

Wednesday, July 31, 2013

1:00-2:30 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: SUSAN WARSINGER

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 and 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 Mrs. Susan Warsinger, 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*. I would like you to know that Mr. Louis Smith is here with us today. Right there. Thank you, Louis.

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

Susan Warsinger will share with us her *First Person* account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor, for about 45 minutes. If we have time toward the end of our program,

we'll have an opportunity for you to ask Susan a few questions.

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

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

Susi Hilsenrath was born in Bad Kreuznach, Germany. She was the eldest of three children. Here we see Susan's family. From left to right is her brother Joseph, mother Ani with ^ in her lap, her father Israel, and Susan with her arm around her father.

Here we see Susan and her brother Joseph.

On November 9-10, 1938, known as Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass, Nazi thugs smashed the windows and furnishings of the Hilsenrath family's home. Months later, Susan and Joseph were smuggled to France.

In May 1940, the German Army invaded France. Susan and Joseph were evacuated from a children's home in Paris to Versailles, where they were temporarily housed in Louie XIV's palace. Soon German soldiers arrived and the children fled with their guardians to the unoccupied part of the country under the

Vichy government.

The arrows indicate their movement southward.

With the help of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Susan and Joseph received permission to immigrate to the United States. Information written on this tag that Susan wore identifies her name and states she is sailing for the United States on the SS Serpa Pinto.

After crossing the Pyrenees to Spain, the two children sailed to Lisbon, Portugal, and arrived in New York in September 1941. Susan and her brother Joseph are highlighted here on this photograph from a newspaper. Susan lives here in the Washington, DC area. She has three very accomplished daughters, and as she notes nine wonderful grandchildren. She spent 29 years as an educator in the public school system.

Susan's volunteer work at the museum includes being a member of the Museum's Speakers' Bureau. She is also a ^ two guide leading law enforcement officers, including FBI agents and law enforcement officers from all over the United States and from throughout the world through the museum's permanent exhibit. She gives tours to special groups such as college-aged

leaders and individual tours to visually and hearing impaired people. During the summers, Susan participates in the museum's program Conversations in the Wexner Center, where she welcomes questions and conversation in an intimate setting as she discusses her experience during the Holocaust. Susan is also giving tours for the museum's new exhibit, *Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration and Complicity in the Holocaust*. And she is a member of the writing workshop for survivors here at the museum. You can read some of Susan's writings online on the museum's website.

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

[Applause]

Susan, thank you so much for joining us, for being willing to be our First Person today. We have just an hour. You have so much to share. We'll start right away. Why don't we begin with you telling us about your early years, those years before Kristallnacht, those years before the war, about your family, your community, your own life in those early years.

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, many changes happened in my family after the Nazis came into power. I'm going to tell you all of these stories from a child's point of view, because that's the way I remember it. So you will just have to bear with me if I get to be a little bit childish every once in a while.

I remember we moved a lot. We lived, had lived in a very nice house. All of a sudden, we didn't live in a spacious house anymore. It seemed to me like we were always moving from one abode to another, which was on an economic level.

>> Bill Benson: With each move?

>> Susan Warsinger: With each move. What happened was my father had a thriving linen store and all of a sudden he didn't have it anymore. He was boycotted. How many of you have been to the permanent exhibit? If you remember, there's this one big exhibit with an SA man standing in front of a store, and he is saying, "Buy only in German shops, buy only from German people," as if we were not German people. So my father lost -- can you hear me when I'm talking this way or do you want me --

>> Bill Benson: You're good.

>> Susan Warsinger: Can you hear me all right? OK.

All of sudden he didn't have his store anymore. I remember he had to go to a farm to sell strawberries and cherries to the people who were in our town. That's how he had to make his living.

>> Bill Benson: I remember you telling me that when he would come home after he was forced to go and sell cherries and strawberries, that you knew when he had been able to sell a few by just the look on his face. I think you said he was smiling when he'd come back, you knew he had been successful that particular day.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah, yeah. We had some special signal, I remember between us. I remember, I don't know, maybe it was how many baskets he sold or something. It was just a private thing I had with my father that I remember.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the town. What kind of town was it? Was it a small town?

>> Susan Warsinger: Bad Kreuznach is a spa. It's a place where people come to recuperate from all kinds of illnesses. A lot of people come there for pleasure, because it's a beautiful town. It

was built in 14 -- I don't know what year.

14-something-something. They had a thriving Jewish community living there. And then --

>> Bill Benson: Your family had been there for a long time?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah, my parents got married there.

>> Bill Benson: How large was your family? Your extended family.

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, we had a lot of relatives that were living in Germany. I'll tell you at the end. The only ones that survived was my family, my immediate family.

>> Bill Benson: It was a large extended family?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. All of those didn't make it out.

>> Bill Benson: What about your schooling in those early years?

I remember you telling me that your first years of school were really not very happy years for you.

>> Susan Warsinger: No, they were not happy at all. I hated going to school, because kids were making fun of me. I seemed to be a normal little girl. I wasn't quite sure why they were making fun of me. So one day I didn't have to go to school anymore. I tell you, I was really happy. The reason for me not having to go to

school anymore was because Jewish kids weren't allowed to go to public school anymore.

>> Bill Benson: And then what happened?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, we had numerous Jewish families in our town, so the Jewish families hired one teacher, and they hired one room, and this particular teacher had to teach the kids from first grade to 10th grade, all in this room. One grade sat in this row, the second grade. We had 10 rows and he had to teach us all of the subjects.

I tell you, we did OK. We learned a lot. We learned a lot from each other.

>> Bill Benson: And it was happier?

>> Susan Warsinger: It was.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me an incident where your mother had sent you to get bread, and you had to go through a park.

>> Susan Warsinger: You want me to tell you about that?

>> Bill Benson: I do, yeah.

>> Susan Warsinger: OK. I hope you want to listen to this. I was this little kid, and my mother used to give me the responsibility of

going to the grocery store. She gave me some money, she asked me to go to the grocery store to buy a loaf of bread. So I felt very proud of myself, because I was the one that was providing nutrition to my family.

[Laughter]

Here, we live here, and the grocery store, let's say it's at the back of the auditorium. In order to get to the grocery store, I had to walk through a park. I started, I had to go down the stairs, I walked down the stairs. The caretaker of the park came to me, he said, "Little girl, you cannot go through this park anymore." I couldn't figure out why I couldn't go through the park. I went home to my mother and I told her. She said, "Well, just walk around the park to get there, walk this way, that way, go all the way around."

So the next time she gave me the money to go to buy something, maybe it was milk, so I got to the steps of the park, and I said to myself, I was very tired, so I thought, well, maybe I would cut through, because I just didn't want to take all the way around. So I went through the park, and the caretaker came, and he started to throw rocks at me, and he started to say horrible

things about me. I was this little girl.

That wasn't the worst part. The worst part of my remembrance is he had a young girl who was just about my age, and she saw her father doing what he was doing, and he was her role model. So she copied what he was doing, and she kept on throwing rocks at me, calling me a dirty Jew and all kinds of other things.

So I would never walk through that park again.

>> Bill Benson: Susan, in 1938 your mother had another child, I think your brother Joseph. She had no choice but to have him at home. Why was that?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, Jewish people weren't allowed to go to the hospital. They had to have their baby at home. The picture that you people saw before was my brother and I. We were sitting on the steps, and we were sitting outside because my mother was having a baby.

>> Bill Benson: You described a few minutes ago remembering moving from place to place, and each time it was a smaller and as you said lower down the socioeconomic scale. At one point, you ended up in a place called Adolf Hitler Platz, was the name of the

place before you lived. You were living in a place with, I believe, a rabbi and his family. Tell us a little about that.

>> Susan Warsinger: OK. Is it OK with you? OK.

It was a house, it was like an apartment house, it had like four floors. On the first floor, my family occupied the first floor. The rabbi lived on the second floor. A non-Jewish family lived on the third floor. And on the fourth floor was an attic. Well, it was one night my brother and I were very excited because the next day it was going to be my mother's birthday, and it was November 9, 1938.

All of a sudden, these bricks, rocks were being thrown through our window. My brother was a year younger than I am, but he was the brave one. He went to the window, and he looked outside, and he said to me that it was our neighbors that were throwing the rocks and the bricks through the window. And he said there are several policemen, and if you had gone upstairs to see the civil policemen, they're wearing the big, funny hats, wearing this blue uniform. He was standing outside, like this, at the edge of the crowd. He wasn't doing anything at all to stop the people from throwing the bricks and rocks through the window.

So we were very scared, my brother and I really were scared. We started to walk across the hall to our parents' bedroom, and just as we were doing that some people had uprooted a telephone pole, and they smashed it through the front door, and our front door was made out of glass. It was made out of beautiful colored glass. They smashed through the front door, and the glass was being strewn all over. So we ran to our parents' bedroom, and we said, "My goodness, what's happening?"

They always tried to protect us, and they always never tried to tell us what was happening. So my father said, "Well, let's just go hide up in the attic."

So we went up to the attic, and the rabbi's family was already there, but the rabbi wasn't there. We found out later that the people who went through our apartment, they looted a lot of our belongings. Also, when they got to the rabbi's apartment they destroyed all of his artifacts and his books and much of his furniture.

So we were hiding up in the attic. I looked out, there was this little window and I looked out, and the rabbi was standing on

his veranda. There were two SA men, the brown shirts probably that you learned upstairs in the PE, they were holding him.

Another one came along and took ahold of him, cut off his beard and sent him to jail.

>> Bill Benson: You saw that?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, I did see that. I did.

So I went, I found out later that they didn't only do it to our apartment, to the people in our building, but they did it to everyone in our community. Not only did they do that to every Jewish family in the community, but they did loot all of the Jewish stores that were left that were selling to Jewish people, because nobody else was buying from them. Also, they burnt down our synagogue. Not only did they do that in our town of Bad Kreuznach, but they did it all over Germany. That's why it's remembered as the Night of Broken Glass, which is called Kristallnacht.

>> Bill Benson: November 9-10, your mother's birthday in 1938.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Hundreds of synagogues in Germany were burned that night.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Did you have any idea after that that it was widespread, that that pogrom was everywhere in the country?

>> Susan Warsinger: No, I didn't know about it until much later.

>> Bill Benson: With the rabbi arrested, taken away, what about your father?

>> Susan Warsinger: My father wasn't taken away. Now, let me tell you why. My brother and I keep talking about it, and I should have asked -- I mean my father has passed away, he's dead. I can't ask him anymore. I should have asked him. But one of the things that we think is either that he was, because he had been born in Poland when he was a little kid, he came to Germany, maybe because at that time the Nazis, the Germans were not at war with Poland yet, because it was before they occupied Poland, which was in 1939. Maybe because he played chess with the chief of police. We talked about a third reason.

>> Bill Benson: Otherwise, thousands of Jewish men were imprisoned on that night?

>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly. Exactly.

>> Bill Benson: You're all in the attic. How long did you stay there?

>> Susan Warsinger: I don't remember. Maybe a few days.

>> Bill Benson: A few days.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember anything of that time, being in that attic and you were with the rabbi's family, too?

>> Susan Warsinger: Since it was November, it had been the apple-picking season, we had -- someone had gathered lots of apples, piles of apples all over the attic. So we had plenty to eat, because we kept eating apples all the time.

Then the kids, we played. We played all with them, we made abacuses out of them -- abaci, sorry.

>> Bill Benson: Abaci?

>> Susan Warsinger: We made abaci out of them. We played all kinds of games with the apples. We were innocent children. We really didn't understand how serious it was. All I know is that before the Night of Broken Glass, my father and mother used to have discussions whether they wanted to leave Germany or not, and my mother was always for it and my father said, "Oh, this is going to blow over and everything is going to be all right."

>> Bill Benson: Hitler can't last?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, yes. But after the Night of Broken Glass, nobody wanted to stay there anymore.

>> Bill Benson: That's when your parents made that very profound decision to try to get out of Germany at that point?

>> Susan Warsinger: Right.

>> Bill Benson: After Kristallnacht when they made that decision, what did your parents do?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, my father realized that we have to get out of Germany, and in order to come to the United States, this is what everybody wanted to come to, is to come to the United States, the land of democracy and freedom and where you could be anything you wanted to be, you couldn't come to the United States because the United States had a quota, and also every country in the world had a quota, except for the Dominican Republic.

So my father said, well, he found this woman who was a French lady, and she had children of her own. She was willing to do for all of the money that he had left, that he had saved up, she was willing to smuggle my brother and me to France.

>> Bill Benson: Just the two of you?

>> Susan Warsinger: The two of us. She would pretend on the train we were her children.

>> Bill Benson: This was your youngest brother, right?

>> Susan Warsinger: Not the baby. The one looking out the window.

>> Bill Benson: Year younger than you. She'd take the two of you and your parents, they made the decision to let the two of you go.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. Yeah. I guess, for me, it was like a big adventure. I didn't realize that I might never see them again. But I think that it must have been a horror for my mother, who had to send her children away.

>> Bill Benson: I'm sure everybody in this room can't imagine what that would be like to send you away to another country.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. I keep thinking about when I had my three girls, I couldn't imagine sending them away and not knowing what's going to happen to them.

Anyway, it turned out OK. So we went to France, and we went on the train and we had to keep very quiet, because we were supposed to be French children. So when we got to the border,

we pretended we were sleeping and everything turned out all right. And we ended up in Paris.

>> Bill Benson: Was there an incident where German soldiers or guards boarded the train?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Do you remember anything about that?

>> Susan Warsinger: We were very scared. My brother remembers that we were -- he was fast asleep. He thinks, this is his -- we never asked our parents. He thinks that maybe she drugged us so we would be fast asleep, so we wouldn't be able to speak German, because she was worried that we would say something in German and we wouldn't be her children. But I don't know if that's correct or not.

>> Bill Benson: You got across the border.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Went to Paris. Once you're there with a French lady who, in effect, smuggled you out of the country, what was waiting for you in Paris?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, my father had a third cousin, and he lived in Place de la Vendome. He had a hotel. In those days

people lived in a room in a hotel. He was a working guy. He was young.

>> Bill Benson: Single guy, right?

>> Susan Warsinger: Single guy.

Here he had these two children. My brother was very nervous. Excuse the expression, he used to wet himself in the bed. He was upset and anyway, so he, the cousin, had to go to work, he left us in the room. He said, "You stay in the room until I come back." Of course, my brother was very curious, and he was 7, and he used to leave as soon as cousin -- he went on the Metro. In those days the Metro was a big thing because it was the only one besides in New York. So he went on the Metro. He went all over Paris. He made sure that he came home.

>> Bill Benson: 7 years old?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Were you a good girl, you stayed put?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. I always followed the rules. I still do that. He's just more adventurous than I am.

>> Bill Benson: So how long was your distant cousin able to do this?

>> Susan Warsinger: Not very long. So then he found a place where they would keep the bread, in a small town around Paris. There was a lady who was taking children in, and I don't know who it was, I think it was the Quakers. They were very generous to people. I want to thank the Quakers a lot for everything that they did. They helped, and I think they paid for us to stay with this lady.

We were not the only children. We were maybe 10 children that were lost.

>> Bill Benson: She sort of took lost, orphaned children in?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: It wasn't a happy place?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, it's -- there was one place, she had a daughter and she favored her daughter, was very sad occasion.

Anyway, we complained to --

>> Bill Benson: Is this the place where you were not allowed inside during the day?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about it. Here you are 7 and 8 years old --

>> Susan Warsinger: You remember all of this?

>> Bill Benson: I do remember this.

[Laughter]

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah, during the day we weren't allowed to go into the house, and we had to eat in a cabin outside of the house. She was French and her husband, she did the same thing to her husband. She made him stay outside too.

[Laughter]

I remember. The good part about her husband, he was eating pon frietes. Those are French fries. That was the first time I ate French fries, the most delicious thing I ever ate.

It was unpleasant. She wouldn't let us go to the bathroom. We had to go in a pot in the middle of the night. We weren't allowed to use the bathroom. In the morning somebody had to go clean up. Somebody complained. So he found us another place --

>> Bill Benson: Your cousin. He did get you out of there?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Where did he take you?

>> Susan Warsinger: To another place. Those were two ladies, and they were very good to us. We went to school in that town, and we learned French. I tell you, I was there for a few months. If you can't speak the language and you're a little kid, you pick it up right away. I mean, I could speak. My vocabulary was on the level of a child, but I could speak.

>> Bill Benson: You could hold your own with the French kids at that point?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: How long did you continue in that circumstance?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, in 1940, I guess, all of you know in June of 1940 Hitler had declared that he was going to take over all of Europe. He walked into Austria, then he said I'm going to take over Europe. So he took over Czechoslovakia. He went into Poland. So the next thing he did in 1940, which is June, the Nazis were bombing, not Paris, but bombing all around. We could see in our bedroom, we could see the bombs falling down from the German planes. I'm sure you've seen them in the movies, the airplanes. It looked like the Fourth of July. I remember.

So everybody got really scared. So I don't know how we got

to Paris, but on the day that the Nazis marched into Paris my brother and I were there. He remembers it very well. I don't know why we were in Paris, not in that place. When they came walking into Paris, a lot of Parisians were really scared, not only Jewish people, but we called them, the German army, the Boche. Everybody wanted to leave.

Some people fraternized with the Nazis. But most everybody did not. So they wanted to leave. I don't know if you saw on the map, you see Paris here, and then just think of one of these rectangles as France. Half of it was the occupied zone of France, like half of that, and Paris is up here. It's the occupied zone.

So then they made some kind of a treaty with the French, and they said, well, the bottom part is going to be unoccupied, and we were supposed to be free, but Petain was the president of that part of France, and he was an ally, really, of the Nazis.

Anyway, so what everybody wanted to do was get to the southern part of France. But before that, everybody wanted to get out of Paris. So I'm going to ask the audience if they know what beautiful town is right a little bit, 45 minutes west of Paris.

Anybody know which town I'm talking about? Yeah, Versailles.

You're absolutely right.

A lot of people headed to Versailles. Somehow, some people took us, my brother and I. I don't know who took us. I think it was two nuns.

>> Bill Benson: Took you and your brother. Of course, there's tens of thousands of Parisians fleeing. It's an exodus.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. We get to Versailles. Here is this poor mayor of Versailles, he doesn't know what to do with all of these Parisians. Where do you think they put us up? Somebody say it. In the palace, right. They took us.

>> Bill Benson: Can you tell she was a teacher?

[Laughter]

>> Susan Warsinger: It's very hard for me to keep talking without asking you questions, because I know some of you know all of the answers way before me.

Anyway, what they did is they gave us a burlap sack. It was this tremendous haystack. We filled the haystack with burlap, then we tied it up, and then we went in -- guess which is the

biggest room in the palace? Anybody know which is the biggest room? It's very beautiful.

>> Bill Benson: I think I heard it.

>> Susan Warsinger: Hall of Mirrors, yes. The Hall of Mirrors.

So they put us in Hall of Mirrors on the side. So we were sleeping there. And so I don't know -- don't ask how many days we were there, because I don't remember.

>> Bill Benson: OK, I won't ask.

>> Susan Warsinger: Eventually, the Nazis came to Versailles.

>> Bill Benson: You have tell us about the incident with the Nazi officer.

>> Susan Warsinger: OK. We heard them marching, the steps of the German army was really frightening. They came in with tanks, and they came in with -- what are those? Jeeps. There was one guy on a motorcycle in the front. I don't know, he probably was the leader. I don't know what his rank was. He was the leader of the whole thing. And they got in front of the palace, and they wanted to talk, whoever talk to the person in charge. So the person who was in charge only knew how to speak French and this leader, this Nazi officer, this German officer only knew how to

speaking German. They needed to talk to each other. So somebody said, "We know this girl. She's upstairs in the Hall of Mirrors. She knows how to speak German."

I was a little kid, and they bring me up. There's this Nazi officer, he had on these boots. They were all the way up to here. I'm looking, I can just see his knees, I'm looking up to him. And he said -- I don't know what he said to me in German, but anyway I translated whatever it was. I don't remember what it was. But it was to their satisfaction.

So at the end, he goes and clicks his boots together, and he bows down to me, and he said, "Little girl, how come you know how to speak German so well?" I tell you, I was frightened.

>> Bill Benson: I bet you were frightened.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. Anyway, I told him that the French schools were very good and I had learned.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Isn't there great irony in that?

[Laughter]

>> Susan Warsinger: Anyway, so then we couldn't stay there anymore, because it was the occupied zone. It wasn't safe.

>> Bill Benson: You're still on your way to Vichy, France?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Where did you go from there?

>> Susan Warsinger: OK, we went to a place called -- a small town near Vichy, they had a chateau, an old castle. It was all Jewish children there. We knew it was not safe to stay in the occupied zone in Brout-Vernet. It was in the occupied zone, but it would be safer to stay in the occupied zone. We ended up in the Chateau des Morelles in Brout-Vernet. There we went with a whole bunch of children. We went to school in the village, but we weren't allowed to go to this school in the village with the kids who lived in the village because -- and they were all farmers. These kids were all farmers. They didn't want us to rub elbows with their children. So we had, again, a school of our own, and we had a French teacher who taught us and who was very good to us.

I went back to France when I was an adult, I found out that this teacher we had was the mayor of a little town around there. So anyway, he was a very nice person, and he did teach us, taught us how to write and conjugate and history. Things were OK.

>> Bill Benson: You were in a school, but it sounds also, as operating more or less like an orphanage at that point?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: With a number of other Jewish children.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Besides the fella who was the mayor, who was running that place?

>> Susan Warsinger: Oh, a person -- who was running it? Well, Jewish people were running it.

>> Bill Benson: They were running it, OK.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Everybody was really scared, because people started to find out what the Nazis had planned out. By that time, I think they were thinking of the Final Solution, and they knew that eventually they were going to take all of the people and put them in the concentration camps. They started to take the people in the occupied zone. In fact you will learn in the other exhibit that I will tell you about a little bit later, that they rounded up 35,000 people and they put them into this big arena, which is --

>> Bill Benson: In Paris, right?

>> Susan Warsinger: In Paris. Right next to the Eiffel Tower.
Thank you for bringing me back. In the Eiffel Tower, and like
3500 policemen rounded them all up, and they all sent them to the
concentration camps. They were eventually going to do that in
the unoccupied zone too.

In the meantime, we wanted to be back with our parents,
and we didn't know what had happened to them.

>> Bill Benson: Did you have any contact with them at all once
you had left them?

>> Susan Warsinger: No.

>> Bill Benson: In this orphanage/school, you had very little. It
was meager existence there.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: You told me a wonderful story, though, about
celebrating your birthdays while you were there. Will you tell us
that?

>> Susan Warsinger: I haven't thought about that in a long time.

Oh. Is it OK?

>> Bill Benson: I think it's OK.

>> Susan Warsinger: We got dessert maybe once a week, twice a week, and what we did is if we knew somebody's birthday was coming, the friends and the relatives, let's say it was my brother's birthday, I and some of my friends and his friends saved their desserts, desserts from their dinners, and we went and hid them. We had these lockers, like you have in high school, we had these lockers in the attic. Every kid had their own little locker.

So we hid the desserts up in the locker and saved it up and saved it up, and when it was time for the person's birthday one of us went to the kitchen and got one of those -- and got one of those brown trays. We tried to design it with doilies and somebody picked flowers and put it on the tray. Everybody brought their stash, and when it was the morning of the birthday we used to go to their room and put it -- we were in this big dormitory, but we went to their bed and put the tray on their bed and sang to them.

We didn't know "Happy birthday." It was different.

>> Bill Benson: That's very touching that the kids, you found a way to celebrate and be as normal as you could.

>> Susan Warsinger: A way to be loving to each other. I think probably that is a way to survive, because you have love, and then you have happiness.

>> Bill Benson: Here you are with your brother in this home in southern France. Essentially, one day you find out your parents want to come get you. They want to get you out of there. Tell us about that.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. Sometimes the children in the home, they got word from their parents where they were, and they got them out, wherever they were, in England or Italy or whatever. They got them out. So my brother and I always prayed maybe that would happen to us.

So one day the director, which was a lady, the director, she called me up to her office. Well, of course, she only called anybody up to the office if they were bad, and so I couldn't imagine why she was calling me, because I was such a goody-good.

[Laughter]

I got up there, and she was writing. She looked up with her glasses, she looked at me, she said, "Suzanne." That's what they

called me, because my name on the birthday says Susi, but when I came to the United States I wanted to be very sophisticated, so I changed it to Susan. This was a long time ago

Anyway, she said, "We have heard from your parents, and they are in the United States, and they have found you here." This organization called HIAS and the Quakers all have been working. All these organizations that we give money to and donate money, they really do wonderful things, they found us. My father sent tickets, and we came to the United States.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about getting to the United States, how did your parents get out of Germany and make it to the United States?

>> Susan Warsinger: OK. My father had a cousin, who had a pickle factory in Brooklyn, and they knew about our plight, so somehow or other, you know, the United States didn't want to raise their quota because we were going to be an economic burden to our society, and we were going to take away everybody's job.

So she promised that she was not going to let my father be a burden to the United States. She was going to hire him, make

sure he worked.

So he got his affidavit. It was really lucky, because after that not many people got out of Germany.

>> Bill Benson: Right, because the war is already well on at that point.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Before the Night of Broken Glass, all the Nazis wanted to do was get the Jews out of Europe, just tell them to leave and they said to the rest of the world, "Go take them," and the rest of the world just shut their eyes. But after the Night of Broken Glass, there wasn't anyplace to go, so not many people were able to get out of Germany. So my father was lucky.

>> Bill Benson: But your father went first by himself?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, because he couldn't get an affidavit for his wife and the baby. He came here --

>> Bill Benson: Your mother and youngest brother are still in Germany at that point?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Yes. Then he got my mother and the baby out. I guess, again, I did not ask enough of my father and mother how all of this happened. That's why I'm giving you advice: Please tell your children everything, answer all of the

questions or ask your parents, so that later on after they have passed away you know all of the history. The thing is, after we came to the United States, you know, nobody really -- I'm changing the topic but I think it fits in well.

>> Bill Benson: It fits in.

>> Susan Warsinger: Nobody really wanted to talk about it.

Everybody put it under the rug. The Jews didn't want to talk about it, because it was such a horrible experience. The Germans didn't want to talk about it, because they were the perpetrators. The rest of the world didn't want to talk about it, because they didn't do anything. So everything was under the rug.

It wasn't until like 1993, like when this museum was built, is when the Jews were coming out. The thing is why are they doing all of this? Why are we talking so much about the Holocaust? It had nothing to do with you, nothing to do with you or you, but it does, because we have to -- well, I'll talk about it later.

>> Bill Benson: Susan, you now know that your parents, they're alive, they're in the United States, they're sending tickets so you can get out of there. How did you get to the United States?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, we went to Marseilles, which when you look at the map, Marseilles is down here.

>> Bill Benson: Coastal port city.

>> Susan Warsinger: We went across the Pyrenees, and went into Spain, then ended up in Lisbon. Lisbon was a neutral country at that time. At that time, a lot of boats left from Lisbon.

>> Bill Benson: Can I interrupt for a second? When you left the home, did you have chaperones? Here you are two young kids. You don't remember?

>> Susan Warsinger: No, I don't think we had any chaperones.

>> Bill Benson: You got on trains and left?

>> Susan Warsinger: Like kids today, I would not send my grandchildren like that anywhere.

>> Bill Benson: Over the Pyrenees into Spain, then into Portugal. You and your 8-year-old brother.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. We got onto a boat called the Serpa Pinto. There were 50 children allowed into the United States. Somehow or other they had found passage to get here. It was not like a grand cruise ship the way we have now. It was a cruise ship, but it was small, because they didn't have the big ones. We

were not allowed to mix with the people on the cruise ship. I don't know what kind of --

>> Bill Benson: A Portuguese ship?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. It was Portuguese. But they were Americans on this ship. I don't know. We never talked to them.

Anyway, so we had to be in the hull at the front of the ship, and we were in the hull, and all 50 of us were in this one room. We had bunk beds and -- well, my brother is going to get mad at me if I tell you this.

>> Bill Benson: You got to tell though.

>> Susan Warsinger: So he was -- I was sleeping on the bottom, he was sleeping on the top. I don't think anybody was on the third bunk. He had always been nervous, because he used to wet his bed. So this is -- we switched, I got on top, he got on the bottom. I'm telling you this for a reason. He found a stash of pineapple that the boat was carrying. It was not too far from where we were, where the room was, and we had never eaten any pineapple before in our entire life. He felt that that was the most delicious thing. So he kept on eating pineapple and pineapple, until he got really sick on the boat. The boat ride was 14 days. The boat kept

going up and down, up and down, and sometimes the insides of his abdomen came swishing over the railing of the boat into the deep waves. He was sick a lot.

So then he went and he wet his bed, and he got a rash. A rash all over his torso, from here to here. It was really serious, but nobody did anything about it. I'm just telling you this for a reason.

So 14 days were up, and they said it's 6:00 in the morning, we were going to see the Statue of Liberty. So we were all very excited. My brother was already up there the whole night waiting for it to come. So we got up there, maybe a little bit before 6:00. There was a fog. You could not see your hand in front of your face. It was so terrible. It was really terrible, and we were all very upset.

We stayed up there. I'm telling you, I'm not making this up, at 6:00, at exactly 6:00, the fog rose just like the curtain in the theater or when you go to the opera, the curtain rose and there was the Statue of Liberty, right next to us. It was the most exciting experience that I can remember from that time.

So we got to New York, and they had a doctor, doctors came onboard to check us out. All of the other people got off. All

the doctors came -- no, two doctors. Maybe three, I don't know. They came onboard, and they checked out. They checked to see if we had some kind of infectious disease. So they got to my brother, and they said, "This person has some kind of disease that we do not understand what it's all about." So they said, "You can't come into the United States."

So where do you think they put him? Ellis Island is right.

You guys are so smart.

[Laughter]

They said, "You have to go to Ellis Island." Of course, I wouldn't let him go by himself. I went with him.

>> Bill Benson: Your parents are on shore somewhere?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, my father. And so I guess he found out what was going on. So we went to Ellis Island and I tried to explain to them what it was. I had tried to explain to the doctors what it was, but they wouldn't listen to me.

So that was the best place I had been in a long time, Ellis Island. I tell you. We sat on these long tables, and on the tables there were these round plates with stacks of white bread. It was this high, and they had like six or seven slices. You could eat as

much as you want. If you wanted to hold one in your hand, you could take it and you could squish it up in your hand and make a little ball out of it. We thought that was so exciting. We found out later on that it was called Wonder Bread.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Candy that you could chew all day? Right?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. We found out kids had candy you could chew all day. What do you think it was? Chewing gum.

Yes.

[Laughter]

Then also there was a sailor sitting next to my brother, who offered my brother a drink. Here you are, these little kids, I wasn't quite sure whether my brother should drink this drink. It was brown, it had bubbles in it. The sailor said, "Oh, it's OK. It's OK." My brother drank it. He liked it a lot. The sailor said, "It is Coca-Cola."

[Laughter]

So it was a wonderful experience.

Anyway, his rash subsided, and we came onshore and my father was there waiting for us.

>> Bill Benson: Do you recall your reunion with your parents, what that was like for you? It was a hard adjustment at times, wasn't it? Once you got settled you had to go to, I think it was called, Americanization school.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: What was your adjustment like here in the United States? Got just a few minutes.

>> Susan Warsinger: Oh, OK. I'm talking too much. I'm sorry.

>> Bill Benson: It's your day. You get to talk a lot, yeah.

>> Susan Warsinger: It was difficult. At first we had to go to Americanization school and learn how to speak English. Then we went to school, and they put me in the 7B1. I don't know why they put me in 7B1, but I couldn't believe what was in that class. Nobody paid attention to the teacher, and nobody did their homework. Kids were looking out the window, they were chewing gum. I couldn't understand it, because we had been very -- we always, in France and in Germany, respected the teacher a lot.

Then I found out that I was in 7B1 and that they had homogeneous grouping and all of the kids in my class were all of the dumb kids, and all of the smart kids were in 7B7, and so the

reason they put me in 7B1, not because I was dumb, but I didn't know how to speak English. The teacher really was not very understanding of any of my problems.

They didn't have any ESL teachers, the way we do in school now. In the meantime, I learned how to speak English, so gradually I got to 7B5, but I never made it to 7B7.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: I remember you telling me that you just couldn't believe how bad American boys could be.

>> Susan Warsinger: I feel sorry for the teacher now, because I can understand it.

>> Bill Benson: You were a teacher.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah, we never have homogeneous grouping anymore. We don't do that. We have a heterogeneous grouping. I can understand the problems the teacher had. She certainly was not understanding of any of my problems.

>> Bill Benson: What did your father do to get himself settled and begin to earn a living once he was here, because he didn't speak English either when he came.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah, he did. What did he do at the beginning? Oh, yeah, he got together with some farmer who had chickens, and he bought eggs from the farmer, and he brought them home, he had this little machine. You put the egg in the machine and there's a light. You call it candling. You looked to make sure there are no bloodstains in there. Then he put them into separate containers, then he sold it.

>> Bill Benson: He went door to door selling the eggs?

>> Susan Warsinger: To the Jewish people in the community in Washington. We went straight to Washington.

>> Bill Benson: Washington, DC, right here.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. You know why? Remember the rabbi that I told you got his beard cut? He ended up in Washington, so my father always looked up to him, because he was the wise man of the town. So he said, "If Washington is good enough for the rabbi, it must be good enough for my family." So that's how we got to --

>> Bill Benson: You stayed lifelong friends with the rabbi and his family, right?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, right.

>> Bill Benson: When did you learn about the rest of your extended family?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, I didn't learn about what -- I found out. I found out about the ghettos and the concentration camps when everybody else found out in the United States. But I did not -- then after a while, you know, we had the Red Cross, who had all of these records, and you could find out what happened to your relatives.

Well, I checked it all out, and on my mother's side they all went to concentration camps and they died in Riga. My father's family, they were Polish, then you could probably learn that if you go to another exhibit, what they did to the Polish Jews. There was father Dubois who went around to all of these little villages to find out what happened to the Jews, because there was no record of them. He found out from the people that were living in the town that when the Nazis came into their little town, they made all of the people go into the woods, dig graves, and then they shot them.

>> Bill Benson: Did any other family members survive from your family?

>> Susan Warsinger: No.

>> Bill Benson: No? We're close to the end of the program. So we're not going to have a chance for question-and-answer period. Susan, you can stay behind for a little while? So when Susan steps off the stage, please absolutely feel free to come up, ask her questions, just say hi to her, get your photo taken, whatever you want to do. Please feel free to do that.

I'm going to turn back to Susan to close our program. I know I wish we had another hour with her to go deeper into some of the things she shared with us and other things we didn't get to. But really, I thank you, Susan, for being here. I thank all of you. I want to remind --

[Applause]

I want to remind you that we'll have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until August 15, then we'll be finished for 2013. But we'll resume again in 2014. So I hope you can come back. If not this year, sometime next year.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* gets the last word. So on that note, I'd like to turn back to Susan to close today's program.

>> Susan Warsinger: I know you were going to ask me that, so I wrote it down, because I didn't want to forget anything. So I hope you don't mind if I read it to you instead of just talk.

I want my children, my grandchildren and my future great-grandchildren, my brothers and their families, my friends and the visitors here in the audience to rejoice in the fact that we are living in a democratic society and that we should be resolute in making sure that no dictatorship would ever usurp our liberties.

What do we have to do? We need to remember the atrocities that happened to families during the Holocaust and pass this information on to our progeny. But besides remembering, we have to take action to confront hate. Just as our museum strives to motivate citizens and leaders to overcome indifference and work to protect free societies and prevent future genocides, we as individuals have to do the same. We have to take care of each other, and what we do matters.

Now, why do I work in this museum, people ask me. How can you do this over and over? How can I not do it? Explaining what happened during the Holocaust, to our visitors, law enforcement officers, FBI agents and students of all ages, that I

tour through the permanent exhibit, hopefully teaches them that part of our history so that they will apply it to themselves and become better police officers, future leaders, and informed citizens.

Hopefully, it will teach them that they should never just be onlookers when they see injustice occurring in their lives.

When you visit the permanent exhibit, you will understand that my part of the story takes place on the fourth floor. Be sure to look at the exhibit that is near the beginning, on the fourth floor, that discusses the boycotting of stores. Also take a look at the propaganda section. The young students are reading a book called "The Poison Mushroom." This is where little kids are learning that a Jew is a poison mushroom.

Look for the Jewish responses. Look for the avian conference and especially the part about the Night of Broken Glass.

Also, look at the voyage of the St. Louis. This ship looks just like the Serpa Pinto that I was on. And please also visit our new exhibit Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration and Complicity

in the Holocaust. One of my colleagues is giving a tour at 2:00.

Let's see, after this if you rush out the door you might catch that.

>> Bill Benson: Out to the right, yeah.

>> Susan Warsinger: At the top of the steps, you go right. He's a very good tour guide. That is a very unique exhibit, because it talks about why and how the Holocaust happened instead of what happened. You might want to do that. He's going to give it again at 3:00. If I have the time, I'm going to take a couple of my friends through it in between. So anyway, you might want to do that.

I hope that you have a good learning experience. I want to thank Bill Benson for helping me tell my story, and I want to thank the audience for coming to our museum and being witnesses to the history of the Holocaust and for listening to my story.

[Applause]