2025 Auschwitz Podcast Henry Meyer and Bella Ouziel AUDIO

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**SPEAKERS**

Bella Ouziel, Trinity Johnson, Cori Silbernagel, Henry Meyer, Interviewer, 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.

**Trinity Johnson** 00:23

I'm Trinity Johnson, Director of Holocaust Programs and Museum Experiences, and I'm thrilled to welcome you to a limited podcast series focusing on local survivor stories connected to Auschwitz. This limited series is in advance of us hosting Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away. a temporary exhibition which is in partnership with the Cincinnati Museum Center and coming to historic Union Terminal in October 2025 for this special conversation, I'm joined by my colleague Cori Silbernagel, our Director of Collections and Exhibitions, Cori, thanks for being with me today to talk about these two very special stories.

**Cori Silbernagel** 01:03

Thank you. Yeah, so let me just introduce who we're going to talk about. They are each remarkable individuals who are both remarkable during this time in the Holocaust and and even more remarkable later in their life. So we are going to share the story of Henry Meyer and Bella Ouziel, both Auschwitz survivors. Henry Meyer was born in Dresden, Germany. He was a child prodigy of the violin, extremely talented, and found himself in Auschwitz in 1943 he survived, will share two different really powerful stories of his survival and became a really important member of our community today, here in Cincinnati, we will also share the story of Bella Ouziel. Bella was a Greek Holocaust survivor from Salonika, Greece, when the Nazis occupied Greece, she was forced into a ghetto with her family, and only weeks later, was deported, taking an extremely long and terrible train journey to Auschwitz, where she lost a sister and found other ways to to survive. So let's let's dive in and talk a little bit about Henry Meyer. When Henry arrives in Auschwitz, he is with his brother. He's been separated from the rest of his family by this point, and his brother very quickly dies. So he becomes on his own, and he also becomes really ill. So let's learn a little bit about this experience, not only of being ill, but a really remarkable story about how, how Henry survives.

**Henry Meyer** 03:02

So I was sick. I was in a selection and I knew was what happened to me. Next morning I would report to Auschwitz, and further on to Birkenau in gas well in the krankenbar in Auschwitz, a prison doctor, also a Jew came around and saw that I was awake at Night and started a conversation with me. Said she ABS will be better. I said, No, won't be better. This is the end. I know what gives here. That is an kind of camp which does away with people. And tomorrow I will be gassed, and that will be it. So obviously, that wasn't the right what should I say? Theme for conversation. And he switched around. He said, What have you been doing? I said, I haven't been doing very much. I'm very young, and I was sort of talented musician, and I played concerts and things like that. And I said, What have you been doing? He said, Well, I have just started to be a doctor. I said, where? I said, in Breslau. I said, Well, Breslau, I used to play. I played a concert in Breslau, I think. And the guy stopped and said, Are you the one who played the Tartini Congedo, D minor? I said, George, which means, well, I was a test console. And he said, Well, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Where could I have gone? I. Waited a minute, the man disappeared from the valley about I don't know. Man came back and had a body, a skeleton, body over his shoulder, plunked this dead person next to me, over the shoulder and carried me out of the condo into another barrack where he has bought the stead person from. He exchanged the registration cards, and I was alive again.

**Trinity Johnson** 05:36

So that clip is incredible for a couple things, but what? Every time I listen to it, every time I watch it, I'm struck by something different. But this time, I was immediately transported back to Auschwitz, where we studied in the summer of 2024 and I'll never forget one afternoon we were given free time to walk around and view exhibits and just kind of decompress. It was a heavy two weeks of learning, and I'll never forget when I found the Krankenbau and Henry's story just came back to me. And it was exactly this story that I remember kind of recalling and just playing back through my head. Because what a miracle that here. He's lost his brother. He had this beautiful musical career. Virtuoso, very young, even to be so far along in a musical career, and it's cut short. And then that is the thing that actually saves his life, his musical career, someone recognizing him from a performance, and also just that doctor risking, you know, switching out the bodies and really saving Henry's life in that moment. It's an incredible story.

**Cori Silbernagel** 06:52

Yeah, I mean, when I think about Henry's entire story, there's these, there's these moments along the way that had had that not happened, or had this not happened, he wouldn't have survived. And it really is remarkable that that Jewish doctor, you know, saw, saw his life as as worthwhile, and did something really courageous. It really is amazing. I also think a lot about Henry as I reflect on that trip to Poland that we took, you know, I remember walking through Auschwitz one and and Auschwitz Birkenau camps. And, you know, really just just feeling and remembering the stories of our local survivors. So, you know, Henry was, you know, with us on that trip, and Bella, who will learn about soon, and the others, it really changed my entire perspective on, you know what this history is, and what these people, who are real people, what they endured and overcame.

**Trinity Johnson** 08:11

And I think it's incredible with this exhibit being in Cincinnati, and starting in October of 2025, people who may never have the opportunity to go to Auschwitz and engage with this history directly. Can really have this History brought to them through this incredible exhibition and artifacts that, you know, there's so many artifacts, we saw so many there, but artifacts in this exhibit that have never been exhibited before, and so it's really an incredible way of localizing, right? Able to remember Henry's story, both in the space, but even through the Auschwitz exhibit. It's incredible to still be able to learn these people's experiences in this place that is geographically so far away, right?

**Cori Silbernagel** 09:00

Absolutely, absolutely. Well, let's, let's move on to another one of those moments in time where, where Henry's life, life was saved and and he was alive again, sick, yep. Also with music.

**Henry Meyer** 09:14

I was a member of the marching band. Now, have you ever seen a violinist in a marching band? This wasn't very good, and with the attitude of these people of saying, why don't you play? Who needs you? Out. You know, I could have lost my situation, my good position, even better position than others. So I must have said it somewhere before I'm born under a lucky star. The symbol player of the band got sick and I went to the Krankenbau. And said, I'm an absolute virtuoso in the symbols (having never having had a symbol in my hand.) I said, So you play. And I played, as everybody would do, with a symbol, bang these things together, and nearly broke my wrists, because you see, the air becomes steel. So to say, you strike the symbols, you don't bang them. Well, I did learn that fast, and I became a very popular star.

**Trinity Johnson** 10:33

Something that strikes me about that segment one is his humor, right? And how he's sharing the story. He taught me how to play symbols. I had no idea that you don't strike them. So that's that's so true, an incredible learning that I did not have before hearing Henry share that. But here again, music saved his life. And also being able to say, Oh, I, I'm a virtuoso on the symbols and knowing that that's very brave, that he did that, that he lied right? And we hear that in a lot of survivor stories, saying and doing or be saying you're trained as something, that you're not in a in a way, to survive. It's just an incredible story, but also very cute, how he he shares that,

**Cori Silbernagel** 11:22

yeah, well, and I think it also is really, it's really humanizing right to to think about everything that Henry had been through, and to be much later in life when he's recording this testimony, He's He's recording his his experience, and he can reflect back with a bit of humor as a way of of coping and being able to share that story. I think you know when, when I, when I think about all of the Holocaust survivors I've met over the years, everyone deals and shares their story. They deal with that trauma in a really different way. And I think that that clip really captures a lot of Henry's personality and how he was able to deal with that later in life, Henry comes to Cincinnati. He continues to play the violin and becomes a founding member of the La Salle quartet. Travels internationally, becomes widely recognized, and he also becomes a music teacher here in Cincinnati, at University of Cincinnati. So today in our community there, you know, there's, there's this, this huge legacy of music and and rich culture that is here because he was here. It's, it's really powerful to be able to share not only his Holocaust story, but, you know, everything he did after too,

**Trinity Johnson** 13:05

yeah, his incredible legacy. And I think it's also, you know, stories like this, really, also when you see an exhibit like the Auschwitz exhibit, you know, our museum is so much built around these local stories, right? Because this is what people respond. So meaningful to is how people responded and experienced and explain that experience. You know, facts and figures really are not, at least, are not what I leave moved by from an exhibition, and as director of exhibitions, you know that it's through the personal stories, and it's stories like this that really show you an aspect of the history, and especially of Auschwitz in camp history that you wouldn't get just from with just being in the space, it really is the people who are illuminating the space and connecting us to that. It's such a different learning.

**Cori Silbernagel** 14:10

Yeah, yeah, I completely agree. Let's, let's transition over to sharing a bit of Bella's story, another really remarkable story of survival. I had shared a little bit earlier that she she was from Greece, was living with her family in a ghetto when the family was deported to Auschwitz, when they arrived in Auschwitz, really Bella's life in a new world began right the life in the world of Auschwitz. And so much of what we learn from the exhibit that's coming to Union terminal is how huge that world was. But. But before we, you know, go into that exhibit and learn about the huge universe of Auschwitz. Let's, let's kind of bring it back in and think just about Bella. So let's listen to a clip about what it was like when Bella arrived.

**Bella Ouziel** 15:19

Right away, they separate the adults like, you know, my father was in a different land, with my brother, my mother, with my little sister and me and my sister in a different because the young people had to be separate. They have three lands, you know, one for the man, one for the woman, and one for the younger adults. So when we went there, I was carrying my little sister in my arms, so the German can open and look my face. And I guess they thought to, you know, I was too young to have a baby or something. So he took my sister away from me and gave it to my stepmother, so she pushed me in the other land, which was where my sister was so and then after they put me there. So we know we're not going to see each other, but we didn't know what would happen. And so from there, they took us to bath houses, which they took our clothes off, they took our jewelry off, they took everything, like whatever you had.

**Trinity Johnson** 16:33

So in that clip, we hear, you know, the heartbreaking reality of arrival. We know that that's followed by selection, which, you know, after being in a train for days, and you arrive disoriented, and you're ripped away from your family. You know, it's interesting, Bella was still with her sister Sylvia, which, just like Henry, Henry was still with his brother, Fritz. You know, for a time, she had her sister with her, and I'm sure they clung to each other for support, but it's just a really heartbreaking reality of those early days in camp life. And so I think some of what's incredible about Bella's story not only the realization, which she eventually does realize, that her family was selected and murdered when another prisoner tells her to look at the smokestacks. So that realization is it's just heart wrenching, right, and to think that she continued to put one foot in front of the other and keep going, and then also do that even after her sister passes, we know that she also becomes part of a camp family. Similar to in the other episode, we talked about Roma and Rosalia and a sister bond and a camp family. We see that also in Bella's story, you know, anything that could help hold on to hope, right? Is so incredible. And I think, you know, we see that in her story. Another really interesting connection, kind of, to Henry's story, is, I'm fast forwarding a little, and I know we don't have time to really get into it. Bella goes from Birkenau to Auschwitz 1. And I don't know if you remember how she used to talk about that. She actually said Auschwitz one was better because there was soap there, as opposed to Birkenau, that was her level of feeling like she had a better or an easier time in Auschwitz, one which was still not easy at all. And then we hear Henry and his one clip talking about how, Oh, I'm getting sent to Birkenau. That's not good. My time is up. So it's really interesting these two clips together and some of the things that they talk about,

**Cori Silbernagel** 18:48

yeah, and I think you know your point of of finding hope after the realization that that you've lost your family, you know, Sylvia became ill really quickly and and was murdered by the Nazis because she was ill. So Bella was alone, and she really remarkably, found, found camp sisterhood, just like just, you know, as as Roma and Rosalia did. So when I think about Bella's story in the camps, it's hard to imagine what she went through, but it seems easier for me to understand when I when I learned these stories of of Bella and her camp sisterhood, because what I do understand, or maybe I understand more about, is, is that connection from from person to person, from human to human, and and the strength that we we gain from friendship from family and Bella finds that in the camp. Another point of hope for Bella is is her faith. She continues to observe Judaism in the camp, despite the terrible conditions. So let's watch another clip from Bella talking about how she did this.

**Interviewer** 20:28

Was there any celebration at all of the Jewish holidays, or recognition of the Jewish holidays?

**Bella Ouziel** 20:35

Some of the Polish girls, I don't know how. They have Bibles. They have prayer books. They knew the holidays, and they used to tell us, you know, like Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, you know, Pesach, they used to tell us. So we used to celebrate, my celebrate. We have nothing to celebrate. The only time when Yom Kippur came, we didn't eat that day, you know, they used to give us, you know, something. So we, nobody of the girls now, none of us. We, that day, we, you know, we want to fast. Was Yom Kippur, and they really got mad, you know, they say, you know, you you're not going to keep your religion. You can't keep your religion, whatever. But still, nobody was accepted what they were saying. We just decide we're not gonna eat. We're not gonna eat. We didn't eat all day, till in the evening, they give us the piece of bread.

**Trinity Johnson** 21:32

So that's one of my favorite stories of spiritual resistance. And to think about something you know, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, where Jews traditionally fast, right? And here Bella is in this environment where she's already getting meager rations, very little, not substantial at all, to survive. But yet, observing the Yom Kippur fast was so important to her to continue to hold on to her, and she mentions other prisoners too. So I think that's such an incredible illustration of spiritual resistance. And I think it's also interesting in thinking about Bella going back to Salonika after surviving a death march, after being liberated from Bergen Belsen by the British in '45 eventually going back to her hometown in Salonika, and one of the things we share in our museum is how she had to legally fight to reclaim her family's home, and we know that part of that was also an important aspect of her story, because antisemitism didn't end at the end of the war, Right? So holding on to her identity and holding on to being Jewish, and then going back into a place where, once again, being Jewish was not safe, going back home thinking everything's over, needing to fight for your home, not feeling safe so much so that she and her husband decided to come to Cincinnati and rebuild their lives here. So I think it's also an important it's showing us the strength that Bella had in holding on to Judaism, but also how it was still not safe for Jews after the Holocaust. And I think that's a misconception that everyone thinks everything just goes back to normal and everything was okay, but it was the reason Bella and her husband came to Cincinnati in the first place.

**Cori Silbernagel** 23:25

Yeah, yeah. You know the the war ended, but antisemitism continued, as it always had been. Bella comes to Cincinnati in 1951 she she marries a man named Sam. They marry in Greece, come to Cincinnati together, and this is an opportunity for Bella to really have a new life, to rebuild the life that she wants to have. I think so she, she does that in a lot of different ways, but I'll really quickly just share part of the story that I love. Bella begins working for a company called Standard Textile. Standard Textile still exists and headquartered in Cincinnati today, but at this time, they they're hiring Jewish immigrants coming to Cincinnati - Holocaust survivors and refugees that are that are rebuilding their own life. So Bella finds community in Cincinnati and really flourishes in many ways, although that's not to say that it was easy, right? Rebuilding was really hard, and it was hard for Bella too. But you know, when we think about Bella's story and Henry's story, I love talking about them together, because each of them made their mark in Cincinnati, in. In a different way. And I think, I think it's really special to think about how every single Holocaust survivor who arrived in Cincinnati has their own story. And a lot of those stories we don't, we don't even know about there. There are survivors that lived here that are just beginning to share their stories. So there's so much more work to do. And I think that if we stay rooted in stories like Bella's and stories like Henry's and all of the other Cincinnati survivors, we can really, you know, we can really meet the moment of sharing stories from the past to really inspire action and positive, you know, humanity today,

**Jackie Congedo** 25:54

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.