Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Dr. Steven Fenves
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Warren Marcus: Good morning. Welcome to U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Warren Marcus. I will be the host today of museum's public program, First Person. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 20th year of First Person. Our First Person today is Dr. Steven Fenves, 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. I will also tell you the first year this was funded in my father's honor when he passed away, so doubly honored to be here with you and with Steven.
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.
Steven will share with us his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 Minutes. I'm going to be the evil timekeeper, so sometimes I'll have to go get the story moving because he has so much to share. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Steven 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. If you have no idea what I just said, ask a young person near you.
[Laughter]
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 June 6th. 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 Steven is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. We begin with this portrait taken in 1940 or 1941 of Steven Fenves and his sister, Estera. Steven was born on June 6, 1931 in Subotica, Yugoslavia. The arrow on this map of Yugoslavia in 1933 points to his hometown.
In this photo we see Steven's parents Lajos and Klare, at a racetrack in Subotica in the 1920's. They are circled. And Steven tells me the woman to the right is an aunt of his. In this photo we see Steven and his family on an outing to their vineyard in the summer of 1940.
In 1941 Germany attacked Yugoslavia and Germany's ally, Hungary, occupied Steven's town. Life changed immediately for Steven and his family. As we'll hear. At the end of June 1944 Steven and some of his family members were sent to another ghetto and then to Auschwitz. Here we see an aerial reconnaissance photo of Auschwitz-Birkenau taken in September 1944 by the U.S. Army Air Corps. The arrow points to the barrack that Steven was in from June to October 1944.After his liberation, Steven was placed in a U.S. Field Hospital established at Buchenwald, which as you probably know was a concentration camp previously. The arrow on this map points to where the field hospital was set up in the old S.S. quarters.
Now a little background about Steven and his life since the war. After arriving in the U.S. in 1950, Steven was drafted into the United States Army in 1952. After his discharge he enrolled at the University of Illinois where he would eventually earn his Ph.D. in civil engineering and begin a 42-year academic career in the civil engineering field at the University of Illinois and later at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. After he retired from Carnegie Mellon in 1999, Steven moved to the Washington, D.C., area where he worked for 10 years at the National Institute of Standards and Technology. Steven and Norma, who is here today, met in Chicago and were married in 1955.
Now listen to this. Listen to what their kids do. Gregory is President of the University of Texas at Austin. Carol is celebrating her 36th year of service in various positions in the New York City Administration. Peter is a professor of German, Jewish Studies, and Comparative Literary Studies at Northwestern University. Their youngest, Laura, is an administrator at a local senior social services Program. Steven and Norma have seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.
Steven first began speaking about his Holocaust experience in the 1970's when he served as the founding president of the Holocaust Survivors' Organization of Pittsburgh. Upon his second retirement in 2009, Steven became active with this Museum. In addition to participating in the First Person program, he volunteers with the Museum's Visitor Services. In 2014 Steven published "The Life and Art of Klara Gereb:1897-1944," a book about his mother, a graphic artist who was killed in Auschwitz, and her work that was rescued by her former cook during the deportations. Steven's granddaughter, Hannah, a graphic artist herself, was the designer of the book.
With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Steven Fenves. Ready, boss? Steven reminded me to bring my glasses. Well, I'm completely intimidated by experiences and your family's track record, Steven. And it's always a pleasure to see you and share your memories with the public.

So you were 10 years old when the part of Yugoslavia you lived in was occupied by Hungary and your family's life was forever changed. Before we get to that, can you give us some background about what your life was like up to 10 years? Tell us about your family, relations with Jews and non-Jews in your community, anything you'd like to share.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: OK. I was raised in an upper middle class family. My mother was a graphic artist. She didn't do much artwork after my sister and I. Displaced her from her studio that became our playroom. My father was at that time a manager of a publishing house. Later on he became editor-in-chief of the newspaper that was published. We were not observant. At home we did not keep kosher. About the only Jewish traditions maintained at the home was first of all a Saturday main meal was a bean dish that could be prepared the night before so that they didn't do any work. And the annual cleaning out of the cupboards of every crumb of leavened bread and burning that, even though the family continued to eat leavened bread for Passover. That was a custom we participated in.
At home we spoke Hungarian. The school when I started first grade was in Serbian. It was called a Jewish school, but it was actually a public school. Yugoslavia was so dirt poor at that -- to show you how dirt poor Yugoslavia was, when King Peter rode into Belgrade in 1918 at the liberation of Belgrade, he had no boots. He rode his horse barefooted. The king. His son before he was assassinated sort of made up for that. But anyway, in Yugoslavia, public education -- four-year public education was mandatory, except the state could not afford it. So any organization, religious or otherwise, that provided a building and three teachers, the government provided a fourth teacher. And that became the principal. And that was the government school. So the school I went to was called the Jewish School, even though it was named after the queen. Because the Jewish people supported it.
>> Warren Marcus: Did you go to Hebrew school?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: We went to school 5 1/2 days a week, including Saturday mornings. And three days a week in the afternoon we went to religious school. In addition, since Saturday morning was taken up, Saturday afternoon there was a youth service conducted entirely by the students, which had to end very promptly at 2:00 for the same reason that the two theaters in the city started their matinees at 2:00. And it was important to clear out the sanctuary to get to our seats in time. But very carefree, very enjoyable childhood.
>> Warren Marcus: Can you tell us about the makeup of the town? The percentage of Jews.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Remember the map that was shown? That was part of Hungary until World War I. At that time the majority were Hungarians, but there was also a large Serbian contingent. There was a large Croatian contingent. At one point I said all two meters tall. Somebody challenged me on that. But I said, well, to a 10-year-old they all looked that tall. These mountaineers that all became very successful farmers. There was a Jewish population of about 6,000. But probably the same number of Germans brought in by the Austrians. And probably a similar number of Roma, gypsies, who did all of the worst menial tasks.
>> Warren Marcus: So pretty diverse community. Most people got along fairly well.

>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Well, off and on. There were three soccer teams in town. Serbian, Croatian, Hungarian. They played a round robin. We went to watch it. Not so much to see the game but to watch the police getting on the field to break up the crowds.
>> Warren Marcus: So I'll take back the aura of good feeling. So in 1941 as I mentioned with the maps, Germany invades Yugoslavia and its ally Hungary. And Hungary occupies the part of Yugoslavia where you were. And right away things really changed. Tell us about how life changed. From the first.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: On the day of the occupation, the Hungarian officer with a drawn handgun expelled my father from his office. And my aunt who was by then the manager from her office. And all of the Jewish establishments, Aryan administrators were placed. This administrator vowed to authorize the family, which he did very simply. He closed access to the family's personal bank accounts for my father and uncle. And turned around and charged a 100-person payroll to that personal account. Which sort of wiped us out on day one.
All kinds of restrictive events happened through the years. More and more repression. More and stringent regulations. Half of the apartment was given up to housing military. We lived off the property that we could sell and from my mother's handiwork. For us kids the biggest constraints were number one Jews were restricted to 6% of the students in academic high schools, which started fifth grade in Europe. So I had to study very hard to be one of the nine kids to be in there. Second access to the beach was closed up. And third access to the movies was closed off. And at that age --
>> Warren Marcus: That's a big deal when you're 11 and 12.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Very serious deal. So it was a very hard, harsh occupation.
>> Warren Marcus: So you went from upper middle class to very lower class and really scrambling for any kind of quality of life very quickly.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes.
>> Warren Marcus: So this happened to all of the Jews in the town. Did you -- did the Jews work together? Did they have -- did any non-Jews help you out along the way? Or was it just too risky?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: There was help. Obviously the first of the regulations was that Jews could not employ Christians. We had to let our cook go. But she came back to help as often as she could. There was a lot of collaboration. The former accountant of the printing plant became the real doer in liquidating property.
>> Warren Marcus: So the head accountant who had worked for your dad for a while, early on, he turns and --
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: He was handling essentially all of the transactions for a large number of Jewish families. And because of his regard for my father, he didn't charge us a fee for his services.
>> Warren Marcus: Isn't that nice. OK. So you did have some help, but most of -- now the Germans aren't there. None of this is being done by the Germans.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yeah.
>> Warren Marcus: Besides the townspeople, who else are enforcing these drastic changes for the Jews?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: All of the -- first of all, the occupation was by the Hungarian army. But the Hungarian state police was a fantastic entity. I don't know how many

thousand strong. Very intimidating people walking around with these black bowler hats and the huge black feather in their hats. They prepared for the deportation in 1942. They staged a trial effort a little bit south from where we were and killed a couple thousand people. Jews and Serbs. So police presence was very strong.
>> Warren Marcus: Was that at Iasi?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: No. That's in Romania. No, this was in Yugoslavia.
>> Warren Marcus: OK. So you got to -- you stayed in school. Did your sister stay in school?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: My sister did not make it, the test. She went to a parochial school.
>> Warren Marcus: So education continues.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Many of the Catholic orders were very decent and did not obey the state law. And accepted Jewish students. Both parochial schools run by nuns and academic high schools operated by a branch of the Jesuits.
>> Warren Marcus: So life continues academically, if you will.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: The Jewish community provided equivalent schooling for everybody else. There were enough Jewish teachers that were let go to staff the Jewish school.
>> Warren Marcus: OK. All right. So this is sort of what life was like for a few years. And in the spring of '44, Hungary is about to surrender to the Allies, and Germany moves quickly to occupy Hungary and the areas that are occupied included your town. Conditions get much worse very quickly under the Hungarians. Your father is taken away. Your mother, your sister, and you were forced into a ghetto. Tell us about that transition and then what the ghetto was like for all of you.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Altogether, there were about 600 German soldiers in the entire country.
>> Warren Marcus: German soldiers?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: German soldiers in occupying Hungary. And those who have any interest in the military do a fast calculation. 600 German soldiers in a manner of three weeks deported 500,000 Jews to Auschwitz. Divide 500,000 by 600, and you think these German soldiers must have worked very hard. There were no Germans who --
>> Warren Marcus: It was mostly Hungarians.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: The entire deportation was done by the Hungarian state police according to plans that they had worked out. All it took was for the chief officer to authorize the Hungarian police to do this. My father was taken away by Hungarian plain clothed men. We were directed into a ghetto strung along the railroad siding. Miserable conditions. All done by the Hungarians. But they --
>> Warren Marcus: I'm sorry. Did you know what happened to your dad? Did you have any idea?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: We knew that he was at first in a camp actually in the bottom of a brick factory nearby. And then he disappeared. He had been quite ill. We never expected him to be able to survive. The night of the deportation was one of the bitterest -- the day of the deportation was one -- is one of my bitterest memories. I have no idea how the information was broadcast that 6,000 Jews were going to be deported, moved into the ghetto that day. But we lived on the second floor. By the time we were told to get started, two floors -- two levels of stairways were occupied with people lined

up ready to vandalize and ransack the apartment, yelling at us, grabbing us, spitting at us, as we took the few things that we were allowed to take down the stairs. It's in my memory. It never will leave my memory.
>> Warren Marcus: Did you know -- were these people who knew your family? Or who knows, it was so hectic you wouldn't know? But they were townspeople.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: They were townspeople, yeah.
>> Warren Marcus: And tell us about your cook and what happened there.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Among those people was our former cook, who had worked for us for three years. She went through the kitchen, picked up my mother's cookbook, went to the bedroom, picked up my mother's diary. Went to the former studio, which was the playroom, and took out a big folder and shoved in it a couple hundred lithographs, etchings, drawings, and took it with her. We didn't know that at that time. Later on when we came back from the concentration camp, she gave it back to us.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: And we actually have the cookbook on display at the previous exhibit. There's a lot more about this particular story in the online exhibit, called Some Were Neighbors. Steven tells that story and there's more information about the cookbook.
So on short notice you're kicked out of your apartment, which half is already given to some other people. And you're sent to the ghetto. Tell us where you were -- what the new conditions were like and what life was like there.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: The ghetto was a bunch of derelict houses along the -- facing the graveyards. Very little sanitation. Very poor food service. Everybody cramped. Two families per room. Essentially no sanitary facilities. For something like less than a week. And then one day we were lined up, railroad cars were there. Again, Hungarian gendarmes packed us into trains, into freight cars, standing room only, and we were transported to a nearby village that had been emptied and made available for collecting the people.
>> Warren Marcus: Like a transit camp.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes. And we were assigned a chicken coop, the entire family. Three or four days there. Terrible conditions. Sanitary, food, nothing was available. All kinds of rumors flying around we are going to be returned home. We are going to get trains to Switzerland.
>> Warren Marcus: And the Hungarians hadn't told you anything. You just had to do what they told you.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes. So it was very, very stressful. Until again we were called out. We were lined up. The railroad cars were there again. And we were packed in 60 to 80 people to a car. But not the American freight cars that you are accustomed to seeing. These short European cars, one of which is in the Museum. One bucket for sanitary purposes. The door slams shut, and we were off. Five days, six days. I don't know. But eventually we --
>> Warren Marcus: And no food or water.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: No food or water.
>> Warren Marcus: So there are about 6,000 Jews in your town. They are all put in this horrible ghetto for a few days. Then moved to this other holding place, which --
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Which probably doubled the number of people from surrounding areas, villages, small towns. And then to Auschwitz.

>> Warren Marcus: Can you tell us a little bit about what it was like inside that car?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Well, the first time you wet your pants at age 13, you go crying to your mother. Second time around, it just doesn't matter anymore. People going -- people dying in the car. People going mad. People dying was a plus because the bodies could be stacked, and that gave a little bit more space to crunch down. But not very far from the bucket because the stuff from the bucket was slushing out all over onto the people. And you spent days and nights like that.
>> Warren Marcus: And you were 13 years old.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes.
>> Warren Marcus: Is there any air? Was there a little window? Or was it just stifling?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: There was one little window covered with barbed wire.
>> Warren Marcus: And no clue about your destination?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: No. And no standing or moving.
>> Warren Marcus: Five or six days. And you get to Auschwitz and the doors open. Tell us about that.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: The stench and the noise hits you at the same time. This incredible stench that still -- every survivor's nostrils still remembers. Yelling. Prisoners coming to empty the train. S.S. For the first time we saw S.S. A truncheon in one hand. Yelling at people to move. The inmates yelling at you, why did you come? We sent people to tell everybody what's happening here. Why didn't you listen to them? Why did you come?
Eventually men and women being separated. My mother and sister went in one line. I went in the other line. Then suddenly we were facing this German officer. 2/3 of the survivors that you have interviewed and others will tell you that was Dr. Mengele who -- and I happened not to have been introduced to the gentleman, so I don't know his name. All I know is that he had white gloves on, and he sent me that way. And I found out the next day that that way was the gas chamber and the crematorium.
>> Warren Marcus: And you told me something that I share on other programs. That the first time you saw a German in this history was when?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: That time in Auschwitz.
>> Warren Marcus: That's the first time you encountered the Germans and the S.S. with officers and the subordinates and the prisoners telling you what to do.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes.
>> Warren Marcus: So what happened to your family?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Well, it turns out that my mother and sister were separated somewhere down the line. They were in different places. My mother perished sometime in the first couple of weeks. My sister and I -- I met my sister twice in Auschwitz, which didn't happen to many people. She was shipped to Bergen Belsen. And we were reunited.
But I was in a group of kids, 13 to 15-year-olds, and we were put into this huge building. Stripped naked, shorn of every hair on the body. Disinfected with something terribly stringent. Given a cold shower. Tossed some inmate clothing. Unmatched shoes. Still no food. Still no -- nothing to drink.
>> Warren Marcus: So you probably haven't eaten or had anything to drink in a week.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Something like that, yes.

>> Warren Marcus: And facing all that's in the car. Then you're here. Did you get a tattoo, Steve?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: At that time in Auschwitz, incoming inmates were no longer tattooed. Only people going out. I was tattooed on my way out.
>> Warren Marcus: Oh, OK. Just for your information, Auschwitz is the only place where people were tattooed. You got a number everywhere else. That's a common misunderstanding. In Auschwitz you might get a tattoo.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: But the number is tattooed on your arm and that's your number.
>> Warren Marcus: You were in Auschwitz for a few months. Tell us what life was like, what was your work, what were the sleeping conditions. Share with us what you can.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: The first three weeks, four weeks, I was in what was referred to as the youth barrack. Kids my age, about my age. Awakened at 6:00 a.m. Line up for food. Before you could organize somehow a cup, the soup was ladled out into your hands. Standing around, sitting around all day long, locked in the barrack at night. Six to a bunk. Three-level bunks. I was with a group of friends, classmates, and one by one they died off.
>> Warren Marcus: From disease or --
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Just starvation and --
>> Warren Marcus: Deprivation.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: The big thing you learned -- well, there are lots of little things to learn. Like for example, once a day there say run to the latrine. Make sure as you run to pick up a round, smooth pebble so that you have something to wipe yourself with.
>> Warren Marcus: A pebble.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: They did not happen to supply toilet paper.
>> Warren Marcus: Right.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: The big things that you learn is that first of all, Auschwitz was a -- Auschwitz was a killing camp. 1.5 million dead. But Auschwitz was also a huge stockyard stocking potential slave labor. And officials, military and civilian, from German factories, quarries, railroads, et cetera, came to shop for slaves. You have seen pictures of antebellum slave traders in Alexandria. Imagine doing that to thousands of people at a time.
>> Warren Marcus: So wealthy industrialists would come in, not just Oscar Schindler, but others would come in and claim they needed x number of workers for their factories. So all around Auschwitz and others factories spring up so they get free labor.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: The factories were everywhere from Paris west. And the thing you realized after a few days is that these people -- these people shopping for slave labor did not stop at the youth barracks. If you wanted to buy laborers, you needed them for heavy physical labor, because that was the arrangement. The S.S. referred to them politely as a slight deviation on their final plan. That was the understanding. That you worked to death. Then they can kill you.
So they never chose kids from our group. And people -- kids and others in Auschwitz, what you learn is that people emotionally and mentally die before they die physically. All over Auschwitz, all day long, you saw these walking corpses. Eyes that don't no longer see. Food that can be taken away from them because they can't -- they no longer recognize what it is. Shuffling around.
>> Warren Marcus: Completely dehumanized.

>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Dehumanized until some night or some morning they are carted away with the night's corpses directly to the crematorium. No point in sending them to the gas chamber. They were already dead. My understanding is that my mother was among those.
So life looked pretty bleak. Another thing about Auschwitz is if you have ever seen an Alcatraz movie, you know that the prisoners are afraid of two groups of people. The guards and the leaders.
>> Warren Marcus: Right.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: And you're afraid of the leaders more because at night they are locked in with you. The guards are locked out. The S.S. camps were ran on that principle. Common criminals --
>> Warren Marcus: These are the Kapos.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes. Common criminals were brought in as the Kapos, overseers, and they ruled two per barrack. Crueler than any of the S.S. enlisted men. And free to do what they want. The two Kapos in our compound finally must have realized that shoving and yelling and beating is not enough of a communication medium. They occasionally needed some verbal interaction, and they needed an interpreter.
One thing I forgot to say about my childhood is that my sister and I were under the control of an absolutely miserable governess whom we hated as much as we could.
>> Warren Marcus: How do you feel about that, Steven? What did you really think of her?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: I mean, we made up every prank, everything we could to get this woman off our back.
>> Warren Marcus: However --
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: However, she taught me German. And I volunteered to be an interpreter, and I became an interpreter in Auschwitz. After the inmates were fed from the barrels, the interpreters could spoon out what was left in the bottom of the barrels.
>> Warren Marcus: And that's a big deal.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: That was a big deal. So I --
>> Warren Marcus: I'm sorry. You're still in the youth barracks.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Still in the youth barracks. Still am convinced that's where I'm going to die. Until in August something, it's reported everywhere, about 3,000 gypsies in the same compound were exterminated in one night.
>> Warren Marcus: In one night, right.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: And the following day, the group of new Kapos showed up. Instead of the green triangle of the criminals, they wore red triangles of political prisoners. And one of them came over to our barrack looking for a Hungarian, Polish, German interpreter. Well, I had never heard Polish spoken. I never read Polish. But I knew that it was a Slavic language like Serbian, and that it couldn't be much different from Serbian. So I volunteered. And I guess I didn't have much competition, because I was the last one left living from our group coming from Hungarian occupied Yugoslavia.
>> Warren Marcus: Just to remind our audience, how old are you at this time?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: 13.
>> Warren Marcus: 13. OK.

>> Dr. Steven Fenves: So this Polish Kapo picked me up as his interpreter. And that was the most significant single change in my life. Marrying Norma was the second, but that came much later. They made it clear that we are all to get -- that many of them were anti-Semetic, but that didn't count because right now we have other things to worry about, and that we all have to resist the Germans and everything we could and work together.
>> Warren Marcus: So not only did they bring you in as an interpreter, but you're now in a group to do what you could to survive and fight back.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Did everything but beating me to get this through my head. So I became an interpreter. Meeting the German shoppers at the compound headquarters, escorting them, translating for them as they interviewed inmates. And then escorting them out. Of course, you quickly learn that you don't have to interpret verbatim. If they were looking for wood workers, then any answers -- that anybody who had callouses on their hands could be introduced as a wood worker, et cetera. But you have to be careful not to speak too long because the Germans knew that some of the interpreters were padding their responses.
>> Warren Marcus: Got it.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: So that was the official work. The unofficial work was many other things. The Resistance was exercised as much as we could, going from compound to compound, pretending to be repairing roofs and passing intelligence and passing black market goods was a big time. And that's how I met my sister in one of the women's camps. Women's compounds. So that went on for quite a while. Things were becoming worse and worse. It was known that the Russians were advancing.
And the Kapos, the Polish Kapos, decided to smuggle me out of Auschwitz. They dressed me in an outgoing transport to get out of there. And coaching me very carefully as presidential candidates are coached before debates on -- on thinking of every possibility that may occur. So that's how I got out of Auschwitz. I got tattooed. Put on a train. Put on -- well, before putting on the train, the Kapos handed me some decent -- reasonably decent clothes, et cetera, and we were off.
>> Warren Marcus: Just to underline an important point, particularly for students, the Resistance comes in many forms. You just heard some real examples of it. Not just armed violence and armed resistance. There were many examples of that, surprisingly enough. There are all kinds of other ways, even within an unbelievable place like Auschwitz where people were trying their best not only to keep going but make things difficult. So you got on this train. What's next?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: And the train three days later arrived in a village called Neiderorschel. We were let out. The S.S. commanders gave a speech. The foreman gave a speech. The Hungarian translator translated it. And then the foreman came up, this long line of 330 people, came up to me and said, what are you doing here? I didn't select you. I was his interpreter in Auschwitz. And he recognized me.
>> Warren Marcus: So he figured out the game.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Well, that was not one of the coaching things I --
>> Warren Marcus: That was not one of the things you prepared for. What happened?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: So I took a long breath, and I said, well, sir, with this many new inmates, they thought you would need another interpreter. He said, oh, yeah. That's a good idea, and walked away.

>> Warren Marcus: At the age of 13, just let's make sure we're clear on this, OK?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: But that was not it. Because as soon as we were let in and no great surprise were seated at benches at a table and getting some warm hot soup, the interpreter and other inmate sat right next to me and started asking questions. Where did you come from? How come the foreman knows you? Et cetera, et cetera. I was eventually -- the first night, I never slept because I was interrogated by the camp resistance organization.
>> Warren Marcus: They thought you were a plant or a spy.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes. But eventually I convinced them, particularly when talking to a gypsy orderly and telling him what happened to his family. Slowly they accepted me.
>> Warren Marcus: You were a very persuasive 13-year-old.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Well, yes. I had to be. So this was a factory for using wings for airplanes. Sabotage in the classical order, classical definition, was done as much as we could. Even though supervision was very strict. We worked 14-hour days. 6 1/2 days a week. But conditions were a lot better than Auschwitz. We had some food. I'm told that rations were calculated at 1200 calories a day for that kind of work.
One advantage was that the camp cook was a Czech political prisoner, formerly owner of a restaurant in Prague. And he managed to get some flavor and texture and variety into the slop that we were fed.
>> Warren Marcus: So you were a foodie too.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yeah. I mean, yes. So that lasted through the winter.
>> Warren Marcus: Now we're into 1945.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Fewer and fewer pieces and parts arrive. We were shipping out less and less complete wings. We watched the bombers going east in the morning and returning west in the afternoon, always in missing man formation, counting the holes. And the planes that were shot down. And that was one change that was noticeable, that there were fewer and fewer holes as the war went on. Until March the 1st.
>> Warren Marcus: '45, right?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: '45. March 31. April 1, they emptied the camp and took us on a death march. 11 days to reach Buchenwald. Probably 1/3 of the people dying on the road, either by being shot for staying behind or shot while attempting to escape or shot when the locals brought them back the following morning, shackled with barbed wire and then shot in front of us.
>> Warren Marcus: You got through that and got to Buchenwald.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: We got to Buchenwald. We kids -- there were about six of us that same age. We knew something about the Resistance plan to collaborate Auschwitz from our Kapos. We wanted to participate in that. I plopped down on a cot, and two of my buddies woke me up. You idiot, you slept through it all. The Americans are marching in. So I cannot -- I have no reliable --
>> Warren Marcus: You don't have any glorious stories?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: I have no reliable stories.
>> Warren Marcus: Of the American soldier appearing over the hill. You were out cold.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes. Until somebody took me to the 120th U.S. Army -- 120th Field Evacuation Hospital, which took over that crescent of barracks, of buildings, that were designed for S.S. recuperation -- as a recuperation facilities. That became one.

>> Warren Marcus: So you were in the field hospital for a while, and then you went back to your hometown.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yes. Tell us about that.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: I'm from a -- a well-to-do peasant family took me in to fatten me up, which was a bad idea because of my liver. I got jaundice. I can't give blood because it looks like I've had --
>> Warren Marcus: Problems.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: An illness. Hepatitis. Thank you. But it's just liver ailment called jaundice. And so eventually it took a long time to get going because people from the western countries were out of Buchenwald, and there were those of us going on the other side. But by then the iron curtain took over.
So I went back. My sister came back. My father came back on a Soviet military train totally broken physically and emotionally, unable to accept that our mother was not returning. He lasted four months and then he passed away in February 1946.
>> Warren Marcus: Right. So you did get to see him.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: I got to see him and I did get to bury him in a tomb.
>> Warren Marcus: I think I'd like to leave a few minutes for questions.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: OK.
>> Warren Marcus: You have lots more to talk about, about getting into Yugoslavia, getting out of Yugoslavia. But let me give the audience a chance. Now you can come up to the microphones. Here are the rules. Two microphones. Ask your question. I'll repeat it, make sure we all get it and Steven gets it. And then we'll close the program. So please don't take off yet because we always end with a closing comment from our First Person.
So if anyone has a question -- and let's keep the questions to what you've heard from Steven about his experience. Does anyone have a question you want to come up with? Come on up to the mic, please. I can't resist. How old are you?
>> 14.
>> Warren Marcus: OK. I'm fixated on that age because of what Steven went through. What's your question, young man?
>> You earlier mentioned Adolph Eichmann. Can you go more in depth about what he did? I don't know much about that.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: If you go to the permanent exhibition, you'll learn a lot. He was a midlevel officer in the S.S. He happened to work for some big shots. He was the gentleman who organized the One State Conference in a suburb of Berlin that decided on the execution of the Final Solution, and he became the person going from country to country executing the agreed-on order of the Final Solution, mainly the extermination of 6 million European Jews.
>> Warren Marcus: We have a lot on the website about him. But he organized the -- when the Germans annexed Austria, he was -- his claim to fame was he did a really good job organizing it. And I'm being very diplomatic. And then he rose up in S.S. ranks and was the main transportation guru, if you will. And there's a lot on the website. He is one of the key perpetrators.
>> Thank you.
>> Warren Marcus: Sure. Anyone else? Anything about Steven's story? Thank you.
>> Have you ever met Elie Wiesel?

>> Dr. Steven Fenves: I met him at -- well, at the old convention center in Washington, D.C., at the second world gathering of survivors I met him. We were in Paris at the same time before coming to the states. I checked with him whether we were in same place, in the same agency, but we weren't. And I met him two or three times after that.
>> Warren Marcus: He was our founding chairman of the museum. He died a few years ago. Again, not just because I work with the encyclopedia, but there's a lot of information on the encyclopedia about him. Author of "Night," which many of you may have read or will read it in school.
Let's alternate.
>> Hi. I want to thank you for being here. Pretty awesome.
[Applause]
Also I wanted to know if you received any medical attention or was there access to any medicines of any kind while you were in --
>> Warren Marcus: In the camps?
>> In the camps.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: No medical attention. I have the complete documentation from the international tracing service. My medication card is empty. My punishments card is empty. Which I'm very proud of.
>> Warren Marcus: Spoken like a 13-year-old.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: And drugs -- well, as I said, my clothing was a lot better than other inmates. A group in Neiderorschel, a group from the camp went to this town to get -- with a cart to bring bread and other stuff. I could disguise myself and a couple of times sneak into a pharmacy and get some aspirin and bandages with black market money. And that was about what the camp provided.
>> Aspirin and Band-Aids. That's all.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Yeah. But a very prominent French doctor wrote a book about his experiences in the Holocaust.
>> Thank you.
>> Warren Marcus: We're going to have to do one more. But afterwards there will be time if you want to come up and shake his hand or give him a hug and ask another question.
You're going to have the last one. I apologize to you. Go ahead.
>> I am wondering how you attempt to recover mentally and emotionally from this. Did you seek help from a professional?
>> Warren Marcus: I'm going to repeat that. What's it been like to recover mentally and emotionally from all of this? Did you get help along the way? How are you doing? Go ahead.
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: Mentally I don't know if I had to do anything. Emotionally I certainly started out by closing off. For many years, first years of our marriage, children coming, et cetera, if I thought about it at all, I thought about it in the third person. Until some unpleasantness arose at work, and I realized that in making personnel decisions, no matter what it was, I visualized the selection line in Auschwitz. And that I was not a person to make any kind of career decisions about anybody. I resigned as department head and took off again. And that was a hard lesson to learn.
>> Warren Marcus: Thank you, Steven. I'm going to turn back to Steven in a moment to finish the program, but first I'd like to thank all of you for being here today. We'll have

First Person programs every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. And I know you're in Washington all summer so you'll be back. We hope you can come back for another program. For those of you that didn't have a chance to ask Steven a question, he'll be onstage. After he finishes, you can come say hello, take a picture, and we'll just wait in line.
It's our tradition that our First Person has the last word. Steven, could you share some thoughts to close our program?
>> Dr. Steven Fenves: If there's one thing I hope you take away from this it's that I was not supposed to be here. Not that the regular speaker cancelled out and –
[Laughter]
I was not supposed to be here because 80 years ago I was accused, tried, and convicted, and condemned to death. The only thing that was led to this ending is time and place. And I have been living under that warrant ever since. So keeping -- that's what I hope you can keep in mind, of how far man's injustice to man can be. It didn't start from scratch. It started with a small, very small, number of agents, and it started with a huge, huge number of bystanders who did nothing. And out of that mix came the progressive worsening of the situation.
The motto of this establishment is never again. Yet we have had genocides -- many genocides since the Holocaust. Two of them in my own native country. One in Bosnia and one in Kosovo. So please keep that in mind. The smallest manifestation of injustice, discrimination, persecution, there are always people ready to pick up the slogan and carry it forward.
The only thing that's different -- that was different with Germany is that eventually it got to the point where it became part of the government's agenda. Legislative, judicial, every part of the government participated in executing the Final Solution. That's what needs to be avoided. You can air your prejudices if you feel like it wherever. But please do not carry them to the point where you find a couple hundred like-minded people who are ready to start another genocide. Thank you.
>> Warren Marcus: Steven, we can't thank you enough.
[Applause]