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UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
***FIRST PERSON* SERIES**
BOB BEHR

REMOTE CART

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>> Bill Benson: 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. We are in our 14th year of *First Person*. Our *First Person* today is Mr. Bob Behr 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 of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. The Museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Bob Behr will share with us his *First Person* account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If we have time towards the end of our program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask Bob a few questions. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Bob is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

Bob Behr was born in Germany, which is highlighted on this map, March 1, 1922. He celebrated his 91st birthday this past March. He lived his first 20 years of his life in the city of Berlin, which is circled on this map of Germany. In 1942, Bob was

arrested because he was Jewish and sent to Czechoslovakia. He was interned with thousands of other Jews in Theresienstadt also called Terezin. The arrow on this map of Czechoslovakia points to Theresienstadt.

Later in 1944, Bob was sent to a satellite camp where he worked to rebuild the SS general headquarters destroyed by the allies. By 1945 the red Army reached Theresienstadt and Bob was liberated on May 5, 1945.

Today Bob and his wife, Marie Therese, live in the Washington, D.C. area. After serving with the U.S. Army from 1947 to 1952, Bob worked here in Washington, D.C. until he went to work for the U.S. Air Force as an intelligence officer, living in Germany from 1954 to 1961. Bob continued his civilian career with the Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio until his retirement in 1988. After leaving the Air Force, Bob, who had earned a Master's degree in modern European history, was a college professor teaching European history with a special emphasis on World War II and the Holocaust.

In 2000, Bob and Marie Therese moved here to be close to their daughter, Deborah, in Rockville, which is just outside of Washington. They have two daughters and four grandchildren. Besides Bob's passion for history, he stays in shape by walking three miles daily.

Bob is a volunteer at the museum's Visitors' Service. In addition, he is frequently called upon to use his fluency in German and French to translate documents, and mostly he translates documents that had been captured from the Germans.

You will find him here on Friday afternoons.

With that I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mr. Bob Behr.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Bob, welcome and thank you so much for your willingness to be with us today as our *First Person*. I had a number of times the opportunity to talk with you. I know that if we had the time, we could spend all afternoon and beyond with as much as you have to share with us. But we have an hour, so we'll try to get through as much of what Bob has to tell us in that time.

Bob, let's begin today with you telling us about your early years, what those years were like that preceded Kristallnacht or Night of the Broken Glass.

>> Bob Behr: Well, you can actually break this down into two distinct dates. As all of you know, I'm sure you do, Hitler came to power on the 30th of January 1933. That means I was already 11 years old. So you have a period that before Hitler and then after Hitler came to power. And that is, of course, a tremendous amount of difference.

I was a kid. I grew up -- my first memory of the Holocaust was my father. My father was like the kids today. The kids today, in my house anyway, the TV goes whether anybody watches or not, but it goes. And so my father in those days listened to the radio day in, day out. He was an MD; so when he was not dealing with patients, he listened to the radio.

Why I do mention this? Because my first memory of the

Holocaust, I heard a guy screaming over the radio about Jewish conspiracy. Jews had caused the loss of World War I. So what do you think when you're a kid and you hear things and don't understand it? I was always close to my mother. I went to my mother and said, "Mom, what the hell is the Jewish conspiracy?" And my mother said, "Don't worry about it. It's not something you have to worry about. If your father wants to listen to this, let him. You don't worry. We live in a free country. We live in a democracy. You have nothing to worry about." So what do you do? "When you hear this, you don't worry." So I didn't.

And then suddenly on one day, ladies and gentlemen, on one miserable, lousy day, the 30th of January 1933, everything changed. Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Hitler became the most powerful person in the German republic which was heretofore a democracy. And everything else faded. So my life from one day to the next changed. The people who were yelling about Jewish conspiracy, and the Jews are misgivings, those people now were in power, could implement all the threats they had made against Jews. Now they could do it.

And ladies and gentlemen, in answer to his question, what was it before, it radically changed. I will have a hard time describing to you in the time I have how life changed in the city of Berlin.

How many of you have been to Berlin? I want some hands. High. Quite a few. It's now a beautiful city. It was not a beautiful city then. But it was our home. And suddenly in this city which we used to like and which we grew up in, resented us, disliked us, persecuted us. How did that manifest itself? Signs all over the place. "Jews not

allowed." "Jews not wanted." "Jews not admitted here." It was going on and on.

The Nazis are masters of propaganda. And the propaganda was raining on the German people, including the city of Berlin. And every day there was something bad about Jews. I could spend hours with you and give you examples, but unfortunately I don't have that much time. Just think about your hometown, wherever you are from, and the things you like to do: play ball, go to a movie, go to a restaurant. Can't do anything anymore. That's the way it was with us.

My favorite sport was swimming. I loved to swim. So when you swim, you need two things, right? You need a pool and you need water. And what the Germans did, they integrated the third element, a pool, water, and a big sign, "Jews not allowed here." We don't want Jews in the swimming pool. And so the screws were getting tighter and tighter. It became a city in which instead of loving it, we feared it. We were afraid. It dribbled on us every day. I mean, the Nazis were determined to eradicate Jewish life.

Before I go to the next question, I want to explain one thing to you. And I'm going to be quite honest. If I hurt your feelings, forgive me. I was born Jewish. My parents were Jewish. But that was a name on a piece of paper only. What we really were, my parents especially -- I never had any brothers and sisters. My mother took one look at me when I was born and said enough is enough, and we're not going to have another child looking like him. So that was the end of that one.

In any case, my parents were German. My father was an officer in World War I, decorated with the Iron Cross, First Class, and was enormously proud of it.

We were Germans when we were Jewish. Keep this in mind. It hurts you because the very people to whom you want to belong says we don't want you. You can be a Jew, that's fine. But we don't want you.

In 1934, in September, the Nazis had a big rally. Remember, in 1933 they assumed power. A year later they had that rally. They took over our citizenship. From one moment to the next we were no longer German citizens. We were residents. They didn't kick us out. We were a resident, meaning we were allowed to stay there. But we could not participate in German life anymore. We were not allowed.

It goes all across the board. My father was a doctor. He was no longer allowed to treat German patients. He was no longer allowed to collect money from Social Security -- from the insurance companies. It was going on. So you get the idea of what life was like. And what that does, it makes you afraid.

Now, you can think, how did they know that you were a Jew? Good question. First of all, which most of you guys may not know, a German birth certificate has a line item in it which says religion. It was mandatory to be filled out. So the Germans had it on a silver platter. They knew exactly who were Jewish, who were not. So it became a life of anxiety. It became a life of fear.

I'm being very honest with you. We were afraid because the punishment was drastic every time you did something wrong, including crossing the street! If a German crossed the street the wrong way, you got a warning. If we did and they found out you were a Jew, they beat you up for it. Could you do something about it? Not really. You

could try to get out, which wasn't easy. While President Roosevelt wasn't exactly helpful to get out.

So I am hoping in the time that I have to give you a picture of an idea what life was like from complete freedom to total oppression in everyday life.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, before we turn to Kristallnacht in November of 1938, you were sent to boarding school in Sweden. Tell us a little bit about that. Why?

>> Bob Behr: Ok. Number one, the bad news. My parents got divorced. I stayed with my mother. And my mother was a person who accomplished things which almost hard -- you'll see later on what she did. But right now the question, she found out there was a boarding school in Sweden.

Now, for those of you who are very good in geography, let me just tell you, Sweden was a neutral country, nothing to do with anti-Semitism, a free country. It had good money. It had good people. And what I mean by good money is valuable money. Money is judged by the ability to exchange it into other currency.

So my mother found out that there was a boarding school. And lo and behold, I told you before that woman was amazing, she accomplished things, she got me enrolled. There were about 40 of us, all German-Jewish kids, and we were admitted to the school. Suddenly we were out of Germany. It was 1936, 1937. We were in a free country, could say what we wanted, could do what we wanted, as long as it was within the law. No more Nazis, no more chicanery, no more hatred, nothing.

So end of story? No! Because as far as this is concerned, it

lasted six months. When my mother, six months later, went to the bank and said, "I need to exchange”-- I don't remember, 300 marks into Swedish currency, the clerk says, “No more. We do not exchange money anymore for tuition purposes. We have other problems and no money.”

So what happened to the school? It closed. Six months later we were called together and told that the school was closed. But, the Director said, "I got good news for you. We found Swedish families who are willing to take you in." There were 40 of us. “You can stay in Sweden. You don't have to go back to Germany. All we need from you is a letter from your parents that they have no objections if you stay here.” As far as I know, 38 people, parents, happily signed it, affidavit, that their kids could stay in Sweden and two didn't. I'll give you about five seconds to think who the second was. But my mother, the energetic, wonderful woman, says, “You're coming home. I don't want you to stay here. I need you to come home.”

Behind the statement, the long story which I don't want to bother you because I'm from a pretty dysfunctional family -- well, it's true. You may say I am too, but you don't really know that yet. Give me a chance. By the time I am finished, you may say he's dysfunctional, too. In any case, I had to come back and that was the end of that Swedish adventure.

>> Bill Benson: November 10, 1938, was the night of what's known as Kristallnacht or Night of the Broken Glass. On that night vicious attacks took place against Jews, their businesses, their homes, all over Germany. You were 16 at that time. Hundreds of synagogues were

burned. You were 16. How did that personally affect you and your family?

>> Bob Behr: Well, in a way, psychologically it did, physically it didn't. I don't know if you all know the background of Kristallnacht or what happened. I don't have an opportunity to go into the thing. But, I remember that my mother told me she received a phone call from somebody. I have no idea who. And that person told my mother don't let your son get out of the house tomorrow, which was the night, 8th or 9th of November, 1938. And she didn't. For what we did not experience was any physical harm to come. Was there physical harm? You bet ya there was. Not only did they set the synagogues on fire, they took the Jewish holy scripture and threw them on the floor and made the Germans walk across it. I told you before, we were not very Jewish, but that's above and beyond the call of righteousness.

So my biological father was arrested. 40,000 Jews were arrested in Berlin alone, eeny, meeny, miny, moe, up to the concentration camps. All in revenge for the assassination in Paris. So Kristallnacht hurt us very much.

My father was in a concentration camp. The only way you could get out is from the concentration camp, on a ship, and off someplace, another country. I never saw him again. And that was it. He did get out. I found that out. He made his way to America and died here in the time after liberation in 1945. When I finally made it to America, while I was on the ship, he died. So I literally never saw him again after he was arrested on Kristallnacht.

Life after this was terrible. There are things which most people don't even know. After the assassination in Paris, the burning of the synagogues and the

looting, there was additional things. The Germans did two things. Number one, they went to the big insurance companies who had insured the synagogues and the Jewish stores and told these owners of the insurance companies, “You will pay, you will reimburse the damage, but” -- they added – “not to the owner, the Jew. You will give it to the government.” So if there was a 50,000 or 100,000 mark indemnity to be paid, then the Germans took it and the owner got nothing, lost his insurance money in addition.

Furthermore, and that's where we came in -- we didn't have a store. My father was a doctor. But they levied a fine on us, on the entire Jewish community in Germany, of one billion. And, please, that's not a mistake. That's a B, one billion marks which the Jews had to collect and turn over to the government.

How many Jews were there? The German population at the time was 65 million people. Jews were 500,000. You do the math. That's not even 10%. But they made us pay. We had to sell my mother's jewelry to even make our quota, to do that. So that gives you a feeling of the German idea of revenge. They took it and we had to hold still and take it.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, you would continue living in Berlin with your mother until 1942 when you were arrested. Tell us a little bit about that time between Kristallnacht, after your mother had to sell the jewelry and help pay for the fine and when you were arrested in 1942. During that several-year window, briefly, what was life like for you then?

>> Bob Behr: Ok. Remember I told you guys that I came back from Sweden because my mother wouldn't sign the letter. And so I came back, and we're now talking about 1937, 19 --

early 1938, before Kristallnacht. The Germans had established a forced labor arrangement. That's not slave labor. I want to be sure. It's not slave labor. Forced labor meant you had to go and work where the Germans want you to work. And you could not, for example, say I don't feel well and so forth.

I had to go when I came back -- they established a special office for this. For the Berlin Jewish young people and middle-aged people had to go every morning and get work assignments. This was our manual labor. It was difficult. For example, I got a job carrying coal. They had central heating all over the city, and they had to have coal. So we went on a truck and brought the coal. And then you had to bring it downstairs in the basement where they had the stove. Or you had to take bricks up on a construction site.

You know, ladies and gentlemen, when I look at your faces, you're all too young to remember. But in those days they didn't have all the cranes they have today. It was manual labor that brought those bricks up there. And that was my job. It was very difficult.

Furthermore, the office where we had to report to was approximately 12 kilometers from where we were. How did you get there? You say street car. We could only allow certain street cars. Never more than two Jews. They wouldn't let us in. To tell you how I got there, that's the way I got there. I went on my bicycle. Rain or shine, I bicycled the 12 kilometers down in the morning and the 12 kilometers back. I call myself lucky that I was young enough and strong enough to do all the work which I had to do.

Just as an aside, after the war, the new government, democratic

republic, Germany, a rich country, they want to reimburse us for all the suffering we've done. They came up with the enormous and intelligent decision, we're going to give them $5 a day for every day they suffered. I suffered 12 years. Multiply this by 365 days times five marks and you think I would get all the money. No. But they taxed that, too. Anyway. So we are not the only ones here who are suffering from taxes. They made us. So that gives you some idea how the time was between our arrests. It was work, work, work.

Let me just add one thing. We were no longer allowed entertainment. We couldn't go to a movie, couldn't go to the theater, couldn't go to the music hall, couldn't go dancing. So what do you do? You're 17, 18 years old. You want to live. You want to be young. But you couldn't do it anymore because they wouldn't let you in. So we solved that. We had house parties and well organized. We took our parents and fanned them out. Family A, parents go to family B, and the kids from family B come to family A apartment and we had house parties. No supervision because we had written off our parents. And I'm not going to give you any details what we did. But I tell you, we compensated a little bit for all the suffering we had there. Well, I'm not going to go into any more details.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, during that time, what did your mother do?

>> Bob Behr: My mother didn't do anything. She was a housewife. She never had a job. She never -- she didn't go to the university or do anything. She was just there practically -- my mother had one hobby, playing Bridge. And she found four or five people who also loved to play Bridge. They had a little club where they met and played Bridge. But she really was an ordinary housewife: cleaning, cooking, whatever else belongs, washing and so forth.

>> Bill Benson: She got remarried somewhere in that time though, didn't she?

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. Let me see now. That saved our life. In the Bridge playing she was popular with another doctor who had the name of Hamburger, the way you eat it but that was also his name. And those two met. I don't know. I wasn't there. I rely on my mother's story. He asked her to marry my mother. And my mother came to me and said, “Should I marry him?” And I said, “You know, you shouldn't ask me that. I mean, that's a decision you will have to make.” And she said, “Well.”

And then one day he met the three of us. And he repeated his offer to marry. And he said something, ladies and gentlemen, that saved my life, otherwise I wouldn't be here today. He said, "Lily, marry me. I am a veteran of World War I. And it's a good possibility that the Nazis will not punish the veterans, the German veterans, of World War I."

To make a long story short, they did marry. And it was true, as you will hear later, that our lives, the life of my father, stepfather, and mother, were saved because of his service. I hate to speculate what would have happened to us if she had not married him. I think I wouldn't be sitting here today. You may have had somebody else but not me because we would have been gone to the east and to the gas chambers like they started in 1941 to kill us.

>> Bill Benson: At one point during that period you were forced out of your house. You lost your house.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. How many of you live in an apartment? I want to see some hands. Ok.

You guys who own a house, just ignore what I'm telling you now, this story. Because we lived in an apartment, on the third floor, without an elevator. But that's where we lived for many years.

In Berlin -- it's in the western part of Berlin which later on became the British sector after the war. In 1938, just after Kristallnacht, the Germans passed the law that Jewish renters no longer have protection from being expired or so forth unless they didn't pay the rent. So my mother got a letter. It says, "Dear Mrs. Behr, the Christian residents of this building have informed us" -- that's the owner -- "have informed us that they no longer wish to live under the same roof as Jews. You are requested to move out as quickly as possible but no later than" -- and gave a date. What do you do with a letter like this? Very clever. We tried to ignore it. It will go away. We had paid our rent. We had lived there for years. We liked it. We had never hurt anybody. We had never harmed anybody. So we ignored it.

Guess what we did? What we got? We got a second letter. A little rougher in tone. "Get the hell out of here, of our building, you Jews. We don't want you here." And now they forced us. They forced us. We had to quit. And by that time the Nazis had the law that Jews went someplace else but only with other Jews. Couldn't go to other Christian household or apartment building. So that was our thing. We had to move out for no other reason that your religion was not acceptable to the Christian people who lived in the building.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, you would continue under those circumstances until July of 1942 when

you, your mother, and your stepfather, now, were arrested and you were sent to Theresienstadt. Tell us about your arrest and then going to Theresienstadt.

>> Bob Behr: I would love to tell you about the arrest. Now, just follow me. We start off with a lady who my mother knew. I think they went to school together. I'm not even sure. But they were friends, not very close friends, but friends. And that lady came to my mother in July or the end of June 1942 and said to my mother, "Lily" -- which is my mother's first name – "I need to get out of Germany. I can no longer stand it here. I don't know what's going to happen. I am not married. I have no relatives. I'm all alone. I want to get out. Can you help me?" And my mother, making a long story very short now, my mother knew a priest in the area. If you ever go back to your home and look at a map of Germany, you'll see that Constance is a spitting stone from the Swiss border. My mother said, "Go see him. I'll give you his name. I can't help you. You got to work that out yourself. But here is his name and address. Maybe at night he will bring you across the border to Switzerland and you'll be out of Germany and free." So yes, she got the name. Yes, she met the priest. Yes, he did it. He brought her across the border.

Now, you think that's a happy end story? Watch. So what does that woman do? She writes a postcard to my mother in Berlin, which, number one is already a mistake with the Nazis censoring everything but she writes a postcard and says, "Lily, guess where I am? I'm sitting in Bern" -- the capital of Switzerland – "having a real cup of coffee, enjoying the sunshine." It was the month of July. And then she writes a P.S., "Without you, I wouldn't be sitting here today."

Now, I want you to all quickly put your mind, you are now in a Gestapo office. You censor the mail. You read that postcard. What conclusions do you draw? There's only one, that the woman she is writing the card to is the one who helped her get out of Germany, which was punishable. End of story? No. The next day, or two days later, I don't remember that, we were arrested. The Gestapo came, took us in. And that's how it started.

We were not under the normal evacuation. Because, remember, my stepfather was a veteran. So the evacuation to the east, to the gas chambers had already started in 1941. We're now talking July of 1942. But we were not sent via -- if it hadn't been for the postcard, I don't know how much longer we could have stayed. But the bottom line is that postcard existed, and the Nazis took appropriate action to arrest us. We were shipped to Theresienstadt rather than sent east and killed.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about Theresienstadt, once you got there.

>> Bob Behr: Ok. Two minutes of background. Those of you who are historians or interested in history, there was such a thing as the Austria-Hungarian Monarchy. In 1918, when the Austrians lost the war, same as the Germans, the Treaty of Versailles rearranged all of Europe. And among other things, this area where Theresienstadt is located became the Czech Republic. Before that it was Austria. Austria was gone. The empire. And now the Czech owned that. A lot of history involved. I don't want to bore you with it. But in 1939, Hitler marched into Czechoslovakia and took it over. Czechoslovakia ceased to exist.

Theresienstadt was a Garrison city under the Czech Republic.

Suddenly the Germans moved in. The Czechs had no more Army. So the city, with the exception of the civilian dependents who lived there, the city was empty and that they decide we're going to make a concentration camp, build a wall around it. A bus going to Prague two or three times a week. You can visit that place. Only about 35, 40 minutes by bus.

So the city was empty. And the Germans decided. So they went to the Czech Jews in Prague and say here is your city, you're going to be imprisoned up there. And the Czech ran the camp. The German Jews -- those who they didn't send to the east were sent there as well. Mostly old people or special people like ours, veterans.

Now, let me just give you some idea of the complexity of that thing. Very briefly, there were 4,000 dependents living there in little tiny houses, still exist. Everything is still there. The Germans kicked those guys out. And now they had an empty city. And in that city where they had 4,000, give or take a few, people living up there which were kicked out, they stuffed 60,000 people. You cannot imagine how miserable life was. It was so overcrowded.

How many of you like sometimes in your day or in your weeks a moment of privacy? I want to see your hands. Thank you. That's great. Because that's exactly how I felt. Except in Theresienstadt there was no escaping from people. You were never alone! You were never alone. We slept 40 people in one room, no straw, no beds, not even a nail on the wall to hang something. It was so overcrowded that people kept dying of diseases.

My first job in this miserable place was to carry dead bodies.

Again, let me throw out to you that even though I personally didn't have the pleasure to know you, that when you had a death in your family, it was a solemn occasion: a wake, a viewing, something more appropriate. This was nothing. The people died from diseases, sanitation. We all looked like I don't know what, because the Nazis wanted that we look like something from daily unrest and so forth.

So my first job was to collect dead bodies. I told you. What does that mean? We had to throw them on a cart. One on the head, one on the shoulders, one on the feet, shoop, throw them on a cart, preferably naked because the clothing was valuable.

And I will tell you something. After you do this for a while instead of honoring the dead, respecting them, all you care are about how heavy they are and how high you have to throw them. You know what that does to your soul, your equilibrium, what that does to your mental ability when you become so raw, so disinterested from reality that you don't even think about things like honoring a dead person? Nothing.

So life in Theresienstadt was blinded. It did have something which no other concentration camp had. It had a cultural level. They had musicians up there. They had poets up there. They had artists up there. And the Nazis let them practice before they sent them to the gas chamber. I mean, this is a controversial type camp. The Germans called it “Hitler gave the Jews a city to do what they wanted.” Yeah, that's right. They didn't.

And the other little things, which are not well-known, the city was run by the Czech Jews and run very well. They had a mayor who was a Czech. He was the

one who was responsible. He was the one who interfaced with the Germans. Why I mention it is I have the greatest respect for the Czechs except for one thing. Those guys, being Czechs, blamed the German Jews for not having done enough to prevent Hitler coming to power. That, of course, in the eternal words of American slang is B.S. because it simply wasn't true. We didn't do anything. We couldn't have done. But the Czechs didn't care. They didn't care. They blamed us for the suffering they did because of Adolph Hitler and the loss of their country in March of 1939.

In 1943, the Germans realized that they had to empty the camp. It's no longer possible to have these hundreds and hundreds of people in the camp without any decent medical facilities, food, and so forth.

How many of you take a shower a day, practically? I want to see those hands. Ok. You're all very clean. Supposing I'm telling you that you cannot take any shower anymore, period! How would you feel after a week? I'll give it to you in one word. Dirty! Believe me. Trust me. You feel dirty. You feel sticky. You feel unhappy with yourself. But that's what they wanted us to be like. That's what they wanted us to be. And we did.

So by 1943, they began to empty the camp. They send 1,000 Jews, Czech, German Jews in a cattle car to Auschwitz or Birkenau and killed them. And I became very worried that my mother and my stepfather would be also -- they called it resettlement. Germans are great at finding names. Resettlement sounds innocent enough. I mean, this is very simple. You have a big hurricane up here. And then you resettle people because you have to rebuild the city first. But everybody in the camp knew that resettlement

meant death.

How did we know? We had no newspaper, no radio, no nothing. How did the camp know that the word resettlement equates to death? I'll tell you how. Very few German SS people there. Most of the guards who were guarding us were Czech whom the Germans hired to guard the camp. Now, that didn't mean these guys were in love with the Germans. But they got something to eat. They got money. They got a job. So they said, what the hell, I'm going to work for the Germans regardless of how I feel.

But the Germans also used those young guards to escort the trains from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. And, of course, it was Czechs saw the smoke, smelled the air, knew what happens at the ramp when they unloaded the poor people up there and made them line up, women here, children here, men over there and so forth. They saw all of that. And they didn't take long to figure that out. But they came back to Theresienstadt. Not liking the Germans, they told their buddies, the Czech Jews inside, don't you agree to resettlement because what that means, here it is. And they told them what they experienced when they escorted those trains to Auschwitz and smelled the air and saw the fire and so forth. So everybody in the camp knew.

Now, my own life was this. I was really worried. My mother was not in good health. My stepfather was not in good health. I was wondering what's going to happen. How am I going to protect them? I wasn't so much worried about myself. But I was worried about them.

Now, bear with me. New chapter. The war in 1943 had had

reached tremendous portions. Your grandfathers, the Air Force and the British were bombing the hell out of Berlin, day in and day out, at night the British, during the day the Americans. The reason I'm telling you this, because it comes together.

Among the buildings they destroyed was the building where the SS chief had his headquarters. Shoop, gone. Now, a four-star general got to have a headquarters. You would all agree. My God, the poor guy must have put his head someplace, his troops someplace. So they went to the German Army and said I need a new headquarters.

Why am I telling you this? Bear with me. Coming right around to it.

So, the Germans gave him a piece of land, which is now that little town of Wulkow which Bill mentioned. And they said this is where I want my headquarters. And the Nazis, who were supposed to build it for him, came to Theresienstadt. They said we need 250 volunteers to go there and build him that headquarters, among them carpenters, plumbers, unskilled labors which I was, and so forth. Then they added a sentence, and that's crucial. The sentence is, "If you volunteer to go there” -- because, among friends here, nobody ever wanted to go to the SS recommended. So nobody volunteered for nothing. If you have good English. So, in any case, they come and said, "If you will volunteer, we will not," quote/unquote, "resettle your parents, your relatives in the camp." And I bought that. I said if I don't do anything -- so I volunteered.

And now by the end of 1943, I was sent to that area to build that camp. I don't know how much you want me to talk about that.

>> Bill Benson: We're starting to get very close to the end. I want to be sure that you tell us a little bit about that and then, of course, about your liberation and about your parents.

>> Bob Behr: Ok. Well, I'm going to cut it short. I just want to tell you that in that labor camp up there in that sub-camp from Theresienstadt, that, ladies and gentlemen, was the first time since 1933, since January 1933, that I wanted to die. I had always told myself I'm not going to give those SOBs the satisfaction that I will die because I want to live until the world what happened once we're free. But now I gave up.

I don't have time to go into the hardship of that camp. But it was so bad that I got very sick. By 1944, I was very sick. I had something which is a vitamin deficiency disease, which is very ugly because you get big blotches over your body, the clothing sticks. You get a high temperature. I said: no more; I can't, time's up. If I go, I go.

And as I was standing and thinking that, I was one day -- this is a story. I want you to follow me. I was standing on the barbed wire fence on a Sunday looking out. We're now talking about the end of 1944 or it could have been January of 1945. I don't remember. And there was another prisoner with me. And what we saw was the following. We saw -- outside the camp was a highway. And on that highway we saw a track of Germans going from east to west.

Now, let me explain this to you. All during the war the Germans went from west to east, conquering Poland, Hungary, Russia. Now all of a sudden the same Germans went from east to west. I remember asking this guy, “Do you see this?” He said, “Yeah, of course I see this.” They looked about as miserable outside as we looked miserable

in the inside. And I asked him, "What do you make of this?" He said, "It's very simple. The Germans are fleeing from the Russians." The Russians after Stalingrad, the Battle of Stalingrad, began to win the war. And by now, by 1943, they had pushed the German Army so far west that the first Russians were entering the easternmost province of Germany which no longer exists. So I figured if the Russians are that close, that the Germans are already fleeing, well, maybe I can hang in a little bit longer. And I did. I survived. And we were returned to Theresienstadt. That camp was never finished because the Russian Army came.

We were returned. And we arrived there about February of 1945. My stepfather and my mother were still alive. For once the Nazis had kept their promise that they would not quote/unquote resettle them, and they were alive. And now it was February 1945. And on the 5th of May, the Russian Army came and we were free.

>> Bill Benson: When did you know you were free?

>> Bob Behr: Well, the guards vanished. The SS guards vanished. They were around all the time. And all of a sudden, shoop. They were never there. They saved themselves where they went. There was sort of a period of no-man's land. The Russians weren't here yet. The Germans were already gone. There were only the Czechs who were just as happy that the Nazis had left. Nobody knew. Who's going to feed us? Who's going to take care of us? I mean, the Nazis had everything organized. That organization went to hell in a hand basket because there wasn't anybody there to enforce it. But it wasn't very long and the Russians came and took over.

By the way, those combat troops, the Russians, were very good

to us. They were not raping women and stealing watches. The German word for watches, uhr. They would always say, “Uhr, uhr, uhr.” They wanted all of our watches. But we didn't have any watches anyway. They later took it when we get to Berlin.

Anyway, that's how it happened, the liberation.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember your sense when you finally said it's over, we're liberated?

>> Bob Behr: No. Because I don't have any word for that. I cannot other than platitudes to say how happy we were to be free. That is something you need -- there are two moments in this time period. First one was -- it began to sink in that Germany lost the war, the Nazis were gone, and we were free. And the second moment of that magnitude is when the ship went passed the Statue of Liberty. We cried so hard. We never thought we would experience it. After 12 years, to be sailing passed the Statue of Liberty into the New York Harbor is a moment you need to experience. Words cannot describe it. I don't care how good you are. It's just not there.

And so it was when we were liberated. Words cannot describe it, of things you'd been dreaming about, you were hoping about, you were praying about suddenly are there. I don't have the right words to bring this to you. But I'm sure you understand.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, before we close, I'm going to ask you two other things in the little time that we have. One is, with the war over, tell us how your mother and your stepfather were at that point. And then go forward real quickly, you finally pass the Statue of Liberty in February 1947. But just a few months later in November you're in the U.S. Army and you're

back in Germany. So tell us about that. That was remarkable.

>> Bob Behr: What was the first one?

>> Bill Benson: How your mom and stepfather were.

>> Bob Behr: They were very weak. Died shortly after the war, both of them. They survived, technically speaking survived. They went with me to Berlin, which is another story because the Nazis had occupied our apartment. We had to chase the people out. So I got them resettled back there. And I went off to America. Well, I wound up in Texas, in Dallas, Texas.

>> Bill Benson: With $10.

>> Bob Behr: With $10. Well, let me tell you how I got there. We arrived in New York. We were put up in the hotel. And the next day or two we were interviewed. And what I had done in the meantime, the distribution committee, which was a Jewish committee, had surveyed the Jewish communities all over the United States and said: how many of these refugees can you take? So when my time came to be interviewed, they asked me, “What do you want to do?” Adding immediately, "you cannot stay in New York." Yes, sir.

So anyway, “What options do I have?” And they looked at the list and said, “Well, you can either go to Dallas or you can go to Chicago. Where do you want to go?” I didn't have a blasted idea. We were cut off from everything, neither about Chicago nor about Dallas. But I figured out: let me see; if I go to Chicago, I got to live with gangsters. If I go to Dallas, I got to live with Cowboys. So that is the lesser of two evils. And guess what? I wound up in Dallas, 108-degree heat.

I don't know how many Texans are here. I don't want to hurt

anybody, too. But you are a caliber of your own.

[Laughter]

Whether you came from Europe, and suddenly these guys' life, 100 miles to a drive-in and 100 miles back. So think nothing of it. So it was different.

My biggest -- first of all, they got me a job. They got me a job in a ladies leather factory where they made handbags, belts. This is before Velcro. So in those days you had to glue things together. Why am I telling you this? Because in the middle of this damn factory was a kettle with glue which had to be stirred all the time so that the glue wouldn't get hard. Guess who did the stirring. So I smelled bad. I hated that job.

Then I came home and the land lady -- her name was Merrill. I'll never forget that. She could never distinguish the difference between Germany and France because she kept calling me "Frenchy." So I was Frenchy. I lived there. I said that's really not the life I was hoping for.

So her husband, Merrill's husband, worked in the oil fields. They only came home over the weekend. And what did he do? I don't know how to describe it very well. But those houses had a porch around the upper floor. You can go upstairs. That's where the bedrooms are and so forth. I rented a room up there. One day, shoop. The window broke. A rifle came pointing at me lying in bed and saying, "You, SOB, if you don't leave my wife alone, I'm going to get even with you." I had nothing to do with his wife, nothing other than she was my landlady and called me Frenchy. So I said the time has come to move.

So first of all, after I was finished in that ladies' handbag factory,

I got a job at Walgreens. Everybody here knows of Walgreens. Well, in those days they had counters. And you could have a cup of coffee or breakfast and so forth. The crucial moment came when one of those nice 60-year-old ladies with blue hair came in, sat down at the counter and said -- and I went up there. I said, "May I help you, ma'am?" "Yeah. Give me two eggs over easy, toast, coffee, and a glass of juice." “Yes, ma'am.” So I went to the manager. “What the hell are eggs over easy?” Nobody in Europe ate eggs over easy. They ate them sunny side up or they didn't eat any eggs. That was all I knew. So he explained to me what it was and how easy that is. So I served her. She calls me back and says, "You call that over easy?” They were hard as a rock because -- I said that's not for me either. I went to the military. I said I got to have a structured life. I got to have something to support my mental state. And I went to the Army. And I said, “Take me. I'm yours.”

[Laughter]

Anyway, in those days you didn't have to be a citizen. You could sign a Declaration of Intent, meaning if you signed this, that you would become a citizen as soon as you are eligible. And that's called a Declaration of Intent. That was enough for the Army to take me.

>> Bill Benson: And we're going to close in a moment. You would actually end up back in Germany and interrogating former Nazis.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: As part of the intelligence service. I wish we had the time to spend more time on everything that Bob has shared with us, that postwar experience in Germany, just very

powerful stuff. We'll just have to have you come back another time when we have Bob with us again.

>> Bob Behr: Or you can invite me and I'll come to you.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Better yet.

[Applause]

>> Bob Behr: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much.

>> Bill Benson: We didn't have time for questions and answers. But Bob is going to stay for a little while over here. If any of you would like to come and ask him a question, just shake his hand, give him a hug, whatever you want to do, please do it.

>> Bob Behr: Ok. Thank you.

[The presentation ended 2:06 p.m.]