

Thursday, May 9, 2013

1:00 p.m. – 2:12 p.m.

**UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MUSEUM**  
***FIRST PERSON SERIES***  
**IRENE WEISS**

REMOTE CART

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CART Services Provided by:  
Christine Slezosky, CBC, CCP  
Home Team Captions  
1001 L Street NW, Suite 105  
Washington, DC 20001  
202-669-4214  
855-669-4214 (toll-free)  
[info@hometeamcaptions.com](mailto:info@hometeamcaptions.com)



**ROUGH DRAFT TRANSCRIPT**  
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>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson, and I am the host of the museum's public program *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. This is our 14th year of *First Person*. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Irene Weiss, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2013 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*.

*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 at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. The museum's website, [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Irene Weiss will share with us her *First Person* account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If we have time towards the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask Irene a few questions. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Irene is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Irene Weiss was born in Botragy, Czechoslovakia on November 21, 1930. The arrow on this map of Czechoslovakia indicates the general location of Botragy.

Irene's father Meyer owned a lumberyard and her mother cared

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for Irene and her five siblings. In this photograph, Irene is at the lower left with two of her sisters and cousins.

When Nazi Germany took over and divided Czechoslovakia, Botragy fell under Hungarian rule. Irene and her siblings could not attend school, and her father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, was conscripted into forced labor for six months in 1942. The Fogels were moved into the Munkacs ghetto, where they lived in a brick factory. The arrow points to Munkacs.

In May 1944, Irene and her family were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The arrow points to Auschwitz. Irene and her sister, Serena, were selected for forced labor, then were forcibly evacuated in January 1945 to other camps in Germany. Fortunately the liberation by the Soviet Army of the Neustadt-Glewe camp, indicated by the second arrow, where Irene and Serena worked near the end of the war, left the girls unguarded, and they were able to make their way to Prague to look for relatives. Of their immediate family, only Irene and Serena survived the war.

In 1947, the girls and their Aunt Rose, who had been with them throughout their time in the camps, were able to immigrate to New York. This photograph shows them upon their arrival in the United States.

Irene met and married Marty Weiss in 1949. They moved to Virginia in 1953, where Irene lives today. Irene earned a degree in education from American University and taught English as a Second Language in the Fairfax County, Virginia, public school system. She taught middle school students from many countries.

Irene's husband Marty passed away in January of this year. Marty, who was 93, was a combat veteran of the Second World War, seeing action in North

Africa, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe. He had a long and distinguished career as a geologist with the federal government serving at both NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the U.S. Geological Survey. Irene and Marty were married for 63 years.

Irene and Marty have three children and four grandchildren.

Their son Philip is a family practice physician in upstate New York. Their daughter Lesley is Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs for NCSJ, a nonprofit organization that advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic states and Eurasia. Their son Ron is an administrative judge in Washington, D.C.

Lesley was recently appointed by President Obama to be the chair of a U.S. commission that preserves, protects, and memorializes cemeteries, monuments, and other cultural heritage sites in Europe associated with American citizens. And just two weeks ago she went to Warsaw, Poland, as one of four delegates named by the President to represent the United States at a commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. I'm pleased to let you know that both Ron and Lesley are here with us today. If you wouldn't mind just rising, showing people you're here.

[Applause]

Thank you. Irene became a volunteer for this museum two years ago, and this is her second time speaking as part of the *First Person* program. In January she spoke to the Foreign Diplomatic Corps at the museum as part of a commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day and the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. There were some 50 foreign diplomats in attendance.

With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Irene Weiss.

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[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Irene, thank you so much for joining us today, for your willingness to be our *First Person*. There is so much for you to tell us, and we have just less than an hour for you to do it. So it's a big challenge. So we better start I think right away.

You describe for me the time for you and your family in Czechoslovakia, before World War II and the Holocaust, as a time of hard work but also a good life, one in which there was a sense of safety. Spend just a few moments telling us about that life before the war.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, yes, we were a family of six children. And our parents concentrated on raising the children, protecting the children, educating the children. Our father worked, mother worked very hard. In those days women didn't have any modern equipment to help them. So it was work from morning till night. It was a normal family. We observed religious events. We went to school. I was 13 years old when all of this ended. We played in the neighborhood with other children. It was just a normal life of daily concerns and daily chores.

>> Bill Benson: How large was the Jewish population in the community where you lived?

>> Irene Weiss: It was a very small farming town where we lived. The Jewish population were just 10 families. The total number with the children and so on were about 100 persons.

>> Bill Benson: About 10% of the population.

>> Irene Weiss: About 10%.

>> Bill Benson: You had said to me that there really -- to your knowledge, there wasn't much anti-Semitism at that time. Will you say a little more about that?

>> Irene Weiss: There wasn't. My father was born there. His father was born there. My father was 47 years old when it all ended. He grew up with the other people in the town.

Knew him well as a young man and so on. He had a sister who also grew up there. They were part of the community, the general community. It really was a peaceful life with the neighbors until suddenly things changed.

>> Bill Benson: Before we move to the changes that occurred, tell us a little bit about your Aunt Rose and Pearl. You're going to talk more about them later. Just tell us a little about who they were.

>> Irene Weiss: Rose and Pearl were my mother's sisters. They were in their mid 20's. They lived just a few kilometers away from us. They were the daughters of my grandfather. They were also -- my grandfather's entire family, they were also deported to Auschwitz, about the day before we were, in April. By sheer chance we actually met up with them there, which I will tell you later. Saved my life and my sister's life.

They were wonderful aunts. When we were younger, they played with us. They carried us around. They read to us. We were very attached to them. So when we met up with them in Auschwitz later, it really changed our situation, our emotional situation.

>> Bill Benson: And I know you'll tell us much more about that.

By the time Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, launching World War II, your community already experienced profound change. Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany, and earlier in 1939 your community has been occupied by Hungarians, which immediately changed your lives. Tell us what you can about that time under Hungarian rule.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. As you say, the Hungarian government was allied with Nazi Germany. So they proceeded to carry out the same kind of discrimination against Jews as the Germans

did. They initiated laws to restrict the freedoms of Jews. Right away Jewish children couldn't go to the schools. I had been sent -- I had to drop out of the school I was attending. All our freedoms were taken away. We could not travel by train. We could not own property. My father's business was confiscated. We had to wear a yellow star. In general, we were exposed to any kind of humiliation and mistreatment by those who chose to do that because the law was on their side and not on our side. We were victimized. It was approved by the law.

>> Bill Benson: With your father losing his business, how was the family able to make ends meet, to be able to put food on the table?

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, it became very difficult. He stayed at home doing chores around the house. Everybody had livestock to help feed the families. He attended to that. He was no longer a businessman.

Money was very tight. None of it was spent. We lived off all the things we got from the farmers. Everything was cooked and baked for the family. Nothing was bought besides maybe salt and occasional sugar.

>> Bill Benson: The most essential.

>> Irene Weiss: The most essential.

>> Bill Benson: You mentioned you could no longer go to the school you were in. You ended up, I believe, going to school in another community. Tell us about that.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, in my little town school ended at sixth grade. My parents --

>> Bill Benson: Period.

>> Irene Weiss: Period. No one else. The farming children, children of the farmers, that was ok because they needed to be working in the fields. But my parents looked to find a way to

continue our education. So after sixth grade I was sent to the bigger city nearby, a large city called Munkacs. I commuted by train to middle school until we were told to wear the yellow star, at which point it was not safe for me to be in a different community with a yellow star.

>> Bill Benson: You were commuting by yourself, I believe.

>> Irene Weiss: I was commuting by train. Often I was the only one getting on the train in my town because it was a one-track town, and often the train stopped just for me.

>> Bill Benson: Just for you.

>> Irene Weiss: To go elsewhere, to be in the train and in a new place with a yellow star was much too dangerous. Besides, the law said that I could no longer attend Hungarian schools.

>> Bill Benson: I think it was around that time that you had a frightening experience on the train with your father.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, indeed. Things became very dangerous. My father and I were on the train to go to the nearby town, just about a five-minute ride. He was resting where he was identifiable as being a Jewish man. We were almost at our station back home when a bunch of young men -- I call them hoodlums -- came up to him and began to talk among themselves about how they were going to throw him off the train. They laughed. They carried on. They spoke rudely to him and telling each other how, well, let's do it and how about starting to do it. I was 13 years old and terrified, wondering whether we'll make it home safely, whether the train will stop and we can get off before this stuff would actually happen. It so happened that it was a short ride and we got off very frightened and shaken.

We heard of other stories about a Jewish man being thrown off trains, anywhere en route. It became open season, a free-for-all. We had no rights. Our enemies had all the rights. The police stood by and did nothing. It was fun and games to



humiliate Jewish men and to pick fights with them knowing that they would be winning and nobody would --

>> Bill Benson: You had no recourse. There was nothing you could do.

>> Irene Weiss: No recourse. Could not bring a suit or complain because you were not a citizen by this time. Even if you were born in the country, your citizenship was denied. There was absolutely no protection. It's an extremely frightening feeling when the law doesn't protect you and that others have access to humiliate you and to mistreat you and to cause you bodily harm. It's more frightening to deal with other human beings than it is with the law.

>> Bill Benson: And in this case the law explicitly wasn't on your side.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. It was open and acknowledged that we had no rights.

>> Bill Benson: In 1942 -- and would continue for several years under those circumstances; and in 1942 your father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, were forced by the Hungarians to do forced labor for the military. Tell us about your father's conscription into the forced labor battalion and what that meant for your family.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, we heard that the men, the young men who were conscripted and taken away, were not soldiers. Jewish men were not given guns. They were taken to the front and used as mine sweeping and other kinds of most dangerous exposure.

>> Bill Benson: By mine sweeping, literally that means walking into a minefield.

>> Irene Weiss: Right. Right. They were expendable. So it was very frightening to know that he may never come back. And, in fact, most of the young men never came back from those early days. They were killed.

My father was allowed to come back, because apparently at that point they still returned men who had large families. Since he had six children, he did come

back and stayed home, again without his business, until we were then deported to Auschwitz in 1944.

>> Bill Benson: But he was gone for a full six months, I believe.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, he was.

>> Bill Benson: Because you were so young, do you remember both him leaving and then coming back after those six months?

>> Irene Weiss: Oh, yes, definitely. When he left, of course, again, the feeling of helplessness. You don't hear from him. You don't know how he's being treated.

>> Bill Benson: You might not even know if he was alive.

>> Irene Weiss: No, we didn't, until he showed up again. Strange for our children. He had a little beard when he left. And when he came back, he didn't have the beard. I remember how we stared at him and barely recognized him. He was like a new person. But very grateful he came back in one piece.

>> Bill Benson: And as bad as things were under the Hungarians, they would turn profoundly, and tragically, so much worse, when the Germans came in 1944. That was after two more years between your father's forced conscription to when the Germans came. Things changed immediately. Tell us about that time.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, yes. The Hungarian government did make many restrictions and took away our rights and liberties and property, but they did not expel their Jewish citizens. But when the Germans occupied Hungary, they were now in charge. They were well prepared for the expulsion of Jews.

>> Bill Benson: Why did the Germans all of a sudden come in and occupy the land of what had been their ally?

>> Irene Weiss: Right. By 1944, the war had turned, and it was quite obvious to the Hungarian government and everyone that Germany would be losing the war. And Hungary decided that they were on the wrong side and decided to pull out of the alliance. And at this point Germany actually invaded Hungary and occupied Hungary. So they were in complete charge.

Even though they were losing the war and was late, just about a year or so before they actually lost the war, the first job, their first task, was to collect the Jewish population and deport them into Germany, Poland, and the various concentration camps. Actually, for a government that was -- that needed its resources, its soldiers, railroads and all for the war purposes, instead concentrated on using all of those facilities to gather up and deport their Jewish population.

>> Bill Benson: Especially, as you said, at this point we were losing the war. So they were in sort of -- from a military standpoint, they were in desperate straits.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. It was the first job. Actually in every country in Europe that they occupied, that was the first job. They became very efficient doing that. They sent in their henchmen who were in charge, immediately requisitioned the necessary trains. They organized the Jewish population, gathered them into larger groups. Within one month of Germany occupying our area, one month, we were all in ghettos and gathering places. They pulled us out of our homes. We had to abandon all that we had and leave our home with a suitcase each. We were transported into these large gathering areas, which were usually a factory of some kind, a brick factory in this case where they had barracks and facilities.

So in no time we find ourselves out of generations of living in the same town and in the same house, abandoning our property and our home. We were

gathered into crowded conditions, into a ghetto.

>> Bill Benson: Thousands being brought into this brick factory.

>> Irene Weiss: Thousands from all the regions, from all the smaller towns into this larger city.

We had no idea of our fate. How long will we be there? Will we come back? What is their plan?

When you consider a family with six children ranging in age from about 7 to 17, you find yourself out of your home and your routine and dependent on whatever food and necessities they will give you. It's terrifying. Looking back, my parents should have been the most frightened and agonized about what was going on because they could not protect their children.

>> Bill Benson: No. There's six of you and your parents. When they began, when the Germans began, deporting the Jews out of Hungary, the numbers are staggering. If I remember correctly, approximately -- I think something like 450,000 Jews were gathered as you described into ghettos and over about a six-week period, I believe, deported to concentration and death camps.

So for you, after being in this ghetto, you wouldn't be there long before you were sent with your family to Auschwitz.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. We were there about four weeks. And the conditions deteriorated. It was terrible. You have people of all kinds, older people, sick people, pregnant women, young babies, all kinds of human conditions. It was terrible. The persecution there was intense. They would call out the men in the middle of the night or in the middle of the day for interrogation, demanding valuables. There would be beatings. People would come back bloody.

There was, for example -- well, they made an announcement that affected me, which said all girls under 16 should report to a certain place to have their hair shaved or their fathers would be beaten and punished. So without a moment's notice, I ran to the tent where this was happening, and they shaved my hair. I had long, blonde braids. Somehow it didn't occur to me that I should be worried about that because I was thinking of my father and how that might affect him. I came back to where my mother was, and she was appalled. She gave me a kerchief to put on my head. And from then on, that's what -- I covered my head.

As it happens, later when we arrived in Auschwitz, it had a profound effect on my survival there, which I'll talk about.

>> Bill Benson: Ok. 16 years old at that point.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, no. I'm 13.

>> Bill Benson: 13. With your head shaved. It was girls under 16 who had their heads shaved. So you're forced to go to Auschwitz. I know it's very hard to find the words to describe that, but tell us about going there and what happened.

>> Irene Weiss: After four weeks living in crowded, humiliating conditions -- we had no bath. We had no change of clothes. We had very little food. We were no longer the human beings that we were before. You can imagine the condition when that many civilians of all types are not given proper care or facilities.

So then one day, a long cattle train arrived on the premises of this brick factory which had a railroad siding for their own -- their own purposes. We were herded into the train.

Again, no one ever told us what the next step is. In other words,

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no communication because we did not matter. We were like cattle. Herd them in. Herd them into the train. Lock the door from the outside. Everybody is sitting on the floor of the train, men and women separate, by their own choice for modesty sake. A big bucket put in the center of the train for the toilet. You're locked in. It's dark. No one tells you where you're going or why this is happening to you. You have children. You can't give them any answers. You don't have any answers. So it's very -- very, very frightening. We never heard of Auschwitz, but we did hear of rumors that the Jews in Poland were killed in large groups by German Nazi soldiers who would gather them into the forest areas and shoot them and bury them in large graves there. So that rumor is what we thought might be our fate, that when the trains stop, we might find ourselves in the forest in Poland being met by a firing squad.

In the train, my father would look out a small window and look to see the direction, trying to see if he can find the direction the train was going. At one point he said that, yes, he recognized the area that the train was switching towards Poland. So without anybody telling us any more, we felt that our fate was sealed. Great anxiety and fear.

After about two days and two nights, the train stopped. Began looking out the small window. My father was assessing the situation. He said this looks like there are barracks here, guard towers, fences. He saw men in prison uniforms. It seemed like it was some kind of a work camp. He passed it on to the people in the car, cattle car. Everybody calmed down and felt a little more secure.

>> Bill Benson: Because it wasn't the forest where you thought you would be shot to death.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. So it might seem -- it seemed to everyone that, well, if it's a labor camp, a work camp, perhaps we can survive this trial also. So people were much more calm than they had been on the trip up to that point.

So soon the trains were opened from the outside. There were great deal of shouting and yelling, in German, to get out, to get out, quickly get out and leave everything behind. So everybody was jumping out the train. All our belongings -- as soon as we were out of the train, all our belongings were dumped out on the platform. We saw trucks on the platform. These prisoners were picking up all the belongings and throwing them on the trucks.

The shock of realizing that not only were we going to lose the last little bit of belongings, but all of those precious papers, identification papers that showed who you were, where you came from, where you belonged. Without papers, you are nothing. There is no record of your existence. And that, too, was thrown out with everything else. So it hits you that you're nothing, and no one will ever account for you here. There is no possibility that you belong anywhere.

So to imagine such a feeling is definitely a sense of desperation.

>> Bill Benson: So you are forced off the train. It's you and your parents and your five siblings.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. We were forced off. Thousands of people came out of a long train. The platform was totally filled. Of course, the shouting continued about men to one side and women and children to the other side. So my father and 16-year-old brother joined the group of men to the one side. We had no idea that we'll never see them again. And the women and children and elderly kept moving up the platform. Pretty soon we didn't see the front of the platform, what was going on at the front. But pretty soon we were up in the front and found ourselves facing about a dozen Nazi soldiers with dogs and weapons. One in particular was separating people at great speed, without much deliberation. Almost immediately he

separated Serena, my 17-year-old sister, and sent her to one side. It seemed like other young adults were also going, being sent to that side. And then quickly he motioned my mother and two little brothers to another side. We became aware that women and children and elderly seemed to be going on that side. And then there was still -- my younger sister and I were left holding hands. He was looking at us. And not being able to apparently figure out my age, because my head was shaved and I was wearing a kerchief and heavy coat and looked more like a young woman perhaps, so in a matter of six seconds, he separated the two of us and sent me going towards the young adults.

>> Bill Benson: Where Serena was?

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. And sent her to where my mother and younger children went. I froze there. I didn't move. I just stood there leaning towards where my little sister went, hoping to see that she caught up with our mother. I couldn't see. There were barriers there. I was desperately worried that she will not catch up with them. There were crowds moving. She was but 12 years old. I was just beside myself with worry that she will be alone. I suddenly forgot that I, too, was alone at this point. After standing there for a moment, I was motioned to go towards the young adults.

To digress a little bit, about 25 years after I was liberated and I was in this country, I came across a book called -- it was an album. It seems that the German soldiers were taking pictures, photographs, of the particular train arrival on which we were and taking pictures of all the steps of processing the new arrivals, getting off the train, being separated, and going in all the different directions. Those photographs were kept by a Nazi soldier. It was found after liberation by a survivor. And eventually it was put into an album, which is here in the museum gift shop. It's called "The Auschwitz Album." I had a chance to



get a hold of that album and looking at it, I recognized myself exactly in that position when I was standing there alone looking toward the direction where my little sister went. And it seems that -- I have no idea -- I had no idea that I was being photographed, but I was captured in that position. That photograph is in this museum as a visitor might come out of the cattle car. It is on the wall as you come out of the cattle car. It shows a group of women being separated. And it shows me in one corner already having been separated, but standing there for a few seconds while I was frozen and not moving. It was a most astonishing discovery that there is a record of that particular instance.

>> Bill Benson: That was the day they happened to be photographing.

>> Irene Weiss: That was the day. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And this book that Irene showed me, there's just no words for it. It's staggering to look at this methodical record of each of those steps that you described, and others, "The Auschwitz Album," the story of the transport. The picture, as you said, is here in the museum.

So now you're separated. You're with the young adults. The other adults and Serena. Take us from there.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. I was running after her because she had already moved way up a road with all the young adults. I was calling her name and yelling for her to wait for me. She finally heard me and turned around. The first thing she said to me, why didn't you go with mom? And I was so very upset and so concerned about my little sister I didn't even answer her. I just kept telling her, Edit will never catch up with our mom, she's going to be alone. She was in this big mob. There were so many people. I kept telling her I tried to see but I couldn't see. Anyway, I was terribly, terribly upset about her idea that she will be alone in this mob of

people.

We were taken to be processed in what turned out to be a bathhouse where everyone was shaved, our clothes were taken, disinfected, prison clothes, one-size-fits-all kind of clothes. Our shoes were taken. We were now altered completely and no longer recognizable.

At this point I had experienced my second very upsetting trauma. In going through stages of this processing, when it came to having the hair shaved for the women, I had skipped the stage because I had already had my hair shaved. But my sister had to stay and go through that. And so by the time -- I got my prison clothes and all. I was finished ahead of her and marched out the door, where I saw hundreds of other women looking exactly the same, with hair shaved, same kind of long, gray dress. I knew that when my sister comes out the door, I will not recognize her, because suddenly it was just impossible to see who was who. So I now became terrified that I won't meet up with her.

So you have people, a close, united family, torn apart stage by stage. And all of a sudden, we're divided up into parts. Here my little sister is somewhere out there. I am alone and unable to connect with my sister. My father and brother are somewhere else. It was just very confusing. For me, at the age of 13, terrifying.

I was pushed out the door. I stood by the door. I didn't move. However, I became aware of the fact that those who had already come out the door, the women, were being counted off and marched off towards barracks. So I kept falling back and back, not to be taken. And yelling her name every time the door opened. I would yell her name. She wasn't coming. She wasn't coming.

So eventually a young woman from our town who came out the

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door and heard me calling her name and recognized the name and my voice, she said to me that I know Serena is still back there, and I'll stay with you and help you to recognize her when she comes out. So that's what happened. Between the two of us, mainly she helped me when Serena came out so that we were then marched off together. Suddenly my heart stopped beating a little slower.

>> Bill Benson: And then amazingly you would connect with your aunts. How did that happen?

>> Bill Benson: Yes. My mother's two sisters. My grandfather's, grandmother's family. They were brought to Auschwitz the day before. We didn't know that exactly. But when the Hungarian transports were arriving in Auschwitz, the trains were coming from all the gathering areas, day and night. Literally day and night, the trains, one after another. Many times there were two trains on the platform at the same time. As we said before, it was the only large Jewish group remaining in occupied Europe. The war was ending with the Germans, and they were rushing to bring this last group and do the final solution, the genocide, on this remaining group.

So when we all arrived, they really didn't have immediate work assignments or barrack assignments. There was a great rush of crowds and people. So most of the time we were to sit outside on the ground, in between the barracks from morning till night, just waiting to be let in for the night. And then the next day, again, waiting until they decided who goes where. So while sitting there on the ground, stepping over people, one of my aunts literally stepped over us and recognized us.

>> Bill Benson: Totally happenstance.

>> Irene Weiss: Totally an amazing thing, because there were thousands of people in every

direction sitting around, standing around.

That really, for me, meant as if I had my mother back now. Because even though they were only in their mid 20's, to me they were Aunt Rose and Aunt Pearl, spoke to them in a more represented way. Because they scooped us up. Managed to arrange that when we were led into the barracks at night, that we ended up in the same barracks.

So for me, you know, the terror of being alone, of being a nonperson, just the frightening feelings of mobs of pretty hostile groups -- you know, everybody looking out for themselves, everybody upset. It was just so terrifying. All of a sudden I had someone to cling to and someone to whom I meant something.

>> Bill Benson: Family, adults, people that you had grown up with. Respected. Loved.

>> Irene Weiss: Right. And although they didn't have much in a way to protect me, I didn't know the full extent of what they could not do for me. But emotionally they did everything for me.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, there's so much more for you to tell us. I'm worried about our time.

>> Irene Weiss: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us, once you were selected to stay alive to do labor, tell us what you were forced to do.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Eventually they figured out what to do with all of these many women. Some were sent out of Auschwitz to other camps in Germany. We were assigned, about 1,000 women were selected and assigned to do work within Auschwitz. First we were tattooed. We were told that we would be marched off to a certain area. Auschwitz had many camps within camps, separated by electric wire. So they marched us off to several camps in

an area where the clothing and belongings that came out of the many, many trains and the clothing and belongings that came out of the crematoriums were brought here for storage and for the women, the prisoners, to work with, to separate and to categorize and to get ready for shipment back to Germany. Because they utilized everything that was brought by the trains. So we became aware of the fact --

>> Bill Benson: This was with your two aunts and Serena, too.

>> Irene Weiss: All four of us. Here we had the urgent problem of making sure that the four of us are never separated, which was a daily problem, especially for me. The selections continued daily by the Germans to select out young children like me who they missed at the platform upon arrival and the sick and older ones. So the selection continued. And I was always vulnerable.

>> Bill Benson: So it was a constant risk.

>> Irene Weiss: A constant risk. So to stay together, the four of us continued an even more difficult task.

We became aware of this place -- one electrical fence separated from crematorium and gas chamber. We understood now what people told us when we arrived. When we first arrived, we asked the prisoners who had come before us -- the first thing we asked them is, when do we all get to see our parents? And our families? They very crudely pointed to some chimneys in the distance. And they said, "That is where your parents went when you arrived and they were dead within a half-hour of arrival." And we looked at them like there was something wrong with these people. We said to each other, how could they say such things? We quickly dismissed it. There were some strange things going on here that people could talk like that. But now that we were next-door to the crematorium and

the gas chambers, not only did we see the daily entering of huge crowds of people through that gate and the chimneys belching smoke and fire, but we understood that those people who told us those things were right.

Our barracks faced a road that came from the train platform, passing the window of our barrack, and go into the gate that opened up for them where the gas chambers and crematoriums were. So there was often a backup, because the killing went on day and night, but the trains kept coming day and night. So there was a backup of actually -- of killing. So often these huge crowds of women, children, and elderly would sit down on the road in front of our window waiting for their turn.

>> Bill Benson: Right in front of where you were working.

>> Irene Weiss: Right in front of where we were working. They saw us, and probably took some comfort from seeing us. And they would try -- they would call out to us like, where are you from? What's your name? We couldn't tell them anything, because the gate would open soon and they were totally trapped. There was nothing to be said. The gate would open. They would enter. And within a half-hour you would see the belching of the fire and smoke even harder.

We also worked at night in this place because there was so much stuff to sort out. There were mountains of eyeglasses and mountains of shoes and mountains of toothbrushes and toothpaste, books even, baby carriages, pots and pans, suitcases, clothing.

Everything that people brought with them, the stuff was literally as high as the roof of the barrack. Between two barracks as high as the roof. We would work at the base of the mountain and just keep pulling stuff out and working day and night. We

realized that these are people who are dead. When you see mountains of baby carriages and baby shoes and all kinds of household things, you know that these people will never see -- never be alive to see this again.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, you would stay in those circumstances for eight extraordinarily long months. But in January of 1945, you're still with your two aunts and your sister. The Soviets are approaching. So it's the Germans, the Nazis, decided to shut down Auschwitz and move you out and you were forced on a Death March. In the time we have, tell us about where you went with your aunts and your sister and what happened before your liberation.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Yes. Well, we heard the war approaching by gunfire and noises of weapons. We thought, ok, two things, either we'll be liberated or they'll kill us all just -- all just in time. Because we were nothing to them. We didn't think they would leave the evidence. We expected to be killed.

Instead, for some strange reason that the Germans had, they decided to evacuate the camp and forced us out. January, in the snow, in very cold weather, onto the roads to literally go on a Death March, deeper into Germany. Some people thought of staying, hiding. My two aunts discussed it with others. Should we try to hide, try to go? The decision was very difficult to make because, again, we thought that those who stay, they'll probably burn the barracks down with the people in them. And even though it's cold and we're too weak to march, the gate is open, we're going out of here, so let's just take that chance.

Well, neither decision was the right one. However, in retrospect, those who stayed and hid had a chance to be liberated within two weeks. The Russian Army approached there. Those of us who left, thousands of us, huge numbers died because to march without proper clothing and shoes in January, through Poland into Germany.

**ROUGH DRAFT TRANSCRIPT  
NOT A VERBATIM RECORD**

>> Bill Benson: And an even especially brutal winter. More than normal.

>> Irene Weiss: It was one of the coldest winters, we found out later. We were heavily guarded. People who couldn't walk, or even held onto someone, were shot. The roadside was filled with dead bodies. They didn't have us stop and rest. Certainly we had no food or water. We didn't have proper clothing. It was literally a Death March.

Occasionally -- well, they marched us into another camp, a very huge camp called Ravensbruck, which was overflowing with people from other camps that they brought there. So, again, we had to actually sleep outside the first few nights. There was no room for anyone. There was chaos. I remember sleeping the first night outside. I found a newspaper flying around in the wind. I took the newspaper and I covered myself. I remember vividly that I fell asleep, and it felt so good and warm and comforting to sleep out there. They woke me up, my sister. I realize now I was beginning to freeze. Because it was just too calm and peaceful.

So, anyway, they took us out of this place because it was mobbed with people. They put us in open cattle cars for a short trip further. Unimaginably cruel, because it snowed on us and the wind whipped in. We were freezing. Our mouths were so dry from dehydration. You know, if it snowed, everybody opened their mouth to the sky to catch any of it. My aunt, Pearl, the train stopped at one point. These were steam engines. The engine was being filled with water for running the train. We heard this gushing of water. We were so dehydrated. She stood up with a cup and dangled it out of the open cattle car yelling, you know, water. There was a guard -- there was a guard with a gun and a dog in each cattle car. And this guard, a woman guard, she got up and began to beat her, viciously beat her down to the ground. Made her head bleed. Just pounced on her cruelly.

**ROUGH DRAFT TRANSCRIPT  
NOT A VERBATIM RECORD**



>> Bill Benson: And what she had done was ask for water.

>> Irene Weiss: Asked for water. So nobody did that again. We didn't get the water.

>> Bill Benson: So you would end up at a camp called Neustadt-Glewe. That would be the last camp, I believe. I know we're going to wrap up soon, but if you can bear with us, folks.

Tell us about your two aunts, you and Serena.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. We ended up in the small camp. Again, the overcrowding and the chaos and the lack of even the kind of rations or assistance that we had elsewhere had broken down. In this camp we actually starved. There were no rations. There was practically nothing. And in addition to that, because of the heavy crowding, we became tremendously infested with lice. And that led to Typhoid, Typhus. People began to die from that.

We were on the floor. Always on the floor. There were no barracks, not even the bunk type of things we had at some other places. My Aunt Pearl became sick with Typhus and was delirious, fell on the floor. People were stepping over her. She was bumping into people and not knowing where she was because of the high fever. We decided to put her in this small infirmary that was on the premises. At least she had a bunk to lie on. Serena and I kept going, looking in the window. We couldn't enter it. She would motion, come to the window and indicate to us that she was getting better. But one day a truck arrived, and we saw all the sick people from the infirmary being loaded onto the truck, including my Aunt Pearl. So we became aware of what this meant. They didn't have a killing facility in this place, so they sent the truck to collect the sick and take them to where there was a killing facility, which was Ravensbruck.

>> Bill Benson: And you knew that's what happened?

>> Irene Weiss: We knew that's what happened. They took her, with many others. And, of

course, she never came back.

Later my other Aunt, Rose, also became feverish, very high fever, again on the floor. And, again, being trampled and so on. Although we knew what was going on at the infirmary, we had no choice. With her permission, we put her into that little infirmary. But we were vigilant, Serena and I were watching for the trucks.

They didn't do anything for the sick there. It was just a better place to be off the floor. So we snatched her out in a few days, just brought her back to where we were on the floor. Somehow her fever broke, and she pulled through.

During this chaotic time, as I say, the selection continued. I mean, here the war was practically upon us, the German Army. The Germans had their hands full.

>> Bill Benson: You mean the Soviets were almost there?

>> Irene Weiss: The Soviets were almost there. And yet they had the organization enough to come and continue the killing and select people.

One day we were outdoors being counted. That, too, was a routine that was a torturous experience because we would be thrown out early in the morning, wait for hours to be counted. So during this counting, selections continued, because they could take a good look at people.

Serena was very, very, very run down, very thin, emaciated. We had pretty much full-fledge starving here. So they pulled her out in the selection. I said to the German doing that -- I said, "I am her sister." He said, "ok, you can go, too." So they locked us in a room, waiting for the truck to come with many others who looked like us. I was so terrified of being alone without my sister and my aunt being very sick and may not make it.

Again, the terror of being alone, I suppose because I was 13, seemed to be so much stronger in me than in my sister. I could not abide, imagine, the possibility of fending for myself in this situation. It was not possible.

>> Bill Benson: So you were going to go wherever she went.

>> Irene Weiss: We both knew where we were going. I knew. But rather than staying alone, I wanted to go with her. They said fine.

So we were locked in this room and waiting for the truck.

Because of the chaos of the war approaching, the truck didn't arrive. So by the end of the day somebody pushed the door, and it gave. And one by one we sort of sneaked out and went back to our original barrack and nobody seemed to notice. The confusion was quite large.

So because the truck didn't arrive, we had this chance to survive. We headed back to our room, where my aunt was still, and the others. They all started, you know, yelling "the children are back."

>> Bill Benson: Meaning you and Serena.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Even that was strange because nobody ever called us children. That was very dangerous to do. Children had to die. Jewish children had to die. And they did by the millions. They were subject to the genocide that the Germans perpetrated against the Jews. So their plan was to kill the young. There will not be another generation. And kill their mothers with them, reducing the disturbance that might cause to separate them. Besides the young women who will not bear children. You kill the old and the sick that you have no use for and you use up the young adults in slave labor, and soon they'll all be gone and genocide will be complete. Keep that up for several years. It was, I must say, very successful, because by the end, they managed to kill six million, either in gas chambers or outright, you know, using

them up in hard labor, starvation, and mistreatment or shooting.

>> Bill Benson: So, amazingly, because of the truck not showing, you were able to walk out and you, your sister, and your Aunt Rose were able to survive and liberation came shortly after that.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. And liberation came shortly after that. Yes. So by this time, we had been at this place en route and in this place for five months, which was an incredibly difficult place because we were starving. Not hungry but starving. So when finally -- the Russian front and Russian Army did approach the area, the German guards disappeared from their guard towers and cautiously watched to see if that was for real or whether they will come back. Nobody moved. Nobody left the place. Nobody tried to open the gate. Because we were unsure of the situation. We heard war noises. But mainly we felt that we weren't sure that they're not coming back.

So one day somebody tried the gate, and it was opened. We never did see the Russian soldiers. They remained in the towns nearby. We remained until cautiously we exited through the gate and then found a town by the very same name as our camp, Neustadt-Glewe. Put my Aunt Rose into the hospital there because she was very, very sick. We stayed. We didn't leave. We waited for her.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, we're going to close the program in just a moment. Obviously, we just scratched the surface, and we could spend, you know, the rest of the day and beyond hearing about more that Irene would share with us, including all that happened from that point forward that we don't get to hear about. When we finish in a moment, because we didn't have time for questions and answers, Irene is going to step off the stage over here, and if any of you want to come up and meet her, ask a question, whatever, please feel free to do that.

I want to thank all of you for being here, invite you back for another *First Person* program. We will run through the middle of August this year and then resume in 2014. I want to thank all of you. You've just been a wonderful audience. Thank you.

It's our tradition here at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. So I will turn back to Irene to close the program.

>> Irene Weiss: Ok. So we have heard it said that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. So how can we avoid becoming bystanders in our time? We have to recognize hate speech and propaganda when it starts and remember where it can lead if good people look away and don't speak out.

[Applause]

Thank you very much.

[The presentation ended 2:12 p.m.]