

Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person

Agi Geva

Thursday, June 6, 2019

10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Remote CART Captioning

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioning is provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.

This transcript is being provided in rough-draft format.

HOME TEAM
CAPTIONS

www.captionfamily.com

>> Ladies and gentlemen, the program will begin in a moment. Please take that moment to silence your cell phones. Thank you.

Patricia Heberer Rice: Good Morning and welcome to First Person. My name is Patricia Heberer Rice, and I'm director of the Senior Historian's Office here at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Today, as many of you may be aware, is the 75th anniversary of D-Day, the Allied invasion of Normandy on the French mainland which laid the foundations of the Allied victory on the Western Front during World War II. Before the invasion, the Soviet Red Army carried on the bulk of the Allied fighting in Europe. Western Allied troops only gained a footing on the European continent with the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. But it was the Allied landing in northern France that would anchor Allied victory over the Nazis.

The invasion, code-named Operation Overlord, began in the midnight hours of 6 June 1944 with aerial and naval bombardment of French coast and an aerial assault carrying in 24,000 Allied troops by parachute. The amphibious landing of infantry and artillery troops on the Normandy beaches began at 6:30 that morning. Nearly 160,000 troops crossed the English Channel on D-Day, storming the Normandy beaches code-named Omaha, Utah, Gold, Juno, and Sword. Names familiar to us from that day. The Normandy landings were the largest seaborne invasion in history, with nearly 5,000 landing and assault craft, 289 escort vessels, and 277 minesweepers participating. That first day was difficult and dangerous, as the assault forces faced choppy seas and inclement weather, and beaches sewn with landmines and anti-tank obstacles. Allied casualties on the first day were at least 10,000, with 4,414 confirmed dead, compared to German losses at 1,000, and did not accomplish initial objectives like the capture of Caen, which fell to Allied hands only in late July. But the ultimate objective of D-Day was the opening of a Second front on the European continent with western Allied troops. Paris was liberated.

Yet, while the troops were advancing from the west, the Nazis and their collaborators were deporting Jews from Western Europe and Hungary to the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center. By D-Day, 5 million Jews had already been murdered. By the following year, Allied forces from east and west had liberated Europe from Nazi rule. On April 25,

1945, Soviet and American troops met at the Elbe River, near Torgau in Germany. That sealed the Allied victory. German surrender came on 8 May 1945.

And those same brave soldiers that defeated Germany encountered and freed its concentration camps and killing centers, liberating hundreds of thousands of prisoners, the victims, and survivors, of Nazi persecution. Today we remember these brave men and women.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our host Bill Benson.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Patricia, thank you so much for that very important and profound information that you have just shared with us about D-Day 75 years ago.

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 Mrs. Agi Geva, 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 Holocaust survivors who volunteer at our Museum and who share their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust.

If time allows, following our conversation, you will have an opportunity to ask Agi a few questions. If we do not get to your question, you can ask one and tag the Museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy. Today's program will be livestreamed on the Museum's website and on Facebook. A recording of this program will be made available on the Museum's YouTube page.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Agi's introduction. Agi was born Agnes Laszlo on June 2, 1930 in Budapest, Hungary. She was one of two daughters of Rosalia and Zoltan Laszlo. Agi and her sister, Zsuzsi, spent the first six years of their lives in a small village where their father managed a large farm. Due to her father's failing health and anti-Semitic legislation prohibiting Jews from working in the Agricultural business, the family moved to Miskolc where Agi's mother managed a boarding house.

Here we see the house that was Agi's home. Here we see her parents. On March 19, 1944, the same day that German forces occupied Hungary, Agi's father died. Agi, her sister, and mother joined a group of 30 Jews sent to work in the fields outside the town. After a month they returned to Miskolc where they lived in the Ghetto for a few weeks before being confined to a brick factory on the outskirts of town. The following month the family was deported to Auschwitz.

This map shows the locations of the ghettos in Hungary, including Miskolc and the direction of the deportations to Auschwitz. As Patricia noted, while the Allies were landing in Normandy, the Germans were intensifying deportation of Jews to Auschwitz to murder them. Later Agi, her mother and sister were interned at the Plaszow concentration camp. The arrow on this map points to Plaszow.

When the Soviet army approached Plaszow in the fall, the three women were sent back to Auschwitz for a few weeks, then were moved to several labor camps. On April 28, 1945, Agi was liberated from a forced march by American soldiers in Garmisch.

This photograph of Agi is from 1950 after she immigrated to Israel. Agi resides in the Washington, D.C., area. She moved to the United States 17 years ago after living in Israel since 1949, where she worked in the insurance field for 32 years. She has two children, four grandchildren, and four great grandchildren. Agi speaks Hebrew, Hungarian, German, and English. She has translated many documents for this Museum. Agi currently volunteers most Sundays here at the Museum where she meets with our visitors and shares her history.

Agi speaks frequently about her experience during the Holocaust at high schools, universities, as well as military installations. Agi is also a contributor to the Museum's publication, "Echoes of Memory," which features writings by survivors. After today's program, Agi will be available to sign copies of "Echoes of Memory," which is also available in the Museum's bookstore.

I'm happy to let you know that Agi's daughter Dorit and their good friend Naomi are here with Agi today. With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Agi Geva. Agi, please join us.

Agi, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person today. Thank you very much for being here and on this particular day, in commemoration of the invasion at Normandy. We have a very short time. You have so much to share with us. So we'll get started right away.

World War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland September 1, 1939. But before we turn to the war and the Holocaust, tell us first about your family, your community, and your early years of life before World War II began.

>> Agi Geva: My earliest memories are on the farm where I lived my first six years. It was a very pleasant place. We had lots of cousins. I had my parents there. Father had nine siblings. My mother had eight siblings. So we had lots of cousins. They came to vacation at our house on the farm. And we had a really nice quiet childhood. Even though the war was happening in other places. We had no television of course, and we did not have a radio so we were not very informed. Maybe they took advantage of it.

>> Bill Benson: Agi, you shared with me that before the war began, you were full of patriotism towards Hungary. Will you say a little bit about that?

>> Agi Geva: Well, it was the school system also. I read a lot of history about Hungary, and I started to write poetry about patriotism to Hungary, but very strictly had to be for government.

>> Bill Benson: What caused your family to move to Miskolc? And once they were there, what did your family do? Why did you move to Miskolc?

>> Agi Geva: We had to move because my father was fired from his job in 1936. And it was really unexpected, unbelievable situation. He never, ever recovered from it. So my mother understood that she had to take over and take care of the family. So we moved to Miskolc to this boarding house that she opened. And it was a business.

>> Bill Benson: Agi, of course, with the war beginning September 1, 1939, the full impact of the war itself didn't really come to your community for several years, in fact, until the Nazis occupied your town in 1944. Tell us about that time between the start of the war in 1939 and before the Germans came in early 1944. That was a long period of time. What was that for you and your family.

>> Agi Geva: There were rumors of course that something might be happening. But my parents were using a sentence that we so often hear now, to us this will not happen.

And they really believed that it won't. But we could have escaped, but where to? And to leave behind the families and siblings of my parents and the business and everything, they just couldn't find the strength to leave them. It was not logical even.

>> Bill Benson: With such a large extended family, did any of your family members leave Hungary during that time?

>> Agi Geva: Actually during that time, one cousin came to Israel very early, I think, in 1936. And she was the only one.

>> Bill Benson: The only one.

>> Agi Geva: But the rest of the family was saved because we were living in Miskolc. Only my parents and my sister and me. But all of the other family members were in Budapest. And that was almost the end that the Nazis came into Budapest. So almost everyone was saved.

>> Bill Benson: You were a little girl during that time. Yet at some point you became aware of anti-Semitism. Do you remember when you first became aware of anti-Semitism in your life?

>> Agi Geva: There was an incident that I didn't even tell my parents. I don't know what was my reason not to. Maybe I was afraid they wouldn't let me go to school again. I was coming home from school. I had my backpack on. The pack was on my back. And there was a boy who said I was a Jew who threw some stones at me. And the stones hit the pack. Hit my bag. And somehow it was very, very disturbing.

>> Bill Benson: You didn't tell your parents about it?

>> Agi Geva: No.

>> Bill Benson: Were you able to continue schooling during those years? Were you able to go to school up until the time the Nazis came?

>> Agi Geva: Yes, until the last day. In 1944, the 19th of March. My dad died. He actually didn't know what had happened. He was unconscious the last few days. And when we came back from the funeral, already there were German soldiers with guns.

>> Bill Benson: So that date, March 19, 1944, the day your father died, is when the Nazis occupied Hungary.

>> Agi Geva: Yes. It was a bad situation.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us more about that day and then what followed in the few days after that as you recall.

>> Agi Geva: Instantly there were new rules. For instance, the yellow star. We couldn't leave the street or go anywhere without it on our blouses. Jewish teenagers were not supposed to own a bicycle. We had to take our bicycles to the municipality and turn it in. It was really something that was very surprising. We were not supposed to walk on the street. That was a normal situation here. And my mother tried to save us by -- the workers in the field, they were very needy. Some friends. We worked in the fields for a couple of days actually. But we were supposed to swear loyalty to Hungary, and we did. The reason was we shouldn't be deported. But then the rules changed, and they brought us back and put us in the ghettos.

>> Bill Benson: Initially they said if you swear loyalty, you won't be deported?

>> Agi Geva: Yeah, that we won't be deported.

>> Bill Benson: If I remember right, at some point your mother tried to save you by sending you to another village.

>> Agi Geva: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Will you share that with us?

>> Agi Geva: She sent us to a non-Jewish lady who we knew. And she offered to help us. But the reality, actually it was very difficult. And she stopped going out of the house or going near the window. And we were still in mourning. My father just died, and we didn't like to be there and begged my mother to take us back home.

>> Bill Benson: And to go there was very dangerous. You took off your yellow stars. So you were traveling. And had you been stopped --

>> Agi Geva: It was a risk to walk without the yellow star. It was a decision, my mother said. And it was very scary on the train because the Nazis and the Hungarian gendarmes were asking for papers. Documents, looking at people, and deciding on the spot who can continue on the train and who they are going to take off the train. And what happened to those who were taken off, we tried not to think about it. And then I was so scared on the train I didn't even know what I was so scared of. I just saw people taken off and taken away. Led away by police and the Nazis. Somehow we were so lucky. And I don't know. We arrived safely back. We were not disturbed.

>> Bill Benson: Then as you were telling us you went to a farm to work with a small group of others from your community. When you returned to Miskolc, tell us about going to Miskolc. You were, I think, taken back there by the police.

>> Agi Geva: We were. And it was the 2nd of June. There was bombarding. And we were supposed to lie low in the fields. And we were taken to another small village where they separated us from the men. And then we were questioned. Did we have any jewelry or money or documents and whatever the Nazis wanted to have. They were beaten badly. We were so desperate. But it's really indescribable.

>> Bill Benson: And that day was your birthday, wasn't it, June 2?

>> Agi Geva: Yes. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: In the middle of June, several weeks -- less than two weeks later, you and your family and many other Jews were taken to a brick factory for deportation to Auschwitz. Tell us about that and what happened to you and your family when you were taken there. And just to add to what Patricia said at the opening, while that was happening, the Allies are landing, but the Germans are intensifying their efforts. In fact, if I remember correctly, over about a six-week span, more than 400,000 Jews from Hungary were deported to Auschwitz, which staggers the imagination. And there you were. Tell us what happened.

>> Agi Geva: We didn't know actually what was the importance. And in that same month, a lot had already taken place. And how quickly the Germans so quickly and so organized, they were so organized to deport quickly the Hungarian Jews. They took us to this big factory. And that was only one of the hundreds of stations where they -- the Jewish people had to get up on the trains. I don't know how to call them. And that was the first stop. I thought that the ghetto was worse. But when I looked around, we had nowhere to sit, nowhere to sleep, and I thought that was terrible. But the train cars were much worse, and they pushed as many people in as they could. And we had no idea.

>> Bill Benson: Agi, before you tell us more about that, let me ask you another question. While you were in the brick factory, I believe, one of your friends actually escaped from there.

>> Agi Geva: Some neighbor told my mom, take the girls and just walk out. There is no sides. Only the roof. And it could have been done. But she was so scared, my mother,

that one of us will be taken a different way or discovered or -- she just wasn't up to it. She just couldn't do it. So she decided to stay. After she saw what was happening and when the doors opened in Auschwitz actually, after the 3 1/2 days journey, we were so dazed. And somehow we kept hearing some guards telling us -- how lucky can I be? And I was lucky. Because the idea was -- the real question was that nobody died in our wagon. I don't know how those people really lived. Nobody died in our wagon. So we were lucky. And we were supposed to be lucky.

>> Bill Benson: So after 3 1/2 days, you arrive at Auschwitz. Tell us about that.

>> Agi Geva: Well, there were different people. There were babies, teenagers, tradesmen, old people, sick people. Some teenagers started to scream. They didn't know what's going to happen. What's going on. They couldn't stop. Babies started to cry. Couldn't stop crying. People fainted. People were hungry, thirsty, hot. It was really a situation that is hard to describe. So when we arrived and suddenly the doors opened, and we saw where we were, we did not know where we were.

So this time my mother thought she is not taking any chances. She just goes to the front. She goes to the front and get information, what's happening. And what was happening is that there were three or four Nazis selecting. They were selecting left for some people and right for other people. And my mother was watching what happened. And then we were told that everyone under 16 will be sent to the left side.

All that my mother wanted to be sure of is that we looked the same, more or less. So she told us -- she came back slowly and got between the lines at some point. But she got back to us. And then she told us don't tell anyone that you are sisters or don't tell that I am your mother because the Nazis immediately would separate family, family members. That was one of the things. And you can't say that you are 13. My sister was 13. I was 14. We couldn't say our age because we might not look it.

So she told me take out your scarf and put it on your head in a way that you should look older. And it was done like this. Even now I look older.

[Laughter]

So it worked. And she did hers so that she would look younger.

>> Bill Benson: It was brilliant on her part. Brilliant.

>> Agi Geva: So we were sent to the same side, all three of us. Now our happiness didn't last very long, of course, because there were more selections and more humiliations that were indescribable. I can't even tell you exactly how horrible things were that were happening that day.

>> Bill Benson: Do you mind telling us about your friend Edith?

>> Agi Geva: There were only two Jewish girls in the classroom at my school, and somehow we became to be really good friends. Very good friends. And then we were in the brick factory, and we kept together, her mother and us. But then when we arrived, her mother was sent to the left. Edith stayed with us. And my mom kept on telling her, stay. Please stay with us. I'll look after you as I'm looking after my own girls. But when the next day, the trucks came. They picked up every girl under 16. They wanted to be sure that there wouldn't be any. So the trucks were there to take us they said maybe to a better place, better food, better treatment. So many girls really started to go. And Edith started to go. And my mother called her back, please stay with me. I will help you and I will look after you. And she said I might see my mom. I want to be taken to where my mother is. And that cost her her life. I never saw her anymore.

>> Bill Benson: As you were telling us, Agi, incredibly you, your mother, and sister were still together, and you were selected for labor. And you were sent to a place called Plaszow. What was Plaszow? What did you do there?

>> Agi Geva: Plaszow was a horrible place. But it was a place where machine parts were made. It was different later. We had to carry big rocks up a hill one day. And the next day you had to carry them back. So it was also humiliating and frustrating.

>> Bill Benson: You carried a rock up and carried it back down?

>> Agi Geva: The next day.

>> Bill Benson: And then you had to also then later break up some of the rocks and put them in the ground?

>> Agi Geva: Yes. Had to dig them up and put them -- we were making a road actually.

>> Bill Benson: And you shared with me that some of the inmate population at Plaszow besides Jews who had been deported were serious criminals there.

>> Agi Geva: And they opened the prisons. All the murderers and robbers were there with us and other things. Those criminals were sent to Plaszow. So we were not only scared of the Nazis and the -- but we were also scared of our fellow prisoners.

>> Bill Benson: At Plaszow you said there was a point where you thought you were actually about to be liberated.

>> Agi Geva: We heard shots one day. And my mother immediately saw a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel. And said, OK, maybe the Russians are coming to liberate us, and all of this will end. But the Germans were there also. They heard it. So they evacuated the camps and took us back to the railroad station. And we were really, really very desperate. And we were sick. And we were weak and we were hungry and we were thirsty. It was a very, very hard trip.

>> Bill Benson: And they took you back to Auschwitz where you faced more selections.

>> Agi Geva: Auschwitz was always the first selection. And that was Mengele. I don't even say that he was a doctor, Dr. Mengele. He was the Angel of Death because he was the worst human being actually. I heard. I can't tell you what I didn't see. But he was the man who was selecting that day. And very quickly he had behind him soldiers with guns. And he was standing in the middle. And he told us when we got off the train, left, right, left, right. But we were already used to it, and not really knowing what was happening.

But when my mother found out what was happening she asked all her friends and all of the grownups around to listen to her not to let me know what is happening. She was knowing that there were shootings and killings and whatever. I can't even pronounce it. I will not be able to cope with it. And she was careful that I shouldn't know. And I was naive enough not to know. I found out the first time in Germany from the radio, that's when I heard what was happening in Auschwitz. And I was there two months ago, maybe six weeks ago and didn't know.

But then on the other hand Mengele was selecting us, and my mother was really bothered because we looked sick, bad. She would go first. My sister after her. And I would be the last. But then she said if it's a possibility we would be staying there and the other possibility is working camps. So there is a possibility for the working camps. So my mother was sent to the right. My sister was sent to the right. I was sent to the left. So I spoke up. I thought, oh, no, no, no, please don't make me go to that side. He expected me, I suppose, to say that -- you know, because my family was on that side. But I was

praying for this already. So I told him because it was a work camp. And then he realized that I spoke in German.

Now I didn't mention in the beginning. When I was very small my father told us that there must be something we -- we should have something that can't be taken away from us. And he decided on languages. And he brought German and English tutors. So we spoke fluent German, my sister and I at that time. So when he heard me talking German, he was -- I don't know, impressed or what. But his feelings about it changed. He said, OK, go to the right.

>> Bill Benson: After he heard you speak in German.

>> Agi Geva: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that you have been asked many times by people, well, when you had that encounter with Mengele, were you afraid of him. And you had a -- give us your response.

>> Agi Geva: People say, what, you weren't afraid of Mengele? And I say, oh, no, I was afraid of my mother.

[Laughter]

Because she told me what to do.

>> Bill Benson: And speaking of your mother, after one of the -- on one of the trips in the cattle car, she was injured. And as a result of that, there's quite a remarkable incident that occurred.

>> Agi Geva: Someone decided to lift her up to the window of the cattle car and hurt her shoulder. And we were all the time -- the purpose is something that we don't even have now. They saw this on my mother, and they said, OK, she can leave. But not in the same barrack with us. She had to be in the quarantine barrack with other people. She was scared because the selection the next day might have sent us out of the camp, and she would have stayed there. So she arranged an exchange with another girl whose sister was in the barracks. So she was able -- that was a possibility to exchange. So she told the sister, you come here at 7:00 in the evening and I will go there. They had only numbers. They won't know. They have down 230 people, and that's all that matters. They found out that it was from the sick barracks. So we were standing outside the whole night asking people who joined the sick barracks. And they thought anybody can get sick. So nobody said and nobody would help. Nobody stood out. And today I have no idea what made them --

>> Bill Benson: You said to me that the other -- your other fellow prisoners there took -- tried to take care of you and look out for you because of your mother and you were a mother and two sisters. Your mother did many things to protect you. And one was that you wore glasses as a young girl, and she would take those off of you.

>> Agi Geva: She took off my glasses and folded them up and put it in the side of her shoe. First that they shouldn't find it, and second that I shouldn't look different because without the glasses I definitely wouldn't be sitting here today. And very few people really could cope with it without their glasses. That was one of the things that my mother did.

>> Bill Benson: And you were at Auschwitz, you also were tattooed while you were there, weren't you?

>> Agi Geva: When my mother saw the argument with Mengele -- well, not the argument but talking about it she fainted. She thought she would never, ever see me again. So when I joined her already, she didn't even know that I was there. But then

when she came to, we had our worst humiliation again. They tattooed on our arm the letter a for Auschwitz and the number. I want everybody to see the tattoo because my mother made us promise that we are not going to remove it. She told stories. Everybody can say whatever but this is proof of us being there. The letter a and the number.

>> Bill Benson: And you might get a chance to view it with Agi afterwards when you're signing copies of your book.

In late 1944 you were sent from Auschwitz for a last time for slave labor. Tell us -- you were is not to Rochlitz. Tell us what that was like.

>> Agi Geva: It was a learning camp. We were all there -- I mean, by all, I mean the camp Auschwitz got all of the workers or laborers for Germany. We went there for work. And we were asked -- well, not asked -- but sent and ordered 200 people, 180 Hungarians, 20 Polish to go to -- back to the trains.

>> Bill Benson: All women?

>> Agi Geva: All women. 180 Hungarian and 20 Polish. And we went to Rochlitz. And it was a camp where they taught us how to make parts for airplanes. And it was something that made me happier because it was work. I thought that now I am responsible. I am a human being, in spite of my being just a number as I was told. And we knew enough from being in the big factory, the real one --

>> Bill Benson: That was at Calw?

>> Agi Geva: Yes, near Stuttgart.

>> Bill Benson: What did you do at Calw? You were trained on how to make these parts. And that's what you did when you went to Calw?

>> Agi Geva: Yes. There was a big machine called [Speaking in German] And we worked from 7:00 in the evening until 7:00 in the morning. The hardest part was to stay awake during the whole night and early morning hours. We had these big machines that were humming, a monotonous sound. It was a fight to stay alive. But that's what we did.

>> Bill Benson: You must tell us what your mom did, though.

>> Agi Geva: OK. So we three, my sister and my mom, worked at a different machine. Not like mine. My sister had to check the sizes of a certain device, whether it's big enough or small enough. If it was small enough, it was thrown away. If it was big enough, it went to my mother's department where she had to follow her written instructions. And one day she was doing it, it exploded. And she got so scared that she fainted, again. And then she was taken to her quarters. And she had to be explained that this is a very, very delicate stone. You can't press a screw hard to it because then it will explode. And it's very hard to find a new one. And if the new one comes in, the crate, it goes off to the airplane factory. So she thought, oh, that's a good idea maybe. I can help the war a little bit. And she kept on doing it. She kept on pressing the screw to the stone. When the stone exploded.

>> Bill Benson: Because had they thought she was doing it deliberately that would have been the end of her?

>> Agi Geva: All three of us. So we didn't know. We didn't know. Only after the liberation. Many things we didn't know.

>> Bill Benson: Amazing.

>> Agi Geva: She was very careful about it. But that it should look really authentic. She called it mini sabotage.

>> Bill Benson: Mini sabotage.

Finally in February 1945, you are taken from Calw on a forced march, what we call a death march. Where did you think you were going? And what was that march like for you?

>> Agi Geva: What I was thinking, I can tell you only that I was not thinking. I don't think we could think anymore. It was impossible to stand in the doorway. And I thought we were waiting for some conditions to get better or something. Or a transport. No transport. Just walk out the door. Well, it was winter. It was Germany.

>> Bill Benson: And an especially harsh winter.

>> Agi Geva: Yes. And I didn't mention at the beginning one thing that we had just a piece of dress on us. And our shoes had been worn out and didn't even fit. We couldn't get scarves or shoes. So no scarves or socks or underwear. It was something that we didn't have. So we just had to walk out the door. And started walking. 400 kilometers. I don't remember how many weeks it took, but it was again only at night. Only at night so that the villagers shouldn't see us, that the population shouldn't see us. We were walking half asleep, half frozen, half dead.

I can't even tell you how in the mornings the guards, six guards, they looked for shelter for us to sleep, but who could sleep? And then in the evening standing again at the doors of this barn and walk out and they told us find yourself some food. And the food was raw potatoes, raw cabbage. Sometimes we would find it. And sometimes the villagers would give us something and the Germans took it away. Not every time but most of the time.

So I think when I told you that this was worse, and then that was worse, this was really, really the worst.

>> Bill Benson: When were you liberated?

>> Agi Geva: The date?

>> Bill Benson: Well, the circumstances.

>> Agi Geva: The circumstance was that we had to -- in the middle of the walk, we were told we can go to a railroad station. The trains will come and pick you up and we will continue by train. But the other girls who understood German, they sent the message through the whole group of people that the troops are not to go on the train. The troops are bringing weapons to execute us. So we didn't -- we couldn't figure out how it will be done. But when we arrived, anyhow, there was nothing on the train. No guns. I just saw some envelopes at the station. And it was said to be for the German officers, not to the soldiers, and later it turned out to be false papers, documents so that we can cross over to Switzerland.

>> Bill Benson: So the officers could cross over to Switzerland.

>> Agi Geva: And we were sent back to the forest. And I really want to tell you the worst. That was nothing that was worse. We were sent back to the forest and suddenly saw that there were no guards around us. We were just there in the forest.

>> Bill Benson: So you realized there's no guards.

>> Agi Geva: No.

>> Bill Benson: What did you do then?

>> Agi Geva: 180 Hungarians had 180 opinions. What to do or where to go. My mother realized what we shouldn't eat anything but should get out of danger. People were

eating too much and that was dangerous. But then my mother found some people, some women, who agreed which direction to go and to walk. We couldn't stay there. So we started out. And we heard voices. We got scared. But they were talking English. So again I was sent to see who they are, see who they were. They were American soldiers. That's the first time in my life that I saw Americans. And after they heard who we were, where we had come from and what was our situation, they liberated us actually and took us to their headquarters.

>> Bill Benson: Before they did that, though, didn't you put out like a surrender flag?

>> Agi Geva: Yeah. Somebody had dirty white underwear.

>> Bill Benson: White underwear.

>> Agi Geva: But we didn't have any underwear but it was something. And we had to lift it because we had no idea who was coming.

>> Bill Benson: So you have to tell us, though, once you were with the soldiers, they offered to get something for you.

>> Agi Geva: Yeah. They took us to their headquarters. They told us take off the curtains. They had medical people around to see who needs what, what condition we were in. And then they were even nice enough to tell us we are going shopping to town. And everybody can choose something. And they will buy it for us. So people wanted a piece of cake. Somebody else wanted just something warm to put on that we dreamt of the whole year. Some other people wanted chocolate bars. But I wanted lipstick.

[Laughter]

>> Agi Geva: I wasn't allowed to wear lipstick and my mother wouldn't have bought it for me. So I thought I'd use this time to get it.

>> Bill Benson: And they got it for you. And they got it for you.

So in the little time we have left, Agi, now you're liberated. You've been liberated. You have the U.S. soldiers taking care of you now. What did you and your mother and your sister do then?

>> Agi Geva: Yeah. It was -- it was a nice time. Not everybody at liberation had a nice time. Some people had it very, very hard. But we had a nice time. They took us to Innsbrook. There was a hotel for all the refugees. Not all but some. And we could choose. We could choose where to go. We could choose to come to the states, to Palestine, to Australia, wherever we wanted to. But, no, my mother wanted to go back to Hungary to find out who was alive. So nobody could persuade her. So we went back to Hungary.

>> Bill Benson: There's so much more that Agi can tell us from that point forward. Much less all that she skipped over. I know we could have sat here all afternoon. But I do want to --

>> Agi Geva: All week.

>> Bill Benson: All week. All week. Absolutely. No question about it. And we want to turn to our audience. But I have just two more questions for you, Agi. you already pretty much said this, but you said that you cannot really say how horrible things really were. Will you say a little bit more about that? And I think your sister had something to say about that.

>> Agi Geva: There was a 50-year silence at a certain time when people didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to know, didn't want to admit even what happened. They had to understand but that's how it was. And my mother and sister took it very much to heart.

Not to mention anything anymore about it. But I was so much interested but my mother thought of something or something would happen that I couldn't remember. I never got an answer. She would just move on. You were saved. Forget the rest. Don't ask questions.

And then when I started to talk in schools and for my granddaughter, who invited me the first time to talk in her classroom, I hear that it's impossible to tell it all. Impossible to tell the atrocities, the horrors of what was happening, and I will not be able to talk about it if I mention all of those indescribable things.

So I promised my -- my sister was very disappointed when she heard me talking the first time. She told me, you know that is not how it happened. And how don't you tell it all? So of course my answer was, you won't even tell this. And I realized that if I will not see movies or read books about the Holocaust and if I do not hear other people's stories that were worse maybe than mine, maybe not, I will not be able to continue talking. But what I tell you is what I can tell you. I can't tell about all of it.

>> Bill Benson: Agi, the other thing I know that because of the significance of June 6 for D-Day, June 6 is also important in Israel's history in 1967.

>> Agi Geva: That was the Six Day War we called it. And it was very dramatic. My kids were teenagers so they were not in the army yet. But every single Israeli did their part for this war. But it's very, very significant, the Six Day War. June 5 and 6.

>> Bill Benson: Should we take some questions from our audience? We're going to ask that -- we have time for a few questions. We ask that you go to one of the two microphones that are in the aisle. Please go to the microphone. Make your question as brief as you can and then I'll repeat it just to make sure that we hear your question. But first I think we have one from online.

>> Yes. We have a question from Facebook. Christine Suarez is really touched by your resilience. And she wants to know what or who helped you move forward after your experience during the Holocaust.

>> Bill Benson: She is so impressed with your resilience. She wants to know who or what helped you to be able to move forward with your life after the Holocaust.

>> Agi Geva: After or during?

>> Bill Benson: Well, during and after, yeah.

>> Agi Geva: During was my mother and sister. We lived a lot for each other. I don't think I would have been able to survive it without my mother or my sister. And for each other, we kept up the good faith. Basically that we were -- we were very careful not to be scared, not to be negative. We were so positive and optimistic during the whole time because of each other.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Agi. We'll go here and then I'll come over here, OK?

>> During this time, did you observe -- what kept your faith alive in regards to your Jewish tradition and spiritual lives during the Holocaust?

>> Bill Benson: What kept your faith alive?

>> Agi Geva: By being so lucky and by being selected together with my mother and sister. And by being with them. To be with family, I think, that was the most important.

>> Were there songs that you still sung during these times?

>> Agi Geva: Oh, yes. I suppose there was singing. But, yeah, religious songs or just songs?

>> Any songs.

>> Agi Geva: Well, in one of the books I write in particular about a woman, Lily, who sang opera arias to us on a regular basis. And for a few seconds, it was really, really meaningful.

>> Bill Benson: Did Lily survive?

>> Agi Geva: Yes, she survived and had kids and all.

>> Bill Benson: She did. OK. One more question.

>> Thank you so much for sharing your story. I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about -- and I know you said that you guys didn't watch TV. But how the media was used to change people's viewpoints back then and if you see it happening again today.

>> Bill Benson: Repeat that one more time.

>> How the media and propaganda was used and how if you feel that is happening today.

>> Bill Benson: The question is your thoughts about the use of propaganda and how propaganda was used. And if you feel like in the world today where we're seeing, you know, propaganda like we heard during World War II.

>> Agi Geva: Yeah, the propaganda was trying to say that the Holocaust never happened. That the Holocaust was just propaganda. And that's why I decided that I'm going to tell it to everybody who will listen. Because somehow I have a feeling that whoever hears my story will not be anti-Semite anymore and will not say anymore that this didn't happen.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you very much. Thank you. I'm going to turn to Agi to close our program in just a moment. Before I do, just first I'd like to thank you all for being with us. Remind you that we'll have First Person programs each Wednesday and Thursday until August 8. All of our programs will be up on the Museum's YouTube page. If you can't come back this year, you can see any of our programs on the YouTube page. We hope you'll take advantage of it.

When Agi is finished she's going to depart the stage to go upstairs where she will be available to sign copies of "Echoes of Memory." And that will also be an opportunity for you to talk with Agi and if you want to see the tattoo then you're going to show it to them once Agi is up there. It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person gets the last word. And so on that note, I'm going to turn to Agi to close today's program.

>> Agi Geva: OK. So first of all, thank you for being so quiet and letting me speak. Secondly I find it important if I can say so for everybody to know at least one more language. You will never be out of a job if you have one more language. If you know it very well. Discipline in a way that I wouldn't see at school because to welcome work, to look up to someone and follow that someone's feelings and instructions like I did with my mother and my sister and I -- I wouldn't have been able to do it differently. And thanks for being interested. Really thank you.