

Good afternoon. I think I'm going to get started. I'm Susan Snyder, and I'm a curator here at the Holocaust Museum. And I want to thank you for joining us for our 12th season of First Person. Our guest today is Josie Traum, who we shall meet shortly.

This 2011 season of First Person is made possible through the generosity of the Louis and Dora Smith Foundation, to whom we are grateful for again sponsoring First Person. This is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand experiences associated with the Holocaust. Each guest serves as a volunteer here at the museum.

With few exceptions, we have First Person each Wednesday through August. We will also have First Person programs on Tuesdays in April through July. The museum's website, www.ushmm.org, provides a list of upcoming First Person guests. Excerpts for First Person programs are available as podcasts on the museum's website and on iTunes.

Josie will share her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. We will then follow with an opportunity for you to ask questions.

Before you are introduced to her, I have a few announcements. If you have tickets for the permanent exhibition, they are good for the rest of the day. So don't worry if they're for any time between 1:00 and 2:00 during the program. They will be-- you can use them for the rest of the day. If you have a cell phone, can you kindly put it on mute or turn it off so as not to disturb Josie? And also, if you can avoid getting up and leaving in the middle of the program, that would be also helpful, as it can be also disruptive.

The Holocaust is the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between '33 and '45. Jews were the primary victims. 6 million were murdered. Roma and Sinti, or gypsies, people with mental and physical disabilities, and Poles were also targeted for destruction, decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi Germany.

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

We begin with this portrait of Josiane Aizenberg walking on a street in Brussels. She was born on March 21, 1939, in Brussels, Belgium, to Jacques and Fannie Aizenberg. The arrow on the map of Belgium points to Brussels.

In 1942 Josie's mother, Fanny, was able to secure a hiding place for Josie-- oh, excuse me. This is a photo of Josie and her parents walking in Brussels.

In 1942, Josie's mother, Fanny, was able to secure a hiding place for Josie in a convent in Bruges, Belgium. Shortly after, Fanny, who worked with the Belgian underground, was denounced and deported to Auschwitz. After a year of hiding in the convent and growing Nazi suspicion, the Belgian underground relocated Josie to hide with a Christian family in Brussels. Here we see Josie and Fanny shortly before Josie went into hiding.

Allied forces liberated Belgium in September 1944. Soon after, Josie was found by one of her aunts, Fanny's sisters. After being liberated, Fanny returned to Belgium in the late 1945. Eventually, Josie's father, Jacques, reunited with the family, and they moved to the United States in 1949. Here we see Josie, Jacques, and Fanny after they were reunited.

Josie would eventually marry Alfred Traum, also a Holocaust survivor. And we close with this wedding portrait of Josie and Freddie. Please welcome Josie Traum.

[APPLAUSE]

So thank you so much, Josie. I'm really honored to be able to do your First Person--

Thank you.

--because I think you're-- I find your story very interesting. And so I'm going to just jump right in. You were born in '39. Your memories before the Holocaust are few, but you do remember life with your mother and father-- well, with your mother.

Yes.

Your father was-- went to Great Britain in 1939?

In 1940.

1940.

To join the British army.

And did you-- did your mother communicate with him at all before the war broke out in Belgium?

Before the war broke out?

Or did he-- was he gone as soon as the war broke out, around the same time?

He left in 1940. War broke out September 1939. Belgium was invaded by the Germans in May 1940. But my dad left on one of the last boats to leave Belgium and cross the channel to volunteer to be in the British army.

And did he leave prior to the invasion?

You know, I'm not sure, but I think he did.

Did your mother-- do you know if your mother heard from him during that time?

No, she did not.

OK. So when he left, that was really the last she had heard.

Exactly.

And I'm jumping around a little, but he was on one of three ships. Can you explain what happened?

My understanding is that these three ships that left Belgium and went to England, they were all torpedoed except for one. And two ships went down and one did not. Fortunately, my father was on that ship. But my mother never knew that.

Right. She didn't know. So did she-- do you know if she assumed that he had not survived.

She really had no idea, as far as I know.

So she basically had to keep it together--

Yes.

--and worry about the family. And do you know what she did day to day after your father left, how she made ends meet?

Well, as far as I know, we lived in an attic apartment with my-- her parents-- her parents, myself, and my mother. We

lived in an attic apartment. And we were staying there pretty much not so much in hiding, but keeping to ourselves as much as possible.

Do you remember anything about being in the attic apartment right before you were put into hiding?

A little bit. I remember my grandmother. I remember being with my mother. And not very much. I mean, I was born in '39, and I was maybe a year old, two years old.

And so in 1942, your mother manages to secure hiding because she is connected somehow with the underground.

My mom was connected with the underground, which is--

Excuse me, I'm sorry. The Belgian resistance.

The resistance. She would hand out leaflets. She would-- there were Jews coming in from Germany and Austria. And they would-- she would make sure that they could be placed in hiding.

She was active in the underground, as far as passing out newsletters, and doing whatever she could. And she because she was part of the underground, she made sure that I had access, that somebody would pick me up and put me into hiding. At that time, it was really thought in Belgium that the Germans would leave the women and children alone and only take the men. So hence, that's when my dad left, and my mother and I stayed behind.

Your grandparents, your maternal grandparents, was your grandfather, do you know, a World War I veteran?

I really don't know that.

I only ask that because in Western Europe there was this thought that families who were World War I veterans and Jewish were-- would possibly be spared.

Were safer.

Right.

I'm really not sure of that at all. I don't know.

So you went into hiding. Do you remember going physically?

I remember. In fact, two strange ladies came to our apartment on one day. In 1942 I was three years old. And they came to pick me up and put me into hiding. And I didn't understand what was going on, as you can imagine. A three-year-old really has very little understanding of what's going on.

And my mother, by the way, was not allowed to know where they were taking me, because it was known that Germans, the Nazis, when they would come and arrest you, they would try and find out where the rest of the family is. So they couldn't tell the parents where the children were being hidden, because they felt if the Germans would come and try and get the information out of them, if they didn't know where the kids were, they really couldn't talk.

So my mother, actually, when they took me out to Bruges, these two strange ladies, my mother told me I was screaming and crying. I wasn't allowed to carry any toys.

In those days, today, kids' rooms are full of toys. In those days, you had one toy or maybe two toys. And if you saw a child walking with a toy on the street, it was suspicious, because a child normally wouldn't carry toys on the street. So if they were carrying a toy, it means they were being taken somewhere.

So these two strange ladies came to my mom's place, took me away. I was kicking and screaming. And they took me to

this convent in Bruges, which is a beautiful little city in Belgium. It's like the Venice of Belgium, full of convents, but full of canals. And I was greeted there. And I was placed in hiding.

You have some very distinct impressions of the nuns, the things that they wore.

Yes.

You describe that you saw them-- you always saw them with their habits and their hats. Which, of course, when you describe the hats I think of Sally Field in *The Flying Nun*, because I kept-- in all the pictures, I don't really-- but you remember that they-- once you saw them without their habits on, without their hats. And it struck you.

It did strike me. These nuns were-- their habits were very much like *The Sound of Music*, very stiff with these kind of accordion collars. And I do remember, we used to sleep dorm style on lots of beds in this big room. And I remember the nuns-- and this petrified me for some reason. The nuns would take off their head covering, and they were bald underneath. And that really shook me up. And I imagine it's because they were so tight and so hot that they shaved to make it more comfortable.

What were they like? Were they friendly? Were they warm? Businesslike?

Well, not businesslike. But they were pretty strict. Very, very strict.

And I always want to emphasize this, that it's-- they were strict with me, not because I was a Jew. They were strict with all the kids, all the Christian kids. This was like an orphanage that I was in. And unbeknownst to me, there were three other Jewish children being hidden there.

Now these nuns were really taking a risk by hiding me, because if they were found by the Germans, they would have been shot immediately. But they were very strict. They really didn't know how to handle little kids. I cried a lot.

I was a very fussy eater. I remember throwing up once during the night, and they left me all night in my throw up, in my vomit. So they were very, very strict. But I need to emphasize, it's not because I was a Jew. They were strict to all the children.

Right. And actually, it's interesting, because I asked Josie yesterday. I said, why do you feel like you need to rationalize the way they behaved? That they were strict. They were strict. You said that you thought they weren't nurturing because they didn't have children. They didn't have motherly instincts.

I don't think it was in their experience on how to behave with the little ones. I mean, I cried. I would throw up. I missed my mom. And I don't ever remember being held by them, being hugged, or them trying to soothe me. And so that I remember very, very clearly.

Which you also mentioned that you-- one of the things you do remember about the Holocaust, before the Holocaust, is the way your mother and grandmother treated you.

Well, I was very-- by my mom and grandma, I was very nurtured, and I was hugged. I was loved. And I remember that very distinctly for the first three years of my life, the fact that-- excuse me. I was with my family, with my mom and grandma, who I was very close to. And I think I got a lot of love from them. So I think when I came to these nuns, it was like a shock.

But these nuns weren't hugging any of the kids. It wasn't just me. They were very strict.

So you had mentioned that you felt, because you had a strong bond with your mother and grandmother, that they were very-- they were very nurturing. You felt this really carried you through.

I think it did. And I--

And I recounted to you, and I mean, you had remembered this story as well, that I had once talked to the mother of a child who had to put her child in hiding. And she said, I didn't hug my child for months before I had to put her in hiding so that she would not be attached to me, so that she would go away easier.

Right.

And I said I thought it was such an oxymoron from what you had said, and--

Right. Well, I guess there are different ways of handling things.

--different experiences, right?

And I was very, very fortunate in having a very loving--

Environment, yeah.

--immediate family, my mother and grandmother. And I think that kind of held me through the years, the fact that I did have this very strong love and bonding. And I think that kind of formulates you for the future in being able to hold on to life in general.

Right. I think-- so six months to-- do you know how long you were at the convent? Was it six months?

Yeah, I was at the convent for six months. And unbeknownst to me, this was more like an orphanage. It was full of kids. In those days, when parents weren't able to take care of kids for a while, they would put them in an orphanage, and then take them out when they could.

So it wasn't what we think today as--

It's not like today. I mean, these orphanage people had parents, but they were still in an orphanage, awaiting for their parents to pick them up. Apparently, as I mentioned before, there were three other Jewish children there. And apparently, the nuns found-- I found this out after the war. The nuns found out that the Germans, that the Nazis, were going to come and pick up the four Jewish children-- the other three and me included. And the nuns actually smuggled me out during the night and took me back to Brussels, to a Christian family, where I actually-- I stayed hidden for the rest of the war.

Now this family also was taking a tremendous chance in taking me in. They were risking their lives in hiding a Jew.

The family was the Debrakeleers?

The Debrakeleers, right.

And do they-- were they also in Bruges?

No, they were not in Bruges. This was in Brussels, which is where I originally came from, where I was born. And they lived in Brussels. We lived in an apartment.

By the way, it was a man, a woman, and their little girl, who was very similar in age to me. Now the man, the father in the family, was very active in the underground. In Belgium, you had Jews and Christians working together in the underground, in the resistance, to try and help as many Jewish families as they could.

And apparently Mr. Debrakeleer was often taken out for interrogation because he was in the underground. And I very often saw him come back. He would be black and blue because they would actually beat him. But he never said that I was in hiding there. He never mentioned it.

So here again, they were taking a chance. They really hid me. And I was, obviously, very, very lucky.

Did you-- do you remember if there were other families in the area, in the apartment building, that knew of you, or do you remember meeting other people?

I don't. There was really-- they kept very much to themselves.

What did you do on a day-to-day basis? Did you go out? Did you play?

No. I did not go out.

You stayed physically--

Inside the apartment. And I played with the little girl. And I stayed there for a number of years, till Belgium was liberated in 1944. You described that sometimes they would go away on the weekends and they would move you to another place.

That's true. They would move me to-- my grandmother had some neighbors, some friends, some Christian people, who they would actually keep me for a day or two and then bring me back when the Debrakeleers would come back. So I was with my grandparents' neighbors.

And did you recognize them? Did you know who they were?

I guess I did.

And did you feel emotionally connected at all to the Debrakeleers?

In thinking back, I don't think so. They were a very strong family unit. Here again, they risked their lives. They saved me. But [SOB] (SOBBING) I was not part of the family unit. I remember seeing-- sorry-- I remember seeing the man, the woman, and the little girl huddled in a corner, and hugging. And I was never part of that unit.

And yet they saved me. I mean, they really did. They didn't have to take me in. But they did.

But I was not part of the family unit. I didn't belong. And I think I was very conscious of that.

I think it's interesting, again, that you want to emphasize that they risked their lives, that they took you in.

They did. But they did.

Right. I know. I know. I just, I find it interesting that this is-- it is important. It's an important point. But if you think about these things from the perspective of a four- or a five-year-old--

Yeah.

--you don't know that. And so it all impacts you in a different way I think. But I can't speak for you. But I understand what you're saying. You want to really emphasize that these people risked their lives, especially because it was usually a death penalty if you got caught.

Right. And I think I have a more understanding now, with children and grandchildren, how important it is to hug and to nurture. Some were conscious of, I think now, of what my feelings were, and what they might have been.

Were you at all-- was there this underlying fear that you would be denounced? I mean, do you feel that there was-- did you feel that you lived at all ever on edge when you were in hiding?

I don't. I don't think I understood that. Because I mean, I was four, three, four. I don't think a child of that age has the understanding of the fear, or that somebody might come and pick you up.

And that you didn't feel that the Debrakeleers-- sometimes I feel like you can intuit-- children can intuit what an adult is going through. But in this case, you didn't.

I don't think I did. Maybe at the time I did. But I can't recall that right now.

So I haven't really talked about your mother. But I would like to actually talk about when Belgium was liberated, and what happened to you. And then we can-- I think that'll bring us to your mother's story.

Well, my mother was deported with her parents to Auschwitz. And she managed. She survived. In fact, she's still alive. She's 94. And she--

She still volunteers here.

She's a volunteer here, which is quite amazing.

It is. She's in better shape than I am.

And me too.

My grandfather, they were all arrested. They were denounced by some neighbors, and they were taken, deported to Auschwitz, the concentration camp.

Now my grandfather, as you're probably going through the museum, you noticed how prisoners were taken in cattle cars. My grandfather died on a cattle car. When he got to Auschwitz, usually they opened the cattle cars, and out of 120 people, 40 were already dead. My grandfather was one of those.

My grandmother and mother got to Auschwitz. As soon as they got off the cattle trains, there was a selection. And my mother and grandmother were separated immediately. And my mother wanted to be with her mother. And she right away went to the row where my grandmother was. And the German beat her, and she had to go back in the other line. And he said, you go where you're told. And she actually never saw her mother again.

My mother-- my mother-- my grandmother was killed immediately.

But your mother survived selection.

My mother survived selection, and she was in a labor camp making ammunition. And she was actually liberated. She was, when Auschwitz, when the Nazis took many of the prisoners out of Auschwitz and started walking towards Germany, they went into one of the last battles between the Russians and the Germans. This was a death march. And it was called the death march because so many people died while they were on this death march.

And my mother was liberated, actually, by the Soviet Union. They were the ones who were in battle with the Germans at that place at that time. And they liberated my mom and took her to a hospital. My mother was pretty sick. She had typhus and meningitis. And they took her to a hospital. And eventually, the Red Cross brought her back to Belgium.

But in the meantime, you were liberated months before that.

Yes.

And who came to get you?

My mother. My mother had two sisters, a younger sister and an older sister. My mom was in the middle. Her two other sisters were also hidden during the war in Belgium in churches. And that's how, really, they survived.

Belgium was liberated in 1944. And as soon as it was liberated, my aunt, my mom's older sister, five years older than my mom, she came to get me. Being part of the underground, and hidden in the underground, there was a whole network. And my aunt knew how to find me. So she went, and actually searched for me, and found me, and brought me to her house.

Once Belgium was liberated, she and her husband and her three sons immediately went back to their apartment. And of course, they took me in.

Do you remember-- did you remember her when she arrived at the Debrakeleer's? Did you recognize her?

I don't remember that. But I remember going with her.

How did you feel?

Wonderful.

You did?

Yeah.

And I think it's really-- it's interesting, because you said that there was immediate acceptance with her sons. They were-- you were like their mascot.

Right.

And can you describe what it was like having them?

They teased me. They played with me. They hugged me. I mean, I was part of the family ruckus, kind of. When I went to their home-- this was in 1945-- I was six years-- I must have been five, almost five years old. And the three brothers were 10, 12, 13. They were very close in age.

And they really-- I mean, they really treated me like a toy. I was like their mascot. And it was wonderful.

It's a good thing.

Yeah.

And it's interesting that they were older boys and they survived with their mother. And it's very unusual.

Well, they weren't hidden-- they were hidden with their mother, not their father. The father, my uncle, my aunt's husband was also very active in the underground, and was very active in the partisans and the resistance. And so they weren't together. But amazingly enough, my two-- my mother's two sisters were hidden, and did survive, and were in churches. So Belgium was really unusual in that way, that Jews and Christians really worked together in trying to hide Jews.

And when you were reunited with your aunts--

Yes.

--and your cousins, and your uncle, did you understand then that you were Jewish? Did you understand that you were-- you had been in hiding because of your religion?

I really did not, because I think a four- and a five-year-old really doesn't understand. And I really didn't have the understanding, the cognitive understanding, of what it was to be a Jew. And now I'm a Jew.

All I remember, my aunt would light candles Friday night. So that was kind of familiar to me again.

Had you been-- the nuns had taught you how to say the rosary.

Yes, in French.

In French. Did the Debrakeleer also-- were they a religious family at all?

I don't remember that at all with them.

So when you were liberated, you actually didn't have either Jewish or non-Jewish religion?

Right. Right. I was kind of--

Areligious.

Areligious, like an empty shell, willing to take anything in. Yes.

So your mom, your mom survived. And she ended up back in Belgium.

The Red Cross brought her back to Belgium. She had been in the hospital for a while in the Soviet Union, when they first found her. And she made-- the Red Cross took her back. And she came to her sister, her older sister's house, and-- going to start crying. (SOBBING) She knocked on the door, and there I was. So my mom and I were reunited.

Did you remember her?

I did.

Do you recall what her reaction was?

I don't. But we must have held on to each other. That's all I know.

Well, I actually, I watched your oral history. And I just want to read a quote. When they asked her, she said, I don't have words to describe it. It's like life has been given back to me. Which I thought was very touching and profound, because it's like getting life twice for her.

Yes.

And you describe it. You were completely attached to her. And at night, can you describe--

You're going to get me crying again.

I'm sorry. Do you want me to-- it's your story, though. You have--

My mother tells me this, because I really don't remember it. When she first came back, and we were together (SOBBING) at night, I would tie my nightgown to hers, because I was so afraid she would leave me.

But after a while, were you assured that she was there? She was not going anywhere.

Yes. I stopped tying my nightgown. I'm sure.

And what about your father at this point?

My father, my father had been in England during the war. And he actually was a tailor. And he and his brother both went to England to volunteer in the army. And the British actually put them in the best place for their skills. They were both tailors, and they put them in a factory making British uniforms. So my dad was in a factory making uniforms.

And the house he was living in in London was bombed. And he was actually in the house when it was bombed. So he spent two years in a hospital and didn't come back to Belgium until 1946, which is a year after the war.

So this was a person that you had to get to know, because you did not remember him at all.

Of course. I was seven years old when I first saw him. I remember we went to the port where my dad came back from England by boat. And I remember my mother pointing to him and saying, there's your father. And of course, he was a total stranger to me. He left when I was 13 months old. So I really didn't remember him.

And once you were-- the family was reunited, you were still-- you were living, actually, with your aunt, and eventually moved to your old-- your parents' old apartment.

Yes. We stayed with my aunt, my mom's older sister, for a while. Then my dad came back, and we eventually went back to the apartment-- not the attic apartment, but to the apartment where my parents had been living before.

What was life like for you with them having to get to know each other, and with your father having to understand what your mother had been through?

Right. It was very hard. It was very, very hard. Three of us, all three of us had totally different experiences. My dad had been injured. He was bombed. He came back to see my mother, who had gone through hell. And I myself was kind of in the middle.

So it was very, very hard. My mom had a very hard time when she first came back. She had nightmares every night. I remember her screaming [SOB] during the night.

So it was very hard. It was hard for my dad. It was hard for me. It was hard for my mom, for all three of us to get to know each other and be readjusted to each other.

And in Belgium, what did your parents do?

My parents were both-- my dad was a tailor. He had a store. The apartment we lived in, the front was a store. And in those days, people-- if a man wanted a suit, they didn't go to a department store and get a suit off the rack. You would have to get a bolt of material, get measured, and you would get a suit made to order, to fit you.

So my dad was actually a tailor, and he would see a person for quite a few weeks, and had a number of fittings, cuttings, make a pattern. People would choose their material. So my dad made suits for people.

And my mother was a dressmaker. She actually, before the war, she was actually a designer and a dressmaker for the royal household, which was a pretty big deal in those days. So they were both in the dressmaking business-- patterns, dressmaking, designing.

But in '49, I think-- was it '49 that they decided they would go to the United States?

Well, actually, they decided way before then. Once they were reunited, my parents were very anxious to leave Europe. And they applied for visas. And eventually we got a visa in 1949, and came to this country, and settled in New Jersey, because my mom had an aunt there. And of course, you usually go where there's a relative. So we settled in New Jersey. And my parents both got jobs in the garment district.

And it's interesting, because again, I just want to quote your mom, from her oral history, she said, we came to America, the Golden Medina, and that's where our problems started. The acceptance of Americans was horrible. And there was a language barrier.

And she describes some antisemitism, things that had occurred, that you were-- you started school when you were-- they put you in, like, kindergarten or first grade.

I was 10 years old when we came.

And every two weeks, you had to [? work. ?]

They think if you don't speak English, you-- they put me-- I was 10 years old. They put me in first grade. So after two weeks, I was in the second grade, and so on and so on, till I caught up with my grades.

So it was tough.

It was very tough. But I but I learned English very quickly. As a child, you kind of pick up the language. And I would speak English when I came home instead of French, because my parents were so anxious to speak in English. So we spoke English at home. And I learned English pretty rapidly.

And how was the adjustment for your parents?

I think my parents had a very hard time. My mom really found that there were some relatives of my dad's living in New York. And my mom tried to talk about some of her experiences.

And they didn't want to hear her. They would say to her, that's in the past. Those are bad times. We don't want to hear those things. And she really couldn't talk.

And you were a hidden child. So how did you feel about talking about your experiences?

I didn't.

You didn't.

I didn't talk at all. In fact, most of my friends and the people I was with really didn't know about my early experiences.

I'm jumping ahead a little.

OK.

When you are in-- after college or high school--

High school.

--at some point you decided that you want to go to Israel for a year.

Yes.

And you tell your parents this. And what happened?

Ha. Well, I wanted to go to Israel. I had received a scholarship to study in Israel for a year, which I thought would be wonderful. My dad was totally against it. My mom was also against it at the beginning. But believe it or not, she talked my dad into it.

And to this day, I am shocked that they let me go. I mean, this was in 1956.

Well, 1956. They were Holocaust survivors. They had already given you up once.

Exactly. And they were very protective, and they didn't want to let me go. But I worked on them for many, many months. And my mother worked on my dad. And eventually I did go.

And how was it, living in Israel?

It was wonderful. I had a wonderful time. I studied in Jerusalem for six months, and then I worked on a kibbutz for six months. And it was a wonderful, free feeling. There I really-- I began to understand (SOBBING) what it was to be a Jew.

And were you able to also meet other people who had your experiences--

Of course.

--who were Holocaust survivors.

Yes.

And this is a very significant part, because you met your husband.

Yes. He was a-- in those days, we traveled by ship. You don't just go on a plane. They really didn't-- they did have planes, but it wasn't as accessible as it is today. So I traveled by ship to Israel and back.

And going back to the States, I was on-- I took an Israeli passenger liner. And I met Freddie, my husband, who was a chief radio officer. And we were married a year later.

On a ship.

On a ship. Well--

That picture was taken on a ship, I think, yes?

Yes, while it was in port in New York.

Right. And actually, Freddie's with us. And he is also a Holocaust survivor who was on a Kindertransport that went to the United Kingdom. And there were Kindertransports that went in '38 and '39. And he survived in the United Kingdom, and lost his whole family.

So that brings me to my next question, which is, do you think it's purposeful that you married somebody who could relate to your experiences?

Of course. And yet it's strange, because I don't think we talked about it immediately. We didn't. But there was a certain feeling of commonness and understanding.

And you had children in Israel.

Yes.

And you-- then you emigrated to the United States.

Yes. And do you want to talk about what it was like to emigrate and why you did it?

Well, I talked to you about that before. I have three children. Two of them were born in Israel, a boy and a girl. And my oldest, my son, is handicapped. And at that time, we were really counseled to come to the United States for services here. So we did. My daughter and my son, we came to the United States. And then I had a third child, another boy in the United States, who is also handicapped.

(SOBBING) So I am very fortunate to have a normal child and two handicapped boys. But I'm very lucky. They have wonderful services here. They both live in group homes. I think you were encouraged to come by a doctor in Israel. You were encouraged to come here, where the services were better.

Exactly.

And I think when I read through the story, and I heard this, it was-- I was very moved by the oral histories of your mother, and the comments that she had made. She said that with all the things that you and Freddie have encountered, that you really have-- there's joy in your lives. There's a lot of joy in your lives. And I thought that was really interesting. And I was impressed that she could see that.

And so I-- it was very moving for me. And it's, of course. Moving to be able to talk to both of you, because I think you've just-- you are so touching, that you volunteer here, and you do--

I mean, last week Josie was telling me she toured with a group of-- we have a judges program, and she was with 150 judges. She was one of 17 people who volunteered to tour, and to be in this building every week, sometimes more than once a week. I see you all the time. I think you live here. I think it's really-- it must be very trying experience, and it's-- but of course, very helpful for us.

Yeah. And for me. Once I retired, I saw--

Oh, that's the other thing.

What?

I don't mean to interrupt, but I did want to make sure that you talked. Could you talk about what you did after you-- your children were old enough to-- because that I did not know until yesterday. So.

I went back. Once my boys were situated in programs, I went back to school. I went to undergraduate. And then I went to graduate school at Catholic University here and became a social worker. And I worked for 19 years for Montgomery County in the Child Protective Services, working with abused and neglected children. And for me, it was a wonderful place to be, making sure children were safe. And that's what I did.

And then, once I retired in a few years ago, I started volunteering here, and became a docent. And I really find this work challenging, and wonderful, and very interesting.

I thought that was really interesting, that was your career. And of course, it has meaning to the rest of your life, obviously. So.

I'm actually going to open it up to the audience, if you have questions. I just would ask you one favor. Can I repeat the question before you answer it, Josie?

OK.

OK. Questions? Yes.

Prior to going to Israel, had you become more religious as you found Judaism?

Prior to going to Israel, had you become more religious and had you found Judaism?

To some extent, I became-- well, I didn't have anything as a child, in my early childhood. But I think I became more of a traditional Jew, trying to follow the traditions. And my parents did also. So we did, together as a family, begin to-- I certainly did-- to follow the holidays and the meaning of Judaism.

Did you have a question as well?

Yes. [INAUDIBLE]. Do you think that they didn't want you to become attached to them, knowing that at any time, you could be taken away again?

Wait a second. Let me just repeat it. The question was, the Debrakeleers didn't hold and nurture Josie. But do you think that was because they didn't want to become attached to Josie and have her taken away?

That's possible, but I can't guess as to why they did that. I really don't know.

And it was clear to you they were not. They were people. They were not your relatives.

Yes, right. Yes.

Yes.

And did you ever see-- have you ever seen this family again? Have you ever seen that family again?

And have you ever seen that family again?

My husband and I went back to Belgium in '89, I think. And we tried to find them. And we found out that they had all died, including their daughter. So I really couldn't trace them.

And I tried to trace the nuns. And I was in touch with the government trying to find some clues. And I got a reply saying the order is no longer in existence. So I'm trying to do some research.

In fact, I was touring someone from the government whose brother is a priest and works a lot in Europe. And she said, can you please let my brother-- can he do some research? So I gave her all the information about the nuns, what I know of their names, and the correspondence I have had with the Belgian government. And this priest actually wants to do research.

Who knows? They might have merged with another order. Because I really do want to acknowledge them.

Other questions? Yes.

[INAUDIBLE]

She, first of all, thanks you. And she expressed that it sounds like you speak to a lot of different groups of people. And how do you think it's impacted them, your experiences in talking to them?

Well, I think what I try to impart, really, is that people can make a difference. And every single person makes a difference. To not let people-- if you see somebody being hurt or discriminated against, you have to speak up. And I always say that every person makes a difference.

Yes.

Yes, do you discuss the things that happened with your sons?

Excuse me?

Do you discuss these things with your sons?

Do you discuss these things with your sons, and her daughter? With her children.

Yes.

I do. Absolutely. My daughter and grandchildren have come to hear both my husband and I speak. So they know our story. They really do.

And I would also like to add that in your oral-- in your oral history or in Freddie's, at the end, your daughter speaks, and she says the same thing your mother said, that you remember, she-- she always feels there was joy. And she knows your experiences. She's always-- you've always been open about it. And there's always been joy in your lives. And you did the interviews 16 years ago. So it's been quite some time since you've started talking about it.

Yeah.

Other questions? Yes.

I'd like to applaud you for going back to school and also for working on behalf of abused children. That's amazing. But I wonder if you might be able to speak a little bit about what your mother went through, or is that too painful?

The question-- well, first, the comment was that this gentleman applauds Josie for going back to school, and for doing what she did as a profession, which I would agree. I second that.

And the question part was, do you-- can you talk a little bit about your mother's experiences and what she went through, or is it too painful?

No, I can talk about her experiences. I mean, she speaks very openly about it. And we go to hear her speak, and she speaks to us.

Getting to Auschwitz was, in itself, an ordeal. It was horrible. She was in this cattle car for four days, transporting wherever you're-- the country you were from to the concentration camp, you were stuck in this cattle car without food or water, which is in itself was horrible. She was there, as I said, with her mother. And in the first selection, she no longer saw her mother.

And she was placed in an ammunition factory. I think she was filling grenades or bombs with chemicals. And I know that she tells me that her eyebrows and eyelashes burnt off because the chemicals were so strong. She would work 11 hours a day, and then come back to the concentration camp.

And she was-- actually, she tells me this. The shelves. I don't know if you've been upstairs yet. The shelves where people slept in Auschwitz. She was on one shelf with six French women. And they would huddle together every night.

And she said they became like family. They would hug each other and just keep warm with each other. And she actually kept in contact with them after the war.

But her day-to-day life, starvation, it must have been horrid. I think she weighed 65 pounds when she was liberated. She was in pretty bad condition.

My mother is, by the way, one of the few people who has two tattoos. Auschwitz, not every concentration camp gave you a tattoo.

It was mainly Auschwitz.

Mainly Auschwitz.

Mainly Auschwitz-Birkenau.

She had one tattoo. And a few weeks later, a new transport came, meaning more prisoners. And they made some mistake, and gave her the same number as some other people. So what they did is they crossed out her number and gave her another number.

And what boggles my mind is that they were going to kill her. But they had to have the right number. So that kind of gives you an idea of the mentality.

When she was liberated, she was very, very sick and very weak. And she said, the reason she thinks she remained alive is when the Americans liberated some of the concentration camps, they started giving food immediately to the prisoners. And many of them died because they couldn't digest the food. It was just too much for their stomach to be able to absorb it.

The Russians, apparently, gave the prisoners warm milk. And that's all they would give them. And she thinks that that's why she was able to digest it and remain alive.

So she tells many stories. Life was pretty, pretty horrible.

OK. Yes.

How old were your parents?

How old--

How old were your parents?

My mom must have been in her early 20s. They were married in 1938. I was born in '39. And she was taken in 1942. So I think she must have been maybe 24, 25.

And lucky for her, she was young enough, so she was-- in the selection, they put her in a labor camp where she would be able to work. My grandmother, obviously, was too old. She wasn't even 50. But she was immediately gassed.

But my mother must have been really pretty young. She was born in 1916, so if she was taken in '42, she can do the math.

Well, did you want to follow up?

Oh, I'm sorry, yeah. Were you ever-- any other children-- do you have any siblings?

No, I couldn't. My mother--

Let me just ask.

I'm sorry.

That's OK.

Did you have any other siblings, was the question.

My mother, while she was in Auschwitz, they did medical experiments on her, and she was not able to have children anymore. That's why she calls me her one treasure.

You had a question, and that's-- I'm going to actually take this as the last question.

I'm just curious what it was like to have lived through this. Were you completely unaware of what was happening, and then to learn later the significance of these events, and there you were part of it, and all that, what that process was like?

One second. She asked what was it like to live through this experience and be completely unaware of the historical experience going around her and learn later.

Living through it, I don't think I realized the horribleness of it. I really don't. And I think as I got older, I started filling in the gaps with knowledge, really reading a lot, and understanding, and hearing from my mother, and really meeting other people who have gone through the same thing.

I didn't realize it at the time. You kind of accept life for what it is. As a three-year-old, a four-year-old, you live and you get used to what you have.

I wanted-- I really would like to thank you, and I wanted to thank the audience as well. Before I conclude the program, as it's our tradition in First Person that you have the last word. So I'm turning it back to you.

OK. What I wanted to say I have written down in my folder. However, I know it. I don't know if--

[LAUGHTER]

--if any of you have gone through the museum, I always like to quote the Lutheran Minister Martin Niemoller. I don't know if you read his quote on the wall as you exit the main exhibit. He wrote,

"First they came for the Unionist, and I was not a Unionist, and I did not speak out. Then they came for--

Political prisoners.

--political prisoners. I did not-- I'm not a political prisoner, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews. I was not a Jew, so I did not speak out. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me." [SOB]

And that kind of, to me, echoes what this museum means, that you have to speak out. You have to speak out for your fellow human beings. You really do.

This quote, by the way, Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran minister who was very pro-Hitler when Hitler came into power, because he promised so many wonderful things. But after what he saw, what Hitler was doing, he was actually very much against him, and he was imprisoned.

If you go to the end of the second floor, the whole quote is said on the wall. And to me, it's one of the crucial things in this museum.

Well, thank you so much, Josie. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

OK. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you. Oh, thank--