Hear My Story: Cori Silbernagel &Trinity Johnson trip to Poland transcript

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:04

Behind the words pictures and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders. One by one, these stories stir the soul.

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:20

See, mine is 4018, my sister was 40, 017,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this - hear my story - so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations.

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:41

 I will never meet someone else like my father, but there are many of us who, if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you. They will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day.

**Trinity Johnson** 00:54

Thank you for joining us for this special episode. My name is Trinity Johnson, and I am the Director of Holocaust Programs & Museum Experiences, and I am thrilled to be joined by my colleague, Cori Silbernagel, our Director of Collections & Exhibitions here at the Holocaust & Humanity Center. And I said that this was a special episode because today we're actually going to talk about an incredible trip that Cori and I took together this past summer, where we were studying on the grounds of Auschwitz-Birkenau. So over 10 days, Cori and I had the fortunate opportunity to travel throughout Krakow learning about the vibrant Jewish community that existed there pre war as well as today, and then we left from Krakow and visited Auschwitz-Birkenau and studied on the grounds for eight days, an intensive study with the top historians and educators at the state museum. And so I'm thrilled to welcome Cori today to share our reflections and learnings from that incredible trip. And Cori, we are also sitting in a very specific area of our museum between Deportation and Annihilation, which directly links, really, to the beginning of our trip, specifically, and then also kind of that thread that really took us throughout the rest of our experience at Auschwitz. Can you share a little bit about our tour and why right here in the museum?

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:29

Yeah, absolutely. So we began our trip in Krakow. We spent two days there and saw, you know, spaces that really highlighted and celebrated pre war Jewish life and sites that were a lot harder to understand, namely the Krakow ghetto. So while we were in Krakow, we we had an amazing tour guide who was great for me, because I didn't really know much about Polish Jewish history. So although this was a seminar that, you know, really focused on educating about the history of the Holocaust and Auschwitz in particular, our tour, in our in Seminar experience began at the beginning of Jewish life in Poland, so that gave me great context. And while we were, you know, while we were on those walking tours, over two days, I was constantly brought back to the design of our museum, because that was really the first, the first time that I was able to learn some of the history of the Holocaust in a meaningful way through the stories of our survivors. And there was one photograph that came back to me while we were in Krakow in the Deportation exhibit in this area we're sitting in today next to Annihilation, which is behind me. There's a photograph of a streetscape. There are no people in the photograph, but there are suitcases and bags and pieces of luggage. And this space was significant in Krakow because it was the gathering space that Jews were taken to before they were deported from the ghetto. While we were on our tour, we were walking through the historic ghetto in which, you know, there's still some wall remnants that remain today, and we saw the space that this photograph was taken. And for me, it was my first opportunity to have this, this type of, you know, grounded sense of history and sense of space, where, where I was standing on, on that same ground. So it was extremely significant. And. And again throughout this entire trip, I was kind of brought back to our museum, and had a lot of reflection points on how we we shared the history. So you visited Auschwitz before. How is it unique from some of your other experiences?

**Trinity Johnson** 05:20

Yeah, it's really interesting, because this this was a really profound trip. The first time I went, I was as an undergraduate studying Holocaust and genocide studies. And then the second time, I was a chaperone for students going to Auschwitz for the first time on March of the living and this time I went back as a PhD student, also studying Holocaust and genocide studies, but I think this is the first time that I allowed myself to feel the history that we transmit to people. And what I mean by that is, when I was a graduate student, I came to that field knowing a lot, but I had so much more to learn, and I'm still learning it. But then as a chaperone, I was really there for the emotional journey of others, and not necessarily really allowing myself space in either of those experiences to really think of the people. And now as a PhD student, again, with a student lens on this trip. However, knowing the stories that we now know because of the work that we do every day was so much more impactful, because those stories echoed in my years the entire time. I'm sure they did for you as well. And it was very different, only because, you know, when we were in Krakow and thinking of of Henry Carter, and then in Auschwitz, and walking around Buna Monowitz, and never having seen Buna Monowitz For ever on any of those trips, and knowing Werner's story and the experiences he had there, it was such a different trip to be surrounded by those stories, and that's only been because of how long I've been at the center and how deeply now I'm studying it in a completely different way to continue to teach this history. And I know I said this to you when we first talked about applying for the program and Oh, will we get in? Let's hope. It's incredible learning. You don't have to go to these camps to effectively teach the Holocaust, but what perspective you have after is so incredible. And I think that's something that you almost can't put to words, but I'm gonna challenge you in this moment. I'm curious, now that we have been there since it was your first time, how did this change your outlook? I mean, you live and breathe in this history every day, like I do. You teach it, you archive it. How has this changed your perspective and also your work here at the museum?

**Cori Silbernagel** 08:03

Yeah, I think it's so hard to articulate it. I think I still, you know now, now it's been several months, and I'm still kind of unpacking everything we learned, what we experienced, the places we went. I I agree with you. I think that carrying the perspectives and stories of our survivors through those spaces had so much meaning, and I felt so much connection to to those individuals, some of whom I've never met in person, I've just cared for, their artifacts, their photographs, their special things. So having an opportunity to better understand their experiences, I think, you know, was something I will never forget. You know we we we have had this conversation before where you say, you know, you don't, you don't need to go to learn the history, but, you know, I, prior to this trip, would have agreed, but it's hard for me to, you know, I'm torn now because, you know, one of my first feelings or reflections on the plane on the way home, after, you know, these 10 days was I can't believe I've been teaching this history without being there and and experiencing it from that perspective. I think, you know, one of the really special things about how we share Holocaust history is that it's through our local stories. And, you know, we live in work in this, you know, historic train station that has this positive and authentic connection that grounds me in my work here. And. To share the stories. But what I realized, I think, in coming back after having had the seminar experience, was that, you know, my perspective was kind of was somewhat narrow. It was narrow in that it was very localized. And, you know, I've gotten very comfortable with sharing a small set of stories. And I think one of my perspective shifts was that, you know, I'm now challenged to ensure that, yes, we're sharing the local stories, but but that there are so many more stories that need to be told, and I think that is the responsibility of our organization, of other Holocaust organizations. I think that, you know, we have to, we have to do more. So I left with this kind of perspective shift and having, you know, new new founded responsibility, or deeper responsibility. And, of course, deeper understanding too well.

**Trinity Johnson** 11:14

And I think one of the interesting things about this summer institute, the International Summer Academy is the group dynamics that we were part of. Here. We were to museum professionals. There was a couple other museum professionals there, but this was such a diverse learning environment, with folks who had retired from professional careers or were currently classroom teachers or museum professionals, and a couple of them had not really even studied the Holocaust, and so this was their first way in. And I thought it was really beautiful in the times, where we were able to take those local stories and give perspective in the space. Because I don't know if you felt this way again, it was incredible learning, but it was very history forward, which is very different than our approach here at the museum to Holocaust education. It's through the local perspectives, and the history is part of that, but it's narrated through our local perspectives. And there were opportunities we both shared stories of our local survivors that I do think was an important element, since we were in such an environment of history lecture and learning, I don't know if, if you felt the same or or, I think in speaking to some of the folks who were part of our trip, they were just really moved by hearing these Stories.

**Cori Silbernagel** 12:40

Yeah, yeah. And I think it was also interesting to, you know, balance, like have this careful, you know, this careful balance of history and story. I think you know, in one of the ways that we differ, because you have studied the Holocaust for so long. I came into this work as a collection specialist, not not a historian, or having, you know, a lot of historical knowledge. So one of you know, one of my goals in wanting to go was to gain that larger picture. I thought that I might come home understanding more, and I think that while I I do understand more, and I know a lot more, there's so much more that I don't understand. And I think, you know, that's why I still, that's why I say I'm still unpacking the trip. There's so there's so much I didn't know, and it just raises so many more questions. So, you know, to to talking about this larger group we were with, I felt really privileged to be part of that group and to learn with with them. Because although, you know, we work at a Holocaust museum, we teach this history, we share the local stories of survivors and eyewitnesses. In a lot of ways, I was, you know, kind of at the same point of learning as others, some of the others in our group, and you know that that created a really great space where, when we sat in lectures or we took a walking tour, the questions that were being asked, some of them were my questions, too. So I think, you know, there's value in taking a group seminar trip like this. I think if I had planned, you know, my own trip to Auschwitz, I think my experience would have been a lot different. And while we were in Auschwitz I and Auschwitz- Birkenau, we we had this amazing opportunity to, you know, not only hear from the scholars and professionals that work at the state museum, but we also had an opportunity to see some, you know, some pretty an unseen places that that are not open to the general public. So I would love to hear from you, you know what? What were some of those spaces that you know you found meaningful? What did you see that you haven't seen before?

**Trinity Johnson** 15:43

Yes, so that that was one of probably the most important benefits of this trip, and learning from the historians are these kind of uncharted areas that no one else has seen, or really, the doors haven't even really been open since the camp was almost liberated, almost essentially. So a few of those spaces, I remember there was an Unpreserved barrack we visited, the kitchen that is also not something group tours are taken into, and a space that group tours are taken into, and Block 10, where the atrocious medical experiments on women were performed. And I hope you'll talk about the Unpreserved barrack, because that was incredible to see. Anyway. We'll get to that. But I think for me, seeing Block 10 was really impactful, because part of my focus within this scholarship has been the experiences of women, in particular during the Holocaust. And I've read so so many accounts and memoirs of women who were in Block 10 and part of the medical experiments. So to be in that space and know that no one else has seen that space, seeing the sick bay, where where women were. And I'll never forget, there was this moment where many of the windows are shuttered so that you couldn't see out, but there were a couple on one side in particular that did look out and the view that you saw, and I don't know if it's intentional or not, you can't see out any of these other areas, except for this one wall. And what you do see is the barbed wire and the guard tower. And to me, that was a really striking moment, because you have this anonymity, or you can hear, you know, the executions possibly happening, which happened a lot outside of Block 10. And then the one space that you're able to look out is a reminder that you're a prisoner, and the barbed wire and the Watchtower is right there outside that window and in that was really striking to me, that I was standing there and seeing that, knowing the stories that I've read, and not being the only thing those women were able to see.

**Cori Silbernagel** 18:15

I think you know to that, to that kind of idea of being in in the same spaces. And you know, imagining those people, many of you know, many of their stories have not been shared. I had a similar point in Auschwitz-Birkenau. We were walking through an unpreserved barrack - and actually you saw this first. But as as you know, our group was walking through. We were taking photographs. We were listening to our guide. Kind of give us a sense of the space, what these different rooms were used for, how, how people survived in that space. You called me back. I was a bit ahead of you, and you said, Cori, you have to see this. And what you showed me is, you know this image in my mind of it that I really won't ever forget we had learned earlier on our tour that the first barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau were built by Soviet POWs. These were soldiers that came from all walks of life, professions of all kind, and they were tasked with building the structures, building the first brick structures that were there. And you pointed out to me a spot where the mortar in the brick building was really sloppy. And. You could see the fingerprints, and not, you know, not like the lines of our fingerprint that you might leave on a window. You could see their fingers scraping through the mortar. And I had that moment of just realizing that these POWs, these prisoners were, you know, they were. They were forced to do this building, whether they had skills or not. It was the only way they were going to survive was to perform this labor. And today, Auschwitz-Birkenau remains as the memorial, and although the people those prisoners, are not there, most of their artifacts are not remaining. There's traces of them still in those buildings. So it was, it was a significant moment for me. And just, you know, again, getting out of the big the big history, this overview, history that I, that I came for, that I wanted to know, and and it brought it down to the person who was standing, where I was standing, building that wall, smoothing that mortar, creating this space that today, you know, serves as a memorial to you know, to remind us of the legacy of the Holocaust, of this atrocity it humanized it in a way that, you know, I think we aim to do in our museum, but in a different way, in a way that that I don't know. Again, I'm having, like, such a hard time articulating it.

**Trinity Johnson** 22:03

It's still a work in progress, and I love that. You know, it was a lot of learning, intensive learning, really a lot of history. But as if we didn't have enough of those, many days at Auschwitz studying, you and I also were fortunate, we added an extra History Day to our itinerary, but then we kind of went our own separate ways, and I'm wondering if you'll share, what did you do on your extra History Day in Poland? Yeah.

**Cori Silbernagel** 22:32

So when we left Auschwitz, we took a train back to Krakow, and then we somehow made it onto another train that that took us to Warsaw. I had never been to Warsaw. I wanted to stay in Warsaw for for my my extra day of learning, and I scheduled a really fantastic tour. It was just me and a guide who was going to take me on on a Jewish heritage tour through Warsaw. It was, it was a great tour to have at the point of our trip, we were, we began in Krakow, where I learned a lot of you know the the history of of the first Jews in Poland. When I began my tour in Warsaw, it was, you know, first thing in the morning we arrived the night before. We hadn't really explored anything within the city yet, and I met my guide at what was a historic Jewish street that became incorporated into the Warsaw Ghetto. And he brought me to the corner of the street and showed me the street signs. This one street had several different street signs. And he asked me, you know, what did I... What did I think that meant? And I didn't really, I didn't really know, like I hadn't made, I don't know why I didn't, but I hadn't made the connection. And said, I, I'm not sure. And he shared, this is the journey the street has had through time. There is a pre war street sign. There's the the street sign under Nazi occupation, the name of the street changes over time. There's the sign of Soviet times following the war. And there's the street sign today that brings the name back forward. So there was an and they were, you know, they were built from bottom up. So it was such a great place to begin the tour, because it made me, you know, like I got it after he explained it to me, right? Like it made me understand that this wasn't only going to be. A Holocaust tour, I was again going to be immersed in how, how the Holocaust is part of Warsaw's history, but it's not all of Warsaw's history. It's part of Warsaw's Jewish history, but it doesn't begin there or end there. So you know that that's, that's my one big, you know, learning point. We traveled around for five hours. And you know, we know, we know that the Warsaw Ghetto is, is not that large, right? But my guide, I think, because it was just the two of us, and he knew I really wanted to learn. He zigzagged me through so much of the ghetto that by the time our tour was done that day, we had seen remnants of the ghetto wall that remained in the courtyards of contemporary apartment buildings. We had seen memorials placed throughout the city, which was the point that I realized Warsaw is is a city of memorials, and it's a city of resistance. During the Holocaust, I left that day, feeling so tired from all the steps in the miles I put in, zigzagging around, but it made me realize again, you know, being in the authentic space of where, where the Warsaw ghetto was, that the ghetto was it felt so big when you're standing there, seeing the buildings around you and imagining how many people lived and survived and perished in in that ghetto, you know it. It gave me also, I think another kind of perspective shift in realizing the, you know, the difference in place during the Holocaust, this was the final spot of our of our trip, is the final stop. And you know, we had been to Krakow, we had been to Auschwitz. We'd been to other camps, like plasov and, you know, Warsaw had, you know, had its own Holocaust history that was unique. So I'm so glad that we made that extra, that extra day out of our trip. I mean, it added so much more value while I was, while I was in, you know, Warsaw, having this whirlwind five hour walking tour. You weren't with me. Tell me about where you went.

**Trinity Johnson** 27:56

I went to the Sobibor killing center. So, as we know and as we teach, and why we are here in Annihilation in our museum, talking about the six killing centers is really the chapter we're sitting in front of Sobibor was one of the killing centers and completely dismantled. And so really nothing was left there. However, when I was in graduate school, I had just come off of an archeological excavation in Egypt, and there was a little piece of me that was still really obsessed with excavation and all of the elements that go into that historical process, and I remember it was when they had started the excavations at the former site of Sobibor. And so I used to follow all of the field reports and knowing exactly what they were doing mechanically as far as archeology, but obsessed with what are they going to find? There being... nothing was left. And so to know that now there is a museum and a memorial. There a modern museum. It was beautiful, designed just absolutely gorgeous. The interaction. And I know one of the things we really wanted was physical interaction in our space. They had it, and it was done so beautifully and...and appropriately. A couple of the things that were really striking for me because of what they were able to do through the archeological excavation is find original foundational outlines of where the gas chambers had been, and, of course, remnants of items that people carried with them. And so when you walk in the entire length of the museum, there is a artifact case that cuts through the middle of the history. So you kind of wind around it all through the museum, learning about, kind of the broader history of the Holocaust. But then specifically to Sobibor. How does it fit into the timeline, but you're never out of eyesight of this artifact case and within it, the items that keys, wedding bands, lipstick, toothpaste, toothbrushes, all of the things that people would have carried with them when they were thinking that they were being relocated for labor, broken children's toys, things like that, which represent, unfortunately, the victim landscape of the people who were sent there. And I just thought it was such a striking design to always have that in your eyesight, to be reminded of the people, the people who came there. And of course, many of those items are anonymous. You don't know who they belong to. There were some that they were able to identify, whether it was a luggage tag or something like that, but it was just really, really powerful to be reminded of the humanity of in a place that was so absolutely inhumane, and to know that that site is also now part of education, that it wasn't dismantled to the place that it's forgotten in the historical record. So it was a little bit of finally seeing something that I was really, really focused on early in my study of Holocaust and genocide studies, and now kind of seeing that full circle and seeing what they've done in order to transmit that history further, was just, it was incredible.

**Cori Silbernagel** 31:28

I think, you know, that's the power of museums right to serve, as you know, kind of this third space of learning. And I think, you know, artifacts, artifacts are such powerful vehicles for storytelling. So I love, I love hearing about how they, you know, ensured in their design that you you could always see those. I think that it reminds me a little bit of the Annihilation exhibit in our museum, which is designed to include shoes. It's designed to look like the cages of shoes that are at Majdanek and, you know, and just in the design process you were there, you know, we went back and forth of how, how do we do it, and how do we do it in the right way that continues to humanize the Holocaust? And, you know, we felt at that time, and I still feel strongly to this, that the way to do it, the right way, was to bring forward this, you know idea of immense loss of life, the people that are not present are counted through their things. And that's how I think, you know, we, we approached annihilation as an exhibit. And I think it sounds incredibly powerful how they've done something similar to that in Sobibor, you know, with with those things that remained at the site, and again, like that goes back to the the powerful point of of being in these places, even if there's nothing that remains today, those stories are still there, and museums can bring those stories forward. So I had a similar experience with archeology. And you know, the stories that remain in these spaces that no longer exist as they once were in the past when we were at plasov. So this is the concentration camp in Krakow. We, you know, we left Krakow on a tram. We went a few stops away with our with our full group, and we went to truly what looked like a public park, and it functions like a public park today, too. And we met our guide there, who said, you know, here, here we are at Plaszow. This is the camp made famous in Schindler's List. You know it's, it's, I iconically recognized throughout the world because of that. But today, nothing remains at the camp we took this, you know, what I thought was an amazing tour with a guide who shared story through the archeology of the site, because there's nothing there today. You know, he had to really rely on a what we already know about the camp, what's documented about it, but it was personalized through stories of people at that camp. And there was one point along our walk where we we came to this large open air display case. And our our guide said to us, you know, when you look into this case, you'll see the excavation site. This entire site has been excavated at different points, and the things that we have found have been archived, but this was left open because we really wanted our, you know, visitors, to understand that this is a public space today, but we are only standing six inches above the camp that existed here before, and when you looked down into this display case, it was, you know, pretty, pretty big square concrete, you know, frame with the plexiglass lid over the top of it. When you looked down, sure enough, you know, about six inches down, there were tombstone remnants, and these were what paved the roads and Plaszov taken from a destroyed Jewish cemetery that was at that campsite. And that was a moment for me where I realized this history isn't far away, and in this case, it's only it's only six inches below where we stand today. That was a really emotional realization for me. It was hard to understand. I think, you know, as humans, we maybe are, it's easier to put that out of sight, out of mind, and to consider a space like Plaszow to be, you know, a beautiful space of nature where there's birds and wildlife and flowers riding their bikes, people riding their bikes and playing with their children. But you know, the legacy of what that space was can't be forgotten because it's only six inches below where, you know, where we exist today, it makes me a little bit choked up to even, you know, think about it. It's easier not to, but we have to.

**Trinity Johnson** 37:37

And it's, it's amazing. You know, these are just a handful of our experiences and stories. And we could go on and on and on, but I know, you know, we can't share everything, unfortunately, but I'm wondering, and this is probably the most challenging question that that we're still kind of grappling with. But you know what, if you had to say, What was one really powerful takeaway or lesson, or where are you really, I guess, in your reflection of this, I'm still unpacking it, but I'm curious,

**Cori Silbernagel** 38:10

yeah, I mean, I totally agree I'm still unpacking it, too. I think you know how I how I feel, today is different from yesterday will be different from tomorrow. I think my biggest, my biggest takeaway, you know, really wasn't in the history knowledge I gained, although that's something that, you know, I'm able to apply in our work today here, and it's something I needed to do to better understand. I think my main takeaway was, really, you know, that kind of the understanding that we carry a lot of responsibility working at a Holocaust Museum, we have a responsibility to carry carry this history forward and to hold it carefully so that you know, we can ensure atrocities come to an end. It's it's hard to find hope in that. It's hard to feel hopeful that it could end but, but it never will if we don't continue this work. So I think, you know, that's that's really my biggest takeaway was this deeper personal commitment to my my profession. I a more meaningful personal connection that that has really changed me forever. What about you? What do you think for

**Trinity Johnson** 39:55

me, it's continuing to honor these stories that have been entrusted to. Us because of sites like that and needing to share how how this history has impacted people. But I think my biggest is that there is still so much I have to learn, and I probably am never going to know it all, but I'm sure going to keep going every day trying to learn more understand, but then, you know, as we do in the space, continue to take that learning in order to humanize, personalize and localize for other people, to hopefully learn these lessons as well. And and I, I feel so fortunate that we had this experience together, and I can't thank you enough for being my travel buddy. It was both professionally as well as personally, such a profound experience, and I'm so glad we had a chance to talk about it together. Yeah,

**Cori Silbernagel** 40:48

me too. Thank you.

**Jackie Congedo** 40:50

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