

THE LAST DAYS: A documentary by Steve Spielberg (Transcript)

Bill Basch: There is one thing that has puzzled me and has puzzled the world: that the Germans dedicated manpower and trains and trucks and energy towards the destruction of the Jews to the last day. Had they stopped 6 months before the end of the world and dedicated that energy towards strengthening themselves, they may have carried on the war a little longer. But it was more important to them to kill the Jews than even winning the war.

During World War II, as Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany conquered nation after nation, European Jews were stripped of their rights, forced into ghettos, deported to concentration camps, and murdered.

Even in 1944, when it became clear that Germany would lose the war, Hitler and his supporters didn't give up their war against the Jews.

His forces urgently pursued the killing of the largest remaining Jewish population in Europe – the Jews of Hungary.

This is the story of five Hungarian survivors during the last year of World War II.

Irene Zisblatt: I grew up in a town called Polena in the Carpathian mountains. It was a small town of two main streets. We had a post office, and we had a town hall, and we had a church, and we had a synagogue. Everybody knew each other. It was beautiful.

Renee Firestone: I lived in a town called Uzhorod. It was a small town yet it had the feel of a big cosmopolitan town.

Right here was a little deli. Right around...right here. And (sighs) we used to come here to have our sandwiches for the afternoon.

Alice Lok Cahana: We lived in a town called Sarvar. It's in Hungary, close to the Austrian border.

Every day, the peasants would carry their wares from the neighboring villages in big baskets and they would carry it on their heads or on their shoulders.

Bill: Szaszovo was a very small little community consisting of 3,000 people. No electricity and no utilities at all. So it was a very simplistic, boring life. Nothing exciting. But then Budapest where I ended up was an entirely different life. It was an enormous adjustment. I looked at this city, and I said, "Wow." It was like...I never believed anything like this exist.

Tom Lantos: Budapest was a magnificent world-class city, on par with Vienna or Paris or London as a great European capital.

This magnificent Parliament building saw the best and the worst in Hungarian history. The bulk of the Jews in Budapest were utterly assimilated, deeply patriotic and enormously proud of their Hungarian cultural heritage.

Alice: There were about 800 Jewish families in our town, and I think the town was 10 or 11,000 non-Jews.

Renee: I had non-Jewish friends. I dated non-Jewish boys. My parents had non-Jewish friends.

Alice: We also felt quite Hungarian at the same time, not just Jewish. So Judaism was our religion but we were Hungarians.

Newsreel Narrator: On August 2nd 1934, officers and men swear the oath of allegiance, not to Germany, but to Hitler personally.

2nd Newsreel Narrator: As Hitler's rule over Germany became absolute, to his alarmed neighbor Austria, Hitler promised to keep hands off.

Tom: In 1938, when I was 10 years old, I bought my first newspaper. And I saw the headlines "Hitler marches into Austria", and I sensed that this historic moment will have a tremendous impact on the lives of Hungarian Jews, my family and myself.

Newsreel Narrator: Germany invades Poland and the free state of Danzig. Warsaw is bombed, blasted and shelled. Poland is in ruins.

Irene: There were refugees coming to Hungary, running away from Poland. And most of the Jewish families, Friday night, the men went to the temple to bring these people home and give them shelter.

Alice: They would come and tell stories. And I remembered, very often, we did not believe them.

Irene: I heard a conversation between my father and another man and he was telling my father what the Nazis are doing in Poland. And one thing that I'll never forget that I heard and he said, "The Nazis are taking our young Jewish infants and they are tearing them in half by their legs and they're throwing them in the Dniester." The Dniester is a river in the Ukraine.

Renee: Then later, of course, the stories were getting worse and we began to hear about mass shootings into mass graves.

Tom: But there was a sort of a naïve – I hate to use the word, but I have to use the word – patriotic feeling that we Hungarians don't do such things.

Renee: Hitler was in Germany, so what happened in Germany didn't reflect on us. I mean, we were far away from it.

Dr. Randolph Braham: There were two wars. There was a military war and hand-in-hand with that war, there was a second war – the war of the SS directed against the Jews.

Tom: The dark side of the Hungarian national character was becoming more and more obvious. The persecution of Jews became more and more obvious. Jews were losing their jobs, their

businesses. There was a Hungarian Nazi movement, the Arrow Cross, and this became of course the most hated and the most feared group for Hungarian Jews.

Renee: People wonder how is it that we didn't do something. We didn't run away. We didn't hide. Well, things didn't happen at once. Things happened very slowly. So each time a new law came out, or a restriction, we said, 'Well, just another thing. It'll blow over.'

Tom: Hitler moved into Hungary on 19th March, 1944. I was 16 years old.

Alice: 1944, March 19th – Germans entered. The SS entered our town.

Irene: Two motorcycles were the whole Nazi regime that occupied our town because they were already there, with the people that lived there the whole time and did their dirty work. Most of them were people that we thought were our friends all these years, but they turned overnight on us and went with the other side.

Renee: And the next restriction was that the Jew cannot walk out on the street without a yellow star. We heard that in Germany, they had to wear the yellow star before they were taken away and in Poland, they did that. So at that point, we were worried.

Tom: I did not wear a yellow star and I was caught. I was put into a forced-labor camp in a place north of Budapest which had an important railroad bridge.

And our job was to repair the railroads, the lines, the bridges – non-stop – while the British and the Americans were bombing day and night. We were obviously worried that we would die but we were also hoping that the Americans and the British bombers will hit all of their targets and destroy this bridge because that was the way to defeat Hitler.

I escaped from that labor camp and I joined the Hungarian underground.

Alice: And the next decree would be that we have to pack up 25 kilos. And at first, we didn't understand. What do you take? Think about your home, your own home. What would you take? 25 kilo... what IS 25 kilo? How much is 25 kilo? Do you take the pillows? Do you take your covers? Do you take your dishes? Do you take... what do you take?

Renee: When we were packing, I wanted to take something that would remind me of the good times. I was very depressed and worried. And so I came across a bathing suit... a bathing suit that my father brought me. I don't want to do this... On one of his business trips, about three years earlier, my father came home and he always brought us something, my sister and myself. And of course we always ask, "What did you bring?" And he opened this box and out of the box came this most beautiful bathing suit. It had a shiny satin finish and a print of multi-colored flowers. And then in the afternoon when I heard the soldiers' boots coming up the stairs, I ran back and I put this bathing suit under my dress. And that's how I left.

Irene: They broke down the front doors. They came in. They gave us a few minutes – they said a half hour but it was not a half hour – to get all our valuables together and they marched us out of the house.

Alice: I couldn't imagine they'd just take out people from their homes because they are Jewish.

Irene: Our friends, so-called, and neighbours, they were standing, lined up alongside of the road and they were yelling, “It’s about time. You go on out of here. We don’t need any Jews in our town. We need to get rid of all you Jews.” And I stood, and I could not believe my eyes. The people I went to school with, their children. We were friends. We were sharing things together. Why are they so hostile? Why do they hate us all of a sudden?

Alice: It’s like when you read that the Jews went out of Egypt. We are carrying all our baggage. The pillows and the covers are tied in a bundle and we children helped to carry it. And I’m so ashamed.

Renee: We wanted to believe that they’re going to take us to Germany and that we’re going to work. We really wanted to believe it. And by then the whole European Jewry was already in camps, which we didn’t know.

Dr. Randolph: The concentration, ghettoisation and deportation took place in a concentrated manner – that is, within 12 weeks. And nowhere else was the deportation program carried out with the barbarity and speed that it was in Hungary.

Alice: They said that they will take us to a ghetto. I mean, we never hear this word. It is not a Hungarian word. “Ghetto.”

Irene to her daughter, Robin: We had no idea where we were. In the morning, when we woke up, I realised that we are in a brickyard, brick-factory yard.

And in April, it was rainy, it was a lot of rain. And we were always... we had to change the sheets, because the roof was the sheets and we were always wet.

There were thousands of people there because they came from the whole county. And there were guards everywhere, with dogs, walking around all the time. Big German Shepherd dogs on very, very tight leashes.

... at the time because this was all just these huts with people, people all over the place.

Robin: So do you know where your hut was?

Irene: Yes. My hut was right here where these piles of bricks are.

And then one day, they announced that everybody that wants to go to work – to Tokaj and the vineyard to make wine – should come on the train. And everybody, voluntary, gladly went on the train because this was hell. And going to work in a vineyard was like going to heaven from this.

Renee: We were taken to the railroad station by the Hungarian soldiers.

Irene: My mother said to me, “I rolled up diamonds in your skirt – in the hem of your skirt – and if you don’t have enough to eat, those are to buy bread.”

Renee: When we arrived in the railroad station, we realised that we’re not going on passenger trains. The cattle cars were waiting for us.

Irene: My father said they ran out of other trains – because it’s wartime they don’t have the other trains so they have to use what they have.

Alice: Anybody who didn't go and didn't go fast was beaten.

Irene: When they closed the doors - when I heard that knock on the outside, like a bolt closing us in there – it wasn't normal anymore. It wasn't... I didn't accept that they were running out of the other trains.

Bill: Budapest, as times started getting worse, I really had to acquire gentile papers. I did not exist as a Jew. I would have been shot. I would have been killed.

Tom: You were hunted animal, 24 hours every day, and you didn't know if anybody you encountered was really on your side. Had it not been for Wallenberg, neither I nor the other tens of thousands would have ever survived.

Dr. Randolph: Raoul Wallenberg arrived when all of Hungary, with the exception of Budapest, was already free of Jews.

Tom: He went to Budapest at a time when, in the countryside the Jews had already been put into cattle cars and shipped away from Hungary. And he decided to join the Swedish embassy there for the sole purpose of trying to save Jewish lives. By issuing so-called Swedish protective passports, he declared that the individual who had this document, at the end of the war, planned to go to Sweden. This was pure fiction. But in the chaos and the confusion of the war, this miraculous, worthless piece of paper worked.

Bill: Several of us acted as distributors or runners to deliver this fake passport to the people that were waiting in those protected houses.

Tom: Wallenberg leased large apartment houses, put up a Swedish sign indicating that all the residents were under the protection of the Royal Swedish Government. I stayed at Saint Steven Park, number 25.

[Speaking in Hungarian]

Most of these houses were upper middle-class apartment houses. And the 3-bedroom apartment that may have had 4, 5, 6 people living there before this crisis suddenly became a hovel with 60, 70 people jammed into a 3-bedroom apartment.

Tom speaking to his grandchildren: It was very uncomfortable, honey, but more importantly, it was unbelievably dangerous.

Tom: The word “protected house” obviously was a misnomer because many of the people living in these “protected houses” were rounded up, taken to the bank of the Danube and killed.

Bill: Now, to get into the protected houses was not difficult. The soldiers didn't care. They were out in the front, “Go in there.” However, to come out... that was the very, very difficult thing.

Tom: If German soldiers or Hungarian Nazi soldiers were suspicious, they ordered us to take down our pants because we were the only people who were circumcised.

Bill: One day, I had on my body, strapped around the fake passports which I was delivering to these people so they could get out of the building and I miscalculated. I went through the sewer

line, and I knew when to get out and I made a mistake. Instead of coming out in middle of the building, I came out in front of the building where two soldiers were guarding the building. I started running as fast as I could across the street, back and forth, and they were deporting a group of Jews. Not knowing where they are taking them, I jumped into that group of Jews thinking, just as I got in so many times into trouble, I'll get out one more time. This is just one more escape. We wound up five days later in Buchenwald.

Irene: We were on the train for about five days.

Alice: Sitting on a heap of luggage that we carried there.

Renee: The cattle car I was in, there was about 120 of us.

Alice: Mashed together like sardines and it's very, very hot.

Irene: They had one pail for, you know, going to the bathroom.

Alice: And suddenly the bucket filled up and then the odour was unbearable.

Irene: They never opened the doors to go to the bathroom. They never gave us any water, they never gave us any food. The children were screaming, they wanted to go home.

Alice: Where are they taking us? Where are they taking us? Nobody answers.

Renee: It was total darkness. The light seeped only through the cracks of the cattle car.

Irene: My father found a crack in the cattle train and he looked out and he just spoke out loud, "I don't think we're going to the vineyard that they told us we were going because we just crossed the border and we're heading towards Poland." And when he said Poland, I remembered the man telling the story about the children – what they're doing to the children in Poland. And I was holding my little brother, and he was 2 and a half years old, and I was holding him so tight and I said to myself, "I will never let him go. They will never take him from me."

Alice: When they opened the door suddenly – and suddenly the light hit you – and because you had your eyes for 4 or 5 days shut or used to this darkness, you're almost blinded.

Irene: We were so happy because we were going to get air. We were going to get off and maybe go to the bathroom like normal people, and have water and maybe some food.

Alice: And everybody would ask, "Where are we? Where are we? What is the name?" And it was a very strange name: Auschwitz.

Alice to her son, Michael: Here we had to be stopped. Here was stopped. Here was a lot of selection happened.

Michael: So you're all standing in a line?

Alice: Thousands of people, and close to each other. And confusion and noise. And then, "Don't move and don't..." Like soldiers, standing straight, you see. And in the middle would the SS go here, to check all of us, walking their dogs and just threatening.

Michael: In single file? Or were there people standing next to you?

Alice: Five. Five in a row. So it was easy to count. Right.

Renee: When I jumped off the cattle car I knew right away that whatever they promised us, whatever they told us, were lies.

Alice: And you see a lot of people running in striped clothes and shaved heads.

Renee: Surrounded by Nazi soldiers and vicious dogs.

Irene: They were yelling and they were screaming.

Alice: “Just hurry up. Leave all your luggage there. Just leave everything.”

Irene: All of a sudden, there was a separation. And my mother and my... My mother and... And my brother and my sister... She held my little brother in her arms – in one arm and my four-and-a-half year old sister in her hand – and I was holding on to her hand, and this was how we were walking towards... They were pushing us towards that destination.

Dr. Hans Munch: When the transports came in, the people were sorted. It was a very primitive process, a very simple one. The people had to stand in a long line. At the front of the line were some medical officers who would say, “This one’s too old, over 50.” “This one goes to the right, the other goes left.”

Renee: My mother was selected at the railroad station. “Go to the left” while my sister and I went to the right. My mother was taken straight from the railroad station to the gas chambers. By the time my sister and I were processed into the camp, my mother was no longer alive.

We were taken to a dressing room. We were told we were going to be taking a shower after this horrendous journey. And we are going to refresh ourselves and then we’ll be assigned to our work.

Irene: They ordered us to take our shoes in one hand and our clothes in the other hand. Then I remembered the diamonds and I grabbed my blue skirt and in the crowd, you know, I just fast took out the diamonds and held them in my hands and I had no clothes on my body.

Renee: And I remember I got undressed with the rest of them, and there I was in the bathing suit, standing in the bathing suit. I had a premonition. I had this feeling that if I take this bathing suit off, if I leave this bathing suit behind, all the wonderful memories that were built in this bathing suit... I kept remembering how I wore there on the swimming pool, and how the boys were whistling at me and my friends were so jealous. And now I’m going to take it off and I’m going to leave it here. Everything that meant anything in life to me, I’m going to leave behind.

Irene: They kept on saying if anybody has any valuables left, to leave them. They had a section for that. And I held on to the diamonds for dear life because that was to buy bread. So I put them in my mouth. And then, when I walked up again, I saw they were opening up people’s mouths and they were looking in the mouth. But I was at the road of no return. I couldn’t give them up any more because I would be shot. “Why didn’t I leave them back there?” And I had them in my mouth and I didn’t know what to do, so I swallowed them.

Renee: We walked into the shower room and the dressing room was locked behind us. And a commando came in behind us and removed all our belongings right away.

Irene: They did give us a shower – a little trinkly shower – and then they... again there was another door on the other side leading out to the courtyard on the other side of this building. And at the door, they had a pile of clothes and they ordered everybody to pick one piece of clothing.

Renee: We waiting till about midnight, and then they permitted us to walk into one of these wooden barracks.

Alice: A thousand people in a barrack. If one person turned, everybody had to turn because we were so close to each other. I used to wake up so cold. And I used to have returning dreams that a whistle. It's dark outside and this is a madman's hell.

Renee: We saw this group of about 20 men coming through the camp. And as they were marching by, I was watching. "Maybe I know somebody." And suddenly I recognised my father. And my first thought was to hide. It was terribly painful seeing him with his shaved head, in this uniform like a prisoner. This man who was helping everybody, who was the kindest human being. I just couldn't imagine how would he feel if he saw us with the shaved heads in this rag. So I really just wanted to hide so he can't see me. And at that moment, our eyes locked. And I could see his tears rolling down his cheek. That was the last time I saw my father.

Irene: I saw trucks coming and screams on the trucks. And I saw two children fall out of the truck. And the truck stopped. And one SS man came out from the front and he picked up the children like that, and he banged him against the truck and the blood came running down and threw him into the truck. So that's when I stopped talking to God.

Renee: They told us that we're going to get a number. A prisoner's number. Well, of course, we expected to get a prisoner's number on our clothing or somewhere. And they set up these tables and at each table sat a few girls with these huge books opened in front of them. And we presumed that they're going to put our name in it and the number that they're going to give us. And then we realised that they are putting this number on our flesh, on our arms.

Irene: They took five of us and they put drops in our eyes. We didn't know why. They didn't tell us. And they put us in the dungeon. They closed us in there and we were standing in water up to our ankles, tightly packed. And it seemed like forever. It seemed like it was an eternity. They never opened the door. They never gave us anything to eat or drink. So we drank the water we stood in. We went to the bathroom in the water we stood in. And then they opened the door and they took us out. And they brought us up into the courtyard and they examined our eyes. And some of the people couldn't see for several days after that. And they took us back to the barrack. And then we found out later that what they were doing is they were trying to change the color of our eyes.

Dr. Hans: For all those who wanted to conduct experiments on humans, this was a thankful workplace. Many experiments were done in Auschwitz, to find ways to sterilize women, specifically Jewish women, in order to diminish the race without going through too much trouble. These women were then sent back to the camp. Sometimes they were immediately transferred because they were so-called "secret bearers". They performed tests, then sent them back to Birkenau and gassed them. One day, a prisoner acquaintance came to me and asked me if

I could try to gain some influence, if anything could be done, not to send them to the gas chamber. The only way to do that was to make them undergo more tests. To save them, we had to keep conducting harmless tests on them. That is what we planned to do, and somehow it worked. And that is why I was acquitted, in Auschwitz.

Randolph: Having survived the first four and a half years of the war, the Hungarian Jews were killed in the last chapter of Hitler's war against the Jews when the leaders of the world were already fully aware of all the details of Auschwitz.

Renee: When we came to Auschwitz, it was during the Final Solution, when he just was desperate already. He was losing the war. Hitler was losing the war. But he was not going to lose the war against the Jews.

Tom: The sadism, the cruelty, the irrationality of the German and Hungarian Nazis of killing the remaining Jewish population when the war was all over, when they could have gained brownie points by being more civilized with – vis-à-vis – these people was really not present because their hatred was so blind.

Randolph: The Nazis diverted trains and other transportation means useful to the Germans for purposes of deporting Jews. That is, to complete the Final Solution program.

Renee: While I was in Auschwitz, the transports were coming in. Two, three transports a day with thousands of people in it.

Randolph: Within less than six weeks, more than 438,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz. The gas chambers, the crematoria could not cope. The SS had to dig special pits to burn the bodies using the Jews' own fat as fuel.

Renee: I saw how they were throwing people into these fire pits. And I said to myself, "Something is wrong with me, my mind is going. I couldn't be seeing this."

Dr. Hans: The mass graves were about 8 x 10 or 10 x 10 meters wide. Wood was piled on the bottom and set on fire. Then the bodies were thrown over the fire. That was it. If the fat burned, then the grave was working. Then more and more bodies were thrown into it. That simple.

Alice: What vast landscape you are seeing here. How could people, normal people, go back after working here or plan this? OK, somebody had to plan it. Somebody had to be an engineer. Somebody had to really put on a map this kind of efficiency.

Irene: The whole time I was in the camp, through the experiments, every time I was selected, I swallowed the diamonds. So every time I swallowed them, I had to find them again. We were allowed to go to the latrine once a day. And I never sat on the hole because I had to go and find my diamonds. One day, the SS woman walked by the door and she saw me in the corner. And I already had the diamonds in the hand and usually I was waiting until, on the way back, I would rinse them off like in the mud, or if there was no mud, in the soup that we were going to get next. But I had no time, and I had to swallow them.

Alice: My God. This is the latrine. Oh, my God. At this place, I was with my sister Edith next to me. And so Edith whispers to me and says, "It's almost Shabbat, this is Friday. It's almost

Shabbat.” How we used to celebrate Shabbat in our house with food and with singing and with praying and you know, lighting the candle. And I told her, “Why don’t we celebrate inside in the latrine?” We ran back to the end and we started to make our Shabbat ceremony and we started to sing... [*singing in Hebrew*] And as we sang the melody, other children came around us and they started to sing with us. Somebody was from Poland, somebody was from Germany, somebody was from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, all thrown together, and suddenly the Hebrew songs, the prayers, the Shabbat united us in the latrine of Auschwitz.

Irene: People couldn’t endure all this pain, the conditions and the hunger and the lice. The lice were as big as my pinky nail, embedded into our bodies. We were sore from scratching and infections. And so when the electricity went on, they ran to the barbed wire to commit suicide. Then they punished us. For every man that ran through the wire, they took a hundred inmates and they killed them in front of everybody as an example. They didn’t even let us die when we wanted. And then I thought of something. They took away my parents. They took my identity. They took away my siblings. They took away my possessions. There is something that they want from me. And then I thought of my soul. And I says, ‘They’re not going to take my soul.’ And I decided right then and there, I’m going to get up from this mud and I’m going to fight because I’m not going to become ashes.

Renee: When we arrived to Auschwitz, thousands and thousands of people were cremated every day.

Randolph: The Nazis used Jewish inmates, a special Sonderkommando, to remove the bodies from the gas chambers and taking the bodies into the crematorium.

Dario Gabbai: As far as I know, there is only four of us that worked in the Sonderkommando alive today. And we are the only eyewitness that saw the whole thing from A to Z – how the Final Solution was done.

I’m Jewish from Greece. And I lived in Greece until the time they took me to concentration camp. The first week of April 1944, I arrived in Auschwitz. They selected some of the Greeks to go to work on crematorium. Now is my first day there. I don’t know what was going on. I saw 2,500 people, all naked, going to the big chamber, which eventually they take only 500 people. They were putting 2,500 people. So nobody could do anything but stand up with their children.

And 15 minutes later, you know, after they close the chamber and the SS threw the gas from these four openings, you know, they open up. What did I see? I see the people I saw 15 minutes ago. I see them all dead, standing up with their children, black and blue. And I said to myself, “What is going on? What is going on here?” There was a Polish guy that was there before. And I said, “Where is God?” He said, “God? God is where you have your strength.”

There were four crematoriums, you know. And they were working 24 hours. And there were a lot of big shots from Berlin coming and watching how the Jews were dying. You know, there was a hole in the hermetically closed, and they were looking there how the Jewish people were dying. It takes two to four minutes. Depends where you are. A lot of people think that we – working in the Sonderkommando – we were guilty of something, you know, because we were doing such kind of a work. But ourselves, you know, we couldn’t get out of it. If you don’t do whatever they’re asking you to do, they kill you right away.

One time, I had two friends of mine, very close friends of mine, they came in, you know. Their names were the Venezias. And I told them right away that they were going to die, you know. And they asked for food. Whatever I had, I gave them to eat. And I told them exactly where to keep themselves, where the openings were, so they can die fast. And after they were through, I took them out and I washed them and I put them in the oven, to be burned.

Tom: We could hear artillery moving closer and closer. And Budapest was the battlefield between the Germans and the Soviet Army. And although we knew it would be weeks before the Soviet Army would hopefully liberate the remaining Jews, we knew that lots of hardships were still ahead.

Alice: In Auschwitz, after Christmas, we hear more and more the bombing came closer and closer.

Irene: The Nazis didn't want anybody to get liberated. So they were herding the people away from the camp.

Bill: The death march was in winter. Those who could not keep pace were simply shot by the wayside.

Alice: If anybody, *anybody*, tries to run away or do anything that is not permitted, will be shot on the spot.

Bill: There were three of us friends that were together up to that point. And we swore that we would sacrifice each other's life for each other, that we would never let each other down. Kids, you know. We had this sort of a dream that will be possible. One of the three had an injury in his knee and had gangrene. And one of the soldiers noticed him limping so he comes up, and he wants to shoot him. When we step in front of him, he pulls out his Luger and he says, "I give you three seconds. Count to three. Either you let him go or all the three of you die." Can you imagine? Even though you're young, that decision that we had to make. And here we promised that we will die for each other, but we couldn't keep that promise under threat of death. We did let him down.

We arrived, about 10 days' march or so, we arrived into Dachau.

Bill to his son, Martin: Oh my God. After 53 years... it is as if it were yesterday.

You could find them right alongside here in the street, just laying and we didn't even pay any attention. You just stepped over bodies. Didn't pay attention. They didn't mean anything.

Martin: Right here?

Bill to Martin: Yeah.

Bill: I never knew anybody's name, never wanted to know anybody. I never wanted to know just in case someday, someone will know this person whose shoes I have taken off when he died.

Bill to Martin: If you can imagine that every morning, my job was for a while – I had to go barrack to barrack to barrack and take those bodies and bring them to the crematorium. We had one of those pushcarts. I remember the Sonderkommandos, those that worked in the

crematoriums, came out and they opened the gate. They took it over from here and they walked it in. But we were never allowed to cross this. They never talked about a crematorium, but we knew.

If we walked in here, we never got out. We never got out from here, from this area because if they let him out and he escapes, they have witness, they have testimony so they wouldn't let him out.

Oy, look at this. The inhumanity of man against man. It's beyond belief. This is the most monstrous thing that man devised. Burning human beings just to get rid of them quicker. Unbelievable.

It's just so emotional for me. It's so hard. Now, why did I survive? Why did God spare me?

Renee: Somebody's started to yell, "Americans! Americans!" and we didn't know what they mean by Americans, and they were pointing up to the sky.

Irene: Planes came out from behind the mountains, from nowhere, and they just bombed the convoy. And they didn't touch us, none of us got hurt. That's when I found out, the first time, that the United States was at war.

Warren Dunn: It was April 29th when I was ordered to go to Dachau. Actually, the night of the 28th and we were ordered to take off as fast as possible to get to Dachau, not knowing what we were facing.

Dr. Paul Parks: We thought it was a military camp, a Germany military camp that we were going in to take and therefore, we were going to capture and capture the people who were inside of it.

Katsugo Miho: We were in the vicinity of what we found out to be concentration camps.

Bill: Suddenly we hear machine guns shooting off. First thought was that we are being killed. And then we saw the American soldiers climbing and crawling and shooting, and then we saw the German soldiers coming from that direction. And as they met up here in the center, the Germans gave up. But visualize 32,000 people coming out of all those barracks.

Warren: Outside the camp, on railroad tracks, was 40 box cars, I believe, was the count, absolutely full of dead bodies. And not having had any knowledge of what we were facing, this was totally unreal.

Katsugo: Most of them were wearing flannel pyjamas. That's all what they had. Blue striped, white striped flannel pyjamas.

Dr. Paul: People were weak. Weak probably isn't even the right term. But they were emaciated. Some of the people looked like they were very old who weren't old.

Katsugo: They were walking dead, what we called, ... skeletons.

Dr. Paul: A few came out first, then more came out, then more came out, and they kept coming toward us because it was almost as if they realized – and I guess they did – they realized that we were different.. that we were people coming to help them.

Bill: And Americans held the gun against the Germans, but they didn't kill them. They let us have them. And taking a dozen or so German soldiers that we caught, literally tore them apart, piece by piece.

Dr. Paul: We captured a German colonel, and I went back and told him that 'We're going to send you back to our offices to talk to you.' And he spit in my face and I killed him. It wasn't long before the war was over after that. But through those last days, we intended to stop Germany from ever having an opportunity to stand up again and do this to anybody.

Katsugo: I've seen many a horrible sight that two years in Italy, France and Germany but the worst thing I've ever seen in my life were the survivors of the Holocaust. This is something which is... to this day I cannot forget.

Tom: I wasn't young anymore. I was very old. I was 16 but I was very old.

Renee: Returning to freedom was very difficult. We didn't know how we're going to make peace with the outside world which didn't want us and we didn't know who we were going to find, or not find.

Irene: They didn't know what to do with us and they put us in a DP camp, which is a Displaced Persons camp and the closest one from where I was, was in Austria. And all the survivors that had no other place to go were in that camp. So it was another camp, but it was free.

Tom: After the Soviet Army liberated Budapest and I became a free human being again, I did not know for months whether my mother or other members of my family would ever return.

Renee: I was hoping that going back to Auschwitz is finally going to give me some closure. And I was shocked to find out that it opened up new questions and new doubts.

Interpreter: She would like to look for information about her family and about herself.

Archivist: Your name, please?

Renee: This is the first time that I decided to find some records on my family.

Renee to archivist: And my sister was Klara.

Interpreter: You found something?

Archivist: Yes, I found something. We can look together.

Renee: Give me some.

Archivist: Please lay the cards down like this.

Renee: Klara... mm hmm It's my sister, yeah.

Renee: I found records of my sister, my father and my own. And when I ask about my mother, the archivist, the historian told me that those who were taken from the railroad station and killed immediately, there is no record of those.

Archivist: Take this upstairs to the archive and ring the bell. Okay?

Renee: Thank you.

Historian: This is a test of blood or something medical researchment of Klara Weinfeld.

Renee: I found out that my sister was experimented on, that they were doing some blood tests on here.

Renee to historian: And what does the zero mean?

Renee: And he said, 'You know, I really don't know'. He says, 'Nobody ever really ask me.' But there is a Dr. Munch who was the head of this clinic who's still alive. And then I found I found out that you're going to interview this man, and that I may have a chance to ask him what those symbols meant?

Renee to Dr. Hans Munch: My sister Klara died in Auschwitz, and I recently obtained these papers from Auschwitz. I would like you to explain these papers.

Dr. Hans: I will try.

Renee: Can you tell me what this is?

Dr. Hans: Nothing important, no...

Renee: What kind of experiments were these?

Dr. Hans: It's nothing. Everything is good.

Renee: Why did she die?

Dr. Hans: 'Clinical institute' ... \That's my institute. She did die... When did she arrive? How long did she stay?

Renee: 6 months.

Dr. Hans: 6 months? And then she died. Well, that is the normal period. Do you understand? You were in Auschwitz as well? Well then, you should know

Renee: I tried to be civilized but he was very evasive and I became very angry. I kept thinking that thousands and thousands of people died in his clinic. I am going to go back to Crematorium 5 because I know that my mother was taken there for sure. I'm going to light some candles and I know that I'm not coming back here anymore.

Alice: And now, just very recently, I got a new letter from Bergen-Belsen that they don't have Edith Lok. They looked through their books, but they found an Edith Schwarz. And I

remembered at one point my sister Edith decided that she would use my mother's name, but I forgot it. And all these years I looked for Edith Lok.

Alice to historians: Can you find me, though, with Hungaria—

Historian: Hungaria? Let's just look at it.

Alice's family: It's not alphabetized.

Alice: Going back to Bergen-Belsen, I want my husband to say a prayer with my children and with me because we will symbolically bury Edith.

Historian: This is the cemetery where all the people were buried, who were brought after liberation to the military blocks. We found the name of your sister. She died here, we think, on the 2nd of June 1945. So all the people who died in those days were buried here, one beside the next one.

Alice: Today is the most special day of my life. Finally, the search is over and we now know what happened and when it happened. I brought here my mother's prayer book and here we will say for you the prayers that's traditional, and light this candle in your memory and remember you forever, as long as we live.

[Jewish prayer: Yitgadal v'yitkadash shemai rabah. B'almah divrah charutay viyamlich malchutai b'chayachon uv'yamaichon uv'chayai kol bet Yisroel ba'agala u'bizman kariv, v'imru amen. Yehai shemai raba mevorach l'olam olmai olmaya. Yitbarach, v'yishtabach yitpaar v'yirroman, v'yitnaseh v'yithadar, v'yithaleh v'yithallal shemai dekudisha, b'rich hu.

Alice: But there are a lot of people like me out there, who are still looking because for us, liberation wasn't the last day.

Tom: I got an announcement that I'd been selected to receive an academic scholarship to the University of Washington in a town called 'Seettle' because nobody told me that it's supposed to be pronounced Seattle. I had a ticket on the SS Marine Falcon. I went to Bunk B-20, put down my knapsack and they called for chow. I had no idea what "chow" was. It wasn't part of my English vocabulary. So I got into the chow line. We had these huge metal trays, and this was a period when of course, my mental preoccupation was still with hunger. And these wonderful people slopped on all the wonderful things on this metal tray. And at the end of the line, there was a huge wicker basket of oranges and a huge wicker basket of bananas. My mother always taught me to do the right thing and I didn't know what the right thing was. So there was another huge sailor and I asked him, 'Sir, do I take a banana or do I take an orange?' And he said, 'Man, you eat all the damn bananas and all the damn oranges you want!' And then I knew I was in heaven!

Irene: I loved my town and I see it picturesque and happy. I'm planning to go there for the first time since I left in 1944.

Irene to her daughter, Robin: Now, look at the sign, Robin. Look at it. It says Polena in Russian.

The river is running on the right-hand side. We used to go bathing here.

Irene: I'm hoping that I can find some of the people that I knew before the Holocaust and maybe that I can talk to them.

Robin: There's the mushrooms in the jar, see?

[Irene speaking Hungarian]

Irene: Maybe they can tell me things that happened while we were away.

[Speaking Hungarian]

Irene: This was one woman, Mariska, she remembered my grandparents and my father and my mother, and me! I was most surprised that she remembered me. I was really afraid that the people were going to be hostile to me, that they were going to be accusing me of coming back to take something away from them. I was asked in a very nice way, am I planning to take my property and come back to live there? And I said no, I just want my children to know where I come from and I wanted to see my town where I grew up one more time before I die.

Renee: Going back to my hometown with my family, with my child, showing her this beautiful town which everywhere we went, the word "Jew" doesn't exist...

Renee to daughter: This building was the Jewish community center.

Renee: I wanted to go to the Jewish temple which was a beautiful synagogue.

Renee to her daughter: Look how they let this... Oh my God. What they did to this city, you just have no idea. It's just unbelievable.

Renee: We went to the temple and there I met this man, this Jewish man. He was also in Auschwitz.

Renee to man: Hello, do you speak Hungarian? Good morning. Are you from here?

Man: I was born here in 1928.

Renee: I'm from the Weinfeld family.

Man: Weinfeld?

Renee: My father had a shop on Cobbler's Lane and of course, my mother attended this temple.

Man: I had my Bat Mitzvah where when I turned 13 in 1941.

Renee: And why did you stay here?

Man: Because I came back from Auschwitz on June 6, 1945 and a few days later, the borders were closed.

Renee: Then he walked us through the temple and he explained to us that this is no longer a Jewish temple.

Man: In the old days, there were Stars of David here.

Renee: What did they do with them?

Man: They made it into a concert hall. They removed everything... e\Everything.

Renee: It was very painful to see that this holy place was transformed into a place of entertainment. The most difficult part was going back to my house.

Renee to her family: Oh my God! That is the original... That's the original gate. The entrance, yeah...

Renee: It was neglected, this beautiful house that father took care of always and everything was manicured around it.

Renee's husband: I think it's locked...

Renee to family: No, it just doesn't open. It doesn't open. It doesn't open.

Renee: And that moment, I really wished I wouldn't have seen it...

One of the neighbors who was a young child at the time they took us away was still there.

Neighbor's wife: Thank God that you are still alive.

Neighbor: I'm telling you, I can still remember everything as it used to be.

Renee: He has now a Russian wife who was very sympathetic.

Neighbor: Your own house... to take someone's house. How could that be?

Neighbor's wife: There would be a lot to tell, but you know what they say... even the walls have ears.

Renee: She was scared to tell me what really happened after we left.

Renee to neighbors: Tell me, after we were taken, did you talk about it?

Neighbor: We were so sorry for Klara. We heard she died on the way.

Renee: No. She died there.

Neighbor: Poor thing... I have only seen it in the movies... Did they really burn people like that?

Renee: Unfortunately, it was much worse than what they show in the movies.

At that moment, I felt very lucky that I will have a chance to go back to the United States to my home.

Irene: I saved the diamonds, all the way... all the way through everything. And when I was free, I didn't talk about the Holocaust but I took the diamonds and I mounted them into a teardrop-shaped pendant because every time I had to save them, I had to cry so much, so I felt that the

tears are appropriate for that, and I told my children that these diamonds should go down from generation to generation to the firstborn girl in the family, until... forever.

And you can see they're different shapes and different cuts. And they're the only thing that I'm... that I'm holding that my mother ever held.

Tom: My life today is something I myself cannot believe. Having been elected by my constituency in California of some 600,000 people nine times, it all seems like a dream and it all places an incredible sense of responsibility on me.

Tom giving a speech on television: As the only survivor of the Holocaust ever elected to the Congress of the United States, I know I speak for all of my colleagues, Republicans and Democrats, in expressing our outrage at the most recent terrorist...

Tom: The center of focus of my life obviously is human rights because I am convinced that this is really the path of a more civilized world. My wife Annette, and I have known each other all our lives. We grew up as children in Budapest and we have been married now for 47 years. We have two daughters who early on came to us and said to us that they planned a special gift for their parents. Since our families were wiped out, they will give us a large family. And we have been blessed with 17 wonderful grandchildren, and it's really the focus of our life.

Renee: I would like to be known as an educator of the Holocaust, so I go to the Museum of Tolerance, where I was the founder of the Outreach Program, and I speak to groups who come into the museum.

Renee giving a tour: ... came into being. When these things are happening, you almost begin to believe that you did something wrong. 'Why would do they do this to me?...'

Renee: I feel it is my duty to make the world aware of what happened during that time.

Alice: I always felt that my language is inadequate and that if I wanted to tell the story about my experiences, I have to talk through a medium. And I found art because art transcends. It's beyond words.

I wanted the surface to be very much layered. It should look like a crumbled wall, like it's papered over with yesterday's news, because people want to forget the past. People want to forget about the Holocaust.

What keeps me going is really the family that my husband and I created. My grandchildren, three wonderful children, two of them Rabbis and my beautiful daughter. She teaches me everyday what is important in life. And my husband who is four-generation Israeli. And such a gallant man. And he helped me to construct a life.

Alice talking to crowd: This painting is 'Arbeit Macht Frei'. When you read this welcome gate, so to speak, 'Arbeit Macht Frei'...

Alice: My art today is about the Holocaust because I have no memorial of my people. I don't know where they are.

Bill: Why, so many of family members died, while so many got killed that the Basch family was almost wiped out. We have regenerated. So when we get together, we are quite a large group. And the joy of sitting with my family and looking around and saying that I was so close to death and here I am sitting at a table and there are 11, 12 of us rejoicing life. The pleasure of living is wonderful.

Dr. Paul: One day, it was on a Sunday, someone knocked at my door and I went to the door. And they had something wrapped up in a newspaper under their arm, and they said, ‘Are you Paul Perks?’ And I said yes. He says, ‘You know, we been looking for you for several years... Off and on various people have been looking for you. We wanted to find you.’ I said, ‘Why?’ He said, ‘Well, there was a fellow who was liberated by you guys at Dachau, who remembered you and he died several years ago, and he’d made a menorah in the camp. He made it out of concrete nails and welded it together and braised it together while it was in the camp, and he wanted you to have it. So we’ve been looking for you to give it to you and here it is.’ And he gave me this beautiful menorah.

Irene: Liberation was like a present from the world and that’s the first time I acknowledged God again, that he is around and that he helped me get to this point.

Renee: I don’t think that God created the Holocaust. I think that God gave us a mind and a heart and free will, and it is up to man what he’s going to do with his life. And I blame man, not God.

Tom: I cannot rationally explain, emotionally explain, intellectually explain the Holocaust. I cannot find a place for a higher authority in this nightmare.

Alice: What kind of people are we? What are the books teaching us? What is the difference between me and another child? What is the Bible teaching me? What is this about?

Randolph: Hitler remained a pathological anti-Semite to the end. In one of his last testaments or warnings to his followers was for them to continue the war against the Jews.

Bill: In his will executed April 29th, 1945, it says, ‘Above all, I enjoin the government and the people to uphold the race laws to the limit and to resist mercilessly the poisoner of all nations, international Jewry.’

Randolph: The holocaust has to be taught as a chapter in the long history of man’s inhumanity to man. One cannot ignore the discrimination inflicted on many people because of race, color or creed. One cannot ignore slavery. One cannot ignore the burning of witches. One cannot ignore the killing of Christians in the Roman period. The holocaust, perhaps, is the culmination of the kind of horror that can occur when man loses his integrity, his belief in the sanctity of human life.

[End credits]