Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Manny Mandel
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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 Mr. Manny Mandel, 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.
Manny will share with us his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Manny 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 Thursdays 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 Manny is one individual’s account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.
Manny Mandel was born to a religious Jewish family on May 8, 1936 in Riga, Latvia. Manny was just 3 when World War II started. Although he was born in Riga, Latvia, Manny's family were Hungarian Jews. They had moved briefly to Latvia because of his

father's work. Here we see a portrait of Manny's parents, Yehuda and Ella Mandel, holding their infant son, Manny.
Shortly after Manny's birth, his father accepted a post as a chief cantor in Budapest, and the family returned to Hungary, where they had lived before 1933. Budapest is highlighted on this map of Hungary. Manny's father was based at the renowned Rombach Synagogue. In this picture we see Manny and his father on a street in Budapest.
The Hungarian government passed anti-Jewish laws beginning in 1938. In 1940 Hungary joined the Axis Alliance, and in 1941 Hungarian troops participated alongside German troops in the invasion of the Soviet Union. The war and increasing restrictions made life for Jews in Hungary increasingly difficult. The photo on the left shows Manny outside his apartment on his first day of school in 1942 in Budapest. On the right we see a photo of Manny standing outside the same apartment in 1988.
German forces occupied Hungary in March 1944. Manny and his mother Ella were fortunate to be included in a program in which Jews would be transported to Palestine in exchange for trucks. Within months, they were transported by the Nazis to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp near Hannover, Germany, in preparation for the eventual departure from Europe. This is an historical photo of Bergen-Belsen.
Negotiations for their transport to Palestine broke down and in December 1944, about six months before the end of the war, Manny and his mother were released from Bergen-Belsen and transported to safety in neutral Switzerland. There they stayed at the Heiden children's home pictured here, where Ella worked as a teacher. Manny is lying down in the front on your left. His mother, Ella, is circled standing in the back.
After the war, Manny and his mother reunited with his father in Israel. They subsequently immigrated to the United States and lived in Philadelphia. Manny is a graduate of Temple University and did his graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a clinical social worker. He met his future wife, Adrienne, in Philadelphia and they were married in 1958. They celebrated their 60th anniversary this past November.
After working for the B’nai B’rith Youth Organization in Cleveland and in Michigan, Manny and Adrienne moved to Washington, D.C., where Manny became the National Program Director for B’nai B’rith Youth Organization. He would later go to work for the Peace Corps before beginning his own psychotherapy practice in 1980. Manny retired from his practice in 2014.
Adrienne’s many accomplishments include having served in the Maryland Legislature as an elected member of the House of Delegates. She is the Immediate Past Chair of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, the nation’s 8th largest water and wastewater utility. Adrienne retired from WSSC in November 2015.Manny and Adrienne live in Silver Spring, Maryland. They have two children and three grandchildren. Their daughter Lisa’s son, Zachary, is a graduate of the University of Maryland and her daughter is a graduate of the University of Michigan and Jon Jay University in New York. Manny and Adrienne’s son David’s daughter, Alexandra, is about to graduate from George Washington University and will attend medical school this coming fall.
Adrienne and their son and daughter are here with Manny today. Manny speaks regularly about his Holocaust experience in various settings such as schools and synagogues locally and in other parts of the country. He volunteers at the Museum

leading museum tours for school and law enforcement groups. Manny will celebrate his 83rd birthday on May 8th. He may say a bit about the significance of that date a little bit later. With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Manny Mandel.
Manny, thank you so much for joining us today and for your willingness to be our First Person. Thanks so much. Try not to look up. Just to look right at your family in the front and the first few rows.
Manny, you were born in Riga, Latvia, in 1936. But your stay there was a short one before you moved to Budapest, Hungary. The war began in Europe when Germany invaded Poland September 1, 1939, when you were 3 years old. Let's begin first with you telling us about your family, why your parents were in Budapest in the years leading up to the start World War II and the Holocaust.
>> Manny Mandel: As you said in the introduction, my father's goal and dream in life was to be a Cantor in the city of Budapest, which was a very significant Jewish community. The city of 1 million people. 20% Jewish. People often ask me did I have friends who were not Jewish. I did, but basically it was a Jewish community in which I lived because that was 20% of the population. My father had wanted to go to Budapest from the time that he finished his training in Austria, in Vienna. He was born in that part of Hungary, Transylvania, you might remember the one person you know from Transylvania. Do you recall? He told me you never met him.
But in any case, he was born in Austria-Hungary. When he was 18 years old, he had to serve in the Czech army. As a Czech army retiree or whatever, graduate, and therefore a kind of Czech citizen and a Jew, Hungary would not give him working papers. He could not take a job in Hungary. He did take a job in Latvia because they had less restrictions, and it was a very important position in terms of that kind of work. He commissioned the papers to go to Hungary, and he thought he achieved his life's dream and would be there for the rest of his life. And except for the little fellow with a mustache he would have been there.
>> Bill Benson: Manny, you told me a story that your mother told that went along the lines of something like, OK, you now speak Yugoslavian. What was the significance of that?
>> Manny Mandel: When my father was in Austria-Hungary, the place was Austria-Hungary. It later became Hungary. Then it became Czechoslovakia. Today it's in the Ukraine. The village did not move. The various ruling groups did as a consequence of change.
My mother's situation -- my mother was born in 1908. When she was about 10 years old, the first world war ended, at which point this had been technically Hungary. Northern Yugoslavia was ethnically Hungary. The teacher comes into the classroom and says, OK, kids. Tomorrow we are going to change languages from Hungarian to Serbo-Croatian. If anybody knows either of those languages, you know, there's not anything that is similar in the two. Not even the alphabet. Serbo-Croatian is like Russian. And Hungarian is written with Latin character.
The kids said, fine, give us new books, we'll be totally happy. They were bilingual. It was not unusual to have this kind of change where people went from one country to another, one language to another, without moving.
>> Bill Benson: And almost overnight.

>> Manny Mandel: Absolutely.
>> Bill Benson: Your father landed a very important position as the Cantor in Budapest. Before he took that position, as I recall, he had been offered positions in London and other places where it would have been much safer. Why did he choose Budapest?
>> Manny Mandel: Well, my father's notion of wanting to go to Budapest was kind of -- that's why he went to Riga. In London they had these auditions. And he was selected everywhere he went. But his dream was to be in Budapest. That was his -- if you want to use it, that was his major league, and that's where he wanted to be.
>> Bill Benson: I remember you telling me that your father, he felt as though he had hit the big time.
>> Manny Mandel: Absolutely. And it was big time. Not just by his measurement. But it was a very significant place. And to be one of the Chief Cantors of Budapest was an achievement that most people were unable to achieve.
>> Bill Benson: While the full force of the war and the Holocaust would not hit your community in Hungary until 1944, there were still many difficulties once war was underway in Europe in the fall of 1939. Tell us about the circumstances for your family and for you in those early years of the war.
>> Manny Mandel: Bill mentioned in the introduction that Hungary becomes an ally of Germany. This goes back to the first world war. The details are not important. But what is important is that because Hungary is an ally, it is not occupied by the Germans. The Germans did not come in -- the Nazis did not come into Budapest until 1944.
So until that time, my recollection is much more of the war, not of the Holocaust. The Holocaust doesn't go to Budapest until -- or into my life until a bit later. The war meant air raids, once, twice a night. From the east came the Russians. From the west came the western allies. Budapest was not devastated as some Hungarian cities were, but it had significant damage.
And for a kid 6 years old to have to go to the shelters once, twice, and occasionally three times a night, was kind of an unnerving experience. And what you don't know is whether the bomb that fell nearby might have hit the building right next door to your apartment building where kids you went to school with lived. So the concept of this kind of devastation was very unnerving.
Other things began to happen as you mentioned, Bill. The Numerus Clausus were implemented in the '20s. They were not enforced. As the '30s came to an end, they were enforced. And all kinds of uncomfortableness was created by that. Example. One day a guy comes to the door and says, I have to take your phone. My father says to him, why? I use the phone for work. He says, too bad. There's a law that says Jews do not have telephones.
You have to understand that there's no logical reason for that. It's just the law. Somebody said this city, this country, doesn't have to make sense. It's just a policy. So that's what happened. Other things happened of the same nature. First grade, that you see the picture over there, was just before I had to go to first grade, the star. Now, I thought that was a major mark of distinction. I was just like all the adults. A little guy, 6 years old, wearing a star. I later discovered it's not quite that.
But I went to school and I heard -- most every day, if not every day, somebody would follow me to school. Please understand we lived at number 13 of the street where we lived. The school was at number 44. Two blocks away. My parents' bedroom in the

apartment building on the fifth floor was on the corner of the building. From their bedroom you could see the school out the window. Yet somebody would follow me. And the question is why? Because this thing called the mark of distinction of a little boy was really a target. It was perfectly OK for somebody to come by and whack you on the head. They could take your shoes, your coat, your backpack, or anything else. But they would whack you on the head because you were a kid with a star, it was OK. Those were the kinds of things that were happening.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that you had really wanted a bicycle, and your father wouldn't get it for you. Tell us why he wouldn't.
>> Manny Mandel: Well, from 1943 on, really '42, my father was conscripted into what they called the labored battalion. You mentioned that the Hungarian army, the men, were on the eastern front fighting against Russia. To backfill the work these people couldn't do, they conscripted the Jewish community who could not serve in the army. My father got a telephone call or a letter or somebody comes to the door. Knock, knock. Please show up at this train station at 3:00 on Tuesday. You'll be gone for a day, a week, a month, or an undetermined period of time.
And from '42 -- late '42 on, I didn't see him regularly. He would come and go based on these orders. One of the times I saw him, I said to him, Pop, I have this kind of overgrown tricycle. I'm almost 7 years old. Would you consider a bike? And he said, sure. I couldn't quite handle a full-size bike, but I could get like an 18-incher. But he said there's two reasons he's not going to get the bike. Why?
One is a minor reason, just inconvenience. We lived on the fifth floor of the apartment building which was 50 years old. So was the elevator in the apartment building. And many occasions the elevator did not work. It was a mechanically run elevator, and parts broke. And the places that used to do the repair for this were now involved in military hardware. So the elevator material was very low on the priority list. So my father said, look, you have a bicycle, you have to truck it down five flights of stairs. He said I couldn't do that. At that age I couldn't take an 18-inch bike up and down five flights of stairs. My father said, look, it's not a pleasant idea. But I'm willing to do that. However, you go into the park and you ride the bike. And you might be there 10 seconds with your yellow star. It is quite likely somebody will want to whack you on the head. They don't want the bike. They don't want your shoes. They don't want anything. They just want to whack you on the head. And for that reason there will be no bike for you now. Later we'll think about it.
And I can add to it that when we came to this country in 1949, I was in seventh grade. We lived in New York. I came home from school one day, and he said we're going shopping. Guess what we went shopping for? A bike.
>> Bill Benson: That's wonderful. Before you started having to wear the yellow star, I believe in December 1941, your family had a really horrifying experience while visiting your aunt in another city. Tell us about that.
>> Manny Mandel: As I said, the Holocaust didn't touch us until later. However, there's a particular experience that clearly is Holocaust related which I can tell you about. I have no understanding what it meant. Not at the age of 5 1/2. As I said, I had a lot of family in northern Yugoslavia. In December of 1941, wintertime, Christmastime, I was not yet in school. My parents decided to take a trip by train to visit the family. Travel was still quite easy in those days. We would go down to the city. It had three names because it was

Hungary, Austria-Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Well, we went there, and my mother and her two sisters. Stayed at the youngest sister's house. I don't recall exactly what happened. It was a bit of an adventure.
I know that her husband owned a cork factory. And they took me to the factory. I didn't know what they heck they were doing. Cork for bottles and I guess other cork products. It was interesting. They took me there. He had a seat installed on the front of his bicycle, and we rode out to the factory. Not very far. And not too much happened the first day or two. Maybe even three. I don't recall exactly.
On the third day, early in the morning, somebody comes up the stairs or the elevator and says there's something funky going on in the street. Five minutes later, knock, knock on the door. Two well-dressed police officers are standing there. Ladies and gentlemen, you need to come outside. All right. We must run a census. Well, now, we run a census in this country every 10 years. The Nazis believed that they needed to run a census every 25 minutes to keep track of people. And they were right.
But it's still unusual on Friday morning, 7:30 in the morning, on the street. Very unusual. But it didn't seem dangerous so we did what we were told. They said dress warmly. It was winter time. It was very pleasant, cold weather. You put on your gloves and muffs or whatever else. Went out and lined up in the street. On the sidewalk. We were told to turn left and start marching in this direction.
Now I remember clearly as we marched -- I shouldn't say march. Just walked. Under guard and stuff, but we were walking in that direction. For a good two to three hours. I walked. My mother carried me. My father carried me. I'm 5 1/2 years old. I'm a little guy. On my left was an 8-foot fence. And the sidewalk, we were on it. And to the right was a major street. Like maybe 14th Street outside.
Now those of you who have been to New York might know this. Those who have not might not. Cities which are not on an ocean or a big lake are on a river, and they would create beaches in the summertime on the river. This city is on the Danube River. In the summertime, the hot pools and cold pools and wave pools and thermal pools and recreational places and restaurants and amusements. I remember having been there in August. This is December.
Four months before I was there, and I remember what it is. I recognize the fence. Why are we here? Of course nobody knew. As we were walking along the fence we see that the big gates for the fence are open, and people are going through the gates and making a left turn. The river was about 300, 400 yards away from here in that direction. And we are ambling in that direction, again having no idea why, what, or who. As we are doing this, there's a policeman standing on our right side, kind of on the street. And he says to my father, Mister, what are you doing here? My father kind of bewildered says to him, well, we're here visiting family. He says but for the purpose of the census, you can't be part of this crowd. You'll mess up the numbers. You're not from here. And my father says, how do you know that? And he says because I'm a foot patrolman in your neighborhood in Budapest. I have seen you on the street dozens of times. I recognized you.
And so my mother and I and my father and the other members of the clan of ours -- probably minutes, if not seconds after this takes place, a car comes flying down the road. An officer gets out. Talks to his comrades. Gets out and says, ladies and

gentlemen, the requirements of the census have been met. Go home. 5 1/2-year-old doesn't understand what's going on, of course, but neither does anybody else.
We go back to my aunt's apartment. And the phone begins to ring. The first call comes from my other aunt. My mother has two sisters and says, where were you? We had plans. So we tell her what's going on. She says that's interesting. Two police officers came to my door at 7:30 in the morning. Asked me four questions. They said thank you. I said thank you. They left. I've been calling you all day long.
And the phone calls began to come in slowly. We began to understand what took place. Those people who went through the gate, turned left and marched to the river, which was to our knowledge iced to about three feet of depth, which had in fact been cannonballed, cracked that morning. They were lined up by the river, shot in the back and into the water. They would be found when the river thawed in March, if they were found. Or if they floated down the ice, maybe they came up some place where the ice was thinner. It went to the Black Sea. This was a pogrom for the valueless exercise in saying, I can do this to you and there's not a blessed thing you can do.
>> Bill Benson: And a great number were killed that day.
>> Manny Mandel: Thousands. Not just Jews, but among them many Jews and others. And the whole point here was there had been some kind of -- if you're familiar with the partisans, there was some partisan activity. They messed up a railroad car, something. And in retribution for this, they put on this mass pogrom. 1941. I can tell you what happened in detail. Of course I had no idea what that meant until many years later. The next morning, back to Budapest.
>> Bill Benson: And that particular pogrom, a lot has been written about it in the years since, in part because it was so unbelievably brutal but also because it just seemed to have come out of nowhere. Just out of nowhere.
You continued to live in Budapest under these awful circumstances, but things changed dramatically in March 1944 when the Germans occupied Budapest. What led to the Germans coming in and occupying it? Because they were allies of the Hungarians. And what changed so quickly for you and your family?
>> Manny Mandel: First of all, Hitler and the leader of Hungary had a disagreement. The allyship breaks up. In 1941 -- piece of history for you. The second man in the German government, Hermann Goring, writes a letter on behalf of Hitler to talk about the Final Solution for the Jewish problem. It's not acted on. In 1942, at the One Day Conference -- there's a display about this upstairs. But it's called by the leader of the S.S. in Prague. It is called for the purpose of in fact putting into action and activating the mechanics of the Final Solution.
They appoint a man to be the leader of these activities. Does anybody recall his name? Correct, whoever said that. Adolf Eichmann. Lieutenant Colonel in the German Army who is the chief of the logistics. He clears Europe from 1943 or '42, he begins to clear all the Jews into concentration camp, killing camps, labor camps, so forth. Because Hungary had been an ally, it's the last one to be approached. It does not get into Hungary until the 19th of March, 1944.
There were some elements of the Holocaust. For example my grandmother -- my father and my brothers decided she should move back into her little village where my father was raised because it would be easier for her. No air raids. She had some problems with her feet and to go up and down the stairs once, twice, three times a night and go to

shelters became very difficult. She was deported before they came into Budapest. They began to clean Hungary.
And Germany occupied Hungary in March of '44. By this time my father is in a labor camp, home irregularly and infrequently. We have certain restrictions in the community. But basically my life as a 7 1/2-year-old is perfectly OK. My parents saw to it that I would live in kind of a bubble. I was not touched by this. Remember, I had no bike for which I could be whacked on the head. I was not worried to go to school. I had my friends. And life goes on.
As soon as Eichmann arrives in Budapest, two men from kind of a semi-self-appointed rescue committee approach him with a deal. You need to understand, folks, that to approach Eichmann in Budapest in 1944 was about as easy as going to Rome and saying, I want to talk to the Pope one-on-one today. Not easy. But they talked their way in. One of the two is a Jewish lawyer from Romania. And his partner was an engineer, trained in Germany, approached Eichmann. And they came up with a proposal.
Before I tell you the proposal, I need to tell you that at this point, in March of '44, it seems that every leader in Germany except for one exception knows that the war is not going to be in their favor. But Hitler wouldn't believe it until the day he died, but everybody else did. So they did what might seem logical. They decided to find ways, if they could, to make any kind of arrangements for their lives after the war if they survived.
I go back to whoever said -- it was Eichmann, whoever said that might know, that Eichmann after the war, which he survives, winds up where? Anybody know? Argentina. Now he didn't go to Argentina based on his army wages. He and others, not that many, but many had some deals made. Joseph Mengele, the doctor from Auschwitz, is the other one. They all wind up in south America with a certain amount of loot on which they can live. I would imagine to have Eichmann in Argentina go to some employment agency and say, I'm Adolf Eichmann. I killed 6 million people. Give me a job. That would be difficult.
So they made provisions. They were based on the following deal. If Eichmann releases 1 million Jews from the concentration camps, they would supply him with 10,000 trucks, to be used as material for the war. Now there are two enormous problems with this proposal. If Eichmann wanted to release 1 million, which he didn't, he didn't have 1 million to release anymore. Most had been killed by '44. As far as the trucks were concerned, I can assure you they didn't have a hubcap, let alone trucks.
>> Bill Benson: It was an incredibly audacious proposal.
>> Manny Mandel: You begin this way so you can wind up this way. One of the two men goes to Egypt. The British were in Egypt, and they were apparently in charge of all logistics and movement and vehicular stuff for the whole war effort in Egypt. He goes to Egypt, and they stick him in jail. He was there until after the war. But no trucks. There was never even thought of trucks.
These negotiations go from 10,000 trucks for 1 million people to something short of 1,700 people for what is called valuables. Valuables, they have to be portable. Some people may know who have lived overseas particularly that certain valuables are always tradeable. For a meal, a room, a ride, whatever. These valuables were collected from all over the world, including the Hungarian jewelry, in suitcases. Two or three of them, reputedly about $2 million worth. Now $2 million in 1943 was a lot more than it is today.

The money was not -- the valuables, the value of the stuff was not turned over to Eichmann at that time.
He told us that he would give us 35 freight cars like the one you're going to see upstairs in the Museum, and we'd be transported directly to some neutral port to be discharged from Europe. Hitler's position was to get the Jews out of Germany. He did that. Get the Jews out of Europe. He didn't quite do that. But the last one was to get Jews out of the world. That he did not achieve.
We boarded the trains, 35 cars. I don't remember how many in each car. You'd have to divide 35 by 1,700 -- or 1,700 by 35. Each car has two buckets in it. One was for drinking water and the other was not. I don't recall anybody ever using them. The weather was pretty good. Nice. It was July. The train stopped every night, nine nights. We slept outside under guard. We were told to pack some food. We were also supplied with some food from kitchens at the various stops by the German or Hungarian army. You know, that you can live without air for minutes and water for hours and food for days. But we had food. That was not a problem. It was not a comfortable ride, obviously. We couldn't lie down in the cars. Couldn't even sit down in the cars. We kind of stood all day long.
>> Bill Benson: Let me interrupt you just for a second with a couple of questions. Your father was not with you, was he?
>> Manny Mandel: Correct.
>> Bill Benson: It was you and your mother. Any other family members with you?
>> Manny Mandel: My father's younger brother, my uncle, and a very distant cousin which is a whole other story.
>> Bill Benson: Can you give any insight into who those 1,700 were that got selected for that? While this is happening, of course, all the rest of the Jews are being rounded up and deported at an incredible rate.
>> Manny Mandel: 14,000 a day.14,000 a day. Hundreds of railroad cars.
>> Bill Benson: To Auschwitz.
>> Manny Mandel: Auschwitz, Birkenau, various places. Few came back. Some did. My two aunts did actually. But I'll get to that a little later.
You asked me how the group was composed. I don't know. What I do know is that apparently this little group of the survivor group or this rescue group got together and were able to kind of allocate a number of spaces in the group to various organizations. The religious, the nonreligious, the Zionists, the non-Zionists, the orthodox, you name it. Every group had something. I don't know what group we fit into. But my uncle was particularly active both in the Zionist organizations and the Underground and was able to secure these spaces.
My father was in a labor camp in geographic Hungary. He was in a city called Vac. He could not come with us. For whatever it was worth, it was not his nobility, but the Germans had some rules. If anybody walked away from these camps or escaped, they would then do a decimation the next day. Line everybody up. Every 10th person got shot. It kind of prevented escapes because you never knew who the 10th person would be. But my father -- the point is you couldn't just walk out anyhow. But even if you could have, you just couldn't.
He survived the war and in 1944, late, he and about 20 of his colleagues in his brigade or group or company of labor battalion people just decided to walk away. This is when

the Nazis are retreating. The Russians are coming. There was chaos. They were able to get away. And they actually walked back down from the Ukraine back down this long road. They rode trains as they could. They stole food. My father told me that he cooked potatoes in the exhaust of automobiles. Trucks. You do what you can to survive. But --
>> Bill Benson: So you were in the train with 1,700 people for nine days.
>> Manny Mandel: From various groups. And we arrived at a place -- again, to my knowledge, and I didn't know any adult -- you know, they didn't know this. But I don't believe anybody knew where we were going because when we arrived at a place called Bergen-Belsen, people said, what's this? We were told you're going to spend three days here. For R&R before you board ships.
Now Bergen-Belsen as Bill mentioned earlier is half an hour or so from the city of Hannover, which is a major railhead, and not that terribly far from the Hamburg region, which is a major shipping point for Germany, northern Germany. We were put into barracks. And there we are. Apparently the the negotiations continued. And 350 of our people were taken out of there for a piece of the ransom. I wasn't one of them. Five months after that, in December, we were all --
>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about going to Switzerland, Bergen-Belsen of course, many in our audience may know that as the place where Anne Frank died. A terrible camp. Horrible. What were conditions like for you? What do you recall of that, knowing that you were still a young boy?
>> Manny Mandel: Anne Frank comes to Bergen-Belsen in August of 1944. I come to Bergen-Belsen in July of '44. Now I didn't know her. This is not play date and cell phone time. I mean, obviously, she was 16 and I was 8. She would have nothing to do with me. But we were there at the same time. Under the same conditions. The same miserable rainy fall weather. The miserable mud that we had to stand outside in, sometimes from 4:00 until 11:00 for the census again, and all the other things.
And of course in many parts of the camp the typhus. Many folks in the medical field, you might know that if you saw a slice of typhus once in medical school once on a Tuesday. It was eradicated with antibiotics, but it was a major killer in the camp. Major. Three things killed people in Bergen-Belsen. Starvation, malnutrition, and typhus. If you see documentaries of the camp's liberation, you see bulldozers pushing bodies into mass graves. As horrible as it might sound. That was Bergen-Belsen. Had to be done in order to bury these bodies so that the typhus bug doesn't go all over Europe and create the black plague of the 20th century.
Life in Bergen-Belsen for us was acceptable, quote unquote, because we were not turned out to go to work. Why? Because the Nazis realized if they turn us out to work and people die that reduces the per capita ransom that they had. They kept us alive because you can't ransom a dead body. As a consequence, the one thing we didn't have was going to work every day.
And we saw people going to work. And I would imagine some went to work and never came back. We were in the camp. Conditions were as I said poor. But we were only there for 5 1/2 months all told. 5 1/2 months is not four years, as some people had.
>> Bill Benson: I was struck, though, when you said that -- even five months is a long time in bad conditions, obviously. And you said there was attempts by your group to try to create as much normalcy as you could given the circumstances. Will you tell us a little bit about what that was like?

>> Manny Mandel: Of course. Normalcy means you do that when you did before you were there. we had 35 physicians in camp, but they couldn't do anything because they had nothing to do it with. They had no medication. But they could examine. We had others. The first group that began to become active were folks who were in business back home. Ladies and gentlemen, business is opened up within weeks. You might find it to be amusing, but that's what they did. After all, they went to work every day back home, and they did this, this, and this. They sold, they bought, they traded, they manufactured. Exactly what they did in terms of Bergen-Belsen possibilities.
When we were going to go to Bergen-Belsen, we were told to bring certain kinds of foods with us for the ride to get to the boat.
Somebody in the community -- I don't remember his name, but my parents knew him. He was a gentleman with some kind of a factory that had to do with tin cans, like food, you know. Aluminum cans. And we could have aluminum cans resealed. So what you did was cooked food, put it into the cans still warm, and sealed it on the top to make it sealed and to prevent botulism for happening for a certain amount of time. As we got to the camp, people ate the food. The supplements that we received. And after that, they washed the cans and guess what? Jewelry stores opened up.
>> Bill Benson: From the tin cans.
>> Manny Mandel: Somebody knew how to make bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and rings from this metal. My mother packed some tin cans. I don't remember how many or how long it lasted. And three other items I remember she packed. Based on either her thinking or somebody recommended that she take a liter of honey. Nutritious. A liter of chicken fat. In a bottle. And a big -- several kilo of bacon. You might say well, that sounds like it makes sense. But in a kosher home of a Cantor, bacon did not exist. Under conditions of this there were certain dispensations given because if it keeps you alive, it's a good thing. The liter of honey, the liter of chicken fat, and the bacon lasted the whole time that we were in camp. How, I don't know.
>> Bill Benson: Your mother made it last, it sounds like.
During that time you got very ill, though. Tell us about that.
>> Manny Mandel: I did two things in camp in the five or six months we were there. I learned how to be bored. I was very good at it. There's nothing to do. Yes, there was a school that was started, a synagogue that was started. There was this and that is the other thing. But no playgrounds, no equipment, no soccer balls. So I got to -- and I don't remember what I did. I don't remember. I can't even remember kids I played with, and there are kids I played with. In the picture you saw at the beginning, all of the kids in that picture were with me in camp. I don't remember any of them. Met some of them since camp, a couple of them died since. I mean, we're told people. But I remember some after. I mean, I met in the last 30 or 40 years, but not 75 years ago.
The other thing I did very well, I was sick. I got some kind of a multiple pneumonia disease. As I said there were 35 doctors in camp. But what could they do? Pneumonia you cure with antibiotics, which they didn't have, or the body did cure itself with its own strength.
What they did do was decided to make me more comfortable. You might know -- I think those of you may know or have some history or background in farming communities and smaller towns. Any of you are hear of mustard plasters? Somehow they found mustard seed. You soak it in water. You crush it. And it makes kind of a mustardy kind of a thing.

You put a rag or burlap into it. And you take that burlap and you stick it on my chest. It has nothing to do with curing new pneumonia, but it's the same as Vick's. It's menthol. It's warm. It makes you feel better. Just gives you warmth and comfort. And that's what they did. It was a palliative medical approach.
>> Bill Benson: And you managed to survive that. And in fact you finally were released with your mother and others.
>> Manny Mandel: The whole, whatever, 1,300 were left after the first 360 left. Approximate numbers. We were taken into Switzerland at which point my war ended. And the war ended. And we'll talk about that now.
>> Bill Benson: Just tell us very quickly what it was like when you went into Switzerland.
>> Manny Mandel: We came to the camp in the freight cars that you will see upstairs. We left the camp actually in passenger cars. There were passenger cars. They were not first class by a long, long shot but at least they had seats. We were taken from Germany to Switzerland across the border. Now for those of you who may know this, it may not be news. But if you don't know, the railroad cars from Germany cannot go into Switzerland because the gauge of the -- or the width of the tracks are different. They are done differently to make sure nobody can invade Switzerland by train because the trains won't go.
So we arrive one side of the platform from Germany on the German trains. On the other side of the platform are these Swiss, big, beautiful, lit, warm, hot chocolate laden trains into which we were transferred and taken into a community with a large gymnasium. Well, what is the first thing the Swiss did to us? They fumigated all of us to get rid of the lice and whatever else they did because the Swiss didn't want to be bothered with this kind of vermin.
>> Manny Mandel: Do you remember the reaction of the adults? Did they feel now they were truly safe once they got across the border?
>> Manny Mandel: Well, we didn't know. But the anticipation was because by this time there was some involvement with the Red Cross and some others, and we were taken to -- if anybody knows Switzerland, there is a German part. We were in the French part, Montreaux, in which there is a community called Kaux. There was a beautiful tourist hotel which the Red Cross had taken over for people like us and others. There for several weeks. They sent us lots of potatoes to fatten us up a little bit.
Now please understand we were not skeletons that you see walking around in Bergen-Belsen. But all of our ribs could be counted. And we did get fattened up. Then they discharged people to various places because others were coming in. And there was an arrangement made by an organization who sent 20 kids, Jewish Hungarian kids, ages 6 to 14, en masse who were placed in the German part of Switzerland, Heiden, some of the children in which you saw the picture. That's the group.
Then they had to come up with somebody who would go along with them, a teacher and a caretaker and a translator. We spoke fluent Hungarian. Nobody in Heiden spoke one word of Hungarian. Now they found a person who was going to be the teacher, which was a younger woman, and believe it or not it was my mother. Well, sometimes having your mother with you is the best thing. But sometimes it's the worst thing because you're the teacher's kid. But my mother had very good German. Of course she had Hungarian. And she had a good amount of French. So we went there and that's where we were.

And that's where the war comes to an end on the 8th of May, 1945. A very important date in history. The war comes to an end on May the 8. It is the birthday of the president of the United States at the time. Who is that? Often we hear the word Roosevelt, which is not too far off. I think Roosevelt died the 12th or so or 14th of April, weeks before. And our situation, as we all know, in 20 minutes the vice president becomes president, and Harry Truman has a birthday on May 8. So we had the war. Harry Truman. On May 8 of this year I will have another birthday. I have one every year. So the three of us, the war, Harry and I share a birthday.

>> Bill Benson: Before we leave, I want to leave just a few minutes for the audience to ask questions. But tell us about reuniting with your father. But before you do, during that whole ordeal, leaving Budapest by train, going to Bergen-Belsen, and then on to Switzerland, did your mother and father have any contact with each other during that time? And then how they reunited.

>> Manny Mandel: They had no contact because the cell phones didn't work so well in Bergen-Belsen. But the point that's important here is that my father could actually trace our group because of this special group. It was known as the Kasztner group or the Kasztner train. And there were others. Kasztner himself stayed in Budapest. His family was with us in camp. But he stayed. My father was able to go see him and demand information of where we were. We were still in Bergen-Belsen. He had some way of tracing us.

Communication with my mother at the time was impossible. It didn't take place. In Switzerland we were able to do something a little better. Now this is December of '44 and January of '45. My father had a colleague with whom he went to school in Vienna who was a Cantor. My mother knew him. She made contact with him in Switzerland and went to see him a couple of times. He got in contact with Hungary. Swiss, a neutral country, the telephone arrangements they could have. So my mother talks to him. He talks to my father. My father responds maybe by telegram and talks to my mother.

My father said, look, I'm back in Budapest. I have the apartment. I have a job. Come on back. My mother said, I will never set foot in Hungary ever again as long as I live.

And she didn't. My father did. I did. Adrienne and I went back several times. My mother never did. She was that angry with the Serbs and the Hungarians.

In any case, my father said come back. My mother said no. We went south to Italy and eventually wound up in Palestine. We were there in 1945 in September. In August of '46 my father is able to arrive, through a story -- which is a whole other story. Illegal immigration and all of that. But that's when the family is reunited.

One of the consequences of the war, I am sure, one of the negative consequences, I think, is I'm an only child. I was born in '36. My cousins who were born in '35, '36, '37, '38. My mother had three sisters and two brothers. Big family, right? These six families produced five children. I think they all decided later in the ‘30s which is when the siblings would have been coming is this is not a place and time to bring in children, except for my uncle, my mother's brother, who had two children. One had one. One had one. One had none. That kind of thing. Being an only child, and if I hadn't been one, so I have nothing to compare to, is one of the consequences.

>> Bill Benson: There are so many more things I'd like to ask you about, and I know you would like to talk about. But let's take just a couple of minutes with our audience and see if you folks have any questions. If you have a question, we ask that you go to the

microphone. There's one in each aisle. Please make your question as brief as you can. I'll repeat it just to be sure that we hear it right. And then Manny will respond to it. Emily, you have one for us.
>> So if you were ever treated differently by your classmates or by your friends that were non-Jewish?
>> Bill Benson: The question was, were you ever treated differently by classmates or friends that were not Jewish?
>> Manny Mandel: I didn't have any friends in school who were not Jewish. But I went to a parochial school. There was a Jewish school down the street. As it happens, the only kids I can remember that were not Jewish that I had anything to do with were two girls who lived next door to me, in the apartment right next door to us, whom I saw with great frequency. At age 5 or 8, I had as good a relationship as I could with a girl.
>> Bill Benson: A brave soul. I will ask you also to stay with us because before we close Manny will say a few more words before we end our program. Yes, sir.
>> Were any of the other Jewish families at Bergen-Belsen, were they resentful that you guys were kind of given like a pass almost out of work and the struggle and all of that stuff?
>> Bill Benson: Were other inmates at Bergen-Belsen, were they resentful, would you have known that, and was it possible?
>> Manny Mandel: I would not have known. We had no contact with them. They may have been. As it happens where we were in our set of barracks, one side was a field, and one side was a forest. One side was the main road to the camp. The only contact we had was on one side, which was several hundred yards away with barbed wire. Now historically, there are all kinds of resentments because you -- there's a gentleman here in town, a very well-known physician. Quite wealthy. And by some coincidence he and many others and I were at the old American Film Institute, which was still the Kennedy Center, to see a certain Israeli television program, not important.
But at the end of which a producer and an author talked, and all of a sudden this little gentleman down in front of us gets up and he says, I was a 27-year-old senior surgeon at the hospital in Budapest and I was not in the group and you were. OK. We got to be friends later on, and he didn't holler at me anymore.
But I'm saying there was tremendous resentment by the nonselected community. But, you know, how do you put four elephants into a Volkswagen? Two in the front and two in the back, right? Same thing here. How would you put 10,000 people into 35 cars? You can't. I was fortunate, lucky, of course. Period.
>> Bill Benson: We have one more question here before we turn back to Manny to close our program. Go ahead.
>> Hi, I'm Emily. My question is how did you feel when the war ended?
>> Bill Benson: The question is how did you feel when the war ended. You knew that it was over for you and your family and your community.
>> Manny Mandel: I'm not sure it had the kind of impact that you might think. It wasn't like it just stopped. When the war ended, I'm in Switzerland, in a very safe place. And the day before and the day afterward were exactly alike. I had classes, whatever. The end of the war becomes much more prominent to me when I have to learn a new language, a new country. And understand that the war was not taking place. I was in a neutral country. Life on Tuesday was the same, Wednesday it ended, and Thursday as

it followed, as a kid for me as I remember it. I didn't reunite with my family or my spouse or my children. I didn't go back to my home and find my stuff either wrecked or now missing or whatever. So many of those things that people experienced, I did not. It's good to be a kid.
>> Bill Benson: I think because of time I'm going to not be able to have you ask the question, but I'm going to ask you and anybody else when Manny is finished, please feel free to come up on the stage and ask Manny the question or say hi to him and shake his hand or give him a hug. He'll take that. Whatever you want to do, we're good with that. I want to thank you first for all being here. Remind you we'll have First Person programs each Wednesday and Thursday through August 8. Our programs will be livestreamed through June 6, but all programs will be shown on the Museum's YouTube channel. So if you can't make it back in person, there are other ways to see our programs, and we hope that you do that. It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person gets the last word.
So with that, I'm going to turn back to Manny to close our program today.
>> Manny Mandel: In the very introduction, Bill talked about the fact that I volunteer at the Museum and do many things. One of the things I do is talk at the information desk upstairs where the most frequently asked question is, where is the rest room? But when people ask where do you begin, where do you understand, what do you do here, you begin to discover there's a level of knowledge that exists in the community is abominable. Now you folks took one of many steps to come to this Museum, perhaps to come to this program, but more so to come to this Museum to see it, to learn. However, there's much more to be learned, and I would like to challenge you. I've not done this in a number of places at the end of my talks. You live in a world where machinery exists like this or anything like this where you can record stuff. I'm going to ask you to go home and get a hold of your parents, grandparents, or children, and record their story. Which probably is not recorded. It will probably be lost to posterity. I mean, I find it very, very difficult to accept when I ask somebody a question of where were your grandparents born or went to school or what did they do and they can't answer.
When I ask a young man or a young kid, where do your parents work? Here in Washington. And of course the response is, with the government. OK. OK. Could you give me a little bit more, like what department maybe or what do you do in the government? You know, are you a spy or not? Something.
[Laughter]
And I challenge all of you to see to it that your family histories are either recorded, updated, or somehow put down in posterity so that your grandchildren can know what the heck went took place. Thank you.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Manny.
Anybody wants to come up, come up on the stage and see Manny. If you do, we just ask you to use the stairs.