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Interview with witness Leopold Sommerfeld in Gothenburg

Summary

Leopold Sommerfeld was born in 1926 in Gothenburg, a city with many old Jewish families but also quite a strong presence of Swedish Nazis during the 1930's and World War II. Leopold's parents were orthodox Jews from Grajevo in Poland who had immigrated in the early 20th Century. Sommerfeld explains that his family were well-informed of the anti-Jewish developments in Germany but that he, as a child, had not known much himself. He was later personally engaged in helping Jews who arrived from camps in Germany and one of the survivors that he met in 1945 was his future wife. Sommerfeld believes that his experiences during these years has strengthened his Jewish identity and he sees himself as a Jew in Sweden rather than a Jewish Swede.

Details

- Leopold grew up in Olivedal, a working-class area in Gothenburg, with his parents and many brothers and sisters, the family spoke Yiddish at home and most of his friends were also Jews with the same sort of background. His father found work as a construction worker when he arrived in Sweden around 1902 and saved money in order to pay for his wife's ticket (she came after him).
- According to Leopold his parents had neither felt welcomed in the distinctly Reform-oriented Great Synagogue of Gothenburg, nor were they very interested in attending their services, which they found too secular. Instead, together with other poor Eastern European Jews they took part in establishing a separate orthodox Schul in an old movie theatre. There was also a Jewish occupational training center and an after-school center that Sommerfeld attended, that was run by wealthy Jewish ladies.
- Their landlord, Mr. Svensson, was very sympathetic towards Jews and had many Jewish tenants. The family lived in a spacious apartment and they had many guests from Eastern Europe.
- Leopold had a good friend as a child, but one day he saw a Nazi flag in his friend's home (the friend's father worked for a German company). "After that I ended my friendship with him and I kept more to my Jewish friends", says Leopold.
- Several times Nazis shouted insults at the synagogue from the street and Leopold experienced anti-Semitic remarks but he was never attacked physically. However, in school there were a few fights, where some boys wanted to beat him up. However, his working-class friends, "whose parents were all leftist and anti-Nazi", defended Leopold so that he would be left alone.
- In 1933, as a child he did not really know what was happening with the Jews in Germany, he believes that the adults did not want to worry the children. Later, Leopold understood more of the seriousness of the Nazi threat, "the Pogroms of 1938 frightened us", he says. Their cantor had been in Buchenwald, so they were informed of the situation for the Jews in Germany, however "it was something that happened there, not here".
- When the Editor in chief of the daily newspaper Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning, Torgny Segerstedt, spoke out against Nazism, some local companies would no longer advertise in the paper, but after the war they quickly changed their position.
- Leopold went to a regular Swedish public school that had a very Jewish friendly principal. He didn't eat in the canteen since the food was not kosher and on Jewish holidays he was given time off. When Leopold did his military service everybody was very considerate, he did not have to eat pork and was allowed leave on Saturdays, there was no anti-Semitism among the men.

- When the war broke out his parents had a Polish Jewish guest who could not return. Also, his parents' siblings were still living in Poland but the Germans bombed a city that was the railway hub in the area, which saved them from deportation, Leopold says. With the war, the frequent visits by Rabbis from the Baltic countries ceased.
- Leopold remembers that they were very upset about the German occupation of Norway and Denmark and that the Jewish Community of Gothenburg helped the Danish and Norwegian refugees with accommodation and support.
- Leopold's family had no escape plan in case of a German invasion, "we had nowhere to go and perhaps the adults did not want to see the situation for what it was", he says.
- Leopold remembers when he met survivors from the camps in 1945, his mother and other women in the community invited them to eat with their families during the holidays. Among the survivors, Sommerfeld met his future wife who came from Czechoslovakia. Her sister, who had Tuberculosis, was also in Gothenburg, she later emigrated to the U.S.
- It was at this time that he understood what had happened to the Jews in Europe, however his wife never talked about her experiences until shortly before she died and only if he promised her that he would not tell their children.
- During the summer and fall of 1945 Leopold did not have a job so he helped supporting the survivors. Through his father, who was one of the founders of a new orthodox funeral service, he also helped with the burial of survivors who died after arriving in Sweden. Since, according to Jewish tradition, it should be a Jew who takes care of the bodies, Leopold traveled around to pick up the deceased. "There were young people who were dead, it was very difficult, but it had to be done. It still torments me, all the dead that we had to carry, it has put its mark on me, but I don't want to have it undone", Leopold says emotionally.
- Leopold's children and grand-children are living Jewish lives and Leopold has been very active in Jewish organizations. He believes that the survivors that came in 1945 (and the Polish Jews that arrived in 1968) has had a profound impact on the Jewish community in Gothenburg, "without them we would have no Jewish community today" he says.