

RG-50.391.0009

Oral history interview with Marcus Choleva

Summary

The father of Marcus Choleva, a Jewish citizen of Copenhagen, Denmark, came to Copenhagen at the age of 13 from Poland in 1905. Of his family's seven brothers, five went to America (first New York, then Detroit) and two to Copenhagen. His mother came from what is now Latvia around 1908 when she was ten. They married in 1928 and had two sons, two daughters.

When Germany invaded in 1940, his family was concerned as they knew how Nazis had treated Jews in other parts of Europe, but did not act until the Danish government resigned *en masse* in August 1943. Marcus, who was then ten years old, was aware of the situation as he had read newspapers since he was six to his mother, who was not permitted to go to school after immigrating. His experiences included:

- Sparked by arrests of the Danish military, the Chief Rabbi and some government ministers, just hours before a planned escape to Sweden, but they were betrayed to the Gestapo by a neighbor, a local Nazi. With other Jews and Danish Communists, they were loaded on to a ship, *Das Vaterland*. They feared they would share the fate of Norwegian Jews whose evacuation ship sank earlier in the Baltic Sea.
- Despite rumors of negotiated access to Sweden, the ship ultimately sailed to a now-Polish port, Swinoujscie, where on disembarking, the Jews were again separated from the Communists. Loaded onto cattle cars, about 50 people per car, Marcus and his family arrived at Theresenstadt on Oct. 5, 1943 after four days.
- After the Nazis seized all their possessions, he and 35 others were placed in a barracks room about 40 meters square with bunks three levels high, three people per level. His father and older brother were separated to an all-male group, while he stayed with his mother and two younger sisters. He saw only glimpses of his father and brother over the next six months. Despite many petty humiliations, including putting on the yellow star, they were proud to be Jews.
- Daily life consisted of about twelve hour work days. He worked as a runner between the camps. Others helped with transport, such as his brother, who at 14 years old drove horses. Children were scarce as many (about 35,000 over the course of his time at the camp) were moved via the Kinder Transport to what the Nazis called a more promising future, but was really to extermination at Birkenau and Auschwitz.
- Other transports of prisoners, about 3-5,000 people, out of the camp were arranged by self-administered lottery resulting in frequent family separations. Almost all, he learned later, went to Birkenau and Auschwitz.
- Food was scarce, consisting primarily of bread or potatoes, and soup. After six months, the camp's 400 Danish Jews each began to receive packages from the Danish Social

Ministry, which, despite in-transit theft, raised their standard of living and bolstered their spirits, while also allowing some sharing with non-Danes. This type of official support played into his family's decision to return to Denmark after the war.

- He described the careful Nazi preparation for a propaganda film made at the camp, made by a German Jew, Kurt Gowenz (sp?). The same artificial scenes of the camp were also used during the visit of two Danish officials in July, 1944.
- Despite the absence of war news, they were aware of Germany's impending defeat due to the increasing youth of the German soldiers and the many overflights of the U.S. 8th Air Force Flying Fortresses.
- April 13, 1945, the day after Marcus's birthday, he heard rumors of sighting a white vehicle flying Danish flags. The Chief Rabbi informed them that the Danes would depart the next day, hard to believe since they could see increased transportation of prisoners to other camps and the construction of a new gas chamber close by.
- They departed on the buses on April 15, 1945. Each bus had a Nazi SS soldier. Uncertainty existed as to the best route as transit rights had only been arranged with the invading British and American force, not with the increasingly close Soviets. They traveled through heavily destroyed Dresden, Berlin and finally Kiel, where the SS officer departed.
- They were greeted with music and food at the Danish border despite the ongoing German occupation on the 19th or 20th of April, sleeping their first night in Odensee. The next day, the 400 Danish Jews boarded a ferry in Copenhagen to Malmo, Sweden and then to quarantine and temporary residences north of the city, where on May 4 they learned of the Nazi collapse in Denmark.
- They had to wait another ten days as British General Montgomery pacified the country but returned to their Copenhagen apartment on May 14th, safeguarded by a neighbor, still clean and furnished.