

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
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Ep. 123: The U.S. and the Holocaust: What did America Know and Do During the Greatest Atrocity of Our Time with Ken Burns' Co-Directors Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways Podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone. It's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today, I am so excited to be with documentary film directors Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein, who have created documentary films about American life and culture, history, politics, sports, art, architecture, literature and music. They are the co-directors with Ken Burns of many wonderful series, including Ernest Hemingway, The Vietnam War, Baseball Jazz, and most recently, The US and the Holocaust. The story of the Holocaust that we all know is about Germany and to a lesser extent, Europe. Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein flip the table and focus on the US And the Holocaust.

LT: America considers itself a nation of immigrants, but as the catastrophe of the Holocaust unfolded with hundreds of thousands of people seeking refuge, they asked the questions, what did Americans know and when, and did America live up to its ideals? As we reckon with the current world refugee crisis, I'm excited to find out more about the US response to the Holocaust and how it resonates today. Welcome Lynn and Sarah. I'm so excited to talk to you both. I love your films.

Lynn Novick: Thank you so much for having us.

Sarah Botstein: Yes, thank you. We're really happy to be here.

LT: It is my pleasure. Why did you both decide to make the film, The US and the Holocaust? Lynn, do you want to start and then Sarah?

LN: Sure, thank you. We're interested in, along with Ken Burns, our co-director on this project and collaborated over many years, and Geoffrey C. Ward, who wrote the script for us, questions of American identity and coming to terms with the more complex and challenging aspects of our past, so we can hopefully look forward to a better future, as you were just saying. And so the story of how we responded to the Holocaust seemed extraordinarily important to us when it was first mentioned as an idea back in 2015, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington was planning an exhibition to explore these same questions. And they approached us to see if we'd be interested in making a documentary film.

LN: And we immediately said yes, partly because we realized that there were a lot of questions to which we ourselves did not know the answer. And it was a many-year process to try to explain to ourselves what did we as a nation do and what did we fail to do and why.

LT: Sarah, how about you?

SB: Well, I agree with everything Lynn just said, and that's the basic origin story of how we ended up making this film. It wasn't actually in our original schedule and we added it because it seemed so interesting and so important. And then over the course of making it, it became more and more relevant and urgency and importance that we didn't actually anticipate it having. And the only other thing I think I would add to what Lynn said is, we sometimes do a disservice to ourselves as a country and to our students who want to learn about this topic or are learning about it in school, is that we tend to teach this period in history in very isolated ways. We don't weave the different themes together so that the Second World War has a different meaning, the Depression has a different meaning, our politics, our complicated way that our government works. Those things are taught in kind of isolated buckets, particularly around this time. So the Holocaust is one thing, the war is another thing, how our government works is another thing. And I think for all of us who worked on the film, the thing that felt new and important was to try to interweave all those things to have a really clear-eyed sense of some of the myths that we tell ourselves and some of the history that we don't know.

LT: How did the film change your understanding of the US and the Holocaust? What did you think, Lynn, in the beginning and what did you think in the end?

LN: When we started the project, I had the misconception that I think many people do, and certainly in the World War II narrative that Sarah was just describing, this is fundamental in some ways to the ways that we Americans think about our role in the Second World War. My misunderstanding of this history, which was quickly unlearned, was that Americans really didn't know much about what was happening in Nazi Germany and had no idea that the Holocaust was happening as it was happening. There was an enormous amount of coverage of who Hitler was, what Nazism was, the ideas behind it, the things he and his comrades said, his partners in crime, about why they needed to rid Europe of the Jews and what they were going to do about it.

LN: And they weren't subtle, shall we say. And then it became a campaign of violence, of deportations, of arrests, of abuse, atrocities that escalated and escalated over time. And that was covered in the American press. It wasn't always on page one and people didn't really fully understand what was happening. But nonetheless, it's my long way of saying that when we started this project, I really thought we could explain away our failures to do more to rescue people or to address this crisis by saying to ourselves what we just didn't know. And it's simply not true.

LT: Sarah, how about you? How did your understanding of the US and the Holocaust change?

SB: It's less how it changed and more that we learned to just amplify what Lynn was just speaking about. I think what surprised me, if there was something that really surprised me, and I think all of us very close to the project, is that in addition to what Lynn was just addressing, that Americans did have a lot more information than I think we like to tell ourselves or many people think that we had, then how did Americans respond to that information is quite devastating. So I think we all often say this. What was very surprising for me, honestly, in a very pure way, is in 1945, once there was no question of what happened and the photographs had been shown, people were struggling to try to make sense of this enormous catastrophe and tragedy.

SB: Americans didn't want to let refugees in then. So it's a consistent theme in American history

that I think the film really does puncture a hole to describe and to try to understand when it comes to this subject, but then generally in terms of American history. So it's surprising to learn how deeply embedded in our American culture, this notion of attention about what kind of country we are, a land of immigrants and a land of safety and refuge for the oppressed and people who are looking for a brighter future or not. And we've been struggling with that for our whole history.

LN: And that's why we want to make the film is to learn and then as Ken always says to share with our audience what we learned.

LT: I learned so much from this series. It was really eye-opening. How did the leadership feel? The president was Franklin Roosevelt. What was his perspective, Sarah?

SB: We get a lot of questions about Franklin Roosevelt and understandably so, I think we tend to look back and moments of history and think, okay, who is the president who is in charge and what did they do right? What did they do wrong? And we certainly should look at our presidents and think about what they did right. What they did wrong. And I think Franklin Roosevelt will go down as a great president in American history and that is true for many many reasons. He's also the president of a Democratic society with an electorate with the Congress and what Lynn was just speaking about anti-semitism. There's a long history of anti-semitism here in this country. We can't pretend that there isn't. He had a lot on his plate that is not excused when I think Americans and we think could have done more. There are things he could have done more to help in this crisis. We're not saying he couldn't have done more and Americans couldn't have done more but the blame isn't only on him as the historian Deborah Lipstadt says in the film. You have to think about it in a more complicated nuanced way to try to understand actually what he did do that was unusual and amazing and he deserves credit for and what he didn't do enough of and then we try to point out both of those things in the film.

LN: I just want to add one thing because we haven't really been talking about this but now that the film has been out, I think it's worth saying which is that when you look back at history, there was a very strong, there is a strong at this moment desire on the right to pin the failures of the United States for not doing more to save the Jewish refugees of Europe on Roosevelt and the Democrats, and to say that this is a Democratic Party failure and that Roosevelt is anti-Semitic and that's why this happened and just as Sarah was saying, the nation bears the responsibility and it fits too neatly into our current politics to think about it that way and at that time if Republicans had been in control, they would not have opened our doors to let in more refugees. So it's an interesting thought experiment and it's important right now because we're living in a real moment today where these things have a lot of importance and there's a lot of coded language around what are we saying if we hold Franklin Roosevelt responsible, the greatest Democratic president as Sarah was saying. It's important for us to kind of take a step back and think about that.

LT: The US accepted more Jews than any other country. I think about 225,000, but the limits on accepting Jews as you point out in the movie and, as you show so heartbreakingly, resulted in many more unnecessary deaths. Over 6 million people were killed. Who do you think was responsible for the reluctance to accept more people? The president, you think had limited responsibility, but is it the Congress, the State Department? Who do you think it is, Lynn?

LN: As Sarah was saying, we have to be careful not to give too much power to the president given the way our government works. The State Department has a huge burden of responsibility here

because there was a system that maybe seems archaic to us today, which was a quota system and that was set up in the 1920s long before Nazis were controlling Europe and it was set up to keep Jewish people out of the United States and other "undesirable immigrants." So they put quotas on every country and they were hoping to bring in more people from England and Germany and what they called Nordic countries at the time.

LN: They were considered real Americans or potentially good Americans and the people from Southern Europe and Eastern Europe were seen as a danger to our society. So that was in place before any of this catastrophe started happening. So the State Department was enforcing those quota rules and there were wait lists of tens or hundreds of thousands of people who had applied for visas to come to the United States, but there was a quota. Only so many people who come from Germany, so many people who can come from Poland, so many people who can come from Hungary, wherever. And so the thing is that even within that system, the State Department could have perhaps not had to be so picky about enforcing the rules. They could have bent the rules a little. They could have been more compassionate about it and instead they went the other direction. They kept on making it harder and harder and harder and that's because there was pervasive anti-Semitism in the State Department. It was an old boy network, kind of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite were running the State Department, a lot of them Southerners and nativists and they didn't want Jewish refugees coming here and they did everything they could to stop it.

LN: So I think the State Department bears a lot of responsibility, but that's within the narrow confines of this quota system. So it's really the American people who did not want to change that quota system.

SB: We also didn't have a fully realized refugee policy because there hadn't been a refugee crisis quite like this in modern history. So I think both of those things are true. There is an enormous cracking down and narrowing of what we're willing to do. It's surprising for people to understand. It's not just mild indifference.

LT: The film series ends with some more recent events. Sarah, can you tell us about those?

SB: I spent a lot of time, as you can imagine, discussing not just how to start the film, but how to end the film. And we had many conversations amongst ourselves. Do we end the story in 1945? It doesn't seem like we should. And then while we were making the film, events like Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, and January 6th happened. And so it felt important to try to show some of the terrible things that are happening, not just around the world and foreign countries, but here.

LT: So how did you make this film behind the scenes? What was it like?

SB: This film is unusual for us because we started editing while the coronavirus crisis fell upon us. So we edited the film entirely remotely. We went from an office on 31st Street and 6th Avenue and an editing house in Walpole, New Hampshire to 20 different locations very, very quickly as a team. And then we had to find ways to get archival material to edit remotely, to get digital stuff going from one place to another, which is typical of pretty much everybody trying to work from home. But in order to film, particularly the live cinematography, we had to find people in remote parts of the world that we hadn't worked on. Normally, we would get on a plane with our crew in New York and go to Poland, Ukraine, Berlin, wherever we were going. We were obviously not able to do that. We were introduced to an extraordinary group of Polish producers, cinematographers, and they

worked out of Warsaw and they were able to film while the memorial locations were closed, mostly for COVID, in extraordinary places at different times of year and go into Ukraine and in Poland. And then as it looked like the invasion might happen, we really scrambled not just to get the archival material to us, but also to finish all the filming that we had to do.

SB: There was an enormous amount of just COVID management and safety protocols to try to make the film, and then we accelerated the broadcast by a year. So not only were we trying to make the film during COVID, we were doing it on a year less time than we thought we had.

LN: Yeah, we work with amazing actors on every project that we've had the privilege of creating with Ken Burns, and this was no exception except that we were essentially having to ask actors, would they be willing to go into a studio? Mostly no. Or did they have a studio at home? And so some people actually had these jerry-rigged thing in their closet. We're all, the early days of COVID, we're trying to direct on Zoom. And anyway, but we got some incredible, incredible readings from extraordinary actors. Could not have been easy.

LT: And how did you both deal with the emotional impact of the horrors of the Holocaust?

SB: I'm not sure that's answerable for me. I think that's a lifelong struggle to try to find meaning from these horrible events and what human beings are capable of doing to each other, and what is the meaning that we should take away from these horrifically tragic events, and also the optimism and perseverance and strength and fortitude of people who had to make all different kinds of choices and lived extremely amazing and productive lives.

LN: I think we can't do our job unless we really care about the story, whatever it is we're telling, and we have told some rather tragic stories in the past. But this one is the one that's very difficult. It's difficult and different. Each one is difficult in a different way, and I'm not comparing them or even contrasting or finding equivalents. But for us, meeting with people and talking to them about what they experienced and remembered. What usually happens is it's you're going along, you're trying to make sense of this incomprehensible event or it's actually not incomprehensible, but sometimes can be easily abstracted. Usually in the course of a project like this, there will be moments where it becomes really real. One photograph, one piece of footage, one person telling you something, or some connection that you make, or sometimes a piece of music. You get occasionally sort of a portal into the feeling of what is happening. That's not every day, it's not all the time, 'cause you can't actually function if you're really feeling it the entire time. But when that happens, it's pretty devastating.

LT: It must have been extraordinarily hard for you both and your team during the isolation of COVID. Before I ask you both for the 3 Takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already touched upon? What should I have asked you that I did not?

LN: I don't think so.

SB: No. It's great.

LT: Lynn and then Sarah, what 3 Takeaways would you like to leave the audience with today?

LN: I think it is important in these really challenging times, and I personally find the last five, six years some of the most disturbing and difficult times I can remember in my adult life of the pandemic and our politics and attacking the world and climate and all these sort of mutually overlapping crises and catastrophes, that it is overwhelming the world we live in right now. And I found that to be quite acute. And so it has been very helpful to try to study the past and find the traces of what we're living through now in the past in different ways. And that's, I think, something we can all practice in different ways. So that's one takeaway. And another takeaway, I guess, would be not to take yourself too seriously, to sometimes find humor and delight in the silly things that happen. So try to laugh.

LT: Sarah, what are the 3 Takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

SB: It's going to sound a little bit like Lynn. My first takeaway, which I did learn from my grandmother who survived this period in Switzerland and got the relatives who I knew growing up out of the Holocaust, always told us as children that life is long and you need to move forward. You can't look back or stay stationary, that you need forward motion. And I think to not see yourself as a victim for people who live through this time, and I think it's a good life lesson generally to just move forward in your life, whatever is in front of you. I'm going to totally take from Lynn that a sense of humor is extremely important. When I married my husband, he said, "The only thing I need you to promise me is that you'll never lose your sense of humor." So when I do, he reminds me of that. And that I think it's important to look around you and pay attention. It's a privilege to live in a democracy. It's a privilege to have the right to vote and you should exercise it.

SB: Back to my grandmother, I don't think she ever missed an election and she certainly wouldn't have let us miss one. So those are 3 Takeaways for me. Lynn, what's your third now?

LN: Maybe just building on all the things you've been talking about as you were talking, Sarah, as dark as things are, it's also really important not to give up. This is another version of the same thing we've been talking about, but it is hard not to feel that we're all completely fucked, as my children often tell me. [chuckle] And maybe we are, but we still have to live. And so we can't give up and not to be Pollyanna-ish and think everything is going to be fine because it might not be, but you have to give yourself some agency and just try to be hopeful, even in dark times.

LT: Thank you so much for your extraordinary films. I love all of them. They are amazing to watch and I've learned so much from each one. So thank you both.

SB: Thank you so much.

LN: Thank you.

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OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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