Wednesday, June 5, 2013

1:00 p.m. – 2:01 p.m.

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
***FIRST PERSON* SERIES**
GERALD LIEBENAU

REMOTE CART

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>> Bill Benson: Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am host of the museum's public program *First Person*. Thank you for joining us today. We are in our 14th year of *First Person*. Our *First Person* today is Mr. Gerald Liebenau, 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*.

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 *First Person* guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through mid-August. The Museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming *First Person* guests.

Gerald, or Gerry, Liebenau, 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 towards the end of our program, there will be an opportunity for you to ask Gerry a few questions.

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

We begin with this photo, this portrait, of Gerald Liebenau at age 5. Gerry was born to a Jewish family in Berlin, Germany in 1925.

Gerry's father was a window decorator for a major large department store. In this photo, we see Gerry and his parents on the beach in Estonia in 1929.

Gerry was the eldest of two children. Here we see Gerry, his mother, and his younger sister Irene in this photo taken in 1937 or 1938.

In 1938, five years after the Nazis came to power, Gerry and his family moved to London, England, where they waited for visas to the United States. In February 1939 they emigrated to the U.S. Here is Gerry's original U.S. Immigration Identification Card.

In 1944, after graduating from high school, Gerry joined the U.S. Army. We close with this photograph of Gerry returning to the U.S. from his post in Austria in 1946.

After the war, Gerry attended Yale University before beginning his career with the federal government, most of which was spent with the CIA. I am very sorry to say that Gerry lost his wife Vivian two months ago. Vivian was his childhood sweetheart. They were married 64 years. They had four children, one son and three daughters. Their son Jonathan teaches at the London School of Economics. Daughter Betsi is a school readiness coordinator for Fairfax County, Virginia, Arlene is with the folk life division of the Smithsonian Institution, and Janet is a primary school teacher who earned her master's degree in education several years ago. Their four grandchildren are ages 15 to 30. The oldest grandson just got married two weeks ago.

And daughters Betsi and Arlene are both here with us today. A little wave, Arlene? There we go. Thank you.

Gerry has been associated with this museum since before it opened 20 years ago, and volunteered for many years with the Museum's visitor services. He also did translation work for the Museum, including documents for the Varian Frye Exhibit, which memorialized Frye's clandestine efforts that rescued some 2,000 persons from Nazi-controlled Vichy, France, including intellectuals and artists such as Marc Chagall and Heinrich Mann. In addition to his work translating for the Museum, Gerry spent 10 years translating works of the renowned Austrian psychiatrist Alfred Adler that had not been previously translated. Gerry and Vivian loved to sail and did so for many years. After they sold their boat several years ago, they continued their love of sailing as one of their children has a boat.

With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our *First Person*, Mr. Gerald Liebenau.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Gerry, thank you so much for joining us, for your willingness to be our *First Person* today. You have so much to share with us in a short hour, so we'll just jump in right away, if you don't mind.

Gerry, you were born in 1925, before Hitler and the Nazis' rise to power. Before we get into the beginning of your odyssey leaving Germany, tell us about those early years, the years before -- when you were a youngster, before the Nazis came to power,

about your family and your community.

>> Gerald Liebenau: I grew up in sort of a middle class, maybe lower middle class neighborhood. The only thing it had that was really worthwhile living there was a beautiful park. Eventually I would go back to that.

My father changed his job. Just came out of the Army. He was a soldier for four years for the German Army. He received the highest awards for his work. He happened to be a heavy machine gunner. And when I went into the Army, I also became a heavy machine gunner. I don't know how that ever fits together, but there must be some gene somewhere.

I grew up as a child, and I had a very early and happy early childhood. I went to public school. My teacher was a very nice guy. I remember him to this day. Even know his name. The name of one of our football coaches some years ago. However that came together.

I enjoyed my schooling. I was not a top student. My father reminded me of that when I would show my report cards, which I kept. There was interesting little information I have there, testament, of what happened to me over the years.

In 1936, the Nuremburg Laws kicked in, something Hitler defined to separate the German people from everybody else. His idea was that Germans have a pure blood, unlike any other people. He persuaded a number of people of doing that, that this was ok. And since Jewish blood was not the same as German blood, it was impossible for Jews to have any -- impossible for Jews to have any contact with Germans. He managed to

make people believe this. I am sure most of the people didn't believe him. They sort of went around with it because it was just too dangerous to have your own ideas.

This idea, in 1930 -- and then these Nuremberg Laws, which were designed mostly to eliminate everyone else who's not German, they dictated what your life is going to be like. And among those things were that a Jewish child could no longer go to public school.

Then in 1936, I had to go to a Jewish school. And you can imagine all of a sudden, all of these kids coming to the same school. There were few, not many, because not many people went to Jewish schools. All of a sudden they were flooded with people who they never expected to get. It was not a comfortable time.

In addition to that, life became a little bit more tense. I know that because I looked back on my report cards, and I got worse and worse marks. The only way that can be explained is that the tension that I had at home kind of seeped into me, and I was also affected by it.

>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind, let me take you back a little bit and ask you a couple of other questions, before we get to that point. Tell us a little bit about your mother.

>> Gerald Liebenau: My mother was -- you want to hear the whole story? My mother was born --

>> Bill Benson: I do, actually.

[Laughter]

>> Gerald Liebenau: Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. Her parents -- they had money. They had

a beautiful home. In addition to the house, they lived in the city. We used to go and visit there because they had beautiful beaches. It was my first exposure to really nice beach weather. I became affected by that for the rest of my life.

My mother began to study piano. Eventually she studied in St. Petersburg, which was sort of the cultural center of Russia. When the revolution started, her mother told her to come home.

My father, who was in the German Army, was stationed as an occupation soldier. He went to services at the synagogue. At the end of services a man said, would you like to come to my home for supper? Which apparently was done in those days. My father did, and saw that beautiful girl there who he fell in love with and eventually they were married. She at one point decided that St. Petersburg was not good enough. She wanted to go to Berlin because that's where my father was. So they got together in Berlin. They were married in 1922. They lived a very nice life together. They had a very nice life.

My mother was also, because of her musical ear, a genius at languages. My father, who tried to learn English, never really could learn English. My mother, on the other hand, picked it up as if it were part of her nature.

To go back to where I was before, tension grew in my family. And there are two ways I could tell this. One was the fact that my father trying English, which was a hopeless task. You could not tune in to any station that was not a German station. He had to listen to a London station because it was the only way he could hear any English, but that didn't help him either.

It was a tense situation. I knew something was happening in my family. My mother became more agitated. We had one other outlet which was quite important to my family. My father was a sportsman. He was an athlete. He rowed. He was a member of a Jewish rowing club. There were several of those in Berlin. The club had a large -- most important, it was located right on the river, the river that goes through Berlin. Learned to swim there and swam there for many years until I learned how.

It so happens, this was long before they started cleaning rivers and doing something about the environment. Right across from where we were swimming was a chemical company. I have no doubt that they dumped the chemicals into the same river in which I was swimming. And if I lived a long life, and am fairly healthy, I imagine I was immunized for all of these diseases that people go to the doctor for to be immunized.

I noticed that the adults in that club started talking about how to get out of Germany. This was the subject taking on increasing importance in the Jewish community.

You might wonder why is it that the Jewish community didn't catch on earlier? After all, Hitler came into power in 1933. He let everybody know what his idea was. He wrote a book, "My Struggle," in which he told everybody, we're going to get rid of the Jews, get rid of the Pols, all of these, he told people. But nobody believed him. The Jewish community in Berlin felt very safe. They felt safe because they lived there for so long. The first Jew to come to Berlin was in 1712 or something like that, on the records, walked into Berlin. They've always been there. They've always been part of the community, part of

society. They were part of the government. They had senior government officials who were Jewish. They couldn't believe that somebody would actually do something with all of these clever people and all of this knit community that Germany was that they would listen to a guy like Adolph Hitler. And yet, they did.

Adolph Hitler had one secret. He had probably the best propaganda machine anybody ever had invented. Many others came after along with him. Soviets did some similar things. But the Germans were unique in making it a science. What they had to say about Jews, their blood, their physical stature. Upstairs, the top floor where you begin your tour, you'll see doctors measuring kids' heads because they could tell a Jew from the size of his head and how the bones were structured. That's how much they penetrated the science and the culture of the German people.

>> Bill Benson: Gerry, you mentioned that there were Jews in the government. You witnessed an incident at the justice. Will you tell us about that?

>> Gerald Liebenau: Yes. Thank you. The park that was across the street from my building -- I lived in an apartment block. The entire block was practically one building, one right next to the other, four stories high or five, and we had an apartment way at the top. My playing ground was the park. That's where I went. I didn't have to go far, across the street into the park. We played the games German kids played, Cowboys and Indians. That's all the German kids wanted to play. To this day, you have Cowboy and Indian clubs in Berlin that people actually dress in exactly the same kind of clothing that they wore when there was real Cowboys and Indians in the wild west. It's an enormous industry, this cowboy business.

One day we were playing. All of a sudden there was a lot of people gathered in front of a courthouse, a huge courthouse, at the end of the park. All of these people were coming together, which not usually happened. As kids, we wanted to see what was going on. We went over there and saw after a while that the whole place was lined by storm troopers. Storm troopers were the active guys who were actually charged with making sure everybody stays in line.

The doors open. A whole lot of men in dark suits and briefcases in their hands walked out of the building. I went by these Nazi storm troopers. Then I knew something was up. Because it turned out they were all Jews. And it was the beginning of the segregation of the Jews of almost everything that was going on in Germany. It was part of the Nuremberg Laws. German Jews, Jewish children could no longer play with non-Jewish children. Jewish doctors lost their license to practice. German doctors were not allowed to treat Jews. It was one of those things that covered everything, including eventually that Jews no longer could use the public transportation system.

There was other increasing pressure on the Jewish community. So this talk that I saw in the club my father took us to almost every weekend in the summer was beginning to make sense to me. As a young boy of 12 years, I knew more or less what was going on.

The business about leaving Germany was almost impossible. It could have been done earlier in the Nazi period before they got themselves organized. But by the time people began to feel what was going on in their lives, they were no longer able to get

out.

To come to the United States, for example, you had to have somebody in the United States vouch in a little document known as an affidavit that you would not only become a charge of the U.S. government, that you never will be needing help from the U.S. government. And for somebody to do that with two kids, a husband, wife, that's quite a big job to take on.

I was lucky. My mother, who was a typical German housewife, only job was to play the piano -- and she practiced all day long, I think. She supervised the maids, the cooks. She made sure everything was going fine when my father was out.

He, by the way, by this time became a textile merchant, a new job he learned because he couldn't believe that anybody could work as a window decorator in the hot summer or the cold winter. It was not a job for an old man.

So my --

>> Bill Benson: This is when your mother, I think, began to think about relatives in the United States.

>> Gerald Liebenau: Yes. Thank you. Sometimes it slides off.

[Laughter]

>> Gerald Liebenau: My mother, she had no real responsibilities, but all of a sudden she began to realize that she had an uncle, her father's brother, who was somewhere in the United States. She had no idea where he was or what his name was. Because his name didn't sit well, so he must have changed his name. She wrote a letter to her father with whom she was

in contact and said, By the way, what is your brother's name and where does he live? And as luck would have it, he knew who it was. The guy was now named Morris Miller, and he was living in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where he had a business. As luck would have it, he also had a son who just graduated from law school.

So the affidavit was something that he could do. My mother wrote a very appealing letter. She could do that. She could make tears come out of your eyes. She told him “Please save us,” because there was no other way we could ever leave Germany without their help.

Sure enough, he did send an affidavit. And my mother, who was always sort of a leader when it came to talking with people, took it to the U.S. Embassy. The attaché who was in charge looked at the affidavit and said: That's not good enough. Why isn't it good enough? Well, he has his business. Can't make that much money in that business. The business was secondhand clothing store on Lackawanna Avenue. That was about as low as you could get. Not much money was being made there. But, obviously, he had enough money to send his boy to law school. But that was not satisfying the council.

At that time the U.S. government, the U.S. State Department, was not favorably in view of the Jews. They didn't like to see Jews come into the United States. And there was a lot of pressure on these people who were issuing the exit permits, actually the visas, for people to come to the States, to give the Jewish people as hard a time as they could.

By this time you're talking 1938. We're getting close to the end

of any departure from Germany.

>> Bill Benson: Gerry, I think you told me at the rowing club when they would start -- the conversation turned to migration, because the U.S. was so difficult to get to, that they were talking about destinations like Argentina, China, places like that.

>> Gerald Liebenau: There were very few countries that actually had an open emigration policy. China was one of the few countries that did. And, yes, there was a Jewish community in Shanghai, of which there was an exhibit in this building, how they maintained their identity and eventually many of the Chinese came to the United States. Many of the Jews who live in China, survived in China, came to the United States.

>> Bill Benson: Fortunately, because your mother had the relative, you were able to get that affidavit. But as you were saying, it wasn't good enough.

>> Gerald Liebenau: My father, who still has this idea that the Nazis were looking only for men, he couldn't conceive of the idea that women and children would also be included in this beginning of taking -- [Inaudible].

In this textile business, he had customers in England. The manufacturing of certain cottons were done in England. He had high-quality material. And I guess because Germany needed foreign currency, they were able to take a business trip, which was limited in time, several months. Allowed to go to England and purchase these textiles so that money would start flowing into Germany, which you would have to give up in Germany for marks. My father had no intention of getting back to Germany, knowing full well he no longer had a chance to survive in Berlin.

That left my mother and her two children to take care of everything that had to be done, to leave a home and move somewhere else. Except she couldn't go anywhere else, except she also had this idea if she could persuade somebody in the American Embassy that all she wanted to do was visit her husband and the children, that somebody might allow.

Luckily we're talking about human beings, because they're all different. Some people meld together. Others will do whatever they can to help other people. This time she saw somebody who actually let her have a visa for us to visit my father. I'm sure they knew -- knew exactly what we were doing. But in this case the man apparently was conscious of the plight that my family was in.

Some time before that, the Nazis came looking for my family. And this is an interesting story because it tells you a lot about people. The Gestapo people, two of them who came into the house, the building, first went to the custodian. The custodian always had a little room on the first floor where you come in, checked everybody out when you walked through. They stopped and said where was the family. And she said, without hesitation, "They're not there anymore. They left." And since it was four flights up, they decided it's not worth going to. So they didn't. If they had come upstairs, they would have found us. Not my father, but my mother, sister, and me. So it was interesting, Germans housing people. There were several of them, probably many of them who would have done differently from what the Nazis asked them to do. But they had no choice either.

So this woman rescued my family.

>> Bill Benson: Before you get to London, you described to me what you called a magical moment, when a truck pulled up in front of your house.

>> Gerald Liebenau: Another example of what Germans do, decent people do. My father had a sense to pay a transportation company to move our furniture from Berlin to Scranton, Pennsylvania. He paid for it. Got a receipt. And totally unexpected, one day a huge moving truck with these massive containers, used to ship things in, pulled up at my apartment building and started taking our furniture out to be shipped to Scranton, Pennsylvania, which tells you, again, that's not what the Nazis wanted you to do. They wanted to take that stuff and take it somewhere else and sell it to somebody so the Nazis could make more money or whatever they wanted to do. But this worked. He was paid. He had a job to do. He did it.

>> Bill Benson: And before you went to London to join your father, Kristallnacht occurred. Will you tell us a little about that?

>> Gerald Liebenau: On November 6, 1938, a Polish -- young Polish man living in Paris who had, obviously, some mental problems became angry because his family, in Germany -- all Poland was sent into concentration camp. He shot a German Foreign Service Officer. He was caught. There was a lot of to-do made about it, but the Nazis took that act as a starting point for their own final solution. They began burning down every synagogue they could and every synagogue that was not next to a building close enough to start a fire.

The synagogue that I attended, my family attended, it was completed building in 1930. 1938 it was burned. It started again with a caretaker for the building who called up the rabbi and said, Our synagogue is burning. The rabbi, who was

well-known, a very talented and very gifted speaker, rushed to the scene. He sent a letter to my family many years after this telling him this story exactly as I'm telling it to you now. The letter is now in this museum. He said, "I came to a scene, and there were these firemen hosing down all the buildings in the neighborhood to be sure that they don't catch fire while the Nazis kept stoking the fire that made sure the building would burn." I saw that building in 1946. I went to Berlin. I was stationed in Vienna, and I went to Berlin. I visited the site of the synagogue. Sure enough, it was burned down. Everything that could burn burned in that building. It was an immense building. It was larger -- it could accommodate more people than this room has. It was a majestic building. And there it was.

But you know what? Every single building in that entire neighborhood was bombed to pieces. There must have been a flight going over that street and left a stick of bomb on every building. Somehow all these businesses trying to save their buildings didn't quite work.

>> Bill Benson: On that night of November 9-10, Kristallnacht, Night of the Broken Glass, for you, I think you told me that you were coming home or somewhere and you saw an art store that mattered to you, and that was destroyed, and that's when you realized what was going on.

>> Gerald Liebenau: Yeah. I was not there when the synagogue was on fire. But I went to school that day because nobody knew what was going on anyhow. But suddenly I came to the corner of the building of the street I lived on and a large art supply store had been totally smashed. The windows were broken. All the things that I used to look at, because I really liked those things, liked the paper, the pens, all the crayons, all the paraphernalia that goes

with making pictures. And I saw that building totally, the store, destroyed.

>> Bill Benson: Jewish-owned business.

>> Gerald Liebenau: Jewish-owned business. That was only one of thousands of businesses that were destroyed.

>> Bill Benson: So soon after that, you started to tell us you then were able to get to England. Tell us what happened to you, how you got out of Germany and what happened when you crossed the border into the Netherlands.

>> Gerald Liebenau: When you got to the train station -- we did get on. Our tickets were good. Again, somehow this was my father's business as well to see that we get tickets. My mother and my sister and I were already thinking we've made it. We're on the train. The train is moving in the right direction. But suddenly at the Dutch border the train stopped. Everyone was told to get out. At that point my mother lost it. She had all the courage and knew exactly what to do at all times, really thought this was the end. And she could have thought that way. Why else would they take us all off the train? They put us into a hotel. I never shall forget that night. I had to tell my mother to please calm down, never mind my sister. It was a moment I had to grow up all of a sudden.

The next day, without any explanation, we were told to get back on the train and continued into Holland. We came to England. My father had a small apartment, a very small apartment. Apparently it wasn't big enough to accommodate all four of us, so I was selected to be handed over to another family, a very Orthodoxed Jewish family, and I was not an Orthodox Jew, but I knew enough to say I'll make a go. They were wonderful

people. They took me in. They treated me like their son. And above all, they said, you know what, you have to become bar mitzvahed because you're turning 13 years old. At that point, every Jewish boy has to be bar mitzvahed or he doesn't become an adult or something like that. Sure enough, as it turns out, if I had wanted to come -- they said they don't know how to do that in the United States. You can't trust it.

[Laughter]

>> Gerald Liebenau: If they had only known how much they saved my life. I didn't have to learn whole portions of the Bible. I didn't have to have a big party. My parents must have been glad. But they were very, very decent people. I guess this is an aside. The Jewish community in Berlin was very self-contained. They thought they were the best.

Let me tell you about the Jewish community. Sometime in 1931, the Jewish community felt something had to be done to let the Nazis know that the Jews in Germany were an important part of the society, that they had money, they were well-educated, they had big names. After all, Einstein was in Berlin. You really shouldn't throw all of these people. They're too good. They're too important.

So this book here -- this is like a telephone book -- has the name of every Jewish household, and it gives the address. I don't think it gives the telephone number. Their address. They gave this book out to let people know not only how many people were in Germany -- remember, it's difficult to come by. But by 1938, they said there may have been 160,000 Jews in Berlin.

>> Bill Benson: All listed there.

>> Gerald Liebenau: Hmm?

>> Bill Benson: All listed there.

>> Gerald Liebenau: This was given out to everybody who had access to it. I am sure this must have helped the Gestapo greatly to find all the Jews. It was like a guidebook of how to find Jews in Berlin. Little did they know putting this -- but it shows you they had no fear. They were not concerned about their life. They were sure that their life in Berlin was as safe as anywhere in the world.

Let me put this book up.

>> Bill Benson: Gerry, you were in England. And then eventually, of course, you would make it to the United States. How were they able to make that happen?

>> Gerald Liebenau: This is kind of a murky chapter in my history. My parents now actually had two affidavits. The second affidavit was from a friend of Morris Miller, my uncle. And this was by a Jewish fellow who was not related to us, who owned movie theaters. Movie theaters, you could get 20 people in. They were all over town. All you saw was cowboy movies. I guess this affidavit also was written by my cousin, the lawyer. And when my mother took that to Berlin, he also said, “This is not good enough because he's not a blood relative.” So twice he turned them down.

When they got to England, they now had two affidavits. They went to the U.S. Embassy. My mother did this again. I tell you, without my mother, I don't think we would be alive today. She must have talked the guy into believing these two affidavits are excellent.

And, again, human beings are not all the same. This guy said, "Sure, fine." And we got our visas, and soon we were on our way to the States.

We were traveling on a ship, a four-stacker, looks exactly like the Titanic. Nothing happened. We had to be in the lowest class, third class, whatever it was, way down in the bottom. But we were treated well, fed well. It was all very nice. And one day -- we couldn't go anywhere. It was not like today when you're on a cruise, you go everywhere you want to go. There were very restricted places that people from birth there could go to. But you could always go -- back in the boat there was lots of space. People could walk. I used to go there. One day I saw a kid about my age, nicely dressed, suit and tie. People dressed up when they traveled anywhere at that time. There was no sport clothes or sneakers.

So I went up to him and I said, "Where do you live?" I had learned by this time a little English because I was going to school in London for a month or two. So I knew enough to say, "Where do you live?" This kid says to me, "D.C." I said, "What's the name of the town?" "D.C." I said, "Well, where is it located?" "D.C." By this time I said this guy has lost it. Guess where I ended up. D.C.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: One thing I'd like you to share with us before we talk about -- a little bit of time we have left -- about when you got to the United States. Your father had been a very avid stamp collector. And those stamps actually became really important to your journey.

>> Gerald Liebenau: Well, it was the first clandestined operation I ever saw. I was not a

participant in that. My father was a great stamp collector. He knew stamps. He knew what kinds were valuable. He had them. He was fairly meticulous in putting these stamps into a collection. His books looked perfect. Every stamp was covered. Every stamp was perfectly put in. He hoped he could take this stamp collection and take it with him outside and then sell it in the States and maybe have some money. But Germans wouldn't let him -- you couldn't keep anything. So he decided he'd smuggle some of those stamps out. He had a cousin, a relative of some sort, who was a manufacturer of albums. And these albums had thick covers. You could open the back of it and put things in there. He put a good part of his collection into these albums and glued it back together and sent it as a package to a friend of his in Mexico. It worked. When we got back to the States, he got the stamps back. I'm not sure that he sold much. He kept collecting stamps. And collectors don't sell. They're collectors. They don't sell. But I guess it did help in a few instances.

>> Bill Benson: That was your first clandestined operation.

[Laughter]

>> Gerald Liebenau: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: So you arrived in the United States. One of the things I wanted you to tell us about, you're now in the United States and they put you in the second grade.

>> Gerald Liebenau: In those days they had no use of English for foreign speakers, this sort of thing. They put me in the second grade. I was 13 years old. I was yay tall. I swear to this day they put me in the second because the first grade didn't have a chair big enough for me. So I started second grade. I must have done well. I moved up. And by the time I got into eighth

grade, I was with my cohorts. All about the same age. I got to the high school. And all of a sudden my grades became great. I was at the top of the class. I must have had a real psychological sort of infusion when I was in Germany. I just had to get out of there. I did fine.

>> Bill Benson: You ended up being class valedictorian, didn't you?

>> Gerald Liebenau: I was one of the class speakers. My accent was horrible. But I did talk about patriotism and fighting. Because as soon as I got out of high school, I was in the Army.

>> Bill Benson: You had met Vivian by this time, in high school. You were supposed to go to your high school prom, right?

>> Gerald Liebenau: This is a terrible story.

[Laughter]

>> Gerald Liebenau: Yes. I did meet my wife, my future wife. By this time we moved to New London, Connecticut. New London, Connecticut, is a wonderful city. They have beaches. They have all the summer entertainment you would ever want. We were very happy in America. And that's where I met my girlfriend. It was on the beach. I went to the beach. There was this gaggle of girls. I believed they must have pulled straws as to who's going to get this guy coming down. And my wife won. That was in the Army.

>> Bill Benson: You can talk some more. I'll let you know when you can't.

>> Gerald Liebenau: People who want jobs, listen to this. When I was in the Army, I was a heavy machine gunner. They sent me to Italy, a little bit north of Naples. It was a terrible time. They gave us uniforms and clothing for hot Italian weather. It was cold. It was the middle of winter. I've never been so cold in my life. And all we did was take our heavy machine guns

and walk up and down into little villages. I was getting very tired of that. And one day somebody told me, “You're going to have to report to somebody in Naples.” So I said, “Sure.” I put on a uniform. In those days every soldier had a uniform. Not just for keeps. I report to this guy. He said to me, “Would you like to jump out of airplanes and kill Germans behind the lines?” I thought for a minute. I was told that the machine gunner could live about 10 seconds before everybody kills him. I said, “It must take longer than 10 seconds to jump out of an airplane." I never had even been in an airplane. The idea of jumping out of it was totally absurd. But what should I do? I said yes.

The next thing I knew, I was -- I lived in a tent. The tent had cots. It was cold, drafty, and awfully uncomfortable. So when I got to this new outfit which I just joined, I was taken to a villa. I was on the seashore. Had its own beach, had maids and cooks. I said, I'm dead and I'm in paradise. That's how we got into the OSS. Didn't tell me what it was until I had enough clearances to be told where I was. And I was actually going to be sent with a team to Austria.

Those of you who saw "The Glorious Bastards," that film depicts the team that came out of my unit. We had the same commanding officer. I was going to do exactly the same mission. But I since learned these missions are rarely successful, and the head of that team was very successful. He was an outstanding soldier, a wonderful operator. He did save the city. He simply talked the mayor into letting the city go as an open city. By this time, Patton was very close to Austria, and that helped. It was an amazing stunt. So I was ready to fight. It was one of those things where the operation succeeded beyond belief.

>> Bill Benson: Do remember what it was like for you to know that just a few years earlier you were a Jewish family having to flee Germany because of the Nazis and now you are a U.S. soldier there and the war is going on? What was that like?

>> Gerald Liebenau: I was too busy being a soldier. I had really no vision of my past. I became an American in a minute, a second, whatever it took.

The whole idea of why we're here today, that there was a horrible thing going on in Germany, that millions of Jews were being killed in camps, that was not normal. In fact, most people never even talked about it. I had some inkling of that when I was stationed in Vienna with the OSS. The war was over. I couldn't go on my mission. So they took me to Austria in a jeep. It was very nice. The Austrians were just as happy to see us as they were when Hitler came into Austria. They couldn't be nicer. And I really had too much to do. I was very busy. Out of our mission was called Paper Clip, which was an Army-wide effort to collect scientists. And that's what we got. It was a very exciting time, to find people who could help the U.S. government become a new family of weapons.

The Germans -- still talk?

>> Bill Benson: You're still talking.

>> Gerald Liebenau: You have no time for questions.

>> Bill Benson: We'll get a couple in. I want you to finish up.

>> Gerald Liebenau: The Germans, by this time, had developed a plane that could fly without propellers. A jet plane. I actually talked to a scientist, a woman who was about this tall, and she was a major test pilot for the German Air Force. She flew these planes about which we

knew very little. So you can imagine she became a very important person for the Air Force. She was sent to the States. She became a citizen. And did some very good work.

It was one of those things you had done something good and it was worth something.

>> Bill Benson: Before we turn to our audience for a couple of questions, at what point do you think you and your parents, sister, family, realized the enormity of the Holocaust and what it meant for other members?

>> Gerald Liebenau: I have to tell you -- when did people realize? The world became aware of it when the movies came out.

>> Bill Benson: "Schindler's List?"

>> Gerald Liebenau: Yeah. Probably the start of this. You began to see all of a sudden something happened about which they knew nothing. I was aware of it because in Vienna there were Jews who had been rescued by various forces, U.S. forces, who came back to Vienna. There was a service at Passover. I went there -- well, we had lots of food in our place and a lot of liquor. So I took some with me, took it to them. That was the first time I met people who actually had gone through this. And they were still looking like they had never come out. They were haggard, old, sick. It was a real revelation that this was the leftover of the Jewish community of Germany. Austria.

>> Bill Benson: Let's turn to our audience for a couple of questions. We have a microphone. Please make your questions as brief as you can. If I think that not everybody heard it, I will repeat it, but otherwise Gerry will immediately answer.

A couple of quick volunteers. Yes, sir?

>> What was the population of Berlin, total, if the Jews were 160,000?

>> Gerald Liebenau: The entire population of Berlin? I think it was around 4 million. Some figure.

>> Bill Benson: A question right here.

>> I was just curious. As a child growing up, did you notice after like the Nuremberg Laws were enacted -- did you notice a change in the way that your classmates treated you? Was there a difference?

>> Bill Benson: Did you notice -- after the Nuremberg Laws came into effect, did you notice different treatment by your classmates toward you at school?

>> Gerald Liebenau: That came with it. That's a good question. As a kid, 8, 9, 10 years old, I saw these German kids in uniform, black pants, brown shirts, leather belts, marching down the street. I was jealous. I felt that they had something I never could get. But I was also aware of the fact that these were pretty rough kids. Fighting started between -- you see, one of the things that Hitler was able to do was to make the Communist regime the alternative to history. He said to the German people, You're going to take me, you're going to get [Inaudible]. While they knew nothing about Nazis, they sure knew about socialism and Communism. And that was a fear most Germans had. One of the things, tactics, he used to put himself into an important position of being able to help.

>> Bill Benson: I think you told me that as a kid, you saw street fights.

>> Gerald Liebenau: There were fights between communists and Nazis. And they were quite rough. The Nazis were not a gentle -- they must have found these guys in beer holes, in

places where workers would go who had no background in politics, were easily led to believe that their life was now going to become better because Hitler had some ideas.

>> Bill Benson: One more. Back here.

>> I'm just curious about -- I know your immediate family was able to get saved. But what about extended family? Did they get saved as well?

>> Bill Benson: The question was, what about others in your extended family? Your family, immediate family, made it. But what about others?

>> Gerald Liebenau: Well, if you look in this book -- I was able to find my family -- my father's family, he lost his brother, his sister-in-law. My mother's family actually was -- she lost a sister. Her sister was living in Berlin. She was on her way to her father in Estonia. And she was taken off the train with her child. And best as we can know now, they were shot in the woods of either Lithuania or Latvia.

>> Bill Benson: We're -- one more question right here in the front. Then we'll wrap up.

>> Please forgive me if this is too personal.

[Question Inaudible]

>> Gerald Liebenau: No. I think they became increasingly aware of their losses. No question. There was no more contact with my mother's sister. My father's brother and wife had a child who was on a transport. The children were taken to England, by English. There were many of those saved. They were simply put by their parents on a train. I think every one of them must have suffered from that for the rest of their lives. They were taken away from their parents. The communication between parents and children, we do have letters of that. They suffered. I

think it affected their whole life.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to turn back to Gerry in a moment to close our program. I want to thank all of you for being with us today. I remind you that we'll have *First Person* programs every Wednesday and Thursday through the middle of August. So I invite you return either sometime this year or on a future visit to Washington, D.C. If you live locally, come back whenever you can.

It's our tradition at *First Person* that our *First Person* has the last word. I'll turn back to Gerry. When he's done, he'll step off the stage. If you want to come and ask more questions or just say hi, absolutely feel free to do that.

>> Gerald Liebenau: All the time.

>> Bill Benson: Ok.

>> Gerald Liebenau: What is it I can learn from this? My only thought is that we do have the best system in the world. We have a constitution that protects us. It's up to us now to make sure that we are aware of the freedoms and those which might impede us. The Germans were not. They saw their rights being taken away. They didn't have the gumption to stand up. They were misled terribly. We have to take a lesson from that. It happened in Germany. It was the most educated, most advanced nation, among the most advanced nations in the world. If it can happen there, could it happen here? Hopefully not.

Thank you.

[Applause]

[The presentation ended at 2:01 p.m.]