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00:00:47,000 --> 00:00:52,316

>> Bill Benson: Welcome. Thank you for joining us for First Person:

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00:00:52,321 --> 00:00:54,321

Conversations with Holocaust Survivors.

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00:00:54,321 --> 00:01:00,476

My name is Bill Benson. I have hosted the Museum's First Person program since it began in 2000.

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00:01:00,484 --> 00:01:05,885

Through these monthly conversations, we bring you firsthand accounts of survival of the Holocaust.

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00:01:05,890 --> 00:01:11,782

Each of our First Person guests serves as a volunteer at the Museum.

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00:01:11,782 --> 00:01:13,319

Jewish Holocaust survivors are those who were displaced,

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00:01:16,211 --> 00:01:22,600

persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, social, and political policies of the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and

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00:01:23,834 --> 00:01:33,813

1945. This included inmates of concentration camps, ghettos, and prisons, as well as refugees and those in hiding.

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00:01:33,813 --> 00:01:37,773

We are honored to have Holocaust survivor

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00:01:37,774 --> 00:01:43,414

Irene Fogel Weiss share her individual personal account

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00:01:43,415 --> 00:01:48,115

of the Holocaust with us today. During our

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00:01:48,116 --> 00:01:54,226

program, please send us your questions and let us know where you are joining us from in the chat.

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00:01:54,227 --> 00:01:57,047

Irene, thank you so much for agreeing

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00:01:57,047 --> 00:02:02,127

to be our First Person today.

>> Irene Weiss: Thank you.

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00:02:02,127 --> 00:02:05,060

>> Bill Benson: Irene You have so much to share with us.

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00:02:05,060 --> 00:02:10,040

Let's begin with youby telling us about your family and your early life in Czechoslovakia?

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00:02:10,042 --> 00:02:14,026

>> Irene Weiss: So, I come from a family of six children,

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00:02:14,027 --> 00:02:22,245

ages about 7-17, very busy family

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00:02:22,245 --> 00:02:29,289

in a small village, farming village, where the

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00:02:29,290 --> 00:02:33,986

children were free to roam around and explore.

21

00:02:33,986 --> 00:02:41,045

My parents worked all of the time, because the upkeep of feeding and

22

00:02:41,046 --> 00:02:47,562

clothing the family, everything done by hand, no help from machines or

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00:02:47,563 --> 00:02:50,278

stores, so they were busy and

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00:02:50,278 --> 00:02:52,896

we didn't require a lot of attention.

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00:02:52,896 --> 00:03:01,145

My father owned a small lumberyard in a neighboring village and he left

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00:03:01,152 --> 00:03:04,962

in the morning and came back.

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00:03:04,964 --> 00:03:12,424

He was much more patient than our mother, because he was not quite as

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00:03:12,424 --> 00:03:14,714

exhausted, as I imagined. He helped us with our homework,

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00:03:14,717 --> 00:03:21,702

he taught us Hebrew, taught us how to read Hebrew.

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00:03:21,702 --> 00:03:23,702

He was extremely kind and patient

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00:03:23,703 --> 00:03:28,625

and between this loving family, we were just a happy

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00:03:28,625 --> 00:03:30,625

bunch of kids.

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00:03:30,625 --> 00:03:40,431

We enjoyed school, had lots of friends and life was nice and normal.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, tell us about this photograph, if you don't mind.

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00:03:40,437 --> 00:03:44,168

>> Irene Weiss: This is the only one I have of my family except

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00:03:44,169 --> 00:03:49,065

the one that was taken in Auschwitz.

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00:03:49,066 --> 00:03:51,066

So, my mother here

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00:03:51,066 --> 00:03:54,258

is 30 years old. I am the baby.

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00:03:54,258 --> 00:03:56,606

This is 1930.

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00:03:56,606 --> 00:03:58,794

She has three children.

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00:03:58,794 --> 00:04:03,733

The little girl is Serena who is about 4, she survived.

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00:04:03,733 --> 00:04:09,168

The little boy Moshe he is about 2 1/2-3, he did not survive.

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00:04:09,168 --> 00:04:20,752

After this, my mother from 1930 on she has three more children who did not survive.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, as you said

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00:04:20,752 --> 00:04:22,752

you were in a small farming community,

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00:04:22,752 --> 00:04:29,543

how large was the Jewish population in your community?

>> Irene Weiss: The Jewish population consisted of 10 families,

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00:04:29,552 --> 00:04:32,617

lots of children and

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00:04:32,618 --> 00:04:41,656

mostly they were small merchants and craftsmen, tailors, Shoemakers, small stores

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00:04:41,656 --> 00:04:45,264

rather poor.

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00:04:45,267 --> 00:04:53,171

It was not a wealthy Jewish community by any means. We lived quietly.

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00:04:53,171 --> 00:04:58,757

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me in the past that there was no

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00:04:58,760 --> 00:05:03,548

antisemitism at that time, from what you understand, can you say a

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00:05:03,551 --> 00:05:05,551

little bit more about that?

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00:05:05,551 --> 00:05:08,474

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, there was no antisemitism.

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00:05:08,475 --> 00:05:16,675

My father and his father grew up in the same place, same house. People knew him as a boy and as a man.

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00:05:16,678 --> 00:05:20,388

He was a very kind patient person.

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00:05:20,393 --> 00:05:22,920

He sold things from the

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00:05:22,921 --> 00:05:27,076

lumberyard and they came to the house and talked about their orders.

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00:05:27,077 --> 00:05:29,077

It was very pleasant.

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00:05:29,077 --> 00:05:31,077

My mother would talk to the neighbors across the

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00:05:31,077 --> 00:05:36,139

fence and do some exchanging of produce.

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00:05:36,149 --> 00:05:38,149

We had no feeling

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00:05:38,149 --> 00:05:42,527

of antisemitism.

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00:05:42,529 --> 00:05:49,808

Of course, it was understood that we went to the Synagogue and they went to church and it was accepted.

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00:05:49,808 --> 00:05:54,285

>> Bill Benson: Before we move on to the events of World War 2 and

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00:05:54,285 --> 00:05:59,464

the Holocaust, I think we have one more family photo. Tell us about this one

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00:05:59,464 --> 00:06:01,683

if you don't mind, Irene.

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00:06:01,683 --> 00:06:07,974

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, I'm the one in the circle. Next to me my little

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00:06:07,974 --> 00:06:11,428

sister, Edith, she did not survive.

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00:06:11,429 --> 00:06:17,081

Behind me is my sister Serena, she survived. The other young lady is a neighbor

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00:06:17,083 --> 00:06:23,453

or friend and the little boy there is her brother.

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00:06:23,454 --> 00:06:34,700

So basically it is my family, Serena, me and Edith, oh, and the little boy in the

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00:06:34,700 --> 00:06:42,190

middle also did not survive, but the young lady did.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Irene.

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00:06:42,194 --> 00:06:48,205

In early 1939, everything changed for you and your family

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00:06:48,205 --> 00:06:51,334

when your community was occupied by Hungary

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00:06:51,334 --> 00:06:54,198

an ally of Nazi Germany, which immediately changed your lives.

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00:06:54,198 --> 00:06:56,803

What happened once you were under

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00:06:56,803 --> 00:06:58,803

Hungarian rule?

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00:06:58,803 --> 00:07:02,722

>> Irene Weiss: Things did change immediately, although our neighbors

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00:07:02,726 --> 00:07:09,746

and people in the town remain pretty much the same, but in the surrounding villages and the cities,

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00:07:09,747 --> 00:07:15,147

the governments changed there were

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00:07:15,148 --> 00:07:18,388

fascists in charge of the government.

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00:07:18,388 --> 00:07:28,330

They were imitating what the Germans did with the exclusion of Jews in

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00:07:28,330 --> 00:07:37,505

professions and business and the hate speech on radio and in newspapers,

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00:07:37,505 --> 00:07:47,444

we were well aware we were surrounded by hostility and we had to

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00:07:47,446 --> 00:07:58,152

decide to lay low and not be out there, you know, just in case.

>> Bill Benson: You told me that your father

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00:07:58,152 --> 00:08:00,958

lost his job.

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00:08:00,964 --> 00:08:03,172

Will you say a little bit about that?

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00:08:03,173 --> 00:08:09,543

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, for a while, he kept it, but the restrictions escalated,

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00:08:09,543 --> 00:08:15,423

so there came a time that somebody else claimed the business

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00:08:15,423 --> 00:08:18,363

and it was officially handed over.

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00:08:18,363 --> 00:08:22,179

My father no longer went to his business.

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00:08:22,179 --> 00:08:30,526

He was at home and it affected our income for the family, and also, you

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00:08:30,535 --> 00:08:37,776

know, the anxiety about a very big blow to confiscate your property and

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00:08:37,780 --> 00:08:42,236

not knowing what the future has for us.

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00:08:42,239 --> 00:08:46,831

>> Bill Benson: How were you able to make ends meet with your father

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00:08:46,835 --> 00:08:49,131

having lost his job at that time?

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00:08:49,133 --> 00:08:54,749

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, I think the fact that we were in a farming town, we

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00:08:54,755 --> 00:08:58,967

did have some land, but we, of course, never worked it ourselves.

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00:08:58,972 --> 00:09:05,817

But because it was a farming town, my mother did have a very large vegetable

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00:09:05,817 --> 00:09:07,818

garden.

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00:09:07,818 --> 00:09:10,661

It was not just for the fun of it.

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00:09:10,661 --> 00:09:14,600

She literally grew enough food to use in the kitchen, and what she

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00:09:16,111 --> 00:09:20,396

didn't grow, she would barter with the neighbors.

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00:09:20,397 --> 00:09:22,577

So, we were never hungry.

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00:09:22,577 --> 00:09:31,247

The farmers were not Jewish, the same way, they did not feel the war for

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00:09:31,250 --> 00:09:34,718

a while in regards to food.

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00:09:34,719 --> 00:09:37,719

There was no income, there was no cash.

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00:09:37,719 --> 00:09:40,189

>> Bill Benson: No cash.

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00:09:40,189 --> 00:09:45,700

Irene, you also shared with me when I was interviewing you at the

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00:09:45,700 --> 00:09:51,631

Museum, that you were with your father on a train and had a scary

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00:09:51,632 --> 00:09:53,632

experience with your dad on that train.

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00:09:53,632 --> 00:09:59,036

Will you say a little bit about that?

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, that was one of the ways

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00:09:59,039 --> 00:10:07,075

hate against the Jews was escalating that we were in danger in many situations

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00:10:07,078 --> 00:10:14,540

So I was coming home on the train with my father, a 5-minute ride, first

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00:10:14,544 --> 00:10:20,858

stop after getting on the train, immediately when the train started

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00:10:20,860 --> 00:10:27,748

moving, there were a bunch of young teenage hoodlum types who recognized my

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00:10:27,751 --> 00:10:33,491

father as being Jews, because he had a small beard.

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00:10:33,494 --> 00:10:40,391

Since hate against Jews was now permissible, they thought they would get

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00:10:40,391 --> 00:10:48,434

away with beginning to taunt him and talk among each other as to what

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00:10:48,434 --> 00:10:54,170

would be -- what should we do with this Jewish man?

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00:10:54,487 --> 00:10:58,627

Wouldn't it be fun to throw him off the train?

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00:10:58,627 --> 00:11:05,394

They laughed and carried on and this kind of taunting and humiliation of

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00:11:05,397 --> 00:11:07,397

my father continued.

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00:11:07,397 --> 00:11:10,670

The people on the train did not say a word.

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00:11:10,672 --> 00:11:12,952

No one stood up and said stop it.

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00:11:12,952 --> 00:11:20,565

I was terrified, because they were serious, and it would have been quite

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00:11:20,565 --> 00:11:28,756

OK for them to do it without any, you know, reaction from anybody else.

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00:11:28,760 --> 00:11:34,460

My father and I were both looking out the window to see how close we

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00:11:34,460 --> 00:11:40,156

were to home and it seemed like forever, but it was only a few minutes.

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00:11:40,159 --> 00:11:47,899

When the train stopped, we got off and they did not have to carry out

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00:11:47,899 --> 00:11:52,540

their plan of having fun with this Jewish person.

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00:11:52,542 --> 00:11:56,164

>> Bill Benson: That only happened because the train stopped and you

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00:11:56,164 --> 00:11:58,574

were able to get off at that point?

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00:11:58,576 --> 00:12:04,014

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, we had been on it longer, I had no doubt they would

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00:12:04,014 --> 00:12:08,770

have thrown him off and I was already thinking, where are we, if they

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00:12:08,770 --> 00:12:14,542

happen to throw him off now, will I go to the end, will I have to walk

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00:12:14,544 --> 00:12:17,263

back and see if I can find him?

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00:12:17,265 --> 00:12:25,535

My mind was racing. What will I do if this actually happens, but the

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00:12:25,535 --> 00:12:33,801

terror of such an experience to do that to my precious father, there is

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00:12:33,801 --> 00:12:42,654

no way I can explain what I went through in the few minutes and, also,

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00:12:42,659 --> 00:12:47,978

my father never rode the train again after that.

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00:12:47,978 --> 00:12:53,038

>> Bill Benson: Irene, before we continue, I would like to let you know

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00:12:53,043 --> 00:12:57,025

we have viewers joining us today from Tennessee, Arizona, Minnesota, and Texas and other

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00:12:57,025 --> 00:13:00,645

places in the country. As well as international viewers from countries like

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00:13:00,646 --> 00:13:06,438

Brazil and Japan, so a lot of folks around the globe are tuning in to hear what you have

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00:13:06,439 --> 00:13:08,439

to say today.

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00:13:08,439 --> 00:13:12,754

I would like to ask a question on behalf of one of our audience members.

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00:13:12,754 --> 00:13:20,396

We have a question that begins, hi, dear Irene Weiss. I have one question. What was your dream as a 13-year-old

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00:13:20,404 --> 00:13:26,003

girl before the Holocaust? Lots of love from Amsterdam.

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00:13:26,004 --> 00:13:30,924

>> Irene Weiss: Of course, I was a schoolgirl with lots of friends

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00:13:30,924 --> 00:13:36,610

and interesting things,

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00:13:36,612 --> 00:13:40,878

you know, clothes and play and things like that.

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00:13:40,879 --> 00:13:48,447

I don't know that I had a special plan, but I knew that my parents had

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00:13:48,449 --> 00:13:51,287

plans for me and my siblings.

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00:13:51,288 --> 00:13:57,084

In this town, school stopped at grade six, because the farmers needed

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00:13:57,088 --> 00:14:00,469

their children to work in the field.

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00:14:00,471 --> 00:14:09,818

My family did not have our children do anything special, so that my

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00:14:09,823 --> 00:14:19,889

mother in particular wanted to be sure we had more than a sixth grade

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00:14:19,895 --> 00:14:21,895

education.

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00:14:21,895 --> 00:14:32,853

So, as we all passed the sixth grade, we were sent to the big city where there was a middle school and a high school

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00:14:32,853 --> 00:14:42,794

and continued our education, so it was understood that we will go that path.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, in 1942, your father,

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00:14:42,796 --> 00:14:49,680

along with thousands of other Jewish men, were forced by the Hungarians to do forced labor for the

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00:14:49,681 --> 00:14:52,691

military. Tell us about your father's mandatory forced-labor service and

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00:14:52,698 --> 00:14:55,961

what that meant for your family?

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00:14:55,967 --> 00:14:58,477

>> Irene Weiss: Well, as

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00:14:58,481 --> 00:15:00,481

we were saying

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00:15:00,481 --> 00:15:07,187

antisemitism that was now allowed by the government proceeded,

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00:15:07,193 --> 00:15:13,793

and especially the men were more

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00:15:13,796 --> 00:15:19,796

humiliated and discriminated against than the women, because they were

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00:15:19,798 --> 00:15:25,798

more recognizable as being Jewish the way they were dressed.

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00:15:25,801 --> 00:15:31,807

So, he was called in with the other young men to forced labor.

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00:15:31,812 --> 00:15:39,382

They were not considered soldiers, they were not given weapons, but they

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00:15:39,382 --> 00:15:47,577

were taken to the front line and used in dangerous positions on the

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00:15:47,577 --> 00:15:55,770

front line that exposed them to injury and death, because they were not

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00:15:55,774 --> 00:16:00,191

respected as soldiers or trusted as soldiers.

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00:16:00,191 --> 00:16:07,143

>> Bill Benson: In fact, one of the things Jewish forced laborers were used as

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00:16:07,152 --> 00:16:12,619

mine sweepers, meaning walking out into fields to expose mines that

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00:16:12,623 --> 00:16:15,108

the soldiers wouldn't have to walk on.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, they were doing

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00:16:15,110 --> 00:16:20,115

the most dangerous work without any protection and of course many were killed.

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00:16:20,119 --> 00:16:22,119

In addition to that,

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00:16:22,119 --> 00:16:26,167

since they did not have the respect of the military,

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00:16:26,171 --> 00:16:29,825

they were humiliated and used as slave labor.

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00:16:29,827 --> 00:16:41,550

So, a condition of not being considered citizens had its effect that the

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00:16:41,550 --> 00:16:46,055

law did not protect us.

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00:16:46,058 --> 00:16:52,842

>> Bill Benson: Do you recall, Irene, how your family coped with your

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00:16:52,842 --> 00:16:57,011

father being gone to do the forced labor?

>> Irene Weiss: It was a great deal of anxiety.

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00:16:57,013 --> 00:17:01,243

it wasn't just that he was gone, he was in

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00:17:01,245 --> 00:17:08,962

hostile territory as we were. It is very hard to explain if you never

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00:17:08,962 --> 00:17:15,317

experienced what it is like to not be recognized as a citizen even if

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00:17:15,317 --> 00:17:22,125

you were born there and parents born there, and what it is like to be

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00:17:22,127 --> 00:17:28,028

worried about people who will attack you, and the police stand by and

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00:17:28,028 --> 00:17:30,028

don't stop it.

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00:17:30,028 --> 00:17:36,604

So, my mother was extremely worried whether he will come back at all,

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00:17:36,607 --> 00:17:44,932

whether he will be injured, what they are doing to him and will he come

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00:17:44,934 --> 00:17:46,934

back.

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00:17:46,934 --> 00:17:51,549

And in the meantime, the load of caring for the family and all of the

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00:17:51,556 --> 00:17:57,616

things that needed to be done fell on her alone, but it was mainly the

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00:17:57,622 --> 00:18:03,682

fear and anxiety of not being treated as a human being and as a citizen.

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00:18:03,689 --> 00:18:09,968

>> Bill Benson: Your father returned after six months, do you know why

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00:18:09,970 --> 00:18:14,317

he was allowed to return after the six-month period?

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, welll the Hungarian government

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00:18:14,319 --> 00:18:21,521

attempted tried to not be as harsh in

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00:18:21,524 --> 00:18:29,280

their laws against the Jews, as the Nazis were, little by little they became more and more harsh,

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00:18:29,283 --> 00:18:36,485

but as this point they re-evaluated these men that were called in to do the

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00:18:36,489 --> 00:18:39,813

dangerous work on the front line.

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00:18:39,814 --> 00:18:48,079

Since he was about 43, 42 and had six children, they decided to let him

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00:18:48,084 --> 00:18:55,798

go home, and so, he appeared one day without much fanfare. He came home. We were all

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00:18:55,803 --> 00:18:57,803

delighted. The children

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00:18:57,803 --> 00:19:06,014

stared at him intently because they cut his beard and we had never seen him without a beard.

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00:19:06,018 --> 00:19:09,468

We literally stared at him for a while

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00:19:09,469 --> 00:19:14,279

until we got used to it.

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00:19:14,284 --> 00:19:19,428

The family was very happy that he survived. He never talked about

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00:19:19,428 --> 00:19:22,710

his experiences. He was very quiet.

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00:19:22,710 --> 00:19:26,550

He came back in one piece and we thought we were safe.

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00:19:26,554 --> 00:19:32,544

>> Bill Benson: Before we continue, Irene, I want to let you know there are more international viewers coming

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00:19:32,544 --> 00:19:36,392

in from London, England, Melbourne, Australia. We have

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00:19:36,392 --> 00:19:38,392

Janet from Minneapolis here in

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00:19:38,392 --> 00:19:44,289

the United States and she asks, I've heard some of your testimonies before. I admire your continued commitment

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00:19:44,290 --> 00:19:46,290

to sharing your story and wisdom.

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00:19:46,290 --> 00:19:50,308

You're a remarkable woman and a superb speaker. My best to you.

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00:19:50,309 --> 00:19:55,747

So she just wanted to acknowledge how profound it is to have you speak

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00:19:55,747 --> 00:19:57,747

But we do have a question

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00:19:57,747 --> 00:19:59,796

now from Jacob.

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00:19:59,797 --> 00:20:01,797

Jacob says, hi, Irene.

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00:20:01,797 --> 00:20:04,945

I want to thank you for doing this, again, no question.

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00:20:04,948 --> 00:20:10,648

Jacob is saying, for you to do this, it can't be easy.

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00:20:10,649 --> 00:20:16,057

It means so much to me to be able to have my teenage children be able to meet and

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00:20:16,061 --> 00:20:18,061

listen to a survivor.

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00:20:18,061 --> 00:20:20,588

Best wishes to you.

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00:20:20,588 --> 00:20:29,542

Irene, as difficult as life was for Jews under Hungarian rule, it turned out to be so much tragically worse in March 1944 when the Germans invaded Hungary.

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00:20:30,188 --> 00:20:40,432

Tell us about the time and what happened to you and your family once the Germans were in power?

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00:20:40,432 --> 00:20:48,312

>> Irene Weiss: So Germany was an ally but a year before the war was over, they realized that Germany was losing the war and

231

00:20:48,313 --> 00:21:00,350

they attempted to pull out of the alliance and then Germany invaded Hungary. Now this time, we understood that we were in big trouble. Because

232

00:21:00,350 --> 00:21:11,457

the Hungarian government they wanted to be a little lenient here and there were now they were unable to do it

233

00:21:11,457 --> 00:21:13,457

Nazi Germany

234

00:21:13,457 --> 00:21:18,859

had a plan for Hungary, for the Jews of Hungary as they did

235

00:21:18,869 --> 00:21:21,461

for every country in Europe that they occupied.

236

00:21:21,464 --> 00:21:28,926

They were ready. We did not understand what their plan was, but they

237

00:21:28,930 --> 00:21:35,818

were ready and within two weeks of their occupation, we were notified to

238

00:21:35,822 --> 00:21:43,284

leave our home and with one suitcase each and report to a gathering

239

00:21:43,289 --> 00:21:51,899

place and all of the Jews in our town and neighboring towns into a ghetto that

240

00:21:51,904 --> 00:21:53,904

was as ready.

241

00:21:53,904 --> 00:22:02,052

In other words, they were very well prepared for this bureaucratic

242

00:22:02,052 --> 00:22:09,709

thing, and so suddenly, we were out of our home.

243

00:22:09,710 --> 00:22:15,221

Our entire family, we abandoned our home and livestock, whatever we

244

00:22:15,223 --> 00:22:22,237

accumulated over years, and I know that after we were out of there, our house was looted

245

00:22:22,240 --> 00:22:29,755

and we were taken away and gathered into a big city, into a

246

00:22:29,758 --> 00:22:33,766

place that was not prepared for human beings.

247

00:22:33,767 --> 00:22:40,344

There were no facilities of any kind, there was no sanitation, there was

248

00:22:40,344 --> 00:22:45,907

no running water, there was no kitchen, there was no hospital.

249

00:22:45,908 --> 00:22:54,857

We had people in there with needs of everything, old people, sick

250

00:22:54,857 --> 00:23:03,806

people, babies, everybody thrown into one big place, and a new living

251

00:23:03,806 --> 00:23:09,020

place was a corner on a floor.

252

00:23:09,024 --> 00:23:16,104

So, the Germans, as I say had a prepared plan before we left our home,

253

00:23:16,111 --> 00:23:22,719

a delegation from the officials of the town, the mayor, this was not a

254

00:23:22,726 --> 00:23:28,862

new mayor, and the police and even our school principal who was an

255

00:23:28,868 --> 00:23:35,948

official of the town came to our house and told my father that he needs

256

00:23:35,955 --> 00:23:43,035

to give him all of his money and all of his valuables and they were

257

00:23:43,042 --> 00:23:46,818

harsh about it. They were not saying please.

258

00:23:46,822 --> 00:23:51,289

They said "we know you must have" and you ought to give it to us.

259

00:23:51,289 --> 00:23:58,679

I know my father gave him something, but we did not have valuables as

260

00:23:58,682 --> 00:24:02,906

such, but they demanded whatever we did have.

261

00:24:02,907 --> 00:24:07,455

>> Bill Benson: Some of the people like the school's superintendent are

262

00:24:07,455 --> 00:24:11,242

probably people your father has known all of his life.

263

00:24:11,244 --> 00:24:15,833

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, and since they were prominent people in the town,

264

00:24:15,836 --> 00:24:17,836

they used them for effect.

265

00:24:17,836 --> 00:24:27,410

>> Bill Benson: And this place you were sent to a ghetto which was in a very large brick factory in the town of Munkacs, I believe

266

00:24:27,411 --> 00:24:36,564

am I correct that also at that the time you were forced to have your head shaved?

267

00:24:36,564 --> 00:24:41,140

>> Irene Weiss: Well, they had rules in that place, all of them very harsh.

268

00:24:41,141 --> 00:24:45,928

The transformation from being a citizen

269

00:24:45,928 --> 00:24:47,928

a person, a free person

270

00:24:47,928 --> 00:24:53,861

and a head of your family and living your free life and

271

00:24:53,871 --> 00:25:02,016

working to being one of a mob of people that

272

00:25:02,016 --> 00:25:09,075

are considered sub-human and no provisions made for us and no respect of

273

00:25:09,076 --> 00:25:11,076

any kind.

274

00:25:11,076 --> 00:25:13,222

We were humiliated.

275

00:25:13,222 --> 00:25:20,842

We were hoarded together like animals, so this was a terrible shock

276

00:25:20,843 --> 00:25:27,193

to all of us and things got worse from day-to-day.

277

00:25:27,193 --> 00:25:34,787

They were having all kinds of humiliation and threats,

278

00:25:34,787 --> 00:25:41,744

especially to the men, and yes, the women

279

00:25:41,744 --> 00:25:49,969

there was announcement about girls under 16 to report to have their hair cut,

280

00:25:49,971 --> 00:26:00,092

and without telling my mother I just went to that place, a tent in the middle of the place, sat

281

00:26:00,092 --> 00:26:02,092

down.

282

00:26:02,092 --> 00:26:07,289

I had my hair cut, because with every kind of order there was a threat,

283

00:26:07,290 --> 00:26:12,979

you know, you will be punished, your father will be punished, your, you

284

00:26:12,979 --> 00:26:19,105

know, it was always that and your father will be punished if you don't

285

00:26:19,107 --> 00:26:21,733

do that and I certainly compiled.

286

00:26:21,733 --> 00:26:32,066

I came back to that place and my mother gave me a handkerchief and I put it in my head and from then on my head was covered.

287

00:26:32,068 --> 00:26:36,202

We both looked sad. She looked at me and looked sad.

288

00:26:36,202 --> 00:26:40,154

And I remember I did not react like I would have in normal life

289

00:26:40,155 --> 00:26:48,915

when 13 year olds who have their hair cuts.

290

00:26:48,919 --> 00:26:53,763

This is not the worst of our problem and the hair will grow out.

291

00:26:53,766 --> 00:26:58,889

>> Bill Benson: Irene, I would like to take a moment to quickly remind

292

00:26:58,889 --> 00:27:03,644

our audience to please share with us any questions they have of Irene

293

00:27:03,644 --> 00:27:06,204

and do that via the chat feature.

294

00:27:06,205 --> 00:27:13,143

Irene, in less than a two-month period, a staggering number of Jews from

295

00:27:13,143 --> 00:27:20,075

across Hungary - nearly 440,000 people - were rounded up and deported to

296

00:27:20,076 --> 00:27:26,474

Auschwitz. You were in the Munkacs ghetto for three weeks when you and your family were deported.

297

00:27:26,478 --> 00:27:28,478

Tell us about leaving

298

00:27:28,478 --> 00:27:40,729

the ghetto and about your arrival at Auschwitz.

>> Irene Weiss: What was going on was the terrible conditions that we were in

299

00:27:40,729 --> 00:27:45,773

I know that the adults were always looking for some kind of

300

00:27:45,778 --> 00:27:50,434

explanation or hope that things were not as bad as it looked.

301

00:27:50,439 --> 00:27:55,483

Since we were still in our country and not far from our home

302

00:27:55,488 --> 00:27:59,703

their idea was, the talk was that

303

00:27:59,708 --> 00:28:02,799

this is temporary and we will be sent home soon.

304

00:28:02,803 --> 00:28:04,803

This cannot be sustained.

305

00:28:04,803 --> 00:28:11,474

We did not imagine that the people in charge of us had plans made and

306

00:28:11,474 --> 00:28:14,192

they knew exactly what comes next.

307

00:28:14,192 --> 00:28:21,273

This was a gathering place for the next transport, so each time we were

308

00:28:21,273 --> 00:28:24,806

horrified at what is happening to us.

309

00:28:24,810 --> 00:28:33,256

Being put in the trains that arrived there at the brick factory,

310

00:28:33,256 --> 00:28:41,702

announcements were made get your thing, hurry, hurry, line up get in the train.

311

00:28:41,703 --> 00:28:47,774

The orders were always harsh, urgent, and threatening, and so everybody

312

00:28:47,774 --> 00:28:54,391

was constantly on the double doing whatever they asked us to do.

313

00:28:54,393 --> 00:28:59,851

Hurry, hurry, get in the train, so we were literally marching alongside

314

00:28:59,858 --> 00:29:06,228

of us are soldiers and pushing the line fast, so we managed, first of

315

00:29:06,235 --> 00:29:13,060

all, we wanted to be sure we all get in the same cattle car, so

316

00:29:13,067 --> 00:29:16,707

we're holding on the children to each other.

317

00:29:16,711 --> 00:29:20,113

We're lucky we got into the same cattle car.

318

00:29:20,113 --> 00:29:28,646

The idea they are taking us elsewhere again is a terrifying feeling for

319

00:29:28,646 --> 00:29:30,646

my parents.

320

00:29:30,646 --> 00:29:36,708

I look back at what they must have felt in how we were being herded from

321

00:29:36,709 --> 00:29:39,240

this place to the next place.

322

00:29:39,241 --> 00:29:45,227

At this particular point, there was no rational explanation in our minds

323

00:29:45,227 --> 00:29:49,212

that something good -- that something good about this.

324

00:29:49,743 --> 00:29:55,263

They were terrified.

325

00:29:55,263 --> 00:29:59,518

>> Bill Benson: So, you had no idea of the destination of where you're

326

00:29:59,518 --> 00:30:02,555

going on the train and it took you to Auschwitz.

327

00:30:02,555 --> 00:30:12,315

Tell us about your arrival at Auschwitz, Irene.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, so we were locked in bolted from the outside

328

00:30:12,315 --> 00:30:19,773

people sitting on the floor and everybody wondering what is

329

00:30:19,778 --> 00:30:27,240

our fate as the train speeded along, my father looked

330

00:30:27,244 --> 00:30:34,706

out and told the people that the train was turning towards Poland and

331

00:30:34,709 --> 00:30:40,449

that was our destination and that definitely made everybody understand

332

00:30:40,452 --> 00:30:44,470

something they did not want to understand.

333

00:30:44,472 --> 00:30:50,720

We heard about persecution of the Jews by Nazis in Poland.

334

00:30:50,722 --> 00:30:57,637

What we heard was entire villages were marched out to the forest and the

335

00:30:57,637 --> 00:31:04,058

firing squad would wait for them and they would be literally mowed down

336

00:31:04,058 --> 00:31:09,984

and there would be Synagogues filled with people and Synagogues would be

337

00:31:09,985 --> 00:31:13,937

put on fire and everyone would be murdered.

338

00:31:13,937 --> 00:31:19,412

The reason we heard that occasionally, a young person would escape.

339

00:31:19,412 --> 00:31:25,305

There is one young woman who ended up in our village for a short time

340

00:31:25,311 --> 00:31:31,206

and she told these things about what was going on, about how the Jews in
341

00:31:31,211 --> 00:31:35,534

Poland were being murdered and we thought this person was exaggerating
342

00:31:35,537 --> 00:31:41,432

and it could not be that bad. But now that the train was heading towards
343

00:31:41,437 --> 00:31:46,153

Poland, people were reminded of what they heard and began to realize
344

00:31:46,157 --> 00:31:48,157

this is a possibility.

345

00:31:48,157 --> 00:31:52,673

I remember being great sadness, but total silence.

346

00:31:52,677 --> 00:31:58,487

No one spoke again in this moving train after that.

347

00:31:58,487 --> 00:32:11,529

It was absolute terror, so eventually, the train stopped and the doors
348

00:32:11,534 --> 00:32:16,969

were open from the outside.

349

00:32:16,971 --> 00:32:26,751

My father looked out before we got out and he said that he sees barracks

350

00:32:26,752 --> 00:32:33,924

and sees prisoners in striped uniform and suddenly the terror about

351

00:32:33,925 --> 00:32:40,445

arriving in the forest facing a firing squad melted away.

352

00:32:40,446 --> 00:32:45,573

They began to rationalize again that there is some hope.

353

00:32:45,573 --> 00:32:51,377

I remember adults saying, well, if we have to work, if this is a labor

354

00:32:51,377 --> 00:32:53,377

camp that is possible.

355

00:32:53,377 --> 00:32:59,104

We were relieved, absolutely relieved, but pretty soon things changed,

356

00:32:59,108 --> 00:33:07,760

so we were again heard shouting and yelling

357

00:33:07,763 --> 00:33:15,797

to get out, get out, and leave everything behind and do it fast and there were dogs and Nazi

358

00:33:15,801 --> 00:33:23,217

soldiers and people jumping out of the cattle cars filling the entire

359

00:33:23,220 --> 00:33:28,782

platform, probably 2,000 people pouring out of this train.

360

00:33:28,784 --> 00:33:36,335

As soon as the shouting of "out, out, leave everything behind and line

361

00:33:36,335 --> 00:33:45,627

up " and more shouting about men line up to one side in a column and

362

00:33:45,627 --> 00:33:53,753

women and children to another column, and even as we were out on the platform

363

00:33:53,754 --> 00:33:58,401

the shouting continued to move, to move.

364

00:33:58,404 --> 00:34:04,159

>> Bill Benson: Irene, I want to draw our audience's attention to this

365

00:34:04,164 --> 00:34:06,164

particular photograph.

366

00:34:06,164 --> 00:34:13,730

The Museum has a remarkable and disturbing collection of photographs called The Auschwitz Album. These photographs were taken by Nazi officials

367

00:34:13,735 --> 00:34:17,207

it just so happens on the very day

368

00:34:17,208 --> 00:34:22,235

that your family arrived at Auschwitz. In this very personal photograph for you

369

00:34:22,235 --> 00:34:26,819

We see you personally circled in this photograph and we have another photograph

370

00:34:26,820 --> 00:34:32,550

that we will turn to in a minute that is a closer view of you.

371

00:34:32,551 --> 00:34:37,537

Tell us about this picture, Irene.

372

00:34:37,537 --> 00:34:41,685

>> Irene Weiss: Yeah, so now we are out of the train and you can see the

373

00:34:41,687 --> 00:34:45,347

train on the side and the larger column is the men that are lined up.

374

00:34:45,348 --> 00:34:47,348

I'm in front there.

375

00:34:47,348 --> 00:34:53,645

My family had just reached the front of this column where we were faced

376

00:34:53,645 --> 00:35:01,130

by about 10 Nazi soldiers, one of them had a stick in his hand and he

377

00:35:01,130 --> 00:35:06,276

was motioning people, separating people from one side to the other.

378

00:35:06,278 --> 00:35:12,724

My mother and my two little brothers who were about 9 and 7 were sent

379

00:35:12,731 --> 00:35:18,751

off to one side very quickly, as soon as they appeared in the front.

380

00:35:18,756 --> 00:35:25,753

My older sister, Serena, who was 17 was motioned to another side and I

381

00:35:25,753 --> 00:35:31,746

was standing there with Edith, my younger sister about 11 holding her

382

00:35:31,746 --> 00:35:38,240

hand and very quickly, the stick came down between us and she was

383

00:35:38,242 --> 00:35:45,237

motioned to where our mother went and I was motioned towards where my older

384

00:35:45,237 --> 00:35:47,237

sister went, Serena.

385

00:35:47,237 --> 00:35:53,362

When my sister was so abruptly separated from me and she disappeared in

386

00:35:53,371 --> 00:35:59,491

a very fast moving crowd, because the separation was crowds were sent

387

00:35:59,497 --> 00:36:05,617

to -- if any woman was -- any mother were holding children, maybe some

388

00:36:05,623 --> 00:36:12,253

grandmothers, too, any people like that, he did not stop to examine who

389

00:36:12,259 --> 00:36:14,299

was in the group.

390

00:36:14,857 --> 00:36:20,779

It was such a group of children and the entire group was motioned, so

391

00:36:20,784 --> 00:36:26,283

while I was standing there for a second horrified that my little sister

392

00:36:26,288 --> 00:36:31,787

was taken from me, large groups of people were going in that direction

393

00:36:31,792 --> 00:36:34,330

and she joined this fast-moving crowd.

394

00:36:34,332 --> 00:36:41,243

I understood right away that she would not catch up with our mother and I was

395

00:36:41,243 --> 00:36:45,843

so frightened of what would happen to this little girl.

396

00:36:45,847 --> 00:36:51,509

As we were being separated, again, we had this feeling and we had this

397

00:36:51,509 --> 00:36:57,641

assumption that this is being separated as though this is a work camp.

398

00:36:57,641 --> 00:37:01,808

Women and children will not work, they are separated.

399

00:37:01,808 --> 00:37:05,360

Men are separated, they will work.

400

00:37:05,361 --> 00:37:09,181

And young adults will work.

401

00:37:09,181 --> 00:37:14,855

All of a sudden, if you take a young child alone and move her with a

402

00:37:14,855 --> 00:37:19,110

crowd without asking names or questions who you are something is wrong

403

00:37:19,110 --> 00:37:21,110

here.

404

00:37:21,110 --> 00:37:28,052

They are not keeping track of the promise that we had thought we saw

405

00:37:28,058 --> 00:37:31,739

here, so I was absolutely terrified.

406

00:37:31,740 --> 00:37:34,620

I knew she would not catch up to our mother.

407

00:37:34,624 --> 00:37:41,982

>> Bill Benson: Irene, here we see a close up of you from the train and

408

00:37:41,982 --> 00:37:43,982

the large crowd.

409

00:37:43,982 --> 00:37:46,473

We have a question from the audience member.

410

00:37:46,473 --> 00:37:50,837

The audience member asked, do you remember what you felt in the instant

411

00:37:51,452 --> 00:37:56,182

when your family was separated from you and your sister Serena?

412

00:37:56,183 --> 00:38:04,114

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, well, terror and confusion and feeling of

413

00:38:04,115 --> 00:38:06,999

desperation and no recourse.

414

00:38:06,999 --> 00:38:12,715

I can't say no, I want to go there or I want to be with my family. It is

415

00:38:12,715 --> 00:38:14,715

finished.

416

00:38:14,715 --> 00:38:16,715

It is done.

417

00:38:16,715 --> 00:38:19,344

The crowd is moving, and it was quickly understand there is no

418

00:38:19,349 --> 00:38:21,349

accounting.

419

00:38:21,349 --> 00:38:24,086

We left everything behind in the train.

420

00:38:24,086 --> 00:38:26,086

We have no papers, we have no names.

421

00:38:26,086 --> 00:38:28,086

We have no possessions.

422

00:38:28,086 --> 00:38:34,290

Suddenly things seemed very desperate, so yes, very, very frightened.

423

00:38:35,549 --> 00:38:42,688

I, myself, was just absolutely devastated that my little sister was lost

424

00:38:42,688 --> 00:38:44,688

to us.

425

00:38:44,688 --> 00:38:51,164

I very quickly went through my mind that she will be alone in this huge

426

00:38:51,164 --> 00:38:57,961

crowd, but then I was motioned to go in the direction of the young

427

00:38:57,961 --> 00:39:04,758

adults and had to go there and I was following the young adults. There

428

00:39:04,758 --> 00:39:12,043

were not too many of the young adults, the bulk of the people who were separated, women, children, elderly

429

00:39:12,046 --> 00:39:17,388

and it was always something like 75%

430

00:39:17,388 --> 00:39:23,211

or 85% from one big transport were killed, because they were mostly

431

00:39:23,211 --> 00:39:25,211

women, children and elderly.

432

00:39:25,211 --> 00:39:31,639

>> Bill Benson: Irene, we have another photograph that is from the same

433

00:39:31,644 --> 00:39:37,631

collection that same day that is as intensely personal for you and

434

00:39:37,631 --> 00:39:39,631

incredibly painful. If you don't mind saying

435

00:39:39,632 --> 00:39:44,869

a little bit about this photograph for us.

436

00:39:44,873 --> 00:39:47,689

>> Irene Weiss: This is an incredible picture. Yes, Nazis were taking photographs of this

437

00:39:47,692 --> 00:39:54,795

particular train and perhaps other trains and the arrival of the people.

438

00:39:54,795 --> 00:40:00,397

These are my two little brothers Wayne and Gerswhin.

439

00:40:00,397 --> 00:40:19,515

Wayne is about 9 and Gerswhin about 7 and with them is my mother profiled there within the circle. She is sitting there with them. And the other people are women and children who came off the particular train. They are sitting here in a wooded area

440

00:40:19,524 --> 00:40:21,914

resting, looking like resting

441

00:40:21,915 --> 00:40:28,087

but what is happening here but they are very near

442

00:40:28,087 --> 00:40:34,725

one of the gas chambers and because of the huge influx of thousands of

443

00:40:34,726 --> 00:40:40,896

Hungarian Jews, the trains coming day and night, there was a backup in

444

00:40:40,896 --> 00:40:47,059

the gas chambers, four gas chambers could not keep up with the killing,

445

00:40:47,066 --> 00:40:54,660

day and night, so they are made to sit and wait for their turn when they

446

00:40:54,660 --> 00:40:58,448

are able to continue to the gas chamber.

447

00:40:58,454 --> 00:41:00,454

Obviously , they too have no idea. People look very calm.

448

00:41:00,454 --> 00:41:02,454

Originally, they were told they were

449

00:41:02,454 --> 00:41:10,811

going to go have a shower. People are always

450

00:41:10,811 --> 00:41:18,219

trying to look for something that is bearable or at least

451

00:41:18,219 --> 00:41:25,055

familiar, so these people are sitting there all old people or people

452

00:41:25,056 --> 00:41:33,604

with women and children and still have the same idea that it is a work camp and that this group will not be working.

>> Bill Benson: As I look at this photograph Irene

453

00:41:33,605 --> 00:41:35,605

and I look at your two brothers looking into the camera

454

00:41:35,605 --> 00:41:40,371

thinking that somebody had just

455

00:41:40,371 --> 00:41:42,578

taken a photograph of them.

456

00:41:42,582 --> 00:41:50,692

So, now you and your sister Serena have been selected for forced labor for slave labor. You are together

457

00:41:50,692 --> 00:41:58,057

You would actually remarkably run into two of your aunts, Aunt Rose and Aunt Piri who had gone ahead of you

458

00:41:58,059 --> 00:42:01,005

and you were able to connect with them.

459

00:42:01,006 --> 00:42:06,462

Tell us the forced labor, the slave labor that you were forced to do.

460

00:42:06,466 --> 00:42:26,296

You were sent to work in a part of Auschwitz that became known as "Kanada." Tell us what you had to do there with Serena and your aunts.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes so my two aunts were in their twenties. They arrived in Auschwitz the day before and we just accidentally ran into them.

461

00:42:26,296 --> 00:42:28,296

They were

462

00:42:28,315 --> 00:42:34,375

They saved my life and my sister's life no doubt about that

463

00:42:34,375 --> 00:42:40,135

because I was

464

00:42:40,137 --> 00:42:43,431

terrified and I needed someone to cling to.

465

00:42:43,432 --> 00:42:50,824

We were first tattooed and selected, about 1,000 women, we were tattooed

466

00:42:50,827 --> 00:43:00,683

on our arms and sent off to work in an area, which became a storage area

467

00:43:00,688 --> 00:43:08,696

where the trucks brought the belongings of the people who came from the

468

00:43:08,700 --> 00:43:17,324

train and later on we realized the belongings that came out of the gas

469

00:43:17,327 --> 00:43:22,871

chamber also was brought to this area of storage.

470

00:43:22,874 --> 00:43:31,102

We were assigned to bring all of these things first into the barracks

471

00:43:31,102 --> 00:43:39,959

out of the weather, and continue day and night shifts to sort out these

472

00:43:39,960 --> 00:43:48,185

belongings in a way that was consistent with what it was, like shoes

473

00:43:48,185 --> 00:43:56,411

with shoes and pots and pans and blankets, and baby carriages and books,

474

00:43:56,413 --> 00:44:03,374

and everything that people brought from the many places that they

475

00:44:03,374 --> 00:44:12,230

thought would be useful, all of this had to be sorted in categories and prepared to be shipped to Germany for the use of the German population

476

00:44:12,231 --> 00:44:19,826

>> Bill Benson: And what we see here in this particular photograph Irene is a literal mountain of shoes

477

00:44:19,827 --> 00:44:21,826

We couldn't even pretend to try to know

478

00:44:21,826 --> 00:44:25,459

how many pairs of shoes have been taken

479

00:44:25,509 --> 00:44:28,533

and put in this pile for you to sort.

480

00:44:28,535 --> 00:44:35,773

Unfortunately, we don't have the time for you to tell us about the eight

481

00:44:35,775 --> 00:44:41,462

months that you spent at Auschwitz, but you remained there under horrific circumstances for that period,

482

00:44:41,464 --> 00:44:47,151

eight months in January 1945, as

483

00:44:47,153 --> 00:44:51,289

Soviet troops were advancing, the Nazis evacuated Auschwitz.

484

00:44:51,290 --> 00:44:55,396

Tell us about the evacuation and what happened to you and your sisters

485

00:44:55,397 --> 00:44:57,397

and aunt at the time.

486

00:44:57,397 --> 00:45:01,378

Where did you go?

487

00:45:01,383 --> 00:45:04,969

>> Irene Weiss: We heard noises of war, bombs and shootings.

488

00:45:04,973 --> 00:45:08,158

We heard the front line was approaching.

489

00:45:08,158 --> 00:45:16,678

We thought that we would all be destroyed that the Nazis will not allow for the

490

00:45:16,678 --> 00:45:24,588

Russian army to witness what is going on in Auschwitz with the gas

491

00:45:24,589 --> 00:45:27,631

chambers and piles of bodies.

492

00:45:27,633 --> 00:45:33,284

We were sure we would be killed, absolutely, so when there was

493

00:45:33,284 --> 00:45:39,401

announcement that we should line up at the gate and camp is being

494

00:45:39,402 --> 00:45:43,168

evacuated, people began to wonder what it means.

495

00:45:43,169 --> 00:45:48,391

Some people thought they should hide and stay, because the war seems to

496

00:45:48,391 --> 00:45:51,599

be coming closer and it will be over.

497

00:45:51,603 --> 00:45:59,800

Our little group decided the gate is open, let's get out, anybody who

498

00:45:59,809 --> 00:46:02,964

stays behind will be killed.

499

00:46:02,966 --> 00:46:14,033

The whole thing will be burned down, so we lined up and exited in the

500

00:46:14,033 --> 00:46:20,666

winter of January 1945, out into the cold weather.

501

00:46:20,668 --> 00:46:26,881

A huge column filled the highways and the sideways and we were escorted

502

00:46:26,881 --> 00:46:31,180

by soldiers day and night, they pushed us on.

503

00:46:31,180 --> 00:46:33,180

People were exhausted.

504

00:46:33,180 --> 00:46:43,882

People were not ready for for such exhaustion and exertion. We didn't have clothes and shoes properly

505

00:46:43,882 --> 00:46:50,196

In other words, it was a death march, and people were falling by the

506

00:46:50,203 --> 00:46:52,203

wayside.

507

00:46:52,203 --> 00:47:01,308

If people sat down or leaned on people, they were shot side of the road was many dead people

508

00:47:01,308 --> 00:47:03,308

It was literally not indurable

509

00:47:03,308 --> 00:47:08,700

It was not survivable, this kind of exhaustion.

510

00:47:09,245 --> 00:47:17,240

>> Bill Benson: And remarkably, you were able to survive and ended up

511

00:47:17,242 --> 00:47:25,852

after a series of different camps that you were forced to march to hundreds of kilometers, you ended up at a place called Neustadh-Glewe from where you were liberated.

512

00:47:25,853 --> 00:47:28,313

Say a little bit about your liberation from Neustadh-Glewe

513

00:47:28,314 --> 00:47:31,758

>> Irene Weiss: This march took many days

514

00:47:31,758 --> 00:47:38,250

and we did arrive at this concentration camp which was already filled with people

515

00:47:38,250 --> 00:47:43,817

and there were no room for more and we were jammed in

516

00:47:43,817 --> 00:47:50,308

and the German soldiers and the people taking

517

00:47:50,308 --> 00:47:55,874

charge of the concentration camp were also worried about their own safety, so

518

00:47:55,875 --> 00:48:02,831

they were beginning to move on with a small crew of taking care of us.

519

00:48:02,833 --> 00:48:11,023

They actually abandoned us to a large degree, the system broke down.

520

00:48:11,025 --> 00:48:17,163

They stopped feeding us almost entirely and we were starving, in

521

00:48:17,163 --> 00:48:24,415

addition to that, we became infested with lice and there was typhus in

522

00:48:24,415 --> 00:48:28,875

the camp and people began to get sick.

523

00:48:28,877 --> 00:48:34,897

This camp did not have a gas chamber, but don't worry, they had a

524

00:48:34,899 --> 00:48:36,899

system.

525

00:48:36,899 --> 00:48:41,724

The killing and the selection of people who were sick or emaciated, they

526

00:48:41,724 --> 00:48:48,611

always had time to select those and they had a truck coming almost daily

527

00:48:48,611 --> 00:48:52,545

from another camp that had a gas chamber.

528

00:48:52,547 --> 00:48:54,615

The truck would arrive.

529

00:48:54,615 --> 00:49:00,890

We recognized the truck and they would select out the sick and the
530

00:49:00,890 --> 00:49:07,162

emaciated and put them on the truck and off, and these people were
531

00:49:07,162 --> 00:49:09,162

killed.

532

00:49:09,162 --> 00:49:12,424

Truck turned around and came back.

533

00:49:12,424 --> 00:49:19,483

After we were here for four and a half months, by the end, starvation
534

00:49:20,992 --> 00:49:26,029

made us just totally skin and bones.

535

00:49:26,030 --> 00:49:35,508

My sister was selected for trip on the truck and I was so scared of
536

00:49:35,508 --> 00:49:41,820

being alone and I certainly was not in much better shape.

537

00:49:41,822 --> 00:49:48,179

I said "I'm her sister," so I was told you can go, too.

538

00:49:48,179 --> 00:49:53,401

So, they put us in a room with many others who looked like skeletons,

539

00:49:53,401 --> 00:49:58,996

locked the door and we sat on the floor waiting for the truck to come.

540

00:49:58,996 --> 00:50:05,873

After a full day, the truck didn't seem to arrive, and somebody must

541

00:50:05,873 --> 00:50:12,747

have opened the door from the outside, and somebody pushed the door and

542

00:50:12,749 --> 00:50:21,212

it was open and we walked back to where we came from into the Barack. We

543

00:50:21,213 --> 00:50:26,501

entered the room, the people there started to chant almost.

544

00:50:26,502 --> 00:50:30,566

The children came back, the children came back.

545

00:50:30,566 --> 00:50:35,084

It seems they were mourning us and they called us the children, which

546

00:50:35,090 --> 00:50:37,090

was a big surprise.

547

00:50:37,090 --> 00:50:42,640

We were never called children, because being called children meant we

548

00:50:42,640 --> 00:50:45,436

were going to be killed.

549

00:50:45,437 --> 00:50:47,437

The children did not survive.

550

00:50:47,437 --> 00:50:57,112

The children were killed in these camps, but apparently, they knew that

551

00:50:57,113 --> 00:51:00,415

we looked like children.

552

00:51:00,416 --> 00:51:14,690

They were so happy to see us and we were really rather surprised that anybody noticed that we were even missing.

>> Bill Benson: and Irene after that the Nazi guards ran off

553

00:51:14,692 --> 00:51:19,057

and you were left there and unsure if they were going to

554

00:51:19,061 --> 00:51:23,135

come back and you ended up leaving the camp, walking out because nobody was there to

555

00:51:23,138 --> 00:51:25,175

stop you and that was your liberation.

556

00:51:25,177 --> 00:51:28,327

Irene, we have a question from an audience member, Maggie.

557

00:51:28,330 --> 00:51:36,936

Maggie asks, after the war, did you go back to your home and if you did,

558

00:51:36,936 --> 00:51:42,850

who lived there and what did your neighbors say or do?

559

00:51:42,852 --> 00:51:49,009

>> Irene Weiss: Yes, so after the war, it took us a very long time to

560

00:51:49,009 --> 00:51:52,468

get out of Germany, because there was no transportation.

561

00:51:52,470 --> 00:51:59,362

We literally hitchhiked down the road, short distances, walked.

562

00:51:59,365 --> 00:52:01,365

We were in very bad shape.

563

00:52:01,365 --> 00:52:04,870

We put the sickest ones in hospitals along the way.

564

00:52:04,871 --> 00:52:09,926

Waited a few days for them to feel a little bit better and took them out

565

00:52:09,926 --> 00:52:11,926

and walked again.

566

00:52:11,926 --> 00:52:19,227

Anyhow, after weeks of attempting to get back, we ended up in Prague,

567

00:52:19,228 --> 00:52:24,367

Czechoslovakia, which was far away from our home.

568

00:52:24,369 --> 00:52:33,207

There, we wanted to know who survived and we talked to other survivors and we looked at lists posted on walls

569

00:52:33,214 --> 00:52:40,014

about names of people who were searching, names of people who they were announcing that they were alive.

570

00:52:40,019 --> 00:52:45,969

Eventually, after many months, about six months after, when we realized

571

00:52:45,969 --> 00:52:52,456

who the few people who were alive and we gathered together in

572

00:52:52,457 --> 00:52:59,487

Czechoslovakia I went back home with one of my young uncles, my mothers brother to my

573

00:52:59,487 --> 00:53:05,974

hometown and entered my house, and there was a family living there.

574

00:53:05,977 --> 00:53:11,402

It was a woman and children, she went over to one side when I entered.

575

00:53:11,402 --> 00:53:14,526

We did not greet each other. She just pulled to the side.

576

00:53:14,526 --> 00:53:21,637

She seemed to know who I was, and we didn't know each other.

577

00:53:21,638 --> 00:53:27,390

I went through the house from room to room, there was nothing that was

578

00:53:27,391 --> 00:53:29,443

ours left in the house.

579

00:53:29,444 --> 00:53:39,764

I went around, sort of a circle, came back out into the kitchen and left

580

00:53:39,769 --> 00:53:50,089

the house and went down into the garden and there was an orchard in the

581

00:53:50,094 --> 00:53:52,094

back.

582

00:53:52,094 --> 00:53:58,076

I realized how long we were gone because the fruit tree were ripe ready to be picked and I suddenly

583

00:53:58,077 --> 00:54:01,724

and I couldn't bear it any longer.

584

00:54:01,724 --> 00:54:05,623

No one in our house nothing in the house was ours, but here was the fruit that survived

585

00:54:05,623 --> 00:54:09,814

waiting for us to pick it and there was no one to pick it.

586

00:54:09,816 --> 00:54:18,580

I began to cry and the first time I was able to cry. In Auschwitz, I

587

00:54:18,584 --> 00:54:20,584

never cried.

588

00:54:20,584 --> 00:54:23,615

People around me never cried.

589

00:54:23,615 --> 00:54:30,893

We worked in this Kanada place next to the gas chamber number four

590

00:54:30,894 --> 00:54:33,694

divided only by an electrified fence.

591

00:54:33,694 --> 00:54:40,779

We watched columns of women and children and elderly walking to the gate

592

00:54:40,780 --> 00:54:48,955

and disappear and within a half hour or so, we would see the chimneys of

593

00:54:48,957 --> 00:54:56,042

the crematoriums belching not only smoke, but belching flames and we had just

594

00:54:56,043 --> 00:54:58,043

seen these people.

595

00:54:58,043 --> 00:55:00,090

They had just talked to us a little bit.

596

00:55:00,090 --> 00:55:05,401

We just saw these little children in their mothers' arms and the flames

597

00:55:05,401 --> 00:55:10,307

were so high in the sky and the flames were so strong.

598

00:55:10,308 --> 00:55:13,281

They made a noise like a wind.

599

00:55:13,281 --> 00:55:19,076

We saw this over and over and tears did not come.

600

00:55:19,080 --> 00:55:23,900

We even spoke about it, why are we not crying?

601

00:55:23,900 --> 00:55:35,167

The trauma, the disbelief, the horror it was so enormous that we were kind of

602

00:55:35,167 --> 00:55:37,167

frozen.

603

00:55:37,167 --> 00:55:40,032

We could not absorb it.

604

00:55:40,032 --> 00:55:42,584

>> Bill Benson: And yet, the tears did come once you got back to your

605

00:55:43,712 --> 00:55:45,713

home.

606

00:55:45,713 --> 00:55:51,256

>> Irene Weiss: When I realized everyone was gone with the exception, my

607

00:55:51,256 --> 00:55:58,476

father was killed, my mother and four of my siblings were killed, and

608

00:55:58,477 --> 00:56:06,810

Serena and I were the only two who survived out of a family of six,

609

00:56:06,811 --> 00:56:12,917

including my first cousins and their parents and mothers and fathers, our grandparents

610

00:56:12,922 --> 00:56:19,589

the entire extended family was killed brutally, and here we were two

611

00:56:19,589 --> 00:56:23,473

young girls left from the entire family.

612

00:56:23,478 --> 00:56:28,606

>> Bill Benson: Irene, in the time, in the short time we have left, I

613

00:56:28,606 --> 00:56:31,342

want to ask one final question of you.

614

00:56:31,343 --> 00:56:36,717

Bur first, I want to show a photograph of you and your sister Serena when you

615

00:56:36,717 --> 00:56:42,092

arrived in the United States with the help of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and

616

00:56:42,092 --> 00:56:44,092

this is 1947.

617

00:56:44,092 --> 00:56:50,262

I want to make sure our audience saw the photograph of the two of you

618

00:56:50,266 --> 00:56:52,606

getting to the United States.

619

00:56:52,607 --> 00:56:59,775

My last question for you is please tell us why, after listening to you

620

00:56:59,775 --> 00:57:05,918

relive the horrors and tragedies that you describe, why do you continue

621

00:57:05,918 --> 00:57:10,013

to share your firsthand account of the Holocaust?

622

00:57:10,014 --> 00:57:18,822

>> Irene Weiss: With the greater awareness of this tragic history, plus the personal testimony,

623

00:57:18,826 --> 00:57:26,900

I hope people are realizing or realized that

624

00:57:26,903 --> 00:57:35,711

this tragic history cannot be repeated and they are learning from what

625

00:57:35,715 --> 00:57:44,523

they are hearing and seeing from testimony that the hate and the

626

00:57:44,526 --> 00:57:48,930

discrimination and separation has to stop.

627

00:57:48,932 --> 00:57:58,364

I'm speaking because I hope that they understand that the tragedy that

628

00:57:58,367 --> 00:58:07,799

they are hearing about makes them be aware and stop this discrimination

629

00:58:07,802 --> 00:58:14,876

and hatred, which is even present in our time.

630

00:58:14,878 --> 00:58:20,663

And in addition to, that I am speaking for those, my family, and

631

00:58:20,668 --> 00:58:26,008

thousands of others who are -- who perished and should be remembered and

632

00:58:26,012 --> 00:58:28,682

I speak for them as well.

633

00:58:29,040 --> 00:58:36,024

>> Bill Benson: Irene, and you speak so eloquently, so movingly, you

634

00:58:36,025 --> 00:58:43,591

described events that most of us can't begin to imagine. We are grateful

635

00:58:43,592 --> 00:58:46,502

for you for doing this.

636

00:58:46,502 --> 00:58:50,701

I know everyone who is watching and hearing you they are not only

637

00:58:50,702 --> 00:58:53,932

profoundly moved, but grateful for you continuing to do this.

638

00:58:53,932 --> 00:58:56,452

Thank you for sharing with us for this past hour.

639

00:58:56,452 --> 00:59:00,612

It is so, so important.

640

00:59:00,614 --> 00:59:02,614

Thank you.

641

00:59:02,614 --> 00:59:11,242

>> Irene Weiss: Thank you for providing this opportunity to speak about this tragic history.

642

00:59:11,246 --> 00:59:13,424

>> Bill Benson: I would also like to take a

643

00:59:13,425 --> 00:59:18,081

moment to thank our donors - First Person is made possible through the generous

644

00:59:18,084 --> 00:59:21,285

support of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation

645

00:59:21,287 --> 00:59:24,197

, with additional funding from the Arlene

646

00:59:24,199 --> 00:59:26,199

and Daniel Fisher Foundation.

647

00:59:26,199 --> 00:59:31,542

I would also like to invite you to join us for our next First Person

648

00:59:31,543 --> 00:59:36,896

program on August 4 at 1:00 P.M. Eastern time for a conversation with

649

00:59:36,896 --> 00:59:41,426

Holocaust survivor, Rachel Goldfarb. Rachel was 11 years old when her

650

00:59:41,426 --> 00:59:45,954

hometown in Poland was occupied by Nazi forces. After escaping two

651

00:59:45,956 --> 00:59:50,488

ghettos, she and her mother joined partisan forces in the forest,

652

00:59:50,488 --> 00:59:55,426

fighting against the Germans. Please join us next month to hear Rachel's

653

00:59:55,428 --> 00:59:57,426

Holocaust experiences.

654

00:59:57,427 --> 01:00:01,276

thank you all for listening and hearing and absorbing from what you

655

01:00:01,277 --> 01:00:04,623

heard from Irene Weiss. Thank you very much.