

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

**Interview with Bent Melchoir**  
**June 24, 1996**  
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## **PREFACE**

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## **BENT MELCHOIR**

### **June 24, 1996**

Question. Let me start off by asking when your family first came to Denmark?

Answer. Well, on my father's side, the family has been living in Denmark, in a number of cities of Denmark, almost for 300 years, which in the terminology of Danish Jews, it's called the Viking Jews of Denmark. Part of the family has assimilated, and part of them remains Jewish, part of them became quite wealthy business people and part of them were rabbis.

So, my father was a rabbi.

Q. The first in the family?

A. No, there were rabbis all along the line almost, going even six and seven generations back there were rabbis in the family. So, my father finished his studies in Germany at the time when there were no vacancies in the rabbinate in Denmark. Therefore, he was not employed by the Jewish community until very late. But since German became the second language, he found some vacancies in the German rabbinate but obviously in 1933 when Hitler came to power, we returned to Denmark. We were then Danish citizens and Danish was our mother tongue.

My father worked in different fields among others in lecturing around the country and telling the Danes a little bit about what the Nazi regime actually meant.

Q. Let me just go back a minute and ask you about the formation of the Copenhagen Jewish community and the establishment of the synagogue?

A. Well, the Jewish community of Copenhagen was officially established in 1684 when the first permission to hold religious services was given by the king of the time. But it took some years to say the least before we were allowed to build a synagogue. The present synagogue which is one of the oldest, at least in this area, was built in 1833, to me a magnificent building, a place which has survived many attacks and also the Nazi period. A place where King Christian the Tenth as the first sovereign attended a service in 1933 at the 100th anniversary and since then his son Frederick the Ninth and his granddaughter Queen Margareta our present Queen have visited the synagogue on quite a few occasions, the last of them was commemoration of the rescue operation fifty years after it took place, in 1993.

So, we have seen in that synagogue also the President of the State of Israel. We have seen David BenGurion and Golda Meir and many other leaders of Israel and of the Jewish people around the world. We have been laughing and crying together in that building which also in 1985 was attacked by an Arab extremist with a bomb which destroyed the whole entrance part which we could repair but happily enough they did not really damage the important parts of the building.

Q. In the 19th century was the Danish community, the Jewish community in Copenhagen a large one, a well to do one, was it very mixed?

A. The Danish Jewish community has never been big in numbers. It's always been a comparatively small community, but very well organized and since 1814, fully recognized as equal to the official religious community of Denmark which is the Lutheran Church, together with catholics and Baptists and other Christian groups, the Jewish community has equal rights in all the 01:07:00 respects, all the rights of religious communities such as rights as conducting weddings with official validity and we also until this day keep the official register of birth and death on behalf of the state.

We have since 1814 produced quite a good number of people who have participated in public life in this country, have contributed to science, to art, to industry, to trade and to political

life in a degree far beyond the number we are until today we have perhaps eight or nine thousand Jews in Denmark and it has never been much more than that.

Q. To go then to the matters of the occupation by the Germans in 1940, how did that occupation affect the Jewish community?

A. Well, to begin with, we shared the history of all other Danes. Obviously we were more shocked, perhaps more afraid than the rest of the population because we didn't know what would be the outcome but since the Danish government worked out some kind of a coexistence with the occupation in power, one of the conditions of that coexistence was that no measures should be taken against the Jewish population.

Q. Where did that stand derive from?

A. It was obvious that if the Germans wanted somehow a quiet area in Denmark, this was a precondition. In Denmark it was unthinkable that people should be persecuted because of their religious beliefs or even if they don't have any religious beliefs then of the fact that they were born of Jewish parents. This could not happen in Denmark and no Danish government could survive to accept and to be passive to such a decision. The story goes that it was the king, Christian the Tenth who personally interviewed and as a famous legend that the king when he went out to town as he did every morning on his horse without any guards or any military or anything like that, he just was on his horse going through the city of Copenhagen and the story says that he was wearing the yellow star which the Germans used as the sign of disgrace to the Jews. Well the truth is that he was never wearing that star because if he had taken it on his uniform he would have been the only one to wear it but he might have threatened to do so and by this it prevented any degradation was ever made to that end. So, we lived as Danish citizens with the problems of an occupation power, of the problems of having Germans enemies of democracy, enemies of all decency to have the real power in this country, but we were not suffering more than any other Dane had to suffer.

Q. Did members of the Jewish community participate in discussions concerning the understanding with the Germans about the Jews in 1940 or in preparation for the -- I know the occupation was a surprise, but there must have been some preparation?

A. The Jewish community of 1940 was a community I would say like the Jewish world almost in the 1930s. Subdued, although until the occupation quite secure never the less low profile. Don't let them hear that you are here. Be quiet. My father was by the official Jewish community several times told off that he was speaking in strong terms against the Nazis. Again it was an attempt that nobody should look at you. They might get the wrong idea.

So, during the years of occupation, this tendency became even stronger. We stopped the magazine of the Jewish community that nobody should say that we could vote the Germans to start anything with the Jewish community. We were, of course, in contact with the official authorities, the government, to get information but we just were the receivers of that information we were not creating the situation.

That was quite typical of the times I would say.

Q. There are those who refer to the occupation as a benign occupation or even as a time of passive collaboration with the Germans.

A. I would say that it was a problem especially if we compare to what happened in Norway where the Norwegians stood up against the Germans and fought them militarily. At the same time I would say no collaboration and if we continue the comparison to Norway, the end to Norway was that they got a Quisling government which means a government that was collaborating with Germans whereas in Denmark we kept the democratic government which was certainly hostile to the Germans. Things were hostile to the Germans we have had borders with Germany all through history and we have fought many wars with the Germans.

So, to begin with there was no chance of any love affair. There was no question that we tried to show our national feelings, the birthdays of the king became demonstrations with hundreds of thousands of people in the streets. We were wearing small signs in our clothes even going with the Royal Airforce signs around. There was no question where we were but we were

passive for a long time, and Danes did not like the sound of a bomb exploding. So, when the underground movement started to become active, and bombing factories that were producing something called the Germans railway lines or similar then there were different opinions about that in the population. It took a very special action from the underground, which was a typical Danish action because it was carried out at 12:00 noon and nobody got hurt and there was even involved the box for beer in that operation and it exploded in a big place which the Germans had just taken over. That created suddenly an interest of a very positive nature, but that came at a time when the Danish government actually had resigned because the Germans demanded a stronger action against the Freedom Fighters, a type of action which again no Danish government could accept and therefore they resigned. There was never formed any other government. A Nazi government like the Quisling government in Norway could never take office in this country.

Q. During the late 30s there was a great number of Jewish refugees from other countries that tried to enter Denmark and not all of them were accepted.

A. That is to put it mildly. Well, the whole western world did not respond to the tremendous need of giving to refugees at the time. Again, Denmark is a neighbor to Germany and therefore obviously there were people who tried to get over the border and Denmark did not give refuge to more people than other countries. Our biggest effort was, in fact, to allow young people to come to Denmark from Germany, young Jews, and to train them as farmers in Denmark and after a year or at the most two years they could continue to then Palestine and work then in the kibbutz in Palestine in a very positive way. That worked very well.

Also, the so called youth aliyah or Jugend Aliyah, had many hundreds of youngsters coming to Denmark but most of them intransient and quite few were allowed to stay permanently.

Q. Was this a source of tension or controversy within the Jewish community?

A. The Jewish community tried to convince the government to open up at least a little bit more and from time to time we succeeded but in most cases we have to admit that the

government was afraid of creating a problem in Denmark. They were afraid because all other countries were hesitant. So, had one country suddenly opened up they could have had so many that they couldn't handle the whole thing. The conferences that were held at the time, international conferences, never gave a positive result. So, this is a dark chapter in our history as it is for the whole western world.

Q. Can you give me the chronology of the rescue. When did it become clear that the Jewish community was imperiled?

A. Well, on August 29, the Danish government resigned and curfew was declared by the Germans and a number of strong measures, a prohibition to assemble in the streets and many kinds of demonstrations and many other specific measures were taken with the German tanks were going through the streets of Copenhagen.

At the time that the governments resigned the Jewish community was fully aware that the protection they had until that point was gone. Then rumors started and every day you had rumors in the morning and other rumors in the evening and I remember my father was very strong in his reaction to those rumors, being afraid that the various reactions would create panic. At the day of the 29th of August, leaders of the Danish society were arrested and among those leaders were also the then chief rabbi Dr. Freidiger, the president of the Jewish community and other Jews that held leading positions.

Q. Why were these leaders arrested?

A. Well, that was the way the Germans wanted to prevent any possible creation of a movement that was directed against them. They thought by taking all these personalities those that could be thought of as leaders of such movements, they were taken away from public life. Among them also a great number of officers of the Danish army and they were held in custody and didn't suffer very much, but they were taken out of society. The Germans didn't realize that others could take the places of those that they held. But, that was the purpose of that.

Q. They were put in prison in Denmark?



A. Yes, in a camp here in Denmark but under comparatively good circumstances and nobody thought really that it should last for very long. But, still we realize that the Jewish community was not treated differently from the rest of the population because if they had not taken the leaders of the Jewish community we would have said well, why didn't you take all the others and not our leaders, so we would almost have been insulted.

But, that was the situation during the month of September.

Q. What was your father's position at this point?

A. Well, my father was a rabbi and had been a strong spokesman against the Nazi regime. He was not officially employed as a rabbi. He had some teaching functions at the time and some lecturing functions but not actually serving in the synagogue.

Nevertheless he certainly was the one to whom people would look for advice in such a situation. That was probably then the reason that when the news really came to us about the plans of deporting the Jews of Denmark to the camps in eastern Europe, that there was sent two messengers. Well, let me first tell you that one member of the German staff, a naval attache at the German embassy in Copenhagen, he decided to reveal the plans. A certain Georg Duckwitz(?) and he had close relations to some leaders of the Danish Social Democrat party and went to them and told them. It was on a Tuesday and the message was that the coming Friday night the Germans would go out and arrest the Jews of Denmark, put them on two boats that were already on the way to Copenhagen harbor and bring them to Auschwitz.

Now, the social democrats went to the president of the Jewish community who had been released by that time and told him he would believe it and at the same time they sent the secretary to our home, to my father and gave him the news and at that point my father convinced that it was true and again it was a problem how to react without panic. The message was the Jews shall not stay at home on Friday night.

Whether it will be possible later to return, we don't know. The Germans here in Denmark are in fact against this decision, but it is an order from Berlin and we can do nothing about it and

it has to be done and the Gestapo will be here to arrest the Jews. So, for God's sake, don't stay at home.

Now the question was how do you spread the news. Although you had three days to begin with the news came at a time when the curfew operated a few minutes later and you couldn't go out into the streets. You couldn't very well use the phone. So, the first chance to spread the news was on the Wednesday morning. Now, that Wednesday was the eve of Rosh Hashanna, the Jewish New Year and there is a very early service in synagogues and orthodox synagogues where you say special prayers and where there are a little bit more people than on a usual normal week day.

So, my father stopped those services in the synagogue of Copenhagen.

Q. In the middle?

A. In the middle of the service and went to the Bimah and told the people what he had been told the night before.

Q. Were you there?

A. No, I was not there. I was still supposed to be not part of it. But he told them that the problem was to spread the news. Everybody would have to think of people especially the lonely(?) people but every person he could think of should have the message and better that the person should have the message from five or eight different sources than no source.

So, there would be no services in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah. This of course alone would make it clear to everybody who would come to the services that there was something wrong. And so we started finding out, I was running to people who lived not too far away and knock on their doors and telling them what was happening.

We were all sent around town. We also tried to phone some people telling them that we didn't have any summer vacation that year so we would go to the country and people knew that if the rabbi goes into the country on Rosh Hashanah it is like Father Christmas leaving before December and that was some of the ways we used to get the message around.

Then really everybody had to find his own solution. There was absolutely nothing prepared whatsoever. Looking back one wonders whether that was good or bad for the Jews. If we had prepared things would it have been found out and stopped. Now everything was an improvisation. You did what you did. Your friends reacted as they reacted. Your next door neighbor, your shoemaker or your green grocer who whoever with whom you were in contact and the wonderful thing was that it didn't really matter who you chose at that point to be your helper.

Q. Did you chose your helper or did the helper chose you?

End of Tape 1

Tape 2

02:01:00 Q. Did you seek out help from others or did others seek to help you?

A. Well, the others did not yet know about what was going to happen and my father had been a frequent guest at the various Danish folk high schools since we were a family at that point six people, my eldest brother went on his own and actually went very soon to Sweden but still we were six persons and we just couldn't go to the next door neighbor. So, my father thought such a school would be a good place to go they would have room enough for a big number of people. So, he phoned actually a place and the headmaster of the school immediately understood what it was all about but he had to answer that there were so many frogs in the area and thereby pointing to the green color of the soldiers which in this connection were German soldiers, so the Germans had taken his school and that would not be exactly the best place to hide.

So we took a chance. Another former headmaster of such a school had become priest at a small village about 100 kilometers away from Copenhagen. So, we went by train on the Wednesday and from the station of that little village my father phoned the priest who again immediately understood what it was about and the priest insisted that all of us stay in his house although my father's idea was that he could put one here and one there. He knew people of his parish and he would know -- but no we should stay there and this was some of the old fashioned parish priest's houses where there was room and even a big garden. I remember the apple trees of that garden. They were just giving the most wonderful apples out at that season. I was then a boy of 14 and perhaps I didn't fully appreciate what was happening apart from the fact that we had to sneak away from our home with almost nothing in our hands.

Q. Did people call your father and say what should we do, how do we do it, or was it each man for himself? Is that really the way it worked?

A. It was more or less each man according to his connections to the right to the left, some used to go in the summer period to some place in the country so they would try to contact that 01:04:00 place. Others actually just went into the next door neighbor.

Q. So it wasn't Jew going to Jew, a Jewish family going to another Jewish family and saying we're in the same situation?

A. No.

Q. It was Jews turning to Gentiles?

A. Exactly, all the way through. I would say, all according to their situation.

Q. And you had that confidence that the Gentile population would help you?

A. I don't think that anybody realized that there was a danger. I don't think that they had time to reflect too much, but to say where could we go, who do we know. Of course if you had closer relations you would choose such relations but many people came and asked for help from strangers.

Q. How?

A. We also left our own apartment. We told the host of the house, we paid some rent in advance and said look after our place while we are away. We told the milkman not to put any milk there and you know, very soon there was no question. Of course, little by little the rumor went around in town so that the non-Jews also learned about it and you could see places where teachers and schools would tell Jewish pupils to go home to their parents. The teachers would perhaps put their personal things to the disposal of such a family or at working places. So, you perhaps had colleagues at work that would help you. Or you went to your doctor and doctors and nurses were very active in those days in hospitals in Copenhagen took in patients under other names just to hide people. All kinds of good ideas were taken into use and as I said it was improvised, all of it. That perhaps was the strength of it.

Q. Were there people who came to synagogue for the holiday not knowing --?

A. That we never found out. I never heard anybody saying to me that they went there so I doubt it. I think that already during the first day the news had come around. There were Jews

still at the time I think for history it should be mentioned, who said it is not true. This cannot happen here. We are under the protection of the king. The poor king who at the time was very ill had fallen from his horse probably after some provocation and had not many chances to protect anybody. But I know of families, parents and children who sat home on that fatal Friday night and more or less waited for the Gestapo because they didn't believe it.

Q. What was the German reaction? This obviously is in retrospect when on Rosh Hashanah there was no Jewish community?

They must have known.

A. They were absolutely surprised. No question about it. They would not admit it and one of the leaders of the German occupation forces here sent a telegram to Berlin. It doesn't matter that we didn't get so many of them, the main thing is that Denmark is Judenrein. That was their attempt to cover up the failure which it obviously was. They had tried still to find out some of the routes that were established because that of course was our next step. We couldn't stay in these places for very long. Although we could trust the population, there still could be the odd one out and there was the odd one out that would be informer to the Germans and therefore we had to think of what is now going to happen.

The dream we still had when we closed the door that we might within a few weeks when things calm down, that we might return. That we realized we dreamed. So, already actually before the raids had started, certain routes to Sweden existed.

Q. Were these prepared by resistance people?

A. Yes, and they were already prepared before the whole situation around the Jewish population, but they were few and long in between but we had a their line to the free world via Sweden.

This would then be the natural thing and actually the same Duckwitz(?) who gave us the information, had gone to Stockholm and had with the Swedish government discussed the situation. When it became clear on the Saturday morning when it was published that the Germans had arrested as they said the Jewish population, or rather that they had removed the

Jews from Danish society, so now they could release the officers of the Danish army. Then the Swedish government issued a statement that they were prepared to take over the Jews of Denmark. The Germans did not accept that proposal but thereby we could say that every Jew knew that could he reach Sweden, he would be safe there.

That was of course of great importance.

Q. How did that news come to the Jewish community, which is no longer a community?

A. It was no longer a community, although the community in a funny way continued to exist. There were people of the community leadership that made some important decisions in the financial field, how to dispose of the Jewish property here and other things. But we listened to radio. We didn't have to concentrate only on Danish radio obviously. It was not on the Danish radio, but Swedish radio and also the BBC programs. So, that was known to us, yes.

02:13:00 Q. In terms of your own specific experience, your father knew a priest, somebody who had been in school, was a priest. You went to that small town. Your father called. He welcomed you. Then what happened?

A. Well this priest had a son who started law at the Copenhagen University and as the father so the son -- the son was very active in the student organization to help Jews and to find out how to organize routes to Sweden. So, there was already established a contact. The priest said you stay here as long as you want, until the end of the war, but after a number of days, we realized that it was too dangerous, not only for us but for the priest. After all they were living normally two people in that house. Suddenly there were eight and already when he went down to the supermarket, which did not exist in those days, but his grocer suddenly products were sold in quite a different amount.

So, it could not work. Then my elder brother went back to Copenhagen in order to try to raise the amount of money necessary to go to Sweden because that was not free of charge and it was not the normal prices for tickets to Sweden. It did cost quite a lot of money.

Q. How did he raise the money?

A. Well, we tried to find people who we knew had some money and who were willing to give us some loans at the time. So, that was possible, although the sum which we needed was an enormous sum compared to the prices of those days.

Q. How much was it and who gave you the price?

A. It was different prices, but it could vary around at the time 1,500 to 2,000 Danish Kroner which wouldn't sound much of today, not terrible much. I would say 2,000 Danish Kroner at the time was something like 300 American Dollars but if you multiplied it by six you already had a bigger sum and that was a terrific amount. And compared to what my father's earnings were in those days, it was beyond reach of any kind.

But my brother managed to raise that money --

Q. From Gentile friends?

A. No, partly from Jewish friends.

Q. Who were still in Copenhagen or had contacts to their offices in Copenhagen and were willing to do this, but there were big collections of money among Gentiles. Again, I remember that the Danish society of medical doctors gave a big lump sum.

Q. To whom?

02:17:00 A. To the resistance movement.

Q. Which then gave it --?

A. Which then, so when they had the people -- there was nobody who did not go to Sweden because they didn't have the money. So, although there was a price, the resistance movement saw to it that nobody was kept back because he couldn't pay the price.

Q. So, if your brother had not been able to raise the money, you could have gone anyway?

A. Yes. That would have been the outcome yes. But it was a question of trying and of honor and of self respect that the money was raised.

Q. How did you get in touch with the resistance people?

A. Well, through that son of the priest there were other contacts at the time we decided to go. The routes that were easiest, the sea is very narrow between Denmark and Sweden, in



Northern Sealand, had become very dangerous. The biggest mishap of the operation was in a small fisherman town in northern Sealand called Gilleleia(?)\_ where almost a hundred refugees were caught in the church of this place and therefore the advice was don't go out there. It's true that it takes not much more than a half an hour and you are already in Swedish waters, whereas going south it would take you six to eight hours to go over the Baltics. They said it was much safer to go south. And that is how it worked and we got an address in a city down south and at that address we paid our money and we were advised to go to the Bishop's house.

Q. How did you get to where you were to --?

A. That's a good question. We actually went by train and that was not one of the happiest or easiest trips I made by train in my life because that very same train going south of course also carried quite a good number of Germans and German soldiers.

So my mother and my youngest brother who at the time was only five years old were put in a special compartment in first class. Perhaps the boy would start asking funny questions. Then we found out that the only woman that was in the same compartment as my mother, took out a German newspaper. So, when she left the train on the way, we were rather frightened that she would go and tell anything, but it worked out very well and we arrived safely to this place.

Again, walking through the streets of that place, you could here people say oh there are many Jews in town today. So, the whole population was involved and at the Bishop's place there was almost sixty refugees. The whole town had to know about it because in the evening the cabs of the town came to take us to the various places where we should live.

So, it was a people's action and not only the resistance movement. At the same time, as many people in the resistance movement would tell you that the biggest recruitment for the resistance movement came thanks to the rescue operation because then already so many people had become active who were never part of the resistance movement before and they continued to work for the resistance also after the rescue operation had ended.

Q. Did you meet with other Jewish families who were fleeing before you went to the place where you were going to get the 02:27:00 boat, before you went to the Bishop's house?

A. No. After we left Copenhagen, no we did not. My brother had, as I said, had some contact in Copenhagen, but apart from that no. We were in a place where nobody else would ever dream of going and by coincidence had that contact there. So, there was no real contact after we had tried to spread the news as far as possible. Then it was a break from one to another and I think that was necessary to have that break because had somebody been caught and pressured to tell, we would have had huge problems.

Q. What day did you leave the first place that you went to, do you remember?

A. We went on the eve of Rosh Hashanah on a Wednesday, and we stayed there actually until the following Friday. The raid was on Friday night at the end of Rosh Hashanah. We came to this place and left there on the same day on the eve of Yom Kippur. So, it was the hour of Kol Nidrei when we entered the fishing boat in order to go out there and we had a rather more dramatic trip but that has nothing to do with the general situation because our fisherman was not a very good navigator and he should have never undertaken the responsibility that he did for nineteen people in this small boat. He didn't know where he was going and when we actually saw land as was planned after about eight hours, it turned out to be Denmark and not Sweden and for a short moment we thought that he was on the wrong side, but he was as scared as we were and we then found a route according to where the sun was on the horizon and miraculously we reached Swedish coast before the fuel was gone.

Q. On Yom Kippur?

A. That was Yom Kippur and we were seventeen hours on the Baltics so that was one of the Yom Kippurs I shall not forget.

Q. Was there any observance?

A. Well, we didn't have any food in any case so at least for seventeen hours we all fasted. But there was no service and there was no chance of --.

End of Tape 2



Tape 3

A. In fact, when we arrived to the Bishop's yard, the Bishop was aware that it was a special day in the Jewish calendar coming up, but he was not aware of the laws of Yom Kippur so when he saw my father and recognized him, and they embraced, the Bishop put to him the question, is there anything special Jews are eating on Yom Kippur. Of course, the first reaction was that the Bishop was ignorant, but the very important part of this is that the Bishop in this desperate situation where he was open to just one person in that town giving him away, with sixty Jews at his house, his main thought was that the Jews even under those circumstances should be given the opportunity to follow the laws of the Torah, the traditional Jewish law. That shows a little bit how the Danish church reacted. That they did not do what some other churches had done over history. That the rescue would be conditioned by giving up your religious ideas. On the contrary they were willing to help us and they wanted the Jews to be Jews and they were among the sixty people there Jews who would not know that it was Yom Kippur that day, but the Bishop would tell them.

So, I have taken that as an example of how the church reacted that the Jews were helped as Jews and not as possible converts. This is part of the picture that should be heard.

I remember at the point that some of the church 03:04:00 organizations in America issued public statements and asking for forgiveness for being passive during the Holocaust and I was asked did I expect a similar statement from the Danish church and I said the Danish church doesn't have to make such a statement. They made a statement on the third of October 1943 which was read in all churches all over Denmark, a very strong protest. Nobody could at the time know whether it was dangerous to read that statement in church, and they did it all over the country. That was the strongest way of assuring the Jewish people of the support of the church of the Jewish population.

Q. Did you know that there were Jews that were captured? Did you know about that or did you learn in Sweden?

A. In Sweden we soon learned about it because those that were captured had relatives that succeeded to get into Sweden. Among those we knew of course were deported was the chief rabbi who had already been in German custody since that day at the end of August.

Q. He had never been released?

A. He had never been released nor had his son by the way nor had the chairman of the board of the Synagogue, but little by little we heard about the successes and the failures and that was soon established a contact through the Danish Red Cross to those that were deported. So, we also heard about those who had died. We also found out possibilities to send passes that was soon after being well organized by the Danish Red Cross so that the biggest number of death actually was during the first six months until about March. I have a register here that my predecessor Dr. Friediger(?) who was among the deportees, he kept as if he were still having the full register power of registration of deaths and births etc., he kept a register according to the guidelines for the official register so I can see when actually the people died.

Q. He kept this in Theresienstadt?

A. In Theresienstadt. You can see there that at the moment when the food parcels started getting through people survived. Incredibly, even in the concentration camps, the Jews of Denmark had special treatment. I cannot understand. Nobody has tried to explain that to this day. Theresienstadt was supposed to be one of the better places to come. One of the better places to come meant that out of 140,000 captives, 33,000 died there in Theresienstadt and 83,000 were deported to Auschwitz. So, the number of survivors was small, but the Danish Jews were not sent, none of them, sent on to Auschwitz from Theresienstadt. And during the last month of the war in April 1945, the famous white busses that were originally organized by the Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte arrived in Theresienstadt on the thirteenth of April and they left Theresienstadt and went through Denmark, taken to Sweden. So, that was a great day for my father who in Sweden was working officially in the capacity as rabbi for Danish refugees.

Q. Your father then became the titular, head of the Jewish community in Sweden?

A. The Danish embassy in Stockholm, in fact engaged him, I think it was the only time that the Danish embassy engaged a non-Lutheran priest, engaged my father as officially the rabbi and he went and visited the Danish refugees who were spread all over Sweden. Some of them got jobs in towns. Others had to stay in some camps throughout the period. So my father went around. He organized services for them. He especially tried to encourage them and give them hope. He spoke to those who had relatives in Theresienstadt. There were many problems for rabbis to take care of and he worked very, very hard. He was away almost all the time. 03:10:00

So, he even had to go back before we were allowed to go back because the Danes in Sweden organized a military unit in case there would be war over Denmark then they could have gone over and participated. Now, they went over on the day the Germans capitulated. They went over to do police work more or less and one of them got killed by a German bullet and my father went over for the funeral.

But we were back in Denmark three weeks after the liberation.

Q. What was it like when you came back?

A. That was a wonderful experience. We were one of the first to come back and people were so awfully nice.

Q. Did you come back in a group?

A. It was very well organized in Sweden. There was a limit how many people could go at the same time on the boats back. The official nice ferry boats and it only took an hour and a quarter. It was a safe trip. So everybody had a note from the authorities what day would be theirs and we were among the first. I think we were actually on the very first day. When we came home to our own street and met the places, the people and I met those that I used to play with the twenty months that we'd been away had been making a difference to all of us. But the way we were received were extraordinary. I can say in the provincial towns where there were not so many Jews the Jews that came back were received as heroes with flags all over town. Enthusiasm and my father used to say that this was even more important than the rescue

operation because after all the rescue operation had as it's ultimate goal to help Jews leaving the countries. Jewish history knows of many cases where nations have helped Jews to leave their country, but we might not have another example of a nation welcoming the Jews back to the country and that was done here I would say even from people who might have thought it would be nice if they had not come back because perhaps they had got an apartment or they were looking after a shop. What I do know, it was almost a unanimous feeling of a warm welcome back to the Jewish community.

Then we had to try to settle everybody and regain according this situation and situations were not alike. Some people had just closed the door and then nothing had been touched. Their flats, their houses or whatever they had were exactly the same position, a little bit of dust and that was it. In some cases, even the Copenhagen municipality had paid their rent for the period they had been away.

Others had said how can we leave a flat and not being able to pay so they had told the landlords they would give up the flat and suddenly they were without a place to live. It was not so easy at the time. There was a shortage of apartments. Some people had sold their business and came back to nothing. So, it was different again from person to person. But there was established an office and special ministry to assist people in that situation. But in the end it was up to each individual to find out how to deal with it. It took some time. A few people had stayed in Sweden if they got good work there, why should they leave it.

So, we went through another quite difficult period. But the day when we could reopen the synagogue was of course a very happy day.

Q. When was that?

A. That was a few months after we had returned. We had returned at the end of May, the beginning of June. I can't remember the exact date when we reopened but the synagogue was ready for the high holidays of Autumn of '45. The old chief rabbi had returned from Theresienstadt and was back for the service in the synagogue.

In certain ways you could say we were back in business as usual, but it would never be the same and it could never be the same. The community had changed some differences inside the community between the so called Viking Jews. Those Jews who had been here for centuries and Jews that had come in the beginning of the century from eastern Europe. Jews that had come from Germany in the thirties and you had a feeling that they had difficulties in getting together. This was forgotten. These differences could no longer exist. And there were many other things where we had to realize a responsibility. We heard about the full truths of the Holocaust. How could a Jewish community not react. We tried to take in, since we were better off than most other communities, also materially better off, we tried to invite children from countries where they had suffered much more than we had suffered. We realized that we were part of the Jewish world. With all our gratitude to Denmark and confirmation that we were part of the Danish nation, this we never doubted, but perhaps we had in our attempt that nobody should have suspicion about our Danishness perhaps we had forgotten our obligations to the outside Jewish world. That had changed. That could never go back.

Q. One hears about this occurrence of the guilt of the survivor, the individual Jew who lived while the others died. Is there any such thing as the guilt of the survivor community?

A. No, I don't think so. I feel that people ask themselves why did I survive, and that question has no answer. Who could claim that he was a better person, that he was wiser, that any quality gave 03:19:00 justification to the fact that he or she was saved and the others were not. That to many people created an obligation, an obligation to be more involved. That we were saved gave an obligation to try to save others who would be endangered and there was enough to do.

But I don't think we in Denmark had any feeling of guilt. Our disaster would not have helped others so since we did not survive so that others paid the price, I don't think we had this feeling of guilt.

Q. It's an irrational feeling, it's a feeling that comes out of trauma?

A. Sure, and we asked the question, but as I said nobody has an answer.



Q. Was it a traumatized community, would you say?

A. The trauma came when we saw the realities of what we actually escaped. But again, I have a feeling that you see there a generation gap. A generation that was already adults and responsible people in their thirties and forties and then a generation that grew up and became adults after the creation of the state of Israel. You see there is a completely new Jewish world.

I remember when I started work for a jewelry(??) Jewry(?) here in Denmark and I joined the international Jewish forces on behalf of Soviet Jews, the generation that were just a few years older than I am were not too happy about this to begin with. They felt, again be quiet, don't let others pay attention to the fact that we are here. We can live without that attention.

Then the younger generation said we are responsible to a much higher degree and I might generalize a little bit but I would say it was quite typical and I think that was also the result of the rescue. Others didn't do it for us, we had to do it for us. We are in this situation together.

03:23:00 Q. What were one or two extraordinary stories about the rescue that you've learned about?

A. Well, I would say that you are now in a situation where historians move in and I have no specific animosity against historians but I feel historians like in other fields, I could take my own field of theology, you have here a very clear picture of what happened. All right, you still have questions here and there, but generally speaking it is very open. We have had so many thousands of witnesses to express what they actually experienced, so what is an historian going to do about that. Since everybody for a number of years has been praising the rescue operation if you want to make a new thesis, a new doctorate of what happened, you have to go against that what is generally accepted. So, suddenly you find historians who try to say this is nothing and actually the Germans closed their eyes and it was not dangerous to help them. I can get quite furious at these stories. I feel first of all they don't know what they're talking about. There were people who died in that operation and nobody at the time could know how dangerous it was.

It is true that if the Germans had put their navy fully into the waters between Denmark and Sweden, they could have stopped the rescue operation, but the Germans had some other

things to do with their navy so it was limited how much they could prevent it. And they did in fact at a number of points stop the transports from Denmark to Sweden. So, it was not a really closed eye, but 03:26:00 one of the stories I learned about much later. In fact with connection with our celebrations in '93 was a story of a woman, a blind woman who had hired a cab and although she was blind on the first part of the tour she directed the driver, right here, left here, straight, until they reached a certain corner where she asked the driver to stop and she pointed to a house across the street and she asked the driver to describe what he saw there. He described the place, whether it needed some painting, what it looked like and she sat and listened, said nothing, then after a few minutes of silence she said to the driver well now you can go on to the address I told you.

So, the driver got curious and wanted to know why should he tell about this house. Why should he stop there. So, the woman tells him that during the second world war when we reached October of '43 she lived in that house with her husband and her children and the idea was that every day the resistance movement brought a number of refugees that were more or less parked in the house until the evening when they tried to find chances of transport. Some evenings they couldn't find any transport so the refugees stayed over the night until the following evening and this went on for a number of days and she was a little bit afraid. Perhaps the children would talk at school, but it all went very well until a night when they had a number of refugees in the house, a big caravan of German military cars stopped outside the house and they were sure that the last moment had come. She herself, this woman got terribly excited. Everybody was sitting in complete silence. Her excitement was so strong that the blood veins in her eyes bursted and she was blinded. That was the situation when she got blind.

After some minutes of her and everybody else there as if it was hours, all the German cars started. Not one soldier had left the cars, nobody had knocked on the door and why they had stopped there nobody can tell you. The only lasting effect of it was that this woman was blinded.

So, the taxi driver asked the woman I can understand that you wanted to save people, but it was it not a terribly high price to pay for your humanitarian ideas? So the woman said if you ask me whether I am sorry that I was blinded I can tell you it has been terrible. Could I wish for anything, I wish for my eyesight back. But if you ask me if you could live your life again, would you have done the same thing, I could tell you yes, I would do the same thing. You see, this fact is so strong that that tells about the approach, about the ideas of our rescuers that they knew there was a risk and even with that risk they would do it. Later for most of our good friends, it came out that they survived as well and that is very easy to see after this. But at the time it was a risk and some of them paid a high price and even then they would say they would do it again.

This is to me a much stronger proof against those so called historians who try to belittle what happened in those days. Again, we have to understand that the rescue did not just happen. It was a result of a long relationship between the Jewish and Christian populations. If there had not been any relationship I doubt whether it would have happened. But there was a relationship and that relationship proved itself to be as strong as it was when it was necessary to prove it.

I believe that this perhaps is also a lesson of the whole rescue operation that this open door policy of a community towards the majority community in the country and that is a necessary step if we want good relationship it means we must be open. Not that we shall forget who we are. Not that we shall forget our roots, but at the same time the positive to the community among who we are living.

Q. Wouldn't you say that the German Jewish community was plausible?

End of Tape 3

Tape 4

Q. Let me ask you about the German Jewish community which made great openings to the community at large in comparison to the Danish Jewish community in Denmark that was received with a welcome that sustained itself when the Jewish community was threatened but in Germany that was not the case. How would you account for the difference.

A. There were many contacts between German Jews and German Christians. They were more on the professional level. The German Christians would have a Jewish doctor or a Jewish lawyer but it remained more or less a mystery what is Judaism. So beyond that general human relationship it is very important for a Jewish community not to hide its specific customs because if you will fight the prejudice that exist among various nations and various religions you can only do so by being open by explain to people what does it mean, why am I doing this why am I doing that. I remember a funny example perhaps, I was in my younger days responsible for the summer holiday camp of Jewish children. The neighbors of our place there went out to have a quiet good 04:02:00 time in the summer they were a little bit disturbed that here was a group of youngsters that made noise in various ways at various times of the day.

So, I decided to invite all the neighbors. I made an open day at this place where all the neighbors came in and I told them about our program and when they heard this noise it meant that there was this activity going on and that noise was another activity, etc. Suddenly we were wonderful friends and the people thought it was exciting that they have got this camp as their next door neighbor. This is where I say if we as Jews invite people into the synagogue, not with any missionary ideas at all but they should know what are we doing there, and what does it mean to us and if we at the same time pay interest in what are they doing in their churches or their mosques and what does it mean to them, that is the way I try to point out is important in a relationship to find these ideas that even when they think they are nice people but they are crazy, there is very soon some mystery coming around. Traditions that are not so mystical. If we only get an opportunity to explain what a symbol means, then the symbol is beautiful. If they just see the symbol and don't know what it is they become afraid.

Q. Was the community then from the turn of the century on the Jewish community actively making itself evident too?

A. Little by little. I must say that perhaps my father's biggest contribution to the Jewish community was that he was able of explaining these things, but there had been others before him, and I would like to add that this is happening today also in Germany. You have many countries in Europe where you find councils of Christians and Jews and there perhaps I could add that one of the countries where you don't have a council of Christians and Jews is Denmark. Because the mere fact that you need a council is already showing a problem.

I have been serving together with three bishops of the Lutheran Church in Copenhagen and I have to every one of them put the question should we establish a council of Christians and Jews and after having discussed it with them, we came to the same results what should that council do? If we should have problems and we might have problems so either you phone me or I phone me and we discuss the problem and we solve it if we need. We don't have to formalize it. But you find such councils in Germany and England and Sweden and in other countries. This is a very important step forward and if we would have had that 100 years ago, I think that it would have been much more difficult for the Nazis to work because you cannot if you have sufficient information you can not go around telling stories of cruelty and what they tried to put into their propaganda if people know better and therefore it was a big job and an important job between all groups in this society to be open and to give that amount of confidence from one to another that is necessary. War, persecutions, are very often based on fear and it's very often a groundless fear. That is where we could do better.

Q. Danish tolerance that was built up before the war towards the Jews, did you ever think it was unique?

A. I didn't think of it like that in those days, and I want to say when you use the expression "Danish tolerance", the Danes are not born more tolerant than anybody else. We feel it nowadays where we have got a problem with the Muslims, but you see the Jews are that many steps ahead of the Muslims because the Danes know they have nothing to fear from the Jews.

They haven't got the same feelings of security when you speak about Muslims. They don't know anything about the Muslims. They might know something about the old testament even if they don't understand it, they know absolutely nothing about the Koran and therefore there is a fear and where there is a fear you see intolerance growing and that is the problem of today.

04:08:00 So, this proves the point that Danish tolerance is not something which you inherit from somewhere(?); Danes are normal people.

Q. And yet during the second world war they behaved differently from any other group?

A. Yes, but that is based partly in any case on the more open relationship. Partly of course also because we had the common enemy. Partly because we had the opportunity, but you're right when it comes to all that it amounted to a situation where, I would say they were brave people.

Conclusion of Interview