To Bear Witness: Stories from Auschwitz to Cincinnati Episode 3 Roma and Rozalia

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** 00:22

I'm Cori Silbernagel, Director of collections and exhibitions at the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. Thanks for joining us for this special podcast series ahead of a special exhibit coming in October, Auschwitz, not long ago, not far away, will open in Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal. And I'm really happy to be able to share some of our local Auschwitz stories with you, along with my colleague Trinity Johnson, our Director of Museum Experiences & Holocaust Programs.

**Trinity Johnson** 00:52

Thanks, Cori. So I think the first story we were going to talk about was the Kaltman family, and starting with Roma and Rozalia, and eventually we'll talk about their third sister, Danka, but just for place and space, Roma and her family were from Lodz, Poland, and in 1940 when the Lodz ghetto was established, her family was interned there. We know that ghetto conditions - we'll talk a lot about camp conditions, which were also atrocious - ghetto conditions also very atrocious. But there's something incredible about Roma's story in the ghetto that I know we we're not going to share a lot about the ghetto experience, but I have to share this, because it'll link to her marrying her husband, eventually, after the war, Sam. While she's in the ghetto, and we know ghetto conditions terrible. People are starving. Roma actually, the meager ration she would receive for slave labor, she would buy books so that she could continue learning. And I just think that that's such a important piece of that part of her story, that that I have to bring up right now, because I know Auschwitz is the focus, but I think that spirit in some of the clips that we're going to share today will really come through that that defiance and resilience in her spirit.

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:15

I love I love that story, because it reminds me that resistance takes many different forms, right? And for Roma, her act of resistance is to is to hold on to that, that one joyful thing in her life. And I think that's really beautiful. Do you want to share how Sam and Roma met each other? Because it is connected to that book story,

**Trinity Johnson** 02:40

yes, so they, you know, in those days, you're exhausted from work. You know you're seeing family starving around you, still holding on to whether that's religion or education. And Roma's situation, she said, you know, learning was important, because they couldn't take what was up here. They might take everything else, property, life, but they couldn't take the education what was in her mind. So teenagers in those days would meet in a courtyard there in the ghetto. That was their socialization. That was how they encouraged one another, and that's where Roma and Sam met. They met, you know, with other teenagers in the ghetto, even exchanging books and continuing to learn. And so I know what we'll talk about later is how that education played such a role in kind of their second chapter here in Cincinnati. I also I think it was important to voice that because it's so much connected to some of the later things and their legacy here in Cincinnati,

**Cori Silbernagel** 03:48

yeah, yeah, I totally agree. So in Lodz, the ghetto is liquidated, and all of the Jews of the Lodz ghetto ultimately are sent to concentration camps. Roma is living in the ghetto with her sister Rozalia, who she remains with throughout the war. And she is also with brothers, two brothers of hers that are in the ghetto. When the ghetto is liquidated, they're all sent to Auschwitz and separated. So let's share a clip about what happens when, when they arrive at Auschwitz, and how, how their story changes.

**Roma Kaltman** 04:32

Unfortunately, we were never assigned a job, which was a lot worse than even working because we didn't have anything to do with us. And forever we were standing in lines, either they would experiment on something, or they would tattoo us. And whenever we were in line, we sort of thought to go over. Is to the end of the line, and this is the only reason that I am not numbered. Also, they did have a number for me and Auschwitz, but I did not get it on my arm.

**Trinity Johnson** 05:17

So that's a really powerful clip, and one of my favorite parts of the story, because it really speaks to ingenuity, right? Here are these two women who have survived ghetto conditions. They've now arrived at a camp. They're... the rest of their family is gone. It's really just Rozalia and Roma together clinging to one another for mutual support and keep going to the back of the line so that they don't get a tattoo. I just find that so interesting and incredible,

**Cori Silbernagel** 05:51

yeah, and it's, it's hard to even imagine how that could have been possible, and what huge risk they were taking right that, that risk to keep going to the back of the line over and over, to re risk each time is really quite remarkable, and it is so inspiring to me to you know, consider these two young women, You know, younger than I am today. You know, surviving so much already and and, you know, realizing they're they're not done yet. They still have have more survival ahead of them. So, you know, that's something that I think is really important about this clip, and just Roma and Rozalia story.

**Trinity Johnson** 06:42

And when we think about tattoos and really what those symbolize, right, the ultimate form of dehumanization, of stripping one's stripping one of their humanity and their identity, and now they're a number or a cog in the slave labor wheel. But you know, which is terrible, but it's so interesting that, in a way, they're holding on to their humanity as well, that they are not - they're refusing to have their their identities taken away. And I think that's such a beautiful aspect as well, of "We are just we're going to beat the system in this moment. We're going to be defiant." And to your point, also the incredible risk that that that took, I think, when we think of their resilience and how they supported one another, one of the really interesting aspects of the next clip we're going to share is how that resilience, but also love, also was part of their camp relationship with Danka, their adopted sister, and so in the next clip, we'll hear about how they met her and how they formed this beautiful camp family. So let's watch that.

**Rozalia Berke** 07:58

So it was, of course, lamenting and crying from people whom they took away, the mothers and sisters and one of my friends whom we knew from the ghetto, Dorca Doriskiewicz, she wanted - she ran to the barbed wires, and I yelled to her, "Don't go to the barbed wires. You will get electrocuted." She said, What is... what should I have to live for? They took away my mother and sister, and they separated me from them, and my father and with my brother, went on the other side. I don't have nothing to live for alone." So we said, "Come here with us." And she said, "Will you take me as a sister?" And we said, "Yes, you will be our third sister. And that's how we went through the war to be known as the three sisters." We were always holding hands together so we wouldn't be separated.

**Cori Silbernagel** 08:59

This is a story that we have shared in our museum for a really long time, and it's such an important story, you know one just because it's sharing the story of camp sisterhood, the story of survival by depending on on your community. Those around you, Roma and Rozalia weren't close friends with Danka before they were in Auschwitz, they all were from Lodz, but they weren't close. Roma would have described them as acquaintances, and it's really powerful to me that when Roma and Rozalia saw their friend in Auschwitz, someone who, you know, they had not known very well before, but that they recognized someone from their past life. That that's so important that they, you know, they reached out and helped. And I don't know if everyone would have whether they were put into this situation or not.

**Trinity Johnson** 10:05

I think it's amazing to think about, you know, seeing someone in need and knowing that you're really in the same situation right. Every moment matters, every morsel matters, every wink of sleep, if you can, matters, and to find some kind of inner strength and resilience to reach out and then help someone else as well, in that area where you're kind of all on the same level, like your fate is really unfortunately supposed to be sealed. I just think that that speaks so much to the strength of Roma and Rozalia and the love that they showed Danka or Dorca, as Rozalia also would refer to her. And I think that love only transcends the rest of the story in camp situations, a lot of times, among women, the phenomena was camp families or sister bonds. So it's really interesting to see women come together. There are other stories of sharing recipes and things like that, right, holding on to these feminine aspects that are very interesting. And here, holding on to family, right, finding family, forming family, and then just the part of how they were always holding hands, right, always holding one another up and pushing forward to survive. And we also see that even through their death march out of Auschwitz, so when they're being marched out of Auschwitz in early '45 we know the camp is starting to also be liquidated. All the slave labor is being shifted back toward Germany, and they are marching to Stuthoff. And they stuck together and held one another up and pushed each other forward, so much so that I think their escape story is incredible, right? I don't remember which one pushed who into the ditch, but all three of them roll into a ditch and hide in a ditch while the line continues on to Stuthoff. And I remember Roma talking about turning her coat inside out so that it wasn't obvious that that they were prisoners. And even then, they stuck together and looked out for one another through the end of the war. And I just think that's such a beautiful I mean, they really were sisters. They became sisters.

**Cori Silbernagel** 12:32

Well and they, they remained sisters the rest of their life, through their rebuilding. I'm jumping ahead in the story, but they, they, they survive, and they do go back to Poland for a time, but eventually, all go to England, and all three of them are living together. Roma leaves first. She comes to Cincinnati with her husband Sam, who she met in the ghetto. They were exchanging books and reading together right

**Trinity Johnson** 13:00

and up until they were writing letters, right, he was still in Europe. She was she was in England, and they connected over letters,

**Cori Silbernagel** 13:08

yeah, so, so she comes to Cincinnati. Rozalia eventually comes to Cincinnati too, and Danka stays in England, but they always remained close, so close that, in fact, their children remained close as family. So you know that that camp sisterhood really became a sisterhood in every sense which is really so beautiful.

**Trinity Johnson** 13:35

Yeah, and having lost all of her family, Danka now, she had family that I know over the years, they went and visited her in England, and so always kept in touch. Just a beautiful story. I also think the next chapter, especially when we think of Roma and Rozalia and what their next chapter was here in Cincinnati, is really incredible. Will you read that quote from Rozalia? It's one of my favorites, that's in our rebuilding section. And sure, yeah, yeah, one of my

**Cori Silbernagel** 14:04

favorites. So Rozalia in the ghetto worked in a hospital, and much of her work dealt with with death and death throughout the rest of her Holocaust years. So Roma wanted to bring life into the world as her reaction. So she she shares in her testimony. And as you said, we share in our museum, "I wasn't happy in men's surgery, so I was transferred to obstetrics. I admitted to say that I also took a midwifery course in England because I have seen dying famine and innocent children go that I wanted to bring life into this world, and I trained, and I am state certified midwife in England." We put that quote into our museum, because it really is. It captures the legacy that Rozalia brought to the world after what she experienced, and she did bring life into the world and and I hope for her that that that brought healing after, after this life changing event.

**Trinity Johnson** 15:17

And it's, it's also equally amazing what Roma and Sam then did because meeting over a love of learning in the ghetto and then, many years after surviving, marrying having children, they established the Kaltman Institute, which is our Museum's week long Institute for teachers to come be equipped and learn the best pedagogy, tools, techniques, how to teach this history to students. And that's named in their honor, the Kaltman Institute. And I think it's so incredible that that love of learning, that passion for Holocaust education and raising awareness of antisemitism, was something that was so important to them in their next chapter, and it's just such a beautiful legacy that they've left us with. Yeah, yeah,

**Cori Silbernagel** 16:08

I think both Roma and Rozalia are are really tremendous examples of people who have seen the worst of humanity and and did everything they could to bring forward the best in humanity and that that is so in tune with with everything we stand for organizationally at the Holocaust & Humanity Center.

**Jackie Congedo** 16:30

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. Archive footage courtesy of the USC Shoah Foundation. Visit Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away. at Union terminal, beginning in October 2025.