UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON SUSAN WARSINGER
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Bill Benson: Good morning and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today, including all of you students from New Jersey. We are in our 16th year of the *First Person* program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Susan Warsinger, whom we shall meet shortly.

This 2015 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of twice-weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serve as volunteers here at this museum. Our 2015 program concludes tomorrow, August 13th. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests and it will provide information about our program in 2016.

Anyone interested in keeping in touch with the Museum and its programs can complete the Stay Connected card in your program or speak with a museum representative at the back of the theater at the end of the program. In doing so, you will receive an electronic copy of Susan Warsinger's biography so that you can remember and share her testimony after you leave here today.

Susan will share her "First Person" account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Susan questions.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Susan is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction.

Susan Hilsenrath was born in Bad Krueznach, Germany, the eldest of three children. Here we see Susan's family. From the left to right is her brother, Joseph, mother, Ani, with Ernest in her lap, her father, Israel, and Susan with her arm around her father.

Here we see Susan with her brother, Joseph.

On November 9-10, 1938, known as Kristallnacht for Night of Broken Glass, Nazi thugs smashed the windows and furnishings of the Hilsenrath home. Months later, Susan and Joseph were smuggled to France.

In May 1940, the German Army invaded France. Susan and Joseph were evacuated from a children's home in Paris to Versailles, where they were temporarily housed in Louis XIV's palace. Soon German soldiers arrived and the children fled with their guardians to the unoccupied part of the France under the Vichy government. The arrows indicate their movement southward.

With the help of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, HIAS, Susan and Joseph received permission to immigrate to the United States. Information written on this tag that Susan wore identifies her name and states she is sailing for the United States on the SS Serpa Pinto.

After crossing the Pyrenees to Spain, the two children sailed from Lisbon, Portugal, and arrived in New York in September 1941. Susan and Joseph are circled. This photograph appeared in a New York newspaper.

Susan lives here in the Washington, D.C. area. She has three very accomplished daughters and, as she notes, nine wonderful grandchildren. She spent 29 years as an educator in the public school system.

Susan's volunteer work at the Museum includes being a member of the Speakers' Bureau, for whom she speaks at venues locally and across the country about her experiences during the Holocaust. Susan is a tour guide leading law enforcement officers, including FBI agents and law enforcement officers from all over the United States and from throughout the world, through the museum's Permanent Exhibit. She also gives tours to special groups such as college-aged leaders and individual tours to visually and hearing impaired people. And she also leads tours for the Museum's exhibit, "Some Were Neighbors: Collaboration and Complicity in the Holocaust."

Susan is a contributor to the Museum's writing project which produces editions of "Echoes of Memory," a collection of writings by survivors associated with this museum. You can read some of her writings online on the Museum website. Following today's program, Susan will be available to sign copies of "Echoes of Memory. "

I am also happy to note that seated in the front row with Susan today are her good friends Karen Zinkgraf and Pam Harrick.

With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Susan Warsinger.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Susan, welcome and thank you so much for your willingness to be our *First Person* today. We first met 16 years ago yesterday. You have been on an annual basis with us at our *First Person* program.

We're going to get started. You have so much to share with us and we have a brief hour together. Your early years were spent living in the town of Bad Krueznach in Germany. Before we turn to the war, tell us what you can about your family and their life and your life before the war began.

>> Susan Warsinger: Ok. I was a very young girl when Hitler first came into power in 1933. I remember my father had a thriving store, a linen store, and he was doing very well in that store. And all of a sudden he didn't have his store anymore.

Can I just ask the audience?

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely.

>> Susan Warsinger: How many of you have been in the Permanent Exhibition already? You have not gone to the Permanent Exhibition? Ok. How many of you are going to the Permanent Exhibition? Oh, good. So you will see -- and then I'll tell you some of the things while I'm talking to look for when you go -- when they go to the Permanent Exhibition.

Anyway, what happened in Germany at that time -- and you're going to see there's a big exhibit about it, what the Nazis did. First thing, they didn't go and take everybody into the concentration camps but what they did to my father they did to a lot of the German people. They boycotted my father's store. So he lost all of his customers. The only people that could come to his store were the Jewish people. And after that he didn't have enough business so he lost his store. And that's how the Nazis first started. They took away all of the livelihoods of all of the people.

We lived in a very nice house when he had the store but then as soon as he lost the store, we kept moving from smaller and smaller and smaller house. In that picture you saw my brother and me on the steps. That was already near -- it was maybe in 1936 or 1937.

>> Bill Benson: So by that time he had lost his business. And you had moved already.

>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. So we moved. And every one of those houses became less elegant than the one before.

I remember, I went to kindergarten. I was really excited to go to kindergarten. I really didn't like going. And then I got to go to first grade. And in first grade I hated going to school because the kids made fun of me. I couldn't figure out why the children were making fun of me. It turned out that the teacher read a book to us, “Der Giftpilz.”. The title meant a poisoned mushroom. It was a picture storybook that the teacher was reading, teaching the kids that Jewish people were poisoned mushrooms.
>> Bill Benson: And here you are in the classroom, obviously.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. So the kids were really terrible to me. I wished that I didn't have to go to school. And you know what? One day I didn't have go to school anymore. And I tell you, I was really happy. And the reason I was happy is because none of the Jewish children in Germany were allowed to go to school anymore to public school. To me it was a good thing but this is what was going on in Germany. The kids weren't allowed to go to public school. However, the people in my town, the Jewish people in my town, hired a Jewish teacher and he taught all the kids in all the grades. So I was very happy because nobody was making fun of me anymore.
>> Bill Benson: I remember you telling me that because there were so few of you, first grade was in the first row.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Kind of each row was another grade.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly. So he did it all the way to the 10th grade. So there were 10 rows. So maybe half of this auditorium, maybe a little less, all the Jewish kids went to that school. And he had to teach us all of the subjects. He had to teach us math, writing, reading, history, and science. But he did it and we were very, very happy.
>> Bill Benson: Do you recall, Susan, an incident where your mother sent you to a local store to get bread but you had to go through a park to get to that store? Will you tell us about that?
>> Susan Warsinger: Oh, yes. I hope they're ready to hear this story. Are you ready to hear this story?

Anyway, I was really, really proud. The German money, pfennige, which is pennies, and she wanted to -- I felt very proud. My mother told me to go to the store to buy some bread. And I was really happy. Where we're sitting is where my house sits and all of the people in the audience here, that's a park. And then at the end of the park was this street which had all the grocery stores. I was very happy to go because there was a passage way through the park. You could go through the park to get to the end and then go to the grocery store.

So one day she gave me the money and I got to the park. There were some steps. I started to go down the steps.
>> Bill Benson: Something you had done many times.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Yes. So when I got to the bottom of the steps, just at the entrance of the park, they had like a gatekeeper. And the gatekeeper came running over to me and he said, "Oh, you little girl." Then he called me all kinds of horrible names. He said, "Jews are not allowed to walk through this park anymore and you do not walk through this park ever, ever again."

So I ran to my mother and I told her. You know, they always tried to protect us, you know, not to tell us what the German government was doing. I guess my parents thought that this whole thing was going to blow over and Hitler was not going to be in power that much longer. So anyway so she said to me: next time I tell you to go to the store, just walk all the way around, go up the block this way, and come around and go to the store that way. It was a big walk.

So the next time she took me to the store, got to the steps in front of the park and I said to myself, I am really very tired. So I guess your audience already can figure out what I decided to do. So I walked down the steps. Of course, the gatekeeper immediately came out and he started to throw rocks at me.

The bad part of it was he had a daughter who was just about my age. She was a little bit older than me. And her father, of course, was her role model. Since he was her role model and she saw her father doing it, of course she did the very same thing. So it was a lesson that I learned, you

know, how important it is for the parents to be good role models for their children. Anyway I never walked through that park again.
>> Bill Benson: Susan, with your father losing his business, how did he manage to feed the family and make ends meet after that?
>> Susan Warsinger: Well, what he used to do, he bought strawberries, raspberries, different berries. He carried them in baskets. He went to a farmer and he bought them. And then he tried to buy them to sell them to the Jewish people in our town. And, you know, the Jewish people tried to support each other. So that's how he made his money. He didn't have very much left.
>> Bill Benson: Your mother had a baby boy in 1938 but at that time she had no choice other than to have her child at home. Say a little bit about that.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. You remember the picture that was on -- my brother and I are sitting on the steps? She was having my -- the baby brother that you saw in my mother's lap, she was having that baby. She was having it at home. They told my brother and me to sit outside on the steps because they didn't want us to listen to her having the baby.

At that time, in our town at least, the rule was that no Jewish woman was allowed to go to the hospital. So she had to have -- I don't know if she had a midwife or not but she had somebody to help her. She wasn't allowed to go to the hospital.
>> Bill Benson: So had there been complications or serious problems, she would have no choice. She would have to deal with it at home.
>> Susan Warsinger: Right. Exactly.
>> Bill Benson: This brings us that terrible night in early November 1938, November 9 through 10. That was to become known as Kristallnacht or Night of Broken Glass. Tell us what you remember about that night.
>> Susan Warsinger: Ok. My brother and I, we were sleeping in our bedroom. This was not the baby. The baby was sleeping with my parents in their bedroom. My brother and I, we were sleeping and we were really very excited. It was November 9. It was going to be my mother's birthday on the next day. So it was maybe around 11:00, something like that. And all of a sudden some bricks and rocks were being thrown through our window. And my brother was a year younger than I am but he was always braver than me so he went to the window and he pulled himself up. He said to me, "Susi "-- that was my name in Germany. "Susi, it is our neighbors" who were throwing the bricks and rocks through the window.

I was really scared. So we jumped out of bed and we started to cross to our parents' bedroom. And just as we were crossing our parents' bedroom, some of the neighbors that my brother had seen outside had uprooted a telephone pole. He said he had seen the policemen.

And those of you who are going up to the Permanent Exhibition, you're going to see the policemen -- the German policemen -- they had these blue helmet hats, blue uniforms.

He was standing at the crowd. He was standing at the outskirts of the crowd and was standing like this.
>> Bill Benson: But not intervening.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly. Yes. So we were crossing to our parents' bedroom. They had uprooted this telephone pole. And then our front door was made out of glass and the glass was broken and it was all over the floor. The objective was to go to the rabbi's apartment who lived in the apartment above us, our house. We lived on the first floor, the rabbi family on the second floor, on the third floor a non-Jewish family, and on the fourth floor there was an attic. While they were going through our apartment, they looted some of our things and broke some of our things but not too much. They wanted to get to the rabbi's apartment and evidently they must have destroyed many of his artifacts and many of his books.

My father said, well, let's hide in the attic. So before we went in the attic -- he had saved a little bit of money, all the money that he had left. He told me to put it in my underwear because he figured if somebody was going to arrest him, if something was going to happen to him, they won't

search a little girl. So here we go up in the attic with all of the money that he had left in the whole wide world.

Anyway, we got up to the attic. The rabbi's family was already up there. But the rabbi wasn't there. And what had happened to the rabbi, they had arrested him and put him to jail. But before they did that, I looked out a little window from the attic and I saw him standing on his balcony. There were two SS officers. And you're going to see many pictures of the SS, the Nazi officers. They were holding him on each side. Another one came and cut off his beard. And then they hauled him off to jail.
>> Bill Benson: So for the purpose of just utter humiliation.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly. Yes.

So later on I found out that they didn't only do that to our house in Bad Krueznach but they did it to all the Jewish families that were living in our town. And not only that, they did it -- they burned down our synagogue and they looted all the Jewish stores that were still left. Then I found out that they did it all over Germany, in every town where there were Jewish communities. And because so much glass was broken that night, they called it Night of Broken Glass, Kristallnacht.
>> Bill Benson: Hundreds of synagogues were burned throughout Germany.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Exactly.
>> Bill Benson: How long do you think you were in the attic?
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah, I don't remember. I was a little girl. It was maybe four days. Something like that. Not a very long time.

You might ask me: What did you eat for four days? It was November. Our town had all of these marvelous orchards. We had all of these apples. They had stored -- my parents and the rabbi's parents, and evidently the non-Jewish family stored piles of apples in that attic. So we ate them.

The rabbi's children were up in the attic with us. We were very -- it was ok, you know. The kids didn't realize the horrors -- the beginning -- it was really the beginning of all the horrors that started in Germany. But as a kid, we didn't know. We ate the apples. We have played with the apples. We played games. We pretended they were balls. We pretended they were all kinds of different toys. So to me, I wasn't that scared. I was just a little kid. It was like an exciting thing that was happening. Of course, my parents knew what it --
>> Bill Benson: What it meant.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: That night I believe some 30,000 Jewish men were arrested.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly.
>> Bill Benson: Taken to the Dachau concentration camp. Your father was not. Why do you think that was?
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. I'm glad you asked me that. I should have talked to my father a lot more about that night. I know he used to be the friend of the mayor of our town. He used to play chess with him. So I don't know. He went to jail for just a few hours and then he came up to the attic. I don't know. It might be that or because he was born in Poland. All of his family were Polish. And at that time, you know, Germany -- Hitler hadn't decided to conquer all of Europe yet. This was like the very beginning. And Poland, he hadn't occupied Poland yet. And I think perhaps because he was Polish they didn't arrest him. So I'm not sure.

So I want to tell the audience something. I was telling my friends about it in the car here. Those of you who are kids and those of you who are parents, tell your kids everything that happened to your parents and your grandparents. Find out all the details. Have them tell it to you personally. We talked about, oh, you have the computer and you can put it all down on the computer but sometimes you erase that stuff and it's gone. So pass it on from mouth-to-mouth so that you know all of these things, so that you know everything that happened in your family.
>> Bill Benson: That's really important advice. Thanks for that, Susan.

The events of that night in particular, the Night of Broken Glass, really led to your parents making the very profound decision that they needed to get out of Germany. Tell us what they did, their attempts to try to get out of Germany.

>> Susan Warsinger: Ok. Well, you remember all the money that I had in my underwear? I had gotten it very wet because there was no bathroom up there. But we laid the money out on the floor and it dried up. So anyway, my father had heard -- I'm telling you this for a reason. My father had heard of a lady that was taking children across the border into France. But she wasn't doing it out of the goodness of her heart. What she was going to do, she had children of her own and she pretended -- she used her children's passports. She put, I don't know, our pictures in her children's passports. So we were supposed to be her children. She pretended when we crossed the border from Germany into France, she pretended we were her children. Of course, my father gave her all of that money. So he knew that we were going to be safe because, you know, Hitler wasn't at war with France at that time.
>> Bill Benson: You and your brother Joseph.
>> Susan Warsinger: My brother Joe. My father, before the Night of Broken Glass -- and I'm telling you people many Jewish people didn't want to leave Germany because they all thought, well, this is going to blow over.
>> Bill Benson: And it's been their home for hundreds of years in many cases.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly. Many had been in the First World War. They were citizens. They were part of Germany.

After the Night of Broken Glass nobody, no Jewish family, wanted to stay in Germany. And, of course, before my father wanted to stay in Germany but my mother always wanted to leave. It was going on like that. They had big decisions to make. They had big decisions to make. But after the Night of Broken Glass everybody wanted to get out.

Of course, there were quotas in all of the countries. So if you wanted to leave Germany -- and the Nazis were happy. They wanted to get rid of the Jews. But nobody in all the countries in the world wanted to have them.

I guess you'll find out when you go up to the Permanent Exhibition. They had an Evian Conference. Roosevelt was the president then. The conference was let's open up our quotas, let's open up our countries. No country opened up their quotas. Only country that did was the Dominican Republic. You can learn about that. There's this big picture when you get up there, a big picture that was in the "New York Times." It talks about the Evian Conference. So make sure you look at that. It really shows you what was going on in Germany at that time.
>> Bill Benson: And I believe you had relatives in the United States. So even with relatives, because of the small quota, you were not able to come.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly. Yes.
>> Bill Benson: So your parents say, well, at least we're going to send Susi and Joe into France.
>> Susan Warsinger: Into France.
>> Bill Benson: Do you remember what it was like for you to leave your parents, to be sent? Any sense of what you were feeling at that time?
>> Susan Warsinger: I have a hard time talking about that. I had put it -- this separation from my parents, I have put it very far back in the back of my mind. Then I became a mother myself and I can just see how terrifying it must have been for my mom to send her children away and not know if they were ever going to see them again. So it's a very difficult topic for me to talk about.
>> Bill Benson: I can imagine it would be.

You remember an incident on the train with the woman who they paid to take you into France. I think German soldiers boarded the train.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. My brother and I, we had to pretend we were fast asleep. We did not speak any French and here we were supposed to be French children. So we were sleeping. And my brother tells this story. I don't know if I ever told you this. But my brother tells this story that he thinks that maybe we were drugged so we would be sleeping or maybe we were drugged because the separation from our parents was going to be so difficult. I don't know. I really don't know. But anyway, we had to be very quiet. Somehow or other I think I heard them talk in French but I was pretending to sleep.

>> Bill Benson: And your parents' plan worked. You got to Paris. What happened then? The lady delivers you. You make it to Paris.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. Here are these two kids. I was 9 and my brother was 8. So here we were all by ourselves. There was a second cousin who was living in Paris. He was a young man, similar to your age. How old are you? 22. Yeah. Maybe he was 25. He had a nice little apartment in Paris, in the Place de la Vendome. So he said he'd keep us for a while until they figured out what they were going to do with us. So we stayed with him.

And he had a job. So he went to work. He told my brother and me to stay in his little apartment until he got back. But my brother, I told you he was very adventurous. He snuck out the minute this second cousin left the apartment. He went all over Paris on the Metro. He used to go under the stiles. He came back. He was 8 years old. Of course, I never did it because I was always very good and listened to everything everybody ever told me to do.

So anyway -- this cousin couldn't take care of these two children. So there were all kinds of wonderful organizations in France that were looking out for children. And one of them was the HIAS. You talked about it before. And then there was the OCE. They found the place for us to stay in one of the suburbs of Paris. A lady had a house and was taking care of children, like maybe orphans or something like that. So we stayed with them.
>> Bill Benson: Was it just Jewish orphans or just orphans in general?
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. Maybe 10 lived in her house. Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: So you were there for a little while.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. And now it's May 1940. I guess you all know -- you probably learned in school --
>> Bill Benson: Before you turn to that, Susan, tell us when you were at that house -- it was not a happy experience. Can you say a little bit about that?
>> Susan Warsinger: Ok. This was the first house we were at. She was Madam Zalitski. She had a daughter. She favored her daughter and all the children that she was taking care of. I'm sure somebody paid her to take care of us. She treated us very poorly. She -- they wouldn't let us go in the house to eat. We had to go in the outhouse to go to the bathroom. She didn't give us the good, same food as she gave to her daughter. She had a husband who she bossed around. That's who we learned how to eat pon frietes, french fried potatoes. He would give some to his daughter but he wouldn't give any to us. You remember things like that.
>> Bill Benson: I think you were only allowed to be in the house to sleep.
>> Susan Warsinger: To sleep. Yes.
>> Bill Benson: And that was on straw.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. We complained to the second cousin. He found us another place. There were two ladies. She took care of different children. She was very good to us.
>> Bill Benson: Then what happened from there?
>> Susan Warsinger: Well, it was -- we were, again, sleeping in our bedroom. We used to look out the window. We used to see German planes bombing -- they didn't bomb Paris but they bombed the surroundings of Paris. Because, you know, by this time Hitler had said I'm going to take over all of Europe. He had gone into Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia. So his next objective was to get into France. So he was bombing the outskirts of Paris. We used to look out the window and we used to see them bombing. So we knew what was happening. Well, anyway, in June the Nazis came marching into Paris.
>> Bill Benson: So you had to leave Paris at that point.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. Well, not only us. Everybody was really scared. They were frightened because we called them the boche. That's what the Germans were, the German Army. Not only the Jewish people were frightened but everybody was frightened of the Germans. They wanted to run out of Paris. So some of them went south to Vichy and some of them went west to Versailles. I don't know who took us but in this exodus people were --

>> Bill Benson: That's what it's known as, the exodus. Right? When thousands and thousands were fleeing on bicycles, carts, anything to get away from the advancing German Army.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: So there you are part of that.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. So we ended up in Versailles. You know what's in Versailles? There's a big palace in Versailles. So when all of these people who were getting to Versailles, they didn't know what to do with us. So the mayor of the town said, well, we're going to put them up in the palace. And there's this one big room in the palace. Does anybody know what that big room is called? The big, big room.
>> Bill Benson: I hear somebody.
>> Susan Warsinger: Somebody knows this? Ok. I'll tell it to you. It's called the Hall of Mirrors. And the palace -- could you see this room here? Make it twice as long as this auditorium. And then it had these chandeliers hanging from all over, mirrors on the walls. So what they did is -- they had to put us to sleep someplace. I don't know how we ate. I just don't remember. But they had to put us to sleep so they gave us these burlap sacks, you know, that you put potatoes in. And in the back they had this tremendous pile of hay. So we put the hay into the potato sacks. And then we tied it up. And then we had a nice little mattress. So what we did -- all over the sides of that Hall of Mirrors we put our beds, our mattresses, put them next to each other. All of these people were sleeping. I do remember that that straw was itching a lot.
>> [Laughter]
>> Bill Benson: And the burlap, I would think. So there's all of these refugees filling the Hall of Mirrors.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: Then the Germans come.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. They didn't stay in Paris. They came marching into Versailles. We heard them with their big boots. They were making this noise. We could hear the trucks. We could hear the tanks. It was really scary. We could hear them marching into Versailles.

So anyway, they got in front of the palace. They wanted to speak to the mayor of our town -- I don't know if he was the mayor that they wanted -- I don't know. Some big official. Then at the beginning of this Caravan that the Nazis came, there was this car. This high-ranking German officer got out of the car. Now, he didn't know how to speak any French. And the mayor of the town didn't know how to speak any German. They wanted to talk to each other. Somebody said there's a little girl in the palace and she knows how to speak German. So it was me, you know. So anyway, I'm scared.
>> Bill Benson: Terrified.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly. So they call me downstairs. It was not in the garden side. It was the front side of the palace. So they started to ask me different things. So I translated for them. I don't really remember what they talked about. But at the end they must have been satisfied because the Nazi officer, with high boots, bent down to me like this and he said, "Little girl, how come you know how to speak German so well?" So I was really scared by then. So I told him, you know, the French schools are really very good and I learned how to speak German.
>> Bill Benson: Very, very quick-Witted. That was pivotal you were able to say that.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: So after that you would make your way to another community.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. After in Versailles, Versailles wasn't safe because the Nazis took over all of northern France but they left a little bit on the inside of Southern France to be independent of the Nazis. So a lot of people wanted to go down there.
>> Bill Benson: What we call Vichy France today.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly. Of course, it wasn't that independent because the president at that time of that independent Vichy, he was really in cahoots with the Nazis. But it was better than being in the Nazi occupied.

So anyway, we went to Vichy. And near Vichy there was this little town called Brout-Vernet. And in that town there was a chateau, a castle, an old castle. And in that old castle there were children

that were lost. But these were all Jewish children that were lost and they didn't know where to go. They lost their parents. They didn't know. So they all congregated into this particular chateau in Brout-Vernet.
>> Bill Benson: Essentially an orphanage for Jewish kids.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: There you are in this little community, in this orphanage. What was that like?
>> Susan Warsinger: Well, I tell you, they were very good to us. We went to school. We went to school but -- you know, those people in that village, a really small village, wouldn't let us go to their public school either because they thought we would contaminate their children somehow. It was really so sad. Because here were these little village kids who were all farmers. We could have learned from them. We were all of these cosmopolitan kids. We could have taught them so much.

But anyway, they gave us a French teacher. And all of the kids from the chateau went to a public school but we were segregated. We had a wonderful French teacher who taught us -- I learned how to speak French really well. I really knew how to write in French. We were happy.

Of course, everybody, all the kids in that chateau, they all wanted to be reunited with their parents. I dreamed about being reunited with my parents every night because we hadn't heard from them and we didn't know.
>> Bill Benson: So you had no idea where they were or if they were even alive at that point.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: The war is going on. Circumstances are difficult in general and there you are with very meager resources. You told me about how you celebrated each other's birthdays as kids. Can you share that?
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. You have a good memory. Wow. In that children's home, kids birthdays, we didn't have any money. We couldn't buy them presents. We didn't have anything. But what we did have, once or twice a week we got dessert. Maybe it was a little piece of cake. Maybe it was a cookie. Maybe it was a piece of candy. What we did is we saved it. We didn't eat it. We all had a locker room in the attic of the chateau. So we saved it. If we had a friend that was going to be a birthday child, so all of the friends got together and we all saved the cake. Then we put it in one of the lockers. When it was the day of the person's birthday, one of them went to the kitchen. We had these trays like you have in the cafeteria in school. And then somebody tried to find a doily. Somebody went out to see if they could find a flower. All of the loot that we had collected from not eating the dessert, we would put it on the tray. And the person would wake up in the morning -- there wasn't any "Happy birthday." It was a different song we sang. The person saw the tray with all of these goodies on it. That's how we celebrated. I'm glad you remembered that.
>> Bill Benson: Finding moments of joy in those circumstances.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Susan, here you are in a children's home in Southern France. You don't know anything about the fate of your parents, their whereabouts. Then one day you learn that your parents are trying to get you out and are trying to get to you. How did your father manage to get you out, your parents, under those circumstances?
>> Susan Warsinger: Ok. So what had happened to my parents, my parents, they had a relative here in the Bronx who had a pickle factory. She was my father's cousin. She and her husband and her children had this pickle factory. My father got in touch with her. Again, the quota was still going on. You know about the quota I was telling you about. But she sent him enough papers and she said that he would not be a burden to the United States, she would give him a job, he wouldn't have to be economically dependent on anybody except her. So he got affidavits to come to the United States. And my brother and my mother stayed in Germany.

And while he got here, he worked and somehow or other he got in touch with the State Department. I have all of these letters now that I found on how he tried to get her out of Germany and the baby. So anyway, they got here. So they got here in 1940 while we were in that children's home in France.

>> Bill Benson: So the rest -- your mom, dad, and baby brother.
>> Susan Warsinger: Came to Washington. The reason they came to Washington is because -- you know that rabbi I was telling you about? He also escaped out of Germany. He came to Washington. And my father figured, well, if it was good enough for the rabbi, it was certainly going to be good enough for him. So that's how we ended up in Washington.
>> Bill Benson: Of course, for our audience, important to note that we were not in the war yet. That didn't happen until after Pearl Harbor day. And Pearl Harbor in 1941. So had that happened, they wouldn't have gotten out of Germany. But they were able to manage.

So here they are, you're in Southern France. What happened then?
>> Susan Warsinger: Well, my father --
>> Bill Benson: For a while, he had no idea where you were.
>> Susan Warsinger: No. There was this organization called the HIAS. He, again -- again, the State Department, called all of these organizations. The Nazis kept good records. We find records now still of what happened to all the Jewish people because they kept records of everything the Germans did. Somehow or other they found where we were. He sent us the tickets. We came to the United States.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that trip, how you left the chateau, the small town, and made your way to the United States.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. We went to Marseille, which is the city on the way of the South of France. Then we went through Spain. We went over the Pyrenees, which are mountains. We went to Portugal, into Lisbon, which is the capital. And there was a boat, a Portuguese boat called the Serpa Pinto. We got on to this boat. There were 50 kids on this boat. And these 50 kids, they owe their life, plus my brother and me, to Eleanor Roosevelt. I found this out not too long ago. I found it out in the records here at the museum. Eleanor Roosevelt, she worked very hard. She had an organization to try and get children here to the United States.

So these 50 kids, we were in the hull of the ship. We were in the front, way down on the bottom. We were not allowed to mix. It was a cruise ship. We were not allowed to mix with the people on the boat. So we were all on that ship.
>> Bill Benson: It was a Portuguese ship which is significant because Portugal was a neutral country.
>> Susan Warsinger: Exactly.
>> Bill Benson: That's why the ship was safe for us in that sense. Of course, a few months later it would not have been possible.
>> Susan Warsinger: This was like September 1941. Then, of course, the war started here in December.
>> Bill Benson: So you made it really with just a couple of months to spare.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: So the ship pulls into New York Harbor. You're excited. You're going to meet your parents. Then you get waylaid a little bit. Tell us what happened when you arrived.
>> Susan Warsinger: I told you about my brother Joe. Well, he wasn't going to stay in that hull of the boat where we were told not to go. But he went and investigated that whole ship. He found a place where they had pineapple, fresh pineapples. He and I had never eaten pineapples before. They were sending pineapples to the United States. I don't know where they got them but they brought them to the United States. He kept eating pineapples, pineapple, pineapple, morning, noon and night. You know, he was very excited. I don't want to tell you about this but he's not here so don't tell him. He used to wet the bed. You know, we were in bunk beds in that hull. He used to sleep on top of me. So I made him change. I was on the bottom and he was on the top.

Anyway, he was eating all the pineapple. He was urinating in the bed. And you know, pineapple is very acidic. He got this rash all over his body. By the time we came to the port in New York, you know, all the people got off the boat. They had a doctor come into the hull of the boat to check all the 50 kids to make sure they didn't have any communicable diseases. So everybody was fine except my brother. They looked at his rash on his body. On top of it he had a fever. He said he

had a fever. He tells everybody he had a fever. He doesn't talk about the rash. But I remember he had the rash. They said you can't come into the United States.
>> Bill Benson: You stayed on the ship for a while? What happened?
>> Susan Warsinger: Give a guess. Where do you think they took us?
>> Bill Benson: Ellis Island?
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Absolutely right. Because in those days Ellis Island was the place where you took people that they wouldn't let in. So we went to Ellis Island. There they gave him medicine and whatever.
>> Bill Benson: Meanwhile, your parents --
>> Susan Warsinger: My father --
>> Bill Benson: Still haven't seen you.
>> Susan Warsinger: We saw him standing on the pier and we were on the boat. We waved. We couldn't get to him.
So anyway, I just wanted to tell you about Ellis Island a little bit. Is that ok?
>> Bill Benson: Sure.
>> Susan Warsinger: So we learned all about the United States in Ellis Island. So we were sitting in this dining room. The table was long. All of these different people that couldn't come into the United States, you know, all kinds. We were all sitting, eating together. And on the tables they had bread piled up like this high. There were these white slices. We had never seen white bread before because, you know, in Germany or France they never wasted anything. So here was this white bread. We took the white bread. We could just crush it in our hand. We could make little balls on it. They told us it was called Wonder Bread. We were so excited.
>> [Laughter]
>> Susan Warsinger: Then my brother was sitting next to this sailor. He was drinking this brown drink. It was bubbly. It tickled your nose. My brother -- he said to my brother, "Why don't you take a taste?" My brother looked at me because I was his bigger sister, “Should I taste it?” I said go ahead and try it. He said, “Oh, it's very good.” It turned out it was Coca-Cola.
>> [Laughter]
>> Susan Warsinger: Anyway. And then we also found out that the kids here in the United States, they could have candy and you could keep it in your mouth for a whole day.
>> [Laughter]
>> Susan Warsinger: So we learned about chewing gum.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the reunion with your parents.
>> Susan Warsinger: Well, you know, my brother healed. He healed. Then we went back to the pier. They took us back in the boat. My father took us to Washington where my brother and the baby were.
>> Bill Benson: Do you remember much about what that was like?
>> Susan Warsinger: I don't like talking about it.
>> Bill Benson: Ok. Ok. It was a hard time for your parents. Wasn't it?
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: Of course, one of the things that you had to do was resume education. Tell us about that.
>> Susan Warsinger: Ok. They put me in the seventh grade. At that time, they didn't have, you know, like you go to school and you have -- some kids are smart at reading, some kids are not so smart. You have them all together. But what they had at that time, they had homogeneous grouping. And what they did is they took all the kids that were really smart and put them in one class. And then they put all of the kids that didn't know how to read, that didn't know how to behave, and that didn't do their homework, all of them in one class. And then everybody in between in different classes. So 7B the smart ones, 7B1 were the dumb ones. Guess where they put me. 7B1, yup.
>> Bill Benson: 7B1.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. I couldn't believe what was going on in that classroom. And the reason they put me in 7B1 is because I didn't know how to speak any English. So I was really feeling badly for

the teacher. I couldn't believe that the kids in the United States didn't do their homework. Because, you know, in France and in Germany, the teacher is the most important thing in your life besides your parents.
>> Bill Benson: Right.
>> Susan Warsinger: But these kids, they didn't do their homework. And a couple of the fellows would sleep while she was teaching them something. I just couldn't believe that. Anyway, we don't do that anymore. We mix everybody together. So anyway, after a few months I was in 7B3 but I never did get to 7 --
>> Bill Benson: You never made it.
>> Susan Warsinger: No.
>> Bill Benson: I was struck when you told me -- when we first met you told me you were just stunned at how bad American boys could behave.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: I remember you telling me that.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. But I mean, they were not -- they were just -- not all boys, you know, just there.
>> Bill Benson: 7B1.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. That's what I saw.
>> Bill Benson: It was quite an adjustment for you to make when you came here. When your parents first arrived, how did they earn their living? What did they do to sort of get established?
>> Susan Warsinger: I think what my father did when he first came here to make money, he used to go to the -- he remembered the strawberries and the berries. He used to go to the farmer. And he went and got eggs from farmers. And at that particular time you had to go check the eggs to make sure that there wasn't any blood in them. So he bought all of these -- I remember he bought cases and cases of eggs. He took them home. And in the basement he took a little box and he put the egg inside the box to look that there was no blood in it. And then we helped him put the eggs in like a 12-egg carton. Then he went out and he sold them to the Jewish people in Washington because they all wanted to support him and help him out. So that's how he started out.
>> Bill Benson: Selling eggs to folks.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: What about the rest of your family in Germany? What do you know about what happened to your family?
>> Susan Warsinger: Well, everybody on my mother's side ended up in the concentration camps. Nobody survived.
>> Bill Benson: Nobody survived.
>> Susan Warsinger: Everybody on my father's side -- because I told you he was from Poland. You probably will learn it when you go upstairs and if you go to see the exhibit "Some Were Neighbors," you're going to learn that, you know, when the Nazis went into Poland, they didn't even bother sending them to the concentration camps. What they did is they went into all of those small towns and they made all of those people go into the woods and dig graves and then they threw them in the graves and shot them all. So all of my father's family -- there's no record of them. They're gone. Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: So you lost virtually everybody in the extended family.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. Yeah. But the Nazis didn't succeed. Can I brag now?
>> Bill Benson: You may brag now. You have time to brag. Absolutely.
>> Sandra German: I'll brag. I have three kids. I have three daughters. They're all -- my one daughter is a cardiologist, the other is a dancer, the other one runs her husband's businesses and she's a dietitian. They all have children. My grandchildren, one of them just graduated with a Ph.D. from M.I.T. Another one is a doctor. And everybody is really, really doing wonderful things for the United States. And they're doing research. They're big human beings who help the United States. And I'm so very proud of them. And my brother's kids the same thing.
>> Bill Benson: Joseph?

>> Susan Warsinger: Yes. Also, the baby -- Joseph is a cardiologist. And that baby --
>> Bill Benson: Bad little Joseph became a cardiologist, a rather famous one as I understand.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. And my brother Ernest, the baby, he worked for NASA. He's a physicist. He's retired now but he still goes to meetings because he knows all about the ozone in the air and he makes meetings with people all over the world to see what we can do about the ozone in the air. So Hitler didn't succeed what he set out to do even though he killed everybody in my family. We survived.
>> Bill Benson: Susan, we have a couple of minutes to have a few questions from our audience. Is that ok?
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: Before we close the program.

So we have a chance for you to ask Susan a couple of questions. I would ask that you wait until you get a microphone when you have a question. I hope that somebody will. Wait until you have a microphone that way everybody including Susan will hear the question. And I may repeat the question to make sure everybody hears it. Try to make it as brief as you can. That way we can get a couple of questions in.

We have microphones on either side of the aisle. I think there's a hand up here. And we have a microphone. Yes?
>> When you were looking for a country to go to, why didn't you go -- or could you go to Israel?
>> Bill Benson: When you were looking for a country to go to, the family, why not go to Israel?
>> Susan Warsinger: That's a very good question. You know, at that time, Israel -- there was no Israel. It was Palestine. And it was, you know, what country Israel -- Palestine belonged to at that time was England. They had a quota just like everybody else. It was very hard to go to Palestine. You couldn't just go to Palestine. A lot of Jewish people wanted to go there to start a new state. But not everybody wanted to go there. Not everybody could go under the English quota. And then, besides, my mother and father had heard such wonderful things about the United States, how wonderful the United States was and how democratic the United States was. That's all we talked about.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you. Do we have another? There we go.
>> I wonder how long you were in the chateau in Southern France.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yes, I was there from 1940 to 1941. At that time Hitler hadn't figured out the final solution yet. People were going to concentration camps but they were not this plan of gassing and doing away with all of the Jews in it Europe. It was not known at that time yet. But we knew that things were bad for the Jewish people. So I was very lucky to get here. He's talking about one of the reasons that I didn't -- I was lucky because the war with the United States hadn't started. I was lucky because people really weren't mass sent to concentration camps at that time.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you. We have one right over here in the end.
>> What was the religious life like for you back in Germany, especially, you know, being a Jew? What was it like? What were some of the strong points? How did that help, if anything, about what was happening to your people at the time?
>> Susan Warsinger: I'm glad you asked that.
>> Bill Benson: A question about Susan's religious life and how did that help.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. My father was very Orthodox. He was a very Orthodox Jewish man. We kept all of the traditions. When we went to France in that children's home, in the chateau, the children's home kept kosher and we kept all the traditions. Even though in France, you know, the kids in France don't go to school the way you guys go. You have the weekend off, Saturday, and Sunday. In France the kids get off on Sunday and Thursday. So the Jewish kids had to go to school on Saturday, which is --
>> Bill Benson: The Sabbath.
>> Susan Warsinger: Yeah. So we went but the teacher was really good. You're not supposed to write, drive, all Orthodox rules. So they were really good. The teacher, we read and we talked. So he understood our plight because we were religious.

As far as believing in God -- I think that's probably what you were asking me. Probably saying to me how can she still believe in God when she saw all of these things happening to the Jewish people. Well, my feeling is this. It wasn't God who was responsible for the Holocaust. God gave man a choice to do what he wants to do. It was the Nazis who did it. It wasn't God.

As far as my religion is now, in the United States, it's much easier not to be Orthodox. Guess what? I'm not Orthodox anymore but I still believe in the Jewish religion. So I'm proud to be Jewish.

Does that answer your question?

>> Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. Thank you.

We have time for one more. Right here in the middle.

>> What languages are you fluent in?

>> Bill Benson: What languages are you fluent in?

>> Susan Warsinger: In English, maybe. When I was in Germany, I was 9. I left Germany when I was 9. That's like my mother tongue. I speak still and read still on a 9-year-old's level. I find that fine. But the minute you start talking and start reading German writers who are very intellectual and literate, it's very hard for me to understand those words because I never got a chance to use them. So my German is ok. When people speak slowly, I'm fine. I went back to Germany. I was fine if people were speaking slowly.

And my French -- the thing, the most important thing I wanted to tell you, you know, like Germany is not my country. I'm an American. I really never liked German people for a long, long time. It wasn't their fault but. And I didn't like hearing it. I didn't like hearing German. So I kept away from it for a long, long time. But now, you know, the Germans said, look, we're sorry for what our grandparents did. They do everything, all of the young people. They put up monuments. They're sorry for what their grandparents did. They are shocked at what their grandparents did. So I can't be upset with the German people anymore. I'm not. I'm just upset with what their grandparents did.

And the French was the same thing. It gave me two years -- I used to speak really well. Gave me two years of being away, separated from my parents and it brings back bad memories. But I can still speak it but from a child's level. But I don't like doing it. I'd rather speak in English.

I'm very patriotic. You can ask me anything patriotic. I'm all for the United States.

>> Bill Benson: We are about to close our program. I'm going to turn back to Susan in just a moment to close our program because it's our tradition at *First Person* that our First Person gets the last word. I want to just remind you that we will end our season tomorrow with our program tomorrow. We will resume again in the spring of 2016. So we hope if your travels bring you back to Washington, D.C. or if you live somewhere in the area that you'll come back to a *First Person* program next year.

When Susan's done with her final word, she's going to leave the stage. I'd like her to make her way up the aisle on the right so that she can get out and sign copies of "Echoes of Memory" that she contributes to. That will be an opportunity for you, too, to ask her a question that you may not have been able to do so.

When Susan's finished, our photographer, Joel, who has been taking pictures as you noticed, is going to come up on stage and take a photograph of Susan with you as the backdrop. So I'm going to ask you to stand at that point because it makes just a really nice photograph for Susan to have when we're done with the program.

On that note, I turn it over to Susan.

>> Susan Warsinger: I knew you were going to ask me that so I wrote it on my computer and printed it out. It's just one page.

I want my children, my grandchildren, my brothers and their families, my friends, and the visitors here in the audience to rejoice in the fact that we are living in a democratic society and that all of us should make sure that no dictatorship would ever usurp our liberties. We need to remember the atrocity that happened to families during the Holocaust and pass this information on to our progeny. We need to learn from this horror in our history. We cannot undo the atrocities of the past. Besides remembering, we have to take action to confront hate. When we see injustice taking place, we have to

do something about it. We cannot be onlookers. We have to be sensitive to each other. We have to take care of each other.

Why I do volunteer in this museum? People ask me: How can you do this over and over? How can I not? Giving tours to our visitors through our Permanent Exhibition hopefully teaches them what hatred and prejudice can do to people. And when touring law enforcement officers and future FBI agents, I hope that they understand their role when encountering atrocities.

We cannot be bystanders and definitely not be collaborators. There are threats of genocide in many parts of the world at the present time. We cannot be indifferent to emerging threats of genocide and mass atrocities. All of us need to be aware of what is happening and we need to work together and take the necessary actions to prevent people from being murdered for the simple reason that they are different. Never again do we want to stand by and do nothing.

I want to thank you, Bill, for helping me tell my story. I want to thank you, the audience, for coming to our museum and being witnesses to this story of the Holocaust and for listening to my story.

Now, when you go to the Permanent Exhibition, make sure -- my story is all on the fourth floor. And many of the exhibits there discuss exactly what I was talking about. So look at the exhibit called “The Boycott" and "The Propaganda" exhibit, and "The Jewish Responses," and look at the “Evian Conference” exhibit. There is a big exhibit about the Night of Broken Glass up there.

I hope that you have a wonderful learning experience when you go up there.

[Applause]