

Thank you very much for your patience this afternoon. As you can imagine, it's a crazy day. But this program is a regular program that we have for our public. So we wanted to be able to accommodate them today. And I appreciate everyone moving in and helping us to get seated right away.

Welcome to First Person. My name is Susan Snyder. And I am the associate curator of Art and Artifacts here at the museum. And I'm also a co-curator for the exhibition outside, Life and Shadows, Hidden Children In The Holocaust. And I want to introduce my other curator, Dr. Steven Luckert, who is also curator of the permanent exhibition.

[APPLAUSE]

We're hoping that if you have time after this that you will go and walk through that exhibition. And we are fortunate enough today to have somebody whose objects are actually in the exhibition with us as our First Person speaker.

This year's program has generously been funded by the William Goldring and the Woldenberg Foundation. First Person is a public program that takes place throughout the season, usually 1:00 PM here in the Rubenstein Theater. This one hour program features the experience of Holocaust survivors. Within that time, we will have a question and answer period at the end. In honor of the survivor, we ask that you stay for the entire program.

You probably might still have passes to the permanent exhibition. By the time this program ends, my guess is that you will not be allowed entry into the permanent exhibition. So I ask that if you still want to see the exhibition, you might want to not stay for the program. Because today the museum does close at 5 PM.

Photography is not permitted during the program. And we ask that you turn off all cell phones and pagers. Your response to the program is very important to us. So that we ask that you fill out the response form you received when you came into the auditorium and return it to the attendant when you exit.

Our speaker this afternoon is Tswi Herschel. To give you historical context for his experience, we have prepared a brief introduction.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims. 6 million were murdered. Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

Tswi Herschel's birth was eagerly anticipated by his father, Nico and his mother, Ammy. Just after he was born on December 29, 1942, Tswi's father created this life calendar, which included hopeful prophecies of how his son's life would unfold. There are images throughout of Tswi growing up, marrying, and eventually leaving the Netherlands for the land of Israel. Nico even included a drawing of himself speaking to his son.

But this was not to be. Nico and Ammy had already received their official notice of deportation while Ammy was still pregnant with Tswi. Her pregnancy had exempted them for a time. But in April 1943, their could no longer be a deferral. Tswi was placed into hiding with the de Jongh family, who raised him as their own son.

He was reclaimed by his paternal grandmother after the war ended. Still, he maintains his ties with the family who hid and protected him. Tswi discovered later on that the Nazis had deported his parents to the Sobibor killing center in Poland, where they perished. They left behind pictures and documents that give some clues to the character of the parents Tswi Herschel never had a chance to know.

Please help me welcome Tswi Herschel.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you, Tswi. I wanted to point out that Tswi was kind enough to come from Israel for this First Person. And he is joined today by his wife, Annette Herschel, who's seated in the front row. Tswi, I think we should start, perhaps, by you describing your memories of the de Jongh family, these first memories of your childhood.

Thank you very much. Being here and telling my story, I'm very impressed about what you just showed about my father, my mother, and myself. But let's start to answer your question.

Generally, when children can remember something is usually after their third year, when their life is perfect, when they are in a very well-protected loving surrounding, environment. In my case, I remember the family de Jongh, my mother and my father. Definitely it's my mother and my father, because that's the way I recognized them, started actually approximately in September 1944.

I can remember that Montgomery-- I didn't know at that time it was Montgomery-- but the gliders were landing in front of our house. I was in hiding in Oosterbeek. And Montgomery was on his way to start the Battle of Arnhem.

My memory is so strong, so incredible that even I can paint you the room where we used to live in, the room where we had our meals, the piano, the Bible, everything in detail, even the colors. They were such loving parents for me that my foster sister, the youngest one said to me once, we were so jealous. Because you were the king of our house.

But you were such a fantastic little boy that we all loved you. When I think back of them, my father, he was a tall man in my eyes. And he didn't speak so much. He was very busy with his business. And he was in the resistance movement.

On the contrary, my mother, she was so caring and so loving for me that in September 1944 while we were sitting in the cellar, our house was hit by a bomb. It collapsed. It was on fire. And I can remember every second of it.

Later, when I spoke to my mother after the war, she said to me don't thank me ever. Because I have to thank you. So I ask her why.

She said when we were sitting in the cellar, and we couldn't get out, I said to myself I'd had it. For me, my life is over. I don't want any more.

And you were standing next to me. And you were pulling my jacket or whatever, what she has on. And I looked at you and she said no. I have to save this boy.

I wanted to ask you, you mentioned a Bible. And we had talked about the religion that you first learned, the first religion you remember. Can you talk just briefly about that?

- Oh, yeah. We were very frum. We went every Sunday to the church. Every day we had the prayers.

And even when my brothers were fighting. And I remember once, and that's the first story from the Bible what I can remember, is that he said to his youngest son, take the Bible-- it was after the meal, after the lunch. So he took the Bible with the gold, gild on the side.

And he opened the chapter of Cain and Abel. And it made such an impression on me. Because he said-- it was like in the church. And I was shivering in a way. And the Bible was something, in our family, it was God, the queen, and [INAUDIBLE].

After the war ended, a strange woman approached the de Jongh family. Can you briefly talk about that as well?

Yes. We were evacuated to a little town, a little village, Spakenburg. And we were there. And I can remember the Canadians liberating us. I can remember the Jeeps coming to our street.

I can remember all the flags, the red, white, and blue flags. And I remember that I was sitting on the shoulders of my father. And everything was smooth.

We were happy. The family was happy. We all were happy.

And one day, and it must have been almost by the end, we were liberated in May. The end of May, all of a sudden there came an old lady in my eyes. And she was in her 50s.

And she said to me, I'm your grandmother. And I'm going to take you. And she took me in a second. I was kidnapped in a way. And then the tragedy for me started.

After you were returned to your grandmother, she entrusted you to a woman who she told you was your mother, Bella. And what was that like for you? Can you describe the experience of being separated from the de Jonghs, how it felt. Because you said earlier, the de Jonghs were the parents that you knew. They were the first mother and father that you knew.

Well, this experience was devastating. First of all, I didn't know this elderly lady. She was totally strange for me. And I had to say Oma to her. I got even a wooden horse. And I don't like horses and especially not wooden horses.

So she brought me to Rotterdam. And then I came to a lady. And she said, this is your mother. And you have also a little sister. And we lived in that house.

I lost my family, my mother, and my father, and my brothers, and my sisters. I lost also my name. Because I was called Henkie de Jongh. And all of a sudden, my name was Tswi Herschel.

I lost my religion. I lost everything. I lost hope in life or whatsoever.

And the psychological effect was that I was doing things what was not for my age a normal thing. I peed in my bed and all these little things what was already far behind me. This impact was so enormous that I lost everything what you can think of.

And on top of it, my new mother and my new grandmother, they were not caring and loving people. And I was longing for that. I cannot remember one single second that I was taken from the floor and held by them in their arms and cuddled. And that I was missing. I was missing that enormous.

And at that point, would they take you to the de Jonghs to visit them periodically?

No. In the beginning, that wasn't the case. In the beginning, I wasn't allowed even to mention their names. Because I was theirs. And what happened in the past I had to forget.

But I was talking about it. I was asking every time can I go to Mommy. Can I go to Mommy. I want to see Daddy. I want to go to Mommy.

So after, I think it has been 2 or 3 years, I was allowed to see them for the first time. Which was a very emotional moment also in my life. And I didn't want to part. And they didn't want to. They wanted to be with me.

Later on, I was allowed to see them alone. And they lived in Dordrecht. That's approximately 25 minutes drive by train. that my father had to bring me to the train station. And I could travel alone at that time. It was possible as a little boy.

And my mother never, ever brought me to the train station. The moment the time was there that I had to leave, she disappeared. Later I heard from my sister that she couldn't take it. She couldn't bear it. I was her son.

And when you were nine, you came across something in your mother's home, your second mother's home. And it was a very fateful thing for you. Can you describe the circumstances and the events surrounding what you discovered?

Yes. And the problem was with my grandmother. My grandmother was very traumatized by the second world war by

itself. First of all, she lost her husband. He was killed, one of the first in Auschwitz. And at that time there was a possibility to get, to receive post. That's one thing.

The other thing is that she didn't want my parents to leave Holland to go to Palestine. And she was nagging my father and my mother time and time again. She lost her husband, but she lost also her son and a daughter.

But she was the one to blame. And she blamed herself. And that was her trauma.

So every time I was introduced to other people, not as her grandson, I was introduced this is the son of my son. In a way, I was depersonalized. I wasn't her grandson. I was the extension of her son. And I had to be like her son. I had to talk like her son.

So one day in the cupboards, in the bookshelves, on the top shelf there were a--

I don't mean to interrupt. But let me just clarify. At this point, when you are nine years old, your grandmother and your mother are the people who are taking care of you. And so at that point, Bella, to you is your second mother. And you discover on the bookshelf, go ahead.

I've been always very curious. Even today, I'm very curious. So one day no one is at home and I climbed a chair. And one of the books I took.

And later, I find out it was a diary of my father. And a piece of paper fell out of it. And it was a family tree.

And I opened that piece of paper. And that family tree says Tswi Josef Herschel is the son of Nico Louis Herschel, married to Ammy Weyel. And Nico Louis Herschel is the brother of Bella Elizabeth Herschel. And that was the lady supposed to be my mother at that time.

So all of a sudden, I discovered the secret, the so-called secret. I kept this for myself for almost a year. So one day I spitted it out.

I had to say it. You know, it was in my head. It was nagging me.

So one evening, on a Saturday evening, I said who is Ammy Weyel? And Ammy Weyel is the mother-- is my mother's name. It was like a lightning hit that room.

And they didn't say much. They said we will tell you. We will tell you.

So I said listen. I know exactly. Ammy Weyel was my mother.

The next day they called me in their bedroom. And they said sit down. We have to tell you something. Indeed, Ammy Weyel is your mother. And your father is my brother. And his name is Nico Louis.

And that was all. I went down to my toys, to my cars. I loved cars as a young boy and was playing with. But I wasn't playing. I was crying.

They never, ever paid attention to me. And after so many years, they said, well, you didn't cry. But they didn't have a look, you know? They didn't care for me.

And that was also in discovery what made such an impact on me, that to behave, let's say, as I should behave I became very-- in school or wherever-- obstinate. I was the one who took the lead. And I did all kinds of things what in normal circumstances I'm sure I wouldn't have done that.

And can you describe some of the materials that were left by your parents, some of the writings, the invitations, and how that's helped you?

My father was economist. And he was very precise. He documented everything what he wrote, what he received, et cetera.

On top of it, he wrote 10 diaries. And they are very well-written. Not because it's my father. It's not just saying, well, this morning, I got up with a headache. And I'm going to do this and this and that.

No, he describes his surroundings, his family, the place where he was living, and the situation with his, at that time, his girlfriend, my mother. And later, he wrote about going on Aliyah. Aliyah is going to immigrate to Palestine. And he was a very, very dedicated Zionist. And that's even in the beginning of the war. Part of his diary, it's published. Not all of it, but because it was from historical value.

On top of it, my parents were separated. One was working in Arnhem. My father was working in Arnhem. And my mother was working somewhere 50 or 60 kilometers in a very small village.

And they wrote each other every day. I have this correspondence. I think I read approximate 30, 35% of it. It's very hard to read it for me, very emotional.

Because their hopes for the future, it was in the war. It's war time. Their hopes for the future to get married, to go to Israel, or to Palestine at that time, it's very emotional for me.

But on the other hand, it gave also an impression who my parents-- what kind of character they have, what their reaction was on certain circumstances. I learned a lot about myself, a kind of identification, what a normal child has when he has his own parents. And usually, I know it from my own children, I have two daughters. And ever so now and then they say, you know what? I'm like you.

I'm exactly like you. I have your character. Fantastic, isn't it, Dad? And that's what I find in those letters. In those letters and also in the diaries, it gave me actually an identification, who am I.

And what are my capabilities, what can I do? My father did like this. And my mother did like that. And it gave me, actually, a direction in my life.

And what about your grandmother Rebecca and your aunt, Bella, What did they contribute to the knowledge? How did they help you understand them better?

Zero. My aunt is still alive. Thank God, let her healthy, far away from my bed. She never contributed in a positive way to my existence, to find out who I am or what I'm going to do with myself or whatsoever. I had to find my own way.

And my grandmother, she was so traumatized, what I already told you. Her behavior, I couldn't get through it. Only one day-- I was used to go every week to her to see her. And she was always crying. And that's the that's the way I find out what her trauma was.

And I said to her, listen, Grandma. You are hiding something from me. And I want to know. It must be very important. And it has to do with me.

And she didn't want to tell me. So the next week I said to her, listen, if you don't tell me, I will leave. And I left.

And a week later, I came back. And said listen, if you don't tell me, I won't come back. And I left.

And after three weeks, she gave me a call. And she said to me please come. I want to talk to you. I will tell you.

I came. I made a cup of tea. And she didn't want to tell. So I said OK, fine. But this time whenever you call, I won't come.

I left. And after 3 or 4 weeks she called me again. And she begged me on her knees to come.

I will tell you now. It's very hard for me. And I said no, I have to be sure that you are going to tell me your secret. So I came and then she told me this story that it's her to blame that my father in the first place and in the second place, my mother, were murdered.

And when we spoke in the past, I've asked you repeatedly about the relationship with them and what it's like today. I asked you yesterday about that, as well as your stepsister, your adopted sister, Bella's daughter.

You mentioned that you sort of severed relationships with them. Perhaps not with your grandmother, but with your aunt.

Well, a matter of fact, I tried to keep them far away from me because their influence was so devastating in the past and also during our marriage that I didn't want to see them. I had no urge. Not because they were family, so close family. I couldn't cope with the simple fact that they didn't educate me in a proper way.

I just was one of their-- yeah, I had to polish shoes every day. In the winter, I had to do the central heating. I had to Hoover. Not out of free will, it was a part of my program, my daily program.

In other words, your daily chores.

Yeah.

And so now that you've found this information out, you've had conversations with your parents, with your grandmother and Bella. And I know that you know quite a bit about not only the de Jongh family and how you came to be rescued by them, but also another significant woman and her daughter who helped you to find the de Jonghs family. Can you briefly talk about that? Tell the audience how you came to live with the de Jonghs during the war.

My father was employed by the government. He had to check the books of the municipality of Arnhem. And his boss was also a very close friend. They became very, very close.

And when the war started, he said you know what? It's time for you to get into hiding, you, your wife, and your son. But his boss was a very well-known-- well, very well-known in Holland. And he became one of the 250 hostages taken by the Germans.

And the place where my parents and I are supposed to go into hiding became unsafe. So my parents and I were in the ghetto of Amsterdam. And my father knew, he wrote in his diary what was going to happen with us. He tried to find a way to find a place for me.

So he contacted the wife of his boss. And she said OK. I'm going to solve it. And actually this story, what I'm going to tell you now, I heard it for the first time, you know, I think it was eight years ago or nine years ago. Nine years ago, yeah.