Thursday, March 27, 2014

11:00 a.m. – 12:04 p.m.

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

REMOTE CART

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>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon -- actually, good morning. We changed our time from 1:00 to 11:00 in the morning and I'm getting used to it.

Good morning and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today. This is our 15th year of *First Person*. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Irene Weiss whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2014 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation with additional funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

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

Before continuing, I would like to take just a moment to remember Herman Taub, who was with us many times here as our *First Person*. Herman passed away this past Tuesday. He was to be here today as our *First Person* but became ill several weeks ago, and Irene agreed to move from her scheduled date later this summer to today. We thought Herman would fill in for Irene's date a little bit later, but unfortunately we lost him. He will be greatly missed. I suggest that you might think about Googling Herman Taub to get a sense of what a remarkable man he was.

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

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

Irene's father, Meyer, owned a lumberyard and her mother, Leah, cared for Irene and her siblings. In this photograph Irene is at the lower left with two of her sisters and two cousins.

When Nazi Germany took over and divided Czechoslovakia in 1939, Botragy fell under Hungarian rule. Irene and her siblings could not attend school and her father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, were conscripted into forced labor for six months in 1942. In April 1944, the Fogels were moved into the Munkacs ghetto where they lived in a brick factory. The arrow on this map points to Munkacs.

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

of their immediate family only Irene and Serena survived the war.

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

After arriving in the U.S. and living in New York, Irene met and married Marty Weiss in 1949. They moved to Virginia in 1953. Irene earned a degree from American University and taught English as a second language in the Fairfax County Public School system. She taught middle school students from many countries.

Irene's husband Marty passed away in January of 2013. Marty, who was 93, was a combat veteran of the Second World War seeing action in North Africa, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe. He had a long and distinguished career as a geologist with the federal government serving at both NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the U.S. Geological Survey. Irene and Marty were married 63 years.

Irene and Marty have three children and four grandchildren. Their son Philip is a family practice physician in upstate New York, daughter Lesley is Director of Community Services for NCSJ, a nonprofit organization that advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, Baltic states. Their son Ron is an Administrative Law Judge here in Washington, D.C.

Lesley was appointed by President Obama to be chair of a U.S. commission that preserves, protects, and memorializes cemeteries, monuments, and other cultural sites in Europe associated with American citizens. I'm pleased to let you know that Lesley is here

today with Irene. If you wouldn't mind?

Thank you.

[Applause]

Irene became a volunteer for this museum three years ago. This is her third time speaking with us as part of the *First Person* program. And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mrs. Irene Weiss.

[Applause]

Irene, thank you so much for your willingness to be here as our *First Person* and to move your date from when you were anticipating to join us today because of our loss of Herman. So thank you very, very much.

>> Irene Weiss: I'm glad to do it.

>> Bill Benson: You have so much to tell us in such a short time, so we're just going to go right into the discussion that you're going to have with us.

You described for me the time for you and your family in Czechoslovakia before World War II, before the Holocaust, as a time of hard work but also a good life, one in which there was a sense of safety, as you put it. Before we turn to the war years, tell us about your family and your community and you in those years before the war.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, we lived in a small farming town, population 1,000. We knew our neighbors. We were friendly with everyone. My mother visited back and forth and traded things with each other.

There were six children in my family. We were a very close family. My father had a

business in a nearby town. Every day he came home from work it was a celebration for the children. Sometimes he would bring us an exotic fruit called an orange.

[Laughter]

It would be divided six ways, each child getting a piece. We watched at the ceremony of peeling it. No one thought they wanted more than their share. It was a treat. Sometimes he would bring a bar of chocolate, which was the same thing; divided six ways. We were delighted.

We had good things to eat because it was a farming town. We had fresh fruit from the trees. We had baked things that my mother made that were fantastic. But these were not usually the foods that we got.

My father did things that in retrospect seem a little bit strange but it was very normal. When we needed shoes -- they sold them -- there was a shoe store in the nearby town. And instead of taking six children to the shoe store, he would take strings, measure each of our feet, write down the name who it was, and he would go to the shoe store and bring back these beautiful, shiny, patent leather for the girls and lace-up shoes for the boys. I mean, it was just wonderful. He was patient and caring and a hands-on father.

My mother, she was busy with preparation of all the foods that were done in the home. Nothing was bought. There were no bakeries or grocery stores. So I, as a young girl, loved to watch the process of preparing food. How is butter made? How is cheese made? How is the dough made for the bread? Things like that, I would follow my mother.

>> Bill Benson: Things that today we wonder about.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. And then eat the results. I remember my mother would give me a piece of dough, and I would make miniature things of the same things she made. Then she would bake it. And then my siblings and I and some little girlfriends would have a tea party. You know, bring our rag dolls out. So it was a very normal and happy life.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little bit about your aunts, Rose and Pearl. They will figure very prominently in what else you're going to tell us today, but tell us a little bit about them.

>> Irene Weiss: My mother's two young sisters, they were in their mid-20's. Since I was only 13 when this tragedy happened, up to that point, I called them Aunt Rose and Aunt Pearl. I looked up to them as grown-ups, important young ladies.

Luckily, when my sister and I found ourselves in Auschwitz, almost the first week, the first few days, we met them there by chance. There were crowds of people and yet we somehow recognized each other. So they took us into their barrack where they were. I think because of their love, protection, and just the sense that we belonged to some people who loved us and we were not just sort of the sub humans that the Germans designated our status, it definitely helped me to survive.

>> Bill Benson: And we're going to hear much more about that. Irene, by the time Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, which started World War II, by that time, however, your community had already experienced profound change. Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany. And earlier in 1939, before Germany invaded Poland, your community had been occupied by Hungarians and that immediately changed your lives. Tell us about that time when the Hungarians began their occupation of where you lived.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, as you say, Hungary was allied with Germany and they were imitating the way Germany treated their Jewish population. They began to make laws to restrict all of our movements, our freedoms, all of our rights. My father's business was confiscated and given to a non-Jew. I could no longer go to school, to the Hungarian schools. Soon after that, we had to wear a yellow star to identify ourselves to all who wanted to mistreat us. The laws were made to take our freedoms away and to give the police and the officials in charge the right to do that. So in such a circumstance the dangers are great because those who want to do you harm suffer no consequences.

>> Bill Benson: They could do it with impunity.

>> Irene Weiss: And they did.

>> Bill Benson: You told us about a very early, frightening experience you had with your father, I believe, on a train. Can you tell a little bit about that?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, Jews after a while stopped taking trains and appearing in public because they were so vulnerable. I was coming home, just one stop from his place of where his business was back home, on a train. He had a small beard, which in those days identified him as being Jewish. Today, as we know, men have beards and it doesn't mean that they're Jewish or any other ethnic group. But some young men, I call them hoodlums, on the train sort of recognized that he's Jewish and they began to make fun and tease and humiliate him. They were wondering what to do with him, should they throw him off the train and wouldn't that be the fun thing to do. With him, I was probably 11, 12, at the time, a terrifying experience.

>> Bill Benson: And no other passengers?

>> Irene Weiss: Nobody lifted a finger or said don't do that. People just didn't take the side of the Jewish people. So luckily, what happened, it was just one stop that we had to go by the train and by the time they would have done that, the train stopped and we got off. But we were very shaken. My father and mother, when he told us back home, just very frightened and decided not to go on trains anymore.

>> Bill Benson: Do you know how your parents, once your father lost his job, was forced out of it, how your parents managed to make ends meet, how they were able to feed their family?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, his income stopped. They didn't know how long that would last. Six children. The only thing that really helped us was that it was a farming area and we grew our food and prepared the food, so food was still ok but there weren't too many excursions to the shoe store or any other place. The children understood. We made no demands.

>> Bill Benson: You would continue for several years living with circumstances getting harder and harder. And in 1942, your father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, were forced by the Hungarians to do forced labor for the military. Tell us what you know about your father's conscription in the labor brigade and what that meant for your family.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, well, the men were called into forced labor. This was not being soldiers because Jews were not given guns or any kind of military training. They were put in the frontlines where the danger was great. Most of them never came back.

It seems that during this early period when this started, the Hungarian government still had some kind of a compassion for men who were older than 42 and had large families. And after a certain length of time, they released them. So my father came back. His beard

had been shaved. We children stared at him like a new stranger. We didn't recognize him. He sat at home with no place to go and no way to earn a living. He helped around the farm, the house.

It was a very scary time because we didn't know how long this would go on, hoping that the war would be over. We never felt that this strict isolation and discrimination against us was going to last. Somehow we always had hope that this will pass, this is some kind of a strange madness and that it can't continue. Unfortunately things got worse.

>> Bill Benson: Far worse.

>> Irene Weiss: Much worse.

>> Bill Benson: So as difficult as those times were for you, your family, other Jews, under Hungarian rule, it turned suddenly dramatically and tragically worse in 1944 when Germany invaded Hungary. Tell us what happened once the Germans came in and what that meant for you and your community.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. The Germans invaded Hungary because Hungary saw that the Germans were losing the war and they decided to get out of the alliance. And because of that, Germany invaded Hungary.

The way the Germans worked in the lands that they occupied is the first task was to collect the Jewish population and move them out into ghettos and then ship them further into camps of various kinds in Poland and Germany.

As soon as the German soldiers arrived --

>> Bill Benson: You remember them coming in.

>> Irene Weiss: Oh, I remember them. They were welcomed by the population. The Jewish population feared the worst, but still we didn't know how bad -- we still didn't understand their plan. We had never heard of Auschwitz. We had never heard of death camps. We still -- for some reason people don't want to accept the worst. It's too difficult.

They began further isolation basically to allow the population to do what they wanted to do. They gave them permission to isolate, to humiliate, to attack. We had no recourse in a court of law. You could not bring any kind of law. And if a gentile accused a Jew of anything, he was guilty immediately. There was no way that he was ever innocent.

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, it meant that you were going to be, as you said, started to be collected. You were forced into a ghetto.

>> Irene Weiss: We were collected. We were made to move out of our home with just very few possessions. Before we left our house, a delegation of officials came to our house and told my father to give them money, jewelry, any valuables that we had because they demanded it. He did give them some. And then we were marched out of our home. Closed the gate. We had pets, animals, closed the gates; so they won't follow us.

We were taken to a place, kind of a hall. The other Jewish families were arriving, too, with their children and belongings. Everybody had a place on the floor. The local officials together with this time German officials had the men come in individually into their offices and they cruelly threatened and demanded to give them more valuables; that we must have more and we should give them. We were totally terrified. We understood now that we were in the hands of people who had the law on their side to do whatever they wanted with us. It's a very

terrible feeling. To have people be your enemies. In other words, other human beings to treat you like that.

>> Bill Benson: Not only be your enemies, but as you say, to have total control to do as they want. If I remember correctly, your head was shaved while you were in the ghetto.

>> Irene Weiss: We were taken to the ghettos in the nearest large city where people, the Jewish families from the region, were there, something like more than 10,000 people. Yes, at this point -- again, we were crowded together. Always a place on the floor for everyone whether they were sick or old or pregnant women, children, everybody on the floor with all of our belongings.

Yes, so there was an announcement that girls should report to a certain place to have their head shaved. It was always a threat. Your father will be beaten and punished if you don't do it. So I didn't even tell my mother. I just appeared at this place. I had long braids at the time. Cut my hair. I came back, and my mother gave me a scarf to cover my head.

Religious Jewish women covered their heads typically. And my mother wore a scarf on her head always. So at this point I didn't look like a 13-year-old teenager. Things, even for a child, became less and less important. You lowered your standards and expectations on what was important. It didn't bother me as much as it bothered my mother it seemed.

>> Bill Benson: It must have broken her heart.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, in the early spring to the early summer of 1944 when the Germans

came, Hungary had the last largest population of Jews left in all of Europe. The numbers of those that were deported is staggering. Can you say a little bit about that?

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, in this place where they ghettoized the Jewish people, trains arrived. It was a brick factory that had a railroad siding for their own purposes. One day this very long cattle train, cattle cars, arrived and announcements were made that we should all head for the trains, get in. There was shouting, yelling, pushing. We were all pushed in, many into a car, the train car; destination unknown. Nobody said where we were going or how long the trip would be.

>> Bill Benson: And you had no idea?

>> Irene Weiss: Absolutely no idea. We tried very hard to every member of the family to get into the same car, stick together, stay together. It was already difficult.

After the train was locked from the outside, after a while it moved. There was silence and terror in these cars. We had heard rumors that the Jews in Poland were being executed in the forests; that they would just be shot in large groups. So we assumed that something like that is going to be happening to us. We didn't know any other destination.

When the train moved and my father was able to look up, look out of the small window, he at one point said that the train reared towards Poland.

>> Bill Benson: Towards Poland.

>> Irene Weiss: And so I remember the tremendous -- the Jewish people, women, children, everyone, are shot down in the forest. Nobody cared. Nobody kept track of who was dead and who was alive.

>> Bill Benson: And your entire family was in that boxcar with you.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, my father, mother, and six children.

>> Bill Benson: After a period of time the train arrives at its destination.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. It arrived at a place where looking out the window or when the door was opened; we saw barracks, guard towers, fences, wired fences. We saw prisoners in striped uniforms. Everybody calmed down. The grownups said that this looks like a labor camp of some kind, a work camp, and this is not the forest in Poland. We see other prisoners, so it seemed like possible to survive such a thing.

Again, we had no idea where we were and neither did we know that the very next step was cruel and harsh and heartbreaking because they shouted and screamed instructions: women to one side, men to the other. So immediately my father and 16-year-old brother and other men lined up on one side. We never saw them again. The women and children and elderly are in another group.

As the platform was filled with people, the train, maybe 2,000 people at a time, the crowd was moving up to the front. We didn't see the front until we were up front in front of about 12 Nazi soldiers with dogs, beautifully dressed in boots, very threatening with the dogs. And one of them was making motion that separated people from each other with a motion of a stick. Again, we didn't even expect it. We didn't say goodbye or any of that thing. All of a sudden, my mother and two little younger children to one side, and my sister, who was 17, to another side. There I was with a younger sister. For an instant he looked at us and didn't quite know what to do about me because of the way I had a scarf on, I had a very large coat

on. I assume he mistook me for a young woman, so he took my sister away from me and made her go towards where the younger children and women went and made me go to where my older sister went, which seemed to be the young adults.

So, again, I never saw them again. I went towards where my sister went. She was way up the road with a bunch of other young adults. I was yelling after her to wait for me. She finally heard me, turned around. She says, "Why didn't you go with mom?" Well, going with mom and the children, that group that was selected from the train went straight to the gas chambers. Within a half-our or so they were all dead. The crematoriums would burn their bodies. The next train would come, and the next group of women and children and elderly. The chimneys were belching fire, not just smoke.

And later on my sister and I and my two aunts, whom we met there, were assigned to work at a place where, again, nobody ever told you what will happen but we found ourselves in a place that was immediately next to the gas chamber number 4.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to stop you for a minute if you don't mind before you come back to that. At this point it was you and Irene; the rest of your family are gone. You told me about this extraordinary book that was published that captures the very day you were there. Can you say a little bit about that?

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, there is a book that you can buy here in the museum bookstore and elsewhere. When the Hungarian Jews were being deported to Auschwitz, it was done in great haste because the war was coming to an end. As you said, this was the largest group of Jews remaining in Europe. So the Germans put extra effort and hastened to complete the job

on genocide.

>> Bill Benson: Because they're losing the war.

>> Irene Weiss: They're losing the war. In six weeks they deported something like 400,000 families, people, Jewish people, to Auschwitz; some elsewhere, but mostly to Auschwitz. For some reason they decided to photograph their efficiency of handling all of this large group. Ordinarily they didn't want to have a record of their deeds, but they assigned two soldiers to take pictures. So these people took pictures of every step of the train arriving, the separation, the processing later, the people walking to the gas chambers. Everything was photographed.

Something like 25 years later these photographs surfaced and albums were made out of it for sale. My daughter bought me one of those albums. I went through every page with a magnifying glass. I was just stunned that it was exactly the way of what happened to us. And I thought: I could never explain this to anyone, but here is the picture exactly the way it was.

So in flipping through pages, hoping to recognize people that I knew or family, I actually found myself in it as I was standing there after my sister was separated from me and I was motioned to go to the other side. I didn't leave immediately. I stood there for an instant looking to where my younger sister went. I was devastated to see -- to think that in the moments that passed she would no longer catch up with my mother. And the crowds were moving fast. I just felt that this little girl will be lost in the crowd. I hung there to see, leaning a little bit towards where she went. I couldn't see where she went. There were barriers. But my picture was taken, and I recognized myself with the scarf.

>> Bill Benson: The day they photographed was the day you arrived.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. They took the photographs that day of several trains, several towns, several ghettos that emptied into it. So that picture actually is here in the museum on the wall enlarged.

Further searching the book, for days and days, many pages, many crowds, some of them hard to see their faces, you know, just crowds, I actually found my mother and two little brothers sitting in a road in front of the gate to the crematoriums waiting their turn. That, too, is captured there.

>> Bill Benson: This is called “The Auschwitz Album."

>> Irene Weiss: "The Auschwitz Album." It is a document that is extremely important because those people who can't imagine can see the detailed way that people were handled and literally processed like a commodity.

>> Bill Benson: So, Irene, you're with your sister Serena and you have really a chance encounter with your aunts. Tell us about that. Then you began to tell us where you were sent, the work you were required to do.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, when we met our two aunts, -- and as I say, they were to us like older adults although I realize they were not that much older. They treated us like their children. They referred to us "the children, the children." To me, I had this moral support. I had this love of somebody who cared for me. It was a very frightening place of, you know, barking orders, adults, strangers, crowded conditions, being regimented, get up at 5:00 a.m. in the morning and get out in the cold to be counted. To be alone in a place like that was just too

frightening for a young person, but both of them sheltered us. And later on when we were assigned to this work near the gas station -- gas --

>> Bill Benson: Gas chambers.

>> Irene Weiss: And crematoriums and so on. The work that we had to do, I couldn't fulfill the quota so they did my share.

>> Bill Benson: They did it for you.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Where was the place you were required to work?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, this was called Birkenau. That's where several of the crematoriums were. My deepest sorrow is what I witnessed there and the memory that Auschwitz means to me more than anything else that happened to me, is to be in a place where the barrack window faced the road where the women and children and elderly came up that road and entered the gate to the crematoriums.

>> Bill Benson: Outside your window.

>> Irene Weiss: Outside the window. Since there was such a rush to exterminate the Hungarian Jews, they came day and night on the trains. There was a backup of the gassing. So there would be people waiting their turn, sitting on the road with their children, looking at us and asking us questions and talking to us and wanting to know where we're from and --

>> Bill Benson: Because they don't know what's ahead.

>> Irene Weiss: Didn't know anything whatsoever that they are minutes away from entering their deaths.

>> Bill Benson: And you knew.

>> Irene Weiss: And we knew. And we couldn't say anything. There was no purpose in that at this point.

Again, you see -- I would stand by the window and I would see them. I would see all of these little children, all ages from infants to little kids and their mothers, grandmothers. I see them walk into the gate, and I hear the next train coming up, not too far. I hear the train, the hissing of the engines and so on. And I just have to look up the road and I see the next huge crowd is coming and yet I didn't have the kind of emotion that I should have had. I did not cry. I did not know how to absorb it. I did not understand that that's happening. There was a total denial even though I saw it clearly.

>> Bill Benson: And you were 13 years old.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. And yet there was something very wooden about the whole thing. This can't be happening. This isn't true. This is not going on. And, of course, I knew that my family took -- my mother and siblings took the same route.

>> Bill Benson: You would spend, I think, eight months at Auschwitz. What was daily life like for you once you found yourself with work assignments and things that you were forced to do? What was your daily life like?

>> Irene Weiss: This particular area of Birkenau was designated for processing all the tremendous amount of stuff people brought with them. These pictures in the album that I'm talking about show the things that came out of the trains and came out of the crematoriums, a tremendous amount of belongings, everything from clothing to household things to shoes,

baby carriages, eyeglasses.

>> Bill Benson: Whatever people had carried with them.

>> Irene Weiss: From toothbrushes, whatever household things, depending on how long they had been out of their homes. This stuff just accumulated. It was first brought from the platform and dumped between the barracks where we worked. It accumulated as high as the roof of the barracks. There were shoes all the way up to the roof, all sizes, all shapes, all kinds of household belongings. These things the Germans assigned a thousand women and about a thousand men in another section where the stuff had to be sorted out, separated into types, and brought under roof, first of all, and then further separated, labels taken off, and shipped back to Germany for the use of the German people.

>> Bill Benson: So the clothing, the shoes, all shipped back.

>> Irene Weiss: Everything. Everything was used. I realize now from reading that the soldiers assigned -- the German soldiers assigned to guard us and in charge of us, they took the best of everything and sent them home to their wives. There were things like fur coats, perfumes, you know, elegant pocketbooks. Depending on whatever people had, it was all beautiful things and valuable. So we worked in day shifts and night shifts to sort these things out and put them in categories. It was shipped back to Germany.

>> Bill Benson: And the guards helped themselves to the best.

>> Irene Weiss: Helped themselves to the best. They brought in 400,000 people of every social level. So the amount of stuff that we worked with, just the number of shoes and eyeglasses, indicated the horrendous number of people.

Again, to me, Auschwitz was, ok, depravations and all of that, but I worked there for possibly about eight months and it was a world unrecognizable in the civilized world. The trains arrived. The people are sorted out. They're marched and killed. Their bodies are burned. And the next train is coming and the next train is coming. Where is this place? What kind of -- this cannot be in Europe. This cannot be anywhere on the earth. And I as a child fantasized that I have no idea where this is, nobody cares, and this is some kind of other world that this is allowed and little children are murdered on arrival and mothers. It made me feel that I was in a parallel universe of some kind.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, as you described, you had some protection by your two aunts for you and Serena. You were at risk because you were so young. Even though you had survived the selection to go with the older adolescents and women, you were still at risk. Didn't your aunts protect you in that regard, too?

>> Irene Weiss: Oh, yes. Their efficiency to get rid of children, their determination, was complete because it seems to me if you're talking of genocide, they don't want a new generation to grow up. So they focused in on children and child baring women, particularly. So there would be reselecting of those they might have missed. Every single day when we were lined up to be counted --

>> Bill Benson: Just in case they missed a child.

>> Irene Weiss: And they would pull out children. I was vulnerable daily.

So during the counting where they would line up five in a row, my two aunts would position me in a most advantageous position so when they looked down, they wouldn't see the

youngest, the smallest. So sometimes I would stand on a rise or on a stone.

>> Bill Benson: To appear taller.

>> Irene Weiss: To appear taller. Never the first one and so on. Luckily it worked, but we were aware daily where -- I was 13 years old. It was definitely the youngest. They would be pulled out. And very often they were with a mother. The mother would just volunteer to go.

>> Bill Benson: To go with her daughter.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. This was a daily -- they would even come into the barracks and look into the bunks where we were, you know, sleeping and pull out young people or elderly, too.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, you would continue, as you said, for eight months, but in January 1945 as the Soviets were advancing you were forced out. They evacuated Auschwitz-Birkenau and you were sent on what is known as a Death March.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, indeed it was a death march. The Russian Army was approaching Auschwitz. That was in Poland. Instead of allowing the remaining survivors there to be liberated, the Germans decided to evacuate the camp. I think the purpose of that was to reduce our number further. It was January, bitter cold, and they marched us out of the camp. There was some discussion among us prisoners whether we should stay and hide, would that be a better way. And my little group, my aunts and others, decided, look, the gates are open; let's get out of here. The Germans will burn this place down as evidence. We're not likely to survive here. So we went with the crowd.

I understand that some number of people did stay. It took about 10 days after the camp was emptied before the Russian soldiers actually did arrive into the camp. Some fared

better -- at any rate, we went. It was an incredible, cold winter. We walked through the snow, the rain, and the cold for days and nights and slept in the gutters. If you sat down, you were shot. Simple as that. The road was the filled with dead people. Even if somebody had to lean on you or something, if they had an idea that you couldn't make it on your own, you were shot. They didn't provide any food, any water. We ate the snow on the ground.

After a while, after days and nights, they put us into open cattle cars, dragged us further into Germany, into camps. The camps along the way were filled up by all of these prisoners that they were evacuating and moving away from the approaching front.

>> Bill Benson: Taking them deeper into Germany.

>> Irene Weiss: Deeper. So they took us into -- very far into Germany in these open cattle cars where the wind and the snow and the rain -- it was not -- it's indescribable.

So my Aunt Pearl -- at one point, the train stopped. They were steam engines. They were filling the engines up with water. We heard the gurgling and gushing of the water. We hadn't had any water. Our mouths were dry. The tongue wouldn't move. She had a cup in her hand. She just kind of impulsively got up from the floor and attempted to dangle the cup over the side for water. And each car at that point had a Nazi-designated guard with us right there in the car. It was a woman. She got up and began to beat her viciously. She cut her head open, bleeding, because she attempted to get some water.

>> Bill Benson: Get a drink of water.

>> Irene Weiss: So we knew not to do that anymore.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, somehow you were able to survive that and you and your sister and

your aunts would end up at another camp, Neustadt-Glewe.

>> Irene Weiss: Right.

>> Bill Benson: As our time is getting short, I want you to be sure that you can tell us about your time there and with your aunts.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, the system broke down here, even what system the Germans had. There was real starvation here. We were there for five months. My sister and I became very emaciated. My Aunt Pearl became sick with Typhus. They took her away to a place where there was a gas chamber and killed her. We knew the truck came periodically to take the sick out of there.

>> Bill Benson: So she had gone, as I remember to an infirmary but you knew --

>> Irene Weiss: She went to an infirmary because she had Typhus. The infirmary usually served for them to get the sick and take them out. They had the infirmary, but it was not for curing or helping.

>> Bill Benson: And you knew that.

>> Irene Weiss: We knew that, but we couldn't help it. She had to have a place to be because we were all on the floor stepping over each other. So we saw her be taken away. Then they continued the selection. So one day my sister was selected. We knew exactly what for. The truck was going to come. I at this point had lost one aunt, the other one was also very sick. I said, "I am her sister." So the guy said, "Ok, you can go, too." So they locked us into a room with people who were so emaciated and run down.

>> Bill Benson: When you said I'm her sister, you knew that was a death sentence for you.

>> Irene Weiss: Absolutely. I was absolutely terrified of the idea of being left alone. The whole thing of I had this protection from my aunts, my sister, but it was all gone. It was just incredibly frightening to me. I just wanted to be with her wherever she went.

So there were other women looking like us in this room. We were there most of the day. At one point somebody tried the door and it gave, and so everybody kind of sneaked out and went back to our barracks. It would seem that because of the chaos of the war that was happening nearby the truck didn't arrive that day. So we lived another day.

After that, very shortly, the Russian soldiers did arrive. We looked out one day and the guard tower was empty. We waited to see if it was for real. Some braver women would go to the big gate and push it, and it gave. And that's how we knew that we were free, that the German guards were gone.

>> Bill Benson: So they were just gone.

>> Irene Weiss: Just gone. Nobody made any announcement. And we didn't rush out the gate.

>> Bill Benson: No.

>> Irene Weiss: We didn't trust what we saw. We felt that they're down the road; they'll come back; always thinking that they have to destroy the evidence. How could they not, you know, with what the liberating Army would find? But they were very scared of being caught by the Russian Army, the guards. They left. They ran. Mostly they tried to get to a place that was being liberated by the allied Army.

>> Bill Benson: Not by the Russians. But you were liberated by the Russians. What

happened when the Russians arrived?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, they ignored us. Camps were set up in hospitals, food, so on, transportation. But with us, nothing. The Russian soldiers showed up and they left. The next time we saw them is when we dared to go out of the camp and walk up the road and found a nearby town. A perfectly normal town, German houses. The population also ran very much afraid of the Russian Army. They had good reason to be afraid, but we have to remember what the German Army did to the Russian civilian population when they were over there.

>> Bill Benson: So you were literally now on your own.

>> Irene Weiss: We were on our own.

>> Bill Benson: Was Serena still with your other aunt?

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Actually, we put her, my other aunt, into this little town's hospital. This was a real hospital. Because she had raging fever, she just couldn't keep up with us hanging around where we were and just waiting. So we did put her in there. Now, they had nothing really either. They had a bed. They had a bed and apparently some tea which was more than before. So we stayed around in the town.

The Russian soldiers never offered us any kind of food. They had their own place where they were. Somebody told us, well, go over there; that's where the soldiers are and they're being fed. So I remember going with some others. We saw them eating. They were being served their meal. At the end somebody came to the gate and said there was nothing left.

So we really had no help. But the worst thing was that we had no help in

transportation. We didn't know how to get out of there because Germany's transportation was destroyed. There was nothing moving. We literally -- after I got my aunt out of the hospital, we started walking towards somewhere.

>> Bill Benson: And you would eventually find your way in Prague, Czechoslovakia. How did you get there?

>> Irene Weiss: Again, there was a rumor: go there; there are trains there. Go there. There are buses there. And the roads were filled with refugees just walking here and there, trying to get out of there.

So actually we went to a town -- Czechoslovakia actually did send some buses to pick up their citizens, a certain place. And after staying there quite a while some buses did show up, and they were mobbed by people, not just Czech, anyone, in and out of the windows, the roof, everything, just hanging on. Again, we're fighting, all of us, getting in there. It drove us to Prague. But there was, I would say, maybe six weeks passed of this hanging around and not being fed, not being taken care of until we found ourselves in Prague.

>> Bill Benson: I want to ask you to tell us one more thing before we formally end the program today. You described to me finally getting back to your home. Will you share that with us?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, I did go back. I was the only one who went back. My aunt was too sick to go. I was designated -- a young uncle, about 20 years old, came back. He had been in another camp. We managed to get together. We were far away from our home in the Prague area, an entirely different region. So he and I got on a train towards home. The train went in stages. It would stop, get off. We would go to another town. Eventually somehow we made

our way home.

I walked up to my house --

>> Bill Benson: To your family home.

>> Irene Weiss: My family home. So this was basically about a year and a half since we left it. There was a family living in it, a woman and children. When I walked in, they knew obviously who I was. We didn't exchange any words. They went over to the side and sort of let me walk in. I walked in the kitchen, went around all the rooms, went around. There was absolutely nothing in there that was ours. I came out back to the kitchen, went out the door, and went down into the garden in the back where there was an orchard. The fruit trees were just heavy with fruit ready to be picked. I just broke down into tears. I thought: How could this be? This grew and it ripened, and my family is not here to pick it. They're all dead. These people, I don't know who they are in there, in that house. There was nothing in there, absolutely nothing that I could take with me, carry with me.

>> Bill Benson: And then you left.

>> Irene Weiss: And then I left.

>> Bill Benson: And never exchanged -- there were no words exchanged with the family. They just watched you.

>> Irene Weiss: No, no. And since then I know several other families that lived there. And, in fact, last summer a cousin went there. He called me from there because he wanted to know how to find my house, a cousin from Boston. So I gave him directions. I said you go to the church and you turn two houses this way, find the house. So he found the house. Again,

some other people were living in there. But he called me and he said, “You know your house is for sale?” I said, “Really? Has anyone asked me whether I want to sell my house?”

>> Bill Benson: Irene, we need to end the program now. I think as all of you can see, we could spend the entire afternoon and beyond not only hearing more about what Irene has already told us but the many things that we haven't heard, including the fact that you stayed in Czechoslovakia for two years before you had the opportunity to come to the United States and begin a new life.

I want to thank all of you for being here for *First Person*. I remind you we'll have a program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August and hope that you can come back and join us some time. We would like that.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. Before I turn back to Irene, I want to say two things. One, when Irene is finished, two things are going to happen. We're going to ask you when Irene is finished with her last word for today, we're going to ask you to all stand because our photographer, Joel, is going to get a portrait of Irene, if you don't mind, with you all standing in the background. So if you don't mind, we're going to ask you to do that. And then Irene will step off the stage. We didn't have time today for you to ask questions, but if any of you want to just come up and hug her or say hi or ask her a question, there will be an opportunity to do so afterwards.

You'll be able to stay for a little while. Right, Irene?

>> Irene Weiss: Ok.

>> Bill Benson: So when we finish, I'll ask you to stand and we'll get a photograph.

Irene?

>> Irene Weiss: Ok. Well, I would like to thank you for coming and listening to my story, what happened to me. I just want to say how much I love this country and how very happy I am that I did come here and lived here and raised my children here. I remember vividly when I arrived the feel of freedom was so palpable compared to where I came from. I understood that the laws here were made to protect the people and not to attack them. I became a citizen as soon as I could. I have been a very loyal, patriotic American ever since.

[Applause]

[The presentation ended at 12:04 p.m.]