Index: RG-50.030.0831

Title: Oral history interview with Benni Korzen

Interviewee: Benni Korzen

Interviewer: Leslie Swift

00:00:00

**Q: But you didn’t go until November, I think.**

A: I didn’t go until November, and stayed with his family, where – where – because the family had two daughters my age, I sort of – I – I – as I remember that time, i-it was an exciting time, because th-th-they – they treated me as I – I suddenly became a member of a new family.

**Q: Right.**

A: And – and there was a very nice house, and so i-it was – it was – you know, I was kept away totally, from the reality of what was happening.

**Q: Right. So as – continuing to speak about what you remember from that time, do you remember being taken to the house, or – I mean, do y –**

A: No, I remember being then taken from the house in – it was November 17th, and the reason I know that date is that a very nice friend, a journalist, a Danish journ- journalist, dug up information that has to do with when we then – when all these Danish Jews arrived in Sweden, there was another sort of chaotic – under the chaos of – because nobody arrived in – in – at given points. https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 7

**Q: Right.**

A: The – the boats that took us over ranged from long boats to, you know, large fishing trawlers. And they ended up wherever they could. And wherever that happened, the Swedish police took notes, and you know, took the information who – who – who had arrived. And so, I have a copy of that, dated November the 18th, where I, as a five and a half year old boy, described as – with, you know, not able to speak Swedish, which I then le – later learned –

**Q: Yeah, of course.**

A: – cause I went to first grade there. And what I remember is that the night when I was picked up by two very nice people that I had never seen before, one of whom gave me a comic strip, a ba – a – a – was a –

**Q: A comic book?**

A: A comic book.

**Q: Oh.**

A: Which I fo – thought was fascinating.

**Q: So that – it’s – did – he or she bought it?**

A: So this [indecipherable] yeah.

**Q: Oh, wow. https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 8**

A: A-A-And then we drove, and I think if – this was not a fast thing. I think it took about 24 hours, because I remember I – I was sleeping and then waking up, and then it was the next night. All the – the – the core things took place at night, because the German patrol boats covered the water between Denmark and Sweden, across which all of these both – boats sailed. So, it was probably something like 36 hours, and I do remember that when I was then placed on a boat, a brusque voice from, I guess th-the guy in charge, said, kid, you puke on this boat, and I throw you overboard. So you better behave. And it was said with some kind of a – you know, a tinge of humor, so I didn’t – I didn’t – it didn’t scare me, it was just, hey, I be – okay, I better behave here. And th-the crossing was fast, because this was a – a very fast moving boat. And at the other end, my fa – of course, in Sweden, my father then, who had come down from Stockholm, where my parents had been settled, he had been waiting there for three days, not knowing – it’s not exactly like th-the schedule is this, you know?

**Q: Right.**

A: So he was very happy, and – and then we ended up in Stockholm, and stayed there until May of 1945.

**Q: A-And so, wh-what – what was your life like in Stockholm? https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 9**

A: It – it was, under the circumstances, I – I – I was then – by the time I turned six, in the spring of ’44, I was enrolled in a local school, first grade. And you know, that became a – a new f – lifestyle, that totally took me into a new world, and therefore, the war had sort of vanished completely from our lives – from my life. Of course, in the case of my parents it was different, because my father was given the task as a – as an attorney, to deal with settlements by the Jewish community, the legal aspects of it. Bu-But, you know, that was not very much part of my life. I – I was –

**Q: So, d-do you remember that your parents were anxious about anything, or it was just sort of like oh, this is our new life, or –**

A: No, they were anxious and nervous because –

**Q: Yeah.**

A: – they knew what – what was going on. But it was not until sometime late April of 1945, that a new event totally took me by surprise. It was a night – in the middle of the night, I hear voices that I never heard before. And I went into the kitchen of the apartment where we live, and there were – this is like four a.m. My parents were set – were seated, and my uncle and aunt were sitting right next to them. And what had happened was that in 1940 – and during the October days, when everybody tried to get across to Sweden, they were captured, along with a group of – of – of people. They were – they had been hiding in a small village near the coast, where https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 10 they were hoping to get off to Sweden. And they were then taken down to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. And they stayed there until April of ’45, when they were rescued by, and taken to Sweden in those white buses that [indecipherable] had arranged. And so, at four a.m. I hear these voices, and I – I walk in there. Th-Th-The – I knew them, but you know, at five before everything happened, we had visited them, so – and I certainly recognized them. And they had survived without being able to function –

**Q: To escape.**

A: – at four a.m., and having a meal, and so on. And I – and – and I do remember that at some point, a – a – I’m just standing there, and nobody is even paying attention to me, and I see my – my – my mother says to my Uncle Ben, don’t eat this, this is not fresh butter. I’ll – I’ll – you know, I’ll get you some fresh butter. To which he said, it’s – it’s – it’s fresh enough for me. Now –

**Q: So –**

A: – what – what we – to – to finish that story, what happened was that the war ended, and May fifth, Denmark was freed, and – and open again. And very shortly thereafter, we returned from Sweden, to – to Denmark. And we found our apartment pretty much exactly the way we had left it during those chaotic days, because a neighbor had taken care of it. https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 11

**Q: And can – can you tell us more about that? I mean, do you know who that neighbor was? Do you remember that person from before the war, or –**

A: Yes. It was a next door neighbor, and – but there were other people because I think the next door neighbor had – there was a death in the family. An-Anyway, it – it was a – i-it – it – it was neighbors who took care of it. And I think that my parents were totally, you know, astounded that this – and of course very happy, and – and – and so, in celebration, what they had brought back from Sweden was a certain kind of chocolate that during the – during the war in Denmark, you know, you can’t get chocolate, so what happened was there was a big party, where all the kids in – in the – in the complex where we lived, were invited up, and it – it was a sort of a – it – it was a party that took several days, that ended up – that ended our Sweden odyssey.

**Q: And when did you come to the U.S., and how did that happen?**

A: That did not take place until ’63. What happened was, before that, in ni – in 1960, I star – as a young, you know, 22 year old kid, I went to wor – I – I started working f – at a movie company aa – as a – you know, a P.A, a production assistant. One day, arrived a crew of five people from CBS in New York. They came to Denmark in order to do a documentary about the rescue of the Danish Jews. And so I was attached – I – I spoke English, and I was attached to them as their sort of show – their – their guide. And what happened was, we went around https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 12 and interviewed a number of the people who had been actively involved in the rescue operation. And a-at some point, we sat in the town of Elsinore, which is on the coast, five miles across the water from Sweden, at the office of a bookbinder, who – whose last name is Kerr(ph). And he spoke not a word of English, so I not only had to, you know, translate, but also sort of try to interpret what he was saying. And that – it was fine, it went on for 20 minutes, and the CBS writer got all the information he wanted, until suddenly Mr. Kerr(ph) turned to me and said in Danish, listen, I’m – I’m – I’m busy, I’m a busy guy. Get these damn Americans out, I’ve had enough of them. Which was a – which made it slightly tricky for me to translate, and I didn’t quite know how to handle that. But I wa – I was sort of saved by the bell, because in walk – into his office walked another man and – and – who was clearly a – his, you know, assistant, or friend, whatever, because he was then introduced to all of us. And when it came to me, and – and he heard my last name, he said, wait a minute, I – I remember that. Then it turned out that wha – what unfolded was sort of a – a – wa-was as follows: it turned out that this man who came in, whose last name was Larsen(ph), had been the assistant of Kerr(ph) during the transportations, and what then ev – developed was that it was on Kerr’s(ph) boat that I had been taken across. And he was the one who said, if you puke, you go overboard. And so, all of this happened within two minutes. And h – https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 13 and of course, Kerr(ph) changed his attitude, and we stayed and had beer and [indecipherable] and – and lunch, and stayed for hours. And then the next day, that story was then made part of the – of – of the documentary. And again, I was, because Kerr(ph) still didn’t speak a word of English, I had to sort of tran – translate everything he said. He then – his story, as part of – of – of the people rescuing, you know, their Danish neighbors, Danish Jewish neighbors, was that he continued sailing across, even into 1943 - ’44, the spring, in spite of the fact that it got increasingly difficult, because there were more and more patrols boats. And so it was only on nights without any moon that – that he could cross without being seen. And what did help his – his enterprise was that he went – he was sort of a – a Scarlet Pimpernel of – you know, he – he didn’t pay much attention to his own safety. He – he – he went from a very small boat, to a f – pa – bigger boat, and by the time, in November of ’43, he had a – as, under the circumstance, a very fast boat. And so, he managed to do this until he was caught and almost killed in 1944, and he spent a year in – in a concentration camp. He also, obviously, survived, because we had this wonderful lunch and thing in – in – in [indecipherable]

**Q: And – and – and so, did – did you talk at all about why he was motivated to do what he did? https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 14**

A: Yes, we did, and his style was – he said – and I translated verbatim, and it ended up in the film, he said, I didn’t rescue the Jews, or anybody, because I liked them. I did it because I hated the Germans. That was – I mean, that – that – that was what he said. Obviously, there was more to it, but that was what came out of his mouth.

**Q: Or he hated fascism, or he hated, you know –**

A: Right.

**Q: – the government, or whatever.**

A: Yes.

**Q: Yeah, that’s – that’s – that’s very interesting, and – so, one question I had, just when reading your story was, when this documentary was made, was it because the Eichmann trial was going on, or was there any relationship to that?**

A: No, I – I – that may have been part of – of the thing, but I think more to the point was that the producer of the CBS documentary, you know, had a personal interest. He thought this was a very important story to show his viewers, and it – it became – it was part of what was then the Sunday morning – CBS had Sunday morning – this before cable and anything. And so the public affairs-type service that was given mostly by CBS – and NBC, and AB – ABC and NBC did not do the same thing. So they had a whole department of – of people on fi – on 11th, and 57th Street, in the production office. And – and they did whatever they thought was important. And https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 15 so, they told this story because they wanted th-the American – the American viewers to see it. And it was broadcast twice, because it did make – it was the first time a – a TV program had done this. Books had been written that – before, and many ca-came afterwards, dealing with the same subject, so –

**Q: And do you – do you know any other people who were rescued? I mean, is there any kind of community that you maintain because of, sort of that shared experience, or you’re just an American now, or –**

A: A few, but bi – because I have a very large family; my father is one of seven, my mother one of four, it was mo – it was more [phone ringing] I’m sorry about this – it was more –

**Q: Oh, that’s okay. [break] Talk a little bit more about coming to the U.S. –**

A: Okay.

**Q: – and why and when, and how that whole thing – how it – how it all happened.**

A: Well, then, because of the contact that I made with the people at – at CBS, which lasted after they went back to New York from Copenhagen, they worked on the program, and then I got a call, would I – would I like to come to New York, because I could help sort of put it together, and then I – I stayed. I – I went back a couple times, but I ended up liking New York, I thought it was very exciting, and I – they gave me a job, sort of being a production manager for a number of programs https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 16 that came out of the same office. The – the public affairs Sunday morning programs. There were two shows, “Lamp Unto My Feet,” and – and “Look up and Live.” Those were the two programs. And this precedes you know, cable, and – and there – everything else. So, th – I – I got stuck here, and I met a young lady in 1964, and got married three – two and a half months after we met, and that is now 51 years ago.

**Q: And now you’re in California.**

A: And now – then we mo-moved from L.A. – from New York to L.A. in 1990, because we made a movie there, and it was easier to – to sti – to then stay, yes.

**Q: So what – I mean, just – just to go back to what you remember from the time, what sticks with you? What is – I guess what – what do you really sort of have clear memories of?**

A: I have a very clear memory of spending something like an hour on a fast moving boat, because what also happened was in October – in November of 1943, pretty much all the Jews had been crossed – ha-had crossed to Sweden, and so those – th- the transports then took care of – had people such as – on the boat it wa – it was a – an RAF pilot who had parachuted over Denmark, and he had to get – be gotten out. The Royal Air Force, you know, the British air force. And there were some other people. So, later on, while I was still six or seven, and we talked about th-the – the https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 17 crossing, I – I wi – my father said something, and I said, well, it was me and the other saboteurs that – that crossed th-the water. I – and because it was sort of a – a very – it was the first time I’d bid – bid – been on a – on a boat of that type. It may have been the first time I’d e-e – been on a boat, ever. You know, as a five year – and a half year old boy, I was very excited about how it worked, and – and since, at that time, unlike before, during the really chaotic days in – in – in October, where s- sometimes young children were a – you know, given sleeping pills, or whatever, to make sure that they would not make noise, this was different. And I guess th-the – Mr. Kerr(ph) took a chance. I guess he talked to me, and the way I responded made him believe that it was not necessary to – to, you know, give me an injection to – for – for me to keep quiet. So, by the time we arrived in – near Helsingborg in Sweden, which is across from the shortest distance from Denmark, I’ve – as we moved into the harbor, along the – the side, I – I saw my father from the boat, and he was there with – I think with a policeman, nervously pacing back and forth. So that’s what I do remember.

**Q: And – and do you remember getting off the boat, and then seeing your father and being reunited, or –**

A: Well, th-the mi – the image I remember is, as we moved into – towards, you know, like maybe 25 yards before the boat actually moored. And then what https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 18 happened, I don’t remember, but obviously what – what did happen was that we took a train, my father and I, to Stockholm, where we reunited with my mother.

**Q: Right. I – I – I – I just asked that question because I’m the mother of a couple of six year old boys, and I can’t imagine, you know, being that person who was waiting for your child to arrive, and –**

A: Yeah. And one reason why, during the interview where I discover – where everybody discovered that the boat had – actually had me on board, what actually happened was that the man who walked in with a severe limp, because he’d been injured during the war, where his fellow – Mr. Kerr(ph) was almost killed, when he was introduced to me, and remember the last name, which is somewhat unusual, there – the – the reason why he remembered that was that my father had, as a gift, made – given him a silver cigarette – he was a smoker – and had engraved in it, a thank you note from him, last name being Korzen. So, the name had sort of se – was a name that this guy –

**Q: Remembered.**

A: – remembered very clearly.

**Q: So – I don’t know how to end the interview. Any – i-is there anything else you would like to say, to tell us today?**

A: Well, the – https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 19

**Q: I mean, what does your experience – how does that inform your day to day life today?**

A: What happened then, where basically people put themselves at – at risk, and – and many died, is an example that sort of stands as a, you know, role model for human behavior. Now, what we’re witnessing these days, having to do with refugees, and – and immigration, and people trying to escape alive from either war, or related horrible – horrible to human situation, i-i-is – is the opposite. And it would be very nice if this example, which is not really that known, could be, let’s say, elevated a-as the role model to – for everybody to – to – to imitate. How that is to be done, remains to be seen. Obviously, it – it would take – it would take a – an attitude that is the total opposite of what’s happening right now. This is 19 – this is 2015, where, as we witness the debate about who we are, and what we should do, and what we should allow, the – the – the – as I see it, the idiocy of doing the opposite of what this country is all based on. This country is based on having people come here, and then start a life that ends up making a country as good as it can be, because of the people. So there – so therefore the – whenever the opposite is being advocated, that to me sounds like it’s based on idiocy, it’s based on ignorance, and anything we can do to counteract that, w-we – we all have, I think, a responsibility to do. https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 20

**Q: Thank you. Okay, can we cut for a minute, and let’s – [break] Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember from life before the Holocaust, you know, did – was your family religious? Did – did you go to synagogue, that kind of thing.**

A: The answer is no. The previous germ – our gran – my grandparents, were somewhat religious. They did not – they did celebrate the – the – the high holidays. I was Bar Mitzvahed when – 13, as the – as the last of my sibling, and so we were, and still are, what you would call secular Jews. When our son turned 13, and we lived in New York at that time, we did not – what we did was, we sent him to be tutored by a Yiddish poet, who tutored kids, and dealt with everything Jewish, except for religion: history, music, culture, etcetera. And so, he got his – his upbringing in the same secular tradition. When my wife and I got – when I got married, which was in 1964, we went down to city hall in – in – in New York, but we really didn’t like the AstroTurf floor, and – and couldn’t see ourselves, sort of, doing the – the ceremony there. So we ended up, we lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and we ended up finding a rabbi in a synagogue, who was willing to marry us with the understanding that we were secular Jews. And so he – he promised to stay away from subject that had to do with – that would not really connect with being a secular Jew. And i – and the only thing he – a-and – and he said, so let’s do it in my chambers, you know, not in the – in the big space, where https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 21 actually, I think the synagogue seats about 3,000 people. So, we came there with eight friends, and he changed his mind, he said no, let’s go into the big space, even though we are only 12 people. And so, you know, be-be-because he wanted to demonstrate that he could deliver a – a sermon for people like us, and – and he – and I – I’ve – he did. So, he managed to stay away from, you know, the word God. And yet, he – he did not violate his own, let’s say background and principles of being a rabbi. He – he knew how to do – to – to have that – that balance. So my – the fact that I was – went through a Bar Mitzvah, I – I – I’m – I’m happy and proud of it, even though the truth is that very shortly thereafter, I lost the ability to s – to speak whatever Hebrew I had learned. Which is what you need to understand, and – an-and you know, it’s like, it just ended up in – in – in retrospect it’s – it was a nice experience, it was a nice thing that happened.

**Q: Right.**

A: But it has not influenced our lives, going forward.

**Q: Right, right. And do you ha – do you feel a commonality with other Holocaust survivors, or do you feel, you know, that your experience was – because there – one thing we learn in this, you know, at the hol – at the museum, is that there are so many different experiences. It is, you know, people say Holocaust survivor, but it is a very diverse sort of set of circumstances. https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 22**

A: It’s a very diverse – yes. One thing that happened very early on, after I settle in New York was my wife and I, we met a – a young girl our age, and for reasons that neither of us understood, we sort of – we became fast friends, and still are. This is now 50 years later. She happened to be – she’s my age, and she was a – she is a survivor, but under much more dramatic osten – circumstances, in that she was saved by her grandmother, who was with her. And this was – she – she was born in Berlin, and under circumstances that cannot be described any other than miraculous, survived, and ended up in sw – in Sweden, in Stockholm. And by the time we met her in 1964 in New York, she had, like I, sort of gravitated from wherever, but – and had no longer – the fact that she was a German Jewish girl, had totally changed into, she was now a New Yorker. But – but her story, and her attitude, and her whole demeanor, clearly was something that, you know, it made an impression, and you know, th-the bond that – it’s not that my story has much to do with hers, because mine is a happy end, and hers is a bittersweet, with a happy end. So, it is a very big difference.

**Q: Mm-hm, yes. So I would like to thank you for coming, and doing this.**

A: Sure. https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 23

**Q: And I – I think – am I missing anything? I said that already, but – so, can you tell me anything you remember about right before, and you know, were – what – was there anti-Semitism, do you remember feeling that?**

A: No, growing up in Denmark, as – in Copenhagen as I did, the – the – the – the – the life that began after I came back in 1945, had – there was n-no anti-Semitism, or any other, let’s say negative aspect of – of life. Denmark was then a society that had very few prejudices. The Danish – the Jewish community in Copenhagen, that had been there for a few hundred years, because in 16-something, the king of Denmark had invited a – a bunch of Jews from Germany or wherever, in sort of middle Europe, to settle, because he was an – an enterprising builder-type king, and he’d heard that having Jews around would be helpful. And so, from that moment on, the Jewish community grew, and by the time we get to World War II, there were, in Danish culture, a huge impact of the Jewish artists and playwrights, and so on. One play that is always part of the repertory of the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, is written by a Jew, and – and deals with a Jewish holiday, and the reason for that. So, the au – so th-the – when I – un-until I left in 1964 and settled in New York, the – th-the – being Jewish in Denmark was almost something that people would boast of, or having a Jewish grandmother, etcetera. Things have changed because there have been at – b-both because of politics, and so on, a-and https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 24 because of Europe now is – is a different continent than it was then. So th-th-the wonderful – let’s say the – the days of peace and prosperity and cultural exuberance that I re-relate to, when I was very young, that has changed, unfortunately, in the negative direction.

**Q: Mm-hm. Yeah. And, do you go back to Denmark?**

A: Yes, we go – we go quite often, at least once every two years. My very large family loves coming here. And so, we s – th-they come here more often than we go there. But, you know, we are – you know, with everything, such as Skype and so on, we – we – we – we stay in very close contact.

**Q: Right. Well, thank you. I think we will end there.**

A: Okay.

**Q: And I guess we need to sort of break everything down, but you don’t need to be involved in that. [break] Thank you very much, Benni, for being with us.**

A: Well, you’re welcome, as a – but Leslie, you know, if – if you – if you discover that you need something more, I can phone it in, as we say.

**Q: Yes, well I’m also going to be in California very soon, so –**

A: Ah, okay.

**Q: I might come to L.A., and – yes.**

A: We do – we do a lot of things like this on iPhones. https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection Interview with Benni Korzen September 18, 2015 25

**Q: I know, I know, but th-this is the way the museum does it, which I think is really good, actually.**

A: Yeah, yeah. Sure, no, no, I – I appreciate that.

**Q: Yeah.**

A: Look, I think what you’re doing is – is wonderful, and it – it’s a – it’s a – for many generations, i-i-it’s – it’s a documentation that probably has more meaning than people reading books, and – and – and all of that.

**Q: Well, for people today, I think so, yeah. I mean, I – I – it’s my pleasure to be able to interview people like you, and I interviewed somebody yesterday, and it’s really – to be able to still record this history while it’s remembered, is – is really important. So, thank you.**

A: Sure. My pleasure. Conclusion of Interview https://collections.ushmm.org Contact reference@ushmm.org for further information about this collection