

REALTIME FILE

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
FIRST PERSON: CONVERSATIONS WITH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
FIRST PERSON IRENE WEISS
JULY 19, 2018

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 19th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Irene Weiss, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2018 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 twice-weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue to August 9. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Irene will share with us her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Irene a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our online conversation: *Never Stop Asking Why*. The conversation aims to inspire individuals and new generations to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises and what this

history means for societies today. To join the *Never Stop Asking Why* conversation, you can ask your question and tag the museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and #AskWhy. You can find the hashtag on the back of your program, as well.

A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's YouTube page. Please visit the *First Person* website listed on the back of your program, for more details.

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

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

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

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

In May 1944, Irene and her family were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The arrow on this map of major Nazi camps points to Auschwitz. This photo was taken upon Irene's arrival at Auschwitz. The circled figure is Irene. Irene and her sister Serena were selected for forced labor, then were forcibly evacuated in January 1945 to other camps in Germany. This extraordinary photo is displayed in the museum's Permanent Exhibition.

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

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

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

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

Irene and Marty have three children, four grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. Her daughter Lesley is here today.

Irene became a volunteer for this museum seven years ago and this is her seventh time speaking as part of the First Person program. In January 2015, Irene was a member of the U.S. Delegation to the 70th anniversary commemoration of the Liberation of Auschwitz. Also in 2015, Irene traveled to Germany with her daughter Lesley to be present at the trial of former SS member Oskar Groening who was a guard at Auschwitz. Irene was a co-plaintiff in

the trial of Groening and again in February 2016 at the trial of SS member Reinhold Hanning. Her testimony at Hanning's trial was featured in a "Time" magazine article.

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

>> [Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Irene, thank you so much for joining us and being willing to be our First Person again. We are very grateful for you for doing this. You have so much to share with us. We have such a short period so we'll just start right off if you don't mind, if that's ok.

You described for me that the time for you and your family in Czechoslovakia before World War II and the Holocaust as a time of hard work but also a good life, one in which there was a sense of safety, you said. Before we turn to the war years, tell us a little about that life in Czechoslovakia before the war began.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, during the Czech government we felt protected and most of all, we felt equal. We were not looked at as a separate group. It's very comforting to belong to the country in which you were born. After all, you're a citizen. So that made a huge difference. They provided schooling for the children. And realizing that a lot of children were Jewish, they accommodated us by not holding school on the Sabbath, which was very helpful and very considerate.

>> Bill Benson: You said you really didn't have a sense of anti-semitism at all at that time.

>> Irene Weiss: That's right. And we were feeling comfortable, the way people ought to in their own homes and in their own country.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little about your mother and father.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, there were six children. By 1944, when tragedy happened to us, the ages were between 7 and 17. It was a very busy household. Everything that we ate, cooked, baked, was all done in the house. There were no stores, no bakeries it was a farming village. The food was wonderful but the women worked from morning till night.

And we as children, I enjoyed watching the process. How is butter made? How are preserves made? How are noodles made? Etc. And I would follow the grown-ups, watching how they produced all of this magical food.

>> Bill Benson: In fact, you described it as you were watching things that helped you later in life, the things that you observed.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, yes. Things don't come from packages, frozen from the grocery store.

>> [Laughter]

>> Irene Weiss: It tasted a whole lot better than that stuff. Food was so important. The kitchen always smelled wonderful. Something was cooking and baking all the time. So it was a happy place to be. And then we observed the Jewish holidays where special foods were prepared and special preparation in every way to get the house ready. So this was a busy family --

>> Bill Benson: Microphone is not on? Sorry. Excuse us for a moment. Technical things.

When the technology works, it's phenomenal.

>> [Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Which is most of the time.

>> Irene Weiss: Ok. Is that better?

>> Bill Benson: You're not hearing that? No. Ok.

>> Irene Weiss: Ok? Is that better?

>> Bill Benson: Are you able to hear that?

>> Irene Weiss: Yes?

>> Bill Benson: I think so.

>> Irene Weiss: Can they hear me?

>> Bill Benson: Yeah. Ok. Good. Thank you. Sorry about that Irene.

>> Irene Weiss: That's ok. It happens.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, by the time Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, which, of course, launched World War II, your community had already experienced profound change. Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany. And earlier in 1939, your community had been occupied by Hungarians and that immediately changed your lives. You say something about that?

>> Irene Weiss: It's amazing what a changing government meant to us. When, as I was saying before, we felt a sense of belonging and citizenship the way it is usually felt by people who are born in a place. All of a sudden with the Hungarian regime we were no longer considered citizens and we no longer were protected by the law. And it is a very frightening thing. Our status hasn't changed but their perception exception of us did. -- their perception of us did. I know my parents were worried about the children. They were worried about our future.

>> Bill Benson: And among the many things that the Hungarian government did to restrict your lives, your father, I believe, lost his business.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. They confiscated his business and gave it to a non-Jew. This kind of activity spread all through the region. Businesses were confiscated. Professional people lost their Jewish professions, teachers, lawyers, doctors, lost their jobs. So there was a general isolation and hostility towards us, which is very, very scary. It's very difficult to explain what it's like where you are not accepted and you don't know what you have done wrong. You had done nothing wrong.

>> Bill Benson: And one of the ways it affected you was with respect to schooling.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Jewish children could not attend Hungarian schools. And the isolation and discrimination escalated until we had to wear a yellow star on our clothes. So that a little -- that really put an end to our movement. We were scared to leave our home and scared to leave our local community where we were a target for anyone who wanted to do any harm, humiliate, scare, bully. It was just not safe to go into the street anymore.

I had a particularly scary experience traveling on the train, a five-minute trip with my father from one little town to the other. He was recognized as being Jewish by a group of hoodlums who were on the train. They gathered around him and began to bully him and discuss among themselves that wouldn't it be great -- what should we do with him? Wouldn't it be grade to throw him off the train? They laughed and carried on saying that's great. And there I am, 12 years old.

>> Bill Benson: Must have been terrifying.

>> Irene Weiss: Absolutely terrified. I can't defend him and no one else on the train said anything. So fortunately our trip was very short. We recognized the terrain, that the train would stop soon at our destination. That's what happened. We got off. And after that my father never got on the train again.

So incidents like that made us hunker down, worry and just hope that we can get by each day without some major tragedy.

>> Bill Benson: And would continue living under the Hungarians for several years. You shared with me that occasionally someone would have escaped from Poland or Ukraine and would come to your town. Talk about what was happening to Jews elsewhere. Can you say a little bit more about that?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, we heard there was severe persecution in other countries, of Jews. And,

yes, in Poland, which was occupied by Nazi Germany, there was a lot -- there were problems with the Jews. We heard about it. We heard that people were collected and taken into the forest, literally mowed down by gunfire; that people were pushed into synagogues and burned alive and things like that. We really did not believe it. As you say, occasionally somebody from that area would escape and hide out in our area and they would tell us these stories and more, horrible stories of killings, of children, and women. We thought they were exaggerating.

>> Bill Benson: That it couldn't be like that.

>> Irene Weiss: Couldn't be possible.

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, in Hungary and in Czechoslovakia, where you were, in 1942, your father along with thousands of other Jewish men were forced to do forced labor for the Hungarian military. Tell us what it meant for your father to be forced into one of these labor brigades and then what it meant for your family.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, it was wartime but Jewish men were not conscripted into the war. They were not trusted with a gun. So they were basically called in to do forced labor at the front, places where it was most dangerous. They were abused in addition to being exposed to the greatest danger.

So we knew that it might end up that he would not come back alive. And that was really the way it was with most of the young men who were taken into the labor brigades, never returned.

>> Bill Benson: Many of them were forced to walk through minefields to clear the minefields, do things like that.

>> Irene Weiss: Right. It was really a most disrespectful way. Their idea was that these were not people who are loyal to the government, which was not true. People who were born there, loved their country and will protect it.

So my father -- we were quite amazed and happy that after about six months he did come back. And at that point the Hungarian government still made some distinction between young men who were not married and had no families and some were like my father who had six children. So they actually did send him home. But he was shaken. He was never the same. He witnessed and experienced terrible things. He by this time had lost his business. So the family was in great danger now, no income, six children. And also, the constant worry and fear of what else will they do to us. What will come next?

>> Bill Benson: And, of course, while he was gone, your mother with six children is taking care, trying to manage everybody, feed everybody.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. It was a very hard time. We had no idea that worse things were to come.

>> Bill Benson: And they certainly did. As difficult as it was under the Hungarian rule, it turned suddenly, dramatically and tragically worse in March 1944 when the Germans invaded Hungary. Tell us about that time and, of course, what happened to your family once the Germans came in.

>> Irene Weiss: Once the Germans came in and occupied Hungary, things happened very fast to Jews. In our little town and in our community, within two weeks of the German Army arriving we were being moved into ghettos. Two weeks. The super manager of the Jewish question, Adolf Eichmann, he was well experienced in how to organize people and arrange for cattle trains and to get the movement going. And he was ready in two weeks.

It was very sudden. We had no idea. All the things we experienced before -- we were still in our home. We were still feeling somewhat protected by our neighbors who knew my family for generations. But suddenly an announcement was made that we are to leave our

home and we are to take a suitcase each and the next morning be out of our home and gather in a gathering place for further instructions.

Now, to leave one's home with young children without knowing that we're not going to be protected must have been terribly scary for my parents.

>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind, maybe tell us just a little bit about why Germany invaded Hungary. Hungary was their ally, their soul mates.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, Hungary was their ally. But this was towards the end of the war, 1944. And by this time, Germany was losing the war. It was evident. So Hungary decided pull out of the alliance because it seemed to them that they would be on the losing end. So this sudden occurrence changed our lives and the lives of 400,000 Hungarian Jews who in very short time ended up in trains headed for Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: Over 400,000 over a matter of weeks.

>> Irene Weiss: Over 400,000. And this Eichmann, who was this great organizer, he had everything prepared to get the trains, that many cattle cars in wartime where they needed the trains for soldiers and the movement of war but they took the trains away from that, more important to get the Jewish population to Auschwitz and proceed with the killing.

>> Bill Benson: As you started to tell us, you were told you had to leave your home, pack a little case. You were sent for a short period to a ghetto in Munkacs. What do you remember of that?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, this was a horrendous experience. They took us -- first of all, a delegation -- after the announcement that we are to leave the next morning, a delegation of local officials came into our house and told my father that they came to tell him that he is to give them all of our money and all of our valuables and they know that he owned a small business and they expected that he had things to give them. They were not polite about it. They said you must give us what you have.

So he apparently gave them something. But as far as jewelry, we had the usual, you know, wedding rings and watches. There was no big expensive things in the family. But he did give them. And of course, we understood at this point that somehow they're not only taking us out of our home, they're driving us of our property, what we leave behind and things we can't take with us. Things looked very dark.

>> Bill Benson: For the period you were in the Munkacs Ghetto, what were the conditions like for you in there?

>> Irene Weiss: Oh, that really was impossible. They brought in the Jewish families from many regions into this one gathering place. It ended up that by the time they collected the people from all the many villages, there were something like 10,000 people in this one location. It was a brick factory that had some grounds and it had some barracks for the purpose of the factory. It was not prepared whatsoever for civilians with all the many needs. There was no sanitation. There was no running water. There was no kitchen. There was no facility for sick people. It was a dumping place.

What we didn't realize -- never quite accepted that it could get worse. What we didn't realize was they were just housing us there for a short period until they could get the trains moving. So it was a terrible time.

The food we brought from home was soon gone. We had to depend on ladles of soup and a piece of bread. Families laid out blankets on the floor and that was our home. There was a lot of harsh treatment, a great deal of threats, restriction of movements. They would call the fathers, the men, in for interrogation, demanding more valuables and more

money.

It was very important to them to take all you had and not to take anything with you because they knew the end result but we didn't.

>> Bill Benson: You didn't know.

>> Irene Weiss: So it was a very scary place. They had all kinds of harsh rules about what we can do and what we can't. At one point they made an announcement, that girls under 16 report to a certain place to have their haircut or your father will be punished. So I heard this outdoors somewhere. I didn't even ask my mother. I ran to this place and sat down and had my braids cut off. Then I went back to our place --

>> Bill Benson: You were 13 years old at the time.

>> Irene Weiss: I was 13 at the time. But I was so scared that my father would be punished; it never occurred to me that I shouldn't do that. I just did it.

When I got back to our place, my mother gave me a kerchief to put on. I don't think either one of us grieved very much about it because by that time we had been so humiliated and so frightened that even I as a 13-year-old felt, well, the hair will grow back some day. It turned out that, unbeknownst to us, when I got to Auschwitz, this had, I believe, gave me my first chance to survive the selection because having had a kerchief on my head and a very big coat that I had on, the Nazi who was doing the separation as to who should live and who should die mistook me for an older person.

>> Bill Benson: Because you had your braids cut off and had on a kerchief you looked a little older.

>> Irene Weiss: Right. So I had no idea that that was to be. Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about arriving at Auschwitz, if you don't mind. We saw that photograph in the beginning of the program where we actually have a photograph of Irene after arriving in Auschwitz. Tell us about that.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, the trip itself was horrific. The realization that we were heading for Poland made the grown-ups review and remember what they heard from those few escaped people who came in Poland and told us that people were being shot in forests in Poland. So the talk in the cattle car by the grownups was that that's what will happen to us when the doors open. We will be in the forest in Poland and we will all be shot. That we remembered, we were told we were heading for Poland. That was the accepted scary thing that the grownups were talking about.

So when the cattle cars arrived in Auschwitz and the doors were opened from the outside, my father said that he saw barracks. He saw prisoners in striped uniform. He saw, you know -- he said, well, this isn't the forest in Poland. It looks like a work camp. And everybody relaxed a little bit. They said, well, if we have to work, we can do some of that. We can do that. So the first arrival was somewhat of a relief. Again, we were totally ignorant of anything that was going on. We never heard of Auschwitz in all of those years.

>> Bill Benson: No mention of it?

>> Irene Weiss: Never heard of Auschwitz. We just heard about brutality in Poland and in the Ukraine, about, you know, soldiers killing people and mass graves and things like that. Not the gas chambers and the systematic, you know, killing of what amounted to genocide of the Jewish people.

So when the doors opened, we heard a lot of yelling and shouting in German and in other languages, get out, get out, leave everything behind. And there was a great deal of harsh language. There were Nazi soldiers with dogs. It was just kind of a hysterical atmosphere of

rush and great urgency. So just leave everything behind. That in itself, you could see that first you lose your job, then you lose your home, and then you lose your --

>> Bill Benson: What few things you were able to bring.

>> Irene Weiss: Right. And now you leave all that you had and just have what you had on you. So the terror mounts. And the uncertainty grows. And no one tells you that there would be any relief or anything good would come out of it. I grew up, got married and had children. I kept rethinking how my parents must have suffered for their children, being help talls take care of them and expecting the worst which definitely happened.

So when we were finally out, everybody jumped out and left stuff behind. The prisoners, who were Jewish prisoners, men, would jump into these cattle cars and dump all the stuff out on to the platform. There were trucks waiting and other prisoners were filling the trucks with it. So there was a general cleanup right away of all that arrived. And then there was shouting and yelling orders. The first order was that men should line up to one side and women and children to another side. So within minutes the men, my father and 16-year-old brother with all the other men, were lined up on one side. And the women and children, we were on the platform and the crowd was moving up. We couldn't see the front. We just moved with the crowd. We were guarded by Nazi soldiers.

All of a sudden we were in the front. We faced about a dozen Nazi soldiers. Standing there with dogs and the guns even one of them was holding a stick and he was very efficiently and very quickly separating people. You know, as a family arrived in front of him, as we did, in a matter of seconds we were torn apart. My 17-year-old sister, Serena, was immediately sent to one side. My mother, two little boys to another side. My father and 16-year-old brother were already separated.

So in a matter of seconds, I was left with my younger sister holding hands. In just really seconds he put the stick between us and made her go to where our mom went and made me go to where my older sister went. I moved a little bit to one side, as the picture showed, but I didn't leave. I was so stunned that my younger sister would now be alone and will not catch up to our mother because the flow of people was continuing. Lots of people had gone in that direction where the mothers and children went. She had to go alone. And I immediately understood that she will not catch up and that suddenly became the most scary and devastating thing to me that she would not catch up.

We also made some civilized assumptions that this is a work camp and the women and children are separated and elderly, then there would be a reunion periodically. Right? Everything was suddenly going through my head. How will she know how she is to catch up? How will we ever have a reunion? Nobody asks your name. And suddenly it occurred to me there are no papers, nothing. What will this reunion be like? But I focused on her. She will be lost to us. And I wouldn't leave.

I was sort of allowed to hang around a few seconds as around me people were moving but after a while somebody motioned me and I moved and went towards where the young adults went, my sister Serena and other young adults. I yelled her name and she turned around and said to me, "Why didn't you go with mom?" And my answer to her was that Edit will never catch up to mom. I don't know what happened. I was holding on to her. I was babbling as though I good something wrong; I somehow let her go and this is terrible, the worst thing that happened today.

Obviously I didn't even know where all were going; that they were heading towards the gas chambers. And we found out soon that within a half-hour to an hour they were all

dead. One could never have believed if someone had told us that during that time of separation. It was just a question of how will we handle that reunion since we are all going to be working here.

>> Bill Benson: So now you're with Serena.

>> Irene Weiss: So now I'm with her and we're off to a processing place a bathhouse, where everyone's hair was cut. And all our clothes were taken. We were disinfected and put through a humiliating processing of young women being shaved, body and hair, by men in a crude and rude way, no sensitivity of any kind, just like bodies being moved, very fast moving through a shower and then to pick up the uniform and out the door, lined up as we had suddenly come from another planet. Because we all looked the same with the shaved heads and the dress. All of a sudden these young women who had been in civilian every kind of person and job and talent and profession all of a sudden looked like people from another planet literally.

And so our time in Auschwitz began. The first thing we asked when we got to the barracks, we asked the first people who had come before us so when is this reunion? The most important thing to us. They pointed to chimneys and smoking chimneys and belching fire and they said, "That's where your families are." So again, we dismissed it and began to realize that we're in a strange place where people say strange things.

>> Bill Benson: I can't imagine as a 13-year-old trying to even begin to grasp what they were really saying to you.

>> Irene Weiss: Things happened so fast that your perception -- you couldn't take it all in. Things were strange and odd and unreal. You could not absorb it. But you heard these scary things that were also not believable.

>> Bill Benson: And yet in the midst of that, astonishingly you encountered a couple of your aunts.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. One incredible thing that I know saved my life was in the mass of number of people, women are looking so much alike that it was hard to distinguish who was who. Outside of the barracks where it was wall-to-wall people we literally stepped over my mother's two young sisters who had arrived the day before. They were milling around with others there and they recognized us and we recognized them.

So we then ended up in the barrack with them which, for me as a 13-year-old, I suddenly thought I'm safe. All my terror diminished. Because they were in their mid 20s. Back home I referred to them as aunt and used the respectful way of talking to them. They were wonderful to the grandchildren. They were my mother's sisters. And to have them with me, I felt like I had my parents back, my mother back. I didn't know that they had little power to protect me. But emotionally, I was able, suddenly -- the terror left me literally. And it continued to protect me and my sister as much as they could emotionally. Any other way they certainly had no powers to protect me.

>> Bill Benson: Once you knew that you were selected to then do labor, tell us what you were made to do.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, things in this strange other worldly place there were things going on. All of these thousands of young adults, the Germans were sorting them out and assigning work. So they selected 1,000 women. They made us line up and they said this is going to be a work group and line up.

>> Bill Benson: And it included your aunts?

>> Irene Weiss: It included my aunts. We made sure at this point we stuck together, which was terribly important. They lined us up in a certain place, that you will be 1,000 women at a

workplace, work assignment. And rumor had it that this was an ok place. You know, among the women rumors fly. Don't line up here. This is not going to be a good assignment. Nobody really knew what was going on but rumor had it this might be a good assignment. So we lined up and they tattooed us. They took hours tattooing 1,000 women. After which they proceeded to walk us through many gates within Auschwitz.

This worst assignment was within Birkenau. There were many subcamps separated by electrified fencing. So we were marched out in the morning to this place. And in this place we realized that this is where they brought all the stuff that came out of the trains.

>> Bill Benson: That you described earlier being gathered and taken away.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. The trucks took all of it here. But it wasn't just from one train. It was, like -- apparently there were, like, 114 cattle trains that came within Germany within six weeks to two months. 114 trains, huge, long trains. And something like 400,000 people were brought into Auschwitz.

The amount of stuff people brought were really mountains of stuff dumped into this area which now became a storage area. And they needed labor to sort the stuff out. First of all, bring it into the barracks out of the weather. And then for many months after, continue to sort them out and put them in categories, take off labels, and ship all of it back to Germany for the use of the German population.

So all of a sudden we understood the magnitude of the people and what was going on here. There would be thousands of eye glasses in a pile. There would be thousands of toothbrushes. There would be thousands and thousands of shoes of every size.

>> Bill Benson: And because of where you were, you could see the scope of this. The magnitude --

>> Irene Weiss: We saw it. We had to realize that every one of those items belonged to a person. Whatever people brought, depending on how long they were in the ghetto and came from there or came right from home. So there was everything. There were even things people thought they might use like musical instruments. Or bottles of perfume, let's say. There would be, you know, leather goods, books. Just about anything household --

>> Bill Benson: I can imagine children had children's books with them.

>> Irene Weiss: There were a tremendous amount of children's things: Baby carriage and all kinds of items that children need because that was people's focus; you know, bring things the children would need.

So we were assigned to do this work. In addition to this, understanding that these people -- each item represents a person and they're gone. We were also unfortunate enough to be an electrified fence away from gas chamber number four in Auschwitz and the crematorium that went with it.

And now we not only -- not only were we told that people are being gassed here upon arrival and the children and women and elderly are being killed here, we saw --

>> Bill Benson: You saw it.

>> Irene Weiss: Saw people coming from the train platform, huge columns of people passing our barracks and walk into the gate. They would even talk to us. Ask in Hungarian who are you, where are you from. You couldn't say anything to them. It was too late. They would enter the gate. And then day and night we saw the chimneys belching smoke and fire. We just saw them. And now they're gone.

And there was such a huge number of people coming so fast so the four functioning gas chambers in Auschwitz and crematoriums couldn't keep up with the killing and they could

not keep up with the disposal of the bodies in the crematoriums. So right across the fence from us they had dug pits into which they dumped the bodies and were burning them. There were fires, huge fires.

And then the people -- we also -- they had a system. They had us working nights, night shift, because there was so much stuff to sort. So one week we would work at night and another week during the day. So during the night, the transports kept coming, day and night. And the crowds of people coming off the platform into this gas chamber kept coming. And when they approached the fires that they saw, it was in sort of a wooded area but the flames from the chimney and the fires from the pits, they looked like they were walking into the fire. They tried and they prayed and they screamed and they pleaded to God and man.

>> Bill Benson: And you saw this day after day.

>> Irene Weiss: I was outside at night. I saw it. I heard it. I would go like this, plug my ears. I could not absorb the cries and the terrible, terrible praying and crying. And then there would be silence.

>> Bill Benson: Silence.

>> Irene Weiss: I never absorbed it. I never understood it. I never even believed it yet I saw it.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, there's so much more that you could tell us about Auschwitz and what you went through with your sisters and your aunts, what you saw. I know we're not going to be able to cover it all. Tell us what you can about your father and your brother were also selected for labor when you first came in. What do you know about your father and your brother?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, first of all, the men were lined up there on the side as we arrived and they watched their families being torn apart. And there was nothing they could do about it. Since we were in this location, we realized that we were alongside gas chamber number four. We saw the men across the fence. And during times, when we were working outdoors, my two aunts attempted to make some eye contact with the men on the other side whose job it was to burn the bodies to pull them out of the gas chambers and into the crematoriums or into the pits.

One of my aunts and I were out there. She was very brave. She was pulling towards the fence. A guy on the other side was getting closer to the fence also. And there was a guard tower right there. I remember I was always so frightened, desperately frightened. So the closer my aunt went to the fence, the more I backed away from the fence. I didn't want to see what would happen next. I was so frightened.

But anyway, I actually did recognize an 18-year-old young guy from a family from my town. I recognized him. He was very dark because he worked outside with the smoke and flames but I recognized him. He managed -- with my aunt being so brave, he managed to throw a note over to my aunt. She picked it up and showed to her sister, my other aunt. And between the two of them they decided tell us only some of what they heard.

So what they heard was he was from our town and the younger men from our town at the selection at the arrival were assigned to work at this gas chamber crematorium and that my father had been there. He lasted but a few weeks and he was shot because he couldn't do the work. He was dead. This young man continued to work. Eventually he was shot, too. But my two aunts didn't tell us the full story because they wanted to spare us my sister. But they just told us, yes, he had been there but that he is no longer alive.

So this is what we heard about him. We don't know anything what happened to my 16-year-old brother who was with him upon arrival. And for some reason, we never, ever could find anyone who knew anything about him during the time we were there or after where people

tried to talk to survivors and tried to see do you know so-and-so, did you recognize so-and-so. You know, did anybody know this young boy? Nobody ever heard of him. Nobody had any trace of him.

>> Bill Benson: To this day?

>> Irene Weiss: To this day. We traced him, my daughter traced him, for years with the Red Cross. We just wanted to know what happened to this young man who was 16 years old. He most likely was not selected to stay with my father because they selected older, stronger-looking people. It was difficult work, I understand. And that he probably just was alone and never had a chance.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, in the little time we have left, tell us what you can -- by January of 1945, as the Russians were advancing and Germany was losing the war, you were forced out on two other camps, on a Death March. Tell us, to the extent you can, where you went, what happened to your aunts, and then your liberation.

>> Irene Weiss: In January 1945 whether the Russian Army was approaching Auschwitz, instead of allowing us, the prisoners, to be liberated, the Nazis had another idea. It's very hard for me to understand why that's what they chose but they decided to empty the surviving people and take them on a Death March, literally on a Death March, through the highways of Germany, the back roads, in the snow and ice. We just marched. If you sat down, you were shot. If you leaned on someone, you were shot. They almost never stopped. We just walked and walked. Mainly through back roads. I don't think they took us on the highways where things were going on.

But anyway, we were taken deeper into Germany for days and days marching and our numbers were diminished. There were dead people along the gutters. It was impossible to survive. Most people didn't have the right shoes. It was desperately cold. Occasionally they would stop in some barn or farm along the way and let us stay a few hours. No food. No water. We ate the snow. Whatever we passed, there was no snow left.

Eventually, after days, they put us in open cattle cars which apparently was worse than walking in the winter because the open -- the wind blew into every bit of the open cattle cars. It was not a survivable situation. And yet somehow -- well, many -- I think they took all these thousands of survivors basically to diminish their numbers. There's some evidence that they hoped to keep some slave labor, that we were taken deeper, those that would survive, deeper into Germany to work in the munitions factory and continue the slave labor. So it's possible. But they did not feed us or take care of us in a way that would make that possible.

So we ended up from Poland in Auschwitz near Hamburg, Germany, in a concentration camp. In this place, the Germans -- their system broke down already. They were running away from the Russian Army, too. So they literally stopped feeding us. We were there five more months before the Russian Army caught up with us there. During those five months terrible things happened. Typhus broke out. One of my aunts caught Typhus.

Amazingly -- this camp did not have a gas chamber but selections continued even here. So the sick were obviously selected. A truck came from another concentration camp, from Ravensbruck, where there was a gas chamber. They picked up the sick and the weak and took them. So selection continued. Feeding stopped. We were literally starving, losing all of our weight. The infestation of lice that caused the Typhus. So it was the last chance of survival.

So my aunt was taken. My other aunt became very, very sick. She was feverish and lying on the floor. I think she had pneumonia. During these few days my sister was selected.

They lined us up every morning to select the weak. She was picked out. And there I was, the panic that I always had returned in a very big way. I spoke up and I said, "I am her sister." And they said, "Well, you can go, too." So I did.

>> Bill Benson: And you knew what was going to happen.

>> Irene Weiss: I knew. She knew. But no way was I going to be alone. The terror was so enormous on me, in me. I just remember thinking, no, I will not be here alone; I cannot be alone. I think my 13 years of age had a lot to do with that because I was simply a terrified child.

So they locked us in a room with many others like us, all emaciated. We were waiting for the truck to come. And for some reason that day the truck did not arrive, because of the war situation on the highway. And at the end of the day somebody pushed the door and it gave and one by one we got out of the room and went back to our barrack. And when we got in there, my aunt was still lying feverishly on the floor. And the other women, they all burst out saying, "the children came back," "the children came back."

>> Irene Weiss: Meaning you and Serena.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. And we were just astonished to be called children because children were not to live in this area, in this world.

>> Bill Benson: So they never acknowledged you.

>> Irene Weiss: Never, never. It was a big secret. We were never referred to as children. And we were just hoping that they -- that the Germans didn't think so either. But suddenly they were crying and they were happy that the children came back.

So after this, soon the Russian Army soldiers did arrive in the camp. But realizing that there was Typhus there, they left and they never came back. So we were certainly abandoned very sick and very needy of every help, transportation, food, medicine, just, you know, survival. A lot of the survivors who could have lived and survived died after liberation because --

>> Bill Benson: There was no care for them.

>> Irene Weiss: No care. So to briefly summarize, we literally walked up the highway. After a while -- we didn't leave right away. We had to stay because we had no strength. After a while people moved into the next village. There always was a village near every concentration camp pretty much by the same name as the camp. So there was this nice village but it had many empty houses because the civilian population fled.

>> Bill Benson: The German civilians.

>> Irene Weiss: The Germans were coming. So we moved into one of the houses but we were in bad shape. My Aunt Rose, we put her in the hospital. She was very close to death. It took us many months of hitchhiking and every other way to make our way to Prague, where eventually we got into a hospital and had some help and began to inquire who was alive and who was dead and tried to figure out which of my extended family survived.

>> Bill Benson: And there were a couple of members who came back.

>> Irene Weiss: A few young adults who survived. And the only one who in his early 20s escaped to what was then Palestine, left the family, he returned as a Czechoslovakian soldier in a British uniform. He was near Prague. We made contact with him. He took us under his wing. He was a soldier. He had privileges. He took us to his -- where he was stationed. He fed us from the military kitchen. He took his sister into a hospital. He did for us what we needed very badly. And from then he made contact with a few of his brothers, young adults.

But basically, at the end, in my family only Serena and I survived. My father, mother, four siblings, everyone was gone, killed. My grandparents, other uncles and aunts with

families, two children with this couple of uncle and aunt, two couples, two children with the other couple, all the elderly. It was a slaughter.

>> Bill Benson: Almost your entire family.

>> Irene Weiss: Entire family. In our village, in our very small farming village where there were only 10 Jewish families -- and I counted the total number of persons, no more than 100, 10 returned. And my sister and I were the only two children. You know, eight adults and two children out of approximately 100 persons. There was families that were totally wiped out that young man that worked as a Sonderkommando at the crematorium, he was killed. He had many brothers and sisters. Their entire family was wiped out. No one came back.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, I think we've probably all know that we wish we had a lot more time because there's so much, so much more you could have shared with us. But thank you so much for that.

I'm going to turn back to Irene in just a couple of moments to close our program. I want to thank you all for being here. We didn't have time for questions Irene will stay behind when she finishes here on the stage. We invite you to come up on the stage if you would like, meet her, ask a question if you would like to do that, give her a hug, whatever you want to do I think you're welcome to do that.

I want to remind you that we have *First Person* programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the 9th of August. I hope you can come back. But all of our programs are available on the museum's YouTube page. So you can see Irene's and other programs as well.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person has the last word. So I would like to turn to a Irene to close today's program.

>> Irene Weiss: Thank you very much.

We have learned from this tragedy that teaching of hate can make people believe that genocide is possible, even a patriotic duty, that killing a civilian population, including their children, is necessary. Now, humanity's vulnerability to hate and violence demands constant vigilance and readiness to speak out against those who seek to dehumanize and divide us. As a survivor, building faith in people and their institutions takes a long time. A lifetime may not be enough. But there are people everywhere who believe that race, color, and religion do not set us apart; that we all belong to the human race.

I want to thank you for coming to the museum and to coming to hear me -- to hear such a sad tale, to hear my story and to be interested in this topic, in this tragic story. It will ensure that when you go back and tell others, it will ensure that this story will never be forgotten. Thank you very much for coming here. And I'm sorry that I had to share such a sad story with you.

Thank you very much.

>> [Applause]