TO UNDERSTAND DOES NOT MEAN TO FORGIVE

I SURVIVE Theresienstadt

by

Robert Fischermann

TO UNDERSTAND DOES NOT MEAN TO FORGIVE

I SURVIVE | by: Robert Fischermann

This book is dedicated to my wife Birgit who has been my life long support. I wouldn't have been able to write this without her help during the difficult times as I lived again, and again, through my experiences.

Written for the publication of the first Danish edition.

Thanks

Let me begin by thanking Pernille Ballebye, from the publishing firm, Gyldendals Forlag. It was she who asked me if I had ever thought of writing about my dramatic experiences. Pernille encouraged me to write and the process resulted in a very close collaboration with journalist Allan Sørensen, from the Christian newspaper, Kristeligt Dagblad. Without his help the book wouldn't have been published. Therefore, I specially want to record my thanks for his contribution.

I also want to thank Line Holm Nielsen for her encouragement during the writing process. And, my gratitude also goes to historic adviser Dr. Dov Levitan, of Bar Ilan University for reading the manuscript and his important comments.

To my wife's sister, Bente Batya Melchior, my thanks for reading, commenting and offering technical support. By the way, Bente and her husband Paul Pinchas, have offered to translate the book into Hebrew, so that our family and descendants who are not Danish speaking have the possibility to read about our family's fate during and after the Second World War.

Robert Fischermann, Jerusalem, Spring 2014

Forward

Every day I think about it. My family being arrested in Copenhagen, the journey to Theresienstadt and what happened during my time in the concentration camp. I also think of the person I have become because of Nazi persecution. Despite my memories, I had tried to distance myself from everything about the Holocaust. I had avoided films about Nazi crimes and if I attempted to read a book about this dark period I found that I either had to put it away, or force myself to read it and experience the subsequent emotional nightmares.

In contrast to many European Jews I survived the war, but I have never managed to free myself of the horrors of my experiences. I relive the terror of being in the cattle wagon rumbling towards Theresienstadt; my time in the camp has always followed me. I heard about the death of my father and elder brother as they tried to flee to Sweden only after I had returned from the camp, a shock that turned the ending of the war into a real and continuing daily heartache.

The eighteen months of the Nazi incarceration of my mother, my sister, my brothers and I changed my life in such a drastic way that I was previously unable to put thoughts into words. The need to forget or distance myself from this period has always been stronger than the wish to talk about it. Occasionally I think that my experience of the German persecution is behind me. But the starvation, the powerlessness, the humiliation and unthinkable events that I experienced as a 15-year-old is, and always will be, an inextricable part of my life. I Robert Fischermann am a concentration camp victim.

The reason I have decided to communicate now is connected both to some new events and also to my age. As I write I am 85 years old. When one is young it is easier to suppress memories of traumatic events. As one gets older it becomes more difficult. Thoughts recur together with a desire to understand the importance of giving testimony for future generations. This becomes even more important when you belong to a diminishing group of survivors. Today it is still not easy to put my memories into words. We are talking about trauma in the deepest meaning of the word. Though my internment was a relatively short period in my life it has caused eternal scars on my soul, which cause me to make well calculated pauses every time I confront them.

The catalyst that made me open up and broadcast my history happened in 2007 during a visit to my sister Fanny in Denmark. It was 62 years after my return from Theresienstadt and an unexpected turning point. Fanny had given me a book to read, 'Dora's Diary', by the Danish author, Dea Trier Mørchs. The author writes about Danish Jews escaping arrest by the Nazis and fleeing to Sweden by sea, and had interviewed my sister about her crossing in 1943. There were 10 people in the rowing boat including my father, my sister Fanny and my brother. After about 1 kilometer from Denmark the boat started to take in water and capsized. Broken ribs and a wounded knee prevented by father from swimming. In the attempt by my brother to rescue our father they both perished. In 2007, in Fanny's apartment in Copenhagen, with the enormous distance from the Holocaust, as far as time and place were concerned, we talked about what happened in 1943 and listened to each other through tears. I had been 15 and she 19 years old. When we opened up to each other we were 79 and 83. It was difficult for her and no less difficult for me. I told her about the journey to Theresienstadt in filthy cattle wagons and only then did she realize what I, my mother and brothers had endured. Theoretically she knew how the Nazis had transported Jews but, she had never heard it from me! My sister opened herself more and more, and to my surprise it was a kind of relief to listen. It was as if the chapter could be closed at last. As we conversed my thoughts were erratic. I urgently realised that Dea Trier Mørchs book must be translated into Hebrew. My grandchildren who live in Israel do not speak Danish, and suddenly it was vital that they know what had happened to their Grandfather when he was 15 years old. I had never heard the details about my father and brother's death before. We had been silent about it after the war. We had lived as if nothing had happened, but poor Fanny could never forget that terrible event. Perhaps it was easier for her to open up and talk to the author Dea Trier Mørchs, a stranger, than to talk to those of us within the family. The book stirred something inside me. I said to Fanny, "Now you have to tell me exactly what happened and I will try to explain what happened to me".

This feeling was reinforced when my daughter asked if I would help my granddaughter, Ore, with a school project. In Israel it is common for schoolchildren to do projects about their family roots. For me, it meant I had to recall my childhood and my upbringing, and that my grandchild would realize, for the first time, that I had been in a concentration camp. At that time she only knew theoretically and superficially that I had been in Theresienstadt. I didn't know how to tell these facts to my grandchild in a way that she could understand and in a way that would also protect her

from the horror. She was 15 years old, the same age as I had been when the Germans came banging at our door in Copenhagen. I found it very difficult to talk about it, so I asked her to ask me questions. To my great satisfaction Ore received top marks for her assignment. However, these conversations opened memories which I found that I needed to shut away again. As time passed, however, I realized I actually had to speak out. My experiences were little pieces of the big Holocaust puzzle.

As a member of 'Danes in Israel', I have often taken part in the annual memorial event remembering how the Danish Jews were rescued as they fled to Sweden in October 1943. Danish fishermen, together with the Resistance, sailed to Sweden in boats, saving the lives of the thousands of Jews crammed inside. But I began to struggle with why the focus should be on the rescue to Sweden. Indeed, the rescue of most of the Danish Jews to Sweden pictures Denmark as a model in dealing with the Jewish community and in many ways it has become Denmark's 'Anne Frank History', so to speak. The history of Anne Frank is the event most people connect with the Jews of Holland during the Second World War, despite the fact that Poland, Holland and Hungary lost such a large percentage of their Jewish community. Similarly, in Denmark most people know of the rescue of the Jews to Sweden. People also remember that some Dutch people cooperated with the Nazis as informers. But what about the account of 472 Danish Jews, 419 of whom survived, who spent one and a half years in Theresienstadt? Our story is a central and important element of Danish Holocaust History. We were never mentioned. Were we forgotten?

Some years ago I decided to talk to the chairman of 'Danes in Israel' about this. He promised to mention it during their next meeting. Then they asked me join the board and at the same time I was asked to make a short presentation of my experiences during the war. As I had brought up the problem I could hardly refuse. In an unconscious way I had brought myself to a situation where I was forced to talk about my repressed memories. For the first time in 63 years I had to give testimony to an audience. My biggest challenge was to speak about my personal feelings. In the camp I always had the feeling of everything being unreal. I hovered at a place between survival and death. Now I had to put my feelings into words and convey them to an audience. I had to prepare myself mentally for the meeting that was to take place in November 2009. My talk was well received and I received a letter of thanks from the chairman. I had not expected such a positive reaction. I was not even sure whether there was still an interest in listening to accounts of the Holocaust. Then I had a bigger challenge, to give a lecture to a German audience. One of our friends asked me if I would talk at a

meeting of members of The German Evangelical Church in the Old City of Jerusalem. There were about 70 people and total silence during the one and a half hours while I was talking. Long ago I realized how important it was to give testimony. But, until my conversation with Fanny I had not been able to do so. We Holocaust survivors are becoming fewer. And very few of us have the strength to give evidence. But for me it is a kind of therapy. Although it is never easy, it helps to talk about it. To think of it is one thing, but to convey it to an audience is something else.

In my 30 years as a licensed Israeli tour guide, I have met numerous tourists and encountered many tour leaders. My wife and I have a special friendship with a Protestant priest and his family from the southern part of Germany. He asked me to send him a copy of the speech I had given in Jerusalem. After receiving my speech he invited my wife Birgit and I to come to Germany and to give three lectures to 600 students and adults. We received an overwhelming reception. At the same time I learned to accept that each lecture is a long and emotionally difficult journey back in time. Every time I end a talk I am drained of energy. In spite of this the positive reaction from audiences has given me a mission. I will continue giving testimonies; I regard this as my duty.

I believe there are details about the Holocaust and especially the details of our liberation that have to be clarified. These are historical events that happened to my family. During the almost 70 years since the Second World War, I have followed the arguments of historians and philosophers as they tried to explain how it could have happened. I was there. I was in the middle of it, with all my dread and fear, hunger and cold. Although I had no knowledge of politics and the bloody battles that took place while I was in Theresienstadt I saw and personally experienced a central part of the history of this war. Today I trust my memory and my understanding of the history to know that which needs correction. To insist on accountability to those who were responsible and to honor those who deserve it. I have to tell and remind my audiences about what happened only a couple of generations ago. This is now a personal duty as I feel that anti-Semitism is still a problem. Not as in Hitler's Germany but it is perceptible. Even though the Holocaust is far away in time, as I grow older, I feel an increasing responsibility to tell people about what happened, about my experiences.

Since then other atrocities have occurred and I am afraid the causes for the Holocaust will be forgotten. With frequent intervals I see in Europe the actual scenarios for Holocaust revival. This has to be prevented; previously

the world was impotent and allowed dreadful events to happen, but I and the last survivors are here as witnesses. We must speak out.

I have read accounts about how prisoners dealt with their experiences in the concentration camp but there are very few accounts about what happened to survivors after the war. Without these accounts an essential part of the Holocaust picture is missing. I experienced the war, the persecution of the Jews, the anti-Semitism, the concentration camp, the hunger, the losses and the humiliations. The time has come for me to come forward and share the history that I was previously unable to articulate.

Chapter 1

The Germans are Coming

Somebody was banging on the door. An authoritative voice shouted, "This is the German police, open the door."

It was five o' clock in the morning, Saturday October 2nd, 1943, the day after Rosh Hashanah the Jewish New Year. We were all fast asleep, my younger brother, Salle and I were sleeping in the same bed. It took us just a brief moment to understand what was happening. We rushed into the dining room. My father was already dressing. We whispered to each other so that the Germans should not hear us from the other side of the door. It was dark outside. We knew that we had to help father escape. We could not hide him. The fact that we were at home in our apartment was not part of the plan. During a service in the synagogue, before the Jewish New Year, the Chief Rabbi, Marcus Melchior had warned Copenhagen's Jewish community that the German occupation forces were preparing an extensive action against the Jews. He had replaced the previous Chief Rabbi Max Friediger, who had been arrested by the Germans and interned in the Horserød camp. Members of the community had been warned not to celebrate the New Year at home as it was thought the Germans intended to arrest the Jews during their High Holiday celebrations in their homes.

On April 9th 1940, Denmark was occupied by an overwhelming German military force. Adolf Hitler's plan for the Jews was already being lifted from the drawing board and becoming a reality in Europe. But, until October 1943 the German Race Discriminating Nürenberg laws were not introduced into Denmark. There were special circumstances existing between the two countries. Until the end of August 1943, Nazi Germany regarded the Danes as being Arians and as such there were certain similar influences as far as race were concerned. In addition they regarded Denmark's farming industry as very important. Denmark was the German larder. But, the continuing unrest and hostility against the occupation by the Danes and the August rebellion in 1943 changed the relationship. Extensive strikes led to a military state of emergency and forced the Government to resign. The special relationship

with Germany came to an end. At the beginning of September the head of the Regency in Denmark, Werner Best, wrote a telegram to the leadership in Berlin: "The policy towards the Jewish population of about 8,000 has to be tightened."

Present day historians agree that Werner Best did not wish to worsen conditions for Danish Jews nor their non-Jewish spouses. His telegram to Berlin was part of a political ploy in the internal German debate. However, the request to do something about the 'Jewish Question', was taken seriously in Berlin. On September 18th Adolf Eichmann's office ordered Rolf Günther, to head a special Commando Force and send Denmark's Jews to concentration camps. The transport ship 'Warteland', with room for 5.000 people anchored in Copenhagen. In Jylland, cattle wagons with room for about 2.000 were waiting.

At that time Werner Best began to send a series of warning signals to the Danish public and the Jewish community. On September 17th 1943, the office of the Jewish community in Ny Kongensgade, was ransacked. A few weeks' earlier files from the office, including lists of the members' addresses were confiscated. Those events were danger signs for the Jewish community. The Germans now had personal information on the entire Jewish population.

On September 28th 1943, a ship navigation expert, Georg Duckwitz, working in the German embassy warned leading politicians in the Socialist Party about the approaching action against Denmark's Jews. Historians disagree whether Duckwitz passed the plans to the Danish politicians on his own initiative, or whether he was following an order from Werner Best. The important fact is that the Social Democrats informed the Jewish community and Denmark's political leadership. Rumors of the Nazis' intention spread very fast. This assisted the rescue of the majority of Denmark's Jews to Sweden. But, for a minority, myself included, there was to be a long, inhuman period as a prisoner of the Nazis, an encounter with anti-Semitism in its most extreme form.

Returning to Saturday October 2nd, 1943, when the Germans were knocking on our door – you may wonder, why we were still in our home, despite all the warnings? We knew about the German deportation plans and had moved to some Christian friends. We had intended to hide there until it was possible to escape to neutral Sweden. We did not dare go into the streets for fear of being seen by Germans or recognized by Danish collaborators. But, my little sister Rebekka, who was 11 years old, suffered from severe epileptic attacks. The night between 1st and 2nd October she had a serious attack. In order not to trouble our Christian friends, my father decided that

we should return to our apartment and call a doctor. That decision had fatal consequences for my family.

My cousin Sara lived in Norway and had two small children. When the Germans deported Norwegian Jews they only took men and the grown up children. Sara was allowed to stay with her two small children. Her husband Jack was sent to Auschwitz, and she never saw him again. We assumed that the Germans would be looking for my father and the older children, Fanny and Ante. However, Fanny and Ante were already in hiding. We, my mother, my younger brother Salle, Rebekka and my little five-year old brother Mogens, thought we were safe and did not expect to be arrested by the occupying forces.

When we heard the Germans banging at the door our first thought was to help our father escape. Salle and I ran into the bedroom to find sheets. We tied them together and secured them to rails on our fourth floor balcony which faced the other side of the street. My father started climbing down. As we opened the door five armed German soldiers rushed into the apartment together with a Danish collaborator. They searched and very soon realized that my father was escaping via the sheets on the balcony. We hadn't thought of removing them.

My parents came to Denmark from Eastern Europe before the First World War. When they wanted to talk about something but did not want us children to understand they spoke in Yiddish. That meant that we very quickly picked up the language. Yiddish is a mixture of German and Hebrew and as a result, I understood everything spoken in German. The German officer ordered two soldiers to go down and look for my father and gave an order that I will never forget: "Shoot him if you find him and he tries to escape." The next order came as an unexpected and unpleasant surprise. "Dress and pack the most important things and then follow us." Our expectation about Germans only arresting men, as in Norway, did not come true. After a few minutes we left the apartment. The German officer directed us into a truck that went to the harbor. Here we saw the boat "Warteland" with a frightened cargo of about 200 other Jews.

The whole situation was completely unreal. My mother was dumbfounded seeing the ship and the many desperate people. We began to look for my father and very quickly realized that he was not on board. I couldn't stop wondering if the Germans had caught my father and maybe they had shot him that same morning. I didn't know either where my elder sister and brother were. Slowly I began to feel an unpleasant uncertainty and fright for what the future would bring.

Chapter 2

Four-eyes. Sheeny.

As a child, I would come back from school and often be met by a group of children taunting me with the words: “Four Eyes” or “Sheeny”, I didn’t understand, I never felt different from the others. True I was a little shrimp and wore round glasses with frames that looked as though they were made of wires. After all that's how children's glasses looked like at that time. But, I was Danish just like the others and did not consider it relevant that my family were immigrants and had a different religion. Whenever I had to pass that place where those children were playing, I was afraid. I would hurry to pass them quickly. I had no idea how they knew that I was Jewish. They saw me as different and I don't think they even knew what it meant. I was afraid of their physical presence and took it for granted that they were attacking me for being a Jew. For me religion was a private matter, but in the light of the persecution of Jews in my own family’s past, I knew that to be called ‘Sheeny’ by boys of my own age, was not something positive or special.

My Family Went to Denmark

Part of my father’s family, as I have researched, comes from Latvia. My father was born August 8th 1894 in the town of Frauenburg. Today it is called Sadus in the western part of Latvia. The first Jews came to Latvia about 1570 and settled in the part of Kurland that is called Piltene. Many of them came to the area as merchants from Lithuania and other parts of Eastern Europe. In the first half of the 19th Century Jews suffered persecution and had to pay especially high taxes.

The Russians were there from 1795 until the end of the First World War. The Tzar gave the Jews citizenship but taxed them double for that favor; nevertheless the Jewish population grew. 100 years after Russia entered Kurland the Jewish population of 5,000 had grown to 51,000 and at the outbreak of The First World War to 68,000. The exponential demographic growth was primarily due to the influx of Jewish immigrants fleeing the pogroms. These pogroms, mainly in Russia but also in Poland and Rumania, were organized, or sometimes spontaneous, attacks on Jews that occurred frequently towards the end of the 19th century.

My mother's family, Wygodzki, came from Kalisz in the province of Poznan in Poland. My maternal grandfather, Meir Wygodzki, was born in 1854 and was a tailor. My grandmother, Ruda Moszkowicz was eight years younger and they married in 1882. They were orthodox Jews and had five children: Leon, Elias, Malka, Fanny and Itzak, born between 1884 and 1897. My mother Malka was born in 1895. During the farmers' rebellion in 1905 against the Russian regime some young Jews took part. But, the government's strong actions against the rebellion forced many of them, those who were not executed, to flee. My family were also among those who fled. My uncles, Elias and Leon were active in the socialist party, the Bund, whose members were fought by the Bolshevists. In the meantime, other Jews were supporting the Bolshevists. In 1913 my uncle Leon fled to Denmark together with most of my mother's family. Thus, fortunately they missed the Germans conquering and burning Kalisz at the beginning of the First World War.

Under the Russian regime and after the 1905 rebellion, the East European Jews suffered from pogroms and poor living conditions. The industrialization taking place at that time led many to look for better conditions in big towns, which caused competition in the workplace to become heavier. Young people were faced with compulsory military service that could last up to 25 years. It was possible to pay 500 Rubles to avoid military service but very few could raise that sum. This led many young Jews to leave Russian controlled areas before the First World War. Some fled northward to Sweden and Denmark, as did my family, while others chose to begin a new life in America or Canada. From Sweden, my father's family went illegally to Denmark; they didn't have passports. My father's elder brother, Salomon went to America and all contact was lost. I am not sure exactly when my father arrived in Denmark. It was probably around 1912, when he was 18 years old. He traveled together with his mother, sisters and brothers. He, together with his two brothers planned to work in Denmark and then to go to America once they had earned enough money. I don't know the fate of my grandfather, Anzelim Moscha Fischermann. Maybe he was conscripted and fell in the war. I can remember my grandmother, Mera Brandt until she passed away in 1932, when I was four years old. My father, Elias Leopold Fischermann began an apprenticeship with a Jewish master house-painter who had a workshop at Nytorv, Copenhagen. There was not always enough work so my father was sometimes unemployed, and my family was in a poor economic situation.

I remember that as children, we never asked our parents to tell us about their life in Eastern Europe. They rarely spoke about the years before

their journey to Denmark. The only thing I remember is that my father told us that he began working at the age of 12 years old. I don't know what kind of work he did. Most of the information about my family I learned only after my parents' death when I searched archives and visited the Jewish graveyard in Copenhagen.

Jewish Immigrant Families in Copenhagen

To come to Denmark from an East European country where religion played a central role must have been very difficult for my parents and the other Jewish immigrants. None of them had a passport. Some were revolutionary socialists like my uncle Leon. Jews huddled together in the slum quarters of Borgergade, Adelgade, Westerbro and Nørrebro. They had to find the cheapest lodgings and lived under poor health conditions. Infectious illnesses could wipe out entire branches of a family tree. The Spanish flu erupted in Denmark in 1918/19 and many hundreds died. My mother's brother Leon and her sister Fega both died on January 21st 1919, and the next day her brother Elias died too. When Leon died his wife Debora, was pregnant. Today, they are all buried in the Mosaic burial-place in Copenhagen.

Many Jewish immigrants worked as tailors, others as shoemakers or painters. Most of the newcomers in Copenhagen didn't have a social network to lean on and had to accept low wages and bad working conditions, some travelling around the country as day laborers. Many tailors worked at home and had very long working days.

The language was a barrier for many. My family spoke Yiddish together and with other Jewish immigrants. My father managed to pick up the Danish language easily. My mother was able to read Yiddish and in time she learned some Danish, but she had difficulties with pronunciation and word order. The only thing she learned was to write her name. One funny incident was when she had to buy horse-radish. My mother pronounced it almost as a naughty word. When she came home with the horse-radish, we asked her what she had asked for. She answered that she had pointed to the horse-radish and said, "I want some of this." All of us were laughing. That was her way of tackling the language barrier. But I think my mother was ashamed of her lack of Danish. It worried her and made her very dependent on my father and on us. The significance of this, I would only learn later, after the war, when with my father dead, I realized quite how humiliating it was for my mother that she was unable to manage on her own. The difficult conditions between the war years in Copenhagen had led to many Jews choosing to live close to

each other, creating a special solidarity and, as a result, a sense of security. This was destroyed in Latvia and Polen after repeated attacks against Jews. It was within this network of Jewish immigrants that my parents met one another. The family story is that my father was a kind of a Don Juan and courted here and there. There was a big effort to find a young Jewish girl for him. He was 29 years old and taking into account the norms of that time it was high time that he found a bride. A meeting was arranged between my father and my mother.

My parents were married by the chief rabbi Max Friediger January 21st 1923. In the beginning they lived in Revalsgade 3, Vesterbro in Copenhagen. My eldest sister, Fanny was born October 1923, and my brother Adolf, we called him Ante, in April 1925. Later we moved to Hothers Plads by Nørrebro's Station where the conditions were better. Most of my childhood memories are from this apartment. I was born April 19th 1928, my brother Salle in October 23rd 1929 and Rebekka in December 1932. We moved to Bispebjerg and Mogens was born in August 1938. So we were six siblings born between the wars. I remember my father as a loving person. When he worked and people could not pay the price he had asked, he was content with less. He didn't have any economic wisdom or aspirations. Several Jewish families lived at Hothers Plads and all were my parent's friends. Some of them were painters, others were tailors. Some worked at home and the family would take part in the work. It was common for the men to spend their free time, playing cards for money. Of course my father had to join them and he was an expert in losing. At that time people received their weekly pay every Thursday. One day my father played and lost all the weekly salary he had just received. There was a terrible row at home, and while my mother was shouting we were hiding. I remember I crawled under one of the beds. I had never seen her so upset. That was the last time my father played cards.

It was my mother who took care of the finances. She was very thrifty and decided to let one of the rooms in the apartment. She would walk from Nørrebro with a perambulator to the market at Nørrebro Station and bargain with the stall holders. Once a year she took us to buy clothes; clothes that she could afford. That was to a shop owned by Mrs. Krasnik. We were never asked what clothes we preferred. Mrs. Krasnik and mother decided what we should have. Usually we were not satisfied with their choice but despite our tears and protests, we simply had to accept what they thought was best. One summer I wore shorts and long stockings connected with a rubber band, I must have looked charming.

Chapter 3

A Concentration Camp Prisoner

The uncertainty and humiliation were intensified upon our arrival at Swinemünde. I didn't know where I was. The ferry from Copenhagen was cold. Other prisoners have later described "Warteland ", as a transport ship for troops, but all I remember is being so weak that I was unable to recall the journey in detail, perhaps also due to the shock and uncertainty. We didn't get any food. I remember that my sister, brothers and I were looking for recognizable landscapes; that is until we were chased into the hold. I wondered whether my mother, had heard the German officer giving the order to shoot my father if they found him, but I refrained from asking her.

In Swinemünde, we were forced into filthy cattle wagons at the train station. The dark brown wooden wagons were locked from the outside. It was hard to believe that 40-50 people could squeeze into each wagon. There were no benches and no space for all of us to sit on the floor. There were no suitcases. Only handbags were allowed with some small items like shoes, jewelry and clothes. All that people had managed to grab in the confusion of their arrest. We stood on the floor side by side. There were fashionable ladies with hats, elderly men and mothers with children. Only the oldest among us could sit down.

A tiny beam of light penetrated the small window. A bitter wind blew through cracks even though the train travelled slowly. The air in the cattle wagon was unbearable. There was a sharp smell of urine and despite the cold, the air was suffocating in the wagon. One of the women had brought a thermos flask with water. The water was soon gone, and then the woman urinated into the flask while we were looking. The close body contact with strange people made the situation even worse. In the wagon there was an elderly woman who had violently resisted her arrest. She had been bound to a mattress and thrown out of the window by the Germans. She was sitting still on the mattress and it appeared that she had completely lost her mind.

We didn't know where the Germans were taking us or how long the journey would last. There was some old straw on the floor which we moved

to a corner and used it as a toilet. All the time I thought about my sister, my brother and my father who were not with us. I was hoping for the best, but the feeling of helplessness was overwhelming and nobody knew any more than I did. We were packed together like animals. A feeling of disgrace came over us. We were silent, powerless and afraid.

The journey seemed endless. It was difficult to keep track of time. At last we stopped in an open landscape and were instructed to come out. It was a short toilet break. Men, women and children defecated next to each other by the rails, while the armed German soldiers were watching. I was 15 years old and very shy. That moment of humiliation has followed me all my life. But, at least I felt the relief of being able to breathe fresh air again. Before we were ordered back into the cattle wagons, we were given some dry bread and a big bucket containing marmalade. It was far from being enough and the marmalade was quickly emptied. However, the bucket soon found another use. Here was a new toilet. It was so humiliating to sit in the cattle wagon and relieve oneself in front of all the other travelers. Some peed in their trousers. Others wept. Most of us stood or sat in silence simply staring. We no longer had control of our fate and didn't know what the journey would bring. I was surprised how fast life could change; from freedom and happiness to total captivity.

In spring 1941, a short time after the opening of the death camp Auschwitz, the first German Jews were deported to Poland. At the famous Wannsee-Conferences, January 20th 1942, 15 prominent Nazis and German officials decided upon the framework of 'The Jewish Problem', Endlösung, i.e. The Final Solution. In July 1942 the Germans began mass transportations of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to the death camps, or rather the death factories Treblinka and Belzec. From spring 1942 until the time when the persecutions of Jews in Denmark began, the SS and the German police sent more than 1.5 million European Jews to the death factories in Poland.

At the Wannsee Conference it was decided to include various government officials so they may learn about the Endlösung project. The Nazis needed help from other Ministries, including transportation, if the destruction of European Jews would succeed. Methods of extermination were discussed, point by point without any objection from the participants. This was the first time a modern state made it official policy to exterminate another people using the cheapest and most effective methods.

Deportation of the Danish Jews.

Back on that fateful day in Copenhagen, the Germans caught exactly 202 Jews. Three managed to jump out of the train at Roskilde. Between October 13th and November 23rd 1943 a further 190 Jews were rounded up, bringing the total number of Danish Jews arrested to 481. Immediately after the deportation different Danish ministries began to gather information about the fate of the Jews. Among other things there was a demand from the Danish side, that the Germans make it possible to send packages to the expelled Jews and, later on, an official visit to the camp by Red Cross representatives or Danish officials. The Danish ministries had little knowledge about the camps and were concerned that the Danish Jews would be sent to different camps in Germany and Poland. There were many rumors. The State Attorney in Denmark, Werner Best, communicated to the leader of the foreign ministry, Nils Svenningsen that able-bodied Jews would be sent to labor camps in Germany. Then by October 1943 it was understood that the so-called labor camps in Germany were places where prisoners worked in dangerous areas at risk of their lives. Then, at the beginning of November, news came that all Danish Jews were to be relocated to Theresienstadt. Though this was an unknown place the impression was that this was preferable than camps in Germany and Poland. In the memoirs written by the Danish chief Rabbi, he writes: "We preferred Theresienstadt; we didn't actually know anything about the camps in East Europe or Theresienstadt. But the name sounded more pleasant."

Seen from the German side, the deportation of the Danish Jews was a failed operation. 481 captured out of about 8.000 Jews was an unsatisfactory result compared to German results in the rest of Europe. Already in November 1938, after the occupation of Austria, 30.000 Jews had been deported to concentration camps. In 1939 the offensive continued with the deportation of Austrian Jews to Poland. Then at the beginning of 1940 it was the turn of Jews from Pommern. At that time about 80.000 Jews had been incarcerated. With such numbers as starting points the arrest of less than 500 Jews in Denmark was hardly a success. On November 2nd 1943 Adolf Eichmann arrived in Copenhagen to make an evaluation of the failed Jewish round-up. He wanted to find the reason for the halfhearted German effort in Denmark. The visit resulted in an agreement, between Werner Best and Eichmann, about the Danish Jews in Theresienstadt. It was decided that Danish Jews would not be sent to the death camps, but nobody knew at that point whether the agreement would be respected by the Germans.

The result of Adolf Eichmann's meeting with Werner Best seemed to represent hope for Denmark's newly deported Jews. On November 4th 1943, Werner Best received a written promise from the leadership in Berlin that Jews over 60 years ikd would no longer be deported from Denmark. In addition, those Jews already deported, who had married non-Jews, would be returned to Denmark. The so-called Stateless Jews, who came to Denmark illegally, could remain in Theresienstadt although they were not regarded as 'true' Danish Jews by the German leadership. As mentioned, an important part of the agreement was that Danish Jews would not be deported further eastward, meaning to the death camps in Poland. And finally, representatives from the Danish authorities would be allowed to visit the prisoners in Theresienstadt in the near future. Compared with the wording and tone from the Wannsee Conference, Werner Best's agreement was relatively good news. But the word relative is critical. That we got a kind of protected status in Theresienstadt did not mean a luxurious life; far from it. In practice all it meant was that we Danes were not to be murdered. On a daily basis however, we struggled with hunger, cold, sickness and mental suffering.

The Jewish Question.

The categorical rejection of the plight of Europe's Jews is a stain on the conscience of many countries. These countries have a direct responsibility for the death of thousands of Jews. Due to their hostile attitudes and closed door policies most of the German refugees were forced to return to Germany. Hitler's interpretation of that situation was that since other countries were not interested in the Jews, he was free to solve the Jewish question. That is to wipe them out.

Extermination. It has never been easy for me to accept that word. Extermination is a word used for insects and animals. From a German point of view I can understand that the word extermination fitted with their terminology and ideas about Jews. The Jew of flesh and blood was going to disappear. The Jew had hardly a status as a human being. In fact, turning the Jews into an abstract phenomena, something unreal, dehumanized, something that ought not to exist, was the absolute marker of the ultimate success of Hitler's anti-Semitic propaganda. The remarkable thing is that the propaganda process against the Jews, beginning with the allegation that Jews were responsible for the dire economic situation, did not compare with other challenges facing the German population. Such problems included basic survival during the war and caring for wounded and dead family members. And, of course, Germans were worried about the progress of the

war. However, I nonetheless believe that without a general apathy towards the fate of the Jews, mixed with latent anti-Semitism, the Nazis' brutal propaganda would not have been as effective. The striking aspect is that Jews were not sent to the death camps by a hateful and violent population; they were sent by silence and apathy. This silence and apathy paved the way for the formulation of the final solution by the German leadership. Slowly, piece by piece, step by step it happened and the population was unconcerned.

The German priest and theologian Martin Niemüller supported Hitler in the beginning. He was an ardent anti-communist and found common ground with Hitler in the fight against the anti-religious. But during the 1930's Martin Niemüller began to express dissatisfaction with Hitler's priority, the power of the state at the expense of the church. That led to his arrest in 1937. The following year Martin Niemüller was sent to the Dachau concentration camp and was finally rescued by the allied forces in 1945.

I mention Martin Niemüller because he was very active after the war in the reconciliation process. He was a harsh critic of the German elite who remained silent and apathetic during the war. One of his most famous quotations can be read on a placard in the 'Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum' in Jerusalem. It sums up the dangers of not being critical and remaining on the silent sidelines when the government hits out at a weak minority.

"First they came to arrest the communists. I did nothing for I was no communist. Then they came to arrest the members of the trade union. I did nothing for I was not a member. Then they came to arrest the Jews. I did nothing for I was not a Jew. Finally they came to arrest me. At that time nobody was left who could do anything."

But the whole internal German debate about the final solution that culminated with the Wannsee Conference had been developing for a long time. Historically, it is difficult to point to a single event that started the whole Endlösung project. But, it was in the years 1940/41 that the Nazi rhetoric and actions of previous years bore fruit and made the murder of six million Jews possible. Historians quarrel over what precisely led to the decision to implement, 'The Final Solution'. Some believe that Hitler gave the order during the ecstasy of victory that prevailed at the Eastern front; a decision marked by strength and security. Others thought the opposite, that it was a decision made in frustration, namely, that Hitler gave the order during the autumn of 1941 as he realized that the Eastern front wasn't going to be so easy; a time when the Nazis suffered big losses. Finally, there are those who think that the whole idea of murdering European Jews was a gradual process made up of different events and turning points. I believe the fact that

European countries were not ready to accept Jewish refugees empowered the Nazi decision process. After the Second World War, many SS-leaders in their trials talked about a direct order from Hitler regarding the slaughter of European Jews. While there is no direct proof of such an order, there is no doubt that Hitler was satisfied in seeing the Jews being murdered.

The Gemlish Letter

The Gemlish letter, dated September 16th 1919, with Hitler's own signature is exhibited in The Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. A copy of the letter can be found in the German State Archive in Munich. It is regarded as Hitler's first written publication of his thoughts about the Jewish question. The letter was bought for about eight million Kroner in 2010 by a private collector for the Simon Wiesental Center. In 1919 Hitler was 30 years old. He was part of the German army's propaganda unit which at that time was busy attempting to reduce the influence of the Bolsheviks on German soldiers who were returning from the Eastern front. Hitler was asked by his superiors to answer a letter from Adolf Gemlich who wanted to know how the army was relating to, 'The Jewish Question'.

Germany's future leader was the right person to answer, and his letter indicates that Hitler already had a very specific attitude towards Europe's Jewish population. In the letter, the young Hitler describes Jews, "…as an eugenic tuberculosis against the nation", and develops his idea of calculated anti-Semitism, led by a strong government following the feelings of the population. His argument was that while anti-Semitic feelings among the population leads to pogroms, a government led process of systematic anti-Semitism will take care of the Jewish problem once and for all. The final step must be to remove, without compromise, all the Jews. Only a government of national strength and not of national weakness can achieve that end. That was Hitler's reply to Adolf Gemlish.

In 1939 the goal was to collect all Jews into ghettoes and then to move them to areas outside Germany. This was carried out by the notorious German 'Einsatz' commandos, led by Reinhard Heydrich. At the end of July 1941, Reinhard Heydrich was asked to make a comprehensive recommendation for the final solution of the Jewish question. Thus the fate of European Jewry lay in Heydrich's hands. His draft was now ready and was to be discussed by leaders at the planned Wannsee Conference in Berlin. However, the conference was postponed because of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the USSR counter offensive. The German air force had lost more than

2000 airplanes in less than six months. Köln had been bombed on December 8th 1941. Hitler gave a speech to German officers on December 12th 1941 and many historians regard this as the nearest one can get to the unequivocal order from Hitler to wipe out European Jews. According to the Minister of Propaganda Josef Goebbels and Hans Frank the Governor of Krakow, both of them having been present during Hitler's speech, the German leader used the escalating crises to finalize the death penalty for European Jewry. In his dairy, on December 13th Goebbels refers to the main points from Hitler's speech. "As far as the Jewish question is concerned, the Führer has decided 'to clean the table'. A new world has begun and wiping out the Jews must be a necessary result. That matter has to be done without sentimentality. We are not here to have sympathy for the Jews, but for our German people." In January 1942, Reinhard Heydrich's 'Einsatz Group A', could boast the murder of 229,052 Jews. Germany's anti-Jewish propaganda had now turned into genocide.

Holocaust, A Unique Case

I regard the Holocaust as something unique. It is an event without comparison. For more than 2,000 years Jews have been persecuted for the simple reason, that they were Jews. The Romans crucified thousands of Jews. The Crusaders murdered thousands of Jews, also Moslems in the name of God. In later times the Turks murdered Armenians. But none of those genocides had the same impact as the Holocaust. I do not wish to diminish those frightful events, nor to downplay their place in history. But, the Holocaust differs in scale, in method, and in the fact that Jews never fought Germany politically or militarily. On the contrary German Jews contributed to their country's culture, trade and science.

During the Second World War Nazi officials sat with engineers and planed precisely the fastest, cheapest and most effective way in which they could kill Jews. State physicians took advantage and conducted experiments on Jewish children, on twins and on Jewish families. Such an exact planned mass murder and such a systematic dehumanization had never before taken place in the history of mankind. The opening of German archives has shown that German officers, in different concentration camps, meticulously recorded not only whether Jewish prisoners had lice but also where and on whose head the lice were to be found.

Can you imagine the number one and a half million? That is the number of Jewish children the Nazis murdered. The SS-man and physicist

Josef Mengele was responsible for the murder of so many children. During the 21 months that he was in charge of Auschwitz, it was he who decided who should be sent to the gas-chambers and who could work. He performed cruel medical and surgical experiments on children and had a special interest in twins. Of the 3,000 twins on whom he performed experiments only 100 survived.

The events of the Holocaust are utterly incomprehensible. I am convinced that only a few people really know the truth about the Nazi's atrocities. One of the books that has made a big impression on me, is, 'The Scourge of the Swastika', written by Lord Russell of Liverpool. Russell was one of the judges at the Nüremberg trials after the war. Although it is written very clearly, the contents are almost incomprehensible. From start to finish, Russell describes a very detailed account of the violation of Jewish victims. It is the details that make it entirely and completely agonizing to read. For me, a victim of Nazi imprisonment, it is horrifying to read about this systematic violation of humanity. Russell's fellow judges tried to dissuade him from publishing the book after the war as they thought it could compromise him as a biased one-sided judge. In my opinion Russell did the right thing to publish the book. Of the many who try to understand what happened and how it happened, Russell comes close and hits the nerve of the madness in the war. He does it in a sobering manner, without exaggeration. As such, it is completely convincing.

Chapter 4

Fanny's escape

My 19 year old sister had no idea that I was sitting on a German ship with my mother and siblings when her employer turned to her and shouted, "Pack what you have got and hurry, the Germans have begun to arresting the Jews."

The conversations with my sister about October 1943 had been shocking, but also vitally important. The details of her escape to Sweden helped me form a clearer picture of the fate of my family. My parents had no money for a crossing to Sweden. The fishermen, who used their boats, demanded a lot of money for the dangerous trip. My uncle, who was a butcher, had sent one of his employees to us with 15.000 Danish Kroner. It was a large sum, and the temptation was too great for the young man who never arrived. He probably kept the money that had been our only hope to escape the Germans. It is far too late to be bitter about that now.

While Fanny packed her things, my father and brother arrived at the factory. The solution, to escape to Sweden, was imminent. Despite our lack of cash, it was now the only chance to escape. I can visualize Fanny with her black hair and dressed in a grey winter coat with blue ribbons. She saw that father was seriously hurt but he would not explain what had happened. Everyone was in a state of shock. Fanny, father and Ante went into Copenhagen. Father limped from the pain caused by his fall when fleeing his flat. Passing the synagogue in Krystalgade they saw Germans and hurried to the train station. They went with many other Danish Jews towards the coast of North Zeeland. Fanny's boss had given them the key to his house in Ordrup and he tried to persuade my father to wait a couple of days to feel better before they continued to Sweden. We didn't know what to do; there was confusion, rumors about German raids and of the different ways to get to Sweden. My family arrived at Snekkersten where they found shelter with a priest's family. The priest told my family about a cobbler who had bought a boat. My father went to the cobbler and asked if he had room for Fanny, Ante and himself in the boat to go to Sweden. But to his surprise father was turned away by the cobbler with the answer, "You must have lost your way".

So Fanny, Ante and my father went towards Gilleleje because they had heard of a hiding place and a possibility to get to Sweden from there.

At that time many fishermen were cautious as they helped Jews to escape to Sweden because twelve of them had been caught in Snekkersten. Therefore they tried to use a different route from an area south of Helsingør. There was an idea to use a schooner to move more Jews at one time. According to the Danish physicist and resistance fighter, Jørgen Gersfelt, who wrote about the Jewish escape in his book, "That is how we fooled the Gestapo", the plan to sail from Gilleleje was leaked by a Danish informer. The Danish helpers waiting by the shore were arrested. The Gestapo's Danish envoy in the area was called Juhl, nicknamed; "Gestapo Juhl" who had worked as a driver for Heinrich Himmler. Himmler later became Minister of the Interior with direct control over the feared Einsatz commandos who were a mobile murder gangs. At a church the Gestapo demanded the keys, but the priest refused. This aroused suspicion so Juhl and his men made a thorough check and found 72 Jews who had been hoping to escape to Sweden. After his work in Denmark, Juhl was rewarded for his enthusiastic efforts with a command post in the Stuthoff concentration camp.

How so many of Denmark's Jews actually managed to escape to Sweden is a combination of several factors. Firstly, the Germans at the beginning of October 1943 didn't do much to prevent the Jews escaping. That was left to the Danish police who generally, chose to close their eyes to the escaping Jews. The same was true of the courts. Judges, who were trying Jews attempting illegal departure, demanded that the German soldiers wait outside the courtroom. In the meantime the Jews were escorted away in a police car. The Germans had to be content with the explanation that the Jews were sent to prison but escaped on the way. Another reason was the courageous Danish resistance efforts. The Resistance first helped to find lodging for escaping Jews on the shore of northern Zeeland. Then, they found fishermen who were willing to run the danger of taking the Jews to Sweden. I have always been deeply grateful to the Danish fishermen and I don't blame them for asking a large sum of money for the risks they were taking.

My family returned to Egebæksvang helped by some Danish volunteers where they were hidden in a hay loft. It was here, my three family members met Dr. Jørgen Gersfelt. He examined my father and diagnosed two broken ribs and a knee fracture. This had happened when my father was trying to escape from our apartment. He had only reached one floor sliding down the sheets that Salle and I had tied together, and then, instead of slowly descending safely, he fell two floors onto hard stones.

The first escape attempt

My father was in severe pain but fully determined to escape to Sweden together with his two eldest children. That same evening Fanny, Ante and my father were brought to a dentist's house in Snekkersten. In the meantime seven other Jews arrived. One of them was Bruno Schmitz, a young Jew from Germany, a 'Halutz', the Hebrew name for young Jews on their way to Palestine. Bruno was the only survivor from the church raid in Gilleleje. He evaded the Gestapo by climbing the church tower and hiding behind the bells. The other 71 Jews were arrested. Among other Jews finding refuge at the dentist were a young sister and brother, Harry and Sonja Sandler who were 19 and 17 years old. There was also 24 year old Dora Thing, with her one year old daughter Høne. Dora's brother, Leopold Recht, 19 years old, was also there with his friend Benjamin Blüdnikow. During the evening the ten made a decision to sail to Sweden. They were promised that a little motor boat would be put at their disposal. All were anxious to escape as fast as possible to the lights on the Swedish coast just five kilometers away; to a neutral country and freedom.

The doctor, Jørgen Gersfelt came to see to my father who was still in pain. He also came to give the one year old Høne a narcotic injection so that she would not cry during the trip to Sweden. It was suggested that my father should wait a couple of days and that Fanny and Ante should leave. But all three insisted on remaining together. The family was already separated and should not be split further. Dr. Gersfelt gave little Høne the injection. Our host, the dentist came with food for the journey that should take between two and five hours depending on the circumstances. All the Jews were given a common Danish name in case someone asked them to identify themselves when they went down to the boat. Everyone was ready but they didn't know what to expect. My father was in a great deal of pain. Several could not swim. There was only one thought that they were focused on - the possibility of surviving. It was the uncertainty about the German intentions and lack of alternative solutions that made them move into the twilight led by volunteers. It was a long walk in a calm night. The fear of the German and Danish informers drove them to walk fast. Fortunately Høne slept. My father asked who the captain was and the answer made every one worried. There was no captain even though payment had been paid for a motor boat and a skipper. Instead the plan now was for the ten passengers to take turns in rowing a damaged rowing boat to the Swedish coast. Those who could not accept the plan had to leave.

Gersfelt writes in his memoirs: “Fischermann was in good spirits, he had a tight fitting towel around his chest and the rib fracture was no longer annoying him, in fact he thought he could pull an oar. It was quite dark without any wind; the sea was dead calm so I thought this little group should have a good chance, especially as they had reached the boat without being detected”. My sister, Ante and my father sat down in the boat with the other passengers. Reason spoke against nine grownups and a baby going on a five hour journey in a little rowing boat. They ought to have waited one more day until my father had recovered, and maybe then to cross the Sound in a motor boat. Unfortunately, reason was a luxury. That belonged to the time before the Germans had banged at the door to our flat. The survival instinct expelled any afterthought, and my father took one oar and gave the other to another passenger. The lights on the Swedish coast were distinct and my father said that it would be okay if they rowed in the direction of the lights and followed the stars they could see in the sky. The volunteers and Kristian, the dentist’s son, pulled off their shoes and pushed the boat out to the calm black water and pushed us off. They waved.

It is difficult to say exactly how long it was until the boat began to take in water, maybe an hour, maybe two. But the boat was heavy and the only tool they had to bail out water was Harry Sanders soft hat. It was not enough and the water in the boat rose slowly until the catastrophe happened. The boat capsized. It turned bottom upwards and everyone fell into the water. One year old Høne disappeared down into the dark deep sea, but Leopold dived in and got hold of her with her sleeping bag. He pulled her up to the surface again.

My father disappeared under the boat. Ante tried to get him free with an oar but he failed and so Ante swam under the boat to rescue his father. The German ‘Halutz’ Bruno, also disappeared. Fanny swam round the boat together with Harry, Sonja, Leopold and Benjamin. They tried to turn the rowing boat over but it was too heavy. So, they hung onto it and tried to gather both strength and thoughts to transfer themselves out of a situation which seemed hopeless. My sister and Leopold decided to swim back in the ice-cold water to get help. They didn't know how far it was but they took off their shoes and most of their clothes and swam to the lights in Helsingør. Fanny said afterwards that she really did not know if she would survive the swim. She thought of father and Ante and hoped they had survived.

Two hours later a Danish sand pumper passed the capsized rowing boat and picked up the passengers. Hønes body was quite stiff and lifeless. At first the skipper didn’t want to have anything to do with them but the crew

forced him to pick up the survivors from the water. The ambulances were waiting by the shore. Someone must have heard the cries of help. All five of them -Sonja, Harry, Benjamin, Dora and Høne- were taken to the Øresunds Hospital. No one had seen Bruno, my father or my brother since the boat had capsized.

In the meantime Fanny and Leopold were washed ashore. It was Kristian, the son of the dentist who found the two of them on the shore. Fanny was unconscious. With help from some fishermen they too were taken to the Øresunds Hospital. Here Leopold was asked to give his name to a policeman. He immediately said Leif Olsen, but the policeman calmed him down and said that he may as well give his correct name. The police would help them get to Sweden, hopefully before the Germans detected a group of Danish Jews who now found themselves in hospital.

Fanny was looking straight into the eyes of a nurse as she woke up. She was lying in a hospital bed and the nurse asked her to drink something warm. "You will have to leave as soon as possible but Pastor Dalsager would like to speak to you". He told her that her father and brother had drowned. This was the moment that my family's escape from the Germans turned into an inconceivable tragedy. Particularly, in contrast to other families who successfully crossed to Sweden.

Fanny's escape to Sweden

Together with members of the resistance, Pastor Dalsager arranged that Fanny and the other survivors from the rowing boat would return to the dentist in Snekkersten. They were transported in the hospital's ambulances. There they were given a good hot meal. In the meantime Høne woke up and it didn't look as if she had incurred any damage from her hours in the water.

The dentist's telephone rang. It was a nurse from the hospital. The Gestapo had arrived at the hospital and were interrogating the staff. Again a story had to be improvised. Jørgen Gersfelt was sent for to give Høne a soothing injection. He tried to encourage the survivors, but he hesitated when he met Fanny. Gersfelt writes in his book about meeting with my sister that day. "Fischermann's young daughter had lost her father and brother and didn't know what had happened to her mother and other siblings. She was numb with despair. It has never been so difficult for me to find words as I tried to say comforting and encouraging words". The failed and tragic attempt to sail to Sweden hit my sister hard. She had been very attached to my father and since then has never swum in the sea.

The Danish resistance obtained a dustcart that picked up my sister and the others from Snekkersten in the middle of the day. Another 50 Jews were picked up by the same cart before it reached its destination. Late in the afternoon of October 8th 1943, my sister and her fellow travelers entered a motor boat. Some passengers had brought poison to use if they were detected by the Germans. They preferred to die than end up in custody of the Gestapo. But this time they succeeded. In the late afternoon my sister arrived in Helsingborg. She was still dressed in her hospital pajamas as the Swedes made her and the others welcome. Their arrival meant freedom from German persecution, but as far as Fanny was concerned it also meant that she was completely alone. Father and Ante were dead and she had no idea what had happened to us.

Chapter 5

Arrival

At nine o'clock in the evening, October 5th, the train stopped. We had been travelling several days, but the impression of time and place had long ago been pushed aside by other feelings, hunger, thirst and cold. As the doors opened I saw armed Czech gendarmes and then, further away stood the SS-officers. They stood in small groups and conferred with one another. They didn't have direct contact with us; the Czech gendarmes had that responsibility. We huddled together. We didn't know anything. We looked around trying to find something familiar. Where were we, where we were going? None of us had an answer. The situation made me panicky. I was afraid of the armed soldiers, what were their orders? The insane woman from the train was carried away. She yelled loudly and disappeared behind a wall. One man died during the journey. He was placed in a wheelbarrow and taken away. The rest of us were ordered into trucks and driven to a nearby town. After 60 hours we had arrived in Theresienstadt.

Theresienstadt- A Concentration Camp comes into being

Terezin was the name of a little garrison town; the Germans changed the name to Theresienstadt. It is 62 kilometers north of Prague on the main road to Dresden and was built by Emperor Josef II and named after his mother, Maria Therese. The town had both a little and a big fortress, barracks and some badly maintained houses on about 400 hectares. The Big Fortress was surrounded by ramparts and divided into barracks. After 1882 the area was no longer used as a stronghold. When the Germans occupied the town it was divided into two parts by a wall. The Aryan part was later developed into the Jewish Ghetto.

Adolf Eichmann- the German SS-Obersturmbannfürer or SS-lieutenant-colonel was responsible for moving the 80.000 Jews living in the region. Eichmann visited Terezin and found that the barracks were suitable for mass occupancy. The walls around the town prevented contact with the outside and surveillance could be carried out with a minimum of manpower. Furthermore, it was close to the railway. The Little Fortress, complete with

one man cells and execution places, was used as a security prison for prisoners who resisted the Nazis. We called it the Gestapo prison. It was seldom that prisoners left the Little Fortress alive. In spite of its small size Theresienstadt was ideal for a German concentration camp.

Arrival in the camp

We were standing in a long queue by the 'Sluice', as the entrance to Theresienstadt was called. The SS-officers ordered us to answer questions about our financial circumstances and bank account numbers. The details were carefully written down. Afterwards we underwent a body search. The German officers and the Czech gendarmes confiscated jewelry, money, cigarettes, cosmetics and watches. These were forbidden in the camp. I had received a watch from school as a prize for diligence and an officer asked me to give it to him. I stiffened on the spot. Would he confiscate it? My watch had a round glass and brown leather strap and was probably not worth much but for me it had great sentimental value. It was such a relief when he returned it to me.

The next thing that happened was a sobering reminder of whom we were and where we were. The German soldiers handed us Yellow Star patches and ordered us to put them on our clothes. Of course we had heard about the Yellow Star from stories about Jews in other countries. Denmark's special status meant that, in contrast to all other German occupied countries, Danish Jews were not forced to wear the Yellow Star. The next step was even more humiliating. We had to be deloused. The gendarmes ordered us to undress. We were standing naked and the hair from all over the body was shaved off. We were deloused one by one. Nobody said a word. It all happened mechanically and fast. With the journey in filthy wagons still so fresh in my mind, I felt like I was being treated like an animal.

We stayed in these disgusting barracks for the first couple of weeks. It was a fight for survival. Married couples began to quarrel and had to be separated. Women and children lived in barracks while the men were accommodated in a stable opposite the barracks. There were bunk beds, without mattresses and it was freezing cold. They let us keep our clothes, but it was not enough. After some time we found we could obtain used clothes. What we didn't know was that the used clothes came from dead prisoners who had succumbed to sickness, cold or hunger. It was their clothes we used as autumn turned to winter. At that time we were ignorant about the transports to death camps, and the daily routine with too little food, hard work and the uncertainty about the future.

A few weeks after our arrival we were ordered to be ready at four o' clock in the morning. We stood in rows in the barrack yard. It was November 11th, I felt so cold. Exactly at six-o' clock the whole population of more than 40.000 began to leave the camp. The only ones staying behind were babies and those who were too sick to walk. We marched in the cold darkness. The silence was striking, no one said a word. It was frightening to march together with thousands of others without knowing what was going to happen. After two, perhaps three kilometers, we were ordered to stand in rows in a valley called Bauschowitzer Kessel. It was difficult for me to subdue the feeling that something strange was going to happen. My thoughts went in all directions; what are we doing here in this field? Were they preparing something secret inside Theresienstadt while we were standing here? Were they going to send us eastward? Were they going to shoot us?

The children cried. There was light rain and German planes were passing above. I remember I was afraid that we would be attacked. We stood there until late in the evening. At ten p.m. we were ordered to return to the camp. Nobody could explain to me what had happened. Only later, I realized that the Germans had made the first official census in Theresienstadt. Everything was written down. They knew everything. Even the names of the dead were meticulously written down on long lists. My 18 month ordeal in Theresienstadt had begun.

In October 1941, Reinhard Heydrich, who at that time was Germany's acting Reichsprotector for Western Czechoslovakia, declared that the 80.000 local Jews should be situated in a special place. Theresienstadt was actually too small, but when the leader of the Jewish community in Prague, Jacob Edelstein suggested the idea of a Jewish Ghetto in Theresienstadt it was readily accepted by the Germans. Jacob Edelstein had been in the Lodz ghetto in 1940. The conditions there had been so bad that the Jewish community here preferred to take the initiative and suggest the Ghetto rather than be sent to Poland. The German leadership was happy with the Ghetto idea which had economic and logistical advantages. The location of Theresienstadt meant that the Nazis didn't have to transport Czechoslovakian and German Jews to faraway camps. There was also the thought of using the camp as a 'model camp' that would give the outside world an erroneous picture of how concentration camps looked in general. The Germans, therefore, planned a camp with places for the old, infirm and Jews of prominent standing, politicians, scientists and artists.

The first transport to Theresienstadt took place in November 1941, two years prior to our arrival. It was a task force of 342 young Jewish men, the

'Build Command', whose task was to change a town of 10.000 inhabitants, to a camp for 60.000 Jews. This entailed providing accommodation and extending the electricity and water supplies. The town's Catholic population of about 7.000 was moved, and workers began to transform Theresienstadt. They didn't have much time as the next two transports with 1,300 prisoners were to arrive November 24th and during December 1941.

A wooden wall was built to divide the SS-officers from the Jewish population. The SS-officers lived in a building with four floors, the town's former hotel. The black SS-flag waved from the top of the building where the Nazis established offices, dwellings, dining halls and a kind of pub. About 1.000 Czechoslovakian gendarmes lived close to the SS-headquarters, but not together with the Germans. They wore their old uniforms, but were provided with hats with the Nazi emblem. To complete the idea of total separation the SS-officers formed the 'Ältesterat', a committee of Jews to manage and supervise the prisoners. The name and idea was taken from a 1903 Russian anti-Semitic paper, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. The paper, a forgery, was about a Jewish plan to take over world control. During the time of the First World War the paper had been translated into several languages and used as basic education in German schools.

In Theresienstadt the Ältesterat consisted of ten elderly Jewish prisoners. They were, of course, accountable to the Nazis. In an area originally meant for 10.000 inhabitants there were now approximately 60,000 Jewish prisoners. These conditions, the cramped quarters, sicknesses and lack of food soon became a serious problem. The Ältesterat was a convenient invention for the Nazis. By giving responsibility to the Ältesterat, for the administration and the daily running of the camp, the Germans did not have to have direct contact with the Jewish population. In fact, the Nazis also forced the Ältesterat to make pivotal decisions, like selecting the Jews who were to be sent eastward. Nobody said directly that the camps eastward were death camps but most knew that those sent would never return. When the Danes arrived in 1943, two years after the camp started, there were about 45.000 Jewish prisoners.

Once, the Germans gave the Ältesterat orders to list 1,300 Jews to be sent eastward. At the last moment the Germans changed the order to 1.000. That meant that every one of the ten members of the Ältesterat committee had to make impossible choices. Which of the 300 would they save and who would be sent to a death camp. This method created a feverish mood among prisoners who tried to bribe the Ältesterat to remove them from the list. Every time a transport of prisoners had to be arranged the mood of the whole

camp changed. People ran around to find out who was going to be sent, and those on the list huddled together until the train arrived. Sometimes they had to wait several days..

Every morning the members of the Ältesterat had to present themselves to the SS-headquarters and receive orders of the day. All orders had to be obeyed without question. The orders were written down and forwarded to the rest of the management who were also Jewish. Thus the Nazis created a situation where Jewish prisoners were administered by Jews and all orders were given by Jews. The only contact the Nazis had with the prisoners was through the Ältesterat.

The first leader of the Ältesterat was Jakob Edelstein who had led the Jewish community in Prague. He had spent three months in Palestine but had returned to Prague to head the 'Palestine Committee' that helped Jews immigrate to Palestine. He was arrested November 9th 1943 and in December 1943 he was deported to Auschwitz where he and his family were murdered The next leader of the Ältesterat was Paul Epstein, a German sociologist and spokesperson for Jewish organizations in Nazi Germany. There were rumors that Epstein had erased a name from a German transport list and I remember having seen him being slapped in the face by a Nazi before he was taken to the 'Small Fortress'. In contrast to the majority of victims who were deported to Auschwitz, Epstein was shot on September 27th probably because he confirmed what would happen to the deportees when they went east. Benjamin Murmelstein, a rabbi from Vienna, replaced Epstein as leader of the Ältesterat and remained until May 8th 1945 when the Red Army entered the Camp. Murmelstein survived the war.

A Model-Camp

Theresienstadt is described, with irony, as Hitler's gift to the Jews since conditions in the camp were not as harsh as in the death camps in Poland. But this was an illusion; there was hard daily work as the camp supplied the German war machine with Jewish slave labor. Some prisoners worked splitting the mica – a Czechoslovakian insulation material used in high tension equipment and electric cables. Others were spraying military uniforms with white color as camouflage for German soldiers on the Russian front. Theresienstadt's statistics speak for themselves. Those who called the camp 'Hitler's Gift to the Jews' were clearly unaware of what was happening there. Originally organized for Czech Jews, then for German and Dutch Jews and in October 1943 it was our turn.

Between 1941 and 1945, 90,000 were sent to their death in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka and a number of smaller camps.

33,000 died in the camp of hunger or disease.

In 1942, 16,000 prisoners perished. Of the 15,000 children who lived in the children's homes only about 100 survived. Only 16,832 of the 140,000, who arrived in the camp, survived the stay.

Among the Danish Jews 53 died.

For me, Theresienstadt was inhuman and terrible. Just like the other camps, it was focused on murdering as many Jews as fast and effectively as possible. in keeping with the other camps, to all the camps was the idea of murdering as many Jews as fast and as effectively as possible. Theresienstadt was just a part of the process.

Chapter 6

Powerlessness

How do you manage to function every day and spend hours in a prison-camp when your family and private life, dignity, humanity and freedom are denied to you and your future is unknown? The answer is that you do it because you have no choice but to follow the rhythm of the place. Those of us from Denmark were luckier than many. As Danes, we received special treatment that meant that some families were permitted to stay together. The administration in Denmark as mentioned earlier had made a special agreement. The most important agreement of all was the arrangement that Danish Jews would not be sent to the Polish death camps.

However, we only learned about this after the end of the war. During our time in Theresienstadt we had no communication with the outside world. There was no radio or newspapers. The only information we had about European Jews was through the stories we heard from other prisoners. Nobody had detailed information about the camps eastward, but we were well aware that there was never a sign of life from those who were sent to Auschwitz. This widespread anxiety hung over us every hour, every day, particularly as we didn't know about the Danish-German special agreement.

After a few weeks in quarantine my family was allotted a room with two other families. The room was about ten meters long, but only three meters wide. In the back of the room the family Choleva lived with their three children aged between 5 and 13 years. In the middle lived an elderly couple, their name was Schwartz, and by the entrance my mother with her four children aged between 5 and 15 years. There were no partitions between the three families. I spent almost 18 months in that room. Wooden beds were placed along an outer wall. The room had an old stove that we used to heat the room and to boil the potatoes that I stole. The other wall faced a yard with a latrine divided between men and women. This toilet was a ditch with a board on the top. It was also here, in the court yard that you had to wash yourself. The unhygienic conditions in the camp caused many problems. We were constantly attacked by fleas, lice and bed bugs. They hid in the wooden beds by day and appeared at night to suck our blood. When we woke up in the morning we were full of bites which itched constantly. We tried to fight them and took the beds apart to catch them. We caught some of these ugly

small grey-black insects which were swollen from our blood, but there were so many.

As far as I was concerned, the bed bugs were not the biggest plague. I suffered far more from the attack of 'itch mites'. These tiny itch mites, just between 0.2 and 0.4 mm would crawl in under our skin to lay their eggs. They attacked fingers, arms, armpits, chest and genitals. I scratched myself continually and ended up with large sores. After a while I was placed in medical quarters with other fellow sufferers. The wounds were treated with a terrible smelling liquid. After three weeks I was well enough to go back to the family room, but only to be attacked again by the horrible mites.

Under such conditions it was almost impossible to remain optimistic. With 12 people in the one room there were often disagreements and quarrels. The conditions made all of us tense and intolerant. Mrs. Choleva was very sharp-tongued in contrast to her soft spoken husband. She was the only one who didn't work, so every day she took care of my younger sister and brother. They had nowhere to play and most of the time they were indoors. My mother was quite resilient. She didn't talk much and very soon learned to accept the conditions and radiated a willpower that was catching. She worked and cared for us when she was able to. But, the strained conditions and quarrelling took its toll. We were simply hungry, tired and despairing. We learned how to live with the biting cold in winter and suffered the harsh heat of summer. We learned to endure the claustrophobic closeness of other people, injurious insects and lack of hygiene. But, I never learned to live with hunger. It is impossible to get used to being hungry and undernourished all the time. The hunger cut into my body. At first I got stomach pains and then I got flabby and tired; then began a chronic headache. I had no patience, I couldn't concentrate. I became sick, and my very will to live was tested.

The Jewish administration in the camp was responsible for distributing the scanty bread ration and coal for heating in the winter. We were also given a kind of soap. We didn't know then that there were rumors that the Germans produced soap from dead prisoners. If that was the soap we were given it would not surprise me. We had food coupons for a portion of food once a day and a kind of soup, water boiled with potato peelings. Sometimes we got a dumpling with an undefinable sauce. It had no taste. I ate it only because my instinct told me that in order to survive I had to eat everything I could. When food was distributed the situation was chaotic. Everyone tried to be first in the queue as there wasn't always enough for everyone. We were standing in the queue with a spoon, fork and a bowl, we didn't need a knife there was never meat. Once a week each group received a package of margarine, but only half a loaf of bread per person.

Despite the hard conditions I learned that the human will to stay alive is very strong. I never wanted to die. My thoughts were only to survive. I made a decision to eat as much as possible, to keep myself as clean as possible and to try prevent myself from being infected by the other prisoners. Those who became ill were in great danger because the Germans had prohibited medicine of any kind. Seriously sick people were sent to quarantine and left to die.

Parcels from Denmark

During the time that Theresienstadt was a German concentration camp thousands died due to illness and hunger. Danish Jews were more fortunate than others as the Germans allowed the Danes to receive food parcels from their families in Sweden and the Ministry of Social Affairs. I am convinced that these parcels saved many Danish lives and the Danes who sent parcels or donated money to buy goods cannot be thanked enough.

Not many things functioned well in Theresienstadt. The only matter that really functioned, according to the plan, was the Nazis' ability to make life as sour as possible for the prisoners. That happened with parcels from the Danish Red Cross. I know that my sister Fanny sent a parcel every month from Sweden after she found out where we were. But at least half of them as well as many other parcels never arrived. They ended up in the hands of German soldiers, or the local gendarmes. Even when the parcels arrived part of the contents had been looted. One of the most important things we received was vitamin pills. The taste was horrible but even the children understood how important it was to take them. Fortunately the Germans didn't regard vitamin pills as medicine, although they were our best weapon to keep sickness at a bay.

Another problem was that some of the Danish Jews were Orthodox and only wanted kosher food. They refused to eat the contents of the parcels and in that way they prevented themselves from gaining extra sustenance. The Danish chief rabbi, Max Friediger, who had arrived in Theresienstadt with us, issued a special religious authorization to eat food that wasn't kosher. Even pork was allowed under those special conditions. He declared that the situation was extraordinary, and that the parcels were a question of life or death for many people. Therefore, he declared that Orthodox Jews were allowed to eat the contents of the parcels with a good conscience.

Of the 472 Danish Jews who arrived in Theresienstadt, 53 died. Some were Orthodox Jews who refused to eat non-kosher food from the parcels

sent by Danish Red Cross. 41 Danes died of hunger and sickness during the first six months, including two of the four babies born between October 1943 and 1944.

Life in the camp

In spite of ongoing hunger I was never close to death. Once, I was sick and in quarantine because of the itch mites. Apart from 'flu and colds, I suffered no serious sicknesses during my internment. Generally I was able to work. I began working as a messenger boy for an influential man. I didn't like him; he was tough and I was afraid of him. But, now and again he gave me a slice of bread. I also helped a Czech couple. They were kind and, very exceptionally, were allowed to live together. I don't know their background but I suppose he must have had influence because he helped in the administration and had held a high position within the Jewish community in Prague. His wife was an opera singer. She had blond hair and I thought her beautiful. Even in Theresienstadt she appeared elegant, elevated above the misery with her soft voice and her soft face. I never heard her singing in all the time I worked for them. Theresienstadt was not a place where people sang of joy and passion as in an opera. They were given a small flat and they had furniture in contrast to other prisoners. I had no friends in the camp except my sister and brothers because there were not many youngsters of my age. I therefore became emotionally connected to this attractive couple, who spoke to me in German and who showed me respect and spoke to me like friends.

Paradoxically, in the middle of our fight for survival, there was still art, culture, humor and music to be found among us. In front of the church there was a big open area with a platform where concerts were occasionally performed. Many of the prisoners were artistic personalities; several were highly capable musicians. The music was played by a full orchestra under the Danish conductor Peter Deutsch, and the Nazis also came to listen to the music. It was quite a bizarre scenario. Jewish prisoners, who would possibly be sent to their deaths shortly, entertaining their own executioners.

There was also theatre. The prisoners performed some of Brecht's works. I did not manage to see the performances but my brother Salle did as he worked at the theater. Some of the prisoners played and sang well known Viennese melodies. Prisoners purposely changed words to be critical of the conditions in the camp, a trick the Nazis never noticed. They only sat and listened. The special children's opera, 'Brundibar', written by the

Czech composer Hans Krasa, was also part of the camp's repertoire. The opera deals with the victory of the good over the wicked. It was performed 55 times with the permission of the Nazis. 50 children always took part in the performance. As time passed many of the children were sent away in transports, but new children's faces appeared. In autumn 1944 the composer himself was sent eastward.

There was no children's education in the camp. It was forbidden. But, some children received a kind of improvised teaching. They would draw and make pictures. Somehow coloring material and paper materialized, brought from an unknown source.

When supplies of coal or coke arrived to the camp, Salle and I, together with some others were ordered to carry the coal sacks. That was hard work and since then we have both suffered from back pains. The coal was brought by rail to the camp in sacks. The sacks had to be lifted down from the wagons and carried along the rails to a handcart. It was, however, a very necessary burden. The winters were hard; we didn't have much flesh on our bodies, and the clothes we brought from home were far from enough to keep us warm. We never thought of protesting and always did everything we were asked to do. We were constantly burdened by the unknown. What would happen if we were unable to work? What would happen if we did something wrong?

I did many kinds of work and then began to work in the potato store. I had to operate a potato peeling machine. The woman in charge had been imprisoned in 'The Little Fortress' or the Gestapo prison, a place where almost no one came out alive. It was the German's torture center. The prisoners, who were sent to the 'Little Fortress', ended as a rule by being transported to the camps eastward, that is if they hadn't already been killed by torture. The woman from the potato store had been arrested together with her husband and had been in an isolation cell for half a year in total darkness. She didn't talk much about her experience, but when she came out she couldn't remember her name. She never saw her husband again.

I suppose she got the job in the potato store from the Ältesterat to help her recuperate and not to collapse because of grief. She looked ravaged and was a nervous wreck. I didn't like to ask her about what she had experienced. It was enough just to look at her. We lived from day to day with the feeling that something terrible could happen any minute and her face and body language was an example of the soul of Theresienstadt. Her history was a sum of the sufferings that we were exposed to. She radiated deep pain.

Every day, right before the end of work, I stole some potatoes and hid them in my clothes. I knew the serious consequences if I was to be caught but the most important thing was to get some more to eat. As my mother's oldest son in the camp and in the absence of my father, I felt that I had to take responsibility for the family, my younger sister and brothers. Before and after Theresienstadt, I never considered taking something, that didn't belong to me. But in the camp I naturally slid into a fight for survival. I knew that every potato stolen would increase the chance of my family's survival. Therefore I stole with a clear conscience. I was happy that I was able to work. It passed the time, calming the fear and thoughts which constantly hammered in my head. I remember many of the thoughts I had. I can remember the barracks in front of me. Sometimes it is even possible for me to recall the smell and stench from the stuffy rooms and from the latrine, as well as the penetrating pungent smell after the barracks had been disinfected.

In particular I remember the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and I knew, as a 15 year old in a Gestapo prisoner camp, that I had many questions to ask. Why are we here? What crime did we commit that caused me, my younger sister and brothers to be torn away from a safe existence with our parents? Was it a crime to be born Jewish? Why did Denmark permit us to be taken to a foreign country in filthy cattle wagons where we had to live under inhumane conditions? How was it that the so-called civilized world allowed this to take place? Is there no justice in the world and why did the Jews have to suffer? We were forced into a depressed and dreadful existence with the death threat hanging over us all the time. Not even the dead were respected. They were transported through the camp in an open truck, where the corpses were thrown one upon the other. Why? These are questions for which I have never found an answer and which haunt me as I return to them again and again.

Life in the camp was first and foremost immobilizing; How would we survive? However, I do remember positive moments which gave long-lasting pleasure such as when the first postcard from my sister Fanny arrived half a year after her flight from Copenhagen. It was the first sign of life from her. We were overwhelmed with joy. She also sent greetings from my father and my brother Ante. It awoke indescribable joy to receive the letter and to know that they had all arrived safely and were secure in Sweden.

We ourselves began to write postcards. The officers in the camp allowed us to receive and send strictly censored postcards every six months. We were forced to write meaningless phrases that the Gestapo had worked out. The Nazis wanted phrases like 'everything is okay ', 'greetings to the

family' and ′'we are healthy and well'. The Nazis wanted to give the outside world the best possible picture of Theresienstadt. They wanted to prevent reality reaching the outside world. But in spite of this German censorship we found methods to convey an indication of our hunger and conditions. We used the phrase 'greetings to Irma'. In Denmark there was a food chain of that name and therefore this was a clear signal that we suffered from a lack of food. Not one of us thought of changing the wording although it must have been peculiar that all Danish Jews had an Aunt Irma in their family. Our hidden messages were understood and parcels with food began to arrive.

Today I know that Fanny purposely refrained from writing about my father and my brother's death during the crossing to Sweden. It was not rational to be optimistic in Theresienstadt but I convinced myself that in the end everything would be alright. One day we would return home to Denmark and meet up with my father, Fanny and Ante. Everything would be like it was before the war. Theresienstadt was only a temporary nightmare. We had to grit our teeth, endure and we would be a whole family again. Those were the thoughts that kept me going.

Chapter 7

Hitler's Scene

Postcards received from our families and parcels received from the Danish Red Cross were not the only things we received from the outside world. In December 1943, we heard about the possibility of a visit by the International, Swedish and Danish Red Cross. What would this mean for us? Hitler's propaganda personnel realized that a well prepared visit was a unique opportunity to show the world that German concentration camps were small and well-functioning. The Jewish communities were ruled by their own committees, the Ältesterat; a village with all that you needed, a hospital, its own police, sports facilities and work arrangements. The Germans wanted to convince the Red Cross and the rest of the international community that the imprisonment and persecution of European Jews was actually taking place in model camps.

To make this lie appear convincing the Nazis had to implement an absurd alteration of Theresienstadt. They had to convert an overcrowded, disease infected place, where the inhabitants suffered from undernourishment, into a place for the whole world to see. That was not easy; therefore the visit of the Red Cross was postponed again and again. On December 1943, Nazis informed the Ältesterat of the plans to be implemented. As usual the orders were sent out from the Ältesterat, through the ranks until everybody was informed. The leader of the board, Dr. Epstein was to function as the Mayor. He had to make a speech to the Red Cross delegation. A speech obviously dictated by the Nazis. During the visit the Danes had to stand in the front of the other European prisoners because our health was better; we had received Red Cross parcels. Under no circumstances were we to address the delegation. If we spoke critically about anything we knew we would be sent eastward. At the risk of our lives we had to keep quiet. We were the theater group; the Red Cross was to be the audience. An exact walking route was planned for the visitors.

I remember how I took part in the beautification of the camp. The buildings along the route had to be repaired and painted. We planted flowers and spread turf so that the muddy roads should look better. For the first time, benches were placed in the camp and play and sports areas were established. The dwellings of the more prominent Jews were highlighted as

a main attraction and were supplied with furniture, curtains and flowerpots. A sign on one building said ‘School’ and another sign read: ‘Closed because of the holiday’. No child in Theresienstadt ever went to school. The school was a fake, the same as the holiday. Fictitious bakeries and groceries were established full of goods. We couldn't buy anything there, and the buildings stood like a film set. The Germans printed special bank notes to give the impression that we went shopping there. On these notes there were representations of Moses with the Stone Tablets. Actually, some of the prisoners were sent money from their families abroad. The German took the foreign currency and gave the prisoners the special camp-money that only could be used to ‘buy’ the clothes that were left when prisoners died.

SS-officer Karl Rahm was in charge of the camp’s facelift. Finally, during spring 1943, he was satisfied with the renovation, but he was still concerned that the camp was too overcrowded to be shown to the Red Cross. Therefore, he gave orders for a comprehensive deportation. More than 17,000 prisoners were sent to the death camps in order that the camp’s facade could be upheld and Karl Rahm would feel he had carried out his orders to perfection. This time it was sick prisoners and orphans who were sent to the death camps. In the children's home only one girl, a Dane, was left. All the others were killed because of this one man’s vanity.

Finally the delegation arrived on the 23rd June 1944. It consisted, among others, of Dr. Maurice Rossel, who was the International Red Cross delegate in Berlin, together with two Danish officials, Frants Hwass, chief of the Social Department, and Dr Eigil Juel Henningsen from the Ministry of Health. There was to have been a Swedish representative but he never came. After the arrival of the delegation it was as if a film started to roll. All the well-rehearsed events took place with great precision. Only the prisoners who had been specially chosen were allowed to speak. Those who stood by the road were commanded to sing as the delegation passed. Sports games were played and we clapped hands by command. It was a terrific performance in honor of the guests. We were afraid to do anything else.

I remember that Rahm, during the rehearsal, while sitting on a motorcycle indicated to his soldiers a woman who had stepped out of line. She was terrified and ran wildly to escape. I don't know what the Nazis did to her but somebody told me that she had been punished.

After the visit

On the day of the visit everything worked as it should. At least as far as the Nazis were concerned. The Danish delegation was pleasantly surprised after their visit. Frants Hwass and Juel Henningsen wrote a report in which our situation in Theresienstadt was described as good, considering the war-time conditions. Neither they, nor Maurice Rossel of the Swiss Red Cross, seemed to see through the Nazi propaganda. He wrote an insipid 15 page neutral report about what he had seen. Nobody scratched the surface, not one of the representatives saw what was really happening to us behind the Nazis' brilliant disguise. Most important of all, Maurice Rossels report confirmed the lies the Nazis told the outside world. T'he account of the Danish officials was not better. The wording in Eigil Juel Henningsens report could have been dictated by the Nazis themselves. It is difficult to believe that the Danish officials were unable to see through Hitler's propaganda and instead chose to write as follows:

> **"If you summarize the numerous impressions we received through our tour in Theresienstadt and add these to the information given by Dr. Epstein and the German authorities, one gets the view, that inside this closed community great progress has happened, especially, during the last six months, and efforts are made to improve this where possible."**

This report and similar statements caused strong criticism and anger after the end of the war. The debate that took place in Denmark about the report was heated and sometimes violent and emotional. Why was the camp mentioned as a community? Why did one speak about progress when Jews were being sent eastwards and 15 people died there daily? The Danish officials were accused of being caught in the Nazi trap but the officials defended themselves. About this debate, the Danish historian Hans Sode Madsen writes:

> **"The polemic didn't take into account the main motive that Hvass and Juel Henningsen had to consider. Primarily, this was to secure the Danish Jews' survival under conditions that, without warning, could change to something much worse. As mentioned, the conditions for Danes in Sachsenhausen and in Stutthof were well known. Because of this knowledge it was necessary to use extreme caution with any communication with the Gestapo. The two officials had probably worked to**

secure and even extend the unique agreement between Werner Best and Adolf Eichmann.“

In 1949, Frants Hvass explained to the Parliamentary Commission that examined the work of the State Administration between the years of 1940-1945: “Juel Henningsen and I realized that several of the arrangements we saw in Theresienstadt were made because of the visit. However, we were more concerned about the health and living conditions of the Danish prisoners. We found that health conditions were better than we dared to expect which was partly due to the earlier agreement enabling food parcels to be sent for the Danish Jews.”

On the international level there was a level of awareness about the conditions in the camps but alongside this, there was also a lack of inclination or, in fact, ability to do anything about it. In his book The Red Cross and the Holocaust, Historian, Jean-Claude Favez examines the information that the International Red Cross had at its disposal and what it could do, or not do, with the information. The International Red Cross was often unable to get admission to the camps or to obtain the information they required from the Germans. By 1944, they had managed to find out the location of the main concentration camps. They had accounts of prisoners who had escaped and other pieces of information that reached the organization. And yet, the International Red Cross was unable to get a clear picture of how some of the camps were organized and even what kind of organizational systems were used in the camps. Jean-Claude Favez writes:

“In February 1944, Carl J. Burckhardt, who was then Vice-President for the International Red Cross, was asked by George Kullman, Vice Secretary for Refugees in the same organization, about the situation in the camps. Kullman wanted to know if it was correct that at this time only 140,000 Jews were left out of three million Polish Jews. To that question Burckhardt answered that he had received this information via secret reports”. This knowledge was at the disposal of the International Red Cross almost six months prior to the visit in our camp.

Concerning Rossel’s visit to Theresienstadt and his report, Jean- Claude Favez said : “The International Red Cross knew the truth. But an exposure at that time would have prevented the future possibility of operating in the camps. Therefore it was decided not to deliver the report about Theresienstadt to the allied countries, the

national departments of the Red Cross or other Jewish organizations."

It is impossible to establish the significance of not publicizing the report. Would it have saved lives? As a neutral organization the Red Cross gained admission to camps, and towards the end of the war it was instrumental in saving many prisoners. Perhaps the publication of the report would have ruined these possibilities? But I cannot help thinking that publication of the report would have created a situation where the allied forces would have felt obligated to ramp up their efforts towards saving European Jews from the Nazis gas chambers. But, to the great satisfaction of the Nazis, the world let itself be fooled. As Jean-Claude expresses it:

"To know is not the same as to understand … and to know is not enough to be able to want; even if there is a will, there is not necessary a way."

Favez thinks that the International Red Cross, when it knew of the murder of the Jews was in the same dilemma as the allied governments when the unthinkable suddenly turned into a fact. What should they do, when they were dependent on cooperation with the Nazis? If they exposed, the truth about what was actually happening in the camps, the Nazis would not allow them entrance in the future. Red Cross packages would be banned and would lead to the death of thousands of prisoners. The situation was incalculable; the choices difficult to make.

After the visit of the Red Cross, the Germans were so satisfied with their own propaganda that they decided to make a film. The shooting of this film showing Hitler granting the Jews a town lasted for many weeks and many of the prisoners were forced to take part. The purpose of the film was for the long-term. The Nazis could send the film to concerned organizations and thus diminish the pressure from abroad. But I assume that the German leadership also intended to use the film to counter possible allegations after completing the murder of the European Jews. There would be no survivors to tell the truth and the German film would be the only testimony about how life in the camp had been. After filming had been completed, all the special construction and props were taken down and removed. Even the few benches were not allowed to remain.

The children's playground was taken apart. I understood perfectly well that the Nazis wanted to give the allies a false impression of Theresienstadt. But I never understood why they didn't leave the benches, the playgrounds and the cosmetic improvements after the visit. Why take everything apart

again? My only conclusion was that the Germans really were cruel people with ruthless intentions. In their view, even we children did not deserve any happiness.

After the Nazis' show of Theresienstadt, a large number of prisoners were sent eastwards. The Germans had at that moment convinced the international world that Theresienstadt was a model camp. No further visits were planned and no one would record that even more Jews were sent to their death. We Danes were spared. But, all the members of the Ältesterat, who had diligently kept their promise not to disclose the actual conditions to the visitors, were also sent eastwards. The exception was the Danish rabbi Max Friediger.

In the autumn of 1944, the same thing happened. The decorations, clearing and cleaning began again. On April 6th 1945, another Red Cross delegation visited the camp. At that time we knew nothing about the progress of the war and that the German decoration of the Camp was part of its final convulsions before defeat. As far as we were concerned it was still a usual workday, the Germans gave orders and we obeyed.

Chapter 8

The Station before Death

I found life in the camp so strange; it was as if I was frozen in a horrific situation. We were alone in an isolated world. We were like animals in a gigantic laboratory where the scientist constantly tried out new experiments. “It has to have an end”, was a sentence I constantly repeated to myself. I never managed to get used to the situation. It was impossible. My body was weak and my head was in a constant state of dread. Maybe it was the religious influence from my childhood, maybe natural optimism that provided strength to maintain the hope that this absurd theater would come to an end. I remember thinking that I had to keep going and not give up. I leaned on my brother, Salle. We fought side by side against the bedbugs, sickness and hunger. It helped to have a fellow-sufferer at about the same age. I tried to focus on my family. The longing to see Fanny, Ante and my father again was so strong - I began to imagine what would happen when we became reunited. I imagined how we would go on walking tours again, play and relax on Shabbat. With all the strength, that I, as a fifteen year old boy, was able to mobilize I knew I had to keep my mother, my younger sister and brothers together. We all had to be strong so that we could be reunited; father, mother and six children. During the summer and autumn of 1944 my sister’s health deteriorated. 14 year old Rebekka suffered from the same epileptic attacks that had led to us being in our apartment when the Germans knocked at the door on that fateful day. It got worse because she could not get treatment and also because chronic stress was a bad basis for any improvement. We were worried all the time. While we were at work she spent every day in the shared room with Mrs. Cholewa and the Schwartz couple. There were no toys. They passed the time by telling the same stories again and again. Rebekka actually never recovered.

Time passed slowly. The only thing that broke the routine was when prisoners were sent eastward, or when new prisoners arrived. They came from all possible corners of Europe dragging the last of their belongings. The anxiety of the unknown could clearly be seen on their faces. We must have looked like that when we arrived almost a year earlier. But, the worst part, and an element that significantly affected my development, was seeing the transports leaving the camp travelling to an unknown destination. Thousands

of prisoners were placed in trains moving eastward. Every few days cattle wagons left the camp. Every time new prisoners were chosen for the journey. I still get a physical pain thinking of those transports and occasionally they still give me nightmares. After almost 70 years, I still dream that I am sent into a building with many rooms. My task is to find a certain room but I am never successful. It is like a labyrinth as I walk around and around getting nowhere. Then I wake up. If I analyze that dream, it is likely to reflect my time in Theresienstadt and as well as the years after the war when another tragic event hit the family.

The Transports going East

In autumn 1944, I was chosen to do one of the worst jobs. I was chosen to help prisoners with their luggage when they had to board trains going east. If only I had got a job in the carpenter's workshop or if I could have just continued as a potato peeler, anything else would have been better. The order for me to help the prisoners onto the train and then pass their luggage to them was awful. All of us knew that they would probably never come back. To take part in sending Jewish friends to a certain death, combined with the fear of myself ending up on one of those trains if I didn't obey, gnawed at my soul. I still cry. I still see it so clearly; the silent people, facing their own death. I remember everything, the waiting trains, the pale faces and the inexplicable certainty that this was a tragedy of massive proportions.

While helping the prisoners with their luggage, I suddenly saw the Czech couple for whom I had worked. The opera singer and her husband, the lovely people who I respected and had appreciated stood in front of me with a bit of baggage. The man came up to me. He took off his wedding ring, gave it to me and whispered, "Get me a cigarette." I was startled and desperate. The reality landed on my shoulders without warning. I felt dizzy and uneasy. "You can't sell your wedding ring for a cigarette", I said. I was angry. I felt such an inner turmoil; I felt that something had been torn out of my hands. I loved the couple. I was tied to them. They were among the only people who had showed me respect. Now they too had to go. I was standing by the train and was at breaking point. I looked downward and bit my lips because I knew there was nothing I could do. His answer gave me a shock, "I don't need it anymore". His calm and serene manner made me even more desperate. I understood what he was trying to say to me; or did I really? But I did what he said. I ran to the nearest of the Czech gendarmes. He received the beautiful ring without hesitation and handed me a cigarette. The couple entered the train; I wasn't able to speak. I couldn't even cry. It was as if

something had burst inside me. I was just a boy, 16 years old.

Like many others, the Czech couple supposedly knew that at the end of the train trip death was waiting for them. Even those who held important positions were not spared. Nobody spoke aloud about it. No one knew when it would be their turn. I felt that anything could happen at any time. Just like in Copenhagen, when we had been sure that the Nazis would take only the men and grown up children, because that was what we had heard from Norway. And then we had been hit with the harsh reality that there were no bounds to the cruelty and no limitations. Similarly, now, slowly by the train, I began to realize that the Germans had no limits in the way that they treated us. Yesterday's exception became tomorrow's norm. And there was absolutely nothing we could do about it.

After a few months of constant hunger, I learned the rhythm of the camp and apathy set in. It was quite impossible to be overwhelmed emotionally by every event. As far as I, and many others were concerned, apathy was the easiest way to respond to an event. No one had the reserves of strength necessary to confront the existential questions triggered by the Nazis' cruelty. Not when the daily struggle was simply to survive. Apathy was the survival of the desperate; the only way if you wanted to preserve your sanity.

The Dilemma of the Ältesterat

So many prisoners were sent east while I was in the camp. Often, as frequently as every three to four days, another group of a thousand prisoners was sent. At other times, there were intervals of weeks. Every time new prisoners had to be selected the SS-officers contacted the Ältesterat and ordered the board to select those prisoners to be transported. It must have been an impossible dilemma for the Ältesterat. As soon as the Nazis had given the order, the Ältesterat was summoned to a meeting, where long lists of names of the 'protected' and 'unprotected' were presented. The 'protected' were the Danish Jews, the families of the Ältesterat, Jews with specific connections and those Jews, who had helped to turn Theresienstadt into a concentration camp. The 'unprotected' were all the others. How was it possible to select those who were to die and those who were to be allowed to live? If the people had been unknown, perhaps it would have lifted the burden of the Ältesterat. But, they were confronted with friends, acquaintances, even family members. For the German officers it was a sadistic game that made them joyous; the Jewish camp overcome with fear, corruption, panic and bribery when the

order came for selecting the next group. Why didn't the Ältesterat refuse to obey the order? The two first leaders of the Ältesterat, Jacob Edelstein and Paul Epstein were murdered by the Nazis for not obeying. Dr. Epstein, as was previously mentioned, told about what was happening in the East and that caused the immediate Nazi reaction. Only Benjamin Murmelstein survived the war as chairman of the Ältesterat.

It has to be added, that in the beginning, none of us, not even the Ältesterat had proof, of what actually happened to those who were sent eastward. The SS-officers claimed that it was only to ease the crowded living conditions in Theresienstadt. Maybe the Ältesterat preferred to stick to that idea in the hope that good behavior in Theresienstadt would reduce the number of trains going eastward. After all, if panic took over in Theresienstadt the result could be even more people being transported. They preferred to accept the German explanation that the trains only meant moving people to another camp. But, by autumn 1944, with the trains constantly rolling out of the camp, the truth about Auschwitz and the other death camps began to sink in, both among the prisoners and the Ältesterat. None of us blamed the members of the Ältesterat. We did not regard them as Nazi assistants in any way. They were as helpless as we were, it was only that they had a more decisive and responsible role. We knew that they could do nothing against the Nazis. The day when the opera singer and her husband entered the train to Auschwitz, I was a child, a naive child. I had always hoped for the best and suppressed the truth, the truth that the world knew about. That day, the day when I saw the lovely opera singer and her kind husband being sent to their death, my childhood ended.

Chapter 9

What did we know?
What do we know today?

Posterity has tried to understand: How could the Jewish Ältesterat select friends and neighbors and send them to their certain death? After the war, descendants of the Board's members have tried to explain the Ältesterat's possible knowledge of the death camps in Poland. Wolf Murmelstein, the son of the leader of the Ältesterat, Benjamin Murmelstein did not attempt to excuse his father's role, but rather, attempted to explain the difficult dilemma in which the members of the Ältesterat found themselves. It is an answer to those that had criticized the Ältesterat for not refusing to co-operate with the Nazis. He writes:

> **"It was not possible for the Ältesterat, or the other prisoners, to know what was happening. Only through uncertain rumors could they try to ascertain the truth. The first information came from a group of Jews from Slovakia who arrived in Theresienstadt on December 31st 1944. But, the whole truth was only revealed after April 23rd 1945 with the arrival of prisoners from the camps in Poland."**

In February 1945, Benjamin Murmelstein was worried about information he had received regarding two buildings that were to be built just outside the camp. There were no architect's drawings and the orders were given orally. He decided to ask the commander Karl Rahm for further information and gave instructions to other members of the Ältesterat concerning what should be done if he was arrested. The order was to build two very simple buildings about 30 square meters each, constructed with building blocks, without plaster and with one small window. I was ordered to help with these buildings and although it was forbidden to speak to the guards, we asked for what purpose they were to be used. I was happy that my mother wasn't there to hear the guard's reply. As the oldest son, and in the absence of our father, I felt myself being pushed into a role with greater responsibility. Therefore I didn't tell her the guard's reply: "You will know when time comes". That was a sinister answer, particularly given the

frequent transports going east, and the rumors of their destination. What was happening? Were events speeding up?

I will never forget the two Danish ladies who received a very special luxury, a package of Gajol, a liquorish from Denmark. They ate it together but didn't offer it to us. At that moment I had the feeling that we were soon going to die. It hurt me that those two women were so heartless. Why wouldn't they share their treat if life was going to end soon?

With time, some prisoners in Theresienstadt found ways to gather information about the camps further east. Many of the prisoners who were transported had smuggled postcards on board the trains. They wrote notes with code words about what they heard about camps outside Theresienstadt. They gave the postcards to anyone around, a civilian, a train guard or simply just threw the postcard from the train hoping that the note would be found and be sent on. Some postcards arrived and confirmed the worst rumor. The camps in the east were death camps where Jews were slaughtered by gas. I was sure we were building our own gas chambers, our own graves. That theory was confirmed by the Danish Chief Rabbi Max Friediger. In his book, Theresienstadt, which he wrote immediate after the war:

> **"Theresienstadt was rescued at the last moment. After the Red Cross had taken Theresienstadt under its protection a secret document was found according to which Theresienstadt had to be destroyed by May 10th. The plan was complete to the finest detail with the destruction to last only a few hours."**

What did the world know?

With the knowledge we have today and thanks to research from information that was available during the Second World War; it is obvious that the allied forces and a greater part of the population in these countries knew about the Gas Chambers. Films showing surprise at these German actions were simply not true.

The center of research at Yad Vashem, (The World Holocaust Remembrance Center) in Jerusalem, has published several articles about the subject. One of those includes, The History of the Slovakian Jews, by Rudolf Verba and Alfred Wetzler. These two young Jews managed to escape from Auschwitz in April 1944, with help from the underground movement within the camp. They had been working outside the fence of the camp and hid in a wood stack, where space had been prepared earlier for two people to hide.

Their absence was registered that same evening and the Germans searched the area for three days. Rudolf Verba and Alfred Weetzer knew from earlier attempts, that the Germans would look for three days and waited until the fourth day to continue their escape. After their arrival in Slovakia they had a meeting with Erwin Steiner, a member of the Jewish council in Zilina. Here Rudolf and Alfred published an exact sketch of the Auschwitz death camp and gave a detailed account of the murder of Jews and the plans to murder a further 800,000 Hungarian Jews and 3,000 Czech Jews. Steiner wrote a 30 page report which was passed on to Rabbi Michael Dov Weissmandel, the leader of the Jewish Help Organization in Bratislava.

In the middle of May 1944, a shorter version of the report was sent to the Jewish Rescue Committee in Switzerland, the Vatican, the Hungarian Jewish council and the Hungarian political leadership also received a copy. Together with the report, Michael Dow Weissmandel had written an appeal to the allied forces to prevent the approaching murder of Hungarian Jews. At that time the Hungarian Jews were the only Jews in Europe who hadn't been imprisoned. Together with the request to intervene, Michael Dow Weissmandel sent a request to bomb Auschwitz and the connecting railways to prevent the Germans from continuing the murder of Jews. But, nothing happened. In May 1944, another two Jews managed to escape from Auschwitz. Czeslaw Mordowize and Arnost Rosin added to the report after their arrival in Slovakia. The new edition was sent to western countries through different channels. The American government received the report June 16th 1944. If we, from our locked up existence in Theresienstadt, did not have a clear picture of what was happening in the east, the Allies in contrast had sufficient knowledge to know exactly what the Germans were doing in the death camps. The war raged on, soldiers from both sides fought and died. But, nobody did anything to stop what was happening in the concentration camps.

The Allied Strategy

According to Yad Vashem's research, in June 1944, the USA's war ministry refused to bomb Auschwitz. The reason: the planes had to be used in other places. In Great Britain, Winston Churchill actually accepted the idea. But, Britain's foreign ministry shelved the plans and conveyed the disappointing answer to the Jewish Agency. Auschwitz was beyond the reach of the planes' range. However, material from the British archives has since appeared including air photographs of Auschwitz dated August 1944, taken by the same air force that a month earlier had claimed that the

camps were beyond the planes' reach. Today, it is obvious that the British and Americans' reasons for not bombing Auschwitz are just poor excuses. Perhaps it was not of strategic importance, but refusing to bomb the camp was simply immoral. Research after the war has shown that, during the summer of 1944, 2,800 American planes bombed seven of the German oil refineries in the area of Auschwitz. The eighth German refinery was actually inside the Auschwitz camp. The American planes flew over the railway tracks leading to Auschwitz and did not bomb them. On August 20th and September 13th 1944, American planes attacked the industrial zone of Auschwitz. That zone lay less than eight kilometers from the camp's four gas chambers. In a letter to the Jewish communities, the then American Vice Defense Minister, John J. McCloy mentioned one of several reasons why the USA didn't bomb Auschwitz:

> **"At the present critical situation of the war in Europe, our strategic air force is busy destroying industrial goals of great importance to the enemy. A task they shouldn't leave. The solution to the problem is the fastest possible victory over Germany."**

I cannot accept the American explanation. Why did the Allies not prioritize stopping the German Holocaust against Jews, especially in the context of the Jewish associations pleading with them to do so? It may sound dramatic, but in my opinion neither Great Britain nor the USA wanted to fight the Jews' struggle. I have no doubt that had it been a question of British or American war prisoners, Auschwitz would have been bombed. But the Allied countries will to save Jews was clearly not as strong as the Nazis' will to murder them. This chapter in world history appears utterly incomprehensible. That summer, around 70,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered in Auschwitz's gas chambers even after the world had learned of the Germans' crimes, in April and May 1944.

I grew up with the Jewish doctrine: 'That a man, who saves a human life, must be regarded as a person who has saved a whole world.' Had the Allies prevented the murder of just one, or ten or one hundred people, the bombing of Auschwitz would have been a moral and historic success. Instead, we are living with this endless debate between those who see the situation as I do and those who accept the Allies' explanations.

After seven decades the whole Auschwitz debate continues. Who ought and should have interfered? From my perspective, the problem dates back to the beginning of the war when German Jews felt that no country would receive them; a sentiment that was exacerbated by the apathy showed by the

outside world when personal testimonies emerged of the incomprehensible numbers of deaths in the concentration camps. This absolute indifference towards the fate of the Jews became a significant motivation for the Jews' desire to settle in Israel.

We survivors are lucky. We are able to go on living and raise a family. In the camps it was a different story. There was an atmosphere of death all around. Its presence was a constant. Children, who were too small to do hard physical work had to empty the ashes from cremated prisoners. They stood in long rows by the river and passed small wooden boxes from one to the other until they reached the last child by the river. That child opened the boxes and emptied the ashes into the river. Those who were not sent to death by the train load, or in the Small Fortress, were kept occupied with death in one way or another. No one in Theresienstadt was spared the feeling. With my personal role in building the two buildings, I too was constantly occupied with thoughts about death. During those moments, I felt that the end was close. After the war Benjamin Murmelstein confirmed, that the two buildings were supposed to have been used as gas chambers. Fortunately, we were not used to building and it took time, a long time, so much time that our approaching rescue could be planned several hundred kilometers away.

Chapter 10

The White Buses

My world stopped at the barbed wire surrounding the camp. With the exception of rumors about death camps in the east I knew nothing about what was happening outside the walls and fences of the camp. The only question constantly on our minds was, 'What if I would be included in one of the nearly daily train transports, alone or together with my family?' I lived in a constant state of terror. On April 13th 1945, something unexpected happened. All the Danes received a message. I still have a copy of the letter that the Nazis handed to the Ältesterat. The message read:

> **"You are hereby informed that you are selected to a travel group that will leave Theresienstadt. You will bring your luggage and appear at building, Bäckergasse 2 this evening Friday April 13th 1945, between 20.00 and at the latest 22.00 hours."**

That is what was written. There was nothing about where we were going and the purpose of our journey. This message was identical with the messages received by those who were sent to the death camps. Was this the moment when everything stopped for me? Was I going to be sent eastward? Was I going to die? I asked myself the same question over and over, but didn't talk to anybody, not even my mother, sister or brothers. I felt weak, fatigued and afraid; horrorstruck by the thought of trains rumbling eastward. Still today, when I re-read that short message in the letter, I shiver from fear.

When we arrived at the building we had a huge surprise. We were told that all the Danish prisoners were to be picked up by a fleet of Swedish Buses. We were going to Sweden. The delight of this message was, of course, mixed with uncertainty and pervading fear knowing the Nazis and their carelessness with promises. Every one hoped for the incredible and yet feared the worst. Immediately, an unusual discussion started. Several Danish prisoners had established connections and fallen in love with Jews from other European countries. Their fate had to be decided. Could their partners join us and go to Sweden? The decision of the Danish Chief Rabbi was that the couples should marry on the spot and get permission to travel with us.

Max Friediger, who also married my parents many years earlier, played an important role in the camp as a member of the Ältesterat. He radiated authority with his full beard and a skullcap on his head. I seldom saw him and never spoke to him but always had the feeling that he protected the Danes. The marriages of the mixed couples were a play with life and death. An immediate marriage was the factor that decided if a person should live in freedom or risk death. The Chief Rabbi refused in a few cases to marry some of the people. Probably because he could not guarantee that their intention was to live as a married couple. A decision I had and still have difficulty in understanding. Surely it must have been his duty to save as many people as possible even if the pair in question couldn't be regarded as a couple. Religious rules were modified; Rabbi Friediger allowed the eating of non-kosher food to prevent orthodox Jews from starving to death. I therefore don't know what made him marry some couples and refuse others. Maybe the rationale in his decision was that marrying all the candidates might provoke the Germans to withdraw their permission for all the marriages. Therefore Friediger said no to those affairs that seemed problematic.

The mood in the barracks was peculiar, nothing like when others were sent on a transport. A middle-aged Danish-German prisoner Harry Harbo, entertained us. He played the clown and the German soldiers laughed with us. I don't remember the jokes. I only remember how I couldn't understand the absurd situation. It took me a long time to realize that this was the end of our stay in the camp. I didn't know anything about the progress of the war and I had no idea that it would only take another month and a half before the Germans would capitulate. As far as we knew, it was our luck that the Germans had been persuaded by the Danish delegation to release us.

The Journey to Sweden

Sunday April 15th 1945, the white Red Cross Buses arrive. It was an unbelievable sight. Could it be possible that I would feel freedom again? I entered the bus and thought that I would see Denmark again in just a few days. It was a very strange feeling. On the one hand, every day for the last 18 months I had tried to stay hopeful and believe that this day would come. On the other hand, I was nervous. What might happen along the way? Could this be another exercise of Nazi fraud? We knew that the war was not over and that made us afraid. It was paradoxical to enter a bus taking us to freedom when an armed German soldier was sitting in the front. We guessed that the war was at its end, but we still had to drive through Germany and the soldier still had official responsibility for us prisoners. In my bus the German

soldier sat facing us. It was a big convoy with 23 buses, six vans, a repair car, a crane car, a special kitchen car, two private cars and three motorcycles. The motorcycles drove in front to check that the road was passable. There were curtains in front of the windows and the German soldier forbade us to look out. We were driving slowly through a ghost landscape; in fact we were on the main road between Prague and Dresden. I peeped carefully behind the curtains. I saw the ruins of war. I saw empty landscapes, empty forests and fields. What had happened? Almost everything had been destroyed. I kept asking myself again and again what had happened, why did the Germans let us escape the gas chambers that we ourselves were building?

The buses were driving with the lights off in roads full of holes. I looked out of the window as we drove through Dresden. How could there be so much destruction? The buildings were like skeletons. We heard the air raid siren and the allied aircrafts. The buses were marked with big Red Crosses on the roof, but this was not a security guarantee. The Germans had misused Red Cross buses and ambulances to carry weapons and soldiers. Could we now, when freedom was within our reach, be killed by allied bombs? The buses increased speed and turned into a forest. Here we hid and ate some of the food which we had. I was afraid as I was aware that the journey was risky but thankfully nothing happened to us. I don't remember how long we were there, but I remember my anxiety and nervousness as we sat silently among the trees and heard the hollow thuds from the bombing. When the all clear sounded we drove on. We reached Potsdam and heard that the Danish Red Cross camp in Friedrichruhe had been hit, with the loss of some lives and several vehicles. Again, I saw the ruins. Almost all the houses had been pulverized by bombs. Only now did I begin to realize that the Germans were losing the war. I had no idea how close we were to the Russian and the Allied forces who were pressing forward towards Berlin, only a few kilometers beyond the horizon. All I knew was what I was told, that I was on the way to the Danish border and that we should continue to Sweden afterwards. I had no idea why we had been rescued while other European Jews in Theresienstadt remained in the camp. I didn't know who was behind the rescue action. We heard that the buses were from Sweden but, at that time, we didn't know that Denmark was involved. The exact connection we only learned many years later.

The Truth about the Rescue Action

For a long time it had been understood that the rescue of the Danish Jews from Theresienstadt was a Swedish initiative under the leadership of Count Folke Bernadotte. He was the Swedish diplomat who had been sent to Berlin to negotiate the release of Scandinavian prisoners of war. In 1945, Folke Bernadotte was the Vice President of the Swedish Red Cross. During 1943 and 1944 he arranged the release of prisoners from Germany. But the understanding that he was also behind the rescue of the Danish Jews from Theresienstadt is not, in fact, justified. As one of the Danes who was rescued it is very important for me to make this clear because of my concern that history has been twisted.

When I read the 1984 book, The Truth about the White Buses, the author, physicist Johannes Holm, gives a detailed account about who was behind the release of Danish Jews in the Swedish buses, one that made me both proud and disappointed. Proud because it showed how Denmark played the central role in our rescue but disappointed because Folke Bernadotte was the person who for years had been incorrectly mentioned in connection with the rescue. Holm himself played a very key role in the matter and he wrote the book based upon the diary that he had written at the time. The reason the book was only published in 1984 is that Johannes Holm and the other Danes involved had agreed not to deprive the Swedes of the credit regarding the rescue of the Danish Jews. According to the history books, it was the Swedish efforts that made our release possible. Many Jews still acknowledge Folke Bernadotte in their annual memorial ceremonies. Yes, we were helped by the Swedish buses but first and foremost our release was due in large part by the Danish authorities. Chief Rabbi Max Friediger also thanks Johannes Holm for the rescue in his book Theresienstadt, and says "…that it was Doctor Holm from Copenhagen and high ranking Gestapo officers who gave him the message that the Danish Jews could leave for Sweden."

In comparison, Folke Bernadotte in the book Sidste Akt doesn't write anything about Theresienstadt or the imprisoned Jews. The historians disagree about the details of the event and about Bernadotte's contribution. However, I can personally vouch for the accuracy of Johannes Holm's book.

The discussion about Folke Bernadotte's role is complicated; in 1948 he was assassinated in Jerusalem. Behind this stood the Jewish underground movement Lehi that wanted to protest against Bernadotte's attempt to moderate the UN's 1947 partition plan. This plan was to divide Palestine into a Jewish state and a Palestinian state, a plan accepted by the Jewish leadership, but then Bernadotte had suggested changes. Bernadotte as a

whole is not a hated figure in Israel and many Jews pay homage to him as a person who saved many Jewish lives during the war.

Today, decades after the violent events and Bernadotte's dreadful death, it is necessary to draw an exact picture of our rescue. Not in order to slander, nor to harm, but because we deserve to see the whole picture and understand the decision making process. We all deserve to know exactly who did what. It should not be used as a pat on the shoulder that Denmark was very active in our rescue from Theresienstadt. Rather, we need to know the details because it is the details that indicate how easily the operation could have failed and the enormous political will that was necessary to execute these kinds of operations. Finally, I am sure that the Holocaust still involves many unknowns and it is our duty to continue to throw light on the events. Maybe it is even easier today in the perspective of a substantial time distance, because today, the interest of the involved partners can perhaps be seen more objectively.

As I see it today we would not have been rescued if it had been solely dependent on Folke Bernadotte. He nonetheless, accepted the honor after the war, an act that was unjustifiable. For me, the following sentence is valid in all conflicts, all wars and in all societies. The few can make an enormous difference. For that effort the Danes deserve to receive the credit and appreciation that an ambitious diplomat hurried to grab only a short time after the war.

The Decisive Effort

In April 1944 Denmark, Norway and Sweden began to promote ideas for the rescue of Scandinavian prisoners in German camps. Nils Christian Ditleff, a Norwegian diplomat in Stockholm and the Norwegian Borghild Hammerich, contacted the Danish resistance fighter Carl Hammerich. During the summer of 1944 the Danish Social Ministries department leader, Hans H. Koch liaised and made contact with the Swedish authorities because they wished to make the rescue a united Scandinavian undertaking. The neutral Sweden was reducing its contact with Germany and wished not to be thought of as a German friendly country at the end of the war.

In the autumn of 1944 there were about 22,000 Scandinavian prisoners in different German camps; resistant fighters, police officers, communists and Jews. About 6,000 of them were Danes. Most of the prisoners were in Neuengamme and Buchenwald. The Social Ministry made a detailed plan involving the Ministry of Health, the Serum institute, Danish Red Cross,

DSB {the Danish Railway} and the Foreign Ministry. At the beginning of December 1944 the Danish ministries were informed, after months of negotiations, that Germany would be willing to free some prisoners. From the Danish side it was seen as a turning point in German policy and on December 5th 1944 a convoy was sent to Buchenwald and returned home with 200 police officers. The success continued and by the end of February a further 134 Danes were released from German camps.

I have spent many hours reading about the White Buses and have met the Danish-Israeli historian Dov Levitan to hear about the details. His opinion is that Denmark created a model for saving their countrymen from German camps. A base was established for these convoys east of Hamburg from where it was possible to keep close contact with the prisoners and at the same time negotiate with the Germans about further developments. One thing that hindered the effort to free prisoners was the German insistence that the Danish Red Cross had to be a part of the system. At that time Helmer Rosting, a well-known Nazi sympathizer was the leader of the Red Cross in Denmark. His central role was problematic because the Red Cross only sent help to prisoners who could be defined as prisoners of war. Those prisoners who ended up in the German camps because of faith, race or resistance activity, were in the eyes of Helmer Rosting, not genuine prisoners of war and therefore couldn't be helped by the organization. This created a situation where other organizations and the Ministry of Social Affairs had to step in to help Jews, like my family, in Theresienstadt.

In March 1945, Count Folke Bernadotte was the head of a Red Cross delegation sent to Germany. Their aim was to continue the rescue of Scandinavian prisoners and the plan was that prisoners would be picked up and transferred to the Neuengamme camp. From there they would travel via Denmark to Sweden. The Germans were willing to free the Scandinavian prisoners but they insisted that the prisoners should be sent to neutral Sweden as the war hadn't ended. That was the beginning of the historic chapter known as ‘Operation White Buses’. 250 Swedish soldiers had volunteered to travel with Folke Bernadotte. They, together with the Danish activists, established a base in the German town Friedrichruhe. From there the delegation began to pick up prisoners from 30 different camps and bring them to Neuengamme and then wait for the Germans’ final permission to continue on to Denmark and Sweden. During March 1945, Folke Bernadotte had four meetings with Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler. The purpose of the meetings was to conduct the final negotiations about freeing Scandinavian prisoners from the German camps. However, Himmler brought another agenda to the meeting that came to overshadow the fate of the Scandinavian prisoners. Himmler tried, through

General Walter Schellenberg, to make Count Bernadotte a kind of mediator between Germany and the allied forces, in the negotiations about the end of the war which was coming closer and closer.

Dov Levitan writes in his doctorate: 'Bernadotte found himself more occupied with political and international questions than the rescue of the Scandinavian prisoners.' With that development about half of the voluntary Swedish soldiers left as their time for participation had expired. They were replaced by 280 Danish volunteers so 'Operation White Buses' now had a Danish majority. In Theresienstadt we were, of course, not aware of that month of long and complicated negotiations. It is strange and in a way overwhelming to think about the comprehensive rescue work that was started while we were prisoners fearing the worst. The whole question over the 'White Buses' took an interesting turn only a few days before the buses came to pick us up.

At a meeting in the Red Cross camp in Friedrichruhe on April 8th 1945, the Danish Johannes Holm asked Count Bernadotte to be especially aware of the Danish Jews in Theresienstadt. At that time other prisoners had already been transferred to Neuengamme and some had crossed the border to Denmark. As the war went on, our rescue from Theresienstadt became a high priority for the Danish authority. Their fear for our wellbeing was spurred by the rapid development of the war during the last month. The fronts moved fast. The Americans were moving in from the West and the Russians from the East. The buses would not be able to drive through battlefields. Johannes Holm mentioned this to Folke Bernadotte at the meeting on April 8th. At the same time, warnings came from the Jewish Congress, that the Jews in Theresienstadt faced a mass slaughter. They had, in a special letter, asked Sweden to do their utmost to save the Jews in the camp. According to Johannes Holm, Folke Bernadotte answered that he had discussed the situation of the Danish Jews in Theresienstadt with General Schellenberg who claimed there was German resistance towards freeing the Danish Jews from Theresienstadt. At the beginning of April the rescue of the remaining prisoners went into high gear. Johannes Holm writes:

> **"I said, if I receive permission from the Swedes, I would see that within 24 hours about 50 busses, some ambulances and trucks with Danish drivers would be in Friedrishruhe ready to help the Theresienstadt prisoners. I got a rather scornful answer from Count Bernadotte who said I ought to know that this was impossible as Denmark didn't have rolling stock to use**

for such transports. I stuck stubbornly to my suggestion but it was obvious that Bernadotte didn't want Danish interference in this action".

A few days before this discussion, the senior Swedish military leader Gotfried Björck, had announced they were too busy rescuing Scandinavian prisoners from other camps to save the Danish Jews from Theresienstadt. In this difficult situation the Danish delegates then decided, in agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that the rescue of the Danish Jews had to be a Danish action. The Danish Jews would be picked up and taken directly from Theresienstadt to Denmark. The reason for the direct route was that the Germans still did not allow mixing Jews with other Arian prisoners like Danish policemen, communists or homosexuals.

The Danish action was not easy. Folke Bernadotte was correct; the Danish buses were not capable of operating within the very demanding time frame. The buses could end up stuck between attacking troops from east and west. And, there were violent disagreements between the Gestapo and the SS about whether to give permission to pick up the Danish Jews. Johannes Holm also played another significant role. He managed to see Karl Rennau, an officer in the SS. After confidential talks and a promise of asylum in Denmark after the war for himself, his wife and his daughter, Johannes Holm managed to persuade Karl Rennau to speak with the leadership in the SS. about the Danish prisoners. Through bribery, with Danish schnaps and food, the leadership of SS changed its view and permitted the movement of the Danish Jews from Theresienstadt. At the same time, Johannes Holm got a promise from the Swedish officer, Falke in Friedrishruhe, that the Danes would be able to use Swedish Buses to rescue the Jews in Theresienstadt. Swedish drivers were chosen for the buses and three officers decided to take part in the journey. The rest of the crew was from Denmark. There was a last minute drama before the journey from Friedrishruhe. The Swedish diplomat, Richert, received a telephone call from the Swedish ministry of Foreign Affairs forbidding the use of Swedish buses from Friedrishruhe. The Swedish diplomat answered, however, maybe with a white lie, that he could do nothing as the buses were on their way.

It was only the day after the departure of the buses from Friedrishruhe that we received the order from the Nazis to show up at the barracks. The whole action succeeded, not thanks to Folke Bernadotte who objected to Johannes Holms idea at the delegation meeting in Friedrishruhe. And, not thanks to the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs who at the last moment tried to prevent the use of their buses. But, thanks to the resolute, wise and

courageous efforts of Johannes Holm, the Danish Ministries and thanks also to Richert and other Swedish officers who gave permission to use the Swedish buses.

For many years I believed the official version about the White Buses, simply because I didn't know the details. I must admit that it meant a lot for me to learn the details behind the rescue action. First and foremost, I now understand how close my family and I were to a very unhappy end of our stay in Theresienstadt. I also think how many other Jews could have been saved if brave people had made more of an effort in other situations. Today, I understand how much just a few people can actually accomplish. This has to be seen in the context of present day conflicts, where the human character and will to make an extra effort for others is tested. It is tremendously meaningful for me that many Europeans didn't give up, but actually helped us Jews. They, first and foremost regarded us as fellow citizens, neighbors and fellow human beings. These memories give me hope and optimism and are still part of my life. The fact that the central support for the White Buses episode came from Denmark makes me proud and grateful.

Chapter 11

With Freedom came Sorrow

Tuesday April 17th 1945, we passed the Danish border. The German guard left the bus. Only then did we realize that it had happened; we were free. Along both sides of the road Danes were standing waving the Danish flag. It was unforgettable; they shouted hurrah and welcome home. We opened the windows and strangers threw food, sweets and cigarettes to us. We drove through Jutland and turned toward Funen. We were to stay the night at the Munkebjerg School before we continued to Sweden. A condition for our release from Theresienstadt was that we had to stay in Sweden until the war was over.

It was like a dream to drive through familiar landscapes. We saw fields, trees, forests, farms and villages and - no barbed wire fences. The people looked happy. It was a long time since I had seen a happy person. The contrast from Theresienstadt was striking; almost impossible to comprehend. People waved and smiled. I felt a freedom that is reserved for people who had been imprisoned and who have feared for their lives. In Odense we ate the first well prepared meal that we had eaten in one and a half years. The intentions were fine, but our bodies were only used to thin soup with potato shavings and so we were unable to digest the delicious food. We were in pain. Some of us vomited while others lay down with stomach cramps.

Wednesday April 18th, it was the day before my birthday and we arrived at Malmo in Sweden. First, we were placed in quarantine where we were deloused. Then we got new clothes. I still don't know the reason but my 15 year old brother Salle and I were separated from my mother and our younger sister and brother. Several weeks passed before we saw them again.

Danish relations turned up looking for their family members. My brother and I looked for our father, Fanny and Ante. We didn't understand why they were not there. Salle and I noticed that several people were staring at us and whispering. We didn't know why and we didn't like the way they pointed at us. Mrs. Cholewa with whom we had lived together in Theresienstadt came to us and said she had just received news that one of her family members was no longer alive. The next thing she said immediately destroyed any sense of happiness that we had been feeling. Her own grief

must have dulled her sensitivities in such a way that she just blurted out, "Your father and brother drowned on their way to Sweden." It was short and brutal. Maybe she said it in that way because we had spent 18 months together in Theresienstadt. But, she was not comforting, nor considerate. She was just giving information.

We stood there dumbfounded. I felt everything collapsing around me. All that we had been through until now faded in comparison with Mrs. Cholewa's message. Maybe it was the war, the imprisonment that had hardened and deprived her and all of us, of the ability to feel for others, to be gentle and help others cope with the cruelty of life. The way she told us was cold and incredibly shocking for two boys who were still only children. The hope that had sustained us for one and a half year in Theresienstadt was gone. We were desperate; had no words, couldn't even cry. We just stood in the square gazing at nothing. We felt absolutely forsaken.

Our first thought was that mother for sure would break down when she heard. Even in our own grief, we might nonetheless have been able to give her a little comfort but we had been separated from the rest of the family. From Malmo we were sent by train to Strängnes. We only wanted to be alone. We went out to the open part at the end of the train. We stood quietly and cried bitterly. We were 15 and 17 years old and alone with our deep sorrow.

In the camp at Strängnes we slowly got used to the food. It was as if we should be fattened. We got black pudding every day. We ate it and it tasted good, even though it felt odd to be eating non-kosher food. Apart from the almost inedible food in Theresienstadt I had never broken the rules of eating kosher that, among other rules, forbade eating pork. That was not important now. I was keen on regaining my strength as fast as possible. My declining religiosity and Chief Rabbi Friediger's permission to eat non-kosher food in emergences also meant that I had was in no doubt about what to do. We gained strength but we still didn't hear anything from the rest of the family. We had the feeling that they were in good hands, after all who would do us harm after our release from a concentration camp?

Reunion with Fanny

Eventually, I don't remember exactly when, we arrived in Gøteborg. Here we met my 19 year old sister Fanny for the first time in more than one and a half years. We hardly spoke to each other, most of the time we just sat next to each other weeping. Mother was also here with our younger sister

and brother, Rebekka and Mogens. Mother was almost unrecognizable. Her face was grey and she looked strangely shrunken. Her grief of losing her husband and son had thrust her into a state of shock. Her expectations of a happy reunion with the family lay in ruins. One of the first things I thought when I saw her was that she must feel that on the one hand she had survived, but on the other hand the life she had once known, and yearned for ever since, had been destroyed forever. She could hardly accept that her husband and son were not alive. In her despair she looked for a rational explanation of why this catastrophe had happened. Tormented by grief she put the blame on her daughter as if Fanny hadn't been through enough herself.

We did not hear anything about Fanny's experiences. Fanny never spoke about them. Like us, mother didn't know the details about that cold night in October when the boat had capsized. We didn't know that Fanny swam ashore and rescued herself in a miraculous way. We were not able to imagine how it had been for her to be alone in a foreign country while we were in the hands of the Germans. We were happy to be together again but the war had built walls between us that were difficult to penetrate. It was only many years later when Fanny and I began to talk about the war that I realized the details about her time in Sweden.

What had happened to her during the first two weeks in Sweden? After her arrival the Swedish police informed Fanny that they had contacted our uncle David who lived in the northern part of Sweden. He sent Fanny a railway ticket so that she could visit him but she decided she needed to gain strength before she saw him. During that time the Swedish authorities provided her with new shoes and clothes. They also informed our uncle about the tragedy. He had been very close to our father and was stunned as he met Fanny. She was happy and relieved to stay with relatives but felt so bereft.

After the visit Fanny went back to Helsingborg and stayed there for about six months. In the meantime my uncle and his family moved to Göteborg and later Fanny moved to cousin Selma and her husband who lived near to Uncle David and his family. She began working as a seamstress in a small factory. Every month she received money from the Danish Consulate so that she could send a parcel to her family in Theresienstadt. She was allowed to send a postcard, written in German, once every six months. Fanny wrote faithfully but could not bring herself to tell us that father and Ante had drowned.

Fanny and the other Danish Jews received the news that Swedish buses had brought prisoners home from the concentration camps. At the reunion with our mother, Mogens, Rebekka, Salle and I, Fanny was happy.

But she said the first time she visited mother in the reception camp she knew she would have to tell mother about the terrible event. In fact, mother had already been told but refused to believe the details. More than 50 years later, Fanny said that it was the most terrible day in her life.

I myself remember little about the stay in Sweden that lasted about 45 days. The time from the arrival in Sweden and the return to Copenhagen was like a dream when you wake up, but cannot remember the details. I am sure that the uncertainty and shock combined with the enormous relief of being released from Theresienstadt contributed to the overall sense of utter confusion. The stay in Sweden was just a dim chapter. In Theresienstadt I had lived with the hope of a family reunited and a return to normal daily life. In Sweden I knew I was free, but any thoughts of returning to our former family life were dead. I was at home but everything had changed. The bubble of hope that I had hung onto for so long, burst. I had dreamed of happiness and I had believed in the future. Instead I was left with sorrow, despair and fear; a feeling I couldn't shake off.

Chapter 12

Guilt

Denmark was freed May 4th 1945 and we came back from Sweden at the end of that month. Home to Copenhagen from where we had been so brutally torn away nearly 20 month earlier. I remember seeing the city. Not very much had changed and it made me feel secure. It was a strange feeling that we Jews no longer had to be frightened of being arrested by the occupying forces. The Germans were gone. Uncertainty was replaced by safety. My family didn't go to many of the Jewish community's activities but we acquired information from different people. We heard about Jewish shopkeepers from whom everything had been stolen. Slowly we realized the extent of the damage caused by the Second World War, damage that reverberated around the Jewish community. There was no end to the accounts of those terrible years. It was like a big sack full of names and events. Some were familiar and others seemed incomprehensible. The arrival into Denmark was a sudden passage. On the one hand there was not much to be said about the persecution of the Jews in public, but on the other hand the Jewish community had difficulty in talking about anything else. In that sense the homecoming was a bit lopsided. We tried not to speak about the war but it was only inside the family that we were able to keep silent about what had happened.

At first we stayed with other Danes at Skovshoved School. After a couple of weeks we were allotted an apartment. Not our former apartment but in in Sydhavnen. After the occupation the Ministry of Social Affairs had established an office to take care of the homes and household effects of Danish Jews who had been arrested. In our case the Germans had left the door open to our apartment. While we were imprisoned in Theresienstadt people had looted everything they could carry away. Only furniture, some cutlery and family pictures remained. These items were handed over to us when we arrived at the new apartment in Scandiagade. Many decades later, I and other Jews who also came back from concentration camps, began to remember exactly what had been stolen. It might sound petty-minded, maybe even materialistic; after all, we ought to be thankful to be alive and to have been rescued. But I remember the sickening feeling that people had taken all

of our belongings, as everyone thought we were dead. We now had to start from scratch, find new beds, sticks of furniture and begin a new life. While the theft by neighbors gave us a bad feeling, I remember with gratitude the actions of the Danish government. They did a prize-worthy job, an example of Danish standards and care for their citizens.

The New Existence

I remember the time at Skovshoved School, before we were allotted the new apartment as a kind of calm before the storm. My mother made an effort to control herself, even though it was evident that she was near a nervous breakdown. She was silent and looked changed; her glance was empty and she was even paler than before. As we moved into the apartment she changed. In the concentration camp my mother had been strong. She had hope and resilience. Now that the Theresienstadt episode had ended she could hold on no longer - she broke down completely. Our return to Copenhagen and Denmark was not what she had hoped. We were back in the family frame but not the family we had previously been. She collapsed and gave up her fight.

Every day during the next half a year, she cried and was utterly inconsolable. Almost all day every day, she would sit in a chair and the tears would stream down her face. I understood her sorrow but the situation was so difficult and her grief got on our nerves. We siblings were not ready to be alone, we needed a grown up person who could guide us. Especially, my elder sister Fanny, she needed a calm atmosphere and a reprieve from the guilt she felt in connection with her crossing to Sweden. She was much too young to cope with these feelings and the mood at home made it so much worse for her. Fanny married and left home that same year. She wanted to distance herself from grief and our chaotic family. She had to get away from the feelings of guilt my mother heaped upon her. Fanny didn't want to confront our mother and she kept quiet. But, it was obvious that it was so difficult for her to be blamed for an event about which she herself felt such deep sorrow.

Fanny’s farewell in the autumn of 1945 meant that I was the oldest child at home. It was difficult to find an apartment in Copenhagen but Fanny’s husband had good connections and they moved to an apartment in Jagtvej Street. My mother’s weak condition placed a heavy responsibility on my shoulders. I stepped into the role of substitute father for my three younger sisters and brothers but I was not really able to fill the role adequately. I

was bewildered after the war and was plagued with memories of the terrible events. I was 17 years old and still needed care, love and a gentle time during which I could continue my education. Instead, I was thrust into a situation where I had to give my younger sister and brothers, and even my own mother, that same care and security that I myself needed.

I was forced to grow up too early. When we came home from Theresienstadt my youngest brother Mogens was seven years old and had to start school. My brother Salle became a shoemaker apprentice. Mother was not functioning and was therefore unable to care of the practical things in the household and so it was I who had to take Mogens to school for the first time. It was I who consulted a doctor who convinced me that it was necessary to hospitalize my epileptic 13 year old sister Rebekka. Her situation had worsened in Theresienstadt where there had been no medicines and she had been left in the care of Mrs. Cholewa. At the epileptic hospital she suffered. When I visited her every three weeks she implored me to get her released. She was in a room with an elderly woman who cried and screamed. I didn't know what was wrong with her but it must have been terrible for Rebekka to be there day and night. It was dreadful for me that Rebekka, my little sensitive sister, didn't feel good even in the hospital. But I didn't know how to tackle the situation or the authoritative doctors. They insisted that she had to stay and I didn't feel able to argue with them. Instead I had to trust them even though I could hardly understand the words and terms when they spoke.

After a few months, Rebekka was finally released and felt better. Unfortunately it was merely a short break, for after a short period at home her condition worsened yet again. Again she was hospitalized, then released after a short period and then hospitalized again. That's the way it was, in and out of the hospital during the first year after the war. Her epileptic attacks became worse and deteriorated into violent cramps; sometimes she lost consciousness. I learned that it was important to check her breathing during the attacks so that she wouldn't bite her tongue. After these attacks, that usually lasted only a short time, her face would swell. But, I didn't have the reserve of strength or knowledge to prevent the attacks worsening. Nor did I see the danger signals that something was seriously wrong. I had so many other things on my shoulders.

Like most Danish people we did not have many resources after the war. My mother received some support from the government. I don't remember how much she received but we could not afford anything beyond rent and food. It was an austere period and a difficult time. When I didn't have to take

care of practical things or visit Rebekka, I mostly stayed at home. One day, I returned from the shops and was immediately struck by the smell of gas. I threw the shopping on the floor and tried to open the door. It was locked, which was unusual. I knew that my mother was at home and I also knew that, in the event of a gas leak of any kind, I mustn't push the bell as it could cause an explosion. I used my key and opened the door.

My mother was sitting quietly in a chair, her eyes closed. The smell of gas was suffocating. I hurried to the kitchen range to close the gas taps and then opened the windows. I shook my mother and she opened her eyes. I dragged her to one of the open windows. She was quiet, pale and expressionless. I had prevented my mother's first attempted suicide. We didn't talk about the event afterwards. A discussion would have required too much energy. But her instability made me constantly alert. I seldom left the house and when I did I hurried back. I could not trust her to take care of herself. After a short while she tried again. It was a repeat of her first attempt. I was away from home, came back and smelled gas. The only difference was that I got angry. I shouted that she had to pull herself together, that we should not have more death in the family. She looked at me but she didn't answer. My mother's suicide attempts were a cry for help. She was in shock. She was filled with grief and depression. She had nobody to talk to, nobody to help her cope with her enormous pain. I don't think she wanted to die but she couldn't see any other way out of her sorrow. Today, I understand mother's behavior. I understand why she hadn't the strength to show happiness. Once Fanny knitted her a cardigan but she did not want it. The same happened when we bought her a leather bag on her birthday. Only when people told her that it was a very beautiful bag did my mother decide to keep it.

When I look back at these first months after the war and compare it with what would happen today, it is obvious that we needed immediate help from a social worker or a psychologist to learn how to manage to live with the scars of Nazi persecution. But, social workers and psychologists were not common at that time. And a boy, 17 year old in 1945, was not as mature as a present day 17 year old boy who has more knowledge and maturity. When Fanny married and left the apartment, mother was still unstable. I had never previously had any contact with government offices which was the main reason why it simply did not occur to me to ask the authorities for help. I often considered asking Fanny for assistance but I didn't want to add to her feelings of guilt. I didn't even tell her about mother's first suicide attempt; it was after her second attempt I went to Fanny.

I couldn't carry the burden and responsibility alone any longer. How could I manage with my younger sister and brothers? My only solution was to try to speak common sense to mother and to impress upon her the responsibility she had now that father wasn't with us. I remember bombarding her with questions. Had she considered what would happen to her orphaned children? Had she considered her responsibility after all that we went through together? And what would our father have done in a similar situation? Would he have forsaken us by taking his own life? For several days I followed my mother while she silently went around. I was constantly alert in case she would choose the easy solution. But she did not try to take her own life again.

In those years our family was like most other Jewish families. The whole Jewish community was like my mother, stricken with grief over a life it had dreamt of, which had been completely destroyed. It was in the same period during which I realized the extent of the persecution of Jews during the war. I started to read newspapers and heard about the death camps from members of the community, but we never spoke about it at home. I remember being troubled and having no one with whom to share my many questions.

Rebekka's death

After years of having to be in and out of hospital, my sister Rebekka's condition finally seemed to improve and she began to work. There was an improvement and she even had a boyfriend for a short time. But something was still not quite right. One day she swallowed a large number of sleeping pills. I found her lying in bed with a big pillbox next to her. I still remember today how her pale skin contrasted with her copper colored hair. I called for an ambulance. Her stomach was emptied and the doctor sent her home. She was exhausted and went to bed early. The next morning I went to see her. She lay in bed; her eyes were closed and she looked calm and relaxed. She was dead. I never found a reason for her suicide. She didn't leave a letter and she hadn't spoken about despair or desperation. I think it was a combination of being crossed in love, her sickness and the traumatic events we went through since the death of father and Ante. She died November 20th 1951, a short time before her 20th birthday. My mother who had lost so much in her life suffered another hard blow. Within eight years she had lost her husband and two children; it was several years before she recovered.

My nightmares, from shortly after my time at Theresienstadt still accompany me. And now they also link me to Rebekka's death. In my dream

I was visiting an empty hospital looking for a certain room, which I would never find. Every night I had the same dream. For years I was haunted by a bad conscience driven by not knowing how much Rebekka must have been suffering.

As the eldest son I had already felt a sense of responsibility in Theresienstadt. I was attentive to my mother's needs and did what I could to spare her from unnecessary worries. When we arrived in Sweden and heard about father's death my feeling of responsibility grew. As my young sister's epileptic attacks worsened I wanted to help but didn't know where I could find the help. That is why, when Rebekka committed suicide, I felt I had lost a dear sister on the one hand, and in a strange way a daughter too. When, during my nightmares, I am standing in the labyrinth of rooms, without any possibility of finding that room for which I was searching, I am sure it relates back to my feeling of failure towards Rebekka. I didn't manage to help her; it should never have happened. Similar to the eternal memories of my experiences in Theresienstadtm I have never been able to leave Rebekka's death behind me.

Chapter 13

Love at First Sight

It was love at first sight when I saw Birgit. She was small and beautiful with black hair and dressed in a green dress with white dots, which suited her beautifully. I met her in a youth hostel in Vejle, summer 1949 when I was on a bicycle tour with my friend, Johan Chawez celebrating my school leaving certificate. Birgit was with her girlfriend Hanna Posner and Hanna's younger brother who played the role of 'Chaperone'. It was a modest meeting. We began to chat and immediately connected with one another. We began to see each other at Jewish youth clubs and sometimes at meetings where parents were present as well. I remember that it was often problematic for Jewish organizations to find good accommodation. We Jews didn't drink and therefore it wasn't good business for restaurants to rent their rooms. My love for Birgit was reciprocated and she has been by my side in the 63 years that have passed since that time.

When I received my school leaving certificate my mother looked so happy. I did well and the scholarship from the Jewish community helped me. That was before Rebekka's death and life had begun to be steadier. The war was far away. As a family we never spoke about it but the memories still lingered. Life in Copenhagen was also better, times were changing. Dresses made of parachute fabric were exchanged for better clothes. The first ship with bananas arrived and I remember giving Birgit a banana as a birthday present along with some peanuts.

As the years passed by I abandoned my dream of becoming a carpenter and considered becoming a schoolteacher instead. My mother would have liked me to be a tailor which was a popular trade at the time among Jews. However, I decided to continue my education and obtain a school-leaving certificate. But first, I had to go to a preliminary class to catch up on the time I had lost in Theresienstadt. Following that, I attended a class for two years in order to study for my school-leaving certificate. I formed a good friendship with one of my classmates, Leif and also his fiancé Lis. Our friendship developed fast and he helped me through difficult times. He knew how to listen and he was the only one who knew my thoughts and worries. I was able to talk to him about the war and the difficulties functioning in a house as the man when I was still just a teenager. It was during these studies

that I made the decision about my future. I wanted to be an engineer with an academic degree. A profession that could be used anywhere in the world. I hadn't thought of leaving Denmark at that time, but the war had taught me to be as flexible as possible. That is the way Jews lived for generations. I needed work that you could take in a suitcase if life became dangerous.

Birgit and I became engaged on New Year's Eve 1950. I remember my mother's smile. It was as if progress with my studies combined with the engagement had a remediable effect on her. Again, she had something that filled her life with pride, happiness and meaning. We celebrated the New Year and the engagement with friends. It was a beautiful evening and a happy time. Our friends came with blue lilacs. I don't know where they got them from, but I remember that it was very special. I began to study at Denmark's Technical High school. I also helped my uncle who now had a butcher's shop and worked sorting the mail at the head post office in Copenhagen.

But when Rebekka took her life, the happiness that I had begun to feel and my belief in the future was shattered. But then Birgit was with me, the close friend I had always longed for but seldom had until now. She was the person I could trust. My family members were either not around or they were too psychologically damaged to deal with my traumas. I only had to mention the word 'father' and my sister Fanny's eyes would fill with tears. With Birgit I felt that I could share everything. She would immediately understand and support me and would accompany me when I visited Rebekka at the hospital. She was there by my side. We spoke about my burden of responsibility and she gave me the strength to continue.

Birgit and I were engaged for five years. Because of economic reasons we had decided to get married after I had finished my studies. It was a wonderful time. We went on bicycle tours all over the country and that across Sweden. Birgit lived in Vanløse and came to visit me often while I was studying. When she had to go home, I would accompany her all the way. We walked from Sydhavnen to Vanløse and afterwards I walked back home again.

We went to the Royal Theater and people were dressed in different ways. Like most Jews we were quite conservative. I preferred a suit and Birgit wore a dress. Other young people, wishing to be different, wore Icelandic sweaters and rubber shoes while the elderly were in full evening dress. We went dancing once a week at the hotel D'Angleterre. We would order cakes and a pot of tea. When we had emptied it we ordered a pot with hot water and used the same tea leaves again and again. We could only afford one pot of tea and after three or four pots of warm water we couldn't taste the tea.

But we were happy. Birgit dressed in white homemade knitted stockings that were replaced by new nylon stockings when they became available. Sometimes we went to the restaurant 'The Strawberry Cellar' and we ate their delicious desserts outside on a bench in the open air. Opposite, you could buy sandwiches in Strøget which was a line of shopping streets in Central Copenhagen. By the Town Hall Square you could buy Hot Dogs. We went there often even though it was not kosher. At that time Hot Dogs were something quite new as were the spring rolls at the Chinese restaurant close to the Strøget.

Birgit's story

Birgit and I had experienced the war in different ways. We did not talk much about that period. We had experienced the war and the mass murder of our people and now we wanted to go on with our lives and start a new chapter. As time went by I learned Birgit's story.

Birgit's grandfather came from Latvia. At the beginning of the 1900's Birgit's grandfather wanted to emigrate and try his luck in Argentina but on his way through Copenhagen he was convinced by a former childhood friend to stay in Denmark. Here the Jews were thriving, free from pogroms, persecution and unjust demands that existed under the Russian regime. Grandfather Jacob Warembrun opened a shoe factory in Copenhagen and as soon as he was established he sent for his young daughter and father. His father, a widower, took care of his granddaughter Olga, who eventually became Birgit's mother. Olga arrived in Copenhagen in1914 and joined the Caroline School for Jewish Girls. Birgit's father, Theodor Schapiro was born in Vilnius, Latvia. He came to Denmark before the First World War, a short stop on the way to the USA, but his money ran out in Denmark. That is how Birgit's father attended the Mosaic Boy's School in Copenhagen. Later, he learned tailoring and when still young established a tailor's shop in Istedgade.

Birgit's parents married September 9th 1928. They lived at Nørrebro in Copenhagen where Birgit and her sister Leia were born. Later they moved to Westerbrogade where they had a big apartment. The large room was used as the shop and a smaller one as a workshop. Leia and Birgit both attended the Caroline School, like their mother.

Birgit did not notice any difference after the Germans occupied Denmark April 9th 1940, except that they had ration coupons. Her parents had bought a wooden summer house in Amager before the war. They could live there only during the summer. Her father had wanted to take this apart

and use the materials to build a house in Lille Værløse where they could live the whole year round. Life continued as it used to be except for the presence of the German soldiers.

In September 1943, just before the Jewish New Year they received word in the Synagogue that the Germans would be rounding up the Jews and sending them to concentration camps. They fled to their summerhouse in Værløse, in spite of a German air base being close by. There was a further problem, the summerhouse‘s loft was full of weapons because Birgit's father was a member of the resistance movement and that house was a good hiding place. One night they heard somebody knocking at the door of a neighbor who shouted, “Heil Hitler”, and with that the Germans left. The neighbor knew that Birgit's family was in the house so he gave the impression that there were no Jews present. They remained a few days and then returned to Copenhagen and stayed with Christian friend.

Birgit's parents had checked the possibilities of fleeing to Sweden. After the Germans’ visit to the house in Værløse, they made their decision. They were picked up with other Jews in taxis. The whole family was sitting in the same car, except for Leia. But Birgit's father wanted the whole family in one car together. That was a fateful action. Later they heard that the other taxi had been seized by the Germans. That evening they had to walk for a long time before arriving at the fisherman's house at Amager and the fishing boat which was to take them to Sweden. On board they had to go down to the hold. There were many people on board and firing could be heard. After passing the three mile limit they were allowed up and soon arrived at Klacksholm in Sweden, where they were received with open arms by the Swedish Red Cross. In the safety of Sweden Birgit's family became part of Swedish society. Birgit's mother worked as a housekeeper and her father in a clothing factory. Although they were refugees they were treated as temporary guests. They lived in their own apartment and both Birgit and Leia attended the Danish School in Gøteborg. The youngest daughter Bente was just one and a half years old.

When the Germans surrendered on May 4th 1945, Birgit's family prepared to return home. They went by train from Helsingør and were received by local Danes with flowers and ‘Dannebrogs’ flags. During their absence, the apartment at Vesterbrogade had been let and the furniture stored by the municipality. They moved into Birgit's grandfather’s apartment. He had not escaped in time and had been sent to Theresienstadt. He arrived home as I did, in the White Buses. Unfortunately, he was sick and died soon after his arrival. I did not know him personally in Theresienstadt, but I had

seen him there many times.

In the meantime, Birgit's father opened a shop at Amager in Njalsgade. Like most other Jewish families they had to begin from scratch. Their non-Jewish friends, who had hidden them before the flight, had taken care of the summerhouse and the four building plots Birgit's father had previously bought from his savings. But, their friends had sold the plots. They didn't believe that Birgit's family would ever return and the family was never able to recover the money.

Our new life together

Birgit and I married on November 28th 1954, between two examinations and only three months before my final engineer's examination. We had always planned to marry after my final examinations but we were offered an apartment which was available only to married couples. The wedding was a conclusion as far as my mother was concerned. She had overcome the worst of her grief and had developed a close relationship with my aunt. They lived within walking distance from each other and met often. I'm sure this was the reason for her improvement. She also met other women of her own age. They were all widows.

In February 1955 I passed my final examination and a new era began. Like young couples we tried to make correct decisions. But in our case, it wasn't only a question of making decisions for the future; we had behind us the background of war. The war was still a central subject when we thought of our future. We asked ourselves the question: "Could it happen again?" At that time over ten years had passed since the end of the war but memories still remained. Denmark had been occupied by the Nazis in 1940 and it was a military superiority that Denmark couldn't cope with. Communists and Jews had to be sacrificed.

The persecution of the Jews began in October 1943 and Denmark had not been able to protect her Jewish citizens. The only possibility was to help them gain security in Sweden. At that time, twelve years after I had been arrested by the Nazis and transported to Theresienstadt, I still didn't feel that I had finished with the war. I thought seriously whether it was responsible to bring children into this world. I was concerned whether I would be able to live a happy life when the Holocaust constantly clouded my mind. In spite of that I was happily married, had finished my studies and life was good. I had a future, I loved my wife, but the shadow of war was persistently with me.

Then I did something in spite of my past. During summer 1955 we went

with friends on our first journey abroad and we went to Germany. Many Holocaust survivors refused to visit Germany or even to listen to the German language. Even now there are survivors who do not buy German products. In Israel there are children and grandchildren of survivors who have this anti-German attitude. But, it was not a problem for me. I told myself that I did not have to love the Germans. We were on a holiday with good friends and we just wanted to enjoy our time.

June 12th 1957, our first daughter was born, Solveig Rina. Rina in Hebrew means happiness. About the same time we bought a summer house plot in Skovlunde where I, a man, who dreamt as a child of being a carpenter, built a 20 square meter summerhouse. My dream had come true. Our second daughter, Lone Ora was born in Aarhus, March 6th 1960. Ora, in Hebrew mean light.

The first journey to Israel

Because of our experiences during the war, the idea of moving to Israel had often crossed our minds. Israel, the young Jewish state, established in 1948, was where Jews from all over the world could find a home. Jews from Arab countries came to Israel because they were persecuted in their homelands. For many European Jews, with fresh memories from the war, Israel was a place where Jews could expect the government to guarantee their security. We knew that in Israel Jews would be able to defend themselves. There would be no more cattle wagons. Following the Second World War we Jews had learned our lesson; we would no longer have to be silent when attacked. It was important for us to keep Jewish traditions even though we were no longer religious and we had a deep rooted yearning for our children to marry Jews; a desire that related directly back to the war when Jewish children were murdered and so many families destroyed. The best therapy for me is to look at my Jewish family and to realise that this wouldn't have existed if Germany had won the war.

We wanted to visit Israel before making important and drastic decisions. We planned to stay for a whole year, to live in a kibbutz for half a year and to spend time learning about the society. At the same time we would attend a Hebrew language school. The other half a year I wanted to work as an engineer. After a while we found a kibbutz that was prepared to receive all four of us. We went to Kibbutz Gal-Ed situated south of Haifa which was close to the armistice line, of that time, opposite Jordan. We made our decision and felt that it was the right thing to do.

Our plan was to drive through East Europe to Piraeus in Greece, and

from there, to take a ship to Haifa. We had our little blue Fiat 600 that we filled with our luggage and two children who were four and seven years old at the time. We leased our house to an American director of an oil company; it was August 1964. We were ready for adventure and had lots of motivation and expectations. Our passports were stamped with entrance visas to Israel. Our route took us through East-Germany, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Greece. Friends thought it an irresponsible project especially travelling through East-Germany with two small children. We had heard accounts of Westerners who were detained by the East-German police, but they were usually detained because they had broken rules by selling nylon stockings, foreign currencies or cameras. Our attitude was as long as we followed the rules nothing unpleasant would happen and this was confirmed by our travel-agent. Just like with our first journey to Germany in 1955 we had no problem driving through a country that only twenty years earlier had planned to murder every European Jew, including ourselves.

I certainly did not realize that I was taking a journey back in time; returning to a confrontation with all the sensations, feelings and profound memories from the war that I had been repressing for many years. At the same time, it was a journey towards the country that was going to be my home for the main part of my life.

We boarded the ferry boat and travelled from Gedser to Warnemünde in East-Germany. When we arrived we experienced shock and sadness. Everything was grey. People seemed depressed. There were almost no cars on the roads. The houses were poorly maintained and there were no signs of commercialization. No color. This scenario reminded me of the war. We had a 48-hour residence permit for East-Germany and the country was a gloomy experience. What a contrast to the former authoritarian conduct that I had experienced during my time in the Camp. We bought petrol coupons. We encountered problems with our booking at the hotel which was also dreary and grey. The hotel we had chosen from home appeared to be a big new hotel that looked impressive. But, we were assigned rooms somewhere else. We had wanted to visit the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin but the border was closed because some East-Germans had tried to escape the day we arrived. Our second day in East-Germany was basically one long effort to leave Berlin. At the border by Schildow, guarded by Russians, we finally got permission to pass. We were stopped several times by the police. They wanted to see our passports and l noticed the same serious expression on each of their faces, never a smile. It was always the same expression, always very serious. It reminded me of the camp and the Nazis.

Finally we reached Dresden and I was reminded of the journey from Theresienstadt in the White Buses in 1945. I noticed towns along the roads that had been entirely destroyed. I had heard of the bad economic conditions in DDR, yet, I had expected to see a difference after 20 years in a large town like Dresden. Instead, I saw bombed out, smoke stained buildings. It was not only the buildings that looked dreadful. Everything seemed awful including the people around. Reconstruction of war damage was slow. Nature however remained as it was and we admired the beautiful mountain landscape as we reached the Czech border.

At border control I got a curt "Gute Reise" from the German custom's officer. On the other side there was a Czech official waving us through with a big smile. I didn't realize until then that the road would pass by Theresienstadt.

Back to Theresienstadt

The Nazis called Terezin, "Theresienstadt". It was situated three kilometers from the hotel we found in Litomeric. Originally, it hadn't been my intention to visit Terezin. But now, as we were so close, I had an immense inexplicable desire to visit Theresienstadt again. Was it a test to settle my past? What would it do to me to see everything again? Would it reawaken memories of events that I had tried to forget for 20 years? I had no idea but I let my instincts lead me back towards this place where I had experienced hunger, seen death and suffered an indescribable feeling of despair and powerlessness.

We found an uncomfortable and decaying barrack town. It was unreal. I recognized everything and at the same time many things had changed. The neat garden was overgrown. Several houses were empty. It was like a ghost town with some soldiers, old people and children still living there. It was almost unbelievable. Who would want to live there? Who could live in a place where death had taken so many lives? In my eyes Theresienstadt was a godforsaken hole. A piece of inhumane earth that was not fit to live in.

I asked for the museum and met a Czech. He asked me if I, with my memories, was afraid to stand on this spot and speak openly. I thought rather, that he should be afraid to be speaking to a former prisoner. The cemetery outside the old Gestapo-prison, the Little Fortress, struck me to my core. I stood in horror unable to utter a single word. I wasn't able to visit the museum. I just stood paralyzed in front of the cemetery. Scenes from the past appeared before my eyes. I couldn't comprehend that just a few years

ago, 60,000 prisoners, had been crammed into this little town that looked just like any other small town that we had passed. It was here, actually here on this very spot, that we had been imprisoned and so many had died. It was here that I had spent 18 long and terrible months living under the uncertainty of what my destiny would bring. I felt an awful stiffness in my body and a strange weight on my shoulders. My mouth was dry and I had difficulty in thinking clearly. We left the camp as fast as possible.

Further south I felt calmer. I declared to myself that seeing Theresienstadt again had definitely helped me place the camp in my past - a piece of history in my mind. I could now put the whole thing behind me and would never again be plagued by the terrible memories; the nightmare had come to an end. Meeting Theresienstadt again had closed the circle. Now I could go on living without giving the Holocaust space in my mind. At least that was my feeling as we drove through Europe.

Towards Israel

In the capital of Prague we stopped a woman in the street to ask for directions. We began talking to her. Her name was Hedda. After a while she squeezed herself into the car and went with us on a sightseeing tour. She told us about life in the town under communist rule, the low salaries and the fear of party members. She also spoke about the improvements. During the last six months it had become possible to talk to foreigners like us without being accused of espionage. After saying goodbye to Hedda, we drove to the old Jewish cemetery in Prague. As it had been forbidden to extend the burial place, people were buried on top of each other. The place looked as if there had been an earthquake. The graves were in an awful mess.

In the Jewish Altstadt, there were several synagogues. Only the oldest one, seven hundred years old, was still in use. In another synagogue all the walls had been painted with names of murdered Jews. It was quite shocking to see people, 20 years after the end of the war, still looking for names of their relatives. The next synagogue we visited was the beautiful Spanish synagogue. The Nazis had gathered about 2,000 curtains from Torah cabinets from different parts of Germany. Their plan had been to establish the place as a museum for an “Extinct Race”. It was strange to think that amidst all the death and destruction of the war, the Germans had had the motivation to think about establishing such a museum. In another synagogue we saw relics from Theresienstadt. There were children's drawings and poems. The drawings were bright and easy as if they wanted to express hope, but the words were gloomy and tragic. They reflected the life in Theresienstadt.

The next day we arrived at Brno and visited a family whom my brother Salle and I had known in Theresienstadt. They were so happy to see us and our two daughters. The meeting with them was another reminder of how good life was in Denmark compared with the conditions in Eastern Europe. The family told that us they could buy all kinds of food but supply was irregular. One day eggs were missing, another day meat. Bananas and lemons were luxury goods that you could buy only rarely.

On our way we reached Beograd. Again we were reminded of German cruelty as we drove into town to find a synagogue. It was the Jewish New-Year, Rosh Hashanah. We wanted to take part in a service to mark the festival. Originally there had been two synagogues but one had been destroyed and had not been rebuilt. When we arrived, the service had just finished but we were nonetheless invited by the female Jewish doorkeeper to have a look at the synagogue. It was very plain. When I think of her explanation for the plainness I still tremble. During the war, the Nazis had turned the synagogue into a brothel. The walls had been painted with pictures of naked women and the balconies had been divided into small rooms where German soldiers drank and had sex with Jewish women who were brought there for that purpose. Now everything had been reverted and the synagogue had reopened. Understandably, the balcony, normally the place for women in a synagogue, was no longer used.

The following day we returned to take part in the morning service. There were exactly ten men for a minyan. There has to be a minimum of ten men to celebrate a service. In the beginning most people were uneasy to talk to us but as they realized who we were, they opened up. They told us that Jews had good conditions and there was no anti-Semitism to worry about. But in the whole of Yugoslavia only 6,000 Jews remained, with only 400 in Beograd. In 1941, when the persecution of the Jews had begun, there had been over 80,000 Jews in Yugoslavia.

September 16th we sailed from Piraeus in Greece to Haifa. For me, the journey through Europe was a long reminder of the Holocaust. The scars of war were still very visible and the Eastern European authoritarian manner reminded me of the old German control. The synagogues, camps, and museums were like small islands in a sea of war memories.

Chapter 14

After many years of exile, bloody wars and persecution, we Jews had finally obtained freedom in Israel. Since the Roman expulsion of the Jews in the year 70 and the destruction of the Jewish Temple there had only been a small presence of Jews in the country. Israel had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire for 400 years until 1917. The First World War and the end of the Ottoman Empire was an important turning point in modern Jewish history. In 1917, the British Foreign Minister Arthur James Balfour, expressed his support for establishing a Jewish national home in the area which was now under the British mandate. The Balfour Declaration came at a very decisive moment.

In 1896, the journalist Theodor Herzl had published the book The Jewish State, which epitomized his idea of establishing a Jewish national state as the only response to the persecution of 19th Century European Jewry. This inspired the development of Jewish Zionism and the movement of Jews returning to Israel commenced. From the end of the 19th century, waves of immigration began from Europe to Palestine. Jewish institutions were established to help buy land. The first kibbutzim were established based upon a communist model. Many of the founders were East Europeans and were strongly inspired by the idea of a non-capitalistic society where '…all give according to their ability and receive according to their needs'.

The Jewish immigration caused tension between Jews and the local Arab population which led the British to take two important steps. The White Paper of 1939, reduced Jewish immigration to Palestine, and was enforced until the end of the mandate in 1948 when the British withdrew from Palestine. In spite of that, about 110,000 Jews immigrated during that period. Had it not been for that ban, many of those who perished in the Nazi camps would have gone to Palestine and thus escaped death. The young German halutz (pioneer) who tried to flee to Sweden in the rowing boat together with Fanny, Ante and my father was among the many thousands who tried to get to Palestine illegally. His hope was extinguished when he drowned together with my father and Ante.

The other important British decision came after the Second World War at a time where different Jewish underground movements had increased pressure on the British in Palestine. The British faced new challenges after

the War and many wanted their mandate in Palestine to end. The scale of Jewish persecution during the war was now well known. Six million Jews were dead at the hands of the Nazis.

In November 1947, the newly established United Nations passed a resolution to divide Palestine into two independent states. The British had to give up its mandate and a Jewish state and an Arab state were to be established. The Jews accepted the UN's division plan but it was rejected by the Arabs who were not prepared to share Palestine with the Jewish population. Several Arab leaders said that they were looking forward to the end of the British mandate so that the armies of Arab volunteers could prevent the State of Israel from being established. On May 14th 1948 a sovereign Israeli state was declared in the area assigned to the Jews. Failure to accept this by the Arabs led to Israel's War of Independence that ended in 1949. Many European Jews came to fight in Israel's first war against the Arabs and many of them, who had previously fled from Hitler's persecution, risked their lives in this war against five Arab nations.

Israel from the Inside

In many ways our arrival in Haifa was symbolic as an introduction to life in Israel. We were late and greeted by a bewildered bureaucracy that couldn't decide how our car should pass through customs. A big ship had anchored in the harbor so we had to leave our ferry and go in motorboats to the docking station. Our brother-in-law Paul, who lived in Israel, waved eagerly at the arrival gate. We were happy to see a well-known face in the country at that moment and we had no idea in that moment how useful this would be in Israel to know somebody who knows somebody, so that strings may be pulled. After having filled in a pile of customs' papers the tug-of-war began about our car that in the meantime had been brought to a quay further away. The custom's officer who was supposed to check the car could not be found. It was already 2.30pm and the office closed at 3.00pm; we were beginning to lose patience. We had arranged to arrive at Paul and his wife's apartment before Shabbat eve and in the meantime, we were getting a very bad first impression of Israel's heavy bureaucracy. We tried to persuade the custom's officer to follow us to the quay to check the car and yet we had no idea when or how the car could be lifted off the barge. We didn't see any cranes. But then, what so often happens in Israel, and what I have learned since to appreciate as part of the charm of the country, was that Paul introduced himself to the custom officer. It turned out that they had common friends in Denmark. Within a short time, the car was lifted from the barge,

brought to the quay and the paperwork problems disappeared. Welcome to Israel.

We knew that kibbutz society was not perfect. We knew and applauded the ideals; the community came first before the interests of the individual. We were looking forward and had great expectations of our stay on kibbutz, the new home for European Jews who had endured the horror of the war; the new home for those who were now looking for a better life in a society based on mutual respect. The idea of living as one big family in the Jewish ancestral country pleased and excited us.

The First Visit

Wn we left Denmark to acquire a more personal relationship with Israel, the security situation in the small country was still far from stable. We had made the decision to go after many talks and deliberations. We considered the effect on our two small children and of leaving a good job and Danish safety and security. It was a difficult decision. But the Jewish fellowship and the thought of taking part in the building of a young state appealed to us. Not in a religious way, but because Jews now had a sovereign state. We regarded it almost as a miracle that the State of Israel had been established after Jews had lived in exile for almost 2,000 years. As Jews, we wanted to be part of such a historic development and that was our main reason for exchanging the pleasant life in Denmark for something unknown. We had a feeling that we would like Israel but we were realistic and prepared to be disappointed. So, we entered our little Fiat to cross East Europe and stay a year in Israel; it was a real turning point in our lives.

We knew we had to be ready to compromise when living in a different country and experiencing the kibbutz community. People may think that life in the kibbutz was an ideal, a happy project created by a group of idealists. However, this turned out to be rather naive.

Our Stay in Kibbutz Gal-Ed

Kibbutz Gal-Ed, situated south of the Carmel Mountains, was founded in 1948, mainly by German Jews. It was quiet, warm and dusty, but also beautiful, overlooking the Mediterranean and soft mountains by the shore. There were olive groves and fruit trees. It was completely different to anything we had previously known. Coming from Denmark, we could never have visualized the kibbutz in advance. Despite the contrast, we felt at home.

We were assigned a small apartment of two rooms a toilet and shower in a semi-detached house. My first impression was that everything was a bit decayed and unfinished. The people who had painted the walls had left streaks on the doors. Sockets were loose and there were no curtains. I was used to Danish standards and thought that everything was a bit messy. But we had arrived. Our agreement with the kibbutz was that both of us should work four hours a day and join the kibbutz Hebrew language school for the remaining four hours of the work day.

When the kibbutz was established, members had lived in tents and the men working in the fields would carry weapons to defend themselves against attacks from the Arabs. Women and children lived in a more protected place. Every second week the men came home. Later, huts were built and as conditions improved, families were able to be together. Every adult had to work. As such, it was not possible for mothers to stay at home and take care of their children. Children's houses were established where a few parents took care of all the children freeing others to work in the fields, laundry or communal dining room. The idea was created by necessity. After work families were together until bedtime at which time the children returned to the children's houses; they never slept with their parents.

In the beginning we lived together with our two daughters aged four and seven, because they were not used to sleeping apart from the family. Later, they also moved to the children's houses. In the beginning it was very hard for us to surrender Solveig and Lone to the children's houses. We missed putting them to bed and getting up with them in the morning. It helped when we saw how fast they made new friends. But, we couldn't help thinking that the kibbutz had made a necessity into an educational ideal. They became used to children's houses and with time came they adopted the conviction that it was also the best way to raise children. Our ideas were different but we were prepared to live according to the rules of the kibbutz. And so we did, despite Birgit and I feeling that children’s houses alienated parents from their children. At parents’ meetings many would sit, apathetic with a book or newspaper, as if the meeting did not concern their sons and daughters. One rainy Saturday, the eleven year old son of our kibbutz foster family, came home to ‘visit’ his parents. The boy’s mother had just been in the middle of cleaning the floor when he came in with mud on his shoes. She scolded her son and the poor boy, feeling like a guest in his own home, got upset and promptly left.

Life on kibbutz was different to what we had imagined. We felt that the ideological framework was sometimes stronger than commonsense. The

kibbutz principles were the guidelines for its micro society but they were often overly restricting, leading to a narrow conservative approach. The socialist mentality, seeking a life of equality, often struggled with accepting new ways of thinking. No one received a salary, just pocket money. On the other hand the kibbutz took care of everything from medical treatment, to three meals a day, to cultural entertainment and more. The leadership was democratically chosen and responsible for carrying out decision-making on the kibbutz. It was a kind of government which appointed different committees. The cultural committee decided on the cultural programs and chose which books would be in the library. The clothing committee made common purchases for all the members. The education committee decided upon the education of the younger generation. Everything was for the common good. If a boy got a present of a bicycle from his grandparents, it belonged to all the children of the kibbutz. There was no private property. The kibbutzim contributed greatly to country's welfare, after the establishment of Israel in 1948. Agricultural produce was exported and many kibbutzim absorbed the streams of immigrants flocking to Israel in the 1950's, especially Jews from Arab countries who had experienced hostility in their homelands. On the kibbutzim many immigrants spent half their worktime learning Hebrew before going on to work.

Our journey to Israel was, in contrast to many immigrants, not a flight, but we nonetheless felt equally strange as we also were beginning from scratch. Learning a new language and working in areas we were not used to. Work on kibbutz was by rotation. That meant that people changed their work every two years. An electrician could be milking cows. A cook could be working as a gardener. It was easy for us to understand the ideology but it was difficult to see the economic advantages of putting unqualified workers in jobs for which they were not competent. In the end many kibbutzim could not compete in the market place and the ideology had to be revised. At the beginning of our stay one of those responsible, a woman, asked if we had problems or anything to complain about. We thought this was constructive and reflected a willingness to maintain a dynamic atmosphere where changes and discussion were encouraged. We had many suggestions but we still felt that we were guests as we were only staying for six months. Therefore we held back. When she asked for the third time, all we said was that we thought it strange that there was such disorder outside the house; that everything was a mess with no one responsible for cleaning up. She got upset and immediately left without a word. We saw it as a sign that kibbutz society struggled to accept criticism because members were so convinced that they were living in more complete and more perfect system than anyone else. In

the dining room I couldn't help overhear talks between members speaking in German. They had no idea that I understood every word and they did not refrain from their demeaning remarks. The beautiful idea that everyone is equal in the society, in reality, sizzled with intrigue and reflected a need for control and reorganization. This little society seemed to be self-sufficient but didn't leave space for individualism. We often thought the decision-making processes lacked logic. The coordinator of the language school began to demand that we ask her for permission to leave the kibbutz on our free days. That was one of the things we were not ready to accept.

On one occasion, the kibbutz electrician cut his finger very badly and needed to go the hospital in Haifa. None of the kibbutz cars were available so he suggested that they ask us if we could take him to the hospital as they knew that we had our own little Fiat 600 that we had brought from Denmark. The nurse didn't have authority to decide and the kibbutz member responsible for expenses wasn't present. So the electrician had to wait for a bus to take him to Haifa. Had we known of the situation we would of course have taken him straight to the hospital without asking anyone.

Our experience with the kibbutz was not what we had expected. The idea of a little idyllic society does not actually exist. Instead, in its place, rigid rules reflect a lack of understanding for individual needs. Even though the kibbutz was founded on values of strong fellowship, it seemed to me that in reality everyone preferred to mind their own business and to hold back from interfering in other people's affairs, even if new suggestions would have benefitted such individuals or the community. One example to highlight the situation - the kibbutz member responsible for the swimming pool went on holiday without transferring his responsibility to somebody else. As a result, the pool was without water until he returned.

Farewell to the kibbutz

I wasn't a socialist in Denmark but had a great respect for policies of equality and economic fairness. My opinion, after being on kibbutz, is that it is a utopian thought but not actually practical. Originally, it was good because it served the needs of the special period in which they were living. It eventually went wrong because the ideals began to overshadow the way of reason. The rules were idolized and cultivated to such a degree that members simply lost their way. This was crystal clear to me through the lens of my Danish cultural upbringing. It was also easier for me to see it this way given that I wasn't one of the ideological founders facing the struggle of giving up the dream, once problems began to appear.

We left the kibbutz after five months, one month before we had planned to, as I managed to find work as engineer. Our stay in the kibbutz was an experience we wouldn't have missed. Today we feel that we are more familiar with Israeli society through our experiences with kibbutz life.

The second part of our stay was quite different. We moved to Ramat HaSharon, north of Tel Aviv where I worked as an engineer. My mother came to visit and met her cousins from Poland who had immigrated to Israel in the 1950's. The meeting with mother's family sent me back in time. They were pale, thin and nervous. They sat still and spoke about times in Nazi concentration camps. Because of their lingering traumas one of the families couldn't manage to have their eldest son live at home and sent him off to live on a kibbutz. He was, for sure, just a rebellious teenager, but the lack of psychological help after the war rendered them unable to cope; previous traumas had left their marks.

Life in the town suited us better than on kibbutz. Nonetheless, we Danes still had to shrug our shoulders about the quality of Israeli service or their ability to meet time schedules. We found small things like ordering a gas balloon a battle that could take several days. Regardless, Birgit and I agreed that we could live here even though our original plan had been to return to Denmark after one year. We had seen and experienced Israel from the inside. We had learned a little Hebrew and got a taste of the complex country where Jews from all over the world had arrived to form a new fellowship.

During the journey home to Denmark ideas began to grow. Maybe Denmark wasn't to be our home forever. Maybe we could build a life in Israel among other Jews after all.

Chapter 15

Farewell to Denmark

Our existence in Denmark was characterized by a sense of absolute security and a stable lifestyle. After our return from Israel, I worked as an engineer at Krone and Kock. I was given interesting and responsible work and I received annual wage increases. I was satisfied. We bought a dog and a summerhouse plot and we went on vacations abroad. Birgit became chairwoman for the International Women's Zionist Help Organization in Denmark.

But our stay in Israel had made its mark. We had realized that it could indeed be possible to make a life in Israel. The idea came up again and again. Birgit indicated that she was prepared to try life in Israel. I was more reluctant. I was the bread winner and if we would go to Israel we would have to sell the house, learn Hebrew, find work, get used to another mentality, another climate, and say goodbye to our close family relationships. And, of course, it was difficult to imagine leaving Denmark.

Birgit cleverly started the process. In 1972, after a long period of overtime, pressure and stress at work she suggested that I pack a suitcase and go to Israel for a couple of weeks to relax. I could stay with Birgit's sister and husband. And, since I was going to Israel anyway, Birgit suggested I use some of the time to look into the possibility of finding work as an engineer. And that is indeed what happened.

For me, it was fourteen fantastic days without any commitments. I visited three different work places and was offered work at each of them. The job that appealed most to me was at the Hadassah hospital on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem. It had to be renovated and extended and I was immediately offered work as coordinator of the project. The salary was much lower than what I had been earning in Denmark but to compensate Hadassah offered to provide the whole family with health insurance and a provisional apartment.

I had often imagined that we would end up in Jerusalem but I had never thought that it would happen in that way at that moment in time. I returned from my holiday with a firm employment offer on the table and a decision had to be made relatively quickly. Birgit was in favor. Our daughter Lone also accepted it on condition that our dog could join us. Solveig had

fallen in love with a school friend and didn't think it fair to make such an important decision without consulting her. My biggest dilemma was my family, especially my mother. She had become very close to me after father's death. I spoke with my sisters and brothers about our plans. They reassured me and encouraged me to go, promising that they would take care of mother.

We made our decision with a reasonable knowledge of Israel and of where we were heading. We were ardent Zionists and moving there was therefore a logical step for us. Both Birgit and I felt a strong desire to contribute towards rebuilding the country. We were not fleeing from pogroms or persecution but the idea of living in a Jewish State really spoke to us. After 2,000 years, the Jewish nation now had a country that could finally offer protection to its citizens against anti-Semitism and persecution.

We thought of our own future as parents and Jews. Assimilation was becoming a common phenomenon among Danish Jews and we wanted to be a Jewish family. It was obvious that it would be easier for our daughters to establish a Jewish family later on, if we lived in Israel.

I came home from Israel on a Thursday. Four days later I quit my job and we signed immigration papers at the Jewish Agency in Copenhagen.

Hadassah Hospital wanted me to begin work as fast as possible, so I decided to go to Israel with Solveig while Birgit and Lone stayed in Denmark until the house was sold and other practical tasks were taken care of. Once more I began a journey by car through Europe. It was a tense time for Israelis and Jews. Earlier that summer Palestinian terrorists had killed 11 sportsmen during the Olympic Games in Munich. While we were driving through Europe we were listening to the latest news about bomb-letters sent to official Israeli offices around the world. Solveig and I were on our way to Israel but we could already sense what it meant to be Israelis, as far as our personal security was concerned. As Danes you don't think about being an obvious target for terrorists. One definitely does as an Israeli. The moment we entered the car, destination Israel, we changed our attitude. We were especially vigilant taking note of all kinds of things to which we would never have given a second thought in Denmark. Before we entered the ferryboat in Naples we checked the car to be sure that nobody had placed explosives under the seats. In the harbor we noticed frogmen swimming around the ferryboat before we went onboard.

Just like our first encounter with Israel, things were not always straightforward. Solveig was pining for Denmark and I was busy arranging the apartment provided by Hadassah. Our first neighbors were a charming

couple from America who had been in Israel long enough to know their way around. I remember how happy they were when they heard we were new olim. It was something quite special to travel so far and yet immediately feel at home or at least among friends. They told us that the first year would be difficult as we became used to the climate, the Israeli temperament and the task of learning Hebrew. It would also be difficult for the children to enter the new society. But, if we could manage the first year we would never dream of leaving Israel. Very simple, they said, we would never be able to live anywhere else. I often think about that advice and how right it was then and still is now. They also gave us practical advice regarding government help for new immigrants. We were able to purchase an apartment on favorable terms. Both Birgit and I had to sign the contract for the apartment so she came over with Lone at the end of 1972. However, she had to return to Denmark as our house hadn't yet been sold. Lone stayed with me so Birgit went back alone. Finally in December the family was reunited.

Then something happened that tightened our bonds to Israel, especially for Solveig and it has remained our home ever since.

Another war

The Yom Kippur war broke out October 6th 1973. Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack against Israel on the yearly Day of Atonement, when many Israelis are in synagogue and fasting. Sirens sounded and reserve soldiers hurried to the fronts in the south and north. One of the soldiers' convoys made a halt by our apartment in the Jerusalem suburbs. Instinctively Solveig hurried to the fridge to fetch some food and something to drink for the troops. She went downstairs and gave it to the soldiers. When she came back half an hour later she had changed. The young soldiers, the majority of them not even 20 years old, were on their way to the front to fight for our freedom. She knew that some would never come back. Suddenly it was as if she understood why we were in Israel.

The war also changed our daily life in many ways. I volunteered as a driver for soldiers who needed a lift from Jericho to Jerusalem when they had a few days leave. I also helped to maintain the machines at the biggest bakery in Jerusalem. The regular staff had been called up. After that war nothing was the same again. It was as if we had had our Israeli baptism of fire even though we were not fighting on the front. We shared our fate with the rest of the population and were under attack along with everyone else. We felt part of the fellowship. We contributed and felt useful.

That's the way we still feel 40 years after our arrival. We still visit Denmark and, of course, we feel like Danes. But we also feel like Israelis. When I look back, I realise that our decision in 1972 has an additional dimension. To have grandchildren in Israel is, for me, the ultimate victory over Hitler and his persecution of the Jews. It is historic justice that Israel is able to defend herself and does not hesitate to do so.

A new way

I don't know how my life would have developed had we stayed in Denmark. Maybe I would have remained an engineer. Maybe I would have changed my profession and sought something quite different. It is impossible to say. But I am sure that I would never have become a tour guide. For 30 years both Birgit and I have worked as licensed Israeli tour guides.

Something I like about Israel is the vigorous dynamic which is always present. There is a pioneer spirit and there are no written rules. People take chances, they look for challenges and are prepared to accept risks. I view it as an optimistic approach for the future.

My decision to become a tour guide was a practical one; at least I thought so. I felt that my efforts and overtime work as an engineer were not appreciated. There was an urgent need for Danish travel guides and Birgit had already qualified. I applied for the next guide's course and was accepted.

When I look past the practical elements of choosing a career as a professional tour guide, I know that my choice also had a personal reason. By meeting German, Danish and other European tourists I could see how other people look at the Israel I had made my home. It was always important for me to hear the Europeans' attitude towards the Holocaust and Jews. I would often mention that I had been a concentration camp prisoner even though this was years after I myself had sat in a cattle wagon on the way to a concentration camp. I once guided a German group in Qumran, the place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. For me this was a first, but the group was especially understanding and were unbelievably conscientious. They followed instructions and accepted almost everything without comments or criticism. I decided to make a practical joke. On the way out of Qumran you can leave through two small exit turntables. I asked for the group's attention and told them that there was a special rule at the site, men leave through the left exit and women through the right. Without hesitating or asking why, the German group hurried to divide between men and women and left in two separate lines. It was, at the very least, completely unnecessary and I immediately regretted having made my personal joke.

In another group there was an Austrian who was very critical about everything that was in some way connected to the Holocaust. We were sitting in Tiberius by the Sea of Galilee. He was about 70 years old. It was 40 years after the war; he sat next to me. After I had spoken about Judaism and the Holocaust he asked me why the group should hear about these subjects when such a long time had passed. I remember my astonishment and anger. I looked into his eyes and asked him:

"Are you a Christian?"

He answered, "Yes."

Then I asked him: "Are you a believing Christian?"

"Yes", he answered.

Then I asked him: "Do you know how long the Jews were accused of the murder of Jesus?"

The crucifixion of Jesus was one of the episodes that have sowed anti-Semitic germs in Christian circles throughout the centuries. The Austrian sat for a long time after my question. The rest of the evening he didn't say one word.

But that kind of unpleasantness never overshadowed the pleasant and enjoyable elements of work as a guide. Over the years, I developed a close friendship with a protestant priest from Germany. We have visited each other's families and he has been a great help in my attempts to share my views on war-time events. He helped me by arranging talks about my experiences to a German public. I have nothing against the young generation in Germany and the reason I agree to speak about my experiences is so that I can raise awareness and try to prevent a Holocaust from happening again.

By meeting so many different European groups I have also helped myself to reflect on life and humanity. For me the biggest questions are those regarding Belief and Forgiveness.

Chapter 16

About Belief

Prior to the Second World War I would walk to synagogue every Saturday. I wore a skullcap and adhered to Jewish laws relating to the observance of Shabbat. It was forbidden to use motorized transport on the weekly day of rest. On the holidays, I would go with my father to the synagogue. On Saturdays though, I would usually go alone as my father had to work because we needed the money After the service I would go to my uncle who lived close by and I used to stay there until the end of the Shabbat. I was a young believing Jew.

Through my time in Theresienstadt I lost my belief and at some point, I removed my skullcap and placed it away in a drawer. I have never worn it since and I never once returned to the synagogue in Copenhagen. During the horrors of the war I was simply unable to hold onto my belief in an almighty, good and merciful God. I am just one of thousands of Jews who lost their faith during the war. Many others kept their belief in order to survive, and others saw the Holocaust as punishment because Jews had moved away from religion. There were people who died of hunger in Theresienstadt because they refused to eat non-kosher food, despite permission form the Chief Rabbi to eat non-Kosher food in accordance with the Jewish rule of 'pikuach nefesh' that allows (even obligates) one to break Jewish law in order to save a life. In the end these orthodox Jews who felt it was wrong and decided not to break the Jewish laws, died while doing so.

Some strong believers choose to use the argument that God had put mankind to a test to be explained at some later date, but not while the events were actually taking place. That's the way some believers regard the Holocaust. We will only understand the meaning of the Holocaust after many years have passed; when people have become more knowledgeable and after many generations of processing and reflection. In my eyes and mind it does not make sense. After so many years have passed I still don't understand, or see the meaning in the evil that happened to my Jewish brethren in Europe in the 1930's and 1940's. To be religious you have to believe in God's mercy and righteousness; He rewards and punishes according to merit. But in my eyes such an approach leads to absurd conclusions, like for example, when I hear religious leaders in Israel saying that train accidents

occurs because women soldiers on the train were wearing short skirts. Is it possible to take such an argument seriously? It is very difficult for me to hear the same Rabbi's interpretation of God's role in the Holocaust: 'The Holocaust happened because some have broken God's rules'. Could a sin by a Jew justify the murder of six million innocents? The well-known Jew and concentration camp survivor, Simon Wiesenthal uses the expression that, "God was on holiday during the Holocaust". But it is not enough to say that God was on holiday from the end of 1930's until 1945 while six million Jews disappeared. If there is a merciful God Almighty the Holocaust could never have taken place. The murder of close to one and a half million Jewish children by the Nazis has haunted me. God's mercy and kindness hasn't any meaning for me anymore. I regard the Holocaust as a direct proof that there is no God. No divine justice or meaning.

When I think about a person like Josef Mengele, the German doctor, who was behind the thousands of medical experiments, torture and murder of Jewish children and who escaped and died without a criminal charge in a court, I can't help pose the question once more: 'Where was God, the all-knowing and wise guarantor for justice, as Mengele took flight and escaped'? I have never received a satisfactory answer. I am aware of the enigmatic discussion about good, believing, ideal people who die of sicknesses, while murderers survive and live a long life. And I am familiar with the arguments that bad things happen because there is a level of meaning beyond that which we human beings are able to understand. And yet…

Further Reflections about belief

I believe that many religious people have it easier than others. They argue that there is a hidden reasoning behind the bad things that constantly happen in the world. They don't argue with God. They don't ask questions. In my opinion they belong to the religion called fatalism. They don't want any discussion. They don't argue with God in the way in which Moses did. They don't ask "Why"? If belief helps them they have an advantage over others who are prepared to confront God. Many of us have different views on the same theological questions.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam have quite different interpretations and explanations on the same subjects. Are they all right? And if not, who is mistaken? I have spoken to my son-in-law about religion. He asks me if I want to join him in the synagogue on the yearly Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur where the Jews ask each other, and God, for forgiveness. I refuse my

son-in-law's invitation. He tells me that he understands me because I have been through events that are impossible to envisage and that no outsider can possibly imagine.

According to Jewish tradition God writes down the fate of every Jew for the coming year by the New Year, Rosh Hashanah. But he waits until Yom Kippur, ten days later to sign his judgment. In those ten days Jews seek forgiveness from people and also from God for the sins they might have committed. We were arrested by the Germans in Copenhagen just after Rosh Hashanah on the Sabbath called Shabbat Teshuva, where the coming year's fate is written down. For me, it is impossible to accept that, on that day, our fate had something to do with our behavior and that Theresienstadt was our punishment.

Maybe it is arrogant to say, but I am not aware of having done something so unjust, or committed a sin against others. Not to the extent that can justify that I, along with millions of other Jews, were exposed to the Holocaust.

As a tour guide here in Israel I once found myself guiding a Catholic group in the Sinai desert. They celebrated a Mass service in the middle of the desert. It was fine weather and the beautiful landscape added to a devout and spiritual atmosphere. I sat at a distance and watched. After the Mass one of the ladies came to me and asked: "What do you think when you see us celebrating a Mass?" I considered for a moment and answered: "If you behave during the time between two Mass services like you do during the Mass, I find it beautiful."

My answer essentially my relationship with religion today. People never behave as beautifully as when participating in a service. It is the same in the synagogue; it does not awaken anything in me when i hear the mumbling in synagogue when people recite prayers they know by heart.

I don't think being religious makes you a better, more ethical or a more moral person. Each person has something evil in him and for some people the evil will grow if it is not controlled. It is like the film about Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the evil is encouraged and with time assumes control. But, at the same time there are people who are good and could never think of doing evil actions. By nature people are both good and bad and know instinctively when they make mistakes and do something that is morally wrong. Many try to find excuses. This is a mechanism that derives more from fear and cowardice, than from ignorance about right and wrong.

After the War many Germans defended themselves by saying that they just acted according to orders. They seemed to be totally unaffected by their deeds when defending themselves in the post-war courts. Others who were involved fled abroad and were not called to account. I think they knew inside themselves that it was wrong but fear and cowardice gave them excuses for their sins and they didn't think further. Let us remember, the German people had years of political propaganda and pressure from the Nazis and became used to obeying orders without considering whether they were morally right or wrong. The same happened when large parts of the Austrian population welcomed the German occupation with enthusiasm.

Although I basically believe people are good I have become more skeptical after the war. Our Holocaust has shown me that people's fear, cowardice and latent wickedness can together commit the most cruel and unthinkable. The Holocaust has shown me that there is no God to interfere and punish people for their sins nor to reward their goodness. The Holocaust has shown me that righteousness doesn't necessarily exist. If somebody asked me if the Holocaust could happen again I wouldn't be able to say "No".

Chapter 17

About Forgiveness

How do you forgive the unforgivable? Is it possible to forgive individuals, a whole people, or God, for the murder of six million Jews during the Second World War? How do you as survivor forgive? Can you? Should you? As a Holocaust survivor I think the concept of 'forgiveness' is one of the most interesting elements. Among my thoughts, the belief in God, the evil and the easiness in letting oneself be misled, have occupied my mind since 1945. As a survivor, the question of forgiveness has been a prominent part of my thoughts since I left Theresienstadt.

Simon Wiesenthal, who survived the concentration camps, has written an excellent book about that subject. It is called 'The Sunflower'. For me, it has been an inspiration throughout the years. The title refers to the sunflowers that were planted on the graves of German soldiers while no flowers were planted on the graves of murdered Jews who deserved the same thing. Together with other Jewish prisoners Simon Wiesenthal was ordered to work in the hospital area. One day he was taken to a young German officer who was dying, the German officer had been hit by a shell. At the meeting with Wiesenthal, the young officer told him that he had participated in herding Jews into a building and then the German officers threw grenades through the windows. To prevent themselves from being burned alive some Jews threw themselves out of the windows. In trying to prevent death by fire inside the house they met it falling on the hard pavement. Some of them were still alive after their fall and the young officer, together with others, shot them as they lay dying on the ground. Now that the soldier was dying, he regretted what he had done. He asked Wiesenthal for forgiveness in the name of the Jews. Wiesenthal felt that the young officer truly regretted his actions and Wiesenthal asked himself if he ought to forgive the officer on behalf of other Jews. Can anyone in a meaningful or morally acceptable way say: 'Forgive me for the Holocaust'? In the end, Wiesenthal left the room without giving the soldier an answer. Later, he wrote an account of this event and sent it to 53 different people, internationally known politicians, Nobel prize winners, Holocaust survivors, priests and rabbis. He wanted to hear their opinion about what he should have done at the meeting with the young German soldier.

In Judaism you distinguish between forgiveness for sins toward God, for instance a breach of the 10 commandments, and a sin committed toward another person. A person who has committed a sin against another person is obliged to ask the injured party for forgiveness. It is not enough to ask God for forgiveness, you must also ask your fellowman for forgiveness. Forgiveness from God is not a matter of course. On the yearly Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, Jews ask for forgiveness for their sins in the past year. In Christianity all people have a common sin: The original sin. Like in Judaism, forgiveness in Christianity is something that God bestows on the people. But forgiveness in Judaism must also be seen in connection with other people's willingness to forgive their fellow human beings.

Wiesenthal did the right thing by leaving the officer's deathbed without giving an answer. It was not doubt that prevented him from giving an answer. Forgiveness was impossible and would have been immoral. Indeed it would have been like agreeing to the Nazis' view on Jews: '… as an anonymous undifferentiated mass, not a gathering of individuals each with his soul, pain and family'. Maybe, Wiesenthal later doubted whether he had been correct and therefore he consulted other people. Among others, the South African priest Desmond Tutu, who was the head of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Tutu answered by referring to the first South African president, Nelson Mandela, who forgave the white prison officials for the torture and executions.

Desmond Tutu's belief was that to forgive would move the world from brutality to sympathy; that the sum of all people's forgiveness would make the world a better place. But his words express, for me, errors that Jews can never accept in terms of the Holocaust.

Wiesenthal was looking for justice and not just forgiveness and after the war he became known as the 'Nazi Hunter'. It is important to understand that his actions were not acts of revenge. Rather, he was pursuing justice. I understand Wiesenthal and I support all that he did to arrest those people involved in the horrific murders of Jews. Following the war, Wiesenthal dedicated his life to tracing and prosecuting Nazis who had fled after the war. Wiesenthal who died in 2005, and symbolically is buried in Israel, often said that he played a role in the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann in Buenos Aires in 1961. Later, Wiesenthal participated in the capture of the police officer, Karl Silberbauer, who had been responsible for the arrest of Anne Frank during the Second World War. Wiesenthal was also the person who found Franz Stangl, the commander of the Treblinka camp together with other Nazis and brought them to court.

Those who claim that Wiesenthal's hunt for Nazis was a matter of revenge are mistaken. Many would say that Wiesenthal was motivated, according to the biblical phrase: 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. They too are mistaken, for that has never been practiced in Judaism. The true meaning of the phrase is that if you have offended another person, for instance by thrusting out an eye, you have to pay with something that can compensate it, for example, pay with money. It does not mean that your eye should also be removed.

The hunt for Nazis after the war and Israel's capture of Adolf Eichmann has great significance for all Jews. It sends a message that you can't run away from your responsibility, even after many years. It sends a message to the world that no one in the future can deal brutally, immorally, inhumanly against a whole nation without taking responsibility. I think that Wiesenthal's activity has contributed towards world justice. Forgiveness would, in my eyes, have justified the Nazis' persecution of Jews, not condemned them. In such a situation, the possibility of it happening again would be forever present.

Not everything can be forgiven

In my opinion to forgive the Holocaust is an absurdity. In Spain, for many years, a Mass was celebrated where they prayed for the rest of Hitler's soul. Catholicism regarded the ability to forgive as a virtue, but do they not question the ideology of forgiveness? By celebrating their Mass were they accepting the Nazis' ideology and actions? It is as if the concept of 'forgiveness' opens up some kind of a moral chasm through which one can slip. The fact remains that millions of people have been offended.

In Auschwitz, the Nazi officers fell behind their quota for murder in the gas chambers. To catch up they placed small children in a row and threw them onto an open fire, one after the other. Those in the row behind stood and expected the same fate that had befallen those in front. As if any, Catholic, Muslim or Jew, or any human being for that matter, would be able to forgive something like that. It is totally absurd to speak of concepts like 'moral', 'righteousness', 'good or evil' in relation to horrific acts like those. These words are absolutely meaningless in this context. And yet, despite that, the subject of forgiveness is often in my thoughts and will always be related to the Holocaust. When it comes to personal forgiveness, I can only speak hypothetically for none of the Germans who were present in Theresienstadt have ever asked me for forgiveness. I cannot, forgive generally; if at all,

theoretically, I could only forgive those Nazis who offended me and mine. But I would still say "No". I would not be able to forgive them.

Take a person like the German officer Karl Rahm. It was he who saw that Theresienstadt looked nice with facades and smiling faces when The Red Cross visited. He had sent several thousand Jews to the death camps from Theresienstadt before the delegation arrived as he thought the camp was overcrowded. An old proverb says 'To Understand it to Forgive'. The thought behind that is if one can understand the logic behind a deed, even if you are the object of the deed, you may reach the point where you can forgive and an open wound can be healed. You can find peace. But, is it possible for anybody to understand how the Nazis were able to torture and murder one and a half million innocent Jewish children?

That is impossible to understand and cannot be forgiven. It should never be forgiven. Never, never. The Nazis not 'only' killed six million Jews they also prevented those people from establishing families. They turned children into orphans and rendered parents childless. The massacres during The Second World War draw gaping wounds in the whole Jewish culture and nation. In centuries to come descendants will be missing. Somebody in their midst will always be absent. There can be no forgiveness for that.

It is my conviction that if a person has sinned against another person and asks him for forgiveness it is up to the injured party to forgive. But what right has a person to forgive in the name of millions of other murdered people? In my opinion no person has that right.

Chapter 18

Looking back

Decades ago I was arrested by the Gestapo in Copenhagen. So many long years have passed since I was placed in that cold, stinking cattle wagon and sent to Theresienstadt. A whole life has passed. I have established a family, worked, studied and traveled. I have two native countries, many friends, and from the armchair in my garden I can see the mountains outside Jerusalem. When I look back, I have a strong feeling of happiness. But I have, late in my life, realized that the Holocaust has changed me forever both for good and for bad. My experiences during the war have given me perspective and an understanding that allows me to distinguish between important and superfluous items, discussions and arguments. After one and a half years in a concentration camp you become immune towards indifference. It doesn't exist in my universe. So if I do encounter indifference I don't want to deal with it. All the small things that bother others simply do not bother me.

My incarceration made everything else irrelevant. On the whole I regard myself as having a positive attitude but I have since realized how much the Holocaust has influenced my personality; not only when I deal with antisemitism, racism or general human respect, but all the time, every single day. My original and hopeful idea was that the war could be pushed to the background of my psyche, but I have now realized that it was wishful thinking. I am traumatized and the wounds in my soul from that time will never be healed.

I know that religious minorities are persecuted in many parts of the world. It torments me that mankind hasn't grown up and hasn't learned from history. For obvious reasons I am more focused on antisemitism because it touches me deeply. I am sad that there has been a deterioration during the recent years that I have lived outside Europe. I shall not mention the many examples of antisemitism that have been registered in France, Great Britain, Hungary, Switzerland or Austria. Instead, I will just speak of some, not the worst, but alarming nonetheless. These episodes are from the same Sweden that received my sister Fanny after her flight from Denmark. I am not talking about the rather strained relations between Israel and Sweden that have developed into minor political scandals. As in 2004, when the former Israeli ambassador in Stockholm, Tzvi Mazal, ruined an art exhibition where

the Palestinian suicide-bomber Hanadi Jaradat, was pictured like Snow-White standing in the middle of a pool of blood. I am also not talking about other incidents which I consider minor, such as in 2009, when the Swedes decided that the Davis Cup tournament, between Israel and Sweden should be played without an audience. I am more concerned, rather, about Jews who, in more recent years, have immigrated to Israel because they no longer felt comfortable in Sweden. Several of them have related how they were spat at, even attacked physically, and how people shouted "Heil Hitler" at them when they were going to and from synagogue on Shabbat. We also heard of spitefulness against Jews wearing skullcaps in Copenhagen. I also think about the large sum of money that the Swedish government had to pay in the summer of 2011 to protect the country's synagogues from anti-Semitic attacks. I have difficulty understanding that so long after the end of the Second World War there is still an impending danger to be a Jew in such seemingly well- functioning European societies. Some people say that Jews are being attacked because of Israel's policies. However, it clearly goes much deeper than that; classical antisemitism still thrives. And this is happening just a few decades after Hitler's and Nazi Germany's cruel deeds.

Today, when I reflect on Europe and antisemitism, I stand looking from the outside, from a secure distance in Israel. Here I know that Jews will not suffer the same fate. Many may shake their heads and, ironically, wonder how I can feel safe in troubled Israel that endures ongoing threats, wars, and violent revolts. After all, this was all happening during those same years following the war when Europe was enjoying relative calm and experimenting with the Welfare State. One of the reasons for choosing to move to Israel with my wife and children at that time was that I wanted a secure life for my family and our descendants.

Nowadays, hatred of Jews marks my days just as much as memories from the war. I am worried obviously about the attacks but I am forever influenced by my experiences in Theresienstadt.

Recently, I have had three experiences where I have had to actively stop myself from fleeing or doing something drastic in order not to lose control. I am not talking about the many times I have given testimony with tears pressing while my voice continued. I am also not talking about the many times Israeli soldiers visited me on Holocaust Remembrance Day, during which I used to find talking to them tremendously challenging as they, the younger generation, grappled to comprehend the extent of the horror. I'm not even talking about the fact that ever since the war, I find it extremely difficult to trust people in general. If we go to the theater I prefer to arrive

shortly before the start time, as I don't like to stand in queues. Doing so reminds me of the countless times I had to stand in queues during the war.

Rather, I am talking about three concrete events, all of them proof that I will never be able to put the Second World War persecution of Jews behind me.

Birgit and I have had a subscription for the Khan Theater for many years. In April 2012, the performance 'If this is a Human Being' was being played. It is based on the book by Primo Levi, the young Italian chemist who was interned in Auschwitz in 1944. He had been active in the anti-Nazi resistance movement, was reported by his own countrymen and delivered to the Nazis. He was among the few who experienced the Red Army's rescue of the camp. After much deliberation, and hesitation, my wife and I decided to see the play. I didn't know how it would affect me, but I was curious. After all, in recent years I had given many talks about my experiences and I thought that I had enough strength to confront the Holocaust in this way.

In the beginning the person on stage tells about his transportation to the camp and what he experienced just after his arrival. Already there it was, in front of me like a mirror. It was as if he was telling my history. I felt the blood rise in my head and considered getting up and leaving the theater right away. But I stayed and saw the performance to the end. It was an unusual and very moving achievement, without pathos and without exaggeration. It was similar to how I prefer to hear and speak about the war, also without pathos and exaggeration. The Holocaust is dramatic enough. I am therefore of the opinion that over dramatization and exaggeration doesn't help offer greater understanding. In the end, that evening in the Khan Theater became an unpleasant experience that I don't want to repeat.

But I do it anyhow. Nearly two months after that evening in Khan Theater, Birgit and I were sitting in a concert hall in Jerusalem. We had come to hear Verdi's Requiem. This had been performed 16 times by the prisoners in Theresienstadt. Holocaust survivors were invited to the concert as guests. I never go to such events without Birgit. The concert was in memory of the Czechoslovakian conductor Rafael Schächter, who rehearsed the Jewish children's choir's performance of the opera 'Brundibar'. He had to repeat the rehearsal three times because the child singers were being sent to the death camps. His last concert in Theresienstadt took place when the Red Cross came to visit in June 1944 as part of the Nazis' account of the so-called 'Perfect Ghetto'. A short time after the concert, Schächter and most of the remaining children, were deported to Auschwitz.

It was a Czechoslovakian choir of 100 singers who sang Verdi's Requiem on a cold winter's evening in Jerusalem. It was beautiful and moving. Two video screens were placed where three of the surviving choir singers from Theresienstadt commented and gave testimony. Clips from Nazi propaganda films were also shown. Suddenly I said to myself, as if I had only just realized it, that I myself had been among those prisoners. My hair stood on end. At the end of the concert pictures of the cattle-wagons were shown. The number 74 was written on one of the wagons; the number of Jews inside. As the train began to move on the film screen, the musicians, including the conductor and the choir, slowly began to leave the hall, one by one, all of them with their heads bent. At last only the first violin remained playing the song with the words 'He will bring Peace to us and to Israel.' It immediately called to mind Nathan Rappaport's sculpture in the Yad Vashem museum which shows Jews with bent heads on route to their death and an elderly Jew carrying the most precious thing he has, a Torah Scroll. The name of the sculpture is 'The Last Journey'.

We were asked not to applause at the end. We rose and stood silently in the dark. I no longer felt like a person among the audience who had come to listen to beautiful music with an historic meaning. I was like one of the prisoners in the train. It is difficult to explain because I know the music well and I anticipated that it would arouse memories. I knew that I would be seeing a film with pictures from the camps. I thought I would be strong enough; able to use my own sense of proportion and perspective to allow me to focus on the music rather than my own memories. A naive thought. It was my own history. I was in Theresienstadt at that same time. I had heard the tunes from Verdi's Requiem as a 15 year old concentration camp prisoner. The sweat began to run down my temples. I wanted to leave; I could not cope with the situation.

The third event I want to mention is our visit to Berlin in 2012. My younger brother Salle and his wife had rented an apartment in Berlin for two months. He suggested we should come and spend a holiday with them. Despite my former difficult experiences we accepted. Would we find traces of the Nazi persecutions of the Jews? I was very curious to know how I would react. It was difficult to recognize the town we had seen 19 years after the end of the war, but memories were there. There was a plaque marking Berlin's Jews during the War and we could read about the different camps they were sent to. We saw a sculpture of one of the cattle-wagons. I was surprised to see small memorial plaques in front of houses where Jews had been living. Each plaque mentioned the person's dates and the name of the camp they had been deported to. The name Theresienstadt was repeated

many times. It was a strange feeling to walk around the town that had been the nerve center of the Nazis. The fact that Birgit and I, and so many other Jews could walk around freely without fear, meant that the memories from a previous era were bearable. To see these memorials in Berlin was a constant reminder that the Nazis had lost the war.

That's how I saw the city until we stood in front of the white and yellow villa by Wannsee, the place where the Nazis in January 1942 had decided the framework and methods for the murder of Europe's Jews. While standing outside the building I felt that it would be impossible for me to step into the villa. But the thought that all those SS-officers were now dead and in contrast, here I was standing, as a free Jew, is what ultimately drove me to enter the museum. The villa was beautiful but cold. My eyes focused on the big wall plaques; the texts, on the big black and white photos and portraits of the conference participants, in1942. The display names are written in Hebrew under the German and English which helped me as we went through. As I stepped inside it was as if I no longer heard the voices of other visitors. I took a few steps forward and felt simultaneously heavy and weightless. In this building I had personally been sentenced to death together with millions of other Jews. My feet couldn't move. It was impossible to continue the tour of the villa. I took Birgit by the hand and together we left that terrible place.

With the events from Verdi's Requiem and the performance in the Khan Theater I ought to have known that a visit to the villa in Wannsee would cause the same unpleasant reaction inside of me. But I know now why I look for those confrontations. After many years of silence I had now pricked a hole in my memory abscess of the war. However, in order to tell my own Holocaust story, as one of the last survivors from that time, I must push myself constantly; I will continue to pay a high personal price for my attempts to close circles from the war. I can live with it, especially with the thought that my words will stand like a counterweight to Holocaust deniers and groundless hate against Jews in our time.

From my experiences I have learned two important things that are significant to note:

One is the importance of family and family solidarity. Two, is the importance of learning how to distinguish between the important things in life and those that are less important.

Postscript

I wish to end my account with something positive. I believe that most people have some kind of wishful thinking in life. Some ambitious dreams never come true, yet others might. My thoughts center on something that did indeed come.

I like grapes very much. Since settling in Israel I have always wished to find myself sitting under a pergola in my own house, reaching up with my hand for a bunch of grapes. Between the years of 1943-1945, this was something that I could never have imagined would come true.

Today, I sit under my pergola that, by the way, I built myself in our house in the Judean Mountains not far from Jerusalem. The house is 750 meters above sea level and I can reach for a bunch of the tastiest dark blue grapes and serve them to all members of our family, including our eight grandchildren.

Maybe this is 'a less important thing in life', but, for me, every year this is a returning source of tremendous pleasure.

Birgit and Robert

Our house in Virum in Copenhagen

Robert, together with his brothers and sister: Ante, Robert, Salle and Fanny

Fanny's confirmation: from left: Robert's mother, Robert, Salle, Fanny, Ante, Robert's father, Rebekka

The Swedish Red Cross Busses

From left: Salle, Fanny, Mogens, Fanny's daughter Hanne, Robert's mother, Robert

The Jewish cemetery in Copenhagen, Rebekka's burial place, Robert's mother, Salle

Brigit and Robert

The whole family with children and grandchildren: The upper row: Robert, Rina's daughter Shani, Ora's daughter Yael, Rina's daughter Adi, Ora's son Amichai, Rina's husband Dani, Ora's husband Shimon, Ora's son Eviatar.
The front row: Rina's daughter Or, Ora's daughter Tamar, Rina's daughter Lihi, Gittee, Rina, Dani's mother Ruti.

Photography with Joy - Phototherapy

First piloted by JDC Eshel in 2012, Photography with Joy has proven to be a life-changing experience for hundreds of Holocaust survivors.

In this program, groups of holocaust survivors meet for weekly photography trips over a period of four months. Through therapeutic photography, they learn to confront their traumatic past and tell their story to the world, using their own creativity. The participants create a portfolio of photographs that helps them share and process their experiences of the Holocaust and its continued impact on their and their families' lives.

At the conclusion of the course, their work is displayed in an exhibition to which the public - including schools and army personnel - are invited. Survivors present their pictures and tell their personal stories as part of the program. Survivors continually remark that the opportunity to exhibit their work and share their stories is both cathartic and empowering.

In 2017, JDC Eshel launched a new intergenerational model of the program in which high-school students work together with the survivors in the photography class. These young Israelis learn about the lives and stories of the survivors', who, in turn are able to share their stories with a new generation.

As of 2019, the Photography with Joy program has been run 44 times throughout Israel, impacting 510 participating survivors, and tens of thousands of others who have visited the exhibitions and borne witness to the survivors' experiences.

Exhibitions have been held throughout Israel, including at the Knesset, and the exhibition has been translated into English and hosted in the USA and at the House of Lords in England.

Robert's photography in Kfar Shmaryahu in Israel in memory of the cattle wagons that stopped on the way to the concentration camp, so that the Danish Jews could get out and relieve themselves by the rails.

TO UNDERSTAND DOES NOT MEAN TO FORGIVE

Robert Fischermann