



# MY MEMOIR



*The Story of a Danish Jew who Fled the Nazis*

Dr. Salomon Vainer z"l



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THE STORY OF A DANISH JEW WHO FLED THE NAZIS

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Translated from Danish by Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

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The Escape to Sweden



Throughout the German occupation, no-one gave a thought to how it might affect us Jews. It was as if such concern was suppressed. To my knowledge, no-one escaped from Denmark while there was still plenty of time. No-one believed that what we heard had happened to the Jews in the great Europe could also happen to us. Up to the escape to Sweden, we Danish Jews lived almost untouched by the occupation. Perhaps we didn't believe things were so bad in the rest of Europe. We had heard about incredible mass extermination of millions of murdered Jews. Most Jews in Denmark thought it was an exaggeration. What we heard was simply too unbelievable. But the day came when the Nazis also demanded us, Danish Jews.

During the summer of 1943, we lived in Humlebæk. At that time, a strained atmosphere was beginning to build up between the German occupiers and the Danish government. Many Danish politicians and police officers fled to Sweden. One day my father was advised to bring his family to Sweden and travel with the police escape boat which was just about to start its journey from Humlebæk. Father thought this to be absurd and declined the offer.



Summer of 1943, my parents, myself and my siblings, together with sister-in-law Busse and her son Freddy

Around October 1, 1943 we heard rumors that the Jews in Denmark were to be rounded up, and that ships were already in Øresund waiting to transport Jews to an unknown destination in Europe. It sounded frightening and sinister. I remember one day my father's uncle Chaim Chmelnik came and told us about the impending deportation he had been informed about at the Synagogue.

### **The Chmelnik Family**



My father's uncle, Chaim Chmelnik with his wife Rachel, Fanny to the left together with the two younger siblings, Moses and Sara

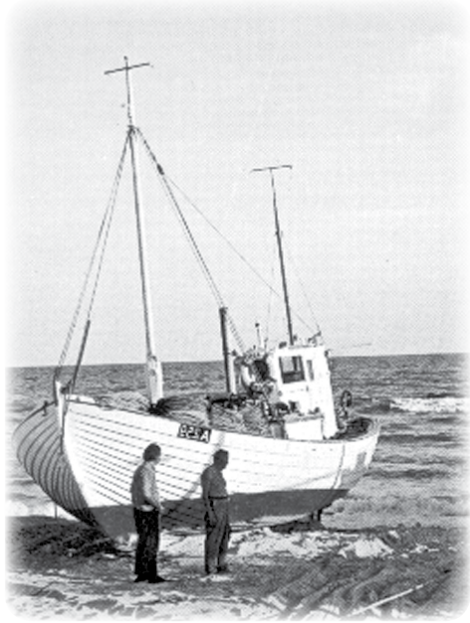
## OUR DEPARTURE TO SWEDEN OCTOBER 6, 1943

Our family was given the opportunity to hide in a villa in Vedbæk. We stayed there two-three days waiting for a chance to take a boat. One of my father's seamstresses and her husband, Tjørnsvedel, secured our ship flight to Sweden. Our brief stay in Vedbæk was nerve-wracking. I remember, early in the morning, we heard a loud engine noise and the rumble of cars – we were startled – “now our turn had come.” Fortunately, it turned out to be a renovation truck making the noise. Otherwise we spent time playing cards with big money – the money we needed to pay our contact person for the transport. We had to pay 2000 DKK per head plus an extra amount to help the transport of other refugees.

At last the day came when a boat was available. However, it was a small fishing boat that had room for a maximum of five adult passengers. The others had to find transport options later. After serious considerations, we agreed that the men and my sister Anna should leave. My mother, my sister-in-law and her son, Freddy, age four, stayed behind.



We left for Copenhagen in a taxi. It was evening and already dark. We drove through the town to Amager. Earlier we passed Christiansborg where there were German check points. We were stopped and the driver got out and exchanged some words with the guard. The driver delivered something which we didn't know what was.



This type of fishing boat brought us to Sweden

We drove on. We passed over Knippelsbro bridge and arrived in Amager. At Amager beach we had to crawl over a wooden fence, which I remember, my father found quite difficult. However, we managed to get across and reached the beach. The fishing boat lay a little away from the shore and we had to wade out to the boat in water up to our waists. We got onboard and were placed below the deck. Here it stank of gasoline and the space was cramped. I became quite seasick. Our sea voyage lasted a good three hours. The captain must have mistaken the direction! It was then that the captain informed us that we were now on Swedish territory. We saw various Swedish vessels sending floodlights over the area. On land we were met by Swedish military and police who received us. We were soaked, both happy and sad. We had left a part of the family behind.





## LIFE AS A REFUGEE

That was how we arrived in Barsebäck where we were immediately taken to a school building and left there. We received nothing, 'neither wet, nor dry,' let alone a bed. It was cold. Even Sweden had to save on electricity. We took off some of our wet clothes and hung them up to 'dry.' The night passed and early the next morning we heard voices outside. Some other refugees were taking a morning walk. We greeted them; we did not know them, and learned that they had had a wonderful evening and night, and had been fed, etc. However, we were both modest and undemanding, so we had been forgotten, something the Swedish police later regretted. I don't remember if we were given a medical examination, but we were interviewed by the Swedish police that morning. We learned that several hundred refugees had arrived on the same day and evening. Everything seemed disorganized, confusing and unprepared. But the main thing is that across the border we came.

We were taken to a collection camp called Snogeholm Castle. It was probably an abandoned castle. It was similar to the collection camp we knew back home as Saltholm Camp where people are smuggled in and then smuggled out again. We had been informed beforehand that the rest of the family had arrived in Sweden and happened to arrive in Barsebäck the day after us. We were reunited at the castle the next day and our joy was immense. We were accommodated in common rooms, men and women separately. The dormitory was furnished with bunk beds. Other youngsters and I had to make do with the upper bunk. It felt like a summer camp. We lived there 2-3 weeks before being transferred to the countryside. We were not permitted entry into many of the big cities unless we could find work there or had connections like family or business relationships in those places.

The time in the camp was fun for us youngsters. When you're 16 years old it's easy to adapt and make the best out of the

situation. A makeshift kiosk where we could buy various essentials, toiletries and tobacco was set up. I remember we had to go up a small staircase to the kiosk barrack in front of which stood a certain tobacco manufacturer checking our purchases. It was manufacturer Hirschsprung who checked whether we had bought cigarettes or that which he preferred, namely cigars.

We were questioned about education and related information and were then assigned a place where there was work and housing for us. My brother Abraham, who studied law, was immediately sent to the university town of Lund. Sweden was then a large industrial country with cities specializing in diverse industries. Ørebro in shoes, Borås in textiles, etc. The rest of the family went to Borås, since my mother and sister-in-law were both seamstresses. My father was disabled with severe vision loss. He did well in Denmark, but as an employee, it wasn't going to work out for him. I think he received some kind of disability pension.

My mother, sister and sister-in-law were sent to the same clothing factory as seamstresses. My oldest brother Moses was given a position as a presser doing piecework at a men's clothing factory and managed fine. I was given a lowly position in a 'knitwear factory' as an errand boy (andra springpojke). The salary was low as I received minimum wage as a 'youth worker.'

But we managed. We were allotted residence in an abandoned villa built of wood on Andra Villagatan 11. There was plenty of room for all of us as my married brother and his family occupied the first floor. But it didn't last long. Soon other refugees would be living in the house, so we had to squeeze together downstairs. Several people lived on the first floor. The last arrivals were the Lekach family who lived there for the rest of the refugee period. My father would often shush us when we became too boisterous. He reminded us that those 'on top' could hear every word we said.



Andra Villagaten 11 in Borås<sup>21</sup>

As a very skilled seamstress, my mother found work in a factory doing alterations. She had to repair the mistakes of others. In doing so, she received a slightly higher salary. In the beginning we received the bare necessities like beds and blankets from the Red Cross, as well as the essential kitchen utensils and more. Quite quickly we were visited by Swedish neighbors, who saw our ‘miserable existence,’ and it did not take long before we got better beds, furniture and so on.

Overall, we Danish refugees were met with kindness and understanding among the Swedes. My brother in Lund along with other students, was protected by the Swedish professors. One of the law professors said, “Come see me” and then the refugees were directed to Swedish stores to receive clothing, shoes and whatever else was needed. Who financed this ‘revelry’ remained a mystery.

After a few months, my sister arrived in Stockholm having obtained office work in the Refugee Center. In Denmark, she had held an office position in a Jewish law firm. One of the

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21 Translator found this photo at <http://nostalgorama.blogspot.com/2019/03/gamla-vykort-pa-jarnvagsstationer.html>.

lawyers there had some influence in the management of the Danish refugees. It was a much sought-after job.

I, as the youngest, started working in a medium sized knitwear factory. Here I was spoiled rotten. As mentioned before, my salary was not great, but on Saturday someone had to fetch coffee with pastries from a bakery in town. It was me who got this job, and I was able to supplement my weekly salary with plenty of tips – after all, people were nice in Sweden. Apart from the wages, the boss looked after me and that helped a lot. I was the only employee that had been invited to his private home where there were other youths my age.

I introduced a new lunch dish to the factory menu. It was noticed that I often had potato sandwich for lunch. At first, I was mocked about it, but gradually it became popular and eventually most of the factory's about 50 workers often had potato sandwich on their lunch menu.

Immediately after my stint as an errand boy, I heard about the Danish schools in the larger cities. I applied to go to Gothenburg to continue my education, but it took about half a year before I finally succeeded. I had probably approached the matter in a completely wrong way. I should have just gone to the school in Gothenburg and said, 'here I am,' then I probably would have been assigned a seat in a class. Some did exactly that. In retrospect, I had to register with Swedish authorities, in order to receive a ration book and other documents so there was probably no other viable way after all.

At last the day arrived when I had to leave the factory. My fellow workers had secretly collected a sum of money that they said was for the purchase of a bicycle. Regretfully I had to leave it behind at the factory when I left Sweden. But it was sweet of them and I was very touched. Sure – I was their favorite.



## AT LAST IN GOTHENBURG

The Danish school in Gothenburg was a regular public school which included 'middle school,' 'real school' (secondary school) and 'Gymnasium' (high school). I arrived in the middle of the school year and started in the 'real school.' The classes were mixed, boys and girls together. We weren't used to this from home. In general, the conditions and the atmosphere were pretty much like those we have today. Some of the teachers included us in discussions about our grades. Many of them were 'overqualified.' For a short while, we had Harald Bohr in math. There were several assistant professors and other academics as well as students who were good educators. I joined 'real school' in April 1944 and completed my exams in November 1944. As far as I know, I was the first to take this exam abroad. I continued in 1.G.<sup>22</sup> The school year ended shortly after the end of the war on May 29, 1945.

As a 17-year-old minor, I was referred to live in a boarding house located in Pixbo, in the outskirts of Gothenburg, roughly 20 km. from the city. From there we took the train to town and had a great time. We were approximately 10-12 boys. I remember many being very talented, discussing politics, art and literature, playing music, while others painted, etc.

After two-three months, additional boys were to enter our boarding house. The oldest among us were referred to a smaller boarding house in the center of Gothenburg on Kungsportavenyen 35. It was the most central neighborhood in the city, right across from, as one says in Swedish, 'Liseberg,' an amusement park similar to our Tivoli Gardens. On the Kungsportavenyen there were fashionable cafés, with a good atmosphere and musical entertainment. However, we could not afford any of that. At this boarding house too, there was a shortage of space and some of us had to move to rented rooms in town. The rent for such rooms was quite high.

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22 1.G. means, the first grade of the Gymnasium corresponding to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, see footnote 17 on page 58.

We, below the age of 18, received a monthly support of 175 DKK. The rent of a room cost about 100 DKK, so it was expensive. I moved in with one of my friends from Pixbo, Rudolf Hirsch called Rudi. He was originally German, from a small town near Düsseldorf. He came to Denmark as a 15-year-old and had only attended primary school but had now entered middle school. He was incredibly energetic but hadn't quite mastered the Danish language, let alone mathematics. I had the pleasure of tutoring him in both subjects. He passed the 'real school' exams with flying colors and surpassed his 'tutor' receiving over 14 on average – nice!

While living in a rented room, we were still quite young without parents or relatives who could take care of us if the need should arise. I had Mrs. Birger Christensen as breakfast mom. Every morning I was welcomed at her home for breakfast. There I also met her daughter, who was my age, and sometimes I met Mr. Birger Christensen and his son Finn. They had stayed behind in Denmark. Naturally I did not ask how or why, etc. Mrs. Birger Christensen took an interest in my small problems. Overall, she was an exceptionally loveable lady.

Shortly after her passing 5-6 years ago, Mirjam and I were in the fur shop to buy a fur coat. There we saw Finn. Of course he did not recognize me, but I told him that I knew him. He answered without interest that many people knew him. I then told him about my stay in Gothenburg, about his recently deceased mother whom I respected greatly and various details about the family and home. Then, he gave in, and Mirjam got a fur at a bargain price.



## ECONOMICS AND POCKET MONEY

An interesting issue. I never had that much money to spend on myself when I was a youngster. As mentioned, we received support from the Refugee Office of 175 DKK monthly. We started the month with each of us putting 20 DKK in the 'box,' 50 DKK for the rent and an extra 5 DKK each because we had a radio. This left us with 100 DKK. We found a place, restaurant Cecil, where one could buy 30 dinner vouchers for 30 DKK. There was appetizer, a solid main course, dessert and coffee. Initially we tipped the waitress 10 øre,<sup>23</sup> but she wouldn't accept them. This left us with 70 DKK + 20 DKK in the 'box.' It was a tidy sum, more than I was used to in Denmark.

The teaching of the Danish school in Gothenburg was spread out in various premises across town. The youngest went to school in the morning, while we 'oldies' mostly attended in the afternoon. As gymnasium students, we needed special facilities, and these were only available in the afternoon.

Our late required attendance at school offered us leisure time during the mornings. Some stayed in bed most of the morning, but others met each morning in the town's 'Konsum' – a restaurant which is kind of a 'milk bar.' On the menu were cornflakes or porridge. A jug of milk stood on each table as well as fresh breakfast rolls and butter. All this cost 25 Swedish öre – about 2 ½ pennies today. The young waitresses gave large helpings. Some of us made a packed lunch to be eaten later, and the Swedish girls gave us suitable bags. These conditions were a great help economically – yes, the Swedes were indeed nice.




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23 The Danish krone (DKK) subdivides into 100 øre.

## MY FREE TIME

In my spare time I had many chores. Occasionally I went home to my parents in Borås, a distance of approximately 70 km. The ticket cost 5 DKK. On exceptional occasions my brother from Lund or sister from Stockholm was also present. But apart from this, I longed to return to Denmark. I was a member of the Danish Football Club in Gothenburg, and I played as much football as I did at home. Many of the other boys in the club were the same friends from Hakoah in Denmark. In general, sports occupied much of my time. We from the Danish Football Club received free tickets to the Park where the division clubs played.

## THE DANISH HOME

The Danish Home was created. As far as I remember, it was on Södre Hamngatan 23. It was a larger apartment dedicated to us Danes. There we could meet, play cards, chess or other games, get a cup of coffee or a drink of water. I don't remember the price, but this didn't really interest me. I enjoyed Saturday evening there very much. Films were often shown. There was usually a feature film – a movie which was forbidden to show publicly in neutral Sweden. There were English and American movies, war movies, spy movies and more, very exciting.

I remember we saw Pimpnel Smith starring Lesley Howard – an excellent actor – which alone was an experience worth watching. There were of course also lectures as well as ordinary films. All in all, it was a place to enjoy yourself. We, gymnasium students, were automatically members of the 'Student Union,' where we could likewise enjoy ourselves. We were spoiled, because we could get coffee and tea without payment – indeed the Swedes were kind. Sometimes during the summer, we visited Lorensberg, a restaurant that was beautifully situated in a large park complex. A couple of our friends performed music over



the weekend. It was Boris Rabinowitsch from 2.G.<sup>24</sup> and Leif Jacobowitz. Leif was an excellent jazz violin player, and Boris played piano with jazz as his specialty. They took Lorensberg's youth by storm. Later, Boris became a music reviewer in one of our daily newspapers, specializing in jazz. He has helped to organize several jazz festivals in Copenhagen, as well as being a co-organizer of '*Copenhagen, Town of Culture, anno 96.*' Leif emigrated to England several years after returning to Denmark from Sweden. Apparently, he became very successful in the clothing industry. In the Danish Home, we naturally met a wide variety of Danes, and both Rudi and I made contacts with others besides our schoolmates. Rudi and I were hard-working students and didn't go out much on weekdays. Saturday night, however, we usually spent in the Danish Home. On Sunday mornings, Rudi would 'drag' me to the State theatre where there were concert rehearsals and other activities. We were given complimentary tickets. Rudi was every interested in music, and my interest in classical music was aroused in this way.

## FRIENDS

**H**ow many Danish refugees were there in Sweden? I believe there were about 16,000. In the Mosaic Congregation we numbered 6-7,000 souls. Who were the remaining approximately 10,000 refugees? I can't come up with a precise guess, but it was evident that not all of them were freedom fighters.

In Sweden and especially in the school in Gothenburg, I met many non-Jews with a special connection to Judaism. Many had Jewish ancestry either on their mother's or father's side. There were large numbers bearing traditional Jewish names: Kalkar, Trier, Goldschmidt, Hannover, Hertz, Blatt, Henius, Gunst, Gluckstadt, Marcus, Hirschsprung, Levysohn, Phillipsohn and others. These were families we often heard about in Denmark, but they rarely appeared in Jewish circles and only a few of them were members of the Jewish community. Some families

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24 Corresponding to 11<sup>th</sup> grade

had long since been baptized and had taken other names. Additional names had disappeared due to marriage. That left the freedom fighters, but they never mentioned their ancestry or their merits. This whole mix of students provided the life of the school with a special atmosphere of renewal. Many friendships were made and later even marriages. Thus, I remember that the now deceased author Ivan Malinovski wrote love poems to Ruth Somer.<sup>25</sup> They got married later in Denmark.

## SUMMER VACATION

The time for summer vacation arrived and of course, I went to my parents in Borås. The entire family gathered there during the summer holidays. We enjoyed ourselves, but occasionally I had to tend to a job I had taken as a bicycle courier. This was a bit of an ordeal. Every day, a Swede arrived at the office. He was an alcoholic. He was well off and paid plenty for his Schnapps. After all, it was rationed. I had never seen such large alcohol consumption. He ended up falling asleep in his chair. We made fun of him, but in this we were unkind.

Before the end of term, a few of us decided to take a bike ride around Sweden. We met in my home in Borås where we were treated to a good meal. My parents were always very hospitable. I had my beautiful bicycle, which I received from the textile factory when I'd left six months earlier.

I remember we were the following boys: Herbert and Daniel Pundik, Sally Besekow, Harry Altschul, Isaac Berkowitz and probably a couple more. We rode through central Sweden and had many adventures. As we approached Stockholm, we were unsure about the way, and some 'idiot' asked a policeman for directions. Herbert and Daniel had gone ahead as they were meeting a relative in Stockholm. The policeman asked us to follow him to the police station. There we learned that

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25 Ruth Somer was Mirjam's cousin, the daughter of Mirjam's father's half-sister, Hannah.

we did not have entry visa for Stockholm. We ended up in jail. We were 'lodged' in separate cells, myself with a drunken Swede who muttered all night, "you devil Danes!" It was quite frightening. But then the next morning was a feast! We had breakfast, delicious rolls and more. Sally and Harry repaid with harmonica music which the prison guards enjoyed immensely. Sally and Harry were both very talented.

Speaking of talented, Sally had heard the previously mentioned Boris play jazz on the piano at a school ball. He was fascinated and asked Boris to teach him. After about two weeks, Sally played boogie woogie like a professional. They have talent these 'Besekowers.' Meanwhile we were escorted to the outskirts of Stockholm and had to report to Upsala's police. We didn't see Stockholm at all.

### **Danish Students from Gothenburg in 1944 and 1945**



The student team  
May 1944

The student team  
May 1945



We returned home when the new school year was about to begin. I took my 'real school' exams and continued in 1.G.,<sup>26</sup> which ended May 17, 1945.



May 4, 1944, Danish gymnasium students  
in Gothenburg

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26 See footnote 22.

Peace Arrived in Denmark



## THE RETURN JOURNEY

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, there were celebrations all over Sweden. Swedes as well as refugees celebrated with cheers. The Danish and Norwegian flags could be seen everywhere. I was with some friends at a restaurant and while we were on the dance floor, a friendly Swede had ordered a bottle of champagne for us.

In the days while waiting to return to Denmark around June 1, we students lived in an atmosphere of euphoria. I don't remember if there was regular school at all. What I do remember is the problem that we had to finish various exams and finals which kept us 'on the rack.'

Soon after peace arrived in 1945 we went on a trip to Gothenburg. We were going to play football against the corresponding Jewish team there. On this trip, I got the lesson of my life. Everyone had bought quantities of tobacco including myself, and it was tucked away in socks, boots and clothes. The customs officials unpacked everything and laid it out on the counter. It turned into a huge pile of tobacco products. It was all confiscated and I was very ashamed. I've never tried to cheat on customs since.

My thoughts were with my parents. After all, they had left everything they owned in Denmark – everything they had built up through their diligence and hard work. Would it all be lost? But my parents were content. As they said, everyone in our family had managed and survived the horror unleashed by the Germans. Along the way we had learned that nearly 500 Danish Jews had been arrested by the Germans and sent to the concentration camp, Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia and that millions of European Jews had been exterminated by the Nazis. My parents returned home to nearly nothing. But with renewed energy and hard work, they succeeded in starting up again.



The Central Railway station in Copenhagen

I did not take note of the exact date of our family's return, but it was in early June 1945. When we arrived at the Central Railway Station, there was great hustle and bustle. The many hundreds of returning refugees created confusion everywhere. Suitcases, bicycles and whatever else had been sent ahead could obviously not be collected the same day. These we had to retrieve later. Most people found out that their suitcases had been forced open, usually it was tobacco products that were targeted, but I believe that most of us took it in good spirits.

The actual trip through Copenhagen was a bit of a disappointment. We encountered subdued expressions all around us. I had the feeling that people were discouraged to see us returning with bulging bags and nice clothes, etc. Many had had to go without for several years. But home we came. My childhood home, a condo on Nørrebro had been rented out through the association and we could had to wait five to six weeks to move back in. Therefore, we were temporarily accommodated at a school, Aurehøj Gymnasium. Several hundred others lodged there as well. After a while, we were given lodgings in town or stayed with family and friends. We finally returned to our apartment. I have been told that the Copenhagen Magistrate arranged the payment of rent and looked after the property and its contents, if no-one else was taking care of it.



My father put his heart and soul into writing down his illustrated *Memoir*, with photos of his family four generations back, which he managed to collect, including photos of his parents' grandparents. *My Memoir* demonstrates how much my father loved every family member and especially how proud he was of us, his three daughters. I'm grateful that my father bequeathed us, his daughters, grandchildren and great grandchildren with the rich legacy of our roots.

*The Story of a Danish Jew who Fled the Nazis* is not exclusively of interest to the family. The description of my father's family's flight to Sweden during the German occupation of Denmark, and their life during the occupation certainly has general interest.

– *Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum,*  
*Gush Etzion, Israel*

