then I said I'm an agronomist, I want to see agriculture. I list that post and I went into the agriculture advisory service. I worked there maybe 10 years, something like that.

Then I was the minister of agriculture. I said, you know, they are looking for agronomist, French speaking, with experience in agriculture. That was in the Haiti. So then I went to Haiti. I spent a year and a half in Haiti. And from Haiti I started wandering in other countries. I was embroiled -- I was caught in the gears of the United Nations. I went to Nepal for a year. I went to Rwanda, before the genocide, and one year in Jamaica.

>> Ronald Coleman: And then you moved to the United States in 1989.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: `89, yes. I got a second job in Haiti. And then my wife said, You go to Haiti, I go to the United States for a doctor degree. And she wound up in the George Washington University here. And one year later -- I used to shuttle, sometimes when I had a long weekend, I could come from Haiti and then go back. And after a year I came to the United States. And the date is very easy to remember. The next day George Herbert Bush was inaugurated, Bush the father.

>> Ronald Coleman: It looks like we will have time for audience questions. You will have a chance to give the final word after the audience questions. But for many people here, this is their first time at the museum, perhaps first time in Washington. Is there anything in particular about the museum you would like to point out to them or make them aware of during their visit?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. When you visit the museum, in fact, the building is talking to us. Try to listen and to see what the building is telling.

I'll give you a few examples. When you're out of the building, you cannot see inside. This is secrecy. You'll know what's happening. When you are in the little alley where you expect windows, there are plates of steel. When you are inside, same thing. You cannot look outside. You have three windows and it's black behind. This is the isolation. When you are in the museum, you don't see -- it's not like a regular museum where you have signs and arrows what to see, what programs to see, etc., you have to look for them. And this is to keep you confused. That's exactly how the people who were deported, they were confused.

In the museum, if you look from the entrance from 14th Street, you have a white wall. In front of it, symbolic war scene. It's a kind of building which was destroyed. You just have the carcass. On the other hand of the hall you have a black wall. This is death. And in the middle you have a slanted wall. You will see when you come out. The wall which is diagonal, you go straight, the black wall, death, but you don't know it. On the left you go somewhere, you don't know where. But you live. And you don't know it.

Now, the wall is the selection at the entrance of the camp. Ok? I went to Auschwitz last year and you see exactly the platform where was the selection, where people came by train. You had an officer with a little table like this. He didn't talk. One was slave labor and one was gas chamber. I'll talk about this a little later.

>> Ronald Coleman: I hope that everyone has the opportunity to visit the museum's Permanent Exhibition. Be sure have your ticket stamped so you make sure to get in to see that. We also have a number of special exhibits. You and I talked briefly about one that is meaningful for you.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. There is one. If you go in the lower level, there are four exhibitions. One is about the genocide in Cambodia. Cambodia is very dear to my heart because I went to Cambodia with the Israeli Assistance Program. I should have stayed there two years in agricultural project. I stayed only four months because this was the years -- sorry. The war in Vietnam started to spill over in Cambodia. And at night you could see the flares of the bombing in the east. So the family couldn't come. And I went back to Israel. But Cambodia was a very, very nice place. I'm not a travel agent but if you can go there, there are the ruins. And this is where the whole trip is.

Thank you.

>> Ronald Coleman: Are you up for some questions from the audience?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah.

>> Ronald Coleman: We have two -- my colleagues have microphones on either side. If you could raise your hand, we'll call on you. Please wait for the microphone to read the question. I'll repeat the question just to make sure that everybody hears it. And then we'll give Alex the chance to respond.

If there are questions you don't have a chance to ask or that are more in-depth, Alex will be around afterwards. You can come up to say hello and have a conversation.

Are there any questions in the audience?

>> Were you scared?

>> Ronald Coleman: Were you scared?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Oh, during the war? I don't remember being scared. I had no reason to be scared. I went to school every day. I know for a fact that I did not miss one day of school. The only question I asked after the war. And I did not miss a day. I was not scared. When I went to sleep, it was more an adventure. They knew exactly how to occupy us. Just an anecdote. They had books of political cartoons. And the cartoons showed two populations.

One they called the botellos, from the word boots, and the boots were the Italians because the Italians -- Italy is the shape of a boot. So the botellos and the cotellos. The cotellos were the helmets. Germany looked a little bit like a helmet. I remember that booklet.

I remember also they had for breakfast good jam. [Laughter] As you can see, I'm a good eater. [Laughter]

No, I don't think I was scared. And for me to go to the countryside during the summer, I don't know -- as I told you before, I don't know if it was a vacation or hiding or a mixture of both. I don't know. I loved to go there. And the sheep, I used to take the sheep for grazing.

Also the ducks. Once I lost the ducks. I wanted to see something else and they were in the field. They just ate what fell after the harvest, you know, you have all of this grain which fell on the soil, on the earth. And the ducks knew their way back. So they started to walk back. And I look. Where are the ducks? They were going back home.

>> Ronald Coleman: I think we have a question in the back.

>> Good morning, Alex. How are you doing? I want to thank you, first off, for sharing your story with all of us.

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

>> Historical, we all need listen to and experience.

I want to ask you, traveling -- working with the U.N. and traveling around the world, you met people that might have believed none of this ever happened. Some of those people might be in this country as we speak. So what would you say to somebody --

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: You mean deniers?

>> Yes. What would you say to somebody who might not believe this happened?

>> Ronald Coleman: The question of Holocaust denial. How would you respond to it?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I couldn’t respond because I never met people who denied.

Another thing, that was not a subject of conversation. It came out a few times maybe. I don't remember. But, no. I don't remember having met a denier. I remember having met deniers of the danger facing the state of Israel when Israel got independent. This I remember. And especially, I shouldn't be political here but people from the left, especially, said, oh, leave me alone with that whole security of Israel. Well, the War of Independence in Israel was to this day the hardest and the bloodiest war in Israel, the hardest and the bloodiest and the longest. A population of 600,000. They had 6,000 casualties. I never calculated how it would be on the scale of the United States. And for this I met not exactly deniers but people who were belittling that.

>> Were you happy with the decisions you made?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Excuse me? What decision, to go to Israel?

>> Like all of your decisions.

>> [Laughter]

>> Ronald Coleman: Hearing from your story, that makes me think -- thank you for the question. It makes me think, you were very young. So a lot of the decisions that were being made were made above you but there are certain points at which had your family not left Strasbourg, Paris, gone into hiding.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: The decision to go to Israel I never regretted, never. Although it cut me from my home and my home country for a good few years. I never regretted it. I integrated -- I was perfectly integrated in the Israeli society. And one of the best ways to be integrated is to serve in the military. You meet people from the Jewish people, met members of the Jewish people, from many countries which I didn't meet before.

One example. On Saturday morning I was in the barracks and I woke up the first Saturday and I heard there was some soldiers playing an oriental game, and screaming at each other in Arabic and playing with a boom box, full volume, music from the Arab world. And I woke up, I thought I am in Baghdad, not in Israel. These were the Iraqi soldiers. I never met them before.

Another thing were the Yemenites. The Yemenites, they were darker than we were. They were skinnier than we were and more hard-working than we were. We were corner cutters. For instance, I was in artillery and in artillery one of the hard things was to dig a position for your gun. Well, we got instruction to dig one meter deep, something like this. And digging is hard work. They give you only -- they give you, how it's called, picks. And they give you shovels. You have to work. And you work all night because everything is done at night. And you don't stop working until the gun is in its position and fully camouflaged. Well, the ones who finished the job the first and the deepest were always the Yemenites, always. Each gun commander could more or less take his crew. And when the Yemenites were in charge of the gun, he selected Yemenites to work with him. They were always the first finished and the deepest. We were trying to cut corners.

Yes?

>> Did your father say that he was scared?

>> Ronald Coleman: Did your father say he was scared? You may have been too young to be scared but your father or your sister, older than you, do you recall them feeling scared?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I don't know. I do not know. My sister went to school every day. She was seven years older than me. She went regularly to school. If my father was scared, he didn't tell us, as far as I remember. And my sister, I don't think she was scared. She knew better the reason why we went to the science teacher or we went into hiding for a couple of days. But I don't think so.

>> Ronald Coleman: It must have been an incredibly stressful time, though. You said your father was exhausted after.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: At the end of the war he was exhausted and worn out, worn out.

Yes? Ok. Ok.

>> You said a German soldier asked you for cigarettes. Did you have any other encounters with other German soldiers and were they friendly or not?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I don't remember. I don't think so. The only thing I remember when there was that rebellion from the Croatians soldiers, I was a good friend of my aunt [Indiscernible]. She was an Italian refugee. She was a Communist. She was an endangered species under the Nazis. And I was at her home. I don't remember why. And I was walking home and I heard shooting. And when I went to a nice little place in the center of the town, I saw dead soldiers under blankets. They were shot and they were under blankets. I think my tante was scared out of her mind until I came home. But I don't remember having been scared.

>> Ronald Coleman: Time maybe for two more questions.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes?

>> Alex, thank you for your story. You lived through one of the most significant parts of our world history. You have a captured audience of young people. What would you say to them out of your life lessons that may help them today with our history that's being written as we talk?

>> Ronald Coleman: What would be your lesson for the young people in the audience?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: First of all, learning it and not forgetting it. Fight against deniers. Because the more we progress over the years, the less direct witness you will have and the more deniers you might have.

If today you listen to Iran Iran is a denier, saying there was no such thing as the Holocaust. That's one thing. You have to learn it. You have to also take a vow never again. You see this in the museum. Never again.

And unfortunately it happens. It's happened in Cambodia. It happens in Darfur and some other places. Oh, it happens in Syria right now, right now in Syria. They shouldn't be deniers.

By the way, if you go in the museum here, go to the second floor, to the right, in the first hall there are a few photographs from what's happening in Syria, what happened six months ago. There is a defector, an official -- a photographer from the government who defected and he brought memory sticks to the museum. And you will see a few of these photographs there. Today's worse. It's worse what's happening.

>> Ronald Coleman: I mentioned about the museum as a challenge experience. You'll see posters, as you leave, that challenge you think about what you saw. We encourage you to be witnesses by visiting the museum today, by hearing Alex's story, by seeing the exhibit. You are witnesses to the truth about the Holocaust and the related subjects.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: And talk to your friends about it. Sometimes, you know -- I am a sensitive soul. When I work at the Information Desk, even if it is sold out, I always find a little reason to give them tickets. I always say -- I confess this to you. I always say, don't ask questions about the tickets. Then I said, you know, when you go out, you talk about your friends to what you saw here.

>> Whenever you're in the Holocaust, did you and your family have to wear like stickers saying that y'all were Jews or nametag saying that you were Jews or no?

>> Ronald Coleman: It's an excellent question. In many places Jews were forced to wear yellow stars as you'll see in the exhibit.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: But we never had to. My family never had to. And the Jews in that town never had to.

As I said, the little town, they knew we were Jewish, these 20, some families, knew we were Jewish. They were not hostile. Once or twice somebody called, you know [Speaking Non-English Language], the little Jew boy. But that was it.

>> Ronald Coleman: We wanted to make sure you all stick around to hear Alex's final word. It's a tradition with the *First Person* program we give the survivors the chance to have the final word. But if anyone has questions you did not get to ask or follow-up or just to meet Alex, say hello, take a photograph, he'll be around for a few minutes afterwards.

I want to personally to thank you all for coming today. I hope you have a challenging and meaningful visit to the museum.

With that, I will turn it over to Alex for the final word.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Ok. Last summer I went to Auschwitz. I wanted to see it. So you fly to Krakow. Krakow is a very nice town. In Krakow you have the feeling, you still feel the influence of somebody who was called Karol Józef Wojtyła. You may not know. He became Pope John Paul II. He was the Archbishop of Krakow and you feel him.

Then you take -- unfortunately I would say Auschwitz and Birkenau are treated like a tourist attraction. So you take guided tours. They take you from your hotel. You go to Auschwitz. You see Auschwitz. You see the gate with the famous inscription, “Arbeit macht

frei," meaning -- it's a deceiving inscription which means work makes you free. When you go in, this is a two-story building. You can take pictures anywhere but one room. In that room you have a heap of human hair and on the side there is a blanket made of human hair. This you cannot take pictures of. It's forbidden out of respect.

In Auschwitz you see the gas chamber. You see the crematoria. And in Auschwitz there were 14 cematoria. It was never bombarded. You ask yourself why. How come? And the allies knew. When you ask the pilots, the pilots said we never got the order to do it. So that's one thing.

The last thing is, when you visit Birkenau, the Nazis tried to hide it. They blew up the gas chamber. And they blew up the crematorium. But you still see the ruins of it. You go there, you see also the railroad coming in. You see where the SS used to sit with the table and directed people to death or gas chamber or slave work, etc.

And one question you ask. The prayer for the deceased, the Hebrew prayer and the Jews for the deceased starts with the words, Kel Maleh Rachamim, meaning God full of mercy. And you ask yourself, God full of mercy? Where were you? Where were you?

Now, I will end on a more positive side. Last year I went to a small village in France. And that village, I recommend it. I can give you the name after. That village is a little jewel in France. But that's not the point. In that village you have a little monastery on the right. And on the right, and there's a plaque outside. And the plaque says: In this site Sister [Indiscernible] and another sister, I forgot her name, and other sisters hid and saved Jews. We know that they are talking about 15 girls who were hidden there and escaped. They saved them. And that site was designated as righteous among the nation by the state of Israel. This is what the plaque says. I should have -- my printer didn't work at home so I couldn't bring it. Anyway.

So, now if somebody wants questions after, I'm open.

>> Ronald Coleman: Thank you all again for joining us.

>> [Applause]