

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Leif Donde
October 2, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Leif Donde, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on October 2, 1989 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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LEIF DONDE
October 2, 1989

[FIRST THREE MINUTES OF INTERVIEW NOT ON TAPE]

A: . . . Jewish boys' school and myself being very eager uh to join him but that shouldn't happen though until after 1945 when we returned from Sweden. Um, I don't remember much and I couldn't I imagine, of the actual German occupation but when it started rather. Uh the German occupation of Denmark started . . .

Q: Could we hold it? Let's ask a little more about your childhood only because people seeing this tape are not necessarily what traditional native Jewish family means. Uh, what for instance, uh, did you eat kosher at home? Did you light sabbath candles at home?

A: Well, in uh in the early childhood, uh my parents didn't keep a kosher home. Uh they did do it however later on when I, just after I was bar mitzvahed, uh they started keeping a kosher home, and also my my mother would light the the sabbath candle. But we would go to the synagogue uh on the high holidays. Uh to please my grandparents I would once in a while go in on the sabbath also but that was really not the, uh something that happened too often. But my parents were very active in Jewish community life. In Denmark my dad belonged to a number of Jewish organizations. He headed one of them and uh now if if only I can translate it properly - it would really correspond to what you would call a brotherhood here. Uh, it was meant as support organization where small independent un entrepreneurs, uh business people, tailors, etc., what they, when in need they could loan money to get through a period of time. Then they would repay it. And it was often, it was all organized by this small organization which was quite powerful. And then at the same time the organization also got involved in the promotion of Yiddish culture. Uh they would stage uh performances when there were uh uh Yiddish actors visiting Denmark, etc. Um, now there were at that time and there still are quite a number of Jewish associations in Denmark, in spite of the fact of course that the community was and is rather small. Uh today the community is about the same size as it was before the Second World War. Uh just around 7,000 people. And uh at that time there was a Jewish boys school and there was a Jewish girls school. Now they've been, uh after the war they were combined into one. And it takes the kids up through uh secondary school, through junior high school, but then for further education, uh the kids have to attend the public schools or other private schools.

Q: You were very young. Did you go to a nursery school of some kind?

A: Yes, I did go to the new Jewish uh nursery school which was located the same place as the girls' school was at that time. Uh, I remember going to the uh nursery school, mostly because I hated it when I was forced to take an afternoon nap. But uh I do remember some of the things that happened at at the nursery school, where we were taught uh things that perhaps you wouldn't be teaching in Christian schools in the sense that uh - well the old Jewish tradition of putting such great emphasis on children's education. Uh now I can mention here

that the boys' school took in uh the boys already at the age of five and started teaching them proper Danish etc. etc. Uh where as public schools only took in uh students at the age of seven. So also in the kindergarten, at the age of four or uh, you would be, uh they would start teaching you uh proper subjects.

Q: What did they teach you?

A: Well, I don't know. It's it's difficult today to say what I learned at the age of three, four and five or, but uh, I don't know. Honestly I can't specify. I couldn't . . .

Q: You probably sang songs . . . ?

A: Exactly, exactly. We learned how to spell. We learned the letters and that kind of uh stuff.

Q: What about outside of school? Uh, what, your playmates, were they all Jewish? Was it a mixed group?

A: It was definitely a mixed group. Definitely. And this was very typical of a Jewish family at that time and even today in Denmark because Jews have lived in Denmark since the 17th century. Uh during the early part of the 17th century the then king who was King Christian IV, declared a city in Denmark, in the southern part of _____ (ph), an open city, and that was, for good reasons he needed to have people come in and help finance his various wars, and uh he also uh wanted to what at that time must have been called industrialize the country so he took in people who knew about tobacco trade and tobacco manufacture. And uh, well the the Danish Jewish population really originated at that time but of course there was a big influx or/and revitalization of the Jewish community in the early part of this century when at the time my grandparents came in, there was a big immigration from Eastern Europe because of the pogroms in uh uh Russia and uh the Baltic States and in Poland. Now . . .

Q: So that then affected the community?

A: Well, it did uh and from what I've read, you know, there there were not always agreements between the different type of communities. There were the old established Danish Jewish communities who had ancestors living in in in Denmark for perhaps up to 200 years or more, and then there were these new immigrants. And uh from what I've heard my parents tell at least, uh there was quite a distinction made between the two groups of Jews during the early part of this century but but of course this is a distinction which doesn't exist any more. Uh, now the Jewish population remained relatively stable uh between the wars but uh after the war there was some immigration to Israel. And also uh there was a general Danish immigration although on a small scale to the States and among them were some Danish Jews who went over there. There were some Danes who, uh Danish Jews who stayed on in Sweden after the end of the Danish or uh German occupation of Denmark. So the population the Jewish population in Denmark after the war, let's say in the late '40's, went down to about

5,000, 5,500. But then in the late '60's, as a result of the unrest and the difficulties in Poland, there was a new influx of Polish Jewish immigrants. Uh, a couple of thousand came in uh just around 1970. And now forms of course an integral part of the Jewish community. But again, uh you asked about Jews in Denmark - did I play with with uh non-Jews as well as Jews, etc. And and I said I certainly did. And this again has to do with the fact that although the Jewish population has received new waves of immigrants through the uh but not waves, but a few times this has happened, the Jewish population in Denmark has always been very much assimilated. Uh, when you speak about Jews in Denmark you you don't classify them as such, as Jews. You classify them as Danes of Jewish extraction or Jewish religion or Jewish family. You don't distinguish between groups whether a person is a Catholic or Jewish or he is uh Lutheran or he's an atheist. Uh, this could be due to the fact also that the church in Denmark has for centuries not really been powerful. You know, something like 90-odd percent of the Danish population belongs to the State church which is the Lutheran Church. But if you look at church attendance in Denmark, it's down to a few percent. So, this has to do with the fact that that you don't you don't feel that there is a difference between, when as a kid, playing with uh Jewish friends or non-Jewish friends. I I guess that to go on from there, there weren't anti-Semites. There really hasn't, for a long, long time, has had no real meaning in Denmark. Uh, what perhaps could be percei... uh conceived as anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism, in the sense that there's a word - to steal, from old, old Danish or northern _____ which is called 'to Jew' something. The person using that word, the non-Jew using that word, is not associating with something being Jewish, but it's an old, old word that was adopted in the language. You hear it very, very seldom today. I heard it as a kid, and I would react. But uh I feel confident that it was not, when the person used it about another person, it was not really to classify in an ethnic group. It was more that the word had become common usage and I think also that the events during the 2nd World War proved uh beyond any doubt that there is no basis for anti-Semitism in a society like the Danish, or in a north European environment.

Q: Thank you. Let's take it back. You have grown up in this family, playing with other kids, Jewish and non-Jewish, what have you. You've been going to this boys school, nursery school. Uh, but life changed. Life changed presumably when the Germans came in, or did it? Tell us what happened when the Germans first came. How did it affect your life, or did it affect your life?

A: I don't think it did in the beginning. (OK) Uh, now you must remember that when the Germans came in and occupied Denmark the uh, on April 9, 1940, the Germans didn't call it an occupation. They came to support Denmark against an attack from the Allied forces and quite openly they also came to Denmark in order to secure their own passage up to Norway. Uh, when the Germans crossed the Danish borders in the early morning of April 9, 1940, there was a little armed resistance but the govern... the then-government and the then-king uh decided very fast to stop resistance simply because it was so evident it was an impossible task to stop the Germans. Uh, it would mean an incredible bloodshed if a serious effort was made to stop the Germans. So instead the Danish government decided to see if they could have a, if they could carry out negotiations with the Germans in order to reduce the

German's, the German influence in Denmark, while Denmark was being occupied by them. And in the beginning it seemed that it was possible. The Danish government stayed on as a government. The Danish police force was allowed to continue. Uh the Danish army as such was disbanded and so was the uh the navy, but the police force remained the controlling uh force in Denmark and of the many, no, let me put it another way - uh of course there was a lot of give and take between the Germans and the Danes at that time on an official level. But one of the things that was made abundantly clear to the Germans was that the Danes would never accept the execution of the Jews. The Jewish issue was not an issue in Denmark, and would not be. The government could not tolerate that it be made an issue. And this was respected by the Germans. Uh, I don't remember much from the first few years of the war. Uh the clearest impact was from just a month before, when we speak about the war I mean, there were a lot of things from my childhood, but but this also actually goes to to indicate that the changes in the daily life were not that many. But I remember clearly on August the 28th, 1943, uh we had our annual family tour of the Tivoli Gardens. The Tivoli Gardens are something completely unique for Denmark - it's an amusement park; it's a flower garden; it's got 23 restaurants; and it's right smack in the center of Copenhagen; and it, there is no entertainment or amusement park in the world like it. I'm Dane and I'm proud of it and I'll insist there's nothing like it. And for a kid being taken to the Tivoli Garden was usually the highlight of the summer season and we had been in, was normally once during the, early part of the season which starts in, around the first of May and then one the late uh part of the season. And I remember clearly that evening on the uh August the 29, I'm sorry - August 28, 1943, when leaving the Gardens there was a crowd in the street looking on as an enormous convoy of German tanks rode through the streets of Denmark, of Copenhagen. Of course, as a kid, I didn't know that the cause of it was that it had come to an impasse between the Danish government and the German occupation forces. And on the following day the pow... the Danish government stepped down, refused to cooperate with the Germans any longer. And the Police Corps, the Danish police force uh was disbanded at, rather they were sent to concentration camps, a large number of the Danish police. But this I guess is one of the early, of earliest clear memories I have from the war. But there's another, there's another memory which perhaps, I don't know - I think it's actually half a year or year earlier - uh being called out in the street by my elder brother in early evening to see a fantastic red hue over the evening sky and that turned out to be a sabotage, the effect of a sabotage of I think the Danish sugar factories. So that they shouldn't be supplying to the German troops. And you could see simply the fire lighting off the evening sky. It could have been half a year earlier but I'm not, I'm not completely sure of the of the date of that.

Q: Did your brother later tell you what this was?

A: No, I I remember, I I remember having heard, hearing these are the sugar factories going up. I remember that. Uh, then uh I remember after August 29, 1943, which was really the crucial day in the occupation history, the German occupation history of Denmark, because uh I think to a large extent the Danish population wanted to disassociate themselves completely from the Germans. Uh now one shouldn't forget that Germany for more than 100 years - that's not quite true - let's say from 1849 - has always been considered the big _____ brother down

south. We had, Denmark had wars against Germany in 1849 - we were lucky at that time - there were some other nations that helped us beat the Germans, but in 1864 we were severely beaten and part of the Danish, southern Danish territory was taken away from them and taken over by Germany. Part of that territory was given back to Denmark after the 1st World War in 1919, but there's always been an apprehension against these very very powerful Germans just south of the border. So to go back to August 29, 1943, I think for a large part of the population, there was a bit of an urgency to disassociate themselves from the Germans and they, I think many of them heaved a sigh of relief that finally the Danish government refused to further cooperation. Uh everybody knew I guess, I'm speaking about the adults, everybody knew no doubt that it would mean uh hardships because now the Germans were in total power, total control. But uh on the other hand uh people couldn't accept uh how the Germans were behaving in Europe and such because although the press was completely censored and controlled by the Germans - one shouldn't forget that the BBC was broadcasting all the time and although of course it was under strict penalty to listen to BBC everybody did it. And information about concentration camps and what had happened to minority groups, what was happening to minority groups, as to all the Jews in Europe, had started to had started to come up to their Denmark. And . . .

Q: What was, excuse me. What was the atmosphere of your family at this time, after the 29th?

A: After the 29th, very much an atmosphere of apprehension, that uh something bad could happen and that we should be prepared for it and that perhaps we would have to leave our home. This did happen, the talk about that, during the month of uh September. And now the whole atmosphere in Copenhagen changed very much uh because there was a curfew on after the 29th of August and you could feel that things were not going the right way. I think that even a kid at that time could feel it, and perhaps what the kid could feel most was the apprehension of his parents. And all the elders. Uh, but still I would say that when it happened, that day that my dad came home in the early afternoon, and he usually worked very very hard - uh leave very early in the morning and come home rather late - but when he came home and said, pack up your or rather don't pack up your things, because we're not going to take any luggage, but put on as many clothes as you could possibly have on you without being very conspicuous uh - it did come as a surprise that we had to leave the place. And that was on, let's see now, September 30th, 1943. That means that it was actually the day before the you you might perhaps have heard that there was a warning issued to the Jewish community on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, and that was on October 1st.

Q: _____ Were you in the synagogue and did you hear . . . ?

A: No, no. Because we heard it the day the day before and that had to do with the fact that my dad was so much involved in community work uh in uh within the Jewish associations, etc. etc. Uh but it was only the following day that the warning was issued from the pulpit in the synagogue.

Q: You heard it the day before?

A: Yes.

Q: Your father came home and said you had to leave?

A: That's right.

Q: What did you do?

A: Well, I said we were told that uh uh that we couldn't bring any luggage whatsoever. That we should put on as many warm clothes as we possibly could, and we went over and stayed over night with uh some friends of my parents, some Christian friends of uh of my parents, and we were told that we would just be staying for one night, which also happened. And the following morning, we went, the whole family, to the railroad station, and took a train down to the southern part of Denmark. Uh, I remember that, again this happened time and again during the escape to Sweden, that we were told try not to be conspicuous. That's very very important. And, well, I would say that I understood that this was serious, but I did also feel that to some extent this was an adventure. I don't think you can expect much else from from a six year old kid. Uh there was definitely an element of adventure involved. Uh there's one instant that, from that train ride which took about four to five hours, that I very very clearly remember ...

Q: Excuse me. Four to five, or forty-five?

A: No, no. Four to five. Four or five hours. Uh if we had a map I could show you, but I've got it in the back. It doesn't matter. Uh I remember we were sitting in the train; and suddenly I saw the door open at the other end of the train. And my uh mother's younger sister with her husband came in. And I was about to say something to my mother about it, and my dad looked at me and said, "Don't talk. Don't say hello. Don't greet them." Again it was...and I found that very strange, of course. But afterwards, I was told that no it was just that people shouldn't notice that something unusual was going on. Now, we came down to this southern Danish city called Nykøbing Falster, which is on an island south of Zealand [**Dan:** Sjaelland], which is the island where you got the Copenhagen _____. And we were put up at a hotel in the center of town. And I remember that the hotel owner's daughter was told - she was a girl of sixteen, seventeen, yes - was told to take a walk with the kids, which she did. And she showed us the town. That's that was not until the following day because we arrived there late in the afternoon, and after an early dinner we were sent up to bed. And then the next morning while I was told that my dad was busy, uh and that was with his contacts to get across to Sweden, uh we went out on this walk with the uh young girl, and we were told that we would have a very early dinner and a big one because it was going to last us for some time. At the hotel there were other families staying which I didn't know until we were, came down to the fishing boat, that they were all going by the same fishing boat as we were. Uh...

- Q: Excuse me. Did you hear any details, any rumors of how those people got there? Any sense of organization behind this?
- A: Only afterwards I heard it. I heard afterwards that this route that we followed was organized and financed to a large extent uh by a very very well-known uh Danish business man, uh Christian business man.
- Q: What was his name?
- A: His name was Buglon Jansen (ph). He owned and operated uh kind of small department store and household articles right in the center of Copenhagen on the City Hall Square. Was a very well-known personality. And - but we had this, this must have been, now we are speaking about the 30's, we left on the 30th, now we are speaking about the 2nd of October.
- Q: OK. You are still at this hotel?
- A: We're still at this hotel and we were given an early dinner and then we were told that as soon as it starts getting dark or just before dark, at dusk, we will leave and we were put in to a couple of cars - cars using the old wood-burners. There was no gasoline. Yes, basically. They drove on on the energy from from wood. Yes. Wood and coal they used. And it was not completely dark. It must have been, it was dusk, and dusk lasts in Denmark normally around an hour or so, and we were driven out of the city and then I remember that we came on a small country road and came to the start of a forest where there was uh - what do you call it - it was a private road, so uh there was a - what do you call it (a gate) - there was a gate. And we waited for a couple of minutes and then uh a man came out from a small house and opened the gate so that we could drive through this private forest and if I'm not mistaken, I seem to recall that there were about three or four cars. Now we stopped short of a beach, a very rocky beach, and now it was getting really dark. And we went down to the beach and there were a number of us - afterwards I found out there were seventeen people - and one could hear the sound of a diesel engine coming closer and closer. That was the only sound we could hear. And there something happened on the beach which my dad has - he always commented on it later on - and I don't know if he did it so many times and that's the reason why I remember it as if I remember it myself - but this really proved that I apparently I did understand the gravity of the situation. Because my dad was a chain smoker of cigars, and my dad was about to light a cigar ...

TAPE BREAK

... "Dad, don't do it. The airplanes can see you." So I'm, honestly, I believe I remember it but it could be because I've been told this so many times. But uh, there's little doubt that that I did, and so did my my sister and brother, appreciate the severity of the situation, the seriousness. Now, then we were taken on to the boat, which was an old, very very smelly fishing boat. And uh we were taken downstairs where we were told to lie down on some bunks and my sister complained when she uh lied down that uh there was something very hard underneath her. And when when uh the uh blanket was pulled away, it it was a gun. It was a rifle or something like that, which of course was exciting to the kids. Anyway uh we started, and that time this, now it was absolutely pitch black outside, and what I remember from the voyage, except for being sea sick a couple of times - I don't know really whether, how much of it I remember it myself or how much of it I remember because I've been told, but uh I remember wailing, uh in the sense that people uh people are crying. Uh, I remember the engines stopping and hearing shouts up on the deck, and uh this was as I said a very old boat, and uh the engines had since stopped. So they worked on them and got them going again. This happened twice. Then also uh we, and this I don't know whether I was told afterwards or I was told during the trip, but the uh heart of the of the of the screaming and crying was due to the fact that the German patrol boats caught uh sight of us. And they had two young skippers who had never tried to run a boat before. Uh they, this I must have been told afterwards, they took the boat right in to the mine fields hoping that the drop was so shallow that nothing would happen and knowing that at least the Germans wouldn't pursue us in there. And uh fortunately the boat was shallow. During the night uh I remember being, people being sea sick, all over. And then, when daylight broke, I heard new screaming and this, I've been told afterwards I know for sure, was because when people looked up from the deck, and looked for, we had reached land, or rather we had approached land, and we had approached a small harbor, a fishing harbor or harbor. People got scared when they saw uniformed uh soldiers or police on the piers because the Swedish military uniforms were very much like the Germans. They were this green color. But uh, we did get in to the port. And that voyage took eleven hours. Uh normally you can cross between Denmark and Sweden at the closest point in twenty minutes. But my dad had explored the possibilities for crossings uh up north of Copenhagen where there's very narrow, uh this sound as it's called between Denmark and Sweden. It's very narrow. But the risk was too big. And that, let me back track just a second. Afterwards I was told that the reason why we met uh our, my my uncle and my aunt on the train was that they went down south to to investigate possibilities of getting over on another route, and afterwards they realized that that was too risky. They had to go up north again. So they only came over to Sweden about four or five days later. Uh

...

Q: Back up one more minute. (Yes, sure.) Before you go on, I would like to go back to this boat. You have said you had two young men who had never sailed a boat like that before. (Yes, yes. That's right. That's right.) How old were they and how did they do this? What kind of help did they have, if any?

A: Well, they were as far as I recall just around the twenties uh the two of them. Nineteen, twenty, or twenty, twenty-one. Uh somehow or other they had been recruited to sail the boat and they had offered to sail the boat. And uh they had been given some maps but uh they really didn't know much about the route over. Uh afterwards I was told, when we learned it in Sweden, they went on to the UK to join the the free Danish forces in the UK.

Q: Do you know their names?

A: No, I don't. I don't unfortunately. Uh, the, this voyage really came to a very dramatic end in the sense that uh only two uh hours after we had landed in Sweden, the boat sank in the harbor. Uh, so uh it was a good thing for us that the boat only took, the trip only took eleven hours and not thirteen or thirteen and a half hours.

Q: What happened to you?

A: Well, we were greeted by Swedish police and taken very well care of. We were taken to a hotel where the whole family was given a room and there I remember we had a chance to to wash and to sleep, but being six years old one is of course one very adult so I said all the time I didn't feel like sleeping and there was a double bed in the room and my parents uh lay down on the bed and also my older sister and brother, and I didn't want to. I had no interest in in being cramped in that bed, plus of course I was very adult being six years and uh didn't matter that I hadn't slept that much that night, so I sat down at the chair at the end of the bed and of course it took ten minutes before I was asleep in that chair. But uh we stayed. This city we...this town we arrived at is called Trelleborg, and it's at the very southern tip of Sweden. And the next day, my dad uh phoned some friends, Jewish friends, in Göteborg [Eng: Gothenburg]. This friend was uh a well-known industrialist. He ran several uh uh garment factories in Sweden and he was a personal close friend of my maternal grandmother. So they arranged that we went up to Gothenburg and stayed there for a couple of days and then we went further up to a small city call Uddevalla uh where my dad worked at one of the factories owned by this friend of my my grandfather. And uh my mother had to work there because to to make a living. My dad didn't bring any money out of Denmark. Uh whatever he did, he used to pay for our voyage, although the the route as such was financed as I mentioned before by this Danish businessman, who ever could pay should pay and however much because then in turn some people who couldn't pay would also uh be carried over. And uh my dad had a small uh factory uh in Denmark - a small garment factory which was left behind. And uh so he had to start completely afresh in Sweden. And we lived in in Uddevalla where my dad and my mother both worked at this garment factory and uh the three of us, the three kids, were sent to a Swedish school, Swedish public school. And I think that we as kids, while we we didn't definitely we were not made to suffer uh my dad and mom combined could make a living although it was more of a subsistence living than it was a luxury living. But uh . . .

Q: What did your mother do while your father was at the factory?

A: She was also uh working in that factory. I don't remember exactly what her job was there. My my dad worked there as a cutter. I don't remember exactly what my mother did. But that - and we stayed in Uddevalla for about six months.

Q: What was it like there? You were now how old?

A: Well, the first few days of the, was a bit strange because uh we spent, I think we spent a couple or first actually a couple of weeks at a big summer house belonging to this Swedish Jewish industrialist, and this and in this summer house there were a number of other families also waiting to be channeled out into uh more normal life in Sweden. And uh there one lived together with other families in exactly the same situation. So uh it was not living in Sweden as much those couple of weeks as living in a Danish Jewish environment in a house in Sweden, and of course everybody was affected but uh by what had happened to them and whether all their family had managed to escape or there were some of their relatives who had been taken by the Germans. Uh I should mention here of course that out of the population of around 7,000 uh Danish Jews, uh more than ninety percent managed to escape to Sweden and uh uh only a very few were taken by the Germans and uh of the Danish Jews, the Danish Jews were all taken to a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, the Theresienstadt, which although of course it it was, it was a Theresienstadt, and it was a sub-human way of of living, it was considered one of the milder uh concentration camps of all the German camps. Uh but of course, during those couple of weeks we stayed in that house in in north, outside of Uddevalla all talk, what ever was discussed concerned what had happened in Denmark and what had happened to relatives and uh people were delighted of course when they had phone calls from other relatives who had managed to to arrive in Sweden, to get to Sweden and and could tell that they were safe etc. Uh after about, I think we were there for two weeks in that house, we moved into the the the proper city of Uddevalla where we had a flat of our own and that's when we started attending Swedish uh public schools and uh there were a couple of other refuge families living in the same block but apart from that we had Swedish friends. I mean as kids we had Swedish playmates, went to their homes and they came to our homes. We we, I guess we, that hap... that was the case of for our kids, all during the time in Sweden that again my parents arranged for a secure family life. So that uh no doubt we were protected. Very much so. Uh we stayed in Uddevalla for six months, and then we moved down to Gothenburg uh where my dad uh got another job with within the same group and uh after about, and we started, let me mention that of course, that when we moved to Gothenburg, we were able to attend a Danish school that was established for refugees in Gothenburg.

Q: Let's hold . . . go back. From the time you got on the boat, to the time you arrived in Göteborg, you as a child went through a whole lot of changes. How did you feel at the various stages? You were _____ at first but what did you feel?

A: There was again uh uh more of an adventure, no doubt about it. Uh but again but more important I could feel how concerned my parents were. And that of course affected, would affect any child. Uh also I could feel when we were in Sweden, when we landed in Sweden,

that my parents were relieved. This would affect a child. Uh more apt to to make a joke. Uh not only the child but the parents and that affected their whole outlook on life. Uh going by by by train up through Sweden was exciting. And and one thing clearly stands to my mind and that was on the way up to Uddevalla, I think I mentioned that we stayed for a couple of nights in the flat of this industrialist. And I'll never, I'll never forget at night looking out the window and seeing all the neon lights. Now Copenhagen had a blackout uh forced upon them by the Germans since 1940. You never saw neon lights. You never saw street lights because you you had to black out everything. That was impressive. Also that fact that you could buy chocolate which was a luxury - well it didn't exist in Denmark during the war. You could buy bananas. That was certainly something new. I was just used to eating artificial banana made made made from extras, some extract or something like that. Sugar etc. Uh this was a new life in many ways. But of course the the important part was really the the family nucleus. That it was safe being together with the parents and and the sister and the brother. Uh and also when we moved to to Göteborg, my maternal grandparents came to Göteborg. Uh so I guess as a as a kid although it was under strange foreign circumstances it was very much of a traditional life for for a kid. It was a very secure family life. Uh the the change not in the feeling of security but the change in the family life came in - it must have been mid or the fall perhaps of 1944 when my dad uh joined the uh Danish uh Brigade as it was called, the the uh the Danish military police force that was built up in Sweden towards the end of the 2nd World War. And uh, with the approval of the Swedish government. And uh in very close contact with the Danish underground movement and with the uh so-called free-Danish army in the UK. Uh my dad only came back to visit us perhaps once, twice a month. And uh again, perhaps it it wouldn't be different for a family life even without a war but but where the dad is away. But of course we felt that the dad was not there.

() Well, perhaps some more responsibility, a feeling of responsibility although I was a kid. Or or the baby rather. My brother uh was uh, he was bar mitzvahed in in March '45 and of course he was the one who really had to take the responsibility while the while our dad was away. But again, I was six, I was seven at that time. I was seven - I must have been at that time. I guess I wasn't much different from other kids. Uh except at certain moments when I felt that it wasn't completely like other families, like like the Swedish playmates were, like they had their family life uh because we're living in a foreign country, all the time speaking about going back to Denmark. There was little doubt about that. We were listening to the uh the Danish radio from uh the BBC to hear about the events and uh I guess what it did mean was that uh in some respects at least a mature... a maturity in some fields that uh you wouldn't normally see in in a seven year old kid which which would be a natural reaction I would think. Uh . . .

Q: Could we hold it for a minute? They have to change the tape and then we will go on.

Q: . . . for a seven year old alone with brothers and sisters, father away . . . ?

A: Yeah, but you know, one thing is certain and that is we were, there was this very positive inference in knowing all the time we would be going back. There was never doubt that we would be going back. And this of course gives a sense of security.

Q: You knew that your people were . . . ?

A: Oh yes, exactly, exactly, exactly.

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

TAPE #2

Q: Now, we have a lot to talk about. Your father is away at the . . . ?

A: Yeah, that's right and uh the uh uh family living in Göteborg and he is quite a distance away and coming back perhaps once a month or so for for an extended weekend. Uh we were, my dad was paid the equivalent of a salary while in the army simply so that the family could be supported. Uh so life in many ways went on as it had while he had been there but of course the dad wasn't there.

Q: What did you pick up from your mother in terms of uh how she felt and how she was carrying on?

A: My mother has always been a very very calm person. Always very much in control uh of herself and although my dad was a very very strong personality, the typical Jewish father, uh the patriarch of of the family, my mother certainly proved that she could run the family during his absence. Uh I think that you asked me before what it meant to to a six year old boy or seven year old boy to live under such conditions - I think it's true for all of us that we matured very much from the experience and we learned to cope with things. Well, you have to. So out of necessity we learned how to manage.

Q: What did that mean? What did coping mean? What kinds of things . . . ?

A: Well, I don't I don't think our world was much different from other kids but perhaps still there was a feeling that it was very important to behave so as not to create more problems because we were all aware as kids that it was a very difficult time for our parents. And it's not that we didn't misbehave. Of course we did. We were kids. But I think that we had, we we had a perception of try not to create more problems than necessary. Now whether my parents felt the same way I'm not sure, although I am because my parents have afterwards commented that we did behave uh extremely well as kids during these very trying years. But of course we we made the same kind of tricks as all other kids did but there was still this sense of there's a limit to what you can do, allow yourself to do because it is causing additional problems for the grown-ups.

Q: Mischief, but not real mischief?

A: No. Exactly, exactly, exactly. And of course there is little doubt either that that living through through such a period ties the family extremely strongly together. Very much so because you become dependent - you you realize how dependent you become on each other.

Q: What was your relationship with your brother and your sister?

A: The normal relationship between an older brother and a younger brother in getting annoyed if asked by the parents to take me along to something he wanted to do with his with his peers

and uh me crying if he if he wasn't too happy about taking me along and making me feel it, but uh normal kids.

Q: What happened then? Uh . . .

A: Well, during the spring of '45, everybody knew what was going to happen but nobody knew when it would happen. Uh . . .

Q: Again, how did you know? You, at age eight?

A: Well, from from hearing it, from my brother who was very mature of course under the circumstances at the age of thirteen and from hearing it from my mother, from hearing it in school, and and of course the sources were partly the Swedish news media. But uh again the most important source of information was the BBC's, the British Broadcasting Service's Danish service and there I can assure you I do remember as if it were yesterday, on the eve of May 4th, 1945, uh my mother was out at some function but the three kids, we were alone in the flat, and we had the radio on, and then we certainly heard, suddenly heard the message from London that the German forces in Denmark, Norway, Best...(ph), and Holland had capitulated with effect on the following morning. Uh, that made quite an impression, even on kids. But again, a sense of adventure. That was an element of it. But there was also this sense of feeling that now we knew for sure our parents would be happy and that we would be going home.

Q: What did you do? Describe the scene?

A: I remember we jumped on the beds. Uh, but strangely enough I, I remember clearly listening to the radio and hearing the news, and that we jumped on the beds, but I don't remember what happened when my mom came home. I don't. But uh I know that during the following days there was of course jubilation everywhere. And we were growing very impatient to because we wanted to know when could we get home. Uh the following day we uh heard, uh my mother had a phone call from my dad that he was going back to Denmark with the police force because they had been ready. That police force, the Danish police force in Sweden, if uh the war had dragged on, if the occupation had dragged on, the plan was that the police force should go in to Denmark as a military unit. Uh but fortunately that wasn't necessary so it went in in the morning of May 5th, which was the day of the, the official day of the liberation and took over the police functions in Denmark, and my dad was in on on the 5th of May. And then I remember during the the uh the following weeks very often my mother was called to the phone. My dad was calling, telling how things were going, and we were all waiting to know when will we be allowed to go back and uh, I remember when we went to the train station finally, on June 1st, and took the train back to Denmark. That was quite something.

Q: What was it like, that train ride?

A: Everybody. This this was, well, this was just one victorious train ride. Uh people singing, people jubilating. Uh it was like you see a sports team coming home from a victory in in many ways, and of course lots of people crying of course. So uh that was on the 1st of June that we returned to Denmark.

Q: Describe what it was like. Did you go back to your house?

A: No. What had happened was that neighbors of ours had promised to look after our flat but they had taken over the flat when we came home, so there wasn't any flat. Uh and uh the same thing had happened to my dad's factory where uh a friend had promised to look after it but uh there was no factory to come home to. But but these are, these were minor things. They were considered minor things and I wouldn't say they were typical either but it it happened to my parents. Uh we were, the first few nights we were back we were staying with friends of my parents. He was the, he was as a non-Jewish head of the Jewish boys school. Oh yes, such a thing could happen in Denmark. Oh yes, easily can happen. Uh he was a very very highly respected uh teacher. He was non-Jewish, but but he was head of the Jewish boys school, so we stayed with them for a couple of days and then my dad had found a summer cottage up in the country-side where we used to go for summer holidays, and we spent the summer there and then my dad found a flat in Copenhagen where we uh where we moved back to when school started and then normal life began again.

Q: Take it back. You had a lodge in Copenhagen? Describe for us what the city looked like to you?

A: You know, I was, I remember, much to my surprise, I didn't recognize the city. I had been away for a year and a half. I had been so absorbed first in living the Swedish way with the Swedish schools, then living a normal life in Göteborg that the year and a half I didn't remember the road, I didn't recall the road really, or didn't remember the buildings on the road going from the from the railroad station to where we were staying but when we came to where we were staying I remembered it all. But this was like, to me Copenhagen was really at that time was like visiting a new city for the first time until I got to the place where we were living, because that was just across from uh where we had, where we used to have our flat or our apartment.

Q: Had the city been damaged?

A: No. Not much. Not not compared to to other cities in Europe. Uh there was some damage but nothing compared uh to what you saw in other places, but what was remarkable was due to the shortages of all kinds during the war, you saw very very few cars. You saw horse-drawn carriages and carts but very very few cars. And that lasted for about four or five months, and then you saw the cars coming back.

Q: What about your neighbors? Uh, or in this case not your neighbors, you were staying temporarily. Uh how did people, how did Christian Danes greet you when you back?

A: Very very warm. Extremely warm. Uh, I guess for them also there was little doubt that we would be returning. This was just an an episode. It was something temporary, that we had to leave. Uh, again, let me go back all the way to what I said before or in the beginning - Jews in Denmark was not an isolated ethnic minority group. They were Danish of Jewish extraction. So they, we were neighbors and nothing else. I guess this is a very important aspect when when we talk about what happened uh during the 2nd World War in Denmark. And then I know that, I've uh given a few speeches on the events of October '43 in Denmark and I know it's said well but look at other countries where people also assimilated and it didn't help them. But this is just one of the other ones because you must take it as a whole where the important part being the proximity to Sweden, the fact that the Germans were disorganized in October '43. Not disorganized but unorganized. They had not yet established their own civilian uh fleets, patrol fleets. Uh there were many Germans sympathetic to the Jewish population. Oh yes. Oh yes. The worst part, the the worst uh were really the the Danish Nazis. There were a few of them. But but no large number but there were they were there and they were uh they were rather influential. One shouldn't forget that the warning to the Danish Jews about the uh the impending persecution was given by uh a staff officer of the German Embassy. Uh . . .

Q: Contradictions abound.

A: Yes. Exactly. Exactly.

Q: But you have come back, and you have rebuilt your life. Day by day. Did it all return to normal? Did you feel it returned to normal?

A: Well, I don't think so, no. Uh for me personally, yes. But there were distant relatives who were caught and who were affected by it, for life. My dad was affected by it for life. Uh, it was said at I don't know - well, he turned white-haired over night. Uh I know he was white-haired uh all during the the late forties, and the fifties, and sixties, although he was, in 1943 he was 30 years old. But it affected distant relatives who had uh close close relatives taken by the Germans. Uh, it, but that's the negative part of it but in the positive, there was also a positive effect on this very very close knit family, getting even, becoming even closer. Uh, did did things change from what they had been before? Perhaps not, perhaps not because sure enough my dad came home and had to start all over again, but was very successful with that also. Uh it didn't change our attitude of how we felt towards neighbors or how neighbors felt towards us. Uh, I don't know. We at the same time as appreciating all the good things that had happened under such a situation of crises, I don't know if perhaps because of knowing what the Germans did - not the Germans, the Nazis - I think one should distinguish there - that uh there was a tendency to grow more cynic than had been the case before. If you were to ask me if my life would have been different if I hadn't had that experience as a kid, uh I guess yeah, it could have. I guess it could have been different. Uh, it could have been different in my relationship first of all with my parents. But in my . . .

Q: You've just. . . how do you think it would have been different?

A: Well, I think this had the very positive effect of creating this extremely close-knit family. Uh with family values, the old traditional values being perhaps even more respected than if we hadn't been through this as a family together. You've seen all over the Western world the break-up of the family pattern, and uh a crisis situation like this of course works the other, the opposite way. Uh, but it could have been another type of crisis of course. It could have. Uh, but of course it also makes one appreciate the kind of country I'm living in or rather I'm coming from. Again uh you perhaps you've met it yourself as an American, but Danes feel extremely embarrassed today more than 45 years after the events, to be reminded of their good deeds, and that this was the miracle. Uh being Danish of Jewish family I can see both sides of it. Uh I can see that to some extent it was a miracle but that the miracle also to some extent had natural causes. Uh, but I mean it when I say that that Danes feel embarrassed when being praised today for their actions in October 1943, and it's not out of modesty. But it's out of surprise why anybody should praise them for doing something for their fellow Danes. This was not done for Jews. It was done for fellow Danes. And I think that is worthwhile to note.

Q: I can't think of a better ending.

A: OK. Thank you.

Q: I want to take you back one more step. (Sure.) I'd like to go back to that train ride. You had described it as really going from the north to south of Denmark. . . .

A: Well yeah, in the eastern part of Denmark it would be almost from the north to the south.

Q: Is it a very long trip?

A: Denmark is a small country don't forget.

Q: Even so, uh and you were very young. You have said that this was and you described some of the instances of this particularly harrowing trip. Uh, did you as a child feel it as being harrowing? Is there one incident that stands out in your mind, seeing your sister, sister-in-law . . .

A: Uh I knew that it was dangerous. There's little doubt about that. I certainly did. I knew that we were exposing ourselves to some grave risks. What those risks were I was not quite uh aware of, but I knew it was dangerous. At anything that I did as a kid not, not by not doing what I was told, could put our family at risk. I was aware of that. So in that sense I think I knew that I had to act very responsibly. And then we go back to the question about maturity. OK.

Q: Anything you would like to add?

- A: Uh, I really don't know what what we have left out. Uh I really don't - there's not much. Because what we've been talking about here more than anything else have been the personal experiences. We're not talking about the general situation and the historical events, uh chronological events. No, I don't think there is much else.
- Q: Yes. Let's pick up one more thing _____ and go to Sweden. You have arrived in Sweden and you are now temporarily at least settled with both parents working. Uh what was your life like uh as a Jew?
- A: Well of course there was the Swedish uh there was the synagogue in Stock... in Göteborg, but I think it was more a life as a Dane in Göteborg than it was as a Jew. Uh, now most of the refugees living in Sweden or at least in Göteborg, uh were, most of the Danish refugees were Jewish but there were also a number of non-Jewish refugees who had been active in political movements, etc. etc and who had had to flee uh Denmark, and the Danes stopped uh pretty close to each other. Uh there would be all kinds of functions of either on the entertainment side or could be cultural but it could also be uh a function to talk about events as they were happening, Denmark, etc. etc. And when you talk about the Scandinavians, Danes have always been known to be the uh the good-humored uh ones, not so formal as particularly the Swedes are. The Danes like to have fun. The Swedes very often like to join in. The Danes are not always too happy to let them join in, and there was a standing practice when they had these Danish functions which were restricted to Danes and/or Danish Jews, but we didn't separate. We didn't distinguish them. There was a catch word. Uh in order to get in you'd have to pronounce a special Danish dish which is completely impossible to pronounce for a person who wasn't born and raised in Denmark and exposed exposed to the Danish language since early infancy. And uh uh it was not very polite to the Swedes. They were our hosts, sure enough, but uh there was a, I definitely want to emphasize that it was a Danish feeling. It was not a Danish/Jewish feeling. It was Danish. Uh we had the Danish schools, uh the Danish school, and uh uh we had a Danish Boy Scout uh Troop there. Uh the kids I associated with would be my classmates from the Danish school but also some of the Swedish kids in the neighborhood. Uh, I'm sure of course that there are also was a very active Jewish life in Göteborg, but this was not really what I noted. I noted a Danish life.
- Q: The Swedish kids who uh, you related well with them?
- A: Oh yes. No problem. Uh when we first moved back to Göteborg from Uddevalla, the Danish school had not been formed yet, so I think for four or five months, I went to a Swedish school, a Swedish public school as I had done in Uddevalla. And together with my sister I went to a Swedish public school summer camp. And when I returned from that camp - it was a six-weeks camp - I didn't speak Danish. I spoke Swedish. Yeah.
- Q: Where did you do it?
- A: Of course I spoke Danish but it took me close to a week before uh I was back to normal

Danish again.

Q: Out of sheer curiosity, what was the name of the dish that was your password?

A: Now I will tell you it - you can try as much as you want to to pronounce it and you couldn't do it. It's - let me put it this way - it is a fruit, kind of a fruit jelly which is served with cream on it or fruit soup, and it's called _____. Now this is impossible. _____ meaning red porridge which is actually red fruit uh porridge with cream. It's impossible for anybody but a Dane to pronounce.

Q: And with that note thank you so much.

A: You're welcome.