UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON MARTIN WEISS
Thursday, July 14, 2016
11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

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 today. We are in our 17th year of the *First Person* program and our First Person today is Mr. Martin 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 volunteers here at this museum. We will have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday through the middle of March. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

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

Marty will share with us his first person account for about 45 minutes. If we have time toward the end of our program, for a few questions, we will take your questions then. The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

We begin with this photograph of Marty Weiss, which was taken after the war. Marty was born in Czechoslovakia in a town called Polana in 1929. Czechoslovakia is highlighted on this map of Europe.

In 1939, Germany occupied half of Czechoslovakia and Hungary, the other half. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, conditions in Polana worsened. By April 1944, Marty's family was transported to the Munkacs ghetto. The arrow on this map of Czechoslovakia points to Munkacs.

In May, they were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center where Marty and other family members were chosen for slave labor. The first arrow points to the location of Auschwitz. Later, Marty and his family were sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. Our second arrow points to the location of Mauthausen.

This is a photograph of rocks that were taken out of the quarry by slave laborers at the Mauthausen camp.

Here we see a document that was uncovered only recently in our archives in which was new to Marty, even though the document describes him as a prisoner. This document is a Prisoner Registration Card which documents Marty's transfer from Auschwitz on May 22, 1944, to the Mauthausen camp. His prisoner number appeared in the upper right-hand corner where the red circle is, along with the abbreviation Ung-Jude, which is the abbreviation for Hungarian Jew. His name is on the upper left-hand corner, also circled in red, if you can see it, along with his birthday and other family information.

After the war, Marty moved to the United States. He served in the United States Army during the Korean War followed by a successful career in the grocery business. He retired 18 years ago.

Marty's wife, Joan, passed away in 2013. Marty and Joan have two children and four grandchildren. And one of their grandchildren just completed law school.

Marty has been a volunteer here at the museum for the past 17 years. In addition to leading groups of students and FBI agents through the museum, Marty is active with the Speakers Bureau. He has spoken to diverse audiences including at U.S. military bases such as Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico and Fort Sill in Oklahoma, as well as the National Security Agency, National Labor Relations Board, prisons, colleges, and many schools.

Marty also recently traveled at the invitation of the Austrian government to the former Mauthausen concentration camp, which is now a memorial serving as an institution for learning about the Holocaust. And he is a contributor to "Echoes of Memory," a collection of writings by survivors associated with this museum. Following today's program, Marty will be available to sign copies of "Echoes of Memory."

And with that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Martin Weiss.

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you so much for joining us and your willingness to be our First Person today. We have so much to go over in a short hour.

Marty, you told me about your life in Czechoslovakia as a child right before the war. Let's start today first with you telling us about your family, about your community, about yourself in those years before the war began.

>> Martin Weiss: Ok. My family -- by the way, I came from a small town. Actually, it was a village. It was in the 1930s. As I was going out -- by the way, I came from a family of nine children. I was number seven. By the time I was growing up -- things have changed. The 20th Century, even though we were in a village, we were like looking forward to the progress of the world, if you will. My father had a business. We also had farmland. So we produced our own food and so on. In those days we didn't have tractors. We used horses with plows. Like you see in pictures.

Most of all, I remember living in a democracy. Even at my age -- by the way, when the war broke out, I was like 10 years old. So that all happened before 10. In the mid `30s, I was very young. Like I said, I have older brothers. My oldest brother was 14 years older than I was. So they were in between. There were others in between.

In our family -- it just so happens we're a little more progressive compared to some people. When I say progressive -- we lived in a village, we lived very simple but we had our own food, plowed ourselves, brought in the food, you know, and so on. We got some help, actually, from the peasants and so on. But the point is we were self-sufficient, if you will. And this is the way we were growing up.

My brothers -- the reason a lot of people had big families is because they needed help. [Laughter] So my brothers worked, especially the older ones, worked very, very hard, constantly. My father was like the master. Unlike in the United States, your father was your father, you never answered your father. He snapped his finger, you know, you just jumped. So my older brothers, they had the burden. They really carried the weight. But at a certain point they decided, hey, my father doesn't pay me; I better go in the city and look for work. So they left, my two older brothers. And then my sister, she was like most girls in a village, wore regular house dresses you made yourself and so on. She was a little more sophisticated. She was -- she decided to go to college away from home. So she went to the city.

Consequently, the reason I mentioned all of this, not to brag, but I mentioned it for a reason. It had a big effect on me. Because I was the youngest one. And I say that this is where life should be. Like you should get educated and so on. And my mother was pushing stuff like that. So my sister went to school. She was away from home. So when she came home, I saw her study. And it had an effect on me.

At any rate, like I say, my older brothers were gone. So the only two of them were able to work. I had another older brother. He was very strong and very capable. And I was his helper. You have to remember, I was like 10, 11 years, eventually 12, 13. My father was in the meat business. We had to slaughter animals and so on. And then we had to work in a field. And I was his helper. I would lead the horses. He would hold the plow and so on.

One thing we did, we really had fun doing it. We used to horse around a lot. So we had a good relationship in our family. Unlike some families they have fights and all of this. I don't remember ever having arguments or fights among us. We just did whatever we had to do.

Anyway, so this is the start of my life. But most of all, because of my sister -- my sister was my example, all of a sudden I felt like I really wanted to do that. So the future looked a little better for me. But then, of course, everything was shattered because the war came. And when Hitler -- the first country he took in Europe was the Czech part. And he wanted the Czechs. Why? Because the Czechs, they were a small country but they had very good, believe it or not, trucks and cars. They were known for that. And believe it or not, they had very good tanks, like the latest, like as good as the German. And no country in Europe had that, only the Czechs. So we were very proud.

When the war came, by that time I was 10 years old. All of a sudden our whole life changed. Then we kept on hearing about all of the things that were happening in Germany. The Jews had to leave, were running away, weren't able to and so on. So we heard all kinds of nasty, nasty things that were happening.

Now, you have to remember, before that, Jewish in Germany, Czech, Hungary -- believe it or not, Germany had a democracy. But a lot of people don't realize, before that. They didn't because of the war, first of all, one, the First World War. Anyway, we felt like there was a future. All of a sudden the Hungarians came in, occupied our area, and all of a sudden the future looked dim.

>> Bill Benson: I was going to ask you, when the Hungarians came in 1939 and occupied your town and community, do you remember them coming in and occupying it?

>> Martin Weiss: Oh, yeah. I remember clearly as day. I was 10 years old. I remember -- the funniest thing is they had -- just to give you a comparison, 13,000 troops outside of town for weeks. They were trying to come further and they couldn't go. We had 300 Czech soldiers stationed in our town. And the 300 soldiers kept back 13,000, 14,000 troops outside -- you know, just one town away, actually. But there was a river and they were able to hold them back.

I must also confess, the Czechs were equipped with tanks but they were real tanks, like the German tanks. They were really up to date. They had some of the best around. In fact, the German wanted the Czech factories right away because they had improved on the German tank. So they wanted to have -- with the fighting, the cannon or whatever, they improved on it and they wanted those blueprints. So they wanted the Czech part immediately.

Anyway, but the point I want to make is this. When Hungary came in -- by the way, the population where we lived were primarily Russian. I know Czechoslovakia, Russian, doesn't make sense. But the way it was, there was a Czech part, Slovakia, which the language was slightly different than the Czechs but considered themselves a separate people. And then in our area, the population was Russian speaking. I don't mean Russia from like deep Russia but European Russian. We got along. We went to school together. We lived like you do here in the United States, you know, we didn't have any problems.

What happened -- the reason I mention that, who they were, they were Russian, the Hungarians and the Germans had such superiority; they just felt like Slavic people were down on the bottom of the barrel. They were like nothing compared to a German or a Hungarian. They were

sophisticated. They were Hungarian, German. And they had this prejudice built in to their system throughout history.

So what happened, they didn't like them either because they were occupied as well. They didn't like it either. But what happened was as soon as the Hungarians came in, my father was old enough -- he actually served in World War I under the Austria Hungarian empire. He was, well, not so bad, you could get along with them. It turned out he was wrong because they joined the Nazis. So they became just like them.

They came in. By the way, they came in -- you have to laugh a little bit. Did not realize why the 300 troops were able to hold them back. They came on bicycles.

>> [Laughter]

>> Martin Weiss: I know, go to war on bicycles!

>> [Laughter]

>> Martin Weiss: They had soldiers, so many of them, marching through town for a whole day and they had three little tanks. And I tell you, I was 10 years old so I was not big, believe me. And they were like toys, like from World War I, actually. They were World War I model. And here the Czech tanks were like tanks! And I remember as a kid, we were laughing our heads off. How can you go to war like this? You know? And this is the way it was.

>> Bill Benson: But, of course, once they were there, things changed dramatically.

>> Martin Weiss: Once they were there -- the reason I mentioned they looked down at us, the Russians or the Slavic people, because they felt they were inferior. Very simple. They didn't hide it. They didn't beat around the bush. This was their policy. Nobody likes to be inferior. Let's face it. The Hungarian peasant or the poor people were no different than the Russians were or we were. It's that simple. Poor people are the same, basically, whenever you go.

Anyway, they came in. And the first thing they started doing, came out with anti-semitic laws or anti-Jewish law. And what did that mean? That you all of a sudden lost all of your civil rights. Here we were used to living in a free country, a democracy. As a kid, it was very hard to accept. But anyway, that's the way it was.

So the first thing they did, they took away people's businesses. They wouldn't give them a license to have a business. They took away the people he's livelihood. If you were a teacher, you lost your job. Whatever you did. You just couldn't work.

And everybody had families. And people were not rich there believe me. Most people struggled. So this was the way it started. But what happened is as time went on, they kept on getting more organized. They were coming down with more and more edicts all the time. Eventually they came out with the yellow star. We had to wear the yellow star. And this may sound like not a big deal afterwards but at the time, it was very demeaning, like you're singled out. And by the way, they had curfews on us, all kinds of restrictions. To put it simply, they made life miserable. This went on and on.

In the meantime, while all of this was going on, we kept on hearing -- because the Germans were very successful, went into Ukraine, took Poland. By the way, right after that, within three weeks, they took Poland. I have remember that, too. Because Poland was next door to us. They started getting more and more -- well, maybe they were that way to begin with because they had sort of like a hierarchy in Hungarian culture.

By the way, they had it in the Polish culture, too. There were the poor. There was the so-called bourgeois if you will. And what happened is we were not used to that. Because to us, like in the United States, you could be a rich man but I'm not to bow to you. But in Hungary, they did. It sounds funny. Society was fixed that way.

The reason I mention it, because there was a summer resort in town. A nice one, too. By today's standards. And the reason I was a little luckier than some places is I was exposed to that. So during the summer we used to get a lot of visitors and they used to come to town to go to the spa. So I learned more about the outside world. It was a different world outside. And since we lived in a village, we were not exposed to this. So we saw more how city people lived and so on. I thought it was

terrific that they could do this. But what happened is, I also learned that they were very, very class conscious. And, again, we were not used to that. Even as a kid I refused to accept that.

By the way, they closed our schools right away. I went to Czech schools. They closed our schools. And just from my own personal point of view, the population, I mentioned, were Russian so they had Russian schools under the Czechs. They wanted their own schools, so the Czechs let them have their own schools. And guess what. We had to go to the Russian school.

Now, admittedly I knew how to speak Russian from the time I was a kid because everybody in town was Russian. Ok? So I had no problem speaking it. However, I didn't know the alphabet. I didn't know reading or writing or anything like this. I went into fifth grade. I mention this, a lot of young people especially, and there the system was different. Our school was -- similar to the United States. The teachers were nice, like ordinary, nice people. Over there the teachers were very rigid. They believed in corporal punishment and that kind of stuff.

They put us into the class, never even teaching us the alphabet first. We got into the class and we had to carry the same load as the other kids even though they knew how to read and write already. We didn't know how to. I was able to speak it but couldn't read or write it. I didn't even know the alphabet. So that was our exposure to our problems from the start. But somehow -- you had to learn rather quickly. So the next two, three years I was going to the school and I learned how to read and write in Russian, and so on. Now I can't remember any of it.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: So Marty, once you're under the Hungarians and they imposed all of these new anti-Semitic laws, more and more edicts came out, people lost -- the Jews lost their livelihoods. How did your family survive in those conditions? How did you get food? And you lived in a rural area.

>> Martin Weiss: Right. Well, we were very fortunate. Like I said in the beginning, we had our own land so we grew a lot of our own food. So we were really independent. We had everything throughout the war until we were taken away. Actually, we even had grain stored away already for the rainy days. We were thinking ahead. But we used to grow our food and we used to harvest it and so on.

And by the way, we used a lot of food because we had a big family. Not only that, but we had visitors all the time. Ok? So we really used a lot of food but we were able to manage fine. My father -- all the business that we were doing, we had to do it during the night. Mind you, our neighbors were regular neighbors, good neighbors. But guess what. They didn't like the Hungarians any more than we did because they were peasants, too, but not quite like we were but we could not trust them. Everything we did we had to do during the night.

By the way, here we have electricity. We didn't have electricity. We had to do it by candle light. So we used to hold two candles. Like I say, I was a youngster. My brother did all the work in the dark. Ok? And we had to do all of this. And by morning everything had to be gone because the police would come or the detectives would come and snoop. And right away would go to prison just like that.

So everything, all of this, we did this throughout the war. But what bothered me all the time is that our neighbors, even though they got along and everything, but we couldn't trust them enough. We would figure just enough to think they would get some kind of payment or something.

And that's sad, when you think of your neighbors like this. I always felt bad about that. And the reason I felt bad is because had the tables been turned the other way, on the other side, I know our family would have done anything to help. So right or wrong, I judged them wrongly I think because I went by my standards. But anyway, that's how I reacted. I remember we felt that way that we had to be very careful. Nobody should report us. So this is the way we lived.

However, what happened right after that, my two older brothers -- actually, right in the beginning, the first year, they inducted all the Jewish men military age, from about 20 to 45 I think it was, every single person; didn't matter if you had a family or somebody was sick in your family, they inducted them into the service. Not to the Army but they were treated like they were in the Army. That means they were under the Army jurisdiction. And they wore civilian clothes but guess what they used them for. They used them for like slave labor, actually.

That part of Europe, from our area all the way to Russia, a lot of mountains, forests, forests and mountains. That's all you have. Poland is full of it. Ukraine is huge. It's a big area. They used them to cut down all the trees in the forests. I'm not talking about electric buzz saws. I'm talking about the old saws, that kind of work. They used them for cutting down. Why? Because they didn't want the partisans -- hiding places for the partisans. So that's why they had them do this. This was one of the jobs.

Some of them, including my brothers, were sent up to the Russian front. And the Russian front -- one of my brothers, especially, he was like the first one there. He was there -- it's 1940. He was in places they had to bury the dead, minefields, that's what they used them for.

>> Bill Benson: To clear minefields.

>> Martin Weiss: That's what I meant. Yeah. It just so happens, to give you the whole thing about this brother, he was there for a long, long time. Finally he got over to the Russian side. Now, usually -- there were a lot of people like him from our area, Czech citizens. When you got to Russia, they volunteered into the Czechoslovakia legion. They had a legion set up. They were happy to have them because they put on uniforms, fighting the Germans. But my brother, when he got over to the Russian side, guess what. Somehow they picked him. Why, I don't know. They accused him of being a Russian spy -- I mean a German spy. Ok? And guess what. They put him in prison with the German prisoners of war. In the coal mines in the mountains. And he was there for the rest of the time. The Russians kept the German prisoners of war two years extra after the war.

Finally he was released in 1947. We already gave up, figured he died. He didn't show up. He just didn't exist. Nobody knew anything about where he was. So just when -- `47, after they released him, somehow or other -- I'll tell you the details because it's too complicated but he got to our hometown finally and he discovered most people didn't stay there. They were gone. But there were a few people, Jewish people, that settled in the small city not far away, about 10 kilometers away. He went straight there. He made sure nobody knew he was there because in those days they had police, the slightest thing they would pick you up and throw away the key. That's just the way the Russians were.

Anyway, he eventually -- by that time -- oh, yeah. One man moved there. My older brother was still in Czech Republic. This amazes me. There was no phone, no communication, nobody knew where anybody was. Somehow he had the address and got in touch with him. And again, I'll save time, he escaped from there to Slovakia and my brother sent him papers and clothes because he didn't have any clothes. And a sister-in-law, she was single. On the Russian rule, under Communism, if you wanted to travel from here to New York, you have to have while you're -- why you're traveling, a permit. And he didn't have any of that. So consequently my brother sent him all of that stuff and he was able to come All the way to where he was. Eventually, he got out from there he went to, believe it or not, Israel. And from Israel he came out to the United States.

>> Bill Benson: Marty, you and your family remained in the circumstances you were describing, remained in Hungary until 1944, for several years.

>> Martin Weiss: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what happened then. What changed -- even as horrible as things were, they really changed profoundly worse in 1944 for you and your family.

>> Martin Weiss: Oh, yeah. Well, actually, it changed worse. But basically it wasn't. By then we knew the writing on the wall that they were going to pick us up any day. There were rumors.

>> Bill Benson: Deportations.

>> Martin Weiss: Deportations. And by the way, before we went -- we were lucky we were left that late. But in Poland and Ukraine, they had mass killings. We heard about this because we lived not far from there.

By the way, through the grapevine. There was no newspapers or radio. We just heard it. Explicit stories. We heard all kinds of stories of what was happening in Poland and what was happening in the Ukraine and the mass killings which turned out to be the Einsatzgruppen or killing squads. They would take areas, people were 300, 20,000, take them to a field and kill them. In some places they had

like 20,000, 30,000 at one time. And like in two days they would kill -- there was one on exhibition, 32,000 in two days.

I met a kid that escaped from a place there were 41,000 people killed like this. Can you imagine? Like a slaughterhouse couldn't be that bad. Mass graves in the Ukraine, a lot of mass graves. There's a Catholic priest who took it upon himself to look into this. He discovered over 1,000 mass graves. Ok? But we heard all of that so consequently we prepared for the worst but there was nothing you could do.

We were thinking of going to the forest and hide but we are a big family, I had younger sisters and my mother and so on. How do you leave them behind? So eventually we decided not to go because my father, my brother, we were going to go a few of us but what is going to happen to them? So we just waited. We already knew it was coming time to pick us up.

At first, the Hungarians, by the way, turned down the German offer to take us. But then, in `44, they decided they were going to go -- they asked them again. They said, oh, sure, take them. In two months -- and this I emphasize -- in two months they emptied out almost 450,000 people from Hungary and shipped us out to Auschwitz. Ok? First we went to a ghetto, which was a short duration. But the point is we went to Auschwitz.

Now, we came to Auschwitz. In our case, by the way, we were 125 people in one boxcar. Ok? 125 people. And one boxcar. And you're talking about most of us had big families, like I say. You could have had a son 25, 30 years old but a 5-year-old kid in the family. There were a lot of kids under 10.

>> Bill Benson: Were you in there with your whole family?

>> Martin Weiss: With my whole family, right. So we were taken to a ghetto first. We were put on those boxcars. The Hungarians were so eager, so cooperative -- by the way, they -- those tracks that were going to Auschwitz, they had to take material to the troops because the Hungarian troops were fighting on the front with the Germans, alongside the Germans. They occupied those tracks with us train after train. They had like several trains a day. And each train had 100, 120 boxcars. Think of that. 125, 135 them in a boxcar. Do the math. I never try to.

What do you call it? We came -- in our case, we came to Mauthausen. The Hungarians did it all in two months. Mind you the logistics of it just to do that.

>> Bill Benson: When you were in the boxcar with your family, did you know where you were going?

>> Martin Weiss: No. We knew we were going to bad places. Because by now we heard all the stories you could possibly dream up. So we were prepared for the worst. But nobody ever expected like what happened in Auschwitz. Ok? You just couldn't be a normal human being and think that.

>> Bill Benson: Even though you felt prepared for the worst.

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah. We heard of the massacres, of the mass killings, of all of that by now. Ok? We heard of all of that. Not only that, but I'll tell you, even the Hungarians who were practicing the same thing, while they were stationed there on the Russian front, guess what they were doing. Throwing women and children into the river on a daily basis. It wasn't just the Germans.

And by the way, in Budapest, they did exactly the same thing. Even before we left -- were deported, we already heard stories in Budapest. They were throwing women and children into the Danube River, daily bodies floating in the river. So it just gives you an example.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about arriving in Auschwitz if you can.

>> Martin Weiss: Ok. When we came to Poland, we already got a wake-up call. We knew we were going someplace east but we didn't know where. We recognized the names on the -- you know, but the meantime we were in the boxcars, no food, no water, no nothing. The only thing we had was a bucket in the corner. That's it.

And, again, everybody had big families, a lot of children. A lot of old people. We came to Auschwitz. As soon as -- we came to reunite. So -- we came in the night. So it must have been about midnight. As soon as they opened the doors, they started shouting orders, “Schnell!,” get out fast. And there were people with uniforms. We didn't know who they were. And sticks like broomsticks, threatening to hit you. Then we found out they were called kapos. They were just other prisoners. They

were doing their job, but they had to do what they had to do. Some of them were probably mean but most of them just put on an act. They had to be like that. But we can't know that. To us it seemed real.

Because it was nighttime, they had the perimeter, on the ground, surrounded with flood lights. But no sooner we were there, I'm talking about thousands of people from this train, a lot of people. A big circle, big area.

By the way, all the sections in Auschwitz, each section with barbed wire and they were electrified. So where they expect us run or how to run, we have our whole families, we're all civilians, but they had guards with the trigger literally on their finger surrounding us every five, six feet, the perimeter. And then they had dogs, that, believe me, especially where we are came from, we were not used to that, really nasty, growling dog. If you let him loose, believe me, he would rip you apart like that. And this is when we came to Auschwitz.

As soon as you got on the ground, they separated immediately men from the women. Then we had to go to a line. An officer would stand there like from a Hollywood movie, shiny boots, fancy bridges, clean, nice, very sharp. You would pass. They would just go this way or that way.

Now, we heard rumors. Nobody told us really. Because of our neighbor, people would be able to work and they will take care of our families. They wouldn't treat them well but they will be living. Ok? So this is the rumor. This is what we accepted. What else are you going to do? Well, as soon as we came there, they went through the line and they were picking.

By the way, one of the reasons I'm here today, I think, and the only explanation I have, I put on two, three jackets before I got off the train so I looked bigger. I remember distinctly making that decision. Ok? And why? Because we knew they will want you to work. We had if it figured out if we work, they will take care of our families because of that. Of course, that was a falacy. But the point is this is what we believed in our own heads. I went through. I'll tell you why I think the jacket saved me. Because all my friends, I was the only one born of my year that came back. Now, many of them were my size, some of them bigger but I was the only one born in it my year that came back.

>> Bill Benson: Marty, who else from your family was selected for work?

>> Martin Weiss: Ok. As soon as we came there -- first of all, my mother, just -- my mother and two younger sisters went to the gas chamber immediately, all the other people.

Now, just to give you an example how unpredictable everything was. I had an aunt. She didn't have any children. She wanted to help my mother. So she went with -- she was a young woman. She could have easily lived but she went with them. Of course nobody expected that.

Anyway, but my brother -- my father and my brother went through the line and we passed. Ok? Now, as we passed, we went -- we were like in one area. I noticed not far away, actually, there was a lengthy space. There was a bunch of women with the children like a little distance, like from here to that wall, very short distance, empty space. I noticed my mother over there. So I said to my father, you know something, I'll make a dash across that space and join them because I'll be able to get some food or something. I knew my sisters were too young. They were 8 and 10 or something like that. So I tried to make a dash across this particular space. And one of those guys with the striped uniform with a stick grabbed a hold of me, back of my neck, threw me back and says, "You can't go there!" And threatened me. I found out he was a prisoner. Said to my father, could you imagine another prisoner, he's so mean? Well, guess what. He just saved my life. I didn't know this until the following morning. It just shows you how life is. You never know what saves you. This is just a coincidence. But I'll always remember that.

They went through showers. Like I say, all the other people went to the gas chambers immediately. But more than that we went through the showers. They took away all of our clothes, everything else. They gave us striped clothes. And by the way, this was in Poland. Spring but cold and dingy and raw. I can't explain it. We were shivering.

We came out of the shower, by that time it was dawn. They marched us up to a barrack. We came to the barrack, and they wouldn't let us in. We had to stand outside, no matter how it was, how nasty it was. While we were standing there, we saw this huge fire under pine trees. There was a row of pine trees and it was a huge fire, like the length of a football field. The flames were going high up to the

pine trees, high up through the trees. In the meantime, we saw the crematoriums surrounding the area with the tall chimneys. We saw this black smoke. And it was so miserable. The weather was like made for the day. It was like if there's such a thing as hell, you couldn't have painted it any different. It was dingy. Not exactly raining but drizzle, cold, and this blood soot coming down like snow. And this was our first morning in Auschwitz.

So we -- oh, then we found out one of the kapos explained what the chimneys were, that they were crematoriums. Before that, we never heard of crematoriums. We didn't come from that kind of world. We asked what the fire was. He says "Those are your families." Just like this. The people who were coming -- the transport was so heavy, so constant, the crematoriums could not handle the volume. So they used a ditch and they burned them in the ditch. And that was our wake-up to Auschwitz. And let me tell you something. I remember distinctly -- I remember I didn't have any tears. You were just like -- it's real but it's not. You know? I can't explain it. You were just like you're stunned. It's hard to explain.

We were there a very short time. By the way, we had bunks, 10 them in a bunk. -- people in a bunk. This was our first day in Auschwitz. And after that, of course, we found out this happened and that happened. Then we were prepared for anything.

Now, because we heard of all the mass killings prior, about the mass killings at all, we figured, hey, sooner or later they're going to do it to us. Why would they save us? Anyway, we got put on a train that took us Austria. We came to Austria. The only reason we were in Austria, because we came and the train stopped on the Danube. We saw Vienna not far off. We could recognize it was Vienna so we knew where we were. But it kept on going and came final to destination. The thing stopped alongside this huge mountain. We disembarked. They marched us up the mountain. We come up to the top of the mountain and there was a big sign, Mauthausen. So that's where we knew we were in a place called Mauthausen.

Now, Mauthausen was built on a stone quarry. So the prisoners that were stationed in Mauthausen were dying there on a daily basis just from hard labor. It was so, so hard and so gruesome. They had to cut out the rocks. Not with a machine or with electric saws or whatever you do cutting out rock. They had picks and shovels. And most of all, everybody was starving all the time.

By the way, they couldn't even get a drink of water. It was hot on top of the mountain when they brought the stone up and so on. So we kept on hearing stories about that. It was just brutal.

Now, most of Mauthausen, by the way, most of the people were considered political prisoners.And by the way, they had people from all over the world. I mean, all over Europe, I should say. They had Germans even. Some were political. Many of the Germans were for different crimes, like rape, robbery, murder, embezzlement, whatever, Jehovah's Witness , some of them were. Thousands of Czechs died in Mauthausen.

>> Bill Benson: When you went to Mauthausen, you were with your father at that time. Right?

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Any other family members with you?

>> Martin Weiss: No. My brother was immediately -- got separated in Auschwitz as soon as we got there. So my brother was on his own.

By the way, he was strong, big. I would have bet my life he would return. I returned. He didn't.

>> Bill Benson: So you went to Mauthausen with your father.

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: From Mauthausen you would be sent on to a camp called Melk.

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah. Right. From Mauthausen -- I stayed in Mauthausen. That was like the main camp. But Mauthausen had a lot of sub-camps. I was sent to a camp called Melk. It was a small town. Not far from there. We were building stones under the huge mountains. In less than a year we built seven huge tunnels under this big huge mountain. The reason they were so anxious to have those tunnels, because they were being bombed by the allies and they wanted to put the factories underground. So they drove us three shifts, constantly.

>> Bill Benson: You're about 15 years old.

>> Martin Weiss: Yeah. When I say hard labor, we had to even take the cement, not mixers -- we're talking about big, big caverns, big space. We had to take the stuff, carry the cement bags on our back from place to place, underground, take the cement, mix it with water and gravel, whatever, and put in pail and hand it up to different levels. Imagine doing that work while you're starving all the time. This is what happened. So people were dying left and right, not because someone was killing you, just plain you gave up. It doesn't matter how strong you are. Sooner or later something happened to you.
>> Bill Benson: And by now you're in early 1945. The Russians are advancing. The Germans are losing the war. And so they take you again at that time and take you to Gunskirchen.
>> Martin Weiss: Right. Exactly. Now, first they took us back to Mauthausen because the Russians were closing in.

And by the way, the Hungarians were also retreating because they were afraid to be captured by the Russians. Everybody was afraid of the Russians. So they kept on retreating.

What happened, the Hungarians, like I say, were retreating. And guess what. All the labor battalions I mentioned to you that were hungry, they didn't leave behind -- mind you, the war is over. Let them loose, right? They brought them in and they ended up in Gunskirchen where I was. Ok? Thousands of them. Mind you, they lost the war. You would think the soldiers would be happy to get rid of them and just go home. They didn't do that. They came into Austria. I could never understand the logic, the stupidity, whatever you want to call it.

Like I say, for sake of time, at certain times, certain point, they decided they better evacuate us back to Mauthausen. So we went back from the working camp to Mauthausen. As soon as you came to Mauthausen, guess what. In this camp, throughout the war, throughout our working time, there were Greeks, Italians -- by the way, the Greeks and Italians may have been Jewish but I have no way of knowing because we couldn't communicate. But there were people from Poland from Russia, my God, even Russian POWs which they were not supposed to be there. But they had everybody in there.

As soon as we came back to Mauthausen at this time, first thing they did, they separated the Jewish population from the others. A-ha, now they're going to kill us. Why would they separate us? Till now we were all treated the same, worked the same, died the same, no difference, no distinction. Why would they separate us? That's exactly what they did. So we for sure -- oh, and they took us out of the main camp, put us on the side of the camp. Ok? It was a very neglected area, like with thorn bushes. There was hardly anyplace to lay down. Oh, the spring but it was cold. We didn't have -- we had one measly blanket and the striped uniforms which was nothing.

In the meantime, by this time, forget food. Whatever we complained about before, now we would have been happy to have that, nothing. In fact, I'll tell you, things were so bad that -- they had bread. When they tried to cut off a chunk, the whole bread would just crumble. By the way, found out later it was made out of sawdust. It literally crumbled. It was like literally bread crumbs like you buy in a grocery store. So we had to put out the palm of our hand. The guy would take a ladle and put it in your hand.
>> Bill Benson: The bread. Yeah.
>> Martin Weiss: And then you would get like a cup, a broth if you want to call it that, from a sugar -- they use it for the cattle. They used to make a sugar beet broth from it. You didn't get the beets but you got the broth. That was it. And by now we were sure they're going to kill us, that's why they brought us here. Why separate us?

Guess what. One day they come out, we are going on a march. Again, rumors. One thing in places like this, there's always rumors. They're going to take us to the Swiss border and trade us for trucks. Americans will give them trucks.

Now, mind you, I was already a seasoned prisoner. One thing I was, I was not daydreaming. I said, yeah? Somebody's going to give trucks for us? We were like half dead anyway. Believe it or not, we were in such bad shape that I can't imagine anybody trying to save anybody.

So anyway, we went on this march. The march was very simple. You marched from there to a place called Gunskirchen. Of course, we had no idea where we were going. Wherever they told us to

go, they had guards. Everybody was just in bad shape. If somebody fell down, they would trip, the guard would shoot them on the spot. Just like that. Then a truck would come and pick them up.

I'll give you one little just idea. There was a potato on the ground. We were on a country road. And this one fellow saw the potato. And he took a leap for it. Another fellow saw the same potato. He jumped for it as well. Guess what. The two fellows started fighting over the potato. Well guess what. The guard picked up his rifle. The guard was like -- I was on the outside lane so he was like a couple of feet away from me. He picks up his rifle and shoots the man right in the face, just like that. Because they were fighting over the potato. It's very memorable. And the reason I could never accept it, how could another human being do this? And by the way, they were not SS. They were regular Army. They were supposed to be the good guys. Hello? I'd like to see the bad guys. So go ahead.

And this is the experience you had. So consequent, what do you call it -- so when we came to Gunskirchen, you found out things -- as bad as we thought we were, this was already like the end of the line, if you will. People were literally walking around like zombies.

Now, a lot of the Hungarian labor battalions ended up there, many, thousands -- I don't know exactly the numbers but there were lots of them there. But guess what my luck. Again, lucky. I ran into a cousin of mine. He was in this Hungarian labor battalion. He was marched from Budapest, from there. He end up. As soon as I got there, immediately I ran into him out of 14,000, 15,000 people. You tell me how that happens.

>> Bill Benson: Marty, in the little time we have remaining, tell us about liberation, your liberation.

>> Martin Weiss: Ok. Yeah. So that was a big plus for me because they were in pretty good shape compared to us. Just psychologically I was uplifted. Here were these guys, like they were like 22. They were in good shape yet. They had good boots, good clothes, like their own clothes. I'll never forget that.

Anyway, we found out one day -- there was so much from there that I could tell you that it's almost humanly impossible understand but people were just falling down, like literally falling down and couldn't get up.

Anyway, the Americans -- we heard the Americans were there but we didn't see any Americans. But somebody noticed the guards were gone. So that should have given us enough confidence that we were ok. Right? But guess what. We decided to stay an extra night. This was in the afternoon. We spent an extra night in the camp. We were afraid to walk out. We were afraid we'll walk out, they'll have machine guns on the sides and mow us down.

>> Bill Benson: Like it was a big trick.

>> Martin Weiss: Right. We were really afraid. So we decided to spend an extra night there, starving and all. We didn't want to leave the place until we were sure it was ok. So the next day we went out of the camp. It's very hard how you psychologically feel at the time but at that time it made all the sense in the world. So we walked out, started looking for food. I'll spare you a lot of stuff in between but anyway, we came to this field and we saw this Army truck in a ditch. We investigated. We saw this big tub of lard on the front seat. Like I said, those guys were in fairly good shape yet. They were young men. He just took -- something with food so we wanted it. But it was locked. He took his fist, just went right through the glass, broke the glass, all fell into the lard. Ok? It sounds stupid, could have gone on the other side. But, you know, in times like this you don't think. You just do things. So anyway, fell into the lard. But we took the lard and we still wanted to save the lard because we figured it has something to do with food, save it. So we scooped it out, cleaned out the glass but saved the lard.

We started walking away. Before we walked away, we decided, hey, look in the back of the truck. What's there? Well, we climb on the back of the truck and we found leather hides all ready for use. We got really excited. I mean we knew we needed shoes and we knew there wouldn't be any shoes for love of money even if you had the money. But the point is, we could go to a shoemaker and have us made shoes. Because in Europe, the shoemakers still knew how to make shoes from scratch. When I was growing up, we had boots for the winter. We had to have the Shoemaker.

At any rate, we went and took this lard. And took the leather hides, rolled up whatever you could carry. We went up to this farmhouse. It was not far away. We marched up to the farmhouse. One

thing I'll tell you. I had such hatred for Germans. If somebody said here's a pistol, shoot him, he's German, I remember feeling such hatred I felt I could have done it. Ok?

By the way, when I started speaking, it took four, five years that I remembered this particular incident. That's why now I like to close with it.

We went to this farmhouse. Mind you -- I remember they were not as bad because they spent more time in Hungary but I went through the whole deal, from Auschwitz and so on. So my feelings were a lot, lot raw, just angry. We got to the house. And this is something that bothers me when I started speaking about this, till this day it bothers me. How come you behave like ordinary people? We came to the house. We knocked on the door. We didn't barge in.

>> Bill Benson: This was a German house?

>> Martin Weiss: A German household. The woman was home alone. Lady came to the door. She opened the door. I remember because they were all tall and I was short. I was in the back. All I could see was her face because she was high up. And they asked her very nicely can she give us some flour, some water, and some eggs. The woman turned around, entered the kitchen, brought it out.

Now, why wouldn't we just go into the kitchen and take over the kitchen? Give me a break. Even if she was not helpless. These guys were in fairly good shape. We could have done anything we wanted. But we didn't do that. Instead of going to the kitchen and cook a meal, our first meal -- by the way, we were hungry! There was a barn in the backyard. In front of the barn there was this iron kettle to heat up water for the cows and stuff. I don't know if you ever saw it in a movie, like from the Midwest. One of the guys blended all the stuff together, the eggs and stuff, and made dumplings because it was the easiest thing to make. We boiled some water in this rusty, iron kettle, in the barn.

>> Bill Benson: Not in her house.

>> Martin Weiss: Not in her house. Never even suggested we go there. Nobody ever said we should go there. And we had our first meal. Ok? It's a funny thing. Even though I was very young and I was very starved but I ate a certain amount and I stopped. The reason I mention it, one of the fellows hooked up with an uncle of his. He was older, like around 50-ish. That was considered very old to still be alive, let's put it this way. He ate too much a day or two later he died. Then we found out thousands of people died because of that. Because the Americans gave them food too quickly and they couldn't tolerate it and they died. They died because of it. It took them a while for allies to figure out what was wrong.

So here's the deal. We ate the food. I remember, oh my God, really content. One of the guys suggests, you know, we should take some of the hides, each one of us, contribute to give to the lady.

>> Bill Benson: So you gave her hides in return for the food she had given you.

>> Martin Weiss: What always bothered me, why we did that. Not one of us objected. I was the one that really -- I should have objected. I didn't. We just did exactly as suggested, went to the door, never went to her house, gave her the hides and said thank you and walked away from there.

You know, like I say, I spoke for four, five years before this story sort of hit me. I have to admit, every time I speak, I always like to include it. It always bothered me that we were so civil. Because, believe me, I didn't feel civil. I didn't feel human. I remember distinctly we did not feel human yet we acted like human beings. And this is something, with hindsight, I could never quite figure it out. But because we were raised a certain way, somehow we all had it. Ok? Not one of us objected.

I better stop here.

>> Bill Benson: We're going to stop now. It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person has the last word so I'm going to turn back to Marty in just a moment to close our program. A couple of things before I do that. One is to tell you that he will be signing copies of "Echoes of Memory" when he's finished. So when he's done, he will go up -- if you allow him to head up the side so he can go up there and sign copies of "Echoes of Memory." We obviously didn't have a chance for you to ask questions. You can see we could have spent many more hours. Unfortunately we only just touched on many, many things that Marty could have shared with us, not only in what he went through during the Holocaust but right after liberation and what happened to him from there.

Just one thing, Marty. Your father was at Mauthausen but he did not survive.

>> Martin Weiss: No. He died supposedly of pneumonia. Again, my father was in the same camp I was, in Melk, actually, that's where he died. But we hardly saw each other. Once in a while. Because he worked shifts. I worked shifts. We were on different sides of camp. Sometimes by chance we were able to meet, just a few times now that I think of it. And one day came back and I had an uncle with him, too, and he informed me that he died.
>> Bill Benson: I'm going to turn to Marty in a moment. I want to thank you for being with us. I remind you that we will have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. If you can come back, we would love you to do that. Otherwise, the website will have information about our program in 2017.

So when Marty goes up there, it's an opportunity for you to maybe chat with him a little bit, ask a question if you didn't get a chance to here.

Marty?
>> Martin Weiss: Ok. I'll tell you, one of the reasons I do this -- by the way, before I moved here, to Washington, which was about 20 years ago, actually, it took about three years for me just to enter the building. But once I started volunteering, I realized something. I promised that if I do survive, I'll tell the world what happened, not so much for me but for the people that perished. The reason I think it's important to learn about this, and I'm glad to see so many young people here, is that if we don't listen and we don't learn from the past, even today, look at all the massacres, the wars, and the fighting is over nothing. Sometimes it's because of religion. Sometimes it's because people find reasons. I still feel that as human beings we owe it to each other to treat each other in a civil manner. To show you, even though I was very angry and hateful and all of this, we still behaved the way we were supposed to, the way our parents raised us.

One thing, I'll tell you something, sounds like I'm bragging, but being Jewish, every religion teaches the same thing, by the way. It doesn't matter what religion you are. But life is very, very sacred. And also that you have to behave like a human being instead of like a pig or an animal or whatever. Somehow or another that came through at that particular time. That was our true test, that not just one of us was like this but we were all the same. Ok? And that amazes me, that my parents or our parents did such a good job on us that we were able to do this.

Believe it or not, when I first started talking about this, this bothered the heck out of me. How come we behaved like that. I know this sounds stupid, but I really remember being bothered. My God, I didn't feel like a human being. I didn't. All I felt was hate yet we did behave like that. But you know something? Looking back now, the way I continued going on afterwards, I think I made the right choices. Because I never, never carried on any hatred to anybody. Ok?

And one of the reasons I'm proud of it, I'll tell what you it is. If I were to go with hatred, I would feel that they won. This way I never felt like a victim. I didn't want to be -- you call me a survivor. I always had a problem with that word. But the point is that it was my values, that I felt like I was -- even though I was victimized, I don't feel like I have to go through life as a victim. Because that would be my point, that your own values matter and what kind of person you are.

I'll tell you, my vengeance is I have two good kids. Each one has two kids. My grandchildren are about as good as I could ever hope for. They did a good job on all of them, my son and my daughter. And to me, that is my vengeance.
>> [Applause]