REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON PETER GOROG
MARCH 13, 2018

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>> Why do we learn about the Holocaust?
>> In today's world it's more important than ever for people to learn that even when they are surrounded by hate it is possible for them to do what is right.
>> I've asked myself a lot of tough questions about the Holocaust.
>> What's your question?
>> How could this have happened?
>> How could human beings be so cruel to one another?
>> Why?
>> Why?
>> Why?
>> Why is it so easy to teach people to hate?
>> How does someone go from being a neighbor or a friend --
>> Parent or husband or wife at home and then do that to other people?
>> What would you do in that moment?
>> Is there a way for me to change the future based on what I've seen in the past?
>> Do you want to help breakthrough ignorance and divisions plaguing our society? Start by asking the questions ask your question.

>> 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*. Today we begin our 19th year of the *First Person* program. Thank you for joining us. Our first *First Person* of 2018 is Mr. Peter Gorog whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2018 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 twice weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. The museum's website, 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 a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our online conversation Never Stop Asking Why. The conversation aims to inspire individuals and new generations to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises and what this history means for societies today. To join the Never Stop Asking Why conversation, you can ask your question and tag the museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum, #askwhy. You can find the hashtag on the back of your program as well.

Today's program will be livestreamed on the museum's website. This mean means people will be joining the program via a link on the museum's website and watching from across the country and around the world. A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's YouTube page. We invite those who are here in the audience today to also join us on the web for our *First Person* program streams tomorrow as well as our programs throughout April. Please visit the *First Person* website listed on the back of your program for more details.

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 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 taken 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.

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 live with 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 to emigrate to the United States. This picture is from their passport. In 1949, while they were waiting for their visa, the Communist government of Hungary closed the borders. Peter grew up in Hungary.

In 1980, Peter defected to the United States. He worked for more than 30 years at national's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, where he -- we have this photograph of Peter at his desk at the Goddard space center a few years ago.

Although Peter's mother had attempted to emigrate to the United States 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 United States following his defection until he received his green card and later became 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, as mentioned, at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, where he worked on such major projects as LANDSAT, the Hubble Space Telescope, the Space Shuttle and the James Webb telescope, which is to be launched this year.

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 also a tour guide for the museum's Permanent Exhibition, leading tours for U.S. law enforcement groups and students from many states. Peter recently joined the history unfolded project reviewing materials submitted by citizen historians. He describes his work at the museum as very emotional.

Peter and his wife Georgie live in Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C. They have four daughters: Sarah, Laura, Anna, and Ileana. 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 two daughters, Monica and Kataline. They are looking forward to welcoming their third grandchildren in early October they are a very close-knit family. And Jorgy is here with Peter today in our first row.

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 Michigan Technological University and just last week, before several thousand people, at the University of Central Arkansas.

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

Peter, please join me.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Peter, thank you so much for your willingness to join us today and be not only our First Person but our first First Person of 2018. So welcome. You've got a lot to share with us, so we're going to jump right in if you don't mind.

World War II began when Germany and Russia invaded Poland in September 1939. Before you tell us about what happened to you and your family during the war and the

Holocaust, tell us a little bit about your family before the war began.
>> Peter Gorog: A little bit of background. Just had been living in Hungary the last 2,000 years and unfortunately anti-Semitism has a history of 2,000 years in Hungary, Warsaw.

I came from Jewish parents. My mother's side, she grew up in a very Orthodox, observant Jewish family. On my father's side, it was a little bit more liberal, about the same as conservatism Judaism here in Hungary.

My great grandparents -- one of my great grandfathers was a rabbi in a small town, part of Slovakia, today. My grandfather studied to be a rabbi but he had nine children and he had to have a civilian job, obviously.

My parents, both of them, were born in 1907. They met in Budapest in the early `30s. My father, after he graduated from high school, he wanted to be a lawyer. Unfortunately by that time in Hungary, anti-Semitic laws were in effect. One of the first ones, more than 10 years before the infamous Nuremberg Laws, Hungarian laws restricted the number of students at higher education institutions. My father wanted to be a lawyer. He applied three times. He was rejected three times because he didn't meet the quota. He became an officer manager in a publishing company.

My mother, she was always very good with her hands. Women at that time didn't really look for higher education, so she went to vocational school. She became a milliner, a female hat maker, which was very fashionable in the `20s and `30s. And so we had a relatively good middle class life in Hungary.
>> Bill Benson: Peter, you described your mother to me, though, as the black sheep of the family. Would you say a little bit about that?
>> Peter Gorog: Yeah, I didn't know that this question would come up. [Laughter]

As I said, she is from a very observant Orthodox family. However, she wasn't observing all the particular laws very strictly. One thing what happened, the day before her wedding she went to the hairdresser to make her hair pretty for the next day. The next day her father walked into the room and he told her that it's time to go to the mikvah, a ritual where Jewish women take time to time and definitely before their wedding. So there she was with her new beautiful hairdo and she had to go to the mikvah where she was completely immersed and her hair needed reparations but fortunately before the wedding started, she had enough time --
>> Bill Benson: To redo it.
>> Peter Gorog: And the wedding pictures are beautiful.
>> Bill Benson: Peter, your father eventually joined your mother in the hat making business. Why was that?
>> Peter Gorog: It was because by the late `30s -- the Holocaust history in Hungary is a little bit different from the rest of Europe. Hungary had not been occupied by Nazi Germany until early 1944. However, the Hungarian government was a close ally of Nazi Germany. The Hungarian government enacted laws which as strict, sometimes even stricter, than the infamous Nuremberg Laws.
>> Bill Benson: The Numerus Clausus?
>> Peter Gorog: The very first in 1920. And later on there were three consecutive so-called Jewish laws in 1939, `40, and `41. First, Jews were kicked out from all government jobs. The numbers were restricted in most major professions, like lawyers and doctors. Jewish doctors could serve only Jewish patients. Jewish patients could go only to Jewish doctors.

So my father lost his job because of the anti-Jewish laws in Hungary. He decided

that private enterprises, at that time, weren't controlled very much so he wanted to learn how to make hats and go into business with my mother.
>> Bill Benson: Although World War II began in September 1939, as you were beginning to tell us, the full brunt of the war and the mass deportation of Jews in Hungary, didn't occur until 1944. Nonetheless, as you were starting to tell us, conditions worsened for Jews in 1939 in Hungary and got increasingly worse for your family from then on, especially when your father was taken for forced labor. Tell us what you can about the circumstances for you and your family once the war began and about your father being conscripted into a labor battalion.
>> Peter Gorog: My mom got pregnant with me in June 1940. In October 1940, my father was taken to the Forced Labor Battalions -- the Forced Labor Battalions in Hungary and the camps where my father stayed, they weren't like concentration camps they were camps attached to military units. That's where Jewish males between the age of 18 and 55 were taken. They were not given ammunition or rifles because they were not trusted and they had to do all the dirty jobs for the military. That's where my father was taken no northeastern Hungary.

1941 March, that's when I was born. And in June, you saw the picture earlier, that was not only the last picture but it was first picture also which was made with the whole family.
>> Bill Benson: The only one. The only picture.
>> Peter Gorog: My mom, father and myself. He was released for a long weekend. He had to go back. And that was the last time he saw me, I saw him, although I don't have a memory.

And later on his unit was moved from one place to another until Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union and the Hungarians were close allies of the Nazis and the Hungarian Army not only occupied part of Yugoslavia, Romania, Slovakia, but also they went into the Soviet Union and so the people who were in the Forced Labor Battalions.

What happened next we don't know. What you hear today, from my mom who, interestingly enough -- and that's part of the Holocaust history. Not just in Hungary but all over Europe. People who survived, they didn't want to talk about their experience, not even within the family. So my mom opened only when I was in my late 40s, already lived in the United States.

So what I could reconstruct of our family life was partly from my mom's memories. Partly because my mom started a diary when I was born. Her purpose was not to publish it one day. Her purpose was that when my father would come back, she would remember every detail of what happened to me. So she jotted down the first words I mispronounced, obviously, and all the silly things I did, how much I hated being washed every night.

So this book and two others is the history of my first couple of years growing up in Hungary. Also, she preserved postcards my father sent from the Forced Labor Battalion. Once a week they were allowed to send a postcard. They could not write down where they were. They could not write down the circumstances because it was censored by the military. But he wrote he fat but his dreams were what he hoped for.

If we have a little time --
>> Bill Benson: Absolutely. From the postcards?
>> Peter Gorog: Paragraphs from my mom's diary so you get the impression of people who lived through the Holocaust, how they felt. And this is from my mom's diary. She rode an emotional roller coaster. She went to the high of love to the low of desperation and then the consolation. So this is what she wrote.

You -- that's addressed to 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."

From here she went to desperation.

"I cannot stand this horrible situation. I am having a nervous breakdown. I try to control myself and I try to believe that you are not in any trouble. You just haven't had the time for writing."

That was after she didn't get a postcard for one or two weeks. From there she went to consolation.

"One day you will show up at our door without any advance notice. And then I would not switch with anyone in the world and I will be the most happy person ever have lived. This is the only thing that keeps me going."

Unfortunately my father never came back. Out of the 100,000 people who were taken into Forced Labor Battalions, 40,000 never returned. And those who survived, many of them were taken captive by the Soviet Red Army, taken to Siberia, and after the war they were released. So this is how we learned about what happened, in general, in this Forced Labor Battalions and how many people died during those circumstances.

>> Bill Benson: Peter, as you were mentioning, reading your mother's diary, that she was writing to your father in the hopes that she would later share your early life but the diaries also gave you, you told me, a glimpse of what life was like for her during that time without your father because she had to support the family. What was she doing during that time of your father away?

>> Peter Gorog: Well, we continued to live in apartment. My mom was making hats, making relatively good money. As long as food was not rationed, which later on the food was rationed, we could buy food. We had water, electricity. She even had time to go to one of the famous coffeehouses in Budapest with her friends. She felt guilty about it. She wrote about it in the diary, that while my father was suffering in the forced labor camp she had this luxury to have a cup of coffee with her friends.

So, yeah, that's from the diary what I learned. Later on, the anti-Jewish laws got even more stricter and stricter. Jewish people had to give up all of their valuable objects: jewelry, pictures, fur coats. They had to take to the Hungarian National Bank. They get a receipt but nobody ever got anything back after the war.

And, of course, out of the 800,000 Hungarian Jews who lived in Hungary before the war only 200,000 survived, the others perished through the Holocaust.

>> Bill Benson: As you were telling us about your father's postcards that he sent, at some point the postcards stopped. When did the postcards stop and when did your mother learn about your father's death?

>> Peter Gorog: The date on the last postcard is December 21, just before Christmas, I believe. That time he was stationed in Transylvania, close to the Ukrainian border, or that time it was Soviet Union. Later on his battalion was taken to Ukraine. In April 1943, my mom got a notification from the Hungarian Ministry of Defense which oversaw the military units and the Forced Labor Battalions that my father disappeared in January 1943 and he was declared dead on February 15.

Now, being declared dead could mean anything. It could mean that you were shot by a Soviet soldier; it could mean that he was frozen to death. Because we know from the survivors that the winter of 1942-1943 -- winters usually in the Soviet Union are very harsh. Temperatures are in the minus 40s, 50s. Snow is knee-high. And these people had to march in

their civilian clothes.

Under the circumstances, they were weak because they didn't have enough food, didn't have medical attention. Many people just couldn't march any longer. They sat down and in a couple of minutes they were frozen to death. Some of them were killed by the commanding officers. It was a kind of mercy killing, if you can say that. They didn't have to suffer being frozen. They were instantly dead.

Other people in the forced labor camp died because these people were used to diffuse mines left behind of the Soviet Army. These people were doctors, lawyers, teachers, educated people but they were not educated in how to diffuse mines so the way they diffused the mines, officers had them march through a mining field and as they marched through the mines, they stepped on the mines, mine exploded, so did the person who stepped on it. So we don't know exactly what happened to my father. We do know that he disappeared during the war activities. That was the official --

>> Bill Benson: That was spring of 1943 when she learned that he was dead.

And then it was just your mother and you. She continues to work and try to support you under those very difficult circumstances. And as hard as the conditions had been for Jews in Hungary, life became, of course, profoundly worse when the Nazis occupied Hungary in March 1944, about a year after she learned about your father's death. Why did things change so dramatically in 1944 and what did it mean for you, your mother, and other Jews in Hungary once the Germans came in?

>> Peter Gorog: Once the Germans came in, Jews were put in the books one of them was that all Jewish person had to leave their apartment and to move into government-designated houses the houses were marked with a yellow Star of David. So the people had to wear a yellow Star of David on their clothes starting in April 1944.

So we had to leave our apartment. But my mom, she was a very smart cookie. I can say that. She knew that it's not a smart idea to move to this designated houses because once the Jews are gathered in one place they can be moved to another place and another place. So instead of moving into the designated houses we moved into the apartment of her childhood friend who was brave enough to offer us a place because according to the laws, those that hid Jewish people had the same punishment as the Jewish people who were hiding.

Nevertheless, we lived in this apartment for two or three weeks when a good neighbor, "good neighbor" denounced us to the police. The next day two policemen showed up and they arrested my mom and they took her away. They left me behind in apartment. And the family I stayed with -- actually, it was just a couple. They didn't have children at that time. I stayed with them.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to interrupt you, if you don't mind. When the police came to arrest your mom, I believe that was one of your actual earliest memories, you actually remember this.

>> Peter Gorog: Yes. Again, I was not 4 years old when the Budapest ghetto was liberated so at that time I was 3, 3 1/2. I very vividly remember when these two gendarmes showed up at the apartment because they had a fancy uniform, tall hat. It's like the one or close to the one President Lincoln had. It had some cock feather attached to the hat so it caught my fancy. And I remember that we were at the dining room table. We had breakfast. I was too small to reach the table so I was sitting on two big books, probably phone books. I remember -- for me, it wasn't so dramatic because I didn't know what happened. I just saw that two persons came in in fancy uniforms, my mom went with them, and the couple I stayed with assured me my mom would come back in a couple of hours.

>> Bill Benson: And, in fact, your mom was arrested, taken to jail. What happened to her next?
>> Peter Gorog: That was part of her character, the chutzpah, if I can use that word, and also her bravery. At that time she was determined that we going to survive no matter what.

So as soon as they got to the jail, she started to scream at the guard -- she told me the story later on. Obviously I wasn't there. That she was arrested unlawfully because she was a war widow. And she started to show the paper she got from the Hungarian minister of defense as proof that my father died. And everybody whose husband died during the war activities were given the title War Widow. The only thing was the Jewish widows were not entitled, only non-Jewish soldiers' widows had some kind of privileges as war widows.

Nevertheless, this guard went to the commander of the jail. He probably was ignorant enough, not able to read what the paper was. He went to the Commandant. The Commandant called my mother in. My mom could not tell me whether the Commandant had pity on her or whether he didn't know what the paper was. Nevertheless, he let her go. She walked out. She was the only one. The remaining people who were in the same jail the next day, they were taken to the railway station and were taken to Auschwitz.
>> Bill Benson: And as you said, the bravery and chutzpah, she was able to get out. And then you described next was another act of chutzpah, how you put it to me. When she got out, she knew you had to go somewhere else.
>> Peter Gorog: Yes. Again, this time people who were already in those designated houses were also -- those who were not taken already to the concentration camps to move into the Budapest ghetto. The Budapest ghetto was all Jewish quota of Budapest, in the inner city. It's about 5-by-8 city blocks. There were two major synagogues and many very small synagogues scattered around the area. It was walled with brick walls and barbed wires. Jewish people could get in but not out. It was guarded by the Hungarian police.

So we were supposed to go there. However, by that time, Raoul Wallenberg, you mentioned in your introduction, came to Budapest. He was sent to Budapest by the American War Refugee Board which was set up by President Roosevelt in 1944. The purpose was to save as many surviving Jews in Europe as possible. They were given money to use whichever way they can to save Jewish lives.

What Wallenberg did in Budapest, he bought up 32 apartment houses. These were relatively tall, six, eight stories high. And as many Jewish people, as many as he could move into these apartments, moved there and they were protected by international law because the building belonged to the Swedish embassy and under international law no local authorities can enter in this buildings without explicit permission of the Swedish embassy.

So we went there and we stayed in one of the apartments. We didn't get the so-called passes. Raoul Wallenberg also gave to many Jewish people. These were documents proving that the person was under their protection of the Swedish embassy.

Raoul Wallenberg also did other brave acts. Going to the Budapest railway station and the brickyard where the trains -- actually cattle cars. You can see one of them in the museum on the third floor. That's where Jewish people were taken, 80 to 100 person crowded into those cattle cars, taken to Auschwitz. Raoul Wallenberg went to the railway station and threatened Nazi officers, telling them that the Soviet Army will be here in no time, you're going to be captured, going to be tried; if you let the Jewish people go, I will vouch for you and you will be free. He gave them money. He saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews.
>> Bill Benson: You described to me that it was late in the war, March 1944, when the Nazis came in and they moved with staggering speed to deport the Jews of Hungary to the death

camps I believe in the span of six weeks, 450,000 Jews in Hungary were deported to death camps. And then in the summer of 1944, because of international pressure, the deportations stopped for a while. You were living in one of the Wallenberg homes by October 1944, they began again. Tell us what happened. Why did they begin again and what did that mean for you and your mother?
>> Peter Gorog: 1944, October 15, I believe, a far right Nazi Party took over the government in Hungary. That's when all hell broke up in Budapest. The Nazis started to deport Jews first from the countryside. That's when, in the span of three months, 400,000 plus Hungarians Jews were taken to various concentration camps, mostly Auschwitz-Birkenau.

This was a tremendous logistic problem for the Nazis to transport so many people in such a short time. They couldn't do it all by themselves. Adolph Eichmann, who later on was captured and tried is and hanged in Israel, he came to Budapest with 600 commandos and they were in charge of deporting so many people. Obviously they couldn't do it without the active help of the Hungarian Nazis and the Hungarian police. October 1944, the Arrow Cross, a far right Nazi Party, took over the government. They couldn't care about international law anymore. They went to these protected houses they arrested the Jews. They took them from their apartments.
>> Bill Benson: So international law didn't matter anymore?
>> Peter Gorog: That time it was no international law whatsoever. Some of the people were taken from the protected houses to a railway station and shipped to the concentration camps others were taken straight to the banks of the Danube River, which separates Buda and Pest. And those Wallenberg houses were actually one or two blocks away from the Danube, so it wasn't a long march for these people. They were taken to the Danube River. They had to disrobe, take off their clothes, shoes, and they were shot. Some of them were tied together three or four persons. Only one was shot and if you fell in the river, he pulled the other two, three. And this was the winter of 1944 or late autumn, early winter. And those who didn't die instantly, they died because of the river.
>> Bill Benson: So what happened to you and your mom in that situation?
>> Peter Gorog: We were, if I can use this word, lucky. Whether it was Divine providence or just sheer luck, when the Hungarian Nazi Arrow Cross thugs came to our apartment, one of the young Nazis -- these were very young people because everybody else were already serving in the Hungarian Army -- recognized me. We were playing in the courtyard of the apartment building. And the Hungarian Nazis were there to guard the building. They just wanted to make sure nobody leave those buildings.

Anyway, this one guy took a liking of me. He told to his friends leave little Peter and his mom behind, I know them. Let's go to the next apartment. So we were lucky. We were left behind. The people in the next apartment were not so lucky. And we don't know what happened to them.

After the Nazis left we had to move again. And that was the time when we moved into the Budapest ghetto where my grandparents and two of my aunts and my cousin already lived at this time.
>> Bill Benson: So when you moved into the Budapest ghetto, at that point -- this is winter of 1944. The Russians are there essentially. So you were there during the siege in Budapest. Tell us what the circumstances were like when you moved into the Budapest ghetto for you, what you were enduring. After all you had been through, now you're in an unimaginable set of circumstances.

>> Peter Gorog: Yes. We lived with many lucky Jewish survivors who survived until October, November, December 1944, in the Budapest ghetto because by that time Budapest was surrounded by the Soviet Red Army, Jews could not be transported to the concentration camps anymore.

And we were living, if you can call that living -- it's very hard to describe. Number one, there were air raids practically all day long. At that time navigation wasn't very sophisticated so there were no nighttime raids. But the Allied Forces and the Soviet Air Force bombed Budapest relentlessly. We spent most of the daytime in the temporary bomb shelters. These were really not built as bomb shelters. They were the basements of the apartment buildings. When they built these apartments, they used the basement to store the fuel for the individual apartments. At that time there was no central heating. Everybody had a little stove, with wood or coal, depending on what kind of furnace they had in their apartment, a dirt floor. And that's where we stayed all day long, on a blanket, on dirt floor.

By that time electricity was more or less non-existent. Water supply was cut off by the bombing. Food -- I really don't know and my mom never told me exactly how we survived but I do remember one event when there was a gap between two bombings. People who were in the bomb shelter went out and they went to the ruins of the houses which were bombed out by the Allied Forces and they went through these buildings rummaging for food. And whatever they could find, they brought back and we ate it.

Now we, as I said, came from an Orthodox observant family, so we would not touch anything which was made out of pork. Fortunately one day my grandmother found a big slab of bacon. Hungarian bacon is not bacon like here. Most of them is just pure lard and you have to eat it with bread. Of course we didn't have bread. It was, as they say, it was not kosher. Nevertheless we ate it because every calorie you could take in meant one more day to live and one more chance to survive.

>> Bill Benson: And you stayed there for weeks until your liberation in mid-January 1945. Tell us what you remember and what you know of your liberation, after this unbelievable ordeal that you've just been through.

>> Peter Gorog: The Soviet Red Army entered the Budapest ghetto in January 17, 1945. That was the day when we were liberated.

You use the word liberation. I am using it because it's part of the Holocaust history and rewriting the Holocaust history unfortunately that some of the current day historians don't use the word liberation. They use the term one occupation, the German occupation, was replaced by another occupation, by the Soviet Red Army. Occupation it was but it was freedom for us Jews definitely.

We were able to come out from the temporary bomb shelters. My mom and I walked back to our apartment. I remember the stench of the dead bodies on the street. I remember the carcasses of dead horses. At that time horse wagons did most of the delivery of whatever had to be delivered.

We went back to an apartment. We were one of the few lucky ones whose apartment was occupied by an ethnic German family. When my mom and I left the apartment, we had to leave everything behind, everything because my mom could carry one little suitcase or whatever she had and there wasn't much she could put in that suitcase. We went back to an apartment and we found the apartment practically intact. Everything was there, including these diaries.

>> Bill Benson: The diaries were still there?

>> Peter Gorog: It was in one of the drawers.
>> Bill Benson: They hadn't touched any of that?
>> Peter Gorog: They hadn't touched anything. Not only that but they were happy to see us, that we were alive. Unfortunately some of the apartments which were occupied by people who were less generous, they didn't return their apartment. They didn't return their belongings of the Jewish people. Again, this is a part of the Holocaust history also in Hungary.
>> Bill Benson: So you move back into your apartment. You're fortunate to be able to do that. What did your mom do now? At that point what did she do to do the basics, feed you? What did she do from that point?
>> Peter Gorog: Well, first thing was to get food. Obviously. And food was short supply, very, very short supply. So what people did and what my mom did, she took whatever she could preserve, valuables, family jewelry, and she went to the countryside and she bartered the jewelry for food. She came back. We had at least something to eat.

Obviously hat making wasn't a good business after the war. Inflation was incredible at that time. My mom was, again, very good with her hands. She started to repair clothes for other people, for family members and whatever income she could get. That's what she did until she joined a co-op which was set up by the government to make woman clothes she was a seamstress from there on until she retired.
>> Bill Benson: Peter, you mentioned that when you were in the Budapest ghetto, your grandparents were there. What happened to your grandparents? And did other members of your extended family survive?
>> Peter Gorog: Out of my mother's eight siblings, two survived because they were lucky enough to come to the United States before the war. My mom and two of her sisters survived. Other family members died in various circumstances. Some were arrested and taken to concentration camps.

Actually, my father's two brothers was taken to forced labor camp and they died due to war activities. My mother-in-law's grandparents survived but only survived a couple of months. It happened to them what happened to many Jewish people who by the time they were liberated either at the concentration camps or in Budapest or whatever city they lived in, their body was so weak that even if food was available, again, they could not cope with a common cold and usually whatever illness, no medication to cure them, their body wasn't able to resist and they just died under natural circumstances, if you call starving and being deprived of medical attention normal circumstances.
>> Bill Benson: And your mother, who just the little glimpse that we've had today, she was clearly a remarkable woman. She was resourceful. She was brave. She took great risks to save you and herself. After the war, what was it like for her, after all she had been through, survives the war, now you're living under Communist regime in this Hungary, wants to get out, how did she do after the war?
>> Peter Gorog: Well, very briefly, after my mom gave up all the hope that my father would return one day from the Soviet gulags, she remarried. My step stepfather was a Holocaust survivor. Actually, he survived Auschwitz. He was liberated in Auschwitz. He came back from Auschwitz. His regular weight was around 150, 160 pounds. When he came back, he was 90, 95 pounds.

Our life in Hungary under Communist system, you can read about it in the memoirs and the museum websites. We don't have time to divulge. It wasn't easy. Oppression was replaced by another. Our lives as Jews were not in danger, however, ironically I couldn't

practice my Jewish religion because religion was against the Communist ideology. I grew up without Jewish education. I returned to Judaism after I came to the United States and started to practice the religion of my parents and grandparents.
>> Bill Benson: I want to be able to turn to our audience for just a couple of questions so before we do that, just a couple more questions for you.

Incredibly when you went back, your mom's diary, postcards were still there. You shared with me that your father, when he would write those postcards, he would refer to your mom as "little squirrel." Right?
>> Peter Gorog: Yeah. That's a Hungarian term of endearment. It's very special. Every time I hear that word I just remember that that's how my mother was called by my father.
>> Bill Benson: It must be incredibly precious to you to have those postcards and that diary still to this day.

The other thing I wanted to mention, if I remember this correctly, that you described going back to your home and it was intact and everything was there. Even today, all of these years later, after you were able to defect from Hungary, come to the United States, your mom was able to move here after you got here and came to visit, right?
>> Peter Gorog: Correct. Visit only.
>> Bill Benson: And passed away while she was here. Your house is still the same pretty much. I think you shared that with me.
>> Peter Gorog: Yes. The house is intact. It's still there.
>> Bill Benson: Same furnishings?
>> Peter Gorog: Same apartment. I had the fortune and privilege to go back with my family, with all of my girls, and were able to show them the apartment I grew up in. It's a very special memory for me.
>> Bill Benson: I wish we could talk about all that happened after the war, what you went through in Hungary to get your education, which was not easy, and then make the decision and why you made the decision to come here. There will be a chance afterwards for you to come up on stage and talk to Peter. You may want to ask him some things about that.

Let's turn now, Peter, if you're ok, just for a couple of questions from our audience before we end. I think we have microphones. We have two microphones on the stands. If you have a question, we ask that you go to the microphone and ask your question. Make it as brief as you can. If you don't have a question now, you'll have the chance to ask Peter one afterwards. So if there's no brave souls that want to jump to the microphone, we understand that. We'll have an opportunity for you to do so afterwards.

I'm going to assume -- wait. Are you ready to ask? Here comes a brave soul. And after you ask your question, I may repeat it just to make sure Peter and I and everybody in the room hears it if that's ok.
>> Hi. I just wanted to say first thank you for sharing your story. It was really amazing. The question I had relates more to the beginning of what you were talking about. You mentioned that you moved in with a Christian family and a few days later neighbors had denounced you. Do you feel that the sentiment of those people was out of malice or more out of fear?
>> Bill Benson: I think the question was when you and your mother were denounced, was it done out of malice or was there denouncing you out of fear? Do you know?
>> Peter Gorog: Well, we don't know because we don't know who the actual person was. You can assume malice because the person who denounced us, he had no obligation -- well, actually under the law one had the obligation to report any hiding Jews. However, if somebody

had some kind of moral laws to follow, knowing that law was unlawful to begin with, then he or she shouldn't have reported us. So we really don't know.

What we do know, in one hand anti-Semitism has been strong in Hungary throughout history, still alive, and still well. We also know that there were people who hid Jewish people. Actually, in Jerusalem's Holocaust museum there is a wall of righteous gentiles who saved Jewish people. And 1,800 Hungarian named are etched in the marble, Granite wall. So in one hand there were people who risked their lives, individuals, and on the other hand there were bystanders who did absolutely nothing in the best case or in worse case they reported on hiding Jews.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Peter.

Thank you for the question.

I'm going to turn back to Peter in just a moment to close our program. I want to thank all of you for being here, remind you that we'll have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. So we hope you can return and join us for that program. And also we'll be live streaming tomorrow's program and all of our programs in April so you will be able to tune in and listen to those on the YouTube Channel, station, of the museum, if you would like to do that.

Two things before I turn back to Peter. One, when Peter is finished, our photographer, Joel, is going to come up on the stage and take a picture of Peter with you as the background. So we want you to stay for that if you would do that for us. That would be great. And as I mentioned before, when Peter is done, he will remain on stage. And we invite you come up on stage and shake his hand, get a picture taken with him, or ask him the question that you may be thinking about right now. So we welcome that very much.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person has the last word. And so with that I'd like to turn to Peter to close our program.

>> Peter Gorog: Very briefly, somebody once said that the Holocaust is a unique moment in history; however, the consequences of the Holocaust is very universal. Meaning that what happened to Jewish people between 1943 and 1945 in the Nazi-occupied Europe is unique to the six million who perished during the Holocaust and the survivors. However, the consequences, learning what happened prior to the Nazi takeover, propaganda, and fake news, and discrimination helped the Nazis to take over the government and to discriminate not just against the Jews but they were discriminating against Romas and homosexuals.

We learn these signs and we should apply in our everyday lives. The motto of the museum is Never Again. What you do matters. And never again, we understand that we don't want genocide to happen again. Unfortunately after World War II ended they had genocide in Uganda, in Kosovo, in Cambodia, so obviously we haven't learned the lesson.

The second part, what you do matters, the "you" is in a different color if you see our brochures and the signs on the wall. The you is extremely important because every one of us in this room, watching on the internet, should not only learn what happened during the Holocaust but also apply it in our everyday life and we have to stand up against discrimination, against bullying, against any action against people who look different, who have different religion, who is different.

So I hope that is the message. If you don't remember anything else, that's what you take home because our number of survivors, eyewitnesses are dwindling. I am the youngest at age 77 in our group. You are the who has to take over and keep the memory of the six million Jews alive.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Peter.
>> Peter Gorog: Thank you.
[Applause]