

Welcome. Thank you for joining us for First Person-- Conversations with Holocaust Survivors. My name is Bill Benson. I have hosted the museum's First Person program since it began in 2000. Thank you for joining us today. Through these monthly conversations, we bring you firsthand accounts of survival of the Holocaust. Each of our First Person guests serves as a volunteer at the museum.

Holocaust survivors are Jews who experienced the persecution and survived the mass murder that was carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators. This included those who were in concentration camps, killing centers, ghettos, and prisons, as well as refugees, or those in hiding. Holocaust survivors also include people who did not self-identify as Jewish, but were categorized as such by the perpetrators.

In the wake of yet another attack on an American synagogue, this conversation with someone who survived the deadly consequences of unchecked hatred feels even more urgent. Survivors' experiences take on new relevance and illustrate that violent antisemitism remains a threat to Jews and to all of society. Steve, thank you so much for joining us and being willing to be our first person today. It is a pleasure to have you with us.

Hello. Hello, everyone.

Thank you, Steve. And before we start, I'd like to remind our audience members to please, send us questions and let us know where you're joining us from in the chat. Steve, you have so much to share with us. We will start right away. You were born in June 1931 in Subotica, Yugoslavia, just across the border from Hungary. Please, start us off by telling us about your city and community in the years leading up to the start of World War II.

OK. Subotica had been part of Hungary for a long time. After Hungary lost in World War I, the west side really allocated the city and the region to the new state of Yugoslavia. The city was about 100,000 people-- Serbs, Croats, Hungarians were the three major ethnic groups, much smaller groups of ethnic Germans, Gypsies, and Jews. There were about 6,000 Jews in the city, roughly divided about 4,000 belonging to what was called the Progressive community, in practices similar to what-- something like the Modern Orthodox these days. And the rest were very small congregations of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

And the place was not always very peaceful. We as children liked to go to the soccer games round robin between the three ethnic groups, not to see the actual play, but to see the mounted police storm the field when the fans became engaged in fighting.

So the Jewish community was largely associated with the Hungarian group or Hungarian-speaking group. My family was not particularly observant. They-- here is my family-- mother, father, my sister, and I. My father wanted to have a small vineyard. And this is the tenant's house on the vineyard. And we are inspecting the rabbit hutch. This was taken in the spring of 1941, just weeks before the--

The Hungarian-- right before the occupation.

I'm sorry?

Oh, this was taken right before the occupation by the Hungarians, right?

[GARB:ED AUDIO] the occupation, yes.

Yeah. Steve, tell us about your father, who we see here in that picture, of course. Tell us about his newspaper work.

My-- this is the editorial staff of the newspaper that was published by Fenyves and Partners. The major owner was my uncle, who was also editor in chief of the paper. And my father was his second-hand man and ran the-- was director of the printing-- publishing house that produced the paper.

When my uncle died in 1935, my father became the editor in chief of the newspaper. He was always very pleased with

the editorial staff. They're all Hungarians, several of them-- particularly the seated gentleman became very well-known in Hungary after World War II.

My father was very proud of the plant. In particular, he was very proud of the huge printing press that he bought in Austria as a piece of surplus property during the hyperinflation right after the war. He-- they-- it was a huge plant and that never worked. And there was a whole series of mechanics that had to be kept at hand to fix the machines so that the paper could be produced.

That is an impressive bit of equipment, I must say. So I can see why he was so proud of it.

Yeah.

Steve, tell us about your mother.

My mother was a graphic artist, educated at the University of-- in Budapest. Afterwards, she did travel extensively, travel in Austria, then Italy, and then France. She did lot of commercial work, very few fine art paintings, but a lot of lithographs and etchings. And this is her self-portrait out of a sketchbook sheet, with women in hats. But she displayed herself in one of them. And I always think it's the sunniest self-portrait of her.

And her name was Klara, right?

Her name was Klara Gereb, yes. This is a lithograph of the castle at Fontainebleau in France. She did sketches on her travel. And then she converted them into reproduce them as lithographs and etchings. The family lore was that my parents became acquainted when my father hired her to do artwork for the newspaper, including the new mast-- head mast of the paper after the paper name had to be changed when Subotica went from Hungary to Yugoslavia.

She continued to do a lot of commercial work. She had a few exhibitions. But she was not active as an artist when-- she was very active in art education of my sister and myself and leading us into all kinds of techniques and study of art.

Steven, you also had a sister. Would you tell us about Eszti?

Well, here we are. My sister, Eszti was two years older than I, well-known in-- all over town for her long braids. This is also taken-- it's spring of 1941. She's-- the insignia on her school uniform identifies herself as second-year student in the high school, namely a sixth grader.

That is such a lovely--

Much more outgoing than I-- but she was-- we fought often as children, usually for territorial reasons in our shared playroom. But we also did a lot of things together throughout our lives until she passed away some six years ago.

That is a very lovely photo, a very happy photo. Steve, tell us a little bit about what daily life was like for you and your sister prior to the occupation.

Well, we-- I should say, I lived a very happy upper-middle-class life. Our family-- servants were a cook, about whom I will talk later, maids, a German governess so that we would study-- learn proper German, rather than the rough Swabian spoken on the streets, and a chauffeur.

Before you say, aha, all this wealth, keep in mind that Yugoslavia was a dirt-poor country. And the social convention of my parents' level was that if you could afford a car-- we had a car-- maybe there were 100 other cars in the town, if that many-- you could also afford to support another family by hiring a chauffeur.

So we had a very rich life, lots of parties, lots of places of entertainment, two movie houses-- was a big thing-- a theater, ice skating rink in the winter, recreational swimming in a nearby lake. It was a very comfortable and exciting life with lots of things to do.

And of course, Steve, that would all change profoundly on April 6, 1941. The Axis powers involving German, Italian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian military units invaded Yugoslavia. And five days later, your hometown was occupied by Hungarian forces. Hungary had anti-Jewish laws and regulations similar to those in Germany, which severely restricted Jewish life. Please, share with us what happened to you and your family on the first day of the occupation.

On the first day of occupation, a Hungarian officer with a drawn revolver expelled my father from his office. The plant was-- plant and newspaper were confiscated. And a Aryan administrator was appointed, who made a formal statement that his intention was to pauperize the family, which he very successfully did.

And so by law, all the employees had to be discharged. Jews could not employ Gentiles. Our German governess didn't even wait for that. On the very first day, she marched out of the house, declaring that she was not going to spend another night in a Jew's house. So that was the beginning of a very constricted life, with further and further pressure of humiliation coming from the Hungarian government.

Steve, there were all kinds of restrictions and increasing forms of humiliation that were piled on the Jews in your town. And describe a few of those to us.

Well, every month, there was a call. Something had to be-- either was confiscated and had to be carried out-- carried over to the police station or some further restriction, all of them intended to humiliate and expose the people to the rage of the community around them. For me, in terms of entertainment, movie houses were closed. The popular local beach was closed to Jews.

But the most severe restriction was schooling. Hungary from 1920s had a law limiting the representation of Jews in places of higher education. And that included academic high schools. So I had a grueling exam, intended in atrocious way, to flunk you. And eventually, I was one of nine boys out of probably 45 or so who were admitted to fifth grade, first year of the gymnasium.

Admission meant nothing. For the following three years, we nine of us sat in the back row. There was no point in raising your hand. No teacher would ever recognize your presence there, except when he or she wanted to say some derogatory thing about Jews or just discharge a curse on the fly while lecturing on whatever subject. That was very difficult to live with. My father became quite ill from all of this. And the restrictions were just kept piling on and on.

Steve, before we continue, I'd like to acknowledge for you that we have people viewing and listening to you from all over the place, including viewers from Colorado, Minnesota, South Carolina, Idaho. And we have international viewers from Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Denmark, South Africa, and India. So you're being watched and heard from around the globe.

And we also have a couple of comments that have come in already, if I could share those with you. Melanie says, thank you for sharing. It's so important that your story and others like you are heard. And then Tracy, another viewer, says, thank you for continuing to tell your story so that today's generations can hopefully learn from the past. Steve, with your father's-- with a family newspaper being confiscated so brutally, income streams stopped for the family. How did your family make ends meet during that time?

By selling everything we had. The dining room furniture went first. But it was valuable, including the stamp collection that I labored on so quite hard. Everything had to go. It was not unusual for my mother to go to the market with a couple tablecloths in a basket and return with a basket of fruits and vegetables, and occasionally, a piece of meat. That was the norm.

Steve, as it became clear that Nazi Germany would lose the war, Hungary began attempting to negotiate peace with the Allies. As a result, in the spring of 1944, Germany moved quickly to occupy Hungary, including Subotica, your town. Tell us what happened to your father and how conditions for your family changed when the Germans occupied your town.

Well, just to put it in context, 600 German troops constituted the occupying force in Hungary. Within five or six weeks, 600-- I'm sorry, 300,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz. When I speak to school groups, I ask them to do a little mental arithmetic to ask how many Jews each of the 600 German soldiers had to deport.

The answer is zero. They sit-- sat in their barracks. The Hungarian state police had a worked-out plan, rehearsed with a mini pogrom just south of Subotica. And in matter of weeks, taking region by region, they collected and deported everybody, all of the Jews from-- except for Budapest. They-- Admiral Horthy stopped them. So we were forced to leave the home and go into a ghetto.

Steve, tell us about your father's arrest a few days after the German occupation.

Very early one morning, my father was arrested by a group of Hungarian plainclothes policemen and taken away. We watched it-- him go from the window. With his health and condition, none of us ever expected to see him alive again. They were taken to a nearby village. And from there, we lost track of him for the duration of the war.

And then of course, you were forced to leave your home. Tell us about that.

Yeah, that's one of the darkest days of my life. I don't know how the event was advertised, papers or whatever. But the fact is that we lived on the second floor. And as we were leaving by-- per-- as per the orders and descending the staircase, every rung on-- in the staircase was occupied by a person waiting to get in the apartment and ransack it. They were yelling at us, cursing us, screaming at us, spitting at us as we trundled down with the little bundles.

And I assume these included neighbors.

I presume I did not have--

Yeah.

--I didn't look up and saw their faces. I just felt their spittle on my face. Unbeknownst to us, our former cook, when we had let go three-- had to let go three years ago, was with the crowd. She went in and very methodically collected my mother's recipe book, a diary of my mother's from her bedroom, and in her former studio, stuffed a big cardboard folder with as much artwork on paper as she could, and carried it away, and returned it to us after the war.

Including the art that we just saw a few minutes ago--

Including.

--of your mother's.

Right. Right.

Steve, so once you were forced out of the house, and it was ransacked, and your father was gone, where were you and your family sent?

Into a small transition camp set up in a nearby village, where the Jews from the region were collected, and then from right there, lined up in front of a row of railroad cars, and packed into the boxcars, 80 people to a boxcar. The doors were shut, clanged shut. And we were off--

Steve--

--eight days, something like eight days. Nobody could keep track-- eight days locked up, no food, no drink, no sanitation facilities, except the bucket that filled up in here, people going mad, people dying, which we consider a benefit because the bodies could be stacked in one corner, giving us a little more space to scrunch down. That's how we spent several days.

Steve, before we continue on with you describing to us Auschwitz, I'd like to remind our audience to please, share their questions for Steve via the chat feature. And I'd also like Steve to share another comment with you from a viewer, [PERSONAL NAME] who says, hi, I am from Bangladesh. I have been watching some content related to the Holocaust on YouTube. And today, I came here to learn more. So we welcome him from Bangladesh.

Steve, so June 16, 1944 was when your family and others were forced onto the train that took you to Auschwitz, as you described. You arrived in Auschwitz with your mother, your sister, and your grandmother. Share with us what that was like for you to arrive there.

Well, we didn't know where we were at anytime on this trip, except we had the sense that we were crossing the Carpathian Mountains and deduced that we were being shipped into occupied Poland. Suddenly, the door slammed open. And we were surrounded by noise of dogs barking, men yelling, batons hitting, but even more violently by a horrendous stench that-- which still sometimes seems like it fills my nostrils, and shouts, yells.

Anybody who could not jump out-- jump off the train was thrown out. We're told to leave all of our belongings on the railroad siding, and eventually, men and women separated, as shown on the slide. This definitely can't be our group. But there were trains arriving daily.

And then eventually, a SS officer stood in front and waved people right and left, which at that time, none of us had any idea what right or left meant. But we soon found out. I happened to be in the group that was sent to live. The other group was sent to the gas chamber and crematorium.

Steve, at this point, did you know what happened to your mother, your sister, and your grandmother?

My grandmother had, in her youth, had an accident. And she had-- her leg was amputated. And she had an artificial leg. So she must have been carried to the gas chamber that my mother and sister were lined up. That-- I waved to them from the parallel line. That's the last view I had of my mother. She perished very soon after she got to Auschwitz.

Steve, Auschwitz, which is located in German-occupied Poland, consisted of multiple camps, including a killing center at Auschwitz-Birkenau. What were conditions like in Auschwitz? And what was daily life like for you in the camp? And what happened to you on that first day?

On the first day, we were marched off from the siding into a huge building. We were stripped naked, all body hair shorn, cold shower with no towels, eventually thrown unsorted pieces of prisoner clothing and unmatched shoes. And so after a while, we managed to trade and get something that could be worn. We didn't know that it was going to be worn for months without washing.

And we were marched into this huge compound. Auschwitz is well-known as an extermination camp where at least a million and a half people were killed in the region, on the upper right of the screen. But if you look at this region in the middle, it will remind you of something like the stockyards in Chicago and all kinds of city, where cattle are stockpiled, waiting to be slaughtered.

So what we see here, Steve, is an aerial view of a close-up of Auschwitz.

Taken in September 1944. And I was standing somewhere there, while-- in somewhere in the barrack marked by the white signal.

If we could just spend a moment here, Steve, just to reiterate what you said-- when this photo was taken in September 1944, you were there. And that white highlighted space is a barrack. And it just it's impossible to not see the analogy you gave to the stockyards, just thousands and thousands of people in there. How many were in that one barrack that you were in?

1,000.

1,000 in that one barrack.

OK. So Auschwitz, in-- beyond the killing center was the stockyard, where inmates were stocked to be lined up for inspection, as German officials, military and civilian, came to select suitable slave laborers available cheaply to be worked to death. That was the function.

The people who survived Auschwitz are those who, in four or five days, managed to get out on an outgoing transport. I was there for five months because this entire barrack full of youths where I was simply a mistake by the officers at the railroad siding of letting a few of us undersize skip the gas chamber. And of course, if any self-conscious manager of a plant, or quarry, or mine looking for cheap slave labor who could do hard work, obviously bypassed 15-16-year-- 13-12-year-old kids and didn't bother, went on to one of the other barracks to select prisoners. So we were there, had no other duty than waiting to die.

And yet somehow, you got-- you managed to become an interpreter at the age of 13.

Yes. If any of you have ever seen a Sing Sing or Alcatraz movie, you know that in a penal colony, there are-- the inmates feared the guards and feared the internal people who are in control. And they fear the latter more because the guards are locked out at night. The SS used this method very effectively.

The trustees who were in charge of the individual barracks were at first common criminals, many murderers who were brought in from the prisons and given the task of supervising, managing the inmates. They were vicious, more vicious than the SS, and certainly with more hatred and more hatred towards Jews than probably most of the SS. Their mode of conversation with an inmate was through a whip or a baton. And in our barracks with the young kids, the normal outcome of a conversation was that the other person was dead from the beating administered as part of the conversation.

So they eventually-- they decided that something else had to be done. And interpreters were appointed. I was fluent enough in German to become one of those interpreters at age 13. The reward was that after the inmates were fed twice a day with soup out of these big cauldrons, I was allowed with my spoon to clean out the bottom of these barrels and take whatever was left by there. My intervention in interpreting was of very little value, whatever I was called for-- the argument between a inmate and the trustee, the overseer usually ended with violent death of the inmate who dared to offend the trustee in some way.

Tell us, Steve, about the night of August 2, 1944 and how that then affected your life.

Unbeknownst to us, in the barrack that I showed you, two compounds further north was the Gypsy compound. Several thousand gypsies-- older men, and women, and children, under horrible conditions, were living in these barracks. They didn't have to stand for the morning and evening roll call. But they lived in miserable conditions.

And on that night, in one night, they were exterminated. We were locked into our barracks. All of the camp was on lockdown. And we heard the screams, the shouts, and the repeated shots. And the following morning, we were allowed out. Two compounds over, we could see inmates cleaning, emptying the barracks, and eventually whitewashing them.

This was a momentous day for me because that was the day I start preparing for my own death. Up till then, there was certainty that not-- no kid from our barracks will ever be picked out, and allowed out, and would not die there in Auschwitz of starvation. Because with this change in the camp, the SS authorities decided that the German criminals were just not bright enough, clever enough to impose discipline.

And they replaced all of the criminal overseers with political prisoners, most of them communists, who they knew one thing-- knew how to organize. So in our compound, all of the overseers became Polish political prisoners. One of them came over to our barrack and said he was looking for an interpreter who could interpret Hungarian, Polish, and German.

Now, coming from Yugoslavia, I knew that Czech-- that Polish was another Slavic language and reasoned that it could not be too different from Serbian, which I had in school. And so I volunteered. And he accepted me.

It turned out that Polish was quite different. It took me quite a while, with the help of several of the overseers, to learn Polish. But I became working for the Polish political prisoners. They made it clear that they are a resistance organization and that working for them requires the same commitment to fight, to resist, and to work towards freedom as they themselves had.

So I was given-- they gave me my life back. I had a purpose. I had something that I could fight for. And that's what I did for the rest of the years in-- and the rest of that year in concentration camps.

So you were part of an internal resistance, then--

Yes.

--inside Auschwitz. Tell us what kinds of things you were doing.

OK-- two things, legal and illegal-- legally, it was my job as an interpreter to meet a German official, escort him to whichever compound he was directed to, serve as an interpreter while he interrogated and chose slaves for his-- whatever trade he represented. That was a big responsibility. You quickly learned to embellish the responses.

If they were looking for somebody for a limber yard-- lumber yard for a screening, whatever, as soon as I heard the word wood from any of the inmates, I immediately-- as describing to the German that this is a seasoned lumberman, et cetera, et cetera. You had to be very careful not to over-embellish the story. They counted your words while comparing to theirs so that you didn't elaborate-- didn't embellish the story. But under those constraints, you could help a lot of people get out of that hell. That was their official duty.

Unofficially, I was part of the resistance organization. And being small, and slight-- [AUDIO OUT] --on trips that full-sized men couldn't. In particular, there was a roof repair detail. Even the SS realized that with the coming winter, the miserable barracks needed some improvement. So we worked on a cart, a hand-pulled cart, one overseer, four or five workers, and I tagging along as interpreter.

And we had the freedom to move from compound to compound, including visiting the women's compound. You ask why? Well, the woman political prisoner overseer in that-- of one of the barracks in that compound had been the pre-war girlfriend of the Polish kapo that led our group. So we frequently made social visits there.

On one of those, I encountered my sister. She was on the way-- she was being sent out on a outgoing transport. She told us-- she told me that she was separated from our mother immediately, but that she understood from others that my mother's condition became worse and worse. And one morning was-- she was carted away with the night's dead and directly taken to the crematorium.

That was normal practice. There was no point of wasting another dose of Zyklon gas on people who were mentally, emotionally already dead. So I eventually cashed all my black market goodies to make sure that-- and got her a sweater and scarf before they went out.

A sweater and a scarf to help her as she left. Steve, I'd like to bring in a video question that we have from a student, Annalise, from Bethesda, Maryland. Let's hear from Annalise.

My name is Annalise. And I go to school in Bethesda, Maryland. As you were such a young teenager when Germany invaded Hungarian-occupied Yugoslavia and you were sent to a ghetto, and a transit camp, and finally, Auschwitz, was it difficult having so much responsibility placed on you as an interpreter when you were only 13 years old?

Annalise is asking the very question I know that that's on my mind. Was it difficult having so much responsibility placed on you as an interpreter when you were only 13 years old?

I was never aware of, bothered by mundane things like responsibility. There was-- I had a opportunity to resist in some

form. And faking interviews was one of the opportunity I had, so I did it. So I understand the young lady's question, but this was not a normal world. Here, you-- if you had a chance of doing anything contrary to the rules, you did it, even knowing that any encroachment was punishable by death. That didn't matter. You did it.

You did it. Steve, you managed to get out of Auschwitz. How did you do that? The resistance organization simply smuggled me out. There was a transport that they thought was safe. They asked an inmate in line whether he would change places with me. And they assured him that they would get him out on another safe transport.

We changed places. I went through the processing line, got myself tattooed. By that time in Auschwitz, only outgoing inmates were tattooed. Another train ride, a little more comfortable-- at least once a day, we were let out to rest our-- stretch our legs. And there was some substitute coffee or maybe a piece of bread.

And so we had-- eventually, the train stopped at a place that said, Niederorschel. And we got out. And that was my-- that was the first introduction.

What was Niederorschel? Tell us about your arrival there.

Niederorschel was a very small camp, no more than 700 inmates attached to a Fokker-Wulf plant producing wings of Fokker-Wulf fighter planes. Later on, when I read about it, I was surprised that the camp was-- opened only in the spring of 1945.

1944, yeah.

1944-- that's when-- by that time, the big, heavy military installations were bombed to smithereens. And so Germany decided to regroup and divide the work into very small units connected by railroads and revived the construction. It never worked. Eventually, the yard was-- railroad was bombed. And we couldn't get pieces. And we couldn't ship out our wings. But anyhow.

OK. Let me say something about the arrival. The SS command gave a speech, which essentially said, any-- everything is punishable by death. The German foreman gave a speech, insisting that the precision and punctuality were the most important things. And then a translator translated these speeches into Hungarian. The majority of the inmates on the transports were Hungarian Jews.

Then something weird happened. The foreman recognized me in the group, walked up to me, and in a loud voice said, what are you doing here? I did not select you in Auschwitz. I had been his interpreter in Auschwitz. Well, the resistance organization in Auschwitz drilled me for situations like that, like presidential debate candidates are prepared for their questioning, except this was not one of the questions that they had anticipated.

So quickly, I collected my thoughts and said, well, sir, with this many new inmates, they thought that you would need another interpreter, never specifying who they were. And he said, oh, that's a good idea and walked away. He and the German civilian workers accepted me as an interpreter. The SS never did. They never wanted to deal through me.

We were led into the camp-- obviously, much better conditions than Auschwitz. We got our first meal, warm meal with some taste. And the interpreter and another inmate sat next-- either side of me, really crowding me in, and started asking questions. Who was I? Where did I come from? How come they-- and the foreman knew me? How come my prisoner's clothes were more fitting than the others?

So I answered the questions that night. They led me to the room of the kapo, the overseer, who was a-- who was German, had been in concentration camps since 1933. And he was the leader of the pack. They start-- they're questioning me, one of the-- orderlies was Gypsy. He had heard some rumors about the Gypsies in Auschwitz, but didn't know much more than that. I explained the situation to him what I saw.

And there were Soviet prisoners of war in the camp, represented in the small group by a cavalry officer. The Germans did not honor the Geneva Convention with respect to prisoners of war. And the Soviet soldiers were in the camp with



us.

He wanted to test my knowledge of Polish. And we sort of exchanged a couple of sentences in Polish, realized that-- we both realized that Russian and Serbian are much more alike than either is to Polish. So from that point on, we conversed in this mix of Serbian and Russian. And so I was accepted in the resistance organization.

We-- as I said, at the plant, we worked 14 hours a day, six and a half days a week, strenuous labor. I won't say hard labor-- strenuous labor. I worked on the inspection line, inspecting the rivets in the wing. Whatever could be stolen was stolen.

We never used the word-- it was always liberating was the word. We liberated scraps of aluminum. We liberated tools, anything that can be converted into weapons. And at night, there was continuous activity of doing things with-- for exchange, trade with the civilians. Jewelers were very good at that, making weapons, and so on. So it's a very exciting life.

Steve, before I-- there's so much more you could tell us about your time at Niederorschel, including things like that in the midst of all that, some of the older inmates felt that the young the few youngsters there like you still needed to get a little education. So at night, in the middle of everything else, you were being schooled in geometry, algebra, in history, in geography, and even English, I think you said to me.

French, French.

Steve, you remained at Niederorschel camp for six months, from September 1944 until April 1945. As the Allies approached, you and your fellow inmates were forced on a march. Tell us about that.

Yes. On April 1, 1945, we were marched out of the barracks, and took 11 days to reach the main concentration camp at Buchenwald. People were laggards, were falling behind. They were shot and left dead in the trenches. There were attempts at escape. Some were successful.

Other were very sad to see-- German civilians bringing back escapees with hands tied with barbed wire, prodding them with pitchforks, and standing around chatting with the guards until they were shot in front of their eyes. Eventually, we got to Buchenwald. From stories of others, I recognize that it was a very quick entry. The crematorium was not working. We were sent into a barracks.

Now, we knew that-- about some of the preparations the inmates-- the resistance organization Auschwitz, which was very powerful-- the steps that they were planning to take to self-liberate the camp. And we kids had grandiose images that we were going to be active partners in that.

Well, it turned out that I collapsed on a cart. And the next thing I heard is one of my buddies shaking me awake, you stupid idiot, you slept through it all. The Americans have arrived. So that was the unglorious-- my introduction to liberty.

And so here, we see American troops from the Sixth Armored Division entering Buchenwald. And this is where you had missed their entry. Steve, you were in very bad shape. And I know you want to share with us about the care that you received once the army arrived.

I collapsed against the barbed wire fence. Fortunately, by then, power was off. Eventually, I woke up on a cot. And the US Army, specifically 121st-- 124th Field Evacuation Hospital set up a huge hospital for those of us who survived in the facilities that were previously-- that were built and previously used for recuperating wounded SS. I don't remember that.

I'm told that all of us were stripped naked, liberally doused with DDT, given a bath, et cetera, put on cots. Anyhow, I woke up. And very slowly, I was nursed back to life. My hand had been broken by a guard during the march. That was reset.

And I slowly began to learn simple things, like cleaning under the fingernails or how to use a knife and fork again. So I was in Buchenwald till late in the summer. Going back, the Iron Curtain already existed. And going back east was much more difficult than the people of France, Belgium, Norway, et cetera, who were cleared out the first week.

Steve, if I could bring in a question from one of our viewers, Faith, she asks, did you return to Yugoslavia immediately after the war, after your recovery? And did you find any other surviving family members after the war?

Well, yes, thank you for asking. I had known in Buchenwald that my sister was alive and that she was recovering from typhus in Bergen-Belsen. So we got reunited. But then what appeared to us a miracle happened-- our father arrived on a Soviet military hospital train and was wheeled in to my aunt's house, where we lived at that time, totally broken, physically and emotionally, unable to accept that his wife had passed away. And he died a couple of months later. The other big miracle was that our cook reappeared and gave us back the stuff that she had taken.

Including your mother's artwork. And this is a terrific photo. Describe the importance of this photograph.

The settee on which we sit in this small apartment that we had later was from our parents' parlor. It disappeared during the upheaval. Our former cook and her husband saw it on a cart. They strong-armed the guy who pushed the cart and gave it to us. And when my sister and I in '47 escaped from Yugoslavia, we deeded it to the local museum.

Where it sits to this day, right?

Where it sits to this day, not on display, but in the lobby of the director's office. So if you ever get to Subotica, go see the museum, which is in our former home, and ask to see the settee from the former home.

I intend to do that as soon as I am able to do that. I want to sit on that settee. Steve, I have one more question for you. In the face of rising global antisemitism, please, tell us why you continue to share your firsthand account of what you experienced during the Holocaust.

Well, first of all, as a survivor, I feel that I have an obligation to speak on behalf of those who are not able to speak. And in that process, I try to convey to the audience that feelings of-- that wherever you see inequity, injustice, prejudice, bigotry, discrimination, you see the makings of-- the potential makings of another genocide or Holocaust. Those feelings can be easily fanned up, fanned to violent hatred by a few dedicated people.

And in cases where this hatred gains government support and government encouragement-- government recognition, government support, genocides-- it's possibly on the scale of the Holocaust, they're still possible. There have been umpteen genocides since World War II. In my own native country of Yugoslavia, there have been two in Bosnia and in Kosovo. It's occurring all over. It has been occurring all over the world. So whatever I can do to make you realize how these hatreds can be fanned and turned into genocide, I try to do so.

And Steve, you do it extraordinarily well, brilliant, in fact. It's so important that you continue to do this. Thank you for doing it for us today. There's so much more that you could have shared. I think everybody knows that you just were able to give us a glimpse. You even hinted at something that we wish we could talk about. And that is how you escape later from Yugoslavia. But we'll have to save that for another time. So Steve, thank you so much for being our first person today.

Thank you for doing it. Thank you to the audience.

Thank you. I would also like to take a moment to thank our donors. First Person is made possible through generous support from the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation. Next week, please join the museum to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day. On Thursday, January 27, please join a live conversation with another Holocaust survivor, Arye Ephrath, at 9:30 AM Eastern Time. This Facebook Live program will focus on the risky choices that are made to protect and save a child's life.

Our next First Person on February 16 at 1:00 PM Eastern Time will feature a conversation with Holocaust survivor and museum volunteer, Halina Peabody. Halina's mother, Olga, protected her two daughters by securing false papers identifying them as Catholic. For years, they were constantly on the move to evade detection and possible arrest or worse. Thank you all for watching today's First Person program.