

Museum of History and Holocaust Education

Gitte Toben Interview

Conducted by James Newberry

May 22nd, 2015

Transcribed by Lauren Hohn

Full Transcript

Note: Sometimes, when Toben refers to plural items, she says them as if they are singular. For instance, she says “four month” when meaning “four months.” This is not a transcribing issue.

Director: All right, roll cameras. Legacy Series, Toben, take one.

[*A clapperboard is held on screen and clapped, dated May 21st, 2015*]

Interviewer: All right, this is James Newberry, and I’m here with Gitte Toben on Friday, May 22nd, 2015 in the Social Sciences Building at Kennesaw State University. And, Ms. Toben, do you agree to this interview?

Toben: I do.

Interviewer: Thank you. So, let’s start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

Toben: It was an early Thursday, 26 of March, 1952. My parents didn’t have a car, but my dad had a motorcycle, and my mother started labor, and he got home from work, [*Brief chuckle at the thought*] got her on the motorcycle, and got to the clinic—back then, they didn’t have hospitals where you went to, it was clinics—and so I was born in, you know, less than fifteen minutes after our ride on a motorcycle, so that was wonderful at one o’clock in the afternoon, so...I can’t complain. It was a Thursday. I guess that’s a good thing. You’re productive, you have the whole [*Chuckles*] rest of the week—actually, back then, if you delivered, you had ten days with, you know, nurturing of the baby and the mother that these clinic-hospitals would...nurse midwives who would really be, you know, stricter and never had a baby themselves probably, so...

Interviewer: Hmm.

Toben: [*She chuckles again, her entire face scrunching up in a grin as she does*].

Interviewer: What city was it?

Toben: Copenhagen, Denmark, and right now that clinic was in the shadows of the...Tower of the Savior, which is St. Christiania. Christiania is the free state now in Copenhagen, and maybe some of the viewers have known about the free state, but actually I was born very close to Christiania.

Interviewer: And what was your name at birth?

Toben: It was...Gitte Nordholk, that’s my grandfather’s...Dutch name, and Johannsson, so...just three.¹ My minister says, “Well, Gitte is something you name a dog or

¹ Nordholk and Johannsson: The spellings are estimated.

cat,” because it’s the last of Brigitte, but my parents says, “Well, but, you know, we’re only gonna call her ‘Gitte,’ so...” [*Chuckles*] And actually, I chose it myself. My parents got married in 1949, May 7th, and back then, they wore top hats, and my dad brought out his hat—they couldn’t figure for name for me—so they had a hundred names, and they would each draw a name and then I was, you know, maybe able to draw my own, which I did. They let my hand go in and I pulled out Gitte. [*She laughs*]. So I chose my own name, so—

Interviewer: What were your parents’ names?

Toben: Alice Lillian and my dad’s name was Kil Owe.² And...they were born in 1925 and 1926, and they met right after the war on the athletic—they were both very athletic—and they were runners and jumpers and, you know, did all the—what you did back then, just like you see in the movies from [*laughing as she quirks her eyebrows*] Nazi Germany, basically. But...

Interviewer: So what did your parents do for a living?

Toben: Well, they finished high school, or whatever was high school back then, which is like tenth grade and...my mother went to...she was actually *au pair* in London, so she learned to speak English, and...so she went to a business school, and she was a business associate department store in Copenhagen called Illum, and it’s still in, you know, business today.³ And my father’s father was—he owned a delicatessen, so back then, you basically took over your family business, and it was a four-year...tutelage, four year school, to be a butcher, *Charcuterie*, which is basically how to make sausage and so forth, salamis, chicken, you got it. And...learning to do the business and running the business and making the signs and so forth, and so they were, you know—my grandfather started a small business, all his brothers—one was a doctor and one was—owned a big furniture store, and he was in business and...but they were all very musical. Everybody says, “Oh, your grandfather should have been singing in the opera. He would really have done it well.” But they sang in the Copenhagen men’s choir, the whole family, so that was, you know—

Interviewer: And you remember hearing them sing?

Toben: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. They actually sang for the king and 1952, they actually were in London, singing for the—for the King George back—just before he died, actually.⁴

Interviewer: Remember any of the song?

Toben: Oh, some of them. Yeah? Sure.

Interviewer: Are they sort of standard, like, Danish songs?

² Kil Owe: Once more, this is a rough estimate of her father’s name and its spelling.

³ *Illum*: “Illum is Copenhagen’s premium department store [for] everything from fashion and beauty to home decor and design” (*Visit Copenhagen*).

⁴ *The King; King George*: Danish King Christian X (1870-1947); British King George (1895-1952).

Toben: They were standard, yes, yes. It was...the tunes—it was, you know, regular. [laughs].

Interviewer: You're not gonna sing for me?

Toben: [shakes her head and begins to sing] *I østen stiger solen op, / den spreder guld på sky, / går over hav og bjergetop, / går over land og by.*⁵ Something like that. And then they would do—you know—but that means “Rise—the sun rises in the east” and so forth, “Be grateful for living.” [Laughs] Basically.

Interviewer: So, did you have any siblings?

Toben: I have a younger brother. He is only seventeen month younger, so we were basically very close, and...you know, I was actually the first grandchild on my mother's side, and my grandfather died of liver cancer when I was a year, so suddenly I was my grandmother's baby. I probably was never alone. [Laughs]. And she read to me and sang to me and taught me to knit, crochet, and...so, you know, we would sit and listen to...radio stories, you know, like Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion*, but they would have whole stories, and you would sit and listen.⁶ And then it would continue the next week, so you'd have to come and listen with grandma, and that was right. So...

Interviewer: So describe the household with your parents and brother.

Toben: Well, they were lucky enough, young couple, moved to the suburbs, which was just four miles from downtown Copenhagen, and it was just like you see in the *Anne Frank* movie with apartment houses, very well planned, green spaces, and...play grounds, schools, kindergartens...⁷ It was all planned, the library was right there...and—so—basically I think they went out to farm land and said, “Oh, yeah, hey! You're gonna retire anyway, so let's build some—you know—houses.” And...of course, so that meant it was all young families, so we had *lots* of friends—I mean *hundreds* of friends—and we all went to the same school and we would, you know, play games. And one way of knowing that *I* was called home was my dad could whistle. His whistle was so loud, and I can't even do it, but I knew that was his [She whistles and laughs]. “Better come home now.” But—

Interviewer: Was he a, sort of, disciplinarian type?

⁵ *Song*: Toben sings the first verse of “I østen stiger solen op” (The Sun Is Rising in the East), a hymn by Bernhard Severin Ingemann (*Jørgen Ebert*). J. C. Aaberg's 1945 translation is: “The sun is rising in the east, / It gilds the heavens wide, / And scatters light on mountain crest, / On shore and countryside” (*Hymnary*).

⁶ *A Prairie Home Companion*: A radio variety show by Garrison Keillor which includes music, comedy skits, and the famous segment “The News from Lake Wobegon” (where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average”) (“Radio”).

⁷ *The Anne Frank Movie*: Toben could refer to the short documentary the Museum of History and Holocaust Education shows to visitors or any number of film or television adaptations of Anne Frank's life or diary.

Toben: No, not really. It was probably more doting, sort of like Otto Frank, very much—I see Otto Frank a lot in my dad. [Chuckles]. So...

Interviewer: Tell me about that connection?

Toben: The look. He had basically...I can see some features between him and my father's father. Otto was tall like my dad, but my dad's dad was not as tall, but they both had this...protective of the family and, you know, could stand a lot of BS—you know—just...but, in a way, conscientious, and...in a way—well, my grandfather would finish the crossword puzzle, like the New York Crossword Puzzle, every day. I mean, he was really good at that. And we always said, "Send it in!" "No." [Chuckles].

Interviewer: Well, tell me what sort of recreational, maybe artistic opportunities were available to you and that you took advantage of.

Toben: Well, I was...a gymnast, athletically inclined, fast-twitch muscles—that helps, but...yeah, I excelled in that and...artistically, I was actually a very shy little girl. If you had told me back then that I would be doing this today, I would say, "Never. I couldn't do that." I couldn't even stand up in front of my class and sing. So, what I just did. [Laughter]. Disprove my own disbelief, right? So I was a very quiet. I was a very dour little girl. My right foot sort of twisted out a little bit. My mother always said, "Stand up straight and smile." [Laughs]. So...well, I liked to draw. I *loved* to draw, color, paint, everything. It was my big...I, you know, would do architectural drawings. I would lay out, you know, how the summer house would look. And I would draw Dior dresses or Chanel...thinking that I could be Pierre Cardin's right hand, maybe. [Chuckles]. We—we can do him, can't we?⁸ [Chuckles].

Toben: So—

Interviewer: Did your family take vacations?

Toben: We did. And it was...basically in Denmark, but it was part of educating me and my brother about old Denmark, the Vikings and...old settlements and islands, so...that was a nice—and my father's cousin, he was not married at that point, so he tagged along [?] we just had a good experience, and...

Interviewer: So what were the destinations?

Toben: Skagen, which is where the painters—the Danish...*plein air* painters would gather every summer for their, you know, get togethers—just like in Paris they would meet up.⁹ [Da-shen-to] and, you know, they would always have their—their like

⁸ *Dior, Chanel, and Pierre Cardin*: Christian Dior and Coco Chanel were widely popular French fashion designers ("Christian Dior Biography," "Coco Chanel Biography"). Pierre Cardin is a French fashion designer born in Italy, known for his Space Age look ("Pierre Cardin Biography").

⁹ "*The Danish Plein air painters*": Toben refers to the act of painting *en plein air* ("in open air"), painting outside made possible by the new retractable French easels and paint tubes starting in 17th century Rome, a technique particularly favored by the French Impressionists (Malafrente).

their boat party—you've seen the picture of the boat party, yes?¹⁰ That would be it, so that was special, then...we would go to—well maybe not to many museums and LEGOLAND wasn't up yet...but Lego—I was probably one of the first kids that got to play with Lego, and...I still remember my first gas station. It was an Esso? station, and it had curved bricks. I still have them. [*Chuckles*].

Interviewer: Made out of Lego?

Toben: Yeah. Plastic. But it didn't have the little suction cups underneath. It was just a plain—it had a slit in the side to expansion.

Interviewer: Oh.

Toben: So very interesting. I should bring it. Yeah.

Interviewer: So, where did you go to school?

Toben: In Copenhagen. Actually, the suburb was very close to the airport and...so, you know, there were several schools there because with all the new families, there were lots of young children going to school, so there was a high demand for schools, and...at first I was in a smaller school, which had been there since 18-something, and I still remember looking out, and still listening to the teacher, but seeing the old yard and old apple trees and the tiled roofs and...so—and they still have the thatched roof there because that was a little...merchants right by the school. But that school was basically to fifth grade, and you took a test, and if you were academically inclined, you went to another school, and if you were more of hands-on, you would go with the practical way so you could learn a skill and be an apprentice, and basically—well maybe it's not quite like that—but maybe they're coming back to it 'cause college is too expensive. And, even though going to school there is free, fine room and board, you have to pay for that, could put you into, you know, debt that you don't want to incur, so yes, there is free education, but you still have to pay it back. [*Chuckles*]. So, fortunate—I have—I wanted to be a nurse, so I did go the academic route, which was very nice, so fortunate enough for me, barely making it sometimes, I was not very good at reading, so...but I'm catching up—I do. [*Chuckles*] So—

Interviewer: At what age did you have to make that decision?

Toben: That was at ten and eleven. Yeah.

Interviewer: Years of age?

Toben: Yeah. And that's when they could—they formed you back then. And my cousin was four month older, but she was in a grade higher than mine, and she never got to be a nurse, but she would have been an excellent nurse...but had she waited long enough and, you know, gotten in my grade level, she would have probably made it. So it was a lot about maturity, so sometimes it's a harsh punishment, in a way,

¹⁰ *The Boat Party*: Toben may refer to *Luncheon of the Boating Party* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. For a detailed analysis, see the *Artble* article (http://www.artble.com/artists/pierre-auguste_renoir/paintings/luncheon_of_the_boating_party).

you know, the way it is. But if you're very talent and you're very eager—like, I have a girlfriend and she did not go the academic way, she went the practical way, but after finishing the tenth grade, she could get an additional education of three years, like a junior college, that made her being accepted to nursing school.

Interviewer: So what qualities in you made you want to be a nurse?

Toben: Well, my mother had a stroke when she was thirty-four years old, so I saw how mean the nurses were to her and I said, "I'm gonna be a nurse, and I'm not gonna be that mean." [*Chuckles*]. She had epidurals, and they made her lie on her stomach for three days, and you know, that's probably not very good...very sad. But she became ambulatory and she didn't know she had a stroke. They thought she had MS because thirty-four, no, you couldn't have a stroke. No. No. But she had had—she was a smoker, see, the war made everybody smoking because there was all these cigarettes, and that's very bad for your gums, and so she had had an experimental gum removal, so—the tissue—but I bet you, they didn't give her antibiotics, I'm still sure that it was just a little germ that went straight [*With her pointer finger, she traces a line from her mouth down*], but...life is strange, isn't it? So...

Interviewer: What was the recovery process?

Toben: It was ph—lots of physical therapy but she managed to get back home—like I said, my grandmother took over and took care of us.

Interviewer: Came into your *home*?

Toben: And stayed with us, made sure we went to school, fed and cleaned and all that, so...and so...that was sad in itself, but my mother regained—she was determined and, so she walked again and she could do almost anything. It was just a little hard—the left hand was a little...you know, she would cheat...she couldn't have anything in her hand and the doorbell rang, she would...so, but she trained the brain—cognitive behaviors and...just amazing. So she bicycled again and...so that was very good, it really was, so...and she—she did fine, she did.

Interviewer: Well, when did you finish school?

Toben: In 1969, I graduated from high school, which over there is called [?] Eksem, the real exam. [*Chuckles*] Oof! And I did pretty good, so right after that—well I had dated a young man at that point, and both his parents were handicapped, and he hated nurses, and he didn't want me to be a nurse, so I was looking into teaching, you know—you know, kind of physical therapy but crafty, ergonomic therapy, maybe, but...he found somebody else, so I...well became young girl, *la fill—jeune fille au pair* in Geneva, Switzerland. So I left, and studied French and German and a little bit of everything, and when I got back...I decided, "Well, I'm going to try nursing school." But before that, I went to like a...it's called højskole.¹¹

¹¹ *Højskole*: Danish for high school, short form of *Folkenhøjskole*, or folk high school ("A Danish Folk High School").

Grundtvig was one of the Danish...thinkers, big thinkers.¹² He was a minister. He was a poet. He was a...he was...the Renaissance man in the 1850s...but...there was this school named after him, and it taught you a lot of skills, so I went there and...actually I got a “little” degree and...but right then, a nursing school called and said, “Yeah, come on,” so that was lucky for me, my lucky break right there.

Interviewer: How long were you in Geneva?

Toben: Well, I was in Geneva six month, but then I went up to Paris because I wanted to learn more French now that I was there, so I worked for a French family there for six month, so I was gone a year.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy that?

Toben: Oh, it was fun. Imagine, can you imagine bicycling down *Champs-Élysées*? [Chuckles] I did that every day to go to school. I lived in the fancy sixteenth arrondissement and I went to...school in—on *Boulevard* [20:00?], [?], so yeah, but I saved a lot of money by bicycling because I didn't have to pay for the subway, or the metro...yeah. So I saved up money so I could buy a Dior scarf in the Dior store. [Chuckles]. Strange how certain things work, right? But, yes, I was very proud of that scarf. Unfortunately, I left it in a taxi, it slid off. That was years ago, but...that's life. Hope somebody got to—

Interviewer: Got to enjoy it...

Toben: Yeah, enjoy it! [Laughter]

Interviewer: Now somebody else has it.

Toben: Hopefully. I hope. Somewhere out there.

Interviewer: And so you said it was a sort of family in a nice section of Paris?

Toben: Oh, yes, oh yes, indeed!

Interviewer: And you cared for how many children?

Toben: Three children there and two in Geneva.

Interviewer: So did they have good or bad behavior?

Toben: Well, they were three adopted children, and you could tell they had been separated from a nurturing soul for a little too young—there was one, the youngest little boy, had a little bit of trouble, but we managed between the mother and I. [Chuckles] So—and the oldest had some problems, too, Isabella, she did pretty good, but she was a girl—right? Girls are tough. So...you know.

Interviewer: And then you returned to Denmark for nursing school?

Toben: Yes.

Interviewer: And how long was nursing school?

¹² Grundtvig: Nikolai Frederick Grundtvig was a writer, poet, and clergyman whose publications on education inspired the Danish folk high school's aims for “enlightenment” over academic achievements (“N.F.S. Grundtvig, folk high schools and popular education”).

Toben: Four years. Almost four years. But back then, you would—you'd pay for your books and you'd study for six month—then they used you in the hospitals. You were part of the work force, so you were given a stipend, but enough to survive, and you had one room, you know, all in, you know, college dorms, so...it—we managed, so I finished with no owing of the banks any money, which was a good feeling, so...being on your own.

Interviewer: And where did you go after nursing school?

Toben: Well, I stayed in Copenhagen, and I first did intensive care, and then I did surgical, but I think I'm more of a medical, you know, caring nurse. I did had a good run as the nurse. We oversaw a hundred and fifty people on two floors, I mean. So you incorporated your helpers and other patients, and now that I think back, that was an excellent idea. There were basically ten beds, but there were always too many people coming in, so there were two extra beds right by my desk, but the healthier patients would go and help feed the ones who couldn't feed themselves. So it was sort of like an [Elms] House, by the way, 'cause it was in downtown Copenhagen. We would have all walks of life from street people to—the king came and died there so, yeah.¹³

Interviewer: While you were there?

Toben: Pneumonia. Yeah. 1972.

Interviewer: Do you remember seeing him?

Toben: Yeah, I do remember. Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you treat him?

Toben: He was not in my section. He did have the other section, so...

Interviewer: Did you go peek?

Toben: Well...we were still in nursing school, so we were sort of like [*She snakes her hand around to imitate walking through the hallway to catch a glimpse of the king, I assume*]...yeah. [*Chuckles*].

Interviewer: Is this the current monarch's father?

Toben: Yeah. Yeah. Correct. And she has been there since 1972, and it is 2015, and she is seventy-six years old—seventy-five—she turned seventy-five on the 16th of April. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay, so when did you—when were you in London?

Toben: Well, that was during my nursing school years. If you wrote an essay about an experience in a different hospital, you would be paid the voyage to the destination, so it was like a “free” vacation. So for—four weeks, I went to children's hospital in Great Ormond Street in London, and...met a wonderful American physical therapist, and...

¹³ Frederick IX (1947-1972).

Interviewer: What was his name?

Toben: Oh. Randy, but it was a she.
[*The interviewer and Toben laugh*].

Interviewer: Excuse me, what was her name?

Toben: Her name.

Interviewer: Excuse me, I was skipping ahead.

Toben: That's right. That's okay. *She* was...she was brilliant. And her dad had also died of a heart attack, and by then, my dad had also died of a heart attack. Her dad...was a heart surgeon with offices on fifth avenue in New York City. Faber. Doctor Faber. So Randy married Dr. Buckingham at the hospital, and they moved to America, and...so...yeah. It's good to have connections, isn't it? But she taught me a very good lesson. We had children coming in for surgeries. They had been born with mis-shaped limbs, and they would, for example, they had flippers instead of hands, but the bones were still there. And back then in 1974, that was pretty experimental, but they managed to...make real hands out of these children's limbs. And so this young boy...you know, had to learn to use his new hand. So we all, and that was her idea, wrapped up our good hand, and that afternoon, we were gonna try and make pancakes with our bad hand, and him with his new hand. You can imagine what messy a kitchen that was. [*Chuckles*].

Interviewer: Helping him to learn.

Toben: Helping him to learn, so we were all equal here, so yeah.

Interviewer: Well, tell me about meeting your husband.

Toben: Well...that was after I graduate from nursing school. I had a wonderful little apartment in the nursing complex in Copenhagen, close to parks, you could run, you could walk, you could go to the beach, you could go to the lake. And it was the...hundredth year of the CTC, the Cycling Touring Club of England. And it was in Harrogate up in Yorkshire, and that's where I met my first husband, and he convinced me that America would be okay. Nursing would be portable, I thought. [*Chuckles*]. So...he proposed—well, actually I came to visit in 1978 in Atlanta, so it was very nice. One day it was nice, sunny, and then suddenly it was very cold. [*Chuckles*].

Interviewer: That's not far at all.

Toben: I was surprised. I thought it was gonna be in the subtropics, so... [*Chuckles*]
Okay.

Interviewer: What was your impression of—you know—your first impression of the United States based on what you had known before?

Toben: Well, you know, we grew up watching *Dallas*. We think everybody's rich and thin. [*Laughs*]. And then you come to America and you're going "Oh. Oh. Okay. Huh." [*Chuckles*]. That was a little different. [*Chuckles*]. Well, *Dynasty* was renamed *Dallas* because *Dallas* and *Dallas*, that was, you know, catching.

So...yeah. But...well, my first impression was like Snow White. I flew eastern from New York to Atlanta, and they—I thought they had polished each apple, and I had never seen a red delicious apple before. And being given a red delicious apple, it was just amazing. [Laughs]. It was just...so there, just growing up in the 50s, apples—yeah, you could get apples from the trees in the backyard—but they had, you know, blemishes and so forth, so anything that pristine, that was, you know, wow, amazing. And oranges, that was just Christmas. Wouldn't get it any other time. So that was a big deal and...Remember in the 50s, even in Denmark, they still had ration cards, sugar, butter, all that stuff. Well, we don't need that anyway, but it was still like that, and coffee also, and one Danish coffee made chicory coffee—you bought the chicory in a little half pound and you mixed it in with real coffee to stretch it so you...it was pretty good.¹⁴ Not bad. Sort of grow up liking it. [Chuckles].

Interviewer: So you settled in the United States?

Toben: So I settled. Yeah.

Interviewer: And did you continue to work as a nurse?

Toben: I did, for a while, at Piedmont Hospital, and...and so...then of course, I had Eric. It was a little hard being a nurse and caring for a baby, if you want to do it the “real” way, you know, close nursing and being there yourself, so...I learned to be a preschool teacher, which was sort of fun, and helped, you know, start a little preschool in—it's right by Druid Hills and, you know, Ponce de Leon.¹⁵ So...that was nice. So I basically came across town to teach there, but I met wonderful people that I'm still in touch with, so...sometimes, they say, there's a reason why you do what you do and what you don't do. And...well, sixteen years later, after my marriage, I was married to my first husband in the church where I was baptized and confirmed, and married in. And...he found somebody else and he moved to Seattle, so—but lo and behold, I thought I was going to go home, but I met my second husband. He was also a bicyclist, so there we go. [Chuckles]. I bicycle commuted all these years to work and even to Druid Hills. There's some hilly streets over there. [Chuckles].

Interviewer: And then you had another son...

Toben: Yeah. And then I had another son, and that's Chris. You've met him for the Summer Institute. Oh, he enjoyed it. He still says, “Oh, yeah. I remember.”

[The interviewer chuckles].

Toben: So...

¹⁴ Chicory coffee: The root of *cichorium intybus* “split, dried[,] and roasted to make coffee substitute” (*Northern Bushcraft*).

¹⁵ *Right by Druid Hills and...Ponce de Leon*: Toben could refer to either the Druid Hills Child Development Center (since 1969) or Druid Hills Preschool, both on Ponce de Leon Avenue (since 1982) (*Druid Hills Child Development Center, Druid Hills Preschool*).

Interviewer: So, you started volunteering for the Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State in 2005? Thereabouts.

Toben: Yeah, whenever the exhibit just opened. And I thought it's important for the...my youngest to come up and see this. Well, maybe it was before '05 because...he was not in school, so it must have been in '01, '02? Something like that, maybe.

Interviewer: I think the main exhibit came about 2003.

Toben: 2003. Then it was 2003.

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm.

Toben: Okay. That's when it started.

Interviewer: And you then started to volunteer?

Toben: Yes. And thanks to [Esther Marel?] well, we went through the whole exhibit, and it was very interesting—especially to me—so...I wrote something in the little book, and Esther came over and she said, sternly, “Now, you come out here. You volunteer, okay?” [*She pretends to be intimidated*]. “Yes, ma'am.” [*Chuckles*]. But...that has really...been very liberating, in a way, because I'm not an academic, but I'm surrounded by all these academics, so I've learned so much! [*Chuckles*]. I pick a little here and pick a little there—

Interviewer: And you tell the story of your father?

Toben: Yes.

Interviewer: So before we talk about his experience during the war, I want to find out about what you're wearing.

Toben: All right, so basically...a custom. This [*She touches her cap*] is from 1856, my great-grandmother's bonnet, and you would wear it for your confirmation—when she was confirmed, she was given it—and when you were at gatherings. It's been passed down in the family, and, you know, I'll take it. As you can tell, it's getting very frayed and very old. And [*she pinches her scarf*] this is basically just—each part of the country has a special...line of outfits, and you would usually wear a white shirt for Sunday and, you know, you would take the apron off but during the week, you would put the apron back on. You could interchange all these smocks. But...but basically...this is just a pretend. [*Chuckles*].

Interviewer: [Do/did] you get a chance to wear it any other time than this?

Toben: When we have the Scandinavian festival, and I'm making my round beignets [*Chuckles*], I do. With my knitting needle.

Interviewer: What is the Scandinavian festival?

Toben: Well, in 1995 it was started in honor of [Sam Lindin and Bob ? son], who was killed. He was newlywed. He was changing a tire on 85 and was killed, so they had a little money and started a scholarship fund, so they wanted this festival to give money to an American student as a, you know, scholarship to get books. And it started out wonderful. We had exchanges of cultural events from

Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, even from Estonia came. And that was very nice because that was part of the Baltic state.

Interviewer: Are they Scandinavian?

Toben: They have a lot of, you know, architecture-wise and custom...

Interviewer: There's not a Baltic festival, I guess...

Toben: Not really, so that's why they come.

[*Both chuckle*].

Interviewer: So when you were young, growing up in Copenhagen, what did you know about the history of the Second World War and the Nazi Occupation. How open were your parents and other adults about it?

Toben: Oh, my dad never talked about it. And he would get *very* emotional if, you know, we went to, like, Anne Frank's house in 1964 and...he came out and he couldn't speak for a long time, so that was—that was hard. So the story's basically were—was told by my grandfather. So...and grandmother. So...I remember the feeling, still, if you had anybody walking behind you in boots that sounded like the black Gestapo, you would tighten up, you would tell people would just, you know, instinctively, you know, freeze for a second. It would just transport them back to bad memories, because Denmark was occupied for five years. They called them the Five Ugly Years. And they did not want people to forget those, either. But...lots of hardship, lots of loss of friends and family, and...it was not an easy time to grow up, but...the fellowship that formed probably lasted a lifetime, so...

Interviewer: Well, let's talk about your father's background—

Toben: Right.

Interviewer: —For a minute. He was born in Copenhagen.

Toben: Yes, also.

Interviewer: And can you describe his childhood? The household that he grew up in?

Toben: He had an older sister, and they were—since my grandmother worked in the shop, they had a maid, so they...doing pretty well for a while there, and...my father went to school and then excelled in—you know, he was very musical too, so he learned to play the guitar and later joined a jazz band, and his sister also—she was actually the one who connected my mother and father, because she was also athletic and was out there in...in the...it was a huge, beautiful area where you could play soccer or do any high-jumps and fields, track and fields, and so forth. And my dad did compete and won—and he was also a good swimmer. They were *all* good swimmers, my mother too, and my dad in 1947 won the Copenhagen championship in butterfly, so that was pretty good.

Interviewer: He was also a boy scout?

Toben: He was also a boy scout, absolutely in 1938. Met Lord Baden-Powell. Lord Baden-Powell came to Copenhagen, shook every boy's hand.

Interviewer: Who was Baden-Powell?

Toben: Oh, Baden-Powell. He was the founder of the Boy Scouts of America. That's right...I should mention that. So...Juliet Gordon Lowe.¹⁶

Interviewer: Connection.

Toben: Just, yeah, connection. Savannah. London.

Interviewer: And—

Toben: Yeah.

Interviewer: What's your impression of your father. What do you think—what kind of kid do you think he was?

Toben: Well...back then, they did a lot of practical jokes. They didn't have YouTube. They didn't have television. They would go to the movies, you know, but...he—I think would tell stories about how when new boys joined the boy scouts, they would make them grease the spikes for the tent plug with grease so it would be easier to hammer into the ground. [*Chuckles*]. Would take a stick with a cloth and run around the fire so the smoke would turn, right? That's just little things. Or they would catch—I guess this is the American word. You probably have to edit this—but...they would go out in the field, and you would see cows, there would be a dried...cow cake, and—or sometimes not so dry, but they would take the big boy scout hat and put it down and say to one of the young boys, "Come on. There's a chicken in here." But they called it [krapculling?], but I can now see where that came from. [*Laughs*]. So...yes, yes, yes. So that kind of practical joking, I think they did a lot back.

Interviewer: Well, can you provide a little background on the politics of Denmark in the 1930s?

Toben: Yes. It was...it was conservative, but with social aspects. Everybody were cared for, basically. You wouldn't have to sleep outside, unless you chose to, so...and...Stauning was the minister during the occupation, and he was a social democrat, but they had a big coalition of, you know, the conservatives, so it evened out.¹⁷ They had to speak to each other. And...some of them really wanted to help the Germans because they really wanted to keep them at bay, you know, if we can please them enough to get along and slide by, somehow today would be pretty bad when you look at it. But now knowing the outcome of what the conflicts were gonna be, General Best was stationed in Copenhagen, and he knew about the 1942 Final Solution, and he was leaking that out, sort of, surreptitiously.¹⁸ And so it was known and there were lots of

¹⁶ Juliette Gordon Lowe, who founded the Girl Scouts of America, was from Savannah, Georgia while Robert Baden-Powell, who founded the Boy Scouts, was from London.

¹⁷ *Stauning*: Thorvald Stauning was the prime minister of Denmark from 1924-1926 and 1929-1942 ("Thorvald Stauning").

¹⁸ *Best*: Werner Best was the German administrator in Denmark who reconsidered his previous promotion of the deportation of Danish Jews and warned the German naval attache, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, of the plans, so Duckwitz and other officials leaked the plans to the Danish people (*USHMM*).

negotiations, you know, “You can’t do that to the Danish Jews. It’s just not,” you know, “Those are *my* people,” and you know about the king, he did not leave. He didn’t flee to London. He stayed, said, “No.” But I think it’s a legend that, you know, he rode with the yellow star every morning on his horseback through town, but he did probably once. [*Chuckles*].

Interviewer: And so what was the significance of...the monarchy in Denmark at that time?

Toben: Stability. The crown princess was just born, the sixteenth of June—the sixteenth of April. The ninth of April was the invasion, so that was the light, and everybody congregated round that, saying “Okay. There’s hope. There’s new life. There’s new life.” And...the queen, well, she was from Germany, so [*She cringes*] yes...so, there you go.¹⁹ [*Chuckles*]. Close connections.

Interviewer: So tell me about the significance of that date, April 9th, 1940. Is that a date that is still regarded?

Toben: Oh, very much. My parents both, individually, remembers waking up, getting ready to go to school, and hearing *all* the noise of the low-flying airplanes and then all the leaflets being dropped all over to surrender, that Denmark was now occupied by the Nazis.

Interviewer: And that’s what it said on the leaflets?

Toben: Yeah. Basically. Yeah. Yes, if you had a birthday that day, you would forget it was your birthday. Yes. Yeah, you know, there were skirmishes at the border, but...it was...over in two hours, I think.

Interviewer: So minimal fighting?

Toben: Yeah. Mmm-hmm. Very minimal. So—

Interviewer: So—

Toben: They surrendered right there.

Interviewer: The sort of public resistance was more symbolic?

Toben: It was symbolic, yeah.

Interviewer: And that’s how these legends might have grown around the king?

Toben: Yeah. It was more a disobedience of the Nazis. So...but yes, but a lot of it is anecdotal, but there was—you know—the king was a strong man, his willpower, could influence people, and he did, so...and that probably made it more uncomfortable for the Nazis to be in Copenhagen. But...it’s...you know...it was not easy, it was not easy, so...

Interviewer: So were some elements of the resistance movement already in place before the occupation?

Toben: No. No. No. No. No. That happened after the invasion because...my aunt and uncle visited Berlin in 1939, and everything on the surface looked fine, you know,

¹⁹ *The Queen*: Alexandrine of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (“Christian X”).

calm. They knew about—that was before September first, the invasion of Poland of course, but...yeah, they thought the racy ideas would stay in Germany, maybe, just south of the border. And all those treaties, and you know, that they—that promised not to invade, well, here they are. “Well, we are protecting you from the communists. That’s why we’re here, mmm-hmm. Yep.”

Interviewer: But I mean *sharing* a border?

Toben: Yeah.

Interviewer: That’s a different thing.

Toben: Yeah, that’s a different thing. You know during the many many *many* years of that close borders. The borders shifted back and forth and back and forth. In 1848, Denmark one Schleswig and Holstein, so they regained all Denmark all the way down to the River Elbe. And then in 1864, Denmark lost, so the borders went *all* the way up *past* where it had been before. So in 1918, when the surrender of Germany, half of that was given back to Denmark, so no...Schleswig-Holstein was cut. Schleswig—Danes were still living in Schleswig-Holstein but...and supported by the Danish together, and it is still to this day, so...So it’s—it’s...yeah. Fluctuating. And back in the 60s and 70s, people by the border could get better reception on their television sets, so they watched German television. [*Chuckles*]. So...

Interviewer: So tell me about the development of the resistance and how your father became involved.

Toben: Well...I don’t know totally many details, but being a boy scout in Copenhagen where, you know, all that information was brewing probably got them involved fairly early on because one of their leaders was, you know, you know, very influenced and could get British BBC radio’s information and so forth. And...they were able, actually, to print the news and my dad was young, fast runner. They would run all the way up to the seven-story tall buildings, and they would just throw out the leaflets, so the people on the streets would gather up the news as fast as they could before the Gestapo would grab them and say, “Hey, that’s—you can’t have that.” So they got uncensored news, which was a relief to a lot of people because, you know, as we know, everything was censored and the six times you hear a lie, you stop believing it so...that was probably, you know, yeah, unfortunate. And I think that, you know, my grandparents—they knew what my dad was doing. They just pretended not knowing. The less they knew the better, right? So...but of course they knew.

Interviewer: So are you saying they were quietly supportive?

Toben: Oh, of course they were. My dad would be punished loudly by just having my grandfather, you know, clap his hand near the hall, so everybody could hear that he was being punished because they were all listening behind doors because now that bad boy, he was out again after curfew, what is he doing after dark? [*Chuckles*].

Interviewer: So the curfew was one element of how people were being monitored and behavior was being controlled?

Toben: Mmm-hmm. Right. Right. That's one. And...the other one was the snitches. You know, you would know whether somebody would right you up or not. And so you would have to be on your best behavior. And little by little, in Copenhagen, the resistance found away to communicate. You could wear a red bandana, or your baby could wear a red bonnet, and the baby carriage, and people would say, "Oh. *Oh*. Great." So...little by little. But it wasn't always easy to get the real news. And...

Interviewer: Did he know anyone personally close to him who was a snitch?

Toben: Snitch. Oh, yeah. I'm *sure* he lived with some. I'm not sure, that's part of why he wouldn't talk, or he was *in* with him, you know, because I remember later in the 50s and 60s...we had a nice summer house, and...my dad said, "Oh yeah, they executed a snitch right over there." And afterwards—I just said, "Oh, yeah, okay." And being burned, "Oh.." But I didn't think of it, but later on—"Well...maybe if he knew that much...and where it was. Maybe he knew more." [*Chuckles*].

Interviewer: So you're saying he and his fellow resistance fighters executed a snitch?

Toben: Oh, yeah. They probably did many. Actually, I remember him telling a—that he told us he didn't have any weapons on him, but he was on a street car and he recognized a snitch, and he had his pipe, and he took the pipe up against his sleeve underneath and went over to the guy, and nobody noticed, but the guy thinks it's the end of a nuzzle...and my dad says, "Well, come with me." So they got off and they went to where the other resistance fighters were, and...Maybe that was *the* one. I don't know. I don't know how many. [*Shaking her head and chuckling*] I don't know. But that was one way to, you know...but...so the resistance grew more and more because suddenly everybody were affected and were, you know, not happy with circumstances. Why should they have to give up all the goods for the German Nazi war machine? So...and, like we know here, like Anne Frank's family, and suddenly here they are in hiding, starved, and...starved for social connections, so...

Interviewer: Well, he was still young at this time...

Toben: Oh yeah, very young.

Interviewer: So he was—was he continuing going school and do regular things?

Toben: Yeah. Yeah. He would be back in school and do it after school and at night, of course, being so young, that's why you heard me tell the story of how they were listening to the radio and get the news, and there would be the code word. "Red herring" or whatever it was. And they knew that at Farmer Jensen's field, there would be a drop off ammunitions and guns, so they filed—singled out, waited, and hear the Royal Air Force, the British planes, would come in and they would morse code up "red herring," and the pilot would see the code word and "Oh, here it is," turn around, drop the goods. And they would glean the field in the night and...or very early morning, and then one morning, my dad is on his way home, and he has a little trailer on his bicycle with the seventeen rifles and ammunitions and whatnot, cigarettes, illegal cigarettes, you couldn't smoke those out in the

free. “Where did you get those?” So...he sees the Gestapo up on the bridge. And he thought, “Well, if I turn around, they’ll know I have something to hide. I’m dead anyway.” So he went up, and they asked, “What do you have there?” And, “Weapons. Weapons.” And they start laughing [“Passijon. Just Passijon.”] So I tell young kids when they visit the museum, “Tell the truth. Always tell the truth. You might get away with it.” [Chuckles]. True. True. True. He went home that day and hid all the rifles in a chair, taking the sewing up, and the ammunition was to blow up the supply trains at night. That’s why he was out after curfew, and the rifles were for the resistance when they were fighting an ambush of Gestapo or whatnot. And...so...neighbors would get money if they turned somebody in or suspicion, a little money here and there couldn’t hurt, so one neighbor probably had suspicion, and...later on, I think they...my grandpa said, “Oh, yeah. They were Nazis.” [Chuckles]. So...Gestapo came to the house and inspected the house and they had their rifles with the bayonet. And they pierced *every* piece of furniture, every painting, every mattress to find—see if there was any weapons hidden anywhere. And...my grandmother later would say, “Oh my goodness. Feathers flying everywhere! It was just the biggest mess.” Fortunately, though, the family was in the furniture business, so it was repaired later on, and...I have a painting in my house here in Marietta of the forest where the Jews were hiding before they were safely taken to Sweden with a bayonet hole in it. And there was nothing hidden there, which was fortunate. My dad sat on the chair with the seventeen rifles. They *never* pierced that chair. He stood up and thanked them for coming by, and they left. Phew! [She makes a gesture of wiping sweat away]. That was pretty lucky.

Interviewer: What would the punishment have been?

Toben: Oh. Deportation, arrest right there. Mmm-hmm. And execution, maybe, in the streets. To leave him to show the *other* resistance fighters, “See? This is what we do to you.” Yup. That’s what they did. So—but he continued. The Final Solution was getting closer. Some of their Jewish friends needed to be in Sweden, and they were also in this rowing club, so...when you’re young, and the dopamine hasn’t set in in the mid-brain, to fool the Gestapo at the pier would be fun, so...they were just out rowing, and they just kept rowing to Sweden, and they had their friend down in the rowboat.

Interviewer: So they were part of a larger movement?

Toben: Yeah. Mmm-hmm.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Toben: Well, they actually managed to get to Sweden. And they had gotten from the underground resistance an excuse why they were in Sweden. They had visited Aunt Anna, and they were going back to school the next day. So, that was legit enough. They went back home on the ferry. And...another friend of mine’s...family was up on the coast, and they were in the fish business, and...they actually *did* have the Jews hidden in the boats and covered up in cold herring. It must have been just dreadful. Just dreadful. And...but you did what you had to do, and the Jews were hiding in the attic of a church. But there was a

snitch. And those people were arrested and they were part of the seventy-seven Danish Jews that were sent to a concentration camp in Germany, so—that died—out of seven thousand—seven hundred Jews in Denmark, so...²⁰ But, which is very unfortunate, so...but Jewish life in Denmark was very integrated unless you were true Orthodox and you went to the Jewish school and you went to the synagogue and had the Sabbaths and so forth...nobody would notice, not really. I mean, later on, I think, “Oh, yeah. Well, she must have been Jewish. Oh. Nels Melcher, he must have been Jewish, too.” But...I think I didn’t really realize it that much until I came to the US, thinking back. “Oh yeah, maybe—maybe we all.”

Interviewer: But how is it organized in such a way that over seven thousand people were—

Toben: Managed to get out? Because of General Best leaking the Final Solution out to the Danish government, and they were very active. They had gotten...everybody informed. Resistance fighters would go out and tell everybody, you know, that was what was happening. And Jewish people, either...either a month before had gone, you know, South of Copenhagen and gotten on some horrible fishing story where the boat ended up back where it was because the fisherman didn’t know where he was and it was such a long way to Sweden and they finally managed to get there, but...they had paid *exuberant* amount of money to get to Sweden, so...so that was...you know...but...it was—it was difficult. It was...so...

Interviewer: So did your father have other close calls?

Toben: Well, yeah. The reason he went underground and disappeared was basically after probably—well the one close was when they were blowing up one of the supply trains, and they were running away from the rail yard, jumping over the fences. He was shot in the back of the knee, but couldn’t go to the emergency room because he couldn’t walk in there with German bullet. Wouldn’t look so good. [*Chuckles*]. That was a pretty close call. And when he was buried, he was buried with his bullet. So...my grandmother was able to cut it out. So...

Interviewer: What—instead of going to the hospital, he went to his parents’ house?

Toben: Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: Was he on the run?

Toben: Yeah. He ran. Adrenaline. Yeah.

Interviewer: And he made it to your grandparents’ house where your grandmother treated him?

Toben: Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer: Then what happened?

²⁰ *Survivors*: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum estimates 120 of 7, 500 Danish Jews died in the Holocaust, 470 of whom were deported to Theresienstadt where many, in part due to the influence of the Danish Red Cross and authorities, were later freed by the Swedish Red Cross in 1945 (*USHMM*).

Toben: Well, he healed. That was good. He was still good at running. That helps. [Chuckles]. And he kept the resistance fighting, you know, they probably kept as many trains as they could blow up, they were...hmm...

Interviewer: And when did he go underground?

Toben: Probably in 1944...that's my guess, because he must have really—they must have really known at that point that he was a resistance fighter, because his name must have been on a list, and...they came up the front steps, and my dad went up the kitchen steps, all the way to the top of the—attic, got out the window, and leapt over to the other building, and slid down the window there. And he mingled in the crowd instead of running away, 'cause then they would have known. But when we talk to the students about bystanders, he had thousands of bystanders all curious, now. “Who are they arresting today?” So my dad went over and said, “Who are they arresting today?” Just to pretend that “Oh, yeah. Couldn't be me if I'm down here, right?” [Chuckles].

Interviewer: And what did your grandparents say to the Gestapo?

Toben: They didn't know where he went, and they didn't. And my grandfather turned white-haired overnight because he didn't know. And I'm surprised they didn't take my grandfather. Really surprised.

Interviewer: So when you say “to go underground”...

Toben: Yeah. He went to the underground resistance headquarters. He got new passport, new ID, and new name.

Interviewer: So it was more a changing of identity?

Toben: Yeah. Change of identity.

Interviewer: Where were the headquarters?

Toben: In Copenhagen. Near the stadium. And...it was...they managed to get connections, so my dad sort of slid out of town and became a farm boarder, and that's what he did the last year of the war. So...and the farmer didn't know anything. It was just extra help...yeah. So...

Interviewer: Did he give up active fighting at that point?

Toben: I think so, but, you know, I'm sure it was hard to not be a little bit of [Chuckles] a spy.

Interviewer: You talk about his youth, you talk about the lack of dopamine...

Toben: Right. [Laughs].

Interviewer: What else do you think motivated him?

Toben: Well...the unfairness of, you know, being the—maybe being the underdog. Maybe he just felt he was, you know...because...even though they were not told the truth, I think some people did know about what was going on in the concentration camps...and...because things were leaked out, and...w—you know—what the future would look like with the Nazis didn't look good, so I

think that was enough to resist, you know, not having a freedom of speech and so forth...

Interviewer: And you talk about bystanders, there are so many people who were bystanders or who went along with it, or who...cooperated...

Toben: Right.

Interviewer: *Collaborated.*

Toben: Right.

Interviewer: So, for your father *not* to do that—

Toben: Mmm-hmm.

Interviewer: That's...significant.

Toben: I guess, so...yeah. Maybe he was a little more brave than others. I don't know. And maybe—who knows?—they might have all been Jewish when their grandfather came to down. I don't know. Maybe. But I think...his cousin was in the resistance, too. It was part of what the family did. I mean they stood together, so...

Interviewer: So when the war came to an end...h-was your father or other resistance fighters, were they recognized for what they had done?

Toben: No. Not really. I don't think so. They just wanted to [*she mimes sweeping something under the carpet*]. Just have a normal life, and they were told to forget everything, just you know...

Interviewer: By whom?

Toben: By the...by the...ministers, you know, by the government, basically. So...

Interviewer: Why do you think they were told to...be quiet?

Toben: Hmm...they thought that that was the best healing. And what they did *right* after the war, my dad was actually part of a Red Cross relief effort, and they went to Germany to help, you know, clean up the streets and, you know...do the civil services down there, so...'cause it was really bad. Hamburg, especially. There was nothing left. So...so they went and helped there. And then he, back in Denmark, you had to have a year of service in the military, so right after that, he was in the service. So...but...but yeah, there you go. You never can tell what bring you—brings you one way or another, so...

Interviewer: So when did your father pass away?

Toben: In 1970, that was fairly young. Forty-five years old. I know. That's young.

Interviewer: Was it sudden?

Toben: Yeah. Instant. Heart attack. But...he'd had stomach ulcers, and I think maybe they were operating a little too much on him, you know...so...but...stress, probably. Well no, he didn't drink. Maybe if he'd been drinking, it would have...expanded the arteries. [*Chuckles*]. So...

Interviewer: So you talk about the silence that followed the war?

Toben: Very much.

Interviewer: But you're sharing your father's story today—

Toben: Right.

Interviewer: —So why is that important to you?

Toben: To honor him. Yeah. He never got to...he honored his...the top of his group in the resistance fighting was named Kim Malthe-Bruun, so of course my brother was named Kim.²¹

[*Chuckles*].

Toben: So...that's how he honored him. Because Kim Malthe-Bruun was shot by the Nazis in April 1945, out on the waters. He was fleeing to Sweden. But they got him. So...

Interviewer: And your father was close to him?

Toben: Yeah. Yeah. So...Yep. So there we go. Yep. You never can tell...it's...

Interviewer: Well, thank you so much...

Toben: You're welcome.

Interviewer: For sharing your story and your father's story. And we'll end there.

Toben: Very good.

²¹ *Kim Malthe-Bruun*: A young Danish resistance member known for his wartime diary consisting of unmailed letters to his girlfriend (“Kim Malthe-Bruun”).

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