REALTIME FILE

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: PETER GOROG
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>> Ladies and gentlemen, our program is about to begin. Please find your seats and silence all of your electronic devices. Thank you.
>> Bill Benson: Good morning, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, First Person. Thank you for joining us. This is our 20th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mr. Peter Gorog, 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.

Peter will share his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Peter 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 #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 Peter is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

Peter Gorog was born Péter Grünwald in Budapest, Hungary in March 1941. Peter's father, Árpád Grünwald, worked as office manager at a publishing house while his mother, Olga Schönfeld, worked as a hat-maker and raised Peter. This was the last picture taken of the family together; Peter was 3-months-old.

Peter's father was conscripted to work in the Hungarian Forced Labor Battalion beginning in 1940 because as a Jew he was considered "undesirable" for armed service by the Hungarian government. In this photo of a Forced Labor Battalion, Árpád is circled. In 1942, Árpád was sent to work with a labor battalion in Ukraine where he died.

Peter and his mother remained in Budapest. In March 1944, German forces invaded Hungary. Peter and his mother were evicted from their apartment and went into hiding with a Christian family. A few days after, a neighbor denounced them.

The Hungarian gendarmerie, or police, arrested Peter's mother and put her in jail. This is an historic photograph from October 1944 of Jewish women in Budapest arrested by Hungarian police.

Two days after her arrest, Olga escaped. She and Peter moved into an apartment safeguarded by Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. Later they fled to the Budapest ghetto where they lived with some of Peter's other relatives until the end of the war. In January 1945, Budapest was liberated by the Soviet Army.

In 1946 Peter's mother made plans for them to immigrate to the US. This photograph was taken for their passport. In 1949, while they were waiting for their visa, the Communist government of Hungary closed the borders. Peter grew up in Hungary.

Although Peter's Mother had attempted to emigrate to the U.S. right after the war, they were unable to leave and lived under the communist government until Peter's defection in 1980. While in Hungary Peter was eventually able to attend university and he earned a Master's degree in Electrical Engineering. He was part of the team that built the first computer designed completely by Hungarians.

His education and experience made it possible for Peter to remain and work in the U.S. following his defection until he received his green card and later become a U.S. citizen.

Peter, who retired in 2014, spent 34 years in the computer field in the U.S., spending most of his time at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland where he worked on such major projects as LANDSAT, the Hubble Space Telescope, the Space Shuttle, and the James Webb Telescope, which is to be launched in 2021.

Following his retirement, Peter became more actively involved with this Museum and began volunteering here. He translates documents written in Hungarian and video testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses. Peter is a tour guide for the Museum's Permanent Exhibition, leading tours for U.S. law-enforcement groups, and students from many states. Peter recently joined the History Unfolded project, reviewing materials submitted by "citizen historians." He describes his work at the Museum as "very emotional."

Peter and his wife Jorgy live in Maryland just outside of Washington, DC. They have four daughters, Sarah, Laura, Anna, and Ilana. They lost their daughter Juliana when she was just two years old. Peter's daughter, Veronika, from his earlier marriage in Hungary,

lives in Northern Virginia with her husband and her two daughters Monica, age 11, and Katalina, age 9. Jorgy and Peter welcomed Laura's daughter Emilia, their 3rd grandchild, into the family last September. They are a very close-knit family. Jorgy could not be here today because of her work schedule, but Ilana is here, having just arrived from Israel after volunteering for a year as an English teacher.

In addition to our *First Person* program, Peter speaks publicly at other settings about his Holocaust experience. He has been sharing his family's history with military, high school and college groups, recently speaking in Colorado at the University of Northern Colorado, Colorado Mesa University and various high schools.

Peter also contributes to "Echoes of Memory," a museum collection of writings produced by survivors as part of the museum's writing class for survivors. After today's program, Peter will be available in the foyer to sign copies of "Echoes of Memory."

With that I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Peter Gorog.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Peter, welcome and thank you so much for joining us and your willingness to be our First Person today. We have so much for you to cover in a short period, so we will start right away if that's ok with you.

>> Peter Gorog: I have no choice.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. Peter, World War II, of course, began when Germany and Russia invaded Poland in September 1939. Before we turn to the war and to the Holocaust, start, first, by telling us about your family and you in the years before the war.

>> Peter Gorog: Well, just a little bit of history of Jewish people in Hungary. They have been living in central Central Europe for more than 2,000 years. Actually, the Hungary tribes survived about 800 years later before Jews as part of the empire settled in what is Hungary today. Unfortunately, the history of anti-Semitism is as long as the Hungarian Jewish presence in Hungary.

Without going into details, there was a golden age of Hungarian Jews in the late 19th Century when Jews were emancipated. They got equal rights with -- actually, they became citizens. They were awarded all kinds of aristocratic titles. They were leaders of the industries. And unfortunately this ended with the First World War. Hungary, unfortunately as usual, they were on the losing side of the war. After the war was over, as usual again, they blamed the Jews.

As far as my family's concerned, they have been living in what was that time the Hungarian empire. Various parts of the empire, my mom was actually born what is now Ukraine. At that time, it was part of Hungary. Some of her siblings were born in what is Slovakia today and the Czech Republic.

And on my mom's side, I came from a very Orthodox-observant family. My great grandfather was a rabbi in a small town. My mom had a very religious upbringing and very religious observant lifestyle.

On my father's side, the family came or became a member of the Jewish community, which is approximately the same as conservative Judaism here in the United States.

They met in the early 1930's, got married 1937, and the rest is history.

>> Bill Benson: How large of an extended family did you have?

>> Peter Gorog: My mom has nine siblings and my father had two brothers unfortunately, on my father's side, I practically never get to know anybody because my father, his two

brothers died during the Holocaust. My grandparents, my father's parents, they died during the Holocaust, not because they were killed or September to concentration camps but because they were old and weak and there was no food, there was no medical supplies; so they died from natural causes but definitely it was the consequence of the war and the Holocaust.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your mother's business.
>> Peter Gorog: My mother was a female hat maker which was a very good business at that time, in the 1930s, 1940s hats were very popular. She made beautiful hats. We had a good middle class living, nice apartment in the middle of the city which was the best part of the city at that time.

My father was a clerk at the publishing company. Unfortunately, and again, part of the history of anti-Semitism in Hungary, the first anti-Semitic laws in Europe wasn't in Nazi Germany but it was in Hungary in 1920. The law Nuremberg Laws, which the number of Jewish students were restricted from Higher Education institutions my father wasn't to be a lawyer. He applied three times. He was rejected three times for one reason and one reason only, because he was Jewish.
>> Bill Benson: So, at some point then, he ended up pretty much joining your mother in his business.
>> Peter Gorog: Correct. Again, as the persecution of the Jews got worse and worse in Hungary, first Jews were banned from government jobs, later banned from any managerial job at any company. My father thought the best way to make sure that our family would make a living, to join my mom. And he learned the female hat-making business also. Before he was conscripted to the Forced Labor Battalion, he worked with my mom.
>> Bill Benson: Although World War II began September 1939, the full brunt of it didn't hit Hungary until 1944. As you were beginning to tell us, nonetheless conditions worsened for Jews in 1939 and increasingly got worse for your family and then especially when your father was taken for forced labor. Tell us what your circumstances were like when the war began and then what it meant once your father was conscripted into the labor about a battalion.
>> Peter Gorog: The Holocaust history in Hungary is a little bit different from the rest of Europe because, as you mentioned, Hungary was not occupied by Nazi Germany until 1944. Nevertheless, Jewish life was very, very, very bad for various reasons. Number one, year after year stricter and stricter anti-Jewish laws were enacted by the Hungarian government. First they were kicked out from government jobs. Later on, as I mentioned, any kind of managerial jobs. Numbers were restricted in professionals like doctors and lawyers. Only 12% of the doctors could practice -- Jewish doctors could practice. Jewish doctors could only see Jewish patients and Jewish patients could only go to Jewish doctors. Later on, mixed marriages were band also. Intimate relationships between Jews and non-Jews were pro prohibited by law. And non-Jewish persons could not serve in Jewish households or work for Jewish employers.

We were the victims – actually, not we were the victims, the very young lady my mom hired as a nanny, she was a Christian girl from the countryside, she came to Budapest to take care of me for a good salary. But when the law was enacted, my mom had to let her go. She lost her job. My mom lost her helper. It wasn't good for anybody.
>> Bill Benson: And then, of course, in October 1940, your father was taken for the Forced Labor Battalion, and she was pregnant.

>> Peter Gorog: Correct. My mom was, I think, three months pregnant with me when my father was taken to the Forced Labor Battalion. These were very specific to Hungary during this time. Jewish males between the age 18 and 55 were conscripted to the Army, but because they didn't trust them with weapons, with rifles or handguns, they served as slave laborers to military units. So, when the war started and the military units started to move from one place to another, so did the people in the forced labor camp.

You saw the pictures. They had regular military uniform, but they didn't get the winter uniform which was essential for survival. In 1942, the Hungarian Army with the Nazi German Army invaded the Soviet Union. The German Army went first in 1941 and the Hungarians in 1942, and so did my father at that time.

>> Bill Benson: And apart from the inadequate uniforms and the weather, the working conditions were exceptionally brutal and harsh.

>> Peter Gorog: Correct. They did all the dirty jobs for the Army, repairing roads, building bridges. But not only that. Once they were in Ukraine, they were used for diffusing the mines, retreating Soviet Red Army left behind minefields in order to slow down the progress of the Nazi German and Hungarian Army. The Hungarian troops used the Jewish slave laborers to defuse these mines.

Now, these people weren't trained for doing this. They were teachers, lawyers, clerks, what not. The way to defuse the mines was that the people in the Forced Labor Battalion had to march in front of the regular Hungarian Army.

>> Bill Benson: Into the minefield.

>> Peter Gorog: Into the minefield. And as the minefield exploded, so did the people who walked through the field.

>> Bill Benson: When your father left, did your mother know where he had gone?

>> Peter Gorog: Yes and no. While my father was away at the forced labor camp, he was able to send postcards from the camp. Now, because this Forced Labor Battalion was attached to military units, he had to put post of his number, a military post of his number. So, the actual location my mom wasn't aware, but because in the news they knew that the Hungarian Army moved into Ukraine and at that time the Hungarian Army was approximately 200,000 people plus 100,000 Hungarian forced laborers, the Jews who were in the labor battalions. And out of the 100,000, 40,000 never came back. They never came back because they died during war activities, died because of the harsh circumstances.

Ukrainian winters are very harsh. And the winter of 1942-1943 was extremely severe. The snow was 30, 40 centimeters high, knee-high or up to the waist. And under those circumstances, with the inadequate clothes they had, these people had to march. They didn't have enough food. They were weak. So if they sat down, in five minutes they froze to death.

>> Bill Benson: Your father at some point was able to come home. That's the photograph we saw earlier. What do you know about that from your mom, about his being able to come home for that short period?

>> Peter Gorog: Well, it was a long weekend. He was released because I was born and they had mercy on him and let him go for a long weekend. I can only imagine. My mom never told me what they did or discussed during those three days. But the picture you saw was made by a professional photographer. And there are some amateur pictures taken by my mom. And my father, I'm sitting on his arm, stark naked. This is why we didn't show it.

[Laughter]

Again, you can imagine. My father was ordered away for seven or eight months and they tried to catch up.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me, Peter, that you have a glimpse, really, of your mother's life, what it was like for her with your father gone. Tell us what you can about that time with your father gone and your mother's caring for an infant and then learning about your father's death.

>> Peter Gorog: I'm a child survivor. I was only 4 years old when my mom and I was liberated into the Budapest ghetto. So, my personal memories of the Holocaust are very sparse. What I know about what happened to us, what happened to my father, I know because my mom preserved the postcards my father sent until the last one sent before Christmas 1942. And also, my mom started jotting down everything what was happening to us, to me. Her hope was that one day we are going to be reunited with my father.

And so she could refresh her memory what my first words were, what food I liked, what I didn't like. So, she had a notebook which wasn't an actual diary. It was her business notebook. She'd hold on to names of her customers and phone numbers, the size of their head and what kind of hat they ordered. And between two customers, she wrote a couple of things which later became a regular dairy. When she got the notification that my father disappeared during the war activities, she turned this one into a regular diary.

And I have three notebooks like this one. That's what my mom used. She wrote, unfortunately, with pencil and they are faded so I had a hard time translating it.

Also, I think I have a copy of the postcard -- not a copy, the original postcard my father sent. Ultimately both the card and notebook will end up in the collection of the museum. The museum has a very extensive collection of Holocaust diaries.

But, just to give you a glimpse of how people felt during those times, here is something from my father's last postcard.

"Please write lots of letters and if you can, please send lots of pictures of yourself and little Peter. I gaze on the pictures I have, and they give me strength to struggle. The work is very hard, but I'm getting stronger. Thanks God, I can endure."

From my mom's diary, I can follow the emotional roller coaster she went through as she tried to deal with work, with family, and the absence of my father. So, from the emotional high of love she went to the emotional low of depression. And here are some illustrations about her love.

"You have no idea how much I long to see you. The thought of seeing you and having you next to me drives me insanity. Why the good Lord punishes me so much that the one I adore the most is separated from me for such a long time."

About her desperation, "I cannot stand this horrible situation and I'm heading to a nervous breakdown. I tried to control myself and I try to believe that you are not in any trouble. You just haven't had an opportunity to write."

And now, she wrote about mundane things about her guilt. She was a Jewish mother, so guilt came naturally. "Last night I was at the coffeehouse with my friends. You were in my mind. Who knows, you might be starving. You are cold. You wore rags. I'm here at the coffeehouse. I have such remorse, although I know that you are not mad at me."

And, of course, there was some information about me, the food I liked, the strange way I pronounced Hungarian words and also how much I didn't like to go to the pool.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you for sharing that, Peter, very much. When did your mother learn about your father's death?

>> Peter Gorog: The first notification came from the Hungarian Minister of Defense in January. It's a pre-printed form, my father's name and the date and the place of his disappearance, notifying my mother that my father disappeared during war activities. Now, this could have meant anything. Because some of the people died and the Hungarian Army just couldn't retrieve the bodies, so they disappeared. Some of them were captured by the Soviet Red Army and they were sent to camps in Siberia. So, they disappeared from the Hungarian Army. And, again, some of them died because of starvation or frozen to death or being blown up on the minefields. So, my mom still had the hope that my father would return.

And then another notification came two months later declaring my father dead. That was important legally for the Army to give account of what happened to one person. So, my father was officially declared dead although we didn't know. And, again, 60,000 Hungarian Jews survived and some of them came back to Hungary after the war, but unfortunately my father wasn't among them.

>> Bill Benson: So, once she had that notice, there she is continuing to try to make ends meet, keep her business going, and to take care of you. And then, of course, things became profoundly worse in March 1944, when the Nazis and the Germans occupied Hungary. Tell us why they came in, in March 1944, and what changed so dramatically at that point.

>> Peter Gorog: Until March 1944, we lived in our apartment. My mother continued her business, making hats. We had whatever was available. By that time food was rationed. So, you could buy just certain amounts of bread, sugar, flour, and what not. But we were still alive. We were still living in our apartment.

March 1944 changed everything for the Jewish people. The Nazi Army was retreating from the Soviet Union. The war was winding down. The Nazis knew that sooner or later it's going to end, and they did not trust the Hungarian government any more than the Hungarian government were the last allies of Nazi Germany, practically, because the other countries, Romania, jumped to the other side at the first possible opportunity. So, Nazi Germany finally occupied Hungary also. Adolf Eichmann, the famous Adolf Eichmann, entered Budapest with the SS officers with the purpose to execute the Final Solution in Hungary also.

The Jewish population in Hungary, including the re-occupied territories which first were taken away from Hungary after the First World War but at the beginning of the World War Hungary occupied them. This is why, actually, they joined Nazi Germany. There were about 800,000 Hungarian Jews still living in 1944. The deportation of the Hungarian Jews started immediately in April 1944. In three months more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews, mostly from the countryside, were taken to various concentration camps, mostly Auschwitz-Birkenau and other places.

The Jews in Budapest were relatively safe because this was a tremendous logistical problem for the Nazis to deport and exterminate 800,000 Jews in such a short period of time. So, the Jews who lived in Budapest were relatively safe. However, our circumstances changed completely. By the decree of the Hungarian government, we had to leave our apartment and move into so-called designated houses the houses were marked just as the Jewish people, with the yellow Star of David. And non-Jews had to move out from those apartment buildings and Jews moved in. Sometimes four, five families in a one or two-bedroom apartment.

We were supposed to do this also; however, my mom was determined to survive, whatever it takes. And we were lucky that she had a childhood friend, non-Jewish, Catholic couple. They didn't have children. They lived in a two-bedroom apartment. And they let us move in.

And it was a big thing not just for us because we were safe for another few weeks, but it was a big thing for them. Because the same decree which said that the Hungarian Jews had to move to these designated houses said also that those Jews who go into hiding will be arrested, persecuted immediately and so would the families who would hide them. And there were a few, unfortunately, very few, non-Jews who risked their very own lives to save Jews among them.

>> Bill Benson: And this couple did that. But you and your mother were quickly denounced by a neighbor, I believe.

>> Peter Gorog: Yeah. That's, unfortunately, a very sad part of the Hungary Holocaust history. There were non-Jews who collaborated with the Nazis and there were bystanders, bystanders who saw that Jews were arrested and did absolutely nothing. They saw Jews deported and did absolutely nothing. And many of them went so far that they reported hiding Jews. And so after three weeks we were reported by a good neighbor. And the next day two Hungarian policemen, actually gendarmes, which is actual police in Hungary, came and arrested my mother.

>> Bill Benson: And this is one of your few early memories. You actually have some recollection of this?

>> Peter Gorog: Yes, that's correct. Probably the reason for this because these Hungarian gendarmes had a very fancy uniform. They had the tall hat and with a cock feather attached to it. And they looked at a 3-year-old boy, very fascinating. We were sitting around the breakfast table. I was sitting on two thick phone books. You younger people, you don't know what phone books are. [Laughter] But we didn't have child seats, so this is how I reached the table. And they took my mom away. And my mom and the host couple said, "Don't worry, Peter. She's going to be back in a couple of days". I wouldn't say that it was a lie, but unfortunately they knew that the likelihood that my mother would come back was very small.

>> Bill Benson: And incredibly she did, after that arrest, she was able to get away. And that's an incredible story.

>> Peter Gorog: It is. It's part of why I'm here today. It's part of my mom's determination to survive.

When she was taken, in one of the worst Hungarian jails in Budapest, she had with her the notification she got from the Hungarian ministry of defense that my father died during war activities. As soon as she got to the jail, she claimed to the warden that she was a war widow. War widows were a special designation by the Hungarian government. Those widows of regular soldiers, not the Hungarian Jews who were serving in the Forced Labor Battalion -- anyway, those were declared war widows. They had some kind of privileges. When food was rationed, they got more food. They got some money from the Hungarian government.

Anyway, my mom claimed that she was a war widow, which she wasn't because she didn't get any privileges. Nevertheless, the warden, who probably couldn't even read what was on the paper, she saw an official form, my father's name on it, and a big stamp on it. So, he got scared. And that was my mom telling me later on, much later on actually, but

that's another story, that she was taken to the Commandant of the jail. The Commandant looked at the paper. My mom couldn't tell me whether she knew that the Commandant saw that she was not a war widow and the Commandant had pity on her or she was -- or he was ignorant also just like the warden. Anyway, they let her go. She came back two days later, and we had to move again because we just couldn't wait for another good neighbor to report us of.
>> Bill Benson: Since you had to move again, she then made another major decision as to how she was going to protect you.
>> Peter Gorog: Correct. Again, we still did not move into any of the designated houses because my mom knew, she just knew and knew that once the Jews were gathered at one place, it would be very easy to take another place and another place. And by that time there were rumors of deportations and people taken to the death camps. So, instead of moving to the designated houses or the Budapest ghetto, which was already set up --
>> Bill Benson: Which is where I think your grandparents were.
>> Peter Gorog: Correct. And my two aunts also. We moved to a house which was set up by the Swedish Embassy and by Raoul Wallenberg, who came to Hungary in early 1944, the American War Refugee Board, which was set up by President Roosevelt in late 1943, early 1944. They sent people in diplomatic disguise through various European cities to save as many Jews as possible.

The Swedish aristocrat, Raoul Wallenberg, who was not Jewish, who had no connection to Hungary whatsoever, came to Hungary with a lot of money given to him by the war refugee board. What he did with the money, number one, he did create some false documents and gave false documents to Hungarian Jews so they could be protected. Not many were, unfortunately.

Also, he bought up 32 apartment buildings in Budapest. And because those buildings belonged to the Swedish embassy, under international diplomatic laws they were regarded as territory of that country and no Hungarian authorities could enter, no Nazis could enter into this building without Swedish permission.

So, the Jews who were lucky enough to get into these protected houses, 32 high-rises, eight, 10 stories high in the inner city of Budapest, housed tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews. And these Jews can thank the U.S. government and the Swedish diplomats who paid with his very own life with his heroic deeds. Hungarian Jews survived because for three months we lived in these houses, every day just more chance to survive.
>> Bill Benson: I might just jump ahead for a minute because of time. Of course, during that whole period Budapest is under intense allied bombing that's going on at that time. There was so much pressure on the Hungarian government that the deportations stopped for a period after 450,000 were deported in six or eight weeks. Then they stopped for a period. And you're in the Raoul Wallenberg house. But then there was, if I understand it right, a coup, the Hungarian fascists took control of the country, the Arrow Cross.
>> Peter Gorog: Correct.
>> Bill Benson: So now it's October 1944. You're in the Raoul Wallenberg house. Things are changing again.
>> Peter Gorog: Things are changing again for the worse for us Jews. We had to move again because the Hungarian Nazi thugs, young people who weren't conscripted into the Hungarian Army because they were too young but they were part of the nationalist Nazi Hungarian party --

>> Bill Benson: The Arrow Cross.
>> Peter Gorog: The Arrow Cross. They came into the Wallenberg houses and started to arrest people. Some of the people were taken to the railway station and deported to the camps, straight. Others were taken to the banks of the Danube River, lined up, stripped of their clothes, and they were shot into the river.

We escaped because --
>> Bill Benson: You have time to tell this, yes.
>> Peter Gorog: Again. When I made this talk about the Holocaust story, I use the words we were lucky, we had a chance too many times. Regardless of your religious belief, it could be a divine intervention, it can be sheer chance why one person survived and another didn't. In our case, we survived because I made a Nazi friend. I made a Nazi friend between two bombing raids. We were playing in the court of the apartment building where we stayed. And this Nazi people who surrounded the building, they were protecting us, protecting us. They saw us playing Cowboys and Indians, and we used whatever we had to imitate rifles and we were shooting at each other. It was very funny for these young Nazi guys seeing Jewish children with the yellow Star of David shooting at each other. And sometimes they, fortunately, took out the ammo from the rifle but they gave us the real rifle. That was the top of my joy. Young boys with a real rifle. I didn't know what it was. But nevertheless, anyway.

So one of these guys knew me by first name. So, when they came to the apartment, to our apartment, and led the people away, he told to his friends, “Let's leave little Peter and his mom behind; I know them.” And they went to the next apartment. And they were not that lucky.

As soon as they left, we left also. Finally, we moved to the Budapest ghetto, which was set up in the middle of Budapest where my grandparents had their one-bedroom apartment. They lived there and my two aunts lived there with my cousin already and my mom and I moved to this house.
>> Bill Benson: When you moved into the Budapest ghetto, the Russians began their siege of Budapest at that time. So you are there right in the middle of the siege. Tell us about that time.
>> Peter Gorog: Yes. Obviously, you cannot forget the sounds of the cannons and the bombings, the airplanes zooming over your head. We spent most of our time in the basement of the buildings, which was a temporary bomb shelter, dirt floor, no electricity, no water, no food, and we were just sitting on a blanket on the dirt floor. That's how we spent most of the days, because during the nights there were no bombings.

Food -- I don't know until today how we survived. But I do remember one thing because it was so out of the ordinary. Between two bombing raids our parents, grandparents, went out and they went to the bombed-out houses and rummaged through the rubbles to find anything edible whether it was stale or rotten. It really didn't matter because every calorie would give you another day, another chance to survive.

One day my grandmother, who was a very Orthodox-observant Jew, came back to our building with a big slab of bacon. Probably you know that bacon is not kosher and it's absolutely a no-no. But this time you just couldn't keep the religious laws. You eat whatever you could because, again –
>> Bill Benson: There's no food.

You had mentioned the winter of 1942-43 as a very harsh one; so was the winter of

1944-45, particularly brutal. So, you have no electricity, no heat. It was a terrible circumstance. Then literally hand-to-hand combat began all around you. What do you remember, what can you tell us, about your liberation?
>> Peter Gorog: I don't know but from history books I know that the Budapest ghetto was liberated in January 19, 1945. What I do remember, at that time the Soviet Red Army soldiers came into the ghetto and they gave the grown-ups cigarettes and us little children candies. At that time, I didn't know I shouldn't take candy from people I didn't know of.

[Laughter]

And that was the good part. Unfortunately, there are stories, real stories, that the same soldiers went to other places and raped women, robbed people, confiscated things. It wasn't a pretty situation. But we were free, free to leave the ghetto.

I remember walking back to our original apartment, dead bodies on the street, dead horses. At that time there was lots of horse-drawn carriages to deliver whatever they had to deliver.
>> Bill Benson: The city was in complete ruins.
>> Peter Gorog: The city was in complete ruins. We were lucky. Again, I use these words. Because our building was not only bombed, our apartment was occupied by a family who when they saw us coming back, they said, "We are glad to see you. We are going to move out and you can move in." They reserved all of our furniture, all of our belongings.

When we had to leave, my mom could take a small suitcase. They still had to hold me on her arm. And we went back and we got everything. Other people weren't lucky because their building was bombed out or the families who occupied their apartments said no way, we are not going to move out, it's our apartment. And that was the end of the story.
>> Bill Benson: Of course, a whole new set of stories happened from there that we can't get into today too much, but what did your mother do to help build a new life with you at that point? She still has a very young son. It's just the two of you.
>> Peter Gorog: Well, in a nutshell, she worked hard as she had done all of her life. Hats weren't in fashion any longer, so she couldn't make a living out of her original profession. She became a seamstress. She was always very good with her hands. She started to work in a small company or co-op, at that time it was a co-op, making female dresses. She worked hard two shifts, 6:00 to 2:00 or 2:00 to 10:00 in the evening. I was all by myself at home at the time. But we survived. We were not persecuted anymore as Jews.

Circumstances were very harsh. Later the system was as dictatorial as the Nazis system in a different way. But, again, when you are alive and you know the difference between being alive and not, you appreciate everything you have.
>> Bill Benson: Your mom was, from everything that you've shared, incredibly brave, resourceful and resilient. One of the things you said to me is that her only purpose was to take care of you after that, her only purpose. And she used her wits and her strength to do that. And from that point forward it was the same thing.
>> Peter Gorog: Yes. Again, the only way I can pay tribute to her -- I cannot tell her anymore. I told her many times how much I appreciated and loved her. To preserve her memory and telling other people what she did during those years and under those circumstances. She worked hard all of her life. She remarried in 1953. My stepfather was another Holocaust survivor. He actually was in Auschwitz. He actually had the number tattooed on his arm and is part of the Holocaust history. No matter how many times I asked him to tell the story of his Holocaust story, he never, ever told me. He never, ever told me.

So, I know what happened in Auschwitz. I know that he was approximately 45 pounds when he came back. He was 45 years at that time. Old. He survived. Actually, he came home in his Auschwitz uniform, and I still have the jacket which I, again, will give to the museum for preservation.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to jump way forward, of course, to 1980, when you were able to make a trip out. You were a scientist, an engineer, and you were able to travel a little bit under restricted conditions, but you came here and then defected. Your mother was able to make a visit here. You tell us about that?

>> Peter Gorog: Yes. Actually, after I settled here, every year either she came to visit us or we went back to Hungary, after I got my American citizenship. And the Hungarian Communist government collapsed in 1989, I believe. So, we were in regular touch. There was no internet, so we couldn't Skype at that time. But we offered her to move here after my step-father died. She didn't want to hear about it. She lived her independent life until age 90, lived in her own apartment, took care of herself.

>> Bill Benson: You still -- there's a lot that you don't know about the death of your father. But you honor him every March, I believe. Will you say a little bit about that?

>> Peter Gorog: Well, my father doesn't have a marked grave. So, this museum actually is a memorial to him and the six million Jews who died, who don't have marked graves. It's a Jewish custom that we light candles in the memory of the loved one who is not with us anymore. I do it at my home, and I do it here at the museum where everybody else can pay tribute.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

We're going to hear again from Peter in a moment to close our program. We didn't have time to have you ask questions. I apologize for that, but I think you can see that we only touched on a little bit and there is so much more about the Postwar years that I wish we could have you hear from Peter about that.

When Peter is done, two things are going to happen when he closes our program. Our photographer, Lolitta, will come up on stage and take a photograph of Peter with you as the background. We want you here for that. It makes a terrific photo. And the second thing, Peter will go up to the foyer where he will sign copies of "Echoes of Memory" and there's a chance to say hi to him to Peter, at that point as well.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. So, with that, I'd like to turn back to Peter to give us his last word.

>> Peter Gorog: First of all, I want to thank you, that you came here today to hear my story. And all the people who come to this museum and see what happened, the six million people, when hatred was not countered, when people stood by while others were harassed or arrested and persecuted.

There is a picture in the Permanent Exhibit. Every time I see it, when I'm a docent and lead a tour or just have the image in front of me -- two young boys, about my age, maybe a little bit older than I was when I was in the Budapest ghetto, standing at the platform of the Auschwitz railway station. Three hours after the picture was taken they were dead for one reason and one reason only, because they were Jews. I feel I am obligated to tell memories and the memories of the more than one million Jewish children who died, who never had a chance to grow up and have their own families, their children, and grandchildren, to keep their memories alive. Especially nowadays when anti-Semitism is alive and well and signs all over the world, in Europe, unfortunately here in the United

States people are dying again just because of their religion or ethnicity.

I feel that we cannot stand by. And because I'm 78 years old. I am the second youngest in the survivor group in the museum. One day soon I'm afraid we are not going to be here to give our testimony. So, it's up to you and your children to make sure that the Holocaust will never happen again to any people, anywhere in the world. I hope that's the message you're going to take home today.

[Applause]