

Thank you all for coming along today.

I hope you've had a chance to look round the exhibition, but don't worry if you haven't - I've been asked to talk for around ten minutes, so there'll be plenty of time afterwards to look round.

So, the theme of this 'Spotlight Talk' is: 'Every Object Tells a Story', which is, if you think about it, one of the main purposes of a museum - and I'll come back to that point in a moment.

The object I'm going to talk about is the painting, which you can see in the exhibition - painted by my uncle Heinz, while in hiding from the Nazis.

The story behind this picture begins in the Netherlands in July 1942, when my mum and her family were forced to go into hiding, to escape from the Nazis, who had occupied the country.

My mother Eva and grandmother Fritzi, were in one hiding place, while my uncle Heinz and grandfather Erich, were in a completely different place. Families were often separated like this when they went into hiding, for practical reasons, and to reduce the risk of being discovered.

Painting was something people could feasibly do while in hiding, as most people had to spend day after day in absolute silence, for hours on end.

What my mother didn't know, was that Heinz had hidden all the paintings that he and her father had done during all their time in hiding, which was almost two years.

The whole family was betrayed in May 1944. They were crammed into cattle trucks and deported to Auschwitz concentration camp. And it was on this journey that Heinz told my mother he had hidden the paintings under the attic floor of their hideaway.

By June 1945, my mother and grandmother had managed to survive the horrors of Auschwitz, and they returned to Amsterdam and, sure enough, they found the paintings exactly where Heinz had hidden them, with a note which said:

'Property of Erich and Heinz Geiringer from Amsterdam who were in hiding and will collect the items after the war.'

But Erich and Heinz never returned.

So, for my mother and grandmother, these paintings were a precious link to their loved ones, who they were never to see again.

But, more generally, I think they also serve as a moving reminder of the importance of preserving and displaying art and artefacts, which – as I said earlier on - is at the heart of a museum's work.

There's also a moving irony to the story, which I'd like to share with you.

Painting materials were in very short supply and rationed. Wood to make the picture frames was, of course, needed for burning as firewood, and the canvas or linen was also very difficult to get hold of.

So, Heinz had to be quite inventive, and had to use sheets and bed linen, which he tore up to paint on. Once, his father was quite put out to discover he had no pillow case, because Heinz had 'repurposed' it for his painting!

As it turned out, it was fortuitous, as he was able to easily fold up and hide these linen pictures under the floorboards of the attic.

Of course, he would never have been able to do this, had the paintings been framed.

While thinking about my mum and her family having to go into hiding all those years ago, I was struck by the awful parallels of recent days (I know many people have been reminded of traumatic stories from their family histories).

I heard an interview on Radio 4 with a Ukrainian teenager, who was talking about how much she just wanted to go back to leading a normal life again – to be able to go out and meet up with her friends, and not have to hide and live in fear.

It sounded so tragically familiar.

So, I think it's more important than ever that we're open to each other's culture and history, and share our own stories, and learn about others.

That's why exhibitions like this are so relevant – to give people the opportunity to celebrate diversity and bring together different people and communities.

To focus on what can bring us together, rather than what keeps us apart.

In fact, I have two wonderful examples of this – when I came to the opening of the exhibition at the beginning of February, I bumped into an old friend, who I worked with when organising an International Day at my daughters' infant school – someone I hadn't seen for about 20 years!

In fact, I'm really glad to see she's here today as well.

And, on another occasion, while visiting the exhibition with my mum, I had a very interesting chat with a woman, who told me about her family's very traumatic experience.

Again, I'm happy to say that she's here with us today too.

So, I really hope this exhibition will inspire other people, and communities, to talk about their history, and share their stories.