

HVT-108

M., Hans 1918-

Hans M. Holocaust video testimony (HVT-108) interviewed by Gerry Singer, Anna Kaufer, and Judith Pfeiffer, August 28, 1995.

3 copies: 1 SVHS first camera; 1 SVHS second camera; 1 VHS copy.

Summary: Hans was born on November 10, 1918 in Copenhagen, Denmark. His father was an eye surgeon. After Hans' parents divorced, he lived with one brother and his mother. His older brother remained with their father. Hans' mother had a daughter with her second husband. His mother administered her husband's medical practice and raised the children in a Lutheran home. The family was not devoutly religious, but they attended church on holidays. Hans and his siblings spoke Danish at home and at school.

The family was well-informed about the developments in Germany. Hans' parents made sure that the children were up-to-date on international affairs. The family had several Jewish friends and shared news with them about the developments in Germany. Throughout the early 1930's, Hans' uncle regularly travelled to Cologne for business reasons. He returned each time with news about antisemitic attacks on German Jews. Hans also learned about the developments in Germany at school. When the Germans invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Hans family became extremely concerned about a second world war.

On April 9, 1940, the German Army occupied Denmark. The Danes were hoping that England would rescue them. However, Denmark capitulated in order to avoid bloodshed and the country was soon paralysed by the occupation. There was a widespread sense of shame for not having attempted to resist the German invasion among the Danes.

During the first year of the occupation, the Danish population became increasingly disturbed and depressed by the news about the Eastern front. The Danes and Nazis negotiated the terms of the occupation. Germany agreed that Denmark's borders would be "respected", Danes would not be forced to fight on the Eastern front, and that Danish Jews would be protected from harm and harassment. Danish politicians, the press and the larger population were unanimously in support of these terms. Initially, the German military simply occupied the country. Later on, however, the Danish industry and food production were increasingly utilized by the German war machine.

Nevertheless, Hitler soon became impatient with Denmark and sent the SS into the country. In June 1941, communists were arrested and interned in Danish camps by the Nazis. The Danes viewed this breach of their agreement as unforgivable and as a sign of things to come. Political and religious freedom were deeply cherished in Denmark. Hans explains the concern for minority rights as a result of the structure of Danish democracy: The government was always formed by a coalition of many small parties. The absence of any large majorities explains the interest of each of these small parties in establishing and maintaining minority rights.

However, the question, "should we cooperate with the Nazis," soon became an election issue. The leaders of the new Danish government signed an anti-communist pact with Hitler, but they continued to refuse to discuss the "Jewish Problem". Even this level of collaboration was not acceptable to the Danish public. The government resigned in August 1943 and deputy ministers administered the country without government backup. On September 8, 1943, Werner Best, head of the SS, requested permission from Hitler to deport the Jews from Denmark. The round-up was scheduled for October 1 and 2, 1943.

There was a spontaneous desire by the citizens of Denmark to save the Jews. The Danish resistance organized their rescue. Hans worked with university students spreading

news among the Jewish community and encouraging them to leave their homes and go into hiding. It was difficult to inform all Jews because they were so well integrated into Danish society.

Efforts were made to transport them by boat to Sweden. In hundreds of small, open fishing boats, the Jews were brought to Sweden where no one was refused passage for lack of funds. Wealthy Danes reimbursed the fishermen who sacrificed their safety and income. The Danes trusted one another, and there were relatively few informers among them. Hans particularly remembers the medical profession and its personnel as being extremely helpful. Many Jews were hidden in hospitals and escorted by ambulance to the boats that would bring them to Sweden.

However, a number of Jews were picked up by the Gestapo because they were not informed early enough as well as some others who did not want to leave their homes or refused to go into hiding because it was illegal. In one case, a group of Jews was betrayed outside Copenhagen in a church loft. The Nazis sent 481 Jews to Germany and then transferred them to Theresienstadt. The Danish government and its bureaucracy made constant inquiries about the condition of this group until the end of the war. As a result, not one Danish Jew was sent to a death camp. Fifty people died of illnesses and/or of old age. The remaining 431 were returned to Denmark after the liberation.

The flight of Danish Jewry stirred the entire Danish population and intensified their resistance efforts. Hans' whole family was involved in the movement. Except for his sister, who worked with the communist resistance, everyone joined the Social Democrat fraction of the Danish resistance. Resistance activities became so ferocious that Germans could no longer walk alone on Danish streets. Sabotage activities were brutal and efficient. Hans' family housed a saboteur. From October 1943 until the liberation in May 1945, Hans continued distributing illegal newspapers, which were crucial for morale, he began to transport weapons and hide people for the Resistance.

After the war was over, many Jews returned to Denmark. They were welcomed home to well-maintained houses, fresh flowers, and a warm reception by friends and neighbours. Nazi collaborators, informants, and women who were involved with German soldiers were paraded on open trucks through the city and ridiculed. Seeing this, Hans became worried that the members of the resistance would start behaving like Nazis.

Today, Hans lives in Montreal and works as a librarian and as a university professor.