

Steen Metz

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Abstract

Steen Metz was born Steen Axel Metz in Odense, Denmark on May 5, 1935. They were assimilated Jews and did not keep kosher and celebrated Christmas. His father had a sense of humor and played with him whereas his mother was very tenacious, and less gentle than his father. They lived in an apartment and rented space for a garden. Steen had many friends, mostly non-Jewish. Denmark was occupied on April 9, 1940 and soon afterwards were able to vacation, his father continued practicing law, they still visited their relatives in Copenhagen and Steen entered school. They had a radio but no car so bicycled. The Jews did not wear a Star and the Danes cooperated with the Germans as minimal as possible. 95% of the Jews in Copenhagen found out that deportation would take place October 2nd and 7,000 escaped to Sweden. The Nazis arrested Steen and his parents and took them to the schoolyard along with 60 other Jews. Steen was shocked as he did not know that he was Jewish. They were taken by cattle car to Theresienstadt where they remained for 18 months. His parents worked and he volunteered and received extra food. After six months, his father died from starvation and was cremated. Steen and the other children were forced to place the remains of those cremated into the river. Sometimes they received packages of food and clothing from Denmark and other times the packages contained rocks. 90,000 out of 176,000 inmates were deported to Auschwitz or other camps and 40,000 died from illnesses and starvation. Steen returned for a visit in 2009 and saw the Museum built where the Children's Barracks had been. He wrote a Memoir for his family and the book was published in April 2011. The chapters about the Holocaust formed a book, "Danish Boy." Theresienstadt was liberated by the Russians on May 8, 1945 and 20 buses took 15,000 people from Theresienstadt and other camps to Baden. Steen and his mother stopped in Copenhagen on their way home to Odense. His mother remarried in '51. He lived there until '53 when he graduated high school and joined the Armed Forces which was required. Afterwards he worked for an international company stationed in Canada where he met his future wife. Upon his grandson's request, Steen started speaking about the Holocaust to students and now he figures he spoke to 30,000 people in 260 groups.

Summary

00:00 Steen Metz was born Steen Axel (Father's name) Metz in Odense, Denmark on May 5, 1935. It is in the middle of the country, about 130 miles from Copenhagen. It took four to four and one-half hours by train with no bridge between the two Islands but now takes about one and one-half hours. His father got a law degree and had a long engagement as

was waiting for the degree. Afterwards they moved to Odense. His mother was Magma Hildesheim (town in Germany with same name). The family originated from Metz on the French/German border and from Rabbis, Netherlands in Jutland. They celebrated Christmas as did other Jews in Denmark and most Jews were assimilated.

- 05:00 In his '95 interview, his father said he was Jewish and felt Danish. Few Danish Jews were kosher and they were not brought up Jewish. His parents got married in his grandfather's apartment, not the synagogue. He learned early to ride a bike and people ran after him with a stick. He played with his father in the fall collecting chestnuts. His father was his horse. He did not have a garden but grew seeds and flowers and Steen collected flowers and radishes. They rented space in a big garden. They used 1/10th of it. They grew everything from seeds. They had lettuce, radishes and flowers. They went in the evenings and weekends to take care of it.
- 10:00 It was close to home. It was common to live in an apartment. His father was very gentle and had a good sense of humor. He had a temper, was creative and at family gatherings celebrated any birthday from 56 to 80. He sang songs that he previously made up. His mother was very tenacious, strong, boring, stubborn and less gentle than his father. She was also Jewish and despite assimilation, was expected to marry Jewish. Her father's brother kept a kosher home. He knew his grandmothers. His maternal grandfather left the country. He was a stockbroker and went bankrupt and went to South Africa or Argentina in early 1900s.
- 15:00 They had a big apartment and had help but soon the nannies and help disappeared. Her mother made up five siblings in her family with an older brother and an older sister and then she was in the middle with two younger sisters. His paternal grandfather died before he was born. His grandmother lived in Copenhagen. He was closer to his maternal than his paternal grandmother. When her husband died, his paternal grandmother moved to a smaller apartment and got help from her sister who was in the hat business. Steen felt close to her. After the war, he was closest to her and the grandmother. The aunt was in wholesale hats. She sold the business as had no one in the family to take it over. Business was poor as men did not wear hats and soon women did not. The aunt retired during the war at age 55. Everyone escaped except for his father's brother, wife, mother and son. The business was closed after the war. After Christmas, his father's mother took him out shopping. Until the mother's father left the country, they were financially well-off. His father had two younger brothers. His father got an education. One brother was an architect and another in business, the grocery business at one time. He visited them in Copenhagen. They did not have Christmas.
- 20:00 Only relatives on his mother's side had Christmas. His grandmother on his father's side was not religious. The Architect was kosher. There were three cousins on his father's side and five cousins on his mother's side. The holidays were family-oriented. They had

friends in Odense where there was no synagogue. It had few Jews and one friendly family where the father was an attorney from Copenhagen. It was the only Jewish family they were friendly with. He had non-Jewish friends. He had lots of friends. When it was his birthday, he had on party for his school friends and one for his neighborhood friends. Steen started school in 1941. Denmark was occupied on April 9, 1940. He vacationed with his mother's older sister and husband in Denmark. They vacationed in the beginning of the war.

25:00 Their apartment had three bedrooms and two balconies and was on the 3rd floor. They moved there on April 9, 1940 from a smaller apartment. His aunt and her sister came to help them move which happened when they were invaded. They had gas heat, electricity and indoor plumbing but no refrigerator and no automobile. They used bicycles for transportation and owned three. He could walk into town in one-half hour or take a bus but usually he bicycled. Their apartment building had three floors, was new and had 700 apartments so was a big complex. There were balconies in the bedrooms. They had no pets. He played with boys and girls. He knew they were occupied as saw German soldiers walking the streets with green uniforms. He thought they were ugly. They threw out stuff from airplanes. His family had a radio.

30:00 Steen remembers playing and going to school but does not remember being at home much. He does not recall his parents talking politics. His life changed little when they were occupied as he continued attending school. He attended a private school and his father continued practicing law as it was not a Jewish company. There was little anti-Semitism. It was mostly Lutheran, the State religion. 95% were members. The 50-year anniversary of the end of the war was in 1995 before his mother died. A journalist asked her if she felt Danish or Jewish and she replied, "Danish." He has a photo from their vacation at a Danish beach where he went with his mother's sister and husband and their children after 1940.

35:00 It was taken the summer before they were arrested and they were arrested a year later. In Odense there were 4 and ½ million people and 500 were Jews so it was a low percentage. They exported Danish food to Great Britain and were forced to ship it to Germany. The Germans loved the food so they treated the Danish differently. Hitler did not want to have more resources than needed in Denmark as he had many fronts. The Germans went through Denmark to get iron from Sweden. Denmark wanted to be neutral but did not get the chance. They still visited their relatives in Copenhagen and still went to Christmas at his mother's sister's. He was never singled out by the Germans or the Danes that he was Jewish. He did not know that he was Jewish. There was no synagogue in Odense. His father was brought up in the Jewish faith though no synagogue. Few people left Denmark before late summer '43. The Danish got approached by the Commandant and got an ultimatum as the Underground was bombing factories and rails and was sinking ships.

- 40:00 The Danes cooperated with the Germans as minimal as possible. The Jews did not broadcast. Sigmund was the beginning of the Final Solution. Werner West was the Commandant. He was ambitious and did not want sabotage. No one wore a Star. It is a myth that the Danish King Christian X wore a Star but he would have worn one if the Jews were required to do so. The idea might have come from a cartoon in an American magazine. He continued being King and the Queen continued in her capacity. The King surrendered April 1, 1940. He supported the Jews which reflected Danish society. Hitler sent him a telegram on his birthday wishing him well and the King merely replied, "Thank you." It was a dismissal and Hitler did not like it.
- 45:00 Life changed drastically when Werner decided on a date and the leading German officer went to the Danish administration and told them the date of the Final Solution. The Chief Rabbi was notified and 95% of the Jews in Copenhagen found out and 7,000 escaped to Sweden. On August 30th, the date for the Final Solution was made for October 2nd, Rosh Hashanah as everyone would be home. The Nazi Duckworth made the arrangements. Commandant Werner was also involved. He went behind the scenes as he did not want to be involved with sabotage. He wanted everything to run smoothly as he was looking out for his career. He thought if the saboteurs hurt him too much, it would be bad for his career. It was unusual to warn people. People left their homes and stayed in hospices under false names and were shipped to Sweden which was neutral. It was 2 and ½ miles away and they got there by a fishing boat.
- 50:00 The Jews hid in the hold of fishing boats which smelled of fish. Children were sedated so they would not cry. Some Jews were caught including his uncle, the wife, his father's brother and the uncle's son. The son was three years younger than Steen and was sent to Theresienstadt. The Jews stayed at Pensions and Guesthouses. The Nazi heard about them and caught them. A husband and wife built boats and took in Jews. The Nazis found out and shot them. There were informers involved. His cousin, the mother, father and aunt hid in a loft and a girl friend of a Nazi was the informer. They were taken away but not to a camp as some were not Jewish.
- 55:00 The Architect brother, wife, son and grandmother were caught in the guesthouse and sent to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. The mother's sister and her Christian husband and daughter were in a loft of a church and the girlfriend of the Nazi informed on them. They were sent to an internal camp in Denmark and a lawyer helped get them released. They were put in a truck and told not to look around or they would be shot and got to Sweden. In September 1943 his family was in Odense. His mother said they were not warned and were shot. His brother said to wait until they made contact. His parents did not know what happened in Norway. Some escaped to Sweden. They did not know what was happening in Germany and Poland. His father did not think it was serious as nothing happened in 3 and ½ years.

- 60:00 It was easy to find where the few Jews lived. His family were members of the Copenhagen Synagogue where they had the names and addresses of all the members. Steen's family had a telephone but the Nazis listened in. The Nazis came early in the morning, about 6 or 7 AM. Steen was not brought up Jewish. They could have hidden in the basement but were transported by lorry to the center of town. They took bread, pastries and clothes with them. The soldiers had on green uniforms. He had never reacted with them. He did not know that he was Jewish. His mother told him why he was arrested at their home. He was in total shock and so were his parents. They were taken to the center of town where the Germans were shouting and counting. There were about 60 people in the schoolyard and he has a photo of it.
- 65:00 It is the only photo of people arrested. A truck took them to the Jutland Peninsula and were herded into box or cattle cars where they remained for three days and three nights. It was completely dark with no benches or food. They shared their bagels and rolls with the others and others shared their drinks with them. They were all frightened and tense. They did not know the others. There were the young people who escaped and Czechs and Germans earlier and had learned about Danish farmland in preparation of going to Palestine. They were 16 to 18 years old. There was one family from another town—a judge and his sister.
- 70:00 Most of the people were from farms. There was a lawyer who his father had worked with. The door was pounded but they did not hear it so the neighbor told them and they escaped to Sweden. The Nazis were told not to break down the doors. Another family in Copenhagen unfortunately, was caught later. They made one stop for fresh air. There were no toilets in the cattle car. In another car, someone committed suicide. Fifteen Jews committed suicide rather than be caught. They arrived in Theresienstadt and saw soldiers with guns who were shouting and they had to walk a mile or mile and a half to the town's train station. They were told to take their money and valuables with them and all was now taken away and from their suitcases. Those taken to Auschwitz and Birkenau had numbers tattooed on them. His mother kept him for 18 months. His father and grandmother were separated. He saw his uncle in Theresienstadt as he arrived a day later from Copenhagen. 472 or 5% of the Danish Jewish population were deported. He saw his father occasionally. They lived in barracks and lofts. There were 80 or 90 people on bunk beds with a mattress or lay on wood slats which had lice.
- 75:00 His mother worked so he did not see her. Steen also worked as he volunteered which was not required. He worked for an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon as a messenger. He went from one Nazi office to another and was given food such as two or three slices of bread. His mother held a couple of different jobs. She worked with mica or glomera, a mineral from the mountains used for installation of wall frames. 250 worked on benches cutting the mineral which was sent to factories. He never saw it. His father lived in a loft similar to his mother's but a different bunker where he was cold. He

dug ditches and had a hard time in the cold. He met his cousin from Denmark who lives outside Paris. She is writing her thesis on Theresienstadt survivors. He talked with one who was from Czechoslovakia and worked with his father. His father suffered as he wore an overcoat and was whipped. He lost 50% of his body weight and spent several months in the hospice and died from starvation. He and his mother saw his father before he died in the infirmary.

80:00 They had curfews. There was room for 6,000 people but had to house 60,000 so built huts but Steen remained in his barracks. His father died after being there for six months on March 13, 1944 at 41 years old. They built a crematorium to cremate the bodies so his father was cremated and put in a little box as the cemetery ran out of room. The children were ordered to take the little boxes to the river. There were 2500 boxes and they were handed from one to the next down the line until they got thrown into the river. Each box had a number and another boy knew Steen's father's number and when it came up, turned it so Steen would not see it.

85:00 It was awful to give children that duty. Steen did not see his father on the road working. He did not make contact with the man who saw his father working. He was glad to hear about it as it confirms other stories. Another job his mother had was to clean floors. The Nazis wrote that his father died from pneumonia, not from starvation. An officer asked his mother how she felt and she told him that her husband died from starvation. The women said she could have been shot for what she said. Seven days later, the officer returned and again asked her how she felt. The Nazis tried to be cruel and take their humanism away. The Dane Administration wanted to see how their Danes were being treated.

90:00 The Germans beautified the town (Steen saw or heard about it) by washing and painting the buildings, putting out nice benches, fake store fronts with clothes. A café, and a bank with new sinks (though no plumbing). They transported young French children who looked healthy and wearing nice clothes to play. There was a musical wunderbar playing. They were told not to talk to the Red Cross, the Director of Security and the Germans. The visitors spent 46 hours at the camp with the Gestapo and they could only walk the paths indicated so they would not see bad things and they had lunch. Steen was transported to a nicer area and when the visitors left, returned to his loft. His mother was not there. She was escorted with others to a far out place. Steen owns a book by the Chief Rabbi in camp where he wrote that Steen's mother was tenacious. Steen was about 10 years old. He heard unusual things from his mother. He outgrew his shoes and his mother got some from the Czech lady and gave her Danish food. Steen worked as a messenger and was given Ersatz coffee for breakfast and bread. He had potato peels and boiled water for lunch and dinner and sometimes dumplings. After six months, he received a package from Denmark and Sweden. All nationalities got packages but they got more than others. The packages arrived too later to help save his father.

- 95:00 A Danish historian wrote a book about people who died from hardship were old. His father was 40 years old when he died 10/11/43. Food packages addressed to her mother should be food, vitamins and clothing but were replaced with stones. They received packages from friends and family in Copenhagen. His grandmother's sister, Giger Michelin was sickly and had a Christian housekeeper, Ella Hoegdahl and sent packages and maintained the apartment. At the cemetery there was a plaque with names of all the Danish Jews who died in Theresienstadt. They biked to see it when they were in Copenhagen.
- 100:00 The boxes were square, brownish gray and had a top on them and were not heavy to pass. There were people from all over but he mostly played with Czech children. They had more inmates from Czechoslovakia than from other countries. He played soccer on a gravel field but it was not a real soccer ball but a ball of rags. He learned phonetically to speak the Czech language. His mother did not believe it but the Czech lady said he spoke it correctly. A boy did not show up to play soccer and his mother told him not to worry; they will return in a few days but they were deported to an extermination camp. 90,000 out of 176,000 were deported to Auschwitz or other camps and 40,000 died from illnesses and starvation so in a way, it was a death camp. He visited in 2009 and it looked similar. It was a fortress town built to keep the Germans out. It had brick walls, barbed wire and watch towers to hold 5 to 6,000 people and held 60,000 or maybe 70,000 people. When his number got high, more people were deported. Theresienstadt was both a concentration camp and a ghetto.
- 105:00 A museum was built where the children's barracks had been located. The country was freed in 1990 and built the museum. Steen was on a river cruise in Europe which ended in Nuremberg and he wanted to see it and Prague for a couple of days. He told the museum that he was a survivor and took a bus from Prague which took an hour. He walked around and went to the Archives and got a certificate. His father's grandfather, Axel, survived and said it should have been his grandmother as she was 64. Steen was glad he returned and saw the Museum and did the research as it was helpful. On his mother's interview CD, she was asked if she would return and she replied, "Oh, once is more than enough." He did not have any nightmares after the war. He returned to Odense where he was born and was scared that something would happen so hung onto his mother's skirt. He could not report this earlier but changed once he wrote his book. When his oldest daughter's son was in business school, he asked Steen to talk so did so.
- 110:00 He spoke to 100 students in the library and everyone asked questions, even his grandson. The grandson said that one of his friends thought that Steen is awesome as now he has a new career. His wife was concerned that he would have nightmares but he did not. His children knew that he was in a camp and was Jewish. They were brought up as Christian as he and his wife made the decision before they were married. His book came out in April 2011. It was a more than 300 page memoir for his family. He took all the chapters

about the Holocaust and put them into another book, "Danish Boy." He did research on the war years, wrote what he remembered and got his mother's interview. He spoke to his grandson's class and they were so well-behaved. Now he spends his time between Florida and Chicago area. He spoke in Florida and they were attentive. The teacher said it is important for him to talk as he is the last generation and talking helped him. He cannot imagine going to the grave without knowing what he knows now. He read books and talked to people and it became his passion. There was a dramatic change about him. His wife understands he spends so much time at the computer. He is invited to Springdale, Arkansas for three days and to his hometown in Denmark in November.

115:00 He wrote an article for them in Danish. He will make several presentations in the school he attended. After Florida, he will go in April next year to Rhode Island. He would want to tell his father of his memory and that six million died is why he is doing this. There were Danish, German and Dutch Jewish children except the "Little Fortress" had political prisoners. Theresienstadt was liberated by the Russians on May 8, 1945. Twenty white buses took 15,000 people from many camps including Ravensbruech which had 421 Jews left. They were in Theresienstadt for 18 months and then the buses came. The Danish administration and the Swedish neutrals contacted the Nazis around February 1945 as they knew the Germans were losing the war.

120:00 They wanted a direct line to the airlines so agreed to have buses. Steen and his mother were on one of the last buses. It was 4/5/45 and never saw the Soviet soldiers. It took them three days to return, heading for Baden. He looked out the windows and saw German soldiers. The white buses had Swedish flags and red crosses so they would not be shot at. They were given sandwiches, hot chocolate and chocolate. Some prisoners came from other camps. There is a Czech survivor living five minutes from here. The German disorder was destroyed. The camps were liberated the third week of May. He spent a couple of days in Copenhagen with his family. His mother wanted to return to Odense where she had friends. Their apartment was rented out so they moved into another rental apartment quickly though it was smaller. It was in the same complex and remained there until his mother remarried when they got a bigger home. His mother remarried in '51 which was not a happy moment for him as it was a difficult situation.

125:00 He lived there until '53 when he graduated high school and moved to another town to join the Armed Forces which was unsettling. He feels he should not have been required to do so. He had other jobs. Then he joined a company to see part of the world as the business was abroad. He met his future wife who lived in the same area as he did. He was sent to Canada where they met at a party making a food exhibition. She came up to him and invited him to the party. He was in a small office in Toronto. It was a surprise party for her birthday, October 1st. The next Saturday, they talked about his passion to talk to students for the past five years. He spoke to 30,000 people in 260 groups. He keeps a track of them all. Perhaps he exceeded 30,000. The Holocaust became more

important as there are deniers, especially in Europe. He asked each person to share the story with four people.

130:00 One more thing is important for a couple of reasons. At the Holocaust Museum in DC, there are panels where they write about events and he found some information that was incorrect so worked with the Museum to change it. In a couple of weeks, the corrected panels should be on display; it is gratifying. He shows photos: 1) His father before he was arrested in '43, taken in '40 or '41 when he was 38 but looks older; 2) His mother at age 85 in the summer when she and Ivy were in their hometown. She died five years later at 90 and he hopes he has her good genes so can keep talking with students; 3) The only photo of the arrest of Jews on the internet before he issued his book. It shows 60 Jews in a schoolyard as seen from the balcony and their bus. He was one of them. The son of the photographer found the photo; 4) Letter with poems from a 6th grade class he spoke at a school in Cape Coral, Florida outside Ft. Myers. The students were attentive and used the Holocaust Museum website and wrote an essay about the things he said—liked ice cream, saw soldiers on every corner, wondered why some families were saved but he was in the last car, thankful for his book of his story, was an “upstander” instead of a bystander and would never forget him.

135:00