To Bear Witness: Stories from Auschwitz to Cincinnati

Episode 2 transcript

**Jackie Congedo** 00:01

Auschwitz is a name the world can't forget. At the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center, we've made it part of our mission to understand its impact by learning from those who survived and came to Cincinnati. In this limited series, we share those stories of courage loss and the ripple effects still felt today.

**Cori Silbernagel** 00:24

My name is Cori Silbernagel. I'm the Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center, and today, we are really fortunate to be filming in our collection storage spaces at Union Terminal. One of my favorite things about working with our collection is that I get to learn the stories of of our Holocaust survivors that settled here in Cincinnati. So today I'm going to share two of those stories with you. Each of these stories is a story of courage, is a story of resilience, and is a story of both survival in Auschwitz and rebuilding here in Cincinnati. So I first would like to share the story of Henry Carter. This is a photograph of Henry Carter taken later in life. Henry Carter was a survivor from Poland. He was living with his family, his wife, has two young children in bleichow. When the German army invaded Poland in 1939 Henry and his family fled their home. They rented an apartment in Krakow, and they were safe for a time, but eventually the German front continued across the country of Poland, and in 1941 Henry and his family were confined to the Krakow ghetto. Henry didn't sit idly by in the ghetto. He, through acts that were both big and small, did what he could to resist, and he became involved in the underground movement. When I look at this photograph of Henry, I can see, I can see that courage within his face. In the ghetto, he obtained false papers, and he was able to come and go from the ghetto secretively, and in doing that, he was able to gather information by listening to the British broadcast radio. So he was learning about what was happening in the war. He was bringing that information back into the ghetto, telling members of the resistance. And ultimately he was arrested. And he was caught for doing this. He was arrested one day coming back into the ghetto to visit his family, and he was placed in the prison in the ghetto. Ultimately, he was deported to Auschwitz, and that was when Henry was separated from his family. He he never saw his wife and children again, and they did not survive the Holocaust in Auschwitz, Henry survived by helping others and by receiving the help of others. When he was in the camp, there were three different boys that he cared for. They had lost their families. They were separated themselves, and Henry cared for them up through liberation. When Henry first arrived at the camp, he was tattooed with a number on his arm. You can see that number here in this photograph, and he was given a striped prisoner uniform. This was the cap that Henry was given. This number is embroidered after the war, Henry kept this because it was a memory of what he had experienced and what he had overcome when they were liberated from the camp. He went home, discovered that his wife and his children had not survived. He had those three boys with him, two of them he was able to reunite with their families, the other he adopted as the boy had no family of his own remaining, and they came to Cincinnati. In Cincinnati, Henry started to share his story. He had married a woman who also survived the camp, named Anne. She came with him. This is a photograph of them taken after liberation. They're wearing their uniforms still. When they came to Cincinnati, they didn't share their stories often, but Henry started to share his story, and some of these newspapers are evidence of that. As Henry got older, he began to share more and more, and he became a really beloved figure in our community. He owned a dry goods store in Erlanger, Kentucky. You can see that photograph here. Here's Henry standing outside of his store, inside of his store, and when I read through these newspapers, I can pull. Pull out, you know, some really special, special quotes. He notes that, "Before I die, I want people to know about what happened." He writes that, "I only survive by strong beliefs. I'm grateful to be here. People don't know what freedom means, and I thank God that I'm here." So it's important for Henry to share his story, and it really is a privilege that we're able to share that story. Today, Henry is no longer living, but his story can continue to be shared through artifacts like these, through the testimony he recorded, and his story is upstairs in the museum today. Another story I want to share with you from the archives is the story of Leo Wilich. This is a story that has been shared in our museum for years through this very special artifact right next to me. If you visited the museum before, you've probably seen this, and today we've brought it downstairs into our collection office to share more of this story with you. So Leo was born in Poland. He is a Polish survivor who was living in Lodz when Poland was invaded. He was a furrier. He was a successful businessman, and upon occupation, was forced into the Lodz ghetto. From the Lodz ghetto, Leo was deported to Auschwitz. He was with his brother. His brother died very shortly after arrival, something that's that's written that really tortured Leo throughout the rest of his life that experience, but Leo really persevered and continued by not only surviving in the camps, but rebuilding a new life here in Cincinnati, When Leo arrived in Auschwitz, he was given this uniform. His number is included here on this badge, and he was never tattooed with this number as many Auschwitz survivors or those coming into the camp were he would have been, had he not been sent to Dachau 10 days later, so he was in Auschwitz for a very short period of time, ultimately, then went to Dachau and was liberated from Dachau at the end of the war. When Leo was liberated, he didn't get rid of his uniform. I mean, it exists right next to us today as this tangible memory of what he had been through. It was important to him. He took very good care of it for an item that was made to dehumanize, to take away his identity. This uniform became part of his identity. And let me explain what I mean by that. When Leo came to Cincinnati, he came in 1949, he was the only survivor of his family and and he had to rebuild. Life was not easy for him, and rebuilding was really hard. So Leo would, upon having a bad day, take this uniform out of his closet at his home, and he would put it on and look at himself in the mirror, and he would be reminded looking at himself that he had witnessed his worst days already. His worst days were in the ghetto. His worst days were in Auschwitz and in Dachau and that because of those experiences, he knew he could overcome what was bothering him today. So the symbol of dehumanization for Leo became part of who he was, part of his story. I want to share a photograph of Leo. This photograph is taken in 1950 he would have been in Cincinnati at this point in time. He carries a very serious face, but we hear that Leo was a really joyful, happy person. He He was the life of the party. He loved to dance. He had many friends among the survivor community. Many Holocaust survivors came here to Cincinnati and and part of that was because of Leo. He became an upstander himself later in life, because he arrived in Cincinnati early on in 1949 as other survivors saw new homes, places to go, survivors from log his hometown, he helped sponsor some of those people to join him in Cincinnati. So part of this vibrant survivor community that exists today among the survivors children and grandchildren, is rooted in that act that Leo did those years ago.

**Cori Silbernagel** 10:16

I want to share a passage from a letter that was written by Leo's cousin. She shares a little bit about him to help us understand who the person was that wore this uniform. She writes, "Like so many other survivors, Leo's ability to create a new life was a remarkable achievement, although he didn't articulate it as such, Leo understood the freedom that he found in the United States. Could never be disengaged from its hard won roots and suffering. His camp uniform was the personification of that suffering, yet his values were anchored in those painful memories. What emerged was an individual whose compassion and desire to alleviate the suffering of those less fortunate made him a much appreciated member of this community." Individuals like Leo and Henry are remembered by many in our community. They're remembered as people who brought others together, people who spread joy and hope. And I really think it's remarkable that they were able to do that, and it really should be an inspiration to all of us that we can be the best of humanity today, even for those that have witnessed the worst of humanity,

**Jackie Congedo** 11:45

This is a production of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. The Center's mission is to ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust inspire action today. This series is part of the Cynthia and Harold Guttman Family Center for storytelling special. Thanks to Julie and John Cohen for their support of this series, visit us in person at historic Union Terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio, or online anytime at holocaustandhumanity.org. Managing producer is Anne Thompson. Technical producer is Robert Mills, and Technical director is Josh Emerson. Additional video production by Michael Holder. Visit Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away. at Union terminal, beginning in October 2025.

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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