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UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
***FIRST PERSON* SERIES**
MARTIN WEISS

REMOTE CART

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>> Gretchen Skidmore: Good afternoon. I'm Gretchen Skidmore, the host of the museum's public program *First Person*. Thank you all for joining us. This is our 14th year of the program. Our *First Person* today is Martin 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 very grateful for again supporting *First Person*. And today we are honored to have Louis Smith with us who is in the front row. So thanks again.

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

Martin Weiss will share with us his *First Person* account as a Holocaust survivor for about 45 minutes today. If time allows towards the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity to ask him a few questions.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Martin Weiss is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

This is a 1946 portrait of Martin Weiss. Martin was born in Polana, Czechoslovakia, in 1929. In 1939, Germany occupied one half of Czechoslovakia and Hungary the other half. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, conditions in

Polana worsened. By 1944 Martin's family was transported to the Munkacs ghetto. In May they were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center where Martin, his father, brother, and two uncles were selected for forced labor. Later Martin and his father were sent to Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria.

Here we see a document recently uncovered in the ITS archive. This document is a Prisoner Registration Card which reflects Martin's transfer from Auschwitz on May 21, 1944, to Mauthausen, May 28, 1944. His prisoner number is on the upper right-hand corner: Ung-Jude or Hungarian Jew. His name is on the upper left-hand corner. There you see it’s circled.

So we are very, very pleased today to have the opportunity to talk with Marty who has been a volunteer here at the museum -- we had a debate about this earlier -- for about 12 years. We are also really honored today to have his daughter Gail in the front row. He has two children, four grandchildren. And we are today all very much missing Joan, his wife of over 50 years who recently passed away.

So, Marty, we know that today we are so fortunate to have you with us. We thank you so much for your willingness to do *First Person*. So I'm going to invite you up to the stage, and we'll have a conversation.

[Applause]

I think we have so much to cover today. We wanted to start by asking you, Marty, to talk a little bit about your life as a young boy in Czechoslovakia before the war, about what life was like in your town and with your family and your community.

>> Martin Weiss: I grew up in a part of Czechoslovakia. I'll explain a little bit. It's not Czechoslovakia now. You only have the Czech Republic. Before there was Czech, Slovakia, and Ruse, they called it. Most of the population was Russian speaking. However, not like Russia, like deeper Russia, this was like European Russian; like most of the people there were Russian.

The reason I'm explaining, then the war came. We were occupied by Hungary. So it was Hungary from 1939 to 1945. And then in 1945, actually it was part of Russia, under Russia. And now it's Ukraine. So if I lived there all of this time, I would have lived in all of those countries; however, it would be the same place.

Life, as I remember it when I was growing up, was very nice. Czechoslovakia was a democracy. There was -- a few democracies in Europe at the time. Poland was a dictatorship. Hungary had a dictatorship of some sense. We felt very, very fortunate.

I remember even when I was in grade school, we knew the value of democracy. One thing I remember they would teach us about democracy, in third grade we elected a president of the class just to show us how it was done. Those little things don't sound very important, but to us at the time it was very, very -- I remember as a kid, it meant a lot.

My father was in business. We also did our own farming. We had a farm. I had older brothers. They did all the work, consequently. As they got older, my father didn't pay them so they went to the city to look for jobs to get paid.

In the meantime, I had one older brother left home. I was growing up, so I was about -- let's see, when the Hungarians came, I was about 10. When I was 11, 12, my older brother and I did most of the farming. We plowed with horses, the old way, like you see in the picture. And we did all kinds of work. Also, it was a business. We did that, too.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: How big was your family?

>> Martin Weiss: There was nine of us: four boys and five girls. Might as well say it now, we went to camp, actually my two younger sisters and my mother died immediately in Auschwitz, as soon as we got there. I had an older sister. She died towards the end of the war, the very end of the war. My father was with me. He died where I was in a working camp. And my older brother, he was a very healthy, strong guy. Believe it or not, supposedly he was liberated, but he disappeared. We never heard of him. Something happened to him. There are rumors what happened to him, that another fellow, inmate, killed him. But I don't know for a fact.

So basically that's what happened to my family. The rest of them did survive. I had one sister, by the way, that was very smart. She was working on papers to go to the United States. In 1939, just about two weeks before the occupation, she was lucky enough she got out. She got the papers. She got out. She went to the United States all by herself. You have to remember we had no money. She didn't have any money. I don't know how she did it. But somehow -- and by the way, other people were waiting for a visa for the United States for five, six years and couldn't get it. Somehow she did it in a very

short time.

The reason I mention this, because later on, after the war was over, she was instrumental of getting us affidavits for my sister and I and were able to come to the United States rather quickly after the war. I just wanted to cover that.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: So you and your family felt like you had full rights in your town and in your community. You never had any sense of any differences?

>> Martin Weiss: No. We felt we were citizens. Period. Nobody pushed us around or anything.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: And how did life change, then, when the occupation, Hungarian, occupied your part of Czechoslovakia?

>> Martin Weiss: Life changed almost immediately. Even 10 years old, we knew right away things were not good. One of the reasons it changed, the whole form of government -- first of all, they used to have a mayor was voted by the people. All of a sudden now the mayor was appointed by somebody. Usually you had to be sort of a Nazi sympathizer. And then, of course, came out the laws, confiscated all Jewish-owned businesses. If people had a job, like let's say they were a teacher or whatever, they lost it. My sister was going to school, like college. She was sent home. She couldn't continue. And so on. So we were affected immediately.

My father was old enough, served in World War I under the Hungarian Empire at the time. He says, well, the Hungarians are anti-Semitic but they're not so bad, you could get along with them. Well, it turned out, as time went on, they came out and

they were very, very nasty. What they were doing is copying what the Germans were doing in Germany. They were doing it in Hungary. In Germany they passed a law. They also passed the same law.

And this continued -- around 1940, 1941, they had a mobilization. All the Jewish men military age, which was from about 20 to 45, were inducted into the Army. Not the Army, because we were politically undesirable. Ok? So they put them into -- they wore civilian clothes. They called it working battalion. What they used them for, they wanted them off the street so they couldn't organize to be an underground or something like that. So they took all of those men, had them under Army jurisdiction. They used them for cutting down the forest. They went to work and used them. Like, my two brothers ended up in the Ukraine, on the Russian front.

And over there things were terrible not only for them but even for the Germans, even for the Hungarians. The conditions were not good. But they were under very, very -- how do I put it -- had no rights of any kind. My brothers, they used them for picking minefields or burying the dead, doing those kinds of chores. I often wondered: why didn't they escape? They had a chance to escape because they were not locked up. Like in a concentration camp you couldn't, but over there.

And the reason was very simple. They came from a culture, our upbringing -- excuse me -- that you can't be responsible for somebody else's death. So what the Hungarians were doing, they copied again from the Germans. If somebody escaped, they would take the company of men, line them up on a field, and just count up to 10 and shoot

every 10th person. So because of that, they didn't escape because they were afraid of being responsible for someone else's death. Excuse me.

As time went on, the conditions got worse and worse. It was very, very severe. Oddly enough, like I said, the population were Russian. They didn't like the Hungarians any more than we did. Politically we were on the same side. We were against them. However, people are very funny at certain times. A certain amount of people -- I'm not going to say everybody. There were good people. You got along with them, lived alongside of them just like in the United States: the Irish, Spanish, whatever, don't care. And we were basically the same. However, there was always a few that for the slightest little advantage they would go and squeal on you or give you up to the police, something like that.

There were people you try to give them help. Believe it or not, we had to be so careful that my mother used to take my two younger sisters to carry a bag of sandwiches, like on the other side of town but that nobody should get suspicious. You would never know who would give us up. And the punishment was very severe. So we had to be very, very careful. This was just one of the things of how life went on.

I'll jump ahead to 1944. In the meantime, we kept hearing all the atrocities taking place in Poland and Ukraine. And by the way, we lived, it just so happened, only about 25, 30-kilometers away from the Polish border. So the Russians, at that time they had split Poland in half. Russia had one half of Poland and Germany had the other half. So the Russians were close to us. So many men would escape to the Russian side to go and join. What happened is, as this was going on, they were very strict in watching what people

were doing because they figured somebody was -- how can I put it -- aiding and abetting these people. All somebody had to do was whisper that you did something and you were arrested and given the third degree. This is the way life was.

Jumping ahead now, this went on all the way up through 1944. 1944, like I say, we kept hearing atrocities but, more significantly, kept hearing atrocities that were almost unbelievable. Even though I was very young, I remember my father talking about it, to other people. And myself, even though I was young, you understood. How could the Germans do that? You have to remember, Germany was in science, medicine, music. They were ahead of the rest of the world. How could they do this? So we heard these stories, very descriptive stories. But we could not quite understand that Germans could do this. Ok? You believed it, but we could not believe it. I know it sounds contradictory.

Then we heard specific stories like from the Warsaw Ghetto, that they were taking people and putting them into the Army truck with a canvas over it and then they would drive around with the truck, put the exhaust into the back of the truck, and drive around until the people were gassed to death. We heard those stories. Then we heard of massacres, big massacres. They had a group called Einzatsgruppen. Their job went into Russian, Ukraine, Eastern Europe. They were going -- they had what -- that's what they called a Blitzkrieg. The Russians couldn't stand up to them. They would slice right through it. They had this Einzatsgruppen --

>> Gretchen Skidmore: The English words for that are mobile killing unit. So there were four different units that followed the armed forces.

>> Martin Weiss: The mobile killing units were literally following like a sweeper, would come to sweep up. They would go into every single town and village. It didn't matter, some villages believe it or not, had like five Jewish families, some had 105 or some had 20,000. They would just go and literally, like a sweeper, just sweep up all the people, take them to a field and just kill them; like that. This went on for years.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: Was there an involvement of your neighbor in one of those?

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: Can you talk about that?

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah. I had one neighbor, he was not a nice man even as it was. But we did some business with him because we needed him, again, because we were doing business selling stuff to the Army. And we were not allowed to because -- it was politically undesirable. So we used him as a partner. We did all the work, but we shared the profits. Anyway, he joined the Army, the Hungarian Army. And he was up in the Ukraine.

As I mentioned, the Germans were doing this as the Hungarian troops. And like I say, a lot of people that were there in the working battalions. I had a cousin, a second cousin actually, he was there and he recognized him. He was there. He was a sergeant. He was one of those committing atrocities. They were throwing women and children into the river. There was a river. And this river had bodies floating every single day, hundreds and hundreds of people every day. They threw them in. Sometimes the guards on a bridge would have nothing to do, so for fun they would go -- and by the way, they took a lot of Jews at that time from different areas and they brought them out, fixed them up, but they didn't

have the camps yet. Auschwitz didn't exist yet. That was the earlier part. So they let them loose in the Ukraine. And it was a very inhospitable place. It was very cold. Most of the people were very poor. They didn't have any decent shoes or clothing. They didn't have any -- they had mostly sheets. They threw something in a pillowcase or sheets. They had buttons on their shoulders. That's all they had with them. The climate in World War II was extremely cold. And that part of the world, 30 below zero was not uncommon. It was just very, very cold. And they were cold under those conditions anyway.

Getting back to this bridge, they would stand there. The stories we got actually from this cousin of mine. They would go and round -- get these people and give them a hard time. They would take the child, tear it out of their mother's arms, and bash the child against the rock. And while the mother was pleading, and only then, would they throw the mother in. So when you hear stories like this, all of a sudden you become a believer. Before we couldn't rationalize it, but now we realize things are really happening.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: So given those stories that were coming back, did your family -- did you and your family ever think about going into hiding?

>> Martin Weiss: Yes. We thought of going into hiding, definitely because my father was that type. But problem was we had no place to go. We didn't have the means to do it. Not like in the United States you could go to work, get in a car, get on a train. Over there, first of all, if you had the means, where were you going to go? You couldn't even trust -- like I say, the population where we lived were against the government, yet we couldn't even trust them. We didn't know whom to trust.

In fact, we were thinking of leaving my sisters with some neighbors. And the neighbors would have readily taken them. But then we were worried that one of the other neighbors would point them out to the police and then they would be left alone and they would pick them up by themselves. So we had to make choices. So we decided to stick together.

Of course, in spite what we heard -- we never heard of Auschwitz, by the way, at all. We heard of massacre. So what happened -- I could go on, but I'll just skip.

In 1944, finally, we were like most of the Jews from the other part, like Poland, Lithuania, all those parts of the world; they took them out to that part and killed them en masse. But our part they left for later. Because at first the Hungarian government said we were citizens and they didn't want to give us up, but then, even though they didn't like us and they mistreated us, however they felt that we still belonged there. So about 1944 they made a deal. And when the Germans came to ask for the Jews again, this time they said, oh, you want them? Sure.

So the government -- by the way, they had a change in government, too. And the government went to work and two months, wasn't the Germans but the Hungarians, picked up 150,000 people, in two months. They shipped them out to Auschwitz. Later we found out it was Auschwitz. So out of those, believe it or not, I would dare say that 80% of them never came back. That gives you an idea, you know, of what happened.

So we were picked up, sent to the ghetto. From there we were sent to Auschwitz. Now we were worried because we were put on a train. By the way, there were boxcars. You took a tour. We were going 125, 135 people per box car. This is women and children, no facilities no water, nothing. Locked in there. Now, of course, all we had was fear. Nothing else. By the time we came to Auschwitz, quite a few people on the cars died because they were old, they suffocated, or the children were crying, screaming, were hungry.

We came to Auschwitz. It was at night, about 12:00. We pulled into camp. Again, I must emphasize we never heard of Auschwitz. We heard of, like I said, all the killings and stuff. So we should have expected anything. We knew we came into Poland we got worried because we heard of all the things that were happening there.

They had us disembark. As soon as we disembarked from the train, there were guys there with uniforms and big sticks, like broomsticks, and just strapping us, “Schnell!” “Get off the train.” So we got off. Everybody was holding up because it was like bedlam. If there's such a thing as hell, it's the only picture I could think of. This must be it. We were surrounded with flood lights. Like I say, it was at night. And all of a sudden we had guards with the rifles, finger on the trigger, surrounding us.

Until this day I don't understand why they needed it. Because, number one, Auschwitz was surrounded, every section of the camp, barbed wire, electric barbed wire. So you couldn't go anyplace. Besides, we were scared out of our wits. But still they had guards with nasty police dogs, really nasty dogs. Everybody was holding out to their children and family trying to stick together.

As soon as we got off, they separated men from the women. And then we had to go through -- there was an officer standing with shiny boots, sharp uniforms just like you see in the movies. The one thing, they were always sharp looking. As you passed through, would go like this or like this. The left would go to the gas chamber. The right would go to work. Very simple. That means that -- I was, believe it or not, actually youngest from my whole town that came back. There were four or five other boys. They were actually a year older, technically. Somehow we always felt we were the same age. And the only reason I think I survived, because I was not that big, we knew they were going to ask to work. I put on about two or three jackets so when I passed through, I looked bigger. And I think -- because most of my friends -- not most, all of them cremated in Auschwitz the first night out. But like I say, the other four were about my size, too. We survived. So it just shows you they had lots of people to pick from. They didn't want too young because they wanted you to work in hard labor.

Luckily, hindsight -- oh, they separated us. I went through the line and I passed. So I went with my brother and my father, a couple of uncles. We were on one side. All of a sudden my brother was separated. He was a good, strong, healthy guy. That's the one that never came back. In the meantime, while we were standing there, there was a little space between us and the group of women like from here to that wall over there, a very small space. But it was empty. And I noticed my mother and my younger sisters. So I said to my mother -- to my father: “You know something? I'm going to dash across that space and join them because I'll be able to get food or whatever.” My sisters were too young to be

able to do that. So my father says ok. So I tried to make a dash across the space. And this fellow, one of the fellows with the uniform, the stick I mentioned -- I found out later he was called a Kapo and he was doing the work, what the Germans asked him to do, to get people moving. He just grabbed a hold of me, like the back of my neck, and threw me back. "You can't go there!" Very mean and nasty. I found out he was another prisoner. Said to my father, “Can you imagine, another prisoner so nasty?”

Well, guess what. Next morning I found out what he did. He literally saved my life. Had I gone, I would have stayed in Auschwitz that night. At that rate, I didn't notice, of course, at the time, but the next thing we went into a shower. They took away all of our clothes. They shaved everybody's body hair off, all the hair, especially older people. We came out on the other side. They gave us those striped clothes. Now we became real Auschwitz prisoners. They marched us up to a barrack, not far, a few hundred yards from where we were. We came to the barracks. It was like dawn. It was miserably cold. Mind you, this was the end of May, I think. It was cold, miserable, rainy, so much so it went right through you. And those clothes that they gave us were like pajamas literally. They took away our shoes. They gave us wooden shoes.

Anyway, we came to our barracks. Not far away, a few hundred yards away, there was a big, big fire under the pine trees. Actually, they have a picture of it up in the museum in one of the places. And the flames were like a long flame, like you see in Arizona, these fires going through. It was similar to that. But a long strip of fire, the flames going up. So we were informed by other prisoners, “those are your families.” The

crematoriums -- by the way, we also found out there were crematoriums. We never heard of the word crematorium. It didn't exist. So they had these big chimneys with black smoke. And the funny thing, you could actually smell the flesh burning, the soot was just falling down, the ashes, just falling down. It was so cold, and this fire, somebody told us, the crematoriums couldn't handle the volume so they were burning them in pits on a daily fashion -- I mean, a daily basis.

This went on constantly. And then later on, because I've researched here in the museum, I found out that they were so meticulous about what they did, they even figured out how many bodies they could burn in 24 hours, counted the bodies, the flammable fluids they were using. Mind you, they had everything researched and done methodically.

Until this day, I could never understand that another nation was capable of doing this. And this is very important to know. One of the reasons, it shows you in this world, just when you think you are safe, modern, better. You have to be very careful it shouldn't happen again. And this is a lesson learned.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: You were there for 10 days?

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah. A very short time. I could tell you a lot more about it, but for the sake of time I'll go ahead.

Anyway, one day we got orders to go on a transport. They put us on a train. We went westward this time. The reason we knew -- otherwise we wouldn't have known, but the reason we knew where we were going is because we came on a deluge

and saw Vienna not far off. Even as a kid I recognized it had to be Vienna, from pictures, whatever. We continued on farther. We came alongside this big, huge mountain. The train stopped. We disembarked. They had us march up to the top of the mountain. Like I say, a big mountain.

In the meantime, we were scared out of our wits. I'll tell you why. Every single time the train stopped, something happened. You figured, this is where they're going to kill us. We heard so much of the killing. Then your brain works funny ways. I remember thinking that way. Then we figured, well, if they wanted to do that they could have done it there. Why would they bring us here? You argue with yourself.

Anyway, we came out at the top of the mountain, Mauthausen. It turned out Mauthausen was built on a stone quarry. That's very important why I say this. All the walls of Mauthausen were like from Henry V or something, the old castles, the big thick, stone walls. They were mining the stone. The prisoners would bring them up. And they would build this huge fortress of a camp. Mauthausen was also very similar to Auschwitz, very, very big, very big. They didn't gas people like they did in Auschwitz, on that level, but nevertheless they had gas chambers. If they were weak or whatever, they would send them to the gas chamber.

They also had -- Mauthausen, like I said, it was a huge camp. But they had a lot of sub camps. For a long time, I knew it even from the Museum, there were 40 sub camps. It turned out because of more research, they were up to about 80. Up until very recently they told me they had only 40.

Anyway, again, I could tell you the story but for the sake of time I'm going to move. They shipped us to one of the sub camps. The camp I went to was Melk. Some other people went someplace else.

Now, at that time they had a lot of prisoners from Hungary especially. The Hungarian contingent was, like I say, all done in a very short time. So a lot of the new prisoners of Mauthausen were Hungarian. What happened is, Mauthausen was also a mixed camp. So far I was talking about Jews, ok? I want you to understand the camps were filled with non-Jews as well as Jews. There were Germans. There were Pols, lots of Polish, lots of Ukrainian, Russian POWs. They were not supposed to be there. There were lots of Greeks, Italians. Ok? Until this day, I don't know. They may have been Jewish, but I don't know because we couldn't speak to each other. So all the time we were there, we had no idea. I don't know if they were Jewish or not. Many of them may have been. Nevertheless, there were a lot from different countries.

Needless to say, the guards -- and this is something that I must emphasize. It always bothered me. Most of the people that I experienced, whenever I was, they not only did the dirty job, but they were enjoying it. I can't explain it. You could see it on their faces. You would think most of these people had families, children, or something. And somehow they really enjoyed their work. Ok? And this is something that bothers the heck out of me. In fact, I'm going to get you sidetracked a little bit.

The Museum does a lot of research. And not long ago they found a film that somebody took -- they were not supposed to from Auschwitz, from the SS.

They were doing the work, killing people every day, every day, smelled that stink of burning flesh. They would go home, have the fanciest china they obviously took away from the Jews, with nice carafe of wine. They would have a nice dinner. Their children nicely dressed, with the short pants, Wagner playing. The same person would be a loving father, whatever, husband, but he was killing thousands of children that day. Ok? This is something -- I saw that film. I could not believe it. This is how they separated themselves. They didn't look at us as people. They didn't call us people. They called us gefangene, which is a special name for a prisoner.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: How did that viewpoint that they had, how did that translate to the conditions you lived under at Melk? What was it like there?

>> Martin Weiss: Ok. I'll give you a little illustration. That's a good point. The working camp was very simple. We worked like three shifts. It depends on when you went to work. If you went to work 5:00 in the morning, you came home about 2:00, 3:00, in the afternoon. And you worked hard. We worked building tunnels. So it was all hard labor, picks and shovels. We had to dig the tunnels. Unlike today. Used dynamite and stuff to blast, but otherwise we had to do shovel the limestone and everything by hand. A conveyor belt would take some of the sand out. But we had to mix the cement, you know, concrete, gravel for -- what do you call it --

>> Gretchen Skidmore: The wall. It was a tunnel, right?

>> Martin Weiss: It was a tunnel. They had platforms. You had to take the heavy pails, move them up. Shovel the concrete for the next level and so on. It was very hard to do. Then we worked with the jackhammers. I was like 15 years old. I was not that big. Plus we didn't eat.

We were starving. Sometimes we had to do this. Not like today, aluminum, they had stainless steel so they were very heavy, above your head, and drill for 10 hours. Just picture.

So these things -- so people were dying. The death rate, just to give you an example, the camp I was in was 12,000 or so people in the camp. And every single month they had replaced -- 3,000 people died. They replaced them with 3,000 new ones that gives you an idea of what the death rate was.

I read an article about that, too. They had it figured out. They wanted to get rid of everybody. But they wanted some labor out of you first. So they had it figured out that an inmate will only last like two, three years, whatever. I don't remember the exact time. But it was a very short timeframe of your life that you would succumb. And this is the way they had it figured. Now they're able to get the work out of you, but they would also kill you at the same time.

And as far as food, they would give us in the morning -- this is when times were good -- a chunk of bread, which was mostly sawdust. I mean literally. And a cup of -- it was like a broth from sugar beads that you use for cattle. So that was like a tea. That was for breakfast. At noon they would bring out to the field, wherever you worked, they would have like garbage can, like kettles, they would bring it out. It was called Verarbeitungserzeugnissen. It was a horrible, horrible-tasting, dehydrated vegetables, stew, or whatever you want to call it. It was so horrid. The smell was so offensive. I remember you couldn't even pass the smell to eat it. But guess what? We ate it. Ok?

I remember, I was smarter than some people. Some people ate

the bread at one time. I would sort of save a piece of it for later in the day. And that was very smart, hindsight.

But anyway, this was the good times. We didn't know it was the good times. Because later on it got worst. By the way, conditions, again, were so brutal. And every single thing that they were able to make worse for you they would do. To give illustration, we worked with cement; we had cement bags. During the winter, you had to stand on a platform to wait for a train that was high up on the field. So the wind was blowing right through you. The clothes were pajamas. They were not even clothes. We could not get close to each other. We had to stand at attention. So some men would take those bags and put them under their jacket, under their shirt, even though they were full of cement, and they would itch and all of that. But to act like a wind breaker.

And you wouldn't believe it. I remember coming back from the midnight shift, like about 1:00, 2:00 in the morning. Whether going out from the camp or leave the camp, they would count us not once but five, six times each way to make sure nobody was missing. They were very careful about that. Anyway, sometimes the Lager coming down, the big shot, he would come and 1:00, 2:00 in the morning stand at the gate, have the guards check, random check people that had these bags. And guess what he would do. Give them 25 lashes. Ok? He wouldn't do it. He would have a special trained group. Somehow they were Spaniards. Don't ask me why. They were the only ones who had a very good life. They had tailor made -- same prisoner uniforms we had, but they were tailor-made, pressed, sharp. They had a nice hat. They looked like they came out of a movie, like out of a picture. They

were trained to do nothing but give these lashes. Well, I don't have to tell you, when they got finished with us, man, believe me, it wasn't [Inaudible] of this world. This is just one of the things -- somehow you ask yourself what kind of people were they? This is what happened.

Anyway, I'll jump ahead for the sake of time. Next we went to the Russians -- the Russians and the Americans were closing in from all sides. We were evacuated back to Mauthausen.

And by the way, in Melk, like I say, it was people of all different nationalities, like I say, from every country. Ok? And we were all treated the same basically. We all lived and died the same way. But they took us back to Mauthausen. We came to Mauthausen. This time they took us -- they came in to the main camp and they separated out all the Jews, separate. They put us on the side of the mountain which was like a neglected area, thorny bushes and stuff like that you couldn't even find a place to sit down. At that time we were really, really like zombies. It was just plain starved. Then we realized the reason they separated us -- why would they do that? Obviously they want to kill us. They're not going to kill everybody, but they're going to kill us. So we were resigned to that. But by that time you were so out of it, that it didn't matter. You knew you were going to die anyway.

Lo and behold, after we were there a short time -- I don't remember exactly how long. We got the orders we were going on a march. Later on they coined it the forced march. This happened at almost every camp people were in. Wherever they were, they marched them someplace else and usually westward. Why? Believe it or not, the soldiers were afraid to be captured by the Russians so they moved everybody westward so

they were captured by the Americans or the English.

Anyway, we went on a forced march. Somebody fell down. They would just shoot them there just like a dog. In fact, on the march, just to give you one little incident, I remember we were going on a country road. There was a potato on the ground. This fellow saw the potato. He leaped for it. Another guy saw the same potato. He jumped for it as well. Well, guess what. They started fighting over the potato. And one of the guards -- by the way, they were not SS. These were regular Army. They were supposed to be the good guys. Ok? I hate to see the bad guys. Just took out his rifle and shot the guy right in the face, in the front. I'm not going to give you the details. You see this. Another guy -- we were going on a country road. There was Alpha or something growing. It was just a matter of jumping off like from here to there. You know, handful of it. The guards saw him. He shot him right there because he went out of line.

We reached a place called Gunskirchen after a few days. We came to Gunskirchen. And by now we were really -- I say each time really, but, you know, we were really, really -- some of us were barely alive. But as luck would have it -- and it shows you I was lucky, in many ways. As soon as I came to Gunskirchen -- by the way, this was a fairly new camp. It was also in a pine forest. There was a lot of water, puddles on the ground. When I got there, who do -- oh. While I was in Melk, I was with a cousin of mine. The same barrack. When we were evacuated, he went to a different place and I went to a different place. I came to this camp, to Gunskirchen, and who do you think I run into but his brother. He was a Hungarian labor battalion. The Hungarians were losing. They took a lot of those people and

brought them into Austria. They didn't know what to do with them. They didn't want to let them loose so they brought them in and put them into this camp. And when I came there, I run into this cousin of mine. He was about 20, 23 years old. He had about two -- a couple of friends his age. They were in fairly good shape yet. They had their own clothes, boots. They were, compared to us, terrific. But because of him, it helped me. All of a sudden I had somebody to lean on if you will. It just shows you how God works in mysterious ways. I left his brother, out of 13,000 population, I run into him as soon as I got there.

And by the way, the camp had only a few barracks. At night everybody had to go -- during the day, we had to stay outside no matter the weather. At night you had to go in the barracks. 5,000 men in a barrack. Can you imagine? Like an Army barrack, 5,000 people. The only way you were able to stand, like sardines pressed, but standing rather than laying. And I was younger than most, so I whittled down, would spend my night just crouched down. So I did better than some people. In the morning, there were a bunch of bodies always. You had to take them.

And here things were so bad already; even that bread was not bread. The bread was -- when they tried to give you a piece of bread if you were in line earlier, they couldn't cut it. It was a little crumble. The problem is, you held out your hand like this. The problem was, when you looked at it, it was full of mildew, blue and white, big chunks of mildew. And guess what? You ate it. And like I say, I can't emphasize how bad things were. By that time, none of us expected to come out alive. You knew they were going to shoot us before. We just knew they were not going to let us go.

So what happened, there were puddles of water. Some men would inadvertently walk into this puddle. It would be almost like walking blind. They would fall down. I remember them reaching out like this for help. You know something? You didn't bother helping them. Not because we were mean or we didn't care, but we figured he's already that far gone, let him die, he'll be out of his misery. We thought we were doing him a favor because they were that far gone.

And back to the shooting part. All of a sudden one day we noticed the guards were gone, but they were not gone. There were some guards, but they were different guards. So we heard the Americans are here, so it seems that one of the officers that was left behind, to watch over us, the captain went to work. He took a couple of elders from the camp. He went out to meet the Americans. We found that out later. I didn't know it at the time. When he met the Americans, he told them, look, I have written orders to kill everybody but I chose not to. Ok? So you see, our imagination wasn't exactly wrong.

So he actually -- then we found out we were liberated. So a lot of people were leaving the camp. We heard of the different incidents that happened before that they would make believe you could go and then kill you outside with machine guns. So we decided to stay an extra night. We were afraid to leave. So the next day we finally left the camp.

First thing we were doing is looked for food. I could go into more detail, but I'll jump for the sake of time. We went -- we came to a field. We saw this truck in a ditch. It was like in a field. We looked inside the cab. There was a big tub of lard, a big

basin. And one of the guys -- like I say, they were in good shape. He took his fist, went right through the glass. All the glass went into the lard. But we wanted the lard because it has something to do with food. So we went on the grass, scooped out the glass with the lard, threw it away but saved the lard. Then we went to the back of the truck and got really excited. We found a bunch of hides, refined, ready to use. We got really, really excited. Oh, we're going to take it to a shoemaker. Believe it or not, shoemakers knew how to make shoes from scratch. Ok? So we figured we will need shoes. Not going to find shoes. So each of us got a bunch of hides. We couldn't carry much, whatever. Whatever we could carry, we rolled them up. We kept on -- we saw a farmhouse not far away. So we came to the farmhouse.

You have to remember, if there was such a thing as hate -- I speak for myself, but we had hate. After all, the Germans did this to us. We hated. I mean there was no such thing as a good German. Every German was a Nazi and every Nazi was a German to us at the time. Just that simple. Nothing complicated. And guess what. Instead of behaving like brutes -- and to be honest, I started speaking here, for years I forgot about this story. Now I like to include it. About three, four years after I started speaking I sort of remembered it. I came to the farmhouse. And guess what we did. There was a lady in the house. She was obviously home alone. We knocked on her door. She opened the door a crack. She asked us what we wanted. One of the fellows asks her for flour, eggs, and water. She went back in the kitchen and brought it to the door. We went -- never went in the house. Never pushed in. One of the guys mixed it all up. She had a barn. There was one of those kettles like you see in the movies the cowboys used to use, heat up water, iron kettle, put

wood underneath, make a fire and heat it up. So we went to the barn, made a fire. We made our first meal of dumplings. We had the ingredients. We had the eggs, lard. It was our first meal. After we were really satisfied with ourselves. The first time we had food. I mean really. Yet we had a certain instinct not to overdo it. One fellow overrate and he died a day or two later, so it just shows you. We were so delicate we could not tolerate any food.

After it was all over, we ate. One of the fellows suggested: you know something? Each one of us should take a couple of the leather hides and give it to the lady. And you know? We did exactly that. Nobody questioned it, anything. Took it over and said thank you and walked away.

That bothered me. Why were we so nice? Like I say, for years I forgot about that all together. Until this day I could never understand that despite -- we didn't feel like human beings. Take my word for it. Anything we felt like, definitely didn't look or act like a human being, yet we behaved like a human being. This is why I always like to include this towards the end because our upbringing was such that even though we were different, from different families, that we had a certain value system. Not one of us questions. The Germans, why give hides? They were untitled to it; go into the kitchen and ransack the whole place if we wanted. Ok? We didn't do it. We didn't even step into the house. And this is something I could never, never understand. Yet if somebody would have said here's a gun, shoot this guy, he's German, I don't know if I would have done it but I felt like I could. Ok?

It just shows you how differently we behaved. In spite of our predicament, how we were, we still behaved -- to put it simply, I discovered one thing. We

were human after all.

I'll stop right there.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: So Marty, we have been actually so blessed and so honored to have you tell about your experiences, to tell about your insights today. We are at the end of the program, although Marty will be around to talk with people and to say hello afterwards.

I will thank everybody for coming and let you know that he's going to be outside in the lobby afterwards, also signing some books.

So I think, Marty, it would be good if we make sure -- I'll turn back to you one last time to see if there's anything that you would like to say to close the program. It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word.

>> Martin Weiss: I haven't thought about this. I would like to close one thing. We have a lot of young people here. The only thing, when I speak in front of young people, I always tell them one thing, that each one of them is important. No matter how much somebody belittles you, don't believe it. You have the right the same as somebody else does. We have to always look out for our next door; if it's a school, a bully pushes somebody around, you can't allow them to do that. You have to stand up for them. Sooner or later your turn will come. And if we protect each other, we have less to worry about it. I think especially for young people that's a good thing to know.

And with all the stink I hear every so often, bullying in school and stuff, it's very important to know that a bully will pick whoever is the weakest or next to him. And if you let him do it, he'll just keep on doing it to somebody else. The same thing with

grownups; if you're pushed around, if you let yourself be pushed. You should not allow it, whether it's you or for your neighbor. If you protect each other, we have a right to call ourselves civilized. That's the only thing I could say.

>> Gretchen Skidmore: Thank you so much, Marty. Thank you.

[Applause]

[The presentation ended at 2:00 p.m.]