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"First Person"

Dora Klayman

July 2nd, 2019.

VOG: Ladies and gentlemen, please silence all electronic devices, our program will begin in just a moment.

BILL BENSON:

Good morning. Welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I am Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. This is our twentieth year of the *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is **Mrs. Dora Klayman**, 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.stenograph.com, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests. Dora will share 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 Dora 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 Dora is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Dora Klayman was born on January 31st, 1938, in Zagreb Yugoslavia, which is present-day Croatia, here we see Dora sitting on a park bench with her younger brother, Zdravko. On this map of Yugoslavia in 1933, the arrow points to Zagreb. In this photo, we see Dora on an outing to the zoo with her parents Solomon, who ran a brush-making factory and her mother was a teacher. Pictured here is Dora's maternal grandfather Rabbi Joseph Leopold Deutsch. In April 1941 when Dora visiting maternal grandparents in the small town of Ludbreg, Germany invaded Ludbreg, in June 1941, Dora's parents, and her brother were arrested.

Their housekeeper was able to get Zdravko, an infant out of prison, from then on Dora and Zdravko were sheltered by her sister Giza and her husband Ljudevit.

On the left we see Giza and we had her husband Ljudevit in the photo taken many years later.

We close with this portrait of Aunt Giza, Dora, and Zdravko, taken to be sent to Ljudevit after he had been arrested, and interned in the concentration camp. In 1943, Aunt Giza was denounced and sent to Auschwitz, where she perished. Dora remained in Yugoslavia, until 1957, and in 1958, immigrated to the United States.

In 1957, while on her way to Switzerland, Dora met Daniel Klayman, who was returning to New York from a year of post doctoral study as a Fulbright scholar in India. They were married in Switzerland a year later and together, they arrived in the United States, in the fall of 1958.

The following year, dan and Dora, came to Washington, D.C., and Dan began his career as a researcher in medicinal chemistry at the Walter Reid army institute of research, his work culminated in his expertise in drug development against malaria, of the birth of their two children, Wanda and Elliott, Dora resumed her education, and getting degrees in French and teaching English as a second language, she thought in

Montgomery County Maryland public schools including 23 years at Bethesda-Chevy Chase high school, where she headed the English, as a second language, department. Dan passed away in 1992, both of their children live in the Washington area.

Wanda is deputy assistant director of an international association that deals with transportation issues. Elliott is a free-lance videographer, and owns a video and film production company. He is married to Iona and they have three children, ages 24, 22, and 15. After Dora retired from full-time teaching in 1999, she became active as a volunteer with this museum, her work here consists primarily of translating and helping to research material from the Holocaust. Written in Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian, her original project was connected to the Jasenovac archive. As we will hear later, Jasenovac was a major concentration camp, in Croatia.

Other projects for Dora have included the translation of a booklet, that accompanied a 1942 anti-Semitic exhibit in Croatia, and the translation of the captions on a large archive of photographs, that had been gathered during the post World War II trials in Yugoslavia.

To add to her language skills, Dora continues to learn Hebrew, Dora also enjoys traveling, she has been to Israel, several times, where she was happy to reunite with her cousins and their families, some of her travels are connected to learning more about the events and the aftermath of the Holocaust.

She has attended several conferences of the International Organization of Child Survivors, including in Poland in 2011, when she visited Auschwitz for the first time, and in Berlin in 2014, where she was impressed by the effort made by that country to teach about and to remember, the Holocaust.

In 2013, she visited the memorial site at the infamous concentration camp where most of her family perished. Last summer she returned to Croatia, this time visiting the

cemetery, at the former concentration camp of

Besides "First Person" she speaks publicly and in other settings including small groups in the museum as well as local schools in the vicinity, and recently at an interdenominational observance of in Delaware.

[APPLAUSE]

BILL BENSON: Thank you so much for joining us, and being willing to be our "First Person" today. Thank you.

You -- you have so much to share with us in our short one hour together. In fact less than that now. So we'll get right to it.

You were three years old, when World War II came directly to Yugoslavia, in the spring of 1941, when it was attacked by Germany. Before we turn to the horrors of the war and Holocaust, start telling us about your family and community in the years before the war>>DORA: So, my -- my family -- hadn't been in -- in Croatia, for a very long time.

When the war actually happened.

By very long time, I mean, not for generations.

They -- my father was actually born in Romania, but they emigrated into Yugoslavia when he was a very young child.

The -- the -- and then they settled in Zagreb. My mother's family, came to a small town, Ludbreg, which is on the -- very -- far north on -- north of Zagreb, near the Hungarian border; and they came, so that my grandfather could serve as rabbi, to the small Jewish community that was there.

They actually came from Slovakia, and -- and they had -- when they arrived, they had two children, and then they had two more including my mother. My mother was the youngest, and by the time war started, my grandfather had

been the rabbi of that community, for 40 years

BILL BENSON: 40 years.

>>DORA: 40 years, so they had been living for for a long time, not just for generations, by the time war came around, all the children of my mother's family had been settled, had been working.

My mother, in particular became a teacher, and elementary school teacher and then married my father, who came in from Zagreb, and they moved to Zagreb.

The other children, in the family, especially, important members of the family, to me, were the -- my mother's sister.

Blanca, who was married and had two children.

And the -- the... sister, who was older, and who was actually born outside of Croatia, who -- with whom -- who arrived with the parents, early on; she was 15 years older than my mother, so she was almost sort of a quasi-mother to my mother.

And she played a very large role, she's the one whose picture you just showed.

BILL BENSON: Aunt Giza.

>> Aunt Giza. She was 15 years older than my mother. So she -- very much took care of my mother and eventually took care of me.

DORA: (Continuing) my father, as you said, ran the factory of brushes. He actually learned the Craft, and then started the business of his own, and by the time war started, there were about 12 workmen; and he was -- they were prospering and doing well.

And so that's more or less the family.

BILL BENSON: You had explained to me in Ludbreg, your mother's hometown, where you were during the war years, that had been an integrated community.

But what did you mean by that?

DORA: Well, can I mean that, there was actually some, but very little in comparison to other places. Overt anti-Semitism. People prospered, my grandfather, had -- only minor events that would be con- -- that would be labeled as "anti-Semitic events" and he served as a translator, for -- in the Court, for German and Hungarian, and he also taught Jewish children, in their religious classes that they had in the elementary school; so the elementary schoolchildren, had a -- had religious education as part of their day.

And the Catholic priests, and the -- the orthodox, I mean, minister was there, and my grandfather, then, taught the Jewish children.

So the Jewish community was rather small.

But fairly well-to-do; and they were either store-owners, or there was a lawyer, a doctor -- so it was -- and the interesting thing is that you take a look at pictures, which are available online, take a look at pictures of the community. And there are tennis clubs, and Jews and Catholics playing together -- by the way, this was practically 90%. I mean, 100% Catholic world. Roman Catholic world. And there were some.... Serb orthodox religions around there but generally this is a Catholic world.

But there was -- there was social integration; and certainly, economic, and educational integration.

BILL BENSON: Thank you for explaining that.

When -- when Germany launched its attack on Yugoslavia, on April 6th,

1941, you were away from Ludbreg -- Zagreb, excuse me on a visit with relatives in Ludbreg, tell us what you can about what you know the circumstances as to why you were away from your family, and what happened once the Germans came into Yugoslavia.

DORA: I was away, because well, I was two years old. And my mother -- my parents just had another baby. My brother.

He was three years younger, and we were both born in January, three years apart. A neighbor from Ludbreg came from visit, and my parents decided to send me to visit with my grandparents, because it was an opportunity to get me on the train. And I have that image, of being on the train, it was very exciting, even though I was very young. I remember.

And the -- so I still don't know, actually, why I was sent. Did they know -- they all knew that the war was imminent. But I don't really think that that was the reason they sent me.

I think they sent me because, first of all, to just visit grandparents, and aunts and so on -- the other one, possibly because, my mother just had a baby so it was a good thing, to send me away for -- for a bit of time. I just happened to be at my grandparents, and that, April, when Germany invaded.

BILL BENSON: I'm going to jump in for a minute Dora, you said they knew that war was probably imminent. Did your parents or other members of the family, did anybody make attempt to try to leave Yugoslavia, before the Germans came in?

DORA: Not before.

There was -- actually, no place to go. That was the problem; and that's what we are talking about a lot these days, is.

BILL BENSON: Right

DORA: People say why didn't you all leave? But there was no place to go.

So there was one thing, and the other -- the other thing is that, we really -- I don't think they knew exactly how things are going to work out.

Eventually, some people tried to leave, and -- my aunt and uncle, was -- my two cousins, did manage to get passes to leave.

Where to? To the Italian zone.

Croatia was -- when -- I don't want to jump ahead, but what happened, when Germany invaded, the country -- the country of Yugoslavia, fell apart.

More or less into the same parts that it's in now.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh

DORA: In that Croatia, became a country, Slovenia, Serbia, so on -- were really taken over by Germany.

But the part of Croatia, that is along the Adriatic, which everybody these days wants to visit, it's very beautiful.

BILL BENSON: Right

DORA: That's actually occupied by Italy. And Italians were -- I think -- it was known -- I don't know. That Italians dealt with Jews in a much more humane way than the Germans.

And then turned out, the local population did not deal with Jews very well.

So the -- how did Croatia become a country all of a sudden?

By itself?

It was certainly not an independent country. Though, that's exactly what it's called itself. It's called itself, "independent state of Croatia."

It's a puppet government.

How did that become?

So, there was a political right -- very nationalistic right that wanted to have Croatia, just Croatia, by itself; without any other members of former Yugoslavia.

Which, of course, Yugoslavia became a country after World War I.

BILL BENSON: Right.

BILL BENSON:

DORA: The screws only talked about "free of Jews" and Croats wanted it free of everybody else.

So Croatia, Croatian right-wing did not succeed, the nationalists Ustaše, that's what their name was, did not succeed in taking over the country, by -- by democratic means.

So they made a pact instead, with -- they are -- they went to Italy on their own, and they got themselves together. They made a pact with Germany, with Hitler, and there's a -- a picture you can see, with the head of the government, shaking hands -- central government shaking hands with Hitler. They made a pact.

You, Germans, let us run this country; and we will do whatever you want us to do. And we'll all be friends.

BILL BENSON: That's how --

DORA: That's how he came into power, and then, they they would run everything exactly the way the Jews -- Germans wanted them, that's exactly what they did.

Just to finish what -- the question.

The -- my aunt and uncle and two cousins managed to get the pass -- passes to go to the Italian zone.

But, unfortunately, never made it all the way. The head of the government said, "Oh, you just return and you'll be fine" he made a proclamation, and they believed it.

And so, they returned to Ludbreg, only to be taken -- sent to concentration camps, in very short period of time.

BILL BENSON: Very short time...

Your Aunt Giza, and your uncle Ljudevit and other family members in Ludbreg, they learned that your parents, had been arrested and sent to a concentration camp, but that your brother had been saved from deportation.

Tell us about what happened to your parents, and about your brother and how you were able to be reunited with your brother. Remember, you told us, you were away at that time.

DORA: Right. Right.

Actually, my parents got -- the deportation started very fast after the Ustasha took over.

And they barely had the time to establish camps, and they were starting to deport people, and the first -- first, they were putting them into former hospitals, or -- other places, where they would find spaces, but eventually, there were camps.

And when my parents were first -- my parents were taken fairly early. And they were not yet in camps. That's not exactly the -- I should call -- they were in the trans- -- transfer camps, sort of. They were still in Zagreb. Before they were actually shipped away totally.

And our housekeeper found out that my -- that -- what happened, and she went, and asked the Ustasha, if she could have my baby brother; and my mother,

then, handed the baby over. And gave the -- they allowed it and she gave the baby to the housekeeper with the hope, of course, that she would call the relatives, and that he would be safe.

Which she did.

And so, she called... my aunt and my uncle and they came to get him.

And I have a fairly clear memory of his arrival. As he was the baby, he was crying.

BILL BENSON: That's one of your early memories that you have of coming into the house

DORA: Right.

BILL BENSON: In 1942, your parents had been deported. You and your baby brother now are living with your aunt and uncle.

In 1942, your uncle Ljudevit himself, was arrested and sentenced -- and sentenced to the concentration camp, you and your mother remained with your Aunt Giza.

Tell us about your uncle's imprisonment in and what that meant for you and your brother and living with Aunt Giza, and I think, might be worth explaining, a little bit about uncle Ljudevit

DORA: Yes, and also probably backing off a little bit of time, because in 1942, what happened was all the Jews of Ludbreg were deported so that happened much before my uncle was deported.

BILL BENSON: Because he was not Jewish

DORA: He was not Jewish and that's what we need to explain, yes.

So my Aunt Giza, they were live in for a very long time, he was -- I mentioned she was 15 years older than my mother and he was ten years older

than she, which played a role, later on.

But he was very boss in a sense, she was working in the local bank and he was one of the directors of the bank.

They were in love but did not get married for a a very long time, and he survived. I can say, so, later on, I used to ask him, well, why did you not get married for such long time and he said say, "Well, she was very happy living with her mother, with her parents, and I was happy living with my mother; so there was no need. " But, of course, it's an excuse, I'm sure. He didn't want to ever say, "Well, you know, she was Jewish and I was not. And there were problems."

The problems were not of the kind that one can imagine, there was no problems within the Family.

And there is a picture, which people can see online, if they want. Of the whole family, and everybody's Jewish except my uncle, who is in the center, a picture of my parents' wedding.

And so, he was always included in everything, but, neither was converting to the other's religion.

And there was no civil ceremony, civil marriage available in Yugoslavia.

BILL BENSON: No -- religious marriages

DORA: Only religious marriages at one point, just before the war started -- so the war was already raging in the rest of Europe. They went Hungary, which had a civil ceremony -- civil system of marriage. And they got married. So they got married in '39; and they thought, of course, that it would save her, because they have heard that sometimes, in mixed marriages, the one -- the spouse -- that was not Jewish could save the spouse, who was Jewish.

So they got married.

So that's who they were.

Living, also, again, in Ludbreg, and everybody was there, in 1942 -- and it came.

BILL BENSON: I might mention one other thing, your uncle was a very prominent man.

DORA: He was a very prominent man, and he was the bank director, as I said, and mayor, very well known, very highly respected in that town, and he -- he was totally into music, played the violin, had a -- had a -- you know, group to play chamber music and to play fun things.

And it was -- truly, a -- you know, a pillar of the -- of that society.

And, actually, family, was -- sort of a minor aristocracy, but strangely enough, not very healthy.

So that, his brothers and sisters, pretty much, died young, and none of them married.

Before dying, and they were all young.

Dying of tuberculosis, and all kinds of things that people used to die of, that we would now cure with penicillin; but -- so that, by the time I came on the scene, there was only one sister alive.

Of 12 of them. And she -- she had not married. So she -- and she was older than he; so she's the only person that I, actually, ever got to know of that family.

Except very distant cousins. Anyway... so back to -- back to deportations. They were awful. I had that one -- that is one memory that I have. It was '42; so I was, like, four years old, a little more than four, but I remember, everybody coming, to our house, I was now living Aunt Giza, and everybody carrying

satchels, and pillows I remember, pillows and saying good-bye to me and crying and my brother and I were there and I'm sure I didn't know what was going on, I know everybody else was very upset, and so it was -- upsetting to me as a child.

And that was that. They -- disappeared and they were off to which became a horrible camp.

BILL BENSON: We'll come back to that. Here you are with your aunt and uncle, and then your uncle, who's not Jewish, he gets arrested.

DORA: Yes, there was a reason for that -- I need to start with. The reason for that -- and that was already '43 now.

BILL BENSON: Okay

DORA: Somewhat later. The reason for that was that, even though, Croatia, was so happy to accept all of the German Nuremberg laws, a lot of people did not. -- did not go along with that, and, of course, Croatia now had its own army, its own laws -- all the laws they promulgated were the same laws that Germany had, absolutely.

BILL BENSON: So all the restrictions?

DORA: All the restrictions, no jobs, no school. You had to -- your -- all your worldly goods were confiscated. You had to write down absolutely everything you owned. There are papers in the museum that we found, that were -- my little cousins had to write down, they had to write down, you know, one necklace.

One winter coat.

Three dresses.

Everything. Everything had to be -- had to be reported.

And could be taken away, of course, you know, housing, all of that.

So, a lot of people, didn't go along with that.

To many, in Croatia, at the time, hats off -- because they actually did not only just -- didn't go along quietly, but they went into the mountains and joined and became a partisan force; and they -- it started slowly. And more and more people went.

And eventually, it became quite a force.

That fought the Nazi.

BILL BENSON: And the Ustasha

DORA: You had the Ustasha force, I saw very few Germans at any point. Mostly Ustasha forces.

And the partisans. And there was constant fighting. Now we go into the part where the partisans would be in the hills.

And they would -- the Ustasha were -- but they were in the town, and the partisans would attack, and sometimes -- and those are horrible sights, and sometimes, the -- the Ustasha would win and sometimes partisans.

And twice Ludbreg was actually liberated for a certain period of time.

But whenever -- since the Ustasha were not very happy, of course, with the partisan attacks and successes, they would look for who is responsible.

And one of the things that they said, "Well, the people in town are probably helping them".

So what they did, is they gathered some of the -- well, well-regarded people in town, including my uncle, and there were about 5 of them, I think.

And they sent -- they sent them, to Jasenovac, that is how they ended up in Jasenovac, the difference between sending Jews to Jasenovac, and sending somebody like my uncle, was in a sense that he was a prisoner of war -- I'm sorry.

He was --

BILL BENSON: Like a political prisoner

DORA: A political prisoner, thank you, and so they were treated somewhat differently. Actually given a sentence of sort.

And -- on the other hand Jews like the first group of my family, that went, they were just killed outright, or put to work; and if they survived, on extremely meager -- extremely meager circumstances with hardly any food, and hardly any shelter from cold, and miserable weather. Then that's that. The people would be thrown in the river, hung, hit -- that was all that my -- my grandfather never made it into the camp.

He was hit on the head.

With a shovel, on the way in.

And was killed.

So it was a -- extremely brutal --

BILL BENSON: I was going to say -- because most of us, I'm sure, it's true of our audience, it was true of me until I met you. I had never heard of Jasenovac.

And it was an especially brutal place

DORA: It was an especially brutal place, and -- it was especially brutal place, and it was brutal, without being so organized, like, Auschwitz, we know, you know,.

People were counted, and organized and it was organized and people were gassed and this way and that way.

This was much more ad hoc, you know,.

And they were just brutal people, who -- and people were killed in every which way.

BILL BENSON: Even buried alive?

DORA: Yeah, I don't know so much burying alive. That would be too much trouble.

They did -- in Jasenovac, itself, there were other places where they would have to dig, big, you know, large numbers and then throw them in and, yes.

But one thing that I have to say about Jasenovac, before -- before I forget: Is that as I said, it held Jews, of course; but also, Roma of whom there were fairly large number, in Croatia.

And most importantly, Serbs. Why is that important? It's important because it's still something that hangs over former Yugoslavia, and in a sense, was one of the precipitating moments in the break-up of Yugoslavia.

I mean... horrible as it is, you know, it's, like, if you kill me, then I kill you; and -- and so there is never an end. There was never any true reconciliation. Or true examination of what really happened. Or truthfully dealing with numbers and so on.

BILL BENSON: So with your uncle, now, in there, what did -- with -- he had a sentence, what was it like for him?

DORA: He was in a sense, very lucky. Because, as I -- the reason I talked about his age, he was born in 1885.

Was -- and he was frail, so, like, much of his family, he probably wouldn't have made it through, but he did survive.

He saw my father, by the way, there. My father was still alive. Because my father was young and strong, and they put him to work.

And he -- he was starving, but he was still alive.

And he told us that when he returned and I know how my father ended up;

so, but -- but my uncle, they knew that he was a banker; and so they put him to run his -- their accounts.

So they put him instead of digging, you know, clearing the -- the problems of the river and building things, or running -- there was -- there was a brick factory and a chain factory. And there was.... what was it called? Canning factory.

Instead of -- I wouldn't call it factory. These are workshops, sort of. Instead of doing that kind of thing, he was put to an office to run the paperwork, to run their accounts and so that saved them, and there was a person in that office, that was kind to him, and gave him some extra food.

After the war, the reverse was -- had happened, and the -- that guy ended up in.... ended up being incarcerated by the new government, and I remember my uncle sending him some packages.

And I sort of wish that I had -- I knew who that person was, but I don't.

BILL BENSON: So while you are uncle is now at Jasenovac, you're with -- you and your brother with your Aunt Giza.

DORA: Yes.

BILL BENSON: In 1943, while you're with your Aunt Giza, she is denounced and taken?

DORA: Yes, she was denounced.

And I must say that, my brother and I were there too and nobody denounced us. It was, like, nobody was paying attention to us almost, it seems like, how did we just go there? You know, how were we there? But she was denounced and they came and picked her up. And as she was running off trying to save herself, trying to get into the attic of a house, she went by the next door neighbors' and the name of the family was Runjak and said, "Please, take the

children."

And so this Catholic family, just ordinary family, of a father and mother, and three children, older than we were, took us in and my aunt -- my aunt was, caught; and deported to Auschwitz.

BILL BENSON: And you only recently learned what happened to her, didn't you?

DORA: Recently, because we have -- we have the archives from Germany, here at the museum now, and I was able to get the the record that she was there, and it says she died of intestinal -- I don't know, problems, and, of course, you have intestinal problems if you live in concentration camps and you are exposed to diseases and you're suffering from malnutrition --

BILL BENSON: Right

DORA: You didn't necessarily had to be gassed. You can get -- you can.

BILL BENSON: Right

DORA: You can die another way, yes, you can be killed in other ways.

BILL BENSON: So Aunt Giza is taken, she's gone, now you're with the family Runjak.

DORA: And I want -- I didn't -- it wasn't a huge period of time.

BILL BENSON: Right

DORA: Because my uncle just happened to return at the time, because he tried to go and follow her, and see if he could save her, but it -- because she had gone to Germany, there was just no way of saving her.

But -- but I need to say that during the time that I was with the Runjak family, we, actually, had Ustasha armed forces -- in our back yard bivouacked in our back yard, we were renting in the house, and that is where the Runjak family

lived. We had Ustasha all over the place.

And so I was -- we were told my brother and I, that we need to call -- we need to call Ms. Runjak "mom," and so we did.

And we -- my brother always called her "mom" from then on.

I was... old enough to know, that she was not my mom.

BILL BENSON: Right

DORA: And so I was able to switch. If the Ustasha were there, if somebody was there that I didn't know; I was -- that was Mrs. Runjak, but if -- but if -- no, I would call her mom if there was somebody there, but if we were all by ourselves, she was Mrs. Runjak, I could switch back and forth.

BILL BENSON: And clearly, the small town, the local people there, knew who you were.

DORA: Everybody.

BILL BENSON: But no one denounced you

DORA: No one, sometimes if we knew the Ustasha -- something special would be in town, I remember the head of the Ustasha once came on a visit and everybody wanted to go see it, see who he was.

So we -- I wanted to go and, of course, I wasn't allowed.

Because it was dangerous.

And -- sometimes I would have to wear a hat on my head because I was a flaming red head in those days, my natural color, there aren't any red heads, I was shocked to come to this country and find out how many red heads there are, so both my brother and I were red heads, so it was very unusual, so I would be kind of sticking out.

So often, when I had to hide, I wear a hat, or there were other times we

hid -- I don't know we ever get to the point of how we hid in the -- how we hide in the basement, where the --

BILL BENSON: I want us to get there very much so.

I do want you to tell us, though, that you were baptized as Catholics, I believe during that time

DORA: Uh-huh.

BILL BENSON: And why did that happen?

DORA: Well, during the time that I was with the Runjak family, we were -- but my brother, also -- Mrs. Runjak, you know, they were very observant Catholics and they -- there was a local priest, who was not apparently very sympathetic to the Jewish Cause.

And he -- he told Mrs. Runjak at one point, "Well, what about these children? What are we going to do about them?" Like, you know, it was a threat.

And so she thought that it was time to have us baptized to save us.

At that point my uncle was back, and she apparently, must have told him; and so they decided that one thing to do would be to baptize us both. So we were baptized.

BILL BENSON: Just as an aside, I believe that that particular priest was tried, and convicted after the war

DORA: Right. Right.

BILL BENSON: So your uncle's back, he did try to find his wife, your Aunt Giza, and, of course, it was too late.

Now you're living in really, a battleground

DORA: Right.

BILL BENSON: Because the war is coming towards the latter stages.

Tell us about that time for you...

DORA: Well, as I said we were sort of in an area, where the partisans, would be -- were able to be fairly close, in the mountains, and now, they are becoming a real force.

And... there would be battles, and we would try to -- we would try to hide during the time of the battle because the -- often, the bullets would be going through our house. There was a time, where, when we were not able to go and hide in the basement, and we would -- I was still in the living room. I remember that very well.

And sitting sort of in a corner, where -- where I could be shielded by the walls, because we were living in a house built in the 1800s, with huge, fat walls, but the bullet come through the window. So there was a time where I was in a corner and my uncle was in -- in the room next door and I was crying and so he came, and just then, a bullet flew through a bedroom window. And into the place where he had been sleeping so in a way I saved his life.

But other times, and, of course, by the time, the war ended, our house was all -- we had these armoires, pierced with bullets, and the sheets looked like, you know, something a child would do with a napkin, you know, little holes; but sometimes we were able to run to the basement.

Now, the basement was not an American-style basement. It was a cellar and you had to get out of the house, and down the -- down the stairs.

And there was dirt floor.

And that's where we used to have -- we had a vineyard and that's where we used to have barrels with wine, and, you know, fruits and vegetables that would be put there for the winter.

Tiny windows, but it was a safe place.

And, you know, there were frogs jumping around -- I thought it was perfectly fine, but, of course, I'm sure it was not an easy place to be, and we slept with -- stayed there for quite a while. There was some kind of cot we put down, and we would -- because the -- battles were mostly at night. And in the morning, you would peer out....

And -- and see who was in charge, and if the Ustasha were in charge, well, you -- you just knew you had to keep, you know, keep out of the way, and hide as best you can.

And if the partisans were in charge, then you could be free.

And there were times -- I have one image in my head of looking through the windows, when they didn't want me to -- and, you know, there were carts being pulled by horses, and the carts were full of bodies.

It was -- you know, pretty brutal time. And the Ustasha, would retaliate when the partisans would win; and there was one time, that I was going with... my aunt was already gone and we had somebody helping us in the house.

And we... she wanted to go to the movies. So she took me along, the -- the lady who was taking care -- and she was holding my eyes closed, supposedly, but I could see.

And the -- the main square, was on every tree, was full of trees; and on every tree, there was at least one body hanging there.

Because they caught so many partisans, and just hanged them.

BILL BENSON: That's an image you remember?

DORA: Yeah.

BILL BENSON: You shared with me, that for you, as a child, your terror

was not about being arrested and deported; it was really about being killed by gunfire and explosions

DORA: Yeah, well -- yeah.

BILL BENSON: Because it was so immediate

DORA: That was very immediate, right, because I didn't understand -- I think I was too young, to understand, what it means to go to a -- to be deported to a concentration camp.

I know -- I knew that my cousins were gone and they disappeared. And, of course, they were killed.

I don't know to what extent. I understood...

BILL BENSON: You survived through that.

The war ends, in May 1945, it's your brother, and you, and your uncle.

That's... three of you

DORA: Uh-huh.

BILL BENSON: Tell us about the wars and, also, about what your uncle, then, did to try to deal with resuming a life, and now he's got two little children that he's caring for

DORA: Right. So...

The war came to an end, and there was sort of expectation that maybe somebody would return.

And.... for a long time people just asked me, like, strange people on the streets would ask me, "Are you still hoping that your parents would return?"

And... and the reason for that was that, there was -- there were rumors that some people were taken to Russia, sent to Siberia, whatever. But, of course, that wasn't so.

There were people who survived, in the family, very few.

One of my -- one of my... uncles on my mother's side and one uncle on my father's side survived as prisoners of war in Germany, because they were in the Yugoslav army, when the -- when war started.

BILL BENSON: Okay

DORA: And -- and another uncle on my father's side survived. Because he was -- he and his fiancée later on wife, escaped to Hungary and they were on this train that ended up in Belgium, and from there, they were rescued into Switzerland.

And so eventually, I heard from -- so anyway, the two uncles, he did not come back, that one, he remained in Switzerland and I connected with him later. But the uncles who returned they went to see if there was anybody there alive, and especially my father's brother, wanted very much to take my brother and me.

But, of course, we didn't know him, and we didn't really want to go, and my uncle certainly was not wanting to give us up.

Because now that's all he had left.

BILL BENSON: Right

DORA: So, he immediately, actually, in 1946, he adopted us legally. And now the other -- the two uncles that wanted us to go with them, weren't -- weren't successful, because -- one of the things that happened was they asked, me if I wanted to stay or go with them.

And I said, "I'm staying".

And so -- at age 7 I had to make that decision.

But I stayed.

They both left, they eventually both ended up in what is now Israel.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh

DORA: And they both remarried. Their spouses were killed, and -- actually, one of them didn't -- was not married before but he got married too, also, survivors and they ended up in Israel; and I never got to see my mother's brother again. But my father's brother, I did see; and the first time I saw him was, actually, he came to Switzerland to my wedding.

BILL BENSON: It was the first time?

DORA: Yeah.

BILL BENSON: Of course, not -- if I'm not -- not long after you were adopted by Uncle Ljudevit, your brother died.

DORA: Yes. Yes, unfortunately.

Having survived the war, he contracted scarlet fever.

And died -- there were three children -- three little boys -- in town that contracted scarlet fever, he must have had a weak heart, that's what they said, and there were no antibiotics then, and he died very, very fast.

So from then on it was just my uncle and I.

BILL BENSON: What do you know, or can recall, about when your brother died the impact on your uncle. He's lost his wife, your aunt; he's adopted you and now he loses his now-adopted son?

DORA: Well, yeah, it was devastating and it took him a very -- took him forever -- I don't think he ever got over it. But he concentrated on taking care of me, and I was very, very lucky that he was a very love- -- loving person; and I had a very good home, and we had, you know, housekeepers and so on.

Who, you know, tried to do their best, and I ended up, then, going away, to -- went to high school, even. I actually had to go away, because there was no

academic high school in that town, in the town of Ludbreg. It was, like, 25 kilometers, away which is, like, 12 miles so it's no distance; however, that was before cars.

Trains took an hour.

And so I had to -- my uncle was insisting that I had to go to music school. I never mentioned that, so much to talk about but in camp, when he was in concentration camp, in Jasenovac, they knew that he could play the violin, and that he had had groups before, so they wanted to be entertained so they had him pit together a -- a choir, and they were putting performances on.

So, to -- for my uncle it was always music is so important. You -- have to -- you know, so I had to go to music school, in the afternoon, and regular school in the morning so I was staying in -- I was staying in this other town, and by that point, I had connected to my uncle -- my uncle in Switzerland.

And --

BILL BENSON: And I want you -- yes, I want you to tell us about that. I want --

DORA: Right.

BILL BENSON: In the time we have left, with the context for our audience,

DORA: Very much.

BILL BENSON: You were living now under a communist government

DORA: Yeah.

BILL BENSON: Life is --

DORA: This is the thing, we went from fascism to communism.

BILL BENSON: Just like that?

DORA: Just like that.

And so, it wasn't possible, actually, to leave Yugoslavia, of course,.

But my uncle from Switzerland, wrote to me, and said, "Could I come and visit?" And because the communist government considered me -- a -- what do they call it?

A -- a victim of fascism -- I was given a passport; and --

BILL BENSON: Because you had the designation, you were a victim of fascism?

DORA: Uh-huh. And the Swiss gave me, eventually, a visa; and so, when I was in 11th -- tenth grade, I went -- at the end of tenth grade I went to Switzerland, and that's the first time, I saw any of my family.

That -- since early childhood. So, you know, very young child. I was a very young child.

So... I ended up finding my -- now I found myself, in an orthodox Jewish family. My aunt and uncle had two children, and one of them was already seven at that time; and the other one was -- one -- one year old, I think.

And... it was quite a shock, because I -- at that point, I had no -- no knowledge of anything Jewish.

Not only was I living in a Catholic country, but nobody was observing any religion during the communist regime, so I went from that to the orthodox family. But they're a lovely family. And I enjoyed being with them, and I was there for a month; and then they had, "Well, when you go back, why don't you try and come here when you are at the university?"

And that's what happened.

BILL BENSON: And you got permission, again, which had to be really

unusual

DORA: I got permission again, it was very unusual to get permission to leave in a communist world.

BILL BENSON: To go to a western country

DORA: Yeah.

BILL BENSON: So you go to Switzerland and live with them. How was that for Uncle Ljudevit?

DORA: Well, obviously, hard.

BILL BENSON: Yeah

DORA: And I felt very bad at, you know, leaving him behind; but I thought it was going to be for a year, you know, I'm going to go back in a year and I was just going to study French and I'll be fine.

Well, that's not what happened.

BILL BENSON: Well -- I just -- I just want you to hear about how she met her husband. Because I like this

DORA: So I got on the train to go to Switzerland, to study for a year.

And on the train, there were -- there were three young men, having a very lovely discussion, outside in the hallway, like, a European train -- you have a compartment and then a hallway.

And the train was very full; so they were standing in the hallway, arguing. And I had --

BILL BENSON: In English, right?

DORA: In English. And I had studied English from -- from fifth grade -- no.

7 -- eighth grade on, from eighth grade on, I studied English and I loved the language, and when I went to the university, I was an English major: And

so -- but I had no opportunity to actually hear native speakers of English, or be able to speak English to a native speaker.

So I was, like, all ears trying to hear what they were talking about. What are they talking about? It was 1957, in the fall. It was a time of... the horrible things that were happening in Little Rock, Arkansas.

With -- with the children being not allowed to get into high school.

And not allowing kids to enter high school, and eventually, the president having to send the troops to prevent these children from being maligned.

So that's what they were talking about. And one of the guys was accusing -- one of the guys was a Yugoslav, obviously, and the other one, obviously, a communist; otherwise he would be going out of the country. And the other one -- and the one -- he was an American.

Who had -- who was being told, like, what kind of a country is this?

What kind of behavior is that?

How can you be like that?

And -- the young man was trying to say, "Well, it's not me. And it's not most of us. Most of us believe in -- in... freedom, and equality, for all. And I'm sure this is going to end."

So when the discussion ended, I went back through the hallway and this young man, who was being accused, of this... bad... activity by American government, said to me, "Pretty red hair" and I smiled and I said, "Oh, you speak English?" Well, from then on we started speaking and we talked for quite a while until he got off in Venice and I continued.

And then we exchanged addresses and then he wrote to me, and I wrote back and I wrote again and I wrote back and a year later he returned and we were

married. And so that's the story.

[LAUGHTER] BILL BENSON: Of course, then you moved here in 1958, but you were able to see your uncle Ljudevit again?

DORA: Yeah, well, of course, I could not go back, we had to get married in Switzerland and come -- come here.

I could not go to Yugoslavia at that time because I was afraid that I would not be able to get a visa, to come out again.

BILL BENSON: Right. It's one thing to send you off for a year to university

DORA: And now I'm leaving forever; and this was not going to work. So I did not go back, but I went back as soon as I could, which means when I got an American citizenship, which I got as fast as I could -- and so at that time, I had two children already.

People think you can get a citizenship like that, when you get married; it doesn't work that way.

You have to wait several years, and apply, and pass a test and so on.

And then I went back, and -- and I was able to go twice, on these trips. It wasn't easy in those days to also just, like, take off for Europe, especially, we're young, and bringing up two children; but I managed to go twice before he passed away.

BILL BENSON: I think we're going to have to close our program, there's so much that Dora had to skip over, as you can probably guess.

So much more we would like to have heard, about, but I'm going to turn back to Dora, in just a moment, to close our program, we didn't get a chance for you to ask Dora a question, but when Dora's done, Dora will remain on the stage,

and we invite anybody in the audience -- all of you, if you want -- come up on the -- she can take it!

Come up on the stage, and meet her, you know, get your picture taken with her, or ask that question if you have one.

You're willing to do that right?

DORA: Of course.

BILL BENSON: Dora will stay on stage, I want to thank all of you for being here, we have programs, on most weeks Wednesdays and Thursdays on this week it's different because of July 4th, Wednesdays and Thursdays until August eight you can see all of our programs on our YouTube channel, we hope you'll either come back and see one of our programs, don't go yet! It's our tradition at "First Person" that our "First Person" gets the last word.

And so, with that, I'm going to turn it back to Dora to close today's program, and, again, we'll vite invite you to come up, if you want, once she's finished

DORA: Can you -- so, I wrote something down, because I wanted to make sure that I don't tumble as we go along, and I wanted to be sure that -- you get my message, and in a straight way.

So, when -- when I visited Jasenovac last year that concentration camp, where -- there were 50 children, that were murdered there.

It was just in a -- in a most awful way.

And to just see graves unbelievable. Why were there graves to begin with? Because somebody took it upon themselves to actually put down the names, when they were burying them surreptitiously. So thinking of that -- thinking also of a friend of mine, who actually -- we were at the funeral

yesterday. She was separated from her parents, when she was a baby, she was born in -- in a concentration camp -- I'm sorry, in a ghetto. She was born in the Warsaw, and the people -- the parents smuggled her out through a Catholic family who sheltered her until the end of the war, and when the mother returned, she didn't want to go to the parents, because she didn't know who she was. It's very hard, it must have been awful -- to be separated from her parents, and then to have to go back to her parents, not knowing who they were.

But I -- I'm thinking of that, and I also think about my baby brother. Who was separated from our mother so that he would survive.

The agony felt by my mother is on my mind, as I watch the shocking news and hear about the events on our southern border.

Young children, even babies -- being separated from their parents.

All I can think of -- and say, is not now. Not here. Not in this country.

No, this is not the Holocaust, what's going on now, no, but it's not the best we can do either.

So I want to join those on both sides of the political spectrum. Who ask for an end of the practice of separating families.

And for the best possible care for the children.

Having lived through the Holocaust, I find it imperative to plead, for the humane treatment for those who seek our help.

And I will continue to speak about my past, in the hope that a reminder of that past may inspire us all, to see the tolerance, compassion, empathy, and respect for others makes for a better world for all.

Thank you, very much for being here!

[APPLAUSE]

(Dora Klayman, 12:05:49 p.m.)