Thursday, July 11, 2013

1:00-2:00 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON: LEON MERRICK

Held at:
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW
Washington, DC

(Remote CART)

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CART Services Provided by:
Stephen H. Clark, CBC, CCP
Home Team Captions
1001 L Street NW, Suite 105
Washington, DC 20001
202-669-4214
855-669-4214 (toll-free)
sclark@hometeamcaptions.com
info@hometeamcaptions.com

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>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon, 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. We are in our 14th year of the *First Person* program. Ow *First Person* today is Mr. Leon Merrick, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2013 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring *First Person*. I'm very pleased to tell you that Mr. Louis Smith is with us today.

[Applause]

Thank you, Louis.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. We will have a *First Person* program each Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. The museum's website at www.ushmm.org provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Leon Merrick will share with us his *First Person* account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor, for about 45 minutes. If we have time at the end of the program, we'll have an opportunity for you to ask a few questions of Leon.

The life stories of Holocaust survivors transcend the decades. What you are about to hear from Leon is one individual's account of the Holocaust.

We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. We begin with this photograph of Leon Merrick, who was born Leon Kusmirek on January 8, 1926 in Zgierz, Poland. After the Nazis attacked Poland in September 1939, Zgierz Jews were moved to Lodz, Poland. The

arrow on this map of Poland points to Lodz.

The Lodz ghetto was formed in February 1940. Over 100,000 Jews were forced into less than two square miles of neglected neighborhoods in the northern end of the city. In the ghetto, Leon worked for the postal service, delivering letters, milk and ration cards. This photo shows members of the ghetto postal service. Leon is in the third row, and he is right here, second from the left. So hopefully you can see where he is based on the arrow.

One of Lodz's main streets passed through the ghetto and was kept open for non-Jewish commerce. So the Jews who lived in the ghetto had to cross that street on bridges like this one.

In 1944, Leon was taken to a forced labor camp in Kielce, Poland. From there he was evacuated to the Buchenwald concentration camp. The arrow on this map of major Nazi camps in Europe points to Buchenwald.

Three months later, Leon was sent to the Flossenburg concentration camp. This arrow on the map points to Flossenburg. From there he was sent on a death march. Leon was liberated by US Forces in April 1945. We close our slide presentation with this photo of Leon posing with friends soon after liberation. Leon is on the far right.

After the war, Leon worked for the US Army in Germany before coming to the United States in 1949. With the $23 that he received upon arrival, he made a new life in Washington, DC. He was drafted into the US Army during the Korean War. Eventually, Leon opened his own restaurant that he ran for a quarter century. Given its closeness to the White House, it was a popular place, especially with the Secret Service who gave him a party when he retired.

Since his retirement in 1993, Leon and his wife Nina have remained in the Washington area.

Leon is a volunteer with the museum's Visitor Services. You will find him here every other Saturday. He is also active with the Jewish war veterans. In 2011, Leon was one of five survivors liberated by the US Army asked to lay a memorial wreath at the World War II Memorial on the DC Mall.

Nina, who fought with the partisans in World War II, continues to work as a Hebrew teacher. I would like you to know that Nina is here with Leon today, as is their daughter, Marsha. Right here.

[Applause]

Leon and Nina have two daughters. They lost their daughter Mira at age 27 due to a rare liver disorder, 27 years ago. Mira was an artist. Marsha is an MSW social worker and the mother of Leon and Nina's two grandchildren. Their granddaughter is a graduate of Drexel University in Philadelphia with a degree in computer science, now working in the San Francisco area, as well as a degree in engineering. While in college, she taught English in India. Their grandson also is in the computer world, and he lives in Israel.

With that, I would like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mr. Leon Merrick.

[Applause]

Leon, thank you for joining us and for being so willing to spend an hour with us as our *First Person* today. We can't possibly do justice to what you could share with us in an hour, but we'll do the best that we can. We'll start right off as soon as right now.

You were not quite 14 years of age when Germany attacked Poland in September 1939. Before we talk about the events once the war began, start first by telling us a little about your family and your community and yourself in those years before the war.

>> Leon Merrick: OK. I was living in a small city, the city of Lodz. The population was 29,000. 3,000 Jewish families. My father was employed in the textile business. I had a younger brother, three years younger. My mother was a housewife. So the war broke out September 1, 1939. The Germans came into our hometown September 7, only seven days later. Right away, in Europe you start school in September, just like in the United States, like everywhere, but we couldn't go back to school. My father lost his job. He couldn't go back to the factory.

Not long afterwards, an announcement came out by word of mouth that all of the Jews in the city had to report to the main market square. So we didn't know what to do. My parents thought, Should we take clothes with us, foods with us, are they going to let us come back home? Should we take my younger brother with us or leave him with our Polish neighbors?

We decided to go as a family to the market square. We walked, we sat down on the cobblestones, maybe an hour or so, a guy came out, he announced this place is to be Jew-free. He gave us three days to leave. So we couldn't take any furniture. We took it to our Polish neighbors. It was the later part of September. We knew that England, France declared war on Germany, and we thought two big powers, Germany won't last long, we'd be able to come back.

Anyway, we called the neighbors, told them they could have our furniture. Another neighbor had the horse and the wagon. We packed up belongings, mostly clothes. We didn't take any furniture. And we went to the city of Lodz.

>> Bill Benson: When you gave the furniture to the Christian neighbor, you thought you'd be back?

>> Leon Merrick: With the understanding, when the war is over, we're going to take it back. Didn't happen like that.

My mother had the sister in the next city, Lodz, L-o-d-z, about 10, 15 miles away. We walked alongside the wagon. We walked. Came to the city. We moved in with my aunt. A family of four, we're a family of four. We slept on the floor for six, seven weeks. While we were there, they announced they're going to form a ghetto in the city of Lodz.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about the ghetto, a couple questions for you. Were all the residents of your town, Zgierz, were they all sent to Lodz? Did everybody go?

>> Leon Merrick: No. At that time, they announced that the place has to be Jew-free, everybody went his own way, wherever they had relatives. Some entered the city of Warsaw. At one time, my parents were talking about going to the city of Warsaw. My mother had a cousin. There is a tin factory. Maybe we'll be safe with him. We're lucky we didn't go to Warsaw. We went to the next city, Lodz.

>> Bill Benson: Did you have family in Lodz?

>> Leon Merrick: My mother's sister. Maybe her cousins, aunts, my father's sister, all living in Lodz.

OK, we went to the ghetto, and then hunger started setting in. Everybody was hungry. The Jews started organizing as best they could. So they opened factories, and they had a lot of tradesmen, had shoe factories and tailor factories, we're going to produce material for the Germans, maybe send in more food or maybe they'll leave us alone. So everybody had to work, and it was important to work because in a place of employment you got an extra bowl of soup. My father knew, so he got a job as an orderly in the main hospital.

>> Bill Benson: The hospital in the ghetto?

>> Leon Merrick: In the ghetto. My mother got a job in the orphanage. She got a bowl of soup there. I notice young people going around with satchels, delivering mail. I said to my parents, Maybe I can do a job like this. If I wasn't going to school, Jews were not allowed to go to school. My father talked to somebody, he told him, Write a petition.

He wrote a letter, I have a young son, at that time I was already 16 years old. I was called to the personnel office. I noticed in the petition that the letter which he wrote a big R initial by the head of the ghetto. I got a job, so I got extra bowl of soup.

>> Bill Benson: When you first told me you worked for the postal service, I was sort of flabbergasted there was a postal service in the ghetto, because I wouldn't have thought mail could go in and out. Tell us what the postal service did and why there was mail.

>> Leon Merrick: OK. Talking about 1940. The first months of 1940. There was a post office, a working post office. You had a lot of Jews from the city of Lodz where I was born. They went to the Soviet occupied zone. At that time, if you know, Germany made a nonaggression pact with the Germans, and with the Soviet --

>> Bill Benson: They were Allies?

>> Leon Merrick: So we had mail. Then at that time, it's before the Germans overrun France and Belgium, the Benelux countries. Aside from that, when they formed the ghetto, the Germans picked the most dilapidated section, rat infested, bedbugs. You had some Jews intermarriaged to non-Jews. The other partners decided to come into the ghetto too, to be with the spouses. Definitely outside they sent mail and packages, things like that.

>> Bill Benson: For a while --

>> Leon Merrick: Yeah, and from South America, all these neutral countries. They didn't declare war on Germany. We had a working post office.

>> Bill Benson: You just told us having a job was so important in terms of getting that extra bowl of soup. Your brother though was too young to work, right?

>> Leon Merrick: My brother was too young to work, so we had to share with him. You get a little more, extra bowl of soup, so he got an extra -- but later he got a job too. Later on, he got a job too.

>> Bill Benson: I think you told me that at one point there were almost 160,000 Jews compressed into this two square mile area with over 90 factories producing goods for the Germans.

>> Leon Merrick: Less than two square miles.

>> Bill Benson: Eventually, I think you said, more than 200,000 would pass through there?

>> Leon Merrick: Once the Germans overrun the countries in Europe, the Benelux countries, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, they rounded up the Jews in the center, the Benelux countries, the center, the Lodz ghetto, it was an assembly point for the time being, until they decided to do away with the Jews.

They were taking out transport from the ghetto all the time. In 1942, the Germans ordered the curfew. Nobody could go in. You had to stay. Nobody could go into the houses. The Germans went from house to house, they blocked off the streets. Everybody had to come to the courtyards, but if there was no courtyard come to the street, and you stood there. I could see the women putting on the rouge to look healthy. At that time, they took away 15,000 children from the ghetto, and elderly.

>> Bill Benson: 15,000 children and elderly.

>> Leon Merrick: They took them to an assembly point, but we didn't know. For the first time I heard about the gas chambers in 1942. I was working in the post office. I was sitting there, somebody told the story what he heard. I don't know where, but he said he heard it, they take the people, the people, they took from the ghetto. Give them a towel, piece of soap, they go to the showers and instead of water gas is coming out. I didn't think anything about it. I didn't believe it. That's what they said.

Later, in 1943, they had a Catholic church in the ghetto and it was padlocked. 1943, they opened the padlocks, the Germans opened the padlocks, they were bringing clothes to the ghetto. They took the local Jews to sort out the clothes. Sometimes a letter fell out, or ID fell out. We know those are the ID cards from the people who just left the ghetto. Some clothes were bloodied. The Germans took the Jews to sort it out, and then the good clothes to send to Germany.

>> Bill Benson: Leon, hunger was so ever present, and you told me that sometimes people would be able to get a prescription from a doctor within the ghetto for potato peels.

>> Leon Merrick: Yeah. The hunger was so bad, and people lost weight, and they got sick, you know. They went to the doctor, if you know a friendly doctor, he wrote you prescription for potato peels, because they had community kitchens. We had, you got the one soup a day. The women used to find out which kitchen peels the potatoes thick, so they went to the kitchen, you wash them out, took out the dirt, there wasn't much left.

As a matter of fact, I saw an accident, somebody came out from the kitchen with a pack of soup, collected for his family, then all of a sudden a boy jumped the women. It was a big tussle.

What happened? The bowl fell, the soup spilled. On the sidewalks. The boy just spreads out, and licks up the soup, whatever was left, on the sidewalk. Hard to believe, isn't it?

>> Bill Benson: Leon, once the deportations began, in 1943, and of course the Soviets and the Germans became enemies and the mail service stopped, what was your role primarily after that time in the postal service?

>> Leon Merrick: Well, we were delivering -- OK, so from the beginning of the ghetto the Germans requested able-bodied men to work for Germany. I remember young men, we had neighbors, get up early, 4:00, 5:00 in the morning, they had the German medical commission, and they're looking if they're healthy, and the Jewish community somehow they paid the families in German scrip money. They had their own money. So we were delivering that. Then we were delivering notices to report to the town square. The Germans always demanded people. They had to feed the extermination camp. You had the camps, whatever it is, so we delivered the notices to report for work, for the assembly points.

>> Bill Benson: You're now delivering notices?

>> Leon Merrick: Notices. For example, I'll give you an example. It's wintertime, cold outside. I have a notice to somebody going to European houses, you had the building, go into the hallway, and I have a certain names and address. I knock on the door, nobody answers. I heard a faint voice from behind the curtain, because if the door was, now it's a curtain, because the people took out the wooden door for firewood. There is a curtain there, I hear a faint voice. I put the curtain aside. I make my way through and the curtain is stuck. I could see icicles falling down. I stick my head in, I

go inside, what do you know -- they're all laying in the beds. No need to get out. They have no jobs. They're hungry. Nothing to look forward to. And I didn't have good news for them.

>> Bill Benson: Leon, your mother, as you said, got a job in the orphanage. What happened to her job?

>> Leon Merrick: In 1942 also, my father -- I'm going back. My father worked in the hospital, and the Germans came and rounded up, took all the patients out. Then they went to the orphanage where my mother used to work, took all of the children out. So my mother had no job there. We didn't know. The rumor was going around, they take the sick people to sanatorium or the kids to send to school. We know now where they took them, they took them all to the gas chamber, killed them all.

>> Bill Benson: You would exist in the Lodz ghetto for about four years.

>> Leon Merrick: Yes, 1944.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the circumstances that led to your removal from the Lodz ghetto and where you went from there.

>> Leon Merrick: In 1944, my job wasn't essential. At that time, because the ghetto started up with 161,000 people, then they bring in more people, at one time or another, 200,000 people in the ghetto. Now they were emptying the ghetto. In 1944, the ghetto only had 78,000 people. I got a notice to report for a transport. 1944, I was 17 years old, and so at that time the Soviets already chased the Germans back from Stalingrad, the Russians, the Soviets are coming closer to our borders. Maybe one of these days we're going to be liberated by the red army. I didn't report for the transport. I was hiding.

Then they took my ration card away. Whatever was left over, my father didn't have the job in

the hospital anymore, my mother didn't get the extra bowl of soup, so maybe my parents talk to other people, What should we do? They said, Well, the boy is 17 years old. They're not going to kill him. Maybe they only want him for work.

My mother packed up a rucksack, sweater, extra pants, underwear, extra socks, and I reported to assembly point. I reported to the assembly point, and I got there, I see people hurting themselves. They didn't want to go in the transports. They're walking around to wires, puncturing your eardrums. If you have no hearing, how can you go to work? Somebody cutting themselves, maybe making a hernia. How are you going to lift things? You're supposed to go to work.

Anyway, after three, four days, they march us to the train station. I had my rucksack. I put this in the cattle cars. Closed the trains.

>> Bill Benson: Before you go on, did you get to say goodbye to your parents?

>> Leon Merrick: Sure, when I left the house, I said goodbye. Then my father came to see me one more time. I was already behind barbed wire. From far away. It was March 1944. Still cold in Poland. You had a 3/4 pea jacket, high boots, I had earmuffs. That's the last time I have seen him.

Don't even have a picture of my family. I don't. Whatever I remember the last time I saw them it's printed in my mind. No picture of my mother, my father, my younger brother.

>> Bill Benson: They locked you in the transport?

>> Leon Merrick: Locked me in the transport. After riding several hours, train stopped, opened up, we came out, guards were waiting there. They told us to climb the tracks. I had this rucksack. I said, "What about this?"

"It will follow later."

I never seen it. Whatever I had on me, that's it. They took us to a camp.

>> Bill Benson: You had on you some pictures, right?

>> Leon Merrick: At that time I had everything, pictures, letters, addresses from relatives. My mother had a sister in France, cousins in Holland. After the war we'd meet. All in my pockets.

>> Bill Benson: Their addresses?

>> Leon Merrick: Everything, sure. So we got to this camp, they didn't give me the rucksack. They took us to the camp. There were already Jews in the camp. The next morning, they marched us under guard to work, to the factory nearby. OK? We came in contact with non-Jews over there. We Jews, we came under guard every day, worked in the factory. When the shift was over, they marched us back under guard. The non-Jews went back to their home. We know what was going on. A lot of people were dreading, if you had a nice sweater, socks, extra pants, a guy can bring you a loaf of bread. I had nothing to trade. They didn't give me rucksack back.

While in this camp, I heard about the Normandy invasion, June 1944. I heard about the invasion, the Allies invasion of France.

>> Bill Benson: How did you hear about that?

>> Leon Merrick: They came together with the Poles. The non-Jews. They heard on the radio. In this camp, at that point, it was going back for the Germans, Soviets and the Russians, whatever you call them, they're coming closer to the camp. The guards come one morning, they said pack up. I had nothing to pack up. They took us to the train station, in open cattle cars. After riding two, three hours, they stop, load us up on tracks, tracks move forward. Still in Poland. Took us to the market

square. The place was swarming with Germans. All kind of uniforms, military men. They came to the tracks, and they asked, "Who are you people?" We told them, "We're Jews."

"You're Jews? You're here to help us win the war?"

What do we tell them? Keep your mouth shut. Told them nothing.

The next morning, they took us out to the countryside, they gave us picks and shovels, and we had to dig ditches against advancing Soviet Army. The German engineering, OK, we worked there for a while. We asked the guards, "What's going to happen when digging ditches is done?" How long can you dig ditches? The guard shrugged the shoulders. We asked, "Why can't you take us back to the ghetto we just came from?" They told us the ghetto is being liquidated. This in July.

We finished digging, they took us to another camp in Poland. We worked in the factory another couple months. The same as the previous factory, making boots for the German army.

Like I mentioned, the war was going back for the Germans. The guards came one day, "Pack up, on the double, to the train station." They marched us to the train station. We can hear the local population, they were running "The Russians are coming!" In Polish, of course. We're from Poland; we understood it. But we'd been under guard.

They locked us up in cattle cars. We didn't know where they were taking us. We just had a small window with barbed wire. We lift up, once the train stops moving, and they could read German names. I remember going to Germany. We didn't know exactly where we're going to.

>> Bill Benson: The names of German cities as you were going by?

>> Leon Merrick: Right. We could hear the whistle blowing, people going into factories. Once in a while the train stopped, because it's war, they had to let others through. You could hear children's

voices, people going to factories, with their lunchboxes. Here I'm 17 years old, locked up in a cattle car only because I'm a Jew, nothing else.

Anyway, after riding about eight days, the cattle car stopped, opened the door, sun. The sun hit us in the eyes. My eyes got clear, I took a good look, I can read "Concentration Camp Buchenwald." I know exactly where I was. I see the Nazi flag flying. After five minutes or he so, the guards came out, "On the double, line up, column of five." They march us to the main gate, which is a familiar sign, "Work makes you free." I didn't get free yet.

We're in the big hallway, the hallway was this big thing. Everybody undress, put everything on the table. At that time, I had addresses, pictures of my family. Once I put everything on the table, whatever I remembered, no pictures, everything on the table, I stood naked, and I told you guys, they didn't give us clothing. I worked in the factory, the machines, running oil. I developed blisters on my calves.

>> Bill Benson: From the oil from the machines?

>> Leon Merrick: From the oil from the machines. I could wash out my pants, but the same thing happened right away. All of a sudden, I'm naked, tall guy, swastika, black hat, must be a big SS man in the camp. He points to my thighs. In the best German I could, I told him, I had no change of clothing, no aprons, I worked in the factory. He stood there, shook his head, walked away.

>> Bill Benson: He could have decided --

>> Leon Merrick: He could decide to do whatever he wanted with me. I don't know. He could give me a paddle shot, who knows. It's 1944. He just took a look, shook his head, walked away.

I was still healthy to work. After this was finished, I remember walking downstairs. I came

downstairs, they must have had 30 guards there, they all had scissors. They shaved our head, underneath the arms, everywhere. They were inmates like I was, but they already had a job in the camp. We were the new arrivals.

After this was finished, they led us into another room, and they had the big basin, looks like disinfecting water, like pool water. We had to submerge. Don't forget my blisters here. I submerged, it was burning like the devil.

I stood up, I noticed the next room, the door is ajar. I see all the shower heads. I'm in a concentration camp, I knew that. I'm under guard. I'm naked, no clothes. I went to the shower. I walked in the next room, the water is not running yet, but the whole room of the shower head, I stood in the shower head, and another guy comes in, he stood, then a third guy comes in. Now we start tussling. Everybody wants a better spot. The water starts running, because everybody is burning.

>> Bill Benson: From the disinfectant?

>> Leon Merrick: From the disinfectant. Now the water starts running a little bit, so we're happy, we're still alive at that point. This was finished, I walked into the next room. There was a guy, he had a pad, paper, my name, he writes out where I come from, your profession. I said I was a student, 17 years old. He writes it all down. Goes to the third guy in the next room, I guess, gave me a jacket, plain jacket, not the striped pajama jackets, just plain. Gave me pants. No socks, no underwear.

Go to the third guy, I can see he has wooden clogs. I see one clog is not the same size. I said, when I got to him, "They're not going to fit."

"I say they fit. Next!"

I take the clogs, I walk out. Walking outside. It's already snowing. Just came from the baths.

It's cold, shivering, start snowing. Then when they had enough people in the column, somebody comes out, a functionary in the camp, not a guard, one of the prisoners too, but he already has a job in the camps. He says "Forward march," and they led us into a barrack. It was a dark barrack. One window, one naked light bulb and shelves. At that point, they're looking for volunteers. Two volunteers to go to the main kitchen and bring soup and bread for the new transfers. That means for us.

A couple guy volunteers, they're gone 10, 15 minutes, come back with a big kettle of soup and bread. They gave me a piece of bread, put the piece of bread in my pocket. They gave me a new bowl, because we didn't bring a bowl. Wooden bowl with a spoon. Gave a bowl of soup. I ate the soup. I thought I'm going to eat the bread later. By the evening, I put down my hand, somebody swiped the bread.

[Laughter]

There was no bread. To this day, I don't remember. I had a regular jacket. I got ahold of needle and thread. Somebody stole it for me. Maybe the people who take care of the barrack. Gave me a needle and thread, and I sewed up the outside, opened my -- I punched a hole, from now on, everything goes here. The bread was lost.

I picked a spot on the bunk. It wasn't assigned anything. But at night, I want to go to the bathroom. We call it the latrine. The latrine is outside. I leave my place I was sleeping, I was laying, I go outside, I come back, nobody let me back in. They said, "You didn't sleep there." This was my lesson, my first day, the lesson in the concentration camp. Even in the concentration camp, you have to be lucky. I think at that point I was lucky for a few days.

>> Bill Benson: Leon, you mentioned that some of the other inmates there had jobs. Tell us about the reds and the greens.

>> Leon Merrick: OK, all right. Buchenwald was built in 1937, 1937-38. As a matter of fact, when they had the Kristallnacht, the pogrom against the Jews, most Jews when they rounded them up to send them to Dachau or Buchenwald. At that time, the greens had the upper hand. The greens -- the Germans administered the camp, the guards outside. The main station were the Germans, the military, the uniforms. Inside the camp was run by the inmates. Talking about the 1937-38, that's before the Germans, the European countries were conquered.

So who was in the camps? Jehovah witnesses, German criminals. We had the designations. The greens were the criminals. After the Nazis came to power, they rounded up the communists.

>> Bill Benson: It could have been a murderer?

>> Leon Merrick: Right. Had a green label.

>> Bill Benson: He's in charge?

>> Leon Merrick: In charge. The commoners had the red label. All German. That's before they conquered the territory. Later on, Auschwitz and Austria in 1938, it was the Austrian population, they were old. The greens run the camp, the criminals. Somehow in 1942, the reds took it over. That means the red triangles, the commoners.

>> Bill Benson: And then, of course, all the Jews are brought in?

>> Leon Merrick: The Jews came into the camp, that's right.

>> Bill Benson: This is where Buchenwald, where you met your friend who became your good buddy. Was that Buchenwald? Herb Lewis?

>> Leon Merrick: OK, Herb Lewis, I met Herb Lewis in Poland. I didn't know him before. It was in one of the labor camps. He wasn't from my hometown. He was not in the Lodz ghetto. I met him in the labor camp. He came from a different city. He became close, more or less. We worked not in the same machine, but we worked for the same factory. Then the Germans came to round us up, on the double, to the train station. I went together with him too. We wound up in the same cattle car.

Once he got off the cattle car, you know how it is, the guard says, "Column of five, column of five," he wound up in a different barracks, I wound up in a different barrack. But I'd see him every day outside.

Then we had to leave Buchenwald. We hooked up together again. We went together. The next thing, they took us to the train station in open cattle cars --

>> Bill Benson: The reason they took you out of Buchenwald, because the Allies are getting close?

>> Leon Merrick: The Allies are coming, the Soviets are coming. One side before the Battle of the Bulge. The Americans are landing. First they took out the Jews. But they said all the Jews assemble. Didn't want to go in the Jews transport. They said they'll give you right away. I was hiding for two days underneath the barracks. Somebody caught me there, gave me a kick. It hurt several days. I couldn't sit down. Not the Germans, but one of the orderlies. They want to save their own skin, you know.

Finally, Jew or non-Jew, everybody report. I reported, and they held us in a big hall, in Buchenwald, in the camp. At night they let us out. The doors opened up, the guards with whips, we

come out, they're whipping us, "Column of five." We had enough people, a few thousands people, they marched us to the city of Weimar, near Buchenwald. They had the railroad through there, put us in open cattle car. Once in cattle car, I couldn't sit down. All of a sudden, the siren starts wailing, you can see the guard. Then we hear the clear signal, the train starts moving.

By that point, we got shot down -- Allies planes were all over the trains, shooting down. The guards encouraged this to wave to the attacking planes. Tell them the guards are doing the shooting. Even at this stage, we don't want to die. Whoever had a jacket, took off the jacket, waved to the planes. Some people had hats, took it off to wave. The planes came so low, I could see the pilot inside. But the guards, they had the guns trained on us.

I remember one time --

>> Bill Benson: These planes are strafing the cars that you're in?

>> Leon Merrick: Right there. Before we even start moving the first time I came out from the camp, I was thinking the train didn't move yet, open cattle car, the planes came from nowhere, jet planes. Something hit me in my face. I turned to my friend, a fellow walker. We became close. I turned to him, I said, "Am I bleeding?" He looks at me, "No, you're not bleeding."

I turn around, I see a wooden sign there like crossroad or crossing. I think maybe one of the splinters hit my face, but not enough to cause bleeding.

>> Bill Benson: Others were killed by the strafing?

>> Leon Merrick: Oh, yeah, they were killed.

The first time the planes start shooting, the guards jumped off the cattle car, open cattle car. In the horizon, they had cottages. I was running toward the cottages.

>> Bill Benson: With the Germans?

>> Leon Merrick: With the Germans, with the guards. I didn't want to get killed. We went down in the basement. At that time, after four years in the ghetto, you learn to speak German. In the camp, I picked up a little German. I heard the guards, they said the Americans, they're going to go back for more bombs, come back and shoot us up again. After 10, 20 minutes, the guards came back, the guards start walking back. I walked back with them too. When they came back to the trains, and the guards noticed what happened to the rucksack, because we left all of the rucksacks, but everybody running away. Some of our guys. They cut the bags open, they took out sausages, cigarettes and breads and crackers. The guards lined us all up, empty your pockets, turn out the pockets. I had nothing, because --

>> Bill Benson: Because you had been with them?

>> Leon Merrick: That's right. They found a piece of bread, and you got shot. I remember one guy, they're chasing him. He run away, they never caught him. He came back. They didn't bother him -- never caught him. He came back, they didn't bother him. Once we step out of the train station, the open cattle cars, I jumped off the cattle car, I spread out, underneath the cattle car. I could see the gravel, the bullets. After they knocked everything out, the guards announced from now on we're going to walk. "Everybody line up." Me and my friend, the fellow walker, it's 1944, I left home, you know, this is beginning of 1945, April.

>> Bill Benson: April 1945?

>> Leon Merrick: I still was in good shape. I stood first in line, in the first line, and then we start walking. They didn't feed us for several days. People got hungry. I was young. I was 17. Some

people were in their 20s, maybe 30s, and they couldn't make it anymore. Or they had one guard, he walked over the column, if you didn't walk straight, he pulled you out from the column, threw you in the ditch and you got shot. When he shot a guy, everybody from the column runs over to him, to go through his pockets. Maybe he's got cigarettes, maybe a crumb of bread, maybe his shoes are better than yours. Pull up the shoes, pull out the pocket. Until the guard says "Everybody back in!" Everybody goes back in. Then we might be walking maybe another few minutes, but people are weak at that stage. They didn't feed us. You can hear shots again. Same old story.

We came to another camp, Flossenburg. Not long, two, three days, it was closed, evacuated this camp. Put us in open cattle cars. Same story, planes overhead. We learned already, when the planes are there, pick up a jacket and wave to them.

>> Bill Benson: The Germans wanted you to signal to the --

>> Leon Merrick: The guards, to signal. The guards are with us in the cattle car, they don't want to get killed.

>> Bill Benson: They thought you were their protection?

>> Leon Merrick: Whatever it is. We waved to them. The last time I remember, once they shot up the locomotives, so we couldn't walk anymore. They marched us out, "From now on, you're going to walk." We walked. We walked. It was raining over there. One of my buttons popped. I had a civilian jacket. I had this thing tied around, we walked. At one point, I thought, OK, towards evening the guards told us you're going to spend the night here. It was woods. It was fall. A lot of leaves on the ground. They put leaves towards the ground, lay down to sleep.

In the morning, I hear that whistle, everybody get up. I get up. A couple guys nearby couldn't get up. The guard told them, "Why don't you wake them up?" The guard comes with the rifle butt, crushed the skull. "Everybody in the line." So we just walk away. We started walking at that time. We walked all night long. We heard the hum, it was getting dark. I thought it was thundering. But the Allies were close by. We didn't know it was thunder. People were walking out. A shot here, a shot there.

The last night, my knees got buckling up there. My friend, my fellow walker who I met in Poland, I said maybe I should go rest nearby. He said, "You go, you're going to get shot." He said, "Why don't you stay in the middle? Don't go to the side. Lean on me." I don't know if i leaned on him or not.

We walked in the ghetto. Came in the morning to a village. The guards told us, "We're going to arrest you." They left us in a barn. The night before it was raining. Our clothes were steaming. I sat down, in a bundle of straw, he sat next to me. All of a sudden, a raw egg. Must have been a chicken coop.

>> Bill Benson: It drops, right?

>> Leon Merrick: Drops down, fell down. I took the egg, I broke it in half. He had half, I had half egg. At that point, we hear shooting. We see the guards in the barn, that tried to pry the door open, they're looking for something white to put in the muzzle of the rifle to try to get out.

In the meantime, one of the guys in the barn, they go to look in the barn, he says, the Russians are here. The Russians! Those were American tanks with white cars. We came from Eastern Europe. At that time, we couldn't tell. Was the star red or white?

Finally, the door opened up, and I can see all, I'm going out, I see every German house, a white flag is hanging. People, there was a German truck there who followed proper provisions, followed the German guards. People going to the truck, taking jackets, pants, even rags.

I went to the truck, I took leather boots. I had no socks. I couldn't take them off later on. I had to cut them off. At that point, I see a lady with a kid, a German woman, she had a kid. I guess the kid was for protection, because so many thousands of people just got eliminated from the concentration camps. She had a small baby. Has a big blanket. Everybody stayed in line. She gives me a piece of bread. I go to the main road, I see trucks, tanks, they're throwing C-rations. I open up the packages. It's all sealed. I see a pack of Chesterfield cigarettes inside, a chocolate bar, big chocolate bar, can of cheese with can opener.

Next thing, we're walking and we come into a house in the village. My friend says, "Why don't you go? Let's go in here. Maybe they'll give you something hot to eat." Outside, it's a village, I see outside a bucket, a tin pail and raw potatoes inside. I scoop down, put raw potatoes inside. We're liberated, but I don't know.

I go into the house, I can smell already chicken and all kinds of people who preceded us. I was young, but people had managed, 30, 40, they looked different. They kill a chicken, they're cooking it.

We go a little further, I see GIs, tanks on the side there, the GIs coming towards us. "Where are you from?"

"Poland."

Maybe they're from here, Michigan, who knows where. "Are you going back to Poland?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to do now."

They gave us something to eat, crackers. I go a little further. I pass by a house, I see a guy, a German stays outside. He has a feather on the side, a Bavarian hat. I asked him in German, "Soup?"

"Ja."

People before us, they have wooden benches, it's the country. They're eating already. They gave me milk, eggs. I ate eggs, for three days I was pooping eggs out. I wasn't used to eggs. We were liberated again.

>> Bill Benson: When you knew you were liberated, what did you do then?

>> Leon Merrick: I tell you, I was liberated, I was free, I was free, I was scared. I said what happens if the Germans somehow come back, come back?

>> Bill Benson: Because the war is still going on?

>> Leon Merrick: It's a war, yeah. I see American tractors, what if they come back? I was scared for a few days.

OK, of course, they didn't come back. I was in this village. Somebody told me they're in the next city, they have a home for refugees over there, you can go to the home. I'm in a village. With the peasants, you know. I went to the home, they had all of the survivors there, women survivors, and they did the country. Men went out to the countryside to look for food.

One day, I was standing near the door. An American GI came in. He says he needs five boys to work. He explained to us that there are tents outside the city, and they have tents set up. I volunteer with a couple of other guys. They put us in the Jeep, the command car. They took us out

there. They had a field kitchen set up. The GIs were sleeping in tents, and they had a field kitchen. They took us to wash the pots and pans. Then they started with spaghetti and meatballs. They had one cook, he was Italian, he talked a little Polish he said "Spaghetti, sausage, kielbasa." I worked there maybe for -- every day they picked us up, took us back. This was 1944.

>> Bill Benson: 1945.

>> Leon Merrick: 1945. After liberation. One morning, whoever came to us says, listen, says, We have to leave here. We're going to Nuremberg. Don't you guys worry. They're going to come pick you up.

I said OK. He said so. I thought maybe he just said it, they weren't going to pick us up. I was home, maybe after three, four days, the guy comes back. He looked like John Wayne, big tall guy, smoked a cigarette. Every word was a cuss word. He said, "Are you guys ready? Pack up."

He took us to the city of Nuremberg. He took us to the city of Nuremberg, and the GIs, the soldiers were there in tents also, and we did the same work. That's where I got reconnected with my friend, Louis. Somehow got reconnected. He knew who I was, came to see me over there.

>> Bill Benson: You and Herb are friends to this day?

>> Leon Merrick: Yeah, right. One day, they said we have to leave Nuremberg. We're being mobilized. We have to drive to Marseilles, to France, board a ship, we're going back to America. He says, "I know you guys have nobody, but we can do two things for you. We can take you on the truck, but once you cross the French border we let you off, you're on your own." Or, he said, "Next stay is a hospital, we can find a job for you there, American hospital."

I says, "Find us the job in the hospital." We got the job at the hospital, OK, we did work there, kitchen stuff. Even the hospital, but they had set up to repair the stoves. German prisoners of war, they put us in charge of the prisoners.

>> Bill Benson: Of the German prisoners?

>> Leon Merrick: Yeah, but they had real guards, which is just us telling them what to do, they had to clean this stuff, you know.

I was there for maybe four, five -- no, I was there in Nuremberg, then they changed. I was in Nuremberg, then they changed the government. The first German chancellor, so we got paid through the German economy. I got myself a job in Nuremberg itself. I didn't want to live in the hospital.

While I was there, I got in touch with my friend, Herb Louis. He was living there. He came to me one day, he said, "I heard you can go to America." I wanted to go to America. By that time people had to have affidavit. Somebody had to sponsor you. I didn't have anybody in America. My father told me once he has a step-sister in America. She has a bakery. That's all I know. How do I know?

[Laughter]

A bakery over there, something like that. I had nobody in America.

My friend comes, he says, "You're registered." I said, "What do you have to do?" He said, "Go to Munich, register." I said, "Go ahead." He went one week, he comes back the next week, he says, "You're registered." I go, I'm registered, and it didn't take long, maybe 2, 3 months afterwards I was called to the American consul, fill out papers, I had clearance from German police, something like this. All of a sudden, I'm going to America. They gave me a book about the United States. They

pointed out places of interest, the Statue of Liberty, about the Golden Gate Bridge, about the capitol, the White House. I picked up a booklet in Polish, so I could read.

All of a sudden, they took us first on assembly point, then we were ready. Took us to the train station. Sent us to Bremen. Bremen who built the ships. Seven, eight days, the ship transfer. We were riding for five days, seven days, we came in the evening, it was dark already, we could see all the coastline from America. We come from German, everything was bombed. There were no lights there. Nothing. At night, you had to go through rubble. Here, I see the places.

They told us, "You'll sleep overnight on the ship." Daybreak, the ship moves -- no, before this the ship moves a little bit, then stops at immigration. People came onboard, checked our papers. Then the ship starts moving further, past the Statue of Liberty, so close I could almost reach her. At that time I knew, "Show me your masses, yearning to be free," things like that.

We came to New York Harbor. At that point, I boarded a ship, the New American something. I was sponsored by a Jewish organization, the people volunteers, they came towards me. They had different nationalities on the ship. Sponsored by Catholic organizations, the Quakers. Each one came to pick up his own group of people. He came here, he says, "Follow me."

Now we had to go through customs. At that time, maybe acquired a shirt, a tie. I didn't have much. Then she said the American Red Cross gave us donuts and coffee. She says, "Follow me." I was riding the escalators, and she gave me two tickets. She says, "You're going to Washington, DC." The gate wasn't open up. The gate opens up, go down, there will be a train, take a seat. She gave me $3 to buy lunch on the train.

I had breakfast on the ship that morning, then I had the donuts, and the customs. She gave

me $3 to buy lunch until I get to Washington, DC. Somebody will meet you there.

The door opens up, I go down, take a seat. I'm going to Washington, DC. I see people sitting on the seat, American Legionnaires. Easy, they get off, we get off.

>> Bill Benson: That's how you know you're in Washington, DC.

>> Leon Merrick: Easy. The trains move forward, they call you off the names, New Jersey, whatever, they call off different names. The train stops. Union Station, people getting off the train. I'm getting off the train too. I have a couple of packages. I'm already free for four years. I accumulated some stuff.

I'm going to Union Station, Washington, DC. The place empties out, nobody comes towards me. I'm standing there. I also mentioned I got the booklet on the United States, places of interest. If you get lost in America, there's a Travel Aid Society, you can go there and ask for help.

I said, maybe I'll walk in, tell them I am lost or somebody didn't pick me up to explain. I go over there, the door is open, I look in, I see two sailors talking to a woman. I hesitate. I'm going to go in. The minute I turn around, I see two women coming towards me. They're volunteers too. I was afraid. They came with me, they -- we shook hands and they says, "You come with us."

Anyway, I got off Union Station, I was looking at the capitol rotunda. I said, "Is this the White House?" I mixed them up. They corrected me: "No, this is the capitol rotunda."

So they took me to a place, in Mount Pleasant, a section of Washington, DC. They put me up, "You stay here for seven, eight days until you get organized." The lady shows, gives me a token for the bus. The local people, here's the bus stop, whatever it is. You go over there, take the bus. She gave me an address to go to the Jewish Social Service Agency on Spring Road. I go over

there, there was the name Mr. Pixnell. I remember the name. I was in the camps. I worked for Americans. He interviewed me. He says -- he gave me $20. He said, "Go see the city."

>> Bill Benson: You still had your $3?

>> Leon Merrick: I didn't spend the $3. I was four years in Germany, I met a few friends. Maybe I want to write a letter, tell them I'm arrive safely, say hello. I need a postage stamp. I know it costs money. I saved the $3. I had the $20 and $3, I had $23. I was living in Mount Pleasant.

I figured I'm going to go one street, come back. I don't want to get lost. I was by myself. I don't know a soul here. I go, I come back. Meantime, I think I was smoking, I asked for matches in the drugstore. He gave me matches. "Free?"

"Yes."

"Free?"

I go back, I do the same route, I go south to U Street. I come back. The third day, I go all the way to Franklin Square, 14th and K Street. I sat in the park. I sat in the park. I have no job. I sat in the park. For some reason, in the rooming house the lady who runs the rooming house, she had also students from GW. She wanted to get rid of me for the day. She gave me breakfast, packed my lunch, come back in the evening.

>> Bill Benson: Sat in the park in Franklin Square?

>> Leon Merrick: Sat in the park to kill time. Across from me a man is sitting. He talks to me. I don't know. I don't know, when I talked to him, he must have noticed the accent or something. He comes towards me, sits down next to me. He asked me the question. I tell him the story, I was in Germany, I just got there three days ago. I told him I live in the Mount Pleasant there and I don't like it. I told

him the story, I have a feeling the lady wants to get rid of us in the daytime.

He says, "You have a job?" I said, "No, I don't have a job."

He says, "I live on 14th Street in the Cavalier Hotel." It was a block away from Park Road. He says, "My wife is the head nurse in Children's Hospital. I want you to come tonight, meet my wife. "

>> Bill Benson: From that you got a job?

>> Leon Merrick: Yes. I follow him, "He says let's go into the drugstore." They had signs there, Rooms For Rent. I have no job. I told him I don't like where I stay. Anyway, so OK, I met his wife, the next day, OK, we took the name of it says Room For Rent. He said this is next block where I live. It was 1420 Parkwood Place. Right around the corner.

So we go over there, and the room for rent? "Yeah." He said, "I have a young man." The minute I open my mouth, the man from the landlord from the house, he noticed my accent. Said, "Where are you from?" I told him the story. Poland. He says, "Yeah? What did you do in Germany?" I said I worked for the American army for a while over there. He says, "You know what? I have a cousin who owns a restaurant. Would you like a job?" I says yeah. Right there on the spot, the third day.

He calls him up, the guy told him bring the man over there. We walked over there. It was a few walking blocks, we came over there, the same story, shook hands, a glass of wine. Anyway, he says, "You know what? I have a place downtown," I think it's one block south of Thomas Circle in Washington, DC. "You don't do anything, come down, see if you like it. If you like it, you stay. If you don't, fine. "

I came down the next day. I says, "I like it." OK, so I have a job.

>> Bill Benson: We've got to wrap up now, I think. Of course, what we're not hearing about here is afterwards Leon would of course meet and marry Nina, that next year, 1950, I believe. Then he would get drafted and enter and served in the army, eventually get out, and would open your own restaurant for many years.

>> Leon Merrick: Right, right. My restaurant for 25 years. Customers in the United States --

>> Bill Benson: They gave you a party when it was over. I'll turn back to Leon in a moment to close. I want to thank you for being here with us at *First Person*. Remind you we'll have programs every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. We'll resume next March. We hope you can come back this year or next year for sure.

As I said, it's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. When Leon is finished, you can stay for a couple more minutes?

>> Leon Merrick: Yeah, sure.

>> Bill Benson: He will step off the stage. We didn't have a chance for questions and answers. If you want to ask any questions, absolutely feel free to do that afterwards or just say hi to him. Whatever you would like to do.

Let me turn to Leon to close.

>> Leon Merrick: I jotted down a few words, because if I don't write it down, I forget myself.

Here it is: When I was in the camps I kept thinking how nice it would be on liberation day. Yet, when this day finally arrived, after so many years of suffering, I felt all alone. I did not know if my family or those dear to me survived. I personally experienced a lot. There's just one profound regret, so many people did not live to see this glorious day. Our experiences are reminders to all people in

everyplace, in every corner of this earth to become guardians of human rights, dignity and freedom forever.

[Applause]

[Ended at 2:00 p.m.]