Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
George Pick
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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. This is our 20th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mr. George Pick, 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 Information about each of our upcoming First Person guests is available through the museum's website at www.ushmm.org, George 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 George 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. 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 George is one individual’s account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. George Pick, or Gyorgy in Hungarian, was born on March 28, 1934 in Budapest, Hungary, to Istvan and Margit Pick. Istvan was an engineer and Margit was a legal secretary. Pictured are Istvan and Margit with their newborn son, Gyorgy.
Here we see George on a seesaw in the playground of his preschool, and a Mother's Day card that George made when he was in first grade. George attended school in Budapest until the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944.After Hungary allied itself with Nazi Germany, Istvan and Margit lost their jobs due to new anti-Jewish laws. Istvan

was then conscripted into the Hungarian labor battalions. Once Germany occupied Hungary in March 1944, George, his mother, and grandmother, along with other Jews in Budapest, were forced to move into buildings marked with a yellow star like the one seen here in the photo. The housing was overcrowded and food was scarce.
Fearing deportation, the family went into hiding in a factory in the fall of 1944.In December, those hiding in the factory were discovered by Hungarian soldiers. After bribing the soldiers, the children, including George, were placed in a Swiss Red Cross orphanage with 500 other children. George and another boy ran away from the orphanage and went back to their hiding place where George was reunited with his parents. Two weeks later the entire family was sent to the Budapest ghetto.
They were liberated from the ghetto by the Soviets in January 1945. In this photograph from 1946, George, who is circled, is seen with a group of survivors, all of whom the Pick family had been with in hiding.
Following the war, George lived in Hungary, where he earned a degree in engineering, until late 1956 when he escaped from Hungary and made his way to the United States to live with his uncle in New Jersey. After working as a laborer George got a scholarship for an intensive English language course at Temple University in Philadelphia. He then went to work for Westinghouse as an engineer. George then taught engineering at the Catholic University of America here in the District of Columbia. After earning his Ph.D., he worked for the U.S. Navy as an aerospace engineer from 1966-1995, retiring from federal service as a Technical Director at Navy Headquarters in Crystal City, Virginia.
While George continues to do consulting work, a great deal of his time is spent writing. He recently completed his autobiography and is currently looking for a publisher. He previously worked on a history of 40 Jewish communities in a particular region of Hungary. George and his wife, Leticia Flores Pick, who retired from the Mexican Foreign Service, live in Arlington, Virginia. George performs several roles as a volunteer here at the museum.
He speaks frequently, especially at local high schools and universities, for the Speakers Bureau. He has also spoken at such places as the National Defense University and the Department of Defense's Office of Inspector General. George also works for our Education Department and Visitor Services. You will find George here every other Sunday where he works with the museum's Movie Series.
George also is a professor at the Encore Learning Center of George Mason University in Virginia where he just completed an eight-lecture series on the “War between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union 1941-1945,” following his teaching of a series on “Classical and Quantum Physics.” Next will be his course on “Earth Science and Climate Change.”
I also want to note that this is the 23rd year that George is leading a group of women in a summer Water Aerobics class three times a week.
And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person Mr. George pick.
[Applause]
>> Bill Benson: George, thank you for joining us today and your willingness to be our First Person. We have as you know one short hour, and now less than that. And you have so much to share with us. We'll just start right away if that's okay.

>> George Pick: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: You were nearly 4 1/2 when Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. But before we turn to the war years and the Holocaust, tell us first a little bit about your family and their community before the war began.
>> George Pick: Well, I have documented evidence that my family, both my parents and my grandparents, have lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire for over 250 years. And so we were quite assimilated. We were not a religious group, but we were more of a cultural and ethnic type of Jews. And most of my family members and extended family members were professionals. We had a number of lawyers in our family. A number of engineers. We had businessmen. And other professions. And I would say that it was an educated middle class. Some of them were richer than others, but that probably characterizes it.
>> Bill Benson: Your mother worked. And there was really -- from what you told me, there was a very clear purpose for why she was working. Will you tell us about that?
>> George Pick: Well, we are talking about the early -- the decades of the 20th century. My mother was born in 1901. And at that time women were expected to go to school until age 16. And usually in the first -- last three or four years, this was a commercial type school where they were learning typing and bookkeeping and this kind of work. And my mother had two brothers. And both of them were expected to be more educated. One of the brothers was going to a medical school in Hungary, and the other brother was studying to be an optometrist. And so it was expected that my mother would -- who lived with the parents would provide her salary to help her brothers study.
>> Bill Benson: So her work was in order to help her brothers get their advanced education.
>> George Pick: Correct. Now after the First World War, Hungary was a big loser. Hungary lost 2/3 of its area, and about 50% of its population. So my family was very extended, roughly 150 -- between 150 and 200 people. I have a family tree. And many cousins and second cousins and so forth. Most of them did not live in Budapest. We did. The very immediate family. But most of them lived in the provinces. So when Hungary was chopped up, we had relatives in Romania, Slovakia, and Yugoslavia. And even Austria. And this of course had determined the outcome of their lives. And as I will tell you later, we were extremely lucky to live in Budapest.
My father was working as an engineer, and just like everyone else in the early 1930s, Hungary was hit by the great depression, and my father lost his job. And it was a very hard few years. My grandfather was a chief engineer of a fairly large company. And because of him, he was able to bring my father in as an engineer. And he worked there until the very beginning of 1939, and then he lost his job for the reason that in 1938 the Hungarian Parliament brought in the first anti-Jewish law, which prescribed that a certain number of or percentage of people, professionals, could be Jewish, but the rest of them could not. And the Jews were overrepresented, particularly in law and in medicine and in engineering. So my father lost his job at that point.
>> Bill Benson: Essentially I think you told me that the Jewish population was, say, 5%. And the new law said only 5% --
>> George Pick: Correct. And this was not the first Jewish law technically speaking. The first Jewish law came much earlier than Hitler, and it came in 1921 where they had what they called the numerus clausus where this 5% applied to a university students, and

one of my uncles, who was a university student at the time, studying medicine, was kicked out, physically and emotionally as well, and not just him but many of his colleagues.
And at that time at that point, the option was to go abroad. In my uncle's case, he went to Italy. And he had to start all over again. So it took him over 10 years to get his degree. And then he couldn't find a job because of the Hungarian depression. And one year he just -- just before he came back he went to Berlin and then he came back to Hungary. And he found jobs, but they didn't pay. And so in 1938, he married an American citizen, and he came to this country. And he was the only one from my family as far as I know who was able to immigrate legally.
>> Bill Benson: And he would become important in your life.
>> George Pick: He became important in my life.
>> Bill Benson: George, while the full brunt of the war didn't really hit you in full effect until the Germans occupied Hungary in 1944, nonetheless life changed significantly with the start of the war. Tell us a little bit about that period between the start of the war and before the German occupation in 1944. What was that time like for your family?
>> George Pick: Well, after the so-called first Jewish law came the second Jewish law. And in that second Jewish law, particularly the economic side, the Jewish community was quite squeezed. And people lost their properties, et cetera. And my father as I mentioned lost his job. And so there were a number of unemployed. What do you do with them? How do they make a living?
Well, in Hungary there was a system which is in German called Strawman. In English it's a straw man. And what we mean by that is that is a Christian person would take out a business license, and under his name, he could hire a Jewish person or more than one and would -- they would work for him. In effect, it was the other way around, but the Jews were working and they would give stipends to this straw man. And that's precisely what happened to my father and many other.
>> Bill Benson: A stipend to do nothing essentially?
>> Well, they had the title and they were getting money. And it turned out to be the super of the building which we lived in. He was a very nice person. And this man we had known for a few years actually. He started around 1940. And went up to '44. Now in the second Jewish law or anti-Jewish law, there was a part which was dealing with people who could or could not become members of the armed forces in Hungary. And the ones who could not become members such as the Jews, the communists, the social Democrats, they were also provided a way of helping or doing something for the quote, unquote Hungarian nation. And the thing was essentially labor. And it was not just labor. It was more like slave labor. And my father was -- Hungary did not get into the war until June of '41, until the Germans started an offensive against the Soviets. Until then Hungary was not part of it.
>> Bill Benson: Just for our audience, so they know for sure, they were utterly allied with the Germans.
>> George Pick: Yes, yes. And the story then is that as I mentioned Hungary was pretty badly chopped up. And Hitler promised the Hungarian government that certain parts of Romania and Slovakia and Yugoslavia would be returned to Hungary. And that was the payback from Hungary that they would become Axis partners and later on they had to stand up, send their armies actually, to fight in the eastern front mostly.

>> Bill Benson: And these labor battalions that were created to do slave labor, your father was affected by that directly.
>> George Pick: Yes, my father was affected actually earlier than the war in Hungary. He was in 1940 already called up. And he went to what is now in the Ukraine, but at that time it was part of Hungary, for building roads. Now imagine that these people were 40 years old or over, mostly overweight, and out of shape, and they got a pick and an ax and stuff like that, and they had to make small stones out of big stones. So it was very, very heavy physical labor for these people. The fortunate thing was that my father's brigade had a very decent person who was overseeing them. And in these brigades there were 200 or 300 Jewish workers and then about 10 or 20 regular soldiers. And my father while he was gone, which is now the Ukraine, he had this cousin and he had a beautiful place in the mountains. And we visited him. And he was deactivated after three months.
And after that, life went on. There was a third Jewish law which was much more like the 1935 law Nuremberg Law, which is a racially based law, not just a law which affected the economic well-being of the people but it was racial in the sense that for example a Jew was forbidden to marry a non-Jew and so forth. I went to a school meanwhile, a Jewish elementary school at that time. So I was rather insulated from these kind of things until 1943.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me an incident that happened in your own building. Tell us about that. You were very young.
>> George Pick: Right. I was very young. Our building had a couple of Jewish families, but most of them were Christian. Some of them were in sympathy with the Nazis and some of them were not. And we had non-Christian friends there too. Or Christian friends there. There was a man, and he felt that I was not polite enough with him when I saw him somewhere in the building. And he gave me a slap in the face. And I wasn't sure why. I never got a slap in the face from my father or mother. So it really shocked me. And this man came back a few hours later and knocked on our door and came back and apologized. And I felt that that was -- that was fine. And that was the last person who apologized for hitting me.
>> Bill Benson: He was the last to do that.
>> George Pick: The last, correct. And in 1942, when the war -- well, the war started with the Soviets in '41, June of '41. But by 1942, the Hungarians were forced to stand up an army. And with the army, 50,000 Jewish men, young men, from 20 to 40, were also called up. And they went to the Ukraine.
>> Bill Benson: For the labor battalions.
>> George Pick: For the labor battalions. And by then, things were changing. People were becoming much more brutal to these people. And of course they went around April or May. And the Russians -- the winter of course came, and the army were not -- was not ready for it. And the slave labor as well were not. So many of them died of hunger and torture. And they were having to work like looking for mines by hand and they blew up.
>> Bill Benson: Literally walking minefields.
>> George Pick: Right. Walking minefields and so forth. Now my father was lucky because he was 41 years old, so he was one year older than the group. But I had a

number of uncles who came and many of them didn't come back. In fact, 90% of these people did not come back.
>> Bill Benson: Like 8,000 survived out of 50,000, something like that.
>> George Pick: 5,000 out of 50,000, yes.
>> Bill Benson: I think it might have been 1943. You had -- you were on an outing, I think, with your mother and you experienced your first incident where you really felt genuinely threatened in a big way. Beyond the man slapping you in the stairwell.
>> George Pick: Right. In Hungary, Hungary was always an anti-Semetic country. But there was an extreme party which is called the Melosh in Hungarian. It's the Arrow Cross in English. And they were extremely sympathetic pro-Nazi. And they had a uniform which was very similar to the S.S. And they were gathering not legally really -- it was still a sort of underground movement. But we were -- in 1943 we were on vacation in the mountainside. And there was a place where they gathered. And my mother and I unknowingly got into the middle of them. And they were yelling and screaming and so forth. So I was very scared. And my mother and I moved away as fast as we could. But this was my first encounter with this extreme group. Unfortunately not the last.
>> Bill Benson: No, no, not the last. The Germans occupied Hungary in March of 1944. Tell us why they did that, you know, briefly, because here Hungary was a loyal ally of the Nazis. But the Germans came in in March 1944, and then things changed profoundly quickly for you.
>> George Pick: Yeah. Well, Germany -- or Hungary was a reluctant ally, so much so that in 1942 Hitler demanded that just like the Austrian Jews and all of the Jews of Europe who were by then either dead or in deportation camps would be turned over to the Germans. One of the regents of Hungary did not allow that, just refused. And Hitler was not in a position to enforce this. But Hitler was always wary of the fact that there were 825,000 Jews in Hungary, and that was the last of the larger Jewish groups.
>> Bill Benson: Anywhere in Europe.
>> George Pick: Anywhere in Europe. So by 1944, when the Nazis were losing the war, and it was obvious to everybody, and they were going to be coming back from Ukraine, the logical way would be for them, for a strategic withdrawal, would be through Hungary. And by then the Hungarian diplomats were already in negotiations with the British and the Russians. So Hitler was afraid that Hungary would change sides. And so they wanted to make sure that Hungary was in their hands. That's why they came in. That was the primary reason.
And the secondary reason, and this is debatable which one was the primary and secondary. But the reason that they had 825,000 Jews still alive there was bothering Hitler and Eichmann and all of the people who were working very diligently, quote, unquote, on solving the Jewish problem. And so when the S.S. and the Wehrmacht divisions came, there were Eichmann and 120 Nazi experts. And what happened in Germany, in five years or more, and in Austria about a year or so, the same scenario played out in two months in Hungary.
Imagine that everybody in the -- first of all they had a lot of eager helpers in Hungary, which helped them, roughly 30,000 gendarmes in the provinces. And they were very eager to collect the Jews, steal whatever they could, and put them in trains and move them as fast as they could. And this happened in six -- in six weeks, almost half a

million Jews were deported, mostly to Auschwitz and 90% of course were immediately gassed. And this we didn't know.
And the reason why is because these anti-Jewish laws came out fast and furiously, every day it happened. The first thing was to make the Jews -- make it impossible for the Jews to travel, to use any kind of public transportation or private transportation. They took cars, bicycles, everything. And then they took the telephones away so we had no communication with our friends and relatives in the provinces.
>> Bill Benson: Radios were banned.
>> George Pick: Radios were banned and taken, along with valuables. And so this is what happened. It was only 10 or 15 days after they came in when they imposed the yellow star on us. And then the next thing was to -- and this is now Budapest. They moved very fast in the provinces. Roughly 147 trains were derailed and used explicitly for the deportation of the Hungarian Jews.
>> Bill Benson: To take them right to Auschwitz.
>> George Pick: To take them right to Auschwitz. But Budapest was the last one because it had a very large Jewish population. And so they left it to last. And then they were going to start it in the very beginning of July. But July of 1944, if you recall your history, the Allies already landed in Normandy about a week before or two weeks before. And they had airports and large bombers were bombing Budapest actually. And by then we were forced to leave our house, our building, because that was not a Jewish building. So we had to move with relatives to one of these buildings you mentioned earlier.
>> Bill Benson: They were called a Jewish home with a Jewish star.
>> George Pick: With the star, yes. So roughly 25% of the population of Budapest was Jewish, but they squeezed us into 5% of the room. And so every room had to have three, four people in it. And we moved in with one of my grandmother's sisters. And in addition to that, of course, we couldn't take our furniture or anything. In addition to that, there was curfew. 22 hours out of every 24 hours. And the curfew --
>> Bill Benson: Curfew on Jews, not on the population.
>> George Pick: No, no. Curfew on Jews. Between 2:00 and 4:00 in the afternoon which was too late to buy food, because everybody bought the food earlier. And there were a number of people, a number of businesses, who would not serve Jews even if they had food. So we had a problem having food. And then besides this, we had this very, very heavy bombing raids. And after the bombing raids started, the regent of Hungary decided that supposedly -- and this is a controversial thing -- he in his memoirs said he did not know that the deportation of half a million Hungarian citizens --
>> Bill Benson: Of his citizens, that he didn't know.
>> George Pick: Right. That he didn't know it until the 1st or 2nd of July and then he stopped. I think a few historians don't really believe that. But the fact was that he did stop it. And it frustrated Eichmann and company, and they left. And this was in the middle of July. From the middle of July until the end of September, there was a new government, military government basically. And we had the same kind of restrictions but we did not have to worry about at that point deportation.
>> Bill Benson: During that period of time.
>> George Pick: Right.

>> Bill Benson: George, I want to ask you a couple of questions. There's so much that we can't cover, I know. But while you're dealing with all of the fears of being deported and all of the restrictions, as you said, there's all of this bombardment going on. All the bombing raids. I want you to share the incident where I believe it was your aunt who had a piece of glass in her head.
>> George Pick: Yeah. Well, what had happened is 2nd of July was a critical day when we were already in the Jewish homes. And there was what they called a carpet bombing by the participation of roughly 1,000 British and American bombers. And roughly 30% of the city was in ruins after that. And we were very lucky. We had four bombs dropped within a few hundred yards of our building. But sitting through a three-hour raid is not exactly what I would call pleasant experience. And I was -- and my mother saw -- imagine sitting in a small room, and these big bursts of light actually as well as sound came. And from then on, I was always horrified -- and even today if there is an unexpected noise.
>> Bill Benson: It still affects you.
>> George Pick: It affects me. And my mother always put a big pillow over my head to muffle the noise after that because after this, bombings, raids became rather frequent.
>> Bill Benson: You said you almost could set your clock by the bombing.
>> George Pick: You could set your clock at 11:00 in the morning the Americans and the British came. And 9:00 at night the Russians came. And so we were in a double jeopardy. And not just us. The whole population, of course, was endangered by this. And the bombs were at that time going all over the place.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your aunt. You wanted to get her medical care.
>> George Pick: Yes. Well, that happened after one of these bombing raids. She was living with my grandparents, who had their own house not too far from where we were. And she was hurt by a flying piece of glass and bleeding. And my father after the raid went over to her and asked -- and brought her to our house. And one of the neighbors was what they called ethnic Germans. And the brother -- there were two women. They were sisters. And they had a brother who was an S.S. doctor. And naively we asked him to give my aunt first aid. And he was looking at us, and he says, you know, I am right-handed but with my left hand I already killed 20 Jews. I haven't even started it with my right hand. I am certainly not going to give you any kind of help. And he turned out to be one of the so-called doctors in Auschwitz who were selecting people.
And so this went on. And my father of course was taken. Between 16 and 60, all of the men were called after the Germans came in for slave labor. And my father was sent to the western end of Hungary. And he was there. We knew that. And in September his unit came back to Budapest. For what reason, we don't know. But it was a very lucky sort of a thing. He had a very good man who commanded the unit. His fiancee lived with us. He had a Jewish fiancee. And by the end of September, things were very, very tense. And the war was already in the territory of Hungary. Not far from Budapest.
>> Bill Benson: The Russian army was advancing.
>> George Pick: The Russian army was advancing. So on October 15 of 1944, after a couple of months after the Romanians switched sides, and in fact the Romanian army came with the red army fighting against the Germans and the Hungarian army, the Hungarian government finally decided -- not the government, but the regent decided to proclaim Hungary's neutrality. Well, it was a laugh, you know, because there was no

army behind him. There was only one division who was loyal to him. And the rest of them were not. And so in two hours, there was a small firefight. He was caught, and his family were caught, and they deported them actually.
>> Bill Benson: And of course the iron cross that you mentioned earlier is now pretty much in control.
>> George Pick: Well, yeah.
>> Bill Benson: With the Nazis.
>> George Pick: In the same day, the Arrow Cross leader was pronounced to be the head of the government. And then Eichmann came in, and 10 days later 10,000 young women, among them several of my aunts, were rounded up and deported to Ravensbruck. And most of them didn't come back, including my aunt. And by the end of October, roughly 50,000 Jews of Budapest were already deported. And by then the transportation was quite shaky.
>> Bill Benson: The rail lines were bombed.
>> George Pick: The rail lines were bombed, et cetera. So people had to walk 200 miles to the Austrian border and then from there they would take them by railroad. And many of them couldn't walk. Roughly 50% were shot by the Hungarian Nazis. And my father came back one day and said that they got the order of being deported the next day. But he got a furlough, and he was not going to go. And then we didn't hear from him for 10 days.
And then 10 days later, an army soldier came to our house and gave us a piece of note from my father saying, I am now in hiding, in a factory. And come with the soldier and join. But don't tell anybody else. Now my mother felt very bad because she had four aunts and his poor mother and other relatives, cousins and so forth. And we were told not to tell them. And so we did go very reluctantly.
And we went, and this was a textile factory before the war, owned by a Jewish person. And this textile factory at that time was used as a camouflage to be able to hide roughly 70 people like my father who were not willing to be deported but were trying to escape. And they all brought back their families. So from 60 men to 170. And if you went in, what you would see is people working with Hungarian uniforms.
>> Bill Benson: Making uniforms for the Hungarian soldiers.
>> George Pick: Right. Making uniforms for the Hungarian soldiers. There was a soldier outside with a gun. And they had all sorts of things showing that this was a very important factory. But in fact it wasn't.
>> Bill Benson: It was a complete ruse. A cover.
>> George Pick: It was a complete ruse. And we had 22 children. And this went on. It's a very complicated story because you can imagine the logistics problems, you know. How do you bring food to these people. And it turned out that there were four factories which were working like that. It was a complicated organization. Zionists, communists, everybody.
>> Bill Benson: Completely covert.
>> George Pick: Completely covert, yes. But we didn't know this, of course. This was later on when we found out. So on December 2, somebody betrayed the person who was the brain. The brain behind it. And the Hungarian Gestapo got him. And they already knew about three of the four.
>> Bill Benson: Three out of the four.

>> George Pick: Three out of the four places. One of them was ours. So they raided us, about four of them. And they had submachine guns. And they selected out the men and the women and children. And we looked at the walls, and we thought that's it. That's the end. But it wasn't the end fortunately. For two reasons. One is that we had a number of well-to-do people with dollars and brilliance and all of this kind of precious stones and so forth. And they were able to bribe these people.
Now these people were not stupid. By now the Soviet army was about 10 miles from Budapest. And they knew that this war is finally going to be over. So they would have a massacre there. There would be somebody inevitably who would have been an eyewitness, and they would be having trouble. But so they didn't. And they didn't kill us. And they told us that if there is a problem, they let us know. And so they left.
But then the leadership of this group where we were decided that the children would be better off if they were in a Red Cross place, a Red Cross orphanage for children. And 22 of us were taken there. I was among the oldest. There were -- the youngest was 6 months old.
>> Bill Benson: All 22 children who had been in the textile factory were sent to this orphanage.
>> George Pick: Correct. Correct. And the orphanage was right in the middle of the city. And we were sort of a little bit on the outside. So they took us, and it was a big building with 500 kids. And they were dirty and hungry. And there was very little supervision there. And this friend of mine --
>> Bill Benson: You're 10 years old at this point.
>> George Pick: I was 10 years old. A friend of mine and I decided that this is not the place to stay. And we decided to get out. Now this building was closed overnight. And at 9:00 in the morning the workers, the Red Cross workers, came in. We had like 30 kids on the floor. And everybody was hungry and dirty. And we told one of them, a lady, that we have some money and we would like to go out and buy food. And if she would let us go or come with us. And she said, OK. And so she let us out. And then we ran away from her. And we went back to the place where my mother and father were. And my friend's family. And we found out later on that about a week later, these children were taken to the Danube and they were all shot. So out of the 22 children, only the two of us --
>> Bill Benson: The two of you were the only ones.
>> George Pick: If you remember the last picture that Bill showed, there were two children. I was one and my friend the other. But the other 500, most of them died.
>> Bill Benson: George, in the little time we have left, tell us now as the Russians are really now on the city limits basically, the siege of Budapest is about to begin, you are moved then into the Jewish ghetto. Into a building there. And you were there through the entire end of the war.
>> George Pick: What happened is after we returned to the hiding place, about maybe a week later, two officers show up and told us that the Hungarian Gestapo guys think that across the street there is an Arrow Cross headquarters and they are starting to be a little bit suspicious of us. And by then at the end of November, the Hungarian ghetto, Budapest ghetto opened. Now the Budapest ghetto was a very unique place. Number one, it was the last ghetto in the whole of Europe. All of the ghettos were already evacuated and people died. So that was one.

And it was the end of November. They could not deport us because the Russians had completely encircled the city. So they -- the best way they thought was to compress 70,000 Jews who were in Budapest at that time, plus those who were in hiding, into a very, very small place, and by small I mean a few blocks. And they thought that before the Russians come, we would be massacred. And there were plans for the S.S. to come in and the Hungarian Nazis to come in and massacre us.
Now the ghetto was put together in a hurry. And so they had these walls that were not made of bricks but only of wood. And so the ghetto leadership, the Jews, were making sure that this wood was loosened so that if the Nazis came in and people could run and some of the people would be able to survive. Fortunately this didn't happen. And we were in a building which was housing also a very -- about 200 old people from a Jewish old age home.
>> Bill Benson: They were in your building?
>> George Pick: In the building that we ended up in the ghetto. And they were in very bad shape already to begin with. And then when the siege began, which was Christmas Day 1944, everybody went down to the basement. The basement in these old houses were not finished. They had dust or dirt there. So the first thing you do is you dig a latrine in the middle of it. And then you have some sheets or something. But, I mean, you can imagine 200 people in that place which is maybe a quarter of the size of this room.
>> Bill Benson: In a damp basement with a dirt floor. And winters generally in Europe are really tough. That was an especially harsh winter.
>> George Pick: It was a harsh winter. We had no water. No electricity. Nothing.
>> Bill Benson: Nothing, including food, of course.
>> George Pick: Food, of course. Well, food was available except for the fact that they had sharpshooters on the top of every building. And if they saw somebody walking on the street, they would shoot them. So it was -- although food was available, or would have been available, nobody was willing to go out and get shot. And so for about three weeks, we practically had no food.
And of course the old people died first. And then there was a lull in the fighting where these people were taken out. And we had a square right in front of the building. And there were maybe six or seven feet high pile of dead bodies. They turned out to be over 3,000 people. And so because of the closeness and because of all of the dirt and lack of hygiene, of course, everybody was full of lice. And it was a very --
>> Bill Benson: It's unimaginable for most of us.
>> George Pick: It was a terrible situation.
>> Bill Benson: And then it turned into door-to-door fighting taking place around you.
>> George Pick: Right. There was door-to-door fighting. And what happened is these buildings, whoever was in Europe knows that the buildings are next to each other. And so what they did, what we did, is to have the walls open so you could walk within the block, 10, 15 buildings, underground. And the S.S. knew this. And one day an S.S. kid came in who spoke Hungarian and said, don't think that you are going to be surviving. We have the ghetto mined. And we will blow you up just before the Russians come in. So that --
>> Bill Benson: So here they know that they are about to be overrun and they've lost, and they are still spending their energy trying to kill all the Jews in there.

>> George Pick: Right. Exactly. And meanwhile, there were some houses which we called safe houses or protected houses. And they were protected by the Wallenberg Group, Swiss and Spanish, and there were about 15,000 Jews in addition to the big ghetto. And they had special papers. And up until the beginning of January the Hungarian Nazis were looking at the paper and let the people go. But after that, they were starting to raid these houses.
And hundreds of people were lined up in the Danube and were shot, just like those 500 children I was talking about. And so it became very dangerous . And most of those people were taken to the already overcrowded ghetto. So we had another few thousand.
>> Bill Benson: George, you were liberated, I think, if it was not your 11th birthday it was very close to your 11th birthday.
>> George Pick: A couple of months.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us how you knew you were liberated. When did it end? At that stage, of course, it's not over for a very long time in truth. But for you, when did the fighting stop?
>> George Pick: Well, it finally stopped, you know -- when you are hearing 24/7 this awful noise of shells going, and shells hitting the building actually where we were, and the bombings and rockets and everything else, all of this noise, all of a sudden, there was dead silence in one morning. And, you know, this was sort of deafening. The silence was deafening. And we had a little window quite high. And somebody went up. And you couldn't see much, but you could see the shoes or the footwear of whoever was out there. And we were very familiar with the S.S. footwear. But this footwear was not familiar at all. So -- and it was quiet. We figured that that must have been the Russians. And then one or two persons went out and indeed the Russians were there. And a lot of dead people were among us by then whom we couldn't take out. And there was a very quiet sort of -- everybody was quiet. And nobody was yelling and screaming.
>> Bill Benson: Jubilant over liberation.
>> George Pick:no. And my father decided we would go home around noontime. And my father and my mother were so weak because whatever food was there, they gave it to me, that one of the crown jewels of the family was a little suitcase, a very little suitcase. Really a child's suitcase. And it was full of family pictures. And my father -- and the whole thing probably weighed two pounds, 2 1/2 pounds. My father and my mother were so weak that I was carrying it.
>> Bill Benson: You had to carry it.
>> George Pick: And it took us four hours to get back to where we were kicked out the summer before. And we went into the bunker there. The siege of Budapest was not over. The siege of Pest was over, but Buda took another month. And many people who saw us became quite white, particularly those who were of Nazi sympathies, who survived. Mr. Dudak was very happy.
>> Bill Benson: He was the straw man.
>> George Pick: Yes. And we left him with a big suitcase of food like pasta and rice and things like that. So of course he gave it back to us. And he made room for us in the bunker. And then we were in the bunker for another couple of months before we went out.

>> Bill Benson: George, we are at the end of our time. I want to ask you one more question and then we'll close our program. So stay with us, please, until we finish because we're going to hear from George again. But the last question, George, you had this very large extended family. How many survived out of your family?
>> George Pick: I could tell you how many died. Roughly 130 of them. And roughly 34 survived.
>> Bill Benson: 34. Right.
>> George Pick: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: George, thank you. There's obviously -- we really just touched the surface of what George described to us in brief. And then of course there's -- the war is going to continue until May of 1945. There's the postwar period. George then proceeded to live under communist rule until he escaped from Hungary in 1956. We'd want to hear all about that. His memoir will hopefully be published in the not-too-distant future and will be an opportunity for us to learn more. I want to thank all of you for being with us and remind you that we'll have First Person programs each Wednesday and Thursday until August 8. And if you can't join us, all of our programs are available on our YouTube page.
When George concludes our program, our photographer Joel, right here, the one who took all of those glorious photos you saw earlier, will come up onstage and take a picture of George with you as the background. So we want you to stay for that if you would do that.
It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person gets the last word. And so on that note, I want to turn to George to close today's program.
>> George Pick: Thank you. I used to say that we should preach toleration and that we should be able to tolerate people of different persuasion, religious, racial, and so forth. And now I am saying that we should be and must be intolerant. Why intolerant? Intolerant against what? Intolerant against bigotry and hate and racism and anti-Semitism, which is again coming up. You know, us survivors feel that we are back in the 1930s. We are very concerned and afraid. Everywhere, in Europe in particular, but even in this country, do not be a bystander. Be active in your community against evils, against hatred of any sort. Be it in your community or anywhere else.
Now in many areas of the world, genocides are raging again. Instead of what we used to say, never again, it's over and over and over again. And it's intolerable. Be intolerant against the evil whether it's a global evil or the local evil. We have shootings in schools. You know that. It's almost a daily occurrence. It cannot be tolerated. You must do something.
And so I want to finish as my last word, look out for all signs of hatred, all signs of anti-Semitism, and do something about it. And that's my last word. Thank you.
[Applause]