Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person
Ralph Berets
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Remote CART Captioning

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>> Ladies and gentlemen, our program is about to begin. Please make sure your cell phones are silenced. Thank you.
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. Ralph Berets, 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 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.
Ralph 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 Ralph 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 June 6. 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 Ralph is one individual’s account of the Holocaust. We have prepared a brief slide presentation to help with his introduction. We begin with this

photograph of Ralph Berets, who was born December 5, 1939, in Amersfoort, the Netherlands. In 1936, three years before his birth, Ralph's father, Otto, and mother, Hilde, had fled to the Netherlands from Nazi Germany. This is Ralph and his sister Marion in late 1941. Marion is two years older than Ralph.
The family led a normal, comfortable middle-class life until Germany invaded the Netherlands in May 1940.The Netherlands is circled on this map which shows Nazi-occupied western Europe in 1940. Deportations of Jews from the Netherlands began in 1942 when Ralph was 3 years old.
To avoid deportation, the Berets family found refuge in a cottage his father had built in the fields on the property of Ralph's father's Christian acquaintance, Mr. Hendricks. One day Mr. Hendricks' son warned them that the Nazis were going to search the cottage. They ran to the fields and were not discovered, but the Nazis burned down the cottage. After this close call, the family contacted the Dutch Underground for assistance in finding new hiding places.
Ralph and his sister were hidden together, separately from their parents. They lived in a number of different hiding places before the whole family hid together in a chicken coop in Arnhem. The arrow on this map of the Netherlands points to Arnhem. They were in the chicken coop until they were liberated by Canadian forces on May 5, 1945.
We close with this photograph of Ralph taken after the war in 1946, at age 6 1/2.
In 1948 Ralph and his family came to the U.S. in the hope of obtaining affidavits to allow them to live in the U.S., spending a year here. They returned to the Netherlands but eventually secured the necessary affidavits and returned to the U.S. in 1951 settling in Plainfield, New Jersey. His father opened a store selling dresses and uniforms then went into real estate.
Ralph became a U.S. citizen in 1957 and continued his education graduating from high school in 1958. He played soccer in Holland and became a star player at his junior high school. In high school he played on the school's basketball and baseball teams. Ralph attended the University of Michigan. While serving as a tour guide on a tour of southern Europe and Israel he met Iris, whom he married in 1963, 56 years ago. Ralph earned a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature in 1969. After teaching at Michigan for six years, Ralph spent most of his career as an English professor and for 11 years as Chair of the English Department at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He also ran a real estate business for 20 years.
Iris became a social worker then earned a Ph.D. in Psychology and went into private clinical practice. Iris is here today with Ralph. They retired in 2005 and moved to Mill Valley, California. In 2014 Ralph and Iris moved to the Washington, D.C., area to be close to their newest grandchild, Ajay. Ralph and Iris have three children, sons Eric and Keith, and daughter Jessica. Keith and Jessica are attorneys, and Eric is a mortgage underwriter. They have six grandchildren and one great granddaughter.
While in California, Ralph began doing film reviews for the Mill Valley Film Festival and continues to do them today. He has recently taught courses on film aesthetics and aging and film at the Encore Learning Program at George Mason University. Ralph and Iris also take courses at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at American University.
Ralph has been speaking to schools and civic organizations about his Holocaust experiences since 1976. He now volunteers here at the Museum where he has done research on prisoner of war camps and translations from Dutch into English. He also

helps visitors find their way around the Museum, and is part of the Museum's Speaker's Bureau.
With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Ralph Berets.
Ralph, thank you for joining us and willing to be our First Person today. You have so much to share with us, and we have such a short period so we'll get started right away.
>> Ralph Berets: OK.
>> Bill Benson: Your parents met in 1933, the year that Hitler took power in Germany. They moved to Holland in 1936, before you were born. Before you talk about your parents' move to Holland and their life with you during the war and the Holocaust, tell us what you can about the early lives and the events that led to them wanting to move to Holland.
>> Ralph Berets: OK. My experience is focused primarily on my father. Both of my parents lived in Krefeld, Germany. From 1935 until my father left the country, he was harassed by people on the street. He was beaten up several times. They painted swastikas on his house and on his father's store. But the incident that really made him -- or convinced him not to remain in Germany was the following. He worked in the store that my grandfather owned. He worked in the materials department.
And there were several other ladies that worked there. One of them accused my father of raping her. And so my father was arrested and put on trial. And very fortunately during the trial, the young woman was called to the stand and she just said, I'm sorry. I can't go through with this. He didn't do it. So they released my father. But they arrested the woman. We found out after the war that she spent a couple of months in jail, but was also released fortunately.
My father then sort of organized or tried to leave the country. He tried to make arrangements to come to the United States. But as you probably know, the United States borders were essentially closed to Jews. So that was not a realistic possibility. He did have some acquaintances in the Netherlands, and he thought they would be better off there than remaining in Germany. So he made various arrangements to go to the Netherlands and to set up a business there.
In order to succeed he needed to have money, and the Germans would not allow Jews to take money out of the country. So my father converted all of his assets as well as some of his grandfather's -- some of his father's assets to three things. Diamonds, gold, and silk. And the primary reason for that is they were relatively easily transportable, and my father also had to hide them when he crossed the border because it was against the law for Jews to take property out of Germany. So my father hid his diamonds in the radiator. He hid his gold coins in his tires. There used to be innertubes between the innertube and the outer tire. And he hid the silk in the upholstery of the seats in the car. And he ended up going across the border five different times. Each time he took some assets, and he also brought some of his relatives.
So my mother came with him. Both sets of grandparents, who were very reluctant to leave Germany because both grandfathers had fought in World War I. They had been decorated soldiers. And they felt they were Germans first, not Jews. And so they had to be convinced to leave the country.
Ironically they probably would have been better off in Germany. More Jews survived, or a larger percentage of Jews survived in Germany, than in the Netherlands. It's very difficult to find a place to hide in the Netherlands. Totally flat. There's hardly a hill in the

country. The cities are relatively small. And everybody knew everybody. And it was -- so we were very lucky to survive. And all three generations of my family survived the war. We were hidden together part of the time. But we were also separated part of the time.
>> Bill Benson: Ralph, you said that your grandparents at first were reluctant to go. Was your mother willing to go readily or did she want to remain behind?
>> Ralph Berets: I think she had ambivalent feelings. My father had a -- I would call it a paranoid personality. Long before what happened with the Nazis, he was always skittish about where he was and who was looking out and what might happen to him. And of course after the incident that took place in his hometown, he really felt like he had no choice. And since my parents had been recently married, I think my mother had no real choice. I think if she had had a choice, she probably would have stayed where she was.
>> Bill Benson: If you don't mind, tell us about that one incident as he's going back and forth taking the goods illegally, when he went across with his friend who seemed to have been sort of a wise guy.
>> Ralph Berets: So my father had already been across the border several times. This was his last time going across the border. And he told his friend, you know, just keep your mouth shut. It's dangerous to go across the border. And they have become much more suspicious so they are checking things much more carefully. And so they went through everything in the car. They didn't find anything. My father in that instance had hidden some diamonds in his toothpaste. And the man sitting next to him, as they were leaving, he says to the guard, you know, you guys were so careful about everything. But you didn't check our toiletries. And my father, you know, sort of gasped and said, you know -- of course he didn't know where the diamonds were hidden. My father had never told him.
Anyway, the guards just sort of laughed and went on. And my father when they got out of view, he stopped the car to catch his breath and said, why in the world would you say something like that? He said, well, I just thought it was funny. And my father said, it wasn't funny because that's where I hid the diamonds, and if they would have found them, you know, I wouldn't be able to proceed. Anyway, so they did get across the border. He ended up being a partner in my father's business in Amersfoort.
>> Bill Benson: Once your family was in the Netherlands, what was life like for them in the first couple of years they were there? Were they able to get themselves reasonably settled?
>> Ralph Berets: We were very lucky. My parents had some contacts in the Netherlands. They were able to set up a store much like the department where my father worked in his father's store. So he sold material goods. Not finished dresses but material goods that seemed to do pretty well. Right in downtown Amersfoort. He also bought a very nice house, which I guess in the United States you would call a duplex, connected to one house on the next side. We lived a very I would say middle class life. And things went relatively smoothly.
My parents joined the synagogue. Which was probably a mistake, because that sort of haunted us afterwards. And I think they lived comfortably. When the Germans invaded in 1940, the Dutch resisted for seven days. They didn't have much of a military, and they were never expecting to have to go to war. So when the Germans occupied the Netherlands, initially they just sort of stayed there and collected information. They weren't in the process of arresting a lot of Jews.

But by 1942, it became very uncomfortable, and my parents did feel like they had to go into hiding. In order to go into hiding, my father had contracted with a friend to build a little cottage on a farmer's property. He built this cottage with the permission of the farmer. And it was basically out of the way. There was no road leading to the cottage. There was enough shrubbery around so you couldn't really see it from anywhere. And if somebody hadn't told on us, we probably could have survived there for the rest of the war.
>> Bill Benson: I'm going to ask you a question about that. He built that cottage, I think, in the latter part of 1940, but you didn't move into it until 1942. So he was making those -- that kind of careful, complicated planning well in advance.
>> Ralph Berets: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Until they went -- they exercised the option to go to the cottage in '42, what was that time like for your family and for your parents living under the Nazi occupation as of May 1940?
>> Ralph Berets: Well, they tried to live a normal life, but it became more and more difficult. And people became aware of the fact that they were starting to arrest Jews. That the Dutch police were complicit with the Nazis in many cities, helping them find the Jews and deporting them. So my father during that time from 1940 when the Germans invaded until we went into hiding late in 1942, we took weekend trips in the car with canned goods, which they stored in the cottage. So by the time we moved there, there was a lot of food. I mean, not great food.
There was a potbelly stove in the cottage. Although my parents were reluctant to turn it on or to build a fire because the smoke would indicate that somebody was there. So we didn't use that very often. There's no running water. There were no toilet facilities or anything. But we felt really relatively safe once we got there, and at least we had stored a substantial amount of food which hopefully would have lasted -- we stayed there for nine months before we were forced to leave.
>> Bill Benson: What precipitated for your parents to make the move into the cottage? It sat empty for a year and a half. What caused them finally to make the decision to go?
>> Ralph Berets: Well, I think the primary motivation was the awareness that there were Dutch people that they knew that were friends and Dutch people they knew who were being arrested, taken to a transport facility where they stayed for a week or two before they were sent to Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen. And the more people that were being arrested, the more fearful my parents became until they felt like they weren't really safe where they were living. And so --
>> Bill Benson: It was time to go.
>> Ralph Berets: It was time to go, yes.
>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that when they made the decision, your parents sat you and your sister down to have a conversation about your new identities.
>> Ralph Berets: Yes. OK. So the Dutch Underground was very helpful during the war. They were also subsidized by the Dutch queen and her husband, Prince Bernard, who was German but who was very supportive of the Jews. So they provided money. They had escaped to London where they thought they would be safer than in the Netherlands. So they supported the underground, and the underground provided false identities for one. So we had false papers. All of us had false papers. We also had false

names because they thought our names were too Jewish. And so we all had a more Dutch-sounding name.
Everybody had to have their hair dyed blond so we would look more Aryan. I didn't have my hair dyed blond because I had blond hair as a child. So I was lucky. The most disturbing part was when my father tried to explain to my sister that she wasn't who she thought she was, that she had a new name, and my sister didn't want a new name. She said, why do I have to give up my name? And my father said, well, you have no choice. It's very dangerous, and you have to have a new name. And they were fighting with one another. And even after the war, my sister was still upset about what happened.
But anyway, that was the first time that my father ever slapped either of us. He finally said, you know, you have no choice. And he smacked her in the face. And he said, you know, you are not Marion. You are Marietje. So that was the end of the argument.
And so we had this new identity, which fortunately came in very handy a number of times during the war. We had yellow stars, which is the synagogue had handed out back in 1941. But we seldom wore them. And after the war -- in fact, it wasn't until my parents died that I discovered the four yellow stars. Two of which were slightly worn, and two of which clearly hadn't been worn at all. So mostly we went around if we went around at all with our false papers and false identities.
>> Bill Benson: For the almost 10 months you were in the cottage.Two questions. One, were any other family members with you? And as a little boy, what do you recall of that time for you?
>> Ralph Berets: Ultimately my parents and both sets of grandparents were with us in the cottage. The cottage had one large room, which is basically the room where we spent most of the time. And a relatively small bedroom. Most people -- most of us spent a lot of the time when we weren't asleep on the floor. It was in comparison to what we had in the chicken coop, it was a very luxurious place. But -- and we were, you know, comfortable there. And for the 9 1/2 months that we stayed there, we had enough food, although my grandfather taught me and my sister how to pick mushrooms. Lots of wild mushrooms are poisonous, but there are some wild mushrooms that you can eat.
So that was one of the luxuries we had. We'd go outside at dawn and pick mushrooms, which I guess was the best time. He knew which side of the tree they grew on. And so we picked mushrooms.
The farmer who let us stay on his property was a very religious person. He felt like it was his religious obligation to protect us. He had given his word that he would do the best he could. And I don't -- you know, I was, what, 3 years old when we went into hiding. And I didn't -- I don't recall very much until the bad things started to happen. And that was the night that one of the farmer's sons knocked on our door and said, the Germans are coming. The Germans are coming. You've got to leave immediately. So we all grabbed something and ran out the door. And I would say within five minutes, the Germans were there.
They were screaming and yelling, you know, something about, we know that Jews are here. Why would anybody else be hiding here? We see all of this -- these possessions, clothes and things. And so they started looking for us outside. But very fortunately it was a night when there was just a horrible thunderstorm with lightning and very loud cloudbursts. And they didn't look for very long. Instead they just burned the cottage down.

And so we stayed out that night. The next morning -- and that's the first thing I remember in my life. The first thing I remember is spending the night in the field sopping wet, hearing the Germans yelling and screaming and then the cottage where we lived going up in flames.
So the next morning when we left the cottage, we were walking toward the farmer's house to thank him for the warning. And we passed the barn, and the farmer's oldest son was hanging from the rafters with a meat hook in his chin and blood dripping down. And unfortunately that's the second thing I remember. When we discovered after the war what had actually happened, the two sons and the father felt betrayed by the oldest son, who had given up our location to the Dutch police, who then informed the Nazis. And so they came looking for us. And the farmer felt like, you know, this was not acceptable behavior. And everybody in the family was very upset. And they hanged him as I mentioned from the rafters. I guess initiating their own kind of justice.
>> Bill Benson: Ralph, you said that that image stayed with you for many, many years.
>> Ralph Berets: Yes.
>> Bill Benson: Ralph, after you had to leave the cottage, your family would find refuge in, I think, three different locations before you ended up in the chicken coop. Tell us about those other locations that you went to and why you left them before you got to the chicken coop.
>> Ralph Berets: Well, we were very lucky in finding places at all, because there were eight of us. After we had to leave the cottage, everybody had to find --
>> Bill Benson: That was the four of you and --
>> Ralph Berets: And two sets of grandparents.
>> Bill Benson: OK.
>> Ralph Berets: And everybody ended up finding other hiding places. People were willing to accommodate two people, but not eight people or six people and obviously we couldn't stay together. And the first place where we came and where we stayed was a very nice family that had seven of their own children. And they took in my sister and me. And this family we met at the Holocaust Museum in 2017. One of his grandsons had done some research on the Holocaust. And contacted me and wanted to know if I was the person that hid in his grandfather's house. And so we started -- I said I don't know. We started talking about where it was and when that took place. And we agreed that, you know, we were the family -- or we were the kids that stayed with his family.
And he told us this funny story how the kids resented us being there because the first night that we came, we got to take a bath first. I mean, there's no running water even in that house. They had a pump, and you had to heat the water and they filled the bathtub. And the way that the kids took a bath once a week, and the oldest child would go first and the youngest child would go last. But when we were there, the two of us went first. And the kids, I guess, were very resentful that that happened. We didn't have the vaguest idea. In fact, I didn't know anything about it until we met --
>> Bill Benson: This was just two years ago.
>> Ralph Berets: Two years ago, yes. That was a wonderful reunion. I still correspond with him.
So my sister and I stayed on the third floor of this house. There was a store downstairs, a bake shop. And they sold baked goods and ice cream. And we had this system that if somebody banged the ceiling three times with a broom stick that we would go up to

hide. And there was a ladder that went up a couple of stories. Houses in the Netherlands are quite high, 12 to 15 feet high, rather than what they have here, 9 to 10 feet. So we would climb up the ladder and lie down between the rafters. So unless somebody really got up there, you couldn't see people hiding there.
Once a week while we were in this hiding place my mother was allowed to visit us. And on this particular occasion, my mother was there with us. So we heard the banging on the ceiling. We had practiced a number of times going up the steps. This is the first time where we took the ladder up with us, which was a very good idea it turned out. So that nobody could really follow us up there.
There was a little piece of wood that you could use to close the area off. Anyway, the Dutch police and the German soldiers came. And they were looking around. They were suspicious. They moved a piece of furniture under -- the way that we got up into the attic, it wasn't high enough. The German soldier sort of pushed the covering, the piece of wood that we had that closed off the area, pushed it out of the way. But he couldn't get up there.
At that particular time, when we went up the stairs, my sister had taken the cat that belonged to the family. She had sort of grown attached to it. When the Germans opened the trap door, the cat jumped on the man's head and -- he had seen some yellow liquid going down the wall. And so he assumed that the cat had done this. And it was very fortunate. It turns out it had been my mother. She was so scared that this was the end that she had peed and not the cat. But they stopped looking.
But we also discovered that one of the sons was, I guess, made a statement at his school about the fact that there were visitors at his house. And so the word got out that this family was hiding somebody. And so we couldn't stay at that particular place.
The other thing that happened, 30 years after the war, I had these dreams five nights in a row. I had the same dream of somebody putting their hand in front of my mouth and the other hand on my throat, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. And I didn't know what to do with that. I just thought, you know, I hardly ever dream. Why do I have this dream five nights in a row? And so I called my mother. And she said, you can't remember that. And I said, well, I don't really remember. But, you know, I subconsciously am remembering this. Do you know what it refers to? And she said, well, I'd rather not tell you. And I said, well, I'll probably keep having these dreams. I wish you would tell me. So she told me when she was hiding with us in the attic, she had her hand in front of my mouth and her other hand on my throat. And she said she was extremely tense.
And if the German soldiers had gotten up there, she said, you know, it probably would have been better for you to die by my hand than if they would have discovered us. And she said she was squeezing pretty hard. And she said it probably would have killed you if that would have happened. Luckily it didn't happen. But we had to leave that hiding place.
>> Bill Benson: So from there I think you went to the home of a butcher.
>> Ralph Berets: Yes. We went to a butcher's home, which is where my mother had been staying. And the butcher was very nice to my mother because he was trying to sleep with her. In fact, he did sleep with her, I guess, not when we were there but before. And my mother said, you know, what's the point of resisting? If it saves our lives, and I don't think we're going to live throughout the war anyway. So she consented.
Unfortunately a couple of days after we moved into the house, the butcher's wife caught

her husband and my mother in bed together, and she kicked us out immediately. Luckily she didn't tell the police. So we had to find another hiding place.
There's one in between that I don't remember, but the last one where we were was at this -- I mean, I would call it a mansion even by today's standards. A woman from Indonesia who could not have children had this gorgeous house. And my sister and I stayed there for a couple of weeks. And she decided she would like to adopt us.
And she contacted my parents through the underground, and my father came to talk to her. And she said, you know, I would like to adopt your children. And he said, well, that's wonderful but there's some conditions. One condition that my father could not accept was the fact that he would never be able to see us again after the war if they survived. And he said, you know, I'm unwilling to do that. And so he didn't give us up for adoption. And this the other thing my sister used to fight with him, even when she was 60 years old, she was fill fighting about, how could you make a choice like that? If we could have survived in this woman's house, how could you risk taking us back and finding other hiding places? And my father said, well, if we were going to die, you were going to die with us. But you didn't die. Anyway, so it wasn't the wrong choice.
Anyway, so we had to leave that house. She didn't want us anymore if she couldn't adopt us. And so the final place that the underground found for us was a pretty horrendous place near Arnhem, a chicken coop.
>> Bill Benson: And it was a literal chicken coop.
>> Ralph Berets: It was. And the chickens were there hours before we moved in. The odor was horrendous. There was no windows. There was a door. There was just a mesh -- metal mesh over a hole that was the window. And it was pretty disgusting. But it was a place to hide. It wasn't in -- you know, it wasn't in the city. Nobody else would really know that we lived there except for the farmer and his family.
The first farmer where we stayed was pretty generous. I mean, he allowed us to take some things that they had left over. Gave us some milk. It was a -- but this particular farmer, who had a pig farm as well as a chicken farm, he warned us that if we took anything, we would be thrown out immediately.
The only thing we could take was they threw things out before they gave them to the pigs, and if we found things that we wanted to eat, we could do that. So every day we looked behind his house. They sort of put a pile of garbage. And we found potato peels and the outer leaves of cabbages. And that was basically -- we had no stored food in this place, so that was our basic diet during the time that we stayed there.
>> Bill Benson: And you were there for almost 13 months.
>> Ralph Berets: 13 months, yes.
>> Bill Benson: Until the end of the war. How many of you ultimately were in that chicken coop?
>> Ralph Berets: We started with just the four of us. But part of what the problem of hiding in the Netherlands was that after a period of time, it got more and more risky. People talked. It was difficult to get food no matter where you were hiding. In order to get food, everybody got coupons during the war. Jews got no coupons. If families ordered, you know, wanted more -- some extra food, it looked very suspicious.
And so the hiding places where my grandparents were, they had taken care of them very well. Each set of grandparents in different places. But ultimately they couldn't stay where they were. So they all ended up coming to the chicken coop. So at the end, the

last month and a half or so, we had some cousins and the grandparents and us. There were 13 people who stayed in the chicken coop. And one of the things that I remember was one night when we were asleep, half of us were asleep because we couldn't all fit on the floor, something came in the window. It seemed like a rock. The next morning we looked at it, and it turned out to be a hand grenade. But luckily it didn't go off.
>> Bill Benson: Any idea where it came from?
>> Ralph Berets: Well, we discovered just before our liberation that there was a German encampment less than a mile away. And they were, you know, marching up and down through the fields. Various properties. And I assume -- I don't know if, you know, if that was intentional or just -- we found -- there were V2 rockets that would go overhead, make this horrible whistling sound, almost on a daily basis.
When I walked in the fields one day, I found a dead body of a German soldier. I don't know what happened, why they didn't retrieve him, although days later the body was gone. I don't know who took it.
>> Bill Benson: Ralph, you told me that your mother was a very meticulous person. What was it like for her to be living in the circumstances like that?
>> Ralph Berets: Obviously, it was horrible. She always kept a very clean house. Everything in order. She was a great cook. It was, you know, repulsive to her. She tried to -- there's no running water. There was a stream nearby. We had a bucket. So you could bring a bucket of water to the house. And had a broom to try to clean it. But I would say even after a year, this place still smelled. And it was just very difficult to tolerate. So it was a very hard time for my mother.
But my mother didn't -- she didn't look very Jewish. And so when we went out, which was not very often, but my sister and I both got sick several times. Had to be hospitalized. It was my mother who took us on the back of the bicycle to the hospital. And very fortunately we knew -- she knew a doctor that was willing to see us and treat us but not leave records behind.
>> Bill Benson: Worries about health must have been profound, with that many people, 13 months. Somebody's going to get sick.
>> Ralph Berets: Well, yes. I think my sister and I were the ones that got the sickest, twice. And we were hospitalized. And after the war we had to be treated as well because we were still sick. I had this disease on my skin called scabies. It created very many rough spots, itchy. And very annoying. And you see these little things crawling on your skin. I also had worms that were eating the little food that I had. They were eating some of it inside. So that was a very difficult time.
The farmer did allow us to stay in
his -- we had planes going overhead and dropping bombs, as I mentioned. And sometimes they got pretty close to where we were staying. And so the farmer had built like an underground bunker, reinforced concrete. And he would be able to close it. And it was a relatively safe place. I don't remember exactly how many kids the farmer had. But it was a large family. Brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, children. They all stayed in his bunker which was maybe 4-by-6 feet.
And when we were in there, we were all crowded in there like sardines. And it was worse than being out in the chicken coop. It smelled horribly, and you couldn't breathe. So we went there three or four times, and then everybody decided it just wasn't worth going in there. And so we stopped going.

Just before we were liberated by the Canadian soldiers, two German soldiers came by the cottage and knocked on the door. And talked to my parents and said, you know, we knew you were here for months, and we didn't do anything. If we are put on trial after the war, would you speak on our behalf so we're not punished? And my parents, you know, said, fine. Yes, we'd be glad to do that. I mean, they didn't know. We didn't know that you were aware of our presence.
Anyway, they asked if they could come over and play bridge with my parents. And my parents felt like, well, they couldn't say no, but they certainly didn't want to do it. And it was a -- I mean, they actually came --
>> Bill Benson: To play bridge.
>> Ralph Berets: To play bridge, yes. And that was -- my parents said to us, my sister and me, they said, you know, make as much noise as you can. We don't want these people here. Of course, during the whole war we were supposed to be quiet. And it was very difficult for us to make noise. They stayed, I don't know, an hour and a half or so. Played bridge.
And the next day there was music and a band and everybody was celebrating. And we walked out to the street. And we were being liberated. That was May 5, 1945. And Canadian soldiers liberated us, and they handed out treats. They handed out chewing gum. And Hershey's chocolate. I had never eaten chocolate. That became my favorite food. I had never chewed gum. I chewed it for a while and swallowed it. I discovered afterwards you're not supposed to do that.
But we were liberated. You'd think that that meant now we were free. But it wasn't quite that easy. We had to -- well, we wanted to go back to our house. Our house was occupied by two German officers. And basically they claimed they had title to the house, which they did. Not legal title, but they had title to the house. And my father had to take them to court, which took, I don't know, 2 1/2 months to finally get them evicted.
>> Bill Benson: Two German soldiers.
>> Ralph Berets: Yes. They lived there. It was -- anyway, he finally go get them out of the house. One of the things I didn't tell you about my father's preparations, before --
>> Bill Benson: I was going to ask you about this.
>> Ralph Berets: So before we went into hiding, my father had a pretty nice car. He knew they couldn't keep the car during the war. And so he took the car apart, the chassis stayed in one garage, and the engine stayed in another garage, and the wheels stayed in a third garage. So the pieces by themselves weren't useful to anybody really. After the war, my father remembered where he had stored each part, and he got somebody to put the car back together. So while we didn't have a house to live in, at least we had a car to get around in.
>> Bill Benson: You told me, Ralph, that your mother said the reason that she married your father, if I remember this correctly, is because he was unlike anybody else. And from what you've described, I mean, leaving the pieces of car in different places, with the expectation that maybe later I'll be able to put it all back together, plus all of the other preparations.
>> Ralph Berets: He was very intuitive. He was somewhat paranoid. And he was, you know, very -- he could somehow anticipate what was going to happen in many instances. He was both a successful businessman and a very careless businessman. During his lifetime, he was a millionaire three times. He was also bankrupt three times.

I'll give you one example. He owned a brake factory in the Netherlands after the war. And it was doing quite well. Unfortunately one day they had a fire, and the factory basically burned down. He tried to claim his insurance until he discovered that he had forgotten to make his last insurance payment. And so the insurance paid nothing, and he had a loss of, I think, over $1.2 million. The good thing about that was he could use that loss for future reference so that he could deduct that on the yearly basis from his taxes. So for years, he didn't have to pay taxes because he had all these losses.
>> Bill Benson: Ralph, you as you mentioned earlier, you and your sister had been ill. After the war ended, you both had to get some pretty major treatment. Tell us about that.
>> Ralph Berets: Yeah. I mean, the doctor at the hospital helped us during the war. But we were both pretty sick. We were obviously very malnourished. We were lucky to get one meal a day during the war. And nobody really liked what they had to eat. So, you know, I guess we were very weak in the sense that we couldn't really fight diseases. So my sister actually was hospitalized very a couple of weeks after the war. She was extremely constipated. And they had a really difficult time treating her. She ultimately was sent to Switzerland, and she stayed with this family there for a couple of weeks after the war. This is a very religious Jewish family, and when we came to visit I didn't know all the rules that applied. But, you know, you're not even supposed to turn a door handle to open the door. You're not supposed to take a handkerchief out of your pocket to blow your nose. And of course I violated all the rules, and that wasn't looked upon very favorably. But anyway, they treated my sister very well. And she was happy that, you know, she found some place where they fed her and took care of her.
And as I mentioned, I had this terrible skin disease and these worms. They were able to treat the worms to some extent with medication. But my mother used to at night, she used to -- sort of embarrassing, but she used to try to find the worms by looking at my rear, and, you know, she would catch them. You know, it was -- I mean, they, you know, eat around your anus and made it very sore and uncomfortable. And my mother had to do that for, I don't know, probably half a year after the war until they finally were all gone.
>> Bill Benson: Ralph, what was it like for you to resume -- go to school after the war?
>> Ralph Berets: It was very difficult. I don't know why but my parents didn't -- you know, when they were preparing for going into hiding, they didn't take any books. They didn't take any toys. They never taught us to read. And they spoke Dutch but with an accent. Because they were German. So when we were liberated and started going to school, we were, you know, pushed back to the lowest grade. We had to learn things from scratch. We spoke with a funny accent. We were in a school -- at least I was in a school where there was only one other Jewish boy in the grade school. And the kids, you know, basically didn't know what to make of us.
We were uncomfortable. We didn't speak right. We couldn't read or write. And so, I don't know, I felt very -- I felt like an outcast. I mean, we were liberated, but in another sense we weren't free. It wasn't a place where -- certainly I didn't feel comfortable. And after the war, my parents felt like they had to make up for lost time. They had friends, and many of them did survive. And so they went out every night. They went out to parties. And my sister and I were sort of left behind with babysitters, with my father's secretary. And they were very nice to us, but somehow, you know, we didn't get to experience the

same kind of freedom and liberation that my parents were finally able to enjoy. And that was hard.
>> Bill Benson: Ralph, we're not going to have time to hear about what it took for you to come to the United States and adjust again to a whole new set of circumstances here. But before turning to our audience, if you'd like to do that with some questions from the audience --
>> Ralph Berets: Yes, I'd be glad to.
>> Bill Benson: But before that, I wanted to ask you, your parents lived very long lives. I think they passed away both in 2006 at ages 97 and 94. They stayed -- they came here. Your sister stayed in the Netherlands.
>> Ralph Berets: No. We went back and forth. My parents all stayed here until I went to college, which was in 1958. My mother left in 1960. Went back to the Netherlands. My parents divorced and -- I mean, separated and divorced. My father left a year and a half later, because he went bankrupt and didn't know what to do. And so they both lived in the Netherlands for 10 years. And then got back together. And then ultimately retired in Laguna Beach, in California.
>> Bill Benson: But your sister is still in the Netherlands.
>> Ralph Berets: My sister is in the Netherlands. She married a Dutch boy. She lived in the states about 10 years after the war, and then lived in Israel for a while. Back in the states. And then in 1976, she moved back to the Netherlands and has stayed there ever since.
>> Bill Benson: And her health is good?
>> Ralph Berets: Yes, she's fine. Yeah.
>> Bill Benson: When you started speaking publicly in 1976, did your family talk much about what you went through?
>> Ralph Berets: For -- nobody wanted to know about the Holocaust after the war. It was like it took at least a generation. I never -- my mother and I never wanted to admit we were Jewish. When I went to school here -- I mean, I had no religion as far as anybody knew. I didn't tell my best friends until I graduated from high school that I was Jewish. And they somehow said they couldn't believe it. We didn't really engage in any Jewish activities. My mother didn't ever want to be in a crowd with only Jews because she thought that was going to create problems. But she had lots of friends. And was quite socially active. Interestingly, where they retired in Laguna Hills, a lot of her classmates from Krefeld, kids that were in her kindergarten class -- this is a community --
>> Bill Benson: In Germany?
>> Ralph Berets: Yes. They ended up -- nobody contacted anybody else to say, we're here. This is a good place to retire. But there ended up being seven other people from her class that ended up living in this community of about 17,000 people. Which is really unusual. The German government -- actually, the city of Krefeld provided an opportunity for survivors to come to Krefeld 50 years after the war. And this is how my mother discovered some of these people who lived in the same community that she didn't know about. They gave them first class accommodations in a hotel. They went to the opera. They went to the theater. They went to museums. They treated them like royalty. And published a book afterwards.

And my parents thought, God, this is unbelievable. And the Germans at that time were really very nice and tried to make up for what happened in the past. Unfortunately, what's going on in Germany nowadays is very sad, because there's so much anti-Semitism now in Germany as well as all over western Europe. And unfortunately even in this country.
So when I started speaking, the first time really that I spoke about the war, was when Spielberg came -- not he himself but his group came to interview survivors. My wife who is a psychologist convinced me that it would be a good time to maybe start talking about the war. I never really talked to anybody about it. So I was interviewed by Spielberg. And that sort of started me on this process.
There was a Midwest Center for Holocaust Studies in Kansas City. And when they knew that I had made this tape, they asked me to speak publicly as well. And so I've been doing it ever since.
>> Bill Benson: Let's turn to our audience for a couple of questions before we close. When we are -- I'm going to first of all if you have a question, I have to ask you to go to a microphone. There's one right up here. And one in this aisle. Make your question as brief as you can. I'll repeat it just to be sure that everybody hears it, including Ralph. And then he'll respond to your question.
I'll also mention that when we're done with the program, Ralph will remain behind on the stage for anybody who wants to also come up and talk with him or ask a question. Yes, ma'am.
>> So, Ralph, you were 6 1/2 and your sister was 8, you said three years older.
>> Ralph Berets: Yes.
>> What did your parents tell you to help you put things together, and if they didn't, what would have been helpful for you to know at that age?
>> Bill Benson: The question, Ralph, is at the end of the war, 6 1/2 and 8, you and your sister, what did your parents tell you to try to help you put your life together, as you said, and if not, what would have been helpful to have been told?
>> Ralph Berets: Very interesting question. My parents basically didn't talk about the war after the war. And they thought maybe by not talking about it that nobody would remember. My sister very reluctantly talks about the war. She would never start a conversation about it. She will interact with it if you start talking.
After I made this tape, and my sister came to visit us -- or actually after I retired and moved to San Francisco, and I made a tape there as well for the Northern California Holocaust Center, and I convinced her to have her recorded, which she did.
I would say my parents did nothing really to help us deal with it. They tried to avoid it as much as possible. They thought I probably wouldn't remember anyway, which unfortunately I do remember things. I don't know what they could have told me. It would have been helpful if we probably would have discussed it so that all of us could have worked it out more successfully together. But that never really happened. My parents didn't start talking about it really until they were in their 80’s.
>> Bill Benson: Two questions over here. Yes, sir.
>> During the war, did you or your family take part in any Jewish holidays?
>> Bill Benson: During the war, were you and your parents able to take part in any Jewish holidays?

>> Ralph Berets: No. I'm not even sure we knew what day of the week it was after a while. My parents were not very religious. And, you know, we didn't take part in any of the holidays during the war.
>> Were you upset by your dad's decision not to let you be adopted?
>> Bill Benson: Were you upset by your father's decision to not let the lady adopt you?
>> Ralph Berets: I'm not sure I really thought about it in the same way. I really liked the house where we were living. It was, you know, just like being royalty. We each had our own bedroom for the first time in our lives. It was a beautiful house. They had, you know, lots of good food. I was very happy there. But I don't think I thought about it at that time in the same way, although I guess in part philosophically I agree with my sister. I think, you know, I'd try to do for my kids what would be the most likely thing for them to be able to survive. And then, you know, you might argue after the war if you survive and try to get your kids back.
But I don't -- you know, my father was very stubborn. And, you know, when he made up his mind, you know, there was nothing that was going to change it. And so I wasn't upset then. But I think it was probably the wrong choice.
>> Bill Benson: Thank you. I think we -- if we have real quick questions, we can do both of you.
>> What do you think is the major reason of why there is now a rise in anti-Semitism in Europe?
>> Bill Benson: Why do you think there's rising anti-Semitism in Europe? That's a complex question.
>> Ralph Berets: Yeah. I think -- I mean, people who are, you know, not doing very well in their lives always look for scapegoats. They are never responsible for what happens. They always try to find someone else who is responsible. And the Jews have been, you know, easy victims for hundreds of years. I just think unfortunately, you know, the tide is sort of turned back to trying to find a group that is successful and they blame it on Jews. You know, they own the banks so therefore they have a lot of money. Therefore, you know, their lives are better than others.
And it's true. A lot of Jewish people do own banks and have become successful. It's not that, you know, they haven't worked for it. I think it's -- you know, I think there's discrimination worldwide. But why it's always against the Jews is very difficult to tolerate. And it is -- my sister lives in the Netherlands. And it's become very difficult there as well.
>> Bill Benson: Our last question before we close our program. I will ask you after her question, stay with us because we're going to hear again from Ralph to close our program.
>> All right. So this question is mostly about your father. You said your father slapped your sister. Did that cause your family stress? And then you have to rely on each other.
>> Bill Benson: I'm having difficulty hearing you but the question I think is, when your father slapped your sister, that was related to the stress going on?
>> Yes, kind of. Yes.
>> Ralph Berets: Yeah. Obviously, there was a lot of stress during the war. And it's very uncomfortable for a whole family to live together in a place where you can't really escape. After the war, in fact, after the Spielberg tape, there was a psychiatrist in Kansas City that volunteered free services for anybody who made a tape, who was

disturbed by, you know, revealing all this information. So I went to a psychiatrist. I ended up going for over 25 years. You know, things that happened during the war stay with you. And have an impact on your daily life.
The best part that happened is the Germans paid reparations to my parents for what they lost during the war. And so they always had some extra income. And the Dutch government paid for their cooperation with the Germans, and so they paid for my therapy after the war. So I got some benefit.
>> Bill Benson: I want to thank you all for being with us and let you know that we will livestream all of our programs until June 6. Otherwise all of our programs are on the Museum's YouTube page so you can view any of our programs as you wish. We also hope you will come back at some point when we continue our program through August 8.
I'm going to turn back to Joel -- excuse me. I'm going to turn back to Ralph in a moment to close our program. And when he's done, our photographer, Joel, will come up on the stage and take a photograph of Ralph with you as the background. So we want you to stay there for this really terrific photograph that Joel will take.
It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person has the last word. So I'm going to turn to Ralph for his last word, and then when he's done he will remain on the stage. We invite anybody to come up onstage and ask a question you didn't get to ask or just shake his hand or say hi or whatever you'd like to do.
Ralph?
>> Ralph Berets: OK. The last word that I usually have is about connected to the last question that I got, about anti-Semitism. I think when I started talking in 1976, I was very hopeful that if the information got out and if enough people knew what happened that it wouldn't be repeated. I can't count the number of genocides that have taken place since that time.
And unfortunately it's not getting better. It's getting worse. And in response to the question, it's getting worse. Germany had really done a very good job of recognizing what their role was during the Holocaust and basically honoring those who survived and sheltering them. It's gotten to be very difficult, even in a place like Germany. There's an alt right party that has come into power to a certain degree, and they have substantial followers. They have rallies all over the country.
And when I read the newspapers, which I do all the time, and see the news, unfortunately it reminds me of the Second World War and what happened. It's really scary. When we came to this country in 1951 they had the McCarthy hearings, which my parents said, oh, my God, I thought we escaped this kind of autocratic rule and people just pointing a finger and having that person arrested.
I see the same thing happening nowadays. It's like nobody follows the rules. And people are being persecuted. And I hope if I leave you with any impression, I hope the impression I leave you with is that people have some responsibility not just for themselves but for one another. I always ask myself the question, if somebody knocked on my door, a stranger, and said, I'm being persecuted for no reason. Will you put me up for a while? I hope I'd say yes. I mean, that's how I survived. But I don't know. It's a hard question to answer. I think I'd say yes. When I had kids, I was more reluctant to say yes. But I would say now.

And that's the message I would like to leave you with. There's something that you can do. And whoever speaks out and does something for someone else, that will be a step in the right direction. Thank you.