

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Niels Bamberger
December 26, 1989
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Niels Bamberger, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on December 26, 1989 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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NIELS BAMBERGER

December 26, 1989

01:00:26

Q: Could you tell me your name please?

A: Niels Bamberger.

Q: And where and when were you born?

A: I was born in October 1928 in Germany. Würzburg, Germany. And I was born, as an infant, my parents fled Germany to Copenhagen in 1932, where my mother originally had come from. And, uh, she lived in...in Germany for nine years, ten years. Then she went back to Denmark.

01:00:58

Q: Why had she lived in Germany for ten years?

A: Because she got married. She grew up in Denmark and lived in Denmark and then she married my father who lived in Germany and they were married in 1923 and then they went back to Denmark when it started to get...uh...with Hitler, and it started to get too hot in Germany. Then they went back to Denmark. And that's where I actually grew up and lived half of my life.

Q: Okay. Tell me about...what did your father do? What was his occupation?

A: Well, in Denmark he had an antique store. He had an art store; and they started that like in 1935-36 in Copenhagen, 'til we fled to Sweden in 1943.

Q: Tell me if you would about growing up in Copenhagen before the Germans came, in the '30s?

A: I went to a non-Jewish school. I was...I wouldn't say I was the only Jew in school, but we were probably two or three fellows and the school was from 8 to 2 every day and then in the afternoon, we went for Hebrew...for Hebrew lessons or Hebrew school for another two, three hours. So we came back...we came home like 5:30, 6:00 every night and did our homework. And that was the same routine. Of course, we had no schools Saturday or Sunday. Then we were off and we went to football games and bicycling and things like that. Whatever we did with my friends.

Q: What was your...your parents' home like. Did you practice...?

A: Well, we had a house in Copenhagen, in the center of Copenhagen. We had our own house that had belonged to my grandfather and great grandfather. It's still standing there now. And it's probably two or three hundred years old. And we had a big apartment on the second floor. There were other people living in the house and then there were stores. There were stores on the ground floor. And we had a synagogue that had been there for more than one hundred years also started by my great-grandfather on...in the same house we had that.

01:03:15

Q: In the same house?

A: Yes. And it's still there. It's not anymore there today because it was given to the city of Copenhagen.

Q: Okay. Tell me how that worked? That is were you...you must have been heavily...your family was heavily involved in that synagogue?

A: Yes. We were very...I was brought up very Orthodox; and, of course, my parents were too. My grandfather was a Rabbi, and my brother is a Rabbi today. So that's the way we grew up. We...we had a very good life. Like Tove said. And uh...we had no problems whatsoever all the time. Not money-wise or economic or we had no problem until it started in October '43, and the Germans had been in the country for three years from '40 to '43.

Q: Hold it for one minute. Before we get to the Germans, I would like to know a little more about your being Jewish in Copenhagen. And you were so closely involved in the synagogue. What...what did your Jewish life consist of? What kinds of things did you do? Holidays, services, what?

A: We had services every day in our synagogue. And, of course, we had the sabbath, the Jewish Sabbath every week, and we had the Jewish holidays. And uh...the reason our synagogue was started originally of...by my great grandfather or grandfather was that he didn't think that the big synagogue--they have a beautiful, large synagogue in Copenhagen--but that wasn't Orthodox enough hundred years ago. They started with, uh...different reformed things; and they cut this prayer out and they cut this one out. And that's when my grandfather started his own synagogue, so to speak. And like I said, it still...it still can be seen. It's in the museum in Copenhagen...the city. You see them in Copenhagen. They have...they removed everything when the house was sold a couple of years ago. It...like I said, it's a very old building, and it's in the heart of the city. And there was no money to pay the taxes and the roof was falling apart so to speak and...uh...then it was sold. The house was sold, and the synagogue was removed. And that's the story. Today, it's just an old, uh...landmark building in the center of Copenhagen that's being owned by a private man or corporation. I don't know who has it today.

01:06:03

Q: Uh, in growing up in such a very...in a Orthodox Jewish home, did you feel differently? Did you feel you were treated differently than your Christian neighbors?

A: Not at all. They were my friends. And, uh...we went together for this or for that and we had birthday parties and we went to ball games and things like that, I said before. And, uh...there was no difference. Nobody ever mentioned anything about Jewish or non-Jewish. We were all the same. We were citizens of Denmark and that's all they cared about. Nobody said you are Jewish or you are not Jewish. That made no difference to us.

01:06:44

Q: When the Germans invaded in 1940, you would have been 12 years old?

A: Right.

Q: Uh, what can you tell me about, uh...the invasion itself? What do you remember?

A: Well, we know that, uh, there were soldiers all over. And they threw out leaflets all over the city, all over the country that people could just go now and don't make any uproar. Everything will continue the way it was. Of course, everything became rationed or rationed whatever. And...uh... we were in school that day. We saw loads and loads of planes, bombing planes coming one after...I mean hundreds and hundreds of planes coming in and Germans on motorcycles, horses, dragging cannons and the big tanks all over the place. It didn't take more than a couple of hours 'til they took over the country. Like I said they [the Danes] couldn't resist. Denmark was a very small country. And, uh...life went on as before, except that that you are not allowed to walk on this side of the street in front of the bank. They would post soldiers with, uh...guns and...and steel helmets and things like that in front of the banks and the hotels and important institutions that they wanted to guard. But besides that nothing happened really. The police was in force and the Danish Army was...although they were there, they had not much to say or to do, but they were all...life was continuing the way it was. Everything got rationed and we had to buy butter and bread and gasoline, all the things. You couldn't go out and buy whatever you wanted, but there was plenty of it around. The Germans took away whatever they needed, but there was still plenty. Denmark is a dairy country, so there was plenty of food for everybody. And then in...uh...in 1943, they took the...they arrested all the police and the Army. They took them away in August of '43. That's when we know...knew something was going to happen. They took them away and interned them all in camps and took their weapons away and then they said that it was the police's fault and the army. Then all of a sudden they switched over and they said that it's all the Jews' fault. I mean they didn't say it, but we knew that something was going to happen.

01:09:32

Q: How? Tell me what your life had been like in those three years and then we will continue.

A: The same thing like before. We went to school. We had food. We had all holidays. And...uh...we went to Hebrew school, went to regular school. There was no difference so to speak except that...uh...we saw the Germans all over. And...uh...everybody despised them. They still do today. When the Germans go to Denmark with their big cars and so on, nobody likes them there. But otherwise, everything continued the way it had been til '43. I think it was August '43 that...uh...they took, the Germans...they took the police force and the soldiers and interned everybody and...uh... August...and October 1st, I believe it was Rosh Hashanah, they had been in to pick up the...all the files from the Jewish... uh...community. They had all the names, all the addresses of everyone in Copenhagen, which was about 6,000 Jews and they had... They knew where they lived, what they did, their business. They had everything. And we were informed in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we were informed that nobody should go home because the Germans are going to round you up the night between the 1st and the 2nd of October. And those who believed it, which most of the people did, we were all scared. They...uh...didn't go home. We all had made arrangements with some non-Jews, some Danish where we could stay or where to sleep. Those who didn't believe it. They were taken, which was a very small percentage anyhow. And they all came back after the war. So we went to our grocer who was a bachelor and he said, "Come to my house and I'll take care of you." So after the synagogue, we went to him and he bought us, or he had in his store bread and butter and cheese and milk and eggs, whatever we needed. He took care of us for a week til we found a connection how to get out of the country. Copenhagen is on the seashore and we went up to Snekkersten, same place and where most of them went from. Everybody went to Sweden from there because it's the narrowest point between Denmark and Sweden. It's like three, four miles wide. That's the whole thing...the waterway. But it is very heavy stream there. It's a very heavy...uh... waterway. So we stayed in his house and....

Q: In whose.... Excuse me. How...first of all, how did you get to Snekkersten?

A: How did we get there? Well, he called up every day. He called up somebody that he knew from the resistance movement and he didn't say...we went with...I went with my parents and my two brothers and a sister. We were six people altogether. And he wouldn't say that he has some people to send. He didn't know if this telephone was...uh...what do you call it?

Q: Tapped?

A: Tapped!

Q: This is your grocer calling?

A: Yes. So he called up. He said, "I have six tons of potatoes. Could you come and pick them up?" 'Til he finally got a connection. And uh...it took us about a week, until the day before Yom Kippur. And then we got a taxi; and the taxi took us up to that place up in Snekkersten,

where everybody had been collected, so to speak. All the people were there. There were two or three hundred people there everyday, four hundred people maybe in somebody's home, in a basement. And I remember as a child that...uh...we were covered up in the taxi with...uh...a blanket in case the police would stop and say, "What's wrong? What do you have in there?" He would say, "I have a sick person. Just close the door. I have to go to the hospital." So we were covered up and he went up there. It's not more than 30, 40 minute ride by taxi. We went up there. We came to that house. And...uh...we met somebody from the resistance movement who took us down to the pier at night, and we came down there and we were told that the boat we were supposed to go with had been taken by somebody else who paid more money for it.

01:13:57

He paid a big sum of money, so he took this man out by himself...the fishing boat. So we had to wait til the next day and...uh...the next day, luckily for us it had been organized this way that the resistance movement had a big schooner-like; and they took two or three hundred people aboard. We went all down...down below deck, and uh...we went out there by row boats. It wasn't far out to the ship and when they had all the people there, first we paid them money. We paid like 2,000 krone a person. That was the going rate. Which was a lot of money at that time; but we were told if you come to Sweden the money is worthless. You can't do anything with it. You might as well leave it here, number 1, and number 2, whatever money you give now will help those people who are poor or sick and can't afford it. They will also get out. Everybody got out, whether they had money or not. They were all helped to get out. And we got aboard that ship and, uh... we got off. We sailed also...uh...for an hour or so at midnight and in the middle of the ocean we had this big Swedish torpedo boat or gunboat coming towards us. We all thought it was the Germans, but it was the Swedish boat. They had the same kind of uniforms and they helped us all off, on the Swedish ship. We got aboard the Swedish ship and they gave us coffee and candy or whatever, and then we went into Sweden. And we were saved.

01:15:31

(cough) So when we arrived in Sweden, we were all listed by names. They wanted to know who is coming and here that they didn't have any German helpers or whoever. We were all listed by name and address and age and so on. And we came there on the night of Yom Kippur or the day before Yom Kippur, which was very unpleasant for us. We got food. We got clothing. We had nothing along except what we wore. We had no...we had nothing along with us. Just what we had on! And...uh...I remember that we went to...we were in a camp, a big camp that was guarded by the Swedish soldiers, and we could go freely. We could go in and out the way we wanted. We wanted, of course, my father wanted to go to the synagogue--which was like 10, 12 miles away. And we all walked in there, on Yom Kippur morning, into Hälsingborg. We walked in there to synagogue and we....

Q: You walked 12 miles just to go to synagogue?

01:16:38

A: Yes. And we attended the services, a full day of services, without food. And uh...in the middle of the afternoon, a girl came in with a bus, a big bus; and they interrupted the services. And they said that all the people from Denmark, all the refugees who are here in the synagogue, should immediately come out to the bus and go back to camp. They had left the camp and we should go back. So my father said, "Now that we have been saved from the Germans, we are not going to go on a bus on Yom Kippur." We were not used to that. (Laughing) So we waited until after the services were over at night, and then somebody took us home from the synagogue. Somebody drove us back to the camp. And when we came back to camp, we were told, "You have to leave tonight. Because you didn't come back with the girl that was sent with the bus, so you have to leave tonight." And uh...we had no money or anything. So we went to the railroad station; and somebody bought us the tickets to Malmö, where my father had a cousin. So we came there in the middle of the night, 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. But we were very lucky. We were saved. We were happy. And uh...then we got an apartment there eventually. Little by little, my parents started a restaurant. On the card I gave you, you can see that from that time. My parents started a restaurant, because my mother felt if she makes food for other people--she was a very good cook--then there'll be enough for us to eat, also. And we all got jobs for October, November, December; and in January, the school opened...a Danish school for the...for the refugees--children, or so to speak. And we went to school there where we had left it off in Denmark and continued in Sweden. We...it was in Lund. We went there by train every day, which was a 20, 25-minute train ride and we got the train...the, uh, tickets from the government, and we got pocket money. Each one got pocket money; and on Sunday, in order to make something extra for us, or to help our parents, we made...I remember that I delivered flowers. I worked in a flower shop, and delivered flowers as a boy. I was 15 years old, so I made extra money that way. And we were very happy there. We had all the goodies that we didn't have in Denmark. They didn't have bananas and oranges and chocolate and chewing gum. We didn't have in Denmark anymore at that time, so we could buy that in Sweden. Not that it was so important, but, uh...there was plenty of everything. Sweden was neutral, and they kept on importing whatever you wanted. They had everything. And that's actually what happened to us in Sweden. We were there for...we were there for close to two years, 'til May '45. Everybody went back to Denmark. We were very happy. On May 4th, when we [were] told that the Germans gave up in Denmark and Norway, Holland, Belgium...uh, we went back.... Everybody was celebrating. And the 28th of May everybody went back on the ferry boats to Denmark. And when we came back to Denmark, each one...there were all the Danes were there, and we all got money. Not a lot of money, but we got some money. So we could take a taxi or bus or whatever home. Each person got some money from the Danish government. And I remember we came home to our apartment and found everything the way we had left it--except, of course, there were mice and spiders and all kinds of things. But the food was on the table, in the pots. Nobody had been into the apartment. Everything was the way we left it. And the synagogue that I mentioned before, our lawyer had taken away the torah scrolls and hidden them in a...what you say, in a vault? Safety vault, in a

bank. And they were all...everything was left the way, the way...uh...everything came back the way we left it two years earlier. What else?

01:21:12

Q: Was your father involved at all in...uh...the brigade? When you were in Sweden, was your father involved at all in the brigade that was being formed?

A: No. I applied for it, but I was only, uh...15 years old, or going on 16, and I was too young. They wouldn't take anybody below 18. And my father was actually too old. [In] '43, he was almost 60 at that time. So they had enough young people and what they actually needed them for.... There was no fighting when we came back. What they needed them for was to clean up after the Germans, and take the weapons away and count this and count that. And the uniforms...whatever they had. My father was too old, and I was too young, so to speak; so they didn't take me.

01:22:08

Q: What did you do when you came back to Denmark?

A: I went back to school. I continued school where I had left off and...uh...there was no... I shouldn't say hard feelings. Everybody was...they were all helping us, all the time in Denmark. All the non-Jews were helping the Jews. There was no difference; and I am sure today they would just say, "You are Danish citizens. You are the same as we are." Nobody would ever ask, "Are you Jewish? Are you black? Are you Chinese?" They don't care. And they helped everybody there.

Q: What kind of help did you receive?

A: Pardon me?

Q: What kind of help did you receive as a family?

A: Well, we had to get back on our feet. We had to...uh...get back to school and clean up in the house and buy new clothes and furniture or whatever we needed there. And my parents got back in their business which had been rented out to somebody while we were away, and the same business they got back again when we came back from...when we came back from Sweden. They continued that. (long sigh) I had my friends. They were all very helpful to me. And we spoke about Sweden. And they told us what had been going on in Denmark during the war. The synagogue...the big synagogue in Copenhagen which is one of the most beautiful one in the world had been used for the German refugees. They had taken everything out and put beds or cots in there and they had all the Germans who were invalids and sick people. They put them in there. That had to be cleaned up. And the synagogue was brought back into order in a very short time. And while this was going on, they used our

synagogue in...in my parents' house. That was used as the big synagogue so to speak. So we have pictures from that also...from that synagogue. Should I mention about that pin?

01:24:21

Q: Yes. Please do.

A: This pin?

Q: Tell us about the pin you are wearing?

A: Well, this is made by...it was made during the war by George Hensen. It was made in silver and this one was made in gold and enamel. It was made for the King Christian X who was one of the biggest heroes, I would say, during the war. Uh... whatever money it cost to make it...the excess money that was left over, went to the resistance movement. That's the way...almost every Dane had it or supported it this way. There are not many left of them today. It was made in 1940 for the King's 70th birthday. There are not many left because first of all, people needed money and they sold them for the value of the silver or gold during the war, but they are back in style today, and I have this from my father. That's why I wear...that's why I am wearing it now. The King Christian the Tenth, they always told stories about the King, about the Jewish Star, that first of all, he was riding around on a horse everyday unescorted by himself. Every morning he would take the same route. Anyone could have killed him as easy as nothing, but he was not afraid. And the King said if the Jews ever have to wear the...uh...the Jewish star, the six-pointed Jewish star where it said Jew on it, he would be the first one to wear it, but it never materialized during the war. It never happened. What else can I...

Q: Okay. Is there anything else you want to add?

01:26:14

A: Well, I would say that the Danes are great people. And one of the few countries...one of the few nations that did more than their share to help the Jews all over the world and they...I am sure they would repeat the same thing and do it today again if it happened, if it should happen that they would be willing to help with money, deeds and everything. They are very unselfish and they are not asking for any thank you or anything in public by anyone. They never did.

Q: Okay. On that note, I thank you very much.

A: Not at all. My pleasure. That's it?

Q: Okay. Thank you. I am glad we got in about the pin.

A: I think it was important.

Q: Yes. I think we do actually. Okay. If you sit still, they are going to bring the camera in and they'll take a picture of the pin and then maybe we'll have Arnold take a picture of it as well. We have a gentlemen who is going to take your photograph. The film has stopped. We have a gentleman who will take your photographs.

A: How long did this take? 45 minutes? I don't remember. I don't remember everything together at one time.

Q: Well, it all came together very neatly.

A: Okay. As long as you are satisfied.

Q: I am very happy. Okay. We need you to be very still. They are going to bring a zoom lens in and...uh...take picture just of the pin. You don't move for a few seconds and they will...

A: Now?

Q: Yal. Just don't move for a little bit, and they got a different lens on the camera and they are doing funny things to it so that... They are doing fancy things to the zoom lens so they can get a close up of that pin. It's a wonderful story, that pin...and...uh. Okay. If you would explain the story of the pin now. Don't move. Just explain it because we are right in on that?

01:28:25

A: The pin was made in 1940. It was made by George Hensen, silversmith, for the King's--who was Christian the Tenth--70th birthday, and all the money, the excess money above the cost of the pin went to the resistance movement. The pin was made in gold and it was also made in silver and enamel. And it was sold almost by any silversmith or silver shop in Copenhagen. I should say in Denmark, all over Denmark. It was sold for raising, in order to raise money for the resistance movement.

Q: Okay. Could you point to the pin please?

A: Point to it?

Q: Just point to it.

A: This one here?

Q: Uh, huh. Okay. That's it. All right.

A: That's it? Thank you.

Q: Thank you very much. I am delighted. It went very well.

A: I am glad you have it now.

01:29:37