UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON IRENE WEISS
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>> Good morning, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 17th year of the *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Irene Weiss, 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 through 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 Irene Weiss's biography so that you can remember and share her testimony after you leave here today.

Irene will share her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Irene questions.

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

Irene Weiss was born Irene Fogel on November 21, 1930. The arrow on this map of Czechoslovakia indicates the general location of Botragy.

Irene's father, Meyer, owned a lumberyard and her mother, Leah, cared for Irene and her siblings. In this photograph Irene is at the lower left with two of her sisters and two cousins.

When Nazi Germany took over and divided Czechoslovakia in 1939, Botragy fell under Hungarian rule. Irene and her siblings could not attend school, and her father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, was conscripted into forced labor for six months in 1942. In April 1944, the Fogels were moved into the Munkacs Ghetto where they lived in a brick factory. The arrow on this map points to Munkacs.

In May 1944, Irene and her family were deported to Auschwitz. The arrow on this map of major Nazi camps points to Auschwitz. This photo was taken upon Irene's arrival at Auschwitz. The circled figure is Irene. Irene and her sister, Serena, were selected for forced labor; then were forcibly

evacuated in January 1945 to other camps in Germany. This extraordinary photo is displayed in the museum's Permanent Exhibition.

The liberation by the Soviet Army of the Neustadt-Glewe camp, where Irene and Serena worked near the end of the war, left the girls unguarded and they were able to make their way to Prague to look for their relatives. Of their immediate family, only Irene and Serena survived the war.

In 1947, the girls and their Aunt Rose, who had been with them throughout the time in the camps, immigrated to New York. This photograph shows them upon their arrival in the United States.

After arriving in the United States and living in New York, Irene met and married Marty Weiss in 1949. They moved to Virginia in 1953 where Irene lives today. Irene earned a degree in education from American University and taught English as a Second Language in the Fairfax County Public School system. She taught middle-school students from many countries.

Irene's husband Marty passed away in January of 2013. Marty, who was 93, was a combat veteran of the Second World War seeing action in North Africa, Italy and elsewhere in Europe. He had a long and distinguished career as a geologist with the federal government. Irene and Marty were married 63 years.

Irene and Marty have three children, four grandchildren, and one great grandchild. Her daughter, Lesley, is here today. She is in the front row right next to Irene.

Irene became a volunteer for this museum five years ago and this is her fifth time speaking as part of the First Person program. In January 2015 Irene was a member of the U.S. Delegation to the 70th Anniversary Commemoration of the Liberation of Auschwitz. In July 2015 Irene traveled to Germany with her daughter, Lesley, to be present at the trial of former SS member Oskar Groening who was a guard at Auschwitz. Irene was a co-plaintiff in the trial of Groening and again in February 2016 at the trial of SS member Reinhold Hanning. Her testimony at Hanning's trial was featured in the most recent issue of "Time" magazine.

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

Thank you, Irene.

Irene, thank you so much for being willing to be our first person and spend this hour with us. We could keep you hear all everyone. We'll get you go at the end of the in hour, so we'll start.

Irene, you described for me the time for you and your family in Czechoslovakia, before the Holocaust, as a time of hard work but also a good life, one in which there was in your words, a sense of safety. Before we turn to the war years, tell us about your family and your life in those years before the war in Czechoslovakia.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, I lived in a small town, a farming town, population only 1,000. Everybody knew everybody else. My family was friends with the neighbors. I had a lot of girlfriends in school. We mingled. We got along well. We visited with each other. It was a peaceful time.

My father and mother spent their time working pretty hard. There was a lot of religious observance in our family. We were looking forward to the usual seasons and good times the children had. So basically it was a normal childhood.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little about your siblings.

>> Irene Weiss: There were six children in our family ranging from 7 to 17. It was very hard work for my parents to raise the children. In those days, children didn't have the medical care. My parents were very worried about the slightest fever because there was no penicillin and things that help today.
So my mother was the kind who worried a lot and hovered over us. We were very much loved. Our father was a gentle and kind, hands-on father.

>> Bill Benson: How large was your extended family?

>> Irene Weiss: My grandparents lived in the nearby town, just a few kilometers away. That was my mother's parents. They had several young adult children, aunts and uncles. Visiting them was the greatest pleasure. We would spend the night or a weekend there. There was a lot of family events and a lot of good times for the children.

>> Bill Benson: I think you described your grandfather's place as a magical place when you were kids.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. He had a summer place in the mountainous area. The grandchildren would be invited to spend the summer vacations there. The whole terrain there was different, mountains and brooks, and different kinds of fruits, berries that we picked and so on. It was just a normal, happy childhood. We were very, very much loved. We felt that at all times.
>> Bill Benson: You're going to tell us later a little bit more about your aunts, Rose and Piri. Tell us about them at this time. They were part of your life as a child.
>> Irene Weiss: Very much. They were two young women. When we were deported to Auschwitz, they were in their 20s. They took over being substitutive parents to me and my sister.

Visiting them, we addressed them in kind of a adult way, like Aunt Rose, and Aunt Piri, and never just, you know -- they were very important to us as the grownups we would emulate.
>> Bill Benson: By the time Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, of course launching World War II, by that time your community had already experienced profound change. Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany. And earlier, 1939, before the invasion of Poland, your community had been invaded or occupied by the Germans -- by the Hungarians, excuse me, which immediately changed your lives. What happened once you were under Hungarian rule?
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, we were under Czechoslovakian rule. And they were more accepting of the different kinds of people in their community. Hungary invaded our area, their anti-Semitism came to the floor. They made many rules and laws to isolate the Jewish population and so we were subjected to all kinds of restrictions. The law did not protect us anymore. Jewish children could not attend Hungarian schools. The discrimination escalated as more and more the government gave the population permission to discriminate. It comes from the top, the people quickly pick it up. So there were such things as invasion of our homes by so-called hoodlums but all they had to do was put on a swastika band and they seemed to be deputized to be in charge of the law. And so we were already afraid and we were already worried about our safety.
>> Bill Benson: You told me about a very frightening incident with your father on the train. Can you tell us about that?
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. It was a very frightening experience. I was on the train with my father going home from my grandparents' town, about a five-minute train ride, really. He was recognized as probably a Jewish person because he had a small beard, the kind that is very popular and common right now but at the time religious Jewish men were probably the only ones who had beards. So these young men on the train decided that they would have some fun. They surrounded him and me and began to make jokes about, "What shall we do with him" and, "Wouldn't it be fun to throw him off the train." They had a big laugh over it. They approached closer and closer.

In the meantime, the rest of the passengers didn't say anything or make a move towards protecting him. I was with him but I was just the observer and absolutely terrified, looking out the window to see how close we are to home, when the train would stop.

And actually that's what saved my father because the train stopped and we quickly got off. It was the first very terrifying experience where he felt the kind of fun that young people would have with an older person just because he was Jewish.
>> Bill Benson: And they could get away with it.
>> Irene Weiss: They could get away with it and no one rose to say anything. And, of course, I, as the child of, you know, with my father, I was absolutely terrified. My father never rode the train again after that.
>> Bill Benson: Also during that time he lost his business, didn't he?
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Very soon after that Jewish businesses were confiscated and given to non-Jews. So, yes, his lumberyard, which he had for years and made a small living, not fantastic; mainly he sold lumber, construction material to farmers, it was confiscated, not paid for. So he now sat at home doing nothing much, helping with the chores in the house. But his income stopped and there were six children to take care of.
>> Bill Benson: How did you manage to eat?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, it was a very scary. My mother grew a garden, a rather large garden. It became part of her daily job to make sure that the food was growing. Buying food from the farmers or exchanging things for food. But this could not have lasted very long because six children need a lot of taking care of.
>> Bill Benson: Moving forward a little bit, in 1942, your father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, were forced by the Hungarians to do forced labor for the military. Tell us about your father's conscription, forced conscription, into a labor brigade and what that meant to your family.
>> Irene Weiss: Well, it was very frightening. We heard about young men being called in to a labor brigade. There was a war on. And, of course, Jews -- they were not soldiers. They were not given guns. They were just used for really front line, dangerous mine clearing and heavy work. And they were heavily abused because they were not treated as soldiers. It was really slave labor. And a lot of them were injured. A lot of them never came back. It was a terribly scary thing for the head of the family to be taken away and then forced to do the kind of work he wasn't trained for and the disrespect and the danger that went with it. So we were very frightened.
>> Bill Benson: And just to repeat something you said; they were forced to do things like walk in the fields to clear for mines.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Ahead of the soldiers.
>> Irene Weiss: Right. Right. So they were in great danger. By the end of the war it was quite clear that the largest percentage of them never came back. They were killed.

It so happened that at that particular time they still had some regard for men who were -- my father was 40-something and had six children. So after a while, six months or so, he was sent back. But the younger men were kept until the end of the war if they survived.
>> Bill Benson: You were nearly 12 at that time. Do you remember your father leaving for the forced labor and coming back home? What was like for you when he came home?
>> Irene Weiss: Well, yes. Our family was already in big trouble because our father not only lost his business and couldn't provide but now he physically was removed from us without any kind of knowledge that he'll be taken care of or that he will come back. So my mother was distraught. It was a terrible time for us.

When he came back, his beard had been shaved. The children barely recognized him because that's the only way we knew him. He was very subdued, very quiet. He did not tell us about what happened to him. It was obvious that he had a very terrible experience. But we were so grateful that he came home.
>> Bill Benson: And you would continue, of course, under those circumstances, until early in 1944. As difficult as life was for Jews under the Hungarian rule, it turned dramatically and tragically worse in 1944 when the Germans invaded Hungary. Tell us about that time and what it meant for the Germans to move into Hungary and why they did that in March 1944.
>> Irene Weiss: Hungary was allied with Germany but by 1944, the Germans were losing the war and the Hungarian government realized that they might be on the losing end of this war so they attempted to pull out of the alliance. Germany would have none of it. So they actually invaded a former ally and we became under German Nazi rule.

And that changed everything. Because although life was difficult under the Hungarians, we lost our civil rights and freedoms and opportunities to make a living and go to school and all of that, but we were in our homes and we were still a unit, a family. It never occurred to us that we could be evicted from our home and from our country. My father and his father were citizens of Hungary. We were comfortable with the idea that we were not going to be deported. However, as soon as the German Army arrived in the general area, in our town, they instigated, instituted, the Nuremberg Laws where Jews lost all of their rights and all of their protection. And not only that but within something like three weeks after the Germans occupied our area, they began to deport people. They began to collect Jews into ghettos in preparation to move them out of the country. That's what happened to us.

>> Bill Benson: You were about 14. Do you remember the Germans actually coming in? I think you told me a little bit about that, that the Hungarians were celebrating the arrival of the Germans.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. I remember very clearly. The main road going through the town, the local population lined the street with jugs of wine waiting for them while they were still out of sight. And then when you heard the marching of the boots and coming, they were cheering and there was celebration. And they rang the church bell.
>> Bill Benson: They rang the church bell?
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Actually, a huge Army marched through the town. They were given wine and food. And then they marched through to the next town. But the flavor of what's to come remained with us because we realized that the people welcomed them. It was always more fear and terror and lack of perfection which for a family with children, if the law abandons you and you are thrown at the mercy of these people who now obviously don't want you, it's really a terrifying event.
>> Bill Benson: I'm sure for most of us in this room, me included, that is unimaginable, that kind of fear.
>> Irene Weiss: Unimaginable. I agree. If the law protects you, you are lucky.
>> Bill Benson: As you were beginning to tell us, they began rounding up the Jews. And within just a few weeks you were forced into a ghetto.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Within a few weeks the announcement was made in our town that we should gather at kind of a City Hall area and bring just one suitcase each and leave our home. My parents, my mother began to bake food, bread and things that she could take for feeding the children no matter where they will end up, where we will end up. Nobody ever told us where we were going or whether we were coming back or what will happen to us.

So we all gathered into this Town Hall area. All the other Jewish families in the town also arrived there. And now all of them were in this one place. We were on the floor of this Town Hall place. They were calling the men. There was an office to where the local gendarme and local officials were in one of the office rooms. They demanded from my father that he hand over his money and valuables. They were threatening him. They told him that they know he must have more than he gave them. He came back saying that he was roughed up and roughly treated.

So very soon after that, local transportation arrived. We were put into these wagons. All the children and all the elderly, everybody, driven to the nearest big town where they set up a huge ghetto, not just for our town but the townspeople, the Jews, from all over villages and towns. There were something like 12,000 people in this one place. It was a big factory with huge grounds and some kind of buildings for the processing and building -- making of the bricks.
>> Bill Benson: 12,000 Jews in the surrounding buildings in this one place.
>> Irene Weiss: In one place without any facilities, no facilities for hygiene. Everybody was on the floor of these barracks, sick people, old people, pregnant women, newborns. Everybody huddled together on the floor without any kind of facilities, no water, no toilet facilities, no food facilities.

So we soon see that things will be too hard to bear. And yet, at every step of the way we still looked to see what was still ok, what we can still bear. And one of the things that was still ok, that the family was together and that perhaps this is temporary and it can't be anything but temporary.
>> Bill Benson: So was there hope that you might return back to your homes that you had left behind?
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. We felt it was some kind of an aberration, that somebody will come to their senses. What do you do with 10,000 or more people here, with all the needs? And we're still close to home. We're still together.
>> Bill Benson: While you were in the Munkacs Ghetto, in the brick factory, I believe you told me you were shaved at that point.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, life was very difficult. Life was just on the verge of being impossible. People were sick. Children were unhappy and so on. And then also hygiene was so terrible that originally the order that the girls under 16 should have their haircut seemed to be a hygiene thing. And although drastic, I ran into the place and sat down, I had my braids cut. I didn't even ask my mother for permission or tell her that I was doing it.

Every announcement, every order was followed by, "You will be punished" or "Your father will be beaten." That was their favorite way. They often called in the men for questioning and beating and having the kind of fun that they thought was appropriate to humiliate men in particular. So I was terrified that my father would suffer as a result.

So my poor mother, she gave me a kerchief to put on. I even -- I was 13 years old at the time. I somehow understood that this isn't the worst thing. It's bad but hair will grow out. Always, you don't totally give in to despair, hoping, hoping.

It turned out, I had no idea, never imagined, that that thing -- I arrived in Auschwitz soon after with the kerchief on my head and no hair. It made me look older. It made me look like some of the married women who also covered their heads after they married, only just women. So because of that my age wasn't evident that I was 13. And when the family was torn apart at the arrival in Auschwitz, separated, I was deemed to be old enough for slave labor and I had the first chance to survive the selection of who should live and who should die.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about going to Auschwitz. You were in the Munkacs Ghetto for about three weeks and then all of you were deported to Auschwitz by train, not knowing where you were going. Tell us about that.

>> Irene Weiss: After three weeks, you know, orders barked, announcements. The announcement was a train was on the premises. There was a railroad at the factory there. We didn't know a train could arrive there right inside to take us to the next place. So this long train with cattle cars, a freight train, arrived. Announcements were barked all over the loud speakers to get your belongings and get into the train, great haste, you know, a lot of harsh orders. So my parents grabbed the kids and the belongings and we headed for the train. We were pushed in there with like 60 to 80 people into a cattle car, again sitting on the floor. The men would go to one side for modesty sake and the women on the other side.

>> Bill Benson: And these were very small cattle cars.

>> Irene Weiss: Very small. It was totally packed. And then they put a bucket in the middle for the toilet. And, again, nobody tells you where you're going. Nobody tells you what's going to happen to you. At every step there are no facilities for ordinary needs. Again, there are lots of children, lots of old people, lots of people with immediate needs. Totally ignored. So we were losing a little more hope as to what's happening to us because we are actually now being taken out of our surroundings.

>> Bill Benson: Going to some unknown --

>> Irene Weiss: Unknown place with an unknown fate.

>> Bill Benson: The train stopped at Auschwitz. We saw that photograph, which is an extraordinary photograph, which shows you after you've gotten off, out of the boxcar. Take a little time just to tell us about that photograph, how you even have that.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, when we arrived in Auschwitz, the doors opened from the outside. They were yelling get out, get out and leave everything behind. So now we have nothing. Lots of shouting. Again, men to one side, women and children to the other. My father and 16-year-old brother lined up with a bunch of other men to one side. It shows in that picture how they are separated in one line.

By the way, I never saw them again, my father and 16-year-old brother.

>> Bill Benson: So what we see in that photograph, that was the moment of the last time you saw --

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. You see that column of men. They were standing there. After that they were shouting line up and go up the ramp. The crowd moved up the ramp. We didn't see where we're going or who was at the front of the ramp. But soon it became obvious that we were up in front. We were met with about a dozen Nazi soldiers blocking our way. They were sort of standing right in the middle. Others stood aside holding the crowd to stay in line.

In a matter of seconds the family was torn apart. First my mother and two little brothers were sent in one direction. Then immediately my 17-year-old sister, Serena, into another direction. And that seemed to be where other young adults were sent. So I and my younger sister, who was about 12, and I was 13, I was holding her hand and this guy doing the separation had a stick in his hand. The stick came down between us.

>> Bill Benson: Between your hands?

>> Irene Weiss: Between our hands, I was holding her. He made me go towards the young adults and her to go where my mother and children went. I had no idea that photograph was being taken, absolutely no idea at all. Until maybe 30 years after the war was over. These photographs surfaced. But at that very moment I did not move. I stayed where I was separated from her because I was absolutely stunned that she was taken alone into the crowd and my mother and children had already passed. Lots of others were moving in that direction. It was obvious to me that she will not catch up to them. I somehow felt that I just can't leave like this. What will happen to her? And that she will be alone in this crowd.

And even as this is happening, we're still trying to find some logical, civilized explanation to what's going on here. So if women and children are taken, are separated, and young adults are separated, it means that it's some kind of a labor camp. And that, of course, families will be reunited periodically. Why should we not think that? And even with that thinking in my head, I felt, How is this little sister of mine going to ever even get to the point of being reunited? Nobody asked her name or anyone's name. Nobody asked identification. Something was terribly wrong suddenly. The civilized section isn't working.

So I stood there for an instant until someone told me to move on in the direction. And I ran, trying to catch up with my sister, Serena, who was already up the road. I was yelling for her. She finally heard me and turned around. She says to me, "Why didn't you go with mom?" She also looked at it the way that normal people would look: You're a child; you should be with mom, not with the young adults.

Well, that was my very, very traumatic arrival to Auschwitz where suddenly the entire family was torn apart.

>> Bill Benson: And then what happened to you and Serena?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, Serena and I with many young adults were then taken to a processing place, a bathhouse, where everyone's hair was shaved and body hair was shaved very cruelly and very, very disrespectfully. We were disinfected. Our clothes were taken away. A uniform dress. Shoes were taken away. We were treated with a great deal of contempt and disrespect. And when we came out of there -- there was a picture. I don't know if it showed up here. Everybody came out looking alike with the hair gone, sisters, mothers didn't recognize each other.

Then we were taken into barracks, into what was then Auschwitz-Birkenau. We still didn't know where we were. We asked the others who had come before us -- the first question we asked, When is the reunification, the meeting of the families? When will we get together? We absolutely felt that is going to happen sometime. They were pointing to a chimney, literally in the distance smoke and flames coming from it. They just said, “Look at that. That's where your families are.” And we said to each other -- we thought, What is going on here that you talk like that? What kind of people are you? Why are you saying these things to us? It didn't penetrate. It was something that was --

>> Bill Benson: Incomprehensible.

>> Irene Weiss: Incomprehensible. But soon things became clearer.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the work that you were forced to do since you were selected to labor. What was the work that you were made to do?

>> Irene Weiss: So for about three weeks we really did nothing but we were locked into barracks in these kinds of shelves where we were supposed to stay, except when permission given to get off, to get out to the bathroom or for some other reason. After three weeks we were tattooed, counted off, and told that you will now be marched off to work in another section of the camp. Rumors -- that took place -- might be ok – rumors. Should you line up? Should you try to get out of it? Is this the end of your life or something a little better?

At any rate, we were marched into this place where we discovered that all the belongings of the people who came in the trains were brought to this place. And all the belongings that came out of the gas chambers, after people were killed, their belongings were brought to this place. It was a storage area for all the stuff that came into Auschwitz-Birkenau by hundreds of trains.

>> Bill Benson: Clothing, shoes.

>> Irene Weiss: Clothing, all the belongings, depending on how long they were out of their home. There was everything. There was clothing. There were pants, suitcases, toothbrushes, eyeglasses, shoes, baby carriages, some food products, violins. You name it, whatever people thought -- books, whatever they brought with them that was allowed or they thought would be helpful to them. It was all dumped outside from the trains, by trucks that went back and forth hauling stuff from the train to the platform. It was dumped outside, alongside the barracks.

And the stuff accumulated as high as the roof of the barrack. You could literally barely see the roof from the piles of shoes and clothing and belongings. We were assigned to get the stuff inside the barracks, out of the weather. And once inside, eventually, they were sorted out by categories of pipes and things. The stuff was sent to Germany for use by the German people. But while we were working there day and night -- two shifts, night and day -- the stuff kept coming from the trains. We could never make a dent in the pile. It was just constantly replenished. From Hungary, the Jews were deported from Hungary within six weeks after Germany occupied Hungary. So in six weeks they deported over 400,000 people into Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: In six weeks?

>> Irene Weiss: In six weeks. Something like 140 trains, long trains, arrived in Auschwitz with people and the stuff they did bring.

>> Bill Benson: And where you were forced to do this sorting of all the belongings that had been taken, from that place you could see the incoming trains. I think you described it as you had a window on the Holocaust right there.

>> Irene Weiss: Unfortunately we worked adjacent to one of the gas chambers, crematorium number four. And we were divided from that building by one electrified fence. And we would see what was going on, on the premises, on the other side. We would see people going in huge columns of men and women and children going in there and disappearing in the gate. And we would see burning of bodies in pits outside on the premises because the crematoriums couldn't keep up with the base of the dead and so they burned bodies outside. We saw that.

We saw columns of women and children coming at night from the trains and seeing the fire clearly and they would scream and pray and cry. And soon it would be silent. And then we would hear, I would hear, the hissing of the train on the platform arriving. It was close enough. Hissing, steam engine, and the noise of the crowd. In a matter of a half-hour or so we would see the columns of women, children, and elderly approaching the front of our window.

>> Bill Benson: When you arrived at Auschwitz, as you told us, your father was selected for work. What happened to your father?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, my father and the other men, when they were separated from the rest of us upon arrival, they were then -- the way it was done, they were then reselected because from among them they had to pull out the older men and younger boys. So they, too, were killed.

My father, apparently -- we found out much later when we were working in this area next to the fence that he was actually selected to work in the gas chambers, in that section where our own men, our own people, our own fathers and sons, were made to pull out the dead from the gas chambers and were made to help with the burning of the bodies. He was one of those who was forced to work there. He was shot, we were told by someone who was able to give us that information. He was shot soon after because he wasn't able to do that kind of work.

My 16-year-old brother, no one knows what happened to him. We don't know whether he was with my father.

>> Bill Benson: To this day you don't know?

>> Irene Weiss: There was never anyone who could give us any information, from survivors that we would question did you know, did you ever meet anybody like that. He disappeared. To this day we have no idea.

My father, who worked in this place, since we were next door and saw these men outdoors frequently, sometimes they would throw over a note. And this is how we found out that my father had been there. Someone threw over a note.

These men, our own men, who in the most incredibly diabolical cruelty that they could do this to our men who had to do this to their families is indescribable. And for many, many years I could never -- I would tell about how my mother and children were killed, what happened to some of them. I could never talk about how my father died because imagine this gentle person, head of a loving family, would be subjected to such a thing. This is not anything that happens on this earth.
>> Bill Benson: Would like to believe it never happened.

Irene, soon after you came to Auschwitz, you did encounter your two aunts, Rose and Piri. And they would become absolutely essential to your survivor and that of Serena's from there.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. It was quite by accident that they came. The Hungarian Jews arriving to sort of a general area of Auschwitz-Birkenau. So we ran into them by accident, by sheer luck, really. They did take us under their wing. They made sure that we ended up in the barrack in which they were. They exchanged some other people two people, from this barrack to that.
>> Bill Benson: Because the count --
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. They prevailed. Through conversations, people were kind enough to let us come and to move to another barrack. Just the numbers had to match. Names were never taken anyway. So just the numbers.

So my Aunt Rose and Piri, I never would have survived, I am sure of it. Because from the moment I arrived there, I was terrified. I was absolutely in a panic of terror. I saw that we were just disposable numbers. They really did both protected me and my sister -- because even though -- what the guards did in this place was treat us as sub-human, not like people. We were not human beings. And that feeling of being treated as a sub-human by another human being is extremely frightening because you have no recourse. You have no protection. If another human being thinks of you as less of a human being and can do anything, he is the law -- it's terribly frightening.

Being young, I was in constant danger of being reselected because I was only 13. So to the only people that I was still a human being was to my two aunts and to my sister. I was their sister's child. I wasn't a sub-human. I clung to them desperately.
>> Bill Benson: And they would do all they could to make you look older to protect you from being selected again.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes, they did. In the lineup of counting every morning, which was a routine, no one escaped from a place like that but they counted you, 5:00 a.m. in the morning. We were thrown out into the cold, line up five in a row. And the delegation of Nazis would come around 9:00, 10:00 finally, all dressed up in coats, warm, boots. They would look down the line. They would count. But this was a great opportunity for them to reselect the ones they missed, like children, or people who were not looking good enough for work. And all they did is, "Come here." And that was the end of you. So my two aunts would position me on a hill a little, on a stone a little. I was never the first one. I was never the last one. I was sort of --
>> Bill Benson: In the middle.
>> Irene Weiss: But every morning was a very dangerous time for me.
>> Bill Benson: You would continue living under these horrifying circumstances and conditions for eight months, I believe, until January 1945 when as the Soviets were advancing, the Nazis evacuated Auschwitz. You were forced then to go on a Death March.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. So we arrived in May. In January the Russian front, the Russian Army, was approaching Auschwitz. And instead of allowing the remainder of the prisoners in Auschwitz to be liberated, the Germans had another diabolical idea to empty the camp and force the prisoners on a Death March deeper away from the front and into Germany. I had no idea what was rationale was there except that it had one result, it diminished our number by a huge -- in a very big way because it was wintertime and we were marched out on the highway, in the snow, and the outdoors.
>> Bill Benson: No food.
>> Irene Weiss: No food. No water. No facilities. If you sat down or on to someone, you were shot. The road was littered with death people. Occasionally deep into Germany they would stop a bunch of us and put us into another camp along the way which was already crowded. Again, there was not even

enough time or space to be indoors in a barrack. We were sleeping outside. We ended up from Auschwitz all the way near Hamburg.
>> Bill Benson: Deep in Germany.
>> Irene Weiss: Deep, deep in Germany, with huge diminished numbers. People died along the way.

And then there was five more months of the war before 1945 May, before the same Russian Army reached us near Hamburg. So in those five months the suffering was indescribable. Even the German system, such as it was, broke down by then because they were retreating.

My Aunt Piri, we were starving and she came down with Typhus. They took her away in a truck to a place where they had a killing facility. Very soon after that, my sister, who was skin and bones by now, she was picked out of the line to be killed. My Aunt Rose was desperately ill with a high fever, lying on the floor, she was its next one that wasn't going to make it. They picked out my sister; I realized that I would be left alone. And that terror that was always with me suddenly became unbearable. So I said, "I'm her sister." So they said, "Well, you can go, too."
>> Bill Benson: And you knew what that meant.
>> Irene Weiss: I knew exactly where they were taking her. I clung to her. She said, "You can go, too." So they locked us in a room with other women who were in very bad shape, young women. And we were waiting for the truck to come. And at the end of the day we were still locked in there. It seemed that the truck wasn't coming. It turned out that because of the approaching Russian front and the chaos on the road, the truck didn't arrive that day. Somebody pushed the door open and we just walked out of that locked room. We had a chance to survive another day. But had the truck come, I wouldn't be here today.
>> Bill Benson: What was that like, to walk out? You didn't know what you were walking out to. What was that like?
>> Irene Weiss: No. We didn't know --
>> Bill Benson: Were the Germans really gone? You didn't know.
>> Irene Weiss: At this point when we got back -- out of this room, we were not yet free. We just went back to the barrack where we came from. And there my Aunt Rose was lying on the floor, flushed with fever.

An interesting thing did happen. The other women sitting around on the floor there, when we came in, they said, "The children are back," "The children are back." That was the first time they ever referred to us as children. No one ever dared.
>> Bill Benson: It would be a death sentence.
>> Irene Weiss: Right. Apparently the women were sort of sad and mourning us. They thought they'll never see us again.
>> Bill Benson: And here you're back.
>> Irene Weiss: But it wasn't over at that point. There was some months to go until the liberation came.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your liberation.
>> Irene Weiss: It wasn't a joyous affair because we were sick and far from home. We knew that we had lost our families, hoping that someone might have returned like my brother or some young adult. But we were not taken care of by the liberating soldiers in this particular place. They were Russian soldiers. They had other reasons for leaving. But they just looked and left. Looked at us and left.
>> Bill Benson: Did anybody say you're free to go?
>> Irene Weiss: No. No. Actually our first sign of liberation was that the guard tower was empty for the first time. And people didn't move because what if they're still around? What if they're coming back? We heard war noises, shooting and so on. But nobody left. A few hours later some of the braver women, they went and tried the gate, the big gate, and it was open. And still people didn't want to leave because they felt that the Nazis, the soldiers are down the road or whatever. So slowly, slowly, those who could walk would walk into the nearest town and looked around, and moved into some empty houses. There was no help. There was no transportation.
>> Bill Benson: What did you do from there?

>> Irene Weiss: From there I literally walked on the highway, hitchhiked occasionally. Somebody, a wagon mostly -- transportation in Germany was destroyed. There were no trains, buses, nothing moved. We just went from town to town.
>> Bill Benson: Trying to make your way back home?
>> Irene Weiss: Rumors go this way. There would be a gathering place where they would feed you. There were people on the move, refugees.
>> Bill Benson: Thousands and thousands.
>> Irene Weiss: Thousands of people on the move, displaced people trying to head home. It took us a very long time. We stopped -- the sick among us, every town there was a hospital, we put the sick among us to be in the hospital; not to be cured or anything, just to rest for a couple of days, then take them out, sick as they were, move on. We lost many along the way.

Eventually we made our way to Prague. It was a long journey. We finally were in Prague where we began to seriously inquire about if anyone survived. So word of mouth. There was no communication.
>> Bill Benson: Did anyone survive besides you, Serena, and your aunt?
>> Irene Weiss: Some -- the most important person who survived, who finally took charge of us, was one, a young man, my mother's brother, my Uncle Joe. When things got bad, the Hungarians occupied us way back, he decided to try to escape. He got out. A single man, a young man alone. He made his way to Palestine, which was then a place that the Jews tried to reach, young adults, of course. He made his way. He had his own tragic experiences. He was put in jail. He was sent back part of the way. But he made it.

After the war -- during the war he volunteered as a soldier in the Czechoslovakian Army. Many of these young men enlisted to come back to liberate Czechoslovakia.
>> Bill Benson: So he was back as a soldier.
>> Irene Weiss: He was back in Prague as a soldier, in a British uniform but as a Czech soldier. There were a huge number of soldiers. And one of these soldiers we asked in the street, you know, Where do you come from? They came from Palestine. My Aunt Rose, who was still with us, this was her brother. So she found out that he was also nearby, stationed nearby. We communicated with him. He didn't know that any of his family was alive. There was years of no communication. We didn't know that he was alive. He came and took charge of a bundle, a few survivors two grandchildren and one of his sisters.

Later we found a young brother, an additional young brother. Single adults had a better chance to survive. The sisters who were married and had children, they were killed with the children.
>> Bill Benson: Your sister, Serena, is 92 now. Am I right? She's living with her husband in New Jersey?
>> Irene Weiss: She's almost 90. Yes. But she's fine. Her husband is also a survivor. They're still ok, living independently. They have children and grandchildren.
>> Bill Benson: Irene, I think our audience knows that we could have spent the entire afternoon and only still just touched the surface of what Irene could share with us. And we haven't had an opportunity for you to ask questions.

We're going to close the program in a few minutes. Irene will stay up here when she's done, on the stage. If you have a question you would like to ask her -- and we invite you do that -- please, come up on stage, ask Irene a question. Have your photo taken, just say hi. Whatever you want to do you're welcome to do that.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person has the last word. So I'm going to turn back to Irene to close the program.

I want to thank all of you for being with us. I remind you that we will have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August.

And, of course, Irene, I know how difficult this is for you. Thank you for being willing to share what for us is incomprehensible. Thank you for being such a brave, brave witness.
>> [Applause]

>> Irene Weiss: I really want to thank you for being interested in coming to the museum and to listen to someone like me to tell you what was done to me and to the Jewish people not so long ago, in my lifetime not to mention history.

I would like to tell you a little bit about an experience that I had recently. I was asked to come to Germany to testify against two Nazi, former Nazi, guards. They were being tried for contributing to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people while they were guards in Auschwitz.

These guards were in Auschwitz in 1944 when the Hungarian Jews were brought there. So when my family and others arrived on the trains from Hungary, these two particular Nazi guards were assigned to be on the platform guarding and facilitating what was going on there, the separation of families and other duties that they needed to do in order for the thing to operate correctly.

One of the guards, his name was Oskar Groening, his job was to collect all money and valuables that all the many people brought with them. He was on the platform. He knew that he was collecting money and belongings, valuables that people will be killed right after and did not bother him. He collected this money, counted it, and returned it to Germany on a regular basis, daily.

When I testified in court, he was sitting -- he said that he had a great sense of duty and obligation to fulfill his job so that the operation should run smoothly. He did not pay attention to anything else. He did not seem to think that that was -- it was doing his job and he was duty-bound to do that.

So when we, several survivors from Hungary, testified in court and told our stories of what happened to our families and how we were treated and how our children were murdered, he said through his lawyer that he had no idea that that experience had such an effect on the survivors. So we understood that he had not come out of his Nazi training and his Nazi idea of what he was doing. He really never apologized. He listened to a lot of these stories. He was given -- was found guilty, given [Indiscernible] years. He is appealing his sentence. He is about 94 years old but he will never go to jail or any punishment like that.

The second former Nazi that I testified for, he came into court with his head down, almost to his chin, and he never, ever looked up. He heard testimony from survivors like me and others, again, more horrific stories of what he participated in. He never looked up. I never had the feeling that he heard me or that he was interested, which was actually another insult.

Later on, through his lawyer, the lawyer made the statement to the effect that, yes, I was there, he said, “Yes, I saw what was going on. I smelled the burning flesh. You could not escape not knowing what was going on but,” he said, “I'm sorry now. I should have done something about it. I'm sorry about that.”

However, what he said was sounding like an observer; he knew about it, he saw it, he watched it, but he had no part of it. So, again, he left the survivors with the feeling that you still don't get it. You still don't want to tell us what did you do. What was the inner workings of the system? How did it work from the inside? What can you tell us that we experienced but didn't know the workings of? I'm 94 years old, why don't you come up front and tell us what you know? Not a word of that.

That trial is still going on. He, too, will never serve in jail. But I'm pleased that I had a chance to testify and to have others hear about it in the community, the media, to report it, so that what is now the grandchildren generation of German young people have a chance to hear it from a courtroom, from survivors, what their grandparents did. Because the grandchildren don't know the stories. The German young people don't know the story because their parents denied it or said it never happened. And the grandparents who were the perpetrators never talked about it. So that at least came out into the open for this new generation to ask their own questions of how their people could have done what they did just a few years ago.

Thank you so much for listening to me.

>> [Applause]