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Oral history interview with Ralph Oppenhejm

Summary

Ralph Oppenhejm, a Danish citizen and Jew, relates his early wartime experience including:

- The invasion on April 9, 1940 including the official calls for calm and the initial agreement of the Nazis to the Danish government's call to not persecute Jews.
- His mother, Melanie's, successful effort five years earlier in cooperation with the Women's Union to bring about 200 Jews from Russia, Czechoslovakia and Germany.
- The move by Werner Best, Germany's local chief Administrator, to proceed with roundup plans for Jews after the government resigned in Aug. 1943, which was leaked by German Commercial Navy Attaché, Georg Duckwitz.
- The spontaneous public opposition to the roundup with protests and widespread cooperation to help Jews escape to Sweden. He claims only 468 of Denmark's 7,000 Jews were captured.

Oppenhejm expands on his personal ordeal starting with separating from his parents to hide in private homes. His family then seeks to escape in an open, leaking rowboat, stymied when a storm and darkness pushed them off course. The captain of a Danish cargo ship picked them up but turned them over to Gestapo officer, Hans Juhl, in Elsinore. He then describes:

- His 14 day detention, after which he and others including his parents were sent to Germany where they were greeted with insults by German citizens watching their arrival by boat at Warnemunde in October.
- His trip on rail cattle cars, 80-90 people per car arriving at Bohushovice, Bohemia near the Theresienstadt camp where they were greeted by the prisoner "Lord Mayor", Dr. Epstein.
- Soup was the primary food with three potatoes per day and bread twice per week.
- His first camp job was to carry away bodies using horseless hearses.
- Knowing an elderly woman who claimed to be an opera singer who had an affair with the Kaiser's brother for whom she bore two sons, who became Counts von Schulenberg.
- Visits by Adolf Eichmann which often created turmoil when the council of prisoners was asked to fill the demand for certain types of people (e.g. those who were blind, children, had TB, or elderly etc.) to go on the next transport to the East.
- Extensive preparations by camp Commandant Rahm for visit by Swiss and Danish government officials to mask reality.
- Execution of the Lord Mayor, Dr. Epstein, for his refusal to conduct a radio broadcast to blame the Allies for dropping a bomb on the camp.
- The system for arranging shipments of food and relief parcels from Denmark to the camp and their work in armaments plants.

- The arrival of 1200 children from Bialystok as the start of Nazi efforts to eliminate witnesses in the closing days of the war. Other arrivals informed them of horrors at other camps such as teeth extraction, hair harvesting, and gassing, none of which happened at Thereseinstadt.
- In April 1945, only about 10,000 of the usual 50,000 prisoners remained. On April 13, rumors spread about Swedish and Danish Red Cross buses in the vicinity, and the Germans began to hide some of their abuses, including the removal of the Jewish stars. But, then buses appeared at the camp, and claiming extraterritoriality, they loaded him, his parents and many prisoners, journeying towards Denmark, through Dresden and its accompanying destruction.
- Arrived back in Denmark at Padborg, describing the wonderment at soap, bathrooms, and clean towels, and the presence of cheering crowds, despite the persisting German occupation before continuing on to Sweden.
- Closes with description of how ingrained Jews had become in Danish society from their original arrival from Holland and Portugal in 1680 by King Christian IV.