REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON RITA RUBINSTEIN
JULY 11, 2018

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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*. We are in our 19th year of the *First Person* program. Thank you for joining us. Our First Person today is Mrs. Rita Rubinstein, 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, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Rita will share with us her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Rita 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 and #AskWhy. You can find the hashtag on the back of your program, as well.

A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's YouTube page. Please visit the First Person website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.

What you are about to hear from Rita is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

We begin with this portrait of Rita, shown here between her Aunt Bella and cousin, Bayla Shulwolf, who perished in the Holocaust.

Rita was born Rifka Lifschitz in December 1936 in Vascauti, Romania. The arrow on this map points to Vascauti.

Here we see an engagement photograph of Rita's parents, Tabel and Avraham.

Rita's father ran a dry goods store and small factory with his sister and brother-in-law in this house -- pictured on the right -- which also served as the family home. Their factory had a few looms to weave native Ukrainian clothing that was sold in the store.

In 1940, the Soviet army marched into Vascauti and drafted young men, including Rita's father, into the army. When Axis troops invaded the Soviet Union the next year, Romanian soldiers entered Vascauti and told all the Jews to prepare to leave within 24 hours. Rita's family was able to bribe Romanian soldiers, who took the family to a ghetto in Transnistria. The area known as Transnistria is shown on this map.

Once there, a village family took Rita's family in. Rita was able to attend a small class, but during the three years the family lived in the ghetto, they faced terrible hardships. After they were liberated, the family was eventually able to return home.

After the war, Rita attended a Ukrainian school in what had become Communist Romania. By obtaining false papers, Rita, her mother, and her aunt were able to travel from Romania to a displaced persons camp in Germany that was administered by the US Army. This photo is of Rita in her Purim costume.

Rita arrived in the United States in 1949 with her mother and her mother's husband, an Auschwitz survivor whom she met in the Displaced Persons camp. They settled in New York City. Rita married Nathan Rubinstein in 1959, the same year Nathan entered the University of Maryland for his Master's degree. Rita graduated from Brooklyn College in 1960; then joined Nathan in Maryland where she began teaching elementary school in Olney, Maryland, just outside of Washington DC. She left teaching to have and raise their three daughters, Nina, Sheri, and Rene. When the girls were older, Rita began teaching at a Yiddish Hebrew school then later became its principal. After retiring from the school Rita became a private tutor for bar and bat mitzvahs, including for adults who haven't had their bar or bat mitzvah.

Nathan passed away at age 58 in 1995. He had lost most of his family during the Holocaust but he survived with his parents in Siberia. After the war they came to the U.S. After service in the U.S. Army, Nathan began a career as a rocket scientist at the Johns Hopkins Applied Research Lab in Baltimore with a top secret clearance.

Their three daughters have a combined eight grandchildren. Daughter Nina is an industrial psychologist with two children. Daughter Sheri is an attorney with four children and Rene is a pediatric nurse at Johns Hopkins hospital with two children. Five of Rita's grandchildren are now college graduates. Her oldest grandson is now in his final year of Dental

School at the University of Maryland. A granddaughter completed her first year of graduate school to become a Physician's Assistant. Another granddaughter is entering her second year at Ohio State University.

Rita is very active in the community. 18 years ago she formed a singing group, the Happy Matzah Balls, which still performs at area nursing homes, senior centers and such places at the National Institute of Health and the Catholic University of America, as well as here at the museum. She also sings with the Encore Chorus. Rita has been a Transition and Hospice volunteer for the Jewish Social Services Agency for the past eight years. She has also traveled to Israel to do volunteer work for the Israeli Army. And Rita volunteers here at the museum, as well, by translating documents and videos of survivor experiences during the Holocaust from Yiddish to English. She speaks publicly in other settings having recently spoken in Omaha, Nebraska, and in Pocahontas, Arkansas, as well as in the local area at Roland Park Country School for Girls, which Rita's granddaughter attends.

Rita is accompanied today by her cousins Cheryl and Sandra Silverman, who've traveled from New Jersey.

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

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Rita.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: Rita, thank you so much for joining us today. And your willingness to be our First Person. We have such a short period with you that we'll just start right away if that's ok.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Ok. My pleasure.

>> Bill Benson: Although World War II began when Germany and the Soviet Union attacking Poland in September 1939, war didn't come directly to your community in Romania until 1940. Before we turn to your life during the war, tell us what you can about the early years in your family and life before the war began.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Ok. Life before the war was idyllic. My parents lived in a two-family home. My mother came from a family of eight children, a very Pious family who lived in a small village next to the town where she lived when she got married. She was the eldest. Children had died before the war. And my grandfather had an orchard and a dry good business as well. I was the first grandchild so I was doted on by my aunts. My mother came -- my father came from a family of four children. He was the only son. And my grandmother became a widow in World War I. Two of her children -- the oldest ones -- went to the United States to the land where gold could be found in the streets. And they wound up in sweatshops because this is, after all, the melting pot. It should be top immigration, I believe. And they worked very hard. I had never met them because they came before World War II.

My grandmother, it was hard because she sent the two oldest ones to the United States. There was some family here. My father and his sister, who was 18 months younger, remained with my grandmother. He married my mother. And they bought a family home together. My grandmother, my father's mother, lived with us.

At that time the Jewish families spoke German because when my mother was born there was Austra Hungary and a lot of these well-to-do families spoke German to their children and my grandmother said: No, I do not want my granddaughter to speak German; I want her to speak Yiddish. So thanks to her my very first language was Yiddish. And that's how I was able to teach it and keep up with it. I thank her for that.

>> Bill Benson: And you also spoke -- the family also spoke Romanian, right?

>> Rita Rubinstein: No. They spoke Yiddish. My mother, yes, she knew some but I didn't because I didn't go to school there.

We had a dry goods store. It was a modern house. My father's sister lived with us. It was a two-family house. The front was a store. My mother -- we had a radio, electricity.
>> Bill Benson: And that was part of being a modern home, right, electricity?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. A modern home. Doing well. My mother was in the store selling the scarves. They made scarves for the Ukrainians. And my father employed some people, as you said. And I was lucky to have pictures. I'll explain how. Because many survivors did not have any pictures of themselves when they were little. We had sent pictures to the United States and then my mother had hidden pictures.
>> Bill Benson: And we'll come back to that. I was struck when you said it was a modern home because not only did you have a radio and electricity, you had indoor plumbing and that made it very modern in the community you were in.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. And my mother had a nanny for me because she was in the store. And somebody came to wash -- we didn't have washing machines then. Of course the water -- we had a well.
>> Bill Benson: You're a wonderful musician and singer. Your father was also, wasn't he?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. I have fragmented pieces of memory. That's why at first I was hesitant to talk about my story. But I remember he loved -- he had a very good voice. He took me to services regularly on the Sabbath and we observed all the holidays. But I would say modern. There was only Orthodox or non-believers, and I do remember that. That was instilled in me. He was a wonderful person, which I heard later on from friends because unfortunately I didn't get to know him very well.
>> Bill Benson: Rita, turning to of course that awful period that began soon after that, Germany and the Soviet Union attacked Poland September 1939, launching World War II. Your town was directly affected. In early 1940, when the Soviets occupied your town of Vascauti, you were not yet 4 years old. Tell us what you know about that period when you lived under the Soviets as both the Soviets and the Germans were allies at that time.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, when the Soviets marched into town, they conscripted all the young men into the Army. My father was one of them. That was the last time I was to see my father. I was 4 1/2 when he took a train, not knowing where he was going. And my uncle was not conscripted for some reason. So he stayed behind.

I do remember when the soldiers were marching, after my father was conscripted, the Russian soldiers were marching in the street. I had a cousin who was seven years older than I, and from the attic he looked out and suddenly we heard pounding on the door and said there's a spy in here. And we children hid under the beds. It was very frightening for us. They came with bayonets my mother begged them. She said: My husband was in the Army, please, we haven't done anything. But we saw a spy. And my cousin came out. This is the spy. He was 10 at the time.
>> Bill Benson: Looking out the window in the attic.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Looking out the window. They sent all the well-to-do Jews -- we were not the richest Jews -- to Siberia and they stayed there for about a year. And then the Germans came back.
>> Bill Benson: Before we --
>> Rita Rubinstein: I mean the Romanians. Excuse me.
>> Bill Benson: Before the Romanians came.

Do you know what happened to your family's business during that time under the Soviets?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, everything had to be closed. Everything was closed. We were no longer -- I had lots of friends and cousins. We played in the streets. That was completely gone. So there was sadness. We didn't know what would happen next.

When the Romanians came back, all -- my aunt, by the way -- there was one surviving sister. My mother, as I said before, was one of eight. And her sister who was seven years younger, my Aunt Bella, whom you saw in the picture, she was working in a bigger town and she tried to go back home to the small village where her parents were and the trains were no longer going there. So it was her lucky stroke -- stroke of luck that she was able to stay with us and that's what saved her. I'll explain later what happened.
>> Bill Benson: We'll hear more about Bella as well.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. Right.

So what the Romanians did, they took 20 men from the place where my aunt worked, all Jews. Their only crime was being Jewish. In the marketplace, they shot them all. And one of them my aunt new very well. He was an engineer.

So we saw the handwriting -- not I because I was too young but my mother and everybody. Before we knew it, the order came that we should be ready within 24 hours, that we had to leave our home behind. Well, what do you take with you? I mean here I am 81 years old, going back so many years. But I remember that vividly. My mother putting on layers of clothing on me, a backpack. Of course toys didn't mean anything. She took bedding, whatever we could take with us.
>> Bill Benson: Whatever you could carry.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Whatever we could carry. They took some bedding. My mother took my father's clothing, his suits, and his prayer shawl which I miraculously -- it survived the war. That's the only thing I have left of my father, which I will share with you later on.

We were on the way to a death camp --
>> Bill Benson: Before we go there, in addition to what you could carry with you the family -- your mother -- tried to hide a few things both on her, some money, and then hide a few valuable and photographs. Tell us about that.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Thank you. My mother had an album which she hid in the attic. That's why I have the pictures, an album of pictures, photographs. And she hid some money. She said when we return, maybe we'll be able to salvage, maybe it will be there.

And my grandmother, may she rest in peace, she had money sewn in her undergarments. I asked why are you doing this. Well, we never know; it might help us. And it certainly did help us. Because when we were on the transport, we had to gather in a place --
>> Bill Benson: 24 hours to do all of this.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, 24 hours. I had a terrible ear infection. I remember so many hundreds of people all gathered. Our train was supposed to take us to a death camp. But rumor had it, my uncle found out, that some soldiers would take people on barges and they would take them to the Ukraine, Transnistria, and a place of Shargorot. It was not only a ghetto; it was also a labor camp.
>> Bill Benson: So they would take you for a fee.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Right, for a fee. And they took us on barges because they crossed the Dnieper River. Even though they took the fee, they would hold the children. The little children didn't know how to swim. They would drown them. They would just throw them in the river.

At that point a soldier was holding my hand. He I guess saw the anguished look on my mother's face. I had blond hair at the time. He said, "Don't worry. I have a little girl just like yours. I am not going to do any harm to her. She'll be ok."

But that was my first time that I was saved. But there were many other times, too. So thank God there were some righteous gentiles who did help. The whole world didn't just stand still.

>> Bill Benson: So your family was able to bribe these soldiers. They took you across the river.

>> Rita Rubinstein: And that was taking a chance. He could have been shot. Because he snuck out at night. But there was some family. My grandmother had a brother. They found out he was in that area, that's why he knew about the area. It was a very primitive town where Jews lived.

>> Bill Benson: Shargorot.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, Shargorot. We were the lucky ones a family was forced to take us in. When I say primitive, it was like a clay hut. They had one bedroom. There were four people. And one large room with a potbelly stove, they kept the heat. No bathrooms. There is a pale outside for us. The winters were bitter cold. They had very little. They were forced to let nine of us -- there were nine of us. Nine and four, 13 people, in a one-bedroom house. And here sometimes people have mansions and they don't have a room for people, so I have to, you know -- it was -- we slept on the floor. Times were very difficult.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us who the nine were in your family.

>> Rita Rubinstein: The nine people that were in my family was my mother and I and her sister and my grandmother.

>> Bill Benson: Sister Bella.

>> Rita Rubinstein: And my grandmother, my father's mother. And then my father's sister, Esther, her husband, her mother-in-law, and two children. So there were nine of us.

>> Bill Benson: Living in this little teeny house.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Living in this little teeny house with no rations. Food was a piece of bread and a little bit of oil. But we had shelter. I saw death in the streets. German Shepherds, to this day I am frightened of German Shepherds. I like other dogs but my friends had to put their German Shepherds away whenever we came for dinner. It's that fear because we saw horrible things.

>> Bill Benson: You described -- you lived there in the ghetto in Shargorot for three years.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yeah. We lived -- things were so difficult. There was no medication.

>> Bill Benson: I was going to ask you to tell us more about that. You described it as terrible as it was, do have some recollection of both good times and bad times during those three years that you were there.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, the good times as a child. We tried to look at things positively. I think I have a positive outlook. I thank God for that. Of course that helped me survive. We found a little rock with a ball. My mother made a rag doll. And what kept us going, too, was cleanliness. My mother had to walk to a river, about a mile away. And my cousin and I had our rag dolls. We went with her.

I almost drown there. I did. I fell in the water and my cousin suddenly said, Oh, oh, aunt Tina, look, there's a little girl in the water." My mother didn't know how to swim. So she threw a sheet and I grabbed on to it. She pulled me out. But it was such a traumatic experience for me that I did not speak for about three days.

And at that time they had, you know -- if you've seen "The Wizard of Oz," the wicked

witch and a good witch. There was a woman who came, she broke an egg on my forehead and started saying abracadabra language and said, don't worry, your daughter will speak again. And sure enough I did.

But the situation was so bad. My cousin, especially, he was older. He was seven years older. He needed food. And my aunt used to yell at him, "Why can't you be like other children and steal?" He said, "No, we do not steal. It's one of the commandments." And since they had it so difficult, they thought we could not possibly survive, all of us, in that situation. After my uncle had -- they survived it. They left for a different labor camp. It was just my mother and I and my grandmother and my mother's sister that remained over there.

>> Bill Benson: And you lost your grandmother during that time.

>> Rita Rubinstein: My grandmother was very ill. In the Jewish religion, we are buried in shrouds. As a young child I asked what are these white shrouds when I die. She had a little sack of sand. And I said, "What is this?" "This is sand from the Holy land and when I am buried, I want that. And since you're my only grandchildren here, I want you to light my candle." So it was a very difficult to see your grandmother die in the same place where you live.

>> Bill Benson: In this little house.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Little house. There was a ritual committee that came. And they took care of her for her grave. But at that time they didn't take children. She's my only grandparent that has a grave, but I've never gone back because the memories are not good. But she has a grave. The other family members do not, unfortunately. And I remember missing her very much. But she knew she would never see her son again. She had that feeling. She had cancer apparently. It was difficult. Very difficult.

Even though you said positive things, we had a woman from our area who formed a little kindergarten.

>> Bill Benson: That's what I was going to ask you to talk about.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Ok. We attended. I was thrilled when I was able -- we learned some Hebrew. She would sing with us. We had like a show and tell. I was thrilled when I was able to say: Oh, today I had a piece of bread and oil. We sang. We tried to forget what in the negative situation, and the sadness and the hunger. We would have no -- potato floating in soup, that was our staple. And my aunt, because she was so handy, sewing and knitting, she went on the black market and she would sometimes give these items or sell these items in exchange of a potato and bread and things like that.

>> Bill Benson: And you said about the food that you do remember just being hungry all the time.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yes. And that's why when kids come over, they say I overdo it. I don't waste food. I hate to throw any food away because there are poor children in the world. There are even poor children in the United States today. There's too much waste of food. I would rather give it to someone but never throw away because I do remember where I came from. It was difficult.

>> Bill Benson: What do you know from later what that time was like for your mother? As you mentioned, your aunt was able to do some sewing and sell goods on the black market within the ghetto. What did your mom do during that time? Do you know? How did she manage?

>> Rita Rubinstein: It's amazing. She must have been very strong. She was in her 20s. Didn't know where her husband was. Didn't know where her parents or siblings were except for the sister who was with us. Always concerned for my well-being. I was an only child being that the

year I was born in they heard Hitler's speeches already over the radio. And a younger child, I don't think, would have survived. The reason I survived was because I was never separated from my mother had I been separated from my mother, I don't think I would have made it. Although, there are some miracles. I have some friends who are survivors. They did survive without their parents.
>> Bill Benson: You would continue to live and survive in that ghetto for three years. The Soviets returned in early 1944 after those three years. This time they came back as liberators. Tell us what you remember about the arrival of the Russians and then what that meant for you, your aunt, and your mother now that the Russians were back but as liberators.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Right before they came, the front was coming very close so we heard a lot of bombing. The kind people who took us in -- into their primitive house, they went to a relative who had a sub-basement. It was really deafening. Loud sounds really startle me to this day. We went to the sub-basement. And then a young boy a teenager, he couldn't stand it any longer. He said, "I'm going out to see what's happening." Everybody was frightened for him. "No, I'm going out." Well, when he came back, he said, "Oh, the Russians are here. There's drinking in the streets." We thought he was hallucinating. And when we came out, indeed it was true. The Russians were there to liberate us. It was miraculous. finally the end was near. But what do we do?
>> Bill Benson: The fact you said that as the Russians got there and then for you, we were free to leave but, yeah, what do we do? We're free but what does that mean?
>> Rita Rubinstein: How do we leave? We had no tickets. We wanted to go back home.
>> Bill Benson: No money.
>> Rita Rubinstein: See if anybody survived. We had no money, nothing, except for the belongings that we took with us.

Well, we got on coal trains.
>> Bill Benson: Coal trains?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Oh, yeah, all different trains. We boarded. And then my aunt -- we went to Czernowitz, which is a larger town, and then my aunt met a woman whose father was a priest in her town. And her husband was in the Ukraine underground in the Army. She made arrangements for my aunt to go back to Vascauti and to check it out.

Our home was not available anymore because the -- the Iron Curtain started setting in. And the Russians made it into a warehouse. They stored grain in there.
>> Bill Benson: In what had been your family home.
>> Rita Rubinstein: In my Vascauti family home. We were able to get on a military train. That woman made it possible.
>> Bill Benson: Before you did that. When you went back to the home and couldn't go into it, is that when you were able to retrieve the photographs?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Let me get back to that. We wanted to find a place, but my great grandparents had a little house that was occupied but the soldier intervened. He said you have to let this family in. They gave us a room for my aunt and myself and my mother. So we stayed there. And then my mother went back to the house. We didn't find anybody, unfortunately, there. She was given a hard time. You can't enter here. She said: But my husband was a soldier; I just want an album. She went up to the attic, retrieved the album. The money was gone. She didn't care about that.

Then my father's best friend came back and he told us that my father was killed while fighting. At least I have the knowledge that he was fighting the Germans and that's how

he got killed on the front. We knew exactly the date so we could observe his memory every year. We put up the candle and say the prayers.

Then she wanted to know what happened to her parents. She went back to the village. The Villagers described the horrible death my grandparents met with. There was my grandfather who would give -- they lived very well with the non-Jewish, Ukrainians the same people he gave credit to before a holiday, before Christmas, they turned on him. With foreign implements, they had them watch how they butchered, murdered, really, his wife and all of the children. So this is how they described it to my mother. And then they let my pious grandfather witness it. And the next day they murdered him as well.

Hearing that, when you're in your 20s, the loss of your husband, loss of your parents and other extended family members -- there were at least 24, 30 family members that were gone and their only crime was being Jewish. It was very hard being home but we knew it was not home anymore. They didn't want us.

I started my first formal school which was run by the Soviets. It was a Ukrainian school where I had to learn Ukrainian. We were indoctrinated to love Stalin. He was the father. He loved children. They made us kiss his picture.

>> Bill Benson: You remember that.

>> Rita Rubinstein: I remember that. I remember walking to school, at least two miles, with my cousin. I had to memorize the poem. They didn't celebrate Christmas the same time we do here but they called it Father Frost [Indiscernible] and they had a big Christmas tree. I had to memorize the poem in Ukrainian and recite it. I was a good student. But you felt -- as a Jew, you felt left out.

When we saw there was no future, the Iron Curtain was setting in, my aunt was working in the bank, the Jewish underground had papers for us saying we were born in Poland. So we were able to get out. We knew there was no future in Romania. We had nothing to do there. And no one there.

So we were on the train with the false papers.

>> Bill Benson: Just share with us, what was significant about saying that you were Polish, because you were Polish, that would allow you return to Poland?

>> Rita Rubinstein: That would allow us go back to Poland, right.

And there's another story of a righteous gentile. There was a guard at the train station. He was checking the papers. He recognized my mother because his mother was the midwife for my grandmother when she gave birth to the younger children. So he didn't disclose it. He knew we were not Polish. And my aunt was not permitted to come. We thought they wouldn't allow her to come. They wouldn't allow her to come until 10 minutes before the train left. She came with us.

>> Bill Benson: Do you know why she wasn't allowed to come with you?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, it was a Communist country. They did not want her to leave. She was a bank employee. They make things very difficult. Our journey was very difficult, too.

We got on a real train going but until we got to Germany, it took us three months because we had to cross different borders. We were in the Czech Republic. We were in Poland. This was all done at night. We got on trains illegally.

>> Bill Benson: We should probably explain to the audience that this was, of course, after the war ended.

>> Rita Rubinstein: This was after the war ended.

>> Bill Benson: So you were liberated in 1944. The war ended May 1945. So you were there

under the Soviets for over a year.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Over a year, right. Yes.
>> Bill Benson: And so it was after May 1945 that you were able to get the false papers.
>> Rita Rubinstein: It was in 1946 that we -- after three months journey we got to Munich, near Munich. It was a DP camp --
>> Bill Benson: A displaced persons camp.
>> Rita Rubinstein: For all the survivors, the remnants of the Holocaust. But we felt free. Schools were established. Babies were born. People who lost their children, lost a husband, life was reborn. In fact, there were 2,000 babies born in Bergen-Belsen. Now, mind you, it was not a plush existence. We were in the same barracks where they trained the SS soldiers but we had a room. We got the Hebrew Sheltering Society -- General Eisenhower came to visit our camp. I was at the sanitarium then.

The reason some of us were really ill after the horrible things we went through, starvation, and no medication, when we went to school, we had health exams and a lot of us had tuberculosis. And this was shortly after the war. I was separated -- my mother took me. I was in a sanitarium and I was there for nine months.
>> Bill Benson: Do you know how far away it was from the displaced persons camp?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. It was about an hour away. Not close. And here I was 10 years old, separated from my mom.
>> Bill Benson: For how long, nine months?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Nine months. Still anti-semitic nurses because it was shortly after the war and this was Germany. I think my pain tolerance comes from that period because they tried -- I needed Streptomycin but it was only available for certain cases of TB. When my mother came back to see me, I saw her once a week, she was looking for me. They said: No, your daughter is in quarantine. Because I really had an advanced case of TB. Thank God, though, there was one kind doctor. I needed surgery. While I was on the operating table, my mother was able to get Streptomycin. She wrote to family members and they sent it. I still had the shots. It affected my hearing. I heard that's an effect. I had shots every three hours for three months. But thank God for that.

We were concerned for health reasons. We knew we wanted to emigrate to the United States.
>> Bill Benson: You needed to be in full health to do that.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Good health.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that while you were in the displaced persons camps, of course you were getting, in effect, care packages food was coming in.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yes.
>> Bill Benson: And you would then take the canned goods that would come and barter them. Say a little bit about that.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. We had a wonderful school. We loved school. Those kids would say oh, school. You're so lucky because I lost my childhood and a lot of school years. Suddenly we had a thirst for knowledge. We had history. Math, geography, all the subjects, Hebrew. We learned about the world. We put on plays.

I met people who did not speak a word of Yiddish because some of my friends were hidden in some convents or with other people's homes, so I learned how to speak Polish. But if you don't know how to write it, you forget it. But I spoke Polish fluently. Because of the need. My mother was sitting in the audience. I loved to perform. One woman sitting next to her said,

"I wonder if this little girl's mother is alive." And my mother said, "I am her mother." And the woman started to cry because she said, "I lost a child the same age." Never to see her again. There were countless stories.

But they took us on outings. I survived my TB. And I will never forget, 1948, May 15, 1948, when Israel was declared independent. The whole school, we were like 100 children, we stayed up all night. We built a big bonfire. We sang and danced because we finally had a country where to go to. Even though the British mandate was there, it was difficult to go to.

And the United States was the first -- Harry S. Truman, who declared it. We were just thrilled with joy. There was a song written, "Tell me where shall I go. There's no place for me. To the left. To the right." Nobody wanted us. You heard St. Louis where everybody was turned away. And there is an exhibit now, What Did the United States Do? I recommend you see it.

>> Bill Benson: Just opened up a few weeks ago.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, as a matter of fact.

>> Bill Benson: That was May 1948. You stayed there another almost another year.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yes, almost another year. Of course my Zionist roots were there. I wanted to go to Israel. My mother said: You're my only child -- there was a quota system then. My aunt was permitted to go to the United States before. I think in 1947.

>> Bill Benson: Aunt Bella? Because she married while --

>> Rita Rubinstein: She married there, married a dental mechanic. But he was a dentist at the camp. Then we had my father's two sisters there. But my aunt who survived the war, she was in a different DP camp. She went to Israel because her son, who was older, he started swimming the channels he said he is going to Israel. Even though she had two sisters in the United States.

Of course I went. I don't regret it at all. Because she said, no, we are going to the United States, you're my only child. She married there --

>> Bill Benson: In camp?

>> Rita Rubinstein: In camp, a step-father. He was 15 years older. He lost his family in Auschwitz. They told my mother it's better not to come as a widow to the United States.

>> Bill Benson: So get married and she did.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about leaving the DP camp and come together U.S., the aunt and uncle that had been with you in Shargorot who left, what happened to them?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, they're the one that survived, came to the little town, and they went to Israel.

>> Bill Benson: So reunited.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. And you said in exchange for food. Yes, we got spam and tuna fish cans. We didn't know what it was. We had never seen it. So my step-father would take it to the farms, the farmers, and they, in turn, would give us fresh vegetables.

>> Bill Benson: Fresh vegetables for the spam. [Laughter]

>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. And some chickens. So we had them slaughtered. And we had -- the food was not a problem. The children used to steal from the orchards some apples. We had fun. We went to the woods. We went strawberry picking.

>> Bill Benson: And like you said, went to school.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Life was really reborn for everybody. It was difficult, very difficult. But everybody was grateful to have survived.

And then, of course, we went -- came to the United States.
>> Bill Benson: 1949.
>> Rita Rubinstein: 1949. Our quota -- we had a quota system and we were finally --
>> Bill Benson: Your number came up.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Number came up. They still had Ellis Island but they no longer gave you exams on Ellis Island. But in the port that took the ship, where they took the ship, we had to pass the exams we were very nervous because I had had TB. But we passed. I passed the test. It was not a cruise ship. Let me tell you that.
>> Bill Benson: The reason it took till 1949, because you were waiting for the quota, waiting for your opportunity.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. So we were definitely legal immigrants. We had to have papers. We had to have a sponsor. Make sure that we wouldn't you -- wouldn't be a burden to the state. Finally when our quota came up -- we were on an Army transport. I still remember --
>> Bill Benson: As you said, not a cruise ship.
>> Rita Rubinstein: General Haan. No, not by any means. It was an Army transport. We were right near the engine. In September the oceans are very, very rough. We had bunk beds. There were quite a few women on one side about 20. My mother said take the upper bunk because if we're sick, nobody -- excuse me. And she was so right. We never went onboard at all.
>> Bill Benson: On the upper deck.
>> Rita Rubinstein: The upper deck. We didn't go to the dining room. We couldn't keep anything down because it was very turbulent. But, I will never forget, one of the most beautiful moments in my life. When we were told we were nearing the harbor in New York, Manhattan, we went onboard then. When the Statue of Liberty, you know, greeted us, there were tears of joy. I felt finally we can practice our religion. We can be proud of who we are. We can go to a synagogue. We can go to school. This is a land of opportunity.

We were really so thrilled to be here. Housing was very difficult. We qualified for welfare because we came with nothing. But it was a shame do not do that. My father learned to paint houses he was a businessman before. He was a house painter. My mother worked in a Barton's factory. You've seen Lucille Ball, you know, with the vending machines. Some of you are too young to know.
>> Bill Benson: The same work environment.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. This is a land of opportunity. I went to school. I started -- why they put me in a 7.SP, which is a special class where they taught French, I didn't speak a word of English. It was sink or swim. I didn't open up my mouth for three months. My mother, I told her, we're in the United States now, we're only going to speak English. I was ashamed of Yiddish then. I wanted to become Americanized.

My cousins whom I had here I met for the first time, they said because of you we had to finish everything on the plate because they said they're starving in Europe. They said you have to become Americanized. I had long braids. I was wise beyond my years because of all the sad experiences I went through, and losses, lost my childhood. But I was not mature enough socially. I had to cut my braids. You can't be a Rifka. You have to be Rita. So I became Americanized very fast.

My mother was amazing, too. She knew all the capitals of the United States. She made sure she learned all the history. And we were so grateful. It's a land of opportunity. You don't know how lucky we are. We can criticize. We have our freedom to criticize. Our

presidents are not always the ones we select and they are not always role models but we'll come through it. We pray and we come through it.
>> Bill Benson: You described to me that your mother, though, was overly protective of you.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yes.
>> Bill Benson: Will you say a little about that?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, being an only child she was very protective about me. She was afraid of my going ice skating. I didn't have a bicycle.
>> Bill Benson: After all she had been through with you. It just made sense.
>> Rita Rubinstein: It was hard. Because I went to school at night. Also I went -- if you -- oh, talking about school, the frustrating thing, they gave me an IQ test in seventh grade and I was just a green horn, really, three months here, didn't know a shoe maker from a tailor. It's a wonder I passed the IQ test. I recall in high school the principal called me in and I said: Why is he calling me in? I was a good student. And he said: I've never seen anybody improve so much in an IQ test. I said, "You know what? You gave an IQ test to a young woman, a young girl, who didn't even know the difference. By some sheer luck I passed it." Of course I improved. And with perseverance, I got a scholarship. I didn't have to pay for college. I became a teacher.

Thank God I met my husband who is also a survivor. We had nothing. This is the land of opportunity. We were the first to own a car, which we earned. First to own a home. Got there and settled. Very grateful.
>> Bill Benson: You told us about your prayer shawl. You go back to that for us and share it with us. Again, describe this is your father's. You were able to hang on to it through all that you went through.
>> Rita Rubinstein: This prayer shawl is the only thing that I have left of my dad. It's very special to me. I know the Holocaust museum wanted me to donate it but I'm very fortunate. I married and had three daughters. I had 35 beautiful years with my husband. He died but he left a wonderful legacy. So four grandchildren. He used to wear this prayer shawl on the high holidays. I wear it now because I'm in a conservative synagogue.

It was given -- the custom was for the bride's parents to present the groom, their future son-in-law, with a prayer shawl. And this is the prayer shawl they gave to my dad. Must have been 84 years old. When I gave it -- I gave it to a special place. This is called -- the guy told me that this was sterling silver. And when they made it then, it has snaps. I was able to clean that. I was afraid to clean it. So this is very dear to me. It's been present at every one of my grandchildren's mitzah. So I won't part with it. And hopefully it will go to the next generation. Great grandchildren someday.

This is it. I'll open it up for you to see. It's a real big one.
>> [Applause]
>> Rita Rubinstein: I feel close to my dad, wherever he is. I'll continue to tell the story so their memories should live on.

nd you should be able to tell people that, indeed, I met a survivor and tell your children and grandchildren. Because in 15, 20 years, I'm one of the younger ones, we'll all be gone. But their memories and your stories will go on. And I hope that history will never repeat itself and that you never experience war or hunger or losses in your family.
>> Bill Benson: Rita, thank you. We're going to hear more from Rita in a little bit, including we have time for a few questions from you. So if you have a question and would like to ask it, we can do that now. We have microphones, one in each aisle. We ask that you go to the

microphone, try to make your question as brief as you can. I'll repeat it just to be sure that we hear it correctly. And then Rita will respond to it.

And folks, if you can stay with us, we're going to hear some final words from Rita, too in a moment. Here we have a question.

>> I was a little curious about the Yiddish. My grandparents also spoke Yiddish but only when they didn't want us to know what they were saying.

>> [Laughter]

>> So your mother and grandmother, they also spoke Hebrew as well, right?

>> Bill Benson: If your families spoke Hebrew as well as Yiddish.

>> Rita Rubinstein: No. The Hebrew was just in prayer but they spoke Yiddish at home. That was my mother tongue.

>> It's so interesting. I never understood why my grandparents never shared that with us. But you said she was embarrassed, right? She was embarrassed about your culture, not wanting to be Americanized so she didn't want --

>> Bill Benson: When you came to the United States, speaking Yiddish when you first came to the United States, you were trying to learn English at that time.

>> That's sad.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, it was difficult. But, you know, you learn. I learned how to speak --

>> Bill Benson: Thank you so much. Thank you.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: We have another one.

>> Thank you so much for your stories, recollections my grandmother --

>> Rita Rubinstein: Will you speak into the mic? I'm sorry, I have --

>> Bill Benson: I'll repeat it, too.

>> Rita Rubinstein: I have a hearing impairment.

>> Thank you again for your recollections and stories. My grandmother was a teenager in Paris during the occupation. She tells me stories about how they hid a Jewish woman in their home to save her. But when I ask her about her experiences, she described a visceral reaction to Germans and other people that oppressed her. I'm just wondering how you overcome all the sadness and grief and visceral reactions, the bad memories, that you have.

>> Bill Benson: The question, Rita, asking how you -- if you have, how you've overcome your visceral feelings about all the terrible things you experienced and those that oppressed you, the Nazis, Romanians.

>> Rita Rubinstein: I count my blessings. Let's put it this way. I'm lucky. I smile. People say, Why are you smiling? Because I am a survivor. And when you smile, the world smiles with you. I always see my glass half full rather than half empty.

When I hear some of my friends' stories from Auschwitz and Dachau -- that's why at first I felt I wasn't privileged, privileged. My friend who works at the museum, she said you lost your childhood, grandparents, father, of course you have a story. I didn't have as horrible a story as they did and so I didn't feel that I should talk about it. But she said, no, every story has to be told. And I did -- that's why I decided travel to other places so children know.

And you don't know how lucky you are. Our kids here don't. We are still the greatest country in the world, I believe.

>> Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: I think we're towards the end of our program and we're going to hear from Rita. Before I turn back to Rita to close our program, I remind you we'll have programs each

Wednesday and Thursday until the 9th of August. If you can't come back for another program, all of our programs are on the museum's YouTube page and we hope that you can watch them again at another point.

When Rita is finished, Rita will remain on the stage here. We invite you to please come up on the stage if you would like, if you have a question, didn't get a chance to ask and you'd like to, that would be a great opportunity or you can just meet her, give her a hug, take a photograph with her, whatever you want to do when Rita's done.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. So on that note, I'm turning back to Rita.

>> Rita Rubinstein: First I want to thank God that we survived one of the darkest periods in history. I'm really grateful to the United States for opening its doors to us. As I said before, it's the greatest country in the world. We should appreciate the freedom that we have and opportunities. I'm proud to be a U.S. citizen. I'm very patriotic. I always fly the flag on 4th of July, Memorial Day, and really we should thank our men and women in the military for the sacrifices they have made in protecting our freedom.

I just want to share with you -- there was a photographer and filmmaker by the name of Luigi Pascana, who was here in April, he took photographs of survivors. What those photographs were, unique, he blew them up. Some of you may have been at the reflecting pool. And large portraits, just to be outside, not in the museum, they can withstand all kinds of weather, with a little blurb of our history, each survivor's history. There were 22 survivors from the museum here. I was one of the volunteers. We were all on the reflecting pool, right beside Lincoln Memorial, under Lincoln Memorial. I think his project is wonderful. The display sends a strong message to the deniers of the Holocaust and is a teaching tool for young and old who never heard of the Holocaust.

At the museum they wouldn't see it but outside -- in fact, I had some phone calls from students. I will tell you that seeing my portrait at the reflecting pool and those of my fellow survivors took on a special meaning. I really felt honored and privileged to be displayed here. It brought memories of a young Dr. Martin Luther King -- I was a very young mother then -- And his memorable "I have a dream" address in 1963 where he stated that all people are created equal and that freedom and justice will prevail. A lot of what he dreamt came to fruition but there's still much to be done.

I, too, have a dream that we will live in harmony and peace with respect for each other. I want to see a world that is free from genocide. Unfortunately past history has several accounts of genocide just like in World War II. And there are genocides occurring today in Syria, Somalia, Nigeria, to name just a few. I don't want our history to be repeated and to impact our children and grandchildren's future.

Take a stand is my message. Do the right thing. Speak up when you see something wrong against fellow humanity. Denounce antisemitism, racism, ethnic hatred, ethnic cleansing and religious intolerance. The future is in your hands, everyone. When you save one person's life, it's as though you have saved the world.

God bless you all. God bless the United States of America. And thank you for letting me share my story with you.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Again, we welcome you to come up and meet Rita if you would like to do that.