Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our 13th year of the First Person program. Our first person today is Mr. Frank Liebermann, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2012 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person. And I'm very happy to let you know that we have with us today Mr. Louis Smith right here in the front row. Thank you, Louis.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here with this museum. Our program will continue until mid-August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Frank Liebermann will share with us his first-person account of his experience as a survivor and his time during the Holocaust and post-- and during the war itself. He will do that for about 40 minutes. And if we have time at the end of the program, there'll be an opportunity for you to ask Frank some questions. The life story of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Frank is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. And we begin with this photograph of Frank Liebermann. He was born in Gleiwitz, Germany, which is now in Poland, in 1929. He was the only child of Hans and Lotte Liebermann. On the left, we see Hans Liebermann. And on the right, we see Lotte and her infant son, Frank.

Both of Frank's parents' families had lived in this part of Germany, which now is part of Poland, for several generations. Frank is pictured here with his paternal grandparents, Bernhard and Jenny Liebermann. Hitler came to power in 1933. And when Frank began school in 1935, Jewish students were separated from the non-Jewish students. And fear of antisemitic attacks became frequent. We see here Frank's first grade class on the first day of school. And I want you to notice this-- the cones they are holding contain sweets to make school sweet. Frank is in the second row, the fourth from the right right there is Frank.

In 1936, Frank's father was no longer able to practice medicine as a result of anti-Jewish laws. In 1938, the family tried to obtain visas to come to the United States. Hans traveled first and Frank and his mother followed a few months later, in October of 1938. Here, we see Frank's mother's ticket for the ship they took to the United States.

The Liebermann family settled in Ohio. And Frank went on to graduate from Western Reserve, now Case Western Reserve University in 1950 with a degree in chemistry. After graduating from college in 1950, Frank started a long and successful career in the textile industry in New York City. And that same year, he married Marianne, his wife of nearly 61 years-- 62 years almost.

Frank would move-- would work in textile manufacturing until 1992, when he and Marianne moved to the Washington, DC area to be closer to their children. Frank would last three months in retirement before going into the travel business, which he continues today, specializing in Europe and US travel, including Alaska.

Frank and Marianne have three children, two daughters, and a son. Their daughters, Nancy and Joan, live in this area. And their son, Jerry, is in Seattle. They have five grandchildren, with the youngest about to turn 21. As Frank notes, three of them are now gainfully employed. One of them is a teaching assistant in Holland and getting a master's degree in modern European history, motivated by the family's history. Another is a teacher in New York City. And the third is with legal aid here in Washington, DC. And the two youngest grandchildren are both college seniors. And I'm sure the hope is they will be gainfully employed in the not too distant future as well.

Frank volunteers with the museum's visitor services, where you will find him Thursday mornings. As part of his responsibilities, he speaks with various groups visiting the museum. He has also spoken to wounded veterans at the recently-closed Walter Reed Hospital. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our first person, Mr. Frank Liebermann.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Welcome, welcome, welcome. Hi. OK. Frank, thank you so much for joining us and for your willingness to be our first person today. We've got just an hour. So we should just start right away, I think.

It's my pleasure.

Thank you.

And certainly is ours. You told me that your earliest memories start in 1934, when you were about five years of age. You also said at that time that, all in all, it was a good time for your parents. Tell us why that was so and what you can about your family and your community in Gleiwitz in those very early years of your life.

We lived in a town of about 120,000 people. My father was an ENT surgeon-- Ear, Nose, Throat. And around that time, I remember, we got a major luxury of a mini convertible, which got us out of the city. We lived in a combination apartment, which was an office in front and a three-bedroom area in the back. And the living room in the daytime became a consulting room, my dad's office.

And we did-- the car permitted us to visit my parents' parents. One was about half an hour in one direction. And my mother's family was about an hour to the west. So I remember the car kind of got us out of town. And those were days when a lot of the transportation in town was still done by horse, horse and wagon. And I'm quoted quite frequently on one of my first trips of looking at some cows and making the comment, gee, what funny-looking horses.

And Frank, didn't a couple of your uncles drive motorcycles too?

Yes, added many gray hairs to my grandma. That was my mother's family.

Tell us a little bit about your mother's family. They had celebrated the 100th anniversary of their wholesale leather business and tannery in 1933. This had gone back to-- oh, we still have a portrait of the founder of the business.

From 1833?

Yes. It was called EE Eugler. And they basically survived through good times and bad. They managed to go through the starvation of World War I by bartering with farmers. And they were therefore convinced that whatever happened is going to blow over. And things will get back to normal.

And before we turn to the events that would lead to you departing, a couple more things about your early years-- one of the family pastimes that I think is always interesting to know about is hunting mushrooms. Tell us about that.

Well, that's an art and-- both an art and a science.

Not a pastime, an art and a science.

Because there are quite a few edible mushrooms. We're beginning to see some of them now coming from various European areas in your specialized supermarkets. But we used to go into the forest. And everybody would pick whatever they found. And at the end, everything would be put on a table and would be reviewed one by one to make sure that it wasn't poisonous. And any member of the family had veto power. And nobody ever got sick. But some of them are delicious. And you just can't buy them.

Frank, you started school in 1935, attending a public school, and said that for you, recess was a dangerous time. Will you tell us about that?

At that time, everybody had to leave the building. The boys were on one side, the girls were on the other. We try to navigate in the middle. And it was obviously the most uncomfortable-- there were teachers and supervisors around. But you couldn't-- it was just dangerous. And people were beaten up and hurt at various times. And this led to the fact that after school, we got out about five minutes early.

The Jewish kids were told they could leave five minutes early.

No, it's-- we had three rooms for the first three grades and within another school. And basically, we generally got there after everybody else had gone in. And we left early, that there wouldn't be any attacks.

So essentially, to get a head-start on the bullies.

Yeah.

Frank, in 1936, circumstances for your parents turned more ominous and became more difficult, if not dangerous. Tell us what was significant about 1936 for your family.

After World War II, there was a Crimean War.

After World War I, right.

I mean, after World War I. I'm sorry.

No, no, no.

There was a Crimean War fought in the area of mostly what was then Poland. And Poland was constructed partly with territory from Russia, partly from Germany. And there were various populations who were vulnerable because they belong to other ethnic groups so that the peace treaty of 1921 gave protection to minorities until 1936-- and that was for 15 years-- to allow resettlement. Most of Germany had Hitler's policy go into effect very early when civil rights were taken away in 1933. But in Upper Silesia, which was covered by the treaty, things stayed relatively stable until 1936.

Once that treaty ended, though.

Once it was ended, things changed radically. They started posting the StÃ¼rmer, which was a propaganda paper, at every street corner. Windows were broken of merchants. My father started getting an SA. Those were the hoods, which originally were used by Hitler. They were stationed at the bottom of the entrance to the apartment house, inquiring where anybody was going, and threatening them with employment and all kinds of reprisals so that it became clear that my father couldn't make a living. He also lost his hospital privileges.

Again, they just said, Jews can't practice in these hospitals any longer.

Correct.

Frank, in 1936, that same year, your mother took a trip to Israel. Tell us about that.

Well, she and her two brothers basically went to explore where we could eventually go. So she came back with a very negative report on Israel because a doctor-- Israel at that time already had one doctor for every 100 people, which basically means that to survive, you had to become a farmer and join a kibbutz. You couldn't make a living. So that pretty much eliminated-- my father loved what he was doing. And that pretty much eliminated that possibility.

Later that same year, I think in July, the family took a trip together. And that's when the treaty expired, when you returned. And one of the things that happened, besides your father losing his privileges and the other restrictions-- your family, your mother's family's business really began to suffer very badly. And you were telling me about documentation of the slide or the decline in their business because of these repressive actions.

Well, I saw the papers, which, by the way, are now with the museum. It started at about 100,000 marks. I mean, the value of money was totally different. Same thing-- in 1938, you bought a car for about $750, just to give an idea.

Puts it in perspective.

And this-- the business went down from 1933 to 1938, when it was confiscated, from about 100,000 to about 20,000.

In a span of five years.

Yes.

Frank, during that same period, as your parents are thinking about what their options are, your mother goes to Israel, they said that you have to take swimming lessons. You need to learn to swim. Say something about that.

Shortly before the end of that treaty, which was, I think, in July, my father said, look, you've got to take a swim test by June. So we're arranging for lessons at the-- there was one city swimming pool. And finally, I didn't want-- I was still a little bit afraid of doing it without-- you originally learn with the cork belts. And I didn't want to give it up.

And I finally-- my grandfather gave me an ultimatum. He said, I'm going to stand here until you do it, which meant basically swimming for 20 minutes so that you could get through any emergency. And it turned out to be not too hard so that I managed to do it for an hour.

But the motivation was because you were leaving.

The fact that we may take an-- we might take an ocean voyage. And it's important that you know how to swim. That was--

In case the ship sinks.

--still one of my favorite recreations.

When your father lost his ability to-- hospital privileges, then really lost his practice, how was he able to make ends meet at that point to keep the family intact?

Pretty much from whatever savings he had and the fact that you basically lived very prudently. And we started looking-- I mean, we were fortunate that we looked for any possibilities. And by the way, the world was closing rapidly in the '30s. You may see the propaganda exhibit here on this floor.

The Germans not only mobilized their own population, but they also convinced the world that they had a noble cause. And countries were closing their possibilities right and left. In fact, the Swiss invented the J on your passport to make sure that they don't get any Jewish people who are trying to escape.

Frank, your family did not keep a kosher kitchen, yet all the meat you purchased was from kosher butchers. Tell us about that.

We sat-- lived in a small town. The Jewish population was probably about 2,000. Some people were Orthodox and kosher. And the only way that they could survive was if everybody bought from the kosher butcher. So the community took that as a given. You've got to give it-- you've got to support him. And we only ate kosher meat, just to support the community.

Frank, your family would endure and try to make things-- ends meet, try to get by between 1936. And then in January 1938, your father made a trip to the United States that would make it possible for him to come to the US permanently in June of that year. Tell us about his trip in January of '38 and the events that led up to his departure the following June.

Well, he took the trip in January and was through my grandfather, who was a genealogist, who used to go to local cemeteries and courthouses to look up family history. I have a family tree that goes to-- back to about the early 1700s. And in fact, one of the Euglers, which was a family name, married a Gratz, who eventually started-- emigrated to Philadelphia, and started Gratz College, and was one of the financiers of the revolution.

So my father went to the Philadelphia Archives to see if there are any relatives available and found out that Rebecca Gratz never married, and her brother moved west, meaning Louisville. And there, the family somehow got lost. And that turned out to be a dead end. But there was a relative in New York.

And he's looking for someone to really sponsor him, right? Yes.

Yes. At that time, you had to have an affidavit from an American citizen that the family would not be on welfare for a year. This was during the height of the Depression in 1938, was the second dip of the Depression. In other words, it got better in '37. In '38, it got worse again. And it was very hard to find anybody. But he came back with an affidavit. And we were able to get a number, which put us on the American quota.

And the affidavit he got, was that from Charlie Marcus?

Yes.

Would you tell us a little bit about Charlie Marcus?

Ah, Charlie Marcus is-- was a son-in-law of my grandfather's father, who came to him in 1905 and said, look, I'm in some financial trouble. I need $5,000, which was about 15,000 marks, for one week.

A big sum of money in those days.

It was a big sum of money.

After the week, he used that money to come to the United States. It almost put the business in bankruptcy. It survived, but that was always a sore point. And they would not have come to him if the circumstances were dire. But my father went to him. At the time, he was-- the son of this person was a vice president of Bendix Aviation and gave us the affidavit, which permitted us, eventually, to get the visa.

And in order to get the visas, there's-- you have to share with us the story of Fraulein Schmidt.

Unfortunately, when times are rough, you find a lot of corruption. When we got our number, when he came back, which was in February, nothing happened. And we were waiting on pins and needles. My father called a friend in Berlin and said, what can I do to kind of-- we use the term follow up.

Said, well, the consul has a secretary, Fraulein Schmidt. Why don't you get her a nice box of candy? Which he promptly delivered in April. And another month went by. And he called up again, nothing's happening. He said, well, did you put 100 marks into the box of candy? And my father, who was a very straight and narrow man, couldn't think of that. But he went on and put 100 marks in.

And I think two weeks later, we got a call to come to Berlin to the embassy to have a physical. And we actually got our visas the end of June. And my father took the next boat and left my mother and me behind because all bank accounts were frozen. You could take out 10 marks, which is $2.50.

The only way that you could take any money-- and we lived on that-- was by taking the cheapest first class ticket and got a very-- which permitted you to get a good spending allowance on the ship. He lived on that until we arrived. At that time, I think he had a furnished room for $5 a week while he was studying for state boards in Ohio, for which he had signed up in January so that he had a little bit of a heads-up when we did arrive.

Frank, before we continue on with your father's journey to the US and then yours, when he got the-- when you got the visas, he immediately took the business office he had and put it up for sale, I believe.

No. The way you-- a long-term lease--

That's right.

--in Europe requires you to give a landlord a mortgage. In other words, it's like a big security deposit. So when he canceled the lease, he had the mortgage principal transferred to his bank account--

And that prompted--

--from the lord.

And that prompted a visit from the Gestapo, right?

Somebody at the mortgage bank called the Gestapo that a large amount of money was being transferred out of the account in his name. And two Gestapo officers came to his office and said, you're under arrest. Said, for what? I understand you withdraw so and so much money from your bank account. Where is it? What did you do with it?

So he said, I transferred it to my account, which, by the way, is frozen. Because all bank accounts were frozen, which means that you could only take out what were deemed your living expenses. So he said, prove it. We have evidence otherwise. So my father picked up the phone and was fortunate that he reached the-- his bank officer.