

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
EMORY UNIVERSITY



2022 Days of Remembrance – “Promise of America” Georgia Commission on the Holocaust

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Chambers of the House of Representatives
Georgia State Capitol

Remarks as Prepared

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I'm honored to be here in the House Chamber. I'd like to thank all of our statewide officials, Georgia General Assembly members, agency representatives, members of the consulate core, members of the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust and, especially, the Holocaust survivors and their families who could be with us today. Thank you all.

A couple of months ago, I drove past Congregation Beth Jacob near the Emory campus.

They were hosting a fair for children. I saw the kids playing and families gathered together, immersed in conversation. But along Lavista Road, I also saw multiple Dekalb County police vehicles with flashing lights and officers guarding the festive gathering for protection.

And, at the time, I thought to myself that it seemed totally normal.

But in preparing for this day of remembrance, that image came back to me, of driving past Beth Jacob and [seeing] the police officers. And then I thought of Emory professor — and now U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism — Deborah Lipstadt and an essay she wrote for the *New York Times* this year about the ubiquity of heightened security measures at synagogues. About the constant threats that individuals face, just for being Jewish. About the rising tide of antisemitism in the U.S. and around the world — and in Georgia.

Our state has its own dark history of antisemitism: the lynching of Leo Frank in 1915, the bombing in 1958 of The Temple, which is now my synagogue. Sam Massell, the first Jewish mayor of Atlanta, who recently passed away, once said, “As a Jew, I had a cross burned on my lawn. I had to bicycle past the Venetian Club where they’d hung a sign: ‘No Jews or Dogs Allowed.’”

And at Emory, the extraordinary university I call home, that now has a vibrant Jewish student community, [once] had a dental school that – in the decades following the Holocaust – systematically marginalized its Jewish students, artificially failing them out of school.

These stories, disturbing as they may be, are a part of the history in Georgia, and sadly they continue into the present day. The Anti-Defamation League released a report just this week that found antisemitic incidents in Georgia surged in 2021 when compared to the previous year, reflecting a sharp upward trend across the nation and, yes, on college campuses.

This is happening right now in our country. Hatred is increasing every day.

And it is only through learning and knowledge that we can strengthen our understanding and our ability to strike down antisemitism, racism, and hate to create a more just society.

To each survivor joining us, know that your story, your courage, and your legacy are the reasons we as a country – and as a state – understand the Holocaust and continue to teach about it, learn about it, and remember its horrors so that never again will our world see such atrocities.

Your advocacy and fearlessness have inspired and empowered us, over three quarters of a century on, to reckon with the murder of six million Jews at the hands of the Nazis. You, by being with us today in this historic chamber, take what might otherwise be relegated to a history book and make it real, alive for all to see and urgent to confront.

The Holocaust was made urgent and real to me at a very young age because of my father and his experience as a survivor.

And that's why I want to share a story with you now: a story that has profoundly shaped my life. It's a story marked by hatred and suffering, yet elevated by resilience, bravery, and hope. It's a story of the kinds of people – refugees and courageous soldiers alike – who define the promise of America, the American spirit, the American dream.

It's my dad's story, but as the number of Holocaust survivors decreases with each year, I realize that it is my story, too. My story to pass along and share with future generations as the first Jewish president of Emory University, as a citizen of the United States, as a husband, father, and grandfather.

This is the story of Steven Fenves, my dad.

He and his sister Eszti grew up in a prosperous, upper-middle class Jewish family in Subotica – a town in a province of Yugoslavia with a large Hungarian population. My grandfather, Louis, served in the army of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire during World War I, and later with his

brother, published the most influential Hungarian-language newspaper in the province. The family lived in a large apartment above their offices and printing plant.

My grandmother, Klara, was a graphic artist who had traveled throughout Europe in the 1920s as an art student. My dad grew up trilingual, speaking Hungarian at home, Serbian in school, and, because of his German governess, he learned German as well.

In April of 1941, as an ally of Germany, Hungary invaded Yugoslavia, and Subotica fell under occupation. My dad was 9 years old. The Hungarian anti-Jewish laws were immediately put into effect. The family's governess stomped out of the apartment, announcing that she would not spend another night in a Jew's home. And my grandfather was led out of his newspaper office at gunpoint and the business was confiscated.

My dad's family had to sell all their possessions for money to survive, including his prized stamp collection. They were forced to live in one corner of their apartment while Hungarian military officers took over the rest of their home.

This dehumanizing confiscation and subjugation had happened to Jews all over Europe and was now happening to the Hungarian Jews. They lost their rights, and the lives that they had built over generations were instantly taken away.

As the next three years passed, life for my dad's family became increasingly desperate, culminating in the deportation of Hungarian Jews.

To put this in a historical perspective, for Germany, [by then] the war was all but lost. The American and British armies had landed in France on D-Day. American and other forces were moving up the Italian peninsula. And the Soviet army was advancing from the east. There was no hope of Germany surviving the onslaught of Allied forces. But the Nazis were so dedicated and single-mindedly focused on annihilating the Jews that they continued to deport Jews and operate the death camps until their ultimate defeat.

So, in 1944, my dad and his family were loaded onto a transport train – a train built to hold freight — that was packed with hundreds of people. My dad was 13 years old.

They did not know where they were going. There was no food or water. The train just kept moving. Finally, days later, the train stopped. The doors opened, and the people were ordered to get off. They were at their final destination — Auschwitz.

The guards took hold of the passengers. Within minutes, they selected my great-grandmother to die in the gas chamber, and the rest of the family was separated.

The average time a person would survive in Auschwitz was four days. My dad would go on to spend five months there. He survived by using the German language that, ironically, his governess had taught him, acting as an interpreter for the officials who were shopping for slave labor, and for the Polish political prisoners who were the overseers in the compounds.

He worked on a roof repair detail and, one day, came across his sister Eszti who told him that their mother had died, shriveling away from hopelessness. On another visit, he brought Eszti food and warm clothing, paid for by trading trinkets on the black market in the camp.

By the late fall of 1944, rumors circulated through Auschwitz that the Germans were planning to exterminate all remaining prisoners, including the children, before the Soviet forces arrived. With this news, the Polish underground began to smuggle people out of Auschwitz, including my dad.

Keep in mind, he was barely a teenager. And because of his young age, he would never have been selected to work in a slave labor camp. The Polish underground knew this and coached him to tell the Germans a number of plausible reasons why he would be on a transport from Auschwitz.

One day, as prisoners who had been selected for work lined up, the underground slipped my dad into the line. He was crammed into the train car. He didn't know that it was bound for a satellite camp of Buchenwald near Weimar, Germany.

After three days on the train, my dad arrived in the small town of Niederorschel with about 300 other slave laborers. They were going to be forced to work at a small factory, making aircraft wings for Messerschmitt fighter planes.

An SS guard gave a talk to the group, and just before they were dismissed, the guard went up to my dad and said, "What are you doing here? I didn't select you."

The guard had recognized my dad from Auschwitz and knew that he wasn't supposed to be there. But my dad thought quickly and said to the guard: "Well sir, with all of these new inmates, they thought that you would need another interpreter." The SS guard, miraculously, believed him.

He would spend the remaining months of World War II as a slave laborer, alongside other enslaved Jews and Russian prisoners of war. They were barely fed, and their lives consisted of nothing more than a daily walk from the barracks to the factory, hours of labor, and back for sleep.

Even with the life being worked out of them, they resisted. The workers would sabotage the wiring in the wings of the fighters so the landing gear would retract after takeoff, but upon

landing, the wheels wouldn't lower and the planes would crash. They risked their own lives to ensure that someday the Nazis would be defeated.

In April of 1945, General Patton's Third Army was rapidly powering through central Germany as Allied forces converged on Berlin. The Nazis were trying to hide the evidence of the camps, so they evacuated Niederorschel through a forced march to the main camp 65 miles away – Buchenwald.

Many died along the way. And during the trek, my dad was confronted by a guard, beaten, and his arm was severely broken. He was very ill, but he made it to Buchenwald. Upon arriving, he collapsed and passed out in one of the barracks.

When my dad came to, he was among American soldiers of the 6th Armored Division. American soldiers were liberating the camp. He had survived.

In the weeks that followed, my dad, still 13 years old, had a choice: to declare himself a refugee and face an even more unknown future, or return to his hometown in Yugoslavia, with the hope of seeing his family again. He chose to go home, and when he got there, he found Eszti had survived Bergen-Belsen, my grandfather Louis had barely survived as a slave laborer in a Silesian coal mine, and two of his cousins had made it through as well.

My grandfather was deathly ill and would die a few months later. But before he died, he wrote a letter to a friend living in New York. My grandfather expressed his hope that his children would move to America. He believed that in the United States, his children would be given an opportunity to flourish – to lead happy, meaningful lives. My dad never forgot this message, and he still has his father's letter.

My dad, my aunt Eszti, and their cousins went on to escape what was by then communist Yugoslavia. They ended up in Paris, which was in chaos after the war and flooded with refugees from across Europe. They lived in a Hungarian slum near the Sorbonne that is now a prosperous neighborhood.

My dad learned French and excelled in high school. He and Eszti were able to get American immigration visas, and they arrived in Chicago in 1950.

And then another uniquely American story unfolded. After a couple of years, my dad was drafted into the U.S. Army during the Korean War. His unit was preparing for deployment to Korea, but at the last minute, the orders were changed, and he became part of the U.S. Occupation Forces in Germany — only seven years after being liberated by the same army in the same country.

My dad has always said that he learned what it is to be an American during his time in the Army. But I think he understood what this nation was about long before, when he was at

Buchenwald, opening his eyes to see U.S. soldiers caring for the sick and the dying. Fighting for justice. He saw that then.

When he brought his sister food and clothing at Auschwitz, he was already an American. When he helped sabotage German planes in a slave labor camp, he was already an American. And when he came to this country for the first time as a refugee, he was already an American. The American spirit is not bound by blood, race, religion, or place of origin. It is based on a set of ideals found within courageous people.

My dad was honorably discharged from the Army, and his service earned him a path to U.S. citizenship and a college education through the G.I. Bill. While in college, he met and married my mom, Norma, his wife of 67 years, and they raised four kids, including me.

My dad would go on to become a renowned professor of engineering, being elected to the National Academy of Engineering at the remarkably young age of 45.

I've spent my entire life trying to understand my dad's story. To live up to his expectations. To make him proud, knowing full well everything he went through to give me and my siblings the opportunities we've had in this great country of ours.

If you look at my career and life, you can see the imprint of my father. I became an engineer, professor, National Academy member. This isn't a coincidence.

And even as a university president, with my dad now nearly 91 years old, he's still the one opinion, the one voice, the person I look up to and listen to more than any other.

And being here with you today – telling his story so others can understand and learn, so that the atrocities of the Holocaust and the hatred that made it possible does not take hold again – that is the best way I can honor him.

By understanding his story, we understand our own story, as individuals, as a society, and as a nation. We understand the promise of America and the sacrifice it has always taken to make that promise real. That's what the truth does. That's what education does. That's what storytelling does. It touches our minds and our hearts. It holds us accountable to the truth.

Thank you all so much.