

Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson and I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. Thank you for joining us. We are in our seventh season of First Person.

Our First Person today is Mr. Isak Danon, whom we shall meet shortly.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust and World War II. Each First Person presently serves as a volunteer here at the museum. We have First Person programs on the remaining two Wednesdays of this month, next Wednesday, and then August 31. And then, we'll close our program for the 2007 season.

The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, that's www.ushmm.org, provides a list of the upcoming first person guests. This 2006 season of First Person has been made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Doris Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring this year's program.

Isak Danon will share his first person account of his experience during the Holocaust, and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. We will follow that with an opportunity for you to ask him a few questions. Before you are introduced to Isak, I have several requests of you.

First, we ask that if possible, please stay seated throughout the one-hour program. That way we'll minimize any disruptions for Isak as he speaks. Second, if you have a question during the question and answer period, please make your question as brief as possible. I will repeat the question so all in the room, including Isak, hear the question. And then he'll respond to it.

I'd also like to ask those of you who may have cell phones or pagers that are still on, to please turn them off, if you wouldn't mind. I'd also like to let those of you who may be holding passes for the permanent exhibition today, know they are good for the balance of the afternoon. So you can stay with us until 2:00, and then still see the permanent exhibition.

The Holocaust was a state sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims-- 6 million were murdered. Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles, were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

What you are about to hear from Isak Danon is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with Isak's introduction.

And we begin with this 1955 photograph of Isak, his mother, and sisters, in Philadelphia, when he was on leave from the United States Army. Isak Danon was born in 1929 in Yugoslavia. The arrow on this map of Europe points to Yugoslavia. In this map of Yugoslavia, the arrow points to the approximate location of Split, Isak's hometown.

Isak's father owned a small dry goods store. Isak and his three sisters attended the local school. This photograph was taken in Split in 1939 at a Jewish clubs Hanukkah party. Isak was nine years old. And in the circle, as the circle will appear momentarily, you see him on the far left.

Pictured in this photograph are Isak's three sisters, his mother, and his father. Shortly after the war came to Yugoslavia in early 1941, Italian forces took over parts of the country. Many Jews fled from more hostile parts of Europe to Split and surrounding areas for refuge, causing the town's Jewish population to swell from about 200 to about 7,000.

In 1943, after the fall of Mussolini, Isak and his father were forced to flee Split, as German troops advanced, and they traveled with partisans through the mountains. After several months, Isak and his father were reunited in Italy with his mother and two of his sisters who had gone into hiding. In 1944, Isak and his family were invited by the United States

government to be part of a group of 1,000 refugees to come to the United States.

Isak and his family spent the next one and half years in a refugee camp in Fort Ontario army base in Oswego, New York. This photograph shows newly arrived refugees waiting to register at Fort Ontario.

I might mention that the young man who's fifth from your right was a friend that Isak made while in Italy. They came over on their ship together, and they remain, to this day, lifelong friends.

Isak and his family settled in Philadelphia after the war. This photograph was taken in October 1946, after Isak's family left Fort Ontario. In this portrait are Isak, his two sisters, mother, aunt, and father.

Isak's older sister did not come to the United States with the family, but stayed in Belgrade. And if you look, you will notice that one of Isak's sisters cut out a photograph of the eldest sister and put her picture into the family portrait up at the upper left hand corner, because they could not bear the fact that she was not in the photo with them.

After the war, Isak and his family moved to Philadelphia. After working to support his family while going to night school to finish high school, then his accounting degree from Temple University, Isak was drafted into the United States Army during the Korean War. He would later have a 30-year career as an auditor with the US Department of Interior.

Isak's first wife with, whom he has two daughters, passed away in 1997. He remarried in 2004, and just this past December, his wife, Leonor, gave birth to their son, Joshua.

I'm pleased to let that today, one of his daughters, Shoshana, is with us. If you wouldn't mind a wave so people know you're here? Thank you.

Isak's volunteer work here at the museum is with the archives, where he translates and summarizes personal accounts of the Holocaust in a variety of languages, including Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian, Italian, Ladino, and French. I might mention that tomorrow, Isak and his wife and Joshua leave for Bolivia-- his wife is from Bolivia, and so they will make that long journey to spend the next few weeks in Bolivia.

So with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Isak Danon.

[APPLAUSE]

Isak, welcome, and thank you so much for agreeing to be our First Person today. I know you have an awful with making such a big trip tomorrow, so thank you for taking the time to do this.

Thank you for having me.

Isak, let's begin today with first telling us a little bit about yourself, your family, and your community in those years before war broke out in Europe.

OK, well, I had a pretty good childhood, happy childhood, as I remember it. I was born in Split. I had three sisters, one older and two younger, and we went to school while our parents managed the store, dry goods store. I had a lot of friends.

I was always small for my age. And grownups thought maybe I was cute, when I would say something, they would think it's a little baby talking. And they would laugh. And teachers liked me. I was a good student.

So that's the memory-- my first memory. Then, we were also active in our synagogue. We would go Friday night or Saturday morning. And we had the synagogue-- we had a Jewish club, a social club.

And we had a youth organization and club. And there was a lot of activity going on. We were pretty well organized as a community.

We would also meet other boys and girls my age, and school children, because in Yugoslavia you had to study religion-- whatever religion you were. That was the most important subject. There was no separation of church and state.

Anyway, because there were few Jews in the town, as you mentioned, only 200, and fewer children, naturally, we would be assembled from different schools at one point twice a week, whether it was Monday and Wednesday, or Tuesday and Thursdays, and we would have our religious instruction. And that was the life as I remember it in the early days.

Isak, I was struck by one thing you said to me when we met. You said that young people were relatively politically conscious in those days. Aware of world events. Maybe say a little bit about that.

Indeed, we were all aware. I remember, like the war started when I was less than 10 years old. But we knew what was going on. Germany was encouraging Spanish civil war, and I was seven years old, then. And the friends my age, we would discuss it, the importance, and whom do you know who went there, and all that.

And then, there was German annexation of Austria, and we would read the paper, and in the movies, you will see 2 or 3 million Austrians waving as the German troops marched in, like celebration. And we were all conscious of that.

So Hitler's rise to power was something that you knew about.

And Hitler was on the rise, and his stormtroopers were already active. And we don't have any doubt what he had in mind as our future, if he succeeds. So that's the reason.

Isak, we, of course, saw photographs of your family, your immediate family. Did you have a large extended family?

Well, my extended family, if you will, came from a town called Sarajevo. That's the capital of Bosnia today. But it was part of Yugoslavia.

Then, my father was born there. And so was my mother. My mother came as a child to Split with her family. And my father later came to Split on a visit, met my mother, and he remained in Split after they married and had us.

Well, so to show you, both of the families, on my father's side and my mother's side, were still around Sarajevo. And they had a lot of children, as families did in those days. My mother was one of the seven children. My father was one of the eight, but he lost two brothers in accidents.

So all these were married, had large extended families.

I liked when you told me that your parents took you to see your grandparents in Sarajevo, and it was your first train ride. And you said, you remember in vivid detail every part of taking that first train ride.

I do. I was three and a half years old. But you know, I remember, we took a boat to the-- as far as the boat would take us. Then a train. And then on the train, I remember my father disappeared, and then later, he called us to the window and threw out sandwiches from outside. He bought it for us.

And then, when we got into Sarajevo, meeting the grandparents. My grandfather wore a Fez, because there was a Turkish area. And it still is today-- Muslims are predominant in that town. So I remember a lot of things from my young days.

Isak, Nazi Germany, of course, invaded Poland in September 1939, launching World War II. War would not come directly to Split until early 1941. Did the invasion of Poland, and the events happening in Poland, and other parts of Europe, did it have any effect on Split before war actually came to your community?

Yes, indeed. For one thing, the war started-- the shooting war started in Poland in 1939. But before that, there were events taking place, like the Nazi rise to power, and Spanish Civil War. Then, you had the Nazis take over Austria, and

then Czechoslovakia.

And the German government was putting pressure on other countries around there to join what they called the Axis. That was Italy, Germany, and Japan. They were the tripartite axis.

So we were following that. And there was what's known as the Kristallnacht, which is when the German stormtrooper, in every city in Germany, attacked the Jewish stores and the Jews that they could get hold of, and abducted many, and they killed many, in thousands. So we knew--

So you knew about Kristallnacht.

That's right. We knew if Germany takes over, if they advance-- and they were taking country by country-- Yugoslavia was surrounded by seven countries-- had borders with seven countries. And within short period, six of those countries were aligned with Germans-- with Germany. Italy, Germany, and whatever they conquered, what they didn't conquer, they had joined the pact.

Were you-- in Split, itself, were fascists coming to power in any way? Were you aware of fascists there?

OK, we knew that, first of all, that Split was once a long time ago occupied by Italians, the Venetians. That was, historically speaking, many years back. And many of the people in Split spoke Italian, and they had relatives who lived in Italy or came there, settled in Split, because they liked the area.

And some of these people came out, came a lot, And there was another thing-- Croats were-- they felt they were junior partners in Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia means land of the Southern Slavs. The country was created after the World War I, taking all the Slavic people from that area and putting them together into what used to be Serbia, with a king and a monarchy.

And now, all these other nationalities formed the country. So Croats-- and Split is part of Croatia-- they felt that they were junior partners. They weren't getting their recognition. So they started rebelling even before they killed the King of Yugoslavia. And at this point in my life, there was a regent-- a cousin of the king-- running the country.

And he was running the country because the king was too young? He was just a boy?

Yeah, until the young prince became of age. And but anyway, he became of age pretty suddenly, later on, right before the war. But other facts that we saw when Germans attacked Poland, we would read and hear about the treatment of the Jews in Poland. And some of them were part of the 7,000 people that came, and they had relatives who were taken to concentration camps. So they would, before they got killed, they would send some correspondence.

And so some of the family members are coming to Split, and so you're getting to know them.

Right, yeah. And anyway, so eventually Yugoslavia was forced to sign the pact with Germans. And that introduced a lot of changes. For example, in school books, which what I'm familiar most with, the curriculum was changed to introduce books that were friendlier to the Germans.

We used to have to study a foreign language starting in the fifth grade French was the language we studied. Well, all at once, we had to start studying German. My sister--

And French was dropped?

French was dropped. My sister had studied French for two years. Now she had to start from the beginning to study German. I came in the class first time in fifth grade, and there was German introduced. And basically, we saw some of the people that we didn't think were antisemitic, they started wearing lapels with swastikas on them.

And we saw signs on the walls, kill the Jews, or stuff like that. They were appearing. And that was the sign that we-- not

only the sign, but the effect that it had on us.

The very direct effect.

Yes, and sometimes the kids would pick on us in school and in the street. And the teachers would be afraid to step in. And sometimes, even the teachers would be sympathetic against us, yeah.

And then, of course, in April 1941, it got worse, obviously, because that's when Mussolini-- the Italians under Mussolini attacked Split, while Germany attacked Belgrade and other parts of Yugoslavia. Tell us what you recall about the attack on Split, and what the Italian occupation of Split was like for you and your family? Because now they were in control.

Right, well how the war came actually was after Yugoslavia had signed this pact with the Germans, that went on for maybe less than a year. And then, the king decided that he was-- the prince decided that he was of the majority age, 18 years old. So he took over the country.

The first thing he did is break the pact, break the relations with Germany.

With Nazi Germany.

Right. And there was celebration in the big cities. None in the city where I was, or the Croatian city, but in Belgrade and Sarajevo, and all these other areas in Serbia and Bosnia, there was celebrations. And everybody was happy.

But then, we all realized that the war would be forthcoming indeed soon. And on April 6, which is about two weeks later, the war did come.

We were awakened this one Sunday in the early morning, by bombs bursting. And we learned later that there were 10 bombs dropped by Italian air force. How we know it was 10 bombs? They created a song for their celebration--

[BOTH TALKING] bombs?

Yeah, that talks about the big 10 bombs that were dropped. And after the bombs fell down for three or four days, nothing happened. But I can mention that my father, and everybody else, all the men, were mobilized right after the king took over. There was a general mobilization.

Into the Yugoslavian--

In Yugoslavia, yeah. So they were mobilized. They had to go report. And my father took off, and we didn't hear from him for a while. Then later, he reappeared in civilian clothes after the Yugoslav army collapsed. It took the Germans all of 10, 12 days to wipe out their army.

How was that done? Mostly through this internal disorder. There was what-- the people were leaving their uniforms, running away, desertions. And Croats refused to fight. In fact--

Because their sympathies were with Germany?

With Germany, in fact, they fought within the same units, you had two factions and they were fighting against each other.

So in effect, mutinies within the ranks?

Yeah. And that's what happened. And in Split, we didn't see any-- we didn't see anything about Italian occupation for about two weeks. Then eventually, we started seeing the military police marching through towns in twos and threes. And we stayed away from them because they looked pretty scary to us.

But where we lived in the suburbs of Split, they had a lot of open fields, and Italian army eventually came with their trucks and armor, and whatnot, and established their camps right within two blocks from my house. And we, the kids, would just go there and talk to the soldiers, regular military.

I have to distinguish-- for while they were the fascist Italians, they're the ones that wore the black shirts. They also might wear a military uniform, but with a black shirt and tie.

And you told me, I think, similar to Nazi stormtroopers?

Similar to SNS, yeah. And they were pretty mean.

And that was different than the regular Italian army?

Different than the regular army. But there were plenty of them, also. No matter whether they were reporting to a different chief, or what. They were visible.

And what happened? Then, we started feeling shortages of food, of everything. And people started complaining. Then they issued us the tickets-- I guess rationing cards-- for food, and clothing, and all that. But you had to find where you can buy this stuff.

We were allowed 15-- let's see, 150 grams of bread a day. But if you go to the bakery store, and they don't have bread, then you don't eat that day. And it wasn't like Marie Antoinette that said, let them eat cake. There was no cake, either.

No cake, yeah.

Anyway, and we were also issued ID cards. But our ID cards had written on it, Jewish. The Italian word is ebra And when we did come up to a store that had, let's say, potatoes for sale, or rice with our coupons, they want to see your ID cards. And if it says, Jewish, you didn't get any of the food, because they weren't allowed to sell.

It wasn't always that way, but a different store, depending on what quantities of food was available. We were a little bit lucky that my mother and father still had that little store, and the store hadn't been doing too well before, right before the war. But now, people needed whatever you had in the store-- they needed it, they wanted it.

And peasants would bring some of their chickens and some of the fruits and vegetables to the city to sell. They would always save some to barter in our store. So I know my mother would come home sometimes with a couple of live chickens and some potatoes, and something like that. So we didn't starve. But it was tight.

So from what you're saying, your father's business hadn't done well, so you'd built up quite an inventory.

Quite an inventory--

And now the stuff was very needed--

--of rejects, actually.

But now it was needed. Now it was needed.

Yeah, what happened, Italian textiles were made out of some synthetic product. When you wet it, it would just shred. And they said, I want some prior to the war material, old fashioned. And the colors were not so modern-- I don't care. I just want it.

Yeah, so while that lasted--

And so these conditions began to, from what you've described, get worse. But they really took a tremendous turn for the

worse in June of 1942. And you remember, in particular, in an incident that you described to me. Tell us about that. And then, what happened as things got really just terrible?

Well, as I mentioned, we still were allowed to operate the store. And they harassed us a little bit. They would come in and say, what coupons did you sell it for? How much did you charge? This kind of stuff.

And then, they would start writing a report, they're going to close down the store. And they would want bribes, you know. And that was a regular thing.

But right before the date that you mentioned, I was 13 years old, and in Jewish life, when a boy reaches the age of 13, there's age of majority, as far as the religion is concerned. And you are invited to say some special prayers, and you make a commitment for your life.

And I remember, I did my share, my part, as every Jewish boy here does, and there, also. And that was right before-- well, that was around my birthday, which is June 17 or 18 in that particular year fell.

And I made a solemn commitment that I would attend services every week. So the following Friday, I came to our father's store, which was about two blocks from the synagogue. And I said, OK, when he was ready to close up, so we can go together to the service, Friday night service.

Well, he had a last minute shopper. And the shopper says, I want this and I want that, and I don't want this-- and delayed him a lot. So by the time we finally closed the store, it was getting quite late. So hurry up, close the store, and we started rushing to the synagogue, which was about two blocks further.

Well, if I may digress a little bit, the synagogue was within the walls of the old city. Split was established by the Emperor Diocletian, was his summer palace. Had 24 big towers, and four huge gates. And there was the big palace.

Like a walled city?

The walled city, yeah, for the Emperor Diocletian. That was in the 4th century. Well, people later, after Rome fell, they came in and established a living base there. And during the 13th century, persecution of the Jews, they put the Jews in there and locked the gates at night.

And this was called a ghetto. I mean, we refer to ghettos here, but that's not the real meaning. The word, ghetto, came from Italian, where they would take all the Jews, lock them up--

Behind walls, literally.

Yeah, within walls. And then let them out next morning. And then, they had to be back by nightfall. So that's where the synagogue was located, right at the entrance of this walled city. Most of the Jews lived way outside in the town, the regular town, modern town, or in the suburbs. But that's where the synagogue was.

And in front of that place was known as the people's square-- like Moscow's Red Square, like People's Square in Beijing. Was a real big square where all the special events were held, and parades, and celebrations, big ones. So our store was at one end, and the synagogue was in another.

As we approach this people's square, we saw commotion. And then, we see all these black shirts, and-- not soldiers, but military police were there. And these uniformed people were beating up people. And somebody would fall down, they kicked them, and then beat them, and they get up and run. And they run after them with the butt of the rifle, and all that.

So you were watching this?

We were watching-- we couldn't go back, and we didn't want to go forward. My father recognized some of the people that were being hit by the soldiers. So he took me and my sister-- there was two of us that had come to the store-- he

took us the back way, and we went all around the city to get to our house.

And when we got there, we didn't know what had happened. But we told my mother and other sisters. And then, the rabbi from that synagogue, he lived about a block or so from us. So we went to his house. We knocked at the door. Nobody there.

So we sat there in front of his house and waited. Two hours later, he came. He had a couple of teeth knocked out, the blood was coming down his front, and he told us what happened. He was limping.

He told us that the black shirts, with military police, came into the synagogue, and says-- the services were just beginning-- and said, everybody out. And as people were coming out, they had formed a gauntlet, and with the rifles, they were hitting everybody.

As people were leaving the synagogue?

As they were leaving, yeah. The only people they did not disturb or hit were two old guys, that had a beard, long beard. They let them go through.

Anyway, and so that was-- by that time, it was late in the night. We went home to sleep. At 5:30, my sister that was with me-- she was younger than I-- she came and woke me up from bed, and says, let's go see if anything happened. So we went there.

We walked-- the city was quite a distance-- the synagogue was quite a distance from our house. So we walked there. And we saw in the people's square, we saw leftovers from a big bonfire. We looked at the bonfire-- that's where all the prayer books were, half burned. And all the-- well, all the paraphernalia that's used in conducting the services.

And even the drapes from the walls, and all that, that was all there. We went inside the synagogue. You couldn't walk in, because the military police had formed like a blockage, and they had one policeman on each side-- not allowing anybody in.

And then, we started walking toward our stores-- our store. And we saw all the Jewish stores that we knew-- my uncle's store, he was selling perfumes and cosmetics. There was totally like glass shattered all over the place. The shelves, they were glass shelves, all down, knocked about.

There wasn't a thing of value left in that store. I mean, even the tables, like where you keep stuff underneath, maybe for the special items-- everything was strewn all over the place. We went to another store, same thing.

We went to our store, our store was in a corner, we didn't have a glass plate. It was just wooden gates to our store. And all they did is broke the sign where it says what kind of store it is and who owned it. They tried to break the door down, but they didn't.

And after that, we all-- well, the reason for all that was that the Germans were coming to visit the administrative offices of the city and the county, I guess. And the Italian, local Italians, wanted to show them how good they were, as far as treating of the Jews.

That they were doing the right thing for the Nazis.

So that's the reason. And then later, we saw all kinds of signs appearing against the Jews. These were officially printed signs by the administration, Italian military administration. So that after that, the life became a little bit tougher.

We didn't have a synagogue, but we held the services in private homes. And we weren't molested anymore than before, actually. But there were things going on, there was more protests by the population, and they would have curfews. And I, being 13 years old--

Didn't obey them.

Didn't obey the curfews. I had to stay up-- well, curfew in summer months, 5 o'clock, that was a little bit too much for a teenage boy. So my parents would be petrified, because whoever is caught walking in the street after the curfew was shot on the spot. So that was the reason that my parents worried about it.

Right. So tell us just for a moment about your oldest sister. Is this when she began to engage in her activities?

Yes, after Germany attacked Russia, then the local Communist Party called the youth of the city, and everybody, to start working in the underground. And I did not know about my sister-- we were pretty close, but I didn't know that she was involved, like printing and distributing leaflets, and collecting for support of the partisans.

The partisans were already beginning to be noticed. So this-- I found that out later when Italy fell, when Mussolini fell. But the partisans, we would hear at night sometimes, firing, shooting. They would sometimes come, and they needed food for their livelihood, I guess.

So we knew that they were active partisans there.

And you would continue living under these circumstances for really the next year. And then in 1943, of course, Mussolini was killed. And the Italian occupiers left Split, the partisans then took control of Split, and of course, that triggered a reaction from the Germans and the Croats. Is that when your family decided it was time to take some action?

Well, yeah, we had anticipated something like that. And we had prepared. My father and I, and my sisters, we all had a backpack with all the immediate needs, like clothing-- a sweater, a pair of shoes if we had it-- food, hard biscuits, and stuff like that. We had practiced how to jump from the window from the back of the house, in case they come to the front door, so we could escape.

And we were prepared. And my mother and father, whatever they had saved-- the banks weren't functioning in those days-- whatever they had saved, they distributed between the two, just in case one of them maybe survives, or can exist without the other.

And when one night, in the middle of the night, a neighbor came knocking at the door-- Mr. Danon, Mr. Danon, the Germans are coming. And we knew that the Germans took the Jewish men first, and took them to concentration camp. And so my father and I put on clothes, and everybody put their backpack, and we decided to go into the mountains to join the partisans.

And that's what we did. And a few other people who found themselves in the same situation-- like maybe they had supported the partisans during the time that the partisans held the city-- they went also. And we went into the mountain. And about 10, 15 miles from Split-- they were very high mountains-- and the roads went near there to the little villages, but none after that.

So we started going up the mountain.

So literally climbing the mountains.

Climbing the mountains, if you will. And looking for partisans. Well, partisans weren't there. Here we are, they were hiding, too, because there was a lot of problems. If the Germans knew there were partisans, then they would come with their arms and kill them.

So we went for many days through the mountains looking where we can turn ourself in, so to speak, to the partisans. And join the partisans. We saw a lot and lots of-- not towns, but villages burned down to a crisp.

There were walls-- they built houses out of cement. The roof was of wood, but they would-- the Germans, or Italians-- they were burning the villages if the partisans would come there and get some food, or they would come, where are your

men? And if you couldn't produce everybody that was supposed to live there, they burned your house and burned the whole town. So we were meeting that kind of situation.

And finally, we met some people who were the partisans. We said, we are here to volunteer. So they took us in, and we continued to march up the mountains throughout the country.

But now, with a group of partisans?

Now, we are part of a unit. But what it meant, we were marching at night, in darkness. We couldn't go near a road, if there was one, because they were patrolled by the Italian and Germans. So we would hide during the daytime.

You hide in the ditch, cover yourself. Or there are some trees, and you go in between there. No noise.

And stay there all day?

All day. Hopefully, you got some food.

[AUDIO OUT]

--young children, and the children would cry, and the partisans were there, afraid during the night marches. They say, make your child stop making noise. If you cannot make it stop crying, we will shut it up because the noise projects into the night. So that was very bad.

I don't know if any child was suffocated because they were crying, but this was one issue that we had.

Isak, you were still a boy, a young boy, 13, 14. For you, was the gravity of it fully-- were you aware of it? Or was there an element of adventure? Or was it just really terrifying?

No, there was an element of adventure. But I could see the fear on my parents' faces before when we were as a family. Now, I was with my father, and he wasn't managing it too well. He couldn't climb mountains like I could, and all that.

So there was some adventure in it. And then, I met up with another two boys my age, and they were talking about what they had done until they came to that point. They would use young boys to sneak up against-- what do you call these bunkers? And throw a hand grenade inside.

The boys would?

The boys, yeah. And they were telling me. I didn't have these things, I didn't encounter any real fighting, except a later point when Germans and Croatians invaded an island where I was. But that gave me a scare.

I grew up, then, at that point.

The reality really hit home at that point.

Really, right.

And you would continue with the partisans until you found your way, eventually, to the coast. And tell us what happened.

Well, this is what happened. We were going through different mountains, from one to the other. It was just constant movement. And then, we would go up-- I couldn't tell you what towns we visited or what mountains, but eventually, we ended up down the coast line. Not where Split was, but much further south.

And they had these little like rowboats, they would put a little sail on it. And that's how we went from the coast into one

of the islands. There was hundreds of islands along the Yugoslavian coast.

So we went to one of the islands that was held by the partisans. And I stayed there for a couple of months. And my father, also, was there.

As part of the partisans, right?

Yeah, we wore our uniform, which was a cap with a red star on it. And that's what we were there-- to fight the battle. Although, we weren't with a gun at that point. But we were-- they put me in a machine shop where they were repairing guns and making ammunition, actually.

And also, we were making-- for the hospital, well, to sterilize the equipment, surgical equipment, and even clothing. From a sheet of tin, we make holes, make a circle bottom so you put surgical instruments there. And then, below, you have a bigger container with water, boiling.

And you would make all that?

Yeah, so I got some training in that. And we went there until at one point-- this is after the Allies were talking about starting a new front, and they were at the bottom of an Italian boot, which was not too far. There was the Adriatic Sea between Yugoslavia and Italy, so they were-- the Allies were sort of making a propaganda that they're going to invade the European continent from the Adriatic Coast.

And this was before D-Day, actually.

Before D-Day, yeah. Because you had a big Russian front, and Russia was saying, we demand opening of a new front, you know. So anyway, what the Allies did, they started sending assistance to the partisans-- pretty substantial assistance. Sending them ammunition, material, medical supplies, clothing, food, and all that.

And they were doing it by using their PT boats from the Italian coast down below. They would come to this island, where I was, and they would unload. And then, they would go back empty. Well, after a while, they said they would take some people with them. And if the partisans felt that they had too many civilians with them who couldn't fight, and children, they would say, OK, you go with them.

So that's how I ended up going to Italy. One night, after the British PT boat came in the darkness, you know, unloaded all that. I went to the dock, and I boarded one of these PT boats. And next morning, I woke up, I was in Italy, in the southern tip of Italy.

In an area controlled by the Allies at that point?

That's where Allies had invaded Italy. And that's what caused Mussolini-- I mean, downturn. Anyway, and my father had done the same thing. And we met in there. But what the British were doing, they were assembling us in groups, and they were preparing to take us to Egypt, into the desert.

And we saw pictures of all the people that they had taken out there-- living in the tents in the sun, scorching sun. So we were there for a while, and then they said, OK, you guys, tomorrow, we'll take you to Egypt.

My father got cold feet. He didn't want to go to Egypt. So he woke me up that night. He had arranged with a local farmer for a horse and buggy, and we went into the big city, the nearest city--

You made your escape from the British.

Right, yeah-- anyway--

It turned out to be a great decision, as it happened.

Yes. So we went there, and we lived in the big city. And my father got a job there with the Allied command. What his job was, reading the letters that people were sending, and censoring any information that might be critical that they didn't want passed around.

And we stayed there until about a week before D-Day. Well, at that point, we learned that United States Congress, or president, had agreed to take 1,000 refugees to United States. So we said, hey, why not? So we signed up.

Now, at this point, we did not know where my mother and sisters were. My older sister had left to join the partisans immediately when partisans took over the city. And she had the credential because she worked with them during the occupation. But my mother and sister, they remained.

So we signed up to go to the United States. We understand that many thousands of others signed up, but only 1,000 were accepted. We happened to be two of the ones that were accepted.

And right before we were to go to the United States-- this was about two weeks after the invasion of Normandy in France-- we got word that my mother and two sisters had arrived to Italy-- the same route that we did.

Up through the mountains with the partisans?

Up through the mountains. But we learned a little bit more about them later, they told us. But anyway, she arrived in the big city, not the same one where we stayed, but another one, a larger city where there were many refugees there at that time. So they talked to each other, is anybody here from Split? Do you know somebody?

No, I'm not, but I know somebody who knows somebody. So that's how they learned-- my mother and sisters learned that we were in another city, my father and I were in another city. And through other contacts, they let us know. We asked them to take the train, come to the city.

And we put their name to go to the United States. And miracle of bureaucracy, in three days, they were approved. And we were ready to come to the United States.

And then, we went with trucks, the British and the American trucks came, picked us all up throughout the Italian liberated area. We went to Naples, and we boarded the ship over there. There was one ship, because-- it was called Henry Gibbons-- a Liberty supply ship. And we waited there for a few days for other ships to join us, so we can have a convoy.

And on this ship, they were already I guess about 1,000 wounded American GIs who were coming back from the front. And we had a little compartment in one part of the ship. We had like hammocks four-- you know, each hammock were four high--

Stacked up.

Yeah, four high, all 1,000 of us with crying children, and young and old, and all that. And the convoy departed Naples July 17th, with an escort of four destroyers. And we went first Mediterranean Sea, and then through the Gibraltar, and into the Atlantic.

And this was a long voyage, about 14 days for this convoy. Twice, we were approached by Germans U-boats-- German U-boats. And what happened in those situations, the ship stopped, all the engines were stopped, and the destroyers went around and created an artificial fog, so the submarines couldn't see us. They would see a big fog.

And we had to go down. And we were suffocating from that fog. But anyway, that was a good precaution.

And 14 days later, we saw the coast line of New York City. Ah-ah.

Isak, we are unfortunately just about out of time. And of course, what happens next is the whole new start of a new life in the United States. And we're not going to have time to get into that, unfortunately. We mentioned in the slide presentation that Isak and his family ended up at a refugee relocation center at an army base up in New York.

As Isak said to me, one of the problems was, of course, it was surrounded by wire. So they really were meant to stay in there. And then after the war, if you don't mind me saying this, the expectation was they would go back. And some did, including I think a couple of your relatives? Your aunt? But through pluck, and all kinds of things, and--

Politics.

Politics, ended up being able to stay and make a new life, and have been here ever since. And I think, Isak, after we finished the program in just a couple of minutes, Isak is going to stay behind. So if anybody would like-- we don't have time for questions, unfortunately, but if you'd like to come up and chat with him, meet him, ask him some questions, please feel free to do that.

Before I close the program and turn back to Isak, I'd like to remind everybody that we will have two more First Person programs this season, one next Wednesday. And our guest next Wednesday will be Mrs. Elizabeth [? Strasburger, ?] who is from Poland, and she will tell us how she and her mother survived the Holocaust by hiding with a family under false identities as Christians, until they were liberated by the Russians in 1945.

So if it's at all possible, please come back next Wednesday, or on August 30th. And otherwise, make plans to come to Washington DC and be here on a Wednesday between March and August of 2007, if you would, to see another First Person program.

It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. And with that, I'd like to turn back to Isak for any final thoughts that he may have to close our program today.

Yeah, well, you heard my story. And it was interesting, and it's painful, a few points. But at least, we survived. We survived due to luck, in most instances. We happened to be at the right time at the right place, and we did what we thought was necessary to do to survive.

But many others-- in fact, 6 million others-- did not survive. They died the most atrocious and most ferocious death that I think human history will record it. And I have nothing to say. I have nothing to say about that.

But I want to thank you for being here and listening to my story. Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]

We have an extra 20 minutes. That was just moving along.