The Upstander Ripple Effect with Dr. Sarah Crane transcript

**Jackie Congedo** 00:03

These are your superpowers, positive character strengths. You have them, all of them, some more than others.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:11

What we are best suited to do in our lives connects with who we are and our character strengths.

**Speaker 1** 00:19

Standing up strong, activating your superpowers is how you can change the world.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:25

and you're pioneering the future of humanity. Let's start right now.

**Lauren Karas** 00:32

Hi. My name is Lauren Karas, and I serve as the Chief Learning Officer for the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. Welcome to the Upstander Ripple Effect. I am delighted to be joined by my friend and colleague, Dr. Sarah Crane, who is the Visiting Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Cincinnati, and she is also the Holocaust and Humanity Center's Scholar in Residence. Welcome Sarah.

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 01:00

Thank you, Lauren. Thank you for having me.

**Lauren Karas** 01:02

Before we get into our conversation, I just want to briefly frame how we came to be sitting across from one another and how you got the fancy title of Scholar in Residence,

**Lauren Karas** 01:12

The best title on our staff. So we have enjoyed a deep partnership with the University of Cincinnati over the last couple years that has looked like a few different things. We've done a lot of work with their School of Education, training their future social studies teachers and English language arts teachers around how to approach this very complex history that we both teach, of the Holocaust. We have done work across verticals in the University with faculty, students and staff, around recognizing and addressing antisemitism post October 7. And then just last year, we partnered with the Judaic Studies department, your department, to start to ideate about what a unique position would look like, that would be a partnership between the University and our Center to bring a visiting professor, which ended up being you, to the University to teach these courses, but then also be fully integrated into our education team. So you come to the Holocaust and Humanity Center once a week where you help infuse all of your incredible knowledge into our education team's work. So that means advising us on curricular resources for teachers, on public programming, doing some work with our Holocaust survivors and their descendants. And the reason we decided to do this is because we both know, as I just mentioned, that this is a complex history, and it's also a history that is very much in our recent memory. Right? We still have eyewitnesses that are very much alive today, that experience this history, and as such, it's a living and breathing history that is constantly changing, and so we wanted to make sure that we are on the pulse of new scholarship that's happening in the field. And so no pressure, Sarah, but we look to you, right, to keep us relevant and current and up to date on what is going on out there in the field, so that we can adjust with our programming and our resources for educators and students, so that frames our, you know, how we came to be sitting across from one another. Before we dive into our conversation, can you just tell us a little bit about your background, where you did your PhD, what your dissertation focus was on, and just how you came to become a Cincinnatian.

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 01:12

The best title

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 03:48

Well, it's a honor to be here, really. And I think one thing I've learned from being a professor as well as the Scholar in Residence is that Holocaust studies exist in different ways, in different fields. It's not only the work of scholars, it's also the work of practitioners, of those who are in the classroom at all levels, we're all still grappling with this history, which is what I think makes it exciting. But we don't always talk to each other. Holocaust centers don't always talk to professors, and we've really created a space where we can have these kind of unique conversations together. I got my PhD in History and Peace Studies from the University of Notre Dame with a focus on Holocaust trials. So looking at particularly the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in Israel in 1961 and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in Germany that ran from 1963 to 1965. I argued that these trials took the example of the most famous Holocaust trial, the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg that happened in 45-46 and changed the purpose of criminal trials from not just punishing former perpetrators, in this case, punishing former Nazis, but teaching didactic lessons about what the Holocaust means in the current moment. And this really centered the kind of involvement of the Holocaust victims. What role did they have in a trial of the perpetrators? They had their own right to kind of truth and reconciliation about atrocities, and I argue that this is really how we discuss trials.

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 05:27

Today, we hear about the International Criminal Court, about crimes that are being committed globally. And I think many of us wonder, have we learned the lessons of the Holocaust? Have we learned the lesson of "Never Again?" And do we have a way to truly punish those who commit atrocities? The Holocaust in the Nuremberg legacy was supposed to be about ending impunity. Have we done that? And I'm really interested in looking at those discourses today. How do we talk about atrocities, and how do we get that language and understanding from trials? And I think that brings me not only to a classroom where I can talk about these issues with my students, but wanting to see what are the conversations that are happening in the public right now, in the nonprofit world, about how do we approach the atrocities of the current moment, since "Never Again" seems to keep happening.

**Lauren Karas** 06:24

So true, and I feel like your research is so relevant to this moment and to the conversations that are happening right now, right out in the field. So Sarah, I wanted to bring you here for this conversation because last month marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day. It also marked the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. And in light of those commemorations, you know, you're teaching a really relevant course at UC right now called Memorializing Trauma, Engraving the Mind and Remembrance. And so you know, in light of these recent commemorations, I wanted to talk to you to learn more about the class and your perspective on Holocaust memory in 21st and the 21st century, just really light hearted stuff. So, um, let's just dive right in your course examines Holocaust remembrance in Germany, Israel, Poland and the United States. And I'm curious, how do memorials in these different countries reflect their unique cultural and historical context, and what do these differences teach us about global remembrance?

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 07:44

Well, thank you. I think when you decide that you want to teach a course on Holocaust remembrance, you have almost too much material right to kind of cover over the course of a semester, and you wonder, which countries should I spotlight? Should I talk about Holocaust remembrance as more of a global phenomenon or more as a local phenomenon. Does it truly exist as both? And the reason I kind of chose these countries that you mentioned is I think they speak to the fact that Holocaust Remembrance has grown, evolved and changed a lot. I mean, here we are with the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. And so much has changed. Of, you know, this kind of, this kind of idea of what was the Holocaust as an event? What are we going to remember about it? Is this an event where we look at primarily the perpetrators, and we ask ourselves questions about, why did the Holocaust happen, and what can the perpetrators tell us about this? How do ordinary people get involved in genocide? What motivated the kind of Nazi elite to commit this genocide? This is kind of one set of questions, and this is largely where Holocaust Remembrance began. Going back to what I mentioned about the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. That was a trial of over 20 members of the Nazi elite, and the kind of message that came out of this trial immediately after the war was that the Holocaust had been possible primarily because of the Nazi elite, and that the kind of greatest crime committed during World War II was not necessarily the extermination of 6 million Jews among other victims of the Nazi regime, but it was the fact that war had been waged at all, and it was this kind of universal message that we need to prevent war, that Nazi regime was this kind of descent into barbarism and that this is a global problem. So the kind of beginnings of Holocaust remembrance were really universal. But as it's evolved, these kind of individual countries have kind of found their own lessons. And their own meaning in this more kind of globalized, universal remembrance. The Eichmann trial, which I study, I think, is really significant for that, because it really brought the focus not on the kind of broader atrocities committed during World War II, many of which are committed in wars everywhere, but the Holocaust in particular. The Holocaust was not only a really atrocious part of World War II, but it's what we should put our focus on. And the Eichmann trial had this crime. It was a novel crime called crimes against the Jewish people. It also really brought the focus of World War II onto the crimes that had been committed against the Jews, because the Jews had been very intentionally targeted, right? But we kind of forget that in 1961 this wasn't common knowledge, right? And Israel Israeli remembrance is completely based, even to this day, on looking at the Nazi regime through the lens of the extermination of 6 million Jews, and of kind of Israel, the Israeli people, as those who inherit this history and need to figure out how to bring that history into the present moment. Today, Germany, on the other hand, you know, the country of the perpetrators, also had to have their kind of own reckoning with not only what does this mean, these kind of broader questions about why did they kill, but what does this mean for the country of Germany today? And I argue that this other trial that took place, the Auschwitz trial, was very much the kind of German people's first reckoning with, "What does this mean for us?" Because that's what's so interesting about these memorials. They're kind of built at a certain point in time, but a memorial, I think at its best, forces us to continue asking these questions, where is the Holocaust in German national identity? Where is the Holocaust in Israeli national identity, or in Polish national identity? I mean the Auschwitz concentration camp, the former Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland is probably one of the most visited sites of Nazi terror, and has a lot of control over how people make sense of it in the present moment. And I think this is why I wanted to give a global perspective, because it shows not only how Holocaust remembrance has taken different forms in different countries, but that those forms are really, I think, what influenced the way we discuss it today.

**Lauren Karas** 12:36

Can I ask you if... Is there a memorial that that you can think of that you think does a really sound job at challenging the viewer to continue to engage in those tough questions that you kind of just rattled off.

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 12:50

I mean, I remember reading once that sometimes the easiest way to forget about something is to commemorate it. Right? Because the work has been done. Right? The Memorial has been built, the message has been told. And I think one thing that makes Holocaust memorials unique is they... is many of the architects have played with this idea of, "What if we make this kind of incomplete? What if we leave room for gaps or reinterpretation? What if a visitor walks away with kind of more questions than they have answers?" I think the Memorial to the Murder Jews of Europe in Berlin does this work very well. It's a very disorienting memorial. I remember I lived in Berlin for a year when I was getting my Master's degree, and I actually had to walk by this memorial probably about once a week to get to my university. And each time I felt like it hit, it hit differently, yeah, and the point of it is that you can walk in from all these different angles, and it never really felt settled to me. I mean, it became really a kind of part of my weekly commute, so I recognized it in that way. But I also felt like it never hit the same way twice. And I think at its core, this is what a Holocaust memorial should do. It should leave that space for you to continue questioning.

**Lauren Karas** 14:20

Absolutely. So we've been talking about these physical spaces. Let's talk about another aspect of Holocaust memory, which is obviously the testimony of survivors, right, and what they bring to this conversation. So I thought it was interesting in your syllabus that you're having your students read Night by Elie Wiesel and you also have an a part of your syllabus, and you just kind of reference this with the Eichmann trials, referring to the 1960s as the "era of the witness." So I'm curious, you know, how does the inclusion of survivor testimonies... How has that shaped our broader understanding of genocide, and what role do these witnesses play in shaping our collective memory?

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 15:09

Thank you. Thank you for that question. It's funny. This term, "the era of the witness" is was originally coined by a scholar, a French scholar, Annette Wieviorka, and she talked about the advent of the witness, and then the era of the witness. And she thought the advent of the witness happened during the Eichmann trial, because the chief prosecutor of the Eichmann trial, Gideon Hausner, very deliberately invited and himself hand picked over 100 witnesses, over 100 survivors of the Nazi regime to bring to Jerusalem and testify, and this was famously a source of much argument. What do these... what do these witnesses have to do with just discerning Eichmann's guilt, which, at the end of the day is the point of a criminal trial? But I would say these testimonies are what is most remembered from the trial. I think the testimonies not only revealed facts, gave the kind of global community a language through which to discuss the Holocaust, but it also showed how much of the Holocaust we had yet to understand, or perhaps, perhaps might never understand, that there are layers of understanding that until that point, I think, had just not been acknowledged. Like, how deep does it go, and how do we access it? It really encouraged people to start asking those questions. And I think when survivors were now in the public sphere, you know, Holocaust remembrance, of course, did exist in the post war, but it was largely a very kind of private remembrance. When there was a public space that was created for it, when the era of the witness really began, I think that was largely because the public saw, saw a value in those testimonies, and I think this is a value that we still kind of look at and examine today. We see in survivor testimonies a truth, we see a personal story, we see a way of access and understanding, but we also see the limits of that understanding, that they are speaking to an experience that we are we ourselves did not experience, did not see, and that there are parts of it that we will never understand. There's this kind of visceral understanding that they have of the Holocaust that we that we cannot access. And there is also a kind of truth in that these survivors are very much a testament as well, to the limits of our understanding. And I think that's part of what we need to remember, is that the Holocaust, just because we have these testimonies, we're not done asking ourselves the questions that they bring up. And I think when students, when my students, meet a Holocaust survivor, I think they experience this. And I am kind of concerned. I mean, many of us are concerned. What happens when the eyewitnesses have passed on. How do we kind of remember not only what these testimonies can tell us, but what they can't?

**Lauren Karas** 18:23

Do you find - I'm gonna, I'm gonna quote you back to you, because you wrote a blog post for us recently that was essentially talking about the legacy of the late Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer and his approach to Holocaust survivor testimony and how it's consumed. And you said, "My job is not to find a way of making the Holocaust horrors more accessible to my students, but to respect the ways in which such horrors reach beyond our ability to understand and explain." That resonated with me a lot. I think I have a similar approach when I'm talking about this history with teachers and how we approach it in the classroom. I'm curious if your students, if you find that they're frustrated by that, like they want you to answer for them. Like, how could this happen? Just tell me why. Like, why did this happen? Just tell me, right? Like they want to figure it out, right? And it's really something that we can't really figure out. And that's kind of the point.

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 19:28

Not completely, right? I mean, I have an interesting experience when my students will initially read "Night," which you mentioned, right? I mean, it's an incredible memoir. It uses incredibly descriptive imagery. It has an emotional impact. I feel like students finish that book really feeling like they don't necessarily have a total understanding of what happens, but, but, but they've been given now a really cool tool to access that. And then I have them watch a survivor testimony for the first time. And I kind of asked them, you know, what do they what do they notice? And Lawrence Langer used to talk about something called deep memory, when a survivor would kind of, almost throughout giving a testimony, would return to the self that existed in the camps. And I actually showed my students a testimony that he reference, he references as kind of the first time he saw it, where a survivor will kind of stop talking, or they'll keep explaining, but you can tell that something's changed. And my students were really confused by that. I mean, really kind of felt for the fact that that, that this person had gone through this experience of retelling but, but were very disoriented by that, and kind of in in response to that, I I kind of felt like I had to say, but that's that, that's the truth.

**Lauren Karas** 19:29

Right

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 19:30

And that's actually another access point for us, even though it might look different than reading "Night." So I mean, I would say students struggle with it, but, but I think eventually understand that it's, in and of itself, a tool these kind of limits of understanding might look different, but give them another way to kind of discuss about what does testimony mean, and what can we learn about this event from those testimonies.

**Lauren Karas** 21:34

I love that. I want to delve a little bit more as we kind of wrap things up here into you know what we want our students to take from this history and this class. So as you know, you know, our mission at the Holocaust & Humanity Center is to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust inspire action today, and when we're focusing on that "inspire action today" piece, we talk to a variety of audiences about harnessing their unique character strengths to stand up against injustice and to become upstanders and show up in a positive way right in their communities. And so I'm curious, what do you see as the most important lessons that your students can take away from your class, and what do you hope the course instills in them, besides just historical content knowledge, right, or adding to their scholarship, right? But as individuals in today's world?

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 22:31

Well, it's so interesting to hear you mention this language of upstanders and character strengths, because this is not a language that I that I knew

**Lauren Karas** 22:41

Right

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 22:41

before I joined all of you at the Holocaust center. But I think I've learned that this different language that we use, I mean, it comes from somewhere, right? It has meaning, but it shows that the Holocaust doesn't mean one thing. And I think that's okay,

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 22:58

I mean going back to the point where you said that students kind of want me to tell them what the answer is, or what the method of engagement is. I want them to walk away from my class seeing that they have a kind of toolkit for lots of different kinds of engagement, but that one isn't going to give them everything. And that's kind of how it's supposed to be, and that's how so many of us approach this event of the Holocaust, and the Holocaust as a kind of form of remembrance. That's why so many of us are involved, and that's why we keep asking these questions about, what does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be part of a national community that's coming to terms with atrocities today? I mean, I think the Holocaust gives us ways to answer all of these questions, but it's going to keep evolving, and that's why these courses are relevant. You know, even today, I was talking to my students last week about the Diary of Anne Frank, which was first published in English in the US in 1952 and here we are in 2025 still talking about Anne Frank, but I do think we're learning how to talk about her in different ways. And that's really what, what I want my students to remember, is that this is - to talk about the Holocaust is a dynamic conversation, and we should be intentional about how we do it, but that doesn't mean that there's one particular way that we're supposed to talk about it.

**Lauren Karas** 22:58

yes,

**Lauren Karas** 24:32

Well, I love that. I think that's a great note to end on, Sarah, as I've told you many times before, your students are lucky to have you.

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 24:39

Thank you.

**Lauren Karas** 24:40

And we were lucky to have you here on The Upstander Ripple Effect, so thank you so much for joining us today, Sarah.

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 24:45

Thank you, Lauren.

**Lauren Karas** 24:46

I'll see you at the center soon, I'm sure

**Jackie Congedo** 24:48

Our thanks to the Mayerson Family Foundation and the VIA Institute on Character for supporting this series. We have a link in the show notes so you can take your own free character strengths survey and learn more about your strengths. We'd love to hear about your experiences with character strengths and how you're using them to stand up. You can reach us anytime by email, and you can listen anytime on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or visit Holocaustandhumanity.org/podcast. You can also connect with us on Instagram andTikTok @holocaustandhumanity and X and Facebook @cincyhhc. The Upstander Ripple Effect is a production of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. This series is part of the Cynthia & Harold Guttman Family Center for Storytelling. Visit us in person at historic Union Terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio, or online at Holocaustandhumanity.org. Managing producer is Anne Thompson. Consulting Producer is Joyce Kamen. Technical Producer is Robert Mills. Technical Director is Josh Emerson. Opening sequence is by Ken Furman. Select music is by kick Lee, and this is recorded at Technical Consulting Partner Studios in Cincinnati, Ohio.

**Dr. Sarah Crane** 24:48

Sounds good.