**Hear My Story Werner Coppel**

Transcript

**SUMMARY:** Steve Coppel and his son, Brad Coppel are the son and grandson of Holocaust survivor Werner Coppel. They join the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center’s Director of Holocaust Education & Museum Experiences, Trinity Johnson, to share their family's story of survival and hope, and reflect on Werner's legacy. Werner's bravery and resilience during his time in a concentration camp and in the aftermath of WWII were also highlighted, along with the importance of preserving Holocaust education and memory. Werner is remembered as someone who stood up against hate and prejudice, the kind of person the Holocaust & Humanity Center refers to as an upstander.

**SPEAKERS**

Werner Coppel, Holocaust survivor (Footage courtesy of the USC Shoah Foundation)

Steve Coppel, son of Werner Coppel

Brad Coppel, grandson of Werner Coppel

Trinity Johnson, Director of Holocaust Education & Museum Experiences at the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I was 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

Mine was 40018. My sister was 40017

**Jackie Congedo** 00:27

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** 00:39

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** 00:46

These stories will change you they will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day. I'm Jackie Congedo. Today's conversation is with Steve and Brad Coppel. Steve's father and Brad's grandfather, Werner, was very special to the community of Holocaust survivors in Cincinnati. At just 19 years old Werner escaped a death march out of Auschwitz. He emigrated to the United States in 1949, arriving in Cincinnati with, as he always said, 'a wife, a suitcase, and a baby' to start life over. In the 1970s, The Cincinnati Enquirer published a letter to the editor that questioned the legitimacy of the Diary of Anne Frank, and the facts of the Holocaust in general. Werner had a decision to make. He chose to speak up and tell his story of survival for the first time publicly. The Holocaust & Humanity Center's Trinity Johnson, hosts this conversation about Werner's incredible life and legacy

**Werner Coppel** 01:43

When we arrived in America seeing the Statue of Liberty, we really believed that we are now in a country of brotherly love, and had left hate and prejudice behind us when that ship left German soil. Unfortunately, that's not the case. We have hate and prejudice with us today. Just as recently the last two, three days, the news came out three United States soldiers in Fort Bragg killed two black people, Black couple, just because they were Black. I am convinced we in America, we are not immune. I'm not comparing America was Germany. But we still have so much hate and prejudice with us. If we'd be very careful that we don't go on the wrong track, somewhere along the line, true, we got to concentration, the Constitution, to the Constitution is powerful, but only as powerful as the people who protect it. And historically, America obviously knew how to fight the enemy from without, but many times doesn't know how to fight the enemy from within. So I would say to every American born in this country here that as long as he or she defends the Constitution and respects rights, human rights for everybody, we safe. But if it ever fails, or if the American population ever fails to do that, we in deep trouble.

**Trinity Johnson** 03:34

Brad, Steve, thank you so much for joining me today to talk about Werner who I cannot adequately put words to the person Werner was just personally but then also for our community and everything he did to raise awareness on Holocaust education as well as hate and prejudice. And really before we get into the way too many questions that I have for both of you. I'm hoping I, Steve, would you mind just summarizing Werner's story and his experiences for the audience who maybe has not heard his story?

**Steve Coppel** 04:13

Dad was a typical German boy. The Nazis came to power. And as a typical Jew in Germany, he wasn't allowed to go to parks. He wasn't allowed to go to the zoo. He was kicked out of school. In 1943, he was deported along with a group of youngsters, their hachshara at a youth group, 275 youngsters were all deported to Auschwitz together. 35 of them survived. They held each other up. The Death March the, which Elie Wiesel writes about in the book, "Night," Dad is one of 771 people to escape that death march. She met two other guys walks into the nearby town called Gleiwitz. And the townspeople take one look at him. And you know, they don't want to do anything. They sent the three guys over to a building where there were families that we're missing a were one of the people who had converted. And they go there. And one of the women in that house is a nurse. And she nurses my dad back to health. And they eventually got married. And she became my mother. So that's that, in a nutshell is his story.

05:40

Now that I've worked at the Holocaust & Humanity Center for almost 11 years, Werner was the first person I met at HHC. Day one walked into the office, he was my welcoming committee, essentially. And he used to joke that that he knew that that I was going to be a star when I walked in. So he was my welcoming committee on my first day of work, and we were just the best of friends from then on out. And one of the things I always so much admired is how he told the story of meeting Trudy, it's one of my favorite love stories. And can you walk us through that meeting and and how their love blossomed, and how that brought them to America?

**Steve Coppel** 06:27

Well, they met, she nursed him back to health. Dad knew that they couldn't stay in Gleiwitz, because that was after the war that was under Russian rule. And they knew that mother was not safe with the Russian army, and the atrocities that they did. So they would tell the story about whenever there was a knock at the door, they would hide my mother in a closet and slide this big dresser in front of the door to protect my mom. They knew they couldn't stay. So my grandmother, and my mother's two brothers also survived. And they, after the war made their way to Berlin, where dad registered as a displaced person. But unless you had lived in Berlin, you couldn't stay there. Well, Dad had visited a friend in Berlin and remember the address. So he gave that address which Berlin had been mostly bombed and records destroyed. So they found a house with other displaced persons. And they put my mom and dad and her two brothers, and my grandmother in that house, and dad wanted to get married and was had trained to go to to Israel, and mom said, I'm not going, I'm done fighting. If you want to marry me, you're going to America. And so that was probably one of the first times that dad did whatever my mom wanted. And there was probably a history of that throughout. But so they came to America. And they wound up in Cincinnati, because my grandmother and my two uncles had come here first. And both my uncle's had, were skilled. And so they they had got set to Cincinnati. And so my mom, dad and my older brother, who was born in Berlin, after the war, all came to Cincinnati. And they arrived three and terminal. Yeah, through walking right through union terminal. So dad never got did not live long enough to see the museum in Union Terminal, but I know that that would have been an incredible memory for him to know that that museum is in the Union Terminal.

08:50

And he often spoke about what it was like to arrive to America. I'm wondering, how did he ever share that experience, that feeling of arriving and and what they did...I...I remember one fond memory about his first purchase and America and what that was, what do you remember about?

**Steve Coppel** 09:11

Well, he would talk about arriving in America, the Statue of Liberty, a special significance for him, because he did leave a lot of pain on the bloodsoaked earth of Europe, and came to Cincinnati, and like any of the survivors he had to figure out to get jobs, to to find a place to live, raise the family, put food on the table and and deal with the emotional trauma and push that back. So there's a story about her getting his getting his first paycheck and going to a bank, and he had no idea he's never set foot in the bank he had no and didn't speak English. And a guy comes up to him. And in German says, you, you look like you could use some help. And there's a picture in the museum of a group of soccer players, my dad, my two uncles, Al Miller, several other German Jewish guys. And this guy wound up being on one of those in that soccer picture. He was one of the guys playing soccer, so but the survivors pushed the memories behind in order to to really start their lives over. And as difficult as that was, Elie Wiesel has said that, you know, the survivors had to wonder why no one wanted to help them during the war. And after the war, no one wanted to hear their stories. So, you know, dad was like the typical survivor, he pushed it to the back and worried about today and not yesterday.

**Brad Coppel** 10:50

And part of that, as he would tell the story, my grandfather would when I was growing up, it really was the Statue of Liberty was the pivot point. So when he got there, it was the realization that he's in a new country now. It's a new future. He didn't want to focus on the past and look backwards, he realized he needed to take care of his wife, and so on and future son who came later. But that was really the transition point where he said, Okay, that Statue of Liberty, he realized he was free. He has passed, but it happened to him before. And really, it was time to get to work and establish a new life.

11:25

And I remember him saying he didn't speak any English at all. So I'm sure that transition, as you pointed out, getting a job providing for a family learning English. One of the things I remember him saying he used to go to the movies. That's how he learned English watching, I believe westerns at a movie theater. And that reminds me of really, the first thing he he bought when he was in America was a bag of oranges. And I just remember when the reason why is because he used humor a lot. And I wonder, when you think of Werner's strengths, I always think of humor, we definitely focused on some of his other strengths, highlighting him in the museum. But how did you see Werner's strengths play out in his life? And how did that inspire either of you?

**Steve Coppel** 12:17

My dad had built a business from scratch, started it in the basement of our house grew this business. And eventually it was moved to a building in Evendale and there were - building was a block long, there were several businesses in that building. And on a Rosh Hashana afternoon, he got the call from his staff that the building was on fire. So we drove over there and the building was on fire. It started in a business back behind where my dad's business was. And pretty much everything was destroyed in that entire building. And I remember standing next to dad, and and I said to her, "What do we do now?" And he looks at me and he goes, "Start all over tomorrow." And that stuck with me from that point on and helped me get through some times. So that inner strength of starting over tomorrow, inspired me and has guided me since that day.

**Brad Coppel** 13:26

And I saw a real strength in terms of a commitment to a purpose. So my grandfather was already in his 50's when I was born, he had already started speaking in the community. So I didn't know any different. When I was still young, he retired from his professional career and was able to devote himself fully into speaking and it really you could see the strength and the passion he had. And honestly, people asked me when I was a kid or when I heard him speak. When I was a little older, like what was it like growing up, and it's like, well, that was always just my grandfather. Like I didn't think of him as oh, he's a speaker. It was... that was him. It's yeah, stories would come up occasionally when we would have Friday Shabbat dinner at his house every week. But there wasn't ever a time. It wasn't like I was three or six or nine where I just sat down and heard the whole story. So the first time I really heard him speak fully was when I was in junior high. And he came to speak to my eighth grade class and other classes. And it was like, Oh, now I can see what he's been able to reflect for everyone else to it. And it was just kind of a wow moment. Like I knew the whole story from bits and pieces, or we're seeing the video but that was the first time where I'd really seen it. And you could just... anyone who interacted with him would understand the passion and the care he had of not just sharing his story, but using it to help the community and help better the future as well.

14:45

Thank you so much for sharing that. Steve, what about you? When did you realize your parents were survivors were did they sit you down and have that conversation?

**Steve Coppel** 14:55

No, there would be snippets. Dad had the tattoo of course. And, but he really, as a kid growing up, the Holocaust consisted of showing of pictures of starved of bodies in front of barbed wire, in striped uniforms, and who wanted to identify with that? So he really didn't go into specifics, there would be snippets and, and he, he interacted with a lot of other survivors and and so you'd find out stories that from from them. But for the most part, what I learned from my dad's experiences were much later in life, from interviews and from listening to some of his presentations. And an aside story - Dad spoke a number of years ago at what is now U.C. Blue Ash, and it was, he a world war two veteran and a second generation and Sarah Weiss. And at that point in my life, I'm like, "Dad, why are you bothering? No one's listening. Look what's going on in the world today." I was smart enough not to say that to my father. But it's what I thought. And I remember vividly that night, there was a question and answer period. And a lady comes to the microphone, I was standing up, I had turned to watch her speak at the microphone, and I'm holding the program. And she said Mr. Coppel, you don't know me, but you spoke in my school a number of years ago. And you so inspired me to do good that I became a nurse and I am leaving in a couple of weeks for dar for all because of you. And I looked at her and I turned around and I threw my program on the chair. And I said, Well, so much for not making a difference. So that's But dad never spoke about very rarely be snippets. If there was anything, he would talk about historical events would come up, or we were living them. They were they're now referred to as history. But dad could always put it into perspective of what to look out for. Don't fall for that. Ask this question, make sure you don't, you know, don't go blind into this thing. So his perspective of life and history was was incredible.

17:34

Yeah, and I think actually, that that's a great kind of callback to that video that we saw of him speaking so eloquently about really realizing that he is not just in Europe, but it's also here in America then. And now one of the lines that he says was respect human rights rights for everybody. And I'm just curious, how did you see that play out in his everyday especially because he was so driven by educating others?

**Steve Coppel** 18:05

He would not allow anyone in his house to to slander, or make racist comments or insulting, nasty, stereotypical comments, he wouldn't put up with it, he'd literally he'd ask you to leave. And he was. He was very, very strong in his belief, of treating people with respect, regardless of and he was adamant and, and well, he would tell the story. This is this is true. And my brother and I learned from this about someone had made a joke to him. And it was the kind of joke you really shouldn't be be telling. And dad looked at him and said, "Look, this is America - I can't tell you what to say. But I can't tell you this. Don't ever tell a joke like that around me again." And that was his way of being an upstander. That was his way of fighting it because he just he wouldn't accept it.

**Brad Coppel** 19:13

Yeah, too. Too often people are just silent when that happens, or, or laugh or play along. And, and as my dad said, it wasn't just that he wouldn't tolerate in his house, but he also wouldn't tolerate in everyday conversation. And he would say that, where I can't stop you from saying it, but he would also be like, but I'm gonna leave and he would just end the conversation and walk away. I remember him and my dad talking about where he had just done that at one point. And, and that's what I think is a really important lesson is, is are you changing the world by by correcting a friend of yours who is making a joke they shouldn't? Maybe, maybe not, but you're at least setting the tone and you're showing that it's not acceptable, and that person might think twice before doing it again, or might reconsider it or it might make someone who is listening it feel more comfortable, who wasn't able to stand up for themselves as well.

20:03

And I just think of, you know, him being so outspoken and really an advocate for for rights for everyone, as he said. And in the museum, we talk about his bravery, we strength spot him as being brave. And we think of of just him surviving right as being brave and resilient. But there's a specific part of his story that I'm hoping one of you can share. Because it's something that happened years later, someone on our staff met another survivor, who said that Werner and another man had carried him during that death march. And it was really because of that, that that man felt that he survived. And as you already mentioned, he also was one of 700, and some that escaped from that death march. And that also in itself was very brave, so I'm wondering if you could walk us through kind of that last half of his story, and how that really set I think, a tone for what we see in his story as being so courageous and brave.

**Steve Coppel** 21:09

Werner, my dad was a type of personality that he was a leader. He was one of those people that would make things happen. He didn't wait for things to happen. That story about he carried a guy. I found out about that through a meeting that was in Las Vegas, and Sarah Weiss had attended it, met the speaker, speaker said, "Where are you from?" "Cincinnati." And she came back and told me the story. So I called Dad and I said, What's the story? This is yeah, we we kind of took turns holding him up, because we knew if he fell, the Nazis with the Nazi guards would shoot him. I said "well, Dad, that would have been a good story to tell me, because I would have loved to have known that." And you had to believe that there were so many other examples. I mean, this youth group, they held each other up and, and they - the remainder who did survive, some went to Israel, some went to America, they stayed in touch. And Dad would joke about, you know, the couple of the girls still had a crush on him, and we didn't even want to go into that in front of my mother. But you know, he just - that was him. He, on a tour, somebody said to me, "What did it take to survive?" Because he said, "I knew your father." He said, "I don't think I could have done it." And I did some research. What did it take to survive? And when I what I found out was that it matched dead on with my dad, it, you took care of yourself that the Nazis didn't give you water to drink, let alone to bathe, but you had to take care of yourself. Don't give up. Dad, Dad never gave up. And that drive, that, that willing to - that is, that is, that is how you fought the Nazis. You didn't give up. You didn't let them break you. You didn't let them demoralize you. And there was a lot of luck. Because there were people who looked out for this youth group. There was... girls, ladies in the youth group who were in the women's camp and sewed some, you know, took took yarn off the sweaters when they were doing the laundry. And they knitted wool underwear and socks. So dad had, you know, they found a way to get it to the men's camp. So, but Dad never gave up. He wasn't... he took care of himself. He made sure that he wasn't going to let them win.

**Brad Coppel** 23:59

But he was also - and you touched on it - he was wired a certain way. So when he was helping carry the guy, it wasn't something where he had to think, "Oh, is this the right thing to do?" Or "How am I going to proceed?" It didn't occur to him as an alternative, as my Dad quoted him saying, he's like, well, he was falling down, and we knew if if he fell down, he would be shot. So we helped him up. But it wasn't, "Should I do this?" It was really "There, there's a fellow human near me who needs help. I'm here, I'm able to assist and I'm gonna go do it." And he really took that and extended that throughout his life.

24:30

And very selfless because, as we know, he was also starving and emaciated at the end of the war. And I mean, hence why Trudy had to nurse him back to health, right? And I'll never forget, he talked about being marched through different towns and curtains being drawn and people not wanting to see what they very much knew was happening at the time. And one of the things you would think that Werner would have been very angry, and you would think that maybe he would would have a lot of ill will towards Germany and Germans. Did he ever go back to Germany though?

**Steve Coppel** 25:15

He vowed that he would never set foot in Germany. And then he was in a business, the business he started was International Foods. And there was reason for him to, for business, to go back to Germany, he was not at all comfortable about it. And at one, he I think he went a second time with my brother, and sister-in-law, my brother actually was working in the company. So they went together, and I know that he had a hard time. As he said, before the war, he never met a German that wasn't a proud Nazi. And after the war, he never met any German that admitted to even being a Nazi. So here, he knew he was amongst people that had tried to kill him that these were people who had been Nazis, his contemporaries and older, he was not comfortable at all, he was invited back to his hometown. Many years later, they, the town's people, the government was trying to reach out to the survivors and and try to make amends. And surprisingly, did dad did attend. He went back to Moers. He took my mom. And...

**Brad Coppel** 26:36

And this had been about 50 years since he moved to America, right? This was well late in his life

**Steve Coppel** 26:43

Well late and he said, you know, he baited the taxi driver... says, "Why whatever happened to that synagogue that was over there?" You know, that kind of stuff. I think he was glad he went. But he was never comfortable being in Germany, he would have been content... I did offer to him, that if he wanted to go back to Auschwitz for some sort of closure, I would go with him. And he said, Look, he said he was in Buna Monowitz, which was the slave labor camp, which had been bombed by the Allies in late 1944. And completely destroyed. He said for me to go back to Birkenau or Auschwitz one he said, "I wasn't there. I was in Buna Monowitz, and it's destroyed." He said, "There's no reason for me to go back." And I was very happy to not do that with him. But I would have, had he wanted, but he did go back. He was never comfortable.

**Brad Coppel** 27:39

He didn't, to kind of your lead to the question. He wasn't angry or bitter or mad still, but he didn't forget either. And he didn't let it go. And, and he definitely allowed that to, like he was saying, he's like, "I have no interest in going," and then very late in life, said "Okay, I'm willing to go back to Germany." But there were a lot of other things where he said, "Hey, I know their history. I know what it is. They can do something else." He, he never bought a German car and and never would have bought a German car his entire life because he said, "Well, the companies that are there now, the people running it probably were too young to do it, but the people that hired them were the ones who looked the other way, or funded things and did that as well."

28:21

What about your grandmother? What was that trip? Like for her? What I know - she didn't speak about her experiences. On the flip side Werner was very outspoken about it. What about her? And what was that trip like for her?

**Steve Coppel** 28:36

Well, Mom came from an area, which was called upper Salacia, which was what Hitler uses as an excuse to go into Poland, and had been German. And then once the World War II was over, that became under Polish rule. So Mom had no desire ever to go back there. I mean, she she she knew what the communism was. She knew what Russian life was. She knew what Poland had done to the Jews. So she had no desire whatsoever to go back. She was I don't know that she was necessarily uncomfortable being in Germany because that was totally foreign to her. This the people who had done but she didn't, you know, she was in a whole nother part. There was a story which happened here in Cincinnati, where my Mom was, Mom and Dad were at a party, and my Mom was sitting on the couch and there's a woman next to her and her husband, on the other side of my Mom, Dad is off working the room, as those of us who know him would know he would do, and the woman leans across my mother to her husband and points at my Dad says, "I, I know him. I've seen him. I just don't remember where." And the husband said, "Well, you probably saw that Jewish center or Bilker's, which was a grocery store at that time. She said, "No. I know I've seen him. I just don't remember where." And my mom recognizing an accent said, "Did you happen to come through this particular displaced persons camp or building?" And she goes, "That's where I saw him. He's the first person I saw in freedom, he helped me off the truck." The, from this building, the Jewish Brigade of the British army, which were Jewish men from then Palestine, who fought in the British army, they would change uniforms at night and put on a Russian uniform, they drove trucks with a Russian insignia, and they drove into Poland to smuggle out under communist rule, the Jews who had gone back, and they literally put them in the bottom of the truck and covered them up with hay or whatever in order to smuggle them out. And they would come to this building at night. And my Dad would be one of the ones helping the people off the truck. And this lady in Cincinnati, Ohio said, "That's the first face I saw on freedom, he helped me off the truck."

31:14

I've never heard that story that's absolutely amazing, but not at all surprising, just knowing his personality and how he didn't know a stranger. And would help anyone. So that, thank you for sharing that. That's incredible. One thing that you spoke of the first time you really heard him when he came in, spoke at your school other than little isolated things here. And there. There was a very real reason why he started sharing his story. At first he really didn't talk about his experiences. But something changed. And I'm wondering if you would share that story. What was it that made him start sharing a story to the point where we highlight him in our museum is the first Holocaust survivor in Cincinnati to start sharing his experiences, which then only opened it up for other people to feel safe and comfortable to also share their experiences.

**Steve Coppel** 32:14

There was a opinion piece in The Cincinnati Enquirer in the 1970s by a gentleman who said, "What is the stuff about the 6 million? And the Diary of Anne Frank is a fake." Well, this wasn't just an individual. He was actually the head of the German-American Citizens League here in Cincinnati, and my father read that. And he was furious, not only because of the comment, but there was no response. The Jewish community, no one responded. The press who covered the war, no one responded, the soldiers who fought, no one responded. And my dad realized that if he didn't speak up, he would be a bystander. And he couldn't do that. He had to, he had to stand up, he had to be an upstander. And he was good friends, or very friendly with some rabbis and professors and people who were starting to think about something with the Holocaust and teaching it. And they worked with dad on presentations and how to go about it. Dad was committed to not talking about the atrocities he saw. And the pain he felt. He talked about harm, and, and prejudice and hate and how you have to fight it. And so he but from that article in the Enquirer that motivated him to, to do it. And when he saw the faces of the students that he was talking to, he realized that he had to keep doing this.

**Brad Coppel** 34:11

And the 1970s were a very different time than they are today. So people didn't have the ability to do their own research, easily go on the internet, go on their phone to look up and try to refute this. This was at a time where survivors weren't really talking much about this to their families and their friends, let alone going out in the public. There was no Holocaust education in schools at that time. So, so Werner realized, if he didn't speak up, there literally might be no one else to refute this. And that's really kind of when he talked about standing up to hate and prejudice. He viewed it as that he cannot let that comment go unchecked and realized, not just was it write a letter to the editor of the Enquirer to just say, "Hey, here's what actually happened." But he needed to make a larger concerted effort to help change the world and make sure that the atrocity -They weren't forgotten.

**Steve Coppel** 35:02

There was one other part to that which progressed through the years. Dad would be so angry when he would see references and comparisons to the Holocaust. And that was done even within the Jewish community. Where, oh they, "you know, it's just like the Holocaust." Dad's like, "No, there is nothing like the Holocaust, you cannot compare anything to that." And so he would he, he fought that as well, he would not stand by. And I have come across some letters to the editor that he he is he had written through the years, where he was fighting those kinds of comments as well.

35:50

Um, one thing that was really interesting, so the clip that we watched of Werner at the beginning, was from his USC, Shoah Foundation testimony, and something he also spent a few minutes discussing was your bar mitzvah. And he was so moved and struck by you, dedicating your bar mitzvah in memory of his brother. And I'm just wondering, can you share what that meant to you at the time as a young boy, but then also, what did? How did your grandfather respond? Do you remember I know that was a little bit of time ago, but but that was such a special moment for him. That that he shared about it, right. And he was very moved by that. Yeah,

**Brad Coppel** 36:36

So, so the bar mitzvah, obviously, is the coming of age for a Jewish male or bat mitzvah for female, where you are recognized as an adult in the community, and it's at age 13 years of age. And my grandfather had one, but his younger brother was murdered in the Holocaust, before he reached that age and never got to have it. So as we were, as we were talking and planning it, we had said that, I was talking with my parents on it and had said that I wanted to dedicate it to Gunther my, my grandfather's younger brother, who, who obviously didn't make it through and wanted to do that. And I knew it would be meaningful. My Dad's middle name is actually Gunther in honor of his uncle. And this, to me was a great tribute to be able to show and say, Hey, though, our family members are gone, they're not forgotten. And, and my grandfather was a very proud man, very emotional, sometimes, but sometimes very stoic. And you can see the emotion in his eyes when we told him, Hey, this is what we're doing. And I mentioned that as part of my speech, my sermon as part of the bar mitzvah saying, oh, and it's dedicated to him. And it was really a touching moment. And you could just visually see how much it meant to him on his face.

**Steve Coppel** 37:50

And interesting aside, and I'm going to get it right this time. Brad is born on January 27, the liberation of Auschwitz. So, Dad was already gone. But his youngest grandson, was born on the day of the liberation of Auschwitz.

38:12

Wow. It's so interesting, also, because Werner was just so as you said, proud and resilient. And I always think of when he would talk about coming through Union Terminal, with a wife, a suitcase and a baby. And that started the next chapter of his life. And just for those who maybe don't know his story, as well, he was the sole survivor of his family. So he lost his parents and his brother. And I'm just wondering, how, how important was family to him? And how important was Judaism also to the way you were raised? The things that that you learned through Werner and Trudy, what was family life like?

**Steve Coppel** 39:02

Family was was everything I mean, we... Shabbat dinner every Friday, carried that on even after my mom passed away. But meals together

**Brad Coppel** 39:12

But the Shabbat dinner, why it was important wasn't the religious aspect. It was the family gathering and eating together and sharing that family experience.

39:22

And as an aside, I knew not to call your father on Fridays because he was making challah. He did not want to be bothered during his holiday. I remember.

**Steve Coppel** 39:33

As a young teenager, we were driving home from synagogue one day. And I said to Dad, how can you believe in God after what you went through? I mean, we just had just left shul. I said, "How can you believe in God?" And Dad's response was, "I believe in the traditions of Judaism. him. God, not so much and totally understandable. But he had a strong belief in the Jewish people in the rituals of Judaism, the practices of Judaism. And I think that that helped sustain him through through the tough years. I they they, if it was Passover, if it was, you know, the Jewish holidays, even in the camp, they found a way to, to celebrate that holiday. Yes.

**Brad Coppel** 40:35

So so for him, it was clearly family first. And then, as my dad said, the religious aspect of it wasn't the important part to him. But being a Jew was him it was intrinsically a part of his identity. It was who he is. He instilled that in his kids, which has been instilled in his grandkids and is now being instilled in the fourth generation, his great grandkids it it is, that is part of who you are. So he wouldn't say he was a Jewish American because are born a Jewish German, because that saying the Jew was modifying who he is. He said, "No, I'm an American Jew." So the American was modifying who he is, the Jew was who he is. And that was an important part of his identity. So it was the traditions it was the culture, it was the food, it was especially the food. But the family came first, the Jewish identity second, God religion was much lower on the list.

41:32

And one thing you have a very special family heirloom that is very much connected to Jewish ritual and also as a holocaust connection. Can you share a little bit about that Talas, dad

**Steve Coppel** 41:45

had a tallis that he used for all the high holidays and somewhere along the way, he told the story that that tallis, along with all of the religious objects of a synagogue in Berlin, were buried in a grave in the cemetery to hide them from the Nazis. And Dad told the story about I surmise from someone in the camp, who said to him, "Werner, if you get out and I don't, we buried this, all these religious objects in this particular cemetery plot this number." He said, "When this is all over, dig the stuff up, bring it back to life." And dad went with a couple of guys after the war to that cemetery, and they dug up off the all the religious objects and the only thing they each decided to keep one thing and Dad kept a tallis. And so he used that tallis, all of the years and I as he got up in life, later in life, I said, "Dad, you know, when the time comes that you are not around, I said, I'm not going to fight with my brother. He can have anything he wants. You know what, it's fine. I said, the only thing I really want from you is this tallis." And about a year before he died, he gave me the tallis and I said, "Dad, what what are you why are you giving this to me now for?" He said, "I'm done with it. It's your turn." And so, Dad passed away in February of 2016. In September of 2016, at our first Rosh Hashana Eve service, I brought that tallis with me and Brad is sitting next to me and my wife, Ruth is on the other side of Brad. And I took that tallis out of the bag, and I was just holding it and holding it. And Brad said, "Dad, you going to put it on?" And I said, "Yeah, I just don't know when." And it took me quite a while before I could put that tallis on because of the history of that tallis. Mom and Dad had done one of the Torah scrolls from Czechoslovakia and donated it, permanent loan to Temple Sholom here in Cincinnati. And Dad was insistent that that Torah not be used. Now, the question is, was it you know, sanctioned as being legitimate and or had it had been ruined? Dad didn't care about that. The contrast of him not wanting to use that Torah was surprising. The temple would take it out on Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur day. And just a couple years ago, in a conversation with the rabbi, Dad had already passed away. She was saying about wanting to use the Torah. And I said, "Let me talk to my brother, I think I know how I feel about it. But let me confirm with my brother." And I talked to my brother, and he was of the same belief that I am or I was, which was the philosophy that Dad had - bring it back to life. And so we told the rabbi feel free, use it anytime you want, bring that Torah back to life, don't let it sit in the case. So those those two objects mean so much to me.

**Brad Coppel** 45:34

And doing a little bit of a call back one of the few times the Torah was used, we did actually bring it and use that for my Bar Mitzvah as well. So when I read my Torah portion, around age 13, of age, it was from the Torah that had survived the Holocaust, and that my grandparents had brought to America, and so helped instill some life into that as well.

**Trinity Johnson** 45:55

Oh, my goodness

**Steve Coppel** 45:56

And that Torah, actually, last April, there was a religious gathering of Torah scrolls from around this tri-state area up and it was up in Cleveland, and Temple Sholom allowed me the honor of taking that Torah up to Cleveland for that service, along with a few of their congregants and I drove it up. I carried it that day, and then brought it back. And that was one of those life's event that you just, you can't even put into words, that was such a meaningful thing to carry that Torah and know that it was still here today.

46:40

So beautiful, bringing that back to life. And also the door that that opens to talk about the history and just how significant that Torah is, and how significant it is to still be able to practice Judaism, right. And that Judaism is still here, we have survived. One of the things, Steve, you're on our speaker's bureau, you're a volunteer docent, you're also on our board of trustees. And I'm so you interact with this history constantly, even in your personal time, too, as well, what fuels you?

**Steve Coppel** 47:17

The look in the eyes of the children that I get to speak to, because they're, they're almost like a sponge. They listen, they grasp what I'm saying. Adults, so so often have preconceived experiences and notions. And sometimes I think I get through to them, sometimes I don't, but the children, the students that I speak to, I really am driven because I want them to open their eyes, I want them to realize that standing by and doing nothing is not acceptable. The character strengths that we have in the museum, they're here to make a difference in this world, and my ability to speak to them that privilege of being able to speak to them, I want that to be the start of them trying to make a difference in this world.

48:22

And I, I would wager that you speak to almost as many students as your father used to, which is just amazing. And we're so appreciative of you continuing to share this history and with whoever I because I know you'll speak to one person, you'll speak to 400 people. So thank you for that. And Brad, recently, as of 2022, we were both part of a trip called honeymoon Israel and we went to Israel. And so that's a segue from Steve and the work he does and sharing his story. You had a very moving moment on that trip when we were all on our way to yod mission. And you took the microphone on the bus and shared Werner's story, I believe, for the first time - you sharing it. Can you talk to us about that experience? And how did that feel? What did that mean for you to be sharing that in Israel on your way to Yad Vashem?

**Brad Coppel** 49:18

Yes, so it was extremely meaningful. So I know you know this for, for those listening. The people in attendance were couples in their 20s or 30s. All of them had at least one Jewish partner, but the spouse or partner for other weren't necessarily both Jewish. So we were going to advise them and they asked if anyone had any personal connections to the Holocaust, Yad Vashem is the Holocaust Museum in in Israel, and it's wonderfully done if if anyone ever has the chance to go to highly recommend it, but it gave me a chance to speak to it. And in the tradition of my grandfather and my father, I probably was a little long-winded and luckily it was a short bus ride. So I let everyone else talk first. But being able to just kind of speak and tell my story, for those people who did not come from a family that had survivors or did not know anyone who was directly impacted by the Holocaust, that allowed me to kind of share my family's history and my grandparents story, and show how personal it was for me. So I became very close with those on the trip. And so my friends who heard the story, even if they had no connection before, that was able to give them a connection. And that's why I think it's so important what my grandfather did, and speaking to the schools. And what my dad does now is, it's not just reading a history book or seeing an exhibit in a museum. It's personal, it's meaningful, you realize, oh, this has helped shaped members of our community as well.

50:49

Yes. And it was a very moving moment as someone who saw your grandfather speak and how he spoke of his story, seeing Steve, how he speaks and shares the story and then to see you it's just this really incredible moment just to see how that history is continuing to live on. And you already mentioned a fourth generation Coppel so your son, Xander. How old is he now?

**Brad Coppel** 51:15

He is almost six months, almost six months.

51:17

So a little early, but I'm curious what, how you hope to share this family history in this family story. With him being it seems like it has been a very big part of your life and the way you were raised and even your outlook on the world today.

**Brad Coppel** 51:36

It has and similar to what was instilled in me is I want him and my wife and I have talked about it. And she is fully supportive of it. She is not Jewish. She was raised Catholic. And but when we talked when we were first dating and talked about, hey, we have some seriousness here and we might have kids - do you wanna have kids? One day? We both said yes. And we said, "Okay, well, would we raise them Catholic? Would we raise them Jewish? How we handle it?" And I told her I was like, "Being being Jewish and being a Jew is such an important part of who I am and who my identity is. And a lot of it harkens back to the experiences of my grandfather and going through the Holocaust, surviving persevering, telling his story, and sharing that it was very important for me. Even though I don't attend temple regularly, I am still a very proud Jew, I still practice a lot of the traditions, I still love the Jewish culture, and the food, and the movies and the humor and everything else. And to me, that is an important part of who I am." And so my wife and I have talked and we agreed and and that's going to be an important part of who Xander is, as well. So he is going to know he is a Jew, he is going to be proud of it. He is going to be proud of his mother's history and culture and traditions as well. But he is Jewish, he is going to be carrying on the tradition from me from my dad, Steve from my grandfather, Werner. And understanding who that is. And not just from a religious Judaism person perspective, but also who you are as a person and how what you do and your actions and your influence, shape the community influence others being an upstander. And I love the upstander versus bystander mentality. But as I was reflecting on this, in our conversation, it occurred to me that it's not only in the moment to be an upstander why my grandfather is remembered so fondly by all of us and the people we interact with, who saw me and say, "Oh, were, are you related to Werner Coppel?" and then they tell stories of him. It wasn't just that he went through the Holocaust. It wasn't just that he survived it. But he used it as a lesson to help influence others. So people will go through trauma and people will be affected. And yes, please be an upstander if you can, in the moment to stop it and curtail it and make it not happen or make it less impactful. But even after the fact, like use that as a lesson, use that as something that you can take and say. "Okay, 10% of life is what happened to me, but the 90% is how you react afterwards." And where I think my grandfather's story is so important, is looking at what happened to him. And not just surviving and persevering, but saying, "I am going to take this and I'm going to do whatever I can in my power to talk to America's youth - so that I can influence one person to be a nurse or another person to be an upstander and try to prevent anything like that from happening again."

**Steve Coppel** 54:28

I also have the privilege of working with right now, my two grandchildren, Amy's two, because as Brad is doing with Xander, Amy and I and Ruth are doing with them and you know so now as a grandparent, I'm continuing to do that which we have done. So it creates quite a moment to to, to move these two grandchildren as well.

55:03

And I will say he Werner would be so very proud of, of continuing to carry that torch right of raising awareness, teaching the next generation to remember not forget, but then also be an upstander. Because that really was every day that was the walk in the talk that that he did. And so really my last it's not a question, it's more of a statement. So if you could fill in the blank for me, both of you, when people hear my family story, I want them to remember.

**Werner Coppel** 55:39

Do you want to go first?

**Brad Coppel** 55:43

I want them to remember, they have a choice. So whether it's a choice in the moment, or it's after the fact, but but even if you're a victim, you don't have to be victimized, you can stand up, even if you're observing, you can be an upstander you don't have to be a bystander. And so, so hearing the story, hopefully people can see, I can make a difference. And I can have a lasting impact as well.

**Trinity Johnson** 56:09

Thank you.

**Steve Coppel** 56:11

I probably would go back to a musical slash play for many, many years ago, Man of La Mancha. And in the song, be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause. And so I want people to do the right thing to stand up to, no matter what the odds, be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

56:44

Well, Brad, Steve, thank you both so much for being with me today and speaking about Werner and his legacy. And thank you both for what you both do, and keeping that history alive and inspiring the rest of us to be upstanders. Thank you.

**Steve Coppel** 56:58

Thank you.

**Jackie Congedo** 56:59

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