Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Irene Weiss
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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. This is our 20th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Irene Weiss, whom you shall meet shortly.
This 2019 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 through August 8th. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests. Irene will share her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes.
If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Irene a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our on-line conversation: Never Stop Asking Why. The conversation aims to inspire individuals to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises. You can ask your question and tag the Museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy. Today's program will be livestreamed on the Museum's website, meaning people will be joining the program online and watching with us today from across the country and around the world.
We invite everyone to watch our First Person programs live on the Museum's website each Wednesday and Thursday at 11:00 A.M. Eastern Standard Time through the end of May. 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 person in the lower left-hand side 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, which is indicated by the arrow on this map, 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, Marty, passed away in January of 2013. Marty, who was 93, was a combat veteran of the Second World War seeing action in North Africa, Italy and elsewhere in Europe. He had a long and distinguished career as a geologist with the federal government. Irene and Marty were married 63 years. Irene and Marty have three children, four grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. Her daughter Lesley is here today. Here with her in the front row.

Irene became a volunteer for this museum eight years ago, and this is her eighth time speaking as part of the First Person program. She also speaks frequently to audiences in other settings. On Monday she spoke to 500 students at a local high school.

In 2015 Irene traveled to Germany with her daughter Lesley to be present at the trial of former S.S. 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 S.S. member Reinhold Hanning. Her testimony at Hanning’s trial was featured in a "Time" magazine article.

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

[Applause]

Hello, Irene. Irene, thank you so much for being willing to again join us for the First Person program. Helping to start off our 2019 year of First Person. You have so much

to share with us, and we only have a limited time so we'll start right away if you don't mind. You described for me 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. Before we turn to the war years, please tell us about your family and your early life in Czechoslovakia.
>> Irene Weiss: So my family lived there three generations. And we had a normal family. Six children. Very close family. My father had a small business in the neighboring town, and he would leave every day to go to work. We would anxiously wait for him to come back, the children. My mother worked taking care of the family, six children.
And in those days, everything was done in the home. Nothing was bought packaged or prepared. And I know that my mother spent every minute of her days working and preparing food and so on for the children. But we children had a lot of fun. It was a farming town. And there was always a lot of activity in relation to what was growing on the farm, what was ripe, what was ready to eat. And we also had free run of the town. We had lots of friends. We were not restricted to our own little neighborhood. We went to school. It was just a very normal family.
>> Bill Benson: You told me that you really experienced at that time no anti-Semitism.
>> Irene Weiss: No, we didn't because the population was 1,000 in the town. Everybody knew my parents. And we children were known who we were. We played with the neighborhood kids. It was just a normal growing up and fun to be a young kid in a farming town.
Actually it was so interesting in a way, if I tell you that we actually sat around in the evening watching the cows come home.
[Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: That's what you did?
>> Irene Weiss: That's what we did. And I remember to this day how all the owners were out there sitting on benches, watching the cows. And what amazes me to this day is that every cow knew which gate to get into. So we had cows. And when ours came to our gate, they turned off from the crowd and took the gate.
>> Bill Benson: They knew where their home was.
>> Irene Weiss: Their home. And so there was a lot of interesting things to learn for children in that so-called primitive way of living. But it was not -- people knew what to do. For example, children -- I would watch not only where does butter come from, but watch the cows being milked. Watched the butter being made. Watched bread being made. Everything was -- jams being made. All of these were interesting things for children to watch and learn. And you might not think that it's fun, but it is. It's a kind of an experience that, you know, you watched it and then you ate it and you knew where it came from.
>> Bill Benson: You were doing the things that you would have expected to do when you became an adult, but that got terribly disrupted. By the time Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, launching the second world war, 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. Tell us about that time under the Hungarians.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, yes. As you say, since they joined Germany, they instituted the so-called Nuremburg Laws restricting Jews from lots of things. The laws were made what Jews couldn't do. Jews couldn't be citizens. Jewish children couldn't go to school. Professional people couldn't -- teachers, lawyers couldn't practice. Our properties were confiscated.
And so -- and eventually we had to wear a yellow star on our clothes, you know, practically being a target for anyone's attempt to do whatever they wanted. And basically the law did not protect us. And it was a very scary thing.
>> Bill Benson: Up to a certain point in order for you to continue schooling, your parents -- because education was so important to your family, they sent you to a different city.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, in the farming town, education stopped at sixth grade because the farmers needed their children in the fields. And so it stopped. And so my parents did not accept that. So as we reached sixth grade and beyond, one after another, we were sent into the big city. It was really an exceptional experience because when I was like 11, 12, I had to get on a train and travel to a big city and be there all day. And then take a train back. And that was nothing like today how kids travel back and forth. But that was a very big deal. It was a one-track train station. And many times the train stopped only for me. There was nobody else going.
>> Bill Benson: And you were 11 or 12 years old.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. I would get on the train and then find my way to the school. Come back late in the afternoon. And in the winter, I could always tell it was getting a little dark. I could tell from a distance coming towards my house, my mother was looking across the fence to see, is she coming? Is she coming? She was getting worried. And then when she spotted me, she would disappear and go back in the kitchen and start preparing my dinner. That was the routine. However, when we had to wear the yellow star, I went to school a couple of times on the train after that. By not putting it on, on my -- I pinned it on rather than sewed it on.
>> Bill Benson: You were required to sew it on but you pinned it.
>> Irene Weiss: When I got on the train, I took it off because I was scared to be recognized as a Jewish girl. When I got to the big city, I also didn't put it on because they didn't know me there. but this did not last long because orders were announced that Jewish children could not attend Hungarian schools. So after that, I was home. And my father was home also because his business was confiscated. Now he had no place to go and no way to make a living. So he was home, and we were all hunkered down at home. And really nervous and worried what our future will be.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the really harrowing, frightening time that you remember being on a train with your father.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, that was -- we didn't have the yellow star on at the time. Things happened very fast one after another. This was still a time a day or two before. But my father had a small beard which was not common as it is today. Typically Jewish men had beards. And I was with him. And it was one stop from where we had to get off. But in that short period of time, a bunch of young guys, you know, which they suddenly were empowered, you know, to be the law if they wanted to be. They gathered around my father and decided to taunt him. And they spoke among themselves about what should we do with him, and wouldn't it be fun to throw him off the train?

>> Bill Benson: You could hear them saying this.
>> Irene Weiss: Oh, definitely. I was near him. And they were having their fun with someone they recognized as Jewish, and therefore available for any kind of humiliation. The law was not going to interfere. But neither did anybody on the train, the other passengers. And so the only reason that they didn't throw him off is that we arrived at our destination and got off. But my father never rode a train again. But I was terrified. Because I was not recognized as part of him, but I certainly knew that something terrible is about to happen.
>> Bill Benson: And that has stuck with you all these years later.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes, because, you know, one is helpless at a time like that. And it -- humiliation of your parents or grandparents was always tremendously difficult to take for children, sons watching their fathers being humiliated. And that continued on even in the concentration camps.
>> Bill Benson: Irene, in 1942, your father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, were forced by the Hungarians to do forced labor for the military. Tell us about your father's conscription into the forced labor brigade and what that meant for your family.
>> Irene Weiss: Well, they called in the young men. And they sent them to the front line. They were not given weapons. They were used for mine sweeping and very dangerous work.
>> Bill Benson: Just so our audience knows, mine sweeping really meant for them to walk into a field, to expose mines by stepping on them.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. They were exposed without weapons any and protection. They were not considered soldiers. They were really slave laborers. And very few came back at the end of the war. Fortunately my father did return because there was one period there where they -- the Hungarian government still recognized the fact that he was a little older and that he had six children, and so he did come home. But most of the young men never came back. And of course we didn't know that he would come back. And it was a very, very scary time. My mother was frantic. Never heard from him, no communication, you know.
>> Bill Benson: Of course, he had lost his business earlier. He's gone. Do you know how your mom managed with six kids to make -- to feed you, how to make ends meet? The farm probably helped.
>> Irene Weiss: The farm helped. My mother was a very hard worker. She grew a huge vegetable garden herself in our property. And that fed us, you know. However, we didn't know how long this will last. And I remember even -- I must have been 11 or 12, I questioned my mother. Do we have money? Are we going to be OK? She wouldn't tell me, of course. She didn't want me to worry about it. But yes, with six children. And this -- you know, the fact that the law did not protect us, so we had no recourse of any kind. We had no protection. So that combined with the uncertainty of a livelihood. I mean, we were exposed to a lot of --
>> Bill Benson: You were stripped of all rights. You had no rights.
>> Irene Weiss: Absolutely.
>> Bill Benson: Yet as difficult as that was for you and your family and other Jews under the Hungarians, it turned dramatically and suddenly and tragically far, far worse in 1944, March of 1944, when Germany invaded Hungary. Tell us about that time and what happened to your family now that the Germans had occupied Hungary.

>> Irene Weiss: Well, we knew when the Germans occupied our area that things would get worse. But it was a year before the war was over. And we did know that the war was coming to an end. We heard war activities, and we read about it. So we really thought that we would escape being taken out of our homes. There was great anxiety about that. But then one day there was an announcement in our town that the 10 Jewish families should gather up some of their belongings and report to a gathering place the next day. And so all of a sudden, we became -- you know, they pulled us out of our home. And suddenly we didn't know what the next step is. Some delegation of kind of important people in the town including the school principal and police person and other officials came to our house after this announcement. And they took my father to the side, and they told him that they came to collect all our valuables and money that we have, and that he is to hand it over, and there was no question about I don't want to or I don't have any. And they pressed him. And demanded.
>> Bill Benson: These were the people that your family had grown up with and knew.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes, they knew my father. But that was the law that they were to collect all valuables. It was a very calculated thing. In retrospect, they knew we wouldn't be needing it because they knew our fate. But we didn't know our fate. We thought that our families taken out of our home with six children, and my parents would have liked to keep some of their money and some of their valuables to exchange it for food in case that is possible, you know, later on for the children. But they were confiscating it. And after that, the very next day, after packing some things, and, you know, the very packing of -- what do you take with you when the family of six is thrown out of their home and you don't know where you're going or how long you'll be gone? My -- first of all, my mother started cooking and baking bread and preparing food to take with us. But then the packing itself into the suitcases was a very difficult thing. I watched them putting things in suitcases. They would put something in, and then take it out. And put something else in and take it out, trying to decide just what is essential, because we could not take very much with just one small suitcase.
>> Bill Benson: Not only what is essential but not knowing what would happen in the future, trying to figure out what might I need, you know, a little bit later. And you remember watching that.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. And, you know, only essentials. Certainly there was no question that a child could take my precious toy or something. We knew better. It was very interesting. We children understood our situation. Nobody made, you know, an unnecessary demand on our parents. We saw the pressure they were under. But they had a big problem with it too, what to take. It wasn't the question of taking valuable things, just practical things. Some bedding and there would be some clothing. And there would be just food. Very, very little.
>> Bill Benson: Maybe cooking ware.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Just basic things. And then the designated time, we took our suitcases and left our yard, closed our gate. We had a dog. Made sure the dog didn't follow us. And we went to this place where we -- the other Jewish families were assembled. And we typically from here on, wherever we went, our place was a piece on the floor, somewhere on the floor. In this place, we put our bundled down on the floor. Each family took a corner and we waited for instructions. And from here on the

next place and the next place was always crowded, a crowded place with displaced people on the floor. That was our home.
>> Bill Benson: And they took you to this -- they created a ghetto at Munkacs.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. They had a plan. We never heard of Auschwitz, even at this late date, when so many had been killed in Auschwitz. The Germans did an excellent job of hiding what they were doing. There was no announcements about it in the papers or anywhere else. We actually did not know that there was such a place. And what we heard from some escapees from Poland, Jews who escaped here and there, a single person, we heard that in German occupied Poland there was mass killing of Jewish peel.
And we didn't even believe it. They told us about such atrocities, whole villages of families killed and synagogues burned down. And we just didn't believe it. We thought they were exaggerating. And so once they -- from this place they took us to the ghetto, which was their plan of collecting people for easy transportation from there. so in this big city, there were some vacant, abandoned brick factories that had large grounds and some barracks.
And this is where they dropped us off. And more and more by the thousands of people were brought from all of the villages and nearby bigger cities, dumped there with their belongings, their children. No facility of any kind. No sanitation. No kitchen. No food. No beds. No hospital. Nothing. Just dropped us --
>> Bill Benson: All forced into this brick factory.
>> Irene Weiss: And so again there was this huge barrack where people moved in out of the weather and found a place on the floor. And eventually we had to step over each other to get to the outside. And it became very scary here because we began to see that we are not being accounted for. Nobody asks our name. Nobody is keeping records about who you are. Inside our documents were confiscated.
>> Bill Benson: All of your personal documents?
>> Irene Weiss: Personal documents that were very precious and very necessary, who you are. If you didn't have papers, it was hard to identify you. You were nobody. Nobody cared. Nobody knew about you. We became aware that we were not reckoned with. Nobody knows who we are. And in other words, we were going to disappear and nobody would know.
>> Bill Benson: For our audience, Irene, it's important to note that along with the other nine families, the 10 Jewish families from your town, over six weeks the Nazis gathered up with their Hungarian allies, rounded up just like they did with you, almost 425,000 people in six weeks and deported them to Auschwitz.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. It seems that by 1944, most of the Jews of Europe had been killed, except the half a million Hungarian Jews that were still intact out of which over 400,000 were delivered to Auschwitz in 2 1/2 months. The trains were running day and night from all of the gathering places, the ghettos, and dumped into mostly Auschwitz. And what happened there is the tragedy of the Jewish people.
>> Bill Benson: Irene, if you don't mind telling us about going to Auschwitz. You spent about three weeks in the Munkacs ghetto, and then you and your family were taken to Auschwitz.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Here in this ghetto, they also periodically called in the men and threatened them demanding that they should give them the money and valuables they

still had. They were determined to take all that they wanted, and that we should not take it away because as I say they knew that we were not going to be using it. And so my father was taken into this kind of interrogation and demand even there in the ghetto, which was always very, very scary. So one day these cattle cars, huge train with cattle cars, arrived on the tracks adjacent to the brick factory. And they shouted and yelled and told us to get in the trains fast. Get your things and get into the trains fast, fast, move. You know, herded us into it.

And we, you know, were very worried about losing each other and not getting into the same car. So we held onto each other, the children, and managed to get into the same cattle car. And after a while, the door was bolted from the outside. And we were in the dark. And we knew that we were in very big trouble because we were taken away somewhere out of our towns and our country. And so the trains kept going. And when my father looked out the little window, we told us what we should fear the most, that the train was heading towards Poland. And at that point we remembered what we had heard, the rumors that we heard about the killings in the forest in Poland.

And so there was silence, and there was grief there and worry about the children. Total silence and terror in that train. And the train kept going for about two days and two nights with a bucket in the middle for a toilet. And actually the train was stopped one time, and some of the men in the train were asked to take out the buckets and then bring them back. The train continued.

So when we finally did stop, again my father looked out and he said he sees barracks and he sees prisoners in striped uniforms. And it doesn't seem like this is the forest in Poland, and that it doesn't seem like we will be facing a firing squad when we get out.

>> Bill Benson: Which is what you had heard had happened.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, what we heard. So everybody was actually relieved to see that this is some other place than what we assumed was a work camp of some kind, a labor camp. So, you know, we were looking -- our parents were looking to see what hope they can see in this terrible situation. So it's not a firing squad. It's a work camp. OK. If we have to work, make the best of a terrible situation.

But when the trains were opened in Auschwitz, and there was the yelling and screaming of get out, get out, and leave everything behind, don't take anything and get out, we were herded on the platform towards the front of the platform. In the meantime, they were shouting orders.

The next order was that all men line up to one side, and women and children to the other. So right away we were separated from our fathers and brothers. After this, more shouting and orders. Just move very fast and take nothing with you. So the women and children were lined up in this huge column as was seen in the picture that you showed before.

And the column moved up. And all of a sudden we were in the front. And we were greeted by about 10 Nazi soldiers. Blocking our way. And one of them had a small stick in his hand. And as he looked at people, he very quickly separated them with that stick. It was very, very fast. First my mother and two little brothers. To one side they disappeared. And my 17-year-old sister Serena to the other side disappeared. And I was left with my younger sister Edit. I was holding her hand. And all of a sudden the stick came down between us, and she was sent towards where my mother went, and I was left standing there alone.

And as it showed in that picture again that you showed, I was so stunned and horrified that she was not going to catch up with our mother because the crowds were moving fast and disappearing and that she would not catch up to them. And I felt somehow that I let go of her. For some reason I felt that I should have held onto her tighter. I didn't understand how I lost her there. And so I didn't move for an instant there. I didn't go where I was told.
And it seems as if the Nazi soldiers were taking pictures of this particular transport arriving. And caught me standing there before I was motioned to go towards where the young adults went. But that separation for me was somehow the biggest trauma that I experienced upon arriving in Auschwitz, because we suddenly -- when we saw barracks and we were reassured that this was a labor camp, and then we saw how young adults were separated and women and children and elderly were separated, so we assumed that the young will be working and the elderly and women and children will not be working and that periodically we will be reunited. That was our civilized assumption of what we were going through.
But then with my little sister being lost in that way, and again nobody ever asked who you are or write down your name. So obviously this was not going to be a reunion that will help her. And so I was really traumatized by this separation. And in the meantime, the men, our fathers and brothers, were standing in a big line watching their families being torn apart. And there is nothing they could do about it.
And after then all the women and children were separated, what we didn't understand, that any woman who held a child and any older person, that group after they were separated were marched immediately into a gas chamber. And they were killed within the half hour or an hour, however long it took. We absolutely could never imagine such a thing. It seems that depending on how many young adults they wanted to keep for slave labor, typically 80% of a huge transport were killed. 80% of women, children and elderly.
>> Bill Benson: Immediately.
>> Irene Weiss: Immediately. And 20% would be held back for slower killing through slave labor.
>> Bill Benson: So of your family, it's you and Serena.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: You have seen your mother and other sisters go. And then your father and your brothers are somewhere in another line. What happened to you and Serena then?
>> Irene Weiss: Well, we were with many other young adults. We were herded into a bath house where everybody was processed, disinfected, shaved everybody's hair. And we were given prison clothes. And all of that was done in a very disrespectful way with a lot of shouting and humiliation. And soon we were lined up in prison clothes, all the women their hair gone, and people didn't recognize their sisters and so on. We all looked alike.
And it was just -- you know, from being a human being suddenly we were no longer human beings. We were -- we had no names. We had no identity. And people were ordering us around and humiliating us. And we were separated from all our families. And of course we still didn't know the worst of it. We did not know that the plan that was being carried out here.

And so when we ended up in the barracks, we asked the people who came before us, well, when is the reunion? And they laughed at us and they pointed to the chimneys in the distance belching fire and smoke. And they said look at that. That's where your families are. And we said to -- we just felt that -- how could they say such things and what are they talking about? And we dismissed it. We just totally dismissed it. And so after being there a few days, asking more questions, getting the same answer, we still never really accepted that. That was not possible.
>> Bill Benson: It was so unthinkable. Utterly unthinkable.
>> Irene Weiss: Where is this place, what is going on here, how could you talk to us like that?
>> Bill Benson: Amazingly, you did find a couple of your relatives, your aunts. How did that happen?
>> Irene Weiss: Well, yes. My mother's two sisters. My mother's family, parents and sisters and brothers, lived in the neighboring town. So they arrived in Auschwitz on another transport. The trains kept coming, hundreds of trains from Hungary. Heading towards Auschwitz. Day and night. So they arrived the night before my two young aunts. They were in their mid 20s. We just happened to run into them in this crowd. And of course that was for me, I think, that saved my life for sure. Because they were older than I was, and I called them Aunt, and they became like parents to me here because they attempted to protect me, you know, as much as they could. But emotionally they were very, very important to me in this very frightening place.
>> Bill Benson: You said that -- you had told me that you looked like a child, but yet you had been selected for labor. And your aunts really did all they could to protect you and make you appear older.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. They really tried. And we had this -- they had a routine there of every morning at dawn we would be thrown out of the barracks for so-called counting. And they would line us up in fives, in rows. And wait for hours in the cold and rain. Whatever the weather was, until the delegation of Nazi soldiers would come out and dressed neatly and nicely in their coats and boots and finally they would come and look down the lines and count.
But there was no reason for them to count. We were not registered in any way. I think this counting was -- it gave them a second chance to make selections out of the ones that they might have missed, some people like me who was a young child really, or people who didn't look strong enough for slave labor. And so every morning, I was in great peril, you know. So my aunts would strategically try to line me up in the line, in the lineup of five. Of course I don't know how much it mattered. I think I escaped it day after day. But they would put me on a little hill or on a stone or -- I would never be the first one and I would never be the last one in the row. Sort of try to shield me.
But I witnessed people being pulled out. A Nazi soldier passing by, all he would have to do is look down and motion with his hand. A person would come out of line, and that would be the end of it. They had perfect right to decide who should live and who should die. And it was their job to reduce the numbers and to kill as many as they felt like in addition to the women and children and elderly. So it became a place where killing was the industry.
There were four gas chambers and crematoriums, and that was the main activity that went on there. And so after a while we came to believe and understand -- well, not

understand, but where is this place and what is going on here. And who knows about this?
>> Bill Benson: Irene, in the little time we have left, there's so much more you could tell us that you won't be able to. But you were forced to go do labor in a particular section of Auschwitz which you said essentially gave you the front window on all the horrors of Auschwitz.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. So after a while, my two aunts and my sister and I and some thousands of other women, were assigned to work in what they called a place where all of the stuff from the trains was brought there, that people brought with them. All of the stuff from the gas chemical chambers were brought there. It was a storage place where they brought the stuff, and we were supposed to sort it out, repackage it, and in categories of what they were, and it was shipped back to Germany so they could --
>> Bill Benson: Clothing.
>> Irene Weiss: It was everything that people brought, depending on how long they were en route and out of their homes. There was everything. There was clothing. There was pots and pans. There was baby carriages. There were toothbrushes. Eyeglasses. Books. Even musical instruments. Whatever people thought that might help them. And all of this came day after day in huge, huge quantities. And so we were assigned a day shift and night shift to sit and first to bring it in from the weather into the barracks, and then sit on the floor and work on these things.
We did this for eight months, and we almost never made a dent in it because it kept being replenished with the trains coming and coming. But we sorted all of this out. And this was next to a gas chamber number four. It was just an electrified fence dividing us from it. And so we had the misfortune to be so close to this activity which we didn't have to ask anybody anymore what happened to our families.
The trains would come, and they would -- after the sorting out, they would -- women and children and elderly, huge columns would pass by our window, and even talk to us, ask us who we are and so on. By then, nothing would help them really. And they would disappear in the gate.
>> Bill Benson: You saw all of that day after day.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. We would look at them and look at these beautiful children held by their mothers, young women, young mothers. They had no idea where they were going. And they would go in the gate, and then disappear. And the next column of women and children from the train would be up the road.
>> Bill Benson: What happened to your father?
>> Irene Weiss: Well, while we were there, we had the front row of what was going on, what was being done to our people. And what we also found out is that in the diabolical way, the Germans made our own Jewish people do all of the horrible cruel work. And what they did is they -- when the trains arrived, as they selected women for work, they also selected younger men to work in the gas chambers. And they were called sonderkommando.
These men and young boys, stronger looking boys, their job was to help herd the people into the gas chambers and then pull out the bodies and put them into the crematoriums. And that was day and night job of thousands and thousands. And we found out that my father was selected for that, and that he worked just on the other side of the fence. We didn't see him, but we were told by -- we recognized a young

man who told -- threw us a note across the fence. And he said that my father did not last very long. That he was shot. And so we did hear that he had lived for a while. But my 16-year-old brother who was with him, he obviously was not there because they selected just the stronger. He was a 16-year-old young boy. He disappeared in a way that we could never find anyone who gave us any account of him. Usually there was a network of, you know, did you hear so-and-so? Do you know so-and-so? Were you with this person? No one knew anything about him ever. And we assumed that he was selected for the gas chamber, taken away from my father and that he probably was killed upon arrival so that there was no trace of him.
And even after the war, for years after the war, we tried to trace through Red Cross and so on. We just wanted to know what happened to him. So in the end, my sister and I survived after many other very harsh conditions that -- one of my aunts was killed because after Auschwitz was -- the Russian army approached Auschwitz.
>> Bill Benson: This is January of 1945.
>> Irene Weiss: In January. And instead of allowing us to be liberated by the Russian army, the Germans pulled us out and took us out in the January cold on a death March deeper into Germany. And by the time we ended up walking and getting deeper into Germany, so many of them were killed on the road because as they sat down they were killed.
And if they, you know, because of the cold weather and -- they didn't feed us. We ate the snow on the ground as we moved along. But the last camp, one of my aunts -- there was typhus. All the way from Hamburg we were walking and in cattle cars. But typhus broke out in this camp, Neustadt, and so one of my aunts had typhus. Of course they picked up the sick and took them.
This camp, this last one, didn't have a gas chamber. But a truck came regularly and picked up the sick and those who they deemed not worth living anymore. So my aunt, we watched her being loaded into a truck with others. But unfortunately, what happened was that my other aunt was also desperately ill. And then my sister, at this camp they stopped feeding us altogether because they themselves were running and in trouble. So we were all very emaciated. So my sister was picked out at one of these selections. And we knew what selections meant. And I was so terrified of being alone in this very, very scary hostile place, I volunteered to go with her. And they said fine, you can go too.
>> Bill Benson: And you knew exactly --
>> Irene Weiss: I knew. I said I'm her sister. They said you can go too. So they put us in a room with others, whom they picked out. And we were waiting for the truck to come. This truck that we watched often come into our camp and take away the sick and the weak just like they did my aunt. Well, apparently, that day, because of the war approaching and the chaos on the highway, that truck didn't arrive that day. And so at the end of the day, the door was opened and we just drifted out of that room. And a very few days after that, the German guards disappeared, and some of the Russian soldiers showed up. So, you know, if the truck had come that day, it would have been the end of us.
>> Bill Benson: The end of you. And on the day that the guards -- as you said, they disappeared. So here are all of you women, and no guards around. And you don't

know what's out there. so what happened when you knew that we're out of here? When did you know that?
>> Irene Weiss: We saw the guard towers empty, but we did not trust that. We did not -- after they disappeared, we thought something is going on, but we were afraid. Nobody went to the gate because we thought oh, they are not going to let us live. They will return. And so everybody waited. Nobody went to the gate.
But it seems that they were running fast because the Russians were approaching. So after a while, some of the women pushed the gate, and it was open. And they drifted out into the nearest town by the same name as the camp. But when the Russian soldiers -- because of the typhus in the camp, I imagine, they didn't come in. They abandoned us immediately. And so there was no sense of liberation.
>> Bill Benson: There's no medical care. No food.
>> Irene Weiss: No food, no transportation, no medicine. And we really -- this was a camp of desperate people. And we were abandoned. And many died. Some of them, you know, the first thing they did if they had any strength they would go into the kitchen of the camp and eat whatever was there. and of course get dysentery because they were in no position to be eating anything like that, you know, after starving. And people died. And who could have been saved if we had proper care. But we didn't. We were very unfortunate.
It took us very many months to move town to town, mostly on the highway. We walked and hitchhiked. There was no transportation. And we heard rumors if you go here, there is transportation. If you go there, there is a camp with food. It was never true. But people --
>> Bill Benson: You would go wherever the rumors said.
>> Irene Weiss: There were hordes of people walking on the highway. Eventually we ended up in Prague. But a lot of loss of life and a lot of suffering. And eventually by the time we were in Prague we felt like we were free.
>> Bill Benson: When you went back to your family home, tell us about that.
>> Irene Weiss: Well, the few survivors, young adults, my mother's family, gathered in Czechoslovakia in one place, and we stayed together. But people got to be anxious to see who else came home. And they decided that one of my young uncles and I, I would go with him and go back to the hometown and check it out and see who is back and bring back some information.
But that trip was also harrowing because there was no transportation. The trains were like you see trains with people hanging from the windows and the roof of the train. That's how my uncle and I went from Prague to quite a distance to where we came from. We got to the hometown, and I went to my house.
Somebody was living there. a family was living there. Nobody I knew. They watched me come in the house. They didn't talk to me. They kind of pulled over to one side. They knew who I was. And I went around from room to room. I went around the house. I came out again to the other side, other door.
I said nothing to them. I saw absolutely nothing of ours in the house. Just the walls and no furniture, nothing. Then I went down into the garden. We had kind of an orchard. And the trees were full of fruit ripening. And that was the first time I cried. I just couldn't understand how the fruit is there, and no one to pick it. And nobody alive. And alone coming home to this house.

And then my neighbors came out. And the neighbor had a – they attempted to talk to me and ask me a little bit about what happened. But there was -- the neighbor had children, boys, the same age as my brothers. And they had grown. They were healthy looking. And my little brothers were killed. And I just -- it was a very, very difficult and sad time.
All the while in Auschwitz when I saw the young mothers and children walking to the gas chambers, we were so stunned and so horrified that we could not absorb it. We could not believe it. We saw it, but it didn't register in our brains. And we couldn't cry. It was not just I, but others. My aunts and others. We stared, stunned. And nobody cried. There was no way to deal with this. But eventually my own setting with my own house and so on, I began to understand the enormity of what happened.
>> Bill Benson: Irene, I so wish we had a lot more time this afternoon. We could spend the rest of the afternoon, and only touch the surface of all that you went through. In 1947, you and Serena did end up coming to the United States.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: And you started a new life here. And a whole new chapter of your life began here and your family. But we're going to close the program in just a moment. I'm going to turn back to Irene to close the program for us. I want to thank all of you for being with us. Remind you that we will have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until August 8. Our programs are on the museum's YouTube channel. And until the end of May all of the programs will be live streamed. So we hope that if you can't come back in person that you can view a program in some other way. Because we didn't have time for questions, when Irene is finished, we invite any of you who would like to and really we sincerely mean this please feel free to come up here on the stage and just, you know, say hi to Irene. Ask her a question. You're fine with that, right, Irene?
>> Irene Weiss: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: For people to do that. So that's a genuine offer to do that. It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn to Irene to close today's program.
>> Irene Weiss: Thank you very much. So I would like to thank you for coming to the Holocaust Museum and for taking time to listen to my story. As you reflect upon what happened to me and my family, you may wonder how such a tragedy could have occurred in civilized western Europe in the 20th century. My hope is that with the increased awareness of this tragic history and personal testimony we will all be able to recognize and resist forces of hatred, prejudice, and division that exists even in our time.
By speaking about those painful times, I am doing my best to honor the memory of those who did not survive to tell their own story. So thank you again for listening to me and coming here, to learn about this terrible history of the Jewish people.
[Applause]