UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
FIRST PERSON SERIES
FIRST PERSON ALFRED MUNZER
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>> Edna Friedberg: Good morning. Come on, you can do better. Good morning. We can have a little energy here.

Welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Edna Friedberg, one of the historians here today. It is my pleasure and privilege to be in conversation with our special guest, Dr. Alfred Munzer, whom you will meet in a few minutes.

We are in our 16th year of the *First Person* program. And this 2015 season of *First Person* is made possible through the generosity of the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation and the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation with additional funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand account of their experience during this time in history. Each of our *First Person* guests serves as a volunteer here at the museum as well. So we are very pleased to see them in this building in a variety of capacities.

This program of conversations will continue through mid-August. If you are in town or if you have friends who are coming back, please encourage them to join us. You can visit the Museum's website, www.ushmm.org, to see the schedule of forthcoming programs and guests.

Inside the program booklet that you received is a card that says Stay Connected. If you fill out that card and give it to a representative at the back of the theater at the end of the program today, you will receive a copy of Dr. Munzer's biography which you can revisit and share with friends. It's also a way to know if we have programs. We do tour events around the country and may be in your community at some point in the future.

To give you a sense of what to expect, Al will share his story today with us for approximately 45 minutes after which we will have time to take your questions. If we run out of time during the question and answer period, I know he is a very friendly person and will be happy to stay around for a few minutes afterwards to talk with you.

What you are about to hear from Al is one individual's experience during the period of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to orient you for the conversation.

We begin with this portrait of Alfred Munzer dressed in a Jewish National Fund costume for the Purim Holiday when it's traditional for children to wear costumes. He is dressed as the object that he is holding in his hand. He is a walking, talking, Jewish National Fund in a costume made by his mother.

This is a portrait of Al's parents on their wedding day in the city of Hague in the Netherlands, a Dutch city. His parents, Simcha and Giselle, were married in 1932.

Al had two older sisters. He is the cute baby there in the middle. His older sister Eva is pictured on the left and Leah is on the right with Al between them.

For historical context, Nazi Germany invaded several countries in Western Europe in the spring of 1940 and in particular invaded the Netherlands, as we can see in the red circle at the top, in May 1940. With the German occupation, life became very difficult for Dutch Jews. After the invasion the Munzers initially remained in their home. We will hear from Al later about the trajectory and changes in their situation as more restrictions were placed on Jews in the country.

In 1942, Al's sisters went into hiding, sheltered by a friend of a neighbor. Al, who was a very small baby, really, a toddler, at the time, went into hiding with the ex-husband of the neighbor, Tole Madna, an Indonesian man whom we see here. Indonesia had been a Dutch colony of the Netherlands. That's a connection.

Al spent the rest of the war in Tole Madna's home in hiding where he was cared for by the woman we see on the left, Tole's Indonesian nanny, a wonderful woman named Mima Saina. This photo shows Al, the boy being held on the right by Tole Madna. You will hear more about these extraordinary people in the course of our conversations.

With that background, please join me in welcoming Dr. Alfred Munzer.

[Applause]

>> Edna Friedberg: Thank you. Thank you so much for joining us today.

>> Al Munzer: Delighted to be here.

>> Edna Friedberg: Let's begin at the beginning – actually, before your beginning. If you could tell us about your parents, where they were born, what they were like.

>> Al Munzer: Sure. Well, my parents were born in Eastern Europe in a part of the world which was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire prior to the First World War but which after the First World War became part of Poland. My mother was born in a small town called Rymanow, and my father was born in Kanczuga. These towns were not very favorable so many Jews left those towns, young people especially, to seek their fortunes elsewhere. So that's what happened to my parents. My father left Kanczuga directly for Holland and my mother left for Berlin.

One of the interesting things, though, about these little towns is we sort of have almost a caricature image that comes perhaps from watching "Fiddler on the Roof" a little too often of these little towns. But one of the things that really has struck me is that one of the people who came from my mother's hometown was a man by the name of Isidor Rabi who went on to come to the United States and was awarded the Nobel prize in physics in 1946 for the discovery of electromagnetism. So there you have it, a major discovery by a man born in one of those little hick towns, one of those shtetls, as they were called in Eastern Europe.

My mother, as I said, she decided to leave town just like Isidor Rabi had previously and joined her siblings in Berlin while my father went directly to Holland.

>> Edna Friedberg: How long did your mother remain in Berlin?

>> Al Munzer: She arrived in Berlin in the 1920s. Interestingly, probably just at about the same time that Adolph Hitler's infamous book "Mein Kampf," "My struggle" was being published. My mother told me she wasn't terribly interested in politics, didn't know anything about the book at the time and really was much more interested in playing with her two little nephews, Norbert and Yasi. That was her major interest while she was there. She remained in Germany until 1932, December 1932, when she joined her childhood sweetheart, my father, in Holland where they were married.

>> Edna Friedberg: In that beautiful photo that we saw earlier.

>> Al Munzer: A beautiful photograph, which actually, the date, December 1932, is another very important date, of course, in the history of the Nazi era. Because it was just about that time that Adolph Hitler made his bid to become chancellor of Germany, really starting off the Nazi era. So a very happy occasion happening in Holland, the wedding of my parents, and then things really beginning to go bad in Germany.

>> Edna Friedberg: How did your parents make a living in the 1930s?

>> Al Munzer: Well, my parents' families from way back where tailors. My father had a men's clothing business that he started in Holland, very successful business, actually. In fact, it's interesting. I was back in Holland just a few years ago and the sign of his store is still there.
>> Edna Friedberg: Really?
>> Al Munzer: It has a white lie in it. It says “Siegfried Munzer, Tailor from Vienna.” It's really a beautiful sign. That was his business. He was very successful.
>> Edna Friedberg: And when did their family expand?
>> Al Munzer: Well, my parents celebrated the birth of their first child, my sister Eva, in July 1936, just about the same time that the infamous Berlin Olympics were held, which Adolph Hitler, of course, tried to turn into an instrument of Nazi propaganda. That was July 1936.

Two years later, a little bit -- two and a half years later in November 1938, my mother gave birth to her second child, my sister Leah. Another very, very special, memorable, sadly memorable, day in the history of the nausea era because this was -- of the Nazi era because this was right after Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, when hundreds of synagogues were burnt to the ground and thousands of Jewish businesses were plundered in Germany and really the start of the full fury of anti-Semitism.
>> Edna Friedberg: I think it's always very striking, especially hearing your family story to think about when we look at historical chronology, we think of this sort of inevitable plod. But your family was having normal milestones and building and could not know what would happen.
>> Al Munzer: Although they were certainly aware what was happening to their families. When my sister Eva was born, it was really impossible for any of their relatives, for example, to join them for the celebration of the birth. So they were very much aware what was happening to their families but they tried to go on with their lives.

Jews had lived in Holland for hundreds of years, were totally integrated into Dutch society. And my parents had made many, many friends in The Hague. Most of them not Jewish, some of them Jewish. They really became part of the community and felt very, very safe.
>> Edna Friedberg: Did you have a large, extended family elsewhere?
>> Al Munzer: Both my parents came from large families. I have never been able to figure out exactly how many siblings. My father had about six or eight siblings. My mother close to an equal number. The only one who survived that I know of was one of my mother's brothers, Abraham or Adolph Munzer who just at the time of Kristallnacht, just about that time, managed to leave Germany. He had been living in Berlin. He was one of those siblings of my mother who had been living there and had hosted her earlier. He managed to leave one of the very few countries in the world that was still willing to take in Jewish refugees. And that was Bolivia.

So to this day I still have relatives living in Bolivia. In fact, I'm going to go to a wedding -- actually in Chile. All the relatives moved from Bolivia to Chile. I'm going to a wedding in Santiago this coming November.
>> Edna Friedberg: But otherwise all the aunts, uncles, nephews you mentioned --
>> Al Munzer: All the others were killed. One of my father's brothers managed to cross the border from Germany into Holland also around the time of Kristallnacht. It was Emil Munzer. He became part of our family. Many happy photographs of the family coming together, going to the park, trying to go on with normal lives.
>> Edna Friedberg: So, everything starts to change in Europe, obviously, at the end of the decade. On September 1, 1939, Germany begins World War II by invading neighboring Poland to its east. As I mentioned in the introduction, the following spring Holland, as well as Belgium and Luxembourg so-called low countries, were attacked. From talking to your mother and others, because you were not yet in this picture, tell us what you can about what this meant for your family and for other Jews living in the newly occupied countries.
>> Al Munzer: Well, my mother told me that the date, May 10, 1940, of course, was a very major turning point. My parents had been asked to host a member of the Dutch resistance movement the evening prior to May 10. He supposedly carried plans in this his briefcase to preemptively destroy the

big railroad center, crossing center, in the city. It was felt that by destroying that railroad center, it might slow down the invasion from Germany. That morning, May 10, 1940, my parents and their guests listened to the radio and heard about the city of Rotterdam had been bombed and destroyed. Then the largest port city in Europe and still the largest port city.

A few minutes after that, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands came on the radio and announced basically that Holland had surrendered. She asked people to do their duty, wherever they happened to find themselves. My mother told me that the first person to speak up after, when the queen's address, was their guest. He said in Dutch, "God zij dank is voorbij," "Thank God it's over." As far as he was concerned, he had done his duty. He had been part of the resistance movement. He had done what he could to prevent an invasion from Germany and now he would just have to accommodate to living in a country that was occupied.

But my parents, of course, knew what had happened to their relatives in Germany, relatives in Poland. So they suddenly felt very much alone with their two small children, my two sisters.

>> Edna Friedberg: And also based on the experience of their relatives, they knew that they would not share with their fellow neighbors' treatment, that treatment would be different for Jews.

>> Al Munzer: Yes. They knew their treatment was going to be different. And, indeed, within a very short time, all of the regulations that limited the activities of Jews that had been put in place in Germany were put in place in Holland within a very, very short period of time. So Jews had to register as Jews. There was a census that was taken. Jewish men had to take a new middle name just like in Germany, the name Israel; Jewish women the name Sarah.

And I found some documents actually. It was my father's, suddenly appearing this middle name out of nowhere, Israel.

>> Edna Friedberg: And these names were to be able to track Jews.

>> Al Munzer: Just to be able to track Jews. One of the first things that happened, of course, was the banning of the ritual slaughter of animals for kosher meat. And people felt that was fairly benign of a severe measure but that's how things progressed. It started with something fairly simple then to something much more severe.

Now, my mother told me that one of the regulations that was put in place was the ban of Jews going into -- using public transportation or going into public parks. My mother defied some of those regulations, thought they were silly. So she did take the baby carriage with my sister Leah into a park in our immediate neighborhood. A German woman approached the baby carriage. And my mother really got -- suddenly got scared. Her heart stopped almost, she told me. And then the woman looked at my sister in the baby carriage and she saw blue eyes and blond curls. She turned to my mother and she said, "Oh, you can tell that that is good Aryan, German blood." My mother thanked the woman and, of course, never went back to that park. Just one lesson, you know, of really what conditions were like for Jews very soon after the invasion.

>> Edna Friedberg: The following March, March 1941, all Jewish property in Holland was Aryanized. Can you explain what that means and what it meant for your family's livelihood?

>> Al Munzer: Really it meant that property that Jews owned had to be registered and now no longer was their private property but was the property of the German state, basically; another major step really towards impoverishing the Jewish community, isolating them, making it much more difficult for Jews to make a living. Somehow, you know, my parents still managed, you know, to continue. But it was certainly a major, major step, a major change.

>> Edna Friedberg: As we'll discuss in a minute, shortly thereafter your family goes into literal hiding but they made some earlier attempts at hiding or minimizing their Jewish identity. Tell us about your sister's schooling, when they wanted to change that.

>> Al Munzer: Well, my sisters were enrolled in a Catholic school, actually. It's a school I visited recently, actually. I have a picture of them all dressed up, participating in a procession, a typical Catholic procession. You know, pretending, really, to be Catholic. So that was their first attempt of hiding their Jewish identity.

I'm not quite sure when that happened, whether that was before I was born or after I was born. I think it might have been afterwards.
>> Edna Friedberg: Speaking of your birth, early in 1941, your parents realized something surprising. Your mother was pregnant.
>> Al Munzer: Early in 1941 my mother found out that she was pregnant again, her third pregnancy, an unplanned pregnancy. She went to see her obstetrician who told her in no uncertain terms that she ought to have an abortion. He told her that it would be immoral to bring another Jewish life into the world. My mother wasn't particularly religious but she turned to the Bible for advice at that time. She read the story of a woman called Hannah. Hannah was a woman who was desperately to have a child. She would go to the temple every year and pray that she might conceive. She made this pledge to God, if the almighty will give me a child, I will give that child to the service of God, all the days of his or her life. And it was in reading of Hannah's agonizing desire to have a child that my mother decided that she could not have an abortion. Her obstetrician fired her as a patient. And so November 1941 is when I was born with the help of a nurse at home.
>> Edna Friedberg: Just as a parent, pregnancy, new life is fraught but bringing a new life into the world in the midst of war as a Jewish parent, I can only imagine the fear and anxiety your parents must have felt.
>> Al Munzer: Yeah, especially since Jewish, male children, traditionally, the first milestone in their life is to -- is the circumcision ceremony eight days after their birth. And just like the obstetrician had earlier, my parents' friends said don't have him circumcised; it would identify him as being Jewish.

But this time the answer to my parents' dilemma came in the form of a worried look on the face of the pediatrician who had just examined me. My father turned and said, "Is there anything wrong with the baby?" And the pediatrician said, "No. It's just that your son will need a minor operation we call a circumcision." So my father told him of our Jewish tradition. And eight days later, it was probably the last such ceremony in our home.

I had found some amazing photographs of the event, of my circumcision ceremony where you can see the whole family gathered around the table, including my sisters, my father, my Uncle Emil, a lot of other people and another picture that has me on a pillow. What's very special about these photographs is that there are only about -- they are only about 1-by-1 1/2 in size. My mother was to keep those two photographs hidden on her body, in her hair, through her stay in 12 concentration camps. And she had this superstition, this feeling, that if she ever lost those photographs, it would mean that I had been killed or I had died. Fortunately I survived, my mother survived, and the photographs survived. They are now part of the collection of the museum.
>> Edna Friedberg: Thank you for trusting us with those. It's a treasure, a treasure.
>> Al Munzer: Yes.
>> Edna Friedberg: I wonder. You may have been if not the last among the last Jewish baby boys to be named, circumcised for many years.

So over the next 10 months after your birth, by September 1942, conditions for Jews in Holland had become far worse and your parents decided that the family must go into hiding if they were to survive. Tell us more about this decision, the arrangements they made, the factors.
>> Al Munzer: Well, my father had received a call to report for so-called labor duty. He knew what that meant.
>> Edna Friedberg: Can you explain what that meant? Our audience likely does not know.
>> Al Munzer: They knew that meant being sent to a camp, in Holland, a labor camp. One of the many types of concentration camps that we now know existed at the time, with a very good chance of being sent on to a place like Auschwitz later on. So it really was a major reason to try to avoid being sent to those camps.

So the first thing my father did was to undergo a hernia operation which he had been postponing for a long time. That gained him a little bit of time. After that, he had a mock suicide attempt. That gained him admission to a psychiatric hospital. So he was hospitalized there as a

patient, pretend patient. And that, too, sort of avoided him being called to the labor camp. He was there basically in hiding as were many other Jews.

A woman who was a close friend of my mother's -- my parents' neighbors told her priest that she had a vision of the virgin telling her to take Jewish children into hiding. So she made an offer to her priest. His name was Father Luthers. I met him after the war. He in turn approached my mother. My mother entrusted my two sisters, with all their belongings, to this woman's care.

>> Edna Friedberg: So it was not a woman she knew?

>> Al Munzer: This was not a woman she had known, no. And that left her, of course, alone in the house with a little baby. My mother was so afraid at the time of the Nazi soldiers coming to the home, the SS coming to our home. She was afraid of the sound of the ringing bell it was making. So she covered the bell with cloth so that it wouldn't awaken her or wouldn't frighten her. Then she said she spent the night sitting on the chairs, watching the clapper of the bell to see whether it moved. So it did not relieve any of her anxiety.

And then finally, her neighbor, a woman by the name of Annie Magna, agreed to take me in. So my mother handed me over with my crib, my belongings. She closed the house where we lived for the last time. She joined my father in the same psychiatric hospital, in her case pretending to be a nurse's assistant. She did not want to be a patient, she told me. So they went into hiding there. So the whole family by that point was in hiding.

>> Edna Friedberg: If I could interrupt a second. I just want to make sure that the audience understands the risks that people were undertaking by agreeing to shelter a Jewish child and even the logistics of having to feed a hidden mouth in the house. Could you talk about that a bit, please?

>> Al Munzer: Yes. In my case, especially, and certainly in the case of my sisters, since we were in the home illegally and everything was strictly rationed, there were no rationed coupons, you know, for us because we were there illegally.

>> Edna Friedberg: For food.

>> Al Munzer: For food. So the family really had to scrounge around for basic food stuff. That was certainly the case for me and also for my sisters. In addition to that, what they were doing was illegal. They could have been arrested. They could have been sent to prison. They could have lost their lives for really trying to rescue a Jew.

>> Edna Friedberg: In the case of the woman who was sheltering your sisters, these were strangers' children. She did not know them before. Your parents also were trusting their young daughters to a family they did not know.

>> Al Munzer: Exactly.

>> Edna Friedberg: How did you move from being with Annie to being in the home of Tole Madna who we saw earlier?

>> Al Munzer: Annie Madna had some run-ins with the German authorities so she was really afraid to keep me in the house. She felt it put me at risk. So she passed me on initially to her sister. Then it turned out that her sister had a neighbor who was a member of the Dutch Nazi Party. Holland had a huge Nazi Party of its own. So she got scared. She was afraid that the neighbor might hear a little baby crying and would ask her who the baby was and find out that she was hiding a Jewish baby. So she passed me back to her sister, to Annie. And then Annie really almost as a last resort passed me on to her ex-husband Tole Madna. He was an Indonesian man. They had been married and divorced. They had joint custody of their three children. So I joined Tole Madna and the three Madna children, One caucasian-looking child with three kids who looked very, very different. Annie Madna was Dutch but Tole Madna was Indonesian.

The person who really took care of me when I was with Tole Madna was the nanny who had taken care of the three Madna children, Dewi, Wilhi, and Robby. I became her baby and she became my mother. And she was an amazing woman. She did not speak any Dutch. She was completely illiterate, could not read or write and the only language she spoke was the Indonesian language which we now call Bahasa we then called Malay. She would walk miles every day just to get some milk for me. As I said, you know, there were no ration coupons for me.

Actually, a few years ago when I was back in Holland, a woman approached me and said, “You know, you drank my milk.” I asked, "What do you mean?" She said, “Well, all school children in Holland were given a little bottle of milk every day. And my mother told me to save half that little bottle for the baby next door.” And I was that baby next door. So here you have a young child 6, 7 years old participating in saving a human life. Really, really amazing.

Mima -- I slept in Mima's bed. I'm told that she kept a knife under her pillow vowing to kill any Nazi who might try to come and get me or even kill me rather than to have me fall in their hands. An amazing, amazing woman.

>> Edna Friedberg: Was she a religious woman?

>> Al Munzer: She -- we're not even sure of her religion. She was probably Muslim. I'm told with a heavy Buddhist influence. And I'm told that she kept a little altar in the house. She would put little bits of food stuff there. And this was something I found out very recently from one of my foster sisters. And nobody was allowed to touch those little bits of food until a few days had passed and then everybody could partake. So she was religious in that sense but we never really knew very much about her religion.

My foster father was nominally Catholic. His ex-wife Annie was protestant. So a whole mix. My foster sister sort of takes pride in the fact that she counted five and a half religions represented in the family counting me as half since I was so little, half Jewish.

>> [Laughter]

>> Edna Friedberg: Your parents, their children are in hiding but the day after Christmas, 1942, what happened to them? They had been in the psychiatric hospital.

>> Al Munzer: On Christmas day there was one more wonderful thing that happened with my parents. It was the last time that my two sisters were taken to them for a visit. Very high risk. But they did manage to have a minor reunion that day. Then just two days later, the psychiatric hospital was empty of all patients and staff and they were all arrested and sent on, first to a concentration camp in Holland. Well, first, to a prison in Holland. And then from there to concentration camp in Holland, Westerbork. So that was first of about 12 concentration camp that my parents were to visit.

>> Edna Friedberg: Where were they taken after Westerbork?

>> Al Munzer: After Westerbork my parents were taken to a concentration camp in southern Holland, Vught, which was the headquarters of the Philips electronics company. My parents were assigned to do work, slave labor, for Philips Electronics. My mother learned from the grapevine that one of the key needs of the Germans, of the German Army, was for radio tubes. So she learned how to assemble radio tubes. And that's what kept her alive initially in Vught.

My mother told me that there would be a lineup every morning in the concentration camp. All the prisoners would line up. And one day a man by the name of Heinrich Himmler actually addressed the crowd. He told them to all continue working for the success of the Reich, that nothing bad would ever happen to them. My mother told me that while he was talking -- this was early, early in the morning, dawn -- she saw the spire of a little Dutch church in the distance. She wondered how wonderful it would be if peace were to break out at that moment and she could just run to that little church and fall on her knees and thank God for having been freed and for surviving. She didn't care whether it was a church, a synagogue or a mosque, just a place to thank God for her survival. But that wasn't to be. The promise from Heinrich Himmler didn't matter. Just a few months later Vught was emptied of all inmates, of all Jews. They were all sent on to Auschwitz, including my parents.

>> Edna Friedberg: Were your parents separated at this point?

>> Al Munzer: It was in Auschwitz that my parents were separated. My father was assigned to working in a factory in Auschwitz where he remained I believe for about six months at least, maybe even longer. My mother was sent on to another camp. Fortunately they were not selected to be killed immediately in Auschwitz like many others. She was sent on to another camp where she was assigned to slave labor for the Telefunken factory, electronics factory, doing the same kind of work, assembling radio tubes.

Recently I found -- it's amazing how documents are still appearing. So recently through the research service here at the museum, I found a little slip of paper that had my father's number as a

prisoner in Auschwitz, no name. Then it said in German "Premium Employee" and a signature. I asked the researcher what this meant. He said it meant that your father's wages at the factory where he did his slave labor had to be paid to the SS and that he warranted a premium level of pay.
>> Edna Friedberg: Because of his skills.
>> Al Munzer: Because of his skills.
>> Edna Friedberg: But not paid to him. He was a slave laborer.
>> Al Munzer: A slave laborer. Paid to the Nazis. Just an amazing little detail that I had never heard about before.

My mother told me that in the Telefunken factory, one of the things that gave her strength and gave her hope was that there were many German soldiers who had been repatriated from the eastern front and they were minus an arm or a leg, severely injured working alongside her. They were so vehemently anti-Nazi, anti-Hitler that they would do everything to really sabotage the operations of the factory. My mother described that she, too, actually participated in little acts of sabotage. She would spend a whole day assembling one radio tube very carefully. And then at the end of the day when the siren was surrounded, indicating the end of the workday, she would put that -- take the radio tube apart, put it back in the drawer and start the process all over again the following day. She took some pride in not enhancing Germany's capacity to do war.
>> Edna Friedberg: Small ways to maintain her morale.
>> Al Munzer: In small ways. Other ways were trying to observe Jewish holidays.
Finding -- pretending to go to -- especially the holiday of Hanukkah when candles are lit. My mother -- of course, they did not have candles. They did not have a candelabra, menorah. So my mother went to the infirmary and told them that she was having her menstrual period and needed lots of cotton. She got wads of cotton and then a little bit of oil from the machine she worked. And that's how they were able to light candles for Hanukkah. It was that kind of activity, I think, that kept her alive.
>> Edna Friedberg: Even how you described her hiding those two tiny pictures of you in her hair, that's an act of spiritual resistance as well.
>> Al Munzer: Very much so. I've often wondered how my mother survived. She witnessed the bombing of the Telefunken factory. She said the traditional Jewish prayer of thanks to God for having survived to see that day as she saw the flames going up. But that was not the end of her ordeal. Because as described in a book, she was then put on a Death March as the prisoners were gradually moved back west. But even there my mother -- somewhere along the way she was put back in one of those cattle cars. She told me that she was able to take a glimpse of the countryside, a glimpse of the countryside outside. She saw the beautiful springtime. And she said to herself, you know, after the war we're not going to have much money but this would not be a bad way to see the beauty of a countryside. I think it was that kind of spirit that really allowed my mother to remain alive until she was finally freed at the Danish border.
>> Edna Friedberg: Of course, during this period she had absolutely no information about the fate of her three young children. She had seen your sisters, as you mentioned, that final time not knowing it was the final time. Tell us what happened to your sisters, please.
>> Al Munzer: Well, sadly, the husband and wife had a fight. It turned out that the husband in the family where my sisters were in hiding actually had been a member of the Dutch Nazi Party. His wife was unaware of that. He denounced his wife as hiding two Jewish children to the Nazis. His wife was taken prisoner and, of course, my two sisters were taken as well. His wife eventually was freed but my two sisters were immediately sent on to Westerbork and after just a day there were put on the transport to Auschwitz where they were killed February 11, 1944. They were just 6 and 8 years old at the time.

Last year, which was the 70th anniversary of their death, was really a time when I came fully to grips with my loss, with the loss of my sisters. As a young child growing up with the Holocaust, I really -- I was about 3 1/2 years old when the Holocaust -- after the war, 4, 5 years old. I really had little understanding what had happened. I thought part of The Hague was just reduced to rubble. I thought walking across fields through rubble to visit friends of my mother was just the normal activity, that every city was like that, or playing hide and seek in bunkers on the beach. I thought that was normal.

And then there were these photographs of these two beautiful girls on the wall. My mother's neighbor would tell me that my sister Eva had some beautiful handwriting, even when she was just 6 years old. I would actually, as a little child, be somewhat jealous of my two sisters. I had no comprehension at all initially of what had happened to them. That just came on very, very gradually over the years.
>> Edna Friedberg: As you matured, did you ever feel guilty for surviving while they did not?
>> Al Munzer: My mother would very often remind me of that pledge that Hannah made, you know, that I talked about.
>> Edna Friedberg: Hannah in the Bible.
>> Al Munzer: Yeah, if the almighty will give me a child, I will give the child to the service of God all the days of his or her life. My mother, whenever I was bad, would remind me of that pledge.
>> [Laughter]
>> Al Munzer: It had a tremendous psychological effect. I think that's one reason I became a doctor and one reason, you know, I volunteer here at the museum. I think it had -- it's not guilt as much but it created I think a sense of responsibility.
>> Edna Friedberg: I'm going to interrupt you a second. Al is very modest. After coming to this country, he became a highly respected pulmonologist, specialist in lung disease, and later served as president of the American Lung Association. So he really has more than fulfilled that pledge.
>> [Applause]
>> Al Munzer: I sort of skipped over one event, the reunion with my mother.
>> Edna Friedberg: I want to go back a little more. We have not talked about the day-to-day reality of your life as a child in hiding, a child who was not supposed to exist. You already mentioned being a white-skinned child in an Indonesian household. Did neighbors know you were there? How was your presence explained if someone saw you?
>> Al Munzer: I was certainly not allowed out of the house.
>> Edna Friedberg: For how long?
>> Al Munzer: For about three years that I was there.
>> Edna Friedberg: Three years. Try keeping a preschooler still.
>> Al Munzer: The only view that I had of the outside world was what I could see through the mail slot. That was my view, total view, of the outside world.

There were a few neighboring kids who appear in some of the photographs who were allowed to play with me. They were Germans but they were communists. It was a Communist family, very staunchly anti-fascist, anti-Nazi. So they were trusted to come into the house and play with me.

I have only happy memories being with the Madna family. I remember Papa Madna playing on the piano. I remember Mima singing songs to me in the Indonesian language. That was my native tongue, actually.

Occasionally I remember having to go into hiding. I didn't know what that meant. It was only in retrospect. I would have to go into a small cellar because the house was being searched. But that's where the family kept all of their Christmas decorations. I do remember playing with those decorations. One of those memories that has remained with me.

And then I remember one time my two sisters, my foster sisters, were doing their homework. I saw them writing. So I took a pen and started scribbling, typical 3-year-old, and tried to imitate. They laughed. I remember getting very, very angry at them because of that. Again, one of those memories that has stayed with me.
>> Edna Friedberg: So for three years they kept you indoors. They managed to feed you. They loved you. They nurtured you. And then the war ended in May 1945, ended in Europe with Germany's surrender. Your mother, who managed to survive, who you didn't remember, came to find you. Tell us about that reunion.
>> Al Munzer: My mother had been freed at the Danish border through the negotiation of the freedom of several thousand Jewish women. She was, of course, in a terrible state and was sent on to Sweden for rehabilitation, for recuperation. In August 1945 is when she returned to Holland. That's when I was reunited with my mother.

I recently had a conversation with my foster sister and she told me that the first house my mother came to was her mother's home. That's where she had left me.
>> Edna Friedberg: Right. So as far as she knew, you were still there.
>> Al Munzer: So she answered the door and there was my mother whom she did not really remember very well. And my mother asked about the whereabouts of my sister and about me. So it was up to this 15-year-old to tell her, well, I really don't know anything about your daughters, Eva and Leah, but I do know where your little son went to.

By the way, you know, children placed in hiding were given a new name. So I had been given the name Bobby. And to this day whenever I talk to the Madna family, it's always Bobby. For many years I thought that I was called Bobby because that's what the dog was called.
>> [Laughter]
>> Al Munzer: The reason being that if people heard Bobby being called, they would think, well, they're just calling the dog. Then one of my foster siblings set me straight a few years ago and said, no, the dog's name was Teddy not Bobby.
>> [Laughter]
>> Al Munzer: So there went that theory. I may have been called Bobby because the Madna son, their child, was called Robby. So because the two names were so close together, people might think Robby was just being called. So that's how I came to the name Bobby.

So she told my mother when my mother returned, where I was. She took my mother to the Madna home. I was asleep in one of the back rooms. I remember being awakened. Typical 3 1/2-year-old, something like that, I was carried into the living room crying, cranky. So the whole family was sitting in a circle and I was passed from lap to lap, the way you typically do with a crying child. And what I do remember is there was one lap I wouldn't sit in and that was my own mother because she was obviously a complete stranger to me. I already had a mother and that was Mima Saina.

So my mother decided that Mima ought to continue to care for me while she, you know, my mother went on looking for work. But that wasn't to be because two months later, in October 1945, Mima suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and passed away. And actually, I have no recollections, no memories at all of Mima except, you know, a few words of the Indonesian language that I remember. And I do remember visiting her grave. So many years later when I went back to The Hague and went to the cemetery, I was able to find my way to the grave because I had been there so many times before as a young child.
>> Edna Friedberg: What happened to your father?
>> Al Munzer: My father remained in Auschwitz for about six months. He was then sent on to Mauthausen, another terrible concentration camp where Jews were forced to carry -- these other prisoners forced to carry these huge blocks up a ramp where many of them would be tripped and then fall down and be killed.

After Mauthausen, in Austria, he was sent on to three more camps in Austria: Gusen, Steyr, and then Ebensee, which was one of the most beautiful spots in the world. Many people probably are familiar with the movie "The Sound of Music." That's where it was filmed. In fact, you know, there was Edelweiss strolling in that former camp.

My father was assigned to doing slave labor in abandoned salt mines assembling V2 rockets, terrible, terrible work. He survived to see liberation by the U.S. Army in May 1945 but his condition was so poor, he was so weak, that he passed away two months later still in a concentration camp in Ebensee. That's where he was buried.

I visited his grave in the former concentration camp. It's standing at his grave that I really first fully came to grips with the loss that I had suffered. I broke out in tears. I had been there twice. And this happened both times. It's really where I felt, you know, I never knew my father except through the stories my mother had told me and through photographs. But standing there at his grave really, really hit me very hard.

>> Edna Friedberg: Do you know how your mother found out that your sisters had died, had been killed?
>> Al Munzer: I'm not sure. She found out very quickly after she had arrived in Holland. Again, I don't know how my mother managed to deal with that news. I think what really kept her alive and allowed her to resume a normal life after her ordeal, after her tremendous loss of her husband and two beautiful daughters, was the fact that she had me to care for. That's what she said. I think that's really -- that really was the case.
>> Edna Friedberg: One more question before we open to questions from the audience because we're almost out of time. You mentioned to me an incident that happened to you and your mother still in Holland shortly after the war when you were going to the movies. If you could tell us about that, please.
>> Al Munzer: Sure. We were standing in line to go to the movies, I think a newsreel. A man standing behind us saw the number, the tattoo that had been tattooed in Auschwitz on her arm. He pointed to it and he said, "There's one they didn't get." So, you know, anti-Semitism really continued after the war, even in enlightened a place as Holland. It wasn't the end of hatred. My mother after that kept her arm covered. She war three-quarter length sleeves for the rest of her life. I really never even could remember what the number was because I hardly ever saw it.
>> Edna Friedberg: In recent years your experience, your love for the Madna family, has actually given you some new relationships with young people from Indonesia. Could you tell us about those, please?
>> Al Munzer: About two years ago my story was brought to the attention of a group of Indonesian students brought to the United States to learn what it is to live in a multi-cultural society, multi-faith society. I was invited to speak to them. When I first started speaking and I showed a photograph of Mima holding me, there was a gasp in the air when I told them that I was the baby she was holding. And then at the very end of my talk I said, you I know, I vaguely remember Mima singing a lullaby to me. It was called "Nina Bobo." And all 25 students started singing it in unison. It was an incredibly beautiful moment. After that, you know, young women wearing head scarves, traditional Muslim head scarves, came up to me, hugged me, kissed me and said, you know, we're all family. It was just an incredibly powerful moment. It shows the power really of the story, of the rescue by the Madna family and the impact it has on people.
>> Edna Friedberg: Thank you, Al.

We have a few minutes for questions. Please raise your hand if you have a question. Do we have mics? We'll pass microphones so people in the audience can hear wherever they are seated.
>> My question is, after Mima died and you were with your mom from then on?
>> Al Munzer: Yes. After Mima died, I remained with my mother. She initially managed to sell the cloth that had remained from my father's tailoring shop. That's how she made a living initially. Then she acquired a cosmetics store. That's how she continued to make a living until we finally moved to Belgium and then ultimately in 1958 emigrated to the United States. My mother just wanted to get away from all the memories in Europe. She never went back to Holland after we came to the United States. She traveled but never to Holland.
>> Edna Friedberg: Or to her birthplace in Poland either.
>> Al Munzer: Or to Poland. I have been back there. Several years ago I received a message through the Museum of a commemoration of the day when all the remaining Jews in that little town, Rymanow, were deported. I decided after some hesitation to go. It was really an amazing visit. It's an idyllic little town, just like my mother described. And, again, to realize that thousands of Jews were deported from that little town on one day is just mind boggling how that was possible.
>> Edna Friedberg: Including the extended family you never knew.
>> Al Munzer: Exactly.
>> Edna Friedberg: Other questions?

Ok. I have a favor to ask of you. In a moment I will turn to Al. It's our tradition here at *First Person* that the *First Person* has the last word in the program. When he's finished talking, if you would all please stand and remain standing for a moment, our photographer, Joel, will come on stage and

take a really nice portrait of Al with you in the background in order to capture our experience here today.

With that, Al, closing thoughts, please.

>> Al Munzer: Well, you know, the story of the Holocaust is really a horror, one of horror. The terrible consequences that begin with hatred, hating anybody. My take from my own story is that even with all of this evil all around them, in a sea of evil, it was still possible for a few people to do the right thing and to save a human life and to take that risk. I think we all, you know, could learn from that, to stand up to evil wherever we see it. When we hear someone say I hate so-and-so just say, you know, don't use that language. We are all meant to love each other as human beings regardless of who we are or what we are. I think that's really the message that I would like to leave people with.

>> Edna Friedberg: Thank you for sharing your story today.

[Applause]