Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Arye Ephrath
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Ladies and gentlemen, the program is about to begin. Please remember to silence your cell phones.Thank you.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. This is our 20th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mr. Arye Ephrath, whom you shall meet shortly. This 2019 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 August 8th. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.
Arye will share with us his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Arye a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our on-line conversation: Never Stop Asking Why. The conversation aims to inspire individuals to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises. You can ask your question and tag the Museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy.
Today's program will be live-streamed on the Museum's website, meaning people will be joining the program online and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. We invite everyone to watch our First Person programs live on the Museum’s website each Wednesday and Thursday at 11:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time through June 6. 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 Arye is one individual’s account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. Arye Ephrath was born into a Jewish family on April 7, 1942 in Bardejov, Czechoslovakia, which is

present- day Slovakia. This is a photograph of Arye and his parents, Miriam and Samuel Friedman, taken after World War II in 1946.

Arye was born the same day as the first deportation of Jews from his hometown. Nazi authorities had ordered Jews to report to the town square, but Arye's mother ignored the order. She gave birth in the basement of their home with assistance from her maid. Arye's father was absent during the birth as he had escaped to the wooded hills outside of town to evade the Nazis.

Arye's parents decided it would be safer for Miriam to move with Arye back to her hometown of Beregszasz, Hungary, now part of Ukraine. Miriam gave Arye sleeping pills, placed him in a sack on her back, and walked across the border from Czechoslovakia to Hungary. Over the next couple of years, Arye and his mother moved from inn to inn to avoid detection.

Meanwhile, Samuel continued to operate the family-owned general store in Czechoslovakia. The store provided goods that the Nazis considered essential, so it afforded him protection. In 1944, the Nazis revoked Arye's father's work permit. He escaped to Sisov, a village in western Czechoslovakia, and sent for Arye's mother and for Arye. A local priest agreed to hide Arye's parents, but not Arye as he posed too much of a risk as a young child. This photograph is of the church where Arye's parents hid.

Jan and Irena Mierni, a local shepherd and his wife, agreed to take Arye if Arye would dress like a girl in order to avoid suspicion from the townspeople, because the couple only had daughters. The Miernis changed Arye's name to Annicka for the duration of his time in hiding. Here we see Arye disguised as a girl. This is a photograph of Arye with Jan and Irena Mierni. The boy on Arye's left is another Jewish child who was also hidden with the Miernis.

Later, Arye's parents, fearing a Nazi raid of the church, moved to hide in a barn. They hid for eight months in a hole dug in the ground covered by hay. Finally, on Arye's third birthday, the Soviet Army liberated Czechoslovakia and Arye was reunited with his parents.

After serving as a tank officer in the Israeli Army during the Six-Days War, Arye decided to combine travel with education so he came to the United States in 1967. He attended junior college in Florida then went to the University of Florida. Knowing his savings from the army wouldn't last long, he took a double load of classes and graduated early, finishing in 1969 with a degree in aerospace engineering. Arye attended MIT, earning his master's and becoming a research assistant. That led to earning his Ph.D at MIT in 1975.

Arye went to work for NASA for a short period in California and Houston before teaching electrical engineering, biomedical engineering and other topics for several years at the University of Connecticut and Tufts University, as well as conducting research at MIT. In 1980, Arye went to work for Bell Labs staying there until 1997. He was then recruited by a colleague to work at a private consulting firm in Virginia that specializes in computer technology and communications. At present, Arye serves as a technical consultant to the U.S. government.

Arye married his wife Peggy, who was also with the Bell System, in 1990. Peggy has been very involved in Jewish education. Arye and Peggy's son Mickey, named for Arye's uncle who perished in the Holocaust, passed away in 2013 at age 21. They have

a daughter and three grandchildren, all of whom live in Alabama. Arye and Peggy moved in 2018 from Fairfax, Virginia, to Smith Mountain Lake near Roanoke, Virginia, which puts them closer to their grandchildren. Arye's volunteer work at the Museum has involved staffing the Information Desk and providing information to visitors about his experiences as a Holocaust survivor.

With that, I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Arye Ephrath. Arye, thank you so much for joining us and for being willing to be our First Person today. With only an hour, it's a short period. We'll just start right away, if you're OK with that. World War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland September 1, 1939. Your parents were married in 1941, and you were born April 7, 1942. More than 2 1/2 years after the war began.

Before we turn to what happened to your family after your birth, let's talk first about your family and what you know of their lives before you were born.

>> Arye Ephrath: Thank you, Bill. And thank everybody for coming today to the Museum. My father was born in the same place that I was born later in Bardejov, Czechoslovakia. And his father, my grandfather, ran the general store in the village. The general store was a small store that sold basically a little bit of everything, like miniature Walmart, if you can imagine that. And my father was working with my grandfather in the store. My father was one of six boys and two girls.

At the time when the war started in 1939, he was already in his early 30's. And still unmarried, which was a source of great disappointment and great worry to his parents. How can a person be already in his 30's and not have a family?

My mother, on the other hand, she was Hungarian. She was born in Hungary. Her father was -- my other grandfather was a lumber merchant. My mother was quite a progressive woman for those times. She actually graduated from secretarial and accounting school. She actually worked with her father, with my grandfather, as his business partner in his lumber yard. At that time, in those times, it was not acceptable for women to wear slacks in public, so she made herself a skirt or a dress that basically was slacks but looked like a dress so that she could climb up and down the piles of lumber in the lumber yard, counting the incoming wood and the outgoing merchandise. When the war started, my mother's family was deported from her hometown and they had to leave basically everything behind, leaving with just the shirts on their backs. They left for a city in Czechoslovakia, and shortly thereafter Jews were deported out of that city as well.

And so they ended up in a small town very near Bardejov, where my father's family lived. The local community, the local Jewish community, received them, welcomed them into the community. Met them at their new place, at the new house, and to introduce them to the locals. And while they were discussing things my grandmother was expressing her great worry. She has two daughters. My mother and a younger sister. She has two daughters who are marrying age, and here she is, they have lost everything they ever had, and how is she going to marry her daughters without a dowry? Again, in those times in Europe, the custom was that a woman when she gets married, she brings to the marriage a dowry of household items, pots and pans, dishes, tablecloths, bedclothes and so on. And they of course had none of that.

Well, one of the local people who was welcoming my mother's family to this little town said, you know what, I happen to know a family in the nearby village, in Bardejov, and

they are beside themselves because they have a son who is already in his 30's and not married yet. He is pretty well-to-do economically, so he would not worry too much about a dowry. Maybe we should get those two together and see what happens. And this is what happened.
[Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: So they got together. Your parents married in 1941. Had you a year later. Germany had occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939, before World War II began in September 1939. Under those circumstances, do you have any insight from your parents as to whether or not the decision to have a child was a source of some fear for them bringing you into what was a very, very difficult world at that time?
>> Arye Ephrath: I'm sure that it was a very, very difficult decision for them. Nobody -- in 1939, when the war started, and early 1941, when my parents married, people could not yet imagine how bad the coming years are going to be. Now the Nazis never made any secret of the fact that they -- their plan was to get rid of all the Jews that they could get rid of. Originally they were going to deport them out of Germany and out of the occupied countries to other places. When that didn't work well, their next step was what they called the Final Solution, and that was to exterminate the Jews. But even then people could not really believe that anybody and especially such a culture that was civilized society as Germany had been at the time would actually carry this out and do it.
So there was a lot of disbelief, a lot of suspension of belief, and I guess my parents figured that somehow they would manage through any difficulty even though they would have a child.
>> Bill Benson: You said to me or described to me your father was a cat. What did you mean by that?
>> Arye Ephrath: My father, since he was born and raised in a small village, he did not have much of a formal education. I don't -- I would say he probably went to school through maybe elementary school and then went to work with his father in the store from that point on. Even though he was lacking in formal education, my father -- and I think I told you that before, in my opinion, I have met quite a few very smart people in my life. My father was the smartest person I have ever known. He was sharp. He was logical. He read a lot. He knew a lot about the world.
And when I said to you, Bill, that he was like a cat, I meant in the sense that a cat is said to always fall on his feet. My father in any situation found a way to stay on his feet. He was an eternal optimist. He always looked for the little pony in the pile of manure. And he always looked for the good side. And much of the time he was right. And that is what helped him, I think, and all of us to survive the Holocaust.
>> Bill Benson: Speaking of your father, how did he manage to be able to keep his store open under the Germans?
>> Arye Ephrath: He -- at first, before I was born, the Jews of Bardejov were -- it was a large part of the community, the town, was a Jewish population, and the Jews were relatively safe because the Germans were very methodical about their deportation of Jews to the extermination camps. And they had not gotten to Bardejov yet. Once they had gotten to Bardejov, in fact, deporting the Jews of Bardejov, my father managed to get a certificate from the Germans called in Germany -- in Germany it's called
[Speaking in German]

It translates in English literally to an important Jew. Now of course the Germans did not mean to say that you were important to them. Basically what it means, it's useful Jew, somebody we need. Because the store, the general store, provided supplies and merchandise not only to the townspeople, everything from toothpaste to clothing and household items, but also to some of the occupying German troops who bought their supplies there.
And so he managed to get this certificate which assured him of not being personally deported. It did not cover his family. After he and my mother were married, my mother was not covered by this certificate, but he was. And so he could continue working in the store in relative safety.
>> Bill Benson: And he did for a while. But of course on April 7, 1942, the day that you were born, was also the day of the first transport that took Jews to Auschwitz.
>> Arye Ephrath: Correct.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the circumstances of your birth and how your parents were able to avoid deportation to Auschwitz at that time.
>> Arye Ephrath: The day I was born was the day of the first transport from Bardejov. Now when we say transport today we mean simply transport. In those times, the word "transport" was enough to cause chills to any Jew because what it meant was that the Germans published a list by name of all the people who were supposed to report to the local train station each with one suitcase of personal belongings. At the train station, they would be put on a train of cattle cars, 100 to 150 people to the car. Each car contained two buckets. One to use as a bathroom for the occupants and one full of water so that they could drink. And then the train would take those people on a journey that normally took anywhere from three four days to a couple of weeks to one of the extermination camps around Europe. And they would never be heard from again.
And so on the day that I was born, that was the day that the Germans required a long list of Jews from Bardejov to show up at the train station for the first transport to a recently opened new camp in Poland named Auschwitz.
Many Jews complied. Many did not. My father was one of the ones who decided not to comply. And he escaped to the forest surrounding Bardejov to hide. My mother was in labor, and she couldn't comply. And the interesting story here is my mother's obstetrician who had been taking care of her during her pregnancy was a nice man named Dr. Rudolf Radisch. And Dr. Rudolf Radisch was not even Jewish, so he really shouldn't have had to worry about his safety. But he was one of the ones who ran for the forest.
And the reason was because many years before, when Dr. Radisch was still a little boy, his mother, who was a widow, came to work as a housekeeper in the household of a local Jewish doctor. And she worked for the doctor as a housekeeper for many years. And the little Rudolf Radisch grew up in the house of that Jewish doctor. And the doctor saw the boy was smart. The boy was very personable. And so the doctor saw to it that he would get a good education, which normally being the son of a housekeeper, he wouldn't have an opportunity to get. So he got a good education all through high school. And after high school the Jewish doctor sponsored him for medical school and helped and supported him until little Rudolf Radisch became Dr. Radisch.
Now that doctor did that because he recognized intelligence and the smarts of the little boy, and he wanted to help him get ahead in life and make something of himself. But

there were very evil tongues in town that spread the rumor that actually the reason that that doctor did that is probably because little Rudolf was his illegitimate son. Now that was absolutely absurd on a number of levels. Not to mention the fact that little Rudolf was already 6 or 7 years old when his mother came to work for the doctor. But nevertheless, it was enough that that rumor that he was the illegitimate son of a Jewish doctor, that rumor was enough for the Germans to decide that he might have some Jewish blood in him. And therefore when the list came out of the people to report to the train station for the transport, Rudolf Radisch' name was on it. And he too escaped to the forest during the day and came back after dark to minister to my mother, to suture her up and so on.
>> Bill Benson: So once that was -- once he came back and you were seen to, when did your father come back?
>> Arye Ephrath: My father came back also the same evening. And it was shortly thereafter that he managed to get the certificate. And so for a while they felt relatively safe. And then the transports became more and more frequent. They decided that staying -- for me and for my mother to stay in Bardejov was not safe anymore because they were -- we were not covered by the safety of the certificate.
>> Bill Benson: In fact, before you go on to that, as you said earlier, the Germans were so methodical with their lists, tell us what happened when they came for your mother's sister who was on the list.
>> Arye Ephrath: The Germans -- if nothing else, they kept very good order and very good documentation of what they did. And at first they were taking Jews, as I said, by name, by lists. And I mentioned before my mother had a younger sister who still lived at home with my grandparents. And one day for some reason she was on a list that the Germans needed. So a couple of German officers showed up at my grandmother's house looking for my aunt, for my mother's younger sister. She was not home at the time. And so my grandmother told them she is not here, and I don't know where she is. But you know what? My daughter is a young girl and her entire life is still ahead of her. I, on the other hand, am an old woman, an old lady, and I have lived my life. If you need to take somebody, why don't you take me and leave her alone? Well, the Germans being Germans they said, no, no, we need specifically her.
They never ended up taking her, but I have been thinking about my grandmother. At that time she was 48 years old, the old woman who was already finished living her life and was willing to go instead of her daughter. A few months later, the Germans became a little bit less methodical and started collecting Jews wherever they could find them. The custodian of the local synagogue, the person who was taking care of the synagogue, his wife got sick and she could not cook for the family and she could not do whatever household chores she had. And so my grandmother went over to their house, to the custodian's house, with a pot of hot soup for the family.
It just so happened that when she showed up there, there was also a German squad there who came to take that family away. And as soon as she stepped into the house, they grabbed her as well. And that was the last that anybody ever saw of her. My grandfather was not home at the time. He was at work. And when he came back home and he found out from neighbors what happened, he decided that he did not want to stay behind without her. And so he hurried to the train station and managed to get on the train to Auschwitz to be with his wife rather than stay behind.

>> Bill Benson: And he knew what that meant.
>> Arye Ephrath: And by that time everybody knew that getting on the train meant that shortly thereafter you are going to go into the gas chamber. Yes.
>> Bill Benson: You and your family lived through these circumstances in Bardejov for about a year. And then your parents concluded that they could no longer keep safe in your town. So they made the decision for your mother to take you to Hungary. Tell us about that.
>> Arye Ephrath: My mother did not come from a very religious Jewish family. In her appearance, she could very easily pass for a non-Jew. And she was from Hungary, a native Hungarian. And so they decided that my father was relatively safe in Bardejov being an important Jew, but that I and my mother were not. And so they decided that the best thing to do was for her to get some forged papers presenting her as a non-Jewish Hungarian woman and for her and me to move to Hungary and live there as non-Jews. For the duration. They hired a professional --
>> Bill Benson: Like a smuggler, right?
>> Arye Ephrath: A professional smuggler woman to try to cross the border between Slovakia and Hungary with me at night. And she got caught. She was turned around and sent back. And my parents had to pay a fine. And they tried it again, and the same result. So finally my mother decided to take things into her own hands. She gave me a sleeping pill at night to put me to sleep, put me in a sack on her back, and carried me across the border into Hungary. With her forged papers. Originally it was not a good place to hide, so we continued to the capital, Budapest.
There she found an orphanage run by an old lady who was also a pediatrician, and she never married in her life, and she ran an orphanage for war orphans. And she agreed to take me into the orphanage and keep me there while my mother rented rooms in a boarding house. Now again at that time in Europe, the custom was that any place that rents hotels or inns or boarding houses for people they don't know, they need to ask for identification papers and notify the local police. So my mother knew that, and she knew that it would take the local police approximately a month to find out that her papers are forged. So she would rent a room in a boarding house. Pay the first month's represent ahead of time. And then two weeks later skip the place and go and find another place. And she kept doing that for about a year, always being a couple of weeks ahead of the police.
>> Bill Benson: That must have been very costly.
>> Arye Ephrath: It was costly. As I said, my father being for a long time a bachelor and having a good job, not that he was rich but he was well off. And so they spent quite a bit where they could to survive. And that's what they had to do.
>> Bill Benson: So while she's doing that, you're in this orphanage. And tell us about what you know about life there. She was a very, very strict person who ran that.
>> Arye Ephrath: The lady, the doctor who ran the orphanage, her name was Dr. Agnes Parcer. She was an older lady who never married. Never had children. And she had never heard of Dr. Spock or Dr. Spock's book.
[Laughter]
>> Arye Ephrath: About how to raise children. She actually ran that orphanage more like a military unit. The best food for kids according to her was spinach. And if you didn't like

spinach at lunch, you would see it again at dinner. And so that -- I was not really used to this kind of life, but that's what we had.
One of her rules was that relatives of her -- of the orphans who lived there, the relatives cannot come and visit them because whenever the relative would leave at the end of the visit, the orphans would cry and be sad, so better not to have the visit at all. And so she forbade my mother from coming and visiting me as well. Which my mother couldn't stand, so she would -- there was a park right next to the apartment building where Dr. Parcer and her orphanage was. And so my mother would come and sit on the bench of that little park and hope to catch a glimpse of her son through the window or the terrace when I was playing with the other kids.
Many, many, many years later, my mother and I happened to be in Budapest together on a trip, and so we made a point of going back to the same park and sitting on the same bench and enjoying each other's company without having to look at me through the window.
>> Bill Benson: Arye, as things became worse and worse for Jews in both Czechoslovakia and Hungary, your parents, your father and your -- your parents decided they needed to find a place for the three of you to go to where you could hopefully be safe. And as a result they along with another family moved to this small village in western Slovakia. Tell us about that.
>> Arye Ephrath: About a year after that, after being a year in Hungary, I was already a little bit over 2 years old at the time. And my father decided that his certificate probably is not going to get renewed, and so he would not be safe anymore. The Hungarian Jews were also being decimated by the Nazis. And so they decided -- my parents came to the conclusion that they cannot sustain the current situation. And what they need to do is hide together, hide somewhere.
My father did some research, and I have no idea how he did that research because that was long before the days of Google and the Internet. He found out that there was a village in western Slovakia named Sisov that never had any Jews living in it. Now that is a rare find in Europe. By that time, Jews had lived in Europe for well over 1,000 years. And even though there were not always many of them, there were always some Jews in almost any place one went. So finding a village in which there were no Jews ever was really an extraordinary thing.
And he decided that that would be a good place for them to hide because the Germans or the Nazis would not look for the Jews in a place well known not to ever have any Jews. And so my mother and I came back from Hungary. My mother and my father and I and my father's best friend and his wife and their child all set out to go to Sisov.
>> Bill Benson: And the reason the friend went along was because --
>> Arye Ephrath: The friend, he had been my father's best friend since childhood. And he said that somehow my father was born under a lucky star. That he was very lucky. And if there is one Jew in Europe who's going to survive this catastrophe, this Holocaust, my father would be the one, and he wanted to be right next to him. And so he said wherever my father goes, he goes with him.
And so they went, two couples, two children. The other couple had a boy a year older than me. His name was Victor. We called him Vicky. And we all set out for Sisov. When they arrived in Sisov, not knowing anybody there, they headed directly to the local

church and confronted the priest and said, we are Jews. We are on the run. We are looking for a place to hide. Would you help us?
Now it's difficult for us today to even imagine what kind of a risk that they put themselves in and what kind of a risk, in fact, they put that priest in. Because hiding or abetting Jews was an offense for which people got shot on the spot. If that priest would say I don't need you here or if that priest would notify the authorities about them, they would be dead. And if he didn't, and if he was found out, then he would be dead. So he was taking an enormous risk. They were taking an enormous risk.
The priest thought about it, and he said I will hide the adults, the four adults. I will find you a place in the church to hide you. But I cannot take the risk of taking children. That's too risky. You will have to find other arrangements for the children. And so there they were, at the church, thinking about what to do with the two boys.
And as they are looking around, they see that outside of the village, the village is surrounded by hills. And on top of the nearby hill is a single home, a single house. And asked the priest, whose house is that? And the priest tells them that this -- the villagers make their living mostly by raising goats and sheep. And instead of each villager or each household taking care of their own goats and sheeps, they have decided to appoint one person to be the shepherd of the village and to keep everybody's sheep, take them out for grazing, cut their wool in the spring and so on. And they built him a house downwind from the village because sheep stink quite badly. Downwind from the village , outside the village, they built him a house and that's the house that they were seeing on the hill. And my father said, that sounds like a perfect hiding place.
So they trudged up the hill to the shepherd's house. His name was Jan Mierni. And his wife was Irena. They had four daughters. Their oldest one was probably 12. And they said to him, we are Jews. We are hiding. We have a place to hide, but we cannot take the children. Would you be willing to take care of those children?
Now this is -- we are now in 1944. In the fall of 1944. The Allies had already landed in Normandy in June of 1944. Everybody was thinking the war is going to come to an end pretty soon. The BBC keeps broadcasting, hold fast. We are coming. It won't take long. So they thought this was a matter of a few weeks maybe before the war is over and Germany is defeated.
So Jan Mierni agreed to take us. My parents agreed to pay him to take us. And they all thought that this was going to be a matter of a few weeks, maybe a couple of months, and all would be well after that. Jan had a couple of conditions, however, before he would agree to take care of us. And his one condition was that since he has four daughters and everybody in the village knows him and knows that he has four daughters, seeing little boys running around in his backyard would raise suspicion. And so he wanted my parents to agree and the other couple to agree that they would dress us as girls and make us into girls and we will be girls as long as we stay with them. And my parents agreed. And the other couple agreed. And I agreed. Vicky didn't agree. Vicky was a year older than I was. And he already had his boyish identity about him. And he would not hear of it. And so he remained a boy, and he was not allowed outside of the house during daylight hours. I on the other hand became a girl. My name was Anna. And because I was a little girl, I was named Annicka. And I was free to come and go as I pleased. I had my chores of feeding and petting the sheep and the goats. That's where I stayed.

>> Bill Benson: He had another condition, right?
>> Arye Ephrath: The other condition that Jan had was because he only had girls, and he wanted to have a boy, he said, should the worst happen and should my parents not survive the war, he wanted them to sign that he would have then the right to adopt me as his own child. And my parents didn't have much of a choice in the matter, and they signed that declaration. Afterwards, when all was said and done, my father says to my mother, you know, what have we done? We have just given this man the perfect motivation to turn us in.
So they decided not to tell him where they were hiding so that he would not be tempted or he would not be able to turn them in. They never told him they hid in the church. After the war -- this is a side bar story. After the war when all became calm again, they apologized to him for keeping him in the dark and said, you know, it's not just a matter that we didn't trust you, but we didn't want to tempt you and we didn't -- we just didn't want to tell you where we were. And he said, it doesn't matter. I knew exactly where you were. And they said, how did you know?
And it turns out that my mother being the Jewish mother that she was could not stand not seeing her boy for a long time, and so every other week or so she would sneak out of their hiding place and come at night to visit me. And she was deathly afraid of the dark. She was deathly afraid of dogs. And she was deathly afraid of the Nazis. And yet every other week, she would walk in the dark through the forest with all the dogs in the village barking to come and see me. This was the winter of 1944. And Jan said one time after she came to visit, I followed her footsteps in the snow and I saw exactly where she went. So I knew where you were.
>> Bill Benson: Arye, our time is running short, and we certainly want to hear about your parents and their hiding place and a little more about the Miernis but about your parents. At first the priest put them in the bell tower.
>> Arye Ephrath: The priest put them up in the bell tower. There was a little room, sort of an attic, above the church right next to the bell tower. And they -- and that's where they were. They were supposed to be very quiet during the daytime. In the evening the priest would come up there to bring them food and fresh water and take down the bucket that they used as a bathroom. And they stayed there for a couple of weeks. A few weeks. They began to worry a little bit because the winter was coming. The winters in Europe are very, very harsh. Winter was coming. And the bell tower of course is open to the elements. But for the time being, they were OK, so they were happy with where they were.
And until one night after the priest came and brought food and water and then left, and they were preparing to go to sleep when they heard strange steps coming up the ladder to the bell tower. Which of course scared the daylights out of them. A strange man they didn't know showed up on the ladder. And he said, just like I thought. There are Jews hiding here. Well, they had a conversation. And it turns out that the priest was the most respected man, of course, in the village. And the village provided him transportation. What kind of transportation? A two-wheeled cart and a horse to carry him around the village. And with the two-wheeled cart and the horse came a person to drive the cart and to take care of the horse. This was this person. He was the priest's chauffeur, so to speak.

And his name also was Jan. Jan is like John in English. His name was Jan Galko. And he said to my parents and to the other couple, there is a rumor in the village that there are Jews hiding in the church. And the rumor says that the Germans have heard it and tomorrow a German patrol is supposed to come and search the church. And if I were you, my advice to you is not to be here. Well, they don't know who he is. They don't know if he's telling them the truth. They don't know if it's a trap. But they don't have much of a choice.
They said, what would you suggest we do? And he says, you come to my house. And then again, when you are hiding in a war, you don't have much of a choice. They came to his house. This is the middle of the night. They came to his house, and it turns out that he and his wife and four children lived in a very, very small one-room house, hut to be more precise, which the one room was basically the living room and where the stove was, the coal stove that was the kitchen, and in the corner were the mattresses on the floor that was the bedroom. And that was their house. And it was very clear that this family, two adults, four children, were having a hard time feeding themselves. Never mind bringing in four more adults to hide.
So they look around and they discuss this. And my parents say to him, you know, we really appreciate your offer of your house to hide us, but we can see that this is not going to work. We have managed somehow until now. We'll manage to find a solution. Thank you very much. We'll find something to save us. And they turned to leave.
And Jan's wife, her name was Pavilla Galko, she burst into tears. And my father thinks maybe he had offended her in some way by telling her that the house is not adequate. He apologizes. I'm sorry. What is it that I said that caused you to cry? And she said, all my life, I have been a good Catholic. I have done what I thought Jesus would want me to do. And now I have the opportunity here to save four lives. And you want to leave. And they said, you know, we cannot do that. So they stayed there.
They stayed there. The next morning Jan, behind his house, had in his yard a big pile of hay for the horse. So he and his son dug a hole, a shallow ditch in the ground, under the hay, covered it with some lumber, and my parents and the other couple were to hide in that hole under the haystack with strict orders not to make themselves seen during the day, during daylight, at all.
Now again it's difficult for us today to realize the risk -- this is a small house, small yard, right next to another house on one side and another house on the other side. There were neighbors living there. If anybody is found hiding Jews, I already said they are to be shot on the spot. And it's not only them. The Germans, the Nazi custom, was that if Jews are found hiding, it's not only the people who hide them who get killed, get murdered, it's their neighbors as well. And many villages in Europe were burned to the ground and their inhabitants shot because one Jew was found hiding in the village.
And so it was of utmost importance that nobody should be able to see or know that there are four adults living in this hole in the ground under the hay. My parents spent the next eight months --
>> Bill Benson: Not the two weeks or the couple of months.
>> Arye Ephrath: Not the two weeks or a couple of months that everybody thought. My parents spent the next eight months in the ground, under the hay. After dark, they could come out to a bathroom break and to stretch and to eat and then go back. They lay next to each other like sardines in a can. My mother told me they actually found it the most

convenient way to do it was head to foot, head to foot. And when one of them needed to turn around, everybody needed to turn around. And that's the way they spent the next eight months until April of 1945, when Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Red Army. And it so happens that I was born was the day of the first transport from Bardejov. And Czechoslovakia was liberated on April 7, 1945, my third birthday. So my birthday has some significance to it.
>> Bill Benson: It sure does. Arye, there is so much that you were not able to tell us that you had to skip over. And much less to be able to tell us what happened after that. But just if I can for a moment, there is so much you could tell about your time with the Miernis. For example, he was, as you said, astute enough to know that it's possible that the Germans would come. He would be searched. So he had a plan. And very quickly tell us what his plan was.
>> Arye Ephrath: Jan Mierni, the shepherd, was worried that who knows who might show up at the door at any moment. So every -- periodically we would practice a procedure that he would clap his hands and yell in Slovakian a word that means "now," and Vicky and I would have to jump into the coal bin, right next to the coal stove, was the bin where the coal was being held. We had to jump into the coal bin and close the cover over us and stay there quiet as mice until he gave us the all clear. And I was, as I said, 2, 3 years old at the time. So I -- my memories of those times are very dim. However, the memory of having to jump into the coal bin and stay there in the dark, the coal doesn't smell good. The coal is very dusty. You come out covered with dust. I was a very fastiduous little girl. And it bothered me a lot. So I remember that.
>> Bill Benson: It was terrifying for you.
>> Arye Ephrath: Yes. And I remember the coal bin very, very well to this day.
>> Bill Benson: I think the last question I can ask you today because of time, tell us what you were able to do for the Miernis and for the Galkos long after the war.
>> Arye Ephrath: To this day -- and I told Bill that privately. To this day I marvel and admire the courage, the decency, and the humanity that the Galkos and the Miernis exhibited in this whole episode. These are strange people coming to your door, saying to you, I am in peril of my life. Please help me. And the risk of your own. And I don't know what I or any one of us, we don't know what we would do in a similar situation. But I must admire what they have done.
There is an international organization named Yad Vashem, which in Hebrew means a memorial which commemorates people who helped save the victims of World War II, the Holocaust. That organization bestows on some people the title of the Righteous Among the Nations. Which is a big deal to those people. So after the war, a few years after the war, my younger brother and I, more him than I, worked on collecting documentation and photographs and eyewitness interviews and so on, and we nominated those four people to become -- to be named the Righteous Among the Nations. And they were.
And if you visit the Museum, if you go downstairs, there is a list of all of the people who have been named Righteous. And you'll find the Galkos and the Miernis among them. My whole family and my brother's family, we all went to Europe when the Israeli Ambassador held the ceremony. By that time Jan Mierni had passed away, but Irena Mierni was around and received the honor in his name as well. And of course they deserved it.

>> Bill Benson: I want to thank all of you for being here with us. We didn't have a chance for you to ask Arye questions. But when Arye is finished, and I'm going to turn back to him in a moment to conclude our program, Arye will stay behind on the stage and we invite all of you, any of you, to please come up on the stage to meet him if you want, ask a question if you'd like, to get a photograph taken with him if you'd like to do that. We'd just ask if you do that you come up the stairs and go back down the stairs if you don't mind. But we really welcome that very, very much. Arye was able to speak about, you know, his father and what he thought of him and if he'd had more time, I know he would have talked about how incredibly brave your mother was as well. Please come back another time. All of our programs will be on the Museum's YouTube channel and will continue through August 8. And our programs next week will also be live-streamed like today's.

It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. So on that note, I'd like to turn to Arye to close today's program.

>> Arye Ephrath: Thank you. Thank you, Bill. The sages of ancient Israel said once that whoever saves one life, it is as if he or she had saved a world of lives. And if you wonder how does this math work, the fact that the Miernis and the Galkos saved my parents and the other couple, not only saved our lives but it made it possible for my younger brother to be born.. It made it possible for Vicky's younger sister, Esther, to be born. And my brother has three kids of his own and another grandchild on the way. Vicky's sister Esther, her son is a medical scientist who has improved or saved the lives of perhaps hundreds of people. And so it goes. So the deeds that the Miernis and the Galkos did, the courage that they showed, was not just for the moment but it would continue to bear fruit for generations to come.

We all face very hard decisions in difficult times. And when we do, it is worthwhile to remember one of the mottos of this Museum, which is what you do matters. And remember, what you do does matter. Thank you.