Thursday, June 20, 2013

1:00-2:01 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: STEVEN FENVES

Held at:
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW
Washington, DC

(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 today. We are in our 14th year of First Person. Our First Person today is Mr. Steven Fenves, 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. And I'd like to let you know that today Mr. Louis Smith is with us. Louis?

[Applause]

Thank you, Louis. First Person is a series of weekly conversations in which survivors of the Holocaust 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 until mid August. Our museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Steve Fenves will share with us his First Person account of his experience as Holocaust survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows towards the end of our program, you will have an opportunity to ask Steve a few questions.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Steve is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. We begin with this portrait taken in 1940 or 1941 of Steve Fenves and his sister Estera. Steve was born on June 6, 1931 in Subotica, Yugoslavia.

The arrow on this map of Yugoslavia in 1933 points to Subotica. Steve's father Louis was the manager of the printing plant of a Hungarian language daily newspaper and would later become the editor of that same newspaper. His mother Claire was a graphic artist. In this photo we see Louis and Claire at a horse race in Subotica in the 1920s.

In this photo we see Steve and his family on an outing to the farm in the summer of 1940. In 1941 Germany attacked Yugoslavia and its ally Hungary occupied Steve's town. Life changed immediately for Steve and his family. Jews in Subotica were subjected to Hungarian racial laws which were modeled after those in Germany. From September 1940 to May 1944 Steve's family lived in one corner of their apartment.

In May 1944, Germany occupied Hungary and Hungarian occupied territories like Subotica. Soon after, Steve's father was deported to Auschwitz, while the rest of the family was forced into a ghetto in Subotica. At the end of June 1944 Steve and some of his family members were sent to another ghetto and then to Auschwitz. Here we see an aerial reconnaissance photo of Auschwitz Birkenau taken in September 1944 by the US Air Force. The arrow points to the barrack Steve was in from June to October 1944.

In October 1944, Steve was sent to another camp at Niederorschel. On April 1, 1945, Steve was sent on a death march to Buchenwald concentration

camp. Steve was liberated by the Americans on April 11. He was placed in a field hospital established at Buchenwald which is seen in this photo. Four months later, Steve returned to Subotica and was reunited with his father and sister, but his father died less than six months after returning to Subotica. Steve's mother perished at Auschwitz. Steve and his sister immigrated to the United States in 1950.

After arriving in the US in 1950, Steve was drafted into the United States Army in 1953. After his discharge he enrolled at the Champaign Urbana campus of the University of Illinois where he would eventually earn his PhD in engineering and begin a 42 year academic career in the computing field at the University of Illinois and later at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh. After retiring from Carnegie Mellon in 1999, Steve and his wife Norma, whom he married in 1955, moved to the Washington, DC area where he worked for 10 years at the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

Steve and Norma have four children. Gregory is Dean of the engineering school at the University of Texas at Austin. Carol works in the New York City Environmental Protection Agency, contracts office. Peter is a professor of humanities at Northwestern. And their youngest, Laura, is a human resources consultant in the Washington, DC area. Steve and Norma have seven grandchildren between the ages of 6 and 26. I'm happy Norma is here with Steve today. A little wave. There we go.

[Applause]

Steve first began speaking about his Holocaust experience in the late 1970s when he became the founding president of a Holocaust survivors' organization in Pittsburgh. Upon his second retirement from the National Institute of Standards and Technology in December 2009,

Steve became active with this museum. In addition to participating in the First Person program, he also volunteers with the museum's Visitor Services on Thursdays.

With that, I would like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Steven Fenves.

[Applause]

>> Steve Fenves: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: Steve, thank you so much for joining us today. It's a pleasure to have you here. You have so much to share with us in a very short period of time, one hour, so we'll start right away.

Let's begin, Steve, with the early years of your life. You were nearly 10 years old when the part of Yugoslavia where you lived was occupied by Hungary and your family's life would be forever changed. Before we turn to that time, tell us about your first few years, about your family, your life, what it was like before the war really hit to your community.

>> Steve Fenves: Well, I was raised in what I would call an upper middle class family, which in European terms meant that there was a maid, a cook, a chauffeur and a governess. That was how life worked in a dirt poor country like Yugoslavia. If you could afford a car, you certainly could afford supporting another family. I remember my closest friend's father drove around in this impossibly small Fiat, which they're again on the market, and he was considered selfish by the community, because he didn't support anyone else.

The governess was a very important person. We spent most of our time with her, because in the social setting of my parents, speaking absolutely fluent and correct, it was necessary.

>> Bill Benson: Your governess was from Germany?

>> Steve Fenves: Our governess was German, yes. It wasn't a particularly observant family. My parents attended services on high holidays, some Saturdays. I went to religious school two afternoons a week after the normal school . And on Saturday afternoons, since regular school ended at noon on Saturday, Saturday afternoon there was a youth service, which ended very promptly at 3:00. We made sure of that, because the matinees, the double header matinee started at 3:00. We all raced to the movies.

My sister and I didn't have to race as fast as the others because we had passed through the press booth; we didn't have to line up or anything. That was the life.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your father. You mentioned the newspaper.

>> Steve Fenves: All right.

>> Bill Benson: They'll adjust it from back there if you're having difficulty hearing. Thank you for letting us know, though.

>> Steve Fenves: My uncle was three years older. In high school he became very deeply involved in a journalist circle, including a couple people who were later very prominent writers in Hungary, and went after baccalaureate went to the university, ostensibly to study law. Everybody addressed him as Dr. Fenves, but there is a revisionist theory now going on that he never finished his law degree because he was so busy being a journalist in Budapest.

My father immediately, after graduation from high school, went to work to support his brother. So when my uncle started, took over this newspaper and eventually with funds from his in laws bought the printing plant, my father became the manager and my uncle died in 1935, he became the editor of the newspaper.

>> Bill Benson: The newspaper was, by this time, by the standards, it was a liberal newspaper.

>> Steve Fenves: A very liberal newspaper. As liberal as the censorship of royalist Yugoslavia allowed, but considerably more liberal than what the fascist government in Hungary would have allowed. Many newspapermen were fleeing Hungary, stopped as their first stop at my father's newspaper before coming to the west.

When I came to the States, there were four Hungary language newspapers, four Hungary language dailies and a Hungarian monthly literary journal. All five of the editors at one time had worked for my father.

>> Bill Benson: Wow. Because of the Serbian censors, your father still had to send all of the articles to be reviewed?

>> Steve Fenves: I remember going with my father every night, the paper was ready, workmen took a break and we went to the City Hall and the censor read the paper and x'd out things he didn't want to see. That had to be chiseled out, then the presses would roll.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your mother.

>> Steve Fenves: My mother was a graphic artist. She had a very famous uncle, very well known architect, who was a great influence on him. She studied in Budapest. I found out now that because of the boundary adjustment at the end of World War I she never finished her degree, but she studied afterwards and we have drawings of her from Vienna, Dresden, Venice, Florence and Rome.

>> Bill Benson: Perhaps later, you might tell us why you have those drawings today.

>> Steve Fenves: OK.

>> Bill Benson: On a lighter note, you told me that you Wednesday afternoon is when the governess was off. That was a time for mischief, because there was no governess. Give us an example of some of the mischief.

>> Steve Fenves: My maternal grandmother had this very old fashioned peasant house. On Wednesday afternoons my sister and our five cousins and I were locked in there. We did all kinds of things. The one that I remember is in a primitive society like that, canning, fruits and vegetables, etc., it's a big thing. One day we took all of the jar, soaked off all of the labels and randomly replaced them on other jars.

[Laughter]

Our grandmother thought that was great.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Steve, thanks for sharing a sense of your early life. In 1941, Germany invaded Yugoslavia and their ally Hungary occupied the part of Yugoslavia where you and your family lived. From the first day of their occupation, your family and your community were immediately subjected to profound upheaval. Tell us what happened to your family and your life once the Hungarians occupied your community.

>> Steve Fenves: My father was escorted out of his office at gunpoint on the first day of the occupation. The newspaper was taken over by Hungarian authorities and assigned to an Aryan manager, who was hell-bent to bankrupt my father. For example, freezing personal access to his account by charging all of the labor expenses to that account.

Part of the apartment was taken over. That was not that big a burden, because the three young officers who were assigned to it were two counts and the prince. Prince Esterhazy was one of them. Those who know about Haydn, who found the Esterhazy court more profitable than the royal court in London, that's the kind of person he was. All of the servants had to be let go, gentiles were not allowed to do work for Jews, and so the three

lieutenants clicked their heels and said "Madame, I understand that you had let your servants go. Our butler is at madame's disposal."

So there was the sight of my mother in the market and a big, ruddy sergeant behind her with a shopping basket. We had things like that.

I'll correct your statement in one place. Some of Hungarian laws actually predated the German laws. In particular, the law called Numerus Clausus, which was enacted in 1921, restricting the attendance at places of higher education. Jews were restricted to the percentage in the whole population, which was about 6%.

>> Bill Benson: Meaning no more than 6% of university students could be Jewish?

>> Steve Fenves: That started grade 5, first year of academic high school. I was in the first group that had to take this exam. Again, fortunately, my father was out of work, so he coached me all summer, and I was one of the nine who were taken into school, which mattered very little because we were sitting in the back, never addressed by the teachers, never responded if you raised your hand. We were just sitting there like turnips.

>> Bill Benson: You told me that the coaching your father did was probably a big source of support to him.

>> Steve Fenves: I'm quite sure, yeah. Because he considered himself a Hungarian at heart. He fought in the Hungarian, Austro Hungarian army in World War I, and this was something that he did quite willingly.

>> Bill Benson: Plus he was out of work.

>> Steve Fenves: Right.

>> Bill Benson: You said it gave him meaning at that point.

>> Steve Fenves: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Your sister, was she able to continue her schooling?

>> Steve Fenves: No, she didn't, but there was a school run by I forget now what order of nuns that accepted Jewish students, and she continued there. Both of us, the thing that hurt the most was when we were not allowed to go to the movies and not allowed to go to the local beach. That really eats into one's pride when you're 13 11, 12, 13 years old.

>> Bill Benson: Your father lost his job. How did the family make ends meet? How did you put food on the table?

>> Steve Fenves: We sold everything we could, including my very large stamp collection that I had been very proud of, silverware, whatever, a small vineyard my father owned where the picture was taken. My mother was knitting, weaving, doing

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the trial that was where your father was charged.

>> Steve Fenves: I forget, 1942, 1943, to legalize the takeover of the plant there was a trial, and only my sister attended. Nobody else from the family could take it. But all of the accusations, one of the accusations was that not respecting the Christian religion. The paper ran on Sunday to produce Monday's paper, and the fact that all of the other papers also had Monday issues, which had to be composed and printed on Sunday didn't matter. So it was a terrible trial.

>> Bill Benson: What was the outcome?

>> Steve Fenves: It justified the takeover of the plant three years earlier.

>> Bill Benson: During that time, and you lived under those circumstances until 1944.

>> Steve Fenves: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Did you know what was happening elsewhere in Europe, both in terms of the war, but what was happening to Jews?

>> Steve Fenves: Not in any specific detail, but we knew where the Germans were, we knew there was some trickling of refugees even earlier, even before 1941. So there was a general sense, but impossible to fathom and impossible to understand. Particularly with the mentality of my parents' generation.

My two cousins were in Hungarian labor service, very cruel service. One of them died there. They were home on a break. They went to their mother, and by that time the southern shore of the Danube was controlled by the partisans. They told their mother that they're going to swim across the Danube at night and join the partisans. My aunt put her foot down and said, no self-respecting Jewish boy is going to swim across the Danube at night and join those people in the forest. And that was that. That was the mentality that based what was to come.

>> Bill Benson: You would be in those circumstances, then of course in 1944 the war is turned against the Germans and Hungary is preparing to capitulate to the allies, and that is when Germany moved quickly, once they realized the Hungarians would capitulate, the Germans moved quickly to occupy Hungary, and the areas including your town. With the Germans, the conditions turned infinitely worse immediately. Tell us what it was like when the Germans took control and what happened after that.

>> Steve Fenves: First of all, I don't believe I had seen a German, one German soldier during that entire period. Germans had no more than 600 people in the entire country, one of them Eichmann, of course. And all of the deportations, loading into the cars, etc., was done by the Hungarian gendarmerie. You can see pictures in the exhibition, the black hats and black cock feathers in the hats.

So my father and the intelligentsia of the town were taken within the first 48 hours to a miserable little place outside of Subotica, then we found out after the war to Auschwitz.

We were ordered to move into a ghetto strung out across from the freight yards. There was this belief that Jews were in control with America daily, and that if the Jews are placed next to the freight yards, the Americans are not going to bomb. Crazy things were going on everywhere.

So we were put into this

>> Bill Benson: Steve, before you go on, you described to me that when you were forced into that ghetto, that day is one of the grimmest memories you have.

>> Steve Fenves: Yes. We were ordered to leave. We packed, as any good Jewish mother packing, packed way too much stuff. As we were leaving, I don't know how the word came about, but certainly the stairway up to the second floor apartment was lined with people wait second floor apartment was lined with people waiting to go into the apartment to ransack it, yelling, spitting at us as we left. That's pretty much a memory that stays with me.

>> Bill Benson: You told me there was one exception.

>> Steve Fenves: The exception was our former cook, whom we let go three years earlier, who was in that line. Went in with the others, collected my mother's cookbook, a diary my mother kept when both of her children were very small, and into one folder she collected together as many of the drawings and lithographs of my mother that she could find.

The cookbook you can see in the exhibit across the hall. And we have the drawings, lithographs, etchings. She returned those to us after the war.

>> Bill Benson: So now you're forced into this ghetto.

>> Steve Fenves: Yes, just a couple weeks, with our maternal grandmother, pressed into one room. No sanitary facilities, no food. Our cook would come at night clandestinely to bring us food. Terrible conditions. Then one morning, lined up and taken to a small village that was

expropriated as a concentration camp. I think we were put into a chicken coop. Then three days after that, we were taken to Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about Auschwitz, while you were in the ghetto, you told me that you received a very nice birthday present.

>> Steve Fenves: Yes, my birthday is June 6, 1944, D day. I had permission to work outside. I was working for the former employee of my father's. I was outside the ghetto when I heard the news. I presume I was the first one to bring the news inside the ghetto.

>> Bill Benson: That the allies had landed?

>> Steve Fenves: Right.

>> Bill Benson: You were then sent to Auschwitz?

>> Steve Fenves: We were then sent to Auschwitz for, I think, five days and six nights in railroad cars, 30, 40, 50 people jammed into a car. No food, no drink, no sanitary facilities, nothing. People were dying. People were going mad. Until we arrived into this sighting, which turned out to be Auschwitz, and shouts, yells, screams, dogs barking. Unloaded from the trains. Some of you may have seen "Schindler's List" and the scene where they arrive on the Auschwitz platform, a graceful sloping platform was made available to them to march with dignity down to the ground. There was no such thing whatsoever.

Lining up, men on one side, women on the other side, five abreast, and an officer waving you right or left. Now, every survivor that I know who has been through Auschwitz will swear that it was Dr. Mengele personally who had collected him or her. I can't say that, because I was not introduced to the gentleman. He just waved me this way, other than waving me that way.

Anyhow, that was the last time I saw my mother. My sister went a second way, I went a third way. Horribly long day of showering, shaving. Eventually thrown some uniforms and broken down shoes and marched at double time into one of the barracks.

Auschwitz was largely an extermination camp, as you know, but it was also one huge warehouse of slave labor. Thousands and thousands of people, male and female, in barracks. Foremen from factories, military or civilian, would come and you would be escorted to one of the compounds, and they would make their selections. Usually the inmates, male or female, naked. I don't know if somebody was looking for I don't know if nudity was an important factor, but it was an important factor.

Most of the people who went through Auschwitz survived because they spent their they were there three, four days.

>> Bill Benson: Before being sent to slave labor.

>> Steve Fenves: Before being sent to slave labor. I was there five months. Because they never came into this barracks where about 1,000 kids my age were housed.

>> Bill Benson: You were 14 years of age?

>> Steve Fenves: 13 years of age. What saved me, I must say, was that miserable German governess, because I, at that time, when we first got to Auschwitz, the trustees, the couples, were German criminals with green triangles, and they needed an interpreter, and they picked me, and I became an interpreter. Just maybe a second ladle of food was given to me.

Then late in August there was a big change, and Polish political prisoners took over. One of them came over and asked for a if there was somebody who could interpret German, Polish and Hungarian. Most of the inmates were Hungarian. Serbian is not that different from Polish, and in the camp you learn to volunteer all kinds of things that you never thought you

would volunteer, so I volunteered and I became an interpreter there. Those were people actively in the resistance doing whatever they could

>> Bill Benson: Inside Auschwitz?

>> Steve Fenves: Inside Auschwitz. Even if resistance meant black marketeering, with I was very a big part of resistance. That changed my life. Up to that point, there was absolutely no hope of surviving, and suddenly I had a reason, an opportunity to do something, I had a reason to want to survive.

>> Bill Benson: Steve, I think you told me another thing that changed your attitude about the will to survive came after the killing of the gypsies. Will you tell us about that?

>> Steve Fenves: We were in that camp, compound C. The night of August, I forget now the date. It's well documented. About half a dozen of the barracks on the compound, in the picture that you showed, were gypsy families. And then families meaning old men, women and children. No work age men. And one night an entire that entire portion was exterminated. That following day, that's when

>> Bill Benson: You were right near there?

>> Steve Fenves: We were locked down, but we could hear it, could hear everything. The following morning we realized the big change of the that the trustees were a different group of people.

>> Bill Benson: So now that you've kind of gotten this new will to live, what did you do then? You're inside

>> Steve Fenves: One of the things, one of my jobs was to meet when everybody else was busy, always busy, at the front of the compound when people coming to select workers had to

be met, had to be escorted, had to be translated for, then escorted back. That was one occasionally, I won't say always, but occasionally something I did.

One source of black market food was the arriving transports. Whenever a train pulled in it was inmates who emptied the trains. We always had a group of our people sweeping the gravel behind the last barracks. When the guards weren't looking, they also went through, and cans of sardines and whatever could be thrown over the electrified fence was thrown over the fence. We would pick it up. That's fodder for the black market.

For a while, I worked in a roof repair detail. Had a pushcart with a barrel of pitch, with a couple rows of roof paper, and went from compound to compound fixing roofs. Hopeless tasks, because these places were very poorly built. But in one of the women's compounds I met my sister, which was seldom occurring in Auschwitz. She told me that our mother had been taken away, and then I rushed to convert all my black market goods to get a scarf and a sweater and gloves to her before she was shipped out on a transport.

So that was the fall of 1944. Our camp was closing down. We knew that the Russians were the Soviets were closer. So the Polish trustees decided to smuggle me out. Nobody would pick me for transport, but I got pushed in, went up to one of the transporters, there's a single person who wants to trade places, they would assure him that he could get out.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about that, one of the inside forms of resistance you were doing, one of the things was sort of keep count of who was in the camps and get that information outside. Say something about that.

>> Steve Fenves: There were commandos, groups working outside the fence, the Polish resistance was never very far from there. Lists of arrivals, not by name but at least by trainload and by number of people still living when the train arrived. I remember trains from

full trains from Greece where not a single person survived the transport. That kind of information

>> Bill Benson: Was smuggled out. So the other inmates with you have decided to smuggle you out, get you out of Auschwitz. Tell us about that.

>> Steve Fenves: That was it. There were cruel games that the SS played all the time. Very careful selection, loading on the train, the train made a roundtrip, arrived on the same inbound platform and everybody was gassed. So it took some intelligence to figure out whether a transport appeared safe or not. I picked one of those, shoved me in the line.

>> Bill Benson: Before you left, you were given a tattoo as you were leaving Auschwitz.

>> Steve Fenves: By that time in Auschwitz people incoming were not tattooed, only people going out.

>> Bill Benson: That's when you got yours.

>> Steve Fenves: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: I believe you were given some clothing.

>> Steve Fenves: Yep. They gave me some, I remember, tight women's ski jacket, woman's ski boots, considerably better clothing than the normal issue to outgoing inmate.

>> Bill Benson: Where were you sent?

>> Steve Fenves: We were sent to after three days on the train again to a small place called Niederorschel. The train pulled in, we were lined up, SS officer gave a speech, the foreman gave a speech, a Hungarian translator gave a speech, and then the foreman walks up to me out of the 400 some people on the transport and says, What are you doing here? I didn't select you in Auschwitz. I was his interpreter in Auschwitz, but he didn't select me.

So the Auschwitz trustees had grilled me drilled me night after night for any eventuality that they thought could happen to me. This was not one of them.

So I had to think fast on my feet, and I said, "Well, sir, with this many new inmates they thought that you would need another interpreter. "

The guy looked at me, said, "Oh, yeah, that's a good idea."

But that was the small part. Then we were let in, seated at benches, at tables, which was a novelty, given hot food, which was a bigger novelty. As we were eating, a Hungarian interpreter sat next to me, and a man who turned out to be a Czech textile engineer sat next to me on the other side, and they started grilling me.

>> Bill Benson: I want to remember you were 14 years of age.

>> Steve Fenves: Yes. "Who are you? How come your clothing is so much better than the others? How come the foreman knows you?"

That night I was taken to the room of the two trustees, who were both German communists, in camp since 1933, and this was 1944, so you can imagine what kind of person survives 11 years of this. And I was grilled by them. There was a substantial number of Soviet POWs in the camp, because Germany didn't honor the Geneva Convention with respect to the Soviets. So their representative immediately continues in Russian, and the Czech guy in Czech. I don't know if anybody spoke Polish at that time.

So they grilled me. Yeah, there was a gypsy in charge of cleaning the barracks, was a gypsy. They were all grilling me.

As the night turned, it sort of started turning around, because they realized that I knew a lot more about Auschwitz than they did. And they were starting to ask me questions. The

gypsy guy had heard about the extermination of the gypsies. One of the young people said he had heard that women were selected for working in brothels for the SS.

And then I lied, I said, no, I never heard of it. I don't think so, because I've seen lots of women selections, and I've never seen one where women were selected for their looks. Whether I convinced them or not, I don't know.

Anyhow, at the end of the night, I was accepted in the resistance organization there. I was put to work next to the Hungarian interpreters on the assembly line, Messerschmitt airplanes.

>> Bill Benson: That's what you made there?

>> Steve Fenves: Yes. If you go to the air and space museum, on the second floor there is a World War II aircraft exhibit, and there's a Messerschmitt wing exactly like the one we worked on.

Working our workdays, every half hour the Claxton sounds and the new wing moves through the next assembly section. Very hard work. But conditions were order of magnitude better than Auschwitz. At least you got something warm to eat twice a day. The bread was maybe 1/4 sawdust rather than 3/4 sawdust. There was a cot with a small straw mattress only shared by two people, rather than by seven. It was really an amazing experience to see so many people doing so many things just because they wanted to stay alive. I mean, you certainly expect that there are shoemakers who know how to fix shoes with soles cut from discarded tires that were lying around the camp, and shoe nails cut from discarded boards; that there were tailors who could mend clothes with thread and needles bartered from the German workers; jewelers making these elaborate aluminum boxes out of scrap aluminum

stolen from the factory with all of the tools, obviously stolen tools from the factory. Everything punishable by death, but who the hell cares?

There were these two brothers, Hungarian Jews, caught in Holland, diamond grinders, who were attempting to grind prescription lenses out of bottoms of milk bottles found in the road.

There were teachers, maybe about a dozen of us kids my age, they decided our education had to continue, and after 14 hour workday they sat us down for lessons in algebra and French.

>> Bill Benson: After working 14 hours on a Messerschmitt wing?

>> Steve Fenves: Yes. Yeah. Being part of that was a very important part of my life.

>> Bill Benson: When you were doing the labor on the wings, the Messerschmitt wings, you and your fellow inmates tried to do sabotage, and get away with it.

>> Steve Fenves: Yeah. One of my good friends was installing the electrical cabling. Occasionally, he would cut the entire bundle, and then just as he got to the station for a new wing he would cut the bundle and report that it came damaged from the previous station.

Now, always my job was with dentist's mirror examining every rivet, the back of every rivet to see that it was properly done, and looking for tears in the aluminum which can propagate.

So we were the only ones allowed to stop the production line. With a perfectly well driven rivet, preparing it was bad, stop the production, drill it out and replace it with a charge driven rivet that rivets itself. If you saw a tear, that was not too obvious, you could signal to the next station where the Soviets were painting camouflage paints to make sure that they put a big glob of goop so that the tear would not be visible.

Lest anybody think we collaborated with the enemy, let me assure you that not a single wing ever flew. This was done at the very end when German industry was totally fragmented by the bombings, and they decided these decentralized things. This was a small factory. Half of the stuff came from other factories, with supporting camps, and the wings were supposed to be shipped out by November sometime. The railroad line was bombed, and nothing came in and nothing could be shipped out. So these big, burly Soviet guys, just dumping the semi-finished wings out. By the way, we had so much Chechens among them, and you better not cross them.

>> Bill Benson: Steve, I'm mindful of our time. I want you to tell us where you went next, but before you do, I want you to tell us how you were able to get news about what was going on with the war.

>> Steve Fenves: Most of the German workers were didn't want anything to do with us. There was one of them who made big business during his lunch hour. They had lunch hours, we didn't. He would read the paper, then he would signal on where he was putting away the paper in a place where one of us would pick it up. Of course, that was German news, which wasn't very reliable.

>> Bill Benson: It kept you somewhat abreast. From there where were you sent?

>> Steve Fenves: April 1, there was an alarm, that the camp was going to be emptied. A group of the younger people in the resistance group wanted to put up an armed resistance. The older guys decided against it. They didn't know where the Americans were. We didn't know where the Germans were. We were quite sure we could overpower our guards, but not if reinforcements came in. So we went on a march, 11 days through, to Buchenwald. Occasionally food, not very often. Escapes every night. Many of the people brought back the

following morning by civilians, prodding them with pitchforks, prodding them a couple centimeters deep into the flesh with pitchforks. So probably 1/3 of the people died.

But it was slow enough that we got to Buchenwald less than 48 hours before. I slept through the liberation.

>> Bill Benson: Before you got to Buchenwald there was an extraordinary incident where you stopped.

>> Steve Fenves: That was part of the slowing things down. Our guards were replaced by a new set of guards came down from Buchenwald, and our guards were taken back. And an inmate, a couple, a trustee was with the SS officers, and I went I snuck up to him, and he said that the camp was being emptied, we should slow down as much as we can. So at night we decided a couple people would hide so the count would be off, and the SS would have to find them, because they had that many bodies dead or alive to deliver. That's what we did. We stalled for at least 12 hours.

>> Bill Benson: The ones who hid?

>> Steve Fenves: Eventually, they

>> Bill Benson: You stalled getting to Buchenwald, but eventually you got there?

>> Steve Fenves: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: What happened there?

>> Steve Fenves: I went to sleep. We got there, I could tell from the descriptions of others, first thing I noticed is that the chimney wasn't smoking, so the crematorium wasn't working. The second thing is that the inner gate was open, so there was no we're not going to be detained. We were just marched inside, pointed to the barracks. I collapsed. Next day somebody woke me up, the Americans were there.

>> Bill Benson: What was that like?

>> Steve Fenves: I just crawled out and ran up Buchenwald is on a sharp slope. Ran up to the wall, and I yelled as much as I could. I crawled my way to the front, and yelled, asking if somebody spoke German, and an officer stopped, and I got my obligation to report all of the names of the SS officers of the camp, the names of all the inmates that were killed.

>> Bill Benson: Were you then pretty quickly put into the field hospital?

>> Steve Fenves: I must have, because I collapsed against the fence, and I woke up a week later in the hospital.

>> Bill Benson: Once you recuperated enough to get out of the hospital, what did you do from there?

>> Steve Fenves: Waiting for the Iron Curtain to open up. Churchill's Iron Curtain speech was 1948, but by July of 1945, the Iron Curtain was there. The Dutch, Norwegian, French inmates of Buchenwald were gone, in 48 hours at most. Those of us who wanted to go back to the other side waited.

>> Bill Benson: You went back?

>> Steve Fenves: I went back.

>> Bill Benson: Back to Subotica.

>> Steve Fenves: Right.

>> Bill Benson: What happened when you got there?

>> Steve Fenves: I got off the railroad station and started walking to my aunt's house, but people were asking, "How did you survive?" It just was the natural thing to do. A couple weeks later, my sister arrived. My cousins arrived one by one. My father arrived on a Soviet military hospital train in horrible condition. He died a few months later.

We tried to resume a new life, but Hitler's Yugoslavia was not it, so we escaped.

>> Bill Benson: Will you share with us how you escaped? I thought that was remarkable.

>> Steve Fenves: Two cousins, two fiancés, my sister and I, six of us, escaped five different ways. Only my sister and I were together. She was liberated in Bergen Belsen, and on the train, on the repatriation train there was a group of Yugoslavia POW officers who had been in camp since 1941, and my sister maintained contact with one of them. One of them had a medium level position in the Ministry of Exterior, and he produced two passports and two exit visas, which were genuine except that he was not authorized to do so.

So the French, on that basis, gave us a 30 day transit visa, and the Italians on that basis gave us a 24 hour transit visa, and we got out to France.

>> Bill Benson: You went different paths, didn't you?

>> Steve Fenves: My sister and I went together. But my Hungary at that time was still fairly, compared to Yugoslavia, quite open. My older cousins and the two fiancés all escaped, as you could tell by the map. Four kilometers north was the Hungary border. They went through Hungary. My cousin Yannish did the, what should I say, most romantic thing. He befriended a young Swiss lady at the Swiss consulate in Zagrab. She was in charge of renewing passports. She found a suitable passport, poured ink on one page -- no, no, she gave the passport to my cousin, who got to Switzerland, sent it back to her. She poured ink on the page that had the certificates and went crying to the consul, saying this is what she did. He calmed her down and issued the gentleman a new passport.

The Swiss are very clever. They recognized here was somebody receiving mail who wasn't registered, so they went to him, "Are you illegal in the country?"

"Yes."

"Where did you come from?"

"France."

So they took him to the other end of Switzerland, walked him across the border to the first French station, and waited, bought him a ticket to Paris and waited.

>> Bill Benson: You all ended up in Paris. Then what happened?

>> Steve Fenves: We tried to be together, but my older cousin had a very attractive offer in Venezuela, so the four of them went to Venezuela. My sister and I waited three years until the visa immigration permit.

>> Bill Benson: Why didn't you come to United States?

>> Steve Fenves: We had affidavits from our maternal uncle, who by that time was quite ill, couldn't live up to the commitment. The affidavit said. But that was our destination. We were looking for a place for the six of us to be together. We couldn't make it.

>> Bill Benson: 1950, you arrive in the United States. Before we wrap up, a couple questions I want to ask you before we finish up. One is in 1953 you're drafted into the United States army, and that was during the Korean War. You hoped that your language skills would allow you to be able to get into an intelligence service. What happened?

>> Steve Fenves: During basic training my entire basic training company had orders for Korea. One guy that I corresponded with afterwards, who kept track, knew of at least 60 people from that one company who were killed in Korea.

At the last minute, about 10 of us for various reasons got our orders changed, and I was sent to an intelligence battalion in Stuttgart, at headquarters in Feingen.

Several weeks later, the officer of the day calls me in, says, "Soldier, we can't use you here. You don't have citizenship. We can't get clearance for you."

He said, "Normal thing in a case like this is to send you back to infantry, basic training, qualifies you for infantry." He said, "You look a little more intelligent than that. What else can you do?" I said, "Well, sir, I've been working as a draftsman. I intend to study civil engineering. If you can find a position as a draftsman, I'd appreciate it." That's how I ended up at engineering section of 7th Section Headquarters.

>> Bill Benson: A career was begun. How did you meet Norma?

>> Steve Fenves: After I got out, while I was in service, my sister married in Chicago, and I don't know -- yeah, through a mutual friend met Norma's brother and sister in law. Norma's sister-in-law was on a kinder transport from Austria to England, and then eventually came to the States. My sister and Horowitz had daughters about the same age, and they became good friends. One day during breaks at school I lived at my sister's. One day I went there, was a sign on the door, "Come and meet me at this house." My sister was not there, but Norma was there baby sitting with her niece. That's how we met.

>> Bill Benson: You were with us on First Person a year ago yesterday, June 19, 2012. Obviously, you had come to the United States with your sister Estera who had also been at Auschwitz with you. I learned today from you that in the -- July of last year your sister passed away. Tell us a little bit about her.

>> Steve Fenves: She came out of the war quite different. As I said, neither of us were very observant. I'm probably more observant now than I would have been in my family. She just totally, absolutely, totally divorced herself from her Jewishness, from her camp experience, except that she did do a Spielberg tape. She totally divorced herself. We would go and say we have to get ready for Rosh Hashanah. "What is that? What is that?"

She married a Quaker, who lived first in St. Louis, then they were in Africa for a very long time. He was in the USAID, US Agency for International Development. He was assigned to Lebanon, and three weeks after he got there the embassy was bombed and he was among the people killed.

She spent three decades here in Washington, in Dupont Circle, very determined woman, lots and lots of friends. She was sort of the mother away from home for dozens and dozens of Peace Corps workers on the Ivory Coast. They constantly congregated at her house. She was a very forceful, very dynamic person. Couple hundred people at her memorial service. Very powerful personality.

>> Bill Benson: We're going to close the program in a moment. I'm going to turn back to Steve to close the program. We didn't have an opportunity for questions. As you can see, we probably could have kept you here all afternoon to really dig deeper and hear a lot more of what Steve could have shared with us.

When Steve is done, he will step off the stage. If anybody wants to come ask him a question, shake his hand, say hi, get a picture, whatever you want to do. You will stay behind? Right, Steve?

>> Steve Fenves: Definitely.

>> Bill Benson: I want to thank you for being with us. We have a First Person program every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We'll do it again next year. If you're not from around here, you get to come back, we sure welcome you back to First Person and the museum.

It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. With that, I will turn to Steve to close today's program.

>> Steve Fenves: Thank you. Well, I'll answer what I presume would have been the first question from the audience, and that is why do I do this. The answer is very simple. I feel an obligation to do so. As you can tell, it's not an easy thing to do. Today, I probably controlled myself better than usual. Normally, somewhere along the line, I break down. But it's a very strong obligation I feel that, as a witness, as a survivor, I have this personal responsibility to report what happened, to make people aware what happened, and to hope, I hope I instilled in everybody the need to combat this and react to any form of discrimination, injustice, persecution and not allow situations like this to develop again. That's why I do it. Thank you.

[Applause]

[Ended at 2:01 p.m.]