United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
First Person, with Josie Traum
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HOME TEAM CAPTIONS

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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. Thank you for joining us. Today, we begin our 20th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mrs. Josie Traum, whom you shall meet shortly.

This 2019 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. Each of our First Person guests serves as a volunteer here at this museum. Our program will continue through August 8. The museum's website, at www.ushmm.org, provides information about each of our upcoming First Person guests.

Josie will share with us her First Person account of her experience during the Holocaust and as a survivor for about 45 minutes. If time allows we will have an opportunity for you to ask Josie a few questions. If we do not get to your question today, please join us in our online conversation: Never Stop Asking Why. The conversation aims to inspire individuals to ask the important questions that Holocaust history raises. You can ask your question and tag the museum on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using @holocaustmuseum and the hashtag #AskWhy.

Today's program will be livestreamed on the Museum's website, meaning people will be joining the program online and watching with us today from across the country and around the world. We invite everyone to watch our First Person programs live on the museum’s website each Wednesday and Thursdays at 11:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time through the end of May. A recording of this program will be made available on the museum's YouTube page. Please visit the First Person website, listed on the back of your program, for more details.

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 her 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 Jacqus and Fanny 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 Belgium. Here we see Josie and Fanny shortly before Josie went into hiding. Soon thereafter, Fanny, who worked with the Belgian Underground, or the resistance, was denounced and she was deported to Auschwitz. After six months of hiding in the convent and growing Nazi suspicion, the Belgian Underground relocated Josie to hide with the Debrackalaers, a Christian family in Brussels. Here we see Josie with the family. The grandson is in the front, in the middle, with Josie to the right. Their daughter is on the left.

Allied Forces liberated Belgium in September 1944. Soon after, Josie was found by one of her aunts, one of Fannie's sisters. Here we see Josie, Jacques and Fanny after being reunited in Belgium. Josie would eventually marry Freddie Traum, also a Holocaust survivor.

We close with this wedding portrait of Josie and Freddie. After moving to the United States with her parents in 1949, she then completed her schooling in Patterson, New Jersey, and Josie went to Israel to study for a year. On the return trip, on a ship, she met Freddie, the chief radio officer, who was also a Holocaust survivor. Upon her return to the United States, Josie attended Montclair State Teachers College for one year.

Josie and Freddie were married on a ship a year after she met him, and she moved to Israel where they lived for five years. While in Israel, the Traums' son, Michael, and daughter, Yael, were born. The Traums relocated to the United States in 1963 to obtain medical care for their disabled son, Michael. Their third son, Jonathan, 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 2007 from her work as a clinical social worker for abused children in Montgomery County, Maryland. Today, Josie and Freddie live in the Silver Spring, Maryland, area. Josie's volunteer work at this museum includes leading tours of the permanent exhibition for law enforcement, including police officers, FBI, judges, and others. Josie speaks publicly about her experience as a Holocaust survivor in various settings, especially local synagogues and schools in Maryland and Virginia.

I'm pleased to let you know that Freddie is here today with Josie, as is their daughter, Yael, and their good friend, Joel Apelbaum. The four are right in the front row, in the middle.

With that, I'd like to ask you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Josie Traum.

Josie, thank you for joining us today and being willing to be our first, not just our First Person, but our first First Person of 2019. I might mention before we begin that Josie's mother, Fanny, passed away this past year at age 101, and was last with us on a First Person program when she was 100 in 2016, and we opened each year for the past number of years with Fanny. It's a real honor we're doing it today with Josie. Thank you.
>> Josie Traum: Thank you. Hello, everyone.
>> Bill Benson: Josie, your parents, Fanny and Jacques Eisenberg, were married in early 1938. You were born in March 1939, just months before Germany and Russia attacked Poland, launching the Second World War. Tell us about your parents and their life in Brussels, Belgium, in those prewar years.
>> Josie Traum: Both my parents, as you mentioned, they were married in 1938. They were really newlyweds, but they both had jobs. They were working. They were happy. Life was comfortable for them. They both worked in their trades, and as I mentioned they were really very comfortable.
>> Bill Benson: Speaking of their trades, tell us about your mother's trade.
>> Josie Traum: My mom, when she was younger, attended what you would call a vocational school where you learned about textiles and clothes designing. She did that, and was quite good at it. Apparently, upon graduation, the Royal Family in Belgium would send some people to this school, and they would pick out a few people to ask them to work for the Royal Family in Belgium. As a matter of fact, my mom was chosen. There were only a few students chosen, and she was chosen, and she actually worked for the Royal Family, which was really a big deal.
>> Bill Benson: A really big deal, I would think.
>> Josie Traum: She did that until she married my dad.
>> Bill Benson: You have a very interesting thing to share about your dad's early career.
>> Josie Traum: That's right. My dad was a tailor. My mom and dad were both really in the clothing, garment business, or work. My dad was not always a tailor. He used to be, he was a violinist, played the violin, and in Europe, as I'm sure maybe here also in the States, because the movies were silent, so when people went to the movies, they usually hired a quartet, a violinist, cellist, a few instruments to play during the movie being shown, because there was no sound, no speaking.

So my dad did that for a number of years. When the movies became talkies, when they had sound, all these people were fired, and they didn't have jobs anymore. So, actually they had to find new ways of being able to work and support themselves. That's when my dad went to tailoring school and learned to be a tailor.

Originally, it's interesting, he wasn't really a tailor, he played the violin.
>> Bill Benson: Josie, your parents were married in 1938, as you said. Nazi power in Germany and Austria took a more ominous turn in late 1938 with Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. You were born March 21, 1939, months before World War II began. Do you know, do you have any knowledge from your parents as to whether or not they were fearful about the future and your life together, with war looming so intensely over

Europe?
>> Josie Traum: I don't think they were really aware of what the future might bring. I know there was a lot of apprehension, my understanding. I was too young at the time to realize it, but I know my parents would listen to the radio on a daily basis, and they really didn't know what would happen. And my parents listened mainly to the BBC, and at that time England was asking people to volunteer, men from Europe to volunteer to come to England and help them to be ready during the war. So they really wanted men to come and volunteer.
>> Bill Benson: Of course, you're going to share with us about your father during that. In May 1940, eight months after Germany attacked Poland, they invaded what we call the low countries, including Belgium, The Netherlands and France. Your father responded to that call from the British Army, and he left just before the Germans launched their invasion. Tell us what your father did, how he left, and then what that meant for your mother and for you.
>> Josie Traum: My dad actually decided to go to England and volunteer for the Army, and he and his brother went together, my Uncle Ben, who was also a tailor. Both of them decided they would go over to England and volunteer for the Army.

They took one of the last ships that was actually able to cross the English Channel. At that time, Dunkirk, many of the British troops were leaving Europe, although my dad wasn't part of the Dunkirk leaving, he was one of the last ships able to leave before the war really began. So my dad and Uncle Ben got to England. Here are these two tailors, and they told the British people, Here we are. We want to volunteer.

I think the British didn't really know what to do with them. So they decided, both tailors, they put them in a factory making British uniforms. Probably the best place they could be. So my dad was really in a factory during that whole time.

My mom and I, I was too young to understand, I was 13 months old when my dad left, when my dad did leave and did get to England, my mom, it was no communication, because the war had started, and my mom really never knew if my dad ever made it or not.
>> Bill Benson: Whether he made it to England or not, much less hear anything more.
>> Josie Traum: Right. No communication. At that time, Germany was torpedoing boats that were trying to cross the channel. My mom never knew whether he made it or not. My mom and I stayed with my maternal grandparents, my mom's parents. We stayed in an attic apartment, very much to ourselves, and we were very much on our own.
>> Bill Benson: You and your mother would stay together in Brussels, under Nazi occupation, for several years, until 1942, when your mother made the truly profound decision to place you into hiding. Tell us what you can about the events that led up to your mother's decision to place you into hiding, and that as best you know what it was like for her to give you up to go into hiding, and what that was like for you.
>> Josie Traum: I think my mom realized that danger was really looming. The Germans had invaded Belgium. As you mentioned, they invaded four countries in one day, May 10, 1940. My mom, I think, realized there was a lot of danger. She wanted to put me into a safe environment.

My mom was part of the underground. She was delivering leaflets for all kinds of events the underground was holding. She was also hiding Jews in our apartment, Jews leaving other countries in Europe and Eastern Europe where the Germans had already invaded. Jews were trying to flee and find safer places. So my mom would put them up for a day or two until they found a safer place to stay. My mom had kind of connections in the underground. What she did next, she really hoped to keep me safe. She was afraid to keep me with her in her apartment, and she was able to notify the underground to have people come and pick me up to put me into hiding.

>> Bill Benson: Before you went into hiding, of course, you were with your mother for that period of time. How did your mother make ends meet? If you don't mind, you shared with me some of the things that were denied to your mother and other Jews, including healthcare for you.

>> Josie Traum: Once the Germans invaded, the Nazis took over the government and all the government services. There were no longer any clinics. Where mothers would take their children for innoculations, injections, well care clinics where one would go to make sure your child was in good health. So my mom and I were very much on our own, to ourselves. We didn't go out very much. Once the Germans came in, we had to have identity cards to identify if we were. If we did walk on the street, a German could stop you anytime to ask for an identification card. The ID card mentioned if you were Jewish or not. If you were Jewish, it was really up to the Germans to do whatever they wanted at the time, and you usually didn't know what that would be. So, we kept very much to ourselves.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that even though you were very young, you have some fleeting memories, and there's one in particular that you told me about, incredibly poignant, and you were on a train or bus with your mother. Will you share that?

>> Josie Traum: Sure. My mom and I were very much to ourselves. We didn't go out very much. On one day, we did decide, my mom decided to go out with me to have a tram ride. In Belgium, they didn't have buses, they had trams that were connected, like electrically, like trolleys, I guess.

We went for a ride on the trolley. I was very happy. I was just under 3 years old. I do remember that while we were on the trolley, we went to sit on the last row. You had rows, two seats on each side. My mom and I went to sit on the last row in the trolley, and while the trolley was riding, a Nazi came onboard and asked for everybody's ID, so that all the passengers would have their IDs ready, and he would go from row to row inspecting the ID, whatever he was looking for.

My mom stayed with me in the last row. She was sitting in the last row with me, and she was shaking terribly, and I didn't know why. I was just about 3 years old, but I had no idea why she was shaking. This Nazi went from row to row asking for people's ID. He went to every row until he got to the last row, and he turned around and left. Of course, there was a sigh of relief. I didn't know why, but my mom also stopped shaking. It's something that I just have an image. I guess I'll never forget it. We were pretty lucky. For some reason someone was looking over us, and for some reason he didn't get to the last row, or decided not to. So that was --

>> Bill Benson: Very powerful memory.
>> Josie Traum: Very powerful.
>> Bill Benson: Josie, during that period, what was happening with your grandparents?
>> Josie Traum: My grandfather was in charge of many of the activities in the synagogue, and he would arrange services, he would arrange all the things that needed to be done in the synagogue. My grandmother tended to sick people, and she was also part of, in Judaism we have a kadisha, which is a group of people that take care of when someone dies. They make sure that all the procedures are taking place. So she was part of that group, and in a way it's an honor to be able to take care of a person when they die. Everything is taken care of for the funeral, for the family and for the person who has died. My grandmother, that was really what she did. She took care of people when they died.
>> Bill Benson: Josie, the Nazis began deporting Jews in 1942, sending them to concentration camps, to killing camps. What effect do you think that had on your mother's decision to place you into hiding?
>> Josie Traum: Well, I think probably a very great effect, and in fact she made the decision to be in touch with the underground to make sure that I would be placed in a safe place, into safety.
>> Bill Benson: When she made that decision, where did she find hiding for you? Tell us about that.
>> Josie Traum: She didn't find the hiding. She got in touch with the underground, and the underground decided that it was important, parents -- when children were being placed into hiding, parents were not allowed to know where the children were being placed.
>> Bill Benson: It was too dangerous for them to let her know that.
>> Josie Traum: The underground realized that when the Germans would come to your apartment and arrest you, they would ask where the rest of your family were: Where is your children? Where is your husband? And the underground realized if the parents didn't know, there was no way they'd be able to get the information out of them. So they didn't tell parents where the children were being placed.

So my mother made that decision. Actually, she gave me to these two strange women who came to our apartment one day to pick me up, and I realize now how difficult that must have been for her. You know, having children and grandchildren of my own, I don't think I can imagine myself doing that. But she actually did give me away and put me -- and knew that I would be in a safe place.
>> Bill Benson: And your mother not only was she Jewish and at risk because of that, but as you explained she was also active in the resistance.
>> Josie Traum: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Which was incredibly dangerous.
>> Josie Traum: It was. If she had been caught, I'm sure she would have been killed.
>> Bill Benson: So, you're handed over to these two strangers, and they place you in a convent.
>> Josie Traum: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You would stay at that convent for about a year.
>> Josie Traum: Actually, six months.
>> Bill Benson: Tell us what you can about your time in the convent, what you know of that time and then what led to the decision for you to leave the convent to end up in hiding with the Debrackalaers, the Christian family.
>> Josie Traum: The convent actually was in a place called Brugge. It's a beautiful little city, full of convents and full of canals. In fact, it's called the Venice of Belgium. It's really beautiful. These two women took me to a convent, and it was full of children. It was more like an orphanage. At that time, food was rationed. People didn't have food for their children. So they put them in a convent really for the time being, hoping that they'd be able to get them out when things were safer and easier and better. So I was placed in this convent full of children and full of nuns. The nuns were very strict, they were very stiff. They didn't dress like nuns do today. They were dressed like "The Sound of Music." I'm sure most of you have seen "The Sound of Music." They were very, very stiff and very strict, and they didn't sing.
>> Bill Benson: And they were not warm and fuzzy like "The Sound of Music."
>> Josie Traum: No, they weren't. As a 3-year-old, all you want to do is be hugged or held, and be held warmly.

I played with the children in the courtyard a lot. We all did. Unbeknowns to me, I didn't realize until after the war, al ltogether we were four Jewish children, with three other Jewish children being hidden there. There were four of us all together.

We played in the courtyard most of the time. I said my rosaries. Kids kind of adapt and do things like the other children do. I did my rosaries in French, and one day, however, the nuns found out that the Nazis were going to come and pick up the four Jewish children and place them. We didn't know -- well, they didn't know what they were going to do with us. The nuns, apparently the Nazis did come to the convent to pick us up, and the nuns said, We're not ready yet. The children don't have their clothes together. Come back tomorrow. Indeed, that's what they did. During the night, the nuns took the four of us out and smuggled us out and placed us in homes in Brussels, which is where I was from, where I was born.

They placed me with a Catholic family, as you saw in the picture, a man, a father, a mother and a little girl my age. I stayed with them there until the end of the war. I also want you to realize in Belgium, probably other European countries also, if a person was found hiding a Jew, the Germans, if they found them, would just shoot them on the street. No questions asked. They would just shoot them. So the people hiding me and Jews and the nuns, however un-fuzzy they were, were really risking their lives by hiding me and by keeping me safe.

I was with this family for the duration of the war. The man was also involved in the underground, but they would often, the Germans would often pick him up at night and interrogate him, and he would come back the next morning. I know they would beat him because he was black and blue. He never told on me, nor some of the other things. I don't know what endeavors he was involved with. But they kept me safe.

>> Bill Benson: They did an incredible thing by taking you in, they kept you safe. What do you remember, though, what your day-to-day life was like living in their household for that long?
>> Josie Traum: I didn't go out very much because I think there was fear they might be caught, I might be caught. So I was really in the house most of the day with a little girl my age. Food was rationed in Belgium as in most of Europe. People were registered and would pick up food at a distribution center, where you'd pick up food once a week, like basics for however many people in your household.

They were registered for three people. I was there illegally. So they would go once a week and pick up food for three people, but of course they'd share with me, they fed me, they kept me safe. I was very fortunate that they did keep me safe.
>> Bill Benson: One of the things you shared with me, knowing the risks they took, the fact that they kept you safe, you still recall feeling, though, that you were really not part of the family unit. A little bit of distance, which having come from a place where you didn't get a lot of warmth in the convent, because it just wasn't what they did, what was that like for you?
>> Josie Traum: It was hard. As you mentioned, they kept me safe. They did. They risked their lives. But there was a feeling, I wasn't part of the family unit. I think as a 3-year-old you feel that, and I really felt that very strongly.
>> Bill Benson: Josie, as you said, you stayed with the Debrackalaer family until the war ended for Belgium, in the fall of 1944. So there was still another eight months or so, nine months of war elsewhere in Europe at that time. When the war ended, your Aunt Theresa was able to find you and bring you to her home. What do you know about how that happened? How did she find you and what that meant to go live now with your aunt?
>> Josie Traum: My mom had two sisters, my two aunts, who were both hidden during the war in churches, through the underground. My one aunt, who was older than my mom, had three boys, three sons, my three cousins. They were all hidden in churches together.
>> Bill Benson: In separate places?
>> Josie Traum: Yes, in churches. Once the war ended, once Belgium was liberated, there was like a whole network of the underground, and they knew how to find me. You would go looking for people. There were lists, and you would find relatives and family. So my Aunt Theresa immediately found me at the Debrackalaers' home and brought me to her house. I stayed there with her, with my three cousins and my aunt and uncle, which was just wonderful. Being with family again, after being kind of separated and not being with anybody I knew, it was wonderful.
>> Bill Benson: I have to ask you to tell us about your aunt's husband.
>> Josie Traum: Yes, my aunt's husband, my Uncle Morris, was a very quiet, shy, meek man, and he was actually in the underground during the war. After the war, he apparently, we saw, he won all kinds of awards for being brave and being in the underground and killing Germans. We couldn't believe it, because this was such a quiet, meek man, and so we were all pretty shocked.

>> Bill Benson: He was recognized --
>> Josie Traum: By the government.
>> Bill Benson: After the war. Wow.
>> Josie Traum: Yes. He got honors and medals and really none of us could really believe it, including his wife. It was amazing! This was a really very shy man.
>> Bill Benson: Your mother's other sister also survived.
>> Josie Traum: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: So did you spend time with them as well?
>> Josie Traum: Well, I spent time till my mom, my mom came back to Belgium in 1945, at the end of the war, but up to that time I stayed with my aunt and her family.
>> Bill Benson: That was almost a nine-month period of time.
>> Josie Traum: Yes, yes. And it was wonderful being with family again. They spoiled me roton. It was just great.
>> Bill Benson: As you started to tell us about your mother coming back, in what must have seemed like a complete miracle, your mother did survive Auschwitz, which is where she was sent. I want you to talk with us about that. After Auschwitz was liberated, she did make her way back and was reunited with you and your sisters. By the time your mom came back, you were 6 years old. You hadn't seen your mother for three years. Tell us what you recall and know about your mom coming back and, if you don't mind, a little bit about what your mother went through.
>> Josie Traum: Very soon after I was put into hiding, my mom and her parents were arrested. The Nazis did come to the apartment and did arrest the three of them.
>> Bill Benson: They were denounced by somebody, right?
>> Josie Traum: I mentioned before, there were many wonderful people in Belgium, people who hid me, who saved many Jews. However, there were many people who were not so wonderful. Our next-door neighbor denounced my mother, went to the Nazis and actually told them where she lives. The Nazis would sometimes pay money for that, or they didn't have to, some people denounced without getting money. So there were wonderful people, but there were also people who were not.

My mother was actually denounced, and she was arrested and deported and taken to Auschwitz. Now, being taken to Auschwitz, I don't know if you've gone through the museum yet, or you will probably later, but you will see there is a railroad car, which a cattle car really, not a regular passenger train car where people sit and are comfortable. When the Germans deported Jews in Belgium, they put them in cattle cars and took them to concentration camps. Now, most concentration camps you got there, they killed you. They were killing centers.

When they took you to Auschwitz, Auschwitz had a subcamp, a labor camp where they made ammunition, and Germans, of course, were very anxious to build up the war machine and to have their ammunition and everything they needed. So, when people got to Auschwitz, they actually put them working in a factory.

Now, when they got to Auschwitz, you know, being in one of these cattle cars, 150 people, passengers were put in a car, you could only stand, you couldn't sit or do anything, and there were two windows for air and two buckets. One bucket to relieve

yourself and one bucket for water. Now, 150 passengers were all on one train, and you were usually on the train three to four days, depending how far your country, where you were coming from to the concentration camp.

Auschwitz was three, four days and nights away by train. So, by the time the train got to Auschwitz, out of 150 passengers in each cattle car, 40 or 50 people were already dead. Now, my grandfather died on one of the trains, and my mom and her mother got off the train. Now, as soon as you got off the train, there was what they called selection. The selection, one line would be for people who were young enough to work in the factory, and the other line would be for people who were maybe older, like my mom, my grandmother, who was around 50, and people holding children.

If you're holding a child, the Germans knew that if your child cried, you would go to the child first rather than do your work. So the selection was made: One line was for younger people who would be able to work, the other line was for older people, handicap people, or people holding children.

My mom and her mom were separated immediately, thinking that my grandma was much older. My mom actually went to be with her mother when they were separated, and the German hit her.

>> Bill Benson: Forced her back over?

>> Josie Traum: Forced her back to her line, and said, You go where you're told. My mom never saw her mother again. My mom was able to work in the factory in Birkenau, they would go there every day, work the entire day, come back at 11:00 at night, and have a little bit to eat. They would have liquid with maybe a carrot peel, potato peel, and they would go to sleep, then the next day go back to Birkenau.

>> Bill Benson: I know you don't have time to tell us about a lot of what she endured, but it went on until her liberation in April 1945.

>> Josie Traum: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: How did she make her way back to Brussels, and what kind of condition was your mother in?

>> Josie Traum: My mom was taken on a death march. When the Germans realized that the Allies were approaching, they tried to empty some of their concentration camps of prisoners, taking them back to Germany where they had more labor camps and probably could use some of the labor. But they actually marched people on the roads. My mom was put on a death march, and they were called death marches because so many people died marching. My mom was on a death march from January 1945 until April 1945, when actually the last battle between the Germans and the Russians, which took place on the Elbe River. That's when my mom was liberated by the Russians. The Germans lost then, and the Russians liberated the people who were marching and took them to the Red Cross.

My mom, as you mentioned, was in pretty bad shape. She weighed about 65 pounds, had typhus and meningitis, and she spent a few days with the Red Cross, and the Red Cross eventually brought her back to Brussels. The first place she went was my aunt's apartment. She knocked on the door, and there I was. So we were reunited which was --

>> Bill Benson: Did you have any idea that she was coming?
>> Josie Traum: No. Nobody knew.
>> Bill Benson: Just knocked on the door?
>> Josie Traum: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: What was that like for you?
>> Josie Traum: Well, thinking back now, I was pretty young, and it was pretty amazing and pretty shocking.
>> Bill Benson: Did she move in with your aunt and you for a while?
>> Josie Traum: For a little while. Then we went back to actually our apartment, to our attic apartment where we used to live. Then eventually my father came back.
>> Bill Benson: Which in itself is incredible. So 1946, I believe it was, the following year, your father comes back.
>> Josie Traum: My dad couldn't come back right away while he was living in London. The house he was living in was bombed. He spent two years in a hospital. So he really couldn't come back right away. He did eventually come back. My parents decided that they really did not want to stay in Europe, they wanted to leave, after everything that had happened to them. They actually made applications to come to the United States.
>> Bill Benson: Before you turn to that, Josie, you were old enough that you remember greeting your father. Tell us about that.
>> Josie Traum: My dad came back by ship, and there is a port city in Belgium, and we knew that my dad was going to come by ship, crossing the channel and coming to Belgium. So my mom and I went to this town, this city, and we waited for the boat to come in with my dad. Of course, I didn't know my father. I was 13 months old when he left. This man came down the steps of the ship, and my mom said to me, There's your father. Of course, I didn't know who he was. My mom recognized him; I did not. And we were together. It was truly a miracle.
>> Bill Benson: As you said, you decided then you were going to -- they wanted to leave.
>> Josie Traum: They did.
>> Bill Benson: It would be 1949 before you were able to come to the US. What did your parents -- how did they rebuild their life? What was that like for those three years, after your father got back, before you came to the United States?
>> Josie Traum: The apartment we lived in, we owned the apartment building. In Europe there's like one apartment on every floor. So there were three floors, and we had the attic apartment during the war. Afterwards, actually, the bottom floor was a store, tailoring store, and my dad had a tailoring store, he would make suits.
In those days, it's not like you can go to Macy's or Bloomingdale's and pick up a suit ready-made. In those days, you went to a tailoring shop; there were bolts of material, you picked your material, the kind of material you wanted for your suit. And my dad, who was a tailor, would fit you and measure you and make a pattern out of paper, then out of material, and this relationship would go on for quite a few weeks until the suit was done.

So, my dad had his tailoring shop, and he actually made suits. So he worked and my mom worked, and trying to put your life back together. My parents did make an application, and it took a number of years to come.

My uncle, my dad's brother, came at the same time. The two families came together, my uncle, his wife, and two daughters, and my parents and me all came together, yes.

>> Bill Benson: Here it is, you're ten years old, in the United States, and starting an entire new life again. What was that like?

>> Josie Traum: Well, it was strange. I didn't speak one word of English. When I came I was ten years old, and they put me in first grade because they thought if you don't speak English, you really don't know very much, which I didn't. I wasn't that tall, so it didn't matter being ten years old in the first grade.

>> Bill Benson: You could sit in one of the first grade desks.

>> Josie Traum: Exactly.

>> Bill Benson: You caught up very quickly?

>> Josie Traum: I caught up. After two weeks, they put me in second grade.

>> Bill Benson: Two weeks later?

>> Josie Traum: Another two weeks, third grade. Eventually, I caught up and graduated with my elementary school.

My parents, by the way, felt very excited about learning English. They immediately started night school, and learned all the states, all the presidents, all the capitals, more than I knew, and they were very, very anxious in becoming Americans.

>> Bill Benson: There were some traumas for you. You shared with me that when you got enrolled into your new school, almost immediately you were beat up by a gang of girls. Tell us what your mom did.

>> Josie Traum: Well, I was beaten up by girls waiting for me outside and beat me up, and I didn't know why. I couldn't speak or ask.

>> Bill Benson: This is right after you arrived?

>> Josie Traum: Right after, like the first day or two when I was first in school. My mom, who knew no English whatsoever, went to the principal the next day and wanted to know why. She actually spoke to the principal, which I thought was pretty gutsy. It never happened again, but I never knew why it happened.

>> Bill Benson: As we mentioned in the very beginning, of course, eventually you would go to Israel to study. Would you mind sharing a little bit about meeting your husband, Freddie?

>> Josie Traum: Sure. I went to study in Israel for a year. It was in the 50s. Late 50s. In those days, you really didn't go by plane, planes were very expensive, and they were passenger liners. So I went to Israel for a year; I studied. Coming back, I went by ship . Going and coming back I went by ship. I met the chief radio officer, who was socializing with the passengers, I being one of the passengers. We met, and we were married a year later.

>> Bill Benson: That fabulous photograph from your wedding that we showed, that was onboard the ship, wasn't it?

>> Josie Traum: On the ship. While the ship was in port, we actually had the wedding on the ship. There were 150 guests. We had our friends come, our family and our people. So it was lovely.
>> Bill Benson: Josie, you went on to have a career working with child welfare, including working with child abuse victims. Do you think that what you went through during the Holocaust, what you experienced, did that influence your career choice at all, do you think?
>> Josie Traum: Looking back at it now, I think it did, of course. Yeah. It had a great influence on me. You know, just wanting to make sure children are safe.
>> Bill Benson: One thing I definitely want you to talk a little bit about, you touched on it, when you were in the convent it was an austere environment, it was just about protecting you. Even at the Debrackalaers' as much as they were there for you, they weren't there for you necessarily emotionally, from what you've shared. And yet, you felt, and you've shared this in the past with me, that you felt emotionally very grounded from your early years. Will you talk about that for a minute?
>> Josie Traum: Sure. I've always felt very lucky that I had a very wonderful and close relationship with my grandmother and with my mom, and as you know I've always felt very strongly that bonding with a child takes place with a caregiver in the first three years of life. That bonding is so important and so strong. It really is kind of a basis for the rest of your life. I feel that I have that. I had this very strong bonding and love and nurturing, from my mother and from my grandmother. So, I was very, very lucky. I think I was really able to sustain a lot of the difficulties that I went through as a child with strangers.
>> Bill Benson: Because of that grounding and love that you had in your early years.
>> Josie Traum: I think so.
>> Bill Benson: Josie, you feel ready to take some questions from our audience? Should we do that?
>> Josie Traum: Sure.
>> Bill Benson: We're going to turn to all of you, see if you have any questions you would like to ask Josie. We have a microphone in each aisle. You will see them here. What we ask is if you do have a question, we ask that you go to the microphone. If you don't mind doing that. For those who are really bashful but have a question, you can also tweet one or send one later after the program. Please make your question as brief as you can, and I will do my best to repeat it to make sure we hear it right and everybody in the room hears it. Then Josie will answer it.
Ma'am, I'll start with you.
>> Did you ever reunite with the other child that you stayed with, that family, later in life?
>> Bill Benson: The question is did you ever reunite with the Debrackalaers' child?
>> Josie Traum: I did not. My husband and I went to Belgium in 1989. My husband was there working, I mean for his work, and I met him there. I tried to look up the family and the little girl, who was my age, and I found out that they had all died. I was never able to reconnect with them.
Before my parents left for the States, until 1949, we did have connections.

>> Bill Benson: Until 1949, OK, OK. This young man?
>> When your mom knocked on the door, did you or your aunt think it was a Nazi?
>> Bill Benson: When your mother came to the door, did you and your aunt think it might have been the Nazis coming?
>> Josie Traum: Well, no, because we knew at that time that the war was over. When I was with my aunt? Yeah, the war was over, and we didn't worry about the Nazis anymore.
>> Bill Benson: You knew you were safe at that time?
>> Josie Traum: Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you. Yes, sir?
>> Did you speak German? If yes, did you ever understand what the Nazis were saying?
>> Bill Benson: Did you speak German? Were you able to understand what the Nazis said?
>> Josie Traum: No. I do not speak German. And -- no.
>> Bill Benson: All right. Thank you. Yes?
>> Do you speak Yiddish?
>> I do not --
>> Josie Traum: I do not. I speak Hebrew and I speak French.
>> What was it like living with a family that wasn't the same religion as you and not practicing the same things they did?
>> Bill Benson: What was it like living with your --
>> No, what was it like living with someone who didn't practice the same religion as you?
>> Bill Benson: What was it like living with someone who didn't --
>> Practice the same religion as you.
>> Bill Benson: Didn't practice the same religion, because you were living with the Debrackalaers. You were living with a Christian family. What was that like for you?
>> Josie Traum: I really wasn't aware of any kind of religion. They did not go to church, and so I was not involved with any of that. I was in the convent, in the convent there was a lot of praying, but when you're 3 years old you kind of do whatever everybody does around you. I have no idea what it was, nor did I even know what it was to be a Jew.
>> Bill Benson: Until after you were reunited with your family, right?
>> Josie Traum: Right.
>> Did you live with any other family besides the one that took you in?
>> Bill Benson: Did you live with any other families besides the Debrackalaers?
>> Josie Traum: No. I was in the convent and the family with the little girl.
>> No one else?
>> Bill Benson: You lived with your aunts?
>> Josie Traum: I did, my two aunts. After the war, I moved in with my aunt.
>> Bill Benson: There you were with other family members and kids, absolutely. OK. Thank you. Yes, sir?

>> Did you have any other options to go to another house? Did you have another option to go somewhere else?
>> Bill Benson: Did you have other options of places to go at that time?
>> Josie Traum: As a 3-year-old?
>> Bill Benson: At the end of the war, yes.
>> Josie Traum: At the end of the war? My parents really wanted to come to the United States. And so, I was ten years old. I kind of did whatever they wanted.
>> Bill Benson: A good rule, yeah. OK.
>> Did you ever find out what happened to your grandma?
>> Bill Benson: Did you ever find out what happened to your grandma? Tell us how you found out what happened to your grandma.
>> Josie Traum:, well, we know that she was murdered. As soon as she got to Auschwitz, there was a selection line, you know, people one side you can work, the other side people who couldn't work. The one who couldn't work, they really killed them right away.
>> Bill Benson: I think if we can go through these last couple questions quickly, we can get you all in if we're really quick. OK?
>> Did your mom ever talk about what it was like working in the factories?
>> Bill Benson: Did your mother ever talk about what it was like at Auschwitz?
>> Josie Traum: She really didn't. My mom didn't start talking till she was about 50 years old. She really had a hard time being able to talk. When we came to this country, we had some relatives here, and my mom tried to tell them what had happened, where she had been, and believe it or not the people said, That was in the past, we don't talk about that now. Those were sad times. Let's talk about the future.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you. OK.
>> When you were leaving the convent, did you know that the Nazis were coming, or --
>> Bill Benson: When you were in the convent, did you know the Nazis were coming?
>> Josie Traum: No, I didn't.
>> Bill Benson: The nuns knew, didn't they?
>> Josie Traum: The nuns knew. The Nazis came or somehow communicated that they were coming to pick us up, yes. I did not know.
>> Bill Benson: The nuns got you out of there?
>> Josie Traum: They got us out.
>> Bill Benson: Yes, sir?
>> How did it feel to be living with the other family and to be like the odd one out?
>> Bill Benson: How did it feel to be living with another family, and did you feel like the odd one out?
>> Josie Traum: I did.
>> Bill Benson: You did? Yeah. Good question. Yeah. Even though they were taking care of, you were still the odd one out, yeah.
>> Josie Traum: They protected me. They really did.
>> Bill Benson: OK. We have one last question here.
>> Did you ever find out what happened to the nuns? That were taking care of you.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. Did you ever find out what happened to the nuns?
>> Josie Traum: Well, I didn't know what happened right after, during or after the war, or during the war. I did find out now -- you know, I really feel the nuns risked their lives and really saved quite a few Jewish children. So, I thought they needed to be acknowledged for doing what they did in saving Jewish children. So I wrote to the Belgium government, and I wanted to find the order, because I knew the name of the order of nuns, and I wanted them to really be recognized.
The Belgian government responded in saying that the orderer is no longer there. Apparently, from what I understand, when there's an order of nuns and some get older and die, the order kind of decreases. What they do, they put some nuns in different orders. So, that particular order is no longer in existence. I have not been able to find them.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you, especially to the young people who asked questions. That's a hard thing to do, and I thank you for doing that.

We are about to close our program. We're going to hear from Josie one last time. I first want to thank all of you for joining us today for our First Person of 2019, and to remind you that we'll have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until August 8. They begin at 11:00 Eastern Time. I mention that for people on the internet watching us, because we'll be live streaming these programs through the end of May. After that, you have to be here in person with us. But each of our programs you can see them on the museum's YouTube channel. We hope that you can come back in person. Otherwise, view our programs one way or the other.

I'm going to turn back to Josie in a moment to close our program. When Josie finishes, our photographer, Joel, or Lolita -- one of them, Joel, will come up on stage and take a photograph of Josie with you as the background. We ask that you stay so that we can get that photograph, when Josie finishes.

It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person gets the last word. On that note, I turn it now to Josie to close our program today.
>> Josie Traum: Thank you. First of all, I want to thank all of you for being here and coming. I very much appreciate it. I speak to a lot of young students, and I go to many schools to speak, and when I speak there I like to finish with this particular saying that I have, and I'll read to you. When you go through the museum, you will see this on the second floor. As you exit the floor, it is written on the wall. To me, this really signifies everything that the museum is about.

I always end my speaking with this. This was written by Martin Niemoller, a Lutheran minister, who at the beginning of the war was very, very much pro-Hitler, because Hitler promised so many wonderful things for people. After he saw what Hitler was doing, he was very much against him, and he was actually very outspoken and actually put in prison.

This is what he wrote. His name is Martin Niemoller. "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."

And this kind of, to me, really identifies what the museum is all about. You have to learn to be able to say something and do something if you see someone being hurt, being bullied, being made fun of. You could really say something and make a difference. Every single person can make a difference.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Josie.

>> Josie Traum: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: We invite anybody who would like to come up to meet Josie, ask her a question because you didn't have a chance to do so, or just give her a hug, whatever you want to do. We invite you to come up on the stage and do that. We would love to have you do that. Please know that that is A-OK.