

--arrived in August 2007. And I might mention that our First Person, today, William Luksenburg and his wife Ellen, both have already seen information about themselves that has just come to light and been made available from the ITS archive. More information on the ITS collection can be found on the museum's website, or by visiting the museum's Benjamin and Vladka Meed Registry of Holocaust Survivors, located in the Wexner Learning Center, which is on the second floor.

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

What you are about to hear from William Luksenburg is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We, unfortunately, usually have a slide presentation to show you. And we've just had a technical problem today, so we're not able to do that. Usually we can show on a screen. But today, for those of you who've been before, we're just not able to do that.

Let me fast forward to William's current life for just a moment before we begin our conversation with William. Today, William lives here in the Washington, DC, area with his wife Helen. And we'll hear more about Helen in the course of our discussion with William, whom he married after the war in 1947. Upon arrival in the Washington, DC area in 1949, William became a master plumber, then bought and ran his own service station for many years before retiring.

William and Helen have three children-- two sons and a daughter. One is an attorney and two are doctors. They have five grandchildren. Both William and Helen are volunteers here at the museum, and they are active in civic matters.

And I'm pleased to let you know that Helen is with us today as well. Helen, if you wouldn't mind.

[APPLAUSE]

I might mention that Helen was also a guest on the First Person program two weeks ago. So I'm very glad to have her here with us today. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our "first person," Mr. William Luksenburg.

[APPLAUSE]

William, thank you so much for joining us, and for your willingness to be our "first person" today. September 1, 1939 was the date that Germany invaded Poland. The town that you and your family lived in was on the Polish-German border, so your life changed almost immediately. Before you tell us about what happened when war came on September 1, please share with us a little bit about your earlier life, what your childhood was like, what your family was like, what your community of Dabrowa Gornicza was like in those years before war came.

I was born to a nice Jewish family, God-fearing family. As a young child, I went to school, which was a Christian school. The teachers were nuns or priests.

And therefore, I'd like to bring out something. As a Jewish boy, I suffered, because some young men call me "Christ killer." And then we had hour of singing. And the teacher played the violin.

He came towards me. He saw I did not sing, because for me, it was sacrilegious to sing songs which not from my faith. So he came back. And he took his bow, he hit him over the head. He said in Polish, [NON-ENGLISH]. Were you sing a Jew. So that was my upbringing. It was very hard.

And after the school, I had to go to Jewish Hebrew school. Then I had to do my homework. And my life was always so.

But we used to have, Sunday, the school closed. That's on Sunday. But Saturday, we had school too. So whatever

Saturday, we had new items. Monday, I was-- my teacher didn't inform me what happened Saturday. So by the time I caught up, by the week, by Friday, Saturday came up again. I couldn't go to school because my father wouldn't allow me to go on Shabbat to the school. So my life was always like a bittersweet.

William, tell us a little bit about your parents, Simon, David, and Rozalia Luksenburg. Tell us a little bit about them.

For those days, my mother was a very educated woman. She used to have what they called a Russian matura, like a-- higher education for women in those days was quite a feat to be. My father was a merchant. And he was-- and he was also, in some different kind of-- doing for goods for other people.

What I'm trying to say, if you borrow money without pay interest. You're not supposed to borrow money and pay interest. So he gave money to call the man. You ask a man what he's going to do with the money. So he explain, just to shake hands. And everybody paid back, but no interest. So they call it self-help.

He also made, like, place to collect money, because in Poland had-- young woman could not get married without a dowry. So in order to get people to have a dowry for the young women, he collected money in some-- I remember some parents come in crying, that the daughter cannot get married. He doesn't have a dowry.

Because they don't have a dowry.

Yeah.

OK.

So he gave them, like 500 zloty. It was a lot of money. So some people could get married. That what life then. Not now.

And of course, William, all that would change dramatically when the Germans came in September. And when they came, you were 15 years of age. Tell us your earliest recollection about the German occupation, and what were the changes that took place immediately after the Nazis were in power?

Well, the first day-- first night, there were all kind plastered that you cannot go out at night on the threat of death. After 6 o'clock no more. A curfew.

So apparently, a young man tried to cross the street, and the guys on a motorcycle come in running. He yell at him halt, and kept on running. And they cut him down with a machine gun.

So our house was the first house. So they asked for some men to come help. So I didn't want my father to go, so I went.

But after seeing that corpse, like, cut in half, and profusely bleeding, I was so scared. Me and another guy who dragged the body from the middle of the road right on the sidewalk.

When I got home, my wife thought somebody killed me, because I was all over full of blood. That was my first experience. And I-- it's hard to forget something like that. I never seen so much blood. I'd never seen a dead person at that stage.

And you were 15 years of age.

Yeah.

So they imposed a curfew, William. What else? What were the other things they did immediately?

Well, in order to get the small rations, you have to register. It was very calculated. You want to have it, whatever they give you-- bread, very small. You used to get a small portion of bread.

So calculator was they know your name. Do you know where they live? We didn't realize that. If somebody would realize, it would not take the resident that-- to register. This was they knew where we live, where they are.

I remember standing, getting up, like 3 o'clock in the morning, and they all opened up the bakery by 10 o'clock to get a small piece of bread. By then, already, the bread wasn't even like bread. It looked like they put some sawdust in it. As you ate the bread, you have to put your finger roof of your mouth, because it was sticking it to the roof of your mouth. It was not edible almost.

And you were ordered to-- many, many of your possessions were ordered to be turned over and confiscated.

We were ordered. That's correct. Radios. Later on, some furs. And any kind of jewelry, anything on the threat of death.

So a lot of people gave up everything because everybody just wanted to stay alive. Because everything was brutally. They you found you, they did something, whether they drag you somewhere or they kill you on the spot.

How long would it be, William, before you were forced to move into a ghetto? And then, once you were there tell us what the ghetto was like for you.

Well, they took the Jewish population in one corner to the city. But we didn't have a wall, because later on, this-- our city, after a lot of people left or had been taken to Auschwitz, we had to go, like, in between two cities. And then there was walled in, and you couldn't go out.

But we have certain streets where we can go. And after the curfew, you could not go any other street, because they catch you, they kill you.

People don't understand the brutality, what we went through. People, all people who are on the street, there was no food. And some people didn't have where to stay at night, because the ghetto, the people didn't have-- we didn't have three or four rooms. Everybody had a room, and one kitchen, and one bedroom.

So a lot of people didn't have where to sleep, and a lot of people were dying. A lot of people. You see right away, you see the terrible, terrible condition for a lot of people, for children and old people.

William, how many siblings did you have?

I had only one older brother. And he wanted to see the world. He didn't realize, 1941, he want to see the world. So I've seen in the paper somewhere, they-- he can go to Germany. He worked there. He figure he's not going to be here clamped in. He goes to Germany.

Once he got there, he realized he is in a concentration camp. They call it not concentration then. They call it Arbeitslager, working prison.

So he made some teeth for the armed forces, for the army, for the people who were around in that prison camp. And he used to send to us, which was to send supplies. And so he had it all right.

But what happened later on, they had sent some people who were there. They were different. They called it [NON-ENGLISH] and [NON-ENGLISH]. The [NON-ENGLISH] were the French, or the German-- the Belgium. And so they were not used to harsh conditions in Germany. So they sent the poor soul to Auschwitz. And they came, our people, from the Ost-- I mean, from our east side, who are more-- can be at harsh environment, cold and [CROSS TALK]--

Tougher winters, and used to it.

So they send him, in the meantime, on the construction. For some reason or other, he broke his leg below the knee. So later on, after my parents, which I come to it, were taken out to Auschwitz, I was alone. And they sent him back.

And then I got caught and went to concentration camp. And he was alone. Apparently, because he was limping, he must-- they sent him to Auschwitz.

Willie, let's come back to that in a little bit. When you went into the ghetto, you moved-- your mom chose for the room for you was the kitchen. So you all moved into the kitchen of a little house. And what was that like, living in that one room?

Well, I remember, also the Jews in Germany who were born in Poland, the German decide to send them back to Poland because they were not born in Germany. So they pushed the train over. And we had to share with some of the German people, Jews, two rooms we had. They got one room, and we slept in the kitchen in one bedroom.

So I remember the people who live in-- the German people on the highest standard wouldn't have flush toilets. We didn't have the people that they had in Germany. So, of course, they weren't happy about it.

I remember, my mother said, those people don't understand. That's what we got. We share with them. And they weren't nice about it. So life was unbearable for them, for us.

And William, in the ghetto, you would be made to go to work right away. Tell us about you had a blue card. Tell us what was significant about that.

In order not to go. They were catching people like dogs or something on the street. If you had-- you worked. You had different kind of cards. A blue, and a red, and a black. Depends.

The blue meant that you work for the war effort. So if they catching people, you show your card, they let you go. They also, at nights, they used to come. They used to take people from beds, and take them away, and you never, never seen them again.

William, what kind of work were you doing, since you had the blue card?

Well, I worked in a factory who made backpacks for the American-- for the German army. And therefore, that was a good job to have, because that was for the war effort.

But later on-- I have to go back. One day, the German made everybody know. Everybody got to show, on this and this day, in the sports arena. We didn't know what the purpose was. We didn't know nothing was going to happen.

So we all came together-- me and my dad and my mom. And we stay up a long time. Finally, we got to the table. And then the German pointed to my mom and my dad, that way, and other that way.

I really did not realize at the beginning what this meant. Later on, I found out. That was 1942.

And if you go upstairs, there is a book about Auschwitz. 2,500 men, women, and children went directly to the gas chamber. That was August the 1st, 1942.

I really don't know. I wasn't a child anymore. But I thought I'll go crazy. I did not sleep. I did not eat. I was a little worried for my mother. But I just missed them. I just could not-- I could not live like this.

So I went to the other city where I had some family. Then my wife lived there. The name of the city was Sosnowiec. So I worked there for a while. Was a German who-- the name was Schwedler, who was the guy who made the factory for the army. And that saved me for a while.

When you lost your parents on that day that you described, after that, you were considered as a homeless person, if I remember.

You see, when you one person, you're not allowed in the ghetto to have any room. So you slept in somebody's hallway

or whatever. One person didn't get any kind of-- share with somebody a room or bedroom. So I became like a homeless person. Wherever somebody allowed me to sleep, I slept, sometimes in the factory, or wherever somebody invited me. So I slept on the floor.

I also had a soup kitchen. And a woman took-- felt sorry for me because I sat alone. So she brought some piece of bread. And she shared with me some. And then she invite me to sleep in their hallway.

So I kind of wasn't myself. I was kind of not myself. I just didn't know.

Tell us, William, about-- there was an incident where you tried to escape. In fact, you did escape. Tell us the circumstances and what happened.

Well, my-- first of all, when my brother came, and he laid in the hallway in somebody's hall.

And he had a broken leg.

He was broken leg. He had two pieces of boards with-- they're put together the leg. And he screamed all night long, pain. I didn't know what to do. I took a towel, a wet towel, put it on his head.

It got daytime. We didn't have any light. I've seen bedbugs eating him alive, running. So I cut it open, and I killed them.

And he fell asleep, like he died. He couldn't sleep all night. By then, I didn't have-- I had to get something to eat or something. We had some items I could sell. And I went out, and I got caught.

And I knew he's going to be there. He's going to die. Nobody going to help him.

I remember people were sleeping. Everybody sleeping. I couldn't sleep. I was pacing back and forth. I couldn't sleep. I just got myself so uptight, and I didn't know what to do. I figure, I'm going to escape.

I looked out the window. It was, like, three stories down. I kept on looking. My God.

But then it got to-- this was at night. I've seen the daylight coming in. And I figured, now or never. I just went over, and I let myself go, and I fell down.

And I had-- I remember I had some family not too far away. And I ran. By time I got there, my leg was swollen like this. I didn't feel it.

So they, later on, they took me up, and they hid me in the attic. And the attic was so hot, I couldn't even breathe. And that-- the worst part was the attic. I just couldn't take it.

But the people came. They say, you cannot stay here. They're looking for you. They got your name. If they catch you in our attic, they'd send us to Auschwitz.

So I went back home, took my armband off. We used to wear those armband with the Star of David. And I came back.

I came back, and my brother was there, limping. And I go out in the street, and I got caught again. They send me to the biggest prison. I known by name when I was a young child. They call it [NON-ENGLISH]. It used to be the biggest prisoner around. And they put you in a hole, like lay you down.

You couldn't sit down. You couldn't stand up. You touch your knees in the bottom. That's how big it is. And they send down some food with a bucket.

I don't know how long I've been in, because I heard screaming. And I just didn't know when I was there-- three days or four days, a week. I don't know. None. No, there was no day, no nighttime.

Finally, they pull me up. And they put me in chains, in chain links, like I killed somebody. I kept on looking in the heavens. My mother going to see me. She going to see me, I kill somebody.

Unknowing to me, they'll send me to the big prison, Blechhammer. When I spoke to my brother, he told me of some people who were with him. And his name was the head of the big Blechhammer prison, Demerer. So I see him go by. So I yelled at him that I'm Luksenburg. I'm his brother. He say he was a German Jew. Comes here. He gave me right away a bowl of soup. And he say he knows a good prison camp where I can go. So that's how I wind up, through him. I didn't know any good prison or bad prison.

We came to work in a factory who made black soot, which was fresh material to make artificial rubber. In order to produce the artificial rubber, you have to have 100 to 120 degrees heat. In my-- that time, my future wife worked there, also women and men. And you have to clean, open up the window, and clean those burners with a big poker all the time. You finish one, you go to the next one. You open up, a big flame coming at you.

And I then, they need a mechanic. Why? When I came the first time, they left some people from western-- a French, or German, or a Belgian man. He told me how to survive. He said, whatever they want to need you, tell them you can. Anything to get away from the pick and shovel.

So they said, they need somebody. I said, yes, I can. So they told me if I know how to weld. I say, yes, I can. So an older the guy, must be two years older, he say, quick, show me how to do welding.

And I became a good welder. I used to be up high, big pipes, welding, like two floors high.

But then, they had some outside people, not in uniform. Private companies working in all these factories. So he kind of-- when he ate, he called me [NON-ENGLISH]. It's "little boy." He said-- he pointed out with his head. What he couldn't eat, put it on the corner. He walked away so he couldn't-- that he couldn't give any food. He would be punished for that.

So what you do, you run. You eat fast. Why? Because somebody catch you, where you got the food from? So you got to eat like a dog real fast.

But some people were really nice too. Not all people were like that. They were not in uniform. And some people really helped me.

Also, they used to wrap their paper in newspapers. The only known thing was happening, I read the German papers. And the German victorious. They were bombing with V-1 and V-2 already. And all the planes went to England, they come back, nothing got shut down. There wasn't any hope that we're going to ever--

So the Germans wrapped their food in paper, and you would find bits of newspaper and read all this propaganda about how the Germans are winning.

And you read propaganda for a long time, you believe it.

Yeah. You, Willie-- William, so this was all at Gleiwitz, at the labor camp, the slave labor camp at Gleiwitz. And as you explained, you were in a-- they were making soot for artificial rubber. You became a welder.

At some point, you had a steamroller accident. Will you tell us about that?

Well, before that-- I forgot to tell-- they asked me if I know how to steamroller. And I say, yes, I can. [LAUGHTER] Never mind somebody else.

And so the steamroller didn't have hydraulic brakes. You have to really push hard and turn it right to left, about 10 times, because there's a chain pulling this front wheel. Before you make a right turn, you can turn and turn and turn.

But what happened, the steamroller was going down the hill fast. I've been trying to push the brake at the same time, and keep on the wheel, turning to the right. But I couldn't do both at the same time. And I ran, and I put the curb, and I flattened it down.

So what the guy did, he takes his shovel, breaks it off the wheel, and kept on hitting over my head till he got tired. What you do, you cover your head like this, and he keep on hitting.

I got my-- almost lost my eye, cut my hair, cut my, lip broke my teeth. I didn't think-- I went the next day, you had to go to work. And I had swollen face like this, and kept on going.

Really I can truly say that I've been to hell and back. And I never thought I'm going to live the day to see.

Believe me, if you don't mind telling us about another incident that you told me about, where you had-- you told us earlier that you would have to eat that food very fast so nobody caught it with you. At one point, I think, you got caught with potatoes, and you were severely punished for that.

See, when we were walking, the SS, our company, we were walking. And they had a kitchen, field kitchen for them-- not for us. So they have-- the potatoes-- never they peel potatoes. They boil the potatoes in the skin. And as they gave each soldier some potatoes, two potatoes fell down, spilled. And they were highway down the hill. They were rolling over to me, OK?

So what does hungry man do? I ran to grab the two potatoes. And as I grabbed two potatoes, they would not let me have it. They hit me with the butt from the gun, like this. But I asked for my potatoes. I wouldn't let them have it. And I was bleeding.

In the midst of all this at Gleiwitz, William, this is where you would meet Helen, isn't it?

Well, in Gleiwitz they had two separate camps-- one for the women, one for men. Since I was a mechanic, I used to work 12-hour shifts, and the women worked three times eight shifts-- three-- it's 24 hours, 3 times 8.

So sometimes at night, beside that, before that, there was some shortening. We had to have shower every day, because the soot was all over your body, and sweat and soot. So we showered every day.

They gave us some soap mixed with sand. You didn't wash too much because it hurt your skin.

So something happened, the women's wash barrack. So Helen had to go through a door, come in and get some water.

And I've been trying to live. And I've been trying to get myself clean. So I cleaned my pants. And I scrubbing the pants. So she saw me. And I say, hello. She said hello to me. And I took a liking to the young woman. I like her.

[LAUGHTER]

I was still young man. So someday I figure I'll talk to her. So I-- can I speak to Helen? So she came out. We talk.

And--

Through the fence.

--for-- yeah.

Through the fence. Yeah.

Yeah. So she got caught. Some big SS woman saw that she talk to a man. And she got caught. And they said that whoever will come out, she said, you're going to get hair shaven.

So Helen didn't want somebody in innocence. All the women-- I mean, all of the men-- they were about two years older than she was. Why should they get her hair shaven?

So she said there was me, because she was such a brave [INAUDIBLE]. He pushed her out, and some other women got her shaving.

So it was-- since then, I've been trying to see her at night. I took cement bags, and I wrote a love letter to her and threw it to her. She threw it to me.

On cement bags.

Yes, on old cement bag. But you can never touch a woman. God forbid, they catch you. You're not going to live another day.

Well, the romance kept on for a long time. I talked to her. Someday, I told her, you know, when we get free, someday I'll marry you.

So I said it because I couldn't picture myself to die. Sometimes I was down. Sometime I didn't think I'm going to die. Because every time I got another job. And this job.

Sometimes when I came to work, I felt like I'm a free man, because nobody's standing over top of me. I did my work, 12 hours, came home was bad. Gone into the barracks was bad. But once I went outside, I was a laborer working like everybody else.

[INAUDIBLE]

Absolutely.

[INAUDIBLE] is about the potatoes and the--

Yeah. Oh. Well, he got to be inventive. Stealing don't mean stealing. It means "organizing."

[LAUGHTER]

So one the night, they made a kitchen for the Germans. And a big truck came in with a lot of potatoes, unloaded down in the cellar. The one night, I figure I'm going to see what the cellar looks like.

They had a big break padlock. I took a piece of bread and made an imprint. And--

You made an imprint in the key lock with bread.

And I had a lot of old keys laying there, because I had a big shop. And to my amazement, I made a key and it opened up. So I took, open up the heavy door, and I took a deep breath. Mm, it smelled so good, and I couldn't resist.

So I told my buddy. I said, tomorrow, we're going to eat. So we take two empty bag from the cement, and we loaded up two bags of potatoes. We has in wintertime, we had one big stove. And we cook with water. And it has barely full. Well, I was still hungry but I got a belly full of potatoes.

But when you're hungry, nobody lets you-- you have to share. You don't share, the people will squeal on you. So next day, 10 of us went. Another day, 20 of us went. You couldn't say no, because everybody is hungry.

Of course, Germans, they weren't stupid. They've seen the amount got to be smaller.



[LAUGHTER]

So I opened the door, and they plant a soldier with a gun. He caught me. I got beaten. I'm telling you, if they beat me one time like this, I would have killed me.

And then--

They beat-- they whipped you, didn't they, with a bull whip?

No. Just to show for everybody else, you got 20 whips on the back with a whip like a horse. What the German want to know, who gave me the key. He didn't think I'm smart enough to make a key.

So he whips it to me. He say, [NON-ENGLISH]. I said, no, I say, I did it myself. I say, I'm going to keep on beating till you tell me. I kept on telling him. [NON-ENGLISH]? I said, no, I did it myself.

I got 20 whips. But when they whip you, they only hit you here. It's all skin, like a feather. After a while you don't feel anything. They can whip 100 times. That's all. No, it's gone.

I was bleeding completely back. And the next day, my buddies who were helping me get the potatoes, they dragged me to work, because I could not walk. Even up to I was liberated, I had my back like a scratch, blood. And I bend down, would bleed.

If I remember-- if I remember it right, William, the-- some of your friends in there that you had helped with the potatoes took some of their little bit of margarine--

Margarine and put it on to soften it up.

Yeah.

It was a crust on my back.

William, in January 1945, the-- the Russians began closing in. And you would be forced out of Gleiwitz by the Germans and forced to go on a death march. Tell us about the death march, and how you think you were able to survive that?

Well, first, before the death march, they loaded us on the open cattle trains. January 1945-- cold. So Helen saw where I jumped, on one-- on one wagon. She went to the other. There wasn't enough to room. You're pressed like sardines, one to each other.

When you slept, you kept on sleeping, you beat-- the knees were bending down, and you falling asleep. You couldn't get down, because you get trapped. Nobody gets you, get up.

And sometimes, people when they're nice, they throw bread. Like we went to Czechoslovakia. Some people threw bread standing on the bridges.

The Czechs were throwing bread. Yeah.

So I've been invention. So I took a blanket, and I straddled the wagon, and another man hold my leg. And I caught a bread in mid-air. And I want to give to Helen some bread. So you can't throw in the wagons, say, give it to Helen.

[LAUGHTER]

So Helen, I brought the bread. And this train is moving. And I'm-- stretch your arm, stretch your arm, stretch your arm. I throw the bread. Guess what? She didn't catch it.

[LAUGHTER]

When we had Helen on the program a couple of weeks ago, she described, from her perspective dropping the bread that Willie had just thrown to her. And--

But I forgave him.

No. Willie, you were in these open cars in January of 1945, wintertime, an especially harsh winter, going back and forth in the open cars. You told us that some of the Czech people were throwing breads, and the Germans were shooting at them while they were doing that.

Sometimes, yeah.

And you had snow to drink--

That was the lucky part. You can be for two weeks without food, but you got to have water. We ate for each other snow.

Matter of fact, when I got unloaded, I've seen so much snow. And the women got unloaded, she saw me grabbing all my snow, pushing my mouth. She said, don't eat. You're going to get sick. Like I would care if I get sick?

[LAUGHTER]

Anyhow, so one thing I want to say. Then I realize that the German lost the war who were driving the open cattle train right through Berlin. And there were slogans. They're going to fight to the last drop of blood. We're going to be victorious and so on.

We kind of didn't realize what's going on. We didn't know what happened.

So we got in a big hangars where they used to make planes. And the roof was all glass. And the American used to bomb. And there was no other roof. Everything was open.

We were all laid down in a concrete full of water. And I got very sick. Whoever was strong got on the high elevation, was dry. But I was sick. Everybody pushing me around. I was laying in the water, and I just gave up.

I had a friend who was a barber, slept in the same bunk. He was shaving the guards. So he was some bread. He found me laying. I was all wet. I was not there anymore.

So he picked me up. He got me a dry pair of pants. He was strong. He elbow way up high, on higher ground, so it was dry, and brought me a bowl of hot soup.

When I drunk that hot soup, I came to life just like you wouldn't believe. When you're cold like this, when you get a-- matter of fact, I drunk the soup. I burned my inside, I drunk so fast. It was just like somebody gave me a new life. That was my friend.

From there, we got loaded. We there-- I can't tell whether a week or so-- to the terrible camp Flossenburg. It was high in Bavarian mountains. There was no food. Cold, like you never know. Siberia's warm. The wind blew all the time.

And we had to work in stone quarries. They had stone quarries. So what you do, you load in the wagon so much stone. Then you jump on it, and you go down the hill. But you come down the hill, you have to move quickly, because another one is coming up. Depends how much load you got. That's how far the little wagon goes.

So in the meantime, there were a lot of Russian POWs too. So he saw something dead, they would-- the Russian could eat anything. The Russian-- it'd be a dead rabbit or something, they eat it.

So he left me alone. And I couldn't push my wagon fast enough. The other was coming. And they got me, and I broke my ribs here, my left ribs.

And now, instead, I was swollen. I was like pin, needle. I must have had a lot of fever. But somehow or rather, I lived through.

Then they said that people who are sick, they had diarrhea, they get some white powder. But in order to get a spoon of white powder, you had to get completely naked, OK? So you stay. You open your mouth, and you push it in, a spoon of white powder.

I coming out, somebody stole my shoes. Can you imagine? Cold weather like this. Go work on a stone quarry. No shoes?

I wait. Somebody else, A Russian came in, I took his shoes.

But I put some grease, because they were strong. And I was afraid he's going to find these shoes, he kill me. And I put some grease on that. Till now, I was so worried he--

Anyhow, to make a long story short, one day they said they need strong men. So a lot of people would die at night in the barracks. In order to be count-- the German got to be everything counted up-- you undress the body, put it in the wash barrack, throw them up, and you put the number with big letters. Everybody got it checked out.

And in Flossenburg, we have big piles, burning bodies. You can smell the fresh all day, all night. They got, like, a big shoot, and they would throw the bodies out and they burn them.

So I took two coats for my body. And I stood like this. I blew my cheeks. I look a strong man.

But I remember that coming, we didn't have any water. And I've seen some empty bottles. So I figure I'll run, get some wash, but I get two bottles of water and bring them back. I come. Back they're gone. I was heartbroken.

After the war, the name is Schwandorf. The people who left, in the barn, the SS threw gasoline and burned him alive. The name of the town is Schwandorf. And I wasn't there.

And you missed it because you'd gone to go get water.

Then they needed another transport. That was already February. I volunteered to go. And I want to get out from there. I knew where I'm going to die. There were rats like this, big ones, eating off-- eat human flesh. No food. No food.

So one day, the Russians were kind of strong. They were carrying food for the guards-- big buckets with food. So I understand some Russian too. So I got up in the morning. I went with them.

And everybody had a bowl. Oh, you have to have your bowl. You don't have a bowl, you don't eat. You have it on a string, always, a bowl.

So everybody's soaks [INAUDIBLE], goes quick. Never [INAUDIBLE], but you got to drink it fast. I've burned all my insides for a long time because I had to drink real fast. And that was the life.

So I came to the terrible camp, Flossenburg. That's it. That's all the I've been telling you about it. I knew I'm going to die.

Then, from there, they send us to another city, German city, Regensburg, where the Allies used to bomb every day. I could tell you by the sun what time it was, because like 12 o'clock they would come in.

And one plane came and made a wide smoke screen. And they would keep on bombing all the time.

And we were fixing the railroad. 20 people, one rail. Could not pick it up. Sometime we drop and broke some people's legs because you couldn't hold it. Broke people's legs.

So apparently the bombing was too much. We went. Every night, we walked at night. They called it a death march. That was almost at the end the war. I didn't know a date. And you walk at night, and you keep up with the crowd.

My leg was swollen. I had wooden shoes. I could not take them off at all. But I take my wooden shoes off, I will not put them on again.

So you go with your nerves, and you shuffle with your feet, as fast as you can. And at the time you hear shot at night, it kind of goes through your body, because you'll be next-- especially the way I felt. I couldn't walk.

And sure enough, we came to one time in the barn. And the farmer's wife saw with some rotten potatoes. People went up eating rotten potatoes.

So she said, no. And she fought with the SS to let her-- she had bread and some peeled potatoes, give everybody some potatoes. The woman cried and gave everybody a piece of bread and potatoes.

And I, somehow or other, put myself, I got to live. I got to live.

We walked and we walked. Every time you walk, you hear a shot, bang, bang, bang. You work with your nerves, you shove. You walk, you walk.

One night, I couldn't walk anymore. I fell. And I close my eyes. And I expect a shot in the head. Nothing happened. I looked down at a corner of my eye. They kept on going. And it felt so good. I didn't have to walk. I'll lay there.

And a farmer going by heard me moaning. He picked me up, put me in the barn, gave me some food, some-- I couldn't eat anymore. Some bread with some grease and stuff. I could not.

He took my stripes, and they buried. And they gave me some clothes, because there's all the time we there, we had lice. I mean lice. You could go to a latrine, and they were in the seams, the nits. We kept on scrubbing. We couldn't throw the pants away.

I have a wide body. You couldn't find one spot eaten up from lice. We all have full of lice.

So it came in the next day, the farmer sang to me, the armies are here. They call the American armies are here. He put me back on the wagon. He brought me to the Americans.

First thing I know, they threw some brown powder. Later on I found out it was DDT. It's just like the whole world stood still. All of a sudden, no more lice. I was just liberated, like.

And they shaved me. And they took a woman's prison, and it made it a hospital. And they took the German doctors, who pressed them in service. The Americans did that. The Russian would not do it. The Russians kept on going. But the Americans took care of it.

And I remember the first night where the American colonel and the German came over. And I was laying on a white sheet. And I don't remember, since I lost my parents. I was laying on the white sheet.

And I saw, like, black in front of my eyes. And here I knew I was laying on a white cloud, and I'm dying. I start to cry. I felt sorry for myself.

So the German doctor held my pulse. He says to me in German, [NON-ENGLISH]. Don't cry, don't cry. You're only very much undernourished.

What they did, they fed me intravenous, because I could not take any food anymore. And it was May, June. The women with the prisoners walked me up in the sun. And I walked, and I felt better. I start to eat.

But later on, after I felt better, I have been told that the American down in the valley, my mother tongue is Polish. There's some Polish people from Detroit, and so were there.

So I walked down there, and sure enough they took me in--

They were Polish, US soldiers, Polish.

They took me in. Yeah. They took me with the mop to mop the floor. I hadn't had the strength to mop the floor.

I say, you come. He give coffee to the soldiers. For long I kept on coffee.

So one day, I see they dug a big hole in the ground. And they thrown chocolate cake, Turkish, and everything. And the cook stays with a shovel of dirt and throws it on.

I said, what are you doing? He said no, Fraulein. No German Frauleins, he said, not for the German. So but I said, no, no. I got these people here. They don't have chocolate cake. They don't have turkey. They got bread. So he promised it, I'm going to deliver not t German Fraulein.

So I organized both. I had some coffee. And one German saw me on a motorcycle. So every day, I had a backpack here and there, all kinds of bags. And I came on driving to that big prison. And everybody say, here, here. Everybody was hungry. So I did that for a few weeks. Every day come. I come in, we loaded up.

William, I'm going to jump in for just a minute, because we're at the end of our time. But before we close up, I'd like you to bear with us for just a couple more minutes. There's two things, William, I'd like you to, if you would, tell us about. And after you had been traversing on the trains through Czechoslovakia in the open cars with Helen, but after that you went separate ways. Obviously, you found each other.

Later on.

So would you tell us how you found each other? And then I want to talk about your jacket. And then we'll close.

OK, so anyhow, they buried my jacket. And after the war, I remember, the barn was like a broken barn. And I kept on looking, looking. I came to the farmer. She was afraid of me.

I said, don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you. And she boiled it out, my jacket, and put it in my backpack, and I drove off.

I came with the jacket to America. And I was the first one here who had the real concentration jacket, because it's made from [NON-ENGLISH] and made from wood. The jacket is not wool or anything like that. I brought it in. And I was the first one to give them my jacket. I figured people want to see what we looked like.

It's on display in the museum. And this portrait of William with his jacket, which had been buried by the farmer's wife because it was so lice infested, and he went back and got it, this appeared in the New York Times when you made your donation, right.

Tell us about, as we close, William, and before we turn back to you for some other closing comments, tell us how you reunited with Helen.

Well, after I got liberated, I live in different city, because in the prison, my cousin was looking for her husband. She found me. So we, with hitchhiking, though there is no trains, no buses, we hitchhike. Took us two weeks to coming

from south to north, to a big city by Rotz.

And I lived in a villa. And a German family had to leave, and we moved in. It was a different story.

And Helen was liberated by the Russians. It's another story. She also came from Poland through Czechoslovakia to American zone. Everybody wants to go to American zone because like a window to the world.

So she heard-- she made my-- heard about my cousin in the camp. It's a long story. Anyhow, she found out that I'm alive.

She didn't know how I felt we were-- I never touch her. I never told her I love her. But that's about it.

So she wrote me a short notice that I'm here. He invited. Come and see me.

So I got dressed, and I took the train. And I met somebody on the train who knew about where she was there. So I come to-- and in Germany, everybody locked the doors.

So I came to the door. And the guy say, you know who is here? She say, who? I said, me. She didn't-- he almost fell out the window. She was looking for the keys. She couldn't find it.

Finally, she found the key. And then, in those days, a watch was a big thing. So I gave her my watch, and I got on my knees, and I said, we getting married. And I gave her the watch.

This is the watch.

So, took a while. Because in Germany, you cannot just move from one city to another, unless you were married. You had a special permission. You just can't travel from one city to another, like this country.

So finally, we got married in March 1947. And I remember the German Marks, the old Marks that they gave us the new Marks. Somebody saw that in Munich-- because how survivors, you get some money for the new Marks.

So I took the train and went to Munich. And there was a long line. And I say, what's the line for? You can register to America. So I got in line.

Two months later, our President Truman realized that we couldn't go back to the home to Poland. We didn't have where to go. So he wrote a law to let 100,000 DPs-- Displaced Person-- come to America. And me and Helen came on this quota. Two months later, we came to America, with \$20 between us.

But a lot of people--

The language.

Yeah, no language. No home. We got, finally, one room with a Murphy bed and cockroaches that big.

[LAUGHTER]

And here you are today with us and Helen. I think we're going to close in just a couple of moments. I'd like to, first of all, thank all of you for being here today. William, of course, thank you for your willingness to share what is only just a tip of the iceberg, if you will, a glimpse at what he experienced over that time. And of course, we can't even begin to talk about the period after the war, and the displaced persons camps, and then building a new life here in the United States.

Reminder that we will have two first person programs each week in June and July, and back to our Wednesday schedule through the end of August. So our next program will be next Wednesday, June the 25th, when our "first person" will be

Mrs. Louise Lawrence-Israels, who is from Holland. Mrs. Lawrence-Israels survived the Holocaust and the war as a result of her family's decision to go into hiding in Amsterdam.

And then the next day, on Thursday the 26th, our First Person will be Mrs. Susan Taube, who is from Germany. Mrs. Taube survived the Riga Ghetto, the Stutthof and Kaiserwald concentration camps, and a death march before her liberation. So we invite you, and hope you'll return to another First Person program. And if you can't this year, plan to come to Washington next year and join us between March and the end of August.

It's our tradition at First Person that our "first person" gets the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn it back to William Luksenburg to close our program.

I'd like to speak to all the young people. This is a great country. Doesn't matter what color skin, who you came from. We're all one. We're all people, God's creation.

I urge you to be good citizen, and that [? under Christ ?] we're all God's children. We should watch for each other.

This is the greatest country in this world. It's no way, nowhere in the whole world is freedom like this. God bless America.

I appreciate your listening, and thank you very much. God bless you.

[APPLAUSE]