

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
First Person – Fred Kahn  
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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 18th year of First Person. Our First Person today is Mr. Fred Kahn, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2017 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 conclude August 10. The museum's website, at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org) provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

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

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

Fred Kahn was born on December 19, 1932 in Wiesbaden, Germany to Jewish parents, Selma and Max Kahn. Here we see Fred at about 9 months with his mother and older brother, Hans. This photo of Fred's father, Max Kahn, was taken around 1935.

The arrow on this map points to Wiesbaden, Germany where Fred was born. In 1933, after Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany, Fred's father fled to Belgium in the hopes that Hitler's rule would end quickly. Fred's mother joined his father later.

They left Fred in the care of his aunt, Rosa Kahn Nassauer and his uncle, Siegfried Nassauer, pictured here with Fred. Fred's parents hoped they could return for their son when it was safe. Fred would live with his aunt and uncle for five years. This photo was taken in 1937 when Fred was about 4 and 1/2 years old.

In 1938, Fred's father asked his aunt and uncle to send Fred to Belgium because he was afraid the border between Germany and Belgium would close. Fred's aunt and uncle sent him first to

Aachen, Germany, indicated by the arrow on the right. A woman helped him get to the border of Germany and Belgium, where Fred's father was waiting. Fred's father took him to Verviers, Belgium to join the rest of the family. The arrow on the left points to Verviers. Four years after Fred left Germany, his aunt and uncle were deported to the killing center Sobibor.

In 1942 Fred's family obtained false identity papers and went into hiding under the Christian surname Lejeune. They moved frequently to avoid suspicion. On September 9, 1944 the area in which they were staying was liberated by the US 1st Army after a fierce battle. Later, when fighting began again, they moved to Liege, Belgium and lived in a friend's basement. This third arrow shows the location of Liege.

In 1952, at age 19, Fred emigrated on his own to the United States.

He joined the US Army in March of 1953 and later that year he became a naturalized US citizen. In 1954, he returned to Germany with the army. We close with this photograph of Fred and his mother, Selma Kahn, in 1954 when Fred visited her in Belgium when on leave from the Army.

Following his tour with U.S. Army, serving in Army Intelligence, Fred attended the University of Maryland, graduating with honors, then earned a Masters of Arts from John Hopkins University. In 1958 he was appointed by the Eisenhower Administration to serve as a "guide" for VIPs visiting the U.S. Pavilion at the World's Fair in Brussels, Belgium, such as Orson Welles, Harry Belafonte and Sophia Loren, as well as government dignitaries.

In 1963 Fred married his wife Rita, who had come to the U.S. as an exchange student from Taiwan. They got married on Fred's birthday. They live in Bethesda, Maryland, in the same home where they have lived for nearly 44 years.

Fred and Rita have a daughter, Anna, and two grandchildren, Beth and Jacob. Anna is here today with Fred, as is his grandson Jacob, who just graduated with honors in Mechanical Engineering from Georgia Tech.

Fred taught at Howard University, and worked for the federal government beginning with the Johnson Administration at the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity where he helped launch the Job Corps. From there Fred went to the Department of Labor where he was a political economist serving under six presidents retiring at the end of 1992.

Fred is widely recognized for proposing debates between Presidential candidates, securing the endorsement of such major American figures as Eleanor Roosevelt, presidential candidate Adlai E. Stevenson and others, with the first debate in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Several years ago, Fred was recognized in the Congressional Record for his role in establishing our system of Presidential Debates.

For the past 15 years Fred has managed a worldwide listserv, "Remember\_The\_Holocaust." You will find him here on Monday afternoons where he serves as a volunteer with this Museum's Information Desk, speaking with visitors.

After today's program, Fred will be available to sign copies of book, "The Story of Fred Kahn," that was written by a high school junior as part of a book series about Holocaust survivors written and illustrated by young authors.

With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Fred Kahn. Fred, please [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you so much for joining us, Fred and for your willingness to be our First Person today. We're thrilled to have you with us. You have so much to share and we have such a short period of time, we should start right away.

You were born in December 1932, just weeks before Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in

1933. Before you tell us what happened to you under the Nazis and during World War II and the Holocaust, tell us about your family and their life before Hitler came to power. What was their life like?

>> Fred Kahn: My mother was born in April 1906. She attended a finishing school on the border with Switzerland. And my father was sent to one day take her home and two years after that, my father married my mother when she was 18 years old, and he was 28 years old. This was now 1924. And at that time, Germany had a democratic government. Between 1924 until I was born, my mother and father had a very comfortable life. My father was a businessman, and unfortunately, his father-in-law died of kidney cancer two months after they had married.

So that's about it.

>> Bill Benson: Your father had served in the German army in World War I, right?

>> Fred Kahn: Correct. My father, his own father, actually died when he was only 14 years old. He was born in 1896. But during World War I, my father volunteered with the German Army. He got wounded. He was a machine gunner and got wounded in France. He was awarded one of the highest medals at that time of the German Army by the future president of Germany. Marshal Hindenburg.

>> One last question before we move on. How large was your extended family?

>> Fred Kahn: Quite a bit. Because our own immediate family, I had only, after my older sister died when she was only about a few months old. And I had a lot of -- it was two of us with our parents.

>> Bill Benson: You had an older brother? Hans?

>> Fred Kahn: He was five years older.

>> Bill Benson: And did you have a large extended family?

>> Fred Kahn: Maiden name of my mother was Greenbaum. My grandmother was going to stay with us for a long time was a maiden name, Barnes. On the Kahn side, Jacob Kahn was my grandfather born in 1855 in a small village in Germany.

While I was on the Internet years ago, I corresponded with somebody from there who happened to live next door to where my grandfather had been born. And found his grave. And I'm still in contact with him.

>> Bill Benson: It wasn't long after Hitler came to power in early 1933 that your father decided to leave Germany for Belgium. What do you know about your father's decision to leave that early, and why he went without the rest of the family?

>> Fred Kahn: My father was never involved in politics, but kept up with the news. And he thought that Hitler would not last more than a couple of years. That's why also at the time, a private army of Hitler, the Nazis was attacking Jews and some killing them in Wiesbaden. And April 1, 1933. Probably heard about that. So in September, my father went to under the guise -- you had to sign up. My mother did that. He went to Belgium hoping that Hitler actually would be gone by the time he would come back.

And that did not happen. And so my mother and my brother and my grandmother joined my father in Belgium.

>> Bill Benson: And your mother went first and then your grandmother went with your brother. And a lit later --

>> Fred Kahn: Two buildings they owned and she had to sell it first.

>> Bill Benson: By the time your mother and grandmother and brother had left, you were left with your aunt and uncle?

>> Fred Kahn: Correct.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us, and you would stay with them until 1938.

>> Fred Kahn: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what that time as best you know, I know you were very young. What was that time like for you living with your aunt and uncle?

>> Fred Kahn: Very, very loving. All I remember is a lot of hugs. Really truly loved me.

And a boy my age, who was not Jewish, Walter. Walter was so close to me that one day other kids said were children -- German soldiers that had been stationed in the town where I lived there, right after me and threw stones after me and called me dirty Jew.

Went through the alley and asked him in German, the only language I knew. [Speaking German] I said what was a Jew. I didn't know that. To me, I was probably only 4, 5 years old. That's it.

And of course sometimes of course, I was naughty.

[Laughter]

I slept with a dog in a hut, and they were looking all over town for me and eventually found me sleeping there with a dog in a doghouse.

[Laughter]

And yeah, right. One day I was very inquisitive. I was up in the attic and I looked through. I was climbing up to see how you would see the place from there. Fortunately, my aunt was right behind me and grabbed me. Of course I got spanked.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Do you know if you had any contact with your mother and father during that time with your aunt and uncle?

>> Fred Kahn: Occasionally my mother who was in Belgium would come. People did not fear at the time. In 1933 to 1938 something would happen to women or children. They knew that men would be most likely interned. But my mother would occasionally come.

I did not know that she was my mother. I remember thinking who's that woman? Is she your friend? She had black hair. And so she hugged me. I remember the hug.

>> Bill Benson: As far as you were concerned. Your aunt and uncle were like your parents?

>> Fred Kahn: That's right. Absolutely. I don't remember what I called my uncle, but I called my aunt Mama. Even when later on I was taken to Belgium. I yelled and cried Mama and a lot of tears. I considered her my mother.

>> Bill Benson: During that time with your aunt and uncle, I believe they lost their business. It was taken away from them?

>> Fred Kahn: Right. In 1935, they were selling meat and sausages, and it was closed.

>> Bill Benson: The Nazis closed it?

>> Fred Kahn: Right.

>> Bill Benson: You also shared with me that while you were there, your paternal grandmother died.

>> Fred Kahn: Yes. Around 12:00 each day, there were two brothers who married two sisters who lived not far from each other. My grandmother, on my paternal side was the older sister of my aunt. Which was also my aunt.

And I would take my grandmother, walk her from one of the sisters to the other sisters. And in fact, when both sisters were quarreling with each other --

[Laughter]

June 1, 1938, unfortunately, she died.

>> Bill Benson: And you were with her?

>> Fred Kahn: Yes. Right. And she fell down and she died. But I remember where she was buried. Because the year after, around that time, the Nazis forbid Jews to have a gravestone.

>> Bill Benson: So your grandmother had no tombstone?

>> Fred Kahn: But I remember where she was buried.

>> Bill Benson: During that time what were your parents doing in Belgium?

>> Fred Kahn: My father became -- he was a businessman. He had to start all over again. But then he became a bridge player. And as a result, he got to know a lot of people from the bridge establishment.

And that would be very -- I tell my wife, this is eventually when we went into hiding, this was thanks to the bridge connection.

Because they considered my father.

>> Bill Benson: A fellow bridge player.

>> Fred Kahn: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Your move to join your parents in 1938, in October of 1938, was sudden. Tell us what precipitated you going to Belgium and what was involved in getting you there.

>> Fred Kahn: Most of you probably know about the Munich pact that gave away part of Czechoslovakia to the Nazis. Next day my father called sister, said get the boy out of Germany. My father thought they would close the border and eventually there would be war. In fact he was right. 11 months later we were out in Europe.

So before I was taken to the city of Aachen and turned over to a lady. There was a guard next to our house.

And during the night, they for some -- I never could understand it, but I was with them where they buried the religious relics of the synagogue in the landfill.

>> Bill Benson: You were with them.

>> Fred Kahn: Correct. Trying to figure out the reason why they wanted me there. The next morning my uncle took me and as we walked out of the courtyard I was turning over to my friends, I wanted to say good-bye. That's the last thing that my uncle wanted to let people know that I'm leaving.

So he said he's already in the field. And so he took me by train to a city province, Wiesbaden, which is near Frankfurt. To the town of Aachen.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about that. When you were told that you're going to leave, did you realize that you were now going to move away from your aunt and uncle and go to your parents?

>> Fred Kahn: They just told me I was going to take a big trip. Didn't go into any details.

>> Bill Benson: The landfill where the religious relics were buried.

>> Fred Kahn: The landfill was just up the street.

>> Bill Benson: And in fact, that synagogue was burned shortly later.

>> Fred Kahn: Six weeks later. Correct.

>> Bill Benson: Now you're taken to Aachen.

>> Fred Kahn: Right. And there a friend of another uncle lived by there in Belgium. By the name of Harlem Kahn. There was a lady there, and somehow my father decided to get me out of Germany. He must have had a lot of phone calls. And obviously his brother told him he knows a person there in Aachen, a Christian lady. My uncle took me to her. Never knew her before. Do you understand? So that's what happened.

>> Bill Benson: So she just was willing to take you across the border?

>> Fred Kahn: Correct. Because she was the friend of another uncle. She took me by streetcar to the border with Germany and then in Germany, of course, learn the only language and knew -- German, the only language I knew then.

>> Bill Benson: So no man's land. Like a space.

>> Fred Kahn: Like one block between Germany, the border and Belgium.

>> Bill Benson: So she told you this little boy --

>> Fred Kahn: Right. Except that I walked too slow. This was the afternoon of October 1. And they expected that there would be a lot of movements of people over the week in Germany or Belgium that no one was notice me. I walked very slowly and I probably murmured something to myself.

The lady was telling me about [Away from mic] I didn't know what that was. I didn't know my father before and never saw pictures. By the time I hide from the Belgium side, this man talked to me in French. But I didn't understand it.

And of course, the borders of France, there was another man yelling something which I didn't understand.

He yelled "that's my son" in French.

>> Bill Benson: You didn't know that was your father?

>> Fred Kahn: No. Of course not. So after maybe -- bear in mind that my father spent five years in Belgium, and he was through the bridge, had connections and probably some phone calls. And maybe 10 or 15 minutes afterwards, reported as a refugee. I was short of 6 years old.

>> Bill Benson: And considered a political refugee?

>> Fred Kahn: Correct.

>> Bill Benson: So now you're in Belgium, your family is reunited with your mother and your father and your grandmother and your brother.

>> Fred Kahn: Correct.

>> Bill Benson: You would live in Belgium for the next year until World War I broke out --

>> Fred Kahn: World War II.

>> Bill Benson: Excuse me. Months later in May 1940, the Germans invaded Belgium along with France and Luxembourg. Tell us what you recall about the German invasion and what your family did once that happened.

>> Fred Kahn: I don't know this very well because my father had a friend in Belgian Army near the border and he called 5:30 in the morning on May 10 to say the Germans just crossed the border. My father decided, and it was on a Friday I think. And beautiful blue skies, I recall. And we have had a Ford car, and we all piled up in the car. My father again thought it would be like World War I and that in the Flanders, the Belgian Army and the English and the French would hold on as they did in World War I.

>> Bill Benson: Stop the German advance.

>> Fred Kahn: Right. Went to Flanders and eventually there, there were tons of refugees. And Germany attacked civilians in order to spread panic there to prevent the advance of English and French soldiers. Even a English soldier, and then of course we had to jump from the car in the ditches and probably some people got killed. Because of the Stuttgarts.

>> Bill Benson: You remember that?

>> Fred Kahn: Yes. Very dangerous. You remember when people try to kill you.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: I think so.

[Laughter]

>> Fred Kahn: That's why they were hollering. And people said how can you remember that? You were too young. I say I can remember. But then eventually the car broke down and my father decided to go with other people in this parking lot to try to make it to go to England.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about that. Before the car broke down, tell us about the British soldier.

>> Fred Kahn: As we drove a British soldier asked to hitchhike with us. He was on the running board. And I recall him saying it's a long way to temporary.

>> Bill Benson: While riding on the runway.

>> Fred Kahn: And hang our dirty [Away from mic] on the 6-foot line. That was the German, trench. They build a line and then the Germans build the other lines.

>> Bill Benson: So you ran out of gas.

>> Fred Kahn: And as a result my mother was now in charge. And by that time.

>> Bill Benson: Because your father is gone by this time?

>> Fred Kahn: He's gone.

>> Bill Benson: Where did he go?

>> Fred Kahn: He tried to get to England and got there 24 hours too late. And next door to Dunkirk, and there was a movie that just came out about Dunkirk. And he was trying to make it with the English and French to England the same way as the over 300,000 Englishmen skewed in Dunkirk.

>> Bill Benson: So now you're without your father and your mother is in charge.

>> Fred Kahn: Right. And shortly thereafter, the same day, come down the hill the German Army. I remember there was a French tank just turn around. And we were going to stay in a house, in a basement. Because the people had gone. And the German lieutenant, talked to my mother and she pretended that she was a German-descended person. And he said don't go in this house. It's not solid. Go next door.

So all night long I was in the basement and I recall like a thunder noise.

And the morning, when we got up, the house next door was destroyed. And then we broke up the hill. I don't see how we would have gotten back to Brussels. We woke up and I dropped the basket of eggs. But on the left-hand side I saw a German soldier look like he was asleep. He probably was dead.

And suddenly out of nowhere came a bus with a Red Cross on it, and it stopped. And my mother again, German, he said get on and he took us to Brussels where the Germans, the Red Cross fed me and then from Brussels to a city not too far from the German border. We hitchhiked back and eventually we split up. My grandmother and brother went one way and then my mother and I. Six weeks after we got back, my father came back to us.

>> Bill Benson: He spent six weeks --

>> Fred Kahn: He told me that he actually sabotaged some of the German phone lines or whatever.

>> Bill Benson: But he made his way back in Germany.

>> Fred Kahn: Yeah. He came back.

>> Bill Benson: So now you're back reunited living in Verviers. Did you go to school?

>> Fred Kahn: From the moment I get to Belgium, they put me in kindergarten and I made some young friends there, classmates, and I would remain friends with them the rest of their life. Today I'm still in contact with Facebook with the children.

And then the first grade, I was last in the class. I was 24 out of 44.

And then my great report card when I was in the third grade and then suddenly third out of 20. But the last two months of the third grade, I got scarlet fever. And then eventually the Germans asked the Jews to register at city hall and also to wear a yellow star of David. When I returned to school in the fall of September after the third grade, we played in an intermission. And all the other kids, my friends, Belgian friends appointed me as a sheriff. And they pretended to to be cowboys and Indians.

But one person called me dirty Jew, in French. So I took my fist and hit him and broke his glasses.

[Laughter]

It brought me to the principal. The principal said, pay the glasses. And I apologized. And the father of the young man was actually selling glasses.

[Laughter]

By then the principal said, I was a colonel in the first world war and my son escaped to England with the Belgian Air Force. And he said I will help you to go into hiding. Hiding meaning you conceal your identity and your whereabouts.

As a result of that, maybe two years later my father was walking and sees this woman and she tells him her husband was Jewish and was arrested by the Gestapo.

I had already been trained and learned Catholic prayers such as hail Mary and our father in heaven.

>> Bill Benson: Your parents began preparing.

>> Fred Kahn: We were prepared and also the brother of one of the bridge players told my father he had a brother in the city. And as a result of it, they received identity papers in the name of people who had actually lived at one time.

>> Bill Benson: Before you changed your identities, I believe your father was arrested.

>> Fred Kahn: Yes. That was in 1941. My father was arrested, but then he was -- they threw him down in a basement of the commandant's house, which is the head quarters of the SS.

And tried to give him a hard time to find out who -- they suspected however, somebody of the same name, but who was a communist.

And calling to my father, fired back, I'm a veteran of World War I and turned out eventually they believed him. They made a mistake. They were looking for someone else. And then of course adding -- during that time, maybe a day or so that my father was arrested. My mother went out of her mind of course.

And that added to the anxiety of going into hiding.

>> Bill Benson: So in 1942, you formally adopted the name of Lejeune.

>> Fred Kahn: And the principal then, I just mentioned, it was only about a couple weeks earlier. The principal found out a place to live, which would be safe. Away from other houses near a forest. I remember because for a short time we were there. I went and picked blueberries in the forest there.

And then every few months we would move. So as not to involve the suspicion of collaborators. There were a lot of people, unfortunately, they were denounced. These people are Jewish.

And of course we pretended that we were Christian and that we had been bombed out by the Americans.

>> Bill Benson: And of course, during that time, the major deportations of Jews were taking place.

>> Fred Kahn: Right. On June 9, 1942, I received a postcard from my aunt, which I



considered my mother. That they were going to be deported the next day to the east. And there were -- you know, my aunt asked my mother to take good care of me. Unfortunately when we went into the under ground, my mother destroyed anything that had our names on it. She always regretted it later on that she didn't keep anything. But what happened the following day, indeed my aunt and uncle were deported to the extermination camp of Sobibor and a few months ago, a German research outfit. I learned that on transportation of the D18 and all people were gassed on arrival. Because they were over 50 years old.

>> Bill Benson: You just recently learned that?

>> Fred Kahn: Right. And also that right here in the bookstore, a book called "The Prisoners of Breendonk," which is in Belgium. It is a transit camp and went up. I took the book home, looked at it and saw the same picture of the same uncle that was a friend of a lady in Germany.

She was asked by Dr. Mangula, honestly, he answered with difficulty. And then go to the bus. And this other man who later became a famous journalist, said, oh I want very well. So he survived working. And he learned later on that my uncle had been to the bus to the people to the camp.

>> Bill Benson: That was in the book you just recently read.

>> Fred Kahn: It was here in Holocaust bookstore.

>> Bill Benson: You describe that period of time moving frequently as the Lejeune family. That you were in what you call --

>> Fred Kahn: Was not in touch with any person of my own age. In other words, we wanted to become actually invisible. And the other point is that -- and this happens to all Holocaust survivors. Going through this experience now must learn very fast, like an adult.

And then I had also the mission of taking care of my grandmother who spoke only German. So at all times I had to be with her. And one time we were in a local train and suddenly some German soldiers came in the compartment and my grandmother panicked. She had in her bag, purse maybe, a Belgian newspaper. Which was actually German. In those days there were no pictures in the newspaper. So she pretended she read the newspaper hiding herself from the Germans. After we got off and I tell my grandmother, guess what? You were reading the newspaper upside down.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: So you described that as a very lonely time for you.

>> Fred Kahn: Oh, yes. I was very anxious all the time because of fear. We're listening to the BBC in French. The British broadcasting corporation. And already the end of June 1942, they mentioned that the Germans were killing, mass murdering the Jews.

So we know very well that if we got caught, we would have been killed. There's no doubt about that. Of course, we did not go into hiding as a vacation. We went there because it was about saving our lives.

And so each day, for me, as I was between the age of 10-12 years old, it was very stressful indeed. And I remember in 1943, that when I wandered to town, I was arrested by the Belgian police for not being in school. And in fact, I had begged for them for some money to get on a bus.

And it turns out to be a policeman. He took me to the police station and interrogated me and I kept saying that my name, as I'd been trained, Freddy Lejeune. And that I had, which is true, the scarlet fever, and I did not want to infect over people.

>> Bill Benson: Which is why you weren't in school.

>> Fred Kahn: Right. However, they took everything out of my pocket and afterwards, I was really expecting Germans to walk in. And they came back and asked me, is your mother blond? And of course my mother was originally was black, but turned herself blond to pretend that she was Christian.

So they told me, You pull out and don't you ever come back. And six years later I would see them again. And I remembered that, but I never told my parents. And six years later my mother found out about that story.

>> Bill Benson: How did your parents manage to provide the essentials like food?

>> Fred Kahn: Fortunately, we were well off. And my father, one of the bridge players, again. He was the head of a bank and turned all his money to the bank director. You really do have to trust somebody.

And so unfortunately, we were to buy everything from the black market, because we had no ration card. We were not registered in the places where we live, even though the law said you have to register. It was city hall and you have to do that when you move into a place or leave, you have to register at city hall. So we were really invisible. So therefore, had to buy everything in the black market.

And the most important thing we could get without spending money was potatoes. So my grandmother was cooking, and she did -- created all kinds of meals with potatoes. And of course, a lot of French fries.

[Laughter]

So that was good. But she made bread with potatoes and who knows what.

>> Bill Benson: Fred, did anyone know your true identities?

>> Fred Kahn: I thought no one knew. But except years later when somebody interviewed me from the British newspaper, and then put it on the radio. A young -- an older woman now -- thought I had died. One of the person probably have found out some different place to play. He was a merchant. Told her she was only 8 years old, that the Germans would go inside and kill me.

For a young girl of 18 years old, very hard to understand why anybody would kill me. I learned that not long after, maybe 20 years ago.

>> Bill Benson: In the fall of 1944, you had been living for two years as the Lejeune family. In the fall of 1944, after your family had moved to their final hiding place in the farming village of Oneux-Theux I believe it is. Spa, Belgium. Belgium was liberated, though the war continued in Europe until May of 1945. When did you realize you could come out of hiding?

>> Fred Kahn: We watched all day long. We watched from the top of the field. The city of Oneux-Theux, only on top was a farming village. At the bottom was a regular city. And then you have a slope. So that you could see across to the slope.

And suddenly there was always fighting. You heard that. The noise. And it stopped and suddenly we saw tanks coming down with an orange thing on top of them.

And my father -- my father now, ran -- just like that. And my mother was so afraid something would happen. But he ran across a bridge that had been blown up and created the American first tank. That was how we were liberated.

>> Bill Benson: And I think your father said that was the greatest day of his life.

>> Fred Kahn: Correct. When my parents, they came to the United States 15 years after I did. In 1967. And I told my wife her what the answer my father would give. September 9, 1944. So I asked this question in front of my wife and indeed, he answered, September 9, 44.

>> Bill Benson: And on that date after that battle you said raged all day long. And finally when

it was over. That in that town of Spa was a huge supply depot for the Germans?

>> Fred Kahn: By that time, three months later, on my 12th birthday, we got word that the Germans had made a counteroffensive, what later became known as the Battle of the Bulge. It started and for three days we heard boom, boom. A lot of noise. And I saw going up the hill soldiers with [Away from mic] I learned later on, this was the first time that black soldiers, volunteers to fight in a battle. And many got killed. I'm afraid that many people -- some of the black soldiers got caught by the Germans and tortured and murdered. And I remember that to this day.

I tell you later more.

>> Bill Benson: And you had thought you were liberated --

>> Fred Kahn: Of course. We had resumed our true identity. That's why it was so dangerous. And we walk in the snow -- it was a very cold winter, and we walked in the snow for the 15 miles to go to Oneux-Theux and stay there in the basement.

But it was the worst part. When the Americans and the British and the Germans. Each one lost a lot of people and a lot of the American soldiers are buried in the Belgian cemetery.

>> Bill Benson: I like the incident you told me about. That after the fighting was over, the towns people went to the German supplies and broke in.

>> Fred Kahn: In the city. People instead of getting American soldiers went in and got ahold of the goods of German armies. Including a lot of Dutch cigars.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Which you gave to the American soldiers.

>> Fred Kahn: There were troops passing by the house and I gave them those cigars and in turn, they threw chewing gum and other stuff to us. I went back to the school at the city where I had lived and the kids couldn't believe I was still alive. And I gave them some chewing gum.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: The war would end in May 1945 with Germany's surrender. At what point, especially after you had thought you were safe, you'd resumed your identities, and then the Battle of the Bulge began. You were fearful the Germans would come back. When did you and your parents actually feel that you were safe?

>> Fred Kahn: Oh, after the war was over, of course. And my father resumed his business and played bridge again until he came to the United States. And I remember when the war was over, I was walking up a hill and I heard the bells of the church singing all over the place. And it was the end of the war. 1945.

And then a year later, I was in the 6th grade and I finished number one in a city-wide exam. Don't forget that during the war, and I didn't mention that. The principal would come to us. Not only found us place to stay. But he brought books in French. I must have read a book a day. So I finished first in citywide exam. And then in high school foreign language. I learned four years of Dutch and of course I knew German. By the time I came to the United States, I knew four languages.

Then I got very active in youth activities. I created a soccer club, and we competed. The neighborhood kids first got together. And then we competed to a championship of Belgium for 18 and under.

In the first year we finished number 2. Finally 1948, we were champion of Belgium. And they couldn't believe it. The people who have grandeured something couldn't believe that at that time I was only 15 or 16 years old, would do all that. I still have the letter telling me how great I was.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: From what you've shared with me Fred, after the war, you dived into life as fully as possible.

>> Fred Kahn: Right.

>> Bill Benson: With your parents giving you total freedom. What does that mean to have just total freedom?

>> Fred Kahn: I learned before my mother passed away and she was in contact with my wife. She said that my father had told her don't bother the boy. We're alive. So between schools in the summer, I would hitchhike all over Belgium, but I couldn't go outside of Belgium, because I was a stateless citizen.

And I wrote for the newspapers in French. And at the age of 17 I was working by then, in those days they had newspapers outside of the store. And I see my name on the front page of a newspaper.

And about the condition of peace. And it's ironic that all these years after, I'm still promoting columns. Through the listserv that I'm managing.

>> Bill Benson: Fred, your parents gave you total freedom, but they said you could not leave Belgium and go to the United States which you wanted to do, until you finished high school.

>> Fred Kahn: Right. Very insistent that I finish the school, which was excellent. It felt like a prep school, and we learned about -- I was in humanities, economics was a major. And teachers were paid by the state. They were inspected. And I still remember most of their names. They were first-rate.

>> Bill Benson: What made you want to come to the United States?

>> Fred Kahn: The brother and sister that lived in the same town that I was in and where my grandmother had lived, left to New York in July, 1938. At first my uncle in New York said he would pay my fare. Turns out he didn't. I borrowed the money.

All the terms which I actually didn't know. First cousin provided the affidavits to come to the United States as a legal citizen. Through appointment, they would pay that there would never be any charge of the American government. And they had a business.

So I had an obligation to become a resident of Baltimore. Moment I arrived got a job as a stock clerk and in the evening I found myself a job as an usher in the movie Avalon. I met there, movie director who made a lot of movies. The diner.

>> Bill Benson: One last question for now, Fred, because our time is getting short.

>> Fred Kahn: My watch is broken.

>> Bill Benson: I'm watching it.

[Laughter]

There's so much you could share with us after coming to the United States, of course. You joined the army, you were in army intelligence and you went back to Germany. What was that like to go back to Germany?

>> Fred Kahn: The first thing of course I want to go back to where I had been reared. It was the Easter Passover and I went to the commander. And I found, I told them my story and they gave me three-day pass. I arrived in the train and my father would come from Belgium.

>> Bill Benson: He let you leave by this?

>> Fred Kahn: I told the train master. I said, it says I was born here. I must have had an English accent. Afterwards, about three months later -- don't forget I was in intelligence, and we did not wear our uniform in public. And the German people would not believe that I was an American soldier. How about that?

>> Bill Benson: Fred, I think we have time for one or two questions from our audience before your close out our program. So let's see if we can get a question or two. We have a microphone in each aisle. If you have a question, we ask that you use the microphone. Make your question as brief as you can.

I'll repeat it just to make sure that we hear it right before Fred answers. Anybody have a question? Gentleman right there raising his hand.

>> Thank you for your time today, sir, and thank you for your service to this country. One of the major elements of the Jewish faith is the bar mitzvah. How were they handled?

>> Fred Kahn: I never had one as a result of it. And also where we lived in Verviers, we only knew one family who was half-Jewish. The husband was Jewish and the wife was German. There was no synagogue there, and of course during the war, I was never bar mitzvahed. And my father and mother were not religious. Though my grandmother, she had the Bible -- the Torah. And she refused to give it up.

And she read the Bible every single day.

>> Bill Benson: So she had it during the whole time?

>> Fred Kahn: Yes, I still have it. That book is religious book that dates back to 1850. But as a result, I never -- my wife, she was Buddhist. Turned into Jewish. She learned Hebrew. She thinks it's the best congregation here in Bethesda. I believe in God very much so, but not -- right now. We forget about something.

>> Bill Benson: We're not forgetting about it. I promise. One last question. We're not going to forget about that. Let me just say that afterwards Fred is going to sign copies of the Fred Kahn story, and that will also allow you to ask other question.

>> Thank you very much for your presentation, Fred. I'm from Australia and what struck me was you were the beneficiary of asylum and the beneficiary of being received into countries to protect you and your family. What sort of the messages do you think we need to hold onto when it comes to how we how we protect people seeking asylum and refugees.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you for that question. I think Fred is going to probably speak to that in a sense when he concludes our program. So we'll do that if that's OK. All right. We are out of time, unfortunately.

Please corner Fred afterwards for additional questions.

I want to thank you all for being with us. We'll have two more First Person programs.

We'll have more information on our program when we resume in March 2018.

It is our tradition that our First Person has the last word. With that, Fred please share your thoughts to close today's program.

Please stay for a couple seconds when Fred is done, because our photographer is going to come and take a photo of Fred with you as the background. We'll try and get Fred up the aisle as quickly as possible so he can sign copies of the Fred Kahn Story.

>> Fred Kahn: Thanks. I'm alive today because of good people who is stood up to evil. To me, their personal fight, the strength, the righteous strength of the human spirit.

I have lived also, personally, an authentic life for myself and others.

Now I tell you why I still have much hope in the human race. When my uncle turned me over to that lady that took me to the border. A lady I had never met before in his life. He was overcome by emotion and I learned about that only long after the war. Many years after. He thought that he may never ever see me again. So he had on himself a very precious thing. And asked the lady to make sure that if ever he would not survive, that she would make sure that she would keep it and give it to me. And so today, I finish the talk by showing you what he

gave to her.

Solid gold watch that she could have sold during the war, whatever. Nobody knew that she had it. And after the war she'd managed to get it to me and here it is. And it was a repeated watch. Unfortunately, I cannot open it, but you can hear it.

>> Bill Benson: Put it up to your microphone.

>> Fred Kahn: Why don't you? Because I don't have the strength in my arms. You can push on that. And it still works.

[Tone playing]

>> Fred Kahn: There we go. That's terrific. And now that watch was given to that lady 79 years ago.

>> Bill Benson: And she got it back to you after the war.

>> Fred Kahn: Right. I did not know -- I know, he probably took her aside. And I never knew about it until I received the package with it and a letter explaining why. As I mentioned, she could have -- no one knew that she had it. She safely -- and I don't know her. So I accepted after the war, according to my father, she worked for the British Army.

She was a German.

And just like the first boy friend I had. Walter was German. And we lived in a place where the land lady, before we went into hiding, was sort of German from the part of Germany that was given to Belgium.

And she arranged for my father to meet with next door to us, the man who was in charge of the German army in that town.

And so they met, and he told us as long as he was there, nothing would happen to our family. But he could not guarantee what was after. He told him, according to my father, between four guys, get lost. Or I would if I was in your case. And that was another German who was not a Nazi.

So you see as a result of it, personally I had nothing against the Germans except actually the murderers. In some cases, sadists. And the more than I learn about the Holocaust through the managing the [Away from mic] which I was asked to take over three years. And it's on Yahoo. 325 members from five different countries. We really dig into that.

And of course if I would encounter, I was an American soldier and I would encounter a German Nazi, I would probably kill him. That's it. And of course I continue preaching about making my wife also. We are human rights activists in a way, not of any organization, but in our way. And one thing is when I first came to the United States, I was shocked to find that discrimination occurred against people because of their skin color.

Having survived, and now I find out probably, back of my mind, I decide never to look down on people because of the way they appear.

In fact, most of the time I think never pass a judgment on people. So that. And as a result of that, I became the vice president of the international club and gave my idea of presidential debates. And you learn about that if you buy that book.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Fred! Thank you.

[Applause]