To Bear Witness\_ Auschwitz Impact on Staff

Wed, Aug 06, 2025 9:42AM • 14:48

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Auschwitz, Holocaust, human impact, survivor stories, unpreserved barracks, medical experiments, Soviet POWs, memorial, Sobibor killing center, archeological excavation, artifact case, annihilation exhibit, Holocaust education, museum design, historical record.

**SPEAKERS**

Cori Silbernagel, Trinity Johnson, Jackie Congedo

**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** 00:23

...And while we were in Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-Birkenau, we we had this amazing opportunity to, you know, not only hear from the scholars and professionals that work at the State Museum, but we also had an opportunity to see some,

**Cori Silbernagel** 00:43

you know, some pretty an unseen places that that are not open to the general public. So I would love to hear from you, you know what? What were some of those spaces that you know you found meaningful? What did you see that you haven't seen before?

**Trinity Johnson** 01:04

Yes, so that that was one of probably the most important benefits of this trip and learning from the historians are these kind of uncharted areas that no one else has seen, or really the doors haven't even really been open since the camp was almost liberated, almost essentially. So a few of those spaces, I remember there was an unpreserved barrack we visited, the kitchen that is also not something group tours are taken into, and a space that group tours are taken into, and block 10, where the atrocious medical experiments on women were performed,

**Trinity Johnson** 01:48

I hope you'll talk about the unpreserved barrack because that was incredibleto see. Anyway, we'll get to that. But I think for me, seeing block 10 was really impactful, because part of my focus within this scholarship has been the experiences of women in particular during the Holocaust, and I've read so so many accounts and memoirs of women who were in block 10 and part of the medical experiments. So to be in that space and know that no one else has seen that space, seeing the sick bay where women were, and I'll never forget, there was this moment where many of the windows are shuttered so that you couldn't see out, but there were a couple On one side in particular that did look out and the view that you saw. And I don't know if it's intentional or not, you can't see out any of these other areas except for this one wall. And what you do see is the barbed wire and the guard tower. And to me, that was a really striking moment, because you have this anonymity, or you can hear, you know, the executions possibly happening, which happened a lot outside of block 10. And then the one space that you're able to look out is a reminder that you're a prisoner, and the barbed wire and the Watchtower is right there outside that window and in that was really striking to me, that I was standing there and seeing that, knowing the stories that I read, and not being the only thing those women were able to see.

**Cori Silbernagel** 03:37

I think you know to that, to that kind of idea of being in in the same spaces, and, you know, imagining those people, many of you know, many of their stories have not been shared. I had a similar point in Auschwitz, Birkenau. We were walking through an unpreserved barrack, and actually you saw this first. But as as you know, our group was walking through, we were taking photographs, we were listening to our guide. Kind of give us a sense of the space, what these different rooms were used for how, how people survived in that space. You called me back. I was a bit ahead of you. And you said, Cori, you have to see this.

**Cori Silbernagel** 04:36

And what you showed me is, you know this image in my mind of it that I really won't ever forget. We had learned earlier on our tour that the first barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau were built by Soviet POWs. These were soldiers that came from all walks of life, professions of all kind, and they were tasked with building the structures, building the first brick structures that were there. And you pointed out to me a spot where the mortar in the brick building was really sloppy. You could see the fingerprints, and not, you know, not like the lines of our fingerprint that you might leave on a window. You could see their fingers scraping through the mortar. And I had that moment of just realizing that these POWs, these prisoners, were, you know, they were. They were forced to do this building, whether they had skills or not. It was the only way they were going to survive was to perform this labor. And today, Auschwitz-Birkenau remains as the memorial. And although the people those prisoners, are not there, most of their artifacts are not remaining. There's traces of them still in those buildings. So it was, it was a significant moment for me. And just, you know, again, getting out of the big the big history, this overview history that I, that I came for, that I wanted to know, and and it brought it down to the person who was standing, where I was standing, building that wall, smoothing that mortar, creating this space that today, you know, servesas a memorial to you know, to remind us of The legacy of of the Holocaust, of this atrocity, ithumanized it in a way that, you know, I think we aim to do in our museum, but in a different way, in a way that, that I don't know again, I'm having like, such a hard time articulating it

**Trinity Johnson** 07:25

as if we didn't have enough of those many days at Auschwitz studying. You and I also were fortunate. We added an extra history day to our itinerary, but then we kind of went our own, separate ways. And I'm wondering if you'll share, what did you do on your extra history day in Poland. You know, we had been to Krakow, we had been to Auschwitz, we'd been to other camps, like Plaszow and, you know, Warsaw had, you know, had its own Holocaust history that was unique. So I'm so glad that we made that extra, that extra day out of our trip.

**Cori Silbernagel** 08:04

I mean, it added so much more value while I was while I was in, you know, Warsaw, having this whirlwind five hour walking tour. You weren't with me. Tell me about where you went.

**Trinity Johnson** 08:20

I went to the Sobibor killing center. So as we know and as we teach and why we are here in "Annihilation" in our museum, talking about the six killing centers is really the chapter we're sitting in front of Sobibor was one of the killing centers and completely dismantled, and so really nothing was left there. However, when I was in graduate school, I had just come off of an archeological excavation in Egypt, and there was a little piece of me that was still really obsessed with excavation and all of the elements that go into that historical process. And I remember it was when they had started the excavations at the former site of Sobibor. And so I used to follow all of the field reports and knowing exactly what they were doing mechanically as far as archeology, but obsessed with what are they going to find there being nothing was left. And so to know that now there is a museum and a memorial. There a modern museum. It was beautiful, designed, just absolutely gorgeous, the interaction. And I know one of the things we really wanted was physical interaction in our space. They had it, and it was done so beautifully and appropriately. A couple of the things that were really striking for me because of what they were able to do through the archeological excavation is find original foundational outlines of where the gas chambers had been and of course, remnants of items that people carried with them. And so when you walk in the entire length of the museum, there is a artifact case that cuts through the middle of the history. So you kind of wind around it all through the museum, learning about, kind of the broader history of the Holocaust, but then specifically to Sobibor. How does it fit into the timeline? But you're never out of eyesight of this artifact case, and within it, the items that - keys, wedding bands, lipstick, toothpaste, toothbrushes, - all of the things that people would have carried with them when they were thinking that they were being relocated for labor. Broken children's toys, things like that, which represent, unfortunately, the victim landscape of the people who were sent there. And I just thought it was such a striking design to always have that in your eyesight, to be reminded of the people, the people who came there. And of course, many of those items are anonymous. You don't know who they belong to. There were some that they were able to identify, whether it was a luggage tag or something like that. But it was just really, really powerful to be reminded of the humanity of in a place that was so absolutely inhumane, and to know that that site is also now part of education, that it wasn't dismantled to the place that it's forgotten in the historical record. So it was a little bit of finally seeing something that I was really, really focused on early in my study of Holocaust and genocide studies, and now kind of seeing that full circle and seeing what they've done in order to transmit that history further, was just, it was incredible.

**Cori Silbernagel** 11:53

I think, you know, that's the power of museums right to serve, as you know, kind of this third space of learning. And I think, you know, artifacts, artifacts are such powerful vehicles for storytelling. So I love, I love hearing about how they, you know, ensured in their design that you you could always see those. I think that it reminds me a little bit of the "Annihilation" exhibit in our museum, which is designed to include shoes.It's designed to look like the cages of shoes that are at Majdanek and, you know, and just in the design process you were there, you know, we went back and forth of, how, how do we do it, and how do we do it in the right way that continues to humanize the Holocaust. And, you know, we felt, at that time, and I still feel strongly to this, that the way to do it, the right way, was to bring forward this, you know idea of immense loss of life, the people that are not present are counted through their things. And that's how I think, you know we, we approached "Annihilation" as an exhibit. And I think it sounds incredibly powerful how they've done something similar to that in Sobibor, you know, with with those things that remained at the site, and again, like that goes back to the powerfulpoint of being in these places, even if there is nothing that remains today, those stories are still there, and museums can bring those stories forward.

**Jackie Congedo** 13:57

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 & 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