United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
First Person with Irene Weiss
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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, the host of the museum's public program, *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our 18th year of the *First Person* program. Our *First Person* today is Mrs. Irene Weiss, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2017 season of *First Person* is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fischer foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of conversations with survivors of the Holocaust, who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at the museum. Our program will continue twice weekly through mid August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

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

Irene will share with us her first person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor, for about 45 minutes. If time allows, at the end of the program, you will have an opportunity to ask Irene some questions.

Today's program will be live streamed on the museum's website. This means people will be joining the program via a link from the website and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. Recordings of all *First Person* programs will be made available on the museum's YouTube page. We are also accepting questions from our web audience today on Twitter. We invite those of you who are here in the auditorium today to also join us on the web when the rest of our programs in April

and early May will be live streamed. Please visit the *First Person* website listed on the back of your program for more information.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Irene is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with her introduction. Irene Weiss was born Irene Fogel in Botragy, Czechoslovakia, on November 21, 1930. The arrow on this map of Czechoslovakia indicates the general location of Botragy.

Irene's father, Meyer, owned a lumberyard, and her mother, Leah, cared for Irene and her siblings. In this photograph, Irene is at the lower left with two of her sisters and two cousins.

When Nazi Germany took over and divided Czechoslovakia in 1939, Botragy fell under Hungarian rule. Irene and her siblings couldn't attend school, and her father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, was conscripted into forced labor for six months, in 1942. In April 1944, the Fogels were moved into the Munkacs ghetto, where she lived in a brick factory. The arrow points to Munkacs.

In May, 1944, Irene and her family were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The arrow on this map of major Nazi camps points to Auschwitz. This photo was taken upon Irene's arrival at Auschwitz. The circled figure is Irene. Irene and her sister, Serena, were selected for forced labor, then were forcibly evacuated in January 1945 to other camps in Germany.

This extraordinary photo is displayed in the museum's permanent exhibition. The liberation by the Soviet Army of the Neustadt-Glewe camp where Irene and Serena worked near the end of the war left the girls unguarded and they were able to make their way to Prague to look for their relatives. Of their immediate family, only Irene and Serena survived the war.

This photograph shows Irene and Serena upon their arrival in the United States. After arriving in the United States and living in New York, Irene met and married Marty Weiss in 1949. They moved to Virginia in 1953, where Irene lives today. She earned a degree in education from American University and taught English as a second language in the Fairfax County Public School System. She taught middle school students from many countries.

Irene's husband, Marty, passed away in January of 2013. Marty, who was 93, was a combat veteran of the Second World War, seeing action in North Africa, Italy, and elsewhere in Europe. He had a long and distinguished career as a geologist with the federal government.

Irene and Marty were married 63 years. Irene and Marty have three children, four grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. Irene's daughter, Lesley, is here with her today. Irene became a volunteer for this museum six years ago, and this is her sixth time speaking as part of the *First Person* program. In January, 2015, Irene was a member of the US delegation for the 70th delegation of the liberation of Auschwitz. Also in 2015, Irene travelled to Germany with her daughter to be present at the trial of former SS member Oskar Groening, a guard at Auschwitz. She was a co-plaintiff in the trial, and again in February of 2016 at the trial of SS member Reinhold Hanning. Her

testimony was featured in a "Time" magazine article. With that, I ask you to welcome our *First Person*, Mrs. Irene Weiss.
[Applause]
Irene, thank you for joining us and your willingness to be our *First Person*. We have such a short time with you and so much for you to share. We'll start right away, if you don't mind. You described for me the time for you and your family in Czechoslovakia before World War II and before the Holocaust as a time of hard work, but also a good life, one in which you said there was a sense of safety. Before we turn to the war years, tell us about your family, your life in those years before the war began.
>> Irene Weiss: Well, we were a family of six children, lived with our parents, whose main focus in life was their children. My mother was very attentive and hovering, because in those days we didn't have the medicines and the prevention things for children. So they were exceptionally worried about our health.

My father went to work every day. My mother worked, all I remember about her is working from morning till night, all the many chores. And the children went to school. We played and we celebrated holidays and loved the different seasons. It was a farming town, so there was a chance to watch things grow, watch the farmers harvest, all those things, which were just normal in the town. So it was just a very happy, normal childhood.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us about your siblings.
>> Irene Weiss: There were three boys and three girls. The oldest girl was Serena; she was 17 at the time. I had a brother who was 16. It was a small farming town, and school ended, public school ended at sixth grade. So my parents, in addition to worrying about our health and our welfare, they were very concerned about our education. So as each of us reached the sixth grade and beyond, we were sent off to the city, to other places, to relatives, to live, where we can continue our education.
>> Bill Benson: You told me, Irene, at that time, you really didn't sense anti-Semitism at that time before the war.
>> Irene Weiss: Not in this small town, where people knew my father and grandfather, and my mother. It was just a very friendly relationship between the women and the men, and the children.
>> Bill Benson: By the time Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, launching World War II, your community had already experienced profound change. Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany, and earlier in 1939 your community had been occupied by the Hungarians, which immediately changed your lives. What happened once you were under Hungarian rule?
>> Irene Weiss: During the Czechoslovakia regime, they were very democratically inclined. There was no distinction between citizens. But the Hungarian regime, because they joined Hitler's war plans, I suppose they decided to follow Hitler's rules in regard to that. So their laws were made, and carried out against Jewish citizens, depriving them of their civil rights and their freedom. So we began to feel the isolation and being treated differently, and not being protected by the laws.
>> Bill Benson: I think, during that time, your father lost his business.

>> Irene Weiss: He soon lost his business. He remained at home, doing chores in the household, not having an income for six children.
>> Bill Benson: At that time, of course, you couldn't continue your schooling, unless you went somewhere else. So you went to school elsewhere, right?
>> Irene Weiss: I did go, by that time, into a city school, in a nearby city. We were made to wear a yellow star on our clothes to better identify us as being different. Basically, acting as a target for hoodlums and discrimination against us. So I had to -- then the law also came out that Jewish children could not go to public schools. So I stopped going to school.
>> Bill Benson: What grade would you have been?
>> Irene Weiss: Sixth grade, something like seventh grade.
>> Bill Benson: That was the end of your education?
>> Irene Weiss: That was the end at that point.
>> Bill Benson: You remember and described to me a really frightening experience you had with your father on a train. Will you tell us about that?
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. The discrimination was increasing, and soon it extended to all kinds of ordinary events, such as riding a train, on the train. I was coming home from another town with my father, only about a five-minute train ride, and my father had a small beard at the time, very common that men have today. In those days, mostly Jewish, married men had beards.

In the train, a bunch of young adults, young teenage types, gathered around my father, laughing and joking, making remarks, such as, What should we do with him? Do you think it might be a good idea to throw him off? All the while, they were laughing and making fun of the whole situation.

Nobody in the train spoke up or come to his defense. I was terrified, because I realized that he was outnumbered and their intent was very serious. They thought it was a lot of fun to do that.
>> Bill Benson: No one was coming to your aid?
>> Irene Weiss: No one coming. Looking out the window of the train, my father and I both realized we're very close to a station, to our station, and if we're lucky, we'll get off before this happens. So that's really what happened, the train stopped and we got off, shaken to the core. My father never got on a train again, any public transportation. It was simply not safe.
>> Bill Benson: In 1942, Irene, your father, along with thousands of other Jewish men, were forced by the Hungarians to do forced labor. They were conscripted into a labor brigade. Tell us what that meant for your family.
>> Irene Weiss: Well, the young men were forced into labor brigades, and he had to leave the family. The communication was very rare, to hear from him. What they were made to do was to work at very dangerous jobs, at the frontline, picking up mines and doing the kind of things that are guaranteed to harm them or kill them. So it was really slave labor for them. Plus, being Jewish, they were not allowed to have weapons. They were really sort of being on the front, but not able to protect themselves.

>> Bill Benson: This was on the front of the Hungarians allied with the Nazis against the Russians at that time.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes, yes.
>> Bill Benson: I want to repeat something you said. One of the kinds of things they would do in labor brigades, use them as human beings to clear minefields.
>> Irene Weiss: Right. And other very dangerous things. Being treated as if they were soldiers, but disrespected and not given the kind of protection that other soldiers had.
>> Bill Benson: After about six months, if I remember correctly, your father did return. Why do you think he was able to return from that? And of course, many died doing that, but your father was able to come back.
>> Irene Weiss: We were very surprised when we heard he was going to be released from this. It seems that, at that point, the Hungarian regime didn't quite decide what they wanted to do with all of these men and sudden availability of all this free labor. But it seems what they did was sorted people out. Since he had six children, a large family, it seems at that point they decided to let him go. But the younger people remained, and most of them did not return.
>> Bill Benson: As difficult as life was under the Hungarians, as you described a little bit of it, it suddenly turned dramatically and tragically worse when the Nazis came in and invaded Hungary in 1944. Tell us about that and then what happened to you and your family once the Germans came in.
>> Irene Weiss: Well, that was another level of terror. Since we heard on the radio relentlessly blaming the Jewish people for everything imaginable. The lies grew daily, and the threat against us, the Jews. The population kept hearing all these lies about how the Jews were spreading disease, they were disloyal, they were dangerous to the state, they had to be deprived of their citizenship, relentlessly hammering away at this one group who is the cause of all the problems, based on the war. And the lies grew and grew, and their following grew with it. Because, there was no other news, all the news was censored heavily and kept out.

So the following grew, and we were feeling more and more threatened and isolated. Again, not being protected by the law, which is a tragic situation to find yourself in. Because, the law stands by and watch the abuse of people, and when they get the idea that it's OK, it's amazing what people will do to each other.
>> Bill Benson: As you said, you were stripped of all your rights, so you had no rights under the circumstances.

Tell us, Hungary was a very close ally of Nazi Germany. Why did the Germans come in, in March of 1944?
>> Irene Weiss: Well, we didn't realize it at the time, but the war was -- the Germans were losing the war. The war was almost over. The Hungarian government changed their minds. They felt that they might be on the losing end of this war and tried to pull out of the alliance. Then Germany didn't accept that, actually invaded Hungary.
>> Bill Benson: You remember them marching in, the Germans?
>> Irene Weiss: Oh, I do remember. There were announcements, parades, and people waiting for them on major highways, putting out flags. It was a celebration. The women

and men came out with jugs of wine and bread and waited for them to come. They climbed the steeple of the church to see them approaching, how far they were from town. The ten Jewish families in my town didn't know what to do, to come out.
>> Bill Benson: Ten Jewish families in your town?
>> Irene Weiss: Ten Jewish families, about 100 persons. We saw the celebration. My father, if I remember somewhat of a discussion, if he goes out with the crowd, that's dangerous. If he doesn't go out, that's dangerous. So it was this conflict. But we certainly knew that the kind of welcome that the townspeople were giving them, that we were in very big trouble.
>> Bill Benson: Of course, very soon after, you were forced into a ghetto.
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. After the Hungarians invaded, within about three weeks we were pulled out of our homes, we were taken away, into the next larger city, where the ghetto was set up in a brick factory, and the -- they selected all the Jewish families from the neighboring towns, and crowded us into this place that was meant for making bricks and not for housing people. So we had these families, women and children and pregnant women and sick people, no sanitation facilities and no facilities for food or for any kind of liveability.

We set up our little bundles on the floor, in one of the corners of this huge facility. You had to step over people to come and go. But basically, there was a terror in the place. There was a sense of tremendous danger. We no longer even had the protection of our own home. We were just one of thousands and regimented and hounded by all kinds of announcements daily. Just very, very scared. People who were sick and could not sleep on the floor, and so on, were in great danger and suffering.

At this place, there was a constant announcement for the men to return to certain places where they were integrated. Mostly, they were -- they demanded of the men to give them more of their valuables. When we left our home, a delegation came to our house the day before to demand from my father that he give them all the money and valuables. And he did have to give them whatever he did. But then, in the ghetto they continued to hound people, demanding more, that, "You must have more, you didn't give us all." There was a constant pressure of taking away all you own, and the feeling you get from that is that you won't be needing it, according to them.

So when they take your family out of your house, and take possession of all that you own, and then keep diminishing the space that you have, and keep taking away more of what you have, it's very, very scary.
>> Bill Benson: You told me while you were in that brick factory, that ghetto, your head was shaved?
>> Irene Weiss: Yes. One of the announcements one day was that all girls under 16 should report to this certain place to have their hair cut, or your father will be punished. There was always this extra threat that if you don't follow orders, somebody else in your family will be punished.

I didn't even tell my mother. I just went to this place. There were other young girls. I had my hair cut. I had long braids at the time. Then I came back to where my mother was, and she looked at me with sad eyes, but really didn't stop to worry about it

too much, because we had other, more serious concerns. She gave me one of her kerchiefs and I put it on. Now I looked like a little married woman. Religious women tended to cover their hair when they were married. So I just blended in with that group.

As it turned out, without my knowing, or even imagining, this small event played a great role in Auschwitz when I arrived. Without a doubt, it gave me the first chance to live and not be sent to the gas chambers with the children.

>> Bill Benson: Having the scarf?

>> Irene Weiss: Having had the scarf, not having my hair, which I resembled like an older person.

>> Bill Benson: This was the spring of 1944. As you said earlier, the Germans were losing the war. It was late in the war. And yet, this desire by the incoming Nazis into your community and your country to round up, at that late date, all the Jews, and they did it with extraordinary efficiency, in the span of what I believe eight weeks, roughly, more than 400,000 Jews were rounded up, both from the cities and the countryside and sent to Auschwitz. The three weeks in the Munkacs ghetto, you were sent to Auschwitz.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. Well, we had never -- we never knew what the next step would be, what plans they had for us, for a huge number of people. But yes, within six weeks after the Germans occupied Hungary, the trains, the cattle cars, were running from various ghettos where they gathered up the people, the trains were running somewhere. It turned out to be Auschwitz, almost all of the Hungarian Jews at this time ended up in Auschwitz.

So when we were in this ghetto, then one day there were announcements to get your stuff and move to the trains, the trains, the long cattle cars, the trains were actually inside the ghetto, because this was a brick factory that they had their railroad for their own purposes.

There was a lot of shouting, yelling, and pushing and "Hurry! Hurry! Get in the train quickly." Everybody tried to hold each other's hands, the children's hands to be sure we end up in the same cattle car. It was a lot of pushing, and soon the car was filled with people.

Again, we were sitting on the floor. After a while, when it was filled, we heard the train lock from the outside. This time, the terror of all of us, especially the parents who had to worry about their children and what their condition would be next, the fear was so great that actually no one spoke. It was just in the air.

Always not knowing where the train is going --

>> Bill Benson: So you did not know where you went?

>> Irene Weiss: Never knew. Never knew the next step. Except that when you're in your own town and there is discrimination and there is discomfort with prejudice, you're still in your house. Then when you're in the ghetto, you realize you no longer are in familiar places. You're strangers, and the fear mounts. Then when you're in the train and you're going off to an unknown place, you're leaving your town, you're leaving your life.

>> Bill Benson: Everything you've known.

>> Irene Weiss: Everything you've known. And again, no idea where you're going. Putting myself in my parents' position now, and all parents who do not know what will happen to their children, and that they will not be able to protect them, is an unbelievable experience.

The train moved eventually, and what people were thinking and what little they knew was that in Poland, which was occupied by Germany much before, we heard that the Nazis carried out murders and atrocities to the Jews in Poland, and that basically they would march them into the forest and gun them down, everybody in the family. There were mass graves there.

We heard some of this from a few escapees. We always felt that it couldn't be true, and these people were exaggerating. But now, when trains started moving and my father looked out and told everyone that the train was wheeling towards Poland, that was really the first time that total despair descended on everyone in the cattle car. Because, going there, now we remembered what we had heard, the rumors we had heard. It occurred to everyone that that will be our fate.

>> Bill Benson: Then you came to this place, Auschwitz. We saw that extraordinary photograph earlier, of you after you got off the train at Auschwitz.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes. So when eventually the train stopped, and again, my father looked out that small window on the top of the cattle car, he announced to everyone that he sees barracks, and he sees prisoners in striped uniforms, and he sees barbed wires, but lots of barracks. He felt this was a work camp, some kind of a labor camp, and that it would not be the forest in Poland.

Everybody actually, all the adults, the grown-ups were saying, Well, we can work, and if it's work, it's not as terrible as they anticipated.

So then when the doors opened and there was again the screaming and yelling to, Get out, get out, leave everything behind, just to get out very fast and leave everything, just lots of shouting, "Out! Fast, fast!"

So my mother told us all to put on some more layers of clothes, that's all that we will have. I remember we all put on extra clothes. And I had a big coat. I put that on. My head was covered with the kerchief. Leaving everything behind is, again, the fear and tension mounts at every step when they strip of all things, including identity papers. So now you don't exist, and no one is asking your name or who you belong to.

>> Bill Benson: So now, all you have at that moment are the clothes that are on you.

>> Irene Weiss: Right, right. And then the shouting and orders were very harsh and very scary, and we kept hearing women and children to one side, the men to another side. This happened within seconds. So the men lined up on one side, and the women and children and elderly women to the other side on the platform.

Even as we jumped out of this cattle car, these prisoners in striped uniforms jumped into the cattle cars and dumped all our belongings onto the platform. We saw trucks on the platform where they were loading our stuff into it. So this, in the days and incomprehension as to what is happening to us, we did realize that we're being stripped of all identity and all of our past.

As the very large group of women and children were moving up the platform, we did not see the front of it. As we became the ones in the front we were met by about a dozen Nazi soldiers blocking the way. One of them was motioning people to go to one side or the other.

Within seconds, my family was torn apart. My father and 16-year-old brother were already lined up, with the men to the one side, and my mother with two little kids, two little boys, was immediately taken away and sent to one side. My sister, 17-year-old sister Serena, was immediately sent to the other side. So I was left holding my 12-year-old sister's hand, Edit. And, as things were proceeding very fast, I was separated from her, and she was sent towards where my mother went and I towards where my older sister went.

I stopped. I didn't move. I didn't go where I was supposed to go. The picture taken by Nazi soldiers at that moment.

>> Bill Benson: The one we saw earlier?

>> Irene Weiss: The one we saw. Unaware, I had no idea pictures were taken. But I stand there, and I did not move and go where I was told, because by that time my mother and two little boys had moved away in a very large crowd, followed them, more women and children, and I felt that Edit, my younger sister, would never catch up to her, and that she would be lost in this crowd alone. Would she be able to know who she is, and who she belongs to, and would she ever catch up?

I just felt that this was the most traumatic thing that I experienced up to then, because if what we figured, what we kind of assumed by civilized assumption, anyway, that if they're separating men and then they're separating women and children and young adults, it is a work camp, and that we will be meeting each other periodically after work.

So it was most important that the women, that my mother and all her children, would be together with her. And this is what went through my mind very quickly, that I could not just leave and leave her in sort of a no man's land. So eventually, I was motioned to go towards where Serena went, with the young adults, and I had to run after her to catch up and I kept thinking, yes, that's exactly how it is with my younger sister, but a much larger crowd.

>> Bill Benson: She's trying to catch up to your mother?

>> Irene Weiss: Trying to catch up, but she won't. I had to run, and yelling, yelling after Serena to wait for me. She turned around, and when I caught up to her, she says, Why didn't you go with mom? I just kept repeating that Edit will be alone, she won't find mom, I don't know why he took her away from me, I don't know why I didn't go with mom.

I was just so confused and so traumatized that basically, she was the one who was alone and that was not possible to tolerate.

>> Bill Benson: Now it's you and Serena, and you don't know where everybody else has gone at that point. What happened to you and Serena at that time?

>> Irene Weiss: Well, we were -- we ended up in a processing place where we were, you know, all our clothes were taken away, all hair and body hair was shaved, disinfected. Then given the prison clothes, you know, one size fits all.

Then we were marched off into barracks. In the meantime, my particular trauma continued with the separation, that even though I was desperate when I realized that my younger sister was going to be alone, all of a sudden, it occurred to me very dramatically that I too was alone, and I was beginning to panic.

So what happened in the processing place was that they didn't have to cut my hair. I skipped that stage, and my sister didn't. So when I was finished and dressed in my new prison dress, I was pushed out the door with other women, and they were beginning to count them off and taking them deeper into Auschwitz, into the barracks.

I wouldn't leave, because I had to wait for Serena. But I was being counted off and backing off and backing off. In addition to that, I began to see that even when she comes out, I will not recognize her, because all these young women who came out finished like that looked alike. So I kept proceeding to the door. Every time the door opened, I kept calling her, "Serena! Serena!"

Nobody answered. I realized I am in desperate trouble now. I was crying; I was calling her name, trying not to be counted off.

So a woman, a young woman from our town, whom I knew very well, she came out the door, and she recognized me. She heard who I called and recognized me. She said to me, "OK," she said, "Serena is still. There I saw her. I will stay with you, if I can, and wait until she comes out and help you recognize her." That's what happened.

So I eventually did. But you know, the trauma of that separation, it's with me today, and every day. It's a kind of trauma that I guess when your family is torn apart and no one tells you you'll ever see them again, very hostile situation. That was the arrival in Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, there's so much that you won't be able to get to today with us because of the time, but there are some things that I know you want to talk about, I'd like you to talk about. You did encounter other family members, your two aunts. Tell us about that. Because they became absolutely essential to your survival.

>> Irene Weiss: When we were finally in the barracks, quite by accident my mother's two sisters, who came from a nearby town the day before, just by chance, we ran into them, of thousands of people. But they were two young women, in their mid 20s, my aunt Rose and Pearl. I was just 13 years old at the time. To me, they were like adults and like my mother's generation.

For me to find them was as if I had found my parents, my mother. They were just protective and wonderful to me and to Serena.

For me, I was so frightened by all that happened before. I was so in a state of anxiety and trauma that just meeting them and have them to protect me. Of course, they could only protect me up to a certain point. But to have them to hold onto and comfort me and so on, I think that I really did survive emotionally and even physically because of their kindness and their love and their protection, and that someone from my family that I belonged to and they belonged to me and I was not amongst strangers.

>> Bill Benson: As you said earlier, the fact that you had had your head shaved earlier while wearing the kerchief made you look older, and that is probably why you were selected to go with Serena. But once you were in Auschwitz with your aunts, they took

steps to make sure, because you were in constant risk of being selected for the gas chambers after that. So you told me things like they would try to make sure you were in the middle where you couldn't be seen, when doing lineups, right?
>> Irene Weiss: We soon realized that having, well, the people that we met there, who came before us, when we asked them, you know, when do we meet with our families, and they pointed to the chimneys belching smoke and fire. They said, Look at the chimneys. That's where your family is.

We thought what did they do to people here, that they make up such stories? We totally dismissed this for days and days. But eventually, it became hard to resist. We saw too much. We heard too much.

So what we then were told, that the women and children, upon arriving and being selected on the platform, were immediately marched to gas chambers and killed within the hour, as fast as the process would take.

So I realized, we all did, that I sort of skipped that selection, but I was still terribly vulnerable, because they selected every day beyond just the platform. So every day at dawn, we were lined up to be counted, and lined up in rows of five, and we stood there for hours, waiting for the German delegation to come and look down the rows of five and count, and also pull out the ones that were missed at the platform.

So I was vulnerable every day, because here I was now stripped of my clothes and my scarf and all that, and I just looked like a little girl. So my two aunts and others, my sister and others making the five in the lineup, positioned me hopefully in a way that I would not attract as much attention. So I would never be the first one, and I would never be the last one, somewhere in the middle. They would hope that I didn't catch the eye.

But every morning was a frightening thing, because I saw other young girls pulled out, and also people they determined were not strong enough or good enough for slave labor.
>> Bill Benson: Or if they became ill?
>> Irene Weiss: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: At some point, you were told or got word about your father. Would you share that with us?
>> Irene Weiss: Well, after a few weeks in this sort of holding camp, they began to send people off, counting people off and sending them out of Auschwitz for slave labor, various war work and other kind of labor. We, my two aunts, heard that they're selecting a thousand women to be transferred to a camp within Auschwitz that sounded like something, rumor had it, it was a good assignment. I mean, rumors were flying. Nobody knew anything really.

So they decided to line up for this new work assignment. We were, all five of -- four of us, we were then assigned to work, which turned out to be adjacent to gas chamber number 4. Which, of course, by this time we believed and we understood what was happening in these gas chambers.

We were to work just an electrified fence separating us from this gas chamber. Our work was to -- well, this was the place where all the clothing and belongings that came out of the many, many trains --
>> Bill Benson: That was dumped on the platform, you told us.
>> Irene Weiss: Dumped on the platform, those trucks took them to this particular place, the stuff that people brought. I read a statistic that something like 147 huge cattle trains arrived in Auschwitz during something like two months with the Hungarian Jewish deportation. So 147 huge trains dumping tremendous amount of belongings, all were taken.

Also, taken to this place, and also the clothing and belongings that came out of the gas chambers from the people they had killed. So we were assigned to sort out all this stuff and bring it first into -- out of the weather, into the barracks, out of the rain, and then to sort them out according to categories and take off labels and get everything prepared to be reshipped to Germany for the use of the German population.

So this was our assignment for the eight months we spend in Auschwitz, before Auschwitz was evacuated and we were taken out on the death march.

During this time of being in this place, also next door to one of the gas chambers, one of my aunts, we were outdoors a great deal bringing this stuff in, and we could see the men across the fence very clearly. And attempted, some of the brave ones, attempted to move closer and closer to the fence to hope to make some kind of contact, to find out who the men were on the other side.

In the meantime, the guard tower was right above all this, with a soldier and a gun. You had to be extremely brave. My aunt, if she think about it, she really was a very, very brave one, and she caught the eye of one of the men. He too, he was interested in finding out about family and who was on the other side. So this young man turned out to be from our hometown. He was actually an 18-year-old young boy. He was working there. He through over a note, and my aunt got it. On it the note informed her that my father had also been selected to work in the gas chamber, to pull out the bodies and to do all the gruesome work that they made, the Germans made our own people do. So that my father was assigned to do this work, but that he had already been dead because he did not fulfill the job well enough.

They used our own people to do this work, and we found out as we worked there that every three months or so they actually killed these men and selected new ones coming off the train from various towns and cities, because these men could only work so long doing this work, and that they needed stronger and efficient people. So my father apparently had been killed even before the three months was up.

My 16-year-old brother originally was with him, was not mentioned, and we have never been able to find anyone who knew anything about his fate or his whereabouts, whether he was there with my father, was also, or was separated at the platform and never even made it into the camp. So even years after, we, the family and my daughter, were putting out search inquiries about the Red Cross and other groups that traced survivors who had not been accounted for, trying to find out what happened to him.
>> Bill Benson: To this day, you don't know anything?

>> Irene Weiss: No.
>> Bill Benson: Irene, you said after eight months doing what you were doing at Auschwitz, in January of 1945 as the Russians were advancing, you were then forced out of Auschwitz and taken on what's known as a death march. In the little time we have left, tell us about that and what happened to your aunt.
>> Irene Weiss: In January, winter, in terrible cold, thousands of people who were still surviving Auschwitz were pushed out on the highway and we were made to march hundreds of miles deeper into Germany, to avoid being liberated by the approaching Russian Army.

We ended up -- well, along the way, the tragedy continued, because if you sat down, you were shot. If you leaned on someone, you were shot. And the side of the road had many, many dead people in the gutters. The rest of us were never fed or given water. The cold, it was definitely a death march.

By the time we arrived deeper in Germany and they put us into other camps further away from the approaching Army, those camps were already filled with people, and the crowding and the circumstances were unbelievable. The German system broke down, as far as feeding and such as it was, broke down.

Disease broke out. In this particular camp where we ended up, typhoid, typhus broke out. We were infected with body lice that carried typhus. My aunt Pearl caught typhus. She became high fever, delirious. We were helpless. She even became deaf from the fever.

So in this camp, and in almost all of the camps, there was a so-called little infirmary. What we learned along the way, that these infirmaries were not to cure anyone, but they would come regularly and take the sick people to gas chamber. So this place didn't have a gas chamber, but we put her in this little infirmary, and there she at least had a bunk to herself.

We soon realized that even though there was no gas chamber, they sent a truck from a concentration camp that did have one to pick up these people. We watched the truck come one day and empty the little infirmary, including my aunt Pearl on the truck, and took her away, and killed her. So that was -- by that time, I must say that we were so defeated and so weak and sick and hopeless, that our reaction was less -- it was a little more muted than it was upon arrival, when we were separated and we realized what was happening. We were already weakened and very hopeless.

Nevertheless, to know what happened to her almost at the end was another tragedy. And in the meantime, they didn't feed us, didn't take care of us here. So my sister became even more debilitated than I. She was skin and bones. The selections continued, no matter where the Germans took us. They never stopped the selection. Because, really, what we realized now, their aim was genocide, and whichever which way they could carry it out, that was number one on their agenda.
So one day, in a lineup, they picked out Serena. I knew exactly, they picked out other young girls who were in bad physical shape. As soon as they picked her out, I said, "I'm her sister." They said, "Well, you can go too."

Both of us were put into a room with the other people who were picked. The door was locked. And we waited for the truck. Because we already knew the system.

You know, people ask me today, Didn't your sister protest, or did you know what you were doing? Yeah, we knew, and I knew, and it was for me the best, the most important thing to do, because I could not imagine being alone. My one aunt dead, the other one also running a huge fever, lying burning up on the floor from the fever. I knew she wouldn't make it. I had to -- I could not. I could not imagine being alone without anyone who belonged to me.

My sister understood that too.

And so we were locked in this room all day. At the end of the day, somebody pushed the door, and it gave. To our surprise, it had been somebody unlocked it. And we looked out the door and gradually everything just, one at a time, tried it, went down the hall, and nobody stopped. There was nobody. The system had broken down so enormously that such a thing was possible.

When Serena and I went back to our barrack, my aunt, who was lying on the floor there, and the other women, they all broke out in saying, Oh, the children came back. The children came back.

>> Bill Benson: There were virtually no other children.

>> Irene Weiss: No other children. Nobody ever called us children, because that was very dangerous to do. Suddenly, it seems they were already mourning us and utterly amazed that we showed up.

My aunt Rose, very sick, but she did make it until the Russian Army did come and did open up the big gate. But then, she was so very sick that she couldn't walk out. Unfortunately, the Russian soldiers who liberated this camp didn't pay too much attention to what was going on there. They just looked in, these soldiers, and they left. We never saw them again.

We were left alone to fend our way, sick and with no transportation and no help. The ones who were strong enough walked out into the nearby town. The rest of us stayed around in the same camp. We desperately needed transportation and food and medical care to get from here to there, and eventually home. It never happened.

So many of us who made it up to that point died in the camps and on the way home, because they were too weak to go any further. As we proceeded, mostly on foot through the highways, one of the -- it wasn't a death march, but it might have been. We put our -- my sister and I and others in our group, put all the sick ones into a hospital in the town. Every town had some kind of a real hospital. So we put Rose in this and the rest of us would wait. Not wait to be cured or anything, but just to rest.

>> Bill Benson: To have enough strength to go on.

>> Irene Weiss: We proceeded this way for hundreds of kilometers, until eventually some buses showed up from Czechoslovakia, and hanging through the windows and the roof people mobbed these buses, hung on. We ended up in Prague, finally in a real hospital.

>> Bill Benson: Irene, we're towards the end of our program here. I wish we had another period of time to spend with you. I'm going to stop for the moment. We're going

to turn back to Irene to close our program in a few moments. I'd like to ask you to stay with us.

Serena, you and your aunt Rose did survive.

>> Irene Weiss: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Made it to the United States later. I wish we had the time for you to tell us about that. But when Irene finishes, we don't have time for questions, unfortunately, please feel free to come up on the stage afterwards. Irene will stay here. Come up here and shake her hand, meet her, or ask her a question if you have a question you want to ask her. Obviously, she has much more to share with us.

I want to thank all of you for being with us. Remind you we will have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We hope you can return. This program and all of the programs in April and early May are live streamed, so you can view them on the internet.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our first person has the last word. When Irene says her final comments for today, our photographer, Joel, the one who did all those amazing photos at the beginning, will come up on the stage, and he's going to do a brief video of Irene with you as the background. So we ask you stay seated until we get through that, if that's OK.

With that, I turn to Irene.

>> Irene Weiss: I also want to thank you for coming to the museum and to take the time to listen to me and my story.

As you reflect upon what happened to me and my family, you may wonder how such a tragedy could have happened in western civilization, in Europe. My hope is that with the benefit of history and memory, we will all be able to recognize and resist the forces of hatred, prejudice, and division that exist in our own time.

By speaking about those painful times, I am doing my best to honor the memory of those who did not survive to tell their own story. And I also hope that I'm doing for them, I'm keeping a promise of never again. Thank you again for listening to my story.

[Applause]