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

REMOTE CART

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>> Edna Friedberg: I think we'll start a few minutes early. Good morning and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Edna Friedberg. I'm one of the museum's historians. I'd like to welcome you to our very beloved *First Person* program now in its 15th year.

The 2014 season of *First Person* is made possible by the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation. We are very grateful for their support. In fact, we're very happy that today Louis Smith is with us. So if you'll just wave and say hello.

[Applause]

Thank you very much.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at the museum. So in addition to their personal history connection to the mission of this museum, they are also an active partner in our work. And we are grateful for that.

This program will continue through mid-August, every Wednesday and Thursday. If you're in town or if you have friends or family who are coming to town, please encourage them to come on Wednesday or Thursday through mid-August. You can find details about upcoming *First Person* guests on the museum's website, www.ushmm.org.

If you'd like to keep in touch with the museum and learn about our programming we have, including possibly in your community because we do travel exhibitions around the country, in your program you have a card that looks like this Stay Connected. Fill it out and give it to a staff member as you leave. If you do that, you will receive an electronic copy of the

biography of today's guest, Mr. Martin Weiss, as well as other materials to explore related to this history.

Today we will listen as Martin -- Marty, as we affectionately call him here -- as Marty shares his story with us for about 45 minutes. After that we'll have an opportunity for you in the audience to ask questions. But before I invite Marty on the stage to join me, we've prepared a brief slideshow to orient you for the conversation.

As much as the story of the Holocaust is history writ large, it is the story of individual experiences. Today we're going to talk about one boy caught up in this history. Here we have a picture of Marty Weiss in 1946, the year after his liberation.

Marty was born in the country of Czechoslovakia in a town called Polana in 1929. There's Czechoslovakia on the map.

In 1939, Germany occupied one half of Czechoslovakia and Hungary occupied the other half. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, conditions in Polana worsened. By 1944, the arrow here indicates a town of Munkacs. Martin's family was transported to a ghetto in the nearby town of Munkacs.

In May, they were deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center where Marty and other family members were chosen for slave labor. Later Marty and his father were sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. This is a photograph of rocks that were taken out of the quarry by slave laborers at the Mauthausen camp.

Showing you here a document that was uncovered only recently in our archives and which was new to Marty even though the document describes him as a prisoner. This

document is a Prisoner Registration Card which reflects Marty's transfer from Auschwitz on May 21, 1944, to the Mauthausen camp. His prisoner number appears in the upper right-hand corner where that red circle has appeared, along with the abbreviation Ung-Jude, which is the abbreviation for Hungarian Jew. His name is in the upper right-hand corner if you can see it along with his birthday and other family information.

So with that background in mind, we are very, very pleased to have Marty with us today and for his willingness to talk. Marty, I'd like to ask you to join me, please, on stage.

[Applause]

I'd like to begin by mentioning that Marty has been a volunteer here at the museum for, what, around 13 years?

>> Martin Weiss: Something like that.

>> Edna Friedberg: And Marty and his beloved late wife Joan, whom we're missing very much, had two children and four grandchildren.

Let's begin with your own youth, Marty. As I mentioned, you were born in Polana, in Czechoslovakia. Tell us a little about your family, please, and life in your hometown.

>> Martin Weiss: My youth, when I was younger, actually, we -- Czechoslovakia was a democracy. By the time I was like 7, 8 years old, I remember we were very proud to be a democracy. Now, the reason even at that young age it made an impact on me, I had older siblings. There were nine: four girls -- five girls and four boys. I was number seven. So I really -- when you have older siblings, you sort of look up, seeking the word through them.

One of the reasons I remembered we considered ourselves very lucky, life was

looking good, we had high hopes for the future and so on. We were for the first time hoping to go to higher education and so on, which before it was almost non-existent.

Our neighbors -- Poland was next door to us. They didn't have the dictatorship at the time. Hungary was a feudal system, though it wasn't a bad country at the time. Oddly enough, they had a good amount of Jews living in Hungary. And most of the time, I'm always surprised to this day, that people don't realize if you were Jewish, if you lived -- whatever country you lived in -- like the Germans, the Jews in Germany or Hungary, we were very loyal citizens. We were really very proud. In Germany, the German Jews were extremely loyal citizens and the same thing with Hungary. They would insist speaking Hungarian and so on. Yet, yet, because of prejudice, they always had problems. There were problems all the time.

Now, we were lucky, like I say, because it was a democracy already. We felt more free and so on. When the war came around, all things changed. My brother was living in the city already. They went to look for work. My sister was going to school, to college in the city. Not too many people, by the way, at that time ran away from home to school; an oddity. Very few people did. She was the only one that went to college from town whether it was boys or girls.

Anyway. So we had this taste of the outside. Plus we were very lucky. We had a summer resort in our town; a real nice one, too. It was owned by one of my father's friends. We attracted a lot of people. They came from all over because we had the mineral baths. So this man that owned it really built up a nice -- it was something even today he would be proud of. So a lot of people from Hungary, from different places.

1937, 1938, especially ‘38, Hitler started making a lot of noise about going to war. And everybody knew already that he was going to go to war. We were hoping that things are not going to be that way, aren't going to happen. So everybody just could not believe it. I remember even though I was young, what I remember, are most of us could not believe that it could happen.

When Hitler started, the first thing he did, he took part of Czechoslovakia -- now, I always had a problem with this because this was a very well -- how can I put it -- economically, it was one of the best parts of the country. Most of the population there were German. But they lived in Czechoslovakia. It was a democracy, so they had their own schools. They treated them like everybody else.

>> Edna Friedberg: Meaning they were ethnically German.

>> Martin Weiss: Right. Hitler started making a lot of noise. He wanted to take part of Czechoslovakia. They said, oh, yeah, we are German; we want to belong to Germany. Hitler said they're German; they belong us. So he just took it.

And by the way, not to get into politics, but Chamberlain, the prime minister of England at that time, literally signed away Czechoslovakia, gave it to him as a present. After that, guess what. Once he took that he decided he wants the whole country. So he took the whole country. They were no match to him because he was well-armed. He had a big Army where the Czechs were well-armed but they were not big; a small country.

Most of the time -- I would like to stress before I go further that Germany or Hitler didn't do everything on his own. No matter how strong they were, they couldn't have done it on

their own. They had a lot of allies. And many times in history, I hate to say it, even while we are still living, history always lets them off scot-free. I'll name you a couple: Hungary on top of the list, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia. You could go down the line. Without them, he could have never achieved what he did.

What was sadder still is whatever country they occupied, they had lots of people, whether it was Western or Eastern countries -- like today you hear about the Ukraine a lot. He had a lot of collaborators in those countries that joined the Nazis. Most of the time people don't talk about this. But more than that the allies, Hungary was one of them -- I'll just stick to that for a while. They occupied our area in 1939, March 1939. So it was much before the Americans known the war as ‘41. We were occupied already in 1939.

At first, we knew already we were in big trouble because they were part of the Nazis organization. So we knew. By the way, the Hungarians were well-known to be very anti-Semitic, like I say, but they're Jewish citizens. They were very proud to be Hungarian. They still are, some of them.

Anyway, I always had a problem with that because if a country doesn't treat me well, I don't think I would be so proud.

>> Edna Friedberg: How did life change for your family after Hungary?

>> Martin Weiss: Fine. Changed first slowly. You learn to condition yourself. What happened is for the first year or so we were getting used to them or they were getting used to us also. By 1940 they mobilized. What they did is they took in this most of the young men into the Army. They were fighting along the Germans against the Russians.

However, the Jewish men what they did, they inducted them into the service from 20 years old to 45. They were kept in civilian clothes under Army jurisdiction. They called them labor battalions. In English translation it comes out to labor battalions. In Hungarian, you would not understand.

Anyway, once they were drafted in, they were under military rule. They used them as slave labor. And by labor I mean -- by the way, the mountains, a lot of forests. And the forests, believe it or not, go through Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. Everything is forests; a lot of mountains, hills, and forests. So they used them to cut down, believe it or not, the trees, all the trees in the forests. And everybody was complaining about it because they were destroying nature. But they did it so that partisans couldn't hide in the forest.

>> Edna Friedberg: And your older brothers were forced into these slave camps.

>> Martin Weiss: My two older brothers immediately drafted into it; right, like all the young people. I don't want to spend too much time on this, but my brothers ended up on the Russian front.

By the way, it was hell on earth. That was the worst place to be even for a German soldier, the worst place to be. So for them it was much worse. And they were right behind the lines. What they were using them for was for minefields, bury the dead and so on. And some places they were cutting down forests and so on.

I often wondered why they didn't escape. They were not locked up like in the concentration camp, locked up under electric barb wire and so on, constantly under guard. Not. I'll tell you the reason some of you may never have heard. They worked up a system that

if someone escaped from the company, the first thing they did, they lined them up the next morning and just took every 10th person and they shot them.

>> Edna Friedberg: Take your time. This is not easy to talk about.

>> Martin Weiss: Obviously that's enough to put an end to anybody. But more than that, we were always very observant. Like today most of the Jewish people, like myself, are not very observant but at that time we were observant.

What happened in our system of learning, the first thing you learn is to preserve life.

>> Edna Friedberg: They didn't want to be responsible for someone else losing his life, of course.

>> Martin Weiss: That meant they couldn't be responsible for someone else's life so therefore they didn't.

Anyway, I don't want to waste too much time on this. But just to give you an idea how life shapes. As it turned out, they were on the Russian front all the years. I had one brother; he was there for a very long time. He eventually got over to the Russian side. And guess what. He got over to the Russian side; for whatever reason the Russian accused him of being a German spy. So guess what they did. They put him in the prison with all the other German prisoners. We didn't know he was alive even after we came back from the camps. Two years after the war they released him. He was in the coal mines in Asia and Russia for all that time.

>> Edna Friedberg: He was lost to your family all those years.

>> Martin Weiss: Right. Finally we find out that he was released two years after the war. At any rate, eventually we got the Czech Republic -- I'm not going to go into the details, but he

finally made it to the Czech Republic where I had a brother still. He settled there for a while. Then after that he emigrated out of the country.

The point I want to show you is everybody's life is a little different. But getting back to our area, about the family, we lived under Hungarians -- actually, by and large we were getting by. The only thing that they did was take away all the Jewish businesses. They took away the license. You couldn't be in business.

Some places they threw you out of the house. Some official wanted your house, they took your house. That doesn't happen too often, too much, in our area, but it did happen. I had an uncle, he was very sick at the time, and they actually took away all his property, his house, and he had to get out. He didn't even have a place to live. This is what they did. They did whatever they felt like.

>> Edna Friedberg: Let me interrupt you a second to ask. What did your father do before the war? And then during this period, how was he supporting his wife, all of these kids?

>> Martin Weiss: We were very lucky, my family, because my father had a business. He was in the meat business. We also had farmland. So we used to farm our own land. And that was a big, big thing, especially during the war. Now, we were raised as soon as we were big enough, you know, we helped on the farm. We cut the hay, all kinds -- potatoes, wheat, just about everything. So even during the war we were lucky, we had all that we needed.

Just to give you -- couldn't find a bar of soap. My mother figured out how to make soap. My father was in the meat business. Used the fat to make soap. So it just shows you. But we were fortunate.

By that time there was already a shortage. And I'll tell you how much of a shortage there was later on in the war. In the spring of the year, I remember we planted potatoes, seedlings for potatoes. And peasants used to come in the night and dug up the potatoes. And I remember saying: Oh my God. What kind of thieves? How could they be like this? I was so innocent so naive, I guess. How could they do this? Well, they needed something to eat. So they dug up the potatoes. At the time I didn't see it that way, I have to admit.

In the community, we got along fine. By the way, all our neighbors, most of the community from town, were Russian. There were 40 Jewish families. There was maybe, like, 2,400 people in the town or whatever. We got along. We never had any problems. We did business with them. In fact, many of them used to come to my father for advice or help or my uncles. So we had no problem as far as getting along.

When the Hungarians came in, all of a sudden a lot of people that had all of a sudden hatred in them, all of a sudden joined in and they were doing the same thing.

>> Edna Friedberg: Your neighbors?

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah. Some of them; not many. But by and large we got along.

As time progressed, we kept on hearing stories about all kinds of atrocities in this Poland and Ukraine especially and so on. We kept on hearing the atrocities. They were so gross, so terrible, that I remember my father discussing it with his friends. We would hear all of these stories. We know they're true, but how could we believe the Germans could be like this?

And I might add, Germany was ahead in just about -- they were ahead in science, medicine, literature, ahead in music. They were very proud of that. How could they possibly

be such murderers? And this is what we had a problem to process.

>> Edna Friedberg: Were you hearing about mass shootings?

>> Martin Weiss: Mass shootings. We kept on hearing -- you go upstairs, you'll find out they had what they called Einzatsgruppen, killing squads. The Germans advanced into Russia. They were going through all of those countries like Ukraine and all of those countries. Wherever they went, as they advanced, they had Einzatsgruppen following them and they would just go and pick up all the Jews in the area. Didn't matter if there were five families in the town, one; it didn't make a difference if it was 20,000. They would pick them up, take them to the woods and just shoot them. They would dig mass graves.

By the way, they had to do it themselves. And in most cases what they would do -- mind you, this is Eastern Europe during the winters; cold weather. Believe me, Eastern Europe could be very terribly cold. Even where we lived it was very cold. And they would have them undress. We came from a culture where a man didn't even see his wife get undressed in front of him, especially children would never see their mother, like in the United States, undress or something like this. And those men, especially a lot of the older men, Orthodox, very observant. Even today if you go to a Jewish area where there are Orthodox people, they don't even look at a woman. They go like this. They don't shake hands, nothing. They have to get undressed and march to their death. Then they would mow them down with machine guns in the mass shootings.

I'm just showing you that how could an educator, so-called leaders of the world, have a population that could do this? Ordinary people became extraordinary murderers. This is

nothing this day I couldn't understand it.

>> Edna Friedberg: I'm going to interrupt for a second to make sure everyone understands the paradox. Since the Weiss family was living under Hungarian rule and Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany, paradoxically you were sheltered from some of this worst atrocities for several years.

>> Martin Weiss: Several years. For a while. Like I say -- by the way, from other countries, like from Germany -- by the way, a country nobody ever talks about, Slovakia. They were part of Czechoslovakia. Right? Slovakia joined the Nazis immediately as soon as Hitler stepped into Czechoslovakia. Slovakia was so cooperative they not only joined the Nazis -- our section was taken by Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the Czech part, taken by Germany. Slovakia joined the Nazis with such fervor that they were the first ones to ship out all the Jews from Slovakia.

By the way, like 90% of them never came back. Ok?

>> Edna Friedberg: So to get back to your family's story, on March 19, 1944, Germany invaded Hungary, its ally.

>> Martin Weiss: 1939.

>> Edna Friedberg: Right, but they invaded Hungary. And then your life changed in your part in ‘44.

>> Martin Weiss: What happened -- the reason I was -- I was getting there, by the way.

[Laughter]

>> Edna Friedberg: Fair enough. Fair enough.

>> Martin Weiss: No. The reason I try to explain is we kept on hearing these stories. So

every so often we heard rumors that they were going to pick us up and ship us out, too. Already now, after hearing those rumors -- not rumors, all the information, we figured our time is coming. Every so often there was a rumor, whatever you want to call it, that they were going to pick us up in a month or next week or whatever. It passed.

Finally, one day, by 1944, it was late in the war -- by the way, by that time the Germans were losing the war. That we knew. The Russians were already pushing back. What they did is they came out -- it was like an Easter. One day they announced everybody should be ready to be picked up. The Hungarian police came in the next day, everybody up. I had an uncle, he had T.B., was in a sanitarium. They picked him up by the stretcher. He would have died anyway. Nobody was left behind. We had no place to go. We didn't have the means. It wasn't like in the United States you could go to work and get on a train. Under the Nazis whether it was Hungary or Germany you couldn't move without being checked for papers and so on. You couldn't go anyplace. Of course, if you didn't have the money -- sometimes if you had the money, you could bribe somebody or something. But if you didn't have all the means and all of this stuff, but there was no place to run. We were sitting ducks.

So came next morning. We packed our bags. They took us to a ghetto. And from the ghetto we were there a very short time without food, without anything. We were in a brick factory. Literally, if it was raining, we laid in the mud.

You have to remember, we were all civilians. Everybody had had lots of small children because we had families. In Europe, people had families between three and 12 children. So there were lots of babies, a lot of small kids.

Now we were prepared for anything because of the stories we heard. We were there a short time. One day the train came up with the cattle cars. They put us on the train. The time I went, there were 125 of them in a boxcar. Some of them had 25 to 135 people in the boxcar. They had several trains running a day. And I remember the trains were like 100, 120 boxcars on the train.

So ask yourself, how could a locomotive pull that? A locomotive in the front and back. The reason I know that not because somebody told me. When we went around a bend, there was a little crack open in the door and we were able to see the end of the train. So we saw the locomotive from the back. That's why I know.

Anyway. By the way, the Hungarians did such a good job -- it wasn't the Germans doing it. Two months they shipped out 450,000 people. Think of the logistics: 450,000 people. Not only that but there was only one railroad going through our area to Poland, to Auschwitz. They tied up the main rail lines with us, with the Jews to Auschwitz, instead of carrying material for the Russian front for the troops. Ok? I could never understand that either. I wish somebody could explain it to me.

Anyway, we got to Auschwitz. In our case it was around midnight. The minute the train stopped, the doors opened up and there were big floodlights like in a ballpark surrounding our perimeter. It was not a big perimeter. They were surrounding us with these lights. They were shouting, "Schnell! Schnell!" Get out! Get out, fast. There were guys in striped uniforms, the prisoner uniforms, with sticks like broomsticks, threatening you to hit you and all of that. We found out later they were kapos and they were other prisoners except they had to

do this job. If they didn't do it, they were in trouble. So they scared everybody.

So we got on the ground. And before you know it, there were soldiers surrounding us with rifles, literally their finger on the trigger. Not only that but they had some nasty, nasty police dogs, really nasty ones. They were growling. They were like you never saw. They would tear anything apart. That's how nasty they were.

Here we are, mothers with children, sisters, everybody was holding on to each other not to lose somebody because the crowd was big. Before you know it, they had us separated, men from the women. In short order, we have to march through -- what do you call it -- there was an officer standing in shiny boots, beautiful outfits, clean. He would go like this or like that. If you went to the right, you went to work. If you went to the left, you went to your death. Very simple. Of course, we didn't know all of that. The rumor was that because people that would work, that would pay for the women and children and so on. We had no way -- there was no choice. You were hoping, ok, it was so.

Because we knew they were going to ask us go to work -- I was not very big actually. To show you I was not very big -- all my friends died first night in Auschwitz and I didn't. Ok? There were another five boys. They were about my height and my size that made it. But actually, technically, they were a year older than I was. So I was the youngest one that survived from the whole town.

>> Edna Friedberg: You were 15 at this point?

>> Martin Weiss: Just about 15. Right.

What I did before I got off the train, I put two, three jackets on so I looked bigger.

Because I had my father, my brother, I had a big brother. I went with them, right after them. And I passed. Now, I didn't know it at the time, but that was -- I think it was the jackets. I'm not sure. Who knows?

>> Edna Friedberg: What other members of your family were with you when you arrived?

>> Martin Weiss: Oh, yeah. My mother, two sisters. They went to the gas chambers immediately. However, I had some cousins. There were seven children. Ok? Two of them survived. They were my age, actually. One of them ended up working in a crematorium. Eventually he was killed as well. Only one of them survived.

>> Edna Friedberg: Was your father with you also?

>> Martin Weiss: My father -- anyway, once we were separated, men from the women, picked for work, we were sitting -- we were standing in a huddle. And the women were separate. Then there was a group not far, just a short distance, a very short distance, empty space. I noticed my mother and my two younger sisters. So decided -- I told my father: You know something, I'm going to go and run across that space, join them. Because this way -- I was older, I'll be able to gather food or something. It would be much easier for them.

My father said ok. So I tried to make a run for it. Well, guess what. One of those guys in the striped uniforms, very nasty, grabbed a hold of any neck, the back of my shirt, back of my neck, threw me back. He says, "You can't go there," threatened me with stick. I went back to my father and complained.

Guess what. After we went through the showers, got the uniforms, they took away clothes, wooden shoes and so on, came to the barracks. By that time it was dawn. And then I

found out what happened to the other people. And I realized that man saved me, saved my life. So that was my introduction into Auschwitz.

There's always an element of luck in life. I didn't stay in Auschwitz too long. I was there only a week or 10 days. We were told we were going on a transport. So they brought our boxcars. We -- even though this time only 50 people in the boxcar. We have to sit cross-legged. By the way, two guards. I don't know why they needed guards. We were locked in anyway. But we were not allowed to talk, move. We were sitting like Indian fashion, our legs crossed. We were not allowed to move anything. I don't remember what we did for a bathroom. Did I tell you? I don't remember. I just don't remember that part at all.

Anyway, we got on the train. We went -- this time we find out we're going westward. Each time the train stopped, somebody figured now they're going to kill us, each time.

By the way, when we came to the barracks -- I forgot to tell you. When we came to the barracks after the showers, the first thing we saw, not far, a few hundred yards away, it was a row of pine threes. And under the pine trees there was a big fire. I'm talking like the size of a football field. Ok? The width of a football field, big flames. The flames were so high they were going up to the height of the trees. We tried to make out what it was.

In the meantime -- by the way this was Auschwitz. It was dawn. We saw these big chimneys, five or six chimneys going straight up very high, like industrial chimneys, black smoke spewing out. And the one thing I'll tell you, if there's such a thing as hell this must have been -- if an artist had to paint hell, he couldn't have done any better. It was very dingy, smoke -- all you could smell was smoke. And, by the way, bodies burning, the chimneys, the

black smoke, was rising. These fires under the trees were going. We were like, didn't know what to make of it. One of the kapos that was there already told us: See those fires? Your families are right there now.

What happened, the crematoriums couldn't handle the volume. The Hungarians shipped out, like I say, in two months, 450,000 people. They were killing 10,000 to 12,000 people daily. Of course, we didn't know that then. The Holocaust does research and we find these things out.

What really gets me about it this was done by ordinary, so-called ordinary, people. And by the way, in the crematoriums, who do you think the people were helping the Germans that were part of it? Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, you name it. All the countries that Germans occupied were willing helpers. Of course after the war they were all victims. But the point I'm trying to say, you find in every population that people are capable of doing it, unfortunately.

So we got on the train. We were going westward. The train stopped on the Danube.

>> Edna Friedberg: Danube River.

>> Martin Weiss: Right. By the way, Vienna not far off. We were able to see the city. Even I could recognize it from pictures probably, whatever.

The train stopped at the water. We heard all kinds of stories about them throwing people into the river, Ukraine and so on. We figured: Aha, they're going to throw us into the river. We tried to reason. If they did that, they couldn't have bring us here. They could have killed us there. So you argue with yourself.

Anyway, we went a little farther. We came -- the train stopped alongside of this huge mountain. It turned out to be a stone quarry, but it was a huge mountain. They disembarked, marched up the mountain. We came to the top of the mountain. It was a big camp. It was called Mauthausen.

It turned out Mauthausen was also a very, very -- if you get on the internet, you'll read up on it and see what I'm talking about. They didn't kill outright in gas chambers. They killed you -- they had a system. They worked it out. Again, we find this out from the Museum. They killed you with attrition, by working you so to death and not feeding you. You only had a certain amount of lifespan. Ok? So this was their program. And it worked. Because people did not survive too long in Mauthausen or any -- by the way, Mauthausen had lots of sub camps. We were told there were 40 sub camps, but the Museum found out later, the last couple of years, there was something like 80 to 100. This is just in Austria.

Anyway, Mauthausen was -- most of the people that stayed in Mauthausen, they worked in the quarry. By the way, Mauthausen was built all out of stone. Like the gates, the walls looked like like if you look in the movie 1500 England or something; the big, thick walls. That's how Mauthausen was built. All done by the slave labor.

One thing I will tell you about Mauthausen -- and so far I was talking about Jews. Right? Once we came to Mauthausen, Mauthausen had a variety of people, nationalities. They had people, even Germans. They had Germans. They had Pols, lots of Pols, lots of Ukrainians, lots of Russians, Russian POW.

>> Edna Friedberg: As prisoners.

>> Martin Weiss: Right. So we were processed in Mauthausen. Then we were shipped off immediately to a working camp. The camp I went to was Melk. Now, Melk was a small camp. It was about 12,000, 13,000 population. The work was very, very hard also.

I stress Mauthausen -- by the way, we were all considered political prisoners. We all had markings. We had markings why you were there. Most people at Mauthausen, the Mauthausen camps, were considered political. However, there were a lot of Germans, like prisoners, sentenced 15, 20 years for murder, robbery, rape, whatever. So they were there also. They were usually the kapos because they were rough. If you live in prison 15 years, you're tough. So they turned out to be the kapos. The kapo in my barrack was one of those. When I found out he was a murderer, I said: Oh my gosh. But you know something? Made it my business never to face him. I always avoided him. Actually turned out not to be so bad in hindsight compared to other kapos who were much worse.

Anyway, we went to work. We worked in building tunnels. I can't go into details because of time. In less than a year we had a population of 12,000, 13,000. We built seven tunnels. And the reason they need the tunnels, they wanted to put all the factories underground because the allies were bombing them.

So we were under constant -- by the way, we worked with cement, gravel. We had to literally mix it with a pail of water, almost like in a house, your own yard. We didn't have any modern equipment or anything. We worked with dynamite. We had to blast into the ground and stuff.

>> Edna Friedberg: And you were starving.

>> Martin Weiss: We were starving all the time. That's one thing I should really stress. One thing you never thought about anything else, many times people think -- you thought about your parents, about this. The only thing you thought of was how hungry you are. Ok? That's the only thing you could think of. If you had a free moment, the only thing you did is you talked to somebody next to you. You could only dream of what you would dream to have.

So Hungary -- I found out this, too, came through the Museum. We had no idea of calories. We lived between 300 and 700-calories a day. Hard labor. Plus we had to march in all kinds of weather to and from work. I remember we were so tired that I remember literally falling asleep walking.

Anyway, I'm not going to go into detail but to show you how in life sometimes you're lucky. I was actually lucky more than once. While I was working in the tunnel, on the night shift, I had to go to the bathroom. So I came out of the tunnel. I went to the latrine. I came back a few minutes later and there was this big black smoke coming out of the tunnel, real heavy black smoke. Turned out a cable -- they have those big cables, literally this thick, caught on fire. In a few minutes the whole tunnel got black. Only thing in the tunnel was we had light, naked light bulbs, small light bulbs. That's the only light they had in there. The smoke, you couldn't even see the light bulb. Literally within minutes 65 or 70 people died just in our own tunnel in that one tunnel. And I happened to be outside. By the time I came back, it was over. This was like a few minutes later. Shows you how sometimes you can be lucky.

Again, because of time I'm not going to go into too much detail, but another time it happened, I worked again a night shift. Most of the people in the camp -- they had, like, Army

barracks, individual barracks. I lived in what you call, might say, headquarters buildings. It was made out of concrete and stone. The kitchen, some warehouses -- sleeping quarters were on top. It was made literally -- I think before that it was used for ammunition depot from what I was told.

Anyway, we were -- the building was long. So 600 on one side and 600 on the other side. One morning, again with luck, they needed somebody to fill a certain -- they called it commandos, working group. In this case it was maybe 20 people or whatever they needed somebody. Regardless if you worked the night before or whatever, they didn't care. They just grabbed you, you go. And they grabbed me. Even I went to this commando group. This was the nicest job I had in all the time I was there. I went about two, three miles from the camp. They had to clean up the grass. It was spring. The twigs and stuff. It was the nicest job I had. That was like a promotion.

[Laughter]

So I remember, it came lunchtime. We broke for lunch. It was so nice. I remember it was sunny. The grass was green. We laid down on the grass. I mean it was like: My God. So while we were doing this, all of a sudden these bombers came, English bombers came in. They honed right on the building, our barrack. They dropped 15 bombs on that building, on one side of the building, actually. Because very strong. It was made out of what they call -- they had a special name for it. It was built with iron cement, so they had a special name for it. I can't remember exactly in German what it was. Anyway, it was a very, very strong building. 600 people that were sleeping there from the night shift got burned, got killed immediately.

Ok? I was not there. So, you see these things just happened by fluke, God, whoever.

>> Edna Friedberg: When you were in Mauthausen, were any other members of your family with you?

>> Martin Weiss: Yes. Actually, when I came to Mauthausen, it was my father and I had a couple of uncles. One uncle and my father were in the camp I was in. However, we didn't see each other too much because we had different work shifts. Besides, I was on one side of the camp. They were on the other side of the camp. Occasionally we were lucky enough that we were able to find each other, otherwise we never knew -- we had no way of connecting to each other. Then one day I found out my father had died. He had pneumonia. He died. My uncle did survive. And another uncle came to Mauthausen with us but went to a different camp.

It just so happen, in this camp also I had a cousin; actually two cousins, two brothers. One of them the work was too hard for. He died there. His brother was lucky. He was an orderly for the kapo. He was my cousin. We were there together in the same barrack. Now we had to be evacuated because the Russians were closing in from Hungary. The Hungarians were pushing in to Austria.

And guess what the Hungarians were doing. Instead of releasing the labor battalions, guess what they were doing. They were taking this testimony with them. They brought them into Austria and put them into a concentration camp with us.

Now it just so happened when it came -- when they evacuated us, they took us back to Mauthausen. And from Mauthausen they send us on a forced march, now they call a forced march to another place, to Gunskirchen, another camp. I have to skip a lot for the sake of

time. We went on the forced march. I'll tell you why it's called the forced march.

By the way, by that time, there was no food, nothing. The only thing we had, if you are strong enough to stand in line -- by that time everybody was the walking dead, literally. The food they give you, like sugar beet soup.

By the way, all along that's all we got. Instead of coffee, they give you this sugar beet broth. It was made out of some kind of a beet they used for cattle. They made it into a tea. So you got a little bit, half a pint or a pint, whatever. Like a cup. You got that. They used to give you a chunk of bread once a day. Right?

This time -- by the way, the bread was made mostly out of sawdust. So when they tried to cut it, the bread literally, because it was old and sawdust, it literally crumbled like bread crumbs. So I remember literally putting out your palm of the hand. They would put it into the palm of your hand. That was the ration for the next 24 hours and that little pint thing.

By the way, we came back from Mauthausen. That's what we were given already. So that, after living like this, we had to go on a march. Consequently, you realize most people were not able to march.

>> Edna Friedberg: You're talking about marching for days not hours.

>> Martin Weiss: By the way, it was blue and white and green, mildew chunks literally. Literally chunks. Like the size of a pea. You know what I mean? And guess what. You ate it.

One thing I would like to say about Mauthausen, too. While we were in Melk, the working camp, we were a mixed community. Like I mentioned before, there were Pols, Russians, Greeks, Italians, you name it, Serbians, all kinds of people from all over, wherever

the Germans were occupying.

We came to Mauthausen. First thing they did was separate the Jews from the non-Jews. Then they figured, aha, this is our end. Why would they separate us out? Here until now we were all together. So they put us on the side of the mountain outside the camp. This was a very neglected area, full of brush; like thorn bushes and stuff like that. While we were there, by now we were hardly getting anything. If you got what I just mentioned you, you were lucky.

One day, I can't remember how long, but we had been on this forced march. The forced march consisted of literally just marching. Most of the time they took us through country roads but we were going, we were told -- the rumor, nobody told us -- to the Swiss border. They're going to change us for Americans giving trucks for us. Now, I was like 15 years old but I was not a fool. I said: Who's going to give trucks for us? We are useless. Heaps of nothing.

So what happened, as we marched, if somebody fell down, first thing the guard would pick up the rifle and shoot him right there. This went on the whole time we were marching. I'll give you an incident. We were on a country road. There was a potato on the ground. There was one fellow saw the potato. He leaped for it. Another fellow jumped for the same potato. Noticed it at the same time. They started fighting over the potato. Guess what. The guard just picked up his rifle and just aimed at his face and shot him in the face. Just like that. Shows you how life was. Not to for the sake of time. I'm sorry.

>> Edna Friedberg: We need to finish up soon, yeah. Sorry.

>> Martin Weiss: Ok. I'm going to have to skip some. We came to Gunskirchen. There was,

again, a new camp, five barracks. I'm telling you, five barracks. We had to go in. By the way, in every camp you went in, you have to stay outside all day, rain or shine. You have to go -- at night you have to get into the barrack. 5,000 men in a barrack. Imagine.

So we went in. Literally, I'm not exaggerating, we have to stand up like this. It was squeezed like sardines. You couldn't even move. But I was younger, so I was able to sort of like jiggle down a little bit and sort of squat. That's how you spend the night. In the morning, by the way, the place was quite a number of bodies every morning. People just didn't make it.

By this time already we were in very bad shape. But here, again, luck. I mention -- the reason I mentioned work battalions, Hungary, they brought them in when they evacuated. Who do you think -- I was in Melk, his brother, we got separated on a transport. First day I came there I run into his brother. He was in the Hungarian labor -- he was pretty good with conditions, so were his friends; so two buddies. I hooked up with them. But mind you, out of 12,000, 13,000 people and walk into him and see him.

Anyway, I was very, very happy that I saw him. I felt a little more confident now. But here things are so bad that literally people were literally falling on the ground and just couldn't get up. The last line.

One day we were told we were liberated, that the Americans are there. I didn't see Americans. We thought it was a trick; that we would go outside the gate, they'll have machine guns and mow us down. This is how you think after a while.

So guess what. We didn't leave. We stayed an extra night just to make sure. The next morning we realized that the guards were gone and we are ok. So we started looking for

food.

Again, I'm going to sort of just get to the point. We looked for food. Oh, we came to a field. We found this truck. It was an Army truck but sort of in a ditch, in a field. We looked in the front of the seat of the truck and there was a big tub of lard. Just open tub of lard. And lard, what are we going to eat? We were hungry. Lard would kill us. Right? First of all, how you could eat lard?

[Laughter]

But it had something to do with food. So one of the guys, like I say, they were in fairly good shape yet because they were just in from Hungary, took his fist right through the glass. All the glass went into the lard. We took the lard on the grass and we scooped out with the palms of our hand, scooped out the glass and saved the lard.

Now we were really excited. We had something to go on. Right? So then before we left we looked in the back of the truck and we discovered a gold mine. What was it? Leather hides all refined already that we could use. We really got excited because we knew we'll need shoes. During the war there was nothing for shoes, especially in Europe. Nothing we had for anything. So we got excited. Each one of us rolled up. Couldn't carry too much because I was very weak. I rolled up a few of them. Everybody had whatever they could carry.

We went and saw a farmhouse not far away. We come to the farmhouse. This is something, I'll be honest, when I started speaking, I spoke for 3, 4 years and forgot this story. Now I have to include it each time. It came to the farmhouse. Mind you, we were full of hate. We hated Germans like you would not believe. I'll speak for myself. I hated Germans like you

could never hate anything more than I did. I remember that these guys were in fairly good shape. They were pretty strong. They were big guys. We came to the door and knocked on the door. Instead of barging in like hoods, we knocked on the door. Something about us to this day I don't know why we did that.

So we knocked on the door. Lady came to the door. She opened up the door a little bit. I guess she was afraid. She was home alone. We asked her for some eggs, flour, and water. The lady ran back in the kitchen. She came to the door. She gave it us. We never went into the kitchen to cook the stuff. We just took it.

She had a barn in the backyard. She had one of those iron kettles that you see, the rustic kettles to heat up water for the Cowboys, whatever, the same thing. So we built a fire underneath. One of the guys mixed up the ingredients. He made dumplings. That was our first meal. In fact, one of the guys ran into one of his uncles, an older man, about 50 probably. He was a rare thing because most in the 50s didn't make it by then. They couldn't take the stress. He died a couple of days later because he ate a little more than he should have. Anyway, so we made dumplings. We had really a good meal. I remember feeling very, very content.

Then one of the guys suggested: You know something, what we should do is take -- each one take some hides and give it to the lady. Not one of us complained. Nobody objected. We just did it.

The reason I'm making a point of this, it's only after I started speaking three, four years later I forgot this. Now I like to include it. I could never understand to this day why we acted

so noble. We never, never entered her house, never pushed her around, never did anything, but actually gave some payment. The only thing I could say that we were raised a certain way with certain values. Ok? And the reason I'm proud of it is because we didn't lose our humanity. Because by that time I didn't feel like a human being anymore. Ok?

So I'll end it right here, too, ok? So I just wanted to bring that up. How you raise your children makes a difference. Even under these circumstances -- and believe me, after it was over I still hated Germans for a long time. I don't now, but I did for a long time. It took a long time to get it out of my system. But I realized by hating them I hate myself as well. And I learned not to do this.

I'll stop right there.

[Applause]

>> Edna Friedberg: Before we open for questions, actually, if would stay standing, it's perfect. We've actually been doing a very nice portrait of our speakers with you standing behind him. So if you would please stand behind Marty while our photographer, Joel, gets a picture of him together with you.

Thank you.

[Applause]

We have a few minutes. Marty, if you don't mind having a seat, please. I'd like to thank you, Marty, for your courage in sharing this painful past with us. We know it is not easy. We are grateful.

We have people walking with microphones. If you have a question, please raise your

hand and we will pass you the microphone so that everyone can hear. We have one back there and a woman here. Thank you.

>> I just wanted to know if these early experiences in your development, how it might have affected later life choices and education and career.

>> Edna Friedberg: Could everyone hear her? Ok.

>> Martin Weiss: That's a pretty good question. I'm very lucky. I handled it, with hindsight, I think pretty good. By the way, when we came out, we had no place to go; no money, nothing. I was literally on my own. Three weeks after liberation -- some people stayed in Germany or Austria, wherever. They stayed in the camps and so on. I chose to go and look for my siblings because I knew if I made it, they made it. So I picked myself up at my cousin's that I met and we went back to our home area.

It just so happened -- little detail about it. We came back. All the bridges were bombed out so we had to get on a train, get off a train, go through the gully and out to the other side, catch another train and so on. Anyway, we got to the city of my area. This was a big railroad station, mind you. Again, luck. Out of all the people I ran into -- mind you, I was 15, 16 years old and I ran into a man I recognized, in a big station. I'm talking like Grand Central Station. I asked him if he ran across my brothers. And he said yeah. He says: Your brother escaped from the Hungarians, set up housekeeping but not in your town. He already -- he was already married. So he had a house in a different area, a different county, entirely different area. I was never there.

By the way, in the United States, 15, 16, you're knowledgeable. You see television.

We didn't know -- you were afraid to go to a city. You just were not used to it. He told me this information. And guess what. I started going to my hometown. I made up my mind I would go to see where my brother is. I found him there. That was my first break.

Anyway, we stayed there for a little while. By the way, the Russians were there. We realized the Russians were not going to leave. They were not going back to Czechoslovakia. So we escaped very early. I could give you lots of details about it but I'm not. Anyway, so we went to the Czech Republic. We found a sister also survived, one sister. One sister died.

From there on I just picked up life as it came, never interested psychiatrist. As far as education, that's one thing that bugged me because I couldn't go to school. I came to the United States very early because -- had a sister left two weeks before the occupation. She left for the United States. She was able to get an affidavit. We were able to come out a year later to the United States. So I came here early.

The minute I got here, again, I was independent. I got a job. I got my own place to live. I lived on my own. Although my sister lived nearby so I had lots of support. From there I went on. Since I actually couldn't go to school because -- I literally started educating myself. I used to go to night school for years. It was just on piecemeal. Never complained to anybody. Never cried to anybody. Never went to a psychiatrist.

I did ok. I raised a nice family.

[Applause]

>> Edna Friedberg: Question here. Is there another question?

I can say that Marty is very beloved by all of us here at the museum. He is not

exaggerating when he says that he just has an unbelievable attitude and a beautiful, beautiful family. We're very grateful to know him.

Are there other questions? Yes, one right there.

>> Have you ever taken your family, your children, and your -- or your grandchildren back to any of the areas of the concentration camps?

>> Martin Weiss: No.

>> I can understand why. Thank you.

>> Martin Weiss: I never had a desire to.

>> Thank you.

>> Edna Friedberg: Other questions? Yes, ma'am, right there. The microphone is coming down.

>> Is there anything that your neighbors that were non-Jews could have done?

>> Martin Weiss: Not really. I'll tell you what. They were not in a position. First of all, most had nothing. Ok? They couldn't have done anything.

By the way, the Hungarians didn't like them either because they were Russians -- now they call them Ukraines. They were good people, hard-working. They didn't have much. They were scraping a living. The Hungarians looked at them as just like the Germans did -- how can I put it? Inferior. So they didn't even consider them as people. They just didn't. You have no idea how it is. There are so many things that -- when somebody thinks they're so high above you, they just don't see you. I can't explain it. They didn't like the Hungarians either. There was very little they could do either way.

>> Edna Friedberg: Along those lines, when you exit the theater down the hall to your right, our current special exhibition explores this question, "Some Were Neighbors," about the choices some people made either to be collaborators or complicit with the Germans and allies or to take extraordinary risks to help. If you don't have time to see it today, look for "Some were Neighbors" on our website as well.

Time for one last question. One second so everyone can hear you, please. Thank you.

>> What were some of the customs that your family practiced that would go away in that childhood with such values of how you lived through it and where you are today.

>> Martin Weiss: The values we had are not complicated. They're very simple. My father was a stern man. Fathers were different in those days than they are today, including myself. Very simple. We were brought up -- what do you call it -- I guess the teachings of the Bible, if you will. We adhere to it.

One thing you learn, the first thing, you respect your elders, your parents, respect other people. And fortunately my family, we were all like this. But it's not just me. These fellows, the first supper, nobody objected. Here is a German woman we hated. Ok? Did I really hate her? But because we were so dehumanized we didn't feel like we were part of the human race. But the population, the Hungarians, looking at them -- they didn't arrest them, but they looked down on them. They were not nice to them because they were Russian, Ukraine, whatever you want to call them. Hungarians were here and they were here.

That's -- by the way, that took me a long time to figure out. That's why they were able

to do it. When they committed those atrocities, they didn't see you as a person, as human being. They saw you as something else. If you had a bunch of rats in a barrel and you just shoot them. And this is the way they looked at you. And this is why they were able to do it. There's no other explanation.

Now, why do people get like this? I don't know. But my upbringing, my whole family, they were big guys but they were not brutal. You know, they were ordinary people. That's the difference and I'm proud of that.

By the way, I raised my kids that way.

[Applause]

>> Edna Friedberg: It's our tradition here that our *First Person* guest has the last word. I'd like to turn it over to Marty. If you have some final thoughts which you'd like to leave us, please.

>> Martin Weiss: I'm just going to read a little bit of something for you for closing.

In closing, I would like to thank you all for being here and listening to my testimony. It is very important that deniers of the Holocaust don't succeed. Six million, 1.5 million children, were murdered in the most brutal fashion by one of the most modern and enlightened countries at the time that gave us famous philosophers, scientists; were also capable of the most atrocious acts in history. All those killed have no gravesite markers. Instead we have the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, a memorial museum that serves as the only memorial and used as a teaching tool to stop bigotry and hate. Even today there are groups and countries that teach hate to children often in the name of religion.

In Hebrew Scriptures there's a saying, "Repair the world." I'm very proud as all of us

should be, that the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum exists. It educates people from all over the world to repair this world. By the way, the translation to repair the world means that every person is responsible to leave a better world than he found. So we take a lesson from that.

I will also, if you don't mind, I speak -- I have been speaking now for quite a while. I speak outside the state, Maryland, like in the south, Utah. It doesn't matter where it is, in the Deep South, and the kids sometimes, I'm telling you, they all behave fantastic. They care. You'd never know we have bigotry in our own country. They are really terrific to see that our children are growing up better, the way I see them. I could say all we can do is be proud of stuff like that.

Thank you.

[Applause]

>> Edna Friedberg: Thank you, everyone.

[The *First Person* presentation ended 12:05 p.m.]