U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

First Person

May 8, 2019

Harry Markowicz

BILL BENSON: Ladies and gentlemen, the program will begin in a moment. Please silence all electronic devices. Thank you.

(After a pause)

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

We are in our 20th year, of the "First Person" program, and our first person today is Mr. Harry Markowicz whom you shall meet shortly

This 2019 season of *First Person*

is made possible by the

generosity of the Louis Franklin

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additional funding from the

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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. Harry will share 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 Harry a few questions. If we Toward the end of our program. If 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 AM EST 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

Harry is one individual's
account of the Holocaust. We
have prepared a brief slide
presentation to help with his
introduction.

And we begin with this photograph of Harry and his older siblings Rosa and Mani in 1941, he was born August 9th, 1937, in Berlin, Germany, his parents max and Marja had emigrated from Poland shortly after World War I, this photo shows Harry's mother around 1914, in Widawa Poland. Harry's mother is the second from the left in the back row with the long braids

The others in the picture are Harry's aunts and uncles, 11 in all, and Harry's grandmother, who is in the middle, sitting next to her youngest child, Bolek. Of those in this photo only three survived World War II.

Harry's mother, her youngest sibling, Bolek, and her sister Leonia who is third from the left in the back row. On this map of Germany the arrow points to Berlin, where Harry and his family lived when he was born. In 1938 when Harry was a year old, a family friend who was a policeman warned the Markowiczes of an impending outbreak of violence against Jews in Germany, Harry and his family escaped to Belgium.

In May 1940, Germany invaded Belgium. This photo shows Belgian refugees walking in one direction to get away from the invading German army, while British soldiers head toward the German troops. The Markowicz family tried to escape and crossed the border to France. On this map, the arrow on the right, points to where the family had been living in Antwerp, Belgium. The family tried to cross the border to France, but they were denied entry. They rented a beachhouse in La Panne Belgium, the arrow on the

left points to La Panne. In 1942, Harry and his family went into hiding in Brussels, Harry and his siblings were placed separately in children's homes and with different families. Harry lived with the Vanderlinden family until the liberation of Belgium in September 1944. Here we see Harry on the left with Mrs. Vanderlinden. And a photo on the right of the identity bracelet given to Harry by the Vanderlindens while he was in hiding. You can see the Vanderlinden surname followed by Henri, Harry's name while in hiding

After the war, the Markowiczes resumed their life in Brussels, here we see Harry and his family in Brussels, Harry and his parents emigrated to the United States in 1951 joining his siblings who had emigrated in 1949 and 1950, respectively.

After arriving in the U.S., in 1951, Harry and his parents settled in Seattle, Washington, where his brother and sister had gone after their move to the United States.

He went to the university of Washington, for his undergraduate study, then attended Simon Fraser university in Vancouver, Canada, for his graduate degree. At Simon Fraser Harry studied linguistics and particularly in sign language led to his career working with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing people. Harry, then, pursued graduate studies in social linguistics at Georgetown university, before going to work in France for five years. He returned to Washington D.C. and became a professor of English at Gallaudet university in Washington, D.C., the world's only university with programs and services specifically designed to accommodate Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing students.

It was established by an act of Congress in 1864, after 30 years at Gallaudet, Harry retired in 2008, and Harry mentioned to me this morning that in today's "Washington Post", there's an article about three graduates of Gallaudet, who have become entrepreneurs and it's their story in today's edition

Harry also taught English as a second language in Israel, as well as French in the U.S., and in Canada.

Since his retirement, Harry has become very involved with this museum as a vol- -- as a volunteer. You will find him at the membership desk on Wednesday, afternoons, Harry also participates in the museum's writing program for survivors and you can read several of Harry's writings on the museum's Web site.

Harry and his wife Arlene, whom he met in Washington, D.C., but to whom he proposed in France, when she came for a visit, will celebrate their 42nd wedding anniversary in June.

They live in Silver Spring, Maryland. Their son Michael is 33.

Arlene and Michael are here today with Harry, as our Arlene sister Joanne and her husband Bruce Cooper with that I would like you join me in welcoming our "First Person" Mr. Harry Markowicz.

[APPLAUSE]

>> thank you so much for joining us, we're going to have you sit here.

You have so much to share with us, we have just one short hour, and so we'll get right to it if that's okay with you.

HARRY: Sure.

BILL BENSON: Harry your father settled in Berlin in 1919. He married your mother in 1926, by the time you were born in 1937 Hitler and the Nazis had been in power if four years, let's begin with you first, telling us a little bit about your parents, and their lives prior to your birth. What you've learned about that.

HARRY: Right. I'll try to remember.

[LAUGHTER] HARRY: My father was a small businessman. He was -- he worked for a business. And my mother I think was a home-maker. Of course, my brother and sister were born before me.

There were several other relatives who lived in Berlin. My father's two brothers and one of his sisters.

And my mother's brother also lived in Berlin.

And I think they were very close to each other.

BILL BENSON: And from the picture we saw with your aunts and uncles, it looked like you did have a large extended family.

HARRY: Yes.

BILL BENSON: Both in Berlin -- and -- and elsewhere.

HARRY: Right.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: One of them -- in the picture to the -- that was my mother's side of the family. Almost all of them were living in Poland. So I never met them. I never met my grandparents.

BILL BENSON: Right. Your father had been a veteran of the first world war, as I understand it.

Do you know anything about his service during World War I?

HARRY: No, never talked about it. The only thing I know is he was a teenager, when -- he went in the Army.

Once, my wife, Arlene, asked him what it was like; and just told it was terrible.

BILL BENSON: Just terrible and you also shared with me, that he either lied about his age to join, or there was -- a misunderstanding, but he was, like, 15 when he joined the Army.

HARRY: Yes, it was -- a trick used to try to avoid going into the Army. He -- it was not his doing, I think my grandparents, his parents, didn't declare when he was born, so until three years later; and that way, when he was called up to go serve, he would have been only -- he would have been 15.

I'm a little confused now.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: But the idea is that he would be very young, and -- and look... too young to go in the Army, but they took him anyway.

BILL BENSON: It didn't work.

HARRY: It didn't work, right.

BILL BENSON: Your sister and brother were born in the late 1920s.

Do you know anything about what your parents' life was like in Berlin during that time?

HARRY: Um... I -- I can only -- I know only a little bit. They had a middle-class life. There were religious, not very religious, went to synagogue on high holidays.

I don't think they kept it kosher a house. My brother and sister went to school. My sister went to public school. My brother went to a Jewish boy's school until -- until Jewish kids were no longer allowed to go to public school, then both of them went to a Jewish school.

BILL BENSON: Went to a Jewish school Kristallnacht, what we call, "Night of the Broken Glass", took place November 10th, 1938, so the year after you were born, time around Kristallnacht, your family fled Berlin for Belgium.

But prior to doing that, your father had taken your two -- your brother and sister to Aachen, Germany, but returned from Aachen.

Can you tell us about the event that caused him to go to Aachen, and come back, and then about your family's flight the Belgium after Kristallnacht?

HARRY: Right. As you mentioned in the introduction, my father had a friend who was a policeman, who told him things were going to get really bad for Jews in Germany.

And that he should get out.

So my parents got -- devised this plan. He went -- he took my brother and sister, eight and nine years old at the time. He took them to -- Aachen, which is a spa resort, near the border of Holland and Belgium.

And... he actually didn't tell my brother and sister what the -- what the plan was, he told them they were going on vacation. But -- they went to Aachen.

And the idea was the -- there, they would find the smuggler to get them across the border. Into Belgium.

So that's what happened. They -- they hooked up with a smuggler, and there were a lot of other people wanting to leave Germany.

So this is a very large group of... would be emigrants.

And they went through the woods.

And got past the German border.

And then we ran into a Dutch patrol. Smuggler, who was a German woman, who either got lost, and ended up -- at the Dutch border instead of the Belgian border. And they were turned over to the German authorities.

The adults were put in jail.

The children were not jailed, actually, my brother and sister, and the other kids in the group were handed over to the Jewish Community in Aachen.

And then they were placed in different families.

Then the -- the police in Aachen called my mother in Berlin. And to let her know that her husband was in jail.

And that she could come and pick up her children.

So a couple of days later, actually, with my mother, I was with my mother, she couldn't travel.

I guess, so her brother, my uncle, Abraham, came to pick up my brother and sister, and brought them back to Berlin.

Then shortly after that, my father went on his own, and got into Belgium, I don't know how, but he got into Belgium.

BILL BENSON: Somehow he was released and --

HARRY: Oh, yeah, I'm sorry, I forgot to mention, he was released a week later.

BILL BENSON: Okay.

HARRY: After the German authorities, made sure that he had paid his taxes. There was an exit tax, which is -- I think it was 90% of your assets.

BILL BENSON: Once he paid that he was free to go at that point.

HARRY: Right. He was free there was no restriction on leaving the country. They wanted to get rid of Jews.

Then they crossed the border into Belgium illegally but somehow he managed that and then he arranged for a Belgian, who lived near the border -- excuse me.

And in that area of Belgium, was -- until World War I, was part of Germany.

BILL BENSON: Okay.

HARRY: So he was a German-speaking Belgian.

And u, had, he actually commuted on a regular basis -- I think he worked in Germany, and lived in Belgium.

And crossing the border for -- for him was no problem.

He took us -- that is my mother, my brother, and my sister and I to cross the border into Belgium in his car, there was a little incident there.

BILL BENSON: I want you to share the incident with us.

HARRY: Again, I -- I remember, I was one year old.

BILL BENSON: Right. But you're central to the story.

HARRY: Yes. We got to the border. It happened at -- just when we got to the border, Hitler was giving a speech over the radio. It was a very important speech, because it involved the -- what was going to happen to the part of Czechoslovakia -- Hitler met with the prime ministers of France and England that they -- he was speaking about.

So the driver was called in to go into the custom house.

And then he came back, and he -- the German guard, there was one German guard outside, because the others were inside, listening to the speech.

Um, he opened the gate.

And in the meantime, while we were waiting, my mother had given me the keys to the car.

BILL BENSON: To keep you occupied.

HARRY: To keep me occupied yeah. The driver came back from the car, my mother gave him a keys there was a whole set of keys and he was looking for which was the right keys. And, you know, the German guard got impatient, put down the gate. Came over to the car.

And he -- until then he had not looked at the car, but -- this was at nighttime.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: It was flashing -- he had his flashlight and -- looked at each of us in the car and -- you know, the car started. The guard let us open the gate and let us through.

BILL BENSON: You were now into Belgium and you went to Antwerp.

HARRY: Belgium. Yes.

BILL BENSON: Before we turn to that. What do you know about any efforts your parents had made, to try to leave Germany, earlier?

I think you had shared they tried to get a visa to the U.S. at one point.

HARRY: They had applied for a visa to come to the United States, but the number -- meant it would have been years before we could come. My father even arranged -- well, he had sent money -- I don't know how, but probably illegally -- to England. A large sum of money.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: In preparation for that.

BILL BENSON: In preparation for that.

I was also going to ask you, you, of course, mentioned that this policeman who had been a family friend, if I remember correctly, he was the fiancé of a young woman who had been the family maid. At one point, but you had to -- she had to leave working for you.

And -- and why was that?

HARRY: Young German women were no longer allowed to work for Jewish families.

BILL BENSON: So that was part of all the restrictions against Jews, under Hitler even before you left Germany?

HARRY: Right.

BILL BENSON: You're in Antwerp.

Do you know much about how your parents -- what their life was like in the -- in the beginning, while they were in Antwerp? How they were able to sort of get themselves reestablished?

HARRY: I think that although we were allowed to stay in Belgium, even though we were refugees -- there were restrictions on work. I don't think my father was allowed to take a job.

And -- so he was dealing in currency. There were many people who wanted to leave Belgium, or Europe; um... because of the threat of war.

And -- but they needed currency that was um...

That was uh, worthy outside of Belgium.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: So the dollars, you needed American dollars or the British pound; and my father was in the business of exchanging currency to make a living.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh. So they were making ends meet and you would continue to -- this was late 1938.

And you would continue living in Belgium and, of course, World War II began, when Germany invaded opponent in September of 1939, but for you, things changed dramatically when Germany invaded Belgium in May of 1940.

A few days after the invasion started, your family fled for France.

Harry, tell us what you can about your family's attempt to try to make it to France, and what happened to you once you reached the border.

HARRY: Right.

Um...

As you said, the invasion started May 10th, on May 14, which was my brother and sister's birthday, they were born on the same day, a year apart.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh.

HARRY: My family and four other families arranged to travel to -- to the French border.

And they rented a truck, with a driver.

And he was supposed to drive us to the French border.

But about two million Belgian people decided to do the same thing; they wanted --

BILL BENSON: At the same time?

HARRY: Yes.

So there were a couple of million people -- Belgian refugees on the road.

BILL BENSON: Fleeing for France and traveling by any means possible right.

HARRY: Right. There were some vehicles, put most people were -- in cars and bicycles but most people were walking.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: Carrying whatever valuables they could. So the roads were extremely crowded.

We got to Ostend, on the Belgian coast, and the driver of the truck said, "This is as far as I'm going." He didn't want to go any further, either because of -- it was impossible with all the people on the road; or whatever.

So he dropped everybody off.

BILL BENSON: Said basically, get out. I'm done.

HARRY: "Get out."

So then --

BILL BENSON: Do you know if you had any belongings with you?

HARRY: We had some. I don't know... what we had, but --

BILL BENSON: Essentially what you could carry?

HARRY: Yes, yeah.

There was -- one of the other families were related to us.

And the two families continued, then, walking -- following the coastal road, which leads to France.

BILL BENSON: Might I jump in here, too, Harry and while you're fleeing with a couple of million people, the Germans were strafing with fighter planes, coming in and strafing, and bombing and so it was a very scary time.

HARRY: Right. I don't remember that personally.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: But, yes, that's what was happening.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: So we continued all the way to the border.

And, actually, on the way my -- my father and cousin -- he was a cousin -- they -- they bought a -- a surrey, a kind of a...

Bicycle for -- with three or four wheels and that you see in some resorts. Like, Virginia Beach, people ped /* people pedal these around.

BILL BENSON: On the beach -- or on the streets.

HARRY: On the streets or on the boardwalk. And so they put the belongings whatever they had on top of that, and the other family had -- my cousin, was also three years old. I was almost three years old -- both of us.

And everybody else pushed, and pulled the things until we got to the border.

When we got to the border... um...

The French didn't let us in, because we were stateless, we didn't have nationality, they let the Belgians into France, and they didn't let us in.

BILL BENSON: And your parents were not Belgians, and they had lost their citizenship in Germany;; is that right?

HARRY: I don't know if they ever had it.

BILL BENSON: If they even ever had it. So they were considered. They had no country, stateless.

>> So there -- (Harry) I don't know what my parents' plans were, whether they wanted to try again later. But anyway, they -- they moved back from the border.

And they went to the villa, in the first resort that -- there's all resorts on the coast.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: And my father by then had run out of money. So my parents subrented the house, the villa.

My brother told me there must have been about 50 people staying there at the time.

BILL BENSON: All probably in the same plight as you?

HARRY: Refugees who were not allowed into France.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: Yeah.

Around that time that I had my very first memory in my life. The memories of being next to the road in a ditch.

And I know my mother was next to me; and I'm aware of many people in the ditch, and next to me, on the road, there's a British officer. After Poland was invaded, in September of 1939, England and France declared war on Germany.

And nothing much happened un- -- but the British sent 300,000 soldiers. Over to France. Belgium was neutral.

So they -- they didn't -- Belgium didn't want any English troops on its soil, because that would have compromised their neutrality.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: But these troops were put on the French-Belgian border to see what was going to happen. Germany was going to invade Belgium, then they were going to move into Belgium, and that's what happened. May 10th.

As you said.

Germany invaded Belgium, and the British troops moved in.

So, like -- we saw in the picture.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: -- earlier, the British soldiers were going --

BILL BENSON: Into this way --

HARRY: Right.

So in my memory... I'm standing -- I'm sorry, I'm -- I'm lying in the ditch, but the British soldier is right next to me, on the road, standing.

And he's looking at the sky with binoculars.

And I fall asleep. I'm less than three years old at the time. Fall asleep.

I wake up, and he's gone. The officer is gone.

So I turned to my mother and asked -- and she tells me -- and I know that she's anxious at this point.

That something's happened.

Of course, I don't understand.

But...

I know that she's uncomfortable.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh. And that's your first actual memory that you have.

HARRY: Right.

BILL BENSON: And, of course, not to go into it here, but that's where "Dunkirk" figures into the history of World War II, with the British trying to rescue as many of their soldiers after being repelled by the Germans at that point.

Harry, so you're in this home, in La Panne, but very quickly, the Germans arrive, too, and they occupy the same town. So you now pretty much have to leave. And return to Antwerp.

Tell us about that.

HARRY: Right.

Um...

Well, we had no choice, at that point there was no point getting into -- trying to get into France.

HARRY: Because Germans are invading France too.

HARRY: France was already invaded.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: And Belgium had surrendered already and soon the French would do the same.

So the only thing you could do is go back to our apartment in Antwerp.

So started the other way.

And walking.

But on the way we got picked up by German trucks that were returning empty from the front.

And they also fed us. They were just soldiers, they didn't care that we were Jewish or anything, they were -- in the war at that time.

So they picked us up.

Not necessarily out of kindness, but probably to get us off the road.

BILL BENSON: Because you're clogging the roads.

HARRY: Because we were not alone, obviously, there were lots and lots of people.

BILL BENSON: They drove you back to Antwerp?

HARRY: Right.

BILL BENSON: Okay.

HARRY: And my parents -- resumed their lives my father went back to his business, my brother went back to school, and I was at home with my mother.

BILL BENSON: But what's profoundly now, of course, the Germans are in control so the Nazis begin issuing all kinds of edicts against the Jews, what were some of the things they were prohibiting and requiring of you?

HARRY: They didn't start right away. This didn't start until October.

BILL BENSON: Okay.

HARRY: So there was this period where....

BILL BENSON: Life felt sort of normal.

HARRY: Sort of. Under occupation, but nothing about Jews in particular, but in started -- the first one, I think, was to require Jews to register as Jews.

Everybody in Belgium had to register, where they lived. This was before the war, but now the Germans' authority, the German authorities required Jews to register as Jews, which is actually against the Belgium Constitution.

But since they were the occupiers, they enforced that.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: Another thing was Jews could not own radios.

Another thing was.... restrictions on employment.

Civil servants -- civil servants couldn't be Jews, for teachers, any kind of government employee could be Jewish.

Doctors could only practice with Jewish patients, same with lawyers.

And so on.

(A pause) so -- and as far as employment was concerned, it messed up my father because he was not one of those categories but it affected us many other ways

BILL BENSON: For your father, of course, it wouldn't be long, of course, before he was called for forced labor. What did that mean?

HARRY: German authorities, set up a Jewish council, which was, then -- as a way of -- of ruling over the -- over the Jewish Community, the -- the Germans would just give the orders to the Jewish community and the -- the Jewish community -- or, I'm sorry, the Jewish council, was required to carry out the orders.

One of the things that the Germans required was able-bodied men, Jewish men, to go to work, for them.

Ostensible in factories and so on.

They also took Belgians, nonJewish Belgians, but they were paid.

BILL BENSON: They got paid.

HARRY: They were, like, workers, but the Jews were slave laborers. And they were sent -- many of them were sent to the northern part of France. To build the Atlantic wall, which -- bunkers to prevent the British from landing in Europe again.

And France, Belgium. My father was one of those who was called out. He was supposed to report at that train station on a certain day with one suitcase.

And the Germans had required the first ones to be -- first Jewish workers to write back home, telling their families that everything was okay, they -- they were working.

That they were lodged and fed, and conditions were good; so that other people were called out -- would --

BILL BENSON: Would go.

HARRY: Would go, but my father didn't trust them.

So instead of reporting for work, we left Antwerp.

And we moved to Brussels.

In Brussels, my parents didn't -- didn't register as -- which was maybe helpful later on.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh, because then your presence was unknown at that point to the German authorities.

HARRY: Right. Right.

BILL BENSON: And -- now you're in Brussels.

In September -- and you stayed there for -- for a while, in September 1942, after you had been to Brussels, in fact, for I think about 18 months; that's when your parents made the extraordinary decision to put the family into hiding.

What -- what can you tell us about -- what propelled them to -- to make that kind of step? We're now going to go into hiding and what they -- what they did?

HARRY: Okay.

In May of 1942, the German authorities required Jews to -- wear a yellow star on their outer garments.

Um, at first, in Brussels -- Belgium has two national -- well, officially three national languages.

French.

Flemish, and German.

Basically, the northern part is Flemish.

And the southern part is French.

Brussels where we lived then, was French, I should point out that there was more anti-Semitism in the Flemish part of Belgium as opposed to the southern part.

BILL BENSON: Okay.

HARRY: On the part of Belgian people.

And -- and the lower -- and the French-speaking part, in Brussels,

the -- Brussels -- people, the authorities in Brussels, and in Liege, another city, the -- it was just liege, the -- the authorities refused to -- distribute the stars.

They resisted for about a month. Then they had to -- but they gave more Jews

the -- the opportunity of finding hiding places.

BILL BENSON: Okay. Okay.

HARRY: Then -- initially, the Germans, the asking the Jewish council to announce that they would repeatriate, or -- or -- report Jews who were willing, volunteer, to be deported to another country. They didn't say where.

Families would be kept together.

There would be work. There would be housing and so on.

That was the exception. So they kept about 4,000 people to volunteer. They wanted 10 to help. They didn't get 10,000. So they started having roundups, that was -- in August.

And they started in Antwerp.

They had two -- two or three roundups.

They came at night.

They have the addresses and they went to areas that were predominantly Jewish.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh.

HARRY: They picked up everybody.

In Antwerp, the police collaborated with them.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh.

HARRY: They surrounded the whole neighborhood with trucks, that picked everybody up that they could find.

Whole families, including old people, babies, sick people -- so, obviously, it was no longer that they were taking people to work.

Babies can't work.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: So the word got back to Brussels.

And my parents took the precautions and they came at night. We didn't sleep in our apartment anymore. Even though we were not registered as Jews, it happened that we lived in a Jewish neighborhood.

BILL BENSON: Right, so if they come through, you're going to get caught there.

HARRY: Right. So I know -- we split up. I was staying with my uncle Abraham, who -- he was nearby, but not -- not in a predominantly Jewish area and my parents -- I don't know who I was with, who else from my family, either with friends or my uncle, Abraham.

And so a few days later, I think September 3rd or so -- the raid happened in Brussels. Without the proportion of the police.

And everybody who was there was taken away.

We were lucky because we were not there at that point. We went into hiding. My -- my parents arranged with a neighbor -- with neighbors for my brother, my sister and I to stay with them -- well, actually, not stay with them.

My parents asked them to move -- it was an elderly couple.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh.

HARRY: They asked them to -- to move to a -- another neighborhood. Where people would know them and we could pass for their grandchildren.

BILL BENSON: Okay.

HARRY: So these people agreed. They were paid to do that.

HARRY: Uh-huh.

HARRY: .

So for a short period of time I didn't know, not very long we stayed with them.

BILL BENSON: Your three siblings together.

HARRY: Right. And my parents moved into an apartment in the building that looked like it was vacant.

BILL BENSON: Okay.

HARRY: And then, after this short period of time, the family were with -- the name was Coons, C-o-o-n-s, they decided to move back to the -- the old neighborhood because they were all empty apartments. Nice apartments.

So they moved back, which is not a good idea.

Also, their grandson was living with them.

BILL BENSON: Their grandson.

HARRY: Their real grandson was living with them. And he was, like, 18 years old. He was unemployed.

So he decided to -- to join -- what was, essentially, the German army. It was -- before -- a militia, that was associated with the fascist party in Belgium.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: So that was another problem.

BILL BENSON: He knows he has three kids living in his grandparents' house.

HARRY: Right. Right. So my parents took us away from there.

After that, my sister and I were in the -- in the countryside, in the children's home. I'm not sure what it was.

And we stayed there for a while. And my brother came to visit us, and we realized that there were Jewish grown-ups, adults, living in -- in that house too, and that made it unsafe for us children -- you couldn't pass -- just have a more difficult time.

So that was unsafe.

So we were taken away from there. I should mention that -- once the -- the Germans started the roundups, there were a dozen or more underground organizations that

helped Jews in various ways come to provided false I.D. cards, because Jewish I.D. cards -- everybody, I think over 16 and over, had to carry a -- an I.D. card and stamped "Jew".

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: So at that point -- I'm sorry, I got --

BILL BENSON: So you had to leave this -- this sort of children's home that you were in; and is that when you went to the Vanderlinden family?

HARRY: Right.

BILL BENSON: Yeah.

HARRY: And, again, it was an underground organization.

BILL BENSON: That made the arrangements?

HARRY: Right. So my sister and I ended up with the Vanderlindens.

They lived on the edge of Brussels, in a cross street, and lived in a very um... very nice neighborhood. It was created by the municipality.

They built these houses -- road houses a yard in front and a back yard, very nice, and we stayed with the Vanderlindens.

There.

That was the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium.

And I didn't speak Flemish, but the Vanderlindens spoke French.

They sent me to school, it was a Catholic school.

The nun -- the teachers were nuns. All the instruction was in Flemish.

All the kids speak -- spoke Flemish.

BILL BENSON: You spoke French.

HARRY: And I spoke French, so I couldn't speak with the French, the nuns could speak French.

As well as Flemish, but the instruction was still in Flemish.

BILL BENSON: Right. Right.

HARRY: There was a church next door, and -- during the schooltime, sometimes we were taken to church. That was my first experience in a church. And was kind of in awe of the rituals, and the -- the statues, the windows... all these things.

And, of course, that was quite scary, the statue of Jesus Christ on the cross, I couldn't understand what that was about.

After I had been there, I had been at the school for a while.

BILL BENSON: Do you know, was the -- was the belief of those -- that ran the Catholic school, that you were French-speaking, Belgium from the southern part of Belgium, or did they know that you were in -- in fact, Jewish, refugees in hiding?

HARRY: Mrs. Vanderlinden took me to the school, and I remember being -- meeting the mother superior. And they had a long conversation, I don't know what she told her.

BILL BENSON: Okay.

HARRY: Mother superior was very nice to me, she gave me a pair from the orchard, which seemed huge at the time.

It was special, because food was scarce during the war.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh.

HARRY: So I remember that.

I don't know what she told her. I don't know -- I assumed she told her I was Jewish, but -- that might have been the only person at the school.

BILL BENSON: Otherwise, you're Henri.

HARRY: Yes, I was Henri.

Harry was my given name, it's a germ -- yes, it's a German name as well as an Anglo-Saxon name, but in Belgium, Harry -- that sounds very strange.

Definitely foreign.

So I had to change to Henri.

BILL BENSON: So you had stayed with the Vanderlindens for a while in the country and then they moved into the city.

Am I correct about that?

Tell us why that happened. And where you moved.

HARRY: There was an incident.

My brother was also staying in that area. Where the Vanderlindens lived. I didn't know it -- nobody told me because they were afraid I would --

BILL BENSON: You would talk.

HARRY: I would talk.

So I -- I -- but the Gestapo went to the house, where my brother was staying. He was there with -- and there were two other Jewish kids hidden there as well.

The Gestapo, then, didn't go there for the Jewish kids, they were from the intelligence, they were actually looking for the son of the family.

Who is an adult. A young adult.

He and some other young Belgians were working in Germany, on the railroad yard.

And -- and at some point, because they were, like, regular workers they got a leave -- a leave to go home, for five days.

But it took them three days to get there.

Because -- the rail traffic was interrupted by bombing.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: So they decided -- well, took them three days to get there.

They were going to spend the -- their time in -- with their families and then return to Germany.

So they were late coming back.

And in the meantime, the railroad yard, where they worked, had been bombed by the Allies.

So the -- the Gestapo suspected that there -- that they were -- that there was at least a spy, one spy that -- among them, who was informing the Allies.

About whatever was going on in the railroad yard where they worked. They were all put in jail.

And this -- the only -- the Gestapo seemed -- looking for evidence, they were looking for a radio transmitter in the house.

They looked behind the pictures.

And so on.

They didn't find anything, when stay walked in, they saw the kids, and they knew they would leave them there. They said, here there are Jewish kids, they spoke to them in German.

BILL BENSON: This is the Gestapo saying this.

HARRY: This is the Gestapo, yes.

And after -- a while, they -- they left, but before leaving they told my brother, and the other two kids that they would be back, the next day, to pick them up.

Of course, my brother and the other kids didn't wait around.

The -- my brother came -- he knew where I was staying, with my sister and came and told us that we had to leave, because if they come back the next day, they might search the neighborhood as well; so we left.

So I went and stayed with my parents for a short time, in their hiding place.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh.

HARRY: And then my parents arranged with the -- asked the underground organization, that hid us to arrange with the Vanderlindens, to move, again, to a different neighborhood in Brussels, where they would not be known.

And so they agreed to do that.

My parents paid for the move. But they had to change, and I moved with them.

BILL BENSON: Into the city.

HARRY: Into the city.

BILL BENSON: Harry, our time is starting to get short and there's a couple of things I know -- I think you would want to talk about and I certainly want you to -- when you were in hiding, in Brussels, with the Vanderlindens, and your parents were hiding in what appeared to be a vacant house -- and there's so much you can tell us about that.

Tell us about the -- the time when you encountered your mother on the street.

HARRY: Yes.

The underground didn't tell the parents where they hid the children.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: Children were separated from their parents, because dangerous for parents -- if they had their children with them, children have special needs, and so on. So -- but -- so the parents essentially didn't know where their children were, they were taken all over the country. Somehow my mother knew where I was. So she occasionally, not very often, but occasionally came to visit me, I was a baby so --

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: Once I was with the Vanderlindens, in Brussels, after the move, I was no longer hidden physically; I didn't have to hide.

BILL BENSON: You were Henri.

HARRY: I was Henri Vanderlinden. I went to school.

The only thing that was hidden, was -- I had a hidden identity.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: I was pretending to be Henri Vanderlinden.

So -- but....

Sorry.

BILL BENSON: Your mother.

HARRY: Oh, yes.

BILL BENSON: You encounter your mother.

HARRY: So one day I was playing outside with another little boy. We were on the sidewalk.

And we had a ball. So we were throwing the ball back and forth.

And then all of a sudden, I realized, my mother is behind the boy. She's walking in my direction.

I had been given various instructions about how to behave.

Obviously, I -- I couldn't tell anybody I was Jewish.

BILL BENSON: Because you're 6 or so now, 6 or 7?

HARRY: 6.

BILL BENSON: 6, 6, yeah.

HARRY: Yes, but nobody had told me what to do.

So I saw my mother on the street.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: So I -- I was thinking what am I going to do? She would be getting closer and closer and eventually, she came up to me.

She passed by me, she didn't look at me. I didn't look at her, I could have touched her, she was so close.

But I realized I was not supposed to recognize her.

BILL BENSON: Incredible composure, though, under those circumstances.

HARRY: Yes, yeah, I think I did my best, at between 5 and 7.

BILL BENSON: Right. It's incredible. I know we're jumping ahead, but in August or September of 1944, your mother took out of the Vanderlinden home as the Germans were retreating.

And it wouldn't be long until you were liberated.

Tell us about being with your mother and being liberated if you don't mind.

HARRY: So one day, my mother showed up at the Vanderlindens and this was not a visit -- she immediately said she came to get me to take me to my parents' hiding place. I -- I didn't know why she actually didn't explain. It was very strange, because the war was over.

And -- but -- I wasn't going to argue with her.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh.

HARRY: So she -- she -- what I remember is being on the streetcar with her. And... she -- I was sitting by the window and she pointed out to the window and said to me, "Look," she said to me -- she didn't speak French.

So she -- she spoke to me in German.

That was a give-away, so, I mean, she's whispering to me.

BILL BENSON: Whispering to you.

HARRY: She said, look, out the window.

So I look out the window, and there's a -- a little German truck, next -- with -- we were stopped at that point.

And right next to me, I -- there's this truck, and on top of the truck, there's a German soldier.

With a machine gun.

And he's looking at -- at the building, keeps looking around, like, he's -- like, he's scared. It was not a normal behavior for a German soldier.

And in front of his truck, there's a horse, a truck being pulled by a horse, must have run out of gas or something.

BILL BENSON: Uh-huh.

HARRY: And my mother whispers to me, the Germans are running away. Remember this.

BILL BENSON: You remember that too.

Harry, once -- once the -- the allies, I believe the British had arrived, in -- in Brussels, your mother took you to -- to -- to see the incoming allied troops.

Tell us about that when you went to the park.

HARRY: So before the allies arrived we knew they were getting closer. And -- and in fact when they got close we could hear the canons fire already.

And there -- it was British troops that liberated Brussels.

They arrived, one evening, the next morning, my mother took me, of course, I'm seven years old at that time.

So -- there's a lot I don't understand yet; but my mother said, "We're going" -- I think -- normally, we didn't go out.

BILL BENSON: Right.

HARRY: So -- said "we're going out. We're going to go to" -- there was a park, not far away.

And they and I didn't know why we were going, but my mother was going out I asked why my father is not going out with us and she tells me, he hasn't left the apartment for two years.

And he hasn't seen people and talked with people for that time.

He's not ready to face the world at that point. So we -- okay, so we go off, and there are lots of people coming out of their houses, and we're all going in the same direction.

Along the way, we arrive and visit a German tank.

And the church is on fire, so, obviously, I was very curious, and I stopped, wanted to see what was going to happen.

I wanted to see the soldiers come out of the tank, and... um... what it was, I didn't realize it then, the -- Belgians, the Belgian resistance at that point was attacking the German army. As they were retreating.

And they probably threw Molotov cocktail on top of the tank, my mother was impatient, she grabbed me by the arm to come out and let's go. So we continued, with all these people. And we arrive at the park.

And that was -- that was quite a sight. I knew something was big happening. It was this row of tanks. They arrived the night before. British tanks this time.

And there were a lot of soldiers, and a lot of -- a lot of civilians, and everybody was hugging and kissing them.

And giving them flowers, and drinks.

My mother and I walked over to a tank. There was one soldier standing on the tank.

And we looked up at him, and he looked down at us smiling.

And then he extended his arm.

So we couldn't speak with him. We didn't speak the language, but my mother understood. She lifted me up and she pulled me up.

And... he held me in his arms.

And I looked down at my mother. She said, "Give him a kiss on the cheek" and so I kissed him.

(A pause) we were smiling -- he was smiling, and I looked down at my mother.

And she was crying.

So then I couldn't understand why she was crying.

I was upset. She said it's all right. I'm crying from joy.

BILL BENSON: Crying from joy, and, of course, this was September 1944, the war, itself, Belgium is liberated; you're liberated. The war would continue until in fact -- what, 74 years ago today, May 8th, 1945.

We're pretty much at the end of the Program. I wish we had two or three more hours with Harry because there's lots that he, obviously, couldn't go into detail about or skipped over, or to tell us from this point forward, what happened as they tried to reestablish their lives and -- but -- and we also don't have time for questions from you in the program. But Harry's going to conclude the program in just a moment.

When he finishes, you're going to stay up here on the stage, and so we invite any of you who would like to, to come up on the stage, and ask a question of Harry, if you would like to.

Or shake his hand, or have a photograph taken with him. So we do welcome that. So please, please, do that. Thanks for being us with us, we hope you can come back to another "First Person", all our programs until June 6th will be livestreamed and all of our programs will be on the museum's YouTube page, so one way or the other we hope you can take in some other "First Person" programs.

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 Harry to close today's program.

HARRY: I would like to leave you with two thoughts. First, my family escaped from Germany by crossing the border into Belgium, illegally.

We were refugees, seeking asylum.

And we were allowed to stay. We weren't the only ones.

Over 90% of the estimated 60 to 70,000 Jews in Belgium at the beginning of the War

excuse me...

Were refugees. Or illegal immigrants.

Mostly from Germany, Austria, and Poland.

More than 60% of us survived the Nazi attempt to ex-terminate us; however, that would not have been possible without the many Belgians such as the Vanderlindens, who risked their lives -- their lives and the lives of their families.

To help us.

Second:

Following the liberation of Belgium, I was reunited with my parents and siblings.

I remember my sister, 16-year-old -- 16 years old at the time, saying to me, "Nothing happened to us. We were not caught. And we didn't starve to death."

When I talked with the visitors at the museum, I'm often asked by school-aged children, what was the worst thing that happened to you during the war?

I didn't understand it then, but it's clear now.

It was being separated from my parents from the ages of 5 to seven.

Children that age expect their parents to protect them.

Not to give them away to strangers.

Even nice ones.

BILL BENSON: Thank you, thank you, Harry. Thank you, all, very much.
[APPLAUSE]
(12:05:22 p.m.)