Hear My Story: Rabbi Shena Jaffee

transcript

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:23

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

**Jackie Congedo** 00:26

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** 00:41

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:42

See mine is 40018, my sister was 40017.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:50

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** 01:03

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** 01:10

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

**Cori Silbernagel** 01:21

I'm Cori Silbernagel, Director of Collections & Exhibitions. In this episode, we're joined by Rabbi Shena Jaffe and her daughters Maya and Noa. In addition to being a faith leader, Shena is the daughter of a Holocaust survivor who settled here in Cincinnati. She and her family now carry on that legacy of resilience and hope. Thank you so much for coming to speak with us today. It really is my pleasure to get to sit down with all three of you. Shena, let's let's dive in and get started right away. Tell me a little bit about who you are and your life in Cincinnati.

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 01:56

Well, thank you and thanks for having us here and the chance to be

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 01:56

with my daughters and you here at the Holocaust & Humanity Center is really special. I am a native Cincinnatian, and my father, Sam Potter, moved... came to Cincinnati when he was three years old with his father, his mother and his six month old sister and they were able to flee the Holocaust. They left Poland in August 1, 1939 so a month before Poland was invaded, and through luck and grit and courage and a few helping hands, they were able to settle here in Cincinnati. So for me, I've been here in Cincinnati most of my life. I grew up. I'm a proud alum of Walnut Hills High School, another graduate today as another student. And I came back to Cincinnati to study at Hebrew Union College, the rabbinical seminary and so then after studying here in Cincinnati to become a rabbi, I went out in the world, and I worked in different capacities and served different communities as a rabbi. And right when Maya was born, her dad and I decided to move back to Cincinnati and build our lives here so we could be close to family and really just be part of the Cincinnati Jewish community.

**Maya Jaffee** 02:00

It's such an honor

**Cori Silbernagel** 03:22

I think that's so special. I myself am a Cincinnati transplant, and you couldn't have convinced me to stay at first, but, but I love it here, because the community is so welcoming, and so I think it's, it's great to hear that you went out and explored and came back and, yeah, really, you know, an important part of our community today,

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 03:46

yeah, and I think it was important for us too, that our girls had their grandparents close by and and could just be part of this community that way. So we're really lucky to have that.

**Cori Silbernagel** 03:57

Wow, that's amazing. Tell, tell me a little bit more about about Sam, yeah, your dad, so you mentioned that they left a month before the invasion of Poland. Why? How? What brought that about?

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 04:14

That is that is one of those things that we still the more we learn about the history of the Holocaust and what was happening in Europe, the more miraculous it seems, and the more just gratitude I have to my my grandparents, for having the vision to know what to do at that time. My father's family was in had lived in Poland for hundreds of years, and his mother's side of the family, what we've learned was pretty well off. They owned a factory that would make suits to order somewhere between a factory and a and a kind of a wholesale store and and my grandfather was... sort of enjoyed life, and wasn't necessarily a settled down, but he and

**Maya Jaffee** 05:08

he had street smarts

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 05:09

He had street smarts, and he and my grandmother got to know each other because my grandmother's brothers and my grandfather all played soccer like semi pro soccer when they were in their 20s, and so they met and married, and eventually my grandfather got into the family business. My grandmother's business and life seemed to be going well in Poland, but what I did learn from my father was that my grandmother, my grandparents, unfortunately died before I was born, so I didn't get to know them, but my grandmother spoke many different languages and had grown up near in Poland, but near Germany, and even in the 1920s it was not... Jews were not permitted to go, to continue in school past third, fourth, fifth grade. So my grandmother actually studied in a gymnasium in Germany for her education, whereas my grandfather finished about third, fourth grade education and didn't continue after that. So one of the things we know we're piecing together is that life for Jews in Poland for years, for decades, was not comfortable. They maybe had a good personal life and good quality of life, but there definitely wasn't equality. And one of the photos that I think speaks to this is this is a picture of my father walking with his father in Poland, and it's, we've blown it up, and I'm not sure if you can see with all of this, but there's a little handmade patch on each of their chests, the Juden patch, that identifies them as Jews, and we know, because we're here to live to tell the tale that my family left before Nazis invaded Poland. We know that, and yet we see, even if history tells us differently, that there were already protocols in place to identify and other the Jews at that time. So the way my father tells it, my grandfather, for years, have been trying to leave Poland. He just knew it wasn't comfortable, and he'd been looking for a visa, and he tried to get out, but just couldn't. And then he got married. He My father was born, my grandmother, my aunt was born, and then he got a he got a visa. But by that point, it was just a visa for himself, so he knew that he couldn't leave at that point. And so what? Um, so life continued, and things and more and more rights got taken away, and life got a little more constricted. And one day he was on a purchasing trip to somewhere in Poland. I don't know. He was taking the train and on the train, he heard some guys make a noise, and he went into one of the cars, and he realized it was his brothers in law, and they were all sitting there playing cards and laughing and scratching, as my father says, and my grandfather sat in the car with them, but didn't enjoy it in the card game, he just sat down, and there's another merchants and another man sitting next to him, and this man was a diplomatic worker, a Jewish man, who had just been dismissed from his job. So all the people in government were being dismissed from their work. And so he was on his way back to wherever they were going back to, and he said, you know, people were trying for visas to get out. So people in Poland, Jews were trying to leave Poland. For years. They were trying to get visas, and they were all being denied. So they stopped trying. He said, I just left on the embassy, wherever it was and and there are visas to be had to get to America. And so in that moment, without cell phones, without anything else, my grandfather took a different train, went back to Warsaw, got four visas for his family, tried to convince his brothers in law, who were sitting there, to go with him, and they said, no, they you know, we're gonna still try to make it work here. We've got too much to lose. Came back, and I don't know it was sometime in the summer he, he told his, you know, told my grandma, Jen, where we have to leave. She said, let's wait till after the High Holy Days. Let's spend the High Holy Days with my parents, and then we'll go to America. Well, the High Holy Days are in September, so somehow, I cannot imagine the conversations that must have happened and the anguish to make those decisions, they left. They managed to get steerage passage. They had, you know, they were in the bottom rung of a boat.

**Maya Jaffee** 09:29

Yeah, they're in the luggage. So, luggage, yeah, the luggage

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 09:31

area, right, yeah. And they managed to get passage, first from Poland to London, and then from London to or somewhere in England, and then to America, and then to New York. And my dad, my father, remembers not much, but he remembers pulling on one of the ropes in the boat and getting yelled at, you know, and so and like, and just that thought. And then they came to America, and he my grandfather, did have a sister. It was a fraught relationship, but did have a sister living in. Cincinnati, and so that helped us get to Cincinnati, and that's how we got to Cincinnati, which was a long story, but that, that is their story and and I think we've just started telling the story a little, yeah, detail

**Maya Jaffee** 10:13

we were talking about this, we had never, you know, been sat down and told the story front to back like I've always, I never, like, neither of us remember hearing it for the first time, like we heard bits and pieces, I don't know, like, when I was younger, I asked my grandpa what his first memory was, and I that's how I learned about the the rope on the boat. But I like, it's, it's difficult to, you know, sit, especially a child, down and be like, This is how we got to America, and it's not a happy story, so But I finally a few months before March of the Living, which was in just a few weeks ago, in late April, around it's December of past December, we preparations for the trip started picking up, and so we you brought the my grandmother, my grandpa's wife, not Jewish, had put together this, like this incredible book filled with every record of our family that she could find.

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 11:19

They're postcards that my grandmother would send back to people in Poland, to family and and transcripts of conversations we had with people that had had some contact with our family,

**Maya Jaffee** 11:29

and this was not - my grandpa didn't sample we called my grandpa Sampo. You might say, you might you might hear us refer to him. His name is Sam, and his last name is Potter, Sampo Sam, he never it is incredibly difficult for his family, especially his mother, to talk about it. Which will, you know, what we'll go into so I don't really know how this started, but well, actually I do, because you went on the March of the Living.

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 11:53

I helped lead a March of the Living. My father and I helped lead a March of the Living trip, which is this Holocaust and Jewish identity journey that students from around the world take to Auschwitz on Holocaust Memorial Day. And we call it March of the Living because the students march in and they march back out.

**Maya Jaffee** 12:19

You march. It's an like, incredible March this year. This past year, it was 7000 people, all different, you know, religions, races, countries. You march from the gates of Auschwitz, it's about two miles less, to the gates of Birkenau, and you walk all the way down the train tracks. So that was what the trip was centered around. But we, you know, our the Cincinnati delegation from this year I was about 10 high school seniors. We joined with the Florida delegation, and we went all to Poland together. And in Poland, you know, we interacted with many other groups. We were in Poland for a little over a week. We were with three Holocaust survivors, all you know, in their 80s. And it was just such an incredible trip. We went to four different concentration camps. We went to many Memorial sites. We went to ghetto sites, museums and, you know, monuments and so many things. And it was just really an incredible trip. So, yeah, so

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 13:33

you were talking about learning about it.

**Maya Jaffee** 13:35

So that was why this partially why this was created, was you and Sampo were going back to Poland, and this is the first time, this is the first time you've been

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 13:44

to Poland. Yeah, it was the first time either of us had been to Poland. My mother, who was Catholic, and her heritage is also Polish, but Polish Catholic versus Polish Jewish. For her, it was very, very important first, that we always be proud of our Jewish heritage and that. And also for my mom, I think that the story of my father's family, her own story and her family, is important too in the context of Jewish history, I think the story of making sure that my father's story wasn't lost was really important to her, and I think what she told us is, even though my father never his parents really never talked to him about the Holocaust was so painful, really discouraged conversation and wouldn't talk about it at all. Wouldn't speak Polish. Would speak to him in Yiddish or English. When my mom came into the picture, they would speak to her in Polish. Sometimes they would speak to her parents in Polish, and they would tell her stories that they didn't tell my dad. So a lot of the things that was a part we've started learning from my mom. And so my mom did embark on this incredible research project of collecting postcards, working with the Holocaust & Humanity Center on translations. And one of the things that she helped us find when we were going on the March of the Living the original one for us in 2011 was I have this picture here as well. She managed to find a man who was from the same hometown as my grandparents, Sompolno Poland, and he was alive, and he lived in New York, and he had put together a website the Jews of Sompolno, and he had this picture, which is a picture of most of the men of Sompolno before they're deported to work camps, labor camps, which ultimately become death camps. And there was a time in the 1950s that he had come to Cincinnati and sat with my grandmother and shared the horrible news that he had seen her brothers and on their way to Auschwitz. And what do you remember?

**Maya Jaffee** 15:55

So, yes, so I didn't know. I have heard bits and pieces of my family's story over the years, but like I said, it had never been laid out start to finish. So this wasn't all news to me, but I learned the specifics. So my grandpa, his mother, had four brothers who were still in Poland with her, and, you know, the rest of her family, as much as they tried to convince them they refused to leave Poland for the High Holidays. So unfortunately, the borders were closed before they could leave. And when this man who had had survived the Nazis and came to America after the war, had been, I think just tracking everyone that he could find, yeah, trying to anyone that had that was from Sompolno. Was just trying to find anyone. And so he had found their house, and she, he had told her, started telling her, and she, like, she kicked him out. She was very it was so difficult, like it was so impossible, but so a few months ago, when we were when I first was able to look at this book and really just hear the story in full, he was sitting at the dining room table with us as we were talking about it. And for some parts he would join in, and some parts he was just, you know, it wasn't, it was just too difficult to talk about. But I remember the most he said was he told because he was, by this point in the 50s. He was a young adult in high school, in high school, so he was just a little bit younger than his uncles were when they were killed. So his four uncles were in their 20s when they were deported to Auschwitz. And they're in this picture, they're in like this corner. But he told me about how the man had come to their house, and he told Tampa's mom that he had seen her brothers in Auschwitz, and he had seen two of them walking like, you know, being led to the gas chambers, and one of them was crying, and the other one was like, comforting him and just being like, you know, like, let's let's go, let's get it over with. And that was the first time I had heard like in any specific detail, and just hearing that, like piece of dialog in that window into a like a real moment in time of my family, just like I've just never been the same sense, and that's just been at the forefront of my mind every single time I think about the Holocaust for my family or anything. I've never had such specific detail of my family like I've never, I never knew any part of that before. So hearing about that really just, you know, I was just thinking about that the entire time we were on the trip. And so many of the other people I was on the trip with had stories like that, and just everyone had family who had been killed. And it was just such a I don't know, it was really very moving.

**Cori Silbernagel** 18:50

I think one of the really special things about March of the Living is, you know, many participants have that kind of personal connection and and others who don't still have that opportunity to learn about the history in a way that's very humanizing, right? And I think that's really at the root of the storytelling our museum does. And I think that is why, you know, year after year, we continue to to help prepare students for their March of the Living

**Noa Jaffee** 19:28

Absolutely, we were also just talking about the museum and how unique this specific museum is and the humanizing aspect... yeah. I mean, so I go to Walnut Hills High School and all ninth graders in Cincinnati Public School at some point in the year take a field trip to the Holocaust and Humanity Center. They just yeah my ninth grade year, they just implemented it. So I went last year, and I was one of two Jews in my history class. So 30 people, yeah. And I mean, even, like, with the other classes, we were joined with, like I was one of. Of 290 people. So it was really interesting seeing, like, when I went in. I mean, I've been here multiple times, and I know a lot of the people whose stories are in there, so especially when Mrs. Rendler's story was up on the board, I was telling, like, my friend next to me, like, Oh, she was my Hebrew teacher in elementary school, and I was just kind of that point of human connection to the history, or even like, as my class was talking about, like the people whose stories they saw in the museum, they would refer to her as Zahava rendler, where it's like, that kind of first name, last name combination is what you use when you talk about a historical figure, not like, that's Mrs. Rendler. What do you mean? And like, that's Mrs. Rendler. To me, that's not Zahava Rendler. So I think just like seeing that connection and how, like, they're not just names on a page, they're real people who look like we knew,

**Maya Jaffee** 20:53

yeah, I had a very similar experience when I was in ninth grade at the on the field trip, one of the exhibits shows a map of, you know, the world and the United States and Europe. And there's all of these different lines coming from different places in Europe, all to Cincinnati. And each of the lines has, you know, names on them. And, you know, just kind of not even realizing when my class was there, I, you know, saw one of the names, and I was, Oh, those are my neighbors. That's the Polaneckis, and exactly like Noa said, you know, just be able to watch my class process that. And you know, this is not just from the textbook. This isn't just from, like, what we're learning, because we have to on this class field trip, you know, this is my, my classmate, Maya's neighbors. Like, she like, you know, we know these people. These are real people. This isn't a story.

**Cori Silbernagel** 21:40

yeah, one of the things that I ask students to do when I lead student tours is to leave our museum, remembering a name, remembering a story, and to share that story. So it's so it's really special that you both helped you know your class make that connection. What, to that point? What responsibility do you feel today to carry this history forward, to speak for your family and for others impacted by the Holocaust?

**Maya Jaffee** 22:22

I think we're at a very crucial point in time, because our generation is the last generation that's really going to be able to that, that is going to be able to talk to people who were there. And even then, we're one, we're kind of in the middle end, where we have such a dwindling population now of survivors that were old enough to remember even so we've already kind of passed that window. So really it was, you know, your generation, that was able to truly be able to talk to survivors who were very much present and can remember as much as possible about the camps and the resistance and everything else so but still, we are able to talk to survivors who were there, and we're the last generation to be able to do so and like in real life, and that's just true. So I, I think that it's very, very crucial now to really be aware of that and do as much as possible to help the, you know, Holocaust & Humanity Center has already done such amazing work, you know, not only memorializing the stories, but also, you know, Ensuring the Continuity of it, and, you know, keeping the memory alive. So really, just doing everything you can to keep it, like you said, Keep it, keep it real, keep it humanized. Keep it not just a part of history. It's a part of, you know, our life and our family,

**Noa Jaffee** 24:01

yeah, and I think it's also like, I felt more responsibility to, like, listen to the stories of the survivors I know, because, like, this is the time to ask those questions. This is it? Or, like, I mean, our other set of grandparents live up in Oberlin, Ohio, and for a while there was a man named Erwin Froman at the synagogue up there who had survived Auschwitz, and I realized he passed away when I was around 10. And I'm always so sad that I never got to ask him this question, Was that too? So I think, like, if you know a survivor now, like, this is the time, like, don't wait to

**Maya Jaffee** 24:33

and I always regret that, because we were, we were just a little too young to really be able to talk to him about it.

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 24:39

I will say what Mr. Froman also did. So he always had lollipops in his pockets, pockets, and so as much as we are you asked like, what we feel like our role is to listen and to share stories, definitely, but also to share the joy of of. What it means and the privilege of what it means to be part of the Jewish people. So Mr. Froman, who taught your dad how to chant Torah, and was such a great past like conveyor of Jewish, of Yiddishkeit, of love of being Jewish, he also had a lollipop for you every time, and made learning and being at synagogue sweet, and I actually brought my, bring out my

**Noa Jaffee** 25:25

because also I think Mr. Froman, like he had every reason to be like jaded, to still be like, open to the next generation and like, not lose that hope,

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 25:35

right and lead with love and and my mom again, my mom, Maxine Potter, found these candlesticks in our house after my grandparents had passed away, my father's parents, and she found them, she cleaned them, she polished them, and she gave them to me. And these were some of the few items I think that we know came from Poland that they brought with them. And so as my mother would be a little bit horrified right now, because they're not polished and they have wax on them, but we use them every week on our Shabbat dinner table, and we say the blessings over our children and oftentimes, our parents are able to be with us. My parents are able to be with us, and your other grandparents, and to be able to bring in that joy to me is really one of the most important aspects of being Jewish. And so I think the stories are so vital and they're so important, and to be able to let people know that this is their story as well, and that people have a way in both, whether you come from a Jewish background or whether you're interested in the story of the Jewish people and you want to know more. There's, there are ways in. And so for me, that's, that's what part of being a child of a family that survived incredible odds, and I'm an only child, and so if I didn't continue helping to enrich the Jewish community, it would be such a waste. It would be such a such a shame. And so that, to me, the sense of mission has definitely been influenced by knowing my heritage, and it fills me with such pride that you girls are finding your own pathway in as well.

**Cori Silbernagel** 27:22

I think that is that's such an important point to bring up, because, as you know, at a Holocaust Museum, we teach about a chapter of Jewish history, yeah, but there's so much before and after and and the history is being written today. So so it's special to hear, Shena, you just talk about that connection of past to present. What are some other what are some other ways that you feel your family story kind of coming forward as you, as you work in the community, as a Jewish leader, as an educator.

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 28:08

It's Maya also pointed out, really, every single person here today, sitting in the in the United States, we have, unless you are a native person of America, you had, you had some challenging way that you got here. Nobody came here...very few people arrived here just on a whim because it seemed like an easy thing to do. And so part of this is, I think, recognizing the humanity of each of our journeys to be here, and what a privilege it is to be part of this community. And so that is one thing that I try. I do try to take, take with me, and an appreciation of just that, that we've all had our challenges to get here, and we have a responsibility to make this space that we have as egalitarian and as democratic as we possibly can. I think, from a Jewish perspective, like you said, we have so many chapters of our history. And I think a reminder, the scary part is almost at every point in history when Jewish people felt that they had achieved a level of real measure of security, of integration and of success, that was sometimes our most vulnerable point. And so I'm afraid that we are living in a time again where that vulnerability is coming to bear. And so I'm hoping we can break the cycle of history. I'm hoping that through humanitarian actions, through an awareness of both our history and the possibility of how we're so much enriched when we lean into diversity. I hope that that is something that will carry us forward. And I think part of what we do within the Jewish community now is. Currently, I'm working with Rockwern Academy as the Director of Jewish Life and Learning. We're working with students, the youngest students, from from one year old to eighth grade, and their parents and their grandparents, and really just trying to deepen the sense of what it means to be part of the Jewish community and for people to find their own way in a lot of the work I've done, especially when I was working with the Mayerson JCC was helping people of all different backgrounds appreciate Jewish culture and Jewish history. And one of the most wonderful things I was able to do at the JCC was we developed a program called Great Faiths, and we would visit different houses of worship, and we would find both what we shared in common with different faith groups and communities, and what we had that was uniquely ours, and that would somehow also deepen our sense of self and sense of purpose. So that's really what I try to do now as a rabbi in the community, is really that help people, those who are Jewish, feel authentic in their Judaism, in whatever way that that that is meaningful to them, but also for people that are not part of the Jewish community, to understand that there is this history and this beauty and this future of Jewish life.

**Cori Silbernagel** 31:16

Yeah, let's go back and talk about March of the Living for a moment. And I want to go all the way back to that very first trip, yeah, began this, this research. I think, you know one, one thing I was thinking as you were sharing that story, was that this was compiled over many years. It took a long time, and I I first before I before I hear more about March of the Living. Want to talk a little bit about how your family found these documents and what that was like during that journey,

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 32:02

One of the things I'm realizing in all of this, when you hear people's stories and when you are trying to uncover what happened, is that things are not linear. You don't... it's not that my grandmother or grandfather handed my mother this box of letters and said, "Here, let me explain them all to you." My... sadly, tragically, my my father's sister, my aunt Ruthie, passed away in 1991 and she did not have any children. And so about that time, it was just us. It was my father and then, and as my dad would say to me frequently, I was his only living blood relative by then, until Maya, and then, Noa came along, which is double Yeah, years of just Yeah, last, yeah, the last. And during that pressure, it Yeah, it is. And I think my mom felt that too, to kind of preserve this history or so, although

**Noa Jaffee** 33:00

I will say, I once asked Emmy, which is what we call our grandmother, I said, like, because she's not Jewish, but still Polish, I asked, like, "How did my grandpa's parents react to that? Did they resent her at all?" And she said no, and that they were just so welcoming. Or even, like, they rescheduled their Passover Seder entirely one time, just so she could make it to Easter mass. So I think it's also amazing, just like, how, like, they weren't like, even though I'm sure they had some fear of, like, the bloodline dying out, they were like, still so welcoming to

**Maya Jaffee** 33:35

my grandma and Emmy's- Maxine is her name. So M for Maxine - and me, Emmy has always like, she's returned it, you know, like double like, she's done such an amazing job always, of, you know, remaining true in her Catholic identity. And, you know, I never, like, we always knew that from a young age, but it was never, I don't ever remember it being a point of conflict, you know, like we, our family, has done a really good job of making equal time for, you know, us being Jewish and still being able to, you know, celebrate her Catholic identity and being able to honor heritage, honor her heritage, and, you know, do The traditions with her while still keeping our own,

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 34:22

yeah, well, and I think the question, a question about the photographs, even telling you we're not very linear. I believe that after my aunt Ruthie died, she had some of these boxes of letters. I don't think we have them in Cincinnati. I don't know. I know that eventually they appeared, and I never asked my mom how she got them. So now, thank you for bringing that up.

**Maya Jaffee** 34:47

You will be, we'll be coming up. Now I'm asking sometimes you just, you know, especially as a high school

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 34:51

student, I just took for granted that, of course, my mother would do this and and start researching, and she really started working. She took. On as a project, and she started working with a translator and different translators, and she was actually told by a historian that this was impossible, that that it was impossible that that people were wearing badges because the history didn't line up, which also, I mean, this is your field, but it's this idea of what's in the books versus what's in reality. And so my mom, yeah, she really started, she worked, worked with finding translations, translating the postcards. One of the things for us that was most chilling was that in some of these letters, and they were back and forth with, you know, how are you wishing you health? Very simple phrases. And that the postage stamp went from changed, it was Sompolno square, and then by about 1942 it changed Adolf Hitler square. And you could see the progression of just the ever tightening. Now that we know in hindsight what happened. We see what happens. So I think it did take time. We still, you know, we go through phases where we can delve into this and really read and try to understand, and honestly, a lot of times that that binder sits on the shelf because it's painful. It's painful to know it exists. No until, till Maya had her first March of the Living session in that night, December. Yeah, I pulled the binder off the shelf.

**Maya Jaffee** 36:27

Yeah. I had no idea existed either, like I had known. Because we have, at my grandparents house here we have, in one room, there's a whole wall of framed this whole wall of photographs, first of all, which I still don't know, everyone in there. But there's also a wall of all of the Ellis Island certificate, certificates of like, you know, citizenship, but that's all I really saw. And, you know, like that picture is also framed. And we have a few other pictures of Sampo, but yeah, and and such a personal look to into the life of, like, my grandfather, like, you know, the relatives, in some of the letters, they asked, like, how is little semi doing? Semi is like, a nickname for Sam? You know, we didn't know. I asked Sam if he had any nicknames, and he was like, No, I just got called Sam. And when I was reading these, like, I was kind of looking over and without even thinking, I was like, oh, Sampo. Like, do you want to read some of these? And he was and he was like, No. Like, I and I, it didn't even occur to me at that time, like, of course, he doesn't want to read this. This is his family that he's lost. It's such a to like to this day, because it wasn't that long ago, and it's still just such a sensitive it's just such a vulnerable point, and there's really no getting over it or getting past it. And we saw that a lot on the trip.

**Cori Silbernagel** 37:52

One of the things I want to hear about your March of the Living trip is really how how how you carry your family story into it? I understand Sam shared his story with your group. It. It was one of the first times he's done that publicly. What was that like?

**Maya Jaffee** 38:16

I felt such pride, first of all, and pride in my family and pride in him, because I know how hard it is, like it's not something that he likes to talk about. It's not, you know, it's not something he feels comfortable talking about. So, so he, yeah, he came to the JCC. This is like, about a week before we left for Poland, and he met with our group in one of our last information sessions all the parents before we went on the trip. And yeah, and there's a video. It's like, almost like, 20 minutes long of him. He sat down in front of the group, and Trinity asked him questions just about his family and about their life in Poland and their journey here and their life here, and we got to ask him questions too, yeah, and just being able to watch him work through that in real time and watch him, and just watching my family's story be heard by other people, in a in a professional and not just me, you know, talking to my friends about it, and it really and being recorded just kind of, you know, goes back to what we're saying earlier about, how do we, how do we continue this on once there aren't any survivors left, and just watching that kind of, one of those first steps be implemented. The trip was about nine days in Poland, and on day four or five, we went to Majdanek, which is like one of the other main concentration camps, is less known than Auschwitz, but it's still had. One of the highest death camp death counts. Was such a different experience because we had been to Auschwitz on, I think, day two, so we had still not really adjusted to the traveling. We were completely integrated with the like 30 kids from Florida. So we were still getting to know each other. We were still adjusting to, you know, just all of the travel and all of the transportation and everything that we had been consuming. So going to Auschwitz as a group was a very different experience, because it wasn't very outwardly emotional. It was very difficult, and it was very somber, of course, but we were all just, we didn't really know how to process it. Everyone was just kind of like, like, I remember someone saying, like, I someone said they felt like they were made of stone, like, it just was such a so much, and it just looks like such a museum that it's hard to process. But by the time we got to Majdanek, which is on day four or five, we had all gotten comfortable with each other. We had all, you know, you have these, like, three hour bus rides every day. So you get to talking, and we were on one of these three hour bus rides, and then all of a sudden, you know, we turned the corner, and like we saw maidonic in the distance, and like we had been joking around, and we just all, like, went quiet, like you felt the difference in the air when you saw it, because it looks so scary. Honestly, it's one of the most well preserved concentration camps. And like, everything's still there. A lot of Auschwitz was destroyed. A lot of the gas chambers are just rubble. A lot of the barracks were destroyed. But Majdanek is all still there, and it just like, all the wood is so, like, dark and black and like it just looks like you see it in the distance, and already you just feel like we all were just like, Oh my God. And we got there, and we had three survivors with us on the trip, and we like they were celebrities to us, like we just loved them so much. They were all in their 80s. None of them had been in camps, but they had family in camps. One of her, one of them's husband, was in a camp. They had all been, you know, they had all been through serious hardship to get to America. So one of the survivors, the only Hershel Greenblatt, who was just the trip grandpa, about five foot tall, you know, he was from Atlanta, so thick southern accent, but he was so sharp, and he was so full of life and laughter and happiness, and he's always the first one to start dancing, or like, I think he was in, like, The mosh pit during one of the dances at some point, like he was just crazy. He was great. We he was with us. And he had, they had all been on march of living trips before. I think this was his first time in Majdanek. Though, we were walking, we started, we were walking to the gas chambers. This was, like, really, the second concentration camp we'd been to. So all we had, really for reference, was Auschwitz. We didn't really know what to expect, and we were walking through and all of a sudden, like i She's very quiet, and I hear like this sound, and I'm not really sure what it is, and Hershel is just bent over sobbing, and just like sobbing and sobbing like guttural just like crying and crying and crying, which you'd never see Holocaust survivors do, that's something that I've really noticed and over the years, you know, they're always the most stoic and the most you know, just so strong and just we survived, and this is my story. And so to witness that direct connection, like I mentioned earlier, how it's still being processed by people in the moment, the emotions that it's still bringing up fresh to this day. And yeah, so watching Hershel just break down, we all just started breaking down, and one of the other survivors came up to a few of us, and she said, you know, we're walking out. We're going to be able to walk out of these chambers, and we're going to be able to, you know, we're going to keep living, and that really just, you know, added, compounded the emotion. And just being in that space with everyone is people, most people I just met a few days ago experiencing such a raw, intense emotional experience with everyone, just peer sobbing and holding each other in the gas chambers. I just felt the weight of all of those lives lived and lost, just like crash down on me, and it was just such a I kept using the word like transcendent. Moment, because I just felt so connected to my family. And so, you know, like we have now records that my family and I was in the gas chambers in Auschwitz too, and to be able to say that I stood in the spot where my family died was just such a moving and a powerful experience. And just so I don't even know any word to describe other than just, like, simply, like, sad, you know, like it was, obviously there are many other words to use, but like it was, it's, it's still grief at the end of the day. As much as you know, the Holocaust has been turned into history books, and it's in textbooks, and it's, you know, like, that's why I'm so grateful for places like this that just really add the human like, human factor to it. Because we were just all so like, so sad, and we were all so emotional and and just like, processing it together. And that was the first really time that everyone on the group had cried for the first time, a lot of people had cried on the first time for the trip, and just being all together and being with the survivors, and it looking at that physical continuity of the generations that were all there, it was really powerful.

**Cori Silbernagel** 46:21

I think you know that that feeling of transcendence you talk about is is important to me, because it, you know, it lets it lets us know that we were here to keep telling the stories. Because this is living history still, you know, I think, of course, we all know we're among our last generation of Holocaust survivors, but this history is still, is still unfolding. The rebuilding continues for the survivors, the research, the scholarship, continues to evolve. We learn more about this period of history all the time, so that that's another thing that I think it's important to share as often as we can, that that Holocaust history is living history today, and it really is, I think, I think so valuable and important that families like yours continue to share these stories. I think it also illuminates that rebuilding looks really different for each survivor family.

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 47:40

I think that's really true. I think that, yeah, and the lessons and the for some people, it's very universal, I think, and the lessons are drawn, and I think in our family, especially for my father, it's very specific to our family. But this idea of rebuilding, we sort of have a joke in our family every time one of us holds or dances with the Torah, my father starts crying. And now it's, I mean, we just start laughing because we just know it's like that, but it's, it's, but it's because it's this continuation, it's the generations are we're going to be continuing in this rebuilding. And there is the, certainly the sadness that his parents and their parents are not we're not able to witness that, but that it is continuing, and there's a real beauty to that. And I think, and I think even Noa, Noa is very involved in theater, and you have two different experiences that of plays coming up that are exploring the Jewish, the Jewish story, and so besides, it's to be able to meld those two worlds. I think there's something really special.

**Cori Silbernagel** 48:47

Now, tell me a little bit more about it.

**Maya Jaffee** 48:49

She's a pro.

**Cori Silbernagel** 48:51

It's, well, it's great to hear that you, you know, you're carrying this, this family story and legacy forward in your own way. So, so what does that look like for you?

**Noa Jaffee** 49:01

Yeah, I mean, this summer, I'm in Fiddler on the Roof at the Cincinnati opera. So I think, I mean, it's been a while since I've gotten to, like, be in a show that, like, tells Jewish history and like, or I can, like, see myself in it. And then this coming winter, I'm the Assistant Director for a play called Indecent, which is about the Holocaust and people in it, specifically about Polish Jews. And I'm also serving as the dramaturge, which is like the historical researcher. And I realized, I mean, I've started compiling some resources. One of the things I did is I made a glossary of every like, Yiddish or Jewish term in the play, and I realized, like, oh, I only had, and I just realized, like, I only had to google one of them, because a lot of it was just like, existing as a Jewish person, like with my family history of just like, I didn't have to, like, do a ton of research for it. So it does kind of feel like I'm, like, telling my own story as long along with, like, the story of the characters in the play.

**Maya Jaffee** 50:07

And just to clarify, just to humble brag on Noah for a little bit more since, yeah, you're six... she just turned 16, so most this happened while she was 15, and being the assistant director that there's no, you know, other than the director, who's an adult. There's no other really adult telling you what to do. It's not like you have assignments you need to turn into a teacher. Like you are basically a director and you're making, you're helping in casting decisions, and you're helping, like, aren't you doing the blocking? Some of it, she's doing the blocking, and she's doing so many things to make turn the play from the script into on the stage. So do you like how do you think you're gonna really stress the Jewish part?

**Noa Jaffee** 50:56

I mean the cast and crew. I'm pretty sure once the show starts, it's going to go going to go on a tour of the Holocaust & Humanity Center. But I think also, just like, making sure, like, they know the history. I mean, I'm going to get so annoying just chiming in every two seconds. But also, just like, once again, like that ninth grade trip I took to the Holocaust & Humanity Center, being that human connection, of like, yes, you're playing a character in the play, but like it's connected to real people, and like it's not just a story.

**Maya Jaffee** 51:30

Yeah,

**Cori Silbernagel** 51:31

I love hearing about how you know, how each of you have found ways to take action in ways that are meaningful to each of you. Could, could each of you tell me, you know, in, in just a snip, what? What is that action? Why? Why is it important?

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 51:56

For me, it's really leaning into Jewish joy, because I think if you know who you are and where you came from, and that each of us has a purpose and a reason to be here, and for me, it's being part of this Jewish story, hopefully you make the world a little bit better, because you know how to take your gifts and bring them to the to the world. So that's been my kind of focus.

**Maya Jaffee** 52:22

For me, it's really just absorbing as much as I can about my family while most of them are still here. I've always been very close with my grandpa, and, you know, we spent a lot of time together, and really just hearing as much as I can and really internalizing it, but also implementing Jewish practices into my everyday life. You know, I went to a Jewish preschool and elementary school, Rockwern Academy, and so that really, really helped build a super solid foundation, you know, because those are such formative years and just how you see the world and how you go about your day, um, and, you know, I go to a pub - I just finished a public high school now, actually, um, but so you know that there really are not any daily Jewish aspects that are implemented as part of the school routine there. So, you know, as of this past year, I, you know, just like small things, you know, we still go to synagogue. I don't go as often as I used to. I need to get back on that. But I did, you know, put like a reminder on my phone that goes off every morning that says, like, did you pray today? And I say the Modeh Ani every morning. And I just, you know, I mentioned it to some of my friends. I have some friends who are Jewish, but they're not as practicing, and they want to get more into it. So, you know, we just say Modeh Ani, and thank you God for letting me live another day, I just get excited, and I just think about all the things that I'm excited to do. So actually, really does tie into leaning into Jewish joy, just being proud of who you are. I never hide it, you know, I always mention it like I it comes up casually, you know, oh, sorry, like I, I can't hang out tonight. It's Shabbat. Or, you know, my friends are well aware by now, just keeping it at a core part of my life and just my daily life. Just focusing on continuity,

**Noa Jaffee** 54:25

for me, it's removing that distance we have from history. I mean, I think it's so easy, especially in this day and age, to just sort of become desensitized to it all. So I think just like, really emphasizing like, this is like, this isn't just history. It's my history. And saying, like, like, I wouldn't be who I am today had it not been for, like, my family's story. So I think just removing that, like, separation, yeah, there's some,

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 54:51

there's a Jewish educator, Avraham Infeld, who talks about part of being Jewish is we don't have Jewish history. We have Jewish memory. And it feels that like. A lot of what you're talking about, and also what the Holocaust & Humanity Center does is it helps bring people's stories to life. So we're not just, it's not that removed. This is our memory, for all of us. This is something we share. So I really appreciate that sense of not of shortening the distance.

**Cori Silbernagel** 55:18

Yeah, I think this entire conversation has reminded me to listen and and see the other I think that's, that's one of the legacies that I see you all carry forward. You know, particularly hearing hearing about your grandmother and your grandfather, your dad and their their openness and willingness to see and understand and care and find joy in life, I think that's really special. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about today that we haven't?

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 56:06

I think the I mean, I think the only thing that I realized we haven't really touched I started by telling the story from very much my internal perspective of my parents. But I think also just knowing the names of our family is important. So I just would like to just acknowledge that my grandparents were Hirsch and Zhenya Piotrkowski, and that's how they lived their lives in Poland. And when they came to America, they got a new last name of Potter, and so they became Harry and Jenny Potter and I, and they, their children were Sam and Ruthie Potter, and that one of the things that brought me the most joy when I was in my rabbinical studies. I was a chaplain, and I would go to the Jewish Hospital, and sometimes I'd walk into a room and there'd be an older patient, and he would say, Potter. He said, Are you Harry Potter's daughter? That's one his granddaughter. And I would always get a snippet of story about the new like newly immigrated Harry Potter helping and taking care of other people, dropping off an extra dozen eggs, helping somebody else get acclimated, and this whole idea of just what it must take, the strength of character to come to a new country with very little and fear and pain and anguish and yet still be there to give to other people, and that that's something that I think of as a model and guides me. Yeah,

**Cori Silbernagel** 57:37

thank you.

**Maya Jaffee** 57:38

Yeah, and I am as part of the actual March, it's common for participants to have a small wooden placard where you write something on it, a message or a name, and then you put it in the in the ground, in the train tracks of Birkenau. And I have a picture of it, but I just wrote my, Sampo's. My great grandmother's four brothers, their names, their family name Lashinsky. And, you know, for the bravery of Sam Potter on the back. Just, you know, like we talked about the name aspect of it and the humanizing aspect of it. And just keep keeping memory alive.

**Cori Silbernagel** 58:21

Yeah, well, and I think there's also so many names we will never know, and that's why it's so important to share those names as we do know them. Well, thank you so much for talking with me today.

**Maya Jaffee** 58:37

Thank you so much.

**Cori Silbernagel** 58:38

The best part of my week.

**Rabbi Shena Jaffee** 58:40

Well, thank you. Best of ours. Thanks for giving us this opportunity to have this conversation

**Maya Jaffee** 58:42

like I said, it was such an honor and such a privilege to be able to be here. Thank you

**Jackie Congedo** 58:52

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