UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON NATE SHAFFIR
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Warren Marcus: Good morning. Thank you for your patience. Welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I saw a couple of you outside. Glad you made it. My name is Warren Marcus, I work here in the Levine Institute for Holocaust Education. I'm the host of today's public program *First Person*. Thank you for coming. This is our 18th season. Our *First Person* today is Nat Shaffir whom you will meet shortly.

This 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.

A personal note. When this program first started in 1999 or 2000, my father recently passed away and my family sponsored *First Person;* so I have a very personal and important connection to this. My dad was a G.I. in World War II. He didn't get to any camps but he saw people coming out of them though he never talked to us about it. We found out later.

*First Person* is a series of conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their existence during this period of time. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at the museum. Our program will continue twice weekly through the middle of August. Come on back every week. The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Nat will share with us his first person account for about 45 minutes. If we have time, we will have questions from the audience. We'll have questions. We'll explain later.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What we are about to hear from Nat is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with an introduction.

Let's see if I can do this. Nat Shaffir was born Nathan Spitzer December 26, 1936, in Romania. Nat has three birthdays. We'll get to that later.

In this photograph, the photograph you saw already, we had Nathan with his parents and his sisters, Sara and Lily. And here is Romania, for you who didn't do well in geography class. So there's Romania.

Near Iasi, shown on this map, Nathan's family owned a dairy farm. In 1941 the fascist Iron Guard confiscated the farm and all the cattle just because Nathan's family was Jewish.

The family moved to a neighborhood of Iasi where Nathan's father, Anton, was able to keep cows and his mother, Fany, bartered products in exchange for tutoring for the children.

When Anton was sent to perform forced labor in early 1944, 8-year-old Nathan helped his family continue to make dairy products. After Iasi fell to the Russians in the summer of 1944, his dad returned to his family. They stayed in Romania for several years before emigrating to Israel.

There's more about Nat's life in America in your booklet but we want to spend most of our time today hearing from Nat and his time during the Holocaust.

With that introduction, we'd like to welcome to the stage, our *First Person* today Nat Shaffir. Come on down.

>> [Applause]

>> Warren Marcus: Cheers. Thank you, Nat. We've got a lot to go through.

I just want to remind you when World War II started, Nat was 3, so during his presentation I'm going to ask him to remind us how old he is during each of these segments so that you will be hearing a story about life in the ghetto and you have to remember how old he was when he was surviving and dealing with the difficult circumstances his family was plunged into.

So the Germans invade Poland in 1939. You're in Romania. I know you're very young at the time but tell us about the community, your dad's dairy farm, growing up before the war started. What do you remember about that?

>> Nat Shaffir: Before the war started, I think it was pretty normal. We didn't have any electricity, any running water. It was a primitive life but it was a good life. For a while we were able to go to kindergarten. I went to first grade. I had both Jews and non-Jewish friends and things were ok. We were pretty wealthy at the time. Life was ok.

>> Warren Marcus: So relations with non-Jews was nothing memorable?

>> Nat Shaffir: Everything was very much the same. We never saw a difference between the Jewish boys or Jewish kids and non-Jewish kids.

>> Warren Marcus: In your town, was it a large Jewish community, small?

>> Nat Shaffir: Actually, my father immigrated originally from the eastern part of Hungary. He and his two brothers immigrated in 1924, after World War I. He established a large dairy farm. So the community was approximately 25 Jewish families, about 89. It was a farm community. In other words, it was one of the surrounding farming areas. And ours was probably one of the largest farms.

>> Warren Marcus: And you had good relationships with the other farmers, Jewish and non-Jewish. Tell us about the priest who came by once a week.

>> Nat Shaffir: What happened, getting back a little bit.

>> Warren Marcus: Sure.

>> Nat Shaffir: The way my father emigrated. Both my parents were born in the eastern part of Hungary. My mother was the oldest of 12 children and my father was the youngest of six. In 1924, after World War I, my father and two of his eldest brothers emigrated to Romania and that's where they established the farm.

In 1931, my father was still single and decided he wanted to get married. His other two brothers were already married. So the most logical place to find a bride was to go back to the community that you came from. So he went back to the village that he came from. And at that point it didn't have any findthebride.com. He went to a matchmaker.

>> Warren Marcus: No yenta.com.

>> Nat Shaffir: No. They went to a matchmaker. The two families knew each other. They were both in the livestock business. So they were trading. So they knew each other. So my father's requirements were to have a nice person, a good homemaker, somebody who could take care of the children and educate the children. Obviously today would not be very politically correct to request something like that. But those days --
>> Warren Marcus: We'll save that for the Q&A.
>> Nat Shaffir: My daughters and granddaughters don't approve of that but that's what happened. So he found a bride. He brought her back to Romania. And before long, three children were born, two girls and a boy, and I'm that boy.
>> Warren Marcus: All right. So you have the big dairy farm. You're doing fairly well. It's interesting to say we're doing very well, almost wealthy but no electricity, no running water.
>> Nat Shaffir: Well, that's what it was. Right. But we were happy.

But you asked me if my father got along with other farmers. Not only did he get along with them but in most cases, many cases, many years, he helped the farmers. Many times there were droughts. These were smaller farms where they didn't have enough need to feed their cattle. Instead of sending them to the slaughterhouses which would get maybe five cents on the dollar per pound, my father would buy from them based on the normal fair market value. He helped them out giving them feed for seeding when they didn't have any money. He always was very good to the farmers. He always helped them out.
>> Warren Marcus: And that's the way one would hope would work with your neighbors. This will come back into the story later on.

Tell us, again, about the local priest who visited once a week.
>> Nat Shaffir: We lived in a nice area. One of our neighbors was a priest. Once a week he would come by and ask my father for a donation for the church and also for some dairy products for some of his congregants who couldn't afford to buy. In almost 20 years my father never once refused such a request. One day in November, 1942 -- well before that, back a little bit. Every time the priest came over, my mother always used to tell us, the children, go out and greet the priest. You know, it was the nice thing to do. And every time we saw him, we would go outside. We lived on the farm, when you saw the fields, you saw him coming throughout open. So you come out, ask about his health, his family, wish him a good day.
>> Warren Marcus: You all knew him.
>> Nat Shaffir: We all knew the priest.
>> Warren Marcus: Let's wait for the `42, for that one.
>> Nat Shaffir: Ok.
>> Warren Marcus: I teased them saying you had three birthdays. Can you explain that a little bit?
>> Nat Shaffir: We were far away from the big city. So when someone was born, they couldn't register the same time people were born. So my father would mark down the birthdays on a Bible. When he got a chance, he went to the big city and registered us. Somehow, the register, either when he arrived there or when he registered when my actual birthday was -- he must have come maybe two months later, a month later. So my regular birthday was recorded as December 28, 1939, December 26, 1936, December 26, 1938. So three different times. We didn't know exactly what happened.

One time, an uncle of mine, which later we will find out what happened to him, came to visit us. It was in July. His children called to wish a happy birthday. So my mother, which it was his older sister, said, he wasn't born in July. There was snow on the ground when you

were born. So anyway, what happened, he sent away to the Romanian embassy a request to get a birth certificate. And he got it. And obviously his birthday is in February. So I did the same thing. I sent away to the Romanian government, petition to send me a copy of my birth certificate. It took a while because Romania, until recently, didn't have faxes yet. So finally got my birth certificate, which is December 26, 1936.
>> Warren Marcus: Now, you all do a little math. I just want to tell you, Nat and I were talking about training this summer to running the Boston marathon. Just keep that in mind. He's run it twice.
>> [Applause]
>> Warren Marcus: Two Boston marathons, five Marine Corps marathons. That makes you feel all guilty, I hope.
>> Nat Shaffir: All after 65.
>> Warren Marcus: Thanks, Nat, for underlining that for us.
Last thing about birthdays. Do you get two or three birthday parties every year?
>> Nat Shaffir: No. But different friends and different family members always wish me a happy birthday late or early.
>> Warren Marcus: I have to work on that.
All right. Let's shift back into the historical time period. So this is before `39. So we have the background. A lot of your family lives nearby but you do have a significant number of family members in Hungary. Right?
>> Nat Shaffir: My entire family came from eastern Hungary which remained there. We will talk about later on what happened to them. But the only people that came were my two uncles, my father's brother and him and my mother that came over from Hungary to Romania.
>> Warren Marcus: Let's shift gears from `39 to `41. So the Germans invade Poland, World War II starts. How does that change your life? Does the government change? Does life for Jews in Romania change?
>> Nat Shaffir: It was a fascist government until 1941. 1941 we started hearing things going on in the world, particular things, Jews being sent to gas chambers, Jews are being killed, Jews are sent to slave labor camps. So because of these little things -- because there was no radio or television or newspaper. The way we heard things was primarily from the market. People go to the market and find out. Some of them were rumors. Some of them were actually facts. So we'll hear stories coming back.
>> Warren Marcus: Let me interrupt for a question because this comes up all the time. Did people believe that? Did they believe it or did they sort of hesitate? What was the reaction? There's not much historical precedence for this kind of large-scale action.
>> Nat Shaffir: We saw some of what they called the Legionnaires, which was part of the Iron Guard government, little by little changing their outlook against Jewish people, more anti-Semitic things. We saw certain things happening where they didn't happen before.
>> Warren Marcus: So that's the local context, as you're hearing much worse stories from, say, Poland.
>> Nat Shaffir: Right.
>> Warren Marcus: So there's a global story going on and then there's things getting worse and worse for you. So I think -- tell us about the Iasi pogrom. That was `41?
>> Nat Shaffir: Actually a little later on. There were a couple. Pogrom is something that individual citizens kill other citizens strictly for monetary values, monetary reasons. It was ok by the government to do so. In other words, the government did not say not to do certain things. It

was sponsored by the government in a way, condoned by the government. Primarily 1941 there was a big pogrom in Iasi where 10,000 people were killed within two days, July 1941.
>> Warren Marcus: 10,000.
>> Nat Shaffir: 10,000.
>> Warren Marcus: And this is paramilitaries, civilians?
>> Nat Shaffir: Anybody that wanted somebody as his property or somebody else's things would just go ahead and do things like that. And they were killed brutally with shovels, axes, whoever had guns with guns but they were killed brutally.
>> Warren Marcus: Did you know anyone, your family know anyone or lose any family in that particular --
>> Nat Shaffir: In 1941, in addition to the pogrom was a train started up in the southern part of Romania going to Iasi. They were ferried in the heat of the summer of Romania, ferried for three days back and forth without any reason. Most of the people in these three trains were dead when they returned to Iasi after three days. One of my father's brothers was among these trains.
>> Warren Marcus: So these were basically cattle cars. When you go upstairs, there's two things I want you to remember, two of the many things you'll remember from that story. One, you will see a cattle car of the kind used to move Jews around, similar to the one used in the Iasi train. And also, there are actually pictures from this episode of these trains being unloaded where Nat lost one of his uncles.

So at that time, you were pretty young but how did your family react? What did you think you could do? What did you think about?
>> Nat Shaffir: First of all, we were pretty far away, about four hours away from Iasi itself. So actually in our community, there weren't that many Jewish people in the first place so it wasn't really involved in that. So we didn't -- we didn't suffer in our own --
>> Warren Marcus: But you heard about it.
>> Nat Shaffir: We heard about it, yes. We were scared, obviously. You hear things like that. We don't know if it's going to come your way, stay in the big city only.
>> Warren Marcus: Sometimes people say, well, did you think about leaving. Did that come up?
>> Nat Shaffir: No. That's your home. That's where you stayed. You don't go anywhere.
>> Warren Marcus: Ok. And just so we're clear, pogrom is from Russian word, an organized attack either supported by the government or engineered by the government. And there had been pogroms around Europe, in some countries from the 1880s on. So this isn't the first time this happened. Probably wasn't the first pogrom in Romania but this was a big one at this point in time.

All right. So even with all of these fears, and hearing some of the international news and it's work time, the dairy farm, life is still ok. Right?
>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah.
>> Warren Marcus: But then it all changes in November 1942. Let's get back to the visit from your neighbor.
>> Nat Shaffir: Since we were such a large farm, the biggest client, biggest customer that my parents had was the Romanian Army. They shipped them all of their dairy products.

So in November 1942, the same priest that used to come by once a week came by. However, this time he came with an armed police officer and two Iron Guard soldiers, also armed. We saw these three, four people coming towards us. We all went out to greet him to

find out what was going on. When we came close to the group, the priest turned to the police officer and pointing at us and said to the police officer, [Speaking Non-English Language], "These are Jews." So the police officer at that point told us we had four hours to vacate the farm because he has orders to take us to the -- to relocate us to a different area.

My father tried to reason with him. He said, “I've known you since you were a little boy. I've known your family. Can't you do something about it, forget the order?: He said, “Because you know me and because you know my family, I'm giving you four hours.” Otherwise he didn't have to do that. My mother realized she's not going to be able to change his mind. She ordered three of us into the house and told us to put on as many warm clothing as possible, many layers of clothing.

Now, Romania is very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. November was already pretty cold, snow on the ground. So we went in the home. My mother, first thing, took whatever money we had in the house, any kind of jewelry or valuables. Then we started loading a one-horse wagon. We were allowed to take whatever we could load on that wagon. So we took blankets, pillows, cooking utensils, anything pretty much that we needed.

We already heard that a certain area was established, back in 1941. So 1941, the so-called ghetto was established by the Iron Guard. When the policeman told us we would be relocated we can pretty much knew where we were going, so we took whatever. Also, a small wagon, besides five people plus whatever things we had, wasn't that much.

So after four hours were over, the policeman told us time is up and we had -- he escorted us through the city. Once we arrived -- now, there's two kinds of ghettos, open and closed ghettos. Iasi was an open ghetto, which means Jews were able to move around within the perimeter of the area. They couldn't leave certain streets past that so we stay in the same area.

So we arrived in the ghetto. We were turned over to the authorities. And the authorities right away told us -- they gave us one room, that that's where we're going to be staying. So coming from a big house into one room with the five of us. In that room all we had was two beds. There was nothing in there no closets, no cooking place, nothing whatsoever. So we were given that room.

We unloaded the wagon. We were told by authorities to show up the next morning to give us the rules of the ghetto, what we can and cannot do. Most of it was what we cannot do obviously. So everybody kind of was in a bad mood, coming in from a large house to a one room.

>> Warren Marcus: It had to be very traumatic. Again, how old are you at this time?

>> Nat Shaffir: 6.

>> Warren Marcus: And your sisters?

>> Nat Shaffir: 8 and 4.

>> Warren Marcus: Ok.

>> Nat Shaffir: So obviously there was a problem there. So the next morning when we arrived to the authorities, number one, they were -- we were told that anybody between the ages of 18 and 50 must do work, must work, manual work primarily. They would not get paid. Jews cannot, even though they had money, cannot go out and buy on the open market anything. So instead we were receiving ration. And the ration allowed us bread, kerosene for cooking and heating and other items. Other items usually like oil and sugar were told in the black market. We never saw those.

So primarily we were getting a quarter of a loaf of bread every two days per person. So for five of us to get a loaf and a quarter every two days. We were also getting five liter of kerosene for cooking and heating. Now, five liters is about a little over a gallon, two and a half gallons, something like that.
>> Warren Marcus: I never understood metrics.
>> Nat Shaffir: It wasn't that much.
>> Warren Marcus: So the authorities, are they the Iron Guard? Are they the Iasi police? Who was running things?
>> Nat Shaffir: The police department. So they were giving all the rules. Number one, Jewish children could no longer go to school. Synagogues were closed. We could no longer go and worship. And that was the thing that each one individual would get a job, manual job. My father's job was to go out in the summer time, sweep the streets and until the wintertime shovel the snow.
>> Warren Marcus: And this is after a very successful, respected career of providing for his family as a dairy farmer and his neighbors. So it's a tremendous change.
>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah. So every morning the man would go out -- by the way, when we arrived at the ghetto, they took our names, ages, gender down. They knew exactly where each individual person lived.

The way it was set up, there were big houses. Each house had maybe four or five bedrooms. Each bedroom was given to one family. So in that house we lived with five other families. So it was very crowded. The whole ghetto was crowded. But in particular, it was very crowded.

So every morning the man would go out to do the work and come back later in the evening, or late in the afternoon. When I asked my mother -- my mother heard that they need certain people, certain jobs to take. My mother heard the need for nurses. Now, she was the oldest of 12 children. She actually raised the other 11 children. So she said she's a nurse. They put her in the hospital to do manual work, you know, cleaning toilets and doing things. So obviously it was better than doing certain things on the street.

My older sister was already 8. So she was able to be a maid to one of the officials, to clean the houses, to the police. So my mother was working in the hospital. My father was usually working on the streets, sweeping the streets.

One day, the person who was in charge to clean the market area died. And the next morning when people were allocating the jobs, my father was called out from the line and says your job now is to go and clean the market area. The market, the Iasi market was always on a Thursday. So Thursday was the market for Iasi. So he was sent out to do manual work, clean horseman you're, ox man you're from the streets. That's pretty much what he was doing for a while.
>> Warren Marcus: And what is little Nat doing?
>> Nat Shaffir: Well, first of all to collect the rations, we had to go out of the ghetto. Number one, we were given a yellow star with the word Jew on it. We couldn't leave the ghetto without that star. Anybody caught would be severely punished. To receive the rations, we had to go out of the ghetto. You could not leave before 5:00 a.m. Although my sister was older, my father always used to send me out to get the rations because a lot of hooligans were picking on Jewish girls. So he was afraid for my sister so he sent me out. Many times I came back -- these hooligans picked on Jewish boys as well. Many times I came home with a bloody

nose and messed up face. But that didn't hurt as much as when these hooligans took my bread away, which means for the next two days we didn't have anything to eat.

The first time this happened, my mother realized this could happen again so she started rationing our own family. So until she accumulated every two days instead of consuming a loaf and a quarter, we consumed a loaf and a quarter less a slice. The next time less two slices. So she accumulated up to one loaf of bread reserve. And actually this thing did happen again later on. So at least we did have something to eat. That was one of the things that my father used to send me out to get the rations.

>> Warren Marcus: Just so we're clear historically. The museum just found out there were over 42,000 ghettos, jails, and places of incarceration. As Nat rightly pointed out, some of these ghettos had walls, the Warsaw Ghetto. Some did not. Some you could never leave. You could leave this one for various reasons.

So in the morning, you would go out to get the kerosene or use the ration card. So you were the delivery boy for the family.

>> Nat Shaffir: Right. Again, we had to go out, leave the ghetto to go out. The bakery was outside the ghetto. We had to line up. The same for the kerosene, line up. And then individuals who were not Jewish were able to just go passed and come in front of the bakery and buy whatever they wanted. The Jews had to wait in line to get their rations.

>> Warren Marcus: Not only were you restricted on what you could get but what you could get was very minimal. It was very difficult.

I know a story about and a guy, this guy Grigory. Tell us about your interaction with this Grigory guy.

>> Nat Shaffir: Let me go back if I May.

>> Warren Marcus: Sure. You're the boss.

>> Nat Shaffir: When my father worked in cleaning the market area, what happened -- the farmers would gather every Wednesday night as a group. And at midnight they would leave, Wednesday night to get to the city by Thursday morning. So Thursday morning, one Thursday morning, this old farmer saw my father cleaning the area. He came over to him and said, Mr. Spitzer, I'm so sorry to see you in the condition you are. I know you were a wealthy person. You helped us a lot. Seeing you in the degrading condition you are in right now breaks my heart. I'm going to try to help you out a little bit. I'm going to speak to some of the other farmers you helped in the past. Perhaps we can help you in some way.

The next Thursday when he came back, the old farmer went over to him and said we agreed to help you and here's how we're going to do that. He said the Caravan starts in a field in midnight, pass the outskirts of the ghetto between 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning. Why don't you show up between those hours at a certain area behind a certain building. Watch out for the last three wagons of the convoy. We will fake a breakdown. Then we will throw something your way.

So my father didn't tell my mother what he planned to do because my mother was the rational person. She always thinks what could go wrong. My father always took a chance. So the next Thursday my father went out between 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning. Now, anybody caught between 2:00 and 3:00 in the morning outside the ghetto only meant one thing, the guy is trying to escape. That would be punishable by death or sometimes imprisoned. So my father took that chance. Again, that's one way to have his family survive. So he went out. Exactly what happened the farmers told him would happen. They faked a breakdown. The last three wagons, before you know it, one of them, tossed a sack to where my father was. My father

waited for a while until everybody left, looked around when there was no police. He took the bag and came home with it. And then we found some potatoes, fruit, cheese, different products, different times. This happened almost on a weekly basis.
>> Warren Marcus: So we understand the risk for your father to be there in the middle of the night. There's clearly risk for these people, too, to do that. If they were caught, what might have happened to them?
>> Nat Shaffir: They took their life in jeopardy. Not only their life in jeopardy, also the jeopardy of their families. But the farmers figured that's a good thing to do because my father helped them a lot in the past. So this is something maybe a payback in a way, if you want to call it that.

That went on for a while until later on, finally the farmer came and said to my father, I'm sorry, we can't do it anymore because somebody complained to the authorities that some of the farmers are helping Jewish people; we can't take a chance like that for us and for your families. So that stopped after about seven to eight months.

But while this was going on, it was really great for us. Number one, in every ghetto, the same in this ghetto, there was always a big black market. So people still had some money. Some people would risk their lives and go out and bring in products and obviously sell it for very high prices.
>> Warren Marcus: Smuggle things in at great risk.
>> Nat Shaffir: Right. But there were certain things people needed, shoes, pants, things like this, also some food products. So when we received all of these things from the farmers, sometimes we had maybe six potatoes, we would trade two of them for something else, an egg or two. So we would trade like that.

So my father would always take me to the area we traded on the black market. And the reason he used to take me along is because if a grown-up was caught with this contraband, he would immediately be arrested. A child would probably be slapped around a couple of times and let go. Many, many years after the war my father told people he always took me along for his protection.
>> [Laughter]
>> Nat Shaffir: What happened, they established certain ways of going to the black market area. I'll keep the contraband. He'll walk around 30, 40 feet ahead of us. When he saw policemen, he would walk off on the sidewalk into the street meaning I should hide. So that's how.
>> Warren Marcus: And how old are you?
>> Nat Shaffir: At this point getting to 7 years old.
>> Warren Marcus: Ok. So you're smuggling at 7 years old, negotiating on the black market at 7.
>> Nat Shaffir: A little later on. My father did all the negotiations at this time.

But in the meantime, we're going out to the kerosene in the morning once a week. We line up at 5:00 in the morning, winter and summer. Winter in particular was cold. The attendant would show up sometimes around 7:00, 7:30. And the way it was established, the way you were supposed to get the kerosene, was not like today you have the gas stations. Say like a booth, in the front of the booth was a little pump. In the front of the pump was a cylinder. In front of the cylinder was a handle. Every time you moved the handle back and forth that would bring up the kerosene with that cylinder. Once the cylinder was full, it was five liters. You put that into a can.

>> Warren Marcus: That was your ration.
>> Nat Shaffir: That was my ration for the week. Right.

So this individual -- there was like a big wide line six feet away from the booth. He would motion from the line for five people to come forward, remove their ration coupon for the week and then fill the kerosene. This individual was an uneducated, lazy drunk, the guy that actually dispersed the kerosene.
>> Warren Marcus: How did you feel about him then?
>> Nat Shaffir: Well, I tell you, things worked out for me and I'll tell you why. But he didn't like to work in particular. He always stood in the booth waiting to warm up, then come out and get five more people. One day I had the guts to tell him -- his name was Grigory. I told him -- I proposed to him, domino [phonetic] Grigory -- the word domino is the title you usually give to the president of a school, someone of authority but I called him it to give him a little bit of prestigious thing. I said, “I'd like to help you.” So he's looking at me. I wasn't a very tall kid. He said to me, "You're going to help me? I said, “Yeah.” He said, “How are you going to do that?” I said, “You look sick.” Probably had a hangover. “You look sick. Let me do the work for you. And if it pleases you, perhaps you can give me a little extra kerosene because my little sister is sick, we could use a little extra heat in the house.” He didn't say anything.

The next week when I line up, he came out and looked for me in the line. He saw me, motioned to me to come forward. He said to me, “Let me see what you can do.” So I did. I was pumping the kerosene back and forth. I did a really great job for him. I was hoping to get something in return. Nothing, nothing this week. Nothing the next week. Nothing the third week.

I realized what a dummy I must have been doing all the work and not getting anything in return. But in the fourth week he said to me, “Little Juden, next week bring an extra can with you.” So from that point on he used to give me either ate a liter or half-liter extra kerosene. That worked pretty much for a long time. So by using extra kerosene I was able, again to trade a little bit for something else.
>> Warren Marcus: And later on there was another exchange.
>> Nat Shaffir: What happened, in 1942 -- well, this was on for a while. So 1944, there was a big notice put out in the ghetto that anybody between the age of 18 and 50 must assemble in a certain area and to bring warm clothing. Obviously anybody that refuses to assemble, refuses to show up, would be punished sometimes by death or sometimes imprisoned. Everybody assembled because they knew exactly where everybody lived, which houses everybody lived. We heard everybody needed to bring warm clothing, we knew they were being sent to someplace else. Also, the notice said they would not be coming back on daily basis. So we knew that's what's going to happen. We heard people had been sent to slave labor camps.

So the day that my father went to the assembly area, we all hugged, cried. We never knew when we were going to see my father again if ever. The last minute before he left, I asked him If I could walk with him to the assembly area and he said yes. And we walked hand in hand. And finally when we get close to the assembly area, he said to me, put his hand on my shoulder and said, “It's time for you to go back.” He looked at my eyes and said -- I'll never forget. He said, “Nat, take care of the girls.” Here I am almost 9 years old, putting me in charge of taking care of my mother and two sisters. What could I say? I told him, yes, I will. I kept whatever feeling I had -- I didn't want to burst out and cry. I didn't want my father to see me cry. So I promised him I would do that.

Later on through all of this period of time that my father was not home I always remembered that I promised my father that I would take care of the girls, I would take care of them to make sure they survived. Many times life was very hard. I was ready to give up. But by giving up, that meant neither my sister or my mother would survive. So I kept on going.

One day when my father was away, I looked for a shirt underneath the bed because that was the closet. I found a bottle of a plum brandy. I took that to the attendant. I wrapped it in another shirt because there was no wrapping.

>> Warren Marcus: To Grigory.

>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah. I said, “I have a present for you.” I unwrapped the shirt and showed him the bottle. His eyes lit up. So he said to me, “I presume you want some extra kerosene.” I said, “No, actually, I don't. What I would like to have is another ration card for a family of four.” And today I still remember, how could I even have the guts to ask him for something like that.

>> Warren Marcus: And you're 11 years old.

>> Nat Shaffir: 9 years old.

>> Warren Marcus: 9 years old.

>> Nat Shaffir: So I'm giving him the bottle. A few weeks later he actually came with a ration of four which meant we get another loaf of bread every two days, another five liters of kerosene once a week. So now I had enough stuff to trade with. So that's what happened.

>> Warren Marcus: You certainly were living up to your father's request. At 9 years old, just remember.

>> Nat Shaffir: After a while, though, this Grigory took a pity on me, I presume. Sometimes he give me a chunk of cheese or a piece of his bread. He used to tell me, “Take that to your little sister.” So obviously I would take that back home and share. After a while, he became really -- not a friend but someone I was able to trust a little bit.

>> Warren Marcus: Let me ask you something. When you go through the exhibit today, learn about the Holocaust, you learn about life and death in ghettos, are people in the Iasi ghetto worried about being taken away? Is there health, disease issues? What's life like in the ghetto in terms of health and daily --

>> Nat Shaffir: There was always a problem -- famine was one of the big problems. We didn't have enough to eat. You went to sleep hungry and woke up hungry. Bathing, had a bath once a week. There was a public bathhouse. The women were allowed to go on Thursdays and men on Fridays. Wintertime not so bad but summer time it’s a problem. So disease was a problem. There was no doctors primarily, no medication. There were people dying.

>> Warren Marcus: All at the same time, at 9 or 10.

While you're in the ghetto for those years, do you have any conception about what's happening in the outside world in terms of the war or the continued assaults on the Jews of Europe? Do you have any knowledge of this or there's no way to know?

>> Nat Shaffir: We heard certain things filtering into the ghetto, not very precise exactly what happened but we knew something, Jews were being killed, being sent away to concentration camps, from Poland, from Hungary, from different parts of Europe. But we really didn't know exactly what happened. But we did hear back and forth certain things.

>> Warren Marcus: So you knew some of it. Ok.

Let's move -- time is getting a little short. Let's move ahead to the end of the war. What happens with you when the Russians are advancing towards your town? Tell us about that. The ghetto. Excuse me.

>> Nat Shaffir: Established in the outskirts of the housing with big fields. So when the city was bombed, many nights, we would run out to the outside to the field and hide in a ditch. One day, bombardments started to come. The city was bombed for three consecutive days. We stayed in these trenches. All of a sudden we heard it was quiet. One of the person from the trenches looked out and said we are liberated. So we couldn't understand what happened. He said, “Look out.” So we saw in the far end of the field there was individuals with gray coats on, gray fur hat with the red stars on their forehead and said these are Russians. So we were liberated in the spring of 1945 by the Russians. In all this time we never heard from my father, by the way.
>> Warren Marcus: Still and you have no idea if he's even alive.
>> Nat Shaffir: Right.
>> Warren Marcus: So did you think about going back to the farm or did you wait -- tell us when your dad came back.
>> Nat Shaffir: We couldn't leave anywhere. My father -- first of all, right after 1945, after the Russians came over, individuals started to come back from the same ghetto where they were sent out to slave labor camps. So everybody asked have you seen my brother, my father, this one. So we finally asked have you seen my father. One individual said, yeah, the last time I saw him was about a month ago; he was in good health and chances are he was shipped to another camp. So we hoped if he saw him a month ago, perhaps he's still alive.

So later on, one day he just showed up. He hitchhiked on Russian convoys, walked a lot, farmers. He finally came back to the ghetto area. We were there for a couple of days, maybe a week. Then he said to me we'll go back to the farm and see what happens to our farm.

So we went back. Before we went to the farm, actually, we stopped at an old farmer that helped us out to thank him for the things that he did for us. The farmer invited us for lunch. After lunch he said, “Where are you going from here?” He said -- my father said we're going to see the farm. He said, “I wouldn't do that.” He said, “Why not?” He said, “Because that's not your farm anymore.” He said, “What happened to the farm?” He said the farm was divided into three. The priest and his family got a third of the farm, the police and his family got a third of the farm, and the mayor of the town got a third of the farm.
>> Warren Marcus: And the mayor.
>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah. For many years after that my father and I spoke to each other and said, What makes people do what they do? Why this old farmer risked his life to help us? Why this priest who was supposed to really help people turn us in as Jews to the authorities? We could never figure it out. Finally we said it was because maybe monetary reasons or something that somebody could benefit. The farmer did it because he had it in his heart. The priest did it because he saw opportunity and took it.
>> Nat Shaffir: And the same for the mayor and the police who one expect -- like you have an expectation for a faith leader, you have an expectation for law enforcement and government to look after people but not in this case.
>> Warren Marcus: Now, at the same time, we tried to find out what happened to our family back in Hungary. So in March 1944, Germany invaded Hungary. Between April 15, 1944, and July 9, 1944, 140,000 Jews were deported to Hungary from Italy to Auschwitz. Among the 240,000 were 33 members of my family, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins. And most of them died. We don't know where, when, or how. Only three people we know for a fact, my grandfather and two of my uncles who was in Auschwitz together at the end. My grandfather

died a month before liberation. He died from starvation. And two of my uncles survived. One was 21 years old, one was 22 years old. They each weighed 65 pounds. So you can imagine what they looked like when you hear the words skin and bones or walking skeletons. That's what they were.

When the Red Cross came into the camp and saw the condition these people were in, they took them to Sweden, which was a neutral country. Between these two brothers, unfortunately one did not make it to Sweden. He died on the way to Sweden. So he was buried at sea. And one did survive. He was in a Sweden hospital for four years to get his strength and weight back. Finally he emigrated to the United States. And he's the uncle that came to Israel to visit. He finally did sponsor me to come to the United States. He is the one that told me about the birthdays that he had. So from 33, immediate family, only one survived.

>> Warren Marcus: So you were very fortunate. Fairly rare for survivors to maintain a family. You had tremendous losses in the extended family.

>> Nat Shaffir: Then we realized at that point there's no future for us to stay in Romania. So my father applied for exit visa and the only country that accepted Jewish people at the time was Palestine. We applied at the time to get an exit visa. Every time it came back denied, for many years. Finally, the last chance my father had, he knew an individual that he was dealing with in the Romanian Army. He said, “This is all I've got, take it. Please give us an exit visa.” He did. So finally 1951 we left for Israel. In Israel, I served in the Israeli Army for three years. Finally came back to the United States.

>> Warren Marcus: Don't be so humble. You were wounded in combat.

>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah, ok. I was wounded. Then they took me back. My mother was working as a nurse in the hospital. She didn't know I was wounded. They brought me back into that hospital. When she noticed that I'm the one --

>> Warren Marcus: She's working at the hospital taking incoming wounded and there's her son.

>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah.

>> Warren Marcus: Another unbelievable.

>> Nat Shaffir: Came to the United States in 1961. One thing when I was reading about your life, you got to Israel and that was the first time you saw an orange.

>> Nat Shaffir: Right. Never saw oranges before. It was a cold country.

>> Warren Marcus: Besides how hard it was in the ghetto.

You know what? I think we'd like to end here. Here's what we're going to do from here on in. Let's take time for some questions. Everything is ok for questions. We'll have microphones. I'm going to ask you to speak slowly and keep it brief. We're here to learn Nat's memories and stories from his life. And at the end we always give our First Person the last word, closing word.

>> Nat Shaffir: I would like to add one thing.

>> Warren Marcus: Please.

>> Nat Shaffir: I did get married. I have five children and 12 grandchildren. Each individual of my children and my grandchildren are named for one of these murdered by the Nazis. My sister did the same thing. So all of these people who perished have names after them.

>> Warren Marcus: Thank you.

Ok. Does anyone have questions?

Thank you.

>> Thanks for your great story. In the years that your father applied for the visa, the exit visa, and you said it took several years before you finally had to bribe somebody, what did your father do? How did you exist while you waited?
>> Nat Shaffir: First of all, we left the ghetto and we got a house. My father went back to the farm area with the old farmer. He was able to buy from him 30 heads of cattle, 30 cows. My father always used to tell these people when they came to ask for a loan from my father and always said I don't know when I'm going to be able to pay you back. My father always told them, “You'll pay me back when you have it.” So my father told him I don't know when I can pay you back. Both farmers said you'll pay me back when you have it. So that's little by little we started to get back into the same field that they knew and produced some dairy but very little, on a very small scale.
>> Warren Marcus: By the way, Nat's had a very successful business career. What a shock, huh? After the black market.

Ok. Any other questions? Sonya?

>> You were talking about your father during the one period of time when he was gone, assumedly to a concentration camp or they sent him off somewhere. Did he ever talk to you or tell you stories when he came back about where he was and what he experienced in that time that he was gone from your family?
>> Warren Marcus: He was slave labor.
>> Nat Shaffir: Right, slave labor camp. They were laying railroad tracks between Romania and Russia so the convoys could continue going. So that was pretty hard labor and very little food. So obviously when he came back, he was not the same. He lost a lot of weight. It was a slave labor camp.
>> Warren Marcus: I forgot something I wanted to mention. Can you tell us, were you a very religious family? Did it ever change during these travails in terms of your faith?
>> Nat Shaffir: For us, our faith, we stayed the same. In other words, we kept the faith because that's the only thing we have to cling on.

Just an example. One time, one of these farmers put a ham in one of these bags that was thrown to my father. We couldn't eat it because we kept kosher. So that was one of the things we traded. That was a good thing to trade with. So we did keep our faith. Many unfortunately did not. It was an individuality. Some people did keep their faith. Some did not.
>> Warren Marcus: So that ham helped you.
>> Nat Shaffir: It helped.
>> Warren Marcus: Anyone else?
>> What was your greatest fear when you were in the ghetto?
>> Nat Shaffir: Number one, to get sick. I was afraid if I get sick, chances are everything would go downhill from that point on. Obviously there's nothing I could do to stay healthy but that was one of the fears. The other fear is, you know, what are we going to eat tomorrow. Always a problem. Famine was a big problem in the ghetto. Not enough to eat. And there was no medication. So to make sure my mother survived to make sure I do everything I possibly can the next day. So always thinking of something what to do.
>> Warren Marcus: At the age of?
>> Nat Shaffir: 9 1/2.
>> Warren Marcus: Ok. Just want to be clear.
>> Hi. My name is Patrick. I'm from Georgetown. Thank you for sharing your story and experience in such vivid detail.

You suffered tremendous hardship at a very young age. You had to learn a lot really fast in the ghetto. My question is, How did that experience actually inform the way you conducted your life post liberation whether in Romania, Israel, or in the United States?

Thank you.

>> Nat Shaffir: Could you repeat the question?

>> Warren Marcus: You somehow got through these difficult hardships. How has that informed your life since then?

>> Nat Shaffir: Obviously I look at a completely different prism. I see things, people, bad and good. Most of the things I always think on the positive way. I always -- one of my grandsons is 9 years old. So last year I brought him over here, also in one of these sessions, and I was wondering if a child 9 years old today can do what I did 9 years old then. Probably couldn't. So it's kind of hard unless a person is in that position.

How things changed in my life, I always try to help people out no matter what. That's my nature at this point. And I think my sisters do the same thing. Because when we realized the old farmer risked his life to help us, the least we can do, humanity, is pay back somehow. I guess it made me a better person.

>> Warren Marcus: Let's do two more. Maybe.

>> Did you ever return or visit your farm again?

>> Warren Marcus: Did you go back to the farm?

>> Nat Shaffir: We went back one time. After that, since it was divided, we did not. There was no reason to go back at this point. We did get compensation from the Romanian government, not really what the farm was worth by all means but some compensation.

>> How old were you when you came to the U.S. and what were your first impressions when you came?

>> Nat Shaffir: When I came to the United States, number one, I came in as a visitor. My uncle sponsored me. When I saw America, I fell in love like all the immigrants do. I decided I want to stay and changed the visa to resident, finally got my green card and eventually became a citizen. I think that's one of the greatest country that we live in. I'm sure all the immigrants that come into this country believe the same way.

Actually, I'm one of the youngest survivors. I'm only 81 years old. Most of the survivors are in their 90s. So it's kind of hard, you know, to make sure what's happened to all of these people. You get less and less of us almost every month, some of them perish or pass away.

>> Warren Marcus: What year did you come?

>> Nat Shaffir: I came in 1961.

>> Warren Marcus: So you were 25. How's my math? 25?

I guess we can do some more.

>> What was one of the hardest things you suffered through when you were in the ghettos?

>> Warren Marcus: What was the worst -- let's just say what was the worst thing in the ghetto for you?

>> Nat Shaffir: Probably when they took my father away and then all of a sudden left on my own, at that age, 9 years old. That was probably one of the worst times.

>> Warren Marcus: Last one. How about here?

>> During the years when your father was away, what was your mother doing? Was she still work as a nurse? What was she doing?

>> Nat Shaffir: Yeah, she was working -- an example what happened. She was working in the hospital cleaning up. Then one of the children -- all of a sudden she was cleaning next to the

beds and she saw one of the children, his face, turn blue. She tried to call the nurse. In the meantime she tried to revive him. She actually did. It's a good thing that she did when she did because when the nurse came in, immediately they called the doctor and finally revived the child. That child happened to be the child of the police department officer from the city. When he saw what the mother did, he actually told the nurse, “Why is she cleaning the floors and the toilets? She should be the nurse.” And she actually was upgraded to an assistant nurse or something like that. So because she saved -- so sometimes luck has a good impact on what happens -- the outcome of what happens to individuals.

>> Warren Marcus: Ok. We're going to wrap up the questions. We're almost done. Here's what I want to tell. When we're done, there will be time -- Nat will stick around a little while. If you want to come up, shake his hand, give him a hug, take a picture. So we'll get to that in a minute.

It's our tradition, as I said, of *First Person*, to give our First Person the last word. So Nat, final words for our guests today?

>> Nat Shaffir: Many people in many countries kept silent what happened in the Holocaust years, the atrocities committed. They say silence is golden but not when it comes to atrocities like that. We need to speak out. It's our duty and our responsibility to humanity, for all of us, to speak out so atrocities like this will never happen again.

Thank you.

>> [Applause]