

# “I Want to Talk About the Truth That was There”

*The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963–1965*<sup>1</sup>

An interview with curators

Florine Miez and Anna Wolfinger

Conducted by Marianne Windsperger

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## Abstract

The exhibition “I want to talk about the truth that was there”: The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963–1965 at Frankfurt’s Römer traced the history and impact of the largest and most significant trial against National Socialist perpetrators in post-war Germany. Using written documents, photographs, film and audio recordings; interviews with contemporary witnesses; and autobiographical accounts, it reconstructs the origins of the trial, the exceptional circumstances to which witnesses were exposed, how the trial became a media event, and the trial’s legal and cultural consequences. The exhibition focuses on the role of survivors, whether as witnesses, activists, or lawyers – it was they who played a decisive role in bringing the truth about Auschwitz to light. Two of the curators, Florine Miez and Anna Wolfinger, in conversation with Marianne Windsperger, provide insights into the making of this groundbreaking exhibition.

**Windsperger:** In 2025, we were looking at eighty years since the end of the Second World War and celebrating this anniversary. How did your exhibition relate to this anniversary, and what topics did you want to focus on?

**Wolfinger:** Mounting the exhibition for the second time, we deliberately chose the date of 8 May as the day our exhibition would end. We wanted to highlight this historic date. It was only through liberation from Nazism and the perspective of the post-war period that it became possible to come to terms with the past. The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial was the most comprehensive legal examination of the crimes of the Holocaust in Germany, and this is also the subject of the exhibition: the trial – from the investigations to the indictment to the verdict. In addition to the legal and procedural aspects, we put emphasis on presenting the circumstances and, above all, the perceptions and perspectives of the witnesses who survived. This is the focus that runs like a thread through the exhibition panels. In addition, we documented a section on the cultural and media reception of the trial.

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<sup>1</sup> A German version of this interview has been published in the journal *Zwischenwelt. Literatur/Widerstand/Exil* in June 2025.

**Miez:** Anniversaries always involve a form of reflection. In this case, the question was: Have we done enough to come to terms with the past? What was possible and necessary in the eighty years that have passed [since the Holocaust]? And how much has happened? Unfortunately, the answer is that much more should have happened. Visitors may also ask themselves: What does this have to do with me? And how does it affect me? In this sense, the exhibition is not intended to leave visitors feeling good. This is especially true when they see the last exhibition panels, which show how few perpetrators actually were put on trial.

**Windsperger:** In addition to the anniversary, there are also personal motivations behind the exhibition. Perhaps you could both briefly introduce yourselves and tell us what your motivations and starting points were?

**Miez:** First, I would like to introduce the starting point of the exhibition. It all began in 2022, when I found a letter from Frankfurt lawyer Henry Ormond to his Polish colleague Jan Sehn during archival research.<sup>2</sup> This letter was written in January 1963, eleven months before the Auschwitz trial began. Ormond writes to Sehn that he had discussed with Fritz Bauer the possibility of displaying material not used in the trial in an exhibition at the Frankfurt Student Union House. This exhibition never took place. In 2022, a group of friends and interested people came together to plan and design the exhibition. At the time, we decided on the sixtieth anniversary of the start of the trial in December 2023 as the date to open the exhibition. Many of us were students then. Now we are working - in law, in an archive, in Holocaust research, and in art. There is a collective of five people behind the exhibition: Anna Wolfinger, Anne Uhl, Maximilian Steinborn, Alexander Tomanides, and me.

**Wolfinger:** I joined a little later, in the summer of 2023. I am a lawyer, and in law school, the topic of Nazi crimes and their legal punishment runs through many areas because our legal system is a counter-model to that of the Nazi era. However, some laws are even older, and in other areas of the law, certain values and judgments still have an impact [on the contemporary German legal system]. So, the topic plays a role in legal studies, but the actual focus on Nazi crimes is usually a voluntary seminar. I attended such a seminar, but it was only one course, and I always thought that the topic was not covered in sufficient depth. It is very important, especially for lawyers, to strengthen their knowledge [of this topic].

2 Letter from Henry Ormond to Jan Sehn, 1963, S 78.2011.Zn, Institute of National Memory (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN), Krakow Branch Office, Commission for the Crimes against the Polish Nation, Krakow, Poland.

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**HENRY ORMOND**  
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Herrn  
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Bitte dieses Diktatzeichen in  
Ihrem Antwortschreiben angeben

Betr.:- Verfahren KZ-Auschwitz.

Sehr geehrter Herr Professor Sehn,

Erst vor kurzer Zeit habe ich Gelegenheit gehabt, mit Herrn Generalstaatsanwalt Dr. Bauer zu sprechen. Alles für eine etwaige Informationsstelle bestimmte Material sollte zunächst ihm selbst zugänglich gemacht werden, da er prüfen möchte, ob und inwieweit er es auch in den Prozess einführen kann. Dr. Bauer möchte mit den modernsten Mitteln und allem zur Verfügung stehenden Anschauungsmaterial die Anklage geführt wissen, wobei Schaubilder, Filme, etc. durchaus eine Rolle spielen sollen.

Er hat nichts dagegen, wenn das für den Prozess selbst nicht geeignete Material in einer Ausstellung, vorzugsweise im Studentenhaus der Universität, gezeigt wird, wenn dort Vorträge gehalten und die Filme vorgeführt werden. Im übrigen, so fürchte ich, wird der Prozess dadurch eine Verzögerung erfahren, dass infolge der Krankheit von Staatsanwalt Vogel und dadurch Staatsanwalt Kügler mit der Alleinarbeit wohl einfach überfordert war, die Anklage nicht zu dem vorgesehenen Zeitpunkt (31.12.1962) fertiggestellt werden konnte. Staatsanwalt Vogel, der seit Mitte Dezember wieder im Dienst ist, sagte mir dieser Tage, die Hälfte des allgemeinen Teils sei fertiggestellt, der besondere Teil mit den 28 Angeklagten sei zwischen ihnen beiden aufgeteilt. Er persönlich rechnet mit einer Fertigstellung der Anklageschrift bis zum April.

Es ist mir jetzt endlich gelungen, die von Ihnen gewünschte Zeitschrift (Journal of Forensic Science) zu bestellen, und ich hoffe, dass Sie sie vom 1.1.1963 ab regelmässig erhalten.

Mit vorzüglicher Hochachtung  
Hm

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**Letter by Henry Ormond to Jan Sehn, 1963.**

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### *About the Exhibition*

We shifted the focus slightly from what Fritz Bauer had in mind [back when he first discussed mounting an exhibition]. He was thinking of the materials that were not shown at the original trial. Back then, the trial was very much in the media spotlight, whereas today, the aim is to make the trial itself understandable for later generations. That's why we decided to show it more com-

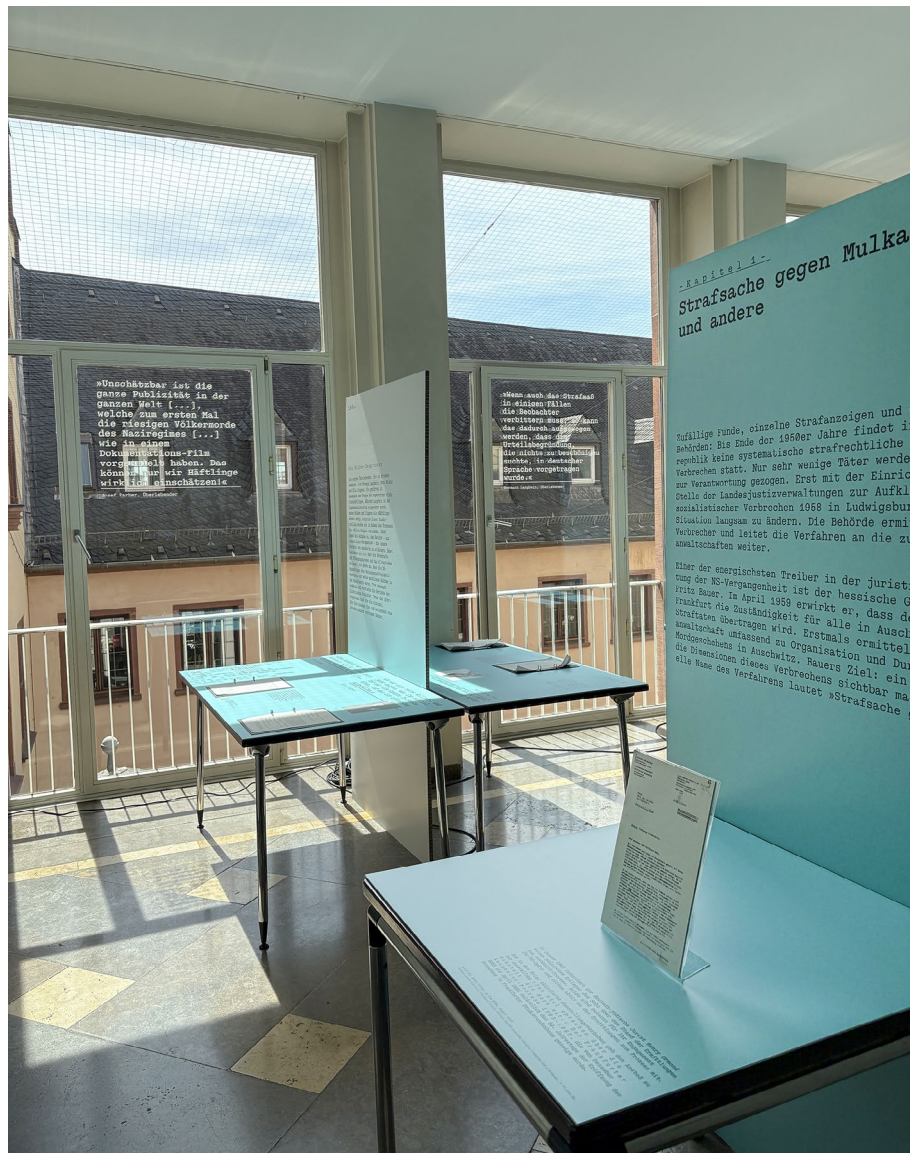
prehensively in the exhibition, with a strong focus on the survivors' perspective. In line with Bauer's idea, we initially chose the Student Union building as the venue for the exhibition. In 2025, we mounted [the exhibition] a second time, this time in the Römer, the city hall of Frankfurt am Main and the first venue of the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial. In May 2026, we will display the exhibition in the bunker at Friedberger Anlage in Frankfurt. This site was once the location of the large synagogue of the Israelite Religious Society. The Nazis set it on fire during the November pogroms of 1938, and it was destroyed. A high-rise bunker was then built on the site. Since 1988, the volunteer initiative 9 November has been taking care of the commemorative site.

**Windsperger:** Let's move on to the content of the exhibition. The title of the exhibition already highlights the important voices of the survivors. Whose voice have you emphasised here, and can you tell us something about this person? More generally: What role did the survivors play in coming to terms with Nazi crimes?

**Wolfinger:** The quote is from Imrich Gönczi, who came to Frankfurt from what was then Czechoslovakia to testify at the trial. He describes the murder of his father. What is special about him is that he came from Eastern Europe. The trial took place during the Cold War, and witnesses from the so-called Eastern Bloc were viewed even more critically, or their statements were classified as less credible because there was the suspicion that they might use the trial for propaganda. Gönczi had already spoken about the crimes before the trial, unlike other witnesses who only spoke publicly about them twenty years later. The exhibition attempts to show the diversity of the witnesses, both in terms of what it meant for them to give their testimony and how they were perceived by the press. This is why we display various transcripts and quotations.

**Miez:** The exhibition features thematic tables showcasing examples of special details or problems that affected the trial, such as the Cold War. Then, there are two witnesses presented for each topic - with a photo if we could find one and a short text about the individual. A QR code leads to a video excerpt from the respective person's testimony with a transcript so you can read along. These excerpts are between two and ten minutes long. These elements form the main part of the exhibition.

We also drew on the book *Die Überlebenden vor Gericht. Auschwitz-Häftlinge als Zeugen in NS-Prozessen (1950-1976)* (The Survivors in Court: Auschwitz Prisoners as Witnesses in Nazi Trials [1950-1976]) by Katharina Stengel (Fritz Bauer Institute). It helped us find the witnesses we wanted to present. Survivors have played a decisive role in coming to terms with the past. This begins with the fact that the initiative for the Auschwitz trial emerged from the documents and statements of survivors. On the one hand, there was the letter from Auschwitz survivor Adolf Rögner, who, with the help of Hermann Langbein, filed a criminal



**The exhibition takes the visitors on a chronological journey through the trial.**

© Florine Miez

complaint against one of the (later) main defendants in 1958. On the other hand, in January 1959, the so-called Breslau documents [execution lists from Auschwitz], which journalist Thomas Gnielka had received from Auschwitz survivor Emil Wulkan, were passed on to Fritz Bauer. These are two essential starting points that are closely linked to the fact that survivors took the initiative. Hermann Langbein also played an important role in the Auschwitz trial. As co-initiator and secretary general of the International Auschwitz Committee, he made a significant contribution by contacting survivors and convincing them to testify, to come to Frankfurt, and to go to court. Many of them were concerned about whether a German court could be trusted. For Langbein, it was clear that it was important for the survivors to tell their stories in court.



One of the thematic of the exhibition focusing on  
**“Emotion and Trauma”**  
 © Florine Miez

**Wolfinger:** The exhibition consists of so-called honeycomb panels, i.e., thick cardboard panels. The starting point, where the tour begins and from which the reading flows, is the letter from Henry Ormond to Jan Sehn.<sup>3</sup> We have highlighted the document on a small pedestal. From there, visitors are guided chronologically through the trial, from the preliminary investigations to the aftermath. In addition to the texts, there are three video interviews with contemporary witnesses and descendants, transcripts of the interrogations, photos and quotes from those involved, tape recordings of the verdict, and excerpts from newspa-

3 Letter from Henry Ormond to Jan Sehn, 1963, S 78.2011.Zn, IPN.

pers, theater, and films. There are also seven tables that focus on different topics. The titles of these individual segments are: “The Milieu Witnesses” as a special group of witnesses who were interrogated in a distinctive way – “Communication in Court”, “Cold War in the Courtroom”, “Emotion and Trauma”, “As a Child in Auschwitz”, “Remembering, Forgetting”, and “Women in the Trial”.

**Miez:** And then there were books by survivors, accounts of what they experienced in Auschwitz and about the trial.

**Wolfinger:** Yes, the idea was that visitors could sit down and immerse themselves in the books or perhaps take the idea of reading with them.

**Windsperger:** On the topic of women in the trial – what was important from your perspective?

**Wolfinger:** Women are not as strongly represented as men [at the trial]. On the one hand, no female SS officers were charged, and on the other hand, only twenty-eight of the 211 witnesses were women. Of course, this does not reflect the reality of the crimes. In addition, women often had a different experience during their imprisonment. Some of them had a better chance of survival because as clerks, they were at least provided with food and adequate clothing, which was not the case for most men. In this respect, [the trial] would actually have been an opportunity to recruit more female witnesses.

**Miez:** Just to add: the survivor networks were also very male dominated, which certainly contributed to fewer women testifying in the trial. In the exhibition section “As a Child in Auschwitz”, we present two witnesses – Jehuda Bacon and Otto Dov Kulka. Both were in Auschwitz between the ages of ten and fourteen, both in the so-called Theresienstadt family camp. Both lost almost their entire families and testified about this at the trial. In Otto Dov Kulka’s case, it is exceptional that his father, Erich Kulka, testified a few months before him. Here, survivor networks become clear again: we show a letter from Hermann Langbein to Erich Kulka in which he writes that Otto Dov Kulka testified excellently and made a strong impression. Erich Kulka had previously asked Hermann Langbein to let his son contact him if he needed help.

**Windsperger:** It’s important that you mention that the survivor networks were also male dominated. I can mainly recount my impressions from the Wiesenthal Archive here [in Vienna]. The correspondence that Wiesenthal conducted was also mainly with male survivors. You have included interviews with contemporary witnesses or descendants in the exhibition that you conducted yourselves. Can you tell us something about these encounters?

**Miez:** I interviewed Peter Kalb. During the trial, he was in his early twenties, and he was responsible for taking care of the witnesses on a voluntary basis. For example, he picked up the witnesses from the airport and spent time with them during their

time outside the court. He went hiking with some of them, or took them out for a meal, or for a walk – he took care of the witnesses.

He talked about what these encounters were like. When he picked them up from the airport, the witnesses were relieved when they saw a young man sitting in the car because it was clear that he was so young that he couldn't have been a Nazi. He got into this work through his father, who worked for the Red Cross. There was a network of volunteers who took care of the witnesses. But he never really got any training on how to deal with people who are extremely traumatised. There were no guidelines on how he should talk to them. For example, he recounts that he was riding in an elevator with one of the witnesses, Stanisław Kamiński, whom he had picked up from the hotel. Suddenly, the elevator doors opened and a woman entered, and the witness next to him froze and couldn't say anything until the woman got out. Then the witness said to him, "That was Mrs Höß". This again makes it clear that something like post-traumatic stress disorder was not really an issue that was taken into account at the time. The victim-witnesses – that is, the survivors – and the other witnesses were housed in the same hotel as the non-incarcerated defendants. No care was taken to separate them.

**Wolfinger:** Another interview is with Gerhard Wiese, a young prosecutor from Fritz Bauer's team. He is now over ninety, lives in Frankfurt, and still gives lectures. The approximately fifteen-minute video interviews all have specific themes. His interview focuses on how he experienced the trial and, in particular, the site visits to Auschwitz. Incidentally, both Peter Kalb and Gerhard Wiese were at our opening, which we consider a great honor. It was touching to see how they spoke to each other. The third interview is with Kurt and Daniel Langbein, the son and grandson of Hermann Langbein. They talk about his commitment as a representative of the survivors and about Hermann Langbein's role in the trial.

**Windsperger:** The focus on post-traumatic stress disorder – including the surge in research and psychology – really took off with the Vietnam War. Attempts to understand what war and persecution experiences mean across generations were certainly not part of the trial at the time. What other sources were of particular interest to you? How did you integrate them into the exhibition, and were there any surprising finds or discoveries?

**Wolfinger:** I think the most surprising find is the starting point, the letter. Otherwise, we were fortunate that a lot was publicly available in archives: more letters, tape recordings, photos. The special thing about the tape recordings is that they allow you to follow the trial as if it were live, and that gives a more immediate impression than if you only read the statements. You can read what happened in the transcripts, but there's something different about hearing the intonation, the reactions, and what's between the lines ... Not everything went smoothly – there were transla-

tion difficulties and situations that were very stressful for those involved. It's good that these recordings are still accessible.

**Miez:** And these recordings have only been preserved because Hermann Langbein strongly advocated for them to be preserved. In fact, they would have been destroyed after the trial ended – their main purpose was to serve as an aide-mémoire for the court – but he argued that they should be preserved for posterity as historical sources. All of these recordings can also be listened to online: The Fritz Bauer Institute has uploaded them and produced transcripts.<sup>4</sup>

**Windsperger:** This is perhaps a related question: The role of language, which is probably much more evident in these recordings than in written documents and transcripts? What role did language or languages play in the witnesses' statements, and how did the court deal with these linguistic challenges?

**Wolfinger:** Here, too, there were different starting points and circumstances. There were witnesses who were fluent in German but no longer wanted to speak it and also had difficulty hearing it in court, especially such formal language. Then, there were problems with the interpreters because the judge initially thought he could understand Yiddish. However, there were comprehension problems during the examination of survivor Simon Gotland. He (the judge) repeatedly says that he does not understand him (Gotland) and therefore interrupts him, which makes his [Gotland's] testimony and comprehensibility more difficult. Some witnesses had to switch to other languages, mostly Polish or French. Others deliberately testified in German.

**Miez:** On top of that, the witnesses were sitting very, very close to the perpetrators. They already had to move [the trial] to a room outside the courthouse because all the rooms there were too small for the court, the witnesses, the defendants, the defense, visitors, and the press. That's why the trial began in Frankfurt's Römer and then moved to the Bürgerhaus Gallus in April 1964. The situation must have been very unpleasant and difficult for the witnesses – sitting there with the perpetrators behind them and also having to pass them to make their statements.

**Windsperger:** Could you explain a little more about how the survivors experienced the trial – what they emphasised in their memories or in the texts that were produced – which you have also integrated into the exhibition with the reading corner – and how they remembered it?

**Wolfinger:** We show these memories in this tense relationship – on the one hand, there was the opportunity to confront the perpetrators with their crimes and to counter it with the support of the society. On the other hand, there is disillusionment and frustration about the sentences that were ultimately handed down, which were significantly lower than what the prosecution had demanded. For many survivors, this confirmed their distrust of the

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.auschwitz-prozess.de>.

German legal system. What shocks me personally is the reaction of the defendants – I mean the reactions of the defendants themselves: no humility, no remorse, just a strategy of denial, of withdrawing, of not taking responsibility – and this in full view of the public. Part of the defense strategy was to focus on memory gaps, twenty years after [the events]. It would be rather surprising to have a complete memory, especially of such traumatic experiences. The renewed confrontation [with what had happened] was a heavy psychological burden [for survivors], which is why the way the witnesses' statements were handled often seems insensitive. We have included a quote from the publicist Ralph Giordano on "second guilt" in the exhibition: [first] that the Germans are guilty of the greatest mass murder in history, and now a second time because of how this trial proceeded and ended. At the same time, however, it was a major legal review [of the crimes of the Holocaust], and that must also be acknowledged. As we can see, this goes hand in hand with the historical documentation of the events. Today, we can revisit the issue and voice our criticism.

**Miez:** Perhaps another example of what Anna just said. Specifically, the defense, pounced on the witnesses: There is a statement by Stanisław Kamiński, who is questioned by the defense, and they refer precisely to this detailed question and say: "How many meters were you away from this and that point?" until he eventually says: "I didn't have a measuring tape to measure exactly how many meters there were between them." And that's what makes it so completely absurd, that they [witnesses-survivors] have to provide details that no one can give; it's just impossible.

**Windsperger:** Back to the exhibition and the reactions you received from visitors and the media. What interested visitors most during guided tours, for example, and what messages visitors should take away with them?

**Miez:** During the tours, I told the visitors that if they remembered just one fact from the exhibition, it should be that the survivors were largely responsible for making this trial happen in the first place. The reactions of visitors have been overwhelmingly positive. We had a different audience at the Römer than we had at the Student Union House. The exhibition at the Römer also received more media coverage, and we had a very diverse range of visitors, including elderly people. But we also had school classes there, which also worked out quite well. Many know the Römer in Frankfurt was the place where the trial began. Sometimes city employees showed the plenary hall from inside; it was interesting for people to see the place they just read about. The place still looks the same, except that a plaque has now been added in memory of the Auschwitz trial and Fritz Bauer. Many visitors were repeatedly shocked, and I think the question I was asked most often is: "Why were so few perpetrators brought to justice? How could that happen?" There is complete incomprehension about why there has been such a lack of reassessment. What sometimes leads to discussion is that we made a conscious decision not to show pic-

tures of the perpetrators but only images of the survivors. We deliberately wanted to focus on the survivors and bring in this perspective. The focus [of other works] is often on the perpetrators. That's not what we want, although we have also printed the profiles of the accused, so they're not completely invisible in the exhibition.

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The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial 1963–1965, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 13 (2026) 1, 167–177.

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