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UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

FIRST PERSON:
With AL MUNZER

Remote CART

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[Due to audio difficulties, event is joined already in progress:]

>> Al Munzer: The works of Sigmund Freud to the United States, was born in the same town that my father was born in. His name was Abraham Brill. And another man came from my mother's hometown, Isidor Rabi, and Isidor Rabi went on to win the Nobel Prize in physics in 1946. So here you have a very, very small town, but some people coming from there.

But after the First World War, conditions in those towns for Jews, really, became fairly bad. There was a lot of anti-Semitism and there were limited opportunities. So my parents both left their homes when they were in late teens. My father went directly --

>> Bill Benson: Separately?

>> Al Munzer: Separately, right. My father went directly to the Netherlands, where he started a men's clothing business, and my mother when to Berlin to join some of her older siblings who had set up homes in Berlin. Berlin was the capital, "The" place to go to in the late 1920s, even early 1930s.

>> Bill Benson: Cosmopolitan?

>> Al Munzer: Very much. It was a major change for my mother. Her mother, my grandmother, did not want to part with her. She felt my mother belonged in the beautiful rural setting, flowers, grass, not what she called the grime of the city.

>> Bill Benson: When did your mother go to Berlin?

>> Al Munzer: My mother came to Berlin probably about 1928.

>> Bill Benson: Just before Hitler began?

>> Al Munzer: Just before Hitler really began his assent. She left Berlin in 1932 to join my father. They had been childhood sweethearts. And they were married in Holland in 1932.

>> Bill Benson: You even said to me that all my ancestors were tailors. Was that true on both sides of the family?

>> Al Munzer: I think so. It was really both sides of the family. There is a story told about my mother's hometown, where a famous Hasidic rabbi religious leader had the aphorism, he said, "Never spoil what is new, always mend what is old." It was sort of an indication that tailoring even got into the religion.

>> Bill Benson: Al, you mentioned to me that your grandparents kept few of their possessions, cash, furniture. Why was that?

>> Al Munzer: They knew there was a history of persecution in Poland. Jews were not particularly welcome there. And so they always made themselves ready to leave at a moment's notice. That's why they kept most of their possessions in cash or things that could easily be negotiated or carried with them.

>> Bill Benson: With anti-semitism on the rise in Germany with the assent of Hitler to Germany, what were the Netherlands like for Jews?

>> Al Munzer: The Netherlands was a very welcoming place. Jews had lived there for many, many centuries. Actually, the same was true, until 1932, in Germany as well, where there was -- Jews were fully integrated and even assimilated into the German society. Then in the case of Holland, into Dutch society.

My own uncle, my mother's brother, who lived in Berlin, was married to a woman who was not Jewish, was Aryan, if you will, and that was very, very commonplace in Germany.

Certainly, in Holland, you know, the Jews had religious freedom for many, many hundreds of years, and were fully integrated into Dutch society.

>> Bill Benson: Did other members of the extended family also go to the Netherlands?

>> Al Munzer: Well, unfortunately, most people either remained at home -- it's hard to part with the comforts of your own home, so some of them, my mother's siblings, my father's siblings, remained in those small towns in Poland. Of course, eventually, all of them were killed. Only one of my mother's brothers ended up surviving. The brother who's actually in Berlin managed to escape to Bolivia.

>> Bill Benson: You still have relatives in Bolivia?

>> Al Munzer: As a result of that, I still have relatives in South America.

>> Bill Benson: September 1, 1939, Germany invades Poland and World War II begins. The following May, 1940, the Germans invade Holland, France, what are known as the Low Countries. Tell us how that affected your family and how quickly was the effects felt once the Germans rolled in in May of 1940?

>> Al Munzer: Well, all of the rules, all of those measures of persecuting Jews, isolating and persecuting Jews that had been put in place over several years in Germany were really put in place in the countries that they conquered in very, very short order. So, for example, one of the first things that happened in the Netherlands was banning ritual slaughter of animals, which is required for kosher meat.

Now, that seems maybe a humane type of thing, maybe perceived that way, certainly a very benign measure at first. But then, you know, Jews had to register, and there was a census taken to determine exactly who was Jewish and who was not.

>> Bill Benson: And where you lived?

>> Al Munzer: And where you lived, exactly. Then people, just like in Germany, had to take a new middle name, as their identification papers clearly showed who was Jewish and who was not.

Then Jews began to lose their citizenship rights, and they were no longer, for example, allowed to teach in the universities. I've been translating documents, as you indicated, for the museum, and one of them is a diary of a professor or teacher at the gymnasium in Holland. He described what it was like to no longer be allowed to teach. He taught Latin and Greek. He just lost his job.

Jews had to register their businesses. Then, of course, you had to confiscate -- registration of property, and finally confiscation of property. So a very quick, over about a year, year and a half, tightening of the screws.

>> Bill Benson: In fact, I read something that you wrote, you said that on March 12, 1941, all Jewish property is Aryanized. What did that mean?

>> Al Munzer: It means Jews no longer owned property, that it now became part of the state, it was owned by the state.

>> Bill Benson: As you say, that's a little less than a year after they actually occupied the country.

>> Al Munzer: Yes. One of the other measures was banning Jews, for example, from being in public parks. My mother describes the implications of that. You know, initially, people really did not obey those rules. It made no sense at all. So she took a baby carriage into a park, and a German woman who worked for the Nazi government in Holland approached the baby carriage, and she looked at the baby, and my mother's heart almost stopped. And the woman suddenly said -- she saw blue eyes,

blonde hair, "Ah, you can tell that's good Aryan stock." Of course, that was the last time my mother ever set foot in that particular park. After that, she obeyed all of the rules.

>> Bill Benson: Either right before the Germans came in or right after, I think your parents provided refuge to a Dutch official. Will you tell us a little about that?

>> Al Munzer: Sure. This was in May 1940. May 9, May 10, 1940, my parents had been asked to host a man who was part of the Dutch resistance against the German Nazi invasion, and he had with him a briefcase containing plans to preemptively destroy the major railroad center in Holland, in a city called Utrecht. The idea was that this would prevent the Germans from using the railroads in Holland when they invaded.

The morning of May 10, my parents and their visitor listened to the radio and they heard that the city, the port city of Rotterdam had been bombed and really destroyed. Shortly thereafter, the Queen Wilhemina of the Netherlands came on the radio and basically announced that Holland had surrendered. She called on people to do their duty wherever they happened to find themselves.

The reaction of my parents' visitor was in Dutch "Thank God it's over." For him this meant, yes, we're going to be an occupied country, the end of a chapter, a new chapter in history is about to begin. But for my parents, they knew, they already had learned enough about what happened in Germany to their own relatives and how they were being persecuted, and they knew and felt suddenly very, very much alone, as alone with their two small children, my two sisters, who were born in 1936, 1938.

There are all sorts of intersections between history in general and family history. My parents were married virtually the same date that Adolph Hitler became chancellor of Germany.

My oldest sister was born during the infamous Berlin Olympics, which were turned into a major item of German propaganda.

My second sister, Lea, was born November 8, 1938, Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, which I'm sure many of you have seen the effects of in the Permanent Exhibition.

So you have a family trying to keep itself together as they read newspapers of all the terrible things that are happening around them, and trying to continue leading a normal family life.

>> Bill Benson: Shortly before you were born, your parents, I believe, started to enroll your sister, Eva, in a Catholic school. What prompted that?

>> Al Munzer: Well, this was -- first, two reasons, really. My sisters were enrolled in a Catholic school. One, they were banned from attending public schools. Jews were no longer allowed, Jewish kids were no longer allowed to attend public school.

The second was really, this was their first, my parents' first, attempt at hiding my sisters' Jewish identity. They felt by enrolling them in a Catholic school and having them participate in all of the things that students did in the Catholic school, perhaps this was one way of protecting them and hiding their Jewish identity.

>> Bill Benson: In light of that, and some of the other things you were saying a moment ago about the intersections with history, your parents are well aware what's taking place in Germany and elsewhere. You were born November 23, 1941. About 19 months after the Nazis occupied France. Your parents' joy in having a new son must have been tempered in some way by their fears, profound fears about what was going on around them. Any thoughts about that, in retrospect?

>> Al Munzer: Yes. Actually, it began as soon as my mother found out she was pregnant with me. She went to see an obstetrician and the obstetrician advised her, very strongly, to have an abortion. He told her that it would be completely immoral to bring another Jewish life into the world.

My mother, at that time, turned to the Bible for advice. And she read this story of Hannah. Hannah, you may remember, was a woman who desperately wanted to have a child and would go to the temple every year and pray that she might conceive. She made a silent pledge, if the Almighty will give me a child, I will give that child to the Almighty's service all the days of his life.

It was in reading that story that my mother decided she could not possibly have an abortion. So that was really -- that was the first fear, if you will, that my parents had, and prior to my birth.

Then, of course, another -- November 23, 1941, when I was born, just before Pearl Harbor, another intersection, my parents had to make another major decision. Jewish boys, as is in the Bible, are usually circumcised at the eighth day of life. My parents' friends very strongly advised against it, because that would mark me as being Jewish.

In that particular case, it was a worried look of a pediatrician that sort of changed their minds. My father turned to this pediatrician, he said, "Why are you so concerned?" He said, "Well, it's no big concern, but your son will need a minor operation, called a circumcision."

My father told him about Jewish custom of having a circumcision ceremony, and that ceremony, probably one of the very last held in the family setting, occurred eight days later in Holland, in The Hague.

>> Bill Benson: Last for a number of years.

>> Al Munzer: Quite a few years.

>> Bill Benson: Over the next 10 months, after your birth, by September 1942, conditions had grown so far worse, so much more worse in Holland, and that was a time when your parents began to think about taking more dramatic steps of going into hiding. Tell us what really prompted them to take those kinds of steps, because they're such major life-changing steps to take. What prompted them, and then what can they do to make it happen?

>> Al Munzer: Well, this was about the time when the Nazis, German invaders were taking the next step, which was to call up Jews for labor duty, a deportation if you will.

So many Jews began to think of ways to avoid that. My father was called up for labor duty, managed to defer the first time by undergoing a hernia operation, which he had postponed for a long time, and that gained him a little bit of time.

But then my parents decided that really we needed to take stronger steps. And families in Holland had a choice. Jewish families could either go into hiding as a group, like the family of Anne Frank, they all went into hiding, into an attic in Amsterdam, or others decided that the family would be split up.

In my case, my parents decided that, as a form of insurance so that if one person might be taken, deported, at least -- killed, at least the others who survived would have a chance, so they decided that the family ought to split up.

So the first one to go into hiding was actually my father. He went into hiding in a psychiatric hospital after a pretended suicide attempt. And that gained him admission to a psychiatric hospital. There were many other Jews in hiding in that hospital.

>> Bill Benson: He actually attempted it as an act to get into the hospital?

>> Al Munzer: Exactly, that's right, right.

My two sisters were placed with a very devout Catholic family. The wife in the family actually had a vision or dream of the Virgin Mary telling her to take in Jewish children, and she's the one that took in my two sisters.

Jewish boys were much harder to place, because they could be identified as being Jewish. My mother finally persuaded her neighbor, a woman named Annie Madna, to take me in. But then after that, my mother actually joined my father in the same psychiatric hospital, but in her case working there as a nursing assistant.

>> Bill Benson: With your two sisters being put into hiding with a Catholic family, was your mother ever able to share with you how she arranged that, how she made that possible? You mentioned that the woman had had sort of a vision she had to do this.

>> Al Munzer: Right. There were two Catholic priests, Jesuit Catholic priests who were very instrumental in finding places where Jewish children could be hidden. My mother's neighbor, one of the neighbors who was Catholic, very religious, very involved in a local church, she talked to these two priests, and they're the ones who really found this woman, this family willing to take in my two sisters.

>> Bill Benson: In both your sisters' case, of course, as well as your own with the Madna family, food was rationed, food was scarce. Now you have extra mouths to feed. Do you know how that was handled?

>> Al Munzer: Initially, as I said, I was placed with my mother's neighbor, Annie Madna. She got scared, passed me on to her sister. Her sister got scared, brought me back to Annie. Finally, Annie,

who was divorced from her Indonesian husband, passed me on to her Indonesian husband, Tole Madna, and he also had custody of their three children, so he had a nannie who took care of the kids, a nanny by the name of Mima Saina.

My mother had made sure that Annie had gotten ration cards and things like that, to care for me, but the Madna family never asked, really, where they would get food, who would pay for this extra mouth to feed.

>> Bill Benson: They just took it on?

>> Al Munzer: They just took it on. Mima Saina was really an amazing woman.

>> Bill Benson: Before we come back to your stay at the Madna family, you mentioned that your mother found refuge by taking a job in the same psychiatric hospital that your dad was in. What do you know about their time together in that hospital? He as patient, her as part of the staff.

>> Al Munzer: This was my mother's first exposure, really, to mental illness. This is a -- mental illness was a much more severe problem, in the sense there were really no drugs to treat patients. Nonetheless, she really felt that, with what was happening in the world, and contrasting that with what was happening in the hospital and the patients, she wondered how sanity really was going to be defined. Crazy things were happening in the world that really had no explanation, no rationale behind them.

>> Bill Benson: Outside the facility?

>> Al Munzer: Exactly. They weren't in the psychiatric facility all that long, but on Christmas Day 1942, my two sisters were brought to visit them, at least, so they had a little bit of a reunion right in

the psychiatric hospital. Major risk, but still, it was their last chance to see their two daughters. So a small part of the family got together.

>> Bill Benson: On Christmas Day, 1942?

>> Al Munzer: Right.

>> Bill Benson: Then the next day something dreadful happened?

>> Al Munzer: The next day, the psychiatric hospital was emptied by the Germans of all patients who were there, and staff. This happened in that particular city and in many other psychiatric hospitals.

>> Bill Benson: At the same time?

>> Al Munzer: At the same time, in Holland. My parents were first taken to a prison in The Hague, then on to a concentration camp on Dutch soil, Westerbork, in northernmost Holland. Just like many others, in one of the diaries I've translated for the museum, there's the story of a young woman, about 19 years old, who worked as a nurse apprentice in one of the psychiatric hospitals, and she was Jewish, and this was a Jewish hospital, and she started a correspondence with a girlfriend. I've been translating those letters. Most of the letters are just girl talk, but then there are other things intervening, and the very last letter is just incredible. She says, you know, I have a choice to make tomorrow. I can either go into hiding like many of my colleagues and try to disappear, or I can stay with my patients, who really desperately need me. And this young woman makes the choice of actually staying with her patients, and of course, a week later she's killed in Auschwitz.

>> Bill Benson: Your parents, as you said, went to Westerbork, then to another camp.

>> Al Munzer: Then they went to another camp, where they did slave labor, called Vught, the headquarters of the Philips Electronics Company in Holland.

>> Bill Benson: Slave laborers there?

>> Al Munzer: Slave laborers there. Eventually from there, taken to Auschwitz, then multiple other camps after that.

>> Bill Benson: You had told me that, something your mother who did survive told you later, that when she was working at the Philips Electronics factory, in order for her to be able to stay alive and work there, she convinced this them that she was an expert in assembling radio tubes, which she'd never done in her life.

>> Al Munzer: Never done in her life. Her neighbor, she learned very quickly how to do this. This little task of assembling radio tubes kept her alive in that particular slave labor factory. Later on, after she was taken to Auschwitz, then to another electronics factory, Telefunken, which is now Siemens, there she did the exact same thing, and it's what kept her alive.

>> Bill Benson: I think you said she'd heard through the grapevine that being able to do that work was your ticket to maybe surviving?

>> Al Munzer: Absolutely.

>> Bill Benson: She took the risk, said "I can do that"?

>> Al Munzer: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: Your parents didn't get a last chance to see you, you are with the Madna family. Tell us about your life with the Madnas.

>> Al Munzer: Well, as I said, Mima Saina was really an incredible person.

>> Bill Benson: She was the nanny?

>> Al Munzer: She was the nanny, born in Indonesia, spoke no Dutch, was completely illiterate, but had really a heart of gold, and she would walk miles every day just to get some milk for me or persuade neighbors to provide some milk.

She kept a knife under her pillow, vowing -- and I slept in her bed with her, she vowed that if any German, if any Nazi would come and try to get me, she would kill them. That's how strongly she felt about protecting me.

The house was searched several times by the German occupation forces, and I had to hide in a cellar at times. What I do remember, some of my earliest memories, is that's where Christmas decorations were kept. So I remember playing with the Christmas decorations. It wasn't all bad.

So my memories, being in the Madna household, are really, really very, very good ones, in a sense.

>> Bill Benson: Who else was in the Madna household?

>> Al Munzer: Mima Saina, then three older children, Davey, Willy and Robbie. They were the three children from Tole Madna's marriage. The youngest was Robbie, who was younger than I was. All the others are considerably older. By the way, I'm still in touch with my foster siblings, with the Madna family. Now with the advent of the security, as of a few days ago we're now Skyping.

>> Bill Benson: Here you are, this young Caucasian child, living in a household of an Indonesian family, we saw the photograph there. How is it possible to not have you attract attention in some way? I know you were hidden, but even neighbors must have had some inkling potentially.

>> Al Munzer: Most neighbors were unaware of the fact. I was not allowed out of the house at all. A few neighbors knew of my presence, certainly people in the Indonesian community. There were

some neighbors who were German communists who had emigrated to Holland, and communists, of course, were very, very strong anti-Nazi. So they were allowed to know that I was in the household.

Then my foster father concocted some wild stories about why I was in the household. He told the Germans that I was the illegitimate child of his ex-wife who now had a new boyfriend who did not want me around. That was one of the many stories he made up.

>> Bill Benson: To explain why you were in the household?

>> Al Munzer: Yes. He told me that story, maybe apocryphal, I don't know. It's like his personality. Very consistent with the kind of person he was.

>> Bill Benson: When the former wife first had you for that short period, and you said earlier she became afraid, she had reason to be afraid, if I remember right. Wasn't there a neighbor she was afraid would be aware that you were in the house, which is why --

>> Al Munzer: Her sister, when I was left with her sister, her sister had a neighbor who was part of the Dutch Nazi party, and she was afraid that if he heard a baby crying in the house he would know what was happening, and that's why she passed me back.

You know, people who hid Jewish children, or Jews in general, took tremendous risks. They really risked their lives. They could have -- the Madnas could have been killed, if I had been discovered, or if they had been found as hiding a Jewish child.

>> Bill Benson: As you said a moment ago, your recollections were that it was a happy place to be.

>> Al Munzer: Absolutely.

>> Bill Benson: Say some more about that.

>> Al Munzer: My foster father, Papa Madna, used to play the piano. There are pictures on the website of the museum of him playing the piano, me sitting there, listening.

My nanny used to sing lullabies and lullabies to me. Recently, I had an amazing experience of an encounter with 15 student leaders from Indonesia, at Temple University, arranged a web-based encounter. A man, a professor in Indonesia who has been involved in trying to improve interfaith relations in Indonesia somehow put in Holocaust and Indonesia into Google, and came up with my story.

He, in turn, got in touch with a woman here in the US who was hosting 25 student leaders from Indonesia at Temple University. So she invited me to speak to those students, and I shared my story with them.

He was aghast when I showed him the photograph of the Indonesian nanny holding me. When I told him that she used to sing a lullaby to me called Nina Bobo, all 25 of them started singing. It was truly an amazing, amazing experience. Which I'll cherish.

>> Bill Benson: Even at that time, there was a fairly significant Indonesian community in Holland.

>> Al Munzer: True.

>> Bill Benson: Was that unusual?

>> Al Munzer: Well, Indonesia was a colony of the Netherlands, and many Indonesians over the years had emigrated to the Netherlands, and started businesses there.

My foster father, Papa Madna, was a manager of an Indonesian restaurant. Mima Saina came to the United States working in a restaurant. Like many other refugees, even to today.

>> Bill Benson: Right. The winter of 1944-1945, you're still with the Madna family, was an exceptionally harsh, bitter winter. The food situation was desperate. You had some memories yourself of that, I believe.

>> Al Munzer: Yeah, a somewhat vague memory. What I remember is, I must have been hungry, and I saw the table set for breakfast, and so during the night I got up, and I sat down at the table waiting to be fed. I fell asleep with my head falling into my plate basically, of course being found much later by the family. That is one memory. There is very, very little food at that time. The only thing really available was something that Holland has plenty of, and that's tulip bulbs. They would be ground up, and that was really our main staple, our main foodstuff.

>> Bill Benson: You told me that all of the dogs and cats --

>> Al Munzer: The dogs and cats had disappeared.

>> Bill Benson: During that time, of course, that year, 1944-1945, where you're with the Madnas, in February of 1944, your sisters were living with a Catholic family, and they ended up being taken by the Nazis. Will you tell us about that?

>> Al Munzer: Well, unfortunately, the husband and wife in that family had a fight, and the husband denounced his wife to the Germans as hiding two Jewish children, and so they took his wife and my two sisters. His wife eventually was released, but my sisters then 6 and 8 years old, were taken to Auschwitz and killed. So it's -- you know, it's very, very difficult for me to even think of that.

>> Bill Benson: Thanks for at least telling us about that, Al.

>> Al Munzer: Sure.

>> Bill Benson: Holland was liberated with Germany's surrender at the end of the war, in May 1945. In August, you were reunited with your mother. Tell us about the events during that time, your mother's liberation, what happened to your father, and what it was like for you to be reunited, as best you know, with your mother, particularly in light of the loss of your sisters.

>> Al Munzer: Well, my mother was actually liberated through the intervention of the head of the Swedish Red Cross, a man by the name of Foulke Bernadotte. He negotiated the release of several thousand women, with Himmler. My mother was in that particular group. This was just before the end of the war, April, 1945.

My mother describes arriving at the border, actually, of Denmark, between Denmark and Germany, and coming off the train and being greeted by this Swedish nobleman.

She said, you know, he insisted on embracing, hugging each one of the prisoners. They felt -- they didn't feel clean, didn't have the right clothes, they were very concerned about that. But this was how she was freed. It was obviously an incredible moment for her.

She was then taken to Sweden from Denmark, to Sweden to recover. Then in August 1945, she returned to Holland, where she found that her two daughters had been killed, but where she found that I had survived, and I was reunited with my mother.

It's one of the earliest memories, clear memories that I have. I was asleep, and one of my siblings came out to wake me up because there was someone in the living room.

I was a child, typical child of about 4 1/2 years old, cranky, crying. I was taken into the living room where the whole family was sitting in a circle, and they passed me from lap to lap. But there was one lap that I wouldn't sit in, and that lap was my own mother, because I did not know her at all,

and as far as I'm concerned I already had a mother, Mima Saina. She was the one who had taken care of me, and who had become my mother.

My mother realized that it would be very, very difficult, in fact, to separate me from Mima, so she arranged for Mima to live with us, and so Mima would continue to care for me while my mother would go out, trying to find work.

Unfortunately, Mima passed away about two months later. She suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died very, very suddenly. And I really have no memory of Mima. It's really amazing. All I remember is being taken to visit her grave many, many times. So much so that when I returned to Holland many years later, I came to the cemetery, I was immediately able to find the place where Mima was buried.

>> Bill Benson: Because you had been there?

>> Al Munzer: I had been there so many times before. Unfortunately, my father's story is a different one. My father, my parents were separated in Auschwitz, and my father was sent on, first to Mauthausen, a very infamous camp, you will see a very part of the exhibit upstairs, where they had these huge blocks of Jews, and the inmates were forced to carry.

From there, he was forced to three more camps in Austria, finally ending up in a camp called Abenzai, in the Alps, and there in abandoned salt mines, the Germans were assembling V2 rockets. My father did slave labor there. It was one of the worst camps operated by the Nazis. My father survived to see liberation by the 80th US Army, actually, but he was so ill, so weak that he passed away. He died two months later.

About two years ago, actually through the museum, I met a woman who was a US Army nurse

who may well have taken care of my father when she was there with the US Army. That was very important to me, knowing that there had been a person who actually took care of him, having a chance to thank her for the care that she provided to him and to other Jewish prisoners who were there. It was very, very important to me.

>> Bill Benson: Your father was liberated, and therefore when he died he was in Allied hands. He was able to have a burial place, which you told me about.

>> Al Munzer: Yes. Yes. People have asked me how I feel about my losses, how they have an impact on me, and it's difficult to describe, because I was born into the Holocaust. To me, having playmates who were orphans, or living in the city that was all reduced to rubble, was just part of normal life. So I didn't know any other world.

This sounds terrible, I was even jealous of my sisters as a young child, because everybody would tell me how wonderful my two sisters were. I had no understanding of the terrible things that had happened to them.

So it's difficult to talk about.

>> Bill Benson: For your mother, she lost her husband, lost two of her daughters, was separated from you through the years, she went to Auschwitz, survived it, sent on a death march, ended up at some horrific camps before she was liberated. What was it like for her to survive and cope after those years?

>> Al Munzer: I really don't know how my mother was able to cope with her terrible losses. The only thing that I can come up with, that's what she told me, that knowing me, having me survive was very, very important to her.

You know, one thing that I don't think I mentioned earlier, was this circumcision ceremony, there were some photographs taken, and two very small prints of those photographs, about 1 x 1.5 centimeter, or an inch in size, were with my mother, kept throughout the concentration camps. She kept them hidden on her body, those two small photographs of my circumcision ceremony. She felt, she had developed this idea, this superstition, if you will, that if she ever lost those photographs, it would mean that I had died.

So I really, I think, was the reason for her survival. It placed a major obligation on me. My mother would remind me about that pledge that Hannah made, you know, I will give my child to the Almighty all the days of his life for service, all the days of his life. She reminded me of that pledge, and it became an important part of my life.

>> Bill Benson: The career choices you've made, the things you're still doing with your work internationally to this day. If you don't mind, Al, maybe we can turn to our audience, see if you -- we have time for a few questions. If you do, we have mics. We're going to bring mics down for you to use. So just wait until you get your hands on the mic. Make the question as brief as you can, then Al will respond to it. If I think we need to repeat it, just so everybody in the room hears it, I'll go ahead and repeat it. But we do have the mics to help out.

Do we have anybody who wants to ask a question? If not, I've got a few more. A gentleman in the front row, Sonia.

[Audience comment]

>> Bill Benson: For those who can't hear, the question is did the Dutch react differently than the Poles in terms of the numbers that were hidden, and what your thoughts are about that?

>> Al Munzer: There's actually somewhat of a misconception about Holland. Yes, we are very familiar with all the good stories about Holland, and the Jews who were saved and people who went into hiding. But actually, next to Poland, the highest percentage of Jews who lost -- who were killed during the Nazi era was in Holland. So Holland does not quite deserve the reputation that it has gotten, it has gotten over the years. It's only recently that Holland has come to terms with that.

Holland actually had the second largest Nazi party in Europe, and there were a lot of collaborators in Holland.

>> Bill Benson: Which makes the fact that you were able to survive and not be --

>> Al Munzer: All the more amazing. It really -- I mentioned some of the neighbors, and one woman, some few years ago when I was back in Holland, said to me, she said, "You drank my milk!"

I didn't know what she was talking about. Then she described how every day schoolchildren in Holland would be given a little bottle of milk. Her mother told her to keep half the bottle for the baby next-door. So this woman, at a very, very young age, learned to be really a good neighbor and participate in a very important act of rescue.

Young children can learn a lesson very early. One of the amazing diaries I've translated was from a young woman who described what it was like to attend school in Germany in the 1930s, during the Nazi era. She said that a Nazi officer would come into the classroom every day, take all of the Jewish kids out, then a whole hour of Nazi indoctrination would take place, then the Jewish kids would be asked to come back into the classroom.

The non-Jewish kids had to form two lines, and the Jewish kids had to walk between

those two rows of those non-Jewish kids, and non-Jewish kids were told to spit on their classmates and yell out, "You are poison to us!"

It's a terrible, terrible story, but what makes it a good story, and a true story, was that there was one little girl, 10 years old, by the name of Hadwick Ashen who refused to participate. She said my Jewish classmates are as good as I am. What you are doing is shameful. And I'm not going to do it.

There you have it. A 10-year-old.

>> Bill Benson: This was the diary you translated?

>> Al Munzer: Recently, something I discovered. She ended up moving to South Africa, where she ended up fighting Apartheid. There you have it, the seeds being planted at age 10 then coming to fruition.

She also is a remarkable woman, translating the Bible into many of the African languages.

>> Bill Benson: Do we have another question? Right here, young man right here. Chris?

>> Did you actually know what was going on when you were in hiding as a child?

>> Bill Benson: The question is, did you know what was going on while you were in hiding?

>> Al Munzer: No, I was really much too young to appreciate what was happening. I thought what was happening to me was just part of normal life. I didn't know anything any different, except having to go in a cellar to hide periodically. But I had no idea why that was, and I frankly also saw absolutely no difference between me and the other kids in the household who looked very, very different, as you saw the photograph. To me, there were no differences. I was really just part of the family, and remained part of the family, remain part of the family to this day.

>> Bill Benson: Before we close, Al, will you say a little bit about that? As you mentioned earlier, you're now Skyping with members of the family. What was it like, how did you maintain that contact over the years?

>> Al Munzer: I tried to visit my foster father, Papa Madna, periodically. We always corresponded. I went to visit him, in fact towards the end of his life, he lived well into his 90s. People said that he stayed alive just so that I could visit, he could visit with me one last time.

I came to visit him in Holland, and we talked for quite a while, and I'll never forget his last words to me. His last words to me is, "Take care of your mother." I'll never forget that. Then after that, as we were leaving the house, he stood at the window and took out a handkerchief and waved. That was the last time I saw him alive. He was well into his 90s. To this day, I'm still in touch with his family. He remarried after the war, had three more children, and the only time all six children would come together was when I was there. I was sort of the bridge, or the glue of the family that kept the two sets of kids together. That happens, just as I said, up until now.

>> Bill Benson: We're going to close our program in just a moment. I'm going to turn back to Al to do that. We have a tradition here at *First Person* where our first person gets the last word. So when I turn it back to Al, he'll close the program.

You'll stay for a few minutes afterwards. If anybody would like to come here when he steps off the stage, ask him more questions, take a picture, say hi, whatever you want to do. He will hang around for a while to do that. I want to thank all of you for being with us, for being such a great

audience. Remind you we'll have *First Person* programs every Wednesday and Thursday until the middle of August. If you have the opportunity, we'd love you to come back. As I mentioned earlier, there's information on the website about our upcoming *First Person* program.

With that, I will step aside and turn it back to Al.

>> Al Munzer: Well, it's really wonderful to see all of you here. I think one of the most gratifying things to me is to see the number of people visiting this museum, which is going to shortly be celebrating its 20th anniversary.

This museum really means a tremendous amount to me. It's not just a museum, a history museum, it's also a memorial, very, very important.

You know, my sisters did not have any grave, obviously. All the Jewish bodies in Auschwitz were burnt, burnt into ashes. So this is the place that I come to reflect and be reunited, if you will, with my family.

My hope is that in telling my story and the museum telling the story of millions of others who went through the same thing that perhaps we can make a difference in the world. Perhaps the most important lesson is really that hatred can do some terrible, terrible things and can lead to something like the Holocaust or a genocide. But at the same time, there are people in this tremendous sea of evil of the Holocaust who did a tremendous amount of good, and personally I always feel that the good they did outweighed the evil, and I think that's one of the other lessons taught by this museum. It's a very, very special place, and I really appreciate everyone who comes through the museum.

In a sense, anyone who goes through the museum and who comes out and says "There but for the grace of God go I" is also a survivor. We're really all survivors of the Holocaust.

[Applause]