

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Ernest Weihs  
January 29, 1992  
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## **PREFACE**

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## **ERNEST WEIHS**

### **January 29, 1992**

Now you can look at me. Um, I want you to first tell me a little bit of your background as a Jewish child in Vienna and how you came to be baptized.

Oh. Eh, I was born uh in Vienna in November, 1908. My father was Jewish, my mother was Jewish. My grandparents on both sides were Jewish. And uh, in 1914, I became, I got a sister. My mother had another child, and when the war was breaking out (phone rings in background). Uh oh.

Okay, start with how you were born in Vienna.

Yeah, I was born in Vienna in 1908, and my parents, and both of my grandparents were Jewish. In 1914, I became uh, I got a baby sister, and we both uh lived with my mother because my father had to go to war, World War One. When the war was over, and he came back, on the way back, somehow, he met another woman, and he wanted a divorce. So my mother gave him a divorce, and both of us, my sister and myself, stayed with my mother. Till I was 11. At that time, my mother just couldn't make it, raise both of us, so she made my father take me, and his new wife to him. He was, he was uh in another state a house there. And so she packed me a little suitcase and sent me off to him. He uh, in the meantime he married that woman. She was Lutheran. When he married her, he switched his religion to Lutheran., and when I came there to live with them, he made me take on Lutheran religion, and they both said it was in a way good, because there was a lot in that city where we lived was a lot of antisemitism, and it was better to say I'm Lutheran, and I was Jewish. So anyway, I stayed with him uh from 11, when I was 11 till I was 14. When I was 14, he tried to get me eh a job. And he was uh, travelling all over Germany. He wanted me to become a nursery man, that means not in a children's nursery, but nursery with uh greenhouses, and ---- flowers. So, when I was 14, he found me a job in Germany close to the city of Munich, and um, in the meantime when I was there, a half a year or so, his co transferred him and his new wife, my stepmother, back to Vienna, and uh I was, I had to learn this craft for 3 yrs, and I got room and board.

Can you describe how different things were in 1938 when Hitler came, can you describe the change in everyday life?

Well, when Hitler came, everybody was getting Heil Hitler, nobody wanted to be against it, and my

real mother was living in Vienna too with my sisters in another part of Vienna. She, uh, managed to marry a, a guy that was from Russia ----- to the United States was not open anymore, but they coming in uh cities in of Russia, she was able with him and my daughter to go, uh, my sister to go to, to United States. Over here, they went each, each own way, they was -----, and my mother, my sister, uh, lived in New York, and my sister got married there to a guy that also came from Vienna.

Back in Vienna, how did people feel about Jews at the beginning of the war?

Well, they were sometimes worse than the term where when Hitler came to power in Germany. And when they saw uh the Jewish people getting picked up, and that was a certain scourge? Where they uh collected them, they standed, they were standing on the street just laughing at them, and snickering at them. Were very, very bad. It was very bad for, for to be Jewish. They had to wear a, a star. You couldn't work nowhere and the people of Vienna, at least 90% were all for Hitler. So, my mother uh was gone then in 1939 she went to the US with my sister. I myself, yeah my father died in 37, so he didn't know anything about the whole thing, and I stayed with my stepmother for the time being, and I had a job in, in, in a nursery in Vienna, which I could hold until, until the end of 38. Hitler came in March. The people I worked for never had any idea what, where I came from, that I was Jewish before, and they could, they were swearing that I was, uh, Lutheran, so they kept me, and the 2 sons of that guy that owned the nursery belonged to the party, Nazi party, and sooner or later, it came about that I'm from Jewish parents, and I have to go. So, they had to let me go, and that was in the, in the end of, of uh '38. In the meantime, uh with this command in Vienna, there is a Israeli -----, the place where all the Israelites were uh registered. They had my birth certificate, and they were trying to get people to Palestine, but before it came to that, you had to go in a camp, and learn how to work on a farm, doing this and that, make the cause??? and so on. But I was acc--they didn't know that I had another certificate that said I was Lutheran.

When you talked before with Linda, you talked about, you described an experience you had being with people as they packed to be transported. Can you tell me how it happened that you came to be doing that and how you felt about it, what you thought was happening.

I was in that uh camp in the Jewish camp to learn uh farming. In the meantime, my stepmother in Vienna got a postcard. I was registered in a Swedish mission that was trying to get Jewish uh people out of ----- . And they were writing me that I should come uh to this, it was a, a priest, - -----, that was the director of the mission ??? for an interview. So, I went uh back from that camp, from that farm, and came to Vienna , and had that interview with that director, and he said

that they uh are trying to get young people from Austria to Sweden, and he registered me, and found out what my profession was, and he said, "Well, right now is no transport going, but we need somebody. Outside of Vienna, they had uh home for the elderly, Jewish people, and there was a huge garden, and fruit trees and everything there. If I could go there and help out till the time comes that I could go on a transport, that would be a big help to them. So, I, I quitted farming, came back to Vienna, and went out to that home for the elderly, and I had my, my room, board and everything, and I worked there. Then the, the time went by and I never got assigned that I am ready to go. I know they needed me and they didn't want to let me go till the last minute. In the meantime, the first woman that opened the gate in that big estate there was my future wife. She was working there too. They promised her the same thing. Help us out there, and we will try to get you out. Well, months went by and, and nothing happened. In the meantime we became good friends, and we engaged. Then in the fall of 42, forty...two I think, 41, 41, the people of that little city where that home was insisted that that home has to be closed, they don't want any Jews living out there anymore. So this uh, Swedish mission had a huge apt building in Vienna where they had uh, apartments for people that got uh kicked out of their apartments, and they had some, it was, it used to be a like a huge uh place downstairs where they had beds for the sick ones. They had a little chapel there, and we had to close up, out there in that home for the elderly, and we all moved in that apt bldg. I worked there and my wife worked there. I mean this, at that time we were not married yet, and we, we, we had a room to live there, 2, 3 rooms, a kitchen and 2, and we stayed until the Austrian government wanted the Swedes to leave, to leave, go home. They had to close the whole thing. And uh, the Jewish uh, the sick ones, they got in hospitals uh Jewish hos--there was a Jewish hospital still there, and, and we uh rented a, a room in an ap, big, in an apartment. There was a certain section in Vienna where the Jews could still stay and live. We were in that apt there, and I got acquainted with a a Dutch uh mission that, which were doing the same thing--feeding people, taking them out of ----- . They were still uh working. And through them, they worked with the, with the SS in Vienna, and in order to be able to stay, they took some of us, we had to go out at night, and pick up certain people for deportation. We had to put them some suitcase full of stuff, whatever they could carry, and uh, in the morning they were loaded up in trucks, and, and taken to a place where they then were tra, get transported to Poland, and that went on for a while, until almost no, no uh Jews were left in, in Vienna, and that was um, '42.

Where did you think they were going?

Well, they promised them labor camps, you know. But then after a while it uh, the truth came through that they uh killed them there, and they buried them in mass graves. I had an uncle. He lived with his wife in an apt, and the SS man came and said, "I like that apt, and I'm going to take

it, and my uncle said, "You can have it but I want to take my bathtub with me," somehow, I don't know how he carried it, I...he didn't want to move until he can get this in. And a week later he was going to Poland, so we, we, we never saw them again, and uh, anyway, it came, the time came uh when the Dutch people had to close too, and that was when I had to go and leave Vienna. My wife, future wife, stayed with her mother and father because the mother was catholic, she could, she didn't have to go, and I left with that transport uh, uh Vienna, it was, I think it was October, '42, and uh, the, -----us with a um, with boxcars to Theresienstadt, that was a, a, a former military camp for, for us and so it's just, and they made a ghetto out of this uh, of this city, just like they did in Poland, made these ghettos. And, uh, they had these huge buildings where men were living. The other buildings where women were living. We even had our own money, and we had our own stores, and uh, first of all, when we got there everything had, they took everything off, gave us this, or gave us something, our suitcase belongings, everything was, shoes, everything was confiscated. And uh

Stop now. We have to put another roll of film in.

Why don't you pick up with describing Theresienstadt.

Uh, so we were separated in different buildings, but we could see each other during the day. And we got fed in, in uh all to one place where we get our food, and uh, it wasn't too bad. It was really like a ghetto, had our own so to speak government, but uh, oh it was controlled by SS, ----- all over the places. I was lucky, they, they, they gave you to certain uh working groups, and I was with a group of people that uh, went out to the railroad station, unloaded the coal, or unloaded the uh potatoes or whatever it was, and bring it back into the ghetto back and forth. In the meantime, because we did this almost every day, we got acquainted with some of the Czechoslovakian railroad personnel, and they got letters for us out home you know, so we actually got corresponding with our people at home, telling 'em how it was and so on. And uh, my ...wife's father was still in Vienna. I was there 42 and in 43 he had to go to my wife, you know, my fiancé, wanted to go with him and come and see me, so she went with him on her own. She didn't have to, she could have stayed with her mother all the way through the war. She came. I was standing there unloading coal, and she comes to boxcar, and she comes out, and I almost fainted. Ha ha. So, anyway, we were together uh, for uh, quite a while. '40, '43, she came in '43, and we even got married there. Not officially married but like a ghetto marriage. And...then uh, in the beginning of 44, they said they need people to work in Germany in factories, and whoever wants to go out of the ghetto can go. So a bunch of us, my friends and me, we volunteered to go. It was, I don't how many cars full of people. And, uh, instead we ended up in Auschwitz. We came, uh was my friends, his wife, and

his wife's little bro, two brothers, little one and uh ---17. We came on at night, all the lights on, we got us out of the cars. Here was the officer, you go this way, you go that way, you go this way, you go that way. All of, most of the women and kids and young people vanished??? That would be going that way. Whoever looked halfway decent to work went the other way. And now, then we were, uh, but my wife was still in Theresienstadt. And the next day we look around. Half of the people that we, that came with

us, we didn't see, we know they were gassed. And the next day, all the women that looked elderly or the kids that couldn't, young, uhhh, working age, you never saw 'em again. Over there they stripped us again of everything we had, and gave us this uh prison clothes. And uh we were in barracks, and oh there's a bed here and a bed here, all the way through, and we to sleep. A couple days later, our women came. They told them in Theresienstadt: Your husbands are working in factories in Germany. If you want to join them, you can. -----and registered and, and ----- . A couple days later we saw them through the fences. Couldn't talk, we couldn't, just saw that they were back here too. So we didn't know what was going on. We, a group of us, we stayed only a little more than a week. We didn't get no stamps, we were sorted out, said you go to, you have to go to another uh labor camp uh where you can where we can put you to work. So, our group went to a place that was called Towfering(ph), was a small labor camp next to a railroad station between Munich and Towfering? And there we were put in bunkers, you know, the roof is grass, and you go steps down, and here is some wooden boards, where we sleep on, so uh from up high you wouldn't probably not realize what's going on there, it looks like grass all over. So we were there, and we didn't know where our wives were. But later on -----found out that they took them to another camp in Czechoslovakia. So we were in Poland, they were in Czechoslovakia, we found that out. After the war you know. So we, we stayed in the camp, get our ration of bread and cabbage soup and whatever they feed us. And I was lucky again. I got to a uh um company, a small group. They went out in the fields, digging out the potatoes, bringing back the cabbage, and all this stuff. And we had huge coats, overcoats, you know, and we would uh, we inside sacks, we put, put potatoes here, potatoes here, we marched in the camp, and in each of these bunkers was a little stove. We heated it up at night and put the potatoes in the ashes, and I think that's what kept us alive, we sacked the food we got you know. But others were not so lucky. I came with people, friends of mine, there's nobody in your group as strong and as-----strong as strong as these friends of mine were. And a week later I saw them as skeletons. They became diarrhea and they just run out. And it was uh it was wintertime, it was the winter of uh from '44 or '45. So uh what happened, they didn't last a week, two weeks, and it was so cold, we uh, we had to bury them. They were only skeletons, only bones and skin. Laying there on the ground. We recognized our friends of course. We had put 'em in a two-wheeler, in a big.....and take them out in the fields with soldiers with us. We had to dig these frozen grounds deep enough so that we could get in.

Soon there was no more room. So we had to carry them to another camp, and .....

beep beep beep beep

Let's go back a little bit, and maybe you can tell me about, you told about your transport in your other interview of strong men who came like ghosts and you tried to help them.

I uh, there was uh, a rumor in that camp that we need some, so many men, and uh in another camp for work. Whoever wants to go can go. So they loaded up several boxcars full of people. And I don't think it was more than 4 weeks when they came back, and they were, when they left they were..... like Hercules, you know, Hercules. They came back and I looked at these guys, they came in rows of 8, 8, 8, and they looked like skeletons too. And they couldn't walk, they were just swaying like this, against us, and when they were close enough to us, they fell on their knees begging for food and water. I had to give them water, you know. And, and then they, they got uh, in their barracks, and I think half of them uh didn't make it...up again, you know, to live through. And we had to go um, on that railroad station where they came from and make sure that they all get out, and there was straw on the bottom of the cars, and already dead people laying around dead that we had to carry out and the rest had to march to the camp. Anyway, it was not only German or Austrian Jews, there were people from France, and the Red Cross finally was sending packages, and these guys were fighting for these packages, ripped it open and there was only, there was red beans in there. But they didn't, who can just, they just ate 'em as they were stone hard. But anyway, there were close to extinction, you know, I don't remember whether they made it or not, but, I think more that 50% didn't make it. So, one day came a commander. We have to leave the camp. The camp is going to be closed. He gave us each a piece of bread, get your clothes, and start marching. And, we had to march towards Dachau... But, in the meantime, some weeks before there were alarms you know, airplanes come, Ameri, Americans were very close at that time already. And we had ducked? in the barracks and so...and eh, so we, we get on that march, it was um supposed to be several days to go to Dachau by foot. And uh, we had some soldiers escorting us. And every move I made ?? were less, less of these guys. And the other ones to go ----- what they had on their uniforms, took everything off, marched with us. And we came, I think we were pretty close to Dachau, maybe a days. Uh, and we were about 6 of us, good friends. We said, we were afraid when we get to Dachau they're going to kill us there, finally. So we were going this uh roads, and it came to a bend, and the soldiers didn't pay no attention anymore. So we said, as soon as the last ones are gone, there was a big side dump, we jump. So, we left the whole troupe and jumped in that hole, waited till everybody is gone. Then we got out and we marched. We didn't know where to go, but we marched. And we came to a, um place where they stored the hay,



and everything. We went up there and slept that night. In the morning came the people from that village or whatever it was. With the guns, come down! come down! come Down! And my friend was saying, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" So they have a, we came down, they took us to the police station, and they let us go. Go ahead. So we went, marched and marched and in the afternoon there came a ---woman on a bicycle. ohhhhhh. Going like crazy. Said, what what's the matter? What's going on? She said, "The army are coming!" They called the Americans armies, you know. The armies are coming! The armies! And she drove on. And we said Well, the armies are coming. Good for us. So we walked towards that little village. It was actually not a village, it was a bigger city, it was called Firstenfeltbrook. It was a German airfield next to it. And we went into that little village. We still heard shooting-----And we, we come to the middle of the village, and here were these Americans sitting on the tanks smoking cigarettes and laughing and Oh my God, I said, That must be it then. So, only one of us could speak English, a friend of mine. And there were others too, uh, ----where it was-----and we told them what happened, and she said, "Put 'em in the hospital! Put 'em in the hospital so they get taken care of." They put us in the hospital, and we were surrounded by wounded German soldiers there, laying with us in that hospital. And the nurses come in, in screaming and crying, "The armies are here, there, they are here, they coming!" Oh my God. They were crying because a lot of these guys got shot and or got arrested. Oh we were...but they took good care of us. They gave us food and everything. We didn't have no hair. They know, they must have known who we are, you know. On our clothes and our weight and everything.

Did you, when you were in the camps, were you friends with Jews? Were they your good friends?

My friends?

Yes. In the camp. Were they Jewish?

Oh yeah, yeah. The most of them, yeah. Except for this group of French people that we saw in that other, in that last camp. But the most of them were Jewish, were all Jewish.

And what kinds of things did they do? Did you see them ever, or did they ever practice their religion? Did you ever see spiritual?

Yeah, in Theresienstadt, they, you could get married Jewish style.

But what about in Auschwitz or in....

No, no, no, no, oh no.

Did people pray?

No, no, no. The funny thing was, this, they called them Kapos. These were Polish, Jews, that were there a long time, in charge of us from the SS, and they hit us more than the SS did, these guys. Yeah, they had these things, when we had to go in these bunks beds, they hit us more than the SS. But the SS 'em, I got one

Beep.

You were going to tell me about the SS, you were talking about the Kapos, you were going to say something about the SS. Why don't you go on.

Yeah, they, they were pretty rough too. One time, they, on the railroads unloading the coal, and the guy that was with us, uh I think I didn't give him the red??? And so, he slipped me, fell head on into the coals. But otherwise, I really didn't get hurt too much. I mean, the, I know they hit people, that they had to go to the hospital, and that, but I, personally, went through the whole thing pretty unscathed.

What kinds of choices did people have in those circumstances. Could you make choices that helped insure that you would live instead of die?

Actually we didn't have any choices. We had to believe what -----they told us you go in a labor camp. We had to believe this. The funny thing was, then, they told us in Auschwitz, we going to that labor camp in Kalfering, we actually, the train actually went through Vienna, I don't know how come. And we looked out these windows, and we just, we could jump, we would have be free. And it went uh from Theresienstadt thru Vienna to Poland. We went to the inner city, and then out and then out and to Germany.

Did having been baptized as a Lutheran help you at all once you were in the camps? Did it make it easier for you?

No. No. There was nothing we could do. I, I, I don't remember anything. A Jew was a Jew. There was no difference. There was no priest or anything. And I know, when like when I said we were

in that hospital, and at the end of the journey, uh, they kept us, then we finally got out, and they had schools where we, where, taken care of and sleeping, they had restaurants there we could go to, to eat and everything. They took care of us. And then there were trains coming, going from there to Munich, and from Munich to wherever you wanted to go.

Back during the war, did you, were there people who tried to help you or other people that you saw? Did you see any people who tried to help in any way. Or particular soldiers or kapos who tried to help?

No. The only people that really helped us were these uh, these railroad personnel, some of 'em in eh Theresienstadt, you know, when we got on the outside to unload, unload, whatever, they took our letters, we gave them money or cigarettes you know.

In Auschwitz, I know you were there only a short time, but tell me a little more about what it's like. What were sort of the standards if you arrived at Auschwitz, what would happen if you were, say, 45 or you were a kid?

Well, anybody that was not able-looking to work, got gassed. That we know for sure because we never saw anybody again. And the ones that are still, were still in good shape, were in barracks, but we didn't work on anything. We just, in the morning we get our soup, or whatever it was, and then we stayed in the open, and we made a big circle, one next to the other and moving around like this just to keep us warm, and we didn't do any work, until after that week they put us in a row and said you and you and you, you can come, and uh, they were left for the other camp. So, I don't know what happened to the rest, but, I assume, whoever didn't get lucky enough, I know a fellow that went with us, strong, witty, he never came back. He must have died somewhere, I don't know where, either in Auschwitz or in another camp. A lot of, so I couldn't say how many got gassed and how many made it, I mean from the group that I knew, several hundred, I think I know only 20 or so came back that I know. And when I, when we met in Vienna again you know, and uh, my wife was, we were actually liberated by the Americans, my wife was in a camp in Czechoslovakia. She got liberated by the Russians, and she came home -----with a train full of Russians, but they didn't do didn't do no harm to her. But she was uh, she was close to not naked you know, she was sick all the time. She had two holes here and big hole here, and she had no stomach. And uh...

So people could make no choices under those circumstances. Even to die when they wanted to, you couldn't kill yourself...

Well, they could. Like, when I was in that little camp after Auschwitz, that Kalfering was the name. We went to bed in the evening, and one of the guys, he was a lawyer, strong guys, he was hanging, hung himself overnight in the in the bunker. We woke up, and here was...so, if you wanted to kill yourself, you probably could.

So how do you think some people survived, and some didn't survive?

I really don't know how it happened. I wasn't very strong. There were guys there twice my weight and a head taller, and couldn't make it, if they got...diarrhea or something. Couldn't hold it anymore and they just were running out. Uh, how, how I came back is, for me, still a miracle, how it happened you know. I don't know. I was close enough several times, but, I got lucky, I never got sick. I think I was in the hospital once, one day, that's all. That's all. And, how it...how this gets elected I don't know. There are better guys, and stronger guys, they should live now instead of me, you know. I just got lucky. Mmm. We had -----and we had laborers, we had doctors, we had lawyers, we had, you name it. You know. And a lot of 'em didn't make it. So, I don't know. I also said somebody up there must have liked me. Ha ha ha ha ha. Because I can't figure it out...that, that I'm here, still here, uh huh. I had so many close calls, and still. I, I don't know. My wife recuperated. And, in 1947, our daughter was born, and she was so tiny, 2 lbs I think, that my wife is was afraid to hold her, she cried, "Take her, take her!" Ha ha, I had to take her. And, and now she is strong, 5'9" or something. We always said, you know, when we came over here she was 4 years old, and she was so skinny, she didn't eat very much.. We always said Wonder Bread made her grow. That's what got her up. And now she has 3 of her own. So,

Well, that's all we need. Thank you very much.

Okay, this is room tone.