Hear My Story: Live with Jesse Eisenberg transcript

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

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

**Jackie Congedo** 00:03

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** 00:21

Mine was 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** 00:40

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.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 01:03

Hello, hello, hello, hi. Great. We are speaking Okay. Thank you so much for having me in your wonderful city, and

**Jackie Congedo** 01:14

yes, you can Okay.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 01:14

Thank you so much for having me

**Jackie Congedo** 01:16

You'd think neither of us have ever done this before.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 01:16

Yeah, exactly. So my wife and I have lived on and off in Bloomington, Indiana for the last 15 years. And yeah, certainly, as we were kind of discussing back there, there's certainly kind of a difference between the kind of Midwestern Jewish community and the and the city Jewish community. Yeah, exactly, exactly.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 01:18

Yeah, I've seen microphones, but I've never touched one.

**Jackie Congedo** 01:23

Jesse, it is so much fun to have you here.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 01:25

I'm so glad to be here,

**Jackie Congedo** 01:26

really, just from the moment you walked in, we had a chance to tour the museum downstairs, and we've been visiting and schmoozing and the whole thing. And you just feel like you fit in Cincinnati. You just feel like you just are part of the family here in Cincinnati.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 01:40

Thanks. I do feel there's something about meeting a lot of older Jewish people that just makes me feel very, very comfortable

**Jackie Congedo** 01:48

that's your demo. Is that

**Jesse Eisenberg** 01:50

that is Yeah? I think that's just, that's just yeah, the demographic that I feel most at ease,

**Jackie Congedo** 02:55

I wanted to start with, sort of your relationship to Judaism and Jewish identity, which has clearly deepened over time when you look at sort of your work and what you've produced, many of your films, some of you who are real. Jesse Eisenberg loyalists know about "Holy Rollers," and now "A Real Pain," grapple with this Jewish history tradition trauma in pretty complex and very human ways. How have your own questions about Jewish identity and memory evolved through your work?

**Jesse Eisenberg** 02:59

Yeah, I It's so strange because, you know, I'm born Jewish. My parents are both Jewish and were more observant than certainly me and my sisters and my generation were. And yet, like, almost paradoxically, like, I've gotten, like, more interested in my faith as I got older, which probably is the reverse for a lot of people of my generation, and for me, I started exploring it through my work, through the arts, like the movie that you mentioned, "Holy Rollers." So when I was when I was 12 years old, I was having, like, a tough time in school. I dropped out of... I missed school for a year and had a tutor, and I also dropped out of Hebrew school, and I was never bar mitzvahed, and I told my parents it was because I thought religion starts wars. I was making it all up. I just wanted to not be in Hebrew school anymore, and so I was never bar mitzvahed. And then about 15 years later, I was doing this movie that you just mentioned, this movie called "Holy Rollers." I was playing a Hasidic Jewish drug dealer, which, apparently there are those people and and I had started to go to the schools for the Hasidic kids, and I told them, I'm, you know, doing this thing. And some of them said, It's okay, you can come on in and we'll teach you. And so I actually was bar mitzvahed at 25 years old, like by the most religious people on the planet, which were the Hasids in Brooklyn, on Eastern Parkway, and so like all through, like, strangely, like, through my work, and especially, and including "A Real Pain," this movie, my recent movie have kind of brought me closer to my faith and to my history and my ancestry than anything I learned about when I was a kid.

**Jackie Congedo** 03:21

and it sounds like also the Midwestern thing is like something that really appeals to you. Have spent some time, significant time, yeah, in Bloomington.

**Jackie Congedo** 04:40

Yeah, it's really special to watch that. And you can see it, I think, in "A Real Pain." How the depth of your grasp on this experience and the identity and the tradition it is such. It's a fabulous film. It's such a personal, tender, funny, I mean, it's. You know, to be able to navigate this topic in a way that's so deeply human and elicits all these emotions so powerful. I think it also clearly it holds very powerful meaning for people who have connections to the history, right, who are survivors or children, you know, 3G's, but also has clearly resonated well beyond the Jewish audience or Holocaust, you know, survivor or children or grandchildren audience. I'm curious, what was it in your own life that sort of unlocked this story for you? Like, how did you come to wanting to tell this story?

**Jesse Eisenberg** 05:36

So when I was a kid, I had a great aunt. She was 85 at the time, and my dad used to tell me all the time, "Be nice to her. She's 85," you know, or "Could you call her? She's 85." And she ended up living to 106

**Jackie Congedo** 05:51

your aunt, Doris?

**Jesse Eisenberg** 05:52

My aunt Doris, yeah, and she ended up, she ended up living 21 years. She ended up living to 106 and so I was kind of guilted into this relationship when I was 16 years old by my dad, who I think was probably guilty for not having a relationship with this woman. And she was really tough. And I was starting to act at the time when I was 17-18, years old, and I needed some kind of like direction and discipline. And I was not finding it in the arts, which is not a place you go for discipline and and so I started going to my aunt's house every Thursday for three hours and helping her out. And then I moved into her house, in her tiny, weird house, and and she just became like my mentor. And I told her, If I ever get a job in Europe, I will go visit the house you grew up in, in Poland, which is, if you saw the movie. At the end of the movie, the characters go visit this little house, and that was my aunt's house.

**Jackie Congedo** 06:45

Yeah

**Jackie Congedo** 06:45

Amazing.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 06:45

So I told Doris, if I ever get a job in Europe, I will go to see this house you're from, you're from, and I got a job working on a movie that was filming in Bosnia, and I was an idiot without a map at the time, so I thought, Okay, let me just pop over to Poland. I'm sure it's next door Bosnia, and it's not. But anyway, so, so I, but I, I went there with my then girlfriend, now wife, and we traveled. This was before MapQuest, or Google Maps, certainly. And it was, you know, to get to this little house was a kind of arduous task to find this village and everything. So we got to this house in Poland, this house that I was telling my aunt, you know, that I will take a picture for her, you know, this thing that I was trying to do as a gesture for her. And I was standing outside this house, and I just had, like, a flood of thoughts, which were that I think I'm supposed to be feeling something, yet I don't, what am I supposed to be feeling? And I was just like staring up at this house for a while, and I was just, I was loitering. Essentially, I was loitering because I wasn't feeling anything, I thought maybe I would like rub the dirt on my face or cry, you know, or, you know, I don't know what, or, you know. And so I started thinking about like, how we connect to our past. And that was a long time ago, and, you know, I've since then written movies and plays, and I always wanted to write something about how we try to connect with our past in ways that are not predictable.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 06:46

I think, you know, if you had asked me before that trip, what would I feel going going to this house, I think I probably would have said, and I think a lot of people probably would would say something along the lines of, cathartic,

**Jackie Congedo** 07:52

yeah, right

**Jesse Eisenberg** 07:56

Or I'd, you know, I'm

**Jackie Congedo** 08:04

some emotional healing, or some connection that

**Jesse Eisenberg** 08:15

feels full circle. I've come back to this place that we were kicked out of, and I just didn't have that feeling. And so when I started writing "A Real Pain," I wanted to try to present kind of like two guys who were dealing with a fraught relationship and their own history while also trying to connect to their family's history. And both are not working out in the way they expected. They're not able to reconcile with each other in the predictable way they thought a trip might like this might do,

**Jackie Congedo** 08:43

yeah,

**Jesse Eisenberg** 08:43

and they're not able to reconcile with their history. And, you know, to me, that's like my perhaps nihilistic, tragic perspective on the ways we try to connect to history in and the way that can often be less successful than we hope.

**Jackie Congedo** 08:59

Yeah, yeah, I think, and I think that tension really comes through. I mean, thinking about that scene outside your great aunt's house, yeah. And just like, you know, the grandness of it in so many ways. And then you have the neighbors who are, like, they're gonna trip over that stone. You can't leave a stone there. Like, what are you doing, right? And sort of the like, you know, grand moment that's supposed to be this big thing that you've conjured up, you know, that's gonna be so significant for you, is interrupted by the like, mundane nature of

**Jesse Eisenberg** 09:28

real world,

**Jackie Congedo** 09:29

life and real world. And so it was just beautifully I thought it was so beautifully encapsulated. I want to ask about the themes of sort of intergenerational trauma that the phone the film explores, you know, as a 3G as we call, as we call, you know your type, right, right here. You know the member of the third generation out from the history. You know, you've said in interviews that you're telling the story from this "the safety of distance," right, which I think a lot of our 3G's can relate to that feeling, certainly folks in our speakers bureau and people who continue to tell the stories of their families. And yet, interestingly, you shared you've also this has also brought your family closer to the history you know, your dad wants to go to Poland, and your son, who was in the movie playing your son in the movie banner makes the cameo. So clearly you're navigating like what your role is in this multi generational experience, right? It's like you're the inheritor of this from your parents who maybe were too close to it to be able to hold it in this way. And you're probably thinking, I mean, as any of us who are parents about the legacy that you leave and how you pass that on, and what will be your son's grappling of it with, right? How are you like? How has this film helped you do that? Or, sort of, how are you working through that?

**Jesse Eisenberg** 10:55

Well thank you for such a nice question. I really never heard of like the 3G concept until I started talking about the movie after making the movie, yeah. And then met people who said, I'm also 3G and I... it sounded like a cult. I didn't know what they were referring to, or a cell phone option. And like, I

**Jackie Congedo** 11:13

it's the best kind of cult. It's the best kind of cult,

**Jesse Eisenberg** 11:16

yeah, now I'm aware of what it is, you know, and but like, I never really thought of myself as part of some kind of legacy, or somebody deserving of some kind of world sympathy, or somebody who suffered something, you know, but, but I was raised by paranoid people who were raised by paranoid people when I was younger, my mother used to wake me up in the middle of the night and say, say to me, "I had a dream that we were in a boat and it capsized and I couldn't save you and you drowned," go back to sleep.

**Jackie Congedo** 11:51

And so, like anyone else had that experience in this room,

**Jesse Eisenberg** 11:55

yeah. Anyway, you can call me anytime if you have any dreams about me dying. But, um, but basically, like, you know, as a kid, I just remember thinking that's terrifying, and I never learned how to swim, you know, of course, and but it's funny. Then, after making this movie and then hearing about this idea of a 3G you know, you know, of you know, it's kind of trauma passed down, the only thing that really makes sense to me, logical sense to me is, because I don't understand epigenetics is, is, is that you know, when you're raised by people who are fleeing things, they're paranoid because that was survival, and then they pass it on to me, a paranoia, because for them, it was kind of survival too. And then for me, kind of like irony is that I live a very safe life, and so I'm kind of, I have this deep paranoia, but it manifesting to do with it, yeah, that I have to, like, do something, but it manifests in the most shallow ways, like, if I don't eat that bagel now, I'm not gonna sleep tonight, because I'll have coffee later. And so I have this, like, deep paranoia, but for nonsense, you know. And as, of course, and as you mentioned, and as Elizabeth mentioned, and as the Congressman mentioned, you know, things are becoming more fraught now. So obviously things are changing a little bit. But I grew up in a kind of halcyon, you know, 90s experience of being, you know, Jewish, and not thinking it was a minority, even because of where I grew up. And so I understand, like, in thinking about like third generation pain. I understand what it's like. My my wife's my wife's father, their family escaped Poland to Russia. So he was born in Russia and then grew up in a displaced persons camp in Germany. And, you know, my wife is a paranoid person because her father saw his best friend jump off the boat and commit suicide on the way to America, you know. So these are all practical, realistic, you know, the realistic implications of growing up in those worlds. The only thing, sorry, no, the only thing I hesitate, only I hesitate, is to kind of, like, associate myself with some kind of great suffering that, to me, feels just, personally kind of a step too far, yeah,

**Jackie Congedo** 14:02

yeah. And since your wife's paranoid and you're paranoid, then, like, the rule of double negatives means your son will be so well adjusted, like, this kid is gonna be just like, grounded, ready to go,

**Jesse Eisenberg** 14:13

we are so conscious of being calm.

**Jackie Congedo** 14:16

Yeah?

**Jesse Eisenberg** 14:16

And yet, it didn't work.

**Jackie Congedo** 14:21

I want to ask, pivoting for a moment to the production of the film. So you filmed at Majdanek, right, which is one of the camps in Eastern Europe, in Poland. And you, you, I've heard you talk about this not being the first time you visited one of the camps. You've been to Poland. You mentioned this you'd been with your wife many years earlier, but I'm curious like what it was like for you to return there with the mission of filming this story. And as I was watching it, I was wondering how much of like what you're emoting you and the rest of the cast or emoting was like your actual reaction in the moment to the space, you know, this isn't a it's it's not a set. You know, this is like the real, the authenticity of that, and how much of it was like acting that you prepared to do, or that the cast prepared to do. Yeah,

**Jesse Eisenberg** 15:13

it was strange. So there's a scene that's set in Majdanek, the concentration camp, which didn't occur to me at the time, because of my own ignorance, that doesn't let movies film there, because, you know, Holocaust movies probably ask them all the time, can we turn your camp, which is a museum, which is a graveyard, which is a hallowed space, into, you know, Auschwitz 1942 and have, you know, our set, you know, and have people running around in Nazi uniforms. And so they just have a policy, which is, we don't let movies here except for the occasional like news footage or documentary or something. So it took a long time to get in touch with them. It took a long time to convince them that my intentions were essentially in accordance with their intentions, which is to show people in today's world what happened here. And so they finally, over the course of like six months, allowed me and granted me access to film there. And I just wanted to mention something, because we're here, you know, talking about upstanders. When I started speaking with the people who work at Majdanek, I just had this incredible revelation, the people that work in this concentration camp are not Jews. They're my age, you know, they're, you know, 40. They're young academics who are really bright people, could probably get any job they want, and they've devoted themselves to Holocaust history, which means that they have to drive their cars into that camp every day and take their lunch break in that camp every day. And, you know, stay late working and then leave in the darkness through Majdanek, I mean. And so when I started thinking about how I grew up hearing kind of criticisms of the poles that, oh, they're antisemites, why would you go shoot a movie in Poland? Or why would you go back to Poland? I really thought of these people and thought how there are so many people in Poland preserving Holocaust history that are not Jewish, that have devoted their lives to memorializing our family's history, and how much more they're doing for our family than me, and that has stayed with me and touched me more than any experience I had there, including the movie, and inspired me and my wife and my kid, you know, by proxy, to get Polish citizenship, because we really felt connected to the people that are working there on our, you know, family's behalf. But anyway, in terms of filming, there we had, you know, there, you know, some cast was Jewish, and, you know, they're seeing concentration camp for the first time. The way we set up the shots in the scenes there were, was to be kind of like, as respectful on a steer as possible, meaning we put the camera like on the side, like we're filming in the room of shoes, for example, where you see, you know, the thousands of shoes in the in the cages, and I didn't tell the actors where the camera was. I didn't want to make it like a movie where they feel like they have to look and do you know, I said, just walk into this room, take it in as you would, and when you're done, you could leave. And so the actors walked in, they looked Jennifer Grey, who's in the movie. She broke down in one scene. The shot's not in the movie, but it was her seeing this thing for the very first time after losing a lot of family in the Holocaust. So kind of what you said was accurate. A lot of the actors were seeing it for the first time. Kieran Culkin, who's the other lead in the movie, is not Jewish, but he was really missing his kids at the time. He never leaves his kids. He didn't want to do the movie. He didn't want to leave his kids. And we brought him into the room with the shoes, and he just walked out. I was like, What happened to you? What happened to you? What happened? He's like, there was a kid's shoe in there. And he's not Jewish. Knew very little about, you know, Holocaust history, except what I told him about in preparation for the movie. And you know, even it touched him so deeply, which I imagine it will when, especially when you know what you've done downstairs, people visit. And of course, when the Auschwitz exhibit comes here as well,

**Jackie Congedo** 18:39

yeah, yeah, it is. It's powerful, and you can see in the film, I think the way that space was received by the cast is like really comes across, and I really appreciate the way I thought you handled those scenes with such care. You know, there wasn't a lot of like, story advancement. There was nothing on there. Just sound the experience of experiencing the space. Yeah, it was really very powerful and respectful. I wanted to ask about the character who is a Rwandan Genocide survivor who converts to Judaism, who's along with the group. And had had read that you This is based on a real person who you know, yeah, tell me about that, and also about the reason, like, was there an intentionality there around connecting to sort of other atrocity, other genocide with that character?

**Jesse Eisenberg** 19:38

Yes, yes. So on the tour group that these characters are going on in Poland, of this heritage tour, there's a character who is the survivor of the Rwandan genocide. His name is aloj. He's based on my friend eloje. The kind of strange thing is so Eloge is born in Rwanda. His family is killed in the genocide. There he goes. Goes to Winnipeg as a refugee, and he finds that the only people he can connect to are the older Jewish Holocaust survivors in Winnipeg. They're the only people that can understand the depth of this kid's this guy's pain. And so he converts to Judaism. He is the most religious Jew I know. If you look up his name, he's Canadian. If you look up his name, the first thing that comes up is a video of him talking about going on an Auschwitz tour. And so here's this Rwandan guy who is so devoted to like, Holocaust history, because it's the only way he can connect to his history. And so when I was thinking about characters that can go on this tour, you know, the truth is, most of the characters, you know, there's the couple from Shaker Heights, and the truth is that would be the main demographic on this tour. And as a writer, I was trying to think about just having a bit of a more diverse group, yeah. And I thought, gotta be so interesting to have a character of a loge. So you kind of indicated it. It would allow me to connect, like, you know, Jewish history and Jewish genocide, the Holocaust, with, you know, another terrible genocide, yeah, of course. And it would allow me, without making any kind of political statement or saying it explicitly, to just connect those two things. I also do work in New York. I do a it's like this show. We do this, this performance of a trial at the Nuremberg trials, and we perform it with Rwandan survivors and Jewish young, you know, and Jewish actors and so, like, I feel a real, you know, I'm somebody when I think about the Holocaust, I think, you know, how could people do this to each other? Obviously, the Holocaust is exclusive to Jews, but what it makes me think of is a kind of a greater feeling of being connected to suffering around the world. And that makes me feel, in some ways, a little better, because it makes me feel like, God, what does it make me feel like? Just connected to the world in a bigger way, and having a character like a loge in the movie without saying it explicitly, or making some kind of grand political statement or some polemic, it just allows me to connect those two things in a way that's, I think, helpful for audiences to connect to as well.

**Jackie Congedo** 22:03

Yeah, yeah. It's a beautiful character and a beautiful exploration of that. Okay, so moving to the present day. Tonight. Tonight is Upstander Awards. Tomorrow is upstander night at Great American ballpark with the Reds playing the Yankees. I don't even think I needed to mention that they're playing the Yankees. The important part is that the Reds important part is that the Reds are playing at Great American ballpark, right? And you, you know, you clearly care about this mission of of building a community of upstanders. You have committed so much of your professional time to the work of memory, moral responsibility, not turning away. I'm wondering how you see your role as a filmmaker, as an artist, in sort of helping people find their own moments to stand up, upstanding.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 22:52

Oh, thanks. Yeah. I'm married to an activist. She teaches in four Title One schools in New York City. She teaches kids who are formerly incarcerated and she teaches kids who are refugees. And you know, so I'm kind of confronted every night. Confronted is the wrong word. I'm treated every night to work that feels far more directly impactful to those who are most in need, and at least in our city. And so when I think about my work in the arts. What I'm trying to do is not is trying to kind of humanize stories and so in the real pain, you know, I My goal was to humanize these two guys in a way that felt modern. Something I have not seen before is a Holocaust themed movie that presents kind of like modern people. I'm sure a movie exists. I just, I've not seen it, you know, that presents people to modern audiences in a way that feels very, very relatable. Yeah. And so my goal, with the real pain, was to try to present two characters that are accessible enough and familiar enough to kind of have a way in to talk about this very fraught suffering and history. And so my goal was not political in the movie. In fact, my goal was the exact opposite. My goal was to make these characters so real and authentic and relatable that, you know, one of them mails weed to himself because he doesn't want to take it through the airport, you know. And you know, my character talks about his the pills he takes for OCD, and you know, my the other guy is drinking all the free bottles of wine on the airplane. And what I'm trying to show is like real people, and yes, they're flawed, you know, they're flawed people, but I think for audiences watching a movie, they relate to that more than they do like the heroic characters, yes. And my gripe with the amount with kind of movies that touch on the theme of Holocaust studies, or Holocaust history rather, is that so often they could feel inaccessible, feel detached, yeah. And so what I was, I was trying to do something that felt very different from that. So in terms of, like, my goal, in terms of. Like, you know, bigger picture, that's what I'm trying to do.

**Jackie Congedo** 25:03

Yeah, I think it provides people, like, an example of what it is to access the history right in an everyday way that's consumable for everyday people. I just thought it was so and it gave permission for people to experience it in lots of different ways and to and to wrestle with their own connection to it

**Jesse Eisenberg** 25:22

Exactly that. My favorite thing I heard after the movie was people telling me, I'm going back to Ireland. We always wanted to see where my grandparents are from, people from other cultures that connected like through my culture story, their own history.

**Jackie Congedo** 25:34

That's beautiful. Okay, last question before we get to the really exciting part. No offense Jesse, but our Upstander Award winners, I course, I realized that for someone with anxiety, it's probably the wrong question to ask you, why you feel hopeful as someone who struggles in this moment of like crazy tension in the world, and you know, lots of strife and struggle, but I'm gonna ask you anyway, sure, what makes you feel hopeful? I mean, what wakes you up every day and keeps you going and can, you know, sort of pushes you on your path, in your art, in your work, what makes you hopeful?

**Jesse Eisenberg** 26:16

Quite a big question, especially for a nihilist. No, I, you know, I don't know. I grew up in the 90s, and there was a feeling of real kind of, like, cynicism that seemed to be like, and that was like, the popular thing at the time, that kind of feeling of, like, stick it to the man is the most important thing in this vague way, without doing anything good. And I see my wife's students. My wife has students who, like, crossed the Darien Gap as kids and are like, now trying to make it in shelters in New York. And like, they're so much more optimistic than I grew up feeling. And I look at my kid, who's eight, who is, like, surrounded by more, like, optimistic, interesting, accepting kids, you know, and like, that's hopeful. And I'm, like, constantly surprised, because I'm a cynic, you know, because, for whatever set of reasons. And like, I look at that, I go, Oh, my God, my wife was, you know, she took her kids to see this play last week. Real Women Have Curves. And they were like, "This is the best day of my life." And I've never said that in my life. This is the best I can even imagine for, you know, I don't even know how it feels so embarrassed and like, you know, these kids who are, like, been through the worst situations you could be, you know, in at, you know, 12 years old. And so that's hopeful. It seems like the tenor of like, maybe younger people, at least the younger people that I'm referring to, has kind of changed and moved away from cynicism and eye rolling. It seems to like, oh, how can we help people, and how can we enjoy things?

**Jackie Congedo** 27:40

Yeah, I think that is the gift that the next generation has and has to give to the world. And certainly your son will be part of that and has a great role, maybe anxious, but role model,

**Jesse Eisenberg** 27:52

yeah, role model, I will never tell him about my swimming nightmares.

**Jackie Congedo** 27:56

Yeah, don't tell him about that. Please join me in thanking the amazing Jesse Eisenberg

**Jesse Eisenberg** 28:01

Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me. Thanks a lot.

**Jackie Congedo** 28:04

Thank you so much.

**Jesse Eisenberg** 28:05

Thanks, Jackie, for your work

**Jackie Congedo** 28:07

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