

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
First Person – Joel Nommick  
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>> Bill Benson: Good morning, and welcome to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My name is Bill Benson. I am the host of the museum's public program, First Person. We are in our 19th year of the First Person program. Thank you for joining us. Our First Person today is Mr. Joel Nommick, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2018 season of First Person is made possible by the generosity of the Louis Franklin Smith Foundation, with additional funding from the Arlene and Daniel Fisher Foundation. We are grateful for their sponsorship.

First Person is a series of twice-weekly conversations with survivors of the Holocaust who share with us their firsthand accounts of their experience during the Holocaust. Each of our First Person guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue until August 9. The [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org), provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Joel will share with us his "First Person" account of his experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Joel a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our on-line conversation: Never Stop Asking Why. The conversation aims to inspire individuals and new generations to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises, and what that history means for societies today. To join the Never Stop Asking Why conversation, you can ask your question and tag the Museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy. You can find the hashtag on the back of your program, as well. A recording of this program will be made available on the Museum's YouTube page.

Your program will have more information about that as well.

What you are about to hear from Joel is one individual's account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction.

We begin with this photo of Joel Nommick as a young boy.

That's a great photo isn't it too?

He was born on December 30, 1942 in Macon, France to Jewish parents, Jean and Agnes Nommick. His parents had owned and operated two successful businesses, a tannery and a factory that manufactured fur coats.

By the time Joel was born, France had already been under German rule for more than a year and half. In May of 1940, Germany had invaded France. Soon after the invasion, the Vichy government came to power in the southern part of France where Joel's family lived. The Vichy government was a collaborationist government that worked closely with the Nazi regime. Vichy officials enacted numerous anti-Jewish laws. This map shows the German-occupied Northern France and the Vichy-controlled Southern France. The red arrow points to the area where Joel lived with his family.

This photograph of Joel's father, Jean, was taken before the war started. In 1941, one of Jean's employees falsely accused him of being a thief. He was arrested and sent to jail. Here we see Joel's mother, Agnes. This photograph was taken in 1945. Following Joel's father's arrest, Agnes and Joel's two older brothers assumed false identities, living under the surname Sabatier.

The years spent living with false identities were difficult as the family often could not obtain ration cards. Some of their neighbors took great personal risk by helping Joel's family obtain food. During this time Joel's father was transported to eight different prisons, military hospitals, and concentration camps including Drancy, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen. After he was liberated from Bergen-Belsen, Joel's father wrote a letter to the family saying they would be reunited soon, however he never returned.

We close with this photograph of Joel and his mother in 1945, after the war.

Following the end of World War II, Joel and his family remained in France. Joel graduated from the University of Lyon with a degree in political science. He taught high school in Lyon. Later, he worked for the Xerox Corporation in France. Eventually, Joel started a company to help other firms to export their products, which led to his representing major eyewear design and manufacturing firms in the U.S, moving to New York City in 1972. After selling his business Joel then went into the retail eyewear business in New York City opening several stores before selling his stores in 2010 but continuing to manage the business until his retirement at the end of 2012.

Joel had two children with his first wife; his first son was born in 1965 and his daughter in 1966. He married his second wife Sandra in 1996. Joel's children, who live in France, have given him four grandchildren.

After his retirement, Joel and Sandra moved to Washington, D.C. for a year then moved to New Hampshire to be closer to Sandra's children before returning to Washington, D.C. a year ago. Joel started volunteering here at the museum in January of this year. You will find Joel here on Wednesdays and Fridays at the Survivors Desk where he talks with individual museum visitors about his Holocaust experience.

I would like you to know that today is the first time that Joel has spoken publicly to a group about his experience.

With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Joel Nommick.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Joel, I'm going to put you here. Thank you so much, Joel for joining us, for being willing to be our First Person. And what an honor it is for us to have this be your inaugural time to speak to a large group. So thank you very much.

>> Joel Nommick: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: We have a great deal to cover in a short period. So I'm just going to start right away. Before you tell us about what happened to your family and to you during the Holocaust and World War II, let's start first with you telling us about your family and their lives before the

war began in September 1939?

>> Joel Nommick: My parents were originally born in the Russian empire before World War I. And they moved to Western Europe in the '20s after World War I. My left in 1925, and my mother arrived in Paris in December of 1927. They knew each other from where they were originally from, Estonia.

And they get married in May, 1928 in Paris. From there, they moved to Argentina to Buenos Aires, where my father had a brother. And my mother also had a brother. In fact, a friend of my father's.

This is where my older brother was born, February 1, 1929. In Buenos Aires. They came back to France I think in 1930.

And they elected to live just outside of Paris in a west suburb in a place called Goush.

They stay on that side of Paris at that time. My father was in Vietnam, and he was in the trading of furs.

>> Bill Benson: Furs, right.

>> Joel Nommick: And it happened that in 1937, the company in the village of Macon where I was born, went through difficulties. And they had to close the business. A judge asked my father -- whether it had been closed or trying to take it over.

We moved, and my mother moved with my two brothers. In one year the company was turned around completely and was really very profitable.

>> Bill Benson: You said to me, Joel, as a result of that your family at that time, they were living a good life?

>> Joel Nommick: They were comfortable, very comfortable. They were privileged. The population in general, they were privileged.

But they were privileged, but they were humble people. They were not, you know, showing their things. They were careful to deal with always caring for others.

So that's the way they lived. Unfortunately, World War II started.

>> Bill Benson: Changed all that.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Did your parents, when they were in Buenos Aires, did they consider staying in Argentina?

>> Joel Nommick: I think probably at the beginning, but I don't think they were liking it so much, to be there. They preferred to come back.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the visit you had from your grandparents from Estonia. Your grandparents came to visit, and that was an important time.

>> Joel Nommick: They came in 1931, first time. And they stayed two, three months, with my parents. And my two brothers.

This is where my older brother was learning Yiddish. They came back also in 1938 with two of my uncles from Estonia. Brothers of my mother.

And my grandparents wanted to stay and my parents wanted them to stay. But because at the time to accept anybody, basically from the East, especially, they were Jews, it was not safe.

But it was a fact.

So they had to go back.

>> Bill Benson: As you noted, that probably saved their lives, right? That they had to return?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. Saved their lives, because what they did when the war started, they went to the soviet.

>> Bill Benson: Where they were safe.

>> Joel Nommick: If in etc., they would be killed by the Estonian.

>> Bill Benson: When World War II began and Poland was invaded in September 1939, the war's full impact doesn't really occur in France until May of 1940 when Germany attacked France and several other countries. Tell us what you can about the early stages of the German occupation. What it meant to your family and the community in the early parts of the occupation.

>> Joel Nommick: When France fell in 1940 they were what we call the exiled, the debacle.

>> Bill Benson: From Paris, right?

>> Joel Nommick: And people were going on the roads from the north and they were scared about the advance of the Germans. So I know that my parents and my brother, they went down in the south of France. And they stayed there for a couple, two, three weeks until things calmed down and they came back to where they were living, in that village.

>> Bill Benson: Joel, if I'm right, at one point, I believe your father went to Berlin to try to save family members.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. That was in 1936.

>> Bill Benson: That was '36. That goes back a little bit.

>> Joel Nommick: My mother. They even drove from France to Berlin. And I think he was able to finance the passage of two of his colleagues. They came to France.

>> Bill Benson: Even though the war hadn't become, came to power in '33, so that's what sent them there to try to get them out?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: After the German invasion of France, did your parents, do you know if they tried to leave the country?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, they try to first come to Canada, and it was closed. Try to come --

>> Bill Benson: Closed to any new immigrants.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. To the U.S., it was almost impossible. Very difficult to get any visa. Argentina was closed also. So basically, they stayed there.

>> Bill Benson: And as we said at the beginning, Germany occupied the northern part of France, the collaborationist government had the southern part of France where you were located. But you told me that Vichy government, they were so closely aligned with the Nazis, they implemented many Jewish laws. Can you say a bit about that?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, first of all, you have to go to your local station, to your local CTO. And register yourself as a Jew, as well as your household.

Then it was difficult to travel, because you needed like a passport or an identity card to travel within the region.

So it was difficult for that, but I think they managed to leave.

My father was --

>> Bill Benson: In 1940. And then of course in the spring of 1941, your father was arrested. Tell us why your father was arrested and what happened after his arrest.

>> Joel Nommick: There were a lot more in 1941 enacted by the Vichy government for the Jews. If you were in the city, you had to wear a star. You were not permitted to be a teacher anymore or a doctor, or people in the administration. A judge, lawyer.

>> Bill Benson: So all Jews forced out of their professions?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And then there was something called Aryanization of business. Which means Jews a forced out, not only of their profession, but also out of their -- my father was denounced as a profiteer.

And I just reread the letter from the administration at that time. And when they send him to prison. And it was because he was from the -- he was a -- how can I say that. Morality was really low.

>> Bill Benson: Low morality for his arrest.

>> Joel Nommick: And when I know how my family, it's even infuriating today. But anyway, was arrested.

>> Bill Benson: Before you go on. You know who denounced him too?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And this is someone that my father put in business.

>> Bill Benson: A non-Jew that he put in business?

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. Even paid for furniture for him and his family. To have suit. To work. And things like that.

>> Bill Benson: But here he thought he had an opportunity to put your father out of business.

>> Joel Nommick: So he was denounced to the Vichy government. It was a special service for the Jewish -- which was run by a guy who died quietly in bed in 1965.

And the guy who denounced my father. He had one year of national the dignity.

>> Bill Benson: The punishment was one year of national dignity?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: What does that mean?

>> Joel Nommick: That means don't do that again.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: So now your father's arrested and ultimately he would spend time in I think eight or more different prisons, hospitals and concentration camps.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about the places he went before he ended up at a military hospital in Toulouse.

>> Joel Nommick: He was arrested in our village by the French police. And he was sent to prison, not far from Geneva. A place in Bellguard, and then he was transferred to a jail in Lyon. And from there, he was sent to a camp. In the foothills of the Pyrenees.

This camp originally was built not for prisoners, but for people who were freeing the regime.

>> Bill Benson: So free in Spain.

>> Joel Nommick: Spain. So there were several camps in southern France which were built for them to be there.

So this camp was mainly, they had a lot of Jewish foreigners in there.

And there were also people there because they were in the resistance or against the regime.

>> Bill Benson: This was a very hard place.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. It was not an ex-termination camp, but it was -- ex-termination camp, but it was a hard place. This was a small camp, like 3,000 people. About 1200 people died in that camp.

>> Bill Benson: It's hard labor, mostly?

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. Hard labor and the food was really very low ration. And people were beaten if they were not working.

So he was there until he went to the military hospital in Toulouse. Let me see my notes.

>> Bill Benson: There are so many different places here.

>> Joel Nommick: In the spring of '42. He was able to be transferred -- a Jewish doctor there. And in order to get out, he simulated epilepsy. In order to do so, he was drinking like 3 gallons of water a day. And in a week, ten days he was starting to spasm. So he was transferred.

>> Bill Benson: And another prisoner was a doctor who helped.

>> Joel Nommick: Told him what to do. So he was able to get out of there. And he was in this military. And where my mother joined him in Toulouse, not in hospital, but with my two brothers in I think it was June of 1942.

And in fact, I was conceived there. Not in the hospital but somewhere else.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: Conceived in Toulouse at that time. OK.

[Laughter]

>> Joel Nommick: I always joke with my mother. You had me in a prison, that's not nice.

[Laughter]

And from there I was able to be transferred to a place on the foothills of the Pyrenees. And just up the mountain from there. So they were in a hotel there, and there was also the wife of an associate of my father, who was in the business. Who was also there.

And they were originally from Poland.

Their name was Berger. And she was there with twin daughters, 6 years of age.

>> Bill Benson: So Mina Berger, here twin daughters.

>> Joel Nommick: My two brothers.

>> Bill Benson: And your mother and your father.

>> Joel Nommick: And my mother was pregnant. So my father has arranged to help Mr. Berger to get out of there to join them and to go to Spain.

And the village said I will take you all in Spain with my car. Because we all relatives. The police on the other side.

And the problem is that Mr. Berger left, but he was not able to join us. So he went directly to Spain, and we waited too long.

>> Bill Benson: So he went directly to Spain.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, so could not go.

September 20, 1942, the police came to. And my father was able to buy them, not to take us. So they left us.

That was the French police. So he was back at --

>> Bill Benson: So your father bribed the police to just take him and leave the rest of his family.

>> Joel Nommick: It was a big gamble.

>> Bill Benson: Absolutely.

>> Joel Nommick: Thank God, didn't have to be subjected to that.

>> Bill Benson: So they took your father.

>> Joel Nommick: They took my father. Back to Berlin. And I think he left on the 25th of September, 1942.

>> Bill Benson: For Auschwitz.

>> Joel Nommick: This convoy, had 1,008 people on board. Mainly Romanian. Jewish-Romanian.

And after the war, there were only eight people alive.

>> Joel Nommick: My mother to survive, you know? So she was able to solve that during the war asking nothing from nobody. Because the business was not going to give her anything anyway.

>> Bill Benson: Right, because she lost the business. So he had put some money away that she could use. Immediately though, your family went under a false identity.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. When we came back. And my mother even had the money to give

Mina Berger money every month for her rent and to live for her and her two daughters until the end of the war. Until it was over.

>> Bill Benson: So, you're the Sabatier family now.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: But you're in the village.

>> Joel Nommick: Everybody knew us from before.

[Laughter]

So there is an episode like that. One of the people from the police of Vichy, you know, in their uniform. There was a young man, he was like 16 or 17 at the time, and he was in school with my brother before.

And he was controlling when my brothers would take the bus to high school. He would say, Sabatier, Sabatier!

>> Bill Benson: He knew perfectly well who he was. Why do you think? Because you lived under those circumstances I think for the better part of two years. Why do you think in that little village, given what had happened to your father, why nobody denounced you?

>> Joel Nommick: I think in this village, 22 Jews were hidden during the war. None of them was denounced. None of them was arrested. So I think it shows that most of the people were against, first of all, the Vichy regime, and even some people who were probably Polish, didn't want to denounce people because it was not in their moral compass or their faith or their idea, their philosophy. So I think we were all blessed.

>> Bill Benson: Because it could have been very different in many other communities in other parts of France.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. So this happened on the larger scale, where they saved over 3,000 kids there, almost 4,000. But it was also for people, it was a hard decision to make. Because if you were found out -- if they found out that you had helped Jewish people, they will punish you. Punishment will be they kill your kids and yourself right away, or they send everybody to camps. And a lot of people lost their lives like this.

So sometimes I'm trying to put myself in the shoes of these people. I said, what would I have done? Having a family. A lot of people don't do anything bad, but you know, they didn't want to be committed.

>> Bill Benson: Just turn a blind eye.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: In fact, you mentioned to me, there were a number of neighbors and people you knew that were not Jews who did find ways to help you.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. I remember two families very well. One they were the house next to ours. And they had a little factory. They were collecting milk from the farm, and they were transforming the milk to pasteurize it, to be sold in the store.

And also to transform them into cheese or cream, whatsoever. And we never had to look for -- they always bring us everything we needed. Cheese, milk.

>> Bill Benson: Was this the Thomassons?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. I remember we used to play together when I was a kid. And there was another family that didn't have kids, and they had actually a convenience store. They were about 250 yards from us. And they help us because sometimes we didn't have tickets. So they help.

>> Bill Benson: Tickets, meaning rations for food?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. You have tickets for butter, for bread. For anything you needed. And

those were distributed by the administration. So you could not buy them.

>> Bill Benson: So money didn't matter?

>> Joel Nommick: They did it on purpose, because otherwise rich people will buy all the tickets, and maybe make money out of it. So they didn't want that to happen. But we had a good printer in the village, and it was good to make our... Did that for many people, and for resistance people also.

But those people put this convenience store. They told my mother if she was going to be taken, they will take her three sons. They will be like their family.

And they were in my life. And also I was glad to be able to talk to people who knew my father when I was a kid. Because they told me what kind of man he was.

>> Bill Benson: I want to come back to that, for sure. But I don't want to forget one important point. Soon after you went back to Thoissey, you were born. What do you know about that? With a war going on?

>> Joel Nommick: War going on and I was born on December 30, 1942. And the day before, and that was a terrible winter, 1942. A lot of snow, cold.

My mother had to take the bus to go to the maternity ward. Where I was born, the next day.

>> Bill Benson: I was really struck by that. So your mother comes in as Sabatier.

>> Joel Nommick: But my uncle went to declare me. With the name of my father where he was born, my mother and so on and where we are living.

>> Bill Benson: I was struck also when you told us a few minutes ago about the police officer for Vichy, France, who would look at the papers and knew your brother from high school.

There was another one who you said was another --

>> Joel Nommick: High-ranking. And his father was living about a mile from us, and he had a good relationship with my father. So this guy joined the war, a lot of folks would think, kill people, arrested people. But not in the village.

>> Bill Benson: But not in your village.

>> Joel Nommick: So he would see my mother and he had that beret from his uniform and he would say hello.

>> Bill Benson: And go elsewhere and do terrible things?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And he left in 1944, and went to Italy, so we don't know. He probably escaped somewhere.

>> Bill Benson: Your two, but who were a good deal older than you, were going to high school in a neighboring town. Macon.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And living in a boarding house. Tell us about that.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, my mother didn't want to put them in the boarding part of the high school. Because she was scared that if they come to arrest the Jews at the school, they will have no chances to escape.

So they were -- a lady was giving room and board to people to make some money. And there were my two brothers there.

My uncle was in the resistance with them and two younger men who fled because they didn't want to be forced.

>> Bill Benson: So to join the German army, they didn't want to be forced to join the German army?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. So this lady had a son who was a prisoner of war in Germany. And she thought if she was going to denounce everybody to the German, they will send back her



son. So that's what she did. She went and denounced everybody.

>> Bill Benson: To the German authorities?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And the commander from Germany headquarters was in World War I, was not a Nazi. So he made sure that everyone was informed at 8:00 at night the same day. Because he let them know tomorrow morning at 6:30, I'm going to come and arrest everybody. So they fled. I think at 6:00, he did it on purpose, because at 9:00, is curfew, so you cannot be outside.

So they had time to go somewhere else. So they escaped. And this poor woman, her son didn't come back until 1945.

>> Bill Benson: She didn't get her son back at that time?

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: During that time, tell us about your mother. You'd said to me that she was able to take care of us all, and yet she paid a price for it.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. First of all, there were tons -- she had probably -- she was depressive, of course. Because living in anxiety all the time, you know? Never know if tomorrow she'll be dead. And I was very often sick. I was a baby, and she has to take care of me and the rest. And she told me, certain nights she will go to bed and she was praying, God, please let me die tonight.

And then of course, she will not die, and she was so sorry she said that. But life was -- she was a strong woman. Even during those times, she had to take care of everybody.

And she always was there for us.

>> Bill Benson: Jews were not allowed to have radios, but she had a hidden radio?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. With those big thing, you know? And they were listening to London every night.

>> Bill Benson: To the progress of the war on the BBC?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And also you had a hidden room in your house if I remember right?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. I know, because I used to play in it when I was a kid. So I didn't know --

>> Bill Benson: Later.

>> Joel Nommick: I thought it was for hide and seek.

[Laughter]

Yeah. So it was behind some furniture which were movable. And there was a door too. And there were some goods in it if they were to be there and stuck for a few days.

>> Bill Benson: You continued to live under these conditions, circumstances, not knowing what happened to your father once he had left for Auschwitz. But your mom did hear from him?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. We receive a letter from Auschwitz from him, which we still have. Where he was saying, I am working. But I'm cold. So if you can send me some warm things. So my mother sent him some boots with fur inside, and also some warm clothes. And he received them.

>> Bill Benson: Of course, there's a number of remarkable things about that. The fact that your father was one, able to send a letter from Auschwitz. Your mother was able to send him some warm clothes and you know he got them. You found that out later.

Tell us the circumstances. Because it is so remarkable.

>> Joel Nommick: When my father arrived in Auschwitz, he didn't say he was a businessman. He said he was a chemist. Because they said probably don't need businessmen here.

So probably had an idea that it was -- I don't know if he knew the extent of what was happening there.

>> Bill Benson: But being a businessman was not going to help him?

>> Joel Nommick: Right. He was on the line to go to work. And what happened there, that was when the camp was still developing. They were building more blocks and building lodging for the S.S. and their families. And one day they ask where he was, if there was somebody who knew how to cut windows, glass for the windows.

So he was very good with his hands, so he said, me. And they give all the people who said they could, they give them a diamond cut.

And he was sent to put those windows at the colony --

>> Bill Benson: The SS officers' homes. Put the windows there.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And then the S.S., my father was picking a German, without accent, like a German. So he could communicate. And the German ask him if he could paint. He said yes, I can paint. So can you paint this room this color? And then can you make toys my kids. So he makes some toys in wood, you know?

I knew he could, because he had made a big plane. I used to play with. For my brothers, but I used to play with it.

So I think that helped him probably to be able to send that letter and to receive this package.

>> Bill Benson: Just to take a moment to reflect on that. Here we are at a killing center where people are -- hundreds of thousands and beyond are murdered there. Yet they're putting up houses for the officers. They're painting their rooms for their kids, making toys.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. Gardens.

>> Bill Benson: Gardens for them. This is going on and your father just happened to have the very, very, very good luck of being asked to do some of those things?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, he was. I think he was always a leader and he knew how to maneuver probably, with people.

>> Bill Benson: And this, I know we might have time to get to this later. But you found all this out later because of people who survived Auschwitz who were there with him?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: France was liberated in September 1944 and the war would of course, continue until May of 1945. What was liberation for your family? You're just a very, very young person. What was liberation like for your parents? How did your mom and your brothers know that they were liberated? What happened?

>> Joel Nommick: That was in the summer of '44, and we've been liberated I think end of August or beginning of September.

>> Bill Benson: The allies were advancing.

>> Joel Nommick: They were also advancing from the south, from Italy. So they went up, the whole family. So the young, and up to Paris. And the main highway was a few miles from the house. And I have that story that my two, but always told me -- two brothers always told me. Each time we passed by this place, which was very often, either with one of or my two brothers. They say this is here, the best day of our lives.

There were a bunch of kids with their bike, and they were to pick blackberries because there were a lot of bushes with blackberries. And this was just like a few hundred yards from the main highway.

And then they heard huge noise, tanks and everything. And they showed the Germans were coming back. So they all hide their bags and hide behind the bushes. And they saw the G.I.s

with the American tanks and the jeeps. And they were all right there.

I have pictures of them on the tanks.

>> Bill Benson: Of your brothers on the tanks?

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. And the G.I., they gave them some chocolate, chewing gum, cigarettes.

[Laughter]

So, yeah. They polluted us.

[Laughter]

So that was really a great day. Even now, when I see my brother in France, he always told me --

>> Bill Benson: That was the best day of his life. I know we're going to skip over a great deal here Joel, but I did want to have you talk to us about this. When the war ended in 1945, your family was waiting for your father to come back. Tell us about that time of waiting. What made you think he was going to come back and what happened?

>> Joel Nommick: When the camp was liberated by the Brits at the end of April 1945 in Bergen-Belsen. That's where he was. He wrote to us on -- I think the letter was dated June 6.

>> Bill Benson: 1945.

>> Joel Nommick: 1945. He said I am OK. I hope you all in good shape. And I will soon be with you. And I will finally see the son I never met, which was me.

So we were waiting for him, and in Bergen-Belsen, there was a lady from our village who knew my parents before the war, and during the war. She was in the resistance and she was arrested by the -- and she was tortured by the butcher of Lyon. And she was sent away where she became one of the -- she was submitted to experiments. And she was a very strong-willed person.

And one morning in Bergen-Belsen, to the places where you have water and people can wash a little bit, she met my father. And she said, I know the French soldier come very soon to bring us back to France.

Then when she arrived in the village from the camp, she came home because she wanted to see him and she couldn't believe he was not there.

But I learned also, for example, that there was a French officer who was in Bergen-Belsen as a prisoner also. And after the war he wrote a book about his experience in the camps.

And he sent the book to my mother where he told the story that my father at night, he will go out and go to steal food to bring to them.

Because during the day, he told that he was a butcher. To have access to food, basically. So that makes me feel good.

>> Bill Benson: To hear that.

After your father had written to you from Bergen-Belsen saying I will see you soon, and he didn't come back. I think your mother turned to the British Red Cross to find out where is he?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. So at first they say that he was liberated and he was sent to France, first. But of course, he wasn't. So we hold again, and the British Red Cross say --

>> Bill Benson: That's what they sent back.

>> Joel Nommick: Left for Russia. And that's it. We never know what happened to him.

So I wish that he passed away in Bergen-Belsen, free, and not going to another situation like many of them did.

>> Bill Benson: And any insight, any thoughts as to why he would have left for Russia? If that was at all true?

>> Joel Nommick: We learned in the 1980s that there was an agreement made between Stalin and the allies, that after the war, the people who were from the zone, influence of the soviet that were coming from the camp would be sent back to them. Which a lot of them did. They did send back a lot of them, and the Russians kill most of them, because they didn't want people tainted by the west.

>> Bill Benson: So that's one possibility.

>> Joel Nommick: One possibility. The other one is he probably was so exhausted after being -- his wait when he left Nordhausen to go to Bergen-Belsen, he was like 80 pounds. And he was still giving out what he had to eat during the day to the young people there.

>> Bill Benson: I'm glad you mentioned that, because among the many places he was sent, Auschwitz, several labor camps and then Nordhausen which was a terrible underground place where they made the V1 and V2 rockets?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: He was there. And you learned later from people who came to visit you that he shared his meager rations with them?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. He was saying the young people, they cannot die. He was adamant about it. Unfortunately.

>> Bill Benson: There's so much more you could tell us that we don't have time for. But I do want you to, if you don't mind. You told me years later, you're 13 years old, which would have made it 1955 almost. You're at home.

>> Joel Nommick: In fact, I thought about it. I think it's 1954. I believe. Probably. I'm not so sure. But it was the end of July, and it was very hot in France that day. And we were inside, in storage, staying in the cold. I was reading -- I was always reading. And someone rings the bell. I went to open and I saw a person, a man. Probably he was 30 years old or something like that.

And he asked to see my father. So I said, I'm sorry, but my father -- during the war. He was like this and he start crying like a baby.

And I didn't know what to do, because I never saw a male, an adult, crying in front of me. So I went to my mother and I told her what happened. So she came. And she said you're alone. He said no, I'm with my wife and two kids.

They have like a little Winnebago, they were going on vacation in the south of France. And he told her what happened to him. He was 17 years of age in the spring of 1944, he was sent to Auschwitz. And she was in the same block as my father.

He contracted typhus. And my father and Hungarian-Jewish doctor, they're hiding. They give him soup, they give -- and they save him. My father told him if we get out of this inferno, this is where I live in France. If you come one day.

>> Bill Benson: Come back and see me.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. So he was on the main highway and he saw that panel on the road. That sign. For our village. So it didn't click right away. So probably a couple nights after, it came back to him. He turned around and he arrived and they stayed two days with us. And he was talking about what happened there. And I was there on my seat like that. I was not moving. I was listening, because that was the first time I really heard from someone, what happened. What happened to my father there.

>> Bill Benson: You were at an age where you could really grasp and understand this?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, and he told us about the spring and summer of '44 where they process several thousands Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz.

So I'll never forget what he said.

>> Bill Benson: Joel, I wish we had a lot more time, because there's so much more that you could share with us. But we have time to turn to our audience I think for just a couple of questions if you would be willing to do that.

We have a microphone in each aisle. If you have a question we ask that you wait until you get the microphone. Make your questions brief as you can. I'll repeat it just to make sure we get it right. And Joel will then respond to your questions.

Do we have anyone who would like to ask Joel a question? We'll hear from Joel in a few moments. If you could stay with us until he's finished, that would be great.

If not, I have many more questions, although I think I'm going to hold on them.

>> When you hear about the resistance in France, you don't hear about many families that were untouched like your family. Have you since heard of other people that weren't --

>> Bill Benson: The question is have you learned of other families, Jewish families that also weren't denounced or found by the Germans or by Vichy France earlier?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, I did. Where we live first, there were 22 Jews in that village. They all survived. Some were French. Some were from Austria. Poland.

I knew them well.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. I'm going to interject one note here, and then turn back to Joel. And I'm going to ask you at the end when Joel is finished. He's going to stay behind, so if you have questions afterwards, please know you'll have a chance to ask him that. I was struck when you told me that you never learned anything about the war in school.

And certainly about the collaboration until you became a university student?

>> Joel Nommick: Because it was not taught. It was the bad period. And they didn't teach us that. Now it's a different story. Now they teach it. But no, even some -- I told you I went to visit a place in June that we didn't know what happened there.

And this is a place which is not far from where we were living, which is called Mesondesur. A small village not far from Geneva, in fact. And there was a house which was a school for Jewish kids who were hidden there. From 6 years of age to 18 years of age.

And the night of April 9, 1944, came to call the kids, and the teacher, and they all died in camps.

I went there. I stayed like almost four hours in that place. This is what was done not far from where we were. And a few miles from where we were living, things happened, you know? People were killed. And why we survived is a miracle and also I think God blessed us not to die in that period.

>> Bill Benson: Joel, I'm going to turn back to you in a moment. I want to thank all of you for being with us. We will end our 2018 season August 9. So we have four more programs. If you could come back, that would be wonderful.

Just know that all our programs are on the Museum's YouTube page. So you can see Joel's program and the others if you would like to do so. We would love you to do that.

When Joel is finished in a moment, our photographer, Joel, a different Joel, is here in front, and he's going to come up on stage. And he's going to take photograph with Joel as you as the backdrop. You're the backgrounds and it make for a great photograph. So please stay for that.

It is our tradition that our First Person has the last word. With that, Joel please share your thoughts to close today's program.

>> Joel Nommick: I'm sorry. I'm going to read something because I tried to organize my ideas

yesterday.

First of all I want to thank Mr. Benson for the great work he does here in making this event really easy for me. And I thank you for your commitment and kindness and your professionalism.

My thanks goes also to Diane Southman, Kerri, Sonya Booth and every volunteer who works here. Thank you to all. And thank you for you all for having this meeting today.

My participation as a volunteer is very recent. I started January 3, 2018. And I found a place of very dedicated people. Their kindness, knowledge and commitment is to be commended. I cannot say enough. The people who work here are really special. This has been a kind of therapy for me in a way. To live the life of my parents and those difficult times. I have learned more about myself and them than ever before.

It made me so proud of them. First my mother who stayed alone to raise us without a husband. And refusing to start a new life for herself and give a new father to us. Thank you for all the love you give me and the lessons of life. She taught me that love is better than hatred. Hatred being like a cancer which is eating you inside.

She give me the direction to stand my grounds without being disagreeable. My father, I thank you for your strength of character and your positive view for the future. I realize that in his short life, he has done so much to provide for his family, but also for a lot of other people.

Especially during these years.

He was indeed a very special man. His courage was the main reason for his survival. But he has done the same for others in different prisons, camps. And he had moral compass and compassion for his fellow men.

I hope that in such circumstances I would have had been like he was. I realize I missed him since I was born.

We should never forget what happened to our people and others during the Holocaust, and we should teach the young generation of the fragility of freedom and liberty.

What happened and why it happened. It is our duty to tell the truth and denounce the abuses and wrongdoings of those who are carrying the type of malfeasance and toxic. But also our message should be one of hope and love and respect of the laws of our faith and of our own country. Thank you all for listening.

[Applause]

>> If you could remain standing please.

It's OK if you clap again.

[Laughter]

[Applause]