REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON: ALEX SCHIFFMAN-SHILO
JULY 25, 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*. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 19th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mr. Alex Schiffman-Shilo, 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 until August 9. The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Alex 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, toward the end of our program, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Alex 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 Alex is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. We begin with this portrait of Alex in his Cub Scout uniform.

Alex was born in Strasbourg, France, in 1933. The arrow on the map points to Strasbourg.

Here we see Alex's parents. They had emigrated from Poland. His father was a traveling salesman, and his mother was trained as a Hebrew teacher. The family moved to Paris in 1938.

When the Germans invaded France in 1940, Alex's family moved to the south of France, where the collaborationist Vichy government took power. Alex's great-uncle Max lived in Villefranche-de-Rouergue, the town where Alex's family moved. The white or demarcation line divides France between the German occupied part and the unoccupied Vichy part.

When Alex's mother fell ill, Alex's Aunt Cylli, who we see in this photograph, came to take care of the family. Throughout the war, Alex and his sister, Madeleine, were able to attend school and summer camp, and lived a relatively normal life in Villefranche until September 1943 when the German crackdown on Jews intensified. Alex, Madeleine and Cylii were able to escape to a nearby forest until the worst had passed. After the war, Alex and his family were able to return to Paris.

After two years of service in the Israel Defense Forces and more than 16 years in the Ministry of Agriculture, Alex worked for 10 years for the United Nations and the Inter-American Development Bank on a number of international agricultural projects. He left Israel in 1978 to work in agriculture in Haiti for the United Nations. From there he worked in Nepal, Rwanda and Jamaica and then back to Haiti on an irrigation project, and as a consultant in other countries such as Madagascar.

After moving to the United States in 1989, Alex worked on projects associated with the World Bank and USAID which took him mostly to Western Africa. Although retired from his international agricultural work, he continues to translate technical documents mostly from French into English. Alex is also fluent in Hebrew.

He met his wife Amy while living in Haiti. Amy, who is from Brooklyn, earned her doctorate at George Washington university and recently retired as Director of Counseling Services for an Arlington, Virginia, high school. Alex and Amy live in Washington, D.C. Their daughter Hallie graduated from the New York School of Law and is a member of the New York Bar Association. I'm pleased to say that Amy is here in the front row with Alex today.

Alex has two children from his first marriage. His son, Mati, a computer programmer, now a math teacher, is married, has two children and lives in Israel. His daughter, Hamutal, married a native Australian in Israel and they moved to Australia a few years later where they live with their three children. Mati and Hamutal both served in the Israel Defense Force. Alex's 24-year old grandson, Tomer, was drafted into the Israeli Army at the end of 2012 making him the third consecutive generation in the family to serve in the military.

As a museum volunteer, you will find Alex at the Information Desk on Monday

mornings. He led tours of the recently closed exhibition, "Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration and Complicity in the Holocaust," and led tours of the earlier exhibition, "State of Deception."

With that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Alex Schiffman-Shilo.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Alex. I'm going to put you right here. There you go.

Alex, thank you so much for joining us today and your willingness to be our First Person. I know that we have so much for you to share with us today so we might as well start.

Alex --

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Just before we start, you could see from the picture here that even then I didn't know how to straighten a tie.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Alex, before we turn to your life during the war and the Holocaust, let's start with you telling us a little about your parents, your family, and you in that time before the beginning of the war in September 1939. What was your early family life like?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: My father and my mother both came from the same little town, in the Province of what is today the Ukraine. It's Galicia. My father served in World War I but on the wrong side, with the Austrian Army because that part of the world was Austria. After the war, in 1922, he moved to France and then in `24, came back to his village, came back with his fiancée, my mother. And in ' 26, my sister was born. My mother, as you said, was a trained Hebrew teacher but she never had an occasion to teach because she had to help my father make a living and she worked as a seamstress.

Two years before the war, my father was a traveling salesman. But being far in the east, it was not convenient so we moved to Paris, just before the war. Paris was more central. It was easier for him. Therefore we moved. When the war started, we moved to the South of France, a short stop in Issoudun, a small town. And then more south where my mother's uncle was since World War I a whole story in itself. I will not tell you that.

>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to after the war began, a few more questions. You mentioned your father served in the First World War. He was wounded, saw combat and was wounded, wasn't he?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: He saw not only that. My father served in communications. And in these days, World War I, communications was telephone. To serve in the telephone part, the most important and dangerous job was to lay lines, telephone lines, and to repair telephone lines. I think my father told me that it was very dangerous and very exposed job. They say that sometimes when you put together wires, suddenly you have the Russians because by mistake you put two wires together which didn't belong.

After the war, he came to France. Actually, he came because his elder brother came before World War I. Now, it's very curious. My uncle left Austria before World War I to come to Strasburg, Germany. And my father left Poland after World War I to the same town but it was France.

>> Bill Benson: World War II, of course, began with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland September 1, 1939. Two days later, September 3, France and Britain declared war on Germany. But for France, the full impact of the war wasn't felt until Germany invaded France in May of 1940. Tell us what you can, if you know anything about that period after the war began officially in 1939 but before it really was felt in France. What was that time like for you and your family?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Family, I don't remember exactly. That period is still called in history books as the Phoney War. Why the Phoney War? There was no combat. The Germans stayed in Germany. The French stayed in France. And suddenly -- and the French built very strong fortification on the German side; meaning, we know today, that they prepared the last war. And the Germans totally surprised the French by bypassing that and going through Belgium, which was not protected. And when the war started, within three weeks they were in Paris. And then we had to go to the south.

One of the things I remember, we took a taxi from Paris to [Indiscernible]. There was a big bridge over the river that bridge had been blown up. And there was no other way, no trains going from Paris to the south. So we took a taxi, this I remember. And from the other side we went to the south. We stayed in Issoudun.

My father was a traveling salesman. I'm sorry, I'm opening -- he was a traveling salesman. He presented manufacturers of leather goods, mostly women's handbags and wallets and things like that. And the manufacturers were in that little town, Issoudun. We stayed there a few good months. And we are three families together: my family -- and we are three in the same class. My cousin -- and we, of course, told everybody, told the parents, of all the bad things the other one did in school.

>> Bill Benson: So you were in Issoudun for several months. You were able to go to school while you were there.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. How many months I don't know but we went to school.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us, Alex, when you were in Paris and, of course, fled once the Germans invaded and occupied Paris, your father -- you lived in an apartment. And your father paid for several years in advance.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Until 1943. And he stopped paying -- we left the apartment, left all the furniture in, until I think August 1943, when the authorities, I think the French, sealed the apartment, took all the furniture out, and then my father stopped paying. After the war, when we came back --

>> Bill Benson: Talk about that later, absolutely. So it was unoccupied for several years and he paid the rent.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: After a short period of time, a few months perhaps, that's when your parents decided to go to Villefranche. Say a little bit more about why they choose to leave and go to Villefranche.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I think we wanted to go away from what would be occupated.

>> Bill Benson: So farther south.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes. And second thing, my mother's uncle was there from almost World War I. He was there for a long, long time.

>> Bill Benson: You explained to me that when you got to Villefranche, essentially you and your family lived openly in Villefranche. How were you able to do that? Were you not worried about, as Jews, being denounced?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Well, I was a child then. There was some 20 or 25 -- I always say I have to count exactly. 20, 25 Jewish families and the population was not hostile. They knew we were Jewish. Once or twice I heard, oh, little Jew boy, but that was it. I know for sure I did not miss one day of school.

Now, once or twice we had to go under the radar. I remember my sister and me, we spent a few nights at the science teacher's house. Now, for me it was an adventure, a

sleepover. The real reason -- I never had the curiosity to ask. The immediate reason, I guess there was a warning. It's a mystery to me to that day how my aunt -- my father was not there. He was traveling. It's still a mystery where my aunt was, maybe at a good friend of hers. She had two, three good friends. But I tell you, for me it was a sleepover.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that one of the memories up of sleeping over at your science teacher's house is that he had comic books or cartoons that mocked the Germans.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. He had cartoons. They were political cartoons. And the cartoons talked about two populations, two populations. One population was the botellos. Now, botellos you have the word boot in it meaning the Italians because Italy looks like a boot. And the other were the cotellos. The cotellos means the hat, the helmet. And Germany looked more or less like a helmet. This I remember from the book.
>> Bill Benson: So political cartoons.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: And I didn't notice before. We saw some poems were written in -- had two different meanings. Depending the order on which you read the lines; if you read straight, four verses, blank, four verses, four verses, blank, four verses. If you read from top to bottom and then second -- it has one meaning. And if you read across and then across, it has a -- it had a totally different meaning. There were some tricks. Of course the whole thing was to express an anti-Nazi sentiment, feeling, yes.
>> Bill Benson: Alex, your mother had been diagnosed with cancer before the war began but she passed away in May 1941 when you were just 8 years old. Tell us what you remember about the loss of your mother.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: What I remember, vaguely, is the few days -- she was with us. We had a very small apartment in Villefranche-de-Rouergue. What I remember is that in her last days, she -- her face was kind of twisted. And she used -- her younger sister, Cylli, was living with us. She came first to take care of her older sister, of my mother. And she used to call her every night when she was in pain to help her, etc. And one night she didn't call. And that's the night she passed away.

Now, she was buried in another town, Toulouse. I didn't go to the cemetery. And I remember my aunt, she kind of -- she sealed the doors and the windows to disinfect. If I remember. There is another name for that but I forgot. To clean the room, etc. A few things I remember.
>> Bill Benson: And your Aunt Cylli would become very important in your life. Tell us a little about her.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Well, almost my surrogate mother, almost. Meaning she was with us. I always had a special relationship with my aunt. So much that my sister protested. Madeleine protested. She said one day -- my aunt was kind of authoritarian and my sister was a teenager, 14, 15, and she didn't accept the authority. One day my sister screamed at me, "She's not your mother". But I had a special relationship with her.
>> Bill Benson: After your mother's death, you went to a camp and there you encountered an anti-Semitic camp director. Can you tell us a little bit about that?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yes. I went actually twice to youth camp, to Boy Scouts, Cub Scout camp. The first I don't remember many things. The second, these camps with another group of Cub Scouts from another city. The counselor, the head of the camp, was from the other city. He summoned me, first day, me and one or two other -- one I remember for sure, maybe two -- and he said these ones were Jewish, "I don't want them." Then came -- his deputy, remember his name, who was the math teacher in my school for higher grades, he said "They

go. I go." That was the end of the story. We stayed.
>> Bill Benson: Remarkable.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. But usually signs of anti-Semitism, we didn't see -- maybe we ask later about Croatia.
>> Bill Benson: This would be a very good time.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Ok. So in my town there was a battalion of German soldiers which, in fact, were Croatian. They were not German. They were Croatian. And they were serving in the military. And part of the Croatians, one day, rebelled against the officers. They killed the officers. And they said that Villefranche was the first town to be liberated. Needless to say, the Germans sent reinforcement and the whole rebellion was quelled within a few hours, not even days.

Now, I crossed the town at that time and here and there I could hear some shooting. And at someplace of the town, at some sites, I saw a body covered with a blanket.

Now, the Germans put curfew on the town. They put posters explaining the curfew in German and in French. And in the poster, the last line said, "Don't be influenced by the Brits and the Jews." So we saw the Jews maybe should go under the radar. And we decided to leave the town for a couple of days.

My sister and me, we left first because my sister had a student ID without a stamp "Jew." My aunt and friend, an Italian refugee, they crossed the roadblock a few minutes later. And I don't know, to this day, what kind of paper my Aunt Cylli had, I don't know. So when they got to the check point, they explained to the server there that they were caught by the curfew and they live here just behind this little hill. They let them go. So we went to the next train station, took the train three more stations, three more stops, and went to the woods where my parents had a relative, a cousin. He was living literally in the woods. His living was to make charcoal. So we went back, went to him.

The problem was that my father was a traveling salesman. Took the train Monday morning. We knew exactly his itinerary. So we went to the nearest train stations. The train arrived. The train stops two minutes. There's no time to jump in the cars and go through the train. And then the train started to pull out. And call it a miracle if you want, suddenly my father appeared at the window. So we ran after the train. These are steam trains. We shouted to him [Speaking Non-English Language], go down at the next station, which he did and he joined us. I suppose that at home he would have found a note or something.
>> Bill Benson: Alex, probably we should explain for our audience that when you had gone to Villefranche originally, that was Vichy France, the unoccupied portion. By the time this Croatian mutiny happened, the Germans had now occupied all of France. So you no longer had even the little security you might have felt when the Germans had occupied. And now they were there in full force.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah, now they were there. Actually the Germans came twice. They came at the very beginning of the war and then they retreated and then they came later. The first occupation was 2/3 of France, including all the Atlantic coast. The second time they occupied the whole thing.

Your father, as mentioned, was a traveling salesman. Continued to do that even while you were in Villefranche when the Germans occupied Vichy France. That must have been a considerable risk for him.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: We were all French. My father had a French ID with a big stamp "Jew". He could have been controlled and he was controlled, twice he told us. He could have

been controlled and vanish. Being arrested and vanished. It didn't happen. I know that he was controlled. So when he took the train Monday morning, there was no guarantee we'll see him on Friday.
>> Bill Benson: That must have been very stressful if not terrifying for him to take those risks.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I want to say something. As Frenchmen, we were more or less protected in the town where we were. Across the street was a Jewish Polish family. They had three sons who were in school with me. And one day they vanished.

I checked at the Holocaust memorial in Paris two, three years ago. I found their names. When I went to the archives, they told me that they didn't survive. Just across the street.
>> Bill Benson: And they were not French citizens.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: They were not French.
>> Bill Benson: And yet even with a French citizenship, your father and family --
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: My father could have been taken. My Tante Cylli, who was not French -- it's a little bit of a mystery just because I didn't ask how she survived during the war. And she was always -- I know that she was very reluctant to talk about that period.
>> Bill Benson: You lived under those circumstances for several years and then shortly after the D-Day invasion which took place, of course, in June 1944, a German armored unit passed through your town firing shells in indiscriminately into the town. Tell us what you remember of that and when did you believe that the war was coming to an end for your family. That was after the Normandy invasion.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: The Normandy invasion took place June 6, 1944. We heard about it by word of mouth. I don't think we heard it by radio. Word of mouth. And, of course, they were -- there was big excitement the allies are coming. They disembarked. But south of us was an SS division, armor division, and they were rushed to the front. And here -- they are not in our town, but here and there when they saw a nice house in the countryside they made target practice on it, the few houses.

Now, on the way, they perpetrated the massacre which we had learned only much later. In a small town -- they went across a town where they thought there was some French underground there. It was not true. It was just a mix-up of names. And they killed the whole population. They destroyed the Village. They set the church on fire. One woman succeeded to escape and she told the story.
>> Bill Benson: They put the townspeople into that church.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: In the church! They put the men in that -- no, they put the women and children. The men they put in barns and gunned them down. So one woman succeeded to escape and she told the story.

After the war, the President of France decided to keep that town as it was. So I always say to visitors upstairs, if you go to France and you don't have much better to do, it's about four hours' drive from Paris. It's a ghost town.
>> Bill Benson: To this day.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. I say always to the ladies you might go there because you're not far from Limoges, where the French ceramics are, so you might be attracted by that.
>> Bill Benson: You told me one date Germans just disappeared, were just gone. Tell us a little more about that. And then what happened once the Germans were gone and you were, in a sense, free to do what you wanted? What happened then?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: We felt being free -- I don't remember exactly what happened. We

knew that the Germans were gone. We knew that they were evacuating. What I do remember is at the end of the war, in my town there were many refugees. And when France was liberated, all of these people traveled back. The war was not over but they traveled back to Lorraine and [Indiscernible]. And they were drunk. [Laughter] I think impossible. But they boarded the trains singing. It was a whole show. I remember that.
>> Bill Benson: And as you said, the war wasn't over. France was liberated in September 1944 but, of course, the war didn't end until May 1945. So at any point I imagine people were fearful the Germans might come back.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah, but -- I mean, I was a boy. I could not follow exactly what was happening. But don't forget. This is the period where there was the Battle of the Bulge. The Battle of the Bulge, which was the German counterattack. And they surrounded the American 82nd Airborne Division. And at that time George Patton, directed toward Germany, disengaged and he put his troop to the north to disenclave the 82nd Airborne. The German offered to the 82nd Airborne to surrender and the American general said "Nuts." That was his answer.
>> Bill Benson: "Nuts." That is famous.

Alex, while, of course, with the war over, you, your father, your sister, Aunt Cylli, you all survived the war and the Holocaust but many of your family members --
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: They did not.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about some of your family members.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: We had my grandparents were still in that little town in Poland, Ukraine. We used to get letters from them because being under the same rule, the Postal Service was working. So we could get letters and postcards. I remember two letters we got. One said "Don't send parcels with food." The parcels arrived empty, stolen on the way.

And the second said -- that was April 1943, I think. Maybe I'm mixed up. No, not April. It was August. But I don't refresh exactly which year. It said "We leave. We don't know where we are going." We know exactly. They were marched to a nearby forest, my grandfather and my grandmother on my mother's side, marched to a nearby forest. They were told to undress and they were gunned down in a trench. We know that exactly by people who succeeded to escape. They didn't succeed.
>> Bill Benson: Alex, you told me about a cousin of yours who had actually joined the French resistance but he was caught by the Nazis what happened to him?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Oh, my cousin. He was a medical doctor. He had a little clinic for wounded resistance people. And he, as a doctor, with the oath, he couldn't leave his patients. He was caught with them and they beat him. He explained that. He spoke perfect German. And they wouldn't have it. They just killed him.
>> Bill Benson: And when they killed him, if I remember right, that was one day before his town was liberated.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: One or two days.
>> Bill Benson: So right until the very end they were still executing people. As you said, massacred that village.

And you had another cousin, Zeff.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Zeff was a cousin, first cousin, of my mother. And Zeff was a Communist. He was an idealist for the Communist idea. And he fought before the war in the Spanish war. He fought on the anti-Franco war. And when this Army was defeated, he went to France and he joined the underground. He brought his two children to my town and came back to the resistance and he was killed in the liberation of Toulouse. I remember when we got the

news, exactly.
>> Bill Benson: You also shared with me your father had a brother who had stayed in Poland and he survived.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. My father -- there were five brothers. The last one, the youngest one, stayed in Poland during the war and he survived What his children survived, I don't know. And after the war, he went to reclaim his watch, to Ukrainian peasant to reclaim his watch. I guess he gave his watch -- in the Jewish tradition in this day, when somebody was bar mitzvahed, you gave him a golden watch. That was a tradition. And I suppose he gave his watch to get some food or money or something. When he came back to reclaim his watch, the peasant murdered him. That was two years after the war.
>> Bill Benson: With the war over in May 1945, five years after the invasion of France, what did your father do to rebuild his life? And what happened to you? How did you get started again after all that you had been through?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Well, we came back to Paris. And my father was offered an apartment but not his. And for sentimental reasons and also financial, because he had paid the rent through October '43, went back in '45. He wanted his own apartment, what had been his apartment even after a legal battle he got it. And then he had to rebuild his clients. And he was not old. My father came back -- when he came back in `45, my father was 50. 50 is not old. I'm 84. 50 is not old. But he was worn out. And one of the signs he was worn out, before the war he wanted to study French. He wanted to know good French. And after the war he couldn't care less. And he only came back to himself. When my sister got married and had two daughters, then my father -- my father had also an unruly son. That was me.
>> [Laughter]
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I studied in France. And in French you can have a deferment for going into the military. And after the studies was over and deferment was over, I didn't show up to the French Army. Instead, I went to Israel and served in the Israeli Defense Forces. But it's a violation in France. If you don't show up -- I had a trial in absentia, as we say --
>> Bill Benson: Thinking of you as a deserter?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: No. A deserter is somebody who is in the Army and runs away. I didn't show up. Legally it's a great difference. Anyway, legally or not I got one year of jail. I was not there. And the confiscation of all of my belongings. I had no belongings, that was not a problem.

So I went to Israel. I served in the IDS. And France has a nice tradition that when a new president is inaugurated, usually there is a widespread amnesty for small to medium infractions. And not to show up was an immediate infraction. Actually I missed the first, Pompidou. I had to wait another seven years, and then I grabbed it. And after this I could come back to France.
>> Bill Benson: I'll come back to a little bit about your military service in Israel but I want to go back to one thing that you shared with me that I would like you to talk about. You had an Uncle Max at the end of the war who had a radio and on the radio they would broadcast the names of people who were returning from the camps and other places. Tell us a little about that.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I called him Uncle Max. In fact he was an uncle of my mother. But at that age, 10, 11, I could go to my Uncle Max who was our next door neighbor. I just knocked at the door and came in. And one day after the war I go in. They had the radio and his wife was listening and sobbing, very quietly. She was sobbing because she had a son Herman, and Herman was killed fighting the Germans, in the French Army fighting the Germans, and the

radio was broadcasting all the names of the French POW who were coming back home and, of course, her son was not coming back. So she was sobbing there. I remember it quite vividly.
>> Bill Benson: Alex, so when you moved to Israel, joined the Israeli military, tell us about your experience in the Israeli military.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. The experience, first of all we always say the military is a melting pot. That's true. I was what they called [Indiscernible], a Central Europe, European Jewish boy. And I knew the [Indiscernible] from South Africa -- one day woke up in the morning and there were people, soldiers, playing backgammon. And listening to the radio full volume with oriental music. I woke up; thought I was in a pub somewhere in Baghdad.

These were the Iraqis. I never met Iraqis you Jewish people before. I also never met Yemenites. Yemenites are usually a little bit darker face. They speak pure Hebrew. In Hebrew you have a few guttural consonants. And they pronounce Hebrew with that accent. But they were hard-working people.

I served in artillery. And in artillery, being a good Frenchman, we had to dig positions and to put at night. We put the gun at the end in the position. It has to be about a meter deep where you put the gun in. And that's the end of your work. Well, being from -- we tried here there and to cut corners, of course. It's a hard job but you have only a pick and a shovel and do your job with that. Yemenites were the first to finish. They did not straighten up until the gun was down. Ready to shoot. That was my encounter with the Yemenites. Later on I saw them, also, in other occasions but that was my encounter with them.
>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to our audience to ask if they have some questions of you, tell us what became of your Aunt Cylli. What happened to Aunt Cylli after the war? As you said, said been a surrogate mother for you.
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah. On one hand she was a surrogate mother. She didn't want to talk about the war. My aunt was Polish. I don't know what kind of papers she had during the war. She lived with us. She was almost kind of my surrogate mother. And after the war she didn't want to talk about that:

What I know, what I remember, is after the war she wanted to get the French citizenship. So she had to study to pass an exam of what they call was not school literary exam but a test of general French culture. And I remember she took private lessons in philosophy and French literature for a good couple of months and then she took the test. And once she became French, she had to take -- she went to dental school in France but she had to leave us to retake the last test of dentistry and then she could work. And she could start to work with the Jewish children and then she opened her own practice.
>> Bill Benson: When did she pass away?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: That's a good question. I don't remember. You remember? A good few years ago.

I remember one thing. She was very old. She's the one who passed away the oldest. A few weeks short of 93. I had planned to go to Israel -- not to Israel, to France to wish her 93rd birthday until my sister called and said, Alex, too late. It was a few weeks before I went. I think I still have the ticket somewhere. The air ticket.
>> Bill Benson: You had this amazing career, I think in agriculture, that took you all over the world, places that to most of us sound very exotic, Madagascar and all kinds of places. Then you came to the United States. And in 2013, you became a U.S. citizen. Tell us what was sort of the -- what pushed you to say I'm going to get this done now? What was it?
>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Two things. One was -- there was 100 years to the musician Woody

Guthrie. I don't know who the father, son, but never mind. One was 100 years to Woody Guthrie. And at the last, last song, the audience was packed at the Kennedy Center. And the last song all the performers were aligned on stage and all the audience was standing singing "This is my country, this is your country, from California, to the New York Island," etc. That was one thing.

You don't want me to sing. [Laughter]

And the second thing was the day after the inauguration of the September 11 memorial at the Pentagon, I went to visit it. You could not visit the day of the inauguration because it was an official day and only official people could go there. I went the next day. So I saw the September 11. And then I went to the Air Force memorial which was just behind -- you know, the memorial I would see the three spikes coming towards the sky. And I went there and I looked at Washington. I had a kind of sentiment, a kind of feeling, this is the land of the free. And then the next day, I surprised my wife, I requested to become an American citizen, the next day. Which I got within four, five months. It took some time.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you for that. I think we have time for some questions from our audience. We have microphones until the aisle. If you have a question, we ask that you wait until you have a microphone. Try to make the question as brief as you can. I'll do my best to repeat the question just to be sure that we hear it. And then Alex will respond to your question.

So we have mics. Anybody willing to or have a question they want to ask?

I will also mention that when Alex is finished, he's going to remain on the stage and that will be an opportunity for you to come up and ask Alex other questions.

And if you don't have questions, I can ask a bunch. Do I see a hand? No. Just a yawn. Ok. [Laughter]

All right. We have a question in the front. We'll bring you a mic. Here it comes. Thank you.

>> Good morning, sir. What made you want to come to the U.S. in the first place?

>> Bill Benson: What made you want to come to the United States in the first place?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Oh, two words, my wife.

>> [Laughter]

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: We met in Haiti. I worked for the United Nations. Amy worked for the American school as a school counselor. And we met on a very auspicious day according to the Jewish calendar, the day of Purim, a Jewish carnival. But in Hebrew it's linked to the fate. So we went together to three different developing countries the last one was Haiti. And then Amy said stop. By then we were married, had a child. And she said, stop, you go to Haiti, I go to the United States to pursue a doctor degree. And this brought her to the George Washington University here. And 18 months later I came. I was used to shuttle when I had the long weekend. I could come from Haiti and see the family.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you very much.

>> [Speaking French]

>> What was it like knowing that anytime during the war your family members could be captured or killed?

>> Bill Benson: What was it like for you, Alex, to know that at any point during the war you or your family could have been captured and killed? What was that like for you as a kid? What do you remember feeling?

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: I must say at that age I didn't feel any danger. I didn't feel any danger. I didn't miss one day of school. This is sure. We went to the countryside in the

summer. Whether it was to run away from something or just a vacation, I guess it was just for a vacation. The only time -- besides the two or three nights we spent at the science teacher's, I went to summer camp with the Cub Scouts and we went to the countryside -- we went for the summer. I don't know if it was a vacation. I guess it was.

Now, there is another thing here. My mother's elder brother had a little factory to manufacture belts, belts for pants. He brought all his machines, equipment, from Kabul to the little town where we were. And he worked cutting leather, etc. One day he got a letter from some Admiral and that Admiral said the Jew is not authorized to own workshop or a factory. Business. Ok. So my uncle made a fictitious sale to a friend of his and then went on. Then we got a second letter. The Jew is not authorized to work in his previous factory.

To this day I wonder how they came to know. Maybe somebody in Villefranche was not exactly happy with him and denounced him. I don't know. Then my uncle had to sell his stuff. And then he went to the countryside. His son, my cousin, was always in boarding school, all these years. And my uncle went to the countryside. I learned only much later that he became in charge of an ammunition depots for the French underground. But I don't know any detail about that. And today there is nobody to ask. Maybe I could find it, Google or something.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: I think we're at the end of our time. We're going to hear again from Alex in just a moment but I want to thank all of you for being with us. We will have five more programs this year until August 9, each Wednesday and Thursday. If you can't come back, all of our programs are on the museum's YouTube page. So please take some of those in if you can possibly do that and we will resume again in March 2019.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word so I'll turn back to Alex to close our program. As I mentioned a moment ago, when Alex is finished, he will remain on the stage. We invite anybody who would like to come up and shake his hand, get a picture taken with him, ask him a question if you didn't have a chance to do so, please take advantage of that.

On that, I turn it over to Alex.

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Thank you for giving me the last word.

>> [Laughter]

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: It doesn't happen every day.

>> [Laughter]

>> Alex Schiffman-Shilo: Yeah, I want to say -- last time you asked that I made a very big last word saying that Israel will always live, etc. Today I'm thinking about this this institution, the Holocaust Museum. I work twice a week as a volunteer at the Visitors Services and when I see classes, school students, come in and older youngsters, I always tell them you tell your friends what you saw here. You tell your friends what you saw here. Because many people as far as time progresses, when time progresses, people -- there is more and more sentiment that, well, it was not that terrible. It was. I always say that to my audience. It was. You spread the word that it was.

Last summer or two summers ago I went to Poland with my son. I went to Krakow. Krakow is a very nice city. And in Krakow you still feel the soul of Karol Jozef Wojtyla. You know who is Karol Jozef Wojtyla? Somebody knows? Pope John Paul II. He was from Krakow. 30 miles from Krakow you have Auschwitz and Birkenau. Auschwitz, Birkenau, are two camps, walking distance. In Auschwitz, you still see the gas chambers. You still see the crematorium. You see the pits where they threw the ashes. When you go to -- the other, Birkenau. Birkenau

is the camp. Nothing is left, only one barrack is left. But you see where the barracks stood. And Birkenau is a camp where 1.5 million people were murdered. This is Birkenau.

Now, the Nazis tried to hide a little bit. So in Birkenau they blew up the crematorium and they blew up the gas chamber. But you feel it. When you stand -- you can stand on the same platform where people were coming in. And that same platform is a little bit symbolized in this building. When you go up the stairs to the second floor, the stairs, you have a little bit of that same view. That was the platform where the SS officer was sitting at the table and he looked at you and he looked at you, and at you. Didn't talk. This was gas chamber. This was slave labor. But you didn't know it. And when you go there, you still feel it.

If all of this was not enough, at Birkenau they had punishment cells. You see them today. Kind of cells of concrete, down. And they let prisoners stay there for hours. Also, another place where they kept prisoners in very, very, very uncomfortable position.

So you go home; you spread the word. As we say here, we hope never again. Although unfortunately it's happening.

Another thing which we say never again is anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism today is under the guise of anti-Israel. But make no mistake it's anti-Semitism. We have to fight against that. We have to fight against that. Many times we find media are against, television, especially, you know, -- the internet, the world of internet, you'll find many, many things.

Ok. Thank you very much.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Again, please feel free to come up and meet Alex if you would like.