

Welcome. Thank you for joining us for First Person-- Conversations with Holocaust Survivors. My name is Bill Benson. I have hosted the museum's First Person program since it began in 2000. Through these monthly conversations, we bring you firsthand accounts of survival of the Holocaust. Each of our First Person guests serves as a volunteer at the museum.

Holocaust survivors are Jews who experienced the persecution and survived the mass murder that was carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators. This included those who were in concentration camps, killing centers, ghettos, and prisons, as well as refugees, or those in hiding. Holocaust survivors also include people who did not self-identify as Jewish, but were categorized as such by the perpetrators.

Over the last three weeks, we have seen the loss of life in humanitarian crises in Ukraine following Russia's unprovoked attack and the exploitation of Holocaust history used to justify the invasion. We have also seen the resilience and determination of the Ukrainian people, as well as their country's commitment to historical truth. We stand with the Ukrainian people, including the thousands of Holocaust survivors still living there during this crucial time.

During our program, please, send us your questions and let us know where you are joining us from in the chat. We are honored to have with us today Holocaust survivor Susan Warsinger, who will share with her-- share with us her personal firsthand account of the Holocaust. Susan, thank you so much for joining us and being willing to be our first person today.

Thank you, Bill for having me come on your program.

Susan, you have so much to share with us. So we're going to go ahead and get started. You were born on May 27, 1929 in Bad Kreuznach, Germany just a few years before Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. Please, tell us about your hometown and your family before the Nazis came to power.

Yeah. I was born in Bad Kreuznach. It's a little town near Frankfurt and near Cologne. And it was a very small town, but it was beautiful. It was surrounded by mountains and had many grape growing all over and many vineyards. And it had a beautiful river called the Nahe, which was a tributary of the Rhine River. And it had a beautiful bridge that was built in the 1300s in medieval times.

And then it had a spa, which was very popular because the German people from all over Germany used to come, and get bathed there, and breathe in the sulfur air, and the fine air so that their illnesses would be better. Anyway, this picture that you're looking at is my father. And we're walking in the garden where the spa was. And that's my father and me, was a long, long time ago. And I think we have another picture for you to share with us as well.

Yes, that's my father, and my mother, and my brother Joe, and me. This is before Hitler came into power.

Well, what was your father's occupation, Susan?

Yeah, he had a linen store. And he was probably doing very well because we lived in a nice house. But these things changed when Hitler came into power.

And that, of course, Susan-- that happened in January 1933, when Hitler was appointed chancellor and moved quickly to turn Germany into a one-party dictatorship. The new Nazi regime persecuted Jews and passed antisemitic laws. So tell us how life changed once the Nazis were in control and how that changed your family's life.

Yeah. Well, the Nazis boycotted my father's store. And he lost all of his customers. And eventually, he had to give up the store. And some German people took it over. So we-- he didn't have any income. So we had to move from one place to another, to many different houses and different apartments. And my father, in order to make a living for his family, he went and picked strawberries. And he sold them in baskets to the people, to the Jewish people of our town to help him make a living.

And you remember him going out doing that, don't you?

Yes, I do. I really do.

And we have another photograph I'd love you to tell us about.

I want to introduce you to my whole family-- my brother Joe. I'm going to be talking about him a lot. He has his arm around my mother. And then he-- she's holding my baby brother, Ernest. And that's me with my arm around my father. Now, I'm going to tell you all of my stories from a child's point of view because that's the way I remember it.

Your baby brother, because of the circumstances, he-- tell us about his birth.

Yeah. We were living in one of the smaller houses. And my brother and I had to sit outside of the house on some steps. And the reason we had to do that is because my mother was having the baby inside the house and because there was a law in Bad Kreuznach that Jewish people weren't allowed to go to the hospital.

That was one of the many, many restrictions on Jewish people at that time. Before we go on, Susan, I'd love to tell you how many people-- or let you know where people are watching you from today. They're watching and listening to you from around the country-- from Minnesota, Alaska, Georgia, Arizona, and Colorado. We also have seventh and eighth grade students watching from Massachusetts. And we have international viewers watching from India, Portugal, Iceland, and Canada.

And here's an audience comment from Betty. Thank god you were saved. What terror you must have gone through. We cannot let this happen ever again. And that's a comment from one of our viewers.

Thank you.

Susan, tell us about starting school.

Well, I was very anxious to go to school, and learn, and be part of a German girl's education. And I was very happy to go to school. And here, that's me. Here I am. This is my first day of school. And I'm holding a cone in my hands. And it was the custom of all German children on their first day to go to school to have a cone like that. And in fact, it's still a custom in Germany now.

But the cone-- and I guess, probably, the audience probably is probably thinking, what on earth is inside of that cone? Well, I'll tell you, Bill, inside the cone, it was filled with candy and sweet things so that our education would be sweet, and lovely, and delightful, and delicious.

And that lasted for a very, very short time because after I went to school for a little while, the teacher started to read picture storybooks to the children. And many of them were very antisemitic. And here's an example of one of the antisemitic books that the children were reading in Germany.

This one is called Der Giftpilz. And it means poisoned mushroom. And if you take a look at the cover of this book, you can see the mushroom. And then there's this ugly face with the ugly nose and a Star of David. And the mushroom is wearing a clown. And so the children, when listening to this story, were learning that Jews were poisoned mushrooms and so that they were poisonous.

And so they tried to keep away from me. And they made fun of me. And they laughed at me. And I was very uncomfortable going to school. And every day, I ran home to my mother. And I said to her, I don't want to go to public school anymore. I want to stay home. And she said, well, just stick it out. Stick it out.

But after a while, I was extremely happy. And the reason I was extremely happy, Bill, is because there was a law in Germany that Jewish children weren't allowed to go to school anymore. So the parents in our-- in Bad Kreuznach, the Jewish parents, all wanted their children to go to school. So they hired one Jewish teacher. And that Jewish teacher had

a one-room schoolhouse. And we all went to that school. Maybe they want to-- there it is.

There you go.

Yeah. The teacher is the one that's holding the-- he's writing something on the paper. And I'm the one with the pigtails. Well, what happened is he was responsible of teaching all the Jewish children in Bad Kreuznach in that one room. He taught from first grade. First row was the first grade, second row was the second grade, all the way to the ninth grade.

And this one, I think, he probably was teaching language arts to all the kids in what we had done. We had written plays about fairy tales in Germany. And what I'm doing is I'm listening to my mother, who was my best friend at the time. And I'm holding a basket. And I am Little Red Riding Hood going into the woods. And she's telling me to be very careful when walking through the woods. And so all these children here were really very happy because there was nobody to call us names and nobody to be antisemitic because we were all Jews together.

For a time, that must have felt like a place of safety after all you were subjected to in that public school.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Did you-- you had an incident that you recall when your mother sent you to the store to get bread. But you had to go to-- through a park to get there. Tell us about that.

Yes. I was very proud of my-- must have been maybe six years old. And I was very proud because I was able to do something for my family. And she used to put the pfennig in my hand. And she said, go buy some bread. And in order to get to the store, I had to cross the street, and walk through a park, and get to the other end where all of the stores were, Kreuznacher Strasse.

Anyway, so I was crossing the street. And then I was starting to walk down the steps to get into the park. And all of a sudden, the gatekeeper of the park started to yell at me. And he said to me, hey, you can't go through this park anymore because you're a dirty Jew. And then he called me all kinds of names. And he told me never to walk through the park again.

So I ran up the steps. And I ran to my mother. And I told her what had happened. And she really didn't want to worry me. And so she said, well, next time you go, just walk around the park. So the next time, she put the pfennig in my hand. And I crossed the street. And there was an entrance to the park.

And I was standing at the top of the steps. And I said to myself, ugh, I am very tired. Because if I had to walk all the way around the park, I would have to walk all the way one block, and then another two blocks the other way, and then go back. And I said to myself, I'm very tired. I think-- and I think you probably already know what I was doing. I did go down those steps.

And so of course, the gatekeeper came. And he started to scream at me the same horrible words. But he also threw rocks at me, the rocks that were in the park. But the bad part of it was that he had his daughter. And she was watching him. And he was her role model.

And so she said to-- must have said to herself, well, if that's what I'm supposed-- what my father does, I'm supposed to do that too. And so she picked up some rocks, and threw them at me, and called me the same names that her father was calling me. And here was this little girl who was learning about hatred and antisemitism. And I never walked through that park again.

What a-- just a horrible thing for a little child to have to experience that, along with the other things you've described. Susan, this brings us to early November 1938. On the night of November 9 through 10, 1938, the Nazi regime coordinated a wave of violent attacks targeting Jewish people in Nazi Germany. These events became known as Kristallnacht or the Night of Broken Glass because of the shattered glass on the streets after the vandalism and destruction of Jewish-owned businesses, synagogues, and homes. You were just nine years old. What do you remember

of Kristallnacht?

Yeah. I remember that night very clearly because my mother's birthday was going to be the next day. Her birthday was on November the 10th. And my brother Joe and I, we were sleeping in our bedroom or ready to go to sleep. It must have been maybe 11 o'clock, something like that.

And all of a sudden, some bricks and rocks were being thrown through our window. And my brother Joe is much braver than I am. I know, I covered myself up because I was scared. But he went to the window. And he lifted himself up. And he said to me, Susie, it is our neighbors that are throwing the rocks through the window. And the civil policeman who was standing at the edge of the crowd like this, and he didn't do anything to stop the crowd from throwing the bricks and rocks through the window.

So my brother and I were very frightened. We ran across the hall to our parents' bedroom. And the bricks and rocks were being thrown through their window also. And my baby brother, they called him Ernst, which was the German name for Ernest. And he was laying in a bassinet right near the window. And my brother remembers that-- my brother Joe remembers that a rock fell on his hand, on the baby's hand. But the baby was OK. He was all right.

And so-- and all five of us, my mother, and my father, and my brothers, and I, we were huddling in the back of the bedroom to decide what to do. And just then, the people had uprooted a lamppost from outside, which was called Adolf-Hitler-Platz. And they smashed the lampposts through out--

Like a battering ram right through your door.

Yes, exactly. They smashed it through our front door. And the glass was beautiful, colored with purple and gray-- no, not gray, orange, and green, and red. And it was strewn all over the floor. And so we were really very frightened then. And so my father decided that we should go and hide up in the attic. I'm just telling you, we lived on the first floor of the house.

And the rabbis of the town-- the one rabbi we had in the town was living on the second floor, and on the third floor, a non-Jewish family, and on the fourth floor was an attic. And so my father thought that it would be best for us to go and hide up in the attic. And so when we got up to the attic, the rabbi's family was already in the attic. But the rabbi wasn't there.

So I looked out. There was a little window. And I looked out the window. I saw the rabbi standing on his veranda. And the two SS officers-- maybe, I don't know, or soldiers. I don't remember exactly what they were. But they were holding him by the arm. And another one came along and cut off his beard. And then later on, I found out that they sent him to jail and that they-- because he was Jewish.

And then I found out that all the men in Bad Kreuznach, in our town, had to go to jail because they were Jewish. And then I found out that when the people were with people-- our neighbors had gone into our apartment. They had ransacked some of the things that we owned. But they really damaged the rabbi's apartment. And they took some of his artifacts and looted some of his things. And then I found out-- yeah, I found out that they did that everybody in Bad Kreuznach, anybody who was a Jew-- there was a Jewish family.

And on that single night, across Germany, some 300 synagogues were burned in that night. Susan, what do you--

Exactly. Our synagogue-- that's what I found out. Our synagogue was also burned. We had one. I'm glad you brought that up, yes.

And what do you remember about hiding in the attic?

Well, we were children. And the rabbi had children. He had three boys and a girl. And I don't know what my baby brother did. But I think they told me later on that the people who lived on the third floor that were not Jewish, they gave my mother some milk to give to the baby. But otherwise, they pretended whatever was going on, they didn't have

anything to do with it.

So we were playing. This is November. And they were apples that were stored. We had stored apples in the attic. And so we ate them. And we played with them. We made-- we played ball with them. And we made-- we used it for an abaci. We counted with them and did math problems. And we were children. So I don't remember it being such a horrible experience being up there. But I'm sure the adults knew that that was going to be the end of our wanting to stay in Germany.

Yeah. The parents had to have been just completely terrified by that.

Exactly.

Susan, we have another comment from a viewer I'd like to share with you named Brian. And Brian says, dear Susan, thank you for sharing your experience-- and this is from a teacher in East Bridgewater, Massachusetts-- I've always wanted to meet a survivor. And I appreciate this chance to hear from you. It's nice to hear from you.

And I'd like to remind our audience, please, if you have any questions of Susan, to go ahead and ask them in our chat feature. Susan, of course, what you've just described, the events leading up to Kristallnacht, all of those events forced your parents to rethink your family's safety in Germany. What did they decide they needed to do?

Yeah, well, at the beginning, before Kristallnacht, my mother always wanted to come to the United States. And my father, I guess, he wasn't that anxious to go for the simple reason he probably thought that Hitler's going to blow over. And he's going to get his store back.

But after Kristallnacht, the Night of the Broken Glass, everybody-- every Jewish person in Germany wanted to get out because they knew that more horrible things were going to come and that Hitler was not going to blow over. So everybody tried to find a way to get out. But all of the countries had a quota, a very large quota. And it was very-- the quota was-- well, it was very impossible to get on the list.

Because the quotas were so small, it was so difficult.

Yeah, that's what I'm doing. Yeah. Yeah, were just so small. So my father had heard of a woman that was smuggling children across the border into France. And Bad Kreuznach isn't too far from the border of France. And so she-- when my father found out about her, I don't know how he found out about her.

And so she was saying, she would smuggle my brother and me across the border and bring us to France. And she would pretend that we were going to be her children, that we were French children. However, she did it for-- not out of the goodness of her heart, she did it because she wanted to make money. And my father gave her all the money that he had saved so that my brother and I could be safe in France.

Susan, we have a question for you, a video question from a student, Lucia, from the museum's Bringing the Lessons Home program. Lucia asks, did you have any hesitation about leaving Germany at such a young age?

Hi, Mrs. Warsinger. My name is Lucia. I am a member of the Bringing the Lessons Home programs class of 2020. And I was wondering if you had any hesitation at the time about leaving Germany and your home, especially at such a young age.

Well, that's a very good question. I knew that my parents wanted to save us. I knew they wanted to send us away. And I knew that I had to do what my parents wanted me to do. But it was very difficult to leave them, to get separated from them. And the thing is, the most horrible thing that now that I'm an adult must have been for my mother and father to send their children away and not know if they were ever going to see them again.

I can't imagine how terrifying that was and tragic for your parents to do exactly that. So there you are with Joseph. You're heading to France. Your mom, and dad, and your baby brother, Ernest, are behind still in Germany. Tell us about

the incident when you were crossing the border into France when German soldiers boarded the train.

Well, my brother-- I remember it differently. But memories are different. And my brother said that he went before I did, a week or two before I did. But I remember the two of us going together. So I mean, it's been over 80 years since all of that happened. But what had happened was is they told me to absolutely be absolutely quiet because I was German. And I didn't know how to speak any French. And we were supposed to be her children.

I think she had put our picture into her children's passport. And so she-- we were supposed to be very quiet because if the French people came and asked us some questions, we wouldn't understand, and we wouldn't be able to answer. And so we had to be very quiet.

My brother said that he thinks that maybe they gave him some drugs so he would be sleeping. But I don't remember having any drugs. But I was very, very quiet. And I pretended I was sleeping. And I heard them come. And she must have said to them that her child was sleeping. And everything was OK. We got to Paris all right.

So once you're in Paris, the lady takes you there. Now, you're in Paris. What happened when you got to Paris?

Yeah, we had a fourth cousin. And he lived in a nice apartment in Paris. And we stayed in his apartment. But he had to go to work. And he had told us to stay in the apartment until he got home from work. But my brother is always braver than I am. And he was curious. And he snuck out of the apartment. And he ran all over Paris, and looked at all of the sights, and then he came back to the apartment before the fourth cousin came back. And so he never-- the cousin never found out.

But the cousin couldn't take care of two kids. What was he going to do? So I don't know. Maybe we stayed for maybe two weeks. Maybe my brother remembers better than I do, but maybe two weeks. And so what he did is he found a foster home for us to stay at near the environs of Paris.

So in May 1940, you're living with your brother and other children in this children's home, this foster home. And then in May 1940, when Germany invaded France, you, your brother, and the other children in the home, and hundreds of thousands of others had to flee Paris. Tell us about leaving Paris and where you ended up.

Yeah. My brother remembers distinctly that we were walking someplace in Paris on the Champs-Élysées and that we saw the German Army marching in. And we could hear the boots, and the trucks, and the cars, and coming down the Champs-Élysées. And not only my brother and I were frightened, but everybody in Paris-- not only Jews were frightened, but everybody in Paris was frightened.

And so many, many people wanted to leave. Some people collaborated with the German Army. But many people wanted to get out. And many people wanted to flee into the south of France. But some people went west, went west.

And the closest town that was west of Paris was Versailles. And so that's where my brother and I went. And we-- both of us do not remember how we got there. But I think that some nuns probably took us. And we ended up in Versailles. And we ended up at the biggest building in Versailles, which of course, is the palace.

And so here, this mayor of Versailles had to take care of all of these refugees that came out of Paris. And they had to house us in Paris. And so what they did-- they have these beautiful gardens outside the palace. And at the other end of the gardens, they had a big pile of hay. And all of-- somebody gave us, all of us, a burlap sack. And we filled this burlap sack with hay. And then they gave us a little string to tie around the sack. And it was perfect for a mattress.

And we put it on our shoulders. And we walked into the palace. And of course, we walked into the biggest room that they have in the Palace of Versailles. And maybe you already-- here it is. It is-- you probably almost don't recognize it because all the mirrors are gone and all the chandeliers are gone. But it is the Hall of Mirrors.

And if you go now, I mean, it's a very elegant place with beautiful chandeliers on the floor and hanging from the ceiling. But at that time, they must have-- the people who were taking care of the palace must have hidden all of the chandeliers

in the basement. So maybe, they were worried that the Germans might-- when the army came, that the Germans might destroy them or steal them. So anyway, this room was tremendous. And so what we did, we put our mattresses that were made out of straw along each side. And then some of us were also in the middle. And we had a place to sleep in that Hall of Mirrors.

It's easy to imagine-- at least, I can imagine this room, this picture covered by refugees-- you, your brother, and many, many others, lying on your burlap hay-filled bags in that beautiful, big room-- powerful.

You had an encounter there with a Nazi officer while you were in Versailles. Tell us about that.

Yeah. Well, and you know, the German Army didn't just stay in Paris. They decided to come to Versailles. That was one of their next places they invaded. And so we heard them coming in and marching, again, in this big cavalcade of cars and trucks. And some soldiers were walking. But in front of that whole caravan was a car. And out of this car came an officer, a German officer.

And I don't know whether he was a general or whether he was a captain, but he seemed to be very important. And he got out of the car. And he said, he wanted to talk to the mayor. Now, they called the mayor. And the mayor did not know how to speak any German. And the German officer didn't know how to speak any French. And so they needed to have somebody to translate for them.

And they said-- somebody said, oh, there's a girl in the palace. And she knows how to speak German. So it was me. It was me. And so I tell you, they called me. And I was really very, very frightened because I thought, maybe, if he found out that I was Jewish, they would do the same thing that they had planned for all the other Jews in Germany.

But I came out. And he was so tall, he was as tall as the ceiling in your place where you are sitting. And I could just see above his boots. And so anyway, they started to talk to each other, the mayor and the officer. And I don't remember what they talked about.

And at the end of the conversation, the German officer said to me, hey, little girl, how come you know how to speak German so well? And I was really frightened then. And so I said to him, oh, the French schools are very good. And I learned how to speak German in the French schools.

You know, Susan, a couple of times, you've talked about how brave Joseph was. I think you've matched him in bravery for doing that and for quick thinking. That's an extraordinary thing that you did there. So Susan, at this time that you're describing, southeastern France remained unoccupied. It was governed by a French collaborationist government known as Vichy France. You and your brother fled from Versailles and fled south. How were you able to make this journey? And where did you find shelter after leaving Versailles?

Now, both of us really can't quite remember how we got from Versailles to Vichy. But we did end up in Vichy. I remember walking around and drinking some of that water they had in the fountains. And then we got to a place called Brout-Vernet, which is a little village near Vichy. And there was a castle, an old castle that the Ouvres de Secours aux Enfants, an agency which was wonderful to lost Jewish children at that time.

And here's that castle. You can see it. My brother and I are not on this picture. Those are the younger kids, some of them. But that's the only picture that I have. And there was called-- it was the Chateau des Morelles. And there we were and with all these lost children that were all over France. And this time, we were only with Jewish children. And everything was fine there because we were in the unoccupied zone.

And one of the things that we had to do every day was to write to our parents. And this is something that I was looking forward to is to write to them and because we were worrying about what had happened to them. Because we had heard stories.

Now in 19-- this is in the beginning of 1941. And we hadn't heard about all the atrocities that happened after 1941. But we weren't quite sure where my parents were and what had happened to them. And so we were there. And we were with

the kids. And we didn't have that much food, but we had enough things to eat.

And you were writing letters to your parents. But were they able to write back at all?

No, we didn't hear from them. No.

Nothing.

We didn't know.

Do you remember what that was like for you? And that must have been just so sad and scary.

Yeah. Yeah, I wanted to hear from them. That was my main thing is what had happened to them. And I wanted to be with my mother, and father, and of course, my baby brother, Ernest.

And while you were at this home, the Chateau, tell us about the education that you were getting there.

Oh, yes. By that time, we knew how to speak French already because when we were in the foster home, we went to school. And we had to learn. And nobody spoke any German. So we were little kids. And we learned it very quickly. And so the village had a public-- a school for the village kids. But they didn't want the children from the Chateau to be mixed with their children.

And so they gave us a special teacher, again, in a one-room house. And all the kids from the Chateau des Morelles went to that one room. And we learned. I have a [FRENCH] where we learned how to do math problems. And I had to write them in. And we learned geography. And he was a wonderful teacher.

And the thing that I remember the most is that in France, the kids go to school on Saturday, but not on Thursday. Thursday and Sunday is their day off. And so we have to go to school on Saturday. But he was so very understanding because we were Orthodox. And the Orthodox Jewish people, they don't write. And they don't work on Saturday. But we did walk to school. But he always gave us lessons so that we didn't have to write anything. And he was a very good teacher.

Susan, we have a audience comment and a question from Masha. Masha asks or says, thank you for sharing your family's story. How did you handle being separated from your parents? What helped you to deal with such a difficult situation?

Yeah, well, writing the letters to them was good. And also, I had the support of all the other children. They were on the same boat with me. All the other children in the Chateau des Morelles didn't know what had happened to their parents. And everybody was waiting to hear from them.

And Susan, speaking of those other children, please, share with our audience some how you celebrated each other's birthdays.

Well, I'm glad you asked me that. When it was time for a child-- for somebody's birthday, that was your friend or your relative, and so we used to get dessert. We didn't have that much food. But we used to get dessert maybe once a week or something. And so what we did is we didn't eat the dessert. We took the dessert and hid it up in a locker up in the attic.

We all had-- everybody had their own locker. And so we saved our desserts for a couple of weeks-- maybe it was three weeks. I don't remember. And then when it was time for the birthday child, we all, all the friends got all of their saved desserts and brought-- and another person went out into the cafeteria. And they got a tray.

And we all put our goodies that we had saved for those three weeks. We put it on the tray. And somebody went out to get dandelions and other whatever was blooming outside. And we put it on the tray. And then we carried the tray in the morning before the person woke up and brought the tray to the person whose birthday it was. And then the person woke



up and was very happy.

I know our audience, as I do, loves hearing about how you were looking out for each other in that way.

Yes, we did. Yes. Yes.

So Susan, here you are in this children's home in southern France, not knowing anything about the fate of the rest of your family. You hadn't heard back. But after about a year in the home, one day, the headmistress calls you in to see her. What did she want to say to you?

Yeah. I didn't know why she wanted to talk to me because usually, you had to go and see her because you've been bad or something. And I was always a very good child. And I never did anything wrong. So I walked up this staircase out of marble and held onto the wooden banister, this ancient wooden banister. And I was shivering. And I was frightened. And so I got inside her office.

And she said to me, Susi, you are going to go to the United States. And I tell you, I was filled with joy. But I was flabbergasted. And I just didn't understand. And so she said, your parents are in the United States. And your baby brother is in the United States. And they have found you.

They have gotten the Quakers-- the Quakers, by the way, they did such wonderful things for children during the Second World War. And also, the HIAS and the OSE, all of them got together. And they found us. And they helped my father make-- well, my father bought the tickets. But they helped my father arrange for a trip for us to come to the United States on a ship called the Serpa Pinto in Portugal.

And before we turn to hearing about your trip on the Serpa Pinto, we have an audience question from a viewer, Kelly. And Kelly asks, how did your parents survive?

It's a very good question. They must have been horribly upset because they didn't know where we were. But so how did my parents get over here to the United States? I'll answer this question. And what happened is my father had a cousin who lived in the Bronx. And she had a pickle factory. And in the United States, you could get affidavits if you had somebody that promised that you would not be a burden to the United States and that they would cover the immigrant's expenses.

And so this cousin, her name was Ann [? Gersten. ?] And she wrote the affidavits. And she said that she would be responsible. But I guess, at the time, the amount of affidavits that she had was just good enough for one person to come. So they had to-- my parents must have had to decide which one was going to come.

And so they decided that my father should come because if he came, he could start to work. And then somehow, it'd be easier for him to get my mother over here. And so that's exactly what happened. He came to the United States in 19-- I think at the end of 1940 or '41. And then he worked. And then he got my mother and my baby brother's affidavits to come to the United States. And so then that's when they started to try to find us.

We can only imagine what it was like for your mother. Her one daughter and one son are gone. And her husband is gone to the United States. And so it's just your mother and your little baby brother still in Germany. That must have been just an extremely difficult time for her. So once you've found out that you were going to join them in the United States, tell us about your journey out of France to the United States. What was that like? And how did it happen?

Yeah, well, the first thing was we had to get out of Brout-Vernet. And we took a train to Marseille, which in the southern part of France. And there, we stayed for a few days. And I'm not sure what happened there, but there were a lot of places that were taking refugees were all over in Marseille. But somehow or other, we got together with many children.

And we got on a train. And the train took us over the Pyrenees, through Spain. And I remember, we were in Madrid. We were in a bus in Madrid. And then somehow, we went-- we got to Portugal. And then we got on the boat that was in

Lisbon. And in Lisbon, and the boat was called the Serpa Pinto.

And I found this out later. We went with 50 children. They were all in the hull. We all were in the hull of the ship. It was a cruise ship, but much smaller, not like anything they have now. And the thing is these 50 kids-- later-- now, I found this out since I worked at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum that Eleanor Roosevelt was responsible for getting all of these children to come-- to save these children. And somehow, evidently, maybe four children were not able to get on to the group. And so they put my brother, and me, and two other children onto the transport. And so what we did is we all slept in bunks in that one room, all 50 of us. And it took 14 days to get here.

We have an image for you to tell us about.

Ah, yes. Oh, yes. Oh This was a tag. Everybody had to wear this tag. And it said who we were. It said-- I wasn't-- and my name is Susi Hilsenrath. And then it said, I'm going on the SS Serpa Pinto and then leaving from Lisbon. And then I'm going to New York. And everybody, all the 50 kids, had to wear this tag. And it looks like it's pretty worn out because we had to wear it every day. But it's at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. And it was in one of the exhibits when it first opened up. Yeah. So the trip took 14 days.

And then, of course, after those 14 days, you're about to go into New York City. You have to share that with us.

Yeah. I do have to share that with you. I really would like to talk about this. Well, one evening, they told us that we should get up early the next morning because at 6 o'clock, we were going to pass the Statue of Liberty. I'm going to get emotional, I can feel it already. I'm sorry.

Well, and you're getting me emotional. So I think that's completely appropriate.

Well, anyway, my brother always gets emotional about this too. Anyway at 6 o'clock-- well, the kids all were up much earlier. And I think my brother probably was up at 5 o'clock up there. And so when we got up there, there was this horrible fog. And you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. And so we were all really disappointed.

But I'm telling you, at exactly 6 o'clock, that fog lifted like a curtain in the theater. And it just went up very, very slowly. And the very first thing we saw, the bottom of the statue, because it was 6 o'clock, and that curtain was rising very slowly and slowly. And we saw her body. And then we saw the head. And then we saw the entire Statue of Liberty. And all the children were excited.

And of course, my brother and I were extremely excited because, first of all, we were going to see our parents. And then we knew that we were going to go to a society where there was a democracy and where we were going to not have anybody call us a dirty Jew or where there was no discrimination against Jewish people.

And yet your ordeal was not quite over at that point. Tell us-- you got delayed. Tell us about that.

Yeah, we did. We did get delayed. When we got to the port in New York, all the passengers of the ship got off the ship. But somehow or other, they had some medical people coming on board to check out to see if the children had some kind of a communicable disease. Oh, this is a picture of us coming into the port. Can you show where I am? Yes, the circle is me and the other one is my brother. This was in a newspaper in New York, when we first came here. This was on September the 24th.

That is a tremendous photograph, that really is.

Yeah, I think so. It was on September the 24th, 1941. Anyway, these medical people came on board. And they checked out all the children. And my brother had a fever. And he had a rash on his body from eating too much pineapple. And they thought that he had a communicable disease. And they said, he couldn't come into the United States. Of course, I would stayed with him. And they said, well, you can't come into the United States. So where did they take us? I bet you you probably thought about it already. Do you know where they took us? We came.

I think I know, but our audience might not know.

Well, I'll tell them. I'll tell them. It was Ellis Island. And so we took us to Ellis Island. And my brother was-- they gave him aspirins or medicine. And they gave him cream for his rash. And he was better very soon.

However, when we were there, the few days that we were there, we learned everything we needed to know for children here in the United States. So let me tell you the three things that we knew made us become a knowledgeable. We sat at long tables, like cafeteria tables in the school system. And there was a sailor sitting next to my brother.

And he was drinking a brown drink. And it had bubbles in it. And the sailor nudged him and asked him if he would like to have a taste. And my brother looked at me. And he said, should I drink it? And I said, well, OK. So he tasted it. And he said, oh, it tastes very good. So this sailor told him that it was Coca-Cola. So in those days, the Coca-Cola was just the drink that was very popular here in the United States.

And so another day that we found out that there was this bread on the table. And it was white. And we had never seen any white bread. And so it was soft. And we could take it in our hand. And we could make a ball out of it. And then we could eat it. And it tasted so wonderful. And somebody told us that it was called Wonder Bread.

And then the last thing we learned, which is really, very important, is that the kids here in the United States were having candy that you could keep in your mouth all day long. And it didn't melt. And then they told us that it was chewing gum. And in those days, chewing gum was a big thing in the United States. So my brother and I were ready to come. And so they-- we put us back on the boat. And they took us back to the pier. And there was my father. And he took us to Washington, DC.

So your father had been waiting all that time while you were having to go through that quarantine and time at Ellis Island.

Yes.

Before we go on, I want to just say to our audience that, of course, the United States was not yet in the war. We wouldn't enter the war until December 1941. Had this been a few months later, Susan's parents would not have gotten out of Germany. So the timing for you was just absolutely wonderful. What was it like, Susan, to reunite with your parents after all that time?

Well, it was wonderful to see them. We were very happy to be with them. Yes.

Yeah. Susan, your immediate family, obviously, was able to get out of Germany. And that was wonderful. Tell us what happened to other family members. Well, most everybody was murdered. My father had been born in Poland. And I had never met my grandparents or his relatives, except for one sister. And she emigrated to Israel way before Hitler, or around that time. And so I never knew any of his relatives. And they lived in Poland.

And I tried to find out what had happened to them. The Germans keep very good records. But I could not find anything as to what happened about them. And I didn't find out until later that in all the small villages, the Germans marched in. And what they did is they made the Jewish people dig their own graves. And they shot them. And they didn't keep any record of what had happened. So my grandparents and my father's relatives lived in a town called Kolomea. And most of those people died that way.

And on my mother's side, many of-- my mother also was born in Poland. I never met her parents, either. And I didn't find out anything, either, about them. But she did have a relative called Tante Anna. There she is. She was my mother's mother's sister. So she was my mother's aunt. And Tante means aunt in German. And my mother called her Tante Anna. So and to me, she was always Tante Anna.

And she lived in a town called Viersen. And she was wonderful to us. And she was like a good, good, good relative. She was a wonderful lady. She had a husband. And she had children.

And what happened to her is-- I did find out what happened to her because she was sent to Riga because the Germans kept records about the German Jews. And she was-- and she had a mother, which was my mother's grandmother, my great-grandmother. And so-- and her husband, Uncle Heinrich, they sent him. And they were such wonderful people. And they were so good to us. And they sent them to Riga. And that they were murdered there.

At the Riga concentration camp. Susan--

I don't know how they were murdered, but they died there. It's said in the book. And still, I don't know. I tried to find out what happened, how they died, and why they died. But they just said, they died.

Thank you for sharing that. I know that's very painful to talk about. We have some comments from the audience to share with you, though.

Tammy writes, Susan's descriptions and storytelling ability puts you there and brings all of these experiences to life. For history, Susan's account is so important. Thank you again, Susan. I will listen to you at every chance I get. And your granddaughter is watching. Rebecca writes, hi, Grandma. I'm watching with my dad and David. We love you.

Well, hello. It's going to be David's birthday. And I think, tonight, we're going to celebrate David's. And he has a twin brother. And we're going to celebrate them. And I just want to brag about my children and grandchildren. They are all so wonderful. And they are contributing to society, all of them, all my nine grandchildren. And David and Rebecca, especially-- they're all-- they're doing-- David is doing-- helping the world in desalinating the oceans. And he's going to save the world from a water shortage. And all my other grandchildren have so much to contribute.

And so what I'm saying to you all, see, what I brought with myself and all these six million people that were killed, they could have had grandchildren. They could have contributed to the world and-- like my grandchildren are contributing to the world.

Susan, I have just one more question for you. In the face of rising global antisemitism, please, tell us why you continue to share your firsthand account of what you experienced during the Holocaust.

We have to remember what happened. We cannot undo the atrocities of the past. We have to take action to confront hate. We cannot be onlookers when we see injustice taking place. We need to understand what prejudice and hatred can do to people. We have to be sensitive to each other and take care of one another. And we have to enjoy-- let us enjoy and celebrate what we have in common.

Susan, we have such gratitude to you for your willingness to continue to do this, to take the time to share your firsthand account of what you experienced. It's so important. You are so eloquent. And as Tammy noted, you are a storyteller. It's no surprise that you spent a career teaching and building a new generation, several generations of people to contribute to the betterment of our world. So thank you, Susan, for all you've done and all you continue to do. Well, we look forward to your next time with us on the First Person program.

Thank you for having me, Bill.

I'd like to take a moment to thank our donors. First Person is made possible through the generous support of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation. I'd like to also ask you to join us again next month on April 27, 2022 at 1:00 PM Eastern Time for a conversation with Holocaust survivor and museum volunteer, Peter Gorog.

Peter and his mother faced antisemitism and Hungarian anti-Jewish laws in their hometown of Budapest. When the German Army occupied Hungary in March 1944, they were ordered to leave their home. Join us to hear how they were-- how they survived and were liberated from the Budapest ghetto in January 1945, when Peter was almost four years old. Thank you for watching First Person today.