

Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person

Joel Nommick

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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank you for your patience. This event is livestreamed, so we must wait until it's time to start. But we can go now. Again, we appreciate you coming.

>> 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. This is our 20th year of the First Person program. Our First Person today is Mr. Joel Nommick, 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. And I'm pleased to let you know that today Mr. Louis Smith is here with us in the front row.

[Applause]

This 2019 season of First Person is made possible by the generosity of Mr. Smith. So we don't get him here very often, so we're thrilled he's able to be with us this week.

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 through August 8th. The museum's website, at 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 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 Thursday 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 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. 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 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 imprisoned.

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 -- or at all, as a matter of fact.

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, Joël'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 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., two years ago.

Joel started volunteering here at the museum in early 2018. You will find Joel here on Wednesdays at the Survivors Desk where he talks with individual museum visitors about his Holocaust experience. With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Mr. Joel Nommick.

>> Joel Nommick: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you, Joel, for joining us and your willingness to be our First Person today. Thank you for that.

>> Joel Nommick: You're welcome.

>> Bill Benson: We'll get started because you have so much to share with us in our very short time together.

>> Joel Nommick: OK.

>> Bill Benson: Before you tell us about what happened to your family and you during the Holocaust and World War II, let's start first with you telling us what you can about your family and their lives before the war began in September 1939.

>> Joel Nommick: OK. Well, my parents were born before World War I, in a country which is now independent. Estonia. At that time, it was part of the Russian Empire. They grew up there. And they had the First World War. And things were really difficult economically. They decided in the 1920s to leave. My father left in 1925. He went to Berlin where he had relatives and finally came to Paris in 19 -- early 1927. My mother came at the end of 1927. And they married in May of 1928 in Paris.

They were -- and then they decided to go to Argentina. Both my father and my mother, they both had a brother in Argentina.

>> Bill Benson: They both had a brother in Argentina?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, in Buenos Aires. So they arrived in Argentina that same year, in 1928. And my older brother, in fact, was born in Buenos Aires. Born February 1, 1929. And they stayed in Argentina until 1930. After the crash of the 1929, things were not so rosy all over the world. So they said maybe it's better to go back to Europe. And that's what they did. They settled in -- outside of Paris where they bought a house. And my second brother was born there, April 13, 1931.

>> Bill Benson: So they were both born considerably before you were born.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. Almost 12 and 14-year difference with my two brothers. So my father was in the trade of furs all over the world. And he was in the top with my uncle, who was in the business also. They were friends from way back in Estonia. And they were successful in business.

And then in 1937, there was a place, a small village, called Thoissey near Macon. And in that little village there was a company who had two factories. A tannery and a fur coat factory. In 1937, they went belly-up. And my father was the biggest creditor. So the judge asked him what he intended to do, either to liquidate or try to make a go at that business. And he decided to make a go at that business.

First of all he had money he had put in the business, but he also increased the capital in order to have a working capital, you know, to reorganize the place and make it profitable. Which he did. So basically the former shareholders sold their shares, you know. And in over a year, about 14 months, 16 months, he turned around the business and the business was doing better. So in '38, my mother moved --

>> Bill Benson: To the village?

>> Joel Nommick: With my two other brothers. They were living in a hotel for a while until our house was renovated.

>> Bill Benson: I think you told me that in a village of 1,200 people, your father employed 300 people in the business.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

- >> Bill Benson: A major employer.
- >> Joel Nommick: Yes. Plus to have a job it was a major economic force in the village.
- >> Bill Benson: You told me that your family at that time enjoyed a pretty good life.
- >> Joel Nommick: Yes. We were privileged basically compared to the majority of the population. And we had cars. We were having, you know, we were always fed greatly. We had clothes. We would take vacation. But nothing extraordinary, you know. But we were living well. But my parents were living well but they were not showing anything because -- and they wanted to deal with people every day. You cannot have such a different inequality. So I respected that from them.
- >> Bill Benson: While the war began, the Second World War again, the full impact really didn't affect France until May of 1940 when Germany invaded France and several other European countries. Tell us what you can about what the German occupation meant for your family and their community in those early stages of the war.
- >> Joel Nommick: Well, first of all, you know, there was what was called the Exodus, where people went on the road to flee the advance of the Germans.
- >> Bill Benson: This was like a mass exodus out of Paris, right?
- >> Joel Nommick: Yes. So they went down -- they did like everybody else. They ended up in a small village in the south of France. And they stayed probably like a couple of weeks and finally things stabilized and they decided to go back. We were in that village. And at first the impact of the Vichy regime, they enacted a series of laws a few weeks after they came to power. There was a Secretary of the Jewish Question. But it was not really -- nothing happened yet, you know. They weren't singling out people or anything. They were arresting a lot of people who were opposing the regime or communists or socialists or political people who were not going to help them in any way.
- >> Bill Benson: I want to go back a little bit before the invasion of France. Before that happened, your father took a trip to Berlin to try to rescue some of the family members that were under Nazi Germany at that time.
- >> Joel Nommick: Yes. That was in 1936. In fact, they drove from France to Berlin. And he was able to help some of his cousins to leave Germany at the time because they needed money in order to pay for their visa, it seems. And one of them came to France and stayed with my parents until he was able to come to the United States.
- >> Bill Benson: Did all of the family leave Berlin, or did some stay behind?
- >> Joel Nommick: Some probably stayed behind.
- >> Bill Benson: Once the Germans were in control of the occupied zone, the Vichy government was set up, tell us about your parents' efforts to try to get out of France.
- >> Joel Nommick: Well, we were like most of the Jews in Europe, you know, scared of what was going on because, you know, we didn't know in detail but we had enough information. And the U.K. was closed. Canada was closed. We tried because we had relatives there. And we tried to come to the United States. Same thing in Argentina. We could not go.
- >> Bill Benson: So all of these countries were closed to you.
- >> Joel Nommick: Yeah, basically, yeah.
- >> Bill Benson: So no choice but really to just remain where they were.
- >> Joel Nommick: Yes.
- >> Bill Benson: Were there any difficulties for your parents because of their citizenship?

>> Joel Nommick: Well, first of all, my father had what was called a noncitizen passport which was a passport for people with no country.

>> Bill Benson: So he was considered stateless, no country.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. Because he didn't have a passport from Russia or from Estonia. My mother had an Estonian passport. My uncle had an Argentinean passport and my older brother because he was born in Argentina.

>> Bill Benson: And the Germans occupied in 1940. You continued to live in Thoissey. In the spring of 1941, that's when your father was arrested. Tell us why your father was arrested. I mentioned a little bit in the introduction. Tell us more about that and then what happened to him after his arrest.

>> Joel Nommick: Well, what happened basically in 1941, early 1941, a lot of anti-Jewish laws were enacted by the French government. They were like a copycat of the Nuremberg Laws in Germany. So first of all, you have to register as a Jew. To register your household, because they didn't know who were Jewish or not.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Joel Nommick: And then in big cities you had to wear a yellow star.

>> Bill Benson: Wear the yellow star?

>> Joel Nommick: Where we were you didn't have to do that. But everyone knew we were Jewish. We were the only Jewish family until the war.

>> Bill Benson: The only Jewish family in Thoissey?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. So four people, my parents and my two brothers. So what happened, the people or the former shareholders, some of them thought, oh, now it's doing very well. And we're going to try to get back the business, basically. So they mounted a scheme with the help of one of the employees to denounce my father to the Secretary of the Jewish Question in Vichy.

So the -- I still have the report made by the administration. And each time I read it, I am really angry just reading this. He was accused first of all of being a Jew. An international crook with low morality and depravity and who was stealing from his employees. So that's why he was --

>> Bill Benson: So the charge is he's a Jew and he's a crook.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. That's what we know. So what happened, he was arrested on June 30, 1941. He was sent to two prisons. One not far from where we were living and then to a prison in Lyon called the prison St. Paul. And in the summer of -- a little later in the summer he was sent to a concentration camp in the south of France. Right in the foothills of the Pyrenees. This was not an extermination camp. Most of the camp -- the camps in France were not extermination camps. Only one was.

But those camps were hard labor camps. People were without good food or -- without food a lot of times. There was no medication to help people. People died because of malnutrition and bad treatment. So he was -- from there he was able to get out of this camp. In the spring of 1942.

>> Bill Benson: The spring of '42.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: Is that when he was sent to the military house in Toulouse?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: How did he manage to end up at a military hospital?

>> Joel Nommick: Well, basically all this required leadership and also being a leader means you can get -- and also you need money. And people were bribable. So with the help of a doctor in that camp, he simulated epilepsy, and to simulate epilepsy was drinking three to four gallons of water a day without eating much. So after a week or so, he started to have spasms. They said oh, he has to go to the hospital. So he ended up in Toulouse in that military hospital.

>> Bill Benson: And once he ended up at the military hospital in Toulouse, your mother and brothers were then allowed to move to where he was.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. They came to Toulouse, and they were staying in a hotel. And in fact I was conceived in Toulouse.

>> Bill Benson: You were conceived in Toulouse.

>> Joel Nommick: Not in the military hospital.

[Laughter]

>> Joel Nommick: And from there he was able to be transferred to a small town, a village, a spot on the bottom of the Pyrenees, just on the bottom. For the reason of sanitary reasons. I don't know what that means.

>> Bill Benson: But related to the belief that he was still ill.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: OK.

>> Joel Nommick: So with -- so my mother was there, pregnant with me. My two brothers and my father, of course. And then there was a wife of an associate of my father, a chemist. And she was with us, and twin daughters. They were 6 years old. And they were Jews from Poland. And the father, Mr. Berger, was also in that camp. And my father was helping him to try to get out. He joined us. And he befriended -- my father befriended the mayor of that village. And they told him, I will bring you myself to Spain with my car because on both sides, on the French side and the Spanish side, we're all related. Nobody will even ask you for papers. So everything seemed to be fine to leave France.

>> Bill Benson: He made it sound like it was going to be really possible for you to get to Spain.

>> Joel Nommick: So the problem was Mr. Berger was able to leave the camp but not able to join us, and we waited too long. So September 20, 1942, the French police came to arrest us. And that was the first time we saw that. My father was able to bribe the police to take only himself, and not us. And from there, we went back with my mother to where we were living in Thoissey.

>> Bill Benson: And that was September 1942.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: In France the deportations of Jews had really begun or increased dramatically by that time.

>> Joel Nommick: Absolutely. That was probably one of the worst years.

>> Bill Benson: Yeah. And they were being sent to transit camps like Drancy and on to Auschwitz.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. So from the -- he arrived in Drancy I think two days later. And he left on September 25.

>> Bill Benson: Just a few days later.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And that convoy was 1,004 persons onboard, mainly Jews from Romania, all genders and ages. And they arrived in Auschwitz on the 29th. And after the war, there were eight survivors of this convoy.

>> Bill Benson: And when your father was sent to Drancy and before he was sent to Auschwitz, he was able to communicate with the family, wasn't he?

>> Joel Nommick: A few hours before leaving, he sent us a card from Drancy. If you want after I am finished, you can come up here and I will show it to you. It has the stamp of the Drancy police and the head of the Vichy state at the time.

>> Bill Benson: The head of Vichy France.

>> Joel Nommick: And he sent these to a third person, friends of us, who was not a Jew. He knew not to compromise --

>> Bill Benson: He couldn't send it directly to you and use your mailing address.

>> Joel Nommick: He didn't want to do that because he thought that would have been a big mistake. If you want, I can tell you quickly what he said. This is dated September 24, 1942. Dear friend, would you give Agnes, the children, and Jean the news that I will in a few hours leave France for an unknown destination. I know that they were planning a trip. I wish them from the bottom of my heart a safe journey and to find good condition on arrival. Please tell Jean to remember me to Mr. Vernier, who may be able to quickly help me. I am leaving courageous anyway and confident in my good star, which will bring me back one day with my family.

>> Bill Benson: I am leaving courageous and confident in my own star.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And would you be kind enough to give Agnes, the children, and Jean a tender kiss on my behalf and give you a friendly handshake.

>> Bill Benson: And of course you would end up never seeing your father again after that.

>> Joel Nommick: No.

>> Bill Benson: After he wrote that and he was sent to Drancy and then to Auschwitz. So your mother is pregnant with you. She has her two sons, and she still has the friend, Nina Berger, and her children, because her husband had made it to Spain. He's gone and safe. What did your mom and family do then?

>> Joel Nommick: Well, we went back to our house in Thoissey, to the village. So that basically we were hiding in plain sight, because everybody knew.

>> Bill Benson: They knew you, yeah.

>> Joel Nommick: And the main reason we went there is because nobody gave us up.

>> Bill Benson: Nobody denounced you.

>> Joel Nommick: So even people who were part of the regime, basically they didn't help us but they didn't harm us.

>> Bill Benson: Even though everybody knew you, in order to go there and be there, you had to have a false identity. So you took on the identity of the identity of this family.

>> Joel Nommick: Some people of the village were printing false papers. So they printed false papers for us because our papers -- normally you have the J, for Jew, on it. So since we could not -- we didn't have a car anymore. We hid the car because everything was requisitioned by the Vichy regime. So you could be controlled at any point, at any time. So when you take the bus or you take the train, you're controlled.

>> Bill Benson: You had to show your papers.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And when you got there, you could be confronted in the street so you needed those papers.

>> Bill Benson: So after several months in Thoissey, your mother gave birth to you. That had to have been an incredibly stressful and difficult time.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. She had to take the bus to go to the maternity home. When on the bus, she had already lost the waters, you know. But she made it. She made it. She was a strong woman. This is where I was born. On September 30. I was declared by my uncle at the city there and under my real name, and the real name was my parents.

>> Bill Benson: Why?

>> Joel Nommick: Because there was no -- people in the administration, they didn't want people to suffer, you know. And so that saved us also because, you know --

>> Bill Benson: So your mother goes there under the name Sabatier but you're born as Nommick. The family name.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And it was also the family name of my mother. So that was the irony of this period.

>> Bill Benson: Following your birth at the end of 1942, you and your mother and your brothers would remain in Thoissey until France was liberated in September of 1944. Tell us what you can about your life. You're just an infant. You're there under hidden identities in a small town where you're known. What were your lives like during that period until the end of the war? And for you in August of 1944.

>> Joel Nommick: Well, for me, of course, I don't have any recollection of the time. So everything I knew about this period was told to me by my mother or my two older brothers.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Joel Nommick: My uncle or parents of my friends from school. But anyway, I knew it was difficult, first of all, because she was alone during the week in that house. My two brothers were in high school in Macon. And we were living in anxiety all the time because we never knew what would happen to us, you know, from the morning to the afternoon. So basically I think I got that in my dreams from her, the anxiety. And at nights she felt so desperate, you know. She told me when I was a teenager, she said at nights I would pray to God, please let me die tonight. I don't want to be here in the morning. And then I look at you in the crib next to my bed and I say, no, I can't do that.

>> Bill Benson: And she gets back up the next day and does what she has to do.

>> Joel Nommick: So she had to do what she had to do.

>> Bill Benson: Your two brothers were at a school in another town.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what happened to them.

>> Joel Nommick: Well, what happened to them, my mother was mad because she didn't want to put them in the boarding side of the high school because she thought if they come to look for Jewish kids, you know, they had no way to escape. So she found a lady who was giving room and board. She was a widow. And her son had been captured -- he was a prisoner of war in Germany.

>> Bill Benson: He had been a French soldier?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes, in 1940. And in 1943, as you know, the Vichy zone was invaded by the Germans. Just after the -- I --

>> Bill Benson: So that meant the Germans took control of all of France at that point.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. So they were German quarters in that city. So this lady thought if she would go and denounce everybody who are there --

>> Bill Benson: Including your brothers.

>> Joel Nommick: My two brothers, an uncle, and two or three younger guys who were trying to flee to join the American army in Spain, because in Alsace -- the Alsatians were considered pure Aryan blood. And they had to be in the Wehrmacht or the S.S. when they came of age. A lot of them didn't want to fight for the Germans.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Joel Nommick: She went down to the German headquarters, and she denounced everybody. Luckily, and for everybody, the German officer in charge was a veteran of World War I and perhaps he was not really a Nazi because he let everybody -- he told everybody to be out of that place by 8:00 that night, because at 6:00 in the morning they will come to arrest everybody. So basically people had like two hours to find a place because at 9:00, you have curfews and you couldn't be outside.

So my two brothers found a place to hide. But since they were not in the same grade, they didn't have the same schedule, so for a couple of days -- or nights one of them didn't know where the other one was. So they were so scared about, you know, the fact that the other one was not there. But finally they reunited.

>> Bill Benson: They made their way back home.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And of course --

>> Bill Benson: And of course as you said, your father's business was taken away from him. So your family lost the business. You're living under a false identification papers so you can't go get ration cards. How did your mother and your family -- how did you do the basic things like buy food?

>> Joel Nommick: My father left money to my mother.

>> Bill Benson: He left some money?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. So in fact she was also paying the rent, and she was giving Mrs. Berger the salary as if his her husband had been working still.

>> Bill Benson: So you gave her money?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And we had money to buy things and just in case something happened.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me there were several people in the village that were really very helpful to you.

>> Joel Nommick: Definitely. They were heroic. First of all, the Thomassons, who were living next door to us, next to the house. And they had a small business of putting milk in the farms, in the neighborhood. They were pasteurizing the milk and transforming it into cheese, into cream, into, you know. So we never -- most of it was requisitioned by the Vichy government. But we always had things for us. And we never were without milk. And if you buy butter with a ration card, this is what you have for a week for one person, a little piece of butter.

>> Bill Benson: A piece of butter like that for a week.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. So we were blessed with that. And they never turned us in and did for us because of their good heart. Then there was another couple who had a little convenience store just down from our house. They were the same age group of my parents. And they didn't have children. But one day they told my mother, Agnes, if they

come to take you, we will take your three sons. They'll be our sons. So that really speaks volumes, you know, of the courage of these people.

>> Bill Benson: What would have been the repercussions for them, for an act like sharing butter with you or --

>> Joel Nommick: Well, first of all, if you were found out to help Jews, the sanction will have been in most instances immediate for them. A final sanction. For their family as well.

>> Bill Benson: And the families as well.

>> Joel Nommick: In fact, there was a family who were there. I never told you that story. But I remember after that. They had five siblings. Five kids. And they had been given away as being in the Resistance and Jews. So the armed forces of the Vichy came one morning. The mother was at work. And the father -- and the siblings were in school. The older son was like 19 or 20. He was with the father. So they killed them both. They burned the house. Their business. And this lady and the kids came back in the afternoon after work or after school and they found nothing, only ashes. Thank God in the village people got together to help them. I know my mother did. And many people did. Helped them. And we had a special bond with them because they were the same age of my brothers more or less.

>> Bill Benson: As you put it to me, there were so many bad things that happened, but there were some good things that happened too. You shared with me really an incredible story about an uncle of yours who had -- who was almost killed. Tell us about him.

>> Joel Nommick: Well, my uncle, he was my mother's brother. He was an associate of my father. They were in business together. And he was arrested three times.

>> Bill Benson: I'm sorry?

>> Joel Nommick: He was arrested three times.

>> Bill Benson: Arrested three times. OK.

>> Joel Nommick: He was able to get out because he was -- he had an Argentinean passport, and the consul of Argentina took him out. But then he was in Macon at that time. And he was arrested. And they were -- it was during the winter. It was cold. And the river had overflowed. So there was a lot of fog. It was in the evening. So they lined up a lot of people they arrested alongside the wall. And the water was just there. So he knew that he had to do something because when they started killing the first ones, he just let himself go down in the water and he walked like a couple of miles in water like this and finally found refuge in a school where he was hidden for a few months in the attic.

>> Bill Benson: He was in the river in the dead of winter during that time.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. So he got kind of like a -- he got kind of sick. So during the day at the high school -- not the high school. It was regular school. He was in the attic just above the classes. And he was coughing a lot. So all day he had a piece of material that he had to bite not to make noise because he didn't want nobody to know he was there. And he said it was a good thing for me after because I used to smoke. And I stopped that day.

>> Bill Benson: Your mother would listen to a hidden radio. Because radios were forbidden. You couldn't have radios. But she would listen to one.

>> Joel Nommick: We had this big radio. And at night they were listening to the BBC.

>> Bill Benson: So they got news of the war.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. That was the only news they had basically.

>> Bill Benson: You also created a hidden room in your house. Share that with us.

>> Joel Nommick: We divided one bedroom, which was a very large bedroom, and we made a wall. And a hidden door. And there was furniture that we can move. And in fact we never had to use it. My mother put things there in case anything happened. Some food and stuff like that. But I used to play in it when I could and sit with my friends.

>> Bill Benson: You would play in the room later.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: With your father gone, you of course didn't know what had happened to him once he was transported. But am I correct that he was able to send a letter from Auschwitz?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that.

>> Joel Nommick: We received a letter from Auschwitz in -- I think if I'm not mistaken 1943. The letter was like concentration camp Auschwitz and the stamp. And the same thing. He didn't send it to us. He sent it to the same gentleman --

>> Bill Benson: To the same fella who was not Jewish.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. And he said I am working. That's all he said. I am working.

>> Bill Benson: I am working.

>> Joel Nommick: But I'm cold. Can you send me some warm things for my feet and my body? And also he asked -- he had a little French dictionary. He wanted to have it because he wanted to make sure he didn't forget his French and stuff like that. So my mother sent it to him. And he received it.

>> Bill Benson: He did receive it?

>> Joel Nommick: And how do I know he received it? There was someone who came back from Auschwitz. And I think I told you that story. He was sent to Auschwitz early 1944. He was 17 years of age. And he was in the same bloc as my father. He was not a Jew. He was a French guy from the northwest of France. And he was sent there because he was a communist member. And he fell sick. And he got the typhus. And my father with the help of a Jewish doctor saved him.

So when they left the camp in January of 1945 to go to other camps, my father told him this is where I live in France. I want you to come and visit me. Because he was hoping to, of course, come back. So this is where I learned about my father. And I learned how he was able to send that letter.

Because basically when he arrived in 1942, they were building more blocs for more prisoners to come. And also for the guards and for the S.S. military there and the high ranking members and their families. So when they were -- first of all, my father didn't say he was a businessman. He said he was a chemist. Because he thought they probably don't need a businessman here.

>> Bill Benson: I'll say I'm a chemist.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And one day they were looking for people who were able to cut glasses for windows, you know, a glazier. And my father was very good with his hands. He could do anything. He was very talented. So they asked for people. So a few people said we know. So they gave them diamonds to cut the glass. So that put him inside, so

he didn't have to be outside in the long cold or in the winter, you know, to work. So he was inside. So that was good.

And my father was speaking German perfectly like a German. So there was no accent. And he was able to communicate with his colonel. And the guy said, can you paint? And he said yes. Well, can you paint this that way? Can you paint my son's room that color? And so -- and then he asked him if he can do toys for the kids. And so that was -- that's why he was able to do this, through this guy who shouldn't have been able to help him, he was helping him.

>> Bill Benson: So he was able to write a letter.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And he received the package.

>> Bill Benson: D-day was in 1944. The war continued until 19 45. You were too young, of course, but what do you know about liberation for your family?

>> Joel Nommick: We were liberated toward the middle of August or end of August. And I have a good story. My brothers, it was the best day of their life.

>> Bill Benson: Best day of their life.

>> Joel Nommick: Best day of their life. A bunch of kids from the village their age, teenagers, they decided one day they were going to go pick wild blackberries. There were bushes in a field a couple of miles from the house. And taking the main highway from the north towards Paris. And they were having fun, you know. Boys and girls and picking strawberries – or blackberries.

And all of a sudden the big noises on the road. Tanks. And so they thought, oh, the Germans are coming back. They were so scared. So they hide. And they hide themselves. And what did they see happening? The Jeeps and the Sherman tanks arriving. So they all run to welcome them.

And I have a lot of pictures of my brother on the tanks, on the Jeeps. And the G.I.'s gave them rations. They gave them chocolate bars. They gave them chewing gum. And the most important, cigarettes.

>> Bill Benson: The G.I.'s were giving them cigarettes.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: With the war's end in May 1945, you told me that your family was waiting for your father to come back.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that time of waiting for your father and what you learned. You told us, for example, already a little bit about the man, the 17-year-old, who he helped to save who was able to share some things with you.

>> Joel Nommick: In January 1945, early January, they were moving people out of Auschwitz and other camps.

>> Bill Benson: Because as the Russians were getting close.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. They were scared of the Russians. So he was sent to Germany. He was in transit a few days. And then he ended up in one of those huge camps, you know, where all of the German economy was alongside with a lot of subcamps. He was in two subcamps there. And also he had another number there. He had a number in Auschwitz and another one there.

>> Bill Benson: Another one.

>> Joel Nommick: So he was sent to Nordhausen. And as many of you probably know it was a horrible place. It was an underground factory where they were making the V1 and V2 rockets they were launching over Britain.

>> Bill Benson: The death rate at Nordhausen was astronomical every day.

>> Joel Nommick: So two things happened. And I met someone who was with him in Nordhausen in the 1980's.

>> Bill Benson: In 1980.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And he told me, your father -- they had this to eat every day. 300 calories. Like a broth of rotten vegetables. It smelled so bad but they had nothing else. And they were adding sawdust in order to make it for palatable. And he was forcing most of the people with him to give it to the young people, people from 16 to 21, because they were the first to die. They were dying like flies, you know. And he said, your father forced us to do that. And he was himself not in good shape. On top of it he was beaten by the S.S. They opened his head. And then he was sent to Bergen-Belsen, where he arrived the first week of 1945, and he was about 80 pounds when he arrived.

>> Bill Benson: How many pounds?

>> Joel Nommick: About 80 pounds.

>> Bill Benson: 80 pounds.

>> Joel Nommick: But he was alive because when the camp was liberated by the Brits, he wrote to us and he said, I am free. I hope you are all in good health. And I should be with you very soon. And I will finally see the son I never met. Which was me. And to this day we don't know what happened to him. The irony of this is we saw people he saw in there.

There was a lady from the same village, from Thoissey, who was in the French Resistance. She was arrested by the Gestapo in Lyon in 1943 and tortured by Klaus Barbie, nicknamed the butcher, and sent to Ravensbruck which was a concentration camp where she became subjected to medical experiments. Then marched to Bergen-Belsen. And there that was a place where you had water and you can wash yourself, she bumped into my father. And she said, Jean, I learned the French are going to bring us back soon. And he was so happy. So when she came back to the village, of course, she went home, maybe a couple of days later came to see him. And she could not figure out why he was not there. so that's what happened.

>> Bill Benson: He sent the letter to you saying that we'll be together soon.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And then you got a notice -- you learned from the British Red Cross something about your father. Tell us what you learned.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. My mother had a cousin in London which was working for the War Ministry at that time, so they made research with the British Red Cross. And they said left for Russia. And that's it.

>> Bill Benson: Left for Russia.

>> Joel Nommick: And I said, why did he leave for Russia? That doesn't make any sense. The French said he probably died there or because there were so many people sick. They were pushed in those mass graves in Bergen-Belsen. So we didn't know what to -- so basically we learned -- and then it took about 10, 11 years for him to be legally declared dead. So we have always had hope he was going to come back. Maybe he was sick somewhere. You know, you always hope.

>> Bill Benson: Even after he was legally declared dead, I think, in 1955, you continued to hope that he was maybe somewhere in Russia.

>> Joel Nommick: So we learned in the 1980's also that there was an agreement at Yalta between Stalin and the Allies that the Allies would give back to the Russians, to the Soviet people. And since my father was born in Russia, it was in the Russian Empire. So basically over 4 million people went back to the Russians. And most of -- half of them were killed in the first few months because they didn't want anybody to pollute their people with western ideas. So personally I hope he passed away in Bergen-Belsen as a free man.

>> Bill Benson: But you don't know.

>> Joel Nommick: But we don't know, and we will never know probably.

>> Bill Benson: What did your mom do then to try to move forward with her life? She --

>> Joel Nommick: Well, first of all, she was a strong woman. She raised us all with dignity and love. A lot of love. Especially for me because I was her last one. And when I was little, I was very -- I was sick very often. So she was basically spoiling me. But I like to thank my mother because basically she was home. She didn't want to give us another father. She didn't -- and I felt sorry that she didn't find somebody or a companion. But she was not looking. But for her old age, because when she passed away she was one month shy of 98.

>> Bill Benson: One month shy of 98.

>> Joel Nommick: But she saw all three of us, you know, going to school, university, going --

>> Bill Benson: And had grandchildren.

>> Joel Nommick: And some great grandchildren also.

>> Bill Benson: What happened to the family business?

>> Joel Nommick: The family business, my uncle wanted the business. After the war we were obliged to go to court to get it back. And finally the lawyers said the judges are saying that it was won during the war. And I suggest you make a deal with them. So we had to buy it back.

>> Bill Benson: You had to buy it back?

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. Not at the same price. But it was -- but it was a good thing because he could have it, and my uncle ran the business until he retired. And when he passed away, I sold the business to someone who was working there since 1945.

>> Bill Benson: Had been working there since 1945?

>> Joel Nommick: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Joel, we have a few minutes, and I think we can turn to the audience for a few minutes' worth of questions. There is so much more I could ask and you could share. But let's see if anyone has a question.

Our request is if you have a question use one of the two microphones in the aisles. If you would go to the microphone and make your question as brief as you can, and I will repeat it just to be sure we hear it right before Joel responds. Do we have any brave souls with a question? Otherwise I have plenty more. Anybody want to ask a question? We'll wait and see if anybody has one.

While we're waiting, you shared with me that your high school after the war, of course, as you were growing up, your high school received a very high recognition for its role during World War II.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. I was in a public high school. And they received the Medal of the Resistance, the only high school in France.

>> Bill Benson: The only high school that got the Medal of Resistance?

>> Joel Nommick: Because a lot of students there as well as the teachers were involved in the Resistance. They were fighting either the Vicci regime or fighting the Nazis. So they lot of them were injured. A lot of them were tortured. Some were killed.

>> Bill Benson: And these are high school kids and teachers.

>> Joel Nommick: Yes. And some were sent to camps and didn't come back. And I had some of these teachers who came back. So there was an unwritten law there that you could not tell any ethnic jokes. And we didn't know why, how come? Nobody tells jokes? And then they taught us why.

>> Bill Benson: We have a question, a young man right here. Hi.

>> I just wanted to know why you always kept believing that your dad was still alive and what your passion and hope was to keep fighting to knowing that your dad was still alive.

>> Bill Benson: Will you say it one more time for us?

>> Why you kept hoping that your dad was still alive, why you always had that fighting feeling inside of you, why you always thought that you knew that your dad would still be alive.

>> Bill Benson: How did you know that your dad might still be alive, what kept that going for you, that hope? Is that a fair --

>> Yes.

>> Joel Nommick: Well, I think it's in human nature to hope, to be an optimist. Also since we didn't know what happened to him, we kept this for years, you know. Maybe he's alive somewhere. Maybe he will come back. It was haunting us basically. I think deep down we probably knew but we didn't want to admit it.

>> Bill Benson: Right.

>> Joel Nommick: You know, we wanted to see him.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. That's a great question.

>> Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: Over here.

>> Yes. Do you recall what it was like after the liberation with the survivors trying to, you know, get back into the norm? Were they welcomed, you know, by their neighbors? And what was that like?

>> Bill Benson: Do you recall, Joel, after liberation, what it was like to try to get back a sense of normal life? Were you welcomed? What was that like for you?

>> Joel Nommick: First of all, it's a very good question. Most of the people that I know were in the camps and came back, they never felt anything. They wanted to forget. Some of them couldn't talk all their life about it. As a matter of fact, I never talked about anything until I came to this museum. That was my therapy.

>> Bill Benson: And that was just last year.

>> Joel Nommick: Yeah. And it was like I had this flaw that I was able to get rid of. And in fact last year in June I was with my kids and my grandchildren. And I told them our story. From a to z. And that was the first time they heard it. And it was the best thing I ever did.

[Applause]

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. Yes.

>> If the Holocaust didn't happen, what do you think you would be doing with your life?

>> Bill Benson: Oh, great question. If all of that hadn't happened, what you do you think you would be doing today?

>> Joel Nommick: I would not be here to talk to you. But if the Holocaust didn't happen, imagine what the world would be. Imagine all these kids who were killed during the Holocaust. Over 1 million of them. They could have been, you know, a doctor. They could have been a researcher. A good professional. You know, they could have formed families. I can give you an example of numbers.

In 1939, there were 17 million Jews in the world. The world population was 2 billion. Today the world population is 7.7 billion. And the Jews, we are probably going to be next year 17 million again. So we were a very small percentage, you know. And why did this happen? This is why this museum is here, you know. But we would have been family. Living all my life like everybody is entitled to.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to have to stop our questions. But when Joel finishes in a little bit, he'll talk to us a little bit more, but when he finishes we would invite you with the questions that you're not able to ask right now, come up on the stage afterwards and ask Joel that question. You're going to stay and answer questions. And that goes for everybody else in the room. Anybody who wants to come up and meet Joel, ask your question, shake your hand, get your photograph taken with him, we welcome that. So please know that. So thanks for being willing to ask questions.

[Applause]

>> Joel Nommick: Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: I want to -- I'm going to turn back to Joel to close today's program. I'd like to thank all of you for being here. Remind you that we will livestream all of our programs until June 6. But all of our programs will also be available on the Museum's YouTube page. If you can't come back in person, there are other ways to see our programs. It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. So I will turn to Joel to close today's program.

>> Joel Nommick: Thank you, Bill. First of all, I would like to thank Mr. Benson.

[Applause]

>> Joel Nommick: I consider Mr. Benson like my friend. I think without him, I would not have been so easy for me to come in front of you all and telling my story. He is professional. His knowledge is to be commended.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

>> Joel Nommick: Also I would like to thank all of the people and survivors. Diane Salzman, Carrie Bannister. Also Kelly. And all of the other people in this museum. We have in this museum a lot of people with a lot of talent. A lot of commitment. And I think they have to be commended. All of the volunteers. But also the people who work here. Because of their kindness and their knowledge.

I would like also to thank you, because without you this would not be possible.

[Applause]

>> Joel Nommick: And I would like to thank my mother for the way she raised us. She was a strong woman as I said before. She was with me. She knew exactly what was going on in my thoughts. And I grew up an angry kid. And when I was a teenager, she sat me down and she lectured me for a couple of hours. And then during several weeks,

she said, you have to let it go. Let it go. Hate is awful. Because I was 18. And she said, love is the most strongest weapon you can have. So forget it.

[Applause]

>> Joel Nommick: And of course I would like to tell you to thank my father for all he did. He was a courageous man. He was a leader, and he was always trying not only to survive but to help others in his life. In his personal life and in his professional life and during his life in the camps. And I wish I can be the same person as he was.

[Applause]

>> Joel Nommick: My message to you all is love life, love your family, love your community, and love your country. Be a good citizen. Protect freedom. And protect liberty. And stand your ground for you but also for your fellow human beings because if he or she is ostracized because she is not like you or for many other reasons. So that's what my hope is, and I'm sure I'm right. I am an optimist, and I have great hope in you. And that's why I like to talk to schools and students because you are the future, and you're going to do the right things.

[Applause]

>> Joel Nommick: Thank you.