UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON STEVEN FENVES
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Remote CART Captioning

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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. We are in our 17th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mr. Steven Fenves, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2016 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their support.

First Person is a series of conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue twice weekly until mid-August. The museum's website, listed on the back of your program, 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 receive an electronic copy of Steve's biography so that you can remember and share his testimony after you leave here today.

Steve 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 questions.

Today's program will be livestreamed on the Museum's website. This means people will be joining the program via a link from the museum's website and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's website. And we invite those who are here in the auditorium today to also join us on the web when the rest of our programs in April and early May will be livestreamed. Please visit the *First Person* website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.

For our web audience, if you would like to use Twitter to ask a question, send a picture, or write a comment during the program, please feel free to do so using #ushmm.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Steve is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

We begin with a studio portrait taken in 1940 or 1941 of Steve and his sister, Estera. Steve was born June 6, 1931 in Subotica, Yugoslavia. The arrow on this map of Yugoslavia in 1933 points to Subotica.

Steve's father, Louis, was the manager of the printing plant of a Hungarian language daily newspaper and would later become the editor of that same newspaper. His mother, Claire, was a graphic artist. In this photo we see Louis and Claire at a horse race in Subotica in the 1920s.

In this photo we see Steve and his family on an outing to a farm in the summer of 1940. In 1941 Germany attacked Yugoslavia and its ally, Hungary, occupied Steve's town. Life changed immediately for Steve and his family. Jews in Subotica were subjected to Hungarian racial laws, which were modeled after those in Germany. From September 1940 to May 1944, Steve's family lived in one corner of their apartment.

In May 1944, Germany occupied Hungary and Hungarian-occupied territories like Subotica. Soon after Steve's father was deported to Auschwitz while the rest of the family was forced into a ghetto in Subotica. At the end of June 1944, Steve and his family that remained in the ghetto were sent to another ghetto and sent then to Auschwitz. Here we see an aerial reconnaissance photo of Auschwitz Birkenau taken in September 1944 by the US Air Force. The arrow points to the barrack that Steve was in from June through October 1944.

In October 1944, Steve was sent to another camp at Niederorschel. On April 1, 1945, about six months later, Steve was sent on a death march to the Buchenwald concentration camp.
Steve was liberated by the Americans on April 11. He was then placed in a field hospital established at Buchenwald, we see that field hospital in this photo.

Four months later Steve returned to Subotica and was reunited with his father and sister, but his father died less than six months after returning to Subotica. Steve's mother perished at Auschwitz. Steve and his sister immigrated to the US in 1950.

After arriving in the U.S. in 1950, Steve was drafted into the United States Army in 1952. After his discharge he enrolled at the Champaign-Urbana campus of the University of Illinois where he would eventually earn his Ph.D. in civil engineering and begin a 42-year academic career in the computing field at the University of Illinois and later at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. After retiring from Carnegie Mellon in 1999, Steve and his wife, Norma, whom he married in 1955, moved to the Washington, D.C. area where he worked for 10 years at the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

Steve and Norma have four children. Gregory is President of the University of Texas at Austin. Carol is Special Assistant to the New York City Commissioner of the Department of Design and Construction. Peter is a professor of literature at Northwestern University. And their youngest, Laura, is a human resources consultant here in the Washington, D.C. area. Steve and Norma have seven grandchildren between the ages of 8 and 30. Norma is here today with Steve.

Steve first began speaking about his Holocaust experience in the late 1970s when he became the founding president of a Holocaust survivors' organization in Pittsburgh. Upon his second retirement from the National Institute of Standards and Technology in December 2009, Steve became active with this museum. In addition to participating in the *First Person* program, he also volunteers with the museum's Visitor Services on Thursdays.

In 2014 Steve published "The Life and Art of Klara Gereb: 1897 - 1944," a book about his mother, a graphic artist who perished in Auschwitz, and her work that was rescued by her former cook during the deportations. Steve's granddaughter, Hannah, a graphic artist herself, was the designer of the book. Copies of the books are available from Amazon.

With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Steve Fenves.
>> [Applause]
>> Bill Benson: Steve, thank you so much for joining us and for being willing to be our *First Person* today. We have a large crowd and you have a huge amount to tell us in a very short period of time. So we'll start.

You were nearly 10 years old when the part of Yugoslavia, where you were living, was occupied by Hungary and your family's life would be forever changed. Before we turn to that time, let's begin with you telling us a little bit about your family, your community, and yourself in those years before the occupation, before the war.

>> Steven Fenves: All right. Well, before that -- I point this out every time I speak here. I taught for 42 years. I never had ushers who ushered people to the front rows so my students always sat in the back rows. This is quite a change for me.
>> [Laughter]
>> Steven Fenves: All right. We lived in this town -- Yugoslavia as a country was only 12 years older than I was. It was only founded after World War I. And before that it was part of Hungary, third largest, Hungary. Very large agricultural center became a border town. It was never as lively as what my parents talked about from before the war, 100,000 people, Jewish population of about 6,000, 4,000 belonging to the progressive congregation, 2,000 belonging to a number of small Orthodox congregations.

We were not particularly religious but my parents attended high holiday festivals, anniversaries, etc. We, my sister and I and three cousins, attended religious schools three afternoons a week and then youth service on Saturday mornings. Regular school went until noon on Saturday so the community organized a religious school for children in the afternoon which had to end promptly at 2:00 because that was the time when the three movie houses in the city opened the matinees and, of course, everybody ran out of the small chapel as fast as they could.

The fact that in school we studied in Serbian and at home we spoke Hungarian was a normal thing to do. That never bothered me, bothered us. It was strange when my children started school and they spoke the same language in school as we did at home. For a while that bothered me.

So we had a very pleasant, upper middle class life. There was talk about the war. There were people coming in as refugees, from Poland, but nobody was really prepared for what happened and it came all of a sudden.
>> Bill Benson: Steve, before we turn to those years, tell us a little bit about your father.
>> Steven Fenves: My father was the younger brother. His older brother became interested in literature in high school. His classmate was later known as the greatest Hungarian writer of the first quarter of the century so they together founded a school newspaper, etc.

When my uncle graduated from high school, he immediately went to Budapest, ostensibly to study law. He spent most of his time as a journalist. Reports are that he never graduated. Everybody called him Dr. Fenves but apparently he never got his law degree. And he came back and started a newspaper with a very sizeable dowry, when he married my aunt; he bought the paper. As soon as my father graduated from high school, he went to Croatia and worked to support his brother. As soon as they could afford it, he came back as the manager of the plant.

So my father was very interested in all of the activities of the newspaper. He was very much interested in his people. For some reason that I don't understand, a number of retirees opened up little wine and beer shops with some food on the side. I remember going there for tasting every one of them, accompanied my father. And particularly Orthodox employees had these fantastic feasts. We always went to those. So we felt very close to the people.
>> Bill Benson: How about your mother, Steve? She was a very talented artist.
>> Steven Fenves: My mother was a well-known artist. The local museum keeps advertising her as the first university-trained graphic artist in town. She did a lot of traveling after school. The family lore is that the two of them met when she started doing commercial work for the paper, etc., including the redesign of the banner. She was not as active as we started growing up for the simple reason that the two of us outgrew the so-called nursery and barged into the so-called studio. So that sort of curtailed her activities.
>> Bill Benson: I can't help but ask you to talk about this. You mentioned to me that Wednesday afternoons was a time off for maids and governesses, when they all took some time off, and that with your seven cousins you would do terrible things.
>> Steven Fenves: Seven cousins in town, one in Budapest who occasionally came to visit and then we were eight. I was the youngest of the eight. It took years in school before I realized that my name was Fenves and not what means the little [Indiscernible]. I thought that was my name.

So we were on our own. Whatever the older guys did, guys and gals did, I followed. So one incident that I had mentioned previously, in the economy with absolutely no refrigeration, no refrigerators, etc., you subsist during the winter on what you have canned and preserved during the summer. Well, one day we broke into my grandmother's pantry, soaked off the labels of every jar and can in the pantry, and rehung them on others.
>> [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: As you said a minute ago, those early years were pretty good years for you.
>> Steven Fenves: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: In 1941, Germany invaded Yugoslavia and their ally, Hungary, occupied your part of Yugoslavia, where you lived. From the very first day of their occupation, your family and your community were immediately subjected to profound upheaval. What happened to your family once the Hungarians arrived?
>> Steven Fenves: The second day of what the Hungarians refer to as liberation, which we refer to as occupation, an Army officer expelled my father at gun point from his office. As of about a month ago, I now have a copy of the order of the commanding general of the cessation of the newspaper. My father and my aunt were thrown out. Well, not just that they were thrown out, the plant was taken over by an Aryan administrator who made it publicly known that he intended to popularize the family and did some nice things like closing access to the bank, to the personal accounts of my father and my aunt, at the same time charging the entire payroll of the plant to that personal account and a few other things like that.

So that's how things went. We lived for the following three years on what possessions we could sell, including my stamp collection that I was very proud of. Eventually 2/3 of the apartment was ceded through Army officers.
>> Bill Benson: You had to have Hungarian officers live in your house with you?
>> Steven Fenves: Yes. There was no more nursery, no more studio. It was all ceded to the officers. And three years of increasingly severe and restrictive and humiliating regulations. Every other month something had to be turned in, radios, etc., but eventually it was clocks, alarm clocks, and stuff like that, long lines standing outside, people coming by and spitting at you. It didn't make any sense. Kids had a raffle going to guess what was going to be the next confiscation in the next month.
>> Bill Benson: What happened to your educations?
>> Steven Fenves: Oh, yeah. That speech of yours needs to be corrected. The Hungarian exclusionary law called Numerus Clausus was copied by the Germans. It was promulgated in Hungary proper started in 1923, the proportion of Jewish students and academic institutions to the same proportion as in the general population, which was about 6%, Numerus Clausus.

Academic education, of course that's elsewhere in Europe, started the fifth grade. That was the first year. So that first summer of occupation I had to study very hard to take this ruthless exam that was designed to kill you. Eventually I was one of the few excepted in. The Jewish community set up a private school for the others. It didn't matter much because you sat in the back of the class, totally ignored by the teachers. Raising your hand you learned was not worth it because nobody ever called on you. So it was a very hard period.

My mother, a very good graphic artist -- actually, her degree was in industrial design. She set up shop. Half a dozen of her relatives were knitting, crocheting, weaving, all kinds of things. And then that was shipped to Budapest where her cousins could sell them at a much better price than we could in the small town. So her handy crafts really helped us survive.
>> Bill Benson: Was your sister able to continue her education?
>> Steven Fenves: She went -- there were several Catholic orders, some nuns, and a teaching order who did not honor the state law and accepted Jewish students. She went to a school run by a convent.
>> Bill Benson: And as you told us, your father was forced at gunpoint to leave his office. The newspaper was taken away from him. There would subsequently be a trial associated.
>> Steven Fenves: Yeah. All of this had to be legalized, of course. In 1943 there was a trial to make this legal. One incident I remember reading about, I don't remember, is the accusation was made that

it was an anti-Christian act that they made the workmen work on Sunday afternoons to bring out the Monday paper.
>> Bill Benson: They said your father made them do that.
>> Steven Fenves: Well, my aunt was the manager by that time, my father the editor. Of course, the defense statement that every other paper everywhere else in the world has a Monday edition which is for use on Sunday the judge ruled irrelevant to this case. So that's the kind of treatment you got under law.
>> Bill Benson: And you would, as you said, live under those conditions until 1944. And then in the spring of 1944, with Hungary about to capitulate to the allies, Germany moved quickly to occupy Hungary and the areas it occupied, including your town. Conditions for your family quickly turned far worse than under the Hungarians as your father was taken and your mother, sister and you were forced into a ghetto. Tell us what happened to you and the rest of your family.
>> Steven Fenves: My father, all the doctors, lawyers, Jewish intelligence in town, was taken away in one night as the Nazis did everywhere, housed for a few weeks in a brickyard nearby and then shipped to Auschwitz. He eventually wound up working in a coal mine in Silesia and eventually was liberated. His memoirs say he was among 30 living out of a camp of 7,000.
>> Bill Benson: At the time, did you have any idea where he went?
>> Steven Fenves: No. Nobody ever knew. The biggest surprise, a year later after my sister and I went back, is that he came back on a Soviet Army military train.
>> Bill Benson: We'll talk maybe a little bit more about that later.

Steve, you shared with me that it wasn't Germans that --
>> Steven Fenves: Oh, yes. I did not see a German soldier until the arrival in Auschwitz. Everything was done by the Hungarian state police. They had long ago planned all of that. Many years later Norma and I were in the Holocaust museum in Budapest and the entrance room is plastered with facsimiles. There was a first page of one of the Budapest papers describing the deportation and the orders of the commanding officer of everybody will be shot if anything happens, etc. I mean, I knew that everybody knew about it but I never knew that it was front page news.
>> Bill Benson: And after your father was deported, you and your family were sent to a ghetto. You remember the day that you were actually forced to leave your home and you described it to me as one of your grimmest memories.
>> Steven Fenves: Yup. We were ordered to leave with whatever possessions we could carry. I don't know how the townspeople were alerted, informed, etc. But we lived -- the hallways, stairs were lined with people waiting to ransack the apartment as soon as we left.
>> Bill Benson: And these were neighbors?
>> Steven Fenves: These were neighbors. These were local people. As we were leaving, they were yelling, cursing, spitting on us, making it difficult to navigate the stairs with carrying some baggage. That was very tough.

Among those people was a former cook whom, of course, we had let go three years earlier because, A, we didn't have money, B, there was a rule that we couldn't have gentile employees. She was in that group. She snuck in, took my mother's cookbook, and took whatever art and paper she could find and shoved it in a big folder and took it with her and after the war returned to us.

Those of you on this floor after this talk, go to the "Some Were Neighbors" exhibit and you will see my mother's cookbook.
>> Bill Benson: You were forced into the ghetto. What were conditions like there?
>> Steven Fenves: Miserable. Two or more families in a room, no sanitation, food distribution out in the court somehow. It just was total chaos. I just remember us kids just running from place to place and all of the wild rumors, anything from a revolt in town to they're coming to liberate us to whatever, there was a train waiting to take us to Switzerland, every possible rumor running around.

Eventually we were lined up and the trains, 80 people to a boxcar. These are European boxcars, not the big American boxcars that you see. 80 people crammed in there with one bucket, that was it, for what I estimate to have been five days and six nights before we arrived in Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to Auschwitz, in the midst of all of those terrible conditions in the ghetto, you told me that you received a most welcomed birthday gift on your 13th birthday.
>> Steven Fenves: I was allowed out because -- I worked in the machine shop of a former employee and I was out of the ghetto on my birthday, June 6, 1944. There we had a clandestine, later to be BBC Europe, and that's how we found out that the Normandy invasion started. That evening when I went back to the ghetto, I suspect that I was the first person who notified people inside the ghetto that that had happened. I don't have any documentation on that. But very few people went outside the ghetto.
>> Bill Benson: So, Steve, they rounded you up, deported you in the boxcars to Auschwitz. Did you know where you were going?
>> Steven Fenves: Nope. Absolutely not. I don't know when the name came up. It certainly was not a standard railroad sign with the name on it. It was a horrendous experience.

Some of you may have seen the film "Schindler's List" and may have seen -- may remember the scene where by mistake the kids from the labor camp are sent to Auschwitz. There's a nice, gently sloping ramp and very gingerly and sedately they walk down the ramp. Well, there was no ramp. There was a railroad car. At my age, the height of my chin. You either jumped or you were thrown out. Guards as well as inmates detailed to empty the trains were glad to throw you out if you hesitated in jumping. Men were separated from women. My grandmother, who had a prosthetic leg which got lost somewhere, was sitting on a bunch of suitcases. My mother and sister went one way and I went the other way. That's the last time I saw my mother.

A lot of Auschwitz survivors will tell you that they were selected by a SS doctor, Dr. Mengele, who did the selections. I was not introduced to the gentleman so I don't know his name. It was just an officer with insignia of SS Captain and white gloves and he pointed right and left, which none of us knew what it meant. It took 24 hours to find out.
>> Bill Benson: Where did your sister go?
>> Steven Fenves: My sister and mother went to the right in their line but they were separated right away so they were not together.

So that's how I got to Auschwitz. Auschwitz is known as an extermination camp, 1.6 million people died there, but it had a second function. It was an enormous stockyard, you saw from the photograph, where people were warehoused to be selected to go out to labor, to the kind of labor that you saw in the slides. The only problem was in a barrack with about 1,000 kids my age, no German foreman, no German officer looking for labor ever stopped to select.
>> Bill Benson: 1,000 kids.
>> Steven Fenves: 1,000 kids. So you learned quickly -- you learned a lot in very short order what the other line meant, what the stench meant, what the ashes falling down on you meant. You learned to -- until you could scrounge to get yourself a cup, you learned to take your daily meal of soup in your hands. On your once-a-day run to the latrine, you learned to pick up a smooth pebble on the road to have something to wipe yourself since unfortunately they did not provide toilet paper. You learned the stench of your own body after months of not washing, of not changing clothes or underwear. Those are the kinds of things you learned.

In this barrack -- many of you have seen movies, criminal movies, and you know that in a criminal establishment you fear two kinds of people, the guards on the inside and the decision makers on the inside who are inmates in control. In Auschwitz, in all the German camps, this was organized, as everything was organized. The overseers, called kapos, were German common criminals brought out from prisons to serve as overseers.
>> Bill Benson: So murderers, rapists, people like that.
>> Steven Fenves: Whatever. Whatever. They only had one problem. They spoke only German and the majority of the kids or inmates in Auschwitz at that time spoke Hungarian.

One thing about my childhood education that I didn't mention is that in my parents' social setting it was absolutely imperative that my sister and I learn perfect high German rather than the crude spoken on the streets. We had a German governess. Any memory I have, the governess is already in it.

So I volunteered as an interpreter.
>> Bill Benson: At age 14, right?
>> Steven Fenves: 13.
>> Bill Benson: An interpreter.
>> Steven Fenves: I was an interpreter. I became an interpreter. The rewards were minimal. One reward was that after the troops were fed from the barrels, you could go, the two interpreters could go, in with a spoon and scrape out the bottom of these barrels.

But you learned a lot about their makeup of the camp, etc. You also learned that people die before their body gives out. That under these conditions of deprivation, starvation, and hopelessness the mind and spirit dies before the body. These people are shuffling around, not seeing where they were going, totally oblivious. Eventually at night they were carted out together with the dead and sent directly to the crematorium, no point in wasting gas on gassing them. They were already dead. Unfortunately these barrack boys were doing that. One by one, every one of my classmates with whom I was together died in that fashion, I'm told from people who were with her when my mother died.
>> Bill Benson: You were able to locate your sister somehow.
>> Steven Fenves: Yeah. That came later.

People ask me about my feelings. I mean, during that period I had no expectation whatsoever of you will be luckier than them and surviving.

The big event was in August, very well documented in the Auschwitz literature, a quarter of this compound -- the entire compound was called the gypsy compound because a quarter of them was occupied by gypsy families, women, children, older men, no working-aged men. They were exterminated in one night. We were locked in. And when the barrack gates were opened, we saw inmates cleaning out the barracks, whitewashing them, etc., and we saw a new set of orderlies, a new set of supervisors, but instead of the green triangle of the criminals, they had red triangles of political prisoners. One of them came over and asked for a Polish-German-Hungarian interpreter. I had never heard a word of Polish in my life. All I knew was that it was a Slavic language and, therefore, I decided it couldn't be much different from Serbian and I volunteered. That's the point that changed my life. Because these people -- first of all, they were willing to train me in Polish because the presumption that it was easy was not that accurate.
>> [Laughter]
>> Steven Fenves: But these people were resisting and insisted that anyone who worked for them also resist in whatever fashion they could. And they certainly expected that anybody working for them would expect to be able to survive through his actions and through his resistance. So the idea of survival, the idea of perhaps getting out of that is not -- I didn't make it up. It was just hammered into my head by these Polish.

So lots of things happened. I was an interpreter. We had the troops lined up for inspection when they came. For reasons that I never understood, every inspection was in the nude. When my sister was selected to work in a light bulb factory threading filaments, the inspection was among 400 nude women. Why that skill requires nudity, I never understood. Anyhow, people were lined up nude, waiting for the inspectors. When the traffic was too heavy, those of us who were interpreters were sent to the SS station in front of the camp, escorted the people doing the translation while they were interviewing the people. Quickly learned through responses, when they looked for carpenters, any response anybody gave was translated as expert carpenter to the German. So that was one of our duties.

The other duty the group had was it had repair detail. In the exhibition, you see one of the barracks from Auschwitz but you don't see the dilapidated condition and the torn roofs. Even the SS agreed with the winter coming, some repair needed to be done. So we were given a cart pulled by two people containing a barrel of pitch and some rows of roofing paper and we went from compound to compound fixing roofs.

Very frequently we went to women's compounds for the simple reason that Polish couples that sort of rotated on this detail had their girlfriends -- female couples, female compounds. So visiting was

part of it. Black marketing was another part of it. It's really amazing to think how easy it was to bribe soldiers, even non-commissioned SS officers.
>> Bill Benson: Was it while you were doing the roofing that you were able to locate your sister?
>> Steven Fenves: Yes, in one of the compounds I located my sister. She was on her way out to a transport. I cashed in all my black market goods and got her a scarf and sweater to get out of there.
>> Bill Benson: And she left.
>> Steven Fenves: She left.
>> Bill Benson: Did you know where she was sent? No.

Steve, we could spend the entire afternoon with you just covering the five months that you spent in Auschwitz and we still wouldn't do it justice. But in a truly astounding way, you left Auschwitz in October 1944. Tell us how that was possible and what happened.
>> Steven Fenves: Again, the Polish kapos smuggled me out. There's no other word for it. They decided on a transport that looked reasonably safe, they shoved me in the line and I got out.

And another -- just to cover quickly before your questions, another train ride arriving to the small town in eastern Germany called Niederorschel and we were assigned to a factory producing wings for airplanes. Lest you think that we are guilty of collaborating with the enemy, let me tell you that no wing produced by that factory ever flew.
>> [Laughter]
>> Steven Fenves: There was enough shortage of pieces, enough sabotage, enough disruption of the railroad lines, etc., so nothing ever happened.
>> Bill Benson: Before you go on, I do want you to tell us that when you left Auschwitz, when you got to, I believe, Niederorschel, here you are a 13-year-old kid who just left Auschwitz, you weren't warmly greeted.
>> Steven Fenves: By the inmates. Warmly greeted by the foreman who recognized me as having translated for him in Auschwitz but saying, "Why are you here? I did not select you." To which I immediately coined the answer, “Well, they thought with this many new people you needed another translator.” He accepted that. But the inmates did not. A Forman knew me. My clothes were better quality than the other inmates. It all sounded very strange. So it was a very long interrogation in German, Hungarian, Russian, Czech, whatever else before I was accepted by the leadership by the resistance organization. And from then on I was part of that organization as well.
>> Bill Benson: And as you were telling us, you were supposed to be making wings but no planes flew from there. You also were covertly making weapons, if I remember correctly.
>> Steven Fenves: Everything was punishable by death, as always. We were constantly -- whatever could be stolen from the factory was stolen. The word stealing did not appear in the inmate vocabulary. It was always liberated. We liberated what we could, aluminum, tools, whatever.

After 14-hour workday, the so-called commons in the barracks became alive with people doing everything, shoemakers, tailors working with thread and needle bartered with black market goods, carving, marvelous aluminum boxes. Most everybody making weapons. I had my own knife which probably would be called a stiletto. Night after night, week after week, carved with stone until it was properly shaped.

The 1st of April 1945, when the order came to vacate the camp -- they thought we had enough weapons and people to overpower the guards who were really -- not that they were not SS, they were not -- they were reservists in their 40s, 50s, and sometimes 60s who were brought in to guard. Anyhow, that fraction didn't win. 11-day march to Auschwitz.
>> Bill Benson: This was the Death March.
>> Steven Fenves: A death march to Auschwitz. Probably half of the people died in the march. We arrived to Auschwitz under tent. It was a very strange place. I could tell by the descriptions from the others who had been there, the first thing I looked for was the chimney of the crematorium. It wasn't smoking, so that was a good sign. Both gates were open, so there was no quarantine, no expectation for long-time detention.
>> Bill Benson: You had your arm broken at that time.

>> Steven Fenves: I had my arm broken. Things like that happened on the walk.
>> Bill Benson: And it was broken not because you fell. You were struck by a guard. Right?
>> Steven Fenves: Yeah. I lost my cool and spoke -- talked back to the guard and he hit me with his rifle.

Anyhow, to close it up -- I can't tell you -- witness reporting on the liberation of Buchenwald which was quite exciting because I plopped into a bunk and the following day somebody woke me up and called me to go up to the fence because the Americans were there.
>> Bill Benson: You were liberated.
>> Steven Fenves: Liberated, yup.
>> Bill Benson: In the time we have left, before we turn to our audience for questions, how did you get reunited with your sister and then with your father?
>> Steven Fenves: Both of us separately made the same decision, giving up our displaced persons status and having ourselves repatriated to other side of the Iron Curtain. Churchill's speech was in 1947 but the Iron Curtain was there in 1945. The first day of liberation -- the first three days of the liberation, the French, the Belgians, the Norwegians, the Greeks, the Spaniard were all out. Those of us who wanted to go to the other side waited months. So it wasn't until mid-July that I got home. A week later -- I missed my sister coming home. It was a well-meaning farmer family decided to take me in to fatten me up. A result of that was jaundice because the liver was so overloaded. So I wasn't there when she came back. As I said, a month later our father was carried in by a local fireman, getting back that he was threatened that he would be tried for collaboration with the enemy because he did not put up armed resistance.
>> Bill Benson: That was the threat if he tried to get back his business.
>> Steven Fenves: Right. So slowly we built things up and then he passed away. At least we could give him a decent burial, next to his brother. His name, my mother's name, and all the other people who perished by this very elaborate, smooth tombstone and this ugly, hammered in names by hired hands. It grates on me when I think of it.

So then decided life in Yugoslavia was not worth it. Our two cousins, their two fiancés, my sister and I, the six of us escaped five different ways in an 18-month period and met up in Paris. And after two and a half years -- since I lost my displaced persons status, I had to come in under quota which was re-opened in 1950 after having been closed down in 1941. That's when we came to the states.
>> Bill Benson: So five years after the war before you got to the United States.
>> Steven Fenves: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: And you and your sister came together?
>> Steven Fenves: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Did you know anybody here?
>> Steven Fenves: Yes. There were several people in New York, as well in Chicago, who knew my parents. Several my parents helped on their way out. So, yes, we had very good support. Until I met Norma, and then I didn't need their support anymore.
>> Bill Benson: I do want to ask you, as we mentioned in the introduction, you recently, 2014, published a book about your mother. What has it meant to you to write that book? Tell us about that.
>> Steven Fenves: Well, my sister and I talked about it a long time. I eventually undertook it because my two daughters-in-law threatened that they would do it themselves.
>> [Laughter]
>> Steven Fenves: And that I wouldn't let them. Collecting things together that had been by then dispersed through the family, writing a blurb about each. It was a very emotional experience. At one point I had a version that the family turned down because I turned myself into an instant art critic on the individual pieces and that was totally inappropriate.
>> Bill Benson: I not only have a copy of your book, I've seen some of the original artwork that your mother did. They're fabulous. She was an extraordinarily talented artist.

Steve, are you ready for a few questions?

>> Steven Fenves: Yes, sure.
>> Bill Benson: We have time for a few questions. We're going to start first from taking questions from our web audience on Twitter; then we'll turn to you folks, our live audience, in the auditorium to see if you have any questions.

While we take our first question from Twitter, I'm going to ask that anybody that would like to ask Steve a question in the audience, if you wouldn't mind making your way to one of the two microphones so that you're ready to be turned to. I'll ask that when we call on you if you will make your question as brief as you can and then I'll repeat the question so everybody, including Steve, hears the question before he responds to it. So if you wouldn't mind doing that. We'll take as many as we can in the time we have remaining.

Let's take our Twitter question which is from Alan Peaceman. "How did Steven react when he heard about the genocide at" [indiscernible] -- I'm not saying that correctly. Did it bring back memories?
>> Steven Fenves: It was very defensively except at first in the Bosnian war and then later in the Kosovo war, in the country that one time I considered my home country that these atrocities were repeated. It was very painful. I agonized a lot about it.

I must admit, I also agonized about some part of the severity of the allied response. Not so much in the Bosnian War but Kosovo War. In the bridge over the Danube that was blown up by a bombardment by NATO forces -- first of all, was designed by the father of a good friend of mine. It was a rural bridge. It didn't provide any logistical support. Things like that, the erroneous bombing of the Chinese embassy, some of those events bothered me.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Steve.

We're going to turn now to our live audience. I'll start with the gentleman on my left.
>> Mr. Fenves, sorry to hear of your tragedies of what you've gone through. But, sir, I would like to thank you for serving in our U.S. Army. As a veteran to the United States, thank you very much for your service, sir.
>> Steven Fenves: Thank you.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you.
>> [Applause]
>> Steven Fenves: You know, that was the time of the draft.
>> [Laughter]
>> Steven Fenves: I did not volunteer. Of the welcome that I received in arriving to the United States, nothing was warmer than the welcome from the selective service.
>> [Laughter]
>> Steven Fenves: I did it because I had pledged that I intended to take my citizenship and that's what it took.
>> Bill Benson: If you wouldn't mind me just adding a little piece, Steve. If my memory's correct, of course with all of your language skills you thought you would be very valuable in intelligence services but because you were not yet a U.S. citizen you couldn't do that.
>> Steven Fenves: They sent -- the Army did a lot for me. I passed all the language tests. They sent me to Europe, stationed in Stuttgart with the intelligence unit. However, they couldn't clear me. The officer who spoke to me was very kind. He said: In cases like that we send you back to infantry. You look a little bit more intelligent than that. What else can you do? I said, well, sir, I also passed my draftsman test and I'm studying to be an engineer. So I got a position in the engineer section at 7th Army Headquarters in Stuttgart and pretty soon I was chief draftsman. So for the first time in my life I was responsible for other people's work.

I got out, got the G.I. bill, we got married, and we bought our first house on the G.I. loan. I have no regrets and no qualms whatsoever about the Army experience. Plus the immersion in American laws, language, etc.
>> Bill Benson: I'm sure you could share some stories about that.

We'll turn to the young woman over here.

>> Hi. I was wondering if the Polish couple you talked about and the other couples that you talked about that helped you get out of the places, did you keep in contact with them? Did you talk to them? Do you know who they are?
>> Bill Benson: Do you keep in touch with anybody who helped you?
>> Steven Fenves: No one, absolutely no one. I made a couple attempts with the Auschwitz museum run by the Polish government. I remembered some verbal name in Polish. I could never produce a name on which they could do a search. The same for everybody else.

The little camp in Niederorschel was a little bit better. I didn't make any personal contacts but a person there organized a small local museum, has interviewed every survivor that he can and he has a book out consisting of interviews of the people. So I know a little bit about some of those people. But otherwise, no. The emptying of the camp in Buchenwald, there was no way of maintaining any contact.
>> Thank you.
>> Bill Benson: We have time for one more quick question.
>> Hi, Steve. I was just wondering how you possibly forgive and move on. Is it a decision that you made? Does it help talking about your experiences and sharing those with people?
>> Bill Benson: The question is, Steve, how you were able to get to a position where you wanted to live and continue on. Let me look here. Yes. I think I've got that. Ok. And does it help for you to talk and do what you're doing today?
>> Steven Fenves: Once I made this transition from being close to the living dead to a purpose and expectation, after that transition I was determined that I would survive, determined that I would help other people survive and that became very easy.

To the point -- and then all kinds of things, moving to France, learning French, passing that incredible French baccalaureate exam that I don't wish on anybody else, coming to the states, learning English, Army service, college, marriage, children, etc., to the point that if I thought about it at all, I thought in the third person, as if that had happened to someone else. And then it was only in the early `70s when I had some problems at work and I thought that it would be helpful -- I thought that there may have been some connection between that and what I had experienced in the camps. That's where I forced myself to talk; first of all, to an adult education class in our temple, as Norma said, hiding behind a heavyset person. That's where she heard the story the first time. The rabbi asked me to repeat it to the youth group, my older kids were there. That's the first time they heard the whole story. And from then on I went to this meeting where some horrible clashes occurred and the only solution was to volunteer to be the founding president and then other things happened. So from then on it was very normal. But in terms of any catharsis, any expectation of additional inside gain, no, definitely not.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Steve. Thank you.

When Steve finishes -- we're going to close the program in a moment. I know there's a gentleman who didn't get a chance to ask a question. When we finish, Steve is going to stay on the stage so please feel free to come up here and chat with Steve if you want to or just say hello, shake his hand, so please do that.

I want to thank all of you for being here and our audiences listening on the internet. We will have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until mid-August. So if you can't come back to the museum, there's programs you will be able to get off the internet, including today's program.

It's our tradition before you go -- hold it, hold it. It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word to close our program. So I'll turn to Steve to do that now.
>> Steven Fenves: Thank you.

I had expected the last questioner would lead with that question because I get it so often, the question of why am I doing this. As you can tell, it's not the easiest thing in the world to do. Today I kept my cool a little bit more than I normally do. I break out somewhere along the line. Sometimes it's almost totally unconnected. But anyhow, I do it because I feel this obligation as a survivor, as a witness, to do it to speak for those who didn't make it, to speak on the topics that this museum is dedicated to, to make sure that people are aware how discrimination, social friction, racial friction can lead to bigger and worse things, and to do whatever I can to inculcate in some of you the need to resist

that temptation and the need to be vigilant not just that the Holocaust doesn't happen but that discrimination and intolerance doesn't get to the point where, frankly, I think it's getting in some of the presidential rallies.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you.
>> [Applause]