

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON BOB BEHR
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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. Bob Behr, 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. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

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. The address is www.ushmm.org.

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

Bob will share his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we toward the end of our program, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Bob questions.

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

Bob Behr was born in Germany, which is highlighted on this map, on March 1, 1922. He celebrated his 94th birthday in March.

Bob lived the first 20 years of his life in the city of Berlin, which is circled on this map of Germany.

In 1942, Bob was arrested because he was Jewish and sent to Czechoslovakia. He was interned with thousands of other Jews in Theresienstadt, also called Terezin. The arrow on this map of Czechoslovakia points to Theresienstadt.

And here we see a map of Theresienstadt.

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

By 1945, the Red Army reached Theresienstadt and Bob was liberated on May 5, 1945, 71 years ago today. This photo is of the Soviet Army.

Bob and his wife, Marie Therese, live in the Washington, D.C. area. After serving with the U.S. Army from 1947 to 1952, Bob worked here in Washington, DC, until he went to work for the US Air Force as an intelligence officer, living in Germany from 1954-1961. Bob continued his civilian career with the Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB in Ohio until his retirement in 1988. After earning his Master's degree in modern European History, Bob was a college professor teaching European History with a special emphasis on World War II and the Holocaust. Bob has spoken in many settings about his Holocaust experience. For example, he spoke to over 1,200 people at the University of Mississippi.

In 2000, Bob and Marie Therese moved to Rockville, Maryland, which is just outside of Washington, to be close to their daughter, Deborah. They have two daughters and four grandchildren. Besides Bob's passion for history, he stays in shape by walking three miles daily. He just told me he was at the gym at 8:00 this morning before coming to the museum.

Bob is a volunteer with the museum's Visitors Service, where he is frequently called upon to use his fluency in French and German. You will find him here on Friday afternoons.

With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Bob Behr.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Bob, thank you so much for joining us today. I know coming on the heels of a workout at 8:00 in the morning, you're raring to go.

Bob has so much to share with us in such a short period of time that we will just jump right in. Does that sound good?

You spent your childhood, Bob, in Berlin before the war began. Let's start first with you telling us about your life in the years before Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass. Tell us about your early life.

>> Bob Behr: Well, the early life was a mixture. I don't know how much you know about history, European history. We're not going to go into a long discussion about World War I and that sort of thing. But it does play a part. You can't get away from history because if you do, you're missing something else.

Berlin was a very ravishing, modern city after the war. It had a lot of problems. The problems were often economic or political nature, which you're probably more interested instead of a lesson of history.

I'm going to tell you how I experienced the 1920s. The 1920s was a tough time for Germany. They had lost World War I. A little bit about my own family. My father was a doctor. My mother was a housewife. And you know what? I never had any brothers and sisters. I understand, somebody told me, that when I was born my mother took one look at me and said, "Oh, boy. Enough is enough."

>> [Laughter]

>> Bob Behr: So I remained an only child.

Did the Holocaust affect me in those years? The 1920s were a very dynamic years. One of the communications, which many of you probably know in a different way, was the radio. The radio was what TV is today. There were two mass communications. One was newspapers and the other one was the radio.

My father, a very dedicated social democrat in those years who had volunteered for World War I -- which I want you to remember because later on it saved my life. So he volunteered for the emperor. And other than that, life was completely normal for a middle class family. Nothing special about it, except one thing which I want to share with you and that is what I just mentioned, the radio.

Now, my father was a very politically minded person. I want to inject here, if I may, the fact that being Jewish -- being Jewish in my family was not the most important thing in our life. It was something we were born with. My family was, first of all, German. And secondly they were German. And thirdly, they were German. And only then did the Jewish religion play a part. So I know I was Jewish but it was no big deal. Pretty soon I changed my mind. Let me share with you how my first greetings with the Holocaust, in the 1920s, when I was 7, 8 years old, came into being.

My father, the dedicated German, listened to the radio practically round-the-clock. I was much too young to understand what the microphone spouted out, except one thing. There was a speaker who kept saying anti-Jewish things: the Jews had lost World War I, the Jews had the black market, the Jews; and he kept going on. 90% of what came out of the loudspeaker I didn't even understand. I heard the words. I know he was talking about Jewish people but the inner meaning didn't really sink in. I was too young.

So what do you do when you're curious, when you want to learn something? I went to my mother. I says: Mom what is this business I heard on the radio about a catastrophe, Jewish people destroying Germany, Jews must be eradicated? Of course, I had no idea what eradicated means. But so I went to my mother and she, in her own kind way tried to calm me down and said don't you worry about anything. And here, the next I'm saying now is a quote, "If your father is dumb enough and wants to listen to the politicians, don't let it affect you." So what do you do when you hear that? Exactly that. It was not supposed to affect. Except the anti-Jewish which came out of the loudspeaker, the speaker being in Munich, and he kept at it.

Now, as the political and economic situation deteriorated in Germany -- and we don't have time to go into this; just trust me it's gotten bad -- and the anti-Jewish propaganda increased, the worst Germany was affected in 1926, '28, years, the more anti-Jewish they had become. Jews owned all the banks, owned all the movie houses and so forth. But did it personally affect me, deep down? It annoyed me. And as a kid I was annoyed that my religion was maligned. But physically it didn't. I lived a normal life as a kid. I went to school, played with my friends. We lived in the western part of Berlin.

How many people have been to Berlin? Not too many. But there was a very dynamic city. And politically, economically, culturally and so forth.

So I lived a normal life as a kid. We played. We went out. My mother was very culturally interested. I saw my first opera when I was about 9 years old and promptly fell asleep during the performance, but we don't want to hold that against her. But she thought culture must be instilled in you. So I was culturally educated.

>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind me mentioning this, Bob, your parents divorced and that would become significant a little bit later.

>> Bob Behr: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Hitler came to power, of course, in 1933. In 1936, you went -- you were sent to school in Sweden. Tell us why. Why was that significant?

>> Bob Behr: Well, my mother -- well, I'm going to jump now from the 1920s to the 1936. In between that time span, from the 1920s to 1933, a dynamic change occurred in Germany. The guy I'm talking about is Adolph Hitler, born in Austria. He wasn't even a German. And he took over. There was no revolution. I don't want you to think there was a big revolution and Hitler came to power. There was one in Russia. That was the revolution. Ours was a formally appointed president -- appointed Hitler January 1933 and things immediately began to change. They changed so drastically, so badly, that I would need about four hours to describe. Now, you're not going to sit here for four hours and listen to me, so take my word for it. It was bad. Such a radical change from a democratic society, which Germany was in the 1920s, to a dictatorship for a man who had spoken on the radio. The guy I mentioned in the beginning, who my father kept listening to and I heard all of these anti-Jewish slogans. That took over. That became the most important things for German life. So life was so bad. If you guys would give me two hours, I could tell you more about it. Just right now, trust me, it was bad. Anything that was nice, pleasant and agreeable was forbidden for Jews.

My mother was really worried, to have her child raised in a country which hated you. Nothing you could do about it. It hated you. She was looking around and we were coming back and there was a gentleman in Sweden, which, of course, is a neutral company, like Switzerland, and opened up a school. And the school was for German Jewish kids. And I was fortunate enough to get enrolled there. I was out of Germany. I was out of anti-Semitism; was in a friendly, neutral country. That's what happened.

>> Bill Benson: And tell us why you came back.

>> Bob Behr: So I was out of Germany. I was free. I was happy. And then all of a sudden about six months later we were called together in the auditorium and the director of the school announced that the school would close. Well, everybody had a long face. Nobody understood why it was closed when there was such a wonderful thing to have, a free school.

Well, when my mother went to the bank in Germany, in Berlin, to pick up money to pay the tuition, the clerk said, "Mrs. Behr, we no longer change money into Swedish money. We need that money for different things." And what happened? No tuition. So the school closed.

So six months after the happy freedom we were back out on the street, so to speak, literally. Some Swedish families were willing to take us in and keep us in Sweden but my mother -- remember, we are Germans, Germans, Germans -- says, "You come home." And I went back home. After a six-month period I was back in Berlin where things had gotten from bad to worse.

>> Bill Benson: And, Bob, because our time is short, we're going to miss portions. So I'm going to now take you to November 9 -- 9 and 10, 1938, Kristallnacht, Night of Broken Glass. Tell us about that. You were 16 years of age in Berlin. What do you remember about Kristallnacht? And what was its direct impact on you and your family?

>> Bob Behr: First of all, I don't know how many of you know. Let me give it to you very quickly. Kristallnacht, the Germans went wild -- by Germans I mean the German population -- went wild. It was a night when they burned synagogues, a night when they smashed the windows of Jewish-owned stores. It was a night where in addition to what I just said, arrested 30,000 Jews, eeny, meeny, miny, moe, and noe was my father. My biological father was arrested that night. I never saw him again. The Jews who were arrested were put into a concentration camp, only because they were Jews, out of which was only one way out, from the concentration camp, on a ship, and to another country. My father was -- my biological father was one of those.

So personally I did not suffer on that evening. My mother received a phone call from whom I have no idea but that person told her, don't let your son out of the house; they are arresting people, they are beating them up and you don't want your son to be molested. So I never got out. I never got hurt.

But the atmosphere, I don't know -- think about where you are from. When suddenly all the churches, all the religious institutions for wherever you live get burned, not one church, not one religious institution, all of them. And why? Because you were a Jew. No other reason. And Jews had to be eliminated from German life.

So I personally did not suffer physically but sure did I suffer mentally. All the Jews were afraid. I was afraid. You could be arrested at any time for no other reason because Hitler didn't like your religion. That's the beginning. So you have an idea it was something which a nation which calls itself a very cultured nation -- those of you who know, that's probably everybody, Germans made beautiful music, beautiful poetry, beautiful science. Everything was great except it was all destroyed, most of it, at least, on that one night.

You know where the word Kristallnacht comes from? When they smashed the glass in the Jewish stores, all of that glass fell on the floor and that's where the word Kristallnacht comes from.

>> Bill Benson: You continued living with your mother in Berlin until 1942, so for another four years almost. Tell us a little bit about that time for you between Kristallnacht and 1942 when you were arrested, including I know early you were forced into forced labor in 1939, I believe.

>> Bob Behr: Well, you already get the idea that things had gotten worse. Now let me tell you how they got worse. Remember, I was in Sweden. I had to come home. And by that time the Nazis instituted things. They instituted for Jews something called forced labor.

Now, I don't want you to think that forced labor is the same as labor, slave labor. It's not. With forced labor -- slave labor, you were incarcerated in a concentration camp. Under forced labor, you had to go every morning to an office to get assigned some work which the government believed is important, whether you liked that work, whether you could physically do it, no. It was only in the interests of the government that the Jews do physical labor.

And I'll give you some examples. I was assigned to carry big bags of coal into buildings which had central heating and needed coal to heat the fireplaces and the central heating. I had to carry bricks into construction sites. Today you look around and you see nothing but cranes, everything automatic. Not in those days. Not in 1937, '38. They used Jews to carry supplies which construction workers needed. You carried it by hand, climbed ladders with bricks which Masons needed. So that's one indication.

In addition, the social life, the little bit of social life which Jews had, was curtailed. Let me give you a couple of examples. Have you been upstairs yet?

>> Bill Benson: Probably not.

>> Bob Behr: Ok. When you go upstairs to the fourth floor to see the exhibit about the Holocaust, when you get off the elevator -- that's my commercial -- there is a small screen on the right-hand side against the wall. That is, in my opinion, one of the most devastating exhibits in that whole museum. It's not very dramatic. It's a little television screen and it was a rolling band of information. Do me a favor. Spend three, four minutes in front of that exhibit because what it will show you are all the measures that the Nazis instituted against the Jews.

I can give you a couple of examples because he won't let me talk much longer. For example, Jews were not allowed to have a car. Jews were not allowed to have a telephone. Jews were not allowed entertainment. I couldn't go to the movies. The things you enjoy, sports. I don't have the opportunity to be closer to you otherwise some audience ask what's your favorite sport. Let me cut across and tell you what mine was. I loved to swim. So with a shortage of water? No. Plenty of water. But the water had to be someplace. It had to be in a pool, whether privately owned or city owned or state owned, you needed a pool with water to swim. And that goddamn pool -- excuse my language.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bob Behr: It a big sign, Jews not allowed to swim in this pool. So, bingo, that was gone. We were not allowed to have animals, house pets. I had to get rid of my little dog.

And what is most important -- let me take you back to 1934. In 1934 -- it's a long story. You don't have time. In 1934 the Nazis -- every year from 1934 -- actually 1933, in the month of September, until the end of the war in 1944 the Nazis had a big rally. 100,000 Germans together in uniform, without uniform, singing, marching, having a great big time. Hitler came to speak every year. Now, why I do mention that in 1934? I think in the beginning I mentioned that my father volunteered for the Army and fought in World War I. So in 1934 the Nazis it decreed in that same rally in that same assembly, that the Jews, effective immediately, are no longer German citizens.

Now, just think back from where you are from and somebody comes to you and saying you were born in America, you had an American passport if you needed one, and it's no longer valid; you are no longer a citizen. You are simply a resident whom we allow to stay in the country but your civil rights like voting, like everything, was gone from Jews. Jews were deprived of this. Ok? So it was getting slowly but surely worse and worse and worse. And there was no way out. Why was there no way out? Let me just mention it briefly.

You could think: I'm Jewish. I'll change my religion. Can I do this? Sure you can. You can go to a priest and say father, I want to become a Catholic. And after certain rituals, the priest performs the rights and you are now a Catholic. But why do I mention this? Because the Nazis had a different philosophy. Sure you can change your religion. You can change it three times if you want to and if you can but the Nazi hatred of the Jews -- and that you've got to get into your head, the Nazi hatred of the Jews was about the blood. Jews had bad blood, were born with bad blood. Jews had blood -- undeserving to be a German. Now, change your religion? Sure. Can you change your blood? No. You're stuck with it.

When I talk to 8th graders, I usually do a little test. I said I want all the people in the audience who have brown eyes to stand up. They look at me. They don't say anything.

No, you don't have to do that.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bob Behr: If you want to, go ahead. Stand up and I will give you the example. If you have brown eyes, stand up. Don't sit down. And now I'm coming and telling you that all people with brown eyes are bad people. So you look at each other and say: What in the world is he talking about? I was born with brown eyes. Sure you were. I was born Jewish. Same thing. Somebody comes to Jews are bad -- thank you very much. Jews are bad. You're stuck with it because you have bad blood.

So I'm trying to give you an idea what life was like after Kristallnacht. It had gotten so bad. The one question in your mind: If it was so bad, why in the world didn't you leave? My God, there was no war yet, there was nothing, why couldn't you? Did the Germans stop you from leaving? Heck no. You want to go, go. It's getting into a country which was the difficulty. It was very difficult.

America did not play a very good role in this. America instituted measurements which prevented me and other German Jews to come to America. And the key word I would love for you to remember is the word affidavit. Now, what in the world is an affidavit? An affidavit is nothing but a sponsor. Substitute the word affidavit for the word sponsor and you got the American law which President Roosevelt instituted in saying you must have an American family to sponsor you to come to America.

You know, I went down to the American Embassy, the old one which was destroyed during the war. I said, we got to get out of here. There is no living here anymore. There is no existence anymore. I went to the embassy. I stood around. Finally got in. I was met by a young lady who spoke fluent German -- because I certainly didn't speak any English. Can we help you? I told her my mother and I would love to go to America; we want to get out of this country. And promptly she says, "Do you have an affidavit?" Do you have a sponsor? The answer was no. We didn't get out. It was that simple.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, because there's so much more you could tell us, at this point I'm going to move us forward.

>> Bob Behr: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to move us forward to July 1942. I will, if you don't mind -- your mother got married. She remarried during that time. So in July 1942, you and your mother and your stepfather were all arrested. Tell us about those events.

>> Bob Behr: Do we have another two hours?

>> [Laughter]

>> Bob Behr: We were not arrested because we were Jews. By 1942, the Germans began to over-operate the gas chambers; Auschwitz, gas chamber was going full blast. You know that six million people were killed. So we were very worried. And to make it worse, my mother -- I'm still upset when I think about it. The story of our arrest had nothing to do with Jewish or anything else. Plain stupidity. Let me tell you very briefly.

My mother had a lady friend. I don't know whether they met in school or they met in boarding school. I don't really remember that. But that lady came to my mother in 1942 and said: Lilly -- my mother's first name, Lilly, I need to get out of Germany. I don't have no family. I'm all alone in this world. Can you think of any way that we can get out of this mess which is now known as Germany? And my mother, by chance, knew a priest, a very wonderful man who taught in Konstanz.

Now that doesn't mean anything. You go back home and you have nothing better to do, take a German map and look where Konstanz is. I'll give it to you. Konstanz is so close to Switzerland that you take a rock and throw it, that rock will land in Switzerland which, of course, you know, was a neutral, friendly country.

To make a long story short, everything happened like clockwork. She gave the woman the address of the priest. She went, met the priest, somehow persuaded him to take her by night across the border into Switzerland. And that's what happened.

So my mother was free. We didn't know anything about this. It's coming back later. So the woman was free. And now what did she do? She writes a postcard in Switzerland thanking my mother for the help she has provided to get her out into Switzerland. So obviously she persuaded the priest to help her and he did and she was free.

And now here comes the clue. She wants to show her appreciation for the help that my mother was giving her by providing the priest's address. And she writes the postcard, which is the first mistake. You don't write postcards to countries like Germany. So she writes a postcard with a picture of the capital and writes down that she arrived and that she is happy. And then she writes a P.S., "If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't be here." So if you are a Nazi censor, you read this, you look at the stamp, it's a Swiss stamp. You know that woman was out. She got out and that my mother was the one to help her. And the Gestapo came and arrested all of us because helping somebody escape from Germany was punishable by very severe things.

Normally I wouldn't be sitting here. After this postcard deal I would have been sent -- my family would have been sent to Auschwitz, any one of those killing camps, and killed. So why didn't we? Why were we saved? We were saved because my father was a veteran of World War I. I can give you a long explanation. That is a television program you should look at. Very good. If you later on want to know about it I'll be more than happy to tell you. We were arrested but not killed because in the conference they decided what to do with the Jews. Number one, kill them. And they did. Number two, remove them from society, arrest them, isolate them. So we fell under the second category because the Nazis decided that veterans of World War I would not be dead. They would be arrested, restricted, removed from society but they would not be killed. That is where we came in. That's how we wound up in the concentration camp.

>> Bill Benson: Theresienstadt.

>> Bob Behr: Theresienstadt.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about going to Theresienstadt and what that was like for you.

>> Bob Behr: Well, first of all, you got to know what is Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt had two names. It had a German name while it was occupied by the Germans. I know, in March 1939, the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia and the country ceased to exist. It became a German colony. And among the facilities they inherited the gold Garrison town which the Austrians had built and used which was called under the Germans Theresienstadt and under the Czech which owned the land, owned the country, it was called Terezin. Same difference.

So we were sent up there. And that was a little town which had approximately [Indiscernible], soldiers. There was no more Czechoslovakia so there was no more soldiers. But the families were still there. There were 4,000 civilian families of the soldiers, relatives, somehow related to the soldier who lived there. They had little houses and so forth.

The Germans said, boy, this is exactly what we need to put some of the Jews we are not going to kill. We're going to put them in Theresienstadt. And a big immigration into this. They built a wall around it. You were a prisoner, a prisoner who would never get out. That was the rest of your life. Now, it was not a prison. I want to be sure you understand that. It was a little town with a wall around it. And the only thing which was pretty was the sky above. Everything else was cut off.

When we arrived, we were in a building which had absolutely nothing in it. You've never seen such an empty building in your life. There were four walls outside, divide us inside. Not a stitch of furniture, nothing. No straw on the floor, nothing. You had to sleep on the floor. There was no sanitary facility, no toilet. We had no water. You had to go outside and actually pump the water.

The worst part about all of this, besides the hunger and the illnesses and the despair -- people are despaired when you take somebody out of his normal environment and shove them into a thing like Theresienstadt. It is a major difference, a major difference. So we went there. Now, life in the camp was terrible. First of all, you were constantly hungry. You were constantly sad because there was no -- the one thing you need to understand is this. When people live under those conditions, they are not very nice. Those people who were forced into this mess, are not pleasant. It's not that the beatings --no. But they were unfriendly, a chip on their shoulders.

You ever been to New York? Most New Yorkers have a chip on their shoulders. Yeah, yeah. They are really nice people but under the conditions they live in, the constant pressure, makes them not very likeable. I'm just kidding, to any New Yorker who may be in the audience.

>> Bill Benson: How many people were crowded into the room?

>> Bob Behr: Well, if you take where we are sitting and make one room out of this --

>> Bill Benson: Where we are sitting.

>> Bob Behr: Yeah. Where we are sitting. How many people would you normally -- remember, there were no beds. There were no cots. There was no straw. There was nothing. They would have put about 35, 38 people in here. Just picture that. No toilet facility, no water. It was July. It was very hot. You were also constantly hungry.

But the thing you lost, at least I lost, the thing which is so difficult to describe and what kept us going all of these years -- remember, I had the pleasure in 1933, talking about 12 years ago now -- the thing that kept us going. I'll give you one word. Can anybody think about it?

Hope. H-o-p-e. Hope kept us going. If it hadn't been for hope more people would have committed suicide. Hope kept us going. And the longer we lived in this camp, under the circumstances that I just described, the further away went the word hope. Everything was in favor of the Germans. Nothing was left for us to enjoy. Love isn't what kept us going. Hope is the one that kept us going. Hope connected with the knowledge that this cannot last forever. Something has got to change.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, there are so many things you could tell us more about Theresienstadt but tell us about the work that you were forced to do, the job that you were given.

>> Bob Behr: Well, the first job -- I had a whole bunch of jobs. The first one was to build a railroad. The railroad tracks were not connected to Theresienstadt so the people had to walk six kilometers from the nearest railroad station to the camp, which was hot, miserable. People died on those six kilometers. That was first job.

The next job I was actually very lucky. I got to work in a kitchen. Now, when I say this and you think about kitchen and cleaning, kitchen work was a blessing. Why? Because you had something to eat. There was always something left over.

And then, of course, that didn't last very long. Now I'm going to take you back for a little bit of history. In the meantime, we're talking 1942, '43, the Allies, particularly the Americans and the British, began to bomb Germany.

If you ever see old news reels of videos of Berlin right after the war, you will see the city was completely destroyed. Why I'm mentioning this is one of the buildings they destroyed was the headquarters of the SS headed by Heinrich Himmler, a four-star building, whose building, number 8 in Berlin, was destroyed. So he lost his headquarters. He went to the German authorities and said: I got to have a new headquarters. I am in charge of all of the SS of all the concentration camps, got to have an office. And the Germans accommodated him, gave him a piece of land and said, ok, here is your land; you can build yourself a new headquarters.

"Build yourself," he couldn't. Didn't. They went to Theresienstadt where we were prisoners and said we need people to go to the fields to build that guy a new headquarters. And then they added a sentence. And that's the sentence which is in my life most important. They said, "If you volunteer to go there, we will not evacuate your folks," meaning my mother and my stepfather. "We will not evacuate."

Now, everybody in that camp knew that there were two words which you never want to hear again. One is evacuate and the other one is resettle. What the Nazis did with everybody in the camp -- and this is a long story and I don't have time. But everybody in the camp knew when a Nazi says we're going to resettle or evacuate your folks, that means we want to kill them. That was a code for killing. Everybody knew. How we knew is another long story but we knew.

And when they promised that they would not evacuate or resettle our folks, my mother and my stepfather, I volunteered to go. Now, this may have been a mistake but it saved the life of my mother and him because for once the Nazis kept their word. When we returned in January of '45 -- and I'll tell you about it in a minute -- my folks were still alive. They were actually, thanks to my volunteering, still alive.

So I volunteered to go there. It was a piece of land with nothing on it. If you had to go and make pee-pee, you had to go against the tree. If you were lucky to find one. To give you a taste of the place where we worked -- ladies and gentlemen, what I'm saying now I'm not very proud of. But it was the first time since 1933 that I wanted to die. I had always told myself I will not give the Germans the

satisfaction to die, suicide or otherwise, running against an electric fence and getting electrocuted, I will not do this; I will survive this mess so that I can talk to people like you and tell them how it was. But now, for the first time, I had enough.

There's a long story, again, which I won't bore you with, just to say that I got very sick. I had a vitamin deficiency, which is very ugly. You get big blotches all over your body. You get a very high temperature. And you feel just lousy. And I had enough. I said I don't want it anymore, I don't want to live anymore. I was milling around, which is the best way to do away with myself. And on November or early December 1944 -- forgive me, I don't know exactly. I was standing at the fence, at the barbed wire fence of the concentration camp, on the inside. There was another guy with me. It was a Sunday. Because on Sunday we didn't have to work. So he and I were looking out. It was November, cold, miserable, not very pleasant. I was feeling accordingly. We looked out. And what we saw was amazing. We saw on the highway just outside the barbed wire a truck of people walking with all kinds of moveable objects, car, baby carriage, anything you could, bicycle. There was a constant stream of people moving.

Now, the important thing is: Where were they moving? This is something I need to explain to you. These Germans out there were moving from east to west. Now, give me two minutes and I will explain. In 1941, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union. And from then on until 1943 all the movement by the Germans were from west to east, towards Moscow, to occupy Moscow and win the war, all the time. The Germans kept winning. If you look at a map of 1939, 1940, of Europe, you will see that 90% of Europe was German. The Germans occupied it.

So now for the first time we saw something which I didn't even understand. It was the guy who was with me. I said, "Who are these people?" He said, "They are German." I said, "Well, where are they going?" He said, "Well, don't you see? They are going from east to west. They are fleeing from the Russians." So the Russians had turned the war around. After the Battle of Stalingrad, the Russians kept winning and winning and pushing the Germans back. And what we saw there was the Russians had come so close that the most eastern Province of Germany, East Prussia, was now threatened by the Russian Army who had every reason to be bitter about the Germans.

So he explained to me that Germans were fleeing from the Russians. And I thought by myself, you know, if the Russians are that close that they are almost in front of our concentration camp, which they may liberate, maybe I shouldn't die; maybe I should try to live.

And to make a long story short, with the help of my higher power, I was able to survive this. Returned to the main concentration camp in January of 1945. I found my mother and stepfather weak, unhappy, but alive. I was back with them. I was back in the main concentration camp. And on the 5th of May, 1944, or '45, excuse me, we were liberated by the Russians. The war was over.

>> Bill Benson: Bob, as you said, the war was over for you. I know we don't have time to talk about all of the events that occurred then but if you wouldn't mind, you told us earlier that your biological father, after he was arrested at Kristallnacht, had left Germany.

>> Bob Behr: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You set out to see if you could connect with him. Tell us what happened.

>> Bob Behr: Well, I had no idea what happened to my biological father but I was able -- the American government had opened the consulate in Prague, in Czechoslovakia, and with the help of the Red Cross I found out that my father was able to get out of the concentration camp in '38 and into Cuba first and then from Cuba to the United States. So he was there. He was alive.

When I finally managed to get out of Germany, classified in 1947, I expected my father to stand at the pier and say hello to his son. Well, instead was a lady who said, "You don't know me. I am a friend of your father's. Your father died two days ago." So I never seen him again since before he was arrested. I was without anybody. I was all alone in America, which can be pretty tough.

>> Bill Benson: We're going to close our program soon in just a few minutes. It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word so I'm going to turn back to Bob for his last word.

When he finishes, he's going to remain on the stage because we didn't have time for questions and answers. So if you have a question or just want to say hi to Bob, shake his hand, absolutely, please feel

free to come up on the stage and do that. And obviously there's so much that we did not cover, including the fact that Bob returned very quickly to Germany as an intelligence officer, was able to spend some more time with his mother before she passed away. So I hope that you can do that.

I'm just -- we're all so grateful for Bob. Anytime you talk about what you went through but particularly right now. This is the Days of Remembrance of the Holocaust, so very significant. 71 years since your liberation on this date in 1945.

On that note, I will turn back to Bob for his last words to close our program.

>> Bob Behr: Thank you.

Well, you already know my age. I am 94 years old. Why in the world am I sitting here talking to people I have never met? What's the big deal? Do I get paid? No. Did I get some special privileges? No. I'm sitting here for only one reason and that reason is very dear to my heart. It's to give you, my audience, the opportunity to understand what can happen if you don't watch out. I mean, the ability to communicate suffering, undeserved suffering, is the motivation for me to prevent you from falling into the same trap as the German people did, believing Hitler. I am motivated to be here hoping that when you leave here, this museum, my speech, that you take something with you which in essence is: I shall not stand by and see what is wrong. If you see something wrong, whatever it may be, whether it's a little thing or it's a big thing, and you feel strong enough, do something.

That's what happened to the Germans. They took this lying down in '33 and never, ever thought about doing something. Because they didn't there was no revolution. There was no Hitler -- Hitler wasn't killed. He killed himself finally in 1945.

Your mission in life -- now I'm talking like a television program. Your mission in life is to be alert, to watch out. And if you can, help people prevent things from happening and do something where you go home, look in the mirror and say I've done a good deal; I have helped somebody; I have advised somebody; I have done something which is important.

Because, ladies and gentlemen, I won't be sitting here much longer. Life has granted me the privilege to live 94 years. I am not going to be here much longer. And the burden of helping, the burden of proof, will rest on you. You have to carry the word. We won't be here. Survivors will die out. That's just the way things are organized. There won't be any survivor to tell you life stories. But you can say I heard one. I learned a lesson. I can't just stand by there and see something which I know is wrong. Whatever is in my power, maybe something big, maybe something little, maybe just an encouraging word, you can do something. And if you can, if in your heart you feel you should, then do it.

That's my parting. Thank you for coming here tonight and listening to me.

>> [Applause]