Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Rita Rubinstein
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Ladies and gentlemen, the program will begin. Please silence any electronic devices that you have.
>> 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 today. We are in our 20th year of the First Person program, and our First Person today is Mrs. Rita Rubinstein, 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. Rita will share with us her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Rita a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our online conversation: Never Stop Asking Why.
The conversation aims to inspire individuals 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 Rita is one individual’s account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.
Rita was born Rifka Lifschitz in December 1936 to Abraham and Tabel in Vascauti, Romania. Here we see Rita with her Aunt Bella and cousin. Bayla Shulwolf.
Here we see an engagement photograph of Rita's parents taken in 1934. They are seated in the front.

Rita's father ran a dry goods store and small factory with his sister and brother-in-law in this house, pictured on the right, which also served as the family home. Their factory had a few looms to weave native Ukrainian clothing that was sold in the store.
In 1940, the Soviet Army marched into Vascauti and drafted young men, including Rita's father, into the army. When Axis troops invaded the Soviet Union the next year, Romanian soldiers entered Vascauti and told all Jews to prepare to leave within 24 hours. Rita's family was able to bribe Romanian soldiers, who took the family to a ghetto in Transnistria. The area known as Transnistria is shown on this map.
Once there, a village family took Rita's family in. Rita was able to attend a small class, but during the three years the family lived in the ghetto, they faced terrible hardships. After they were liberated in early 1944, the family was eventually able to return home.
After the war, Rita attended a Ukrainian school in what had become Communist Romania. By obtaining false papers, Rita, her mother, and her aunt were able to travel from Romania to a displaced persons camp in Germany that was administered by the U.S. Army. This photo is of Rita with other children at the Feldafing DP Camp.
Rita arrived in the United States in 1949 with her mother and her mother’s husband, an Auschwitz survivor whom she met in the Displaced Persons camp. They settled in New York City.
Rita married Nathan Rubinstein in 1959, the same year Nathan entered the University of Maryland for his Master’s degree. Rita graduated from Brooklyn College in 1960, then joined Nathan in Maryland where she began teaching elementary school in Olney, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C. She left teaching to have and raise their three daughters. When the girls were older, Rita began teaching at a Yiddish Hebrew school, then later became its principal.
After retiring from the school, Rita became a private tutor for bar and bat mitzvahs, including for adults who have not had their bar or bat miztvah. Nathan passed away at age 58 in 1995. He had lost most of his family during the Holocaust, but he survived with his parents in Siberia. After the war they came to the U.S. After service in the U.S. Army, Nathan began a career as a rocket scientist at the Johns Hopkins Applied Research Lab in Baltimore with a top secret clearance.
Their three daughters have a combined eight grandchildren. Daughter Nina is an industrial psychologist with two children. Daughter Sheri is an attorney with four children. And Rene is a pediatric nurse at Johns Hopkins hospital with two children. Five of Rita’s grandchildren are now college graduates. Her oldest grandson just graduated from dental school and will begin study at orthodontic school in Colorado. A granddaughter will complete her graduate training and take her board exams as a physician’s assistant in October. Another granddaughter begins her third year at Ohio State University in the fall.
Rita is very active in the community. 19 years ago she formed a singing group, the Happy Matzah Balls, which still performs at area nursing homes, senior centers and such places at the National Institute of Health and the Catholic University of America, as well as here at the museum. She also sings with the Encore Chorus. Rita has been a Transition and Hospice volunteer for the Jewish Social Services Agency for the past nine years. She has also traveled to Israel to do volunteer work for the Israeli Army. And Rita volunteers here at the museum as well by translating documents and videos of survivor experiences during the Holocaust from Yiddish to English.

She speaks publicly in various settings, having recently spoken in Nebraska and Arkansas, as well as in the local area at the school that Rita's granddaughter attends. Rita also recently performed in "Witness Theater," a play produced locally featuring five high school students and four Holocaust survivors and the child of a survivor, who worked together for several months to put on this outstanding Production. And I understand that it will be shown again this coming fall in northern Virginia.
I also want you to know that Rita is accompanied today with her good friend Nazzie Shirazi who is here with her in the front row.
With that I'd like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Rita Rubinstein.
[Applause]
Rita, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our First Person today. We as you know only have less than an hour now to cover an awful lot. So we'll get started if that's okay
>> Rita Rubinstein: Sure.
>> Bill Benson: Although the Second Wolrd War began when Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland in September 1939, war didn't come directly to your community in Romania until 1940. Before we turn to the war years, the Holocaust, and what it meant for you and your family, let's start first with you telling us a little bit about your very early years and about your family before war began.
>> Rita Rubinstein: I came from a loving family. My father was one of four. He was the only son. He had three sisters. My grandmother became a widow in World War I. And she sent the two older ones who were then 16 and 18 to the land of opportunity, the golden land, gold in the streets. Those aunts I never met until I came to the United States. They wound up working in sweat shops. The younger two, my father and his younger sister, were too young. They stayed behind.
And they established themselves. They owned -- as you told the audience and you saw the pictures, they had a two-family house together. And together they were in the business of selling native Ukrainian costumes, which my father had employed some people who wove those with the looms. And my mother was in the store selling those dry goods, the costumes, to the people. And she had a nanny for me. And they also had somebody who came in to do laundry.
On my mother's side, she was the eldest. There were eight children. Two had died before. And so she became the eldest. She was the only one -- first one to be married. I had aunts that were only seven years older than I. They lived in a smaller town where my grandfather owned an orchard, a dry goods store. Had very good relationship with his Ukrainian neighbors. He would give them credit at Christmas time. They were thrilled when we came to visit. And I was spoiled rotten.
But all that beautiful life, I had friends. I played in the streets. I had a doll carriage. My grandma, who lived with us, and many people in our town -- Jewish people spoke German to their children. And my grandmother, may she rest in peace, she insisted that I speak Yiddish because before I was born, it was Austria-Hungary. And so thanks to her that I -- my first language was Yiddish. And that's why I am able to translate documents now.
So life was good. I had my cousins with me to play with. All of that lovely utopia, so to speak, changed very rapidly.

>> Bill Benson: And before we talk about those changes, a couple more questions for you. Tell us a little bit more about your father. You said he was a very charitable man.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Well, unfortunately I didn't know him long. I only knew him for 4 1/2 years. But some things I can remember. He was Modern Orthodox, and he used to take me to synagogue. He had a lovely voice. And he was brave. And I remember him observing different holidays. And, yes, he was remembered as a very charitable, very good person. And I heard more about him. To have a good name is more important than anything else. Later on, when I met people who knew him. Because unfortunately he did not survive.
>> Bill Benson: And we'll of course talk about that in a moment.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your home. It was for the time very modern, right?
>> Rita Rubinstein: It was very modern, yes. The reason being that I'm an only child was we had a radio. We did have electricity. No bathroom facilities. I mean, we had a bathroom but we had to get water from the well. And of course there were no washing machines or --
>> Bill Benson: Right.
>> Rita Rubinstein: All of that. But they heard Hitler's speeches. They were heard already. The year I was born. And so as a result they decided not to have any more children. And I think it was a good thing because I doubt if a younger child would have survived. But I survived. So, yes, it was modern. It was a good life.
>> Bill Benson: And of course all of that would change once the war came to your community. As we noted before, war began September 1939. But in -- it was some months later that the Soviets occupied your town. Tell us -- and you were just not quite 4 years of age when that happened. You're now under Soviet control. What did that mean for you and your family once the Soviets were in your town in Vascauti and took control of your lives?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, it was pretty difficult. They conscripted all of the young men into the army. My father was one of them. For some reason my uncle got out of it. My father's brother-in-law. But that was the last time that I know that I was to see him. He was on a train. He became a soldier. But at least I have the knowledge that he fought against the Nazis. He was in the Soviet army. And I will tell you later about what happened to him.
>> Bill Benson: Do you know from your mother, once he went off and took the train and he was gone, was she able to hear from him for any period of time? Did she get letters? Do you know?
>> Rita Rubinstein: I really don't know.
>> Bill Benson: You don't know?
>> Rita Rubinstein: I don't remember.
>> Bill Benson: Of course not.
>> Rita Rubinstein: I'm 82 now. To go back to when you were 4, it's a little difficult. But I do have fragments and pieces of memory here and there.
>> Bill Benson: About your father when he left. He was drafted.
>> Rita Rubinstein: He was in his early 30s. He was seven years older than my mom.
>> Bill Benson: So now with your father gone into the army, who was -- how did you manage to make ends meet in the family? What happened with your father being gone?

>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, we still had the store. There were no restrictions yet. But I do remember one incident. My aunt had two children, one of whom was six years older than I. And as the Russian army was coming down the main street, they came marching, and my cousin being a curious little boy, he went up in the attic and he was looking out. And suddenly the march stopped, and we heard banging on the door. It was bayonets. Everybody was very frightened. My mother told us to go hide under the bed. And the soldiers came marching in and they said, there's a spy in the house. And she said, a spy in the house? What are you talking about? We saw somebody in the attic. And my cousin came down. And then my mother pleaded with them. She said my husband is in your army. Please don't do us any harm. Because they were looking through the closets and with bayonets.
>> Bill Benson: Looking for a spy.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, looking for a spy. And that little spy was my little cousin who was only, you know, a little boy. 7, 8.
>> Bill Benson: Peering out the window.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Peering out the window, yes. So that gave us a taste of what was to come.
>> Bill Benson: Right. And who was living in the household with you at that time?
>> Rita Rubinstein: OK. We were two families.
>> Bill Benson: Two families.
>> Rita Rubinstein: So two separate kitchens, of course. My aunt, her husband, and two children and her mother-in-law, who was a widow as well. My mother and I and my grandmother, my father's mother, who was with us. She was with us.
>> Bill Benson: And what about your Aunt Bella?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yes. I'm glad you mentioned that. My mother having been one of eight, and Bella was seven years younger than she, there was no future for her in that small town that my grandparents lived in. So it was her luck that she came to live with us and find a position in a bank where she worked. And that saved her life. Because when she wanted to go back home, the trains were no longer going to that small town.
>> Bill Benson: Which turned out to be as you said --
>> Rita Rubinstein: Turned out to be her savior.
>> Bill Benson: Her saving grace, yes. All of that changed even far more dramatically, of course, in June of 1941 when Germany and its allies turned on the Soviet Union. And Romanian troops, who were the allies of the Nazis occupied your town. Tell us what the effects were immediately and what happened once the allies of the Nazis were in control of Vascauti.
>> Rita Rubinstein: It was very different. There were restrictions. We were not allowed to go out. Only at certain times. There were many soldiers wanting to show their power, and the bank where my Aunt Bella had worked in, they took 20 Jews out in the marketplace and they shot them. Simply because they were Jews. They didn't commit in crime. And one of the people that was shot was a friend of my aunt who worked in the bank. So they wanted to show their strength, that they were there.
>> Bill Benson: Because you were so young, did you have any awareness of those kinds of things? Or did your mother shield you from that as much as possible?

>> Rita Rubinstein: I certainly saw sadness around me. We didn't know what had happened. And shortly after, we were told all the Jewish people of the town, you have to be ready within 24 hours. You have to be ready to leave. And you can only take with you -- whatever you can take with you is fine. But everything else you have to leave behind. Well, think about it. What do you take? What's important? And only 24 hours, not knowing where we were going.
We heard rumors that we were supposed to be transported to a death camp. My grandmother had some money sewn into her undergarments. And as a child I said, why are you doing this, Grandma? And she says, you never know. Maybe it will save our lives some day. My mother took some money and possessions and buried them in the yard and attic as well as photo albums. That's why I do have photos. And many survivors say how lucky that you have some photos. I also have some photos that we used to send to America to my aunts.
>> Bill Benson: The aunts that were here.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Because my husband had no photo of his childhood, of him being a baby, at all.
>> Bill Benson: So some of the photographs we saw earlier had been hidden in the attic.
>> Rita Rubinstein: In the attic.
>> Bill Benson: And you were able to recover them after the war.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. And it was true, the money that my grandmother had sewn in her undergarments did help. Within 24 hours, my mother bundled me up in layers of clothing. Little as I was, I had a knapsack on my back.
>> Bill Benson: So it was whatever you could carry.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. They took some bedding with them. My mother took some of my father's clothing. And his prayer shawl with her. She said if he returns, I want to have these things. We didn't know where we were going or what would happen. It was a very, very difficult time. We were gathered. We were on these terrible trains. Gathered in a big waiting hall. I had an infection to begin with, an ear infection. And it was very crowded. Crying.
And in the middle of the night, my uncle heard rumors, heard that some Romanian soldiers would take bribes, and they would -- instead of us going to death camps they would take us on barges to Shargorot. They had labor camps there and ghettos. So our chances for survival there were better.
>> Bill Benson: Than the other option. Absolutely.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. And so this is where my grandmother's money came in handy. And of course we took our lives in our hands because we would have been shot on the spot. I don't know how. I don't have any recollection how we got out. And there were barges. And soldiers were holding children. And one soldier was holding me by the hand at the time. I was blonde. And a soldier, very kind -- there were some kind people around too. He looked at my mother's face, and the anguished look on his face, and he thought, uh-oh. There were many children -- even though they took bribes, they drowned those children. They threw them in the river. And he said, don't worry. I have a little child just like yours at home. And I'm not going to harm her. So that was my first lucky day.

>> Bill Benson: So after bribing them and they're honoring that, I guess, is the right word --
>> Rita Rubinstein: So to speak.
>> Bill Benson: So to speak and taking you across the river. Once you're across the river, you're in this village, this small place at Shargorot. And although life was very hard there, you told me that you have some memories of both the good and the bad while you were there. Tell us about that two-year period of living in this little village. What was waiting for you when you arrived? What were your circumstances like while you were living there?
>> Rita Rubinstein: When we arrived, we were very fortunate that a family, a Jewish family -- it was a ghetto where there were restrictions of course. And they also took people out of labor camps, which the soldiers showed up and they took my aunt every day to labor camp. My mother was with me. That was my saving grace. I was never separated from my mother. It was a family of four.
>> Bill Benson: That lived in this house.
>> Rita Rubinstein: It was a clay hut really. Primitive. Here we came from a modern home. They had no electricity. No bathroom facilities. It was bitter cold there. They had one bedroom and a pot-bellied stove to keep everybody warm and cook. They took in nine people. There were 13 of us and just one bedroom.
>> Bill Benson: With four people that lived there.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Four people that by the kindness of their heart took us in. My aunts and uncle -- my uncle had typhus then. There were no antibiotics or anything like that. There was starvation. My aunt after she would come from labor camp, she had -- there was a black market. And she used to knit beautifully and sew. And she would go to the black market so she could have some food on the table for us. We occasionally had a potato and water. That was our -- in the morning, you had a piece of bread. Times were very hard.
And my cousin was entering his teenage years. And my aunt was mad at him, why can't you be like others and steal? And he said, no, thou shalt not steal. But it got so bad that they decided to leave us and go to another camp. They went to another labor camp. And so they were able to do that because they would not have survived, all 13 of us in that -- in those conditions.
But as children, I -- what really kept us going was cleanliness. My mother had to walk, I don't know, a mile or whatever, to a river where she washed our clothing. And my cousin and I, they made us some kind of a rag doll. As children, we still found some happiness. And a little stone to use as a ball. We went to the river where they washed their clothes.
And none of us knew how to swim. Suddenly my cousin said to my aunt -- to my mother, there's a little girl in the water. And I was drowning. I couldn't swim. So she -- that was another time I was lucky. She threw a sheet in the water, and I hung onto it and she pulled me out. But that was so traumatic for me, I could not speak for about three days. And the good witch came out of the west. And she said -- she broke some eggs. I remember that, raw eggs on my forehead. And she did an abracadabra or whatever, and she said don't worry. She'll be talking in two days. And I did.
>> Bill Benson: And you did.
>> Rita Rubinstein: It was a miracle. Yes. That was the good witch.

So there was a woman from the same town who decided she would form -- she felt bad for the children. And she formed a little like prekindergarten class. And she would sit with us and teach us songs. And so I was thrilled when I was able to -- she taught us a little bit of Hebrew also. I was thrilled when I was able to say that I had a piece of bread today with oil on it. And share that when we had show and tell.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that one of your recollections is really always being hungry. You remember that.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Always being --
>> Bill Benson: Always being hungry.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Always being hungry, yes. Starving. And my cousins and me -- and when we came here, they said because of you that we were chubby. They said you have to eat everything on your plate because your cousins are suffering in Europe. They are starving.
>> Bill Benson: And in fact people did starve to death.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yes. I saw that before my eyes. Starvation. That was a horrible -- that memory will never leave me. Seeing dead bodies in the streets. And dogs frighten me. Especially German shepherds.
>> Bill Benson: To this day, right?
>> Rita Rubinstein: To this day. My friends when they invited us to dinner they knew they had to put him in the kennel because I had that fear of German shepherds, because they would run after the Jews.
>> Bill Benson: During that time in Shargorot, you also lost your grandmother.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. I was very close to my grandmother. My grandmother was really a very strong woman. When I think back, she was not very old. She had two children in America and grandchildren whom she never met. Her only son was in the army. She didn't know if he would get back. And her daughter left for another labor camp. She had a cancer.
And she had -- in the Jewish religion, we have white shrouds. We have to go, you know, and also we have to have a bag of soil that was from the Holy Land. And she had those shrouds made. And then we were all in this one room. And so I saw this white shroud. And I said, what is this? And she said, well, I am probably going to die soon. And this is what we wear. And this is the soil from Israel. She had a little packet. And she said, I want you to light a candle for me.
It was hard for a child, you know. It's a grandma that you love. And shortly after she did pass, and we do have a ritual committee that do ritual bathing but there was no funeral. She is my only grandparent that does have a gravesite but I have never wanted to go back there. They came and prepared the body, to keep it holy and be purified. I saw all of that. But at that time they wouldn't take children to a cemetery or for some reason they didn't allow it.
So that was really very traumatic for me. Especially since my father was one of those on the ritual committee who would have done that. I always wanted to -- it's something very holy. We don't talk about it because we don't -- it's a secret society. It's very holy work. So I saw that. And I said goodbye to my grandmother then. But it was a difficult time.
>> Bill Benson: Rita, before we turn to liberation, when the Soviets came in, in the short time that you have been able to talk about that, you have just very quickly covered a three-year period of life, which is a long time. And so I know that we can't even begin to

do justice as to what that time was really like for you. I do want to go back to one comment you made a little while ago. I think you said that you, you know, had like a doll made of rags. And you -- a stone was like a ball. Say a little bit more about that. As a child, a little girl, with a need to play, even under the tough circumstances, what do you recall of kind of your life as a child and play in any way, shape, or form?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, there was sadness around. But children find playthings. And I had -- my cousin was there. I don't know how he survived. Somehow we did. Played our little games. Found -- you know, as a child you try to put the negative out, just like at the beginning I was very hesitant to speak because I didn't have recollections of everything, just fragmented pieces of memory, of what it was like. There was a lot of sadness. But I always found something positive.
And my mother always built me up talking about the future. Maybe we'll go home. And maybe we'll see our family again. And that's what kept us going.
>> Bill Benson: And it makes us I think really appreciate how important that informal school that you were able to go to must have been in your life.
>> Rita Rubinstein: That was very important.
>> Bill Benson: Yeah.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Very, very important.
>> Bill Benson: The Soviets returned to Shargorot in early 1944, only this time they are coming back as liberators. Tell us about the arrival of the Russians, and what it meant for you and your family once they were back in. And for you effectively the war was over where you lived.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, the front was coming close. You could hear bombing. To this day I hate noises. Except fireworks, though. I'm a kid at heart. I love fireworks. But it was very, very concerning. In fact, it was so concerning that the owner of the little primitive house, he had a friend who had a subbasement. We didn't have any basement. So all of us went to the subbasement and in hiding.
>> Bill Benson: In the friend's house?
>> Rita Rubinstein: In the friend's house. They allowed us in. And there was a teenaged boy. The noise was really deafening. Horrible. We knew that they were bombing all over. And he couldn't stand it any longer. He said, I have to get out. I have to see what's happening. And everybody was against it. And discouraged him. But he said, no, no, I have to go out. He went out. And then came back. And he was elated. He said the war is over. And everybody looked at him in disbelief. They thought he was hallucinating. And he said, the war is finally over. Well, slowly but surely everybody went out. And it really was over. We could not believe it. We were elated. But then again where do we go?
>> Bill Benson: What next?
>> Rita Rubinstein: We don't have a home. What's next? How do we get home? There were no positions. Nothing, you know, to do.
>> Bill Benson: In part, the Soviets were just moving on to the next place, the army was.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. They were our liberators. We were grateful for that. We were free to go. But where did we go? Of course the first place you want to go is home. We want to see who survived. And what was left of your home. That journey was on different army transports.

And my aunt -- we went to a large town where we used to live. My aunt saw somebody from the hometown who had been a daughter of a priest. And there were righteous gentiles still. Thank God for that. I wish there were more. But they did a lot. They really put their lives in danger for helping. And they scouted it out. And he said, I'll get you to your house. And he did. It took us a while.
And we got to Vascauti. Our home was occupied. The Iron Curtain started setting in. The Russians were there. And they made a silo out of our house. It was no longer our house. My mother had to beg them to please let her in because she just wanted her photographs, never mind the money.
>> Bill Benson: Right.
>> Rita Rubinstein: It took a while to persuade them. She said, my husband was in the army. They did allow us to retrieve the photographs. Money was gone, but it didn't matter. And we could not live in our house. But a friend of my aunt's persuaded -- there also was the grandparents' house, but it was occupied. But the soldiers insisted they take us in. There were three of us. My mother, my aunt, and myself. They gave us a room to stay there.
>> Bill Benson: In what had been your grandparents' house?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. There were other occupants and I remember Russian soldiers there for some reason. I would come home from school. That was my first really introduction to a school. It was a Ukrainian school. Very frightening for me. A long way to venture through the bitter. We were indoctrinated to love Stalin and his picture. I was a good student. So they didn't celebrate Christmas as such, but they celebrated in January with a Christmas tree. And Father Christmas, they called it. And I remember having to recite a Ukrainian poem there. It was at that time also that we found out about my father. His best friend came home from serving in the army, and he gave us the exact date when he was killed fighting the Germans.
>> Bill Benson: He was killed in action against the Nazis?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Killed in action. My mother went back to the village where her parents lived. And the same neighbors that were so kind, they are the ones who turned -- when the war was going on, they turned on them and informed on them. They took out my grandfather, with his long beard, and watched how they murdered him and his wife. So that was very, very difficult. Here my mother was in her 20s finding out that she was -- she became a widow and her parents were gone, her sisters and brother gone. It was sad and very difficult times. But she thanked God that I survived and her one sister survived.
>> Bill Benson: Bella. The date that your grandparents were murdered, and the other family members, that was June 19, is that right?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: June 19. The 75th anniversary yesterday.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Horrible.
>> Bill Benson: And you mentioned to me before that that date always was a terrible time for you.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Yes.
>> Bill Benson: So tell us a little bit about -- well, you reconnected with your aunt and uncle that had lived with you in the little house in Shargarot and they left.

>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, yes. They came back to the town too in Vascauti. And I don't know exactly where they lived. I couldn't remember that.
>> Bill Benson: When they had left?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yeah. And of course my aunt started working in a bank again. And we saw the handwriting on the wall because there was no future for us there. The Jewish people were still hated there. It was not a home anymore. So it was hard to get out. But we had falsified papers saying that we were born in Poland. This was the underground -- Jewish Underground. I don't know how they obtained these papers. But we wanted to get out. We stayed in our hometown for a year. And since there was no future there, and we knew that we had family in the United States, and there was some family in Israel but Israel was not independent yet.
So with the false papers, we decided to make our journey to -- we heard that there were Displaced Persons camps established by the United States. And they were sheltering society. So that was our goal, to get there. But how do we get there? We were on the train. We had the false papers. Oh, and there was another righteous gentile who was a guard at the train station. These were not luxury trains. They were for the most part coal trains. We hopped on the roof.
>> Bill Benson: This was just shortly after the war ended.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Shortly after the war ended. It was just a year after. And they wouldn't allow my aunt to leave. But finally -- we were all on the train about an hour before it left. My aunt and my mother.
>> Bill Benson: So you left, just the three of you?
>> Rita Rubinstein: The three of us, and also my aunt and uncle and their family.
>> Bill Benson: Them too.
>> Rita Rubinstein: And the soldier did not betray us. His mother used to be a midwife for my grandmother and helped deliver the children. So there too is another time we were saved. The journey was very long. We had to cross different borders. It took us three months.
>> Bill Benson: Three months?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. Romania is not very far from Germany. To make the journey. And we would go at night. We got on different trains. We were Czechoslovakian. We were Polish. This was all done in secret. That's where my aunt met her future husband also, who was from Transylvania, and he lost his entire family in Auschwitz. Three months.
>> Bill Benson: Bella met him on the journey?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, she met him on the journey.
>> Bill Benson: So you finally eventually make it to --
>> Rita Rubinstein: We finally made it to Germany. Germany that was the perpetrators of what happened to us, where I lost essentially my childhood. But it was a D.P. camp, a Displaced Persons camp, and we were displaced from our home. And we finally felt freedom. Even though we were in the same barracks where the S.S. soldiers were trained, we were given a room. But we had the freedom. We had schools. Theater. Life was reborn. There were many weddings. And one D.P. camp, there were 2,000 babies born to parents that had lost their children. Children lost their parents. I met friends who did not know a word of Yiddish. How did we communicate? They were hidden by Polish

people. They were hidden in convents. And they only spoke Polish. I was forced to learn Polish.
So believe it or not, there were schoolchildren -- oh, school, most people say, I can't wait until it is over. We loved it. We were like sponges. We had history. And mathematics and science. All of the stuff that we missed. We had all of this.
>> Bill Benson: And as you said, life was sort of reborn.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Life was absolutely reborn. In fact, General Eisenhower -- he was a general then. He became President Eisenhower. He came to our camp. And my friend who played the piano, she played for him. As a result of the war, though, a lot of our children were sick. And we contracted tuberculosis. This is shortly after the war. I had T.B. It was discovered. They didn't tell my mother right away but I was sent to a sanitarium, about an hour away from the camp. I was 9 at the time, 9, 10 years old.
>> Bill Benson: And that would have been the first time you were separated from your mother.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. It was the first time. And the sanitarium had a lot of anti-Semitic nurses in it. It was a difficult time. I think my pain tolerance comes from that period. My mother left me with other children who had T.B. but when she came back a week later, she could only afford to come once a week, she did not find me. And they said, oh, she's been quarantined. And I had to be there for nine months. They could not give me streptomycin. They wouldn't give me the shots. They only gave the medication to people who had T.B. of the bones. But my mother -- she got in touch with family.
>> Bill Benson: In the United States, right?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. In the United States. However, they had to perform other tests on me. And I was in surgery where they had to collapse a lung. I was there for nine months. It was very difficult.
>> Bill Benson: Nine months.
>> Rita Rubinstein: A difficult nine months.
>> Bill Benson: Was your mother able to come and visit you during that?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Once a week she came.
>> Bill Benson: Once a week.
>> Rita Rubinstein: And I used to console her. I would it will her, I'll be fine. And the nurses were not very nice. They said they'll do all kinds of tests. They'll hurt. And I gritted my teeth. And I said, no, I am not going to cry. I'm not going to show that. But I survived it. And in schools they took us on different trips. We went to different chapels. As far as food, we had provisions. They gave us tuna in cans. We had Spam. We wouldn't touch Spam. So my stepfather would go to the farmers and he would give them the Spam and canned goods and in turn they gave us chickens, fresh chickens.
>> Bill Benson: In return for cans of Spam?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Right. And we had packages that came from the United States. Hand me downs from my cousins. And we went to the woods. And we would steal apples from the orchards. It was wonderful for us kids. It was really life reborn.
>> Bill Benson: And you were there almost three years?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Three years. We had to wait for the quota system. And while we were there, I will never forget, one day in particular, there was -- it will always be in my mind and my heart. May 18, 1948, when Israel was declared an independent country. We finally had a country to go to. And the United States of course -- and there was such

joy in the school and in the camp. The kids, there were a handful -- there were about 100 of us who made a bonfire. And we danced around all night long because we no longer had to say, tell me, where shall I go? Every door is closed to me. We finally had a place to go to.
But of course I was too young. I couldn't -- my aunt, who married my uncle, had a quota system. They left for the United States way before we did. They left in -- and Bella left in '47. And I had two aunts whom I had never met, my father's sisters. I wanted to go to Israel because that was finally our country. My mother said, I'm sorry, but you're too young. I want you to be on the exodus. You're coming with me. We're going to go to the United States. It was a wonderful decision. But so that was a date that I will never forget.
And another thing in camp, we had a lot of plays that I participated in. And my mother -- I loved to sing, just as my father, I guess. I inherited it. That's why I formed that group. And while I was on stage, there was a mother sitting next to my mother, a woman, not a mother. She wasn't a mother. And she said, I wonder if that little girl's mother is alive to see her onstage. And my mother said, yes, I'm lucky. This is my daughter. And she said, you are very lucky because I lost a child in the war. There were many such horrible stories. And I met many of my friends in school who lost their parents.
But thank God, you know, we were finally free. And we got the help we needed. And with the quota system, we were a little afraid because unlike -- they didn't have -- Ellis Island existed, but we had to have medical exams before we came into the United States. So we were --
>> Bill Benson: So instead of being quarantined at Ellis Island, you would have been --
>> Rita Rubinstein: Exactly. We were afraid because of my history of T.B. that we would not be allowed in.
>> Bill Benson: But finally in 1949, you made it here.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, my gosh.
>> Bill Benson: Before we start to close the program, I want to ask you about a couple of other things if I can, Rita. You said to me that your mother was a survivor and a very strong lady, which is evident from what you've told us. But tell us a little bit more about your mom.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Well, she was very strong. She did her best to try to put food on the table, her and my aunt. My father's sister, they would really go to places that were dangerous. Amazingly she had my father's prayer shawl. How she saved it, I don't know. But that's the only thing I have left of him. And to this day, my late husband used to wear it on High Holidays. And I do so too. And it has been present at every one of my grandchildren's bar mitzvahs. I feel very close to him. That's the only thing that I have of him.
>> Bill Benson: Before you open it, which I hope you're going to --
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes, I'm not going to do that yet. But I wanted to relate my feeling when I first came to the United States.
>> Bill Benson: And I just wanted to sort of reiterate for our audience, think of the journey that this took.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Oh, my.

>> Bill Benson: That your mom hung onto this through all that you have described to us, going across the river on the barge, staying in that little home in Shargorot for three years, and hanging onto it.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yeah. It's unbelievable really that she was able to save this. But you will hear more today, but I said, no, that's too long for my family. And hopefully, you know, it will be present at weddings like it was at bar mitzvahs. But I just want to relate my wonderful experience of the United States and my coming on the ship. It was not a cruise ship, believe me. It was an army transport. It happened to be the same army transport that my husband took when he was drafted -- when he was drafted too young, because his parents wrote him four years younger. He was 16 when he was drafted into the army. He was on that same ship.
>> Bill Benson: A troop transport.
>> Rita Rubinstein: Yes. It was a terrible journey. To this day I only have been on one cruise because I remember the journey. We were in bunk beds right near the machinery. And my mother and I were very sick. But the day we landed in New York harbor, and finally got on deck, the illness left us. We couldn't even think. And seeing the Statue of Liberty greeting us, there, I finally felt I am free at last, free to practice my religion. The doors were open, and the opportunity -- we came with nothing. We had no money left. Nothing. It really is a wonderful country, the land of opportunity.
We can criticize because we have the freedom to criticize. Since we have nothing, I qualified for welfare, but no, we would not do that. My mother tried to work. And my stepfather. And I made it. Really by working hard. If you pursue things and work hard, you can make it. I went to school at night, worked during the day, became a teacher. And my husband and I were the first in the family to own our own home and a car. And our parents were very -- his parents were lucky they survived. And my mother, she was very proud. And thanks to the United States. I really am so grateful. And this is still the best country. We have leaders that are good. Leaders that are not so good. But I think it should be open to immigrants, because immigrants add so much to this country. And they should be legal. I do believe in that. We waited for our turn. But it is one of the greatest countries in the world.
>> Bill Benson: We're sure glad.
>> Rita Rubinstein: I'm glad to be here.
>> Bill Benson: Rita, I'm going to close the program in just a minute.
We will have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until August 8. All of our programs are available on the Museum's webpage. If you can't come back and join us, you can see all of our programs and Rita's program.
Because we didn't have a chance for you to ask Rita a question today, Rita will remain behind on stage with she's done and we would invite any of you, all of you, if you want, to come up onstage afterwards and meet Rita, ask her a question. You know, give her a hug, take a photograph with her, whatever you want to do. You're OK with that?
>> Rita Rubinstein: Absolutely.
>> Bill Benson: So we do invite you to come up and do that very much. It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person gets the last word. And so with that, I'm going to turn to Rita to close our program.
>> Rita Rubinstein: I think I disconnected myself.
>> Bill Benson: Stay in the chair.

>> Rita Rubinstein: I do want to say that Hitler wanted to eradicate us, and I always say my revenge to Hitler is that I have three daughters, eight grandchildren, and hopefully there will be other generations. So he did not succeed, and it's very important for each and every one of us to speak up when -- there are still so many small -- not small but tragedies that are happening. In Syria, all over the world. And each one of us can really make a difference.

I want to say that I thank God that we survived really the darkest period in history. I am grateful to the United States for opening its doors to us. As I said, it's the greatest country. We should appreciate the freedoms that we have and opportunities. And I'm proud to be a U.S. citizen. I'm very patriotic. I always fly my flag. And I'd like to thank our men and women in the military for the sacrifices that they have made in protecting our freedom, and they are still doing it now.

And hate is never right. And right is never wrong. The young people are our future. And that's why I feel obligated to tell my story. And you can prove the deniers wrong. But you did meet a survivor. There are many different stories. We all have different stories. My good luck was not having to be separated from my mother.

And how do I believe I still survive? Do you feel guilty? Why did I survive? Why didn't others survive? There must be an answer somewhere. And if you save one life, you save really the world.

And I'm dedicating this presentation in memory of course my loved ones and the 1.5 million children and 6 million -- 11 million others that died in that terrible period. I thank you for listening to my story. I hope you'll pass it on. And what makes me feel good and go on and my positive attitude, it makes me feel good if I help people. That's why I volunteer. I like working with children. I always have. I love children because I lost a childhood. Children are our future.

I know there's a lot of sadness in this world and a lot of bullying. Please stand up for what's right. And that's very, very important. Do the right thing. Thank you.

[Applause]

I want to share the prayer shawl with you. That's why I bring it. It was traditional for a parent of the bride to present the groom with it. And this was presented to my father by my grandparents before they got married. And when I gave it to clean, they said this piece is sterling silver. Believe it or not, and this is about 84 years old. And so I bring it to show you. That was my dad's. Thank you for listening.