

Good afternoon and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson and I am the host of the museum's public program First Person. Thank you for joining us. We are in our 13th year of the First Person program. And our first person today is Mrs. Josie Traum, whom we shall meet shortly. This 2012 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 guest serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue until mid-August. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Josie Traum will share with us her first-person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 40 minutes. If time allows, we will have an opportunity for you to ask Josie a few questions. 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 have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with our introduction. We begin with this portrait of Josiane Aizenberg walking on a street in Brussels. Josie was born on March 21, 1939 in Brussels, Belgium to Jacques and Fannie Aizenberg. The arrow on this map of Belgium points to Brussels. The German Army conquered Belgium in May of 1940. Shortly before the occupation, Josie's father left Belgium to join the British Army.

In this photo, we see Josie with her parents in Brussels. In 1942, Josie's mother, Fanny, was able to secure a hiding place for Josie in a convent in Bruges, Belgium. Here, we see Josie and Fanny shortly before Josie went into hiding. A short while later, Fanny, who worked with the Belgian underground, or the resistance, was denounced and she was 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. Allied forces liberated Belgium in September 1944. Soon after, Josie was found by one of her aunts, one of Fanny's sisters. Here, we see Josie, Jacques, and Fanny after they were reunited in the United States. Josie would eventually marry Freddy Traum, also a Holocaust survivor. So we close our slide presentation with this wedding portrait of Josie and Freddy.

After moving to the United States with her parents in 1949 and then completing her schooling in Paterson, New Jersey, Josie went to Israel to study for a year. On the return trip, on a ship, she met Freddie Traum, the ship's chief radio officer. Upon a return to the US, Josie attended Montclair State Teacher's College for one year. Josie and Freddie were married on his ship a year after she met him. And she moved to Israel, where they lived for five years.

While in Israel, the Traum's son, Michael, and daughter, Yael, were born. Upon the advice of medical experts in Israel, the Traums relocated to the United States in 1963 to obtain medical care for their disabled son, Michael. Their third child, Jonathan, who is also disabled, was born in the US. Eventually, Freddie's work brought them to Vienna, Virginia. Josie returned to school and graduated from the Catholic University of America School of Social Work and began her career in child welfare. She retired in 2008 from her work as a clinical social worker for abused children in Montgomery County, Maryland.

Today, Josie and Freddie live in Silver Spring, Maryland. Josie's volunteer work at this museum includes leading tours of the permanent exhibition for law enforcement, including police officers, the FBI, judges, and others. She also volunteers with visitor services on Tuesdays. Josie has only recently started speaking publicly about her experience as a Holocaust survivor, including speaking at local synagogues and local area schools.

As part of this week's Days of Remembrance activities, Josie will join others in reading aloud here in the museum the names of those killed during the Holocaust. Josie will read the names of 100 victims, including 12 from her and Freddie's families. And I'd like to let you know that this is something that anybody can do, if you're so inclined. With that, I'd like to let two things-- one, that Freddie Traum, Josie's husband, is here with us in the front row. Freddie, you

might just wave your hand. There we go.

[APPLAUSE]

And second, it's time to hear from Josie Traum. So with that, please join me in welcoming our first person, Mrs. Josie Traum.

Josie, welcome and thank you for your willingness to be our first person today. We have so much for you to cover in a short period, so we'll begin right away. And your parents, Fannie and Jacques Aizenberg, were married in early 1938. You were born in March 1939, just months before Germany and Russia attacked Poland, launching World War II. Tell us about your parents and their life in Brussels in that pre-war time.

OK. First of all, I want to thank everybody for coming and wanting to listen. Thank you. My parents were relatively newlyweds in 1938. My mom had gone to a designing school and was a dressmaker and clothes designer. And actually, before she got married, she actually-- when she graduated, she started working for the royal family and helping with their clothes, fixing them, and doing whatever.

And that was a big honor, wasn't it?

That was a tremendous honor. It isn't everybody that can get a job working with the royal family. My dad was a violinist. And this is probably very difficult for you all to understand. He used to play in the movie houses in the early '30s. The movies were not talking. They were silent films. So because of that, they used to have an accompaniment of a violinist or some orchestra to play music while people were watching the movie. So my dad was actually a violinist in the silent movies.

However, when the talkies came, he lost his job. All the movies started talking. They didn't need the musicians anymore. And my dad went to tailoring school and became a tailor. So they had a store. And we used to live behind the store. And my parents were well established. They were happy. They had a relatively good life until things really began to change in 1939.

Josie, your parents, as you said, were married in 1938. Nazi power in Germany and Austria took a very ominous turn in late 1938, when Kristallnacht occurred, or the Night of Broken Glass. Then you were born just a few months later. And just a few months after that, of course, World War II would begin. Do you know if your parents-- if they ever discussed with you if they were fearful about bringing you into this world? Here you are, a newborn baby in the turmoil of Europe.

Actually, that I never heard them discuss. And if I did, I was so young-- I mean, I was born in '39 just a few months before the war. And my dad actually went to England when I was 13 months old. So I don't remember much of the conversation and the depth of what was talked about.

I also want to ask you what was significant about naming you Josie.

Actually, I asked my mom. And it was a French singer. Her name was Josiane, which is my name. But when I came to this country, nobody could say Josiane so I became a Josie. But for them, my mother loved that name. She loved the singer. She loved the sound of it.

And that's how you got your name.

That's how I got my name.

As a result of Kristallnacht that occurred primarily in Germany and Austria, the vicious attack on Jewish businesses and Jewish homes and the burning of hundreds of synagogues in late 1938-- as a result of that, I think your parents took in a young child for a period. Tell us about that.

Well, my grandparents and my mom did. My dad actually left for England in 1940, for London, to join the British Army. However, my mom, and her grandma, and her parents, my grandparents, would take in Jewish kids and people and hide them till they found a safer place. People were actually fleeing from Poland, from Germany, from Austria, and trying to come more to the west. So my mother and my grandparents would actually hide Jews until they would get a different and better place.

In May 1940, just really months after the war began, Germany attacked what we call the Low Countries-- France, Belgium, the Netherlands-- and that's right before they attacked is when your father left to join the British Army. Tell us tell us about your father's leaving and what that meant, but also then what it meant to your mother.

OK. My dad left. There had been many calls on the radio asking for volunteers, men to come over to England and to join the British Army. My dad and his brother both decided to go and join the British Army. And they took one of the last boats, actually, leaving to cross the channel to go to England.

When they got to England, the British Army evaluated what their skills were. My dad and his brother, they were both tailors. So they evaluated the two men. What could they possibly do for the army? And they placed them both in a factory making British uniforms. So in a way, that was the best place for my dad to be.

And in Belgium-- I just want to state that in Belgium, it was really thought when the Germans came in that the Germans would only arrest and deport the men and leave the women and children alone. So my dad actually left not only because he wanted to join the British Army, but he really felt the women and children would be safe. My mom, and her parents, and I stayed together in an attic apartment. And we lived there through-- until I left.

Until you left. Just a bit more about your father-- when he went to Dunkirk, which, of course, was the scene of a tremendous catastrophe for the British Army-- and I think your mom told me, I believe, that there were three ships in the harbor there taking people like your father. And two of them were sunk by the Germans. And only your father's ship made it. Did your mom have any idea what happened to your dad?

No. There was no communications.

No communication.

We couldn't really communicate. And my mom actually didn't know if my dad had survived or not. Yeah.

So that-- the communication is over at that point.

Yes, pretty much.

You and your mother would remain in Brussels under Nazi occupation, living there, doing the things you were describing with hiding others, until 1942, which is when your mother made this profound decision to place you into hiding. Tell us what you can about the events that led up to her making that decision and then how she made it happen.

Yeah. My mother was very involved in the underground. She was hiding Jews who were leaving from their countries. She was also-- as far as I know, she was passing out leaflets and telling about meetings and what to do. So she had some kind of-- she was part of the network of the underground. And she made a provision for me to be picked up and to be hidden during the war. I mean, really, it was such a profound decision. I don't know how she could have possibly made that, to actually decide, yes, please, take my child and hide her.

So one day, two strange ladies did come and-- to pick me up. I was three years old. That was in 1942. Can you imagine a three-year-old being picked up by two total strangers, not knowing where I was going, not even understanding why they were picking me up? They took me. And they brought me to a convent in Bruges.

My mother was not allowed to know where I was going because they knew when the Germans would come, they would ask where the rest of your family is. And usually, they would hurt you. They would torture you till you would be able to

tell them. But they figured, if they don't tell parents where their kids were being taken, there was no way they could tell.

So indeed, they took me to Bruges to a convent. And indeed, they did come to my mother. And they did torture her and beat her. But she really-- the Germans-- that is, the German officers-- but she really couldn't say where I was because she really didn't know.

So I stayed in the convent for about six months. And unbeknownst to me-- I found this out after the war-- there were three other Jewish children hidden there. It was more or less like an orphanage. It was full of kids. In those days, if people couldn't take care of their children, they would place them in an orphanage until they were able to manage and then pick them up. So the place was full of kids. But there were only three other Jewish kids there and me, so four Jewish children altogether, being hidden by the nuns.

So before we go on about that, let me ask you a couple of other questions. Tell us about not only your grandparents, but I believe you had great-grandparents at that time. What was happening to them?

Well, my grandparents-- well, they were with my mom.

They were with your mom.

We stayed together. My grandfather was very active in the Jewish community, so was my grandmother. And they led a life really pretty much serving the Jewish community. My grandmother was part of what they called the Chevra Kadisha. When a Jewish person dies, there's a special rituals watching the body, making sure that the body is safe. And my grandmother was involved with that. She was very involved with the Jewish community-- and so was my grandfather. I must say, my great-grandparents, I don't remember at all.

Right, right, right. How did, during that time, leading up to when you went into hiding, but before your mother would end up being deported later-- how was your mother able to make ends meet during that time?

I really don't know. I don't know. I know my grandmother, who worked for the Jewish community, would often bring food home. And we would have some food. And of course, in Belgium, food was rationed. So we had very, very minimal food. I don't know how my mom made ends meet. I really don't.

I mean, of course, you were so young. But you told me that you had a fleeting memory of being on a bus with your mother. Tell us about that.

OK. You're pulling at all my strings. It's always-- this story always really gets to me. The German officers, the Nazis, had totally occupied Belgium. And they would walk on the streets and ask for your identity card. And of course, your identity card, which you had to carry with you at all times, mentioned if you were a Jew or not. Inside, there was a large J. And you had-- it was very obvious. You were identified as a Jew. They could stop you any time, arrest you, and deport you.

And one day, my mom and I were riding on a bus. This is before I went to the convent. I must have been all of three years old. And we were sitting in the back seat, totally the back seats of the bus. A German officer came on the bus and started asking all the passengers for their identification cards. And of course, everybody took them out, ready to show it to the German officer.

My mother, all I remember is that she was shaking. She was really petrified. Of course, I didn't understand why. I really didn't know. But she was, of course, petrified for him to get to us. He actually went to every single passenger on the line on the seats. And when he got to the last row where my mother and I were sitting, he turned around and left the bus.

And I always think that God must have been looking over us. But we were saved. And they didn't arrest us. And they didn't take us off the bus. And my mom, of course, breathed a sign of relief. But as a three-year-old, you really don't understand some of the fears. You know a person is scared and afraid, but you don't know why. I certainly didn't know why. I knew you were going to ask me that.

Josie, you've had the opportunity to talk with your mother many times about what happened. What does she say about what it was like for her when she made that decision to give you up to go to a place that she wouldn't know about, which meant that she probably didn't know what had become of you?

Right, or if she would ever see me again.

Or if she would ever see you again.

And I think to myself, as a parent and as a grandparent, I can't imagine making that decision. I just can't. But yet, she did. And I think to myself how brave she was to make that decision to give me up and just not know where I was going. So it's really because of her, not only in birth, that I'm here, it's also because she made sure that I would be safe.

Josie, as you mentioned, you were in the convent, like an orphanage, for six months to a year.

Six months.

Something like that. And then the decision was made to move you elsewhere. Tell us a little bit more about what you know of life in that convent and that orphanage during that time. It was an order of nuns that was--

Yes. It was an order of nuns. And in those days, nuns, they didn't wear habits. They did wear habits. They didn't wear clothes like we do today-- clothes like everyday-- like everyone wears. They were very stiff, very much like the nuns in the Sound of Music-- very stiff, these accordion collars, very stiff. And it was so strict. I remember being petrified. They were very strict. And they would really discipline the children. And they were strict, terribly strict with me. I was a finicky, spoiled little kid. I'm sure I was. And they would force me to eat. I didn't want to eat. I would throw up. They would punish me. The thing is they weren't just strict with me because I was a Jew, they were strict with all the kids. I mean, all the kids really felt the strictness.

And I must say, these nuns-- I mean, they were wonderful. They saved me. In fact, they found out that the Germans were going to come on one day to pick up the four Jewish children. And the nuns found out. And they actually smuggled me out. They smuggled me out during the night before the Germans came the next day. And they took me to Brussels, which is where I originally was from. And they placed me with a Christian family with a little girl. And I actually stayed there for the entire duration of the war. But so I'm very grateful to the nuns. They were strict, but they saved my life.

Share with us, Josie-- you've talked to me about that because they were so strict and to everybody, but there wasn't what we'd like to think of a lot of warmth and coziness. And what was the--

Nurturing.

--nurturing, nurturing-- what was the impact for you, do you think, of that?

Well, it's very interesting you should mention that. I'm a strong believer of the first three years of life being with a caring, nurturing, caregiver-- not necessarily your parent. It could be a grandparent. It could be a caretaker, but those first three years of life being with someone, being able to bond with somebody with nurturing, and love, and affection, I think makes all the difference for you later on in life.

And I really feel that I had those first three years with my mom and my grandparents-- my grandma, especially-- who used to always cuddle me, kiss me, and hug me. And I really feel that those first three years really helped me bond and helped me in my well-being later on in life. So I really-- I feel very strongly those first three years. And it's actually been studied and found out in psychology and in child development that those first three years are really crucial. You can withstand a lot of things after that.

As you did.

As I did.

Josie, your name while you were there-- I believe your last name was changed to Van Berg.

Yes, which is a very Flemish Dutch name.

Why did that matter?

It mattered because Aizenberg was a Jewish name. Although it was a German name, it was also-- could be a Jewish name. So the Jewish children's names were changed so that they would give them a Christian identity. So my first name remained the same because that was a real French name. But my last name did change to Van Berg, which is a real Dutch Flemish name.

And would that have been an advantage over having chosen a French name from the French-speaking part of Belgium, the fact that it was Flemish?

I don't know. I don't know that. Because my mom is not the one who chose it. It was the underground who gave me a name and an identity.

So because the Germans were getting suspicious, they believed convents were hiding Jewish children, the nuns took you and then took you to the home of the Debraecklaer family.

The Debraecklaer, yes.

Tell us about that part of your life.

The Debraecklaers, they were a mother, and father, and a little girl, who was my age. And I stayed with them pretty much in hiding in an apartment. Now, the man-- these were Christian people. The man was part of the underground. He was very active in the underground. In fact, I remember, very often, they would take him out for interrogation. And they would obviously torture him because he would come back black and blue and bruised. But he never told them that I was there. So they actually hid me for the entire duration of the war until Belgium was liberated in 1944.

So it wasn't as though you were living in their household just as their child. You were actually hidden in their house.

I was hidden, pretty much hidden.

Pretty much hidden.

Yes.

I remember you telling me that because they were a family of three, they had food rations for three. You're a fourth mouth.

Me-- in Belgium, food was rationed. You would pick up food once a week for the members in your family. Now, I was not supposed to be there. So I was not even listed. So this family received food for three-- the mother, the father, and the child. And of course, I wasn't listed. So they got food for three people and shared it with me. They made sure that I had food and that I would be fed.

So people were taking such risks to save Jews. People were risking their lives. If the Germans had found them hiding a Jew, they would just shoot them on the street, no questions asked. They would just shoot them. So I'm very fortunate. The nuns really saved me. This family, the Debraecklaers really saved me. And I'm one of the very fortunate ones.

What do you know about your life while you lived with them for several years? What was your life like with them? Do

you know?

Well, here again, these people saved me. They cared for me. But they were very much a family unit. And I wasn't part of that unit. And I felt it. I wasn't their child. I wasn't in the little threesome that they were hugging all the time. But I can't be critical of them. They really-- they saved my life.

Do you know if you ever were able to go outside?

Once in a while on weekends, they would meet some friends who were neighbors of my grandparents. In fact, it's in one of the pictures that I showed you with the whole family. And these were friends of theirs and actually neighbors of my grandparents. So once in a while, I would go out. But it was pretty much on the quiet, when there was nobody else around.

Clandestine outings, almost.

Very much clandestine, yes.

Their daughter was close in age to you. Do you remember being able to play with her?

I did play with her. And I don't remember many toys, but I remember interacting with her and playing with her. Yeah.

So you stayed with them until the war ended in Belgium in 1944 before war was over in Europe. Once the war was over in Belgium for you, your aunt, Therese, was able to find you and bring you to her home. Tell us about that, how she found you in the first place, and then what it was like to go home with this aunt, leave the Debraecklaer family.

OK. My mom had two sisters, my two aunts. They were hidden, also, during the war in churches through the underground. I mean, when I think of our whole family, we really survived because of people hiding us and Christian people really going out on a limb and risking their lives. My two aunts were hidden in churches during the war.

So there was this whole network of the underground. People knew how to find each other. After Belgium was liberated, my mother's oldest sister, Therese, actually went to look for me. And she knew where to find me. People knew how to find each other. So she found me and, of course, brought me to her house. And of course, I immediately felt this was my family. She had three sons, older than me, and they treated me like a little mascot. It was great being with them.

Had they been hidden with her in the church?

Yes. Yes.

Together.

And her husband was part of the underground also. So the whole-- there was a really active underground. One of the interesting things that I feel is very different from Belgium to other countries-- the underground in Belgium, there were actually Jews and Christians working together. There was no differentiation. They really worked together. In other countries, in Eastern Europe, that wasn't the case. But in Belgium, they did work together. And they did help each other. So my aunt took me home. And of course, I stayed with her. I felt this was my family. And finally, I was with them.

You told me a little bit about your aunt's husband, your uncle, who had been in the underground. Tell us a little more about him.

Well, what I know, he got special commendations after the war. He apparently, with bare hands, killed about six Germans while being in the underground. I don't know how he did it. He was a very gentle, quiet, meek man. And so he apparently got a special award from the Belgium government that he had killed quite a few Germans defending Belgian people. So he did get an award. We never expected it of him. It was amazing.

He was, you said, meek. Josie, was there a period where you had to, in a sense, realize that you were Jewish and that you hadn't known that? Or were you too young to really be aware?

I was too young to really know that. Once, when my parents and I were reunited, I think I realized that then because we followed certain rituals that I hadn't for the entire duration of the war.

When you were with your aunt, at that point, did you know what had happened to your mother?

No, no. I had no idea.

No idea. So you didn't know-- your aunt didn't know if she was alive, you didn't know. Any word about your father?

No.

No word. So what was your-- you'd found a family unit, of course. But what was-- do you know about the impact of being there without your parents? Was that something you could grasp fully at the time?

I don't think I could grasp it fully. I mean, I knew I was loved. My aunts' three sons certainly loved me and adored me, made a big fuss over me. And so did my aunt and uncle. So I really felt like I belonged. But I really didn't know what happened to my parents. I had no idea. And it wasn't, of course, until later that I did find out.

So in what must have seemed like a miracle, your mother, Fanny, survived Auschwitz, returns to Brussels after her liberation in April 1945, when the war did end. Your mother, Fanny, comes home. Tell us what you can about that. And then tell us about your mother.

OK. My mother was liberated, as you said, in 1945. She had been in Auschwitz and survived, which to me is incredible. She was on a death march, which means-- I don't know if any of you know, the concentration camps were emptied of their prisoners. And they started marching the prisoners towards Germany. My mother was on a death march for about four months with no food, just marching, no place to really rest or sleep. She survived that.

She was very, very sick. She had typhus and meningitis. She was liberated by the Russian Army. They-- actually, it was one of the last battles, I understand, between the Germans and the Soviet Union. And the Soviets won and liberated my mother. They took her to a hospital. And she stayed there for a little while. They nursed her. And eventually, the Red Cross brought her back to Belgium. The first thing she did when she came back to Belgium, she went to her sister's house, and she knocked on the door. And there I was.

So her sister didn't know she was about to knock on the door?

No.

I'm here, basically.

Yeah. She just came knocking. This is the first place she went. And I was there.

Do you remember that?

I don't. All I remember, my mom telling me that I was overwhelmed, as she was too.

As she was, absolutely. Just tell us a little bit about after your mom placed you into hiding. How did she end up at Auschwitz?

I keep on saying how wonderful the Belgian people were. And the many, many were. However, a neighbor actually denounced her. Many people would get money for denouncing Jews. If you told where a Jew lived, the Germans would often pay you. So a neighbor actually denounced my mom and her parents.

And her parents.

And she was, of course, deported. And she was taken to Auschwitz. And when she got to Auschwitz, she was in one of the first selections, where they put people on one side who were young enough and healthy enough to maybe work, and the others, who they felt would not be able to. My grandfather, by the way, died on one of the cattle trains when they deported him. He died on one of the trains. My grandmother died soon after she got to Auschwitz. My mother and her were separated immediately. And my mother never saw her again. So my mother, by the way, survived. She's 95 today, which is incredible.

We had her right here about two weeks ago.

Yes.

That's right. That's right.

She's incredible.

Yeah, she is.

So I'm very, very fortunate. My father, by the way, eventually came back from Britain. He didn't come back right after the war. He came back in 1946, a year after the war. While he was living in London, a bomb fell on his house. And he was in a hospital for about two years. So he couldn't come back right away. And my parents and I were reunited. Of course, I didn't know my father when I went to meet him at the boat. I was seven years old. I hadn't seen him for six years.

And you do remember that, right, meeting your father?

I do, absolutely. I remember my mom saying to me, my dad was coming down the steps of the boat. And my mother said, there's your father. I had no idea who this man was. Of course, I didn't remember him at all. But as soon as we were reunited, my parents decided to make an application to come to the United States.

Let's come back to that in just a minute, Josie. So when your mother shows up at your Aunt Therese's house, is reunited with you, what happened next? Did she go start a new life?

First, she moved in with her sister. And we stayed together. And then eventually, we went back to the attic apartment, to where we used to live. And I know, you're going to ask me to tell the Story

Then do it.

Bill really knows my stories. I was so happy to see my mother. And I was so afraid. I don't remember many things. But as a child, you remember being separated and being afraid of losing a parent again. So my mother tells me this because I don't remember it. She tells me that when she first came back, I used to-- at night, I used to tie my nightgown to hers because I was afraid to lose her. So we would tie each other. I would tie myself to her because I just was afraid to lose her again.

Josie, the first time we met and you told me about being reunited with your mother and that period, you said, I was just a little kid who needed to be held. I was very struck by that. And jumping forward a little bit, the fact that you chose to go into child welfare and all of that-- might be a connection there in some way.

I'm sure it's not an accident.

Right. So in 1946, your father comes back. Did you know when-- because of his wounds, his injuries, he had to stay longer and didn't come back until, I guess, a good year after the war ended.

Yes, exactly.

When did your mom find out that he was even alive?

After Belgium was liberated and, well, when she came back, when she was liberated, she started corresponding with him. So she knew he was alive. So at least we knew that. We didn't know what shape he was in or whatever, although when he did come back to Belgium, health-wise and physically, he was OK. He had many scars, but he was OK.

Now, it's time for them to rebuild their life. And as you started to tell us, they began making applications to move. What did they do to get reestablished together, and go back, and earn their living, and build a life with you?

Yes. My dad and my mom-- my dad had a store, a tailoring store. And in fact, it was the same store he had before the war. In those days, you couldn't just go to Sears or Bloomingdale's and buy a suit off the rack. In those days, you had to choose your material. And you were fitted by a tailor. They would make a pattern. They would make a suit for you.

So actually, my father had a store, a man's clothing store, where he actually-- he had many bolts of cloth. And customers would come in, choose the kind of material they wanted-- the tweed or whatever they wanted-- and then my dad would actually fit them and make a pattern. And then a few weeks later, they would actually have a suit. And my mother would help him.

And they had a store for a few years till 1949, till we came to the United States. So they made a living that way. We had an apartment behind the store on the same property. It was actually an apartment building. And we had lived in the attic apartment once war started. We were very much in hiding there. My parents had to give up the ground apartment where the store was. But after the war, they got the store back. And we lived in the apartment behind.

And earning a living--

Earning a living.

--with an idea towards moving.

Yes.

So what did they do to set the stage for moving here in 1949?

Well, what they did-- first of all, they applied for all of the papers.

And that was very challenging, right?

That was very challenging. You had to go by certain quota. And being that they were both born in Poland, they came under the Polish quota.

Even though they were Belgian, they came under the Polish quota.

Right, they came under the Polish quota. And we had to wait our turn till 1949. And my mom had an aunt in New Jersey. And of course, that's where we moved. We stayed with her for about a month or two till my parents found work. And we found our own apartment. So we lived in New Jersey.

You're 10 years old now, about 10.

I was 10 years old when I came here, yes.

And didn't speak English.

Not at all.

Where were you academically at that point, given that your first seven years were without any education?

Right. Well, when-- right after Belgium was liberated, school began.

School began.

And I started going to school. The thing is when I came here, because I didn't speak English, they automatically-- I was 10 years old, they put me in first grade. So I was never very tall, but I was towering over those first graders. So they put me in first grade. I stayed there for two weeks. Then they put me in second grade, and so on, and so on till I caught my grade.

Very rapidly.

Very rapidly. And I learned English. And it's interesting. When I came home, I would only speak English to my parents. I speak French because in Belgium you speak French and Flemish. It's a bilingual country. But I mainly spoke French at home. But when we came to the United States, I only spoke English when I came home. My parents were so determined to learn English, and to go to school, and to learn to be Americans.

So they insisted on that, that you speak English at home.

Oh, yes, absolutely. So we did. And they learned English.

And very quickly.

Yes, they did.

What was it like for your parents to try to resume a, quote, "normal life," to build a new life together after all the trauma and unspeakable trauma that they had been through?

I think it was very, very difficult. My mom and my dad had gone through very different experiences. My mom really had gone through horrors. The fact that she remained alive in itself is something. But I think, she still bears the scars of Auschwitz. And I remember, as a child, living in New Jersey, I remember my mom waking up during the night having nightmares, and screaming, and running through the apartment that we lived in. So she was very scarred, not just physically, but I think mentally. And my dad also suffered a lot. And having to get together-- and I was a child in the middle, not really-- not wanting to hurt them in any way and being a good little girl always.

Josie, if you don't mind sharing this, when you moved to Patterson, you were beaten up by a gang of girls. And your mother marched down and confronted the principal about this. And tell us the reason that he explained why this behavior had occurred.

After the first few days in school, there was a gang of girls waiting for me outside. And they really beat me up, to the point of bleeding. So my mom, the next day, marched to the principal and really want to know, what is this about? We're in the United States now. And the principal explained that the children, the girls, who were around my age-- 10-11 years old-- they thought that I was German. And that's why they beat me up. Now, I personally don't think they knew the difference between a German and a non-German. But it was an excuse, I think, that the principal used--

The official reason--

--the official reason.

--for why that happened.

Right.

Was that an isolated incidence? Was your childhood after that normalized?

Yes. That was the only incident that ever happened. I was petrified. I was really scared. But it never reoccurred.

Josie, you would go on, complete your education, you would go to Israel. Tell us, if you don't mind, about meeting this gentleman down here in the front row.

Freddie. I was a student. I was studying in Israel for a year. And in those days-- it was in the '50s-- you didn't take planes so readily. Can you believe that? So I took a boat coming back, a passenger liner. And Freddie was the chief radio officer. And we met. One of my friends, another officer on the ship, who I had met in Israel, introduced us. And we became friends and much, much more. And we've been married 54 years.

And we have--

It's a lot.

And we saw that wonderful wedding portrait. And of course, Freddie also is a survivor. And then we've actually been able to have a first person with Freddie as well. And he'll be back with us in May. Josie, tell us about your mother's sisters. What became of them?

They actually-- they died, but not war-related at all. My mother's oldest sister, Therese, who took me in--

Who took you in.

--moved to Israel with her three sons. And she died of cancer, which is totally not war-related. And my mom's younger sister also passed away. She lived in New York. And we were very close to her.

Did they come at the same time that you came?

No, they did not. Rose did not. No. She came a few years later.

So you had cousins from-- did she have children?

No, she did not.

OK. OK. How many members of your family did you lose in the Holocaust?

My grandparents, my father's brother, his wife, son-- so in my own family, I've lost about six or seven. And in Freddie's family, just as many-- six or seven, his parents foremost.

And those were among the names that you read earlier today or yesterday, excuse me.

Yesterday, yes.

Josie, if you don't mind, we have time to turn to our audience to ask them if they have questions of you. And so why don't we do that?

OK.

I'd like to ask you to make your question as brief as you can. I will repeat the question so everybody in the room hears it, including Josie. And then she'll answer your question. So we have a bold first person right here. The question is do you

think the result of all the trauma that you went through has made you more loving or more distrustful?

I personally think more loving. I don't think I'm distrustful. Basically, I trust people and I accept them. And I hope I see the good in people. So I'm pretty trustful. And Bill mentioned, I went into the field of social work, working with abused and neglected children, who I really feel need that nurturing, and love, and being embraced. And I'm sure it's not an accident that I went into that field. And I worked in it for about 19 years.

OK. I'm going to go-- the gentleman in the back right there. And then I'll come forward to the person-- you that raised your hand. So we'll start first with the gentleman. The question, Josie, is have you been back to Belgium? And did you have a chance to reconnect with the families, the Debraecklaer family.

Yes. My husband and I went back to Belgium in about 1989. And unfortunately, the Debraecklaers have passed away. So has the little girl. We tried to find the convent. We went back to Bruges. And unbeknownst to me, at that time-- Bruges has about 200 convents. It is full of convents.

And I've inquired because I really feel that the nuns need to be acknowledged, the ones who saved me. So I've written to the Belgian government. And they've replied to me. Apparently, that particular order is no longer in existence. But sometimes, there are orders that merge with another order. So I'm doing research on it. I'm hoping to find it because I think all the people who saved me, I would want to see them. Unfortunately, the family who had me is no longer alive.

OK. And then yes, we-- same exact question. OK. Got one of the very back, standing in the back. How many languages did you encounter? In your journey through life, how many different languages have you encountered?

OK.

OK.

In Belgium, actually, you speak two languages. You learn both languages, French and Flemish, which is very much like Afrikaans. It's closer to Dutch. But so I knew Flemish. I knew French. I know Hebrew and English. That's it.

Just four languages.

OK, a gentleman right here. And then I'll turn to you. OK, yes. How did you feel when you came to the United States? What was that like for you to come to the United States? Thank you.

It felt wonderful. It really, really felt wonderful. I felt free.

All right. How did your experiences affect your religious beliefs, Josie?

That's a good question. I am Jewish. And I'm more traditional. I observe all the holidays. We go to synagogue. I light candles Friday night. I say the blessings. And our children have learned to do the same thing and follow those things. So I'm more of a traditionalist. I follow a lot of the traditions because they are important to me.

Thank you. OK. Yes. Was your family assimilated or was your family Orthodox?

In Belgium, my grandparents were Orthodox. The grandparents on both sides of the family were Orthodox. However, my parents were not. They were more traditional, more Conservative, as we are.

Right there in the middle. Question is when the Debraecklaer-- when the parents died, was their child still alive? Do you know?

I do know. We were-- when my husband-- when Freddie and I went back to Belgium in '89, we were in contact with the family that I would sometimes see on weekends, the neighbors of my grandparents. So we contacted them. And we actually met with them and visited with them, which was wonderful. And they're the ones who told me that the mother,

the father, and the daughter died. So they told me, then, in 1989. I don't know what the daughter died of. I mean, she must have been quite young.

Fanny, I got a question for you, Fanny. When--

Josie.

I mean, Josie. Josie. Excuse me, Josie-- they're both wonderful.

That's my mom.

That's her mom. They're both wonderful. At least I didn't say Freddie. When your parents pursued coming to the United States, why the United States?

I think they knew a lot about the United States. They felt that, first of all, the United States were allies in Europe and helped free a lot of the European countries, along with Britain and the other Allies. But I think they had-- they felt a connection. My father also had a brother who lived in the United States and a sister, even though we didn't go to them or live with them. But my father knew enough-- and my mother-- about the United States, about the opportunities here, being able to work, and the freedom. And were they successful from a business standpoint when they got here?

When they got here, my dad worked in the Garment District in New York.

In New York.

And he would commute every day from Patterson, which is just across the Washington Bridge, not too far. And my mom worked in clothing and in dressmaking in different stores. So they both got work. They were both--

And continued their professions.

Continued their professions. She wasn't working for the president's family--

Or the royal family.

--or the royal family, but she had work. Yes.

OK. We have one question there. And we get several. So we'll start with you. Oh, did the woman who denounced-- the neighbor who denounced her mother, do if there was ever any contact there or not?

As far as I know, there was not. No.

OK. Yes, sir. Did you have animosity towards the Germans? And was there a turning point for forgiveness for you?

It's interesting you should say that. I feel very differently with Germans and with Austrians who are older than me because I always wondered what were they doing during the war. Were they part of the Nazi regime? Were they-- who knows? Were they guards in the concentration camp?

However, younger people, I can't hold them responsible for what their grandparents did. And in fact, we come in contact today with young Germans and Austrians who work in the museum, who choose to work here instead of doing military service. They have a choice. They come here as interns and work in the museum. So I can't possibly hold that against this generation, whatever their grandparents or parents did. I can't hold them responsible. They have nothing to do with it.

One more question. Yes, sir. The question is essentially, how did your parents get back their store and their house after they had lost it?

Yes. We lived in an apartment building. And my father-- my parents owned the apartment building. There were four stories, four floors. The top floor was the attic where we had been hidden. And the other people living in the apartments actually remained there. The people on the ground floor, that place had been empty. So in a way, it was waiting for my parents to come back. We didn't get a lot of our belongings. Whoever denounced us apparently took our silverware, our dishes, and many of our belongings. And that we never got back. Because we actually never found out who denounced us.

We're going to close the program in just a moment. Josie, can you-- when we're done, when you step down from here, can you stay behind for a few minutes?

Sure.

So if any of you would like to ask another question of Josie or just say hi to her, she'll step down here off the stage. I'm going to turn back to Josie in just a moment. I want to say, first, thank you all for being with us, remind you that we'll do First Person programs each week until the middle of August. So please, return if you can this year or come back next year, and to let you know that it's our tradition that our first person has the last word. And so on that note, I'm going to turn back to Josie to close our program today.

Whenever I talk to schools, to young people, to students, I always like to read this quote because to me, it is so meaningful. It is what this whole museum is about. This is written by a Lutheran minister. His name is Martin Niemoller. And let me just read you his quotes. First, they came for the socialists. I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists. I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews. I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.

I'm sorry. This quote always really gets me because people have to speak up for each other. If people hadn't gone out of their way and risked their lives, I wouldn't be here. Every person can go out of their way and help another person. If you see discrimination, people being bullied or badly treated, you have to speak up. You have to say something. And this is really what this museum is about.

And by the way, Martin Niemoller was very, very pro-Hitler. He was very much for Hitler at the beginning because Hitler promised so many wonderful things. But then when he saw what Hitler was doing, he started speaking against him. And he was actually imprisoned. So this, to me, is the most important quote.

Thank you, Josie.

[APPLAUSE]