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UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
***FIRST PERSON* SERIES**
Speaker: 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. This is our 15th year of the 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 by 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, 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 their program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater. 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 here today. Bob will share 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 you to ask Bob some questions.

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, which is 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 the Theresienstadt, also called Terezin, camp. 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 was to help rebuild the SS headquarters destroyed by the allies. The Red Army reached Theresienstadt and Bob was liberated May 5, 1945. This photo is of the Soviet Army.

Bob and his wife, Marie Therese, live in the Washington, D.C. area. After serving with the U.S. Army from 1947 to 1952, 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 AFB 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 Service where he is frequently called upon to use his fluency in French and German. You will find him here on Friday afternoons. Because he's doing *First Person* today, he got here at 8:30 this morning, went to work, up on the 5th floor, will do *First Person* for us and when we are done he will go back to work for the rest of the afternoon.

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

>> Bob Behr: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: Seated right here, Bob. Bob, thank you so much for joining us and being willing to be our *First Person* today. You have so much that we could spend the rest of today and tomorrow with you but we have one hour so we'll jump right in and get started. .

You spent your childhood years in Berlin before the war began, Bob. Tell us about your life, your family's life, your community in the years before Kristallnacht and before the war began.

>> Bob Behr: Well, very briefly, my father was a doctor, medical doctor, my mother was a housewife, and I am an only child because I was told that when I was born, my mother took one look at me and says, "Oh, boy, enough is enough" and never had any siblings. So I grew up.

Now, you need to sort of take mentally -- go back to the 1920s. Looking at you guys from here, I don't think there are very many people who were born and raised in the 1920s. The reason I mention it, because I was. And it's there that I made my first very faint and

nebulous acquaintance with Nazi Germany.

The Nazis in the 1920s were excellent in analyzing the mentality of the German people; meaning the Nazis gave the German people music, gave them flags, the uniform, gave them a greeting, everything which the German people sort of loved.

In addition to that, they also instilled absolutely dedicated hatred of anything Jewish. Now, there are hundreds of stories going around why Hitler hated the Jews. I'm going to skip that. I'll just tell you that he was deeply concerned that the Jews were an evil people and that they needed to be eliminated from the German life.

Now, let me give you two minutes of my family. Ladies and gentlemen, we were born Jewish. My father was Jewish. My mother was Jewish. And I am Jewish. But, in our hearts, in our attitude, I was raised as a German. My parents, believe it or not, were first Germans, second they were Germans, third they were Germans, and only then were they Jewish. So you can clearly see the priorities. We believed in Germany. My father volunteered in World War I, went to the front, became an officer and got decorated with the iron cross; really believed that he was doing the right thing to risk his life for Germany. That was the very man who was condemned by Adolph Hitler and the Nazi regime as being an evil person.

Now, I sometimes talk to 8th graders. And I always make them stand up and say anybody who's got brown eyes, I want you to stand up, to the kids. They stand up. I says, “Don't sit down. Just remain standing. And when I got them in the room, I tell them that you with the brown eyes are evil. So they look at each other,” wondering what's coming next. And I tell them, there is no explanation, you are bad people because you got brown eyes.

That's in a nutshell an idea of what a dictatorship is. So you need to accept that. I don't know if we're going to get into the history, but I wanted to tell you that was the first inclination.

My personal experience, remembering this today, 90-some years later, was communication. Anybody know what the mass communication was in the 1920s? Newspapers and what else? Come on, guys.

>> Bill Benson: They said it, radio.

>> Bob Behr: Radio is absolutely correct. The radio was playing. My dad was listening to it. He was very politically minded. And out of this radio came the voice. No idea who. It was so full of hatred. A kid could understand that this guy was angry, very mad. I heard him say things which, of course, I didn't understand. Talked about the Jewish conspiracy. He talked about the Jews have cost the loss of World War I; the Jews signed the peace treaty which was detrimental to Germany.

So what do you do when you're 6, 7 years old and you hear that? You feel a threat and you don't know what to do with it. Well, you do the only thing. You go to your mother and you says: Mom, what in the world is a Jewish conspiracy? And my mom, bless her heart, said, “Don't worry about it.” Yeah, but I like to know what it is.” Takes me too long to explain it”. You don't worry about it. Nobody will hurt you. Nobody will do anything. Nobody will harm you.” The famous words were all changed on the 30th of January, 1933. Adolph Hitler became the chancellor of Germany and suddenly had all the power to do what he has been threatening all of this time before.

So that was my awakening to the Nazi tyranny.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, tell us, after Hitler came to complete power in 1933, several years later you would go to school in Sweden. Tell us why.

>> Bob Behr: Well, I went to a boarding school in Sweden. Now, here comes the geography. Sweden is a neutral country. Sweden is a friendly country. The idea was what my parents wanted me to get out of Germany.

In order to understand it, you've got to be cognizant of what it was like in Germany after Hitler came to power. You want to be harmed? Yes. They were beating up Jews on the streets. They were making our life miserable.

Take your hometown. Think about it. When you suddenly see in stores, in restaurants, in places big signs that you are not allowed to come in there because you got brown eyes or blue eyes, in our case because we were Jewish.

Berlin changed completely. Berlin was never a very beautiful city like some places were. But it was a functional city. And all of this changed one day. Let me describe to you, if I may, the day Hitler took power.

When we have elections up here, there's a lot of tension in the air until the ballots were counted. Then you have a speech by the loser and a speech by the winner. Nobody gets hurt.

Now let me turn this around to Germany in 1933. Hitler was elected chancellor. Now, we don't have time here to outline what a chancellor is. Let me put it in a nutshell. A chancellor has under the Parliamentary system in Germany about as much power as a

president of the United States. So Hitler was now the most powerful person who can do pretty much what he wanted, and there we were.

So on that day I want to describe to you the Nazis marched through the city of Berlin towards the residence where Hitler was living to give him a standing ovation. They had made it a torch march. They had the torch march. And they were singing.

Germans love to sing. Now, that's no problem unless you know what they were singing. Let me share with you the opening line of one of the songs they were singing. In translation it says, "When Jewish blood spurts from our knives, then our lives will be so much better." Now, you're 7, 8 years old and you hear that. What does that tell you? That those guys are bound to hurt you because otherwise Jewish blood wouldn't spurt from your knives. So I lived a life full of unhappiness, full of worry. The life was confined. We couldn't do anything. I was kicked out of school. I didn't have any education until I came to America and took a G.E.D. test. My mother homeschooled me a little bit so I could read and write, but a regular education wasn't even allowed. I couldn't go to school.

I want to just give you one more example of the life, why I wound up in Sweden. I told you that my father was a soldier. I told you that my family was first German, second German, and so forth. We were proud to be Germans. What happened in September of 1934? They had a big meeting in the city of Nuremberg where they issued a new law that no Jew could be a German citizen, whether you were born there or not made no difference. From now on you are only a resident but you are not a citizen. Translate what that means in essence, you lose all of your civil rights. You couldn't vote. You couldn't do anything. You

couldn't participate in any official life. You were an outcast.

In answer to your question -- and I'm sorry I'm so long winded, but my mother wanted the best for me. And the best for me was to get out of Germany, go to some country where you were respected, where you liked, where you could live without being constantly afraid. There was a Jewish financier in Sweden who opened up a boarding school and my mother was successful to enroll me. From one day to another I was out of Germany, I was free. I could be myself. Without having to look over my shoulder who was going to kick me in the behind when I don't see it. So that's why I went to Sweden.

>> Bill Benson: I think there is a group of about 30 Jews from Berlin or Germany that were there. At some point you had to come back. Tell us why -- and there's only a couple of you that came back. Tell us about that.

>> Bob Behr: Well, very simple. Any school needs to have tuition. And it was the same as a private school. When my mother went to the bank in Berlin and wanted to change X number of German marks into Sweden, the clerk told her, "We don't do that anymore. This is currency we need for other purposes and you can't have any money to send to Sweden for your son's school."

So what was the upshot? The school closed. But we were told that the director of the school, when he announced that the school would be closing, said that they had found families in Sweden who were willing to take us in so that we wouldn't have to go back to Germany. Jubilation? Of course. For me? No. Because the director said: You know, all we need from you is the signature of your parents that they do not object if you stay in Sweden

instead of returning to Germany.

Well, my mother wouldn't sign that. She wanted me to come home. I'm from a pretty dysfunctional family, but here is the first evidence. She wanted me home. So when the other kids stayed in Sweden, I had to come back. I came back. We are now talking about maybe early 1938, January, February, and I was right back in Germany where the persecution of the Jews was worse than six months ago when I left.

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, later that year, Bob, November 9-10, 1938, Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass, tell us about that night and what it meant for you and your family.

>> Bob Behr: Well, let me first say, if I may, what is Kristallnacht. Kristallnacht is a very odd name for something. Well, let me tell you what that is.

In Paris, France, a Jewish kid killed a German official from the German Embassy. It's a long story why he did that, but trust me he got a pistol, he went to the German Embassy and couldn't get ahold of the ambassador but of the first secretary and, wham, shoots him and on the night from 8 to 9 November 1938. And the Germans used this assassination as an act which was probably unique in the world by burning the synagogues of the Jews, taking the Holy Scripture and throwing them on the floor and making the Germans walk about it. They smashed -- and this is where the word comes from. They smashed all the windows of the German-owned stores. The glass was littering on the floor. And that's where the word Kristallnacht comes from. It was a night of terror.

Did anything happen to me? No. Because my mother somehow got tipped off by some friend who says don't let your son get out of the house on the 9th of November; you keep

him home. Because, ladies and gentlemen, the Nazis also arrested 30,000 Jews, eeny, meeny, miny, moe without any reason and put them into concentration camps. The only way out of those camps was on a ship to another country. And that's another story because it was very difficult to get other countries to agree.

My father, my biological father, was arrested that night. I never saw him again. He was put in a concentration camp for no other reason that he was Jewish. But that's not what they told him. For no other reason, as punishment for the assassination of that German Embassy guy in Paris.

So here we were. What happens now? Now our synagogues are destroyed. In addition, which is not well-known, the Germans also made two rulings. Let me tell you. They told the insurance companies which insured the synagogues and the stores, that they must pay the indemnity. Whatever the store is insured for, the insurance company must pay. But then comes the hooker. You don't pay them to the owner. No. The owner gets nothing. But the state collects the insurance money. So the guys did not only lose their stores but they also lost whatever it was they would have gotten from the insurance company.

But this didn't affect us. We didn't have a store. It didn't affect us. What did affect us, what I haven't told you yet, the second thing they did, they levied a fine on the Jewish population. And I'm not having a speech defect when I tell you it was one billion marks. That's not a defect on my mind. It was a billion marks. Every Jew got a quota how much he had to pay the government. We got a quota which we couldn't meet. We didn't have that much money. My mother had to sell some jewelry in order to meet our quota.

You see, the power of the Germans was such that there was no objections. We had no rights. You couldn't go to court. It was impossible because we had no civil rights. We were not protected by that. So it was a terrible thing for us to live because life became even worse after that.

>> Bill Benson: And, Bob, of course, the following September Germany invaded Poland and World War II officially began in September 1939. You and your mother and your stepfather would remain living in Berlin until you were arrested in 1942. Tell us briefly -- I know it's a lot of time, but in those years before you were arrested, but the war was on, what was life like for you? I know you were forced to do forced labor during that time.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. The Germans initiated something for Jews which I call forced labor. And I don't want you to think it's slave labor. We still lived at home. We could go back and forth to work. So we were directed to go to work. They created an office where you had to report in the morning. And then they said, ok, there, you go, carry coal or you carry bricks. It was all manual labor; difficult but not impossible.

In addition, since the war had started the whole country was on rations. Everybody had a ration card. We did, too. The hooker with that ration card was it was worth 50% of what the Christian community got.

Now what does that mean? If you are entitled to half a pound of butter a week, which isn't very much in the first place, we were only allowed a quarter of a pound. Whatever the Germans got, we got 50% if it was available because, you see, chicanery, we were not allowed to go shopping at 9:00 in the morning. Jews could only go at 4:00 in the afternoon where most

everything was sold out. It was a war going on. So what was left over was able to sell to Jews. So for the first time in my life I was hungry. I just didn't have enough to eat. There was a black market going on. But for us it was very difficult, so it was a life which is almost difficult to understand.

Now, when you hear this story, what do you think kept us going? I'll give it to you in this one word. That word is spelled h-o-p-e. As long as you can hope that things will change, that things will get better, you've got something to hang on to. But the hope got dimmer and dimmer because everything -- let me just give you an example. Bill alluded to it. On 3 September 1939, the Second World War broke. The Germans marched into Poland. And the next day Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Now, let me describe to you that day. It was a Sunday. All of a sudden it was announced that the World War II had broken out because Germany was, as the Nazis put it, was attacked by Britain and by France.

My parents on that day -- I'll never forget that. They were jubilant. They were absolutely besides themselves in saying this is the end of the German Nazi regime because the French and the British are going to defeat German Army in six months and we will be free.

Now, looking at you, most of you if not all of you, are not World War II veterans. So let me just tell you what really happened. The more my parents were jubilant, the less reality set in because the Germans were winning. They were winning everything. The German Army conquered Paris four weeks after the war started. They never got to Paris in World War I in four years. Now Hitler was in Paris and the swastika was flying. The happiness of my parents

went smaller and smaller and smaller.

>> Bill Benson: And, Bob, of course, you would continue under those circumstances until July of 1942.

>> Bob Behr: That's right.

>> Bill Benson: You were arrested. Tell us about the arrest of you and your parents.

>> Bob Behr: Well, we were arrested by the Gestapo. The arrest was not because we were Jewish. That's the funny part. That had nothing to do with it, perhaps indirectly but not directly.

I don't want to bore you with a personal story.

>> Bill Benson: No, no. This is an important story.

>> Bob Behr: All right. Then I will tell you.

>> Bill Benson: Ok.

>> Bob Behr: My mother had a girlfriend, a lady she went to school with. Don't let that word girl fool you. My mother was a grown-up person, so was that lady. I think they went to school together. I'm not really sure. And that lady came to my mother and said to her, "Lily -- which is my mother's first name, "Lily, I need to get out of Germany. I have no family. I have no relatives. I have nobody. I'm all alone. I need to get out. Can you help me or have you got any ideas?"

Well, the second part of the story is, yes, my mother did. She had met a Catholic priest who lived and worked in the city of Constance. When you go back, look at an atlas and find the city of Constance. That is in spitting distance from Switzerland. You can practically

take a stone and throw it and it winds up in Switzerland which, as you know, was a friendly, neutral, free country.

So, I'm going to make that short. My mother gave that lady the address and the name and address of the priest. She went down to Constance. She met the guy. She persuaded him one way or the other to take that lady across the border during the night because it was punishable. You were not allowed to go to Switzerland. But she better cross. So, happy story.

Let me tell you the rest of it and then you will see what Bill meant by that the woman is free. It's Switzerland. It's July. The weather is beautiful. So she goes to a cafe, sits down, and writes a postcard. That is the first mistake. You don't write a postcard to a country which has censorship, but she did. And she writes that she is in Switzerland, the capital, blah, blah, blah, and then she writes a P.S. on the postcard, which says, "Without you I would never be here. Thank you so much."

Now, you are now a Gestapo officer. You are assigned censorship of mail. You look at that postcard and there's a Swiss stamp on it. So you know that that postcard was mailed in Switzerland. You put two and two together and bingo. You know that the recipient of that postcard is the one who helped that woman to escape, which was punishable, severely punishable. So the Gestapo found us a day later or two days later, arrested all of us for helping a person to escape from Germany in the middle of the war.

>> Bill Benson: And when you were arrested, I believe you were beaten and thrown into a cell.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. They beat me up. They told me -- they took my father and my mother.

They told me for me to report the next morning at 9:00 to the local police precinct.

So, ladies and gentlemen, what are you going to do now? I had a choice. I could go into hiding. I could kill myself. I could do very little else. Going into hiding in a wartime situation when everything was controlled, where all the food were rationed, where do you go? The punishment for hiding a Jew from the authorities was concentration camp if not worse. Who do you go to and say: I want you to hide me until the war is over? I didn't have anybody.

So Bill is right. I reported to the precinct. They beat me up. Arrested me, too. Put me away. And then we were shipped off to a concentration camp.

>> Bill Benson: I know our time is starting to get close -- run out of it. Tell us about where they sent you and what it was like for you in Theresienstadt.

>> Bob Behr: Ok. The Nazis had two major categories of camps. One is a killing camp where they gassed people. And one is a working camp. Many of the people, six million people, as you have heard, went to the killing camps. They arrived. They put them in a gas chamber. End of story. But then there was a category of Jews that were not sent to the killing camps. I don't have really too much time to tell you why not, but bottom line is, to make it very short, the reason we were not sent to a gas chamber is because my father was a veteran of World War I. Don't ask me where the Nazis got that honor code that they suddenly honored refugee -- I mean Jews who were veterans of the war but they did. So we did not wind up in a killing field. We wound up in Theresienstadt, which is an old Hungarian town which was emptied and used them as a concentration camp. It was a terrible stay.

>> Bill Benson: And tell us about that, because it was a terrible stay.

>> Bob Behr: Well, I want to tell you, the tone of Theresienstadt when it was still a civilian town had about 4,000 people. 4,000 people. In the space of 4,000 people the Nazis, including us, moved 60,000 people. 60,000 people in a space of 4,000 people.

I'm going to ask you a question. How many of you like sometimes privacy when you can close the door, want to be alone for an hour or two? Let me see your hands.

Well, thank you. That's what we thought. Everybody likes privacy. This was impossible. It was so crowded there were people everywhere, day and night. At night we couldn't go out. We were locked in the building. In the building, my mother, my stepfather and myself, was a four-bedroom house. Not four bedrooms, four-room house out of which everything was gone. There wasn't a stitch of furniture. There wasn't a nail on the wall. There was no straw on the floor. We had to sleep on the cement floor. Of course everybody had to go to work. I was immediately collected to work. And if I tell you what my first work was, you will shutter.

My first work was to collect dead bodies. People were dying like flies. They had to be collected, manually, and brought outside the town where another crew was burying them in graves. So that was my acquaintance with death.

I venture that most of you when you were confronted with death was a solemn occasion either a viewing or a wake, but nothing where you take bodies and throw them on a cart to bring them out of town.

You know what that does to you? It makes you pretty raw. It makes you pretty raw. You don't even care anymore. All you care is how heavy is the body and how high do you

have to throw it? Can you imagine that? I was 20 years old. It was not something I enjoyed. So that's what work was like.

>> Bill Benson: Eventually, through the help I think of someone you knew you were able to get out of that job and work in a kitchen.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. I was lucky. I met a Czech guy who took a liking to me. He was older than I am. He got me in the kitchen. But it didn't last very long.

Well, you want me to go into --

>> Bill Benson: Not yet. I want you to take a moment and tell us a very poignant story. Of course, by working in the kitchen, if you were clever, you could get a little extra food. You could take some butter. And your father, your stepfather, who was the M.D., gave you a lecture about taking extra butter. Will you share that with us?

>> Bob Behr: Reluctantly. But I will.

Hunger was prevailing. Hunger, except for people like me who were working in the kitchen, hunger was everywhere. People were dying of hunger. I had a mother and a stepfather who were hungry. What do you do if you have food and they have none? I tell you what I did. I stole. I stole things which I could put in my -- in the pocket of my pants and gave it to my parents. That was the way I could extend their life.

The problem is you couldn't do this openly. I remember taking some margarine without paper. Margarine was in a barrel. I took some margarine. How am I going to get this to my parents? I put it in my pocket. The result, you can imagine. Everything was greasy, but they loved it. They had something to put on their piece of bread and it made no difference.

When my stepfather -- I keep saying father, stepfather. My mother got divorced -- I mean -- yeah. She got divorced. My biological father got arrested. I told you this. He was in a concentration camp. My mother remarried and what I talk about now is my stepfather. And when I came one day prouder than a peacock, margarine in my pocket, and says, "Look what I brought you." He took it, she took it, they used it, and then he called me up saying, "Come here. I want to talk to you." and then he gave me a lecture. Now, you be the judge. He was telling me in no uncertain terms that what I was doing was stealing, stealing is wrong; you don't steal. He told me that I should not do this because I have to live with myself, being a thief. I looked at it that it saved definitely my mother's life. Because I didn't always take just margarine. There was flour and things like that.

It was a very difficult time for me to hear my stepfather lecturing me not to steal knowing that it saved my mother's life. What would you have done? Don't answer that. But it's not easy. If I had time, I could tell you more stories like this. You get into conflict with your moral consciousness because I kept taking stuff. I ignored my stepfather. I figured it's more important -- and he ate it, too.

[Laughter]

So I figured it couldn't be all that bad because if he is so intent on being honest and upright, then he wouldn't have touched it. But he did. So end of story.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, you would eventually be sent to work -- we had mentioned in the introduction you were sent to help rebuild the destroyed SS headquarters.

>> Bob Behr: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: That was a horrific experience for you even after you had been through all you had been through.

>> Bob Behr: Bill, that was the worst time I have had. This was a time when we were sent -- there were 200 people. How did I get there? Well, Bill already said the SS headquarters was destroyed and the guy wanted to have a new headquarters. He picked a place and says build me a new headquarters. They came to Theresienstadt and asked for 250 volunteers to go there and build that headquarters.

Well, in order to make that interesting for people like us, the prisoners -- why would we want to volunteer to go there? Well, you need to know that by that time -- when I told you that we had 60,000 people crammed into a space for 4,000, the Nazis had began to realize that they had to do something because they were going to have diseases. They have to do all sorts of problems. They got to empty that camp out. For the Nazis, there was a one-way street, the street ending with the word death. That is when they started having transport from our camp by train once or twice a week, a thousand people in cattle cars to Auschwitz and into the gas chambers. That emptied the camp.

We all knew that. We all knew what happened. I don't have time to tell you how we knew, but we knew. We knew that those who were what the Nazis called would be "resettled," were actually killed.

So back to the headquarters. The Nazis asked -- needed 250 people to build that headquarters. And then in order to make that more appealing they said if you volunteer to go, we will not, quote, resettle, unquote, your folks. And I volunteered. Because I figured my

parents are liable to be arrested, put in a cattle car, sent and so forth.

So I volunteered. And this is what Bill was referring to. It was a little village where we started to build that headquarters. That, ladies and gentlemen, after all of these years I went through, from 1933 to 1943, 10 years, after all of this was through, the treatment in that place was so bad that for the very first time -- forgive me for being honest with you -- I wanted to die. I had lost the guts to want to live. I had enough.

Remember, we were cut off from any news. We had no idea what the war was doing, who was winning, who was losing, nothing. All we knew is that life became very miserable. The SS guy treated us so badly so rough that it wasn't really worth living anymore. And I gave up.

What made it worse, I got very sick. I got a disease which is known as a vitamin deficiency. We had no fresh vegetables. We had nothing. It is ugly. You get big blotches over your body. Your clothes stick. You have a high temperature. You feel -- in order not to use a bad word, you feel lousy. I was weak. I just reached the end. And I was still young. I was only 25 years old. But I had no guts left.

But fate wasn't quite happy for me to give up. And fate guided me one Sunday afternoon on a barbed wire fence where we were looking out of the camp. Another prisoner and I were standing there. We didn't have to work that Sunday. We looked out. And what we saw out there was a most amazing sight. We saw a trek of Germans going -- and this is important for you to understand. They were going from east to west. Since 1941 the Germans were going from west to east conquering Russia. Now the tide had turned. We see the

Germans going west.

I asked this guy next to me saying, "Do you see this?" "Of course I see that." "What is it? Who are these men?" "That," he said, "are Germans fleeing from the Russians." The Russians after the Stalingrad, the Germans have lost all the territory they had conquered and they are now reaching Germany proper. And the Germans are fleeing from the thing.

And I thought by myself: If the Russians are that close, then maybe I shouldn't give up. Maybe I should pull myself together, hang in there, and maybe survive this mess until the Russians are coming.

To make a long story short, in closing, the answer is, yes, and yes. I survived. We returned to Theresienstadt in February of 1945. And on the 5th of May, the Russians came and our camp was liberated. That's the story.

>> Bill Benson: When you got back to Theresienstadt, what condition were your mom and your stepfather in?

>> Bob Behr: Weak but living. They were alive. They were not evacuated. Like the Germans said, "resettled." They were there. I could see them. They were very weak. They died shortly after war from exhaustion. But for once the Nazis had kept their word. They did not resettle, quote/unquote, people where somebody volunteered to go.

>> Bill Benson: So Russians liberate you in April of 1945. What was liberation like?

>> Bob Behr: What was liberation like? This is almost difficult to put into words. In those days they didn't have news cameras and everything. Liberation was mixed emotions. Nobody knew what the Russians would do to you. Luckily most of the people in the camp were from

Czechoslovakia. The languages resemble each other. They're not identical but they resemble each other. So the fact that you suddenly were free, could say what you want, could do what you want. The only thing you could not do is leave Theresienstadt, the camp because we had Typhoid. The Russians had to quarantine everybody and say nobody is going to get out because you have a disease which is contagious. So it was an experiment.

I managed to escape anyway. I went back to Berlin to see if I could get my old apartment back if it wasn't destroyed. And it wasn't. But it was full of German refugees who told me to go to hell in a hand basket; they were not going to let me have that apartment because it was theirs. The German refugees who were bombed out by the bad Americans and they are not going to give that apartment up.

So, what does yours truly do? I went to the Russian Kommandant. I don't speak a word of Russian. With a great deal of luck I got ahold of a Jewish Russian officer who spoke Yiddish. Now, Yiddish and German can understand each other. If you speak Yiddish, you could understand some German. So I told that guy what happened to my apartment, that the refugees won't get out and I needed a place for my mother and stepfather when I get them out of the camp. He said, "Oh, we'll take care of that." He gave me a Red Army soldier with a Tommy gun, and we went back to the apartment. The same guy opened up again and said, "We told you cannot have." I said, "You see this guy?"

[Laughter]

And he said, "Yes." he said, "Two hours. You're gone or else he starts shooting. He doesn't speak a word of German. He just know what this means. “”Shoot, and he'll shoot. He

won't ask any questions. So we got our apartment back.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Bob, in the little time we have left I'd like you to tell us about your getting out of Germany and coming to the United States and about your biological father if you don't mind.

>> Bob Behr: Can I have half an hour?

[No Audio]

-- to bribe a consul to give him a visa. That was the only way that he could get out of the camp if he could show the Germans a visa to another country. He did. Wound up in New York.

You know what? When I was on a ship to see him, he died. He died of cancer the very week when I was on the ship to meet him. So when I got there, I was told that he had passed away two days ago. That was a real big disappointment because he was the one I wanted to visit. I wanted to start a new life and so forth.

>> Bill Benson: I wish that we had a lot more time because Bob obviously told us only a little bit about what happened over the course of all of those years, but then Bob ends up in the United States Army and eventually he goes back to Germany and he ends up interrogating German prisoners of war and ex-former Nazis; a lot to be said about that as he worked for our intelligence service for a good number of years after that. But that's for another time.

I'd like to thank all of you for being here. I'm going to turn back to Bob to close our program in a moment. But I'd like to remind you that we'll have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday through the middle of August. So I hope you can come back and

join us. There's information on the website about our programs as well as what the program will look like in 2015.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. So I'm going to turn back to Bob to close the program. And when Bob's done, he'll step off the stage. We didn't have time for question and answers so, please, absolutely -- Bob, you'll stay for a little bit? I know you have a job upstairs, but they'll probably let you be late for that.

>> Bob Behr: I don't have a choice.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: That's right. Please, feel free to come down and just shake Bob's hand, say hi, ask a question. Please do that.

Let me turn to Bob to close our program. We really thank you for being here.

Bob?

>> Bob Behr: Well, very briefly, Bill told you my age. I'm 92 years old. Question. What am I doing here? Why am I talking to you? Not just once, several times. Why am I doing this? The reason is very simple, because, ladies and gentlemen, we need you. You don't need me. I am a has-been. I'm gone. But we won't be around. People like me will die out. This is the way it goes. Sooner or later we will be gone.

I need to rely on you that you take what you have learned this morning into your life and act on it. If you see an injustice, don't go away and say it's not my problem. Do something if you can. Call somebody if you can. We don't want to have another Holocaust. We need people like you who are young, good-looking, and energetic and you can say don't

do that.

That's my mission. That's why I'm sitting here. That's why I'm talking to you. And I beg you, take that to heart. You don't do that for me. I'm a has-been. I'm gone. It's for the future, for your children, for friends, for everybody else. Fight injustice wherever you see it, wherever you hear it. And if you don't, you're going to wind up like me in a concentration camp because somebody will take over. So keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. Do something if necessary.

Thank you.

[Applause]

[The First Person event ended at 12:01 p.m.]