

Holocaust Memorial Museum First Person

Louis de Groot

Wednesday, May 29, 2019

10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Remote CART Captioning

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioning is provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.

This transcript is being provided in rough-draft format.



www.captionfamily.com

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. Louis de Groot, 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.

Louis 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 Louis 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](https://twitter.com/holocaustmuseum) and the hashtag [#AskWhy](https://twitter.com/hashtag/AskWhy).

Today's program will be live-streamed 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 Louis 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 Louis de Groot and his sister Rachel taken in 1938. Louis de Groot was born on June 28, 1929 in Amersfoort, the Netherlands. His father,

Meijer, owned and operated a store which sold small electrical appliances in Arnhem. Sophia, his mother, assisted with the store.

After the Nazis came to power in Germany in January 1933, many German Jews fled, some to the Netherlands. Meijer often assisted these individuals by escorting them from the border and providing them temporary shelter in the de Groot home. One such individual whom they sheltered was Eva Haller from Vienna. Here we see Eva on the far right with Louis, Rachel, and Sophia.

Here we see a map of the German invasion of western Europe. On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded the Netherlands. Within hours the Nazis had reached Louis' hometown. Soon after, anti-Semitic legislation similar to what had passed in Germany was implemented. Louis was prohibited from going to public school, playing in the local pools, parks, or streets and was banned from going to his non-Jewish friends' homes. In November 1942, after being warned of a forthcoming round-up of Jews, the de Groot family left their home in Arnhem to go into hiding. Louis and his sister Rachel hid separately in several places throughout the Netherlands over the next year. Rachel eventually joined her parents in hiding in Amsterdam.

In December 1943, Louis was sent to the home of Dirk and Ann Onderweegs, active members of the Dutch Underground, in Lemmer. Here Louis who is on the far right is pictured with Bonnette Onderweegs, who is on the far left, the daughter of Dirk and Ann, who is on the far left, along with two friends he made while in hiding. Louis stayed with the Onderweegs until August 1946.

Meijer, Sophia, and Rachel were denounced on April 8, 1944, arrested by a Dutch policeman who was an old schoolmate of Meijer's and sent to Westerbork transit camp. Sophia, who is circled in this photo, is seen here on May 19, 1944, being deported from Westerbork to Auschwitz. This is a still taken from a film showing the deportation process at Westerbork. Sophia, Meijer, and Rachel were murdered at Auschwitz.

After Louis fought in the war for the independence of Israel, he returned to the Netherlands in 1949 to finish his schooling. He then immigrated to the United States in 1950 and was soon drafted into the U.S. Army serving with the occupation forces in Germany. Upon his discharge in 1953, Louis used the G.I. Bill to attend Columbia University earning a Master's Degree in economics and completing all the course work for a Ph.D. in economics.

While in school, Louis worked for the National Bureau of Economic Research, first on a part-time then a full-time basis. He then went to work for Chase Manhattan Bank and eventually moved to IBM where he worked for 26 years until his retirement in January 1987. In 1956, Louis married Barbara Brenner. Barbara earned a Fine Arts degree from Hunter College in New York and became an accomplished artist. Louis and Barbara had two sons, Marc and David. David lives in San Francisco. Marc passed away in 2004. Louis and Barbara loved to travel, especially to Italy which Louis said they loved. Barbara passed away in 2015. They were married just a few months short of 60 years. After living in Berkeley, California, for 40 years, Louis moved from Berkeley to Washington, D.C. in 2018. Louis speaks Dutch, English, French and German and some Hebrew, and likes to spend time corresponding with family and friends. Upon moving to Washington, D.C., he began providing volunteer services with this Museum, translating documents written in Dutch and talking with visitors at the Donors Desk, where you will find him on Sundays.

Today is the first time that Louis has been with us for the First Person program. With that I would like you to join me in welcoming our First Person, Louis de Groot. Louis, please join us.

Thank you for joining us, Louis, and for your willingness to be our First Person.

You have such a short time with us and so much to tell us, we're going to start right away if that's okay. While World War II started with Germany's attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, the war's full impact on you and your family began with Germany's invasion of the Netherlands in May of 1940. Before you talk to us about what happened to you and your family during the war, during the Holocaust, tell us a little bit about your family and you in the years before the war.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, we were a happy family. We had a lot of parks. We enjoyed going there. My sister and I participated in many activities. We would go to the swimming pool. We were members of an organization that always had activities on Sundays. So we were a happy family.

>> Bill Benson: I was struck when you told me, Louis, that you said you were a close and happy family. You said there were rules, but they were good rules. Will you say a little bit about that?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, you know, never -- they were rules of behavior.

>> Bill Benson: To do the right thing, right?

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You told me that your sister, Rachel, whom you called Chelly, was like a second mother to you in some ways. Will you say a little bit about that?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, she was. She was two years older than me. And she would always tell me you have to save your allowance because there's a birthday coming. You have to share in the cost of the presents. And she would pick out the presents.

>> Bill Benson: And make sure you contributed?

>> Louis de Groot: And make sure I contributed, yes.

>> Bill Benson: How large was your extended family?

>> Louis de Groot: My mother had three sisters who spoiled me. And my father had four brothers and a sister who spoiled me too.

>> Bill Benson: And you said you had many, many, many cousins.

>> Louis de Groot: And we had many cousins, yeah.

>> Bill Benson: After the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 as we noted earlier, many German Jews fled to different countries including the Netherlands. Tell us how your father helped those who were fleeing. How your father helped those who were fleeing from the Nazis in Germany.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, he brought them to our home where it was safe because they needed time to make arrangements to go to the States. To get papers for the steam ship company. They usually had visas already. And so I was still very young, but my mother had to explain to me why these people were staying with us. Why these folks were here.

>> Bill Benson: And one of them, Eva, who we saw in a photograph, tell us about her.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, when England decided to allow 10,000 children to come -- they allowed 500 to come to Holland. Eva was one of the children. She came from Vienna in Austria. And she came to us. And her father was friends of my parents. She stayed with us about six months until an organization had been found to take care of the children.

>> Bill Benson: Maybe at the end you can tell us, but she ended up surviving the war, didn't she?

>> Louis de Groot: Eva survived the war, yes.

>> Bill Benson: The war began September 1, 1939. At that time -- they would not attack the Netherlands until the following May. At that time, at the start of the war, did your parents or did the Dutch people expect that the Germans would then invade the Netherlands?

>> Louis de Groot: No, they never expected it.

>> Bill Benson: They did not expect it.

>> Louis de Groot: Never. Holland had been neutral in the First World War. And the day before they attacked Holland, Hitler said they never would attack Holland.

>> Bill Benson: When Germany did the day after he said that attack Holland on May 10, 1940, what do you recall of the German invasion and what did it mean for you and your family once they came in?

>> Louis de Groot: About 4:00 in the morning, there were dog fights overhead, airplanes. And my parents realized it was war. We tried to get to the west part of the country, in order to leave the country, to the port, but we were too late. The army had already, you know, broken some dikes to flood the areas. And there were blockages on the roads. We couldn't get through.

>> Bill Benson: So everything was blocked.

>> Louis de Groot: Everything was blocked. So we had to go back. About 10:00 in the morning, the tanks came into Arnhem. I was 10 years old. I was fascinated by the beautiful uniforms of the tank commanders.

>> Bill Benson: The beautiful uniforms of the tank commanders. Louis, you shared with me that at one point when they were first coming in, the local police warned people to open your windows.

>> Louis de Groot: That's right.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, Arnhem, which became famous in 1944, but at that time they were -- the Dutch were going to fortify the bridge. And the police warned that because of the pressure to open up the windows, so we did. I was looking out the window. And I got thrown back into the house when it broke.

>> Bill Benson: The blast threw you back into the house.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And also tell us about once the Germans were there, some Germans wanted to come to your father's store.

>> Louis de Groot: Oh, yes. They came to the store. The store wasn't open, but they saw items in the display cases that they hadn't seen in Germany for years. And they wanted to buy them. So they came to buy them, and my father refused to open up the store.

>> Bill Benson: But he didn't.

>> Louis de Groot: No.

>> Bill Benson: But they left at that point.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: Once Holland was under German control, you said that life was normal more or less until November, and that's when you went back to school. What happened in the beginning of November 1940?

>> Bill Benson: November 1, they came against the Resistance. The Jews could not be in the civil service. It happened at a number of the universities, the state universities, the professors. Civil servants. They told us that -- because of what was happening, the Germans punished them by closing the universities.

>> Bill Benson: And of course as we'll hear later, the Resistance was so important to your survival.

>> Louis de Groot: That's right.

>> Bill Benson: As bad as it was under the Germans, things turned far worse beginning in September 1941.

>> Louis de Groot: In 1941.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us about that time.

>> Louis de Groot: They punished us by not allowing us to continue in public school. My friends were all in public school. And so, you know, not being able to continue was very painful.

>> Bill Benson: You mentioned to me several things that were very painful at the time, not being able to continue in school. You also said that Jews were not allowed to play with non-Jewish kids.

>> Louis de Groot: Oh, yes.

>> Bill Benson: And the parents --

>> Louis de Groot: The parents said you can come and play here. Don't worry about the Germans. But I was afraid, you know, if someone would see me and didn't like me, and then my parents would be punished. So I didn't go to my friends.

>> Bill Benson: That was the end of playing with them.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: The other thing you mentioned that was incredibly painful was related to your bar mitzvah.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes. The week before my bar mitzvah, the Germans came out with a decree that the Jews could not travel without carrying a permit, but it would take two weeks to get the permits in order. So for my bar mitzvah, relatives couldn't come.

>> Bill Benson: And you said that was especially painful for your parents.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: I know we're going to skip over many, many things that you could share with us during that time, but from the fall of 1941 to 1942, as the round-ups of Jews and the deportation of Jews intensified. Your parents began serious planning for going into hiding with the family. Tell us about their efforts to prepare to go into hiding and what happened once they decided it was time to go.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, the way I understood it is that they -- my parents thought we would be totally cut off from the outside world, so they made a lot of food. They preserved a lot of food. And they stored it with some of the neighbors. But the other neighbor -- there was a neighbor on the left and on the right. So one of the neighbors had the food. The other one, they made arrangements to go into hiding there, and they brought some of our furniture and our clothing there. But in November 1942, we were warned not to stay at home. My parents thought it was time to go into hiding. Something

happened. The neighbor with the furniture and the clothing decided that they didn't dare -- they didn't feel safe to hide them. So the plan fell through. I never found out. But we never saw the food either. So that really -- that actually happened.

>> Bill Benson: And you shared with me very graciously a personal memoir you wrote. And in it you wrote in great detail about the extent of their preparations. And it was just extraordinary, including items that your father thought maybe he could use on the black market if he needed it or to barter. But you said later your parents saw the neighbor who had the goods actually and was using some of the goods for their own purposes.

>> Louis de Groot: Oh, yes.

>> Bill Benson: In your memoir, you describe your first time going into hiding when your father -- if I have this correct, your father's most trusted employee took you and your sister to the railroad station to meet your parents. Tell us about that. That must have been a frightful time.

>> Louis de Groot: My parents were told by a policeman don't sleep home tonight. So the person they had to talk to was the employee who had been with them for 10 years and asked if my sister and I could sleep at their home. And he would go the next day and find out whether the Germans had come to round us up, because what they used to do is they used to put a seal over the lock. So if the lock was sealed, it meant that they had been there. So he went the next morning to look, and he saw the lock was sealed. He knew where my parents had been sleeping, and he found them. And they said to bring the children to us, and we'll leave town. So we met at the railroad station. He removed the star that we had to wear on our clothing and took the train. And we were lucky we were not caught.

>> Bill Benson: And then of course you and your sister, Rachel, would be hidden separately in several different places while your parents were hiding together over the next year until your sister, Rachel, joined your parents in Amsterdam. And you went to the Onderweegs. Tell us what you can about that.

>> Louis de Groot: I was in one place where the people made me make envelopes to sell furniture. But 80 years ago envelopes were not made by machines. They were printed, and then they had to be folded and pasted in order to become envelopes. So the people made me do that. They didn't treat me as part of the family. So I was very unhappy there. At one time I was so angry that I sounded off and my father thought he had to come and straighten me out because I would sound off at these people. But I begged him to take me to my mother. I hadn't seen her in six months. And he did. And my mother -- both of my parents, I told them how I was being treated. And they decided I shouldn't go back to that place. They would find another hiding place.

>> Bill Benson: And I think -- was it the next hiding place where you were actually betrayed? Was this the home of Ton and Leen Meyer?

>> Louis de Groot: No. It was the hiding place before that.

>> Bill Benson: Before that?

>> Louis de Groot: Yes. I was there about two or three weeks, and the police came and said, you know, the neighbors have turned you in. They have heard your voice or maybe they have heard your conversation. But anyhow, we -- they said do you have a place to go? And I said, well, I know where my parents are. So they came the next morning, early in the morning, it was early in December. It was dark. And they made enough noise that the neighbors knew that they had followed up on that tip to arrest me.

And then they took me to the railroad station and helped me to travel to Amsterdam. And I went back to my parents.

>> Bill Benson: And one of the policemen actually travelled with you at that time and accompanied you to Amsterdam.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes. Because I was 13 years old, and I would have been somewhat -- if the Germans -- after they had taken control, then it wasn't safe. So having a policeman with me with papers saying that I am arresting him, you know, it was security.

>> Bill Benson: From there you would go and live with a family that had three girls where you would stay for six months in 1943. Tell us about that time. What do you remember of that?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, those were the people who were not very nice to me and made me make envelopes.

>> Bill Benson: The same people. But the move to their home, if I remember right, was on January 1, and that was deliberately chosen, right?

>> Louis de Groot: Yes, because Germans had control, and we figured that on New Year's Day, they would have had a party and they wouldn't bother. And we were absolutely right.

>> Bill Benson: So that was a good day to make the move.

>> Louis de Groot: It was a good day to travel.

>> Bill Benson: In early January 1944, that's when you moved to the home of the Onderweegs family, with whom you would remain until the war was over and after the war. That was a long period of time. Tell us about your time with the Onderweegs. What was that like for you?

>> Louis de Groot: They were an exceptional family. Mrs. Onderweegs looked upon us as if she had the task to replace the mother until the war was over and the child could go back to the mother. So she was very, very warm, nice people. They were very active in the Underground. They helped about 33 Jewish people to find hiding places in the first six months. Then they were betrayed and they had to go into hiding.

>> Bill Benson: The Onderweegs had to go into hiding?

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: When they went into hiding, what did that mean for you?

>> Louis de Groot: They -- Mr. Onderweegs had come to meet my parents for two reasons. He wanted to make sure nobody was taking money from them for me because he didn't -- he wanted to pay out of his own pocket. The other reason was that he wanted to see if he could find some way that they could correspond and my parents could contact me. And so he told them that at that time as I was told by my family, if ever something happens to you, don't worry. I will take care of Louis as if he is my own child. But my parents had been arrested, which we found out about pretty soon. And he felt, you know, that he had made this commitment, and he was going to honor it. So when they had to go into hiding, there was no question I was going with them.

>> Bill Benson: As you said, they were remarkable, remarkable family. And your point that Mrs. Onderweegs took the responsibility of being a substitute for your mother until you could go back to your mother as opposed to just -- she was just hiding a child. You also told me that when you first went there, the intent was not for you to hide there. It was to possibly go live on a farm.

>> Louis de Groot: That's right. They had committed to take care of a Jewish baby who came about three days after I was there. And when I was there, I came in order to go -- for Mr. Onderweegs to find me a place at a farm so I could help a farmer. But I was so undernourished and Mrs. Onderweegs thought that the farmer would send me back and that Mr. Onderweegs would lose his reputation by sending him an undernourished kid who couldn't live five pounds of potatoes. So she kept telling him, and after a few days he finally gave in and said, all right, he can stay.

>> Bill Benson: What they did in the Resistance was extraordinary.

>> Louis de Groot: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: And before long, you were helping out.

>> Louis de Groot: That's right.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what you did.

>> Louis de Groot: Mr. Onderweegs was the town clerk. That meant he was in charge of all of the administrative areas and therefore he had access to I.D. cards. Now an I.D. card in Holland at that time had to have some backing, so if somebody died, Mr. Onderweegs would revive them so he could make an I.D. card out of it. So having this kind of certainties. But the cards were being checked so it was very important. So many times the I.D. cards were prepared at home, and I was allowed to help him. One of the important things was that the I.D. cards had a picture with a stamp on it. The stamp was part of the picture and part of the card itself. So if you moved the picture and put a new one in, you had to make sure that the part that the stamp that was on the old picture showed up on the new picture. And in order to do that, you used an egg. You would peel the egg. And it has a -- what is it --

>> Bill Benson: A skin on it?

>> Louis de Groot: Yeah, a kind of a skin. That skin if you hold it over the stamp it would pick up the stamp. So if you rolled it back, you get the stamp on the new picture.

>> Bill Benson: So you were doing this?

>> Louis de Groot: I learned to, yes.

>> Bill Benson: In early April 1944, and this was several months after you had gone to the Onderweegs, your parents and your sister were arrested. You were 14 years of age at the time. Tell us when you learned about their arrest and what you knew at that time and how you learned about it.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, I didn't know. But Mr. Onderweegs went to see my parents. My sister Rachel was there. And he offered to find her a hiding place near me. And so he went in April to go and get her, and then he was about five days too late. They had been arrested. So this was a surprise from me. So when he came back home, Mrs. Onderweegs saw him coming without my sister. And she realized that things had not gone well. And so he came to the house with tears in his eyes, and he didn't know how to tell me that my parents had been arrested. So she told me.

>> Bill Benson: How much did they know? Did they know where your parents and Rachel had gone at that time?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, yes. In Amsterdam, he found out they were arrested. They were hiding in Amsterdam. And he had contacts there in the Underground. And they found out immediately that my father was being held and then my mother and sister were being held. They were separated. And so he tried -- they tried to get them freed, but it didn't work out.

>> Bill Benson: As we mentioned during the opening of the slide presentation, the officer who came to arrest your parents was actually someone who had known your father, right?

>> Louis de Groot: Yes. He played marbles with my father after school.

>> Bill Benson: As a boy.

>> Louis de Groot: As a boy.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that you learned that your parents and sister had been deported to another country, but that you didn't believe the worst.

>> Louis de Groot: No. There was always hope. It was not until 1947 or so that I really found out what had happened to my parents.

>> Bill Benson: We saw earlier that extremely devastating photograph of your mother in the boxcar.

>> Louis de Groot: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: How did that picture come to be?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, when they found a film after the war, the film was made by the commander of Westerbork. He wanted a film made that showed how well he treated the people. He didn't know that it would be filmed, a transport. So when they found the film after the war, they found this one shot, and they asked does anybody recognize any of these women. And I thought that I saw my mother there. So they told me to come to Holland, come to Westerbork, and we'll show you the actual --

>> Bill Benson: The film itself?

>> Louis de Groot: And then I recognized that was definitely my mother.

>> Bill Benson: So it just happened to be filmed at that particular moment for your mother.

>> Louis de Groot: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: You continued of course staying with the Onderweegs.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You had a false identity. And you stayed with them until the end of the war in Netherlands in 1945, and then you would stay with them until August of 1946. Tell us what you recall of liberation and what that time was like for you continuing to live with the Onderweegs knowing that your parents and sister were gone, although as you said you still had hope.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, we were -- the family Onderweegs and I, we were hiding. And we were warned again that the Germans knew where we were. So this time -- this is about -- I stayed in town. The family and the baby and the little girl, Bonnette, went to stay on a farm. And Mr. and Mrs. Onderweegs, either one of them came every day to check on me. So one evening -- or one night about 1:00, Mrs. Onderweegs came and she said, get up, get up. Get dressed. I said what's happening? And she said never mind. Get up. So I got dressed. And they took me to the city hall, and there was a Canadian major with four soldiers and that was my liberation. And interestingly enough, he introduced me by my real name. And that was so important to me.

>> Bill Benson: Not by your false identity?

>> Louis de Groot: No. That's right. So that was my liberation. But of course I wanted to know what happened to my family. So it was not exactly a celebration.

>> Bill Benson: Did any of your relatives -- you had a very large extended family. Did any of them survive?

>> Louis de Groot: I had two aunts -- no, three aunts and an uncle who survived. I should say it differently. An aunt and uncle who were married, so a couple that survived, and an aunt who lost her husband, and an aunt and uncle, another couple that survived.

>> Bill Benson: But everybody else was lost.

>> Louis de Groot: Everybody else was lost.

>> Bill Benson: You shared with me that -- of course you had missed 2 1/2 years of school. With the war over you returned to school. What was that like for you?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, I went to school in the area where I had been hiding. And many Jewish children had been in hiding there. So the kids in school were very proud to have a Jew at school at last. And so were the teachers. So they moved me from the first year to second year, because -- I didn't deserve it because I hadn't been in school for 2 1/2 years and I needed to catch up for the first year. So in the second year, I got stuck. I just wasn't ready for it.

>> Bill Benson: But you said generally it was like a festival happening there in the school.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: In the biography that we share with the audience, it mentions that your father, Meijer, had been a very avid videographer or photographer with 8 millimeter film.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: You were able to get some of that film. Tell us how you did that.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, my father had given the films to safekeeping --

>> Bill Benson: And these were films of family events and outings and things like that?

>> Louis de Groot: Oh, yes. Like now, everybody takes pictures.

>> Bill Benson: It was rare then.

>> Louis de Groot: Yeah. So he had given the film for safekeeping to the photographer that he bought his film from. And the photographer put them in a safe in the city of Arnhem. There was a battle in 1944. And the Germans stole everything they could. And so they blew open the safe, and they weren't interested in the film. But he found pieces of the film after the war and saved them for me. When I came to Arnhem, I had the family films.

>> Bill Benson: There was enough salvaged that you have some family films from that time.

>> Louis de Groot: And I had those films even when I came here to Virginia.

>> Bill Benson: In August 1946, more than a year after the war ended, you moved from the Onderweegs to the Jewish Boys Orphanage. What brought about your move to the orphanage?

>> Louis de Groot: Religion. The family was devout. And they said to me, you can be a religious Jew or a religious Protestant. But you cannot be an atheist. And I was not ready to really accept another religion. I felt I had suffered for being a Jew. And I was -- it was hard to be a Jew. So I decided it was better to go to a Jewish Boys Orphanage. We discussed it, and they understood me. So we always stayed very good friends. As a matter of fact, the family came to visit me in the States.

>> Bill Benson: And in fact you're hoping that at this very moment the daughter of the Onderweegs is watching on the Internet.

>> Louis de Groot: This program.

>> Bill Benson: Yes, this program today. The time -- that was a remarkable time in the orphanage, though. And tell us about that.

>> Bill Benson: Well, most of the boys in the orphanage had similar background as I. We had lost our parents. Some had been in camps and some had been in hiding. So we became an extended family, you know. We knew each others' pain.

>> Bill Benson: You said there were some boys who had been -- survived camps who had come into this orphanage with you.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: And then of course before long, you began to think about going to Palestine to fight for the independence of Israel.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes. That was very -- when the ship the "Exodus" was stopped by the British and the people were being taken back to Germany to a camp, and there were not -- they were taking them off the ships, I thought it was enough, you know, that these people should have a home. And I decided -- I was asked to join the Haganah, and I said yes, I would. I fought in the '48 war to establish the state of Israel.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us a little bit about how you made it from the orphanage in the Netherlands, how you got to Palestine. Because that was not easy to do.

>> Louis de Groot: No. But we went to France. We trained in the Alps there. And then we, you know, we had forged documents to get into Palestine. I had a visa for a student to study in Palestine.

>> Bill Benson: Once you arrived, you were with a small group of other Dutch young men. And you're all of 19 years or 18 years of age, I think. And so you're with a small group of Dutch men, young men. And how did you how did you fare once you were there? You remember formed into sort of a Dutch little company, right?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, first we were just spread out. There was no organized army yet.

>> Bill Benson: Yes.

>> Louis de Groot: So then they found a lieutenant who was a Dutchman who had come to Israel in the '30s and had been in the British Army during the Second World War. He was an expert in demolitions. So they gave him all the Dutch fellows who came to be his demolition squad. So we were laying mines and blowing up places.

>> Bill Benson: And after the War of Independence, that's when you returned to the Netherlands to go back to school, complete your schooling.

>> Louis de Groot: Go back to school, yes. I got back into it at almost the same time that I had left. So I was able to finish my school, at least get the equivalent of a high school diploma.

>> Bill Benson: And there you are. I think you're in training now to become an air traffic controller. But you pick up and you move to the United States.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: What made that happen?

>> Louis de Groot: I listened to a short wave radio and I heard Al Jolson entertaining troops in Korea. And I thought, boy, if there's going to be a war, I better go to a country that won the war. So I left Holland.

>> Bill Benson: You came here. And before long you were drafted.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes. That's right. Yeah. I got a letter from President Truman. I was so proud.

>> Bill Benson: And so once you were drafted, you ended up being sent to Germany. What was that like, to be sent to Germany of all places?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, I didn't spend time in Germany. Whenever I was at leave, I would go to Holland where I still had family, my uncle and aunts, or I would go to Paris, to France. But I would not spend time in Germany at all except on the American base.

>> Bill Benson: Louis, we have time to turn to our audience for some questions today. Before we do, though, if you don't mind, there's one other question I'd like to ask you. You as I said earlier very generously let me read your memoir that you had written. And I was so taken by the love and devotion that you wrote about your wife, Barbara. Will you tell us a little bit about Barbara?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, Barbara had to replace so many people that I had lost. And she did. So she understood. My parents and sister were always gone from me, and she had to live with that. She accepted it.

>> Bill Benson: She accepted it. I was just so struck by all that you said about her. Are you ready to hear some questions from our audience?

>> Louis de Groot: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: OK. And we hope that you'll have a question. We ask that you go to one of the microphones. There's one in each aisle. Go to the microphone and try to make your question brief. And I will do my best to repeat it just to make sure that we hear it properly before Louis responds to it. So we invite you to do that. And while we're waiting for somebody who wants to be the first to come up and get us started, I'll continue with, you know, a couple of other questions if I can.

We saw a photograph earlier about Eva who had lived for a period with your parents when they fled Germany. You said she survived. Tell us what happened with Eva.

>> Louis de Groot: I was told that she became an agricultural architect and lived in the northern part of Israel. She was married. Had children. And she died maybe about 10 years ago.

>> Bill Benson: She had 10 children, if I remember you telling me right. Did you say 10 children?

>> Louis de Groot: I said I was told she had children. I was told.

>> Bill Benson: Oh, I think we -- we may have a question here.

>> Hi, I'm Phillip Brenner. Louis, you told me that when you volunteered as a witness in the Museum here, people often ask you if we are living in times in the United States now that remind you of what it was like in Holland during the Holocaust. What is the answer that you give to them?

>> Bill Benson: The question -- and of course we're going to -- we try to as a museum stay out of anything political. But the question is you -- when you speak with visitors here at the Museum, you are often asked if you feel there are things going on that make you feel like what you experienced earlier, to the extent you're comfortable offering a thought there.

>> Louis de Groot: My answer is always I don't like the attack on the press for fake news. I don't like the attack on the judiciary. That's how far I go.

>> Bill Benson: OK. All right. Thank you very much for that, Louis. Thank you. You have a question here?

>> Good morning. I had a more personal question. If you could give us an idea of your family's history in the Netherlands. How long had you been there? Did you have family in Germany? I was interested in sort of the family background.

>> Bill Benson: The question about your family's history, how far back had they lived in the Netherlands and did you have family living elsewhere. A little bit about your family background.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, from what we have been able to determine is my family goes back on both sides, maternal and paternal, to 1700's in the Netherlands.

>> Bill Benson: To the 1700's.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: So centuries living there.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: OK. Thank you. One of the things that you shared with me about Mrs. Onderweegs is you said she really believed that she was there to stand in for your mother when she wasn't there.

>> Louis de Groot: Yeah.

>> Bill Benson: You also said that she just -- the family just made you feel safe.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: What a profound thing to have gotten from them. OK. I think we've got another question here.

>> Hello, Mr. De Groot. I want to thank you so much for your testimony today. I think it's really important for everybody. I want to ask you more about your wife. Was your wife American? Or was she a survivor? And a little more about her childhood and where you met her.

>> Bill Benson: A question about your wife. Was she a survivor? Was she an American? And how did you meet her?

>> Louis de Groot: She was an American. Her father had lost his family, so she lost her aunts and an uncle and grandparents. Oh, how did we meet. She was on a date with a friend of mine.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: But he was OK with it, I think, right? I read that. He was OK with it.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes. We remained friends.

>> Bill Benson: For the record.

[Laughter]

>> Bill Benson: For the record.

>> Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you very much. You remained in -- oh, me, let me go with you, please.

>> How did you remain hopeful throughout these hard times?

>> Bill Benson: How did you remain hopeful during all that time that you experienced when you were in hiding?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, we listened to the radio secretly. And we heard that the troops were making advances. It wasn't fast enough, but they were. And so we had hope. And as long as there's hope, there's a possibility for liberation.

>> Thank you.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you. Yes, sir.

>> All right. How did you finding out about your family's death affect how you think and act?

>> Bill Benson: Say it one more time, please.

>> How did -- Mr. De Groot, how did you act or think differently after you found out that your family was murdered?

>> Bill Benson: What did you feel once you learned what really happened to your parents? What was it that went on for you?

>> Louis de Groot: Well, I always found hope. I never wanted to really feel that they might have been killed until I was told they were.

>> Bill Benson: Until you knew it concretely.

You stayed in contact with the Onderweegs family.

>> Louis de Groot: Oh, yes.

>> Bill Benson: Tell us what that's been like for you. Tell us what it's been like to stay in touch with the Onderweegs for all these years.

>> Louis de Groot: Well, when I was staying with them, I didn't really think about the fact as seriously that they were risking their lives to save mine. But now that I'm a little older and I look back on it, I wonder if I would do that.

>> Bill Benson: Yes.

>> Louis de Groot: It's really remarkable what these people did, you know. About 75 years now since the war ended. 75 years that I have lived. But I wouldn't have without them.

>> Bill Benson: I'm going to turn back to Louis in just a moment to close our program. I want to thank all of you for being with us today. Remind you that we'll have programs each Wednesday and Thursday until August 8. Our final -- our program tomorrow and next week, they will all be live-streamed, and all of our programs will be available on the Museum's YouTube page. So if you can't come back to one of our programs in person, there will be other opportunities for you to watch our programs and Louis' will always be posted on the YouTube page. We have time for one more question.

>> I wanted to know what your relationship with your sister was like. Like were you guys really close? Like were you each others' best friends?

>> Bill Benson: Say it one more time.

>> Like his sister. Were you guys close?

>> Bill Benson: Say a little bit more about your relationship with your sister. Talk a little bit more about your relationship with your sister.

>> Louis de Groot: She was like another mother.

>> Bill Benson: And made sure you contributed to the birthday fund.

>> Louis de Groot: Yes.

>> Bill Benson: It's our tradition at First Person that our First Person gets the last word. So I'm going to turn to Louis to close the program. When he is finished, our photographer, Joel, is going to come up on the stage and he's going to take a photograph of Louis with you as the background. So we want you to stay for that if you would. It makes a wonderful memento of his program here. And then when Louis is done, he'll remain onstage and we invite anybody who wants to come up here, take the stairs and please do so to shake his hand, say hi, ask him a question. And that's OK with you, right, Louis?

>> Louis de Groot: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: With that, Louis, your final thoughts.

>> Louis de Groot: My final thoughts are that we have to be tolerant. You have to accept people for what they are. Most people are very good people, and you can't judge them unless you know their character. Not by the way they look, not by the way they dress, not by the way they have their hair. Be tolerant and accept them. That's really the message that I have for you.

>> Bill Benson: Thank you.

[Applause]