To Bear Witness: Stories from Auschwitz to Cincinnati. The life of Werner Coppel.

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** 00:23

Ahead of the Auschwitz exhibition coming to Union Terminal, we had an opportunity to ask Werner's son, Steve what it would mean to share his dad's story in an exhibition like this.

**Steve Coppel** 00:34

For my dad, as well as most of the survivors, they all had to wonder why during the war, no one wanted to help them, and after the war, no one wanted to hear their stories. And now, 76 years later, his story will be told, and that means the world to us, to his family.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:55

We are here in the archives of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. This is not something that's open to the public. It's behind many closed doors for safe keeping. And we are here with our incredible curator, Cori Silbernagel, who really takes incredible professional but also you have a personal passion for this work, caring for our amazing collection, which includes documents you know, firsthand, real documents that our survivors brought with them and others, and also some artifacts that sort of illuminate these stories as well.

**Cori Silbernagel** 01:29

Yeah, so our collections document the stories of Holocaust survivors, other eyewitnesses, like American soldiers and liberators rescuers, each one of their stories is different, and the things that they saved is so different. So today I want to share with you some of Werner Coppel's collection. Werner was someone who was very close to our center, because sharing his story was really important. So

**Jackie Congedo** 01:58

he was like a pioneer in doing it

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:00

absolutely, yeah.

**Jackie Congedo** 02:01

Walk us through a little bit of what you have in these but I need to put my gloves on,

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:05

yes, yeah,

**Jackie Congedo** 02:06

we are very careful

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:07

if you want to touch anything that's right your gloves and

**Jackie Congedo** 02:10

to make sure that we are not

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:12

so the first things I want to show you today are two, two photographs of Werner. I want to give you kind of a face to this story. So this is Werner Coppel. He is. Was born in Moers, Germany. He was a survivor of Auschwitz. So both of these photographs were taken very shortly after the war. After the war, he didn't return to Moers to stay. He went to Berlin. So this is his personal identification card that was

**Jackie Congedo** 02:47

this would have been after the war that this was,

**Cori Silbernagel** 02:49

yep, yep. So this was issued on May 3, 1946 and we can learn a lot about Werner from this card. We learn that he was born in 1925 his hometown, first name, last name, even his fingerprint is there and then another photograph. So the German government postwar issued these for anyone or for people who were Yes. So he

**Cori Silbernagel** 03:17

he was German, but he was also stateless, right? So this document would have been probably one of the first identification documents that that was issued to him. This isn't his passport. This is just his, his national identification card.

**Cori Silbernagel** 03:38

Wow,

**Cori Silbernagel** 03:38

yeah,

**Jackie Congedo** 03:38

wow. And this portrait of him, which was also taken after the war. This is featured prominently in our Points of Light theater. And if you have not been down to the museum, you need to come, because we have an amazing film that talks about Werner and his story and the activation of his strengths in that story. And this image sticks in my mind from that film.

**Cori Silbernagel** 04:01

Yeah, so Werner's story is one of the stories that's throughout the entire museum. So we we start the museum experience sharing his story in the lobby, and then it continues throughout. You know, Werner is a great example of just one person who, I think, found, found a moment to speak up, and that's what that film is about.

**Jackie Congedo** 04:23

Yeah, yeah, powerfully,

**Cori Silbernagel** 04:25

yeah, absolutely. So let me share

**Jackie Congedo** 04:28

Wow

**Cori Silbernagel** 04:29

over here, we kind of can continue revealing Werner's story through the archives. So this is, this is an affidavit that was issued by Sam Funk in '48, living in Avondale at the time. Yep, so he's living in Avondale, but he owns a farm in New Richmond in Clermont County. He This is an affidavit that really, you know, in many ways, afforded Werner and his family their American Visas to immigrate.

**Jackie Congedo** 05:01

Wow.

**Cori Silbernagel** 05:01

So Sam Funk is sponsoring Werner, noting that he's going to give Werner employment that he won't, you know, be a burden on American society. Yeah, yeah. And you had to have that in order to, in order to immigrate as a refugee, one of many documents. Yeah, so this document notes, you know, Werner's name, and includes his wife and he had a son that he came with, Ron. So Werner and Trudy, his wife had two sons, Ron and Steve. Ron was just a baby when they arrived here, and then Steve was born in Cincinnati.

**Jackie Congedo** 05:41

That's his quote. I arrived in Cincinnati with a wife a baby, and a suitcase, right?

**Cori Silbernagel** 05:45

Absolutely, absolutely

**Jackie Congedo** 05:46

there was there was the baby,

**Cori Silbernagel** 05:48

yep, yep. Then kind of continuing the story, we have his public school certificate of citizenship classes. So Werner and and all of the new immigrants arriving to Cincinnati or elsewhere, whether they were coming from Germany or somewhere else, they wanted to become American citizens. So many people took night classes to learn English. They took citizenship classes to, you know, learn a variety of things, and Cincinnati Public Schools facilitated that... So this is Werner's certificate. We also have Trudy's,

**Jackie Congedo** 06:33

I was gonna say. And I think Trudy's is the one actually, that's in the stairwell right on the way down to the museum. So again, yeah, you come to the museum, and you can see this, you know, in large print, the facsimile of it proudly, sort of on the wall there, down the stairs as you come into the museum. I was assumed that Werner had one, obviously, as well, but I've never seen it. Yeah, I've never seen it.

**Cori Silbernagel** 06:54

So this was issued in 1954 they gained citizenship shortly after. Werner was part of New Hope synagogue in Cincinnati. He was connected to the Jewish community here, and he was someone who I think, I think he shared his story, but not very publicly for a long time. So the next thing I will show you is this article. This, you know, you can learn much more about this in the museum, but this is the article that

**Jackie Congedo** 07:33

that started it all.

**Cori Silbernagel** 07:35

Yeah, it inspired Werner to speak out. So one day, he opens the Cincinnati Enquirer, and he sees in the insert inside of the newspaper an article German Americans Pride versus Politics. And in it, Eugene von Reistenberg, who is at the time, the president of the German American Citizens League of Cincinnati. He is quoted in this article saying that the Diary of Anne Frank is a fake, yeah. I mean, he's [Werner] survived a death march out of Auschwitz. And this was outrageous, this Holocaust denial that he experienced.

**Jackie Congedo** 08:15

Is this what he, the piece he kept? This is this was the copy, a copy of that article that he kept.

**Cori Silbernagel** 08:21

Yeah, so this is a copy of what he kept to us that he you know, what he kept and donated to us.

**Jackie Congedo** 08:27

You can see he even marked as these are his markings there where that piece I can I actually can't imagine what that was like to read that after what he'd been through, and to think just all of the things that went through his mind about how he should respond. But, you know, we know how the story played out and how he ended up responding right, which was to speak his truth, the truth about what had happened and and that started this wave of survivors and others having, you know, the inspiration and the courage to speak out publicly as well.

**Cori Silbernagel** 09:03

Yeah, I think,

**Jackie Congedo** 09:06

Wow.

**Cori Silbernagel** 09:07

You know, Werner again, is just an example of one person who, you know, found a way to to react, and he found a way to, you know, write the good history instead of to, you know, continue to play into this general Holocaust denial then, and to be silent and to ignore it. He wanted to, he wanted to let people know that the Holocaust certainly did happen. Yeah, because he was there and he experienced it,

**Jackie Congedo** 09:37

yeah, and I think about the the need, like, we would like to think that this whole trend of Holocaust denial, revisionism, etc, oh, that's a crazy thing that happened back then, and it's not around anymore. Unfortunately, we know that there's a growing school of that. And I think about Werner and his choice to speak and his courage as sort of a grounding. I mean, I know for all of us, it's kind of a it's a grounding piece of the work that we do every day, right? It's in a moment of continued, you know, proliferation of hate and antisemitism and Holocaust denial, remembering how he chose to respond to that by educating and by illuminating is really powerful, and I think it's instructive for all of us as we keep doing the work so

**Cori Silbernagel** 10:27

and and Werner is just one act which, then again, is this ripple effect that carries through the rest of his life of continuing to speak and speak and speak more and more. It reminds me doing that work that, you know, we can have soft voices, but make a huge impact too.

**Jackie Congedo** 10:49

It is so true. And I, you know, I talk about this sometimes in the humanity gallery as I'm leading tours, but it's the same thing here. Werner didn't wake up one day and say, Oh, I envision this future with an archives like this, and, you know, a museum that educates, he said this, I need to respond to this. I need to figure out how to act. This has activated me in a way that that calls me to the to meet this moment and and he did, and to your point, the ripple of that right that became this, and that became this. And other survivors were inspired to speak, and he found sort of this, you know, rhythm of education that he carried with him throughout the rest of his life, and here we are today because of it. So, yeah, really special. And, and there's one other piece that I want to see here,

**Cori Silbernagel** 11:39

sure, so there's one other item I pulled out from Werner's collection that is really, really special. We don't exhibit it often in the museum because it's in very poor condition. But this is a Haggadah that is used during Passover Seder. This Haggadah was buried in Berlin during the war. It wasn't buried by Werner - by someone else, but after the war, when Werner was in Berlin, he and others unearthed these items, which included Judaica prayer books, and this Haggadah was part of that

**Jackie Congedo** 12:20

Wow.

**Cori Silbernagel** 12:21

So it was used in one of the first Seders after the war, and he brought it with him here to Cincinnati. So, you know, Werner's connection to Judaism, his connection to his culture, to his family, his tradition, I think was really important to him. And I'm, I'm certain that that must have kind of called him to to speak,

**Jackie Congedo** 12:50

informed his activism in that moment, yeah and his, his, his telling of his story. This, I like, was getting choked up just listening what, looking at this and being so close to it, something that survived right such a catastrophic chapter of history. And I just think about the amazing survival and perseverance of the Jewish tradition, and the fact that you could look back over chapters of Jewish history for 1000s and 1000s of years, and whether they're collapsible menorahs, you know, that were hidden during, I think it was actually during the Inquisition. I saw one in a museum, in one of the synagogues, the Moorish synagogues in the south, to something like this, that, you know, Jews at the time, knew that there were going to be other Jews who would need this. They had the they had the forethought and the hope and the audacity to know that this wasn't going to be the end of the Jewish story, and that there would be Jews who would need this. And they kept it and they saved it, and they hid it, and the fact that it was found and it continues today is just like, yeah, yeah. Really powerful.

**Cori Silbernagel** 14:07

yeah. And, you know, because it was brought here to Cincinnati, I think it also gives way to this idea that, you know, the Holocaust is, is is international history, right? It's European history, global history, yeah, but, but it's our local history too. And this Haggadah also has a story here. That part of its story here, and it continues today.

**Jackie Congedo** 14:38

Yeah, did he do? You know if he ever used it after he found it, or was I'm sure he wanted to keep it?

**Cori Silbernagel** 14:44

Yes, so I know that it was used, you know, in that first Seder, but I don't know how often it was used after the war. It'd be an interesting question to ask Steve or Ron, if they remember having this in their home growing up or

**Jackie Congedo** 15:03

Yeah. And the story of, you know, the Haggadah, for those who don't know, the Passover story, is all about liberation, right? The whole thing is about a journey to freedom. And, you know, having a piece that survived its own chapter of liberation, its own chapter of that is really, really amazing. Wow. Well, people will get a sneak peek of something that we don't often put in the museum, because, again, it's so, so fragile. You can tell just by looking at it, it's, it's, um,

**Cori Silbernagel** 15:28

yeah, it's a treasure, though. It's really, it's, you know, every everything in our archives tells a really important story, but this is a story that you know we have to be sharing, and we can't forget.

**Jackie Congedo** 15:41

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for sharing with me. So there's one other piece that I know you want to show folks, and I can't wait for people to see, because it's, it's just so special,

**Cori Silbernagel** 15:51

yeah, so this is another piece in our collection that we don't often share in the museum, but it is. It's amazing. It has an amazing story. So this is the suitcase that Werner and Trudy packed all of their belongings in and traveled to Cincinnati with.

**Jackie Congedo** 16:10

Wow,

**Cori Silbernagel** 16:11

so Werner, when I used to hear Werner speak, he spoke to students as long as he could when Werner would share his story, he would always begin by saying, "I arrived in Union Terminal with a wife, a baby, and a suitcase." And he would say, "That began the second part of my life. Now let me go back and tell you about what happened before." So this suitcase is that suitcase that he would talk about. It's really special. It includes handwritten on it his name, Cincinnati, where they will arrive to, you know, so as as Werner and Trudy and Ron traveled on a ship to the United States, arrived in New York Harbor. This suitcase also did. The suitcase went on the journey too.

**Jackie Congedo** 17:11

Wow. And this so he had this suitcase, and you said one other with it, and that was, that was everything that they

**Cori Silbernagel** 17:19

Yeah, as far as I know. So he also brought with him a wicker trunk that contained things also. Werner was the only survivor of his family, though he he didn't have many things or people around him after the war, so he began his rebuilding in Germany, and the rebuilding continued here. So

**Jackie Congedo** 17:47

the Haggadah was one of the things that was in this suitcase, or possibly with him, on his, yeah, on his person as he arrived. It's so it's, I mean, just for scale, like it's shorter than I am tall, and I just, you know, some of us think about, you know, how long trip to Europe or something, and they would pack this much, and this is this, and one other suitcase about the same size, yeah, is contained everything that that Werner and his family had with them to start Their second chapter of their life here in Cincinnati. It's so, so powerful. And you can see, even though the handles, the leather handles on the side, the one over here, I think, is broken, it's just, it's amazing. So this would have come, I guess, through freight, right, if he was coming off the train, everyone, everything came into, as you said, into New York Harbor,

**Cori Silbernagel** 18:44

yeah, yeah.

**Jackie Congedo** 18:45

And then he would have taken, he and his family would have taken the train, yeah, come through Union Terminal

**Cori Silbernagel** 18:49

probably, yeah, yeah. So, you know, at some point this, you know, again, it made the journey. It made the journey, as his family did, you know, artifacts like this have so much power to tell amazing, deep stories that people might not otherwise ever, ever know about.

**Jackie Congedo** 19:10

Yeah.

**Cori Silbernagel** 19:11

So every chance I get, I try to share Werner's suitcase

**Jackie Congedo** 19:15

I was gonna say, where do you share it? I mean, do we have opportunities to put this out or to show kids, you know, as in different Yeah, setting,

**Cori Silbernagel** 19:24

yeah. So we recently, it was recently exhibited two years ago now, in the Jewish Bicentennial exhibit, as the city, you know, celebrated this, you know, huge Jewish history here, this, this suitcase, along with others, were shared to, you know, represent all of these people that richly contributed to our city,

**Jackie Congedo** 19:47

new Americans, at the time.

**Cori Silbernagel** 19:52

Yeah, so they, they were shared to symbolize this rebuilding and Werner's story is certainly so interwoven into the fabric of that narrative. We also recently shared the suitcase with teachers at our Kaltman Institute. You know to help help teachers also find creative ways to story tell, to help their students make connections and to find, to find their own connection to these people who, you know, may seem very old to them, very, you know, far away, but it's not far away.

**Jackie Congedo** 20:33

This is right here. I mean, you can I touch it absolutely, yeah, my gosh. And you can see it even in the back, how the fabric, yeah? Like, it's wrapped in fabric and kind of painted,

**Cori Silbernagel** 20:42

yeah, so there's some parts that are really fragile on it.

**Jackie Congedo** 20:46

See that the same, yeah, the same with the address, which would have been where it was headed. Can't even imagine, you know, and he'd never, we take for granted, you know, the coming, people coming and going these days, right? It's like easy to hop a plane or whatever, get on a train, but in these days, you know, he this was a whole new world. I mean, he'd never been outside. Had you ever been outside Europe before the war?

**Cori Silbernagel** 21:11

I don't know, I don't know. I don't think so.

**Jackie Congedo** 21:12

I don't think so either. So just the courage, I can't even imagine the courage it took to and to have your child with you and your wife with you, and to feel like you were pioneering this new

**Cori Silbernagel** 21:24

and responsible to to take care of your family.

**Jackie Congedo** 21:29

Yeah, really. And think about the Coppel family now, right? They have generations of Coppels who are here and part of our community and our neighbors and friends and yeah, on our board, and it's

**Cori Silbernagel** 21:40

well, and I would argue, I mean, even the you know, this courage and the bravery that Werner had, yeah, is been passed down to his children. Yeah, for sure, in the way Steve and Ron both share their family stories, that legacy of, you know, standing up and speaking out continues.

**Steve Coppel** 22:01

He was a person, a human being, who endured unimaginable horrors, and yet he could rebuild his life. And one of the lessons he taught his family and certainly me, was whenever, no matter what happens, you start all over tomorrow, and that's what he did.

**Jackie Congedo** 22:22

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.

**Jackie Congedo** 22:47

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.