

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM  
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS  
FIRST PERSON PETER GOROG

Thursday, May 11, 2017  
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our 18th year of *First Person*. Our First Person today is Mr. Peter Gorog, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2017 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.

*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 serve as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue twice-weekly through mid-August. The museum's website, at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Peter will share with us his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Peter 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. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

Peter Gorog was born into a Jewish family in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, in March 1941, as Peter Grunwald. 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, Arpad Grunwald, 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 3 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 points to Peter's father, Arpad. In 1942, Arpad 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 after, a neighbor denounced them. The Hungarian gendarmerie, or police, arrested Peter's mother and put her in jail. This is an historic 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 a 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. As a result, Peter grew up in Hungary.

In 1980, Peter defected to the United States. He worked for more than 30 years at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland.

Although Peter's Mother had attempted to emigrate to the U.S. right 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 U.S. following his defection until he received his green card and later become a U.S. citizen. Peter, who retired in 2014, spent 34 years in the computer field in the U.S. spending most of his time at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, 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. Peter is a tour guide for the museum's Permanent Exhibition, leading tours for U.S. law-enforcement groups, and students from many states. He describes his work as "very emotional."

Peter and his wife, Jorgy, live in Maryland just outside of Washington, DC. They have four daughters: Sarah, Laura, Anna, and Ilana. They lost their daughter Juliana when she was just 2 years old. Peter's daughter, Veronika, from his earlier marriage in Hungary, lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and her two daughters: Monica, age 9 and Katalina, age 7. They are a very close-knit family.

In addition to our *First Person* program, Peter speaks publicly at other settings about his Holocaust experience. He has been sharing his family's history with military, high school and college groups, recently speaking at the University of Northern Iowa, and a synagogue in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

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

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Peter, thank you so much for joining us today and your willingness to be here as our First Person. We have just an hour and you have really so much to share with us. We'll try to get to as much of it as we can while you're here with us.

Let's start first, Peter, talking about your family and your very early life, your family particularly. World War II began when Germany and Russia invaded Poland in

September 1939. Before we talk about the war and the Holocaust and what happened to your family during the war, tell us about your family before the war, what you can about them.

>> Peter Gorog: I came from a Jewish family, both sides. On my mother's side, she came from a very Orthodox family. My great grandfather was a rabbi in a small town which is now in Slovakia. My father's side was less observant Jewish family, very similar to conservative Judaism in the United States.

My father was born in 1907. He aspired to be a lawyer. Unfortunately it didn't happen because starting from 1920, much earlier than in Germany, there was a very strict restrictions on Jewish persons entering into higher education institutions. He tried and he tried and unfortunately he was not admitted. And the only reason was because he was Jewish.

My mother, as you mentioned, was a hat maker. We had a relatively comfortable middle class life in Budapest before the war. Unfortunately the anti-Jewish laws were getting stricter and stricter. My father lost his job, so they relied on my mom's income only. And later in 1940, my mom was already pregnant with me when he was conscripted into the Hungarian labor --

>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to that, a little bit more about your mother, if you don't mind. You described to me she was the black sheep of her family.

>> Peter Gorog: I wasn't sure that this would come up. [Laughter] In a way, yes. As I said, she came from a very observant Orthodox family. She never turned away from Judaism. She just didn't follow the strict laws. One family lore is the day before the wedding she went to make her hair pretty for the wedding forgetting that there is a Jewish custom that on the day of the wedding, the bride goes to the ritual bath where she has to be immersed into water completely. So her father reminded her --

>> Bill Benson: After she had her hair done.

>> Peter Gorog: After she had the beautiful hair done. And it was messed up after it. But there was still enough time before the wedding to make her pretty.

>> Bill Benson: Peter, you described to me that for your parents, they really led a very normal life up till 1939. They had non-Jewish friends. They were active in the community. What were some of the things they did, from what you know?

>> Peter Gorog: They were very active. They loved outdoor activities. During the summer they went kayaking on the Danube River. In the winter they went skiing. They belonged to a sports club which was by that time, because of the discrimination, restricted for Jews only. Jews could not join any kind of organization which was not set up for Jewish people. They went to theaters, concerts, movies. They loved movies. So, yes, they had a relatively normal life.

>> Bill Benson: Although World War II began in Europe in September of 1939, the full brunt of the war and the mass deportation of Jews in Hungary didn't occur until 1944. Nonetheless, as you started to tell us, conditions had been getting worse and worse for Jews even going back to the 1920s. But after 1939 they got increasingly worse, even though the full brunt of the war didn't come to Hungary, including your father being forced into a labor battalion. Tell us what you can about the circumstances for your family once the war began in 1939 and then your father being sent to a labor battalion.

>> Peter Gorog: Yes, the Holocaust history a little bit different from the rest of Europe because Hungary wasn't occupied until 1944 by the Nazis. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism was as rampant in other countries and the Hungarian government "took care" of the Jews. The anti-Jewish laws between 1938 and 1940 made life almost impossible for Jews. My father had to go to the forced labor camp. Jews were not trusted to have weapons or rifles or handguns so they were

doing all the dirty jobs for the Army. 1941, the Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union and because Hungary was the ally of Nazi Germany --

>> Bill Benson: And on that point, Peter, that's a really critical point, the reason that Hungary wasn't occupied by the Germans was because they were such a strong ally of the Nazis.

>> Peter Gorog: That's correct. That they corroborated with the Nazis all the way until the end of the war.

So going back to my father's story, he was taken to the forced labor camp. He was moved from one camp to another and another until 1942. The Forced Labor Battalion moved into Ukraine with the Hungarian Army where out of the 100,000 Hungarian Jewish men between the age of 18 to 55, out of the 100,000, 40,000 died.

Some of them died because of the war activities but many of them died because of the inhumane circumstances they were in. We know from the memoirs and testimonies of people who survived that during the winter, the harsh Russian winter, temperatures are minus 40 degrees, the snow is knee-high, they didn't have other clothes or shoes, and they had to march in those circumstances and many of them just were too weak and couldn't march any longer. If they stopped more than three or four minutes, they froze to death. Those who didn't but couldn't keep up the pace with the troops, they were shot by the officers, Hungarian officers, on the spot. So many of them perished this way.

We don't know exactly what happened to my father. In early 1943 my mom got a notification from the Hungarian minister of defense that my father was a missing person. And later on he was declared dead.

>> Bill Benson: During the time that you know that he was with the labor battalions, did your mother have any idea of where he was? Tell us about her communication with him, particularly a little bit about the postcards.

>> Peter Gorog: I have with me one of the many postcards my father sent from the forced labor camp. I don't know if it can be seen. My father tried to jam as many information as possible into the little space he had. He could not where he was because it was a military operation. The cards themselves were censored, so he couldn't write about the circumstances. So the only thing he wrote about, how he felt, how he missed my mom or he missed me, and how he hoped that the good Lord would help them one day, that we are going to be reunited.

>> Bill Benson: And you have several of those postcards.

>> Peter Gorog: I have several of the postcards. I am in the process of translating it for my children. I automatically plan to donate it to the museum because they can take better care of it.

So is with my mom's diary. My mom started writing down her memories and what was happening in the family and specifically with me in the hope that one day my father would come back and she was able to recall the little minor details from my first words or my silly sentences, what food I liked and what I didn't. At one point, it's very ironic, she wrote that when I took a bath, I was screaming and I didn't want to because I was afraid of water. And later on in my life I became a competitive kayaker. I did everything on the water.

>> Bill Benson: That just must be so incredibly precious to you to have that. People afterwards when they talk to you, when we finish the program, perhaps they might get a glimpse of that. On the little postcard there must be 25 lines, very small handwriting to get everything your father could possibly get on there.

One more thing about that. Do you mind, Peter, sharing the term of endearment that he had for your mother? He would address those?

>> Peter Gorog: Yes. She was called by my father "My little squirrel". In Hungarian, for one reason, I don't know, like cats in this country, that they are very popular. And that was the way he addressed her in the postcards.

I don't know if I have a little time to quote a couple of things from my mom's diary.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely. Please.

>> Peter Gorog: It gives you a little glimpse of people and specifically my mom felt throughout those years and also the emotional roller coaster she went through from expressing her loss to displays, from consolation to hope and determination to survive.

So with her words, first about her love for my father. "You have no idea how much I long to see you. The thought of seeing you and having you next to me drives me to insanity. Why the good Lord punishes me so much that the one I adore the most is separated from me for such a long time."

And from love she went down to desperation. "I cannot stand this horrible situation that I am having a nervous breakdown. I try to control myself. And I try to believe that you are not in any trouble. You haven't had the opportunity to write." Obviously she wrote it after a long time she didn't hear from him.

And something which is very precious for me. Probably this is why I'm here because she had this determination to survive regardless of the circumstances. And this is what she wrote. "Your little girl is strong and the good Lord listens to my everyday prayers that we will be united soon. I have to remind myself all the time that I should not be bitter or desperate as I have to be strong so our livelihood of survival will be secured."

>> Bill Benson: Thank you for sharing those, Peter. We saw in the pictures earlier that your father was able to come one time to see you. Say a little bit about that.

>> Peter Gorog: Yes. I was about 3 months old when he was able to come home for a long weekend. And that's when the picture was taken. Unfortunately I do not have any personal memory of my father.

>> Bill Benson: Of course.

>> Peter Gorog: I just -- I don't even remember his hugs and kisses. But from the cards, I know how much he loved me and that gave me strength throughout the years growing up.

>> Bill Benson: And in light of what your mother was writing, the desperation she felt yet because she was so resilient, she had to continue to make ends meet, provide a home for you. How did she make ends meet during the time that he was gone and, of course, got word that he had died?

>> Peter Gorog: As you said, she was a hat maker for ladies. And hats were very popular in the '30s and '40s. So she made a good living. She set up her shop in our apartment. One room was set aside for her work.

I do remember -- again, I was only 4 years old when the Budapest ghetto was liberated but I still have personal memories that when my mom made some beautiful hats for a wedding, I was the first one to try it, prance in front of the mirror. Unfortunately that time there were no instant cameras and I don't have picture of it.

>> Bill Benson: Peter, as hard as conditions were, as you've described it, for Jews in Hungary generally life became profoundly worse when the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944. Briefly tell us why they occupied, just very briefly, why they occupied Hungary that late in the war and then what that meant for you and your family.

>> Peter Gorog: It was a combination of at least two things. Number one, by that time the German troops were retreating from the then Soviet Union and they had to go through

Hungary to get back to Germany. The Soviet Army was chasing them. But the ultimate reason was that by 1944, a year before the war actually ended, the Hungarians realized that they were on the losing side of this war and they wanted to get out. The Germans wanted to keep them in. So they occupied Hungary and installed a government which although the previous governments were very loyal to Nazi Germany but they -- the Nazis lost confidence in the government and they installed their own people.

>> Bill Benson: Was this what they called the Arrow Cross?

>> Peter Gorog: Later on -- the occupation happened in March 1944. The situation got worse and worse. And by October, the Hungarian far right Nazi Party, the Arrow Cross, took over the government.

>> Bill Benson: Even more extreme than the other two.

>> Peter Gorog: They were more extreme. One example is that -- a story from the Nazi occupation continued we had to leave our apartment. The Hungarian government, and I emphasize that the Hungarian government, forced Jewish people out of their apartment and forced them to go to designated houses which were marked with a yellow Star of David. And people, non-Jews, had to move out of those apartments and Jewish moved in.

So we had to leave our apartment. We were supposed to move into one of these designated houses but my mom -- I just can't describe. She was a smart cookie. She knew that it's not a good idea to move where all the Jews are gathered because then they were very easily identifiable and sent into the ghetto, sent later on to the concentration camps. So that's when we moved into the apartment of her mom's childhood friend, a devout Catholic couple who took their religion seriously and they took us in for a while.

Unfortunately, and that's part of the Holocaust history in Hungary, that not only the government collaborated but there was a very deeply fast, historic, anti-Jewish sentiment in Hungary so when the Germans moved in with only 600 people, Eichmann was able to run up hundreds of thousands of Jews because the neighbors were reporting them, where they were hiding, where they were staying. And so with the help of the Hungarian police they were easily identifiable.

>> Bill Benson: In fact, something like 450,000 Jews were rounded up and deported in about a six-week period once occupied.

>> Peter Gorog: That's correct. Adolph Eichmann mentioned in his memoir that he was surprised at how much the Hungarians cooperated with them and how quickly they were able to send so many Jews to the concentration camps.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me -- I think what you said was one of your own personal first memories was of your mother being arrested by the Hungarian police. Tell us about that.

>> Peter Gorog: Yes. As I said, they were collaborators and bystanders who were not really bystanders because they were actively reported on Jews. One of our neighbors in the apartment building reported us to the Hungarian police. The next day two policemen came and arrested my mom. And that personal memory of mine because the Hungarian police at that time had the very fancy uniform and I remember the uniform very vividly. They came, arrested my mom. I didn't know what was happening. The host couple were really not telling me the truth at that time. They just said that mom goes with the gentlemen and she's going to be back in no time.

She came back in no time, practically, next day but it wasn't because it was a casual thing. She was taken to one of the most infamous Hungarian jails where people -- Jews were collected before they were sent to the concentration camps. My mom, again, was very alert

and she used -- there is a Yiddish word which is wisdom and chutzpah which is being brave enough to do things you otherwise wouldn't do. So this combination of the two prompted her to use the paper she got from the Hungarian Ministry of Defense that my father disappeared during the war activities and she claimed that she was a war widow. And war widows have all kinds of privileges during the war. But Jewish wives of people in the Forced Labor Battalion were not entitled to this privilege.

So my mom went to the warden and started, I assume, screaming. My mom didn't say but knowing her, she obviously raised her voice and she told them that she was unlawfully arrested and they are getting into big trouble. So they took her to the Commandant of the jail. My mom told the story she wasn't sure whether the Commandant of the jail had pity on her or he wanted to have an excuse to release her but he did. She came back but unfortunately the rest of the Jewish ladies you saw in the picture did not. And that's when we had to move again because we couldn't risk another denunciation.

>> Bill Benson: Where did you go then?

>> Peter Gorog: We went from there to a special apartment. Raoul Wallenberg's name was mentioned earlier. He's my hero. Actually, I can thank him for surviving the Holocaust. He was a Swedish aristocrat. He came to Hungary in 1944. The American War Refugee Board sent diplomats from various countries, mostly neutral countries, to the occupied Europe, Eastern Europe, in order to save as many Jews as possible.

>> Bill Benson: This was very late in the war.

>> Peter Gorog: Exactly. This was 1944, already millions of Jews perished but there were still a lot alive.

Raoul Wallenberg came to Budapest with I think \$50 million, which was a lot of money. He bought up 32 or 33 apartment buildings and he crammed as many Jewish families as possible. We stayed in a two-bedroom apartment, probably four or five families which families by that time were mothers, grandmothers -- or grandparents and children. And we were saved because these apartments were on the international law, protected from the local authorities to enter and to arrest people in those buildings.

And that's when the story goes back to the Arrow Cross takeover. When they took over the government, they couldn't care less about international --

>> Bill Benson: 1944.

>> Peter Gorog: Correct.

>> Bill Benson: So even though international law said these were safe houses, the Arrow Cross didn't care.

>> Peter Gorog: Exactly. What they did was they came into the houses and started to round up people. They went from apartment to apartment. We had to line up and were led out of the building. Fortunately for us -- again, there are all kinds of survivor stories. Whether it was because of bravery or wisdom or chutzpah, people survived. And sometimes it was, I cannot explain any other way, Divine Providence.

We were not taken out of the building for one reason and one reason only, because one of the Hungarian Nazi guy, he was 18 years old, he remembered me, that we were children -- while we were staying in this apartment building, we were playing cowboy and Indians in the inner court of the apartment building. We used sticks and -- broomsticks to pretend that they are rifles, sounded boom, boom, and we shoot each other and we pretended we died. We didn't know there was a war outside. Again, I didn't know. I was only 4 years old. And for me everything was exciting. Anyway, one day this Hungarian Nazi, young man, gave

his real handgun to us, fortunately he took out the ammunition, but we were so excited we had a real handgun. We continued to play.

Anyway, this guy, when we were rounded up, remembered me and he told to his friends to leave little Peter and his mom alone, we'll go to the next apartment. And so they went to the next apartment. They weren't as lucky as we were. Most of the people were taken out from these protected houses not to the ghetto, not to the railway station, not to be shipped to Auschwitz. They were taken to the Danube. That was October, November, 1944. They were led to the banks of the Danube. They had to remove their clothes and shoes and they were shot. Their bodies fell into the river, washed away. Nobody knew what happened to them.

>> Bill Benson: And because of what you described, you and your mom were spared at that point.

>> Peter Gorog: Yeah. We, fortunately, were able to escape again. This time we had no choice but we had to move into the Budapest ghetto. The Budapest ghetto was set up by the Hungarian government, again, to contain all the Jewish population of Budapest. Again, the Jews of Budapest were lucky in a sense that the Germans were so busy to round up first Jews in the countryside, that by the time they came to Budapest, it was October, November, the Soviet Red Army were ordered into the outskirts of Budapest. People in the Budapest ghetto survived because the Nazis just didn't have enough time.

>> Bill Benson: They ran out of time.

>> Peter Gorog: Correct.

>> Bill Benson: And now what begins, of course, in late fall of 1944 is the siege of Budapest by the Russian Army. And you're living in the ghetto. And that was an extraordinarily brutal siege. Tell us what you can about your life during those months, several months, in the ghetto.

>> Peter Gorog: Yeah. Life in the ghetto, it's very hard to describe. Budapest was already bombed by the Allied Forces, not just Soviets but American and British planes came during the day. We spent most of the time in a kind of temporary bomb shelters which were the basement of the apartment house we stayed. That was actually the apartment of my grandparents who lived in the historical Jewish district. And that's where the Budapest ghetto was set up. So we spent most of the time in the basement, dirt floor, the basement of the apartment houses. At the time there was no central heating. Every apartment had a little stove or furnace, and people stored their coal and wood in the basement of the apartment building. That's where we spent most of the time. I do remember my mom put blankets on the floor and we were playing with my cousin.

>> Bill Benson: And these were dirt floors.

>> Peter Gorog: Yeah. Food was practically non-existent. Food was rationed already but even then the shops were empty. I don't know how mom got enough food to have enough energy to survive the next few months but she did. I do know that we broke the very strict Jewish dietary laws. We were not supposed to eat anything made out of pork.

My grandmother -- this is how people got food. Many buildings were bombed out by this time. So people who survived went from apartment to apartment in the bombed houses and looked for food, whatever remained. My grandmother was very observant Orthodox Jew. She found a slab of bacon. She brought it back and ate it because we needed every energy we could get.

>> Bill Benson: You told me potato skins, which were not really used as food, became a really important staple in that time.



>> Peter Gorog: Yeah. When I came to the United States, I was surprised by many things but one thing was that here potato skin was a kind of delicacy served in restaurants. In Hungary we used it for feeding pigs. So it was unheard of that somebody would eat potato skin. But we did because that was the only -- my mom found a few potatoes and she didn't peel it usually. If she did, we ate the peel. And at that time it was strange but that was the way of life. We didn't have water practically. Electricity went in and out. We used actually our Shabbats candles to have light.

That's, again, an interesting story of how Jewish life continued to strive in the ghetto in spite of the circumstances. Holidays were celebrated, traditional Jews celebrate every Shabbats Friday evening. We lit two candles. During the Holocaust in the bomb shelter we lit only one candle because we had to save the other one for giving us light during the night. And even the one candle which was supposed to burn all the way down was sniffed after a couple of minutes to save it for next time.

>> Bill Benson: And for our audience, too, to understand that that was an especially brutal winter as well. So when you say you didn't have heat, it was bitterly cold.

>> Peter Gorog: Yes, that's correct. And again, my memory -- during the night we went back to our apartment. We stayed there. The apartment wasn't heated. We didn't have coal or wood. So the only way to keep ourselves warm, the whole family gathered in one bed and we had a big -- I don't remember the English name. This big blanket filled with goose --

>> Bill Benson: Like a comforter.

>> Peter Gorog: Like a comforter. So we were on that, the whole family under the comforter and kept each other warm during the night.

>> Bill Benson: And that lasted until January of 1945, I think, when you were liberated by the Russians, where the siege was over.

In the meantime, there's, as you said, buildings being bombed out, they are shelling and shooting constantly. So your life was in danger in every way imaginable. Tell us what you know about liberation.

>> Peter Gorog: Liberation meant that life returned to normal. Normal in 1945, January, in Budapest, was no food, no electricity, no water, no heating. Nevertheless our life wasn't in danger and that's the normal part. We were not discriminated against because we were Jewish. Russian troops came in.

I remember, again, 4-year-old little boy, very excited to see the Soviet tanks, the Nazi tanks, with the big red five-pointed stars and different uniform from the Germans' uniform. And the Russian soldiers were very friendly, at least to us children. They gave us candy, chocolate. We just rejoiced in having this change in our life.

Later on I learned, actually much later on, when the Communism collapsed, that not every Russian soldier was nice. Women were raped and mutilated. So there are two sides of the story. And there are two sides of how people look back on what happened in 1945.

You used the word liberation. People today, on the right side of the political spectrum, revisionists who try to explain away the Holocaust, say it was one occupation replaced by another one, which was true -- not really started 1945 when the Hungarian Communist government took over -- Communist Party took over the government. Nevertheless, after the war, that's when Europe was occupied by British and American troops and Eastern Europe by the Soviets but that did not diminish the fact that they were the one who kicked out the Nazis and brought freedom to us Jews.

>> Bill Benson: And you were truly liberated at that point.

>> Peter Gorog: I do believe it was a liberation.

>> Bill Benson: With conditions, even though the war for you is over, it would continue until -- in Europe until April of 1945. But as you described, conditions were still awful with no electricity and running water. How did your mother, you know, this amazingly resilient woman, how did she set out to feed her son and try to find a way back to some sense of normalcy?

>> Peter Gorog: Well, there was a tremendous inflation. At that time money probably was worthless. So every time you wanted to get food, you actually bartered. And in Budapest there was nothing to barter for. So what happened was that people took the remaining railway lines and went to the countryside and took their valuables, whatever was left, and bartered it for food.

I remember one time my mom took me, because there was nobody to take care of me while she had to go to get food, and I remember the railway station. Obviously the cars were packed with people so much because everybody wanted to get out from Budapest. People were sitting on the top of the train. It was funny for me that they were traveling on the top of the train. I'm sure it wasn't funny for them. And then we went to the countryside and my mom bartered away everything except her wedding ring.

>> Bill Benson: Except her wedding ring.

Did any of your other family, your extended family members, survive?

>> Peter Gorog: My mom had eight siblings. Some of them died during the Holocaust. Two of them came to the United States. They were lucky enough to get American visa, which was at that time very hard to get.

>> Bill Benson: That was right before the war?

>> Peter Gorog: Right before the war. They came to the United States.

The rest of my father's family practically, complete family, perished. Two of his brothers were taken to forced labor camp and they died there. My grandparents on my father's side, they died because they were old, weak. There was no food, there was no medical supply or medical attention. They actually survived the war but a few months later they just died of natural circumstances. Because a common cold could kill people at that time when they were so weak.

>> Bill Benson: You would end up living under Communist rule for many, many years after that. How did your mother fare during that time all of those years? She tried to get you out right after the war. I think the doors essentially closed with the Communist complete takeover of the government. What did your mother do to help get herself and -- you described her to me as she was motivated solely by trying to make life better for you.

>> Peter Gorog: Yeah. Definitely. That was her determination during all of those years to survive no matter what. She couldn't go back to her original profession because hats was not fashionable after the war for obvious reasons, especially during the Communist system. Everybody had the same Communist hats made in factories. So she worked as a seamstress until she retired. That's how we had bread on our table. She worked hard in two shifts, 6:00 to 2:00 or 2:00 to 10:00 while I was by myself in the apartment.

In 1953, she remarried. Typical Holocaust survivor story. Widows hoped and hoped against hope that their beloved husbands would return one day but it did not happen. Some people returned because they were taken by the Soviets as POWs and in 1946, 1947 they were released. And by 1950 it was obvious that my father would not come back. She was introduced to my stepfather through a mutual friend who was one of the few survivors of Auschwitz concentration camp. He had the tattoo in his arm.

Again, it's very unfortunate because it was very typical of the time and the place that survivors didn't talk about their experience during the Holocaust. Everything I know I didn't learn in kindergarten. I learned after I came to the United States, interestingly enough, because the Holocaust was not mentioned, was not taught in schools. There were no books. There were no commemorations, nothing. As if it never happened. We knew there was a war but we didn't know the fate of the 600,000 Hungarian Jews who perished during the Holocaust out of the 800,000.

>> Bill Benson: You really learned about that after you defected to the United States.

>> Peter Gorog: Correct. Because, again, we were kind of brainwashed. 1949, Communist government took over the power, the Communist Party took over the government. It was not much different from the Nazi regime in Germany where there was only government propaganda through government media which at that time was on the radio and newspapers. So everything you knew about the world was going to schools run by the Communists and telling us that Communism is the best thing in the world and Communism and capitalism is dying. There were two or three newspapers but regardless which ones you bought, you got the same news what the government wanted you to hear.

>> Bill Benson: I wish we had more time to hear Peter's story about the events leading up to his defection and coming over here and all that that entailed. We won't be able to do that. We have time for a couple of questions from our audience. We'll hear, again, from Peter to close our program in a few minutes. So we'd like you to stay through our question and answer period so that we can turn back to Peter in a moment.

We have microphones in each aisle. Please, we have a hand up over here, please wait until you get a microphone. Try to make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat it as best I can so that we all hear it and then Peter will respond.

Yes, sir?

>> [Question Inaudible]

>> Bill Benson: The question is, after your liberation --

>> Peter Gorog: I understood. Under the Communist system, religion was not the topic. Religion wasn't banned but was very, very strongly discouraged. Priests were arrested and sent to labor camps and other kinds of things. So we did not know much about what our school mates' parents did during the war or before the war. We just knew their names and where they lived. We just didn't talk about our personal circumstances.

Interestingly enough, with hindsight, most of my friends in elementary school, high school, were Jewish but I didn't know it because we never talked about that we were Jewish. We talked about everything but religion.

So answering your question, the government took care of the known Nazis. They were arrested and the major corroborators were actually executed. But the little guys, the neighbor who reported us to the police, I don't know what happened to them. They lived their life.

And interestingly enough, after 1989 when Communism collapsed, anti-Semitism came to the surface again in many forms. By that time people showed their real cause and that is a far right Hungarian neo-Nazi party in Hungary and they got 20% of the vote in the Hungarian parliament.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

We have one over here.

>> I wondered, have you had a chance to return to Hungary and if so what date and what was your reaction?

>> Bill Benson: Thank you for that question. Did you have a chance to return to Hungary and when did you go back and what was your reaction to it?

>> Peter Gorog: Yes, I returned the first time in 1989 when I became an American citizen and I was able to go back to Hungary. At that time it was still Communist -- it was the last year of Communism. My reaction was a kind of bitterness. I was suspicious of practically everybody: Were you a Nazi during the Holocaust? Did you report your neighbors?

There was an evolution throughout the years how I evaluated Hungarians' role in the Holocaust. And my main bitterness was first because I never had the real Holocaust story that I hated German. I never had German car or appliances though they are the best because in my mind Germans were the ones who killed my father and killed six million Jews. Later on, as I learned the story and the history and also having the privilege to talk to the German Ambassador twice, my bitterness turned away from Germany, which actually took responsibility for their role in the Holocaust, and they are doing anything and everything except they cannot bring back the dead. But the Hungarian government unfortunately never took responsibility and there is a revisionist history today in Hungary which tried to describe that we were victims, the Hungarians were victims of the Nazis as much as everybody else. Unfortunately that's not the whole story.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

I think we're at the end of our program. For purposes of questions. But when Peter finishes, he will remain up on the stage here. If you have a question you'd like to ask, or come up and just shake Peter's hand, say hi, get your picture taken with him, please absolutely feel free to do that. We welcome you doing that.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. So I'm going to turn back to Peter in just a moment. Before I do, I want to thank all of you for being with us, remind you that we'll have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday through mid-August. We hope that you can return either this year or in another year.

When Peter's done, Joel, our photographer, right here, is going to come up on the stage and take a photograph of Peter with you as the backdrop. We want you to stay put so that you're part of this photograph for Peter when we're done with the program.

Peter?

>> Peter Gorog: I don't know if you already saw the Permanent Exhibition or you will see or just look at the museum website, there is a picture as you exit from the cattle car, which is displayed on the third floor, the cattle car which took the Jews to Auschwitz. Across the wall there are pictures of people coming off the train at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. There is a picture of two young Hungarian boys, a little bit older than I was at that time, in their school uniform, school hats. And the picture was taken, two hours later or maybe three hours later they were dead. They were marched straight from the railway station to the gas chambers. Every time I see that picture, as a tour guide or other occasion, I just am reminded I could have been one of them. I wasn't. And for that I give thanks to my mom and the Divine Providence.

Also, I am reminded that although the Holocaust was a unique event in history, the consequences and the lessons we can learn is universal. And that's why I'm here in the museum because there are people who denied that the Holocaust happened. They may acknowledge that Jewish people died but because -- they died because of starvation and a lot of non-Jews died also. And my responsibility is still to really remind people what the motto of the museum is, "never again." What you can do matters. If you look at the brochures, that's

what really matters. Everyone in this room, including Bill and myself, what we do matters. So when we see discrimination, when we see bullying, when we see that people are judged according to their religion or the color of their skin, we cannot be bystanders. We have to raise our voice and we have to act. And that's what I hope you take away from the museum today.

Thank you for coming.

>> [Applause]