

Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Susan Warsinger
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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. Susan Warsinger, 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.

Susan 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 Susan 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 Susan is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction. We begin with this photo of Susan Hilsenrath who was born in Bad Kreuznach, Germany, the eldest of three children. Here we see Susan with her Brother Joseph, mother Annie with brother

Ernest and her father Israel, and Susan with her arm around her father. And here we see Susan with her brother Joseph.

On November 9-10, 1938, known as Kristallnacht or "The Night of Broken Glass," Nazi thugs smashed the windows and furnishings of the Hilsenrath home. Months later, Susan and Joseph were smuggled to France.

In May 1940 the German army invaded France. Susan and Joseph were evacuated from a children's home in Paris to Versailles, where they were temporarily housed in Louis XIV's palace. Soon German soldiers arrived and the children fled with their guardians to the unoccupied part of the country under the Vichy government. The arrows on this map of France indicate their movement southward. With the help of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Susan and Joseph received permission to immigrate to the United States. Information written on this tag that Susan wore identifies her name and states she is sailing To the United States onboard the "Serpa Pinto".

After crossing the Pyrenees to Spain, the two children sailed from Lisbon, Portugal, and arrived in New York in September 1941. This photo appeared in a New York newspaper, and Susan and her brother Joseph are circled in the photograph.

Susan lives here in the Washington, D.C. area. She spent 29 years as an educator in the public school system. Susan has three very accomplished daughters and, as she notes, nine wonderful grandchildren, and her first great granddaughter is due next Tuesday, April 2. Susan's volunteer work at the Museum includes being a member of the Museum's Speakers' Bureau, for whom she speaks at venues locally and across the country about her experiences during the Holocaust. Next week she will speak at two local colleges and the following week is speaking in Greeley, Colorado. Susan is also a tour guide leading law enforcement officers, including FBI agents, from all over the United States and from throughout the world, through the museum's Permanent Exhibit. She also gives tours to special groups such as college-aged leaders, and has just completed training to lead tours of the Museum's special exhibition, "Americans and the Holocaust." Susan is a contributor to the Museum's writing program which produces editions of "Echoes of Memory," a collection of writings by survivors associated with this museum. You can read some of her writings on-line on the Museum website. Following today's program, Susan will be available to sign copies of "Echoes of Memory."

Accompanying Susan today is her friend Joanne Versteeg. With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mrs. Susan Warsinger.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Hello, Susan. Thank you for joining us, Susan, and for your willingness to be our "First Person." We have -- you have so much to share with us that we're going to start right away, I think. Just jump into it if we can. Your early years were spent living in the town of Bad Kreuznach in Germany. Please -- before we turn to Kristallnacht and the events that happened after that, tell us first about your community, your parents, and about you in those early years of your life.

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, in 1933, when Hitler first came into power, I was a very small child. My father had a thriving business, store. He had a linens store. And he was making a good life for our family. And I was a very happy child. And then all of a sudden when the Nazis came into power, they boycotted my father's store. And so he didn't -- wasn't able to make a living for us. And we had to move from one place to the other.

>> Bill Benson: When your father lost his business, what did he do then to make ends meet, to provide for his family?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, the only thing that he really knew was how to sell things, so he got together with a farmer who was growing berries, strawberries and blueberries and raspberries, and he used to go with his baskets, filled his baskets, and he went to the people in the Jewish community and they bought the berries from him. So that was quite a big difference between what he had -- the income he had before.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely. You shared with me that you would know whether he had had a good day of selling his berries. He'd come home and -- and smile, and you just knew that he had had a good day.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to some of the moves you made, you told me that you were unhappy in your early school years.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Why was that?

>> Susan Warsinger: I think the audience saw the little girl with that cone. All of the children in Germany, when they first went to public school, they got one of those cones, and it was filled with candy. And so that was my first day, the picture that you saw, that everybody saw.

>> Bill Benson: That was your first day of school.

>> Susan Warsinger: So I was really very excited. And I was very happy. But not for very long because the kids started to make fun of me, and they started to bully me. And this is in first grade, and I'm this little kid and I don't know about anti-Semitism. I don't know about hatred. And the teachers were reading a book to the children called "The Poison Mushroom." And the kids were learning from the teacher that the Jews were poison mushrooms.

And then the children just continued to make fun of me, and the teacher certainly wasn't understanding towards me. And so I used to go home every day and tell my mother I didn't want to go to school anymore. And one day I was extremely happy, and the reason for this was there was a law in Germany that Jewish children weren't allowed to go to public school anymore. So I was happy.

>> Bill Benson: You were happy.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And then you ended up going to a Jewish school?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, because the Jewish community wanted their children to have an education. So we had a one-room schoolhouse. And the teacher -- we had one teacher, and he taught all the grades from the first grade to the 10th grade. He taught all of the subjects.

>> Bill Benson: In that one room.

>> Susan Warsinger: In one room.

>> Bill Benson: I remember you shared with me that the first graders or little kids were in the first row, and then it went from there, a few rows.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. First grade, second grade, third grade. 10th grade was the 10th row. And all of those children, he taught us history. He taught us geography. He taught us how to read and how to write. I mean, I was a teacher later on. I don't know

how that man did it. But we were all happy because we were not bullied, and we were not discriminated.

>> Bill Benson: You also shared with me an incident when your mother had sent you to a local store to buy bread.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Will you tell us about that?

>> Susan Warsinger: We had -- pretend this is our house, and then all of the audience here is a beautiful garden filled with flowers.

>> Bill Benson: I can see that.

>> Susan Warsinger: And then at the very end where they first came in was a street. And that was the place where all of the markets were, all of the stores were. Excuse me. Pardon.

>> Bill Benson: Water?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Thank you.

Now, and then in order for me to get to the market, I had to walk down the steps and walk through the park and get to the other end of the park to buy the groceries. My mother wanted me to buy. And I remember I was a very little kid. Maybe 7. And one day I went -- excuse me -- I'm sorry. I went down the steps and started to walk in the park, and the gatekeeper of the park came and he said to me in a very ugly way that I wasn't allowed to walk through that park anymore because I was Jewish. And he said, don't you dare. And then he called me some nasty names.

So I ran home and I told my mother, and she told me not to walk through that park again. So the next time my mother told me to buy a loaf of bread and I was very excited, she put the German money in my hand, and I'm really proud because I'm doing something for my family, and I get over there to the steps and I say to myself, hmm, if I have to go to the store, and I can't go through the park, I have to walk like one block this way and then another big block this way and then go around again.

And so I was standing at the steps there and I said to myself, I think I'm very tired, so I'm sure the audience already knows what I decided to do.

>> Bill Benson: I think so.

>> Susan Warsinger: So anyway I got to the bottom of the steps and of course the gatekeeper came and he saw me. And he threw rocks at me this time and called me all kinds of horrible names. But the most horrible thing was that he had a daughter, and she was maybe -- maybe she was a seventh grader. Is anybody here a seventh grader? Something like that. And she saw her dad --

>> Bill Benson: Throwing stones.

>> Susan Warsinger: Throwing stones at me. And she heard him say all of these horrible things to me. And he was her role model. And so she said, well, if my father is doing this, I must do it too. And so here was this young girl learning about hatred and anti-Semitism from her father. I never walked through that park again.

>> Bill Benson: I'm sure of that. You started to share with us that you had this -- as things got tougher for your family economically and because of the anti-Semitism, you had to move from place to place.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Where did you end up living at that time?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, we were living in very many different houses. And the picture that the audience saw where my brother and I are sitting on the steps, that was not the last house we lived in. But it was -- the houses were smaller and smaller. But we were sitting outside on the steps there because my mother was going to have the baby. The baby that you saw, the one that was sitting on my mother's lap. And she was having the baby. And the reason she was having the baby at home and my brother and I were sitting outside is because Jewish ladies weren't allowed to go to the hospital. And so she had the baby in the house.

>> Bill Benson: She had no choice. She had to have it at home.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. And then after that, we moved one more time. Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: And that was in you ended up at a place called Adolf Hiter Platz, right?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Adolf Hiter Platz. And now that place is still there, but it's not called Adolf Hiter Platz.

>> Bill Benson: And when you moved there, you were living in a home that -- and this is significant in a little bit with the rabbi and his family in that home.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. It was a building that we lived on the first floor. The rabbi lived on the second floor. And a non-Jewish family lived on the third floor. And there was an attic at the very top.

>> Bill Benson: And this of course brings us to that terrible night of November 9-10, 1938, the night that we now call Kristallnacht or the Night of Broken Glass. Tell us what you remember about that.

>> Susan Warsinger: My brother and I -- not the baby, but the one that was on that side and I'm on this side, we were sleeping in our bedroom. And we were very excited because the next day was the 10th of November, which was my mother's birthday. And we couldn't fall asleep. And around 11:00 some bricks and rocks were being thrown through our bedroom window. And I was very frightened. And I covered myself up with the blanket.

But my brother who was a year younger than I am, he was very curious. And he wanted to find out what was going on. So he lifted himself up on the ledge, and he looked out the window. And he said to me, Susie, it is our neighbors. That are throwing the rocks and bricks through the window. And the civil policeman was just standing like this. The civil policeman was standing on the outskirts of the group that was doing all of this. And he didn't stop them at all.

And so we were very frightened. So we ran across the hall to our parents' bedroom, where the baby and my parents were sleeping. And the baby was just a little baby then. And he was in his crib, and a rock fell on his hand. This is my brother Ernest. And a rock fell on his hand, but he didn't get hurt. So he was OK. But we were all huddling together, deciding what we should do.

Some people had uprooted a lamppost of Adolf Hiter Platz and they carried it on their shoulders. And they came to our front door which was made out of glass, blue, red, and beautiful green glass. And they smashed that lamppost through our front door. And I still remember all of the glass falling and shattering all over. And it was really very frightening. So my father said, let's go hide up in the attic. Is there something wrong?

>> Bill Benson: No, no, no, keep going.

>> Susan Warsinger: I heard a noise. Can you hear me all right?

>> Bill Benson: Yeah. I think people can hear us pretty well. Yeah.

>> Susan Warsinger: So my father said, let's go hide up in the attic. And so we rushed up to the attic, and there was the rabbi's family who lived on the second floor was already up there but not the rabbi. And they had this little window in the attic. And I was like this, and I looked through the window and I saw that the rabbi, he was standing on his balcony. He was the only person in the town who had a balcony. And he was standing on the balcony. And two S.S. officers had him standing like this, and they were holding him like this, one here and one here, and another one came and cut off his beard. And at that time a beard was a status symbol for a rabbi.

>> Bill Benson: And you saw that.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, I saw that. And so then later on, I found out that they put him in jail. And later on I found out that they looted his apartment and ours. And later on I found out that they didn't only do that to our apartment, but they did it to every Jewish family in our town, and that they burned down our synagogue. And there was still some Jewish stores left. They had been boycotted, but the Jewish people bought from them so they eked out a living for a little while.

But those stores were looted and glass was broken. And I found out that this burning of the synagogues and this looting of the stores and doing these horrible things to people's families not only happened in our town, but it happened in every town in Germany where there was a Jewish community.

>> Bill Benson: It also happened in Austria on that night, both Germany and Austria. In fact, on that night, over 300 synagogues were burned across Germany. So you're in the attic. The rabbi was taken away. On that night I believe 30,000 Jewish men across Germany were rounded up and arrested. Your father was not that night. Why do you think that was?

>> Susan Warsinger: He wasn't up in the attic, but the way I remember it and the way I have discussed it with my brother, my father wasn't up in the attic when we first were there but he came a day later. And what we think happened is he used to play chess with the mayor of the town. And maybe the mayor of the town was his friend, and he let him go. But we're not sure. And then he came up to the attic, and he was with us. Or because maybe he was Polish, and at that time they hadn't invaded Poland yet. And this is just a theory. We don't know. And because maybe they were worried because he was not a German Jew, he was Polish, maybe they didn't want to put him in the concentration camp at that time.

>> Bill Benson: So there you are in the attic. And you spent a significant amount of time up there in that attic.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. I don't remember how many days. I don't remember. But there were apples up in that attic. And the rabbi's children were with us, and we played with the apples, and we ate the apples. That was our food. And we ate the apples, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Before we move on from there, tell us about your father, what little money he had, he needed to hide that cash.

>> Susan Warsinger: I wasn't going to tell you that story. Forgive me, audience, for telling that story. But my father did have a little bit of money left over. And he couldn't keep it in the bank because he didn't know whether he was going to ever be able to get it back out. So he had hidden it maybe under the mattress in his bedroom. And so he

wanted it to be safe so he took the money out, and he asked me to put it in my underwear. And I was wearing it in my underwear.

>> Bill Benson: That was where he hid it.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, that's where he hid it. And I want to tell you something, we didn't have a bathroom up there. The money got very wet at that time.

>> Bill Benson: Of course the events of that night, Kristallnacht, that led your parents to make this profound decision to get out of Germany.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what happened from there, about the decision to leave Germany, find a sanctuary for you.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. Up until the Night of the Broken Glass, many Jews at that time felt they needed to get out of Germany. But there were a lot of Jews also felt many Naziism and Hitler is going to blow over and everything is going to be all right, and that's how it was in my family. My mother always wanted to come to the United States, which was the greatest country in the world. And my father was reticent about it because he said maybe it will blow over.

But after the Night of the Broken Glass, everybody wanted to leave. And of course there were lots of immigration laws here in the United States. And it wasn't easy to come to the United States. You had to have affidavits and papers, and you had to have somebody to sponsor you in the United States. And they said they would be responsible for you. So the paperwork was unimaginable. So what my father decided to do is he had heard of this lady who was taking children across the border to France. And she was doing it not out of the goodness of her heart but she was doing it for money. So all that money that had dried up, he gave to this lady, so she would take us, smuggle us, across the border into France. And she had two children of her own, and I think what she might have done is taken the kids' pictures off and put our pictures on. I'm not sure. I don't remember any details. I was a little kid.

>> Bill Benson: But you do remember going with her.

>> Susan Warsinger: Oh, yes, I do.

>> Bill Benson: Do you recall when your parents said we're going to send our little girl and our little boy, not the infant, but you and Joseph, we're going to send them away to another country. Do you remember what that felt like for you?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. It's a very sad question. When I think about it, I feel badly for my parents. Can you imagine having a mother and father having to take their children away and not knowing whether they are ever going to see them again? But I guess they had to make a choice, whether they wanted their kids to be safe and stay alive. But for me, it wasn't so terrible because I didn't know. I felt they would come to France in two weeks or something.

>> Bill Benson: So you expected to see them.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. But I was scared. I was scared. And how I felt, I have put it like in the back of my mind and don't think about it.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about -- there was one incident that you do remember on the train as you were making your way to Paris, where German soldiers boarded the train.

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, she had told us to pretend we were sleeping because of course my brother and I didn't know how to speak any French.

>> Bill Benson: She was a Frenchwoman, right?

>> Susan Warsinger: And she was a Frenchwoman. So when the French police or whatever, the people who were in charge of looking at passports, if they had talked to us, they would have known we were not French children. So we had to be very quiet. But evidently we did a good job pretending to be asleep. And we got safely across the border. And she took us to Paris.

>> Bill Benson: And what was waiting for you in Paris?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, my father had a third cousin. We called him uncle. Uncle Heimlich, we called him. He was a young man, maybe, like a young handsome man like you, maybe.

>> Bill Benson: No, he was a young man, I think. Unlike me.

>> Susan Warsinger: No. He took care of us in his hotel. He wasn't married, and he didn't have any children. And he took care of us in his hotel. And he told us to stay in the hotel. So he used to go to work and he used to say to us, stay in the hotel until I get back.

Of course my brother, the curious one, he was like 7 1/2. Maybe 7 3/4. And he used to sneak out of the hotel and go to the metro in Paris and sneak under the stairs and go all over Paris and come back before the uncle came back home from work. And I always stayed home because I always listened. I was always --

>> Bill Benson: You were a good girl, yes. So at some point, though, he was unable to take care of you.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: What did he do then?

>> Susan Warsinger: Well, he tried to get in touch with my parents, and he tried to get in touch with Jewish organizations. And one of the organizations that you already mentioned, HIAS, and there was always also another organization that looked out for children that were lost or didn't have any place to go. So in the environment there was this little village right around Paris, and there was a foster home. And we stayed there.

>> Bill Benson: Is that the place that you were really truly treated badly?

>> Susan Warsinger: Oh, yeah. We were treated badly. But we told the uncle that this lady was not good to the children, and he put us in a different one.

>> Bill Benson: Before you went to the different one, the better one, the place that you were -- if I remember right you were not allowed to be indoors except to sleep at night. You slept on the floor.

>> Susan Warsinger: Oh, you mean that was the first one, yes. Madame Zalinski was her name, but I don't talk about her anymore because I have forgotten about that lady. I remember the second foster home that we went to. There were two ladies, and they were very good to us. We went to the French school in the village, and we learned how to speak French. So we were really good at it. You know, kids learn how to -- if you don't know how to speak the language, you learn it in a big hurry.

>> Bill Benson: In a big hurry.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Do you know whether at that time your parents were able to keep track of you at that point? Do you know?

>> Susan Warsinger: No. The thing is we wrote to them all the time, but we didn't hear from them. So we didn't know what was happening to them.

>> Bill Benson: This was quite a long period of time. So in May of 1940, of course, Germany then -- they had attacked Poland in September 1939, starting World War II, but the following spring May of 1940 they attacked a number of countries, including France. And you were in Paris. What happened?

>> Susan Warsinger: I remember it very well. Why we were in the city I don't quite remember, but I was there when they knew -- when everybody knew that the German army was invading Paris. And the people in Paris were really very frightened. And not only Jewish people, but I mean, many, many people, and they wanted to run out of Paris.

>> Bill Benson: And there was a mass exodus out of Paris.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. And they either wanted to go to the unoccupied -- to Vichy or they wanted to go to Versailles, where there's a palace. And so I can remember the boots, the sounding of the boots, and the caravan of the German army coming into Paris. And I remember the sound of it. And so how we got to Versailles, which is like 40 minutes west of Paris, how we got there, I don't know. Some people walked. Some people took the train. Some people rode on bicycles. Some people went on cars. I think two nuns found us, and they just took us --

>> Bill Benson: Found you and your brother?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, and they took us to Versailles. So we got to Versailles.

>> Bill Benson: There you are in Versailles. And you've got to find a place to stay. So tell us what happened.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Well, you all know there's a big palace called Versailles. And of course all of the people wanted to go there because that was the biggest lodging they would be able to find. So the mayor of the town was really up -- he didn't know what he was going to do with all of these people. So he said, well, where am I going to house them? What am I going to do with them? Where are they going to sleep? So we all got a burlap sack, and then in Versailles, the palace, it has a beautiful garden. And at the end of the gardens there was a big pile of hay. And so they gave us the burlap sack and a little string, and we filled up the burlap sack with hay and then we tied it. And then we had a mattress. So then we went back to the palace, and the biggest room in the palace, of course, does anybody in the audience know what it is? Yeah, somebody said it.

>> Bill Benson: Somebody said it.

>> Susan Warsinger: The Hall of Mirrors. And in the Hall of Mirrors, it had chandeliers on both sides. And then we all laid our mattresses next to each other. And we slept there. I don't know what we did for food. But I remember sleeping, and I remember the hay sticking in my back.

>> Bill Benson: Through a burlap bag.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Of course it wasn't long before the Germans arrived.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. They didn't stay in Paris. They went all over France. And it was easy for them to get to Versailles. And then again I was this little girl, and I heard the sound, that same sound, of the marching of the caravan, of the German army coming into the town.

And so the first thing that they did, they went to the palace. And I saw from the window of the palace German officer. I don't know whether he was a general or whether he was

something else. He got out of the car. It was a Jeep. And he got out of the Jeep, and he said he wanted to speak to the mayor of the town. So the mayor of the town knew only how to speak French, and the German officer only knew how to speak German. And so they needed to talk to each other. And so somebody said, oh, there's a little girl in the palace. She knows how to speak German. And guess who it was? So it was me. So I came out and I was really frightened because I was frightened about Nazis and Germans.

>> Bill Benson: We can all just imagine, you're a little girl standing there, and there's a German officer --

>> Susan Warsinger: With the boots all the way up.

>> Bill Benson: Towering over you.

>> Susan Warsinger: Towering. That's exactly right. He was towering over me. And all I could see was his boots. How many of you have been to the permanent exhibit? How many are going? Oh, that's a lot. So you see the German officers, and they are wearing these high boots. And so they started talking to each other. And evidently I translated. OK. And then the conversation is over. And the Nazi bent over me and he said to me, hey, little girl, how come you know how to speak German so well? So I said to him, you know, the French schools are very good and I learned how to speak German there.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: That was incredibly quick thinking.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: So from there, you would eventually find your way to another place. I'm aren't going to say it right, but Chateau de Morelles.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us how you got there, if you know, and then what happened to you once you got there.

>> Susan Warsinger: OK. When the Germans took over France, they divided it. Pretend this is France. And all of this part right here down here was the unoccupied zone. They told the French people that they could live there, and they wouldn't have to be part of the Nazi government. So everybody wanted to go to that unoccupied zone. And so there was this Chateau de Morelles.

>> Bill Benson: I might just add for our audience that even though it was the unoccupied zone, the Vichy government was fully collaborative with the Nazis.

>> Susan Warsinger: That's right. So we went the unoccupied zone, and there was -- I was telling you before about this organization that had different homes for children all over France. And there was this one in the unoccupied zone in a little village called Brout-Vernet. And so we ended up in this little village, and there was a home for children, lost children, from all over. And we were safe there.

>> Bill Benson: What do you remember about being in that home?

>> Susan Warsinger: We went to school. But I remember the town had a public school. But they didn't want -- and these were all farmers. But they didn't want the Jewish children to rub elbows with their kids. And they said, well, we'll provide a teacher and a one-room schoolhouse for them, for the Jewish children. So I at that time -- well, maybe now -- I don't know if I realized it at the time -- but the farmers' children had so much to give to us, and we had so much to give to them because had been urban children and we had seen all kinds of things.

But it was so strange that those people were anti-Semitic too and they didn't want their kids to be anywhere near the Jewish children. But the teacher was wonderful. Later on in my adult life I found out that that teacher became the mayor of a town in France. But he was very good to us.

>> Bill Benson: He was good to you?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. And he taught us a lot of geography, the history of France. And he was good.

>> Bill Benson: One of the really I thought very, very poignant things you shared with me was, you know, you were refugee kids. You didn't have anything. But you celebrated -- you found a way to celebrate each others' birthdays.

>> Susan Warsinger: Oh, we haven't talked about that in a long time.

>> Bill Benson: Would you talk about that?

>> Susan Warsinger: You know, we didn't have so much wonderful food. But we did every once in a while. Once a week or maybe twice a week we got dessert. And it was a little piece like this, maybe a piece of candy or chocolate cake or something like that. And so before it was somebody's birthday, the friends of the birthday child used to save their dessert, and then in the kitchen they had like trays. Like they have in the cafeteria where kids go to school in the cafeteria. And they got a tray from the cafeteria, and they hid all of their -- they had saved it for a few weeks. And then they found some kind of a -- made doilies out of paper, and they covered it up with a -- the tray with doilies. And everybody put all of their --

>> Bill Benson: The saved-up little desserts, yeah.

>> Susan Warsinger: And on the morning when it was the person's birthday, they carried the tray to the bed and woke the person up. Happy birthday. And then we gave them the tray.

>> Bill Benson: Thanks for telling that again.

So there you are in this children's home in southern France, not knowing anything about the fate of the rest of your family. And then one day you do learn that your parents are trying to get you out and to them. Tell us what happened to you from there. Your parents know where you are now. They want to get you out of there.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. I was doing my homework or something, and the director was a lady. She was the director of this children's home. She called me to her office. And I was really very frightened because you only went there when we were bad. And I said maybe they made a mistake. It was my brother they should have called him.

[Laughter]

>> Susan Warsinger: So I went up there, and I remember there was a staircase and it was a marble staircase. And I went up there, and the office was wood all around. I was scared. And she said to me, Susie, you're going to go to the United States. And I was really very surprised. And what I found out later was that my parents had gotten to the United States. It was a very complicated story. Can I just tell the audience something?

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely. Whatever you want to tell them.

>> Susan Warsinger: I just want to give you -- I know I'm going to tell you a little bit later what to look for in the permanent exhibit. But if you get a chance to look at our special exhibit that we have here, which is called Americans and the Holocaust, there in that particular exhibit, it shows you the problems that the people had to come to the United States. And you had to have affidavits. You had to have written permission from the

United States government, and you had to have a sponsor here in the United States to say that they would provide for you so that you would not be an economic burden. So what had happened -- this is all in that particular exhibit. If you have time to go see it, or if you don't have a ticket to go to the P.E. you might want to go there.

Anyway, what happened is that my father had a cousin who had a pickle factory in Brooklyn. And they wanted to send the affidavits to our whole family, but it wasn't enough. They weren't rich enough to cover all of the expenses. So the United States government said you can have one affidavit. You can have one visa. So what happened is they decided that my father should come here, and then work, and then get my mother and the baby brother that you saw in that picture. And then after they got here, they went to the HIAS and those two organizations found us in the Chateau de Morelles. And they helped write to the state department and write to all of these different people. And finally they were able to get us the visas, for my brother and me to get over here.

>> Bill Benson: If I remember right, your father when he came, then he went to work and found a job. Then he was able to generate enough money to bring your mother over and your baby brother. I might just mention to the audience before we talk about you coming to the United States that the allies landed in north Africa in 1942. And when that happened, the Germans then occupied all of France. And so your ability to get out wouldn't have been possible the next year. So you were able to get out. Tell us about coming to the United States. There you are. You've got to get from France to the U.S.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. So Eleanor Roosevelt -- and you'll see that in that Americans in the Holocaust also. Eleanor Roosevelt, she was pushing her husband to see if they couldn't bring 10,000 children to the United States without all of that visa business and everything. She encouraged him to sign a bill that was -- I'm just telling you this little bit of history so you can understand, to sign this bill. Am I taking too much time?

>> Bill Benson: No. You're good. I'm just keeping an eye on it.

>> Susan Warsinger: OK. To sign this bill. And she said sign this bill, and he said he couldn't do it because we have to take care of the children here in the United States. So later on, she became -- she worked very hard to get children over here. She was in charge of a committee. 10,000 children never happened, the bill didn't get signed. And you would see that in that exhibit.

Anyway, so later on, she was in charge of this committee of bringing some children. And this was in 1941. And they were still giving out visas in 1941, the United States government. And this is like in September of 1941. Ask me the question again.

>> Bill Benson: You had to get to Portugal first. Once you had all of the paperwork you needed, and your parents had sent the tickets -- I think they sent tickets that never made it and they had to resend them.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: But you got to Portugal.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. We went to Marseille, which is like south, and then we went on the train through the Pyrenees. And a lot of Jews later on, you know, got saved because they went through the Pyrenees. And ended up in Portugal. And there was a ship called the "Serpa Pinto." And there was the ship. And in the hull of that ship, 50

children that Eleanor Roosevelt worked very hard with her committee were in that one area of the ship.

>> Bill Benson: 50 children.

>> Susan Warsinger: 50 children.

>> Bill Benson: And as I recall, you were not allowed -- because there was also tourists on that boat.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Because Portugal was a neutral country, so shipping was able to go out of Portugal. You weren't allowed to mingle with them.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. We weren't allowed. It was a cruise ship. It wasn't anything like the cruise ships that we have today. It was much smaller. But my brother did anyway. You know, he mingled. He -- I stayed with the 50 kids and stayed in the hull. But he discovered a closet or some kind of place where they had stored pineapple. And we had never eaten any pineapple in our life, and he had never eaten anything so good in his life. And so he ate and ate the pineapple.

And many times -- and the ship took 14 days to get to the United States. And the Atlantic Ocean was going like this. So my brother had to spend a lot of time over the railing. And some of the insides of his body came into the Atlantic ocean.

So he was all -- was very nervous about coming. He was excited about coming. And can I tell you this part? It's embarrassing to tell the audience. But you have to promise not to tell my brother ever.

[Laughter]

>> Susan Warsinger: Because he sees it differently than I do. He used to wet his bed at night. And he got this terrible rash on his body because the acid from the pineapple made him really rashed. Very serious rash. So when we got close to the United States, they told us that at 6:00 the next morning we would be passing the Statue of Liberty. So all the kids of course were excited because it meant democracy. It meant that we were going to -- my brother and I were going to see our parents.

So we got up really early. And when we got up to the deck, there was a big fog. And you couldn't see. And so we were really upset. But it was a little bit earlier than 6:00. But I'm telling you, at exactly 6:00, that fog lifted like this, like a curtain in the theater. It lifted up like this. And we could slowly see the Statue of Liberty just appear right in front of us.

>> Bill Benson: That gives you goose bumps.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. It gives me goose bumps every time I talk about it.

>> Bill Benson: Wow.

>> Susan Warsinger: And so we saw it. And all of the children were very happy. And so then when we got to New York, and that picture you saw --

>> Bill Benson: Of the ship.

>> Susan Warsinger: And all of the passengers went off, but the 50 kids had to get inspected by some doctors to figure out if we had some kind of infectious disease. And all of the kids passed. But when they got to my brother, he had this rash. And so I told them what the rash was all about, but they wouldn't listen to this little girl. So they said he can't come to the United States.

>> Bill Benson: Keep going.

>> Susan Warsinger: I'm sure the audience already knows what happened. Usually when I talk to high school kids they guess, oh, they made you go back to Germany. Of

course that's not correct. There is a place right next to the Statue of Liberty called Ellis Island, and that's where they take people to quarantine them in those days. Now it's a museum, of course.

>> Bill Benson: And your parents are on the shore waiting for you.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. And so we went to Ellis Island. And there my brother got better. They put cream on him. But we learned everything about the United States in that place. They had these big tables. And on the tables were these slices of white bread. And we took them and we took it in our hand, and it was white. We'd never seen white bread before. And it was white, and we could crush it into our hands and make little balls out of it. And then we would eat it. And they told us it was called Wonder Bread. [Laughter]

>> Susan Warsinger: And then the other thing I learned is there was a sailor sitting next to my brother when we were eating. And he was drinking this bubbly drink. And it was brown, and it had bubbles in it. And so I told my brother, take a taste. So my brother looked at me and said, should I drink it? And I said, well, try it. And he said, oh, it's very good. And then the sailor told him that it was Coca-Cola.

And then one more thing we found out that children in the United States could have candy that would keep -- you could keep in your mouth for a whole day and it wouldn't melt. And of course we learned that it was chewing gum. So we were ready.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: But even -- despite knowing all of that about the United States, you had to go to be Americanized. So you had to go to school. So tell us what that was like for you, before we break and turn to our audience for a couple of questions. So you had to go to an American school.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. We went to an Americanization school for a few weeks to learn how to speak English. And then we went to the public school. Do you want me to talk about that?

>> Bill Benson: If you would like.

>> Susan Warsinger: OK. I don't know. I can't see how many kids are here. But schools were different in those days. The teachers didn't understand anything about immigrant children. And they -- what they had done is they had divided, you know, like not -- they had not had grouping where everybody is in the same room. But in those days they put me in the junior high school, which is now middle school, in seventh grade. And they had 7b1, and so on, 7b6, and 7b1 where all of the kids that were dumb, that had learning problems, and all the kids in 7b5 were all the smart ones. So guess where they put me? Yes. 7b1.

And there they had all of the problem kids. And some of the kids didn't do their homework. And some of the kids chewed gum. And that was not allowed. I couldn't believe it. And a couple of the kids fell asleep in the classroom. And I couldn't believe it. But those were all the problem kids. And that's where they put me because I didn't know how to speak any English. But when I learned how to speak English, in a little bit I got to 7b2, 3, and 4. But I never got over --

>> Bill Benson: You never got to 5.

>> Susan Warsinger: No, no.

>> Bill Benson: Two more questions for you, Susan. One, do you recall what it was like for you to be reunited with your mom and dad, what that was like having been away

from them for so long when you got here? Is it something you recall as profound? Or just you had to move on with life?

We'll move on from there. OK. We'll move on from there. Of your extended family, did others survive?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. My father was Polish. And so all of his relatives were still in Poland. And I guess if you learned in history of the Holocaust then maybe you learned that when you go to the P.E. all of the Polish people, they didn't go to concentration camps. When the Germans went into Poland, they took the people out of the villages and marched them into the woods and made them dig their own graves and then they shot them and killed them all. So my father was from a little village, and we never found anybody. And so the Germans didn't keep records of what happened to all of the Jews in Poland. So I don't know what happened to them. But evidently that's what -- they were killed and in the grave.

>> Bill Benson: To your knowledge none of them survived?

>> Susan Warsinger: None survived. But my mother -- my mother had relatives in Germany, and they kept very good records. And they put them in concentration camps. And all of those records are there as to what happened. And so my -- the relatives from my mother were killed. All of my relatives that were living in Germany during the Holocaust were all killed.

>> Bill Benson: Susan, I think we have time maybe -- I think we actually don't have time for questions unfortunately.

>> Susan Warsinger: Oh, I'm sorry.

>> Bill Benson: I'm sorry about that. But we're going to hear from Susan again in just a moment to wrap up our program. When Susan is finished, she's going to go upstairs, and she'll sign copies of "Echoes of Memory". There may be a chance for people to ask you a couple of questions at that particular time. I want to thank all of you for being with us today. Remind you that we will have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until the 8th of August. So you can come back to another program. All of our programs will be live streamed between now and the end of May. And then the rest of the programs are available on the museum's YouTube channel. It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person gets the last word. And so with that, I'd like to turn to Susan to close our program today.

>> Susan Warsinger: I'm going to read it to you, if that's okay. It's not so very long. I want my children, my grandchildren, my brothers and their families, my friends, and the visitors here in the audience to rejoice in the fact that we are living in a Democratic society and that all of us should make sure that no dictatorship would ever usurp our liberties. We need to remember the atrocities that happened to families during the Holocaust and pass this information on to our children. We need to learn from this horror in our history. We cannot undo the atrocities of the past. Besides remembering, we have to take action to confront hate. When we see injustice taking place, we have to do something about it. We cannot be onlookers. We have to be sensitive to each other, and we have to take care of each other. Let us celebrate what we have in common.

People ask me why I volunteer in this museum. How can you do this over and over? How can I not? Giving tours to our visitors through our permanent exhibit hopefully teaches them what hatred and prejudice can do. When touring police officers I hope

they can understand their role when encountering atrocities. We cannot be bystanders and definitely not be collaborators.

There are threats of genocide in many parts of the world at the present time. We cannot be indifferent to emerging threats of genocide and mass atrocities. All of us need to be aware of what is happening and we need to work together and take the necessary action to prevent people from being murdered for the simple reason they are different. Never again do we want to stand by and do nothing.

We here at the Museum want to inspire citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity. I want to thank you, Bill Benson, for helping me tell my story, and I want to thank you, the audience, for coming to our museum and being witnesses to this story of the Holocaust. And for listening to my story.

As so many of you are raising your hand that you're going to go to the permanent exhibit, I want to just tell you most of my story is up on the fourth floor. And when you get up there as soon as you turn the corner, you're going to see two S.S. men standing in front of a store. And they are boycotting the store. Just remember my father's story there. I want you to look for that.

And then also you're going to see a picture of two policemen walking a dog. One of them is an S.S. man, and he was wearing like a brown suit with the boots, and the other one is a civil policeman wearing a black hat. And he is wearing a blue uniform. And that was the kind of policemen, the civil policemen, that was standing at the edge of the crowd.

And then when you get to Kristallnacht, there's like Torahs that are strewn on the ground, and the monitors are talking about the story of Kristallnacht. Look at that. And then when you're stepping around the corner you're going to be seeing a ship called the "St. Louis" and it looks exactly like the "Serpa Pinto."

Let's see what else. I want you to have a wonderful learning experience. Thank you again for coming and listening to my story.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Susan.