Wednesday, April 16, 2014

11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: BOB BEHR

REMOTE CART

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>> Bill Benson: 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. We are in the 15th year of our *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is Mr. Bob Behr, 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 serve as volunteers 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.

Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card in your program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater after you leave. In doing so, you will also receive an electronic copy of Bob Behr's biography so that you can remember and share his testimony after you leave today.

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

Bob Behr was born in Germany, highlighted on this map, on March 1, 1922. He celebrated his 92nd birthday in March. He lived the first 20 years of his life in the city of Berlin, which is circled on this map of Germany. In 1942, Bob was arrested because he was Jewish, and sent to Czechoslovakia.

He was interned with thousands of other Jews in Theresienstadt, also called Terezin. The arrow on this map of Czechoslovakia points to Theresienstadt.

Later, in 1944, Bob was sent to a satellite camp in Wulkow, Germany where he worked to rebuild the SS general headquarters destroyed by the allies.

By 1945, the Red Army reached Theresienstadt and Bob was liberated on May 5, 1945. This photo is the Soviet Army.

Bob and his wife, Marie Therese, live in the Washington, DC area. After serving with the US Army from 1947-52, Bob worked here in Washington, DC until he went to work for the US Air Force as an intelligence officer living in Germany from 1954-1961. Bob continued his civilian career with the Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio until his retirement in 1988.

After earning his master's degree in Modern European History, Bob was a college professor teaching European History with a special emphasis on World War II and the Holocaust.

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

Bob is a volunteer with the museum's visitors services, where he is frequently called upon to

use his fluency in French and German. You will find him here on Friday afternoons.

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

[Applause]

Bob, thank you so much for being with us today and for your willingness to be our *First Person*. You have so much to share with us in one short hour, so we're just going to go right into it, if that's OK. You spent your childhood in Berlin before the war began. You saw the rise of Naziism and the rise of Hitler. Let's start with you telling us, Bob, about your life in the years that preceded Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass.

>> Bob Behr: Well, it was pretty average. Before 1933, when Hitler came to power, it was a very normal, average life. My father was an MD, my mother was a housewife, and between the years of 1922 until 1933 there were 11 years with a normal family life, nothing special.

Then everything changed. In one day. This is the amazing feature which I remember very clearly. The Nazis came to power on the 31st of January 1933, and the man who had threatened to Jews that he will create horrors and do away with them suddenly had the power to implement this.

So the years between 1933, 30th of January 1933, and what Bill mentioned, crystal night, we'll probably talk about that later, in that short span life changed so drastically.

I don't know anything about you, but if you go home and you would find your hometown, no matter how big or how small, totally changed in attitude, the buildings are the same, the monuments are the same, the sky is the same, everything is the same, except the attitude of your neighbors. People who used to greet you friendly won't talk to you anymore. People who -- the city of Berlin, ladies and gentlemen -- how many of you have been to Berlin? Wow, we got two or three people. So

the city of Berlin completely changed. Not the buildings, not the monuments, not the trees, but the attitude of the people. It became a city of hatred. Signs all over the place saying "Jews not allowed," "Jews not wanted up here." People with whom we lived for years, my parents in peace and harmony, suddenly turn out to be our enemies.

Now, did they really believe this? Did they really hate Jews? Doesn't matter. The outward sign of Nazi power to do away with the Jews, the Jews are our misfortune, that was the thing there. Everywhere.

My favorite sport was swimming. There's a couple things you need to swim. Water. Not a problem with water. But you need a pool. Big sign on the pool "Jews will not swim in this pool."

School. The teacher wanted us to have a morning greeting by saying Heil Hitler when he comes in.

Well, a problem? Yes, for Jewish kids it was a problem, because we were not allowed to use the German greeting the, Heil Hitler greeting. We were not allowed to use it. So what do you do? Do you stay in your seat and let the other kids stand up, or do you stand up and raise your hand anyway and risk punishment?

Well, the Nazis solved it. They kicked us out of school.

I, ladies and gentlemen, grew up without an education. My mother taught me to read and write so I wasn't exactly ignorant, but anything else what you, your children learn in school today, none of this.

I came to America without any education. Took my first GED test when I arrived. That was my beginning. So life before crystal night was not that we were beaten up all the time. We were

maligned. We were made to be outcasts. Picture yourself wherever you come from, and suddenly your neighbors don't talk to you anymore. You haven't done anything. You haven't hurt them. But they won't talk to you. They won't associate.

It became a city full of antagonism, of hatred, of persecution indirectly, mentally. So even though you were nice and behaved yourself, it didn't make any difference.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, before we move on to Kristallnacht, which I want to do and ask you a couple of questions, you described to me your mother as a devoted German. Will you say a little bit about that?

>> Bob Behr: Yes. It's not just my mother. My biological father and my mother were, first of all, Germans. Secondly, they were Germans. Thirdly, they were Germans. And only then were they Jewish. So you can easily see the priority of my biological father as well as my stepfather. Both served in the emperor's army, volunteered, became officers.

>> Bill Benson: In the First World War?

>> Bob Behr: In the First World War. And got decorated with the Iron Cross. So that gives you a picture of what the Germans -- how my parents felt about the Germans.

That was it. That was our country, that was our language, that was our culture, that's what we were. We were Germans. And suddenly we were told we don't want you to be Germans. We don't give a darn what you think and what you do. We do not want you!

Let me give you just one practical example. How many of you have an American passport? Thank you. We had a German passport, and in September of 1934 when the Nazis had their annual rally they took away our citizenship, just like it was a stroke of a pen. We were no longer citizens.

We were residents without any legal rights to vote, to participate, nothing.

It was a real blow to my father, who had fought for that very country which now tells him, in no uncertain terms, We don't want you. And there was nothing we could do about it. Nothing. We were hopeless.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, in 1936, I believe, you were sent to Sweden, but you would come back I think a couple years later. Tell us about going there, but then what was special about you coming back, because you were one of few that came back.

>> Bob Behr: Well, there's a slight mistake. I wasn't sent. If you mean by sent --

>> Bill Benson: By your mother, yes, right.

>> Bob Behr: By my parents, OK. There was a Jewish philanthropist who opened up a boarding school in the city of Lund, which is in southern Sweden. He opened up a boarding school for German Jewish kids who could not get an education in Germany.

My mother, it's a long story, was able to enroll and, bingo, I was out of Germany, in Sweden, which was a neutral country, which was friendly, and I was out. I was free. No more.

That whole happiness lasted six months.

When my mother went to the bank to exchange the money, the German marks into Swedish kroner, the clerk told her, We don't do this anymore. The German government has different priority. They need what they call hard currency, and for other things, between you and I, to prepare for war. But of course, he didn't say that. He just said, We got other priorities. Guess what -- the school closed in six months and we were back where we started.

There was an opportunity to stay in Sweden because some Swedish family said if the school

closes we'll take the kids and they can stay here. They don't have to go back to Germany.

Well, my mother was the opposite, and I'm not going to go into my family history, but my mother wanted me to come home. Six months later, I was back in Germany, and beginning of 1937, and if anything things have gotten worse.

>> Bill Benson: You are only one of two of 100 students who came back to Germany?

>> Bob Behr: That's right. Two mothers, two parents decided they want their kids back home. They don't want them staying in Sweden with a family they don't know. So I had to come back.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, the night of November 9-10, 1938, is the night that we call Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass. Over that night thousands of Jewish businesses, homes and synagogues were vandalized and destroyed. It was a horrific night. Thousands of men were rounded up and arrested.

What was the impact for you of Kristallnacht, you and your family?

>> Bob Behr: Well, I can give you two. First of all, it was a mental shock. I mean, where we lived there were some Jewish stores. The windows were smashed, the merchandise was stolen. We had about, oh, I would say three or four blocks from where we live was a synagogue, which was burning, which was a very well-known synagogue. It was burning, where the people took the holy scripture of the Jews, threw it on the floor, made the Germans walk across it. The flames were spreading out. I remember that.

There were firemen there, but their instructions were only to protect the Christian homes nearby. Let the synagogue burn to the ground, so much the better.

So it was a night that physically, something happened physically to me? No. My mother kept

me home that day, and I wasn't allowed to go to work, but physically I wasn't harmed.

But what did harm me, they arrested 30,000 Jews all over Germany, eeny-meeny-miny-mo, off to a concentration camp. The concentration camp was one exit. That means from the camp to the ship. You couldn't go home, if you couldn't get out; you had to stay in the camp.

My biological father was one of those 30,000 people, and I never saw him again. He did get out, but I missed him.

Interestingly enough, while I was on a ship to come to America he died. It was a real tragedy. I was looking forward to being with him, see him again, get him healthy. When I got to New York, there was a woman with whom he became friends and said, Your father just died.

So he got very ill on that night. And I don't know, do you want to go into Kristallnacht, what it was other than --

>> Bill Benson: No, let's talk a little bit more, if you don't mind, about its personal effect on you and your mother. Your mother was somewhat financially OK until then, I believe. That was devastating financially for you.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah, let me give you a practical example. If you know the story about Kristallnacht with the SS, the German embassy official in Paris who got shot by a Jewish kid, who was nothing more than a student, and the Nazis used that, like I said, to burn the synagogue, to rob the stores and so forth.

So what was interesting in that thing, that the Germans also inflicted something which is not so well-known. The Germans told the Jewish community all over Germany that they had to cough up 1 billion marks, and that's not a speech impediment. That is a billion marks. Every Jew got a quota of

how much he had to contribute to the German government as punishment for the assassination of the German embassy official in Paris.

We did not have that much money. My mother had to sell some jewelry to even make up the money to meet our quota.

So it gives you some idea, and from then on, if we thought that life was bad before crystal night, it became a lot worse.

Those of you who have not been upstairs, let me put a commercial in. Upstairs on the fourth floor is a small video screen, which most people walk right by because it isn't flamboyant, it isn't dramatic. But on that screen they have all the anti-Jewish measures from January 1933 till April 1945. It's an absolutely frightening picture of Nazi punishment of the Jews.

Now, before I leave this, when I talked about the money we had to cough up, let me give you some figures. The German people in those days were 65 million people. How many Jews do you think were there? 500,000. That was it. That was the total number of Jewish folks who were counted as German citizens. It was those 500,000 people who had to cough up the money to give to the German government.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, Kristallnacht was November 1938. The following September 1939 World War II began with the German invasion of Poland. Once the war was on and you're still in Berlin with your mother and your stepfather, what was life like for you once the war began, before -- I want to lead up to your arrest later in 1942, but the first period of the war.

>> Bob Behr: Well, as Bill said, the war started in September, and then I want to give you some psychological insight. On September 1, the Germans marched into Poland. On September 3, on

Sunday, the British and the French declared war on Germany.

My parents, and I remember that to this day, they were jubilant. They thought, My gosh, it will be six months and the British and the French will defeat the Germans and we will be free.

Those of you who are interested in history, it was just the opposite. Hitler won everything, everything until the battle of Stalingrad in 1943. He occupied all of them.

So my parents were bitterly disappointed. The Germans in June of 1940 were in Paris. They couldn't get to Paris in four years in World War I, just to give you some idea. And the more the Germans won, the worse my parents felt, because the disappointment was there.

Now, personally, I was inducted into forced labor. Now, forced labor is not slave labor. We don't have time to go into the difference. Trust me, forced labor is you lived at home and you went to work in the morning, not work of your choice, but the work by assignment.

We were given the job of heavy labors, usually carrying bricks on a construction site or carrying coal in to people who had central heating. It was that type of thing.

>> Bill Benson: You're 17 years old at this point when you started?

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. And the future looked grimmer and grimmer. The laws, we had to turn in our radio. We had to turn in our telephone. We had to turn in the car, which we didn't have, but if you had one you had to turn it in. All of this without compensation. They literally robbed us blind.

Now, the war, of course, brought about rationing. Everything was rationed. Jews had a handicap right there and then. First of all, whatever a Christian got Jews got half of it. If a Christian got a pound of butter a week, we got 250 grams. So we got half of it.

Furthermore, we were allowed to go shopping only at 4:00 p.m. in the evening. Well, by that

time a lot of the food was gone. I mean, we could go there and try to get some potatoes, which were not rationed, but by 4:00 they were long gone.

For the first time, you experienced hunger. You experienced literally not the feeling that you had enough to eat. It was always short. We struggled. We didn't starve to death. No, we did not, but it was not a very pleasant existence. And the future began to look very bad.

The Nazis kept increasing the oppression for us, and it's very difficult for me to explain how that was. Everything was forbidden. You were not allowed to go to the movie theater. We were not allowed to sit on a bench that wasn't painted yellow. If in your mind you have the question, How did they know you were Jewish? You don't look particularly Jewish. How do they know?

They knew. The German birth certificate, then and now, there's a line item about religion. You have to fill out Protestant, Catholic, Hebrew, whatever the case may be. So they had no problem finding Jews.

Then in September of 1940 came the infamous star. You had to wear a yellow star with the word "Jew" sewn onto your clothing, and the law says if you hide that thing or if you go without it you will be severely punished by going to a concentration camp.

So that gives you a picture how the time between the beginning of the war in September 1939 until we were arrested. We existed. We didn't live.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, before you were arrested, I think you were forced out of your home. Tell us where you went.

>> Bob Behr: Oh, yeah. We lived in an apartment. We didn't have enough money to ever own a house in Berlin, which was for us much too expensive. So we lived in an apartment on the third floor,

no elevator, but we lived there and had lived there for some time.

One day, my mother gets a letter from the owner of the building, and said that they had surveyed the Christian people who live in the building, and they had unanimously decided that they do not wish to live with Jews under one head. So would you please get out. In fact, we'll give you two weeks to find another abode and you need to get out.

Well, it was a very difficult thing for us to find, because we were not allowed to go and rent another apartment where there was one. It had to be with a Jewish-owned apartment. It had to be an apartment which was already owned by Jews, who had to move closer together so that we could get in.

Was it easy? No, it wasn't. We finally found one, but of course it was terribly crowded, and not very pleasant living.

>> Bill Benson: You would continue in these circumstances until July of 1942, when you and your parents were arrested, your stepfather and your mother and you were sent to Theresienstadt. Tell us about the arrest, then going to Theresienstadt.

>> Bob Behr: Before I tell you about the arrest, let me tell you the reason we were arrested. Because, that's one heck of a story.

A lady my mother knew from God knows where, I have no idea, and she came to her and said to my mother, Lilly, which is my mother's first name, Lilly, I need to get out of Germany. I cannot live here anymore. I have no relatives. I'm all alone. I don't owe anybody anything. How am I going to get out of Germany?

It so happened that my mother knew a priest who lived in the city of Constance. When you get

a chance, you go home, take an atlas, look at the city of Constance. It's spitting distance from the Swiss border, which of course was the ideal place to be because it was free and honorable, and anybody living in Switzerland was a free person.

So my mother gave that lady the address of the priest. I don't know all the details, but suffice it to say that that lady went to Constance, met the priest, persuaded him somehow to bring her across the border during the night, and she was in Switzerland. She was free.

So what did that woman do? She wants to show her appreciation. She writes a postcard, which is the first mistake. You don't write a postcard in a censorship country. But she writes a postcard and describes, Lilly, guess where I am -- I'm in Switzerland, I'm having a good cup of coffee, and since it was July it's beautiful weather. Then she writes a PS, Without you I would have never made it to be here.

So now, if you are gestapo censorship officer, the first thing you do you look at the stamp and the stamp is from the country of Switzerland. Then you put 2 and 2 together and seeing the writer of that postcard would never be in Switzerland if it hadn't been for the help of the recipient of the postcard. So we were arrested.

We were arrested. My mother was put into a woman's prison. My stepfather and I were put into a male prison. And there we were, didn't know what's going to happen to us.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your interrogation when you first went to the jail. You were beaten with a ruler, as I remember, a steel rod.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. I was told to report to the police station the next morning, and they beat me up before they put me into jail, but I was bleeding. In those days they had rulers, which were made of

steel, and these rulers were used in schools and offices and everywhere, and they used one of those and they beat me, and that was opened up on my face. So I had great foreboding. I didn't know what happened to my mother and my stepfather, but we wound up as punishment for my mother's assistance to that woman, we wound up in Theresienstadt.

Now I got to pause for a moment and tell you, why did we not go to a killing camp? Why didn't they gas us? Why didn't they?

In January of 1942, not July, before, in January, the Nazis held a big meeting, known as the Winzig conference. If you later want to know how that is spelled, I will write it for you. It is nothing more than a lake. There was a big building, and in that building the Nazis held a conference.

That, ladies and gentlemen, was the one where they decided on the final solution, which is a code word of killing. They called it the final solution, once and for all to get rid of all the Jews, we kill them.

The minutes of the meeting are retained. The Nazis honored, if you will, in a YouTube thing, which is very good. If you are interested in it, it's called the Wunzig conference on YouTube.

The Germans being Germans, and very thorough and very detailed, they decided to kill all the Jews, but being Germans they had to first find out who is a Jew. Do you think that's simple? Your mother is Christian, your father is Christian, your grandfather is Christian, your grandmother is Christian, but your great grandfather is Jewish. Now, what are you?

Don't answer that. They wrestled with the idea. They had to find out who is a Jew. Once they got that one down, then the evacuation to the east started, and the people, as you know six million of them, were killed.

In addition to defining who is a Jew, they also decided that people, veterans of World War I who were decorated with the Iron Cross would not be gassed, they would be removed from society. They were put into a concentration camp where hopefully they would die, sooner or later, but they would not be sent to a gas chamber.

In my case, that was the case. My stepfather was a veteran, was an officer, was decorated, and he was sent to Theresienstadt, which was not a killing camp.

>> Bill Benson: So you're sent to Theresienstadt. Tell us about arriving there and what it was like when you got there.

>> Bob Behr: In order to understand the question, you need to know a little bit about Theresienstadt. I'll make that real short, and that is the fact that Theresienstadt way back when, in the 1890s, was an Austria-Hungarian town, a Garrison town, big barracks, small buildings for the relatives. The Austria-Hungarian Monarchy went away in 1919. Then the Czechs took it over. The Czechs existed because the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in March of 1939. And so, suddenly, there was an empty city.

The Nazis decided, who in the meantime occupied Czechoslovakia, that this is the ideal place to put all the people, all the Jews whom they're not gassing, to confine them from society, to isolate them and keep them separate from the normal human beings.

So since my family met that criteria, veteran, officer, Iron Cross, blah, blah, blah, we were sent there.

Now, the city of Theresienstadt, or Terezin, by the way, if you ever visit Prague there's a bus which goes down there and you can visit the camp. But the city had approximately 4,000 civilian

people living there, Czech civilian people, which the Nazis evacuated and sent God knows where.

So they had that empty thing, and in that particular space for the 4,000 people, they crammed 60,000 people. 60,000 people. Now, I'm going to ask you a question. How many of you like to be alone sometimes, whether an hour or a day, sometimes? I want to see your hands. All right. Everybody. Thank you.

The reason I'm asking this, because being alone in Theresienstadt with 60,000 people was an impossibility. You were never alone. You were always with people.

The house we were billeted in, my mother, stepfather and I, was a house completely stripped. There was no furniture. There was no -- it didn't have a bathroom, because we had an outhouse. We had no running water. You had to go and pump, and they put about 50 to 55 people in that four-bedroom house. Four-bedroom? Four-room house. So it was a terribly miserable room. Everybody was miserable.

People died. The older people, who were evacuated, died like flies. My first job, being young and strong, was collect dead bodies. Now, I don't know anything about you, but I venture to say that if and when you were confronted with death it probably was a solemn occasion, a viewing, a wake, something.

Ours? We collected dead bodies by throwing them on a cart, human-being-pulled cart, where three of us, two people to throw the bodies and the other one to steer. Everything was manual.

After a while, ladies and gentlemen, you become so hard about dead people that the only thing you cared, how full was the cart and how high do I have to throw them?

Now, take that in your pipe and smoke it. I mean, this is a life which isn't worth living. The only

thing we saw blue was the sky. We couldn't get out. We were completely separated from all communications. No radio, of course. No newspaper, of course. Nothing. The only thing we had plenty of was rumors. God, did we have rumors. Everybody knew somebody who had another story.

Do you know how we got news into a closed society? It was only one source, and a pretty good one: Newcomers. We were arrested in July of 1942. Somebody who came in September or November of 1942 was from the outside. That's how we got news.

They knew stories about the war. We had no idea who was winning and who was losing. It was very depressing, except for the newcomers who told us what they knew before they were arrested.

So by 1943 the Nazis realized they had to do something.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, before you go there, let me ask you two questions, if I can. As you said, you were young and in reasonably good health and strong. How did your mother and stepfather manage during that same time?

>> Bob Behr: Well, my mother existed by doing laundry for the prisoners. She was ordered to report to the laundry and wash clothing for the Nazis or clothing for the prisoners.

My stepfather was used as the doctor. But when you think, Aha, let me tell you something, a doctor without any medication. There was no medication. Whatever little medication was smuggled into the camp, with so many people, so many being sick.

I remember talking to him, and that man almost cried. He said, I see all these people who could be helped with some medication, but there wasn't any medication. Jews don't deserve

medication. If they die, so much the better. Save us the trouble of killing them.

So it was that type of environment how they lived there.

>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind, Bob, I want you to share with us something you told me. In these extraordinarily horrific circumstances you're in, your stepfather gave you a lecture about not stealing. Will you share that with us?

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. Well, we called it requisitioning. We tried to requisition whatever we could. I had the fortunate time to work a little bit in a kitchen, and I sometimes took a piece of horse meat after it was cooked, and took it home to my parents and said, Here's a piece of meat. It's still warm. So you have a little more to eat.

My stepfather, the good old honest German citizen, gave me a lecture, and said, That is stealing. You may be helping us, but I would choke on that piece of meat because it is illegally obtained, because you're taking it away from the other prisoners, the other prisoners who could have had the pleasure of getting a piece of that meat. You took it away from them. You took it away by bringing it to us. How do you think that makes us feel?

I got upset. I said, I know how it would make me feel. I said, Finally, I got something decent to chew. I wouldn't worry about the next-door neighbor. You can't. You had to worry about yourself, and then your loved ones. There wasn't anything ethically about it. I had no qualms stealing that piece of meat and bringing it to my parents. Now, if I had sold it on the black market, I would say, Well, that's probably wrong. But I didn't do that. I gave it to my mother and my stepfather so that they had something to eat.

Should I have felt guilty about it? You have your opinion, I have mine. I didn't feel guilty at all.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, you began to tell us that eventually the Nazis would take you from Theresienstadt, and they took you to a place called Wulkow.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah, Wulkow. By 1943, late 1943, the Nazis began to get really worried that the camp, so overcrowded, would be riddled with diseases, and the Nazis were very afraid of diseases, typhoid, what have you.

So I'm going to take you a little bit back now. Something happened in that time period which really affected me. Forget concentration camp for a minute. We have a war. Your grandfathers were very active bombing the hell out of Berlin. The British did it during the day, and your grandfathers came at night in the 7th Air Force and bombed.

Among the buildings they bombed was a building where the SS headquarters was. The guy named Heimlich Himmler, the chief of the SS, equal to about a four-star general. Their headquarters was gone. He was the guy who administered all the concentration camps. He administered the military arm of the SS. So he decided he's got to have a headquarters.

He picked a piece of land, went to the German authorities and said, I want you to build me a headquarters in that piece of land. And the Germans said OK.

Then they went to Theresienstadt and said, We need volunteers to go to that place to build the headquarters for that guy. And if I don't have enough volunteers, we have to draft them.

Then they put a sugar thing in there, and said, If you volunteer, if you volunteer we will not evacuate or what they called resettle your folks. Resettle, everybody in the camp knew that meant death. Nothing else, nothing more, nothing less.

How we knew, if we have time I'll go into it, but right now I knew that I didn't want my parents to

be resettled, quote unquote. I need to do something, and I volunteered to go there.

So Wulkow is a little village in what is now the Polish border, which was a big plot of grass, and that's where he wanted the headquarters, and that's where we were supposed to build it.

>> Bill Benson: You said that was one of the worst jobs you ever had.

>> Bob Behr: It was. It was so bad and so cruel. You see, let me give you an example what I mean by cruel. The guy who was the leader of the Germans, lieutenant colonel -- no, that's not true, he was a major, equivalent in the SS, named Franz Schtugar. He was the camp commander.

We got there, and the camp commander was not only leader, he was also a rabid anti-Semite. He hated Jews, and now he's got nothing but Jews under him.

He was very cruel, very determined. I want to give you an example. The Germans who are fighting the war, we're talking 1944 now, the Germans were fighting a war and losing it . Ever since the battle of Stalingrad the fate of the German army turned around, and instead of winning they were losing it.

So he was already upset about that. So when we had nothing to do, because the Germans had a war to fight, they needed transport wounded, they needed transport ammunition. So what happened is that they didn't have rolling stock to bring building materials to that site. So we didn't have anything to do, so what are you going to do with 200-some Jews and no work? You tell them to go to the barracks, sit down, relax, wait till the next train comes.

Not that guy. He couldn't stand the idea that there were days we had nothing to do, because we simply didn't have enough building material. So what do you do with them? Well, he found a way.

I'll give you one example. He gave us a bucket. Now, let me add here quickly that we're

talking about November, December 1944. Anybody who has been ever to Germany will agree me that is not exactly the best time of the year. It's cold, it's miserable, it's horrible.

So he gave us a bucket and a brush, no gloves, and then he marched us into the woods and said, So, I want you guys to wash the trees. Wash them so that I do not find any dirt on a tree.

I don't care, ladies and gentlemen, how many times you wash a tree, if you want to find something you're going to find something, and find he did. Then we were punished. Punished meaning no dinner, standing outside all night. Remember now, we're talking November, December, at times October. It was freezing. Not allowed to go to the bathroom. Pee-pee running down our pants and freezing. It was terrible.

We had about 12 or 14 women there who were supposed to do the cooking for the prisoners, and he made them lie on the floor, and he walked over them so he wouldn't get his boots dirty.

All of this time we didn't know what's going on. We had no idea. And I got very sick. I had what they call invertigo, a vitamin deficiency disease, which manifests in a very ugly way. You get big blotches all over your body, a high temperature, your clothing sticks on you. Ugly. Ugly is the only word I can find.

No medication. What you need is some lemon, some fresh, but of course there wasn't any for us.

So for the first time, ladies and gentlemen, and I want you hopefully to understand me, I gave up. I had not given up since 1933. I have always told myself I will not succumb, I will live to tell people like you the story of what the Nazis did. But suddenly I couldn't anymore. I was weak. I had no guts left. And I said, Well, I guess my time has come. I'm going to throw in the towel. If fate wants that I die,

so be it.

Now, may I tell the rest of the story? Why didn't it happen? What took place?

About November or December, I don't really remember, I was standing at the barbed wire inside the camp looking out with another prisoner standing next to me. It was a Sunday. Because we didn't have to work.

We saw something which I didn't understand, but he did. We saw a track of Germans going, and here comes the important point, going from east to west. They looked about as miserable as we were looking inside the camp. They had any means of transportation. They had no trucks. They had horse-drawn carriages. They had baby carriage. And all was going from east to west.

Now, why did I mention that? Because all this time, from 1941 when German attacked Russia, the directions were from west to east. The Germans kept winning the battles, occupying more and more territory of the Russians, until the battle of Stalingrad, which turned the fate around, and the Germans began to flee.

What we saw, I asked the guy next to me, Can you explain that?

He said, Yes. The Russian Army has finally reached Germany. They reoccupied everything the Germans had taken away from them, and now it's time to pay. The Russian Army hitting the easternmost province of Germany, which didn't exist anymore, which was known as East Prussia, and the Germans were fleeing from the Russian Army. That is what we saw.

So I thought by myself, as miserable as I was, if the Russians are that close, if he is right what he explained to me, if the Russians are that close I might as well hang in there. It couldn't last much longer, and it didn't.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us, Bob, about that. With the Russians advancing you were taken from Wulkow and then sent back to Theresienstadt where you would become liberated. Tell us about your going back to Theresienstadt, what you found with your family and then liberation.

>> Bob Behr: Well, simply, the Russians reached the place where we were building the headquarters. It was never finished. So the Germans put us in cars, freight cars, and shipped us back to Theresienstadt.

We arrived there about February 1945. What I found was my parents alive. My volunteering may have saved their being resettled, quote unquote, killed, and they were there.

They were both very weak. The food situation in the main camp had deteriorated quite a bit. My mother was very ill, so was my father, but they lived. They were not evacuated. They were still there.

I resumed work in the camp, but not for long, because if we arrived in February, on May 5, 1945, the Soviet Army came and liberated the camp.

>> Bill Benson: What did it mean to you to be liberated at that point?

>> Bob Behr: I can't explain that. If you are in jail -- the other day I read a story about there was a guy here 20 years in jail and he was innocent all along. How do you feel? Are there words to describe it? It's almost unreal that suddenly I could say what I want, I could do what I want, so to speak. The feeling of having survived this nightmare took a while to sink in.

You always at night had nightmares, because you didn't know what SS guy is going to hurt you and so forth. So it became a psychological adjustment to realize you're suddenly free, and you weren't really free. The camp had a typhoid pandemic, and the Russians did the only smart thing,

they quarantined the whole thing. Nobody could leave, nobody could go anywhere. They all had to stay until that typhoid thing was going away.

So it was a real big adjustment.

I fled the camp. I fled the camp with another girl. We both were from Germany, and we smuggled ourselves at a Russian troop train, which was going northeast, and we got out.

>> Bill Benson: Eventually, you would end up back in Berlin.

>> Bob Behr: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Then make your way to the United States. Tell us about that, what little time we have left.

>> Bob Behr: The German Jews, ever since the Nazis took over in 1933, they had two major goals where they wanted to go: One was the United States, the other one was then called Palestine.

Well, the British who ran Palestine in those days, in the 1930s, they had a lot of problems with the Arabs. The Arabs didn't want the Jews to come. The British wanted the oil. So they curtailed the ability of German Jews to go to Palestine. So that left America.

Well, President Roosevelt, whom 99% of the Jews admired even from a distance without knowing much about it, President Roosevelt for reason of his own appointed a man whose name I hope you will remember, first name was Breckenridge, the last name was Long. Breckenridge Long became a high official in the Department of State, and my opinion Breckenridge Long didn't like Jews particularly. But Breckenridge Long was in charge of the visa applications.

As you know, anybody who comes to the United States in those days needed a visa and permission to come in. You couldn't just hop a train or hop a flight. In those days, it was organized.

And Breckenridge Long did everything in his power to delay the approval for German Jews to come.

So it was the institute of something, I'll give you one word, I hope you will remember it, it's called affidavit. What's an affidavit? Nothing more than a sponsor. Every Jewish, German Jewish family who wanted to go to America needed to have a sponsor.

Now, turn the clock back and think about it. We're talking 1934, 1935, 1936. America was still in the depression. America had not much work, and people were very desperate. And so one of the things Breckenridge Long, he said, I'm not going to let a bunch of Jews come in, who are willing to take any job for any money just to get out of Germany. So he restricted the availability of a visa.

Now, jump forward to 1945, the war is over. Germany is gone. The President, President Truman, went to Congress and said, I want to let -- I think he said 50,000 Jewish people in without an affidavit.

We will let somebody else worry about it, but they will not have an affidavit.

To make a long story short, that's exactly what Congress approved, and the affidavit, the sponsorship was taken over by the Jewish communities in the various cities.

I arrived in New York in February of 1947, full of eager and hope and question mark what is freedom going to bring you in America. Didn't speak the language. Didn't have any relatives. My father, as I told you, died while I was on the ship. My big hope was gone. So I was all alone.

So I got to New York and they put us up in the hotel Marseilles, and the next day, two days later, we were interviewed. A lady came -- two ladies, and said, OK, your name Behr?

Yep.

OK. What do you want to do?

I said, What do I want to do? I don't know anybody. I don't have anything. What options do I have?

She said, Well, let me see. We have sponsors for all the German Jews. Let's see where your name is. She said, Oh, yeah, we got two places you can go. You go either go to Chicago or you can go to Dallas. Where do you want to go?

Now, ladies and gentlemen, remember where I lived. I lived in Germany, which was quickly cut off from the world. I didn't know beans about Chicago, nor did I know much about Dallas, but I had to make a decision right there.

So I figured if I go to Chicago my life will be entwined with gangsters. If I go to Dallas, I will live with cowboys, by far the lesser evil than gangsters. So I said, Send me to Dallas, and that's where I wound up.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Bob, we are at the end of our program. I'm going to turn back to Bob in just a moment to close us out. There's so much more, obviously, that you could have shared with us. We just scratched the surface in our time here.

You said to me that your mother after the war was really exhausted, and she died soon after the war. Your stepfather, you stayed close with him until I think he died in 1980.

>> Bob Behr: No, he died before.

>> Bill Benson: Before that.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: One of the things I wish we had time to talk about, of course, Bob joined the United States Army, ended up becoming an interrogator of ex-Nazis in Germany. You can imagine that's a

story we could spend a lot of time on.

Bob, thank you for doing this. I thank all of you for being a terrific audience. We will have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We hope you come join us at some future time.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. I'm going to turn to Bob to close the program. Because we didn't have a chance for question and answers, when we're done Bob is going to step down off the stage here. Please come down and talk to him, ask him a question, say hi to him, shake his hand, whatever you want to do. You're fine with that.

I think it's pretty obvious that not only among many other things that Bob is, it's evident that he's a historian and a professor. So I'm sure he will be happy to share as much as you're willing to take in.

I have one other request from you. When Bob finishes I'm going to ask you all to stand when he finishes, because our photographer Joel is going to come up here and take a photo of Bob standing, with you in the background standing. It just creates an incredible effect. If you'll do that for us, it will be great.

Bob?

>> Bob Behr: Last words. I'm full of last words, and don't you laugh about that.

Let me tell you why I do this. I'm 92 years old. That is a pretty respectable age. Why am I sitting here and talking to you? Often the museum sends me out of town. I just came back from Pittsburgh and so forth to give my speech.

My reason, ladies and gentlemen, is that I need you, because, don't feel sorry for me, but I won't be around much longer. Nor will any of the other survivors. They are all in their 80s and 90s. So no hard feelings, we're going to be gone.

So who's going to take the torch? It's you. It's you who lives and works and sends a word out that if and when you see an injustice, I don't care if it's got anything to do with Jews or not, if you see an injustice, don't go away and say, It's not my problem. Yes, it is. Because, unless people like you step in and try to the best of your ability to prevent an injustice, we're going to be sooner or later back to Naziism, because we already got some in the United States running around with swastikas.

It's you. I'm asking, do what you think is right. Don't go away and say, It's not my problem. It is your problem. It is your problem that you take what we have experienced and multiply it to whenever there is the opportunity.

That's my last word, and I hope and I pray that you will do that. Thank you.

[Applause]

[Program concluded at 12:00 p.m.]