**Hear My Story- Rob Herman 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 40018, my sister was 40017.

**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.

**Jackie Congedo** 01:01

I'm Jackie Congedo, and in this episode, we hear from Rob Herman, the son of two Holocaust survivors. His parents, Ed and Halina were both deeply impacted as Jewish children in Poland during the Holocaust. Ed was smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto by his mother and ended up living on the streets before being taken in by an orphanage. Halina was hidden in a Catholic family for years without even knowing her true identity as a Jew. Despite steep odds and the loss of family members, Ed and Halina survived the war, got married and raised their children, and now their son, Rob is picking up the mantle of carrying on his family's legacy, and sat down with us to tell their story.

**Trinity Johnson** 01:40

Rob, thank you so much for being here with me today to talk about your family's incredible story. Welcome.

**Rob Herman** 01:47

Thank you very much, Trinity. It's a pleasure to be here with you, glad to be a part of it,

**Trinity Johnson** 01:51

and we've known each other for many years, and I've learned really your family's story through you. So I'm really excited to talk about your family more and hear how they're doing today. After the many years, I feel like I know them, even though I've never met them.

**Rob Herman** 02:07

Absolutely, well, it's been a pleasure getting to know you over the years, and I think I have a responsibility now, as my parents get older, to continue on their story, the legacy of our family, given the historical context with surviving the Holocaust.

**Trinity Johnson** 02:23

The story of your parents survival during the war is miraculous, and actually, your father, Ed described his own story as this, "My personal journey is a narrative of strong faith, growing up in a hurry, resilience and strength in the face of adversity, a story of close escapes against all odds and miraculous survival." So that really is his summary of his story. So what have you learned from his story? Can you kind of summarize his experiences for us?

**Rob Herman** 02:53

Absolutely, and as I tell my kids, I have three boys, and tell them, imagine being eight or nine years old and dealing with not only extreme antisemitism, but the beginning of the war, which saw his father leave to fight with the partisans and eventually be taken as a prisoner and sent to Siberia, but also being separated from his mother and his sister. Imagine at the age of eight or nine being on your own. So my father's story truly is one of resilience, and my father, even to this day, who's in his early 90s, now, has an optimism and a resilience. That's an example to me, to my sister, to my kids, and his story was one early on in the war he was in the Warsaw Ghetto with his grandfather, who he was very, very close to - his mother's father. And my dad talks about hunger and being cold and the experiences of the Warsaw Ghetto, which many people have talked about, but to this day, my dad hates being cold because he remembers what it was like to be hungry and freezing during the years in the Warsaw Ghetto, his mother was able to occasionally smuggle food to him, but after a period of time in the Warsaw Ghetto, his Mother was able to smuggle him out of the ghetto. He was able to cross over into Hungary. Ultimately, the person that his mother had paid to smuggle him into Hungary and to take care of him once he got there, almost immediately abandon him. So again, going full circle back to what I said about the lessons we teach our kids, myself and my wife, Valerie, is imagine being younger than these my kids are now being on your own, not speaking the language and really finding your own way, being homeless and trying to figure out a path forward, not knowing if your family was alive, it's almost overwhelming. So when you ask about resilience and the optimism my dad has to this day, it's somewhat remarkable. And he's really imparted that lesson on me and now on this next generation my children.

**Trinity Johnson** 05:17

Oh, that's incredible. And you mentioned your grandmother somehow smuggling him out of the ghetto in 1942 just shy of when the Warsaw Ghetto is liquidated. Well, liquidation process begins. What can you tell us that you know about how she was able to do that? That's so incredibly brave and such an act of love,

**Rob Herman** 05:39

it is. And my dad always talks about this idea of the story of Moses and his mother putting him into the Nile, not knowing if she would see him again, but to protect his survival. And my dad talks about it, he gets very emotional about it, thinking about how incredibly hard it is to arrange for this, not knowing if you'd ever see your son again, but knowing it was so necessary for his survival. And my grandmother, it's hard to explain my grandmother and her strength, which she imparted upon my dad. And again, I think that I use it as an example, in terms of being an upstander, in terms of how you live your life, but she had, she was very smart, and she had the right connections and the ability to arrange for this. She not only saved my dad's life, but many other people's lives along the way. She was a true hero, my grandmother also, if you see pictures of her, she was an incredibly beautiful woman and smart. She was the entire package, and I think she was able, with her charisma, to use a lot of that to make sure that my dad survived and other people survived. She was so close to her father, and she really wanted him to leave the ghetto, but at that point, he was older and just wasn't workable. So unfortunately, he perished in the ghetto. But my grandmother, in many ways that I'll never know, was able to arrange for a lot of people's survival. In this particular case, was smuggling my father out of the ghetto and ultimately crossing the border into Slovakia and then to Hungary. She was able to pay somebody a guide. Unfortunately, that person promptly left my dad, as I mentioned, but my dad survived, so it worked.

**Trinity Johnson** 07:39

I have two questions, of course, many more, but two specifically from that one, how was your mother not also forced into the ghetto with your your father and your grandfather?

**Rob Herman** 07:51

So my mother's story is, is a little bit different. My mother,

**Trinity Johnson** 07:55

Oh, I'm so sorry. Your your father's mother, oh, how was she not in the ghetto.

**Rob Herman** 08:00

Yeah, she was on Christian papers with my dad's sister. They were a little bit more fair skinned, and could pass as Christians. My dad, not so much. He's a little darker skinned. He mentions in, I think, in his book, and separately, that he tried to dye his hair blonde to look more fair, but he said it only pointed out more so that he was darker skinned, and it just didn't fit. So he looked Jewish. So they separated. So she was living during a large part of the war under Christian papers with with my dad's sister, my aunt. So it it worked for her, and she was also able to be helpful to other people and help them survive, but she lived as a Christian during the war for the most part.

**Trinity Johnson** 08:50

Wow. And you said that your grandfather was in the military. What do you know of his story?

**Rob Herman** 08:56

Yes, so my grandfather early on in the war, my father was also very close to his father, my grandfather. And early in the war, my grandfather decided to fight with the partisans and fight against the oppression that was already starting to happen in Poland. Unfortunately, very early in the war, he was captured by the Russians. When he crossed over the border, he was taken to Siberia. I think he suffered significantly, but he was able to join Anders' army, and actually went to the Middle East during the war with a British army led by General Anders. And so he ended up, my grandfather, and the rest of the family didn't know if he was alive during the war. After the war, he ended up in Israel, and the family was eventually reunited. It was a complicated story, because he didn't know they were alive, and he ultimately remarried and had a son, my uncle, but he after he found out my father and his mother, my grandfather's wife, my dad's mother and my aunt, my dad's sister, were alive. They were reunited in Israel and lived in Israel, but he went from Siberia to the Middle East, stayed in Israel after the war and eventually reunited with his family. It's a pretty incredible story.

**Trinity Johnson** 10:26

Incredible. And then, when did they? They went to Canada, correct, from from Israel.

**Rob Herman** 10:32

That's exactly right. So my grandfather and my grandmother and my aunt all went to Montreal. My dad stayed for a time, was in the Israeli army, and eventually went to Montreal and joined them in the early 50s.

**Trinity Johnson** 10:52

Do you know why they chose Canada?

**Rob Herman** 10:54

I think at that point, everybody was looking for a fresh start in Israel. I think my grandfather wanted to come to North America. I think there were multiple options on the table, and saw Canada and Montreal as a way to really start fresh and build a new life. He had spent some time in Israel, but decided he wanted to be in North America, and I think the rest of the family was supportive of that, and eventually my father found his way there too.

**Trinity Johnson** 11:24

Amazing and to go backwards, what was their pre war life like?

**Rob Herman** 11:31

Yeah, it's really interesting, and this is speaks to the change that the war brought my father. My grandfather was a successful businessman. He had grown up Orthodox, but decided he didn't want to be part of Orthodox Judaism. It was still involved in the Jewish community, but became a businessman. I think his his father, my great grandfather, saw him as a future Rabbi that wasn't for him. Had a great head for business, and he became a successful businessman in a town called Katowice, and they lived a very good life. They had a driver, they had a nice place to live. So the war really upended that, where I think my father in his early years had grown up feeling very comfortable and confident about life, and that changed pretty quickly. That being said, even when he was a kid, he does remember disparate incidents of antisemitism. So things were certainly not perfect in Poland, but the Jewish community was pretty self contained, and I think he felt very comfortable in his life, and the war, of course, upended that.

**Trinity Johnson** 12:41

Did he ever share any experiences with direct antisemitism and how he persevered through that?

**Rob Herman** 12:48

I think more of that came when the war really started. But he talked about, you know, being called some pretty ugly things, or kids throwing rocks at him and those kinds of things. So I think it gave him a sense of what discrimination, antisemitism, was like. I don't think he experienced it pre-war on a daily basis, but that flipped very quickly to one of survival, where he realized, if you know, he was seen as Jewish once the war started, and certainly after the war started, if anybody was to see he was circumcised, it would be the difference between life and death. So that those early pieces of antisemitism were in his thought process, but it really became one of survival once the war started.

**Trinity Johnson** 13:36

Yeah, and you touched on this a little bit when he was smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto and makes it to Budapest, and then he's just abandoned in this coffee shop. And this is a really pivotal moment in his story, right? He doesn't know the language, and he's left alone and he's scared. What happens? How does he continue on from that?

**Rob Herman** 14:00

I think for my dad, it's a single biggest moment of his life. It's so pivotal. It's so emotional. Even now, my dad is 92 years old, and if you asked him what the most significant moment of his life was in terms of emotion and and just not knowing where his life was headed that would be it. What happened was he was abandoned. His crowded Cafe didn't speak the language, but there were enough people there that saw and my dad was crying softly in a corner. I mean, but imagine, you know, at his age what what he was dealing with. He was able to hold it together. Somebody took him to a woman's house for a meal, and that, even though it was far from being a perfect situation, this woman, Mrs. Schweitzer, in in Hungary, gave him a meal and told him he could come back again for meals. That being said, my father was homeless at that point. He slept in churches, he slept on streets. He dealt with bedbugs, you know, wherever he was, and lice and everything else. So it was far from perfect, but he was able to use that kindness of somebody being an upstander and bring him in for an occasional meal. And eventually, this woman was able to form an orphanage under the guise of being a Christian charity, Catholic charity, and a lot of kids that had no parents around them were able to stay in this orphanage for a period of time, and it really gave them an opportunity to have a life and not just live on the street, but that's where my father was able to find a path forward. And you know, it's some of these stories are heartbreaking, little stories that will come out for my dad over time. For example, he shared a bed with another boy who had seen both of his parents murdered, and the kid would wet the bed every night my dad had to deal with he said he would wake up soaking wet. And you feel for this kid. You think about that kid who lost his parents, who was scared and had really nothing in this world, and again, this orphanage, while being far from a perfect life situation for my dad, it at least gave him a chance, and that's that's really what he was able to move forward from.

**Trinity Johnson** 16:25

And I understand that a couple people who helped at that orphanage and organized it and cared for a lot of the refugee children were recognized as Righteous Among the Nations.

**Rob Herman** 16:36

Yes, exactly right. As a matter of fact, my father in the early 1970s went back to Israel and was able to see Mrs. Schweitzer. She was named, to your point, not only her, but she was named among the righteous. And again, think about the incredible difference she made in these kids' lives, giving them a chance for survival.

**Trinity Johnson** 16:59

Were you ever able to meet any of his rescuers, or

**Rob Herman** 17:03

I wasn't, unfortunately, because they were older, and they passed away before I really had a chance and grew up and was able to get to Israel. But we, when I took my family to Israel, and I had been there before and done the same thing, we noted them at Yad Vashem and really thought a lot about them, and I had a long conversation with my parents about those people that made a difference in their lives. I wish I would have had a chance to meet them and thank them because I exist. And as I tell my kids, they exist because of people like her.

**Trinity Johnson** 17:38

That's amazing. So when you were at Yad Vashem, and you were looking up their names. What? What was that moment like for you to also share that with your family? You know, see this name, know, that legacy? What was that feeling like?

**Rob Herman** 17:53

It's incredible. And I think I felt that even more on a trip we took to Poland recently. But I think in Israel, you think about the creation of the State of Israel and the reasons behind it, and for me, it was just this foundational experience of understanding my legacy. Now keep in mind that growing up, we really didn't talk a lot about this, I had this broad understanding of being the child of Holocaust survivors. It really wasn't until I was an adult, even late into my 20s, that I understood the gravity of that and so and it's an ongoing experience of understanding what my legacy means. You know, I think about that a lot, and I discover new things about my parents legacy, even now, but it was a foundational moment for me to understand where I came from and again I grew up today is different than it was even 30 years ago, understanding that diversity and differences are not something to be embarrassed by. You know, my parents both had accents, and I didn't, you know, I was the first person in my family born the United States, and I almost hid that fact, in part, because I didn't understand what the Holocaust was all about. I knew it from a textbook. I knew it from a broad understanding, but it wasn't something we talked a lot about, and it certainly wasn't something my grandparents really talked about. So for me, that moment that you're asking about was foundational to understand where I came from. And again, as the cliche goes, you really can't understand what you're about or where you're going until you understand where you came from.

**Trinity Johnson** 19:36

So beautiful and what a powerful moment. I didn't know how powerful that moment was in your life and just in the time I have known you and how dedicated you are to this education and raising awareness about hatred and antisemitism and the Holocaust, that's really powerful to hear. Thank you, such a driving force. It makes a lot more sense after working with you for so long, but thank you so much for for sharing that. I want to switch gears to your mother's story, because it's incredible that your father and his parents survived. And similarly to Halina, your mother's story, can you also share her story briefly, like you did for your father, and then we'll bring it all together. I have couple questions as well, so tell tell us about helena's experiences.

**Rob Herman** 20:28

Yeah, absolutely. So my mother is an incredibly bright and caring person, and I think her early years, understanding where she came from, helps me to understand why she's so brave and what an upstander she really is. My mother was born just as the war was breaking out, and her father was a physician in those days. As somebody Jewish, he could not study to become a doctor in Poland, so he went to the Sorbonne in France, and by all accounts, an incredibly bright guy, became a physician. Came back. My mother was born in Warsaw, but they moved to a smaller town, Starowice. And my grandfather had a small medical practice, and they lived above the medical practice. But she was born in the early parts of the war, so what a precarious time. She came from a big family. Her mother had several siblings and both sets of families, her mother's family and her father's family was a big, welcoming family, very close, but unfortunately, early in the war, my grandfather was taken away and her mother, my grandmother had told my mother that the last conversation they had was she said to him, Will I ever see you again? And he said, don't worry. Unfortunately, she never did see him again, but he was in a labor camp not far from where they lived. He was a physician there at the labor camp, and my grandmother realized, from my mother, she was only two at that point, that in order to save her, she needed to send her somewhere into the countryside and hide her so she went to a very Small town called Chernihiv, and she lived as a young Christian with this family that my grandma was paying again. My grandfather, at this point, was already sent away to a labor camp. My grandmother worked as a domestic worker under Christian papers. She would go see my mother whenever she could, but was paying to basically keep her my mother was raised as Catholic, and didn't find out she was Jewish until well after the war was over, because my grandmother wanted to protect her and my grandmother at the end of the war, when she took my mother back, they didn't really know for sure what had happened to my grandfather, interestingly enough, and this is unbelievable, but we only found out in the last decade firsthand what we think happened to my grandfather. My grandmother knew my grandfather was gone, but my mother held out hopes that she would magically see him on the street, or there would be some kind of reuniting, that he was actually alive. Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be. But my mother, post war, continued to assume she was Catholic and she participated in mass, and even now, feels a connection because of this childhood memories to the church, but in as my mother says, you know, at some point, my grandmother said, we're not going to stay in Poland anymore.

**Rob Herman** 24:03

They decided to go to France, and at that point, she told my mother, my mother, at that point, was eight or nine, "You're actually Jewish." And my my mother said, "That can't be. How could I be Jewish?" And so it took some time to adapt to this reality of being Jewish and the weight of her history. That's a bit of my my mom's story. My mom and dad went back to Poland in 2012 for the first time, as you know, Trinity, for the first time since the basically, the war had ended and my mother had left Poland. And there's a scene in this documentary, because they had a film crew following them. There's a scene where my mother goes back to that place that her place at her first house where she was living for the first couple years of her life. And I think for my mother, because she'd never really been back there, she never had that direct tie to her father. There's a scene in the documentary where she's touching the door and realizing that she actually comes from someplace.

**Rob Herman** 25:10

What's incredible about that scene is that she knocked on the door, and again, this is 2012, so 65 years later, after she had left and she knocked on the door, a woman answered very skeptically. Keep in mind, there's a film crew around around them, so of course, the one's going to be skeptical. And my mother explains in Polish why she's there, connecting back with this, this place where she had lived, and the woman who was in her late 80s said, "I remember you," which is an unbelievable thing. And it turns out she was the daughter of the woman who had lived there and been the manager of this building, and was still there. They went upstairs, had a cup of tea, and she pulled out of a safe the log that had existed for 80 years and showed my mother the signatures of when her parents had moved in. So for my mom, you asked, what my mom's history that was an important moment for her to feel that authenticity of where she came from, an incredibly important and a very emotional moment for our entire family, because my mom lost everybody except for her mother during the war, that big family, all those aunts and uncles and cousins all gone, and my mother had a very small family. It was really just her mother and later her stepfather, and that was it. So there was a sadness pervasive in that upbringing as a result, and for my mom, that moment in Poland was significant.

**Trinity Johnson** 26:46

Wow, that sounds so incredibly powerful and and I hope for the viewers who are watching this interview, they can find that episode. I believe it was Frontline

**Rob Herman** 26:59

exactly right,

**Trinity Johnson** 27:00

hopefully, and I definitely have a question more about that in a moment, but hopefully they can find that episode, because yes, it sounds very powerful, and I can't imagine what that would be like going back 60 some years later, and I know your father also accompanied her on that trip, but we will get to that. So how were was your mother reunited with her mother, then at the end of the war.

**Rob Herman** 27:24

So at the end of the war, when my grandmother felt like it was safe to go back and take my mom back to a larger city, she went and picked her up. My mother's experience in this small town was mixed. I don't think she was treated particularly well. Again, people are being paid to look out for her, but it doesn't mean there was a lot of caring or really parenting going on during those early years of her life. So my my grandmother came back, took my mother back, and that was, I think when my grandmother felt it was safe to be with her, but there was a lot to figure out. I mean, just basic living, being able to support the family. Keep in mind, she went from at that point, being a doctor's wife to having worked as a domestic worker during the war. So it was a recalibration of what life held. And again, it must have been incredibly difficult for my grandmother to live a new life, not only as a single mother, but having lost her husband, having lost the ability to think through what the future looks like, my grandmother also got sick during the war with rheumatic fever, so she had a heart condition, and I think her biggest fear was in, she was going to leave my mom because of health reasons, and my mother would have nobody. So that was a, you know, I think, very difficult for both of them to come back together and figure out what the future held.

**Trinity Johnson** 28:55

And you said that she did. Your grandmother did remarry. How did they end up going to Canada?

**Rob Herman** 29:00

So initially, this person, my mother's stepfather, and for all practical purposes, my grandfather, because I never knew my biological grandfather, a great man, very strong. He had lost a child and his spouse during the war, and he has his own stories of bravery and surviving the war. But they met when they were still in Poland. They didn't want to stay in Poland. So initially, my my grandmother and my mother moved to Paris. My mother said she went from speaking the language and feeling very confident about everything to going to France, not knowing the language, starting over again, very difficult, which she did again in terms of learning a new language when she went to Canada a couple years after that, but their idea was also leave Poland behind in the rear view mirror and and move forward. So they initially went to France and started over and my grandfather, my step grandfather, joined them probably a year later.

**Trinity Johnson** 29:59

Yeah, it's, it's just amazing. And one of the things you you touched on also, is that your grandmother was weakened. She had a heart condition, and so one of the things she really wanted to make sure was that Halina would be self sufficient when the time came. And so how she kind of manifested, that is put a lot of emphasis on education. And I know we were talking that Halina not only got a PhD, but also became a dentist. And I'm wondering, because education was instilled so it was so important both to your grandmother and your mother, can you talk a little bit about how important education is and then whether that trickled down? What was that then like? Was education a huge emphasis when you were being raised as well?

**Rob Herman** 30:52

You'll have to humor me here, because I can't tell this part without talking about my dad in terms of how it impacts myself, my sister and now our children, and by the way, my wife, Valerie, is also the only person in her family born in the U.S. She's she's Russian, so we both have this similar immigrant experience, and education is very much part of that. So with my mom, again, because of my grandmother's great desire to make my mother self sufficient, education was everything, and my mother took it very seriously, because for a long time it was just her and my grandmother, and I think my mother internalized a lot of that about education and potentially being alone and abandoned because it... My grandmother was very transparent about everything, and said everything that was was out there in terms of the importance of education. There was no holding back perspective. And I think that had a huge impact on my mom and my my grandmother said to my mom, look, you could go to medical school again. Keep in mind, this is, you know, the early 1960s but you don't want to be in a position as a woman making house calls, so I think you should go to dental school. And at that point in time, my mother followed it.

**Rob Herman** 32:06

You know, my mother did the first couple of years of what would have been a medical school program, because it was identical to the dental school program, and became a dentist. And for my mom, I think she was an exceptionally good dentist, and she was also ahead of the curve with thinking about holistic things in terms of pressure points and acupuncture for dental work, maybe she was 30 years ahead of her time or so. So, not everybody embraced it, but she was a great dentist. But I think she also realized at a certain point that she had more to offer in a different vocation. So in her 40s, she went back and got a PhD in psychology. Her dissertation was on dental anxiety. I think it always bothered her that everybody was anxious to be the dentist, and she wanted to figure out a way to alleviate that. So she continued to work as a dentist for a time and as a psychologist. But education was so important to her mother and to her, and it was, you know, a focal point of her life. And I ultimately, I think, that was imparted on myself and my sister.

**Rob Herman** 33:09

What's interesting is, keep in mind my parents, both Holocaust survivors, met in Montreal, somewhat randomly, similar backgrounds, but my father's perspective on education was completely different, because my father, because he was older, never really had formal schooling in a traditional sense, and also the perspective of his family and education was very different. So after the war, he was in a trade school learning how to fix optical lenses for cameras, sewing machines, and had jobs and wasn't really sure what he wanted to do. And someone in Israel, a gentleman named Mr. May, gave my dad an economic... a book about economics, and opened my dad's mind. And this guy encouraged my dad to get an education. This was, you know, around the time my dad was in Israel, in the Israeli army. So my father, without any real formal schooling, when he got to Montreal, he started going to night school, started with a two-year degree, translated into a four-year degree, and decided to go get a PhD. So they had different paths to education. But needless to say, education for myself and my sister and I think now for this next generation my sons, is incredibly important. And education is an individual experience. It doesn't mean you need to get this degree or that degree, but what it affords you... the opportunity it affords you. And again, education can be a traditional education. It can be a non-traditional education, but it gives you that pathway forward. And I think my mother and my father, for reasons you just heard, have the same perspective ultimately, but got there in different ways.

**Trinity Johnson** 34:56

That's amazing, and you led me right to my next question. I. Actually it's something your mother said at one point that she was hesitant to marry another survivor. So I'm wondering if you can share the story of how they did meet, and then ultimately, how did they come to Cincinnati? Because they were here for a while.

**Rob Herman** 35:15

Yeah, they absolutely were. And Cincinnati, I think, is the longest single place they've ever lived in their lives, which is interesting when you consider their history. So there was a hesitation. I mean, I think when you think about that shared trauma and background, and also, again, immigrants weren't looked at in a way that was necessarily positive. And I think there was hesitation probably more on my mom's side, but I don't know for sure. I haven't asked my dad that question in the context of, what does that bring to the surface for her, for her mother, for her I think there was hesitation from that perspective. And also, I think my dad jokes that he brought a briefcase with his education credentials for his future mother-in-law to prove to her that he was serious about education. I think there was some uncertainty about where he was going with his life too, and he really had to show it. I think as they got to know each other, they realized was a very strong fit, and they're, you know, 60 plus years of marriage, what I think it's taught me is the incredible bond. It's, it's, you know, a partnership and a friendship that has endured, but their shared history is actually an asset, not a liability. But to your question, I think at a certain point, my mother realized that, but early on, there was a hesitation, because she wasn't sure what that brought with it, and in ways that maybe she couldn't even truly understand at that point in her life.

**Trinity Johnson** 36:45

And then what brought them to Cincinnati then.

**Rob Herman** 36:48

So, you know, my my father was an academic. He was working for the Canadian government. He got a teaching job in Plattsburgh, New York, which was close to Montreal. So he would go back and forth a fair bit, but ultimately, he wanted to progress in academia, and he saw an opportunity path of being a full professor at the University of Cincinnati. They'd never been to Cincinnati before. They barely knew anything about it, and like a lot of things, they viewed it as, "Okay. We'll see how we like Cincinnati and do it for a couple of years and see where it leads us." I don't think they ever intended to stay as long as they did, but they not only loved the city, but my father's path University of Cincinnati was very strong. My mother built a life. She had to retake all of her dental licensing exams all over again, but they found a life here and when I was born and we as a family unit, became more solidified and stable in this community. It became their home, and ultimately, my sister Diane's home and mine as well. And it was also the gravitational pull that pulled me back to Cincinnati after having been gone for many years. So they found that this was their home for a long period of time before they they moved to warmer climates in Florida.

**Trinity Johnson** 38:09

and and it's unfortunate, because now that they live in Florida, I've never been able to meet them, but I know they were very much involved in the Holocaust and Humanity Center. In fact, we have artifacts in our collection from your family, especially from your mother when she was in hiding. And actually that that plays a little bit into my next question, because we talked about the trauma of your father, you know, being abandoned in that coffee shop in Budapest. And your mother said that the Holocaust, during the Holocaust, there was no such thing as childhood, and so I know that they were very much willing to share their story, and they did so through our center and through their artifacts. And you said that they really didn't talk about it sounds like at home, and it was more so when you were an adult that you started putting this together. Did you ask a lot when you were a child, or did you know this was maybe not a subject to broach with your parents?

**Rob Herman** 39:10

Yeah, it's a good question, because I'm not sure what consciously went through my mind. There was certainly a piece of me, at least subconsciously, that realized digging too deeply into it was not a good idea. But I think that was even more so with my grandparents. You know, as I look back on it, I think we were happy as a family, but below the surface, there was an undercurrent of sadness for my parents, but especially for my grandparents, and there were certain things that you just didn't broach and you didn't want to dig too deeply, and I think they weren't quite ready to address it my parents. So I knew, generally speaking, the story. It was hard for me as a child to really understand it, interpret it, but I think over time, as I became an adult, I understood more as a child that there were things I just wouldn't dig into too deeply because it was too painful, and that was true for my parents and for my grandparents. I think now, over time, my parents have realized that sharing their story is something that's important, not only for my family, my sister's family, but also for others, and it's why they got involved with the Holocaust and Humanity Center, which for them was, I think, very therapeutic and cathartic and hopefully contributed a lot to the fabric of what the Holocaust Humanity Center is all about. And when they did move to Florida, they did the same thing at the Florida Holocaust Museum as speakers and being engaged in that community. But I think it really started here at the Holocaust Humanity Center, where they felt comfortable talking about it and giving back, which also I think, had enormous benefit for me too, to understand what my history was all about.

**Trinity Johnson** 41:04

yes, and to be able to share that. Because I know we're fortunate that you stayed in Cincinnati and that you are so very willing to share both your learnings and what it is like to have a family history and this legacy. So we're just so thankful for how much you are also willing to keep that story alive. You already touched on that they both went back to Poland after both of them being gone 60 some years. You said your mother specifically, 65 years. It was also their 50th wedding anniversary around that time, if I remember correctly

**Rob Herman** 41:40

exactly right.

**Trinity Johnson** 41:41

Did they ever talk about what that joint experience was like? Because I'm sure it was very up and down for both of them to be seeing these, these sites that impacted them as youth, especially when you explain the moment your mother touched the door and the connection she made there. What was that like as a couple, though, to experience that together?

**Rob Herman** 42:06

It was really interesting to watch, because, in a way, not having been there with them, my third boy had just been born, and I would have liked to have gone, but in ways that I couldn't have seen or heard about without a film crew following them. Incidentally, the Frontline documentary is called "Never Forget to Lie," and theirs is one of the stories that's featured there. For them, to see them together was really interesting for me to view, because I oftentimes think about their story separately, but to see the convergence of their stories in this documentary is really interesting, and to see the bond between them, which I think for many years, and I've asked them this question for many years early in their marriage, I don't think it was something they really talked about a lot, even between the two of them, and to see that experience and being able to share it together, I think was important for both of them. It was really meaningful for me to see that shared experience, because although their stories are different, their childhoods really were lost, they really did not have childhood in a traditional sense. And I think it was interesting for myself and my sister Diane to see that as well and to help us understand a little bit more about our parents and what they lost along the way. But it's interesting, when you mentioned that emotional piece of it, there were moments of great difficulty on that trip. There were also moments of joy and coming back full circle and seeing what they had accomplished in our lives. You talked about education, building a family and a successful partnership of 60 plus years. Now, it's really meaningful. So there's there's those moments of unbelievable tragedy and sadness, but also life affirming in its own way.

**Trinity Johnson** 43:56

And I hear so much the resilience

**Rob Herman** 43:59

That's exactly right,

**Trinity Johnson** 44:00

the perseverance and resilience and and the great bravery it took for them to go back over knowing what they were going to see, or hopefully see what was left. And I can't imagine that vulnerability, but also the bravery that it took for them to be able to do that and and actually, you recently also traveled to Warsaw and kind of retraced your your family steps. What was that experience like, and why did you feel it was important at this point in your life to go back to Warsaw? Yeah,

**Rob Herman** 44:33

It's a great follow up question, because it all ties together for me and I think for the rest of our family too, my parents, my sister, my wife, my kids. So by way of background, I have three boys, 15, 15, and 13, Gabriel, Eli and Benjamin. Gabriel and Eli. We had talked to them about and everybody's path is different for a Bar Mitzvah. We're not an overly religious family, but we feel our Jewish identity pretty strongly. And so Gabriel and Eli had decided that they wanted to do their bar mitzvahs in Israel. And so that was meaningful for different reasons than going to Poland. And I think... we did it the Western Wall. And it was really meaningful to share that experience, especially since my dad had lived in Israel, been in the Israeli army. So that was meaningful. And two years later, Benji, who just turned 13, my youngest boy, we had talked about it, he decided, and this was his idea, which we were fully supportive of, because I hadn't really gotten my head around going to Poland and contemplated what that would mean in the back of my mind. I always wanted to go back. I wasn't sure when that would be and how we would do it, but he decided, and again, as a family, we had kind of decided that we wanted to do something significant in some way, historically and for our family, that meant going to some place of consequence that he wanted to do as Bar Mitzvah in Poland, given his parents were both born and grandparents on my side were both born in Warsaw, and so it was him driving that decision. My other boys, Gabriel and Eli, were excited and supportive of this, since they had done theirs in Israel. My wife, Valerie and I were also supportive of it, but coordinating that is a whole different story. And finding a rabbi, which we did in Warsaw, and it was an incredible experience as a Bar Mitzvah, but for me and for the rest of my family, understanding the weight of that legacy was incredibly important, so that the decision tree was initially driven by him making sure it was a viable path and coordinating that. And we got a lot of help along the way in coordinating it, including from Lewis Kamrass, the Rabbi at Wise Temple here in Cincinnati. But it was really a path that we felt increasingly was important to really explore our roots.

**Rob Herman** 47:00

So for us, you know, being in Warsaw and then Krakow and having these experiences, being on the same ground as my parents had been, was incredibly meaningful. Again. Benji did a great job with his Bar Mitzvah. His brothers were very supportive. The congregation was warm. We felt like we had made true friends there, and it was all ages in all different kinds of histories, including people that had been born before during the war had stayed in Poland a totally different mindset, but these people were supportive, and we felt like this congregation was a second home after a couple of days in Warsaw.

**Rob Herman** 47:38

But some of the experiences in Warsaw really brought home the experience for us, and one of those experiences was going to the Jewish cemetery and finding my great grandmother's my father's grandmother's grave and the Jewish cemetery. For context, the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw is enormous. It's got over 100,000 graves, and there are newer headstones in the front of the cemetery, but towards the very back, you walk a long way 100,000 grave sites. Is a very big cemetery. Walking for what seemed like forever, we're able to coordinate through a local guide and with the head of the cemetery to find my great grandmother's headstone. And it was not an easy experience. And keep in mind, it was in the back of the cemetery. There were trees covering it. Nobody ever walked back that far in the cemetery. She passed away in 1924 when my grandmother was 15. She had two younger sisters, which she took care of, whether they wanted her to take care of them or not. Again, as I mentioned, my father's mother was a very strong person, but we found this headstone. It was buried and very difficult to find, and we called up my parents in the U.S., and we recited the Mourner's Kaddish while we were at the grave site, because nobody else that perished from my mother's or father's side has a headstone. So for us, that was symbolic of the entire family, saying the Mourner's Kaddish for them, and having my dad on the phone reciting it alongside with us. He unfortunately can't travel. It was an incredible experience, full circle experience, life affirming and so meaningful. So to your question, it really is something that profoundly impacted me, and I would say, one of the most profound experiences of my life, because it made me realize directly where I was from, I was on the same ground as my great grandfather, who was perished in the Warsaw Ghetto as my grandmother. I was right there. And there were multiple experiences like that, but that was a pretty profound one, especially to be able to have my dad participate in reciting the mourners cottage alongside us. Yeah, so just an incredible experience, and a full circle experience from so much pain, something so beautiful, like that,

**Trinity Johnson** 50:10

Absolutely beautiful. I am almost speechless, because that's such a powerful story and thankful for technology that your parents could join in that that is absolutely incredible. And I'm sure they were just so also proud of the Bar Mitzvah being in Poland in Warsaw. And I can't imagine how they felt about that. But have you talked to them since about how meaningful that was for them?

**Rob Herman** 50:40

Absolutely, and we we had some video clips from the Bar Mitzvah as well, where they could see Benji reading from the Torah, Gabriel and Eli participating in the service, me and Valerie the same way. And one of the Torahs at this synagogue was from before the war, and as I said to my father, it's possible that this same Torah was used in a synagogue, or somehow part of my grandparents' lives, or my great grandparents' lives, the historical significance of that, and we talked a fair bit about that. Again, we're not an overly religious family, but the the legacy of that is is pretty meaningful. So we talked a lot about those experiences. And I think for my my parents, I I strive to make them proud, but I feel like this one was all about their grandkids, my kids, and they're incredibly proud that that that legacy continues on again. Imagine for all those that lost their lives to be able to see that and maybe in some way they do to see these kids in the year 2024 moving forward, to be able to see that there was this experience full circle, coming back to Poland, having a Bar Mitzvah, and seeing what this legacy was all about.

**Trinity Johnson** 52:17

And it's so interesting. You're providing the segue to my last question, legacy, right? And so where do we go from here? I have a quote also from your father. He said, "Always remember the past. Be an upstander, not a bystander. Be close to your family, transmit your values to your children and grandchildren." So you've spoken a little bit about the importance of legacy, and I'm wondering, what do you hope others who view this from this episode or many years from now, what legacy do you want them to remember, and what message do you want them to take away from your family's story?

**Rob Herman** 52:55

Yeah, well, you mentioned it early on when we started talking. It's this idea of resilience, and we all know in different ways, life has ups and downs. There's discrimination. There's a lot of reasons to be cynical. There's a lot of reasons to check out. But ultimately, my parents' story, and I see this in my children, I'm proud of their involvement in the community and them being upstanders, and they learn that from this legacy of their grandparents, that you do need to participate. You need to be part of something, you need to fight injustice. But it's also I think doing that helps you ride through the ups and downs in your life. Circumstances are sometimes difficult in life, and being an upstander, I think, is something good on an individual level. It lets you see the power of what you can do in terms of positive change, and it makes you a better person, and, frankly, happier person to be able to ride through those ups and downs. And I think that's one lesson that my parents have given me and now their grandchildren for the future, and I take that responsibility seriously. I know my sister does as well, to be able to participate in that story and passing along that legacy long after past and my generation are gone to be able to impart that message, and I expect my kids will carry that on as well.

**Trinity Johnson** 54:34

Well, Rob, thank you so much for being with me in conversation today and sharing about your amazing parents and your family, and thank you for everything you do to continue to educate others about the Holocaust. And it's so great to have your friendship and also your support of the center. And we're just so excited to continue to share your family story with you. So thank you for being with me today.

**Rob Herman** 55:00

Okay, it's a pleasure, and I'm looking forward to our continued work and friendship together, and I'm looking forward to being a part of the Holocaust & Humanity Center for many years to come. Thank you.

**Jackie Congedo** 55:12

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**Jackie Congedo** 55:51

Managing producer is Anne Thompson. Consulting Producer is Joyce Kamen. Technical Producer is Robert Mills. Technical Director is Josh Emerson. Select music is by Kick Lee. This is recorded at the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust and Humanity Center in Cincinnati, Ohio.