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Interviewee: Hansen, Walter

Interview Date: October 11, 2013

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History Class

Interviewee: Walter Hansen

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Place: Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Lindsey Martin

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Walter Hansen is in charge of the restoration of the Danish Fishing Boat at Holocaust Museum Houston. Although not affiliated with the Holocaust Museum, he is a passionate volunteer who wants to tell the story of some of Denmark's heroes. Walter learned the craft of building wooden boats from his father-in-law. He had never heard of the museum's fishing boat until a few years before this interview when someone approached him about restoring it. When Walter heard the boat's story, he knew he wanted to help not only with the restoration process but also telling the history of the Jews who escaped to safety on fishing boats during the Holocaust. Throughout the interview, his passion for the fishing boat shines brightly. Walter goes to schools to talk about the boat as well as the history of the Danes who helped prevent some of the deportations. The boat symbolizes hope for the Danish Jews and future generations to see that good things happened amidst the horrors of the Holocaust. Walter personally watches over the renovations, which should be completed in 2015, and is quite proud of the volunteers helping to restore the boat.

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UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Walter Hansen

Interviewed by: **Lindsey Martin**
Date: **October 11, 2013**
Transcribed by: **Michelle Kokes**
Location: **Houston, Texas**

LM: This is Lindsey Martin and it is 2:51 on October 11th. I am interviewing Walter Hansen regarding the Danish fishing boat. I have a few questions to ask you, the first one is just to kind of ease us into the interview. I'm just curious, where did you grow up?

WH: I originally grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

LM: Okay.

WH: But left there when I was nineteen, I went into the Navy for four years and shortly after I got out of the Navy went back to Pennsylvania but married my high school sweetheart. We immediately moved to Florida. We spent about six years in Florida, from there we went really up and down the East Coast for the next thirty years, eventually came to Houston in 1998 and we've lived here ever since.

LM: Awesome! Where did you go to college, if you went to college and what was your degree?

WH: Well I graduated with a bachelor of science in business administration with a major in accounting from what was then called Florida Tech, Florida Technological University which is now University of Central Florida.

LM: What are some of your hobbies?

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WH: Woodworking has been a hobby of mine for about forty years. I like other things, biking, skiing and that kind of stuff although I haven't done much of that. You don't do much skiing in Houston. But woodworking, boat modeling and working on boats has been one of my favorite things to do for all of my adult life.

LM: So is that something that you did as a child as well?

WH: I started with boats actually when I started to date my wife, the young lady who became my wife. They had a summer house on the New Jersey shore and I got into boating because that was what my father-in -aw was into and I was very much taken with him, he's one of my favorite people. He always had old boats so they always needed to be fixed. I got into fixing boats at an early age and I enjoyed it. I've always enjoyed doing that.

LM: That's awesome. How did you hear about the Holocaust Museum in Houston?

WH: I built a boat for the Keels and Wheels Antique Car and Boat Show that we have in Lakewood Yacht Club every year, this was 2011 I think. That boat got a trophy at the boat show and among the people who came to see my boat was Chris White who is the head of the Elissa Project down in Galveston. Chris had been invited to come up to the Museum to take a look at the Danish Rescue Boat because it clearly was beginning to deteriorate, needed repairs and he looked at it and he said, "You know there's a guy that might be able to help." and he sort of offered me up to the museum. I got an email from Carol Manley at the museum and Carol who is the Director of Collections asked me to come up and give a proposal. Until that time, I never even knew that the museum had a boat. When I got up here, I looked at the boat, I learned the story of the boat and I watched that wonderful video that they had as part of the presentation. It just captivated me. I just thought it was a wonderful project. It has a wonderful message that is associated with it. I signed on as a volunteer to be project manager to restore the boat and also to

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restore the boat and also to improve the presentation of the boat so that it has a lot of impact just being here but we could improve that by telling the story a little more completely.

LM: I was just kind of curious since you mentioned that you built boats, did you ever fish off them as well or do you just like the woodworking aspect of them?

WH: Yeah, I mean commercial fishing and recreational fishing are two completely different things. I have the greatest respect for people who go down to the sea in ships, who make their livelihood aboard these ships these fishing boats. I'm half Norwegian and so my grandfather as most good Norwegian boys of his time did, wen to sea when he was fourteen and sailed square rigged ships until he literally jumped ships in Philadelphia which is why my family developed there. I have some of that I think in my blood but fishing is a... if you ever meet a commercial fisherman you want to shake his hand and tell him how much you appreciate him because it is a brutal, difficult work. Very dangerous work. I have an abiding respect for fisherman.

LM: You mentioned before you started working on the boat that you were approached by Carol. You hadn't heard that we had a Danish fishing boat?

LM: No and I've told people I had never even been to a Holocaust Museum and I lived and worked in Washington D.C. for 8 years and I never went to the national museum because just that period of history, the second world war and the atrocities that were committed, to me it's just such a depressing part of human history. What I learned and I've grown to love this museum now because of the boat exhibit, what I've learned through the boat exhibit is that there were also these rays of sunshine that emerged and we've seen some of the movies of the individuals who saved hundreds and thousands of people through their individual efforts but what I think is unique about the Danish boat story is that this was an entire population of a

country, so far as I know one of only two, Bulgaria and Denmark, were the only two countries

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where the citizens spontaneously acted to subvert the anti-Jewish laws because they saw it as an attack on their fellow citizens and one that they weren't going to allow to take place. They took action and it's a wonderful story about what happens when people do the right thing.

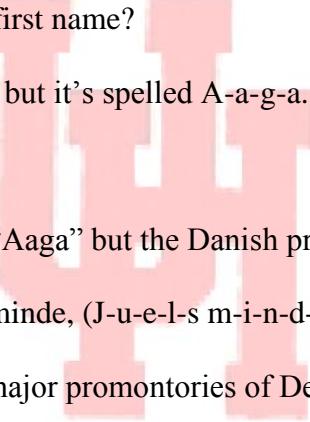
LM: Yeah that's really true. Was there anything in particular that you wanted to find out while you were still in the process of restoring the boat?

WH: What I really wanted to learn was more of the history of the people who were associated with the construction and the initial operation of our boat. We know that our boat was built by a ship builder named Aaga Anderson.

LM: Would you mind spelling the first name?

WH: Oah is... It's pronounced Oah but it's spelled A-a-g-a.

LM: Okay.

WM: You would think it would be "Aaga" but the Danish pronunciation is "Oah." Aaga Anderson was a boat builder in Juelsminde, (J-u-e-l-s m-i-n-d-e) which is sort of on the southeastern coast of one of the two major  promontories of Denmark. It's not near Copenhagen for instance, it's not near Sweden it's down, further west from there, southwest from there. He had a boat building company, a place where he built boats down in Juelsminde and he built this boat for a guy name Valdemar (V-a-l-d-e-m-a-r) Sørensen (S-ø-r-e-n-s-e-n) and that first o has a slash through it (it changes the pronunciation a bit. So anyway Valdemar, I take it, was a fisherman. As far as we've been able to tell our boat was actually built in 1947, it's a post war boat but I think it's the best we could find. It really doesn't matter when it was built because there's... the first question that people ask me, "Is there any indication that this boat was used to actually save anyone?" and the answer is, "No." What this boat does is, is it has this tremendous iconic value because it represents all of the boats that were used to save people because it is of a

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classic design that most of the boats during that period were constructed around. It is an idyllic representation of what those boats look like and it gives us a real sense of what it must have been like to board those boats and to be hidden below decks to take the trip over to Sweden. It gives us the ability to visualize that. That's one of the things that we want to work towards in improving the presentation, is to increase the degree to which our visitors can communicate with the boat, can get in touch with the feelings that the boat represents.

LM: Have you talked to any of the local fisherman that lived there that have used these types of boats before?

WH: I've been in correspondence with a couple of people, very interesting people. One of them is... now I can't think of his last name. Give me a minute and I'll pull up some of his emails, but one of the people that I have corresponded with is an inspector who has inspected these boats for over twenty five years, very intimately familiar with the type of boat and was helpful in explaining to me what certain things were, how certain things worked, how the boats were constructed and so forth. Let me see if I can get down to.

LM: You said Pear, like the fruit?

WM: E-s-b-e-n-a-r-d-t is the gentleman I was just talking about, the inspector.

LM: Okay.

WM: Okay and then let me see if I can get Pair...Pair Thompson. Pair is the owner of a boat called *Marna*, which is a totally restored functioning Danish fishing boat in Denmark that is still operating, it floats and it is used for ceremonial things like they bring Father Christmas in on the boat at Christmas time and so forth. He has been very helpful because we really don't have an idea, we have an idea about what the outside of the boat looked like as late as 1970, about 1970. I don't have any indicate about what she looked like before that. It appears that her second owner

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restored the boat in about 1970 and it's the closest we can get to what she originally looked like.

When I look at those photos she looks almost identical to *Marna*, Pair Thompson's boat. Pair has taken a number of photographs of the inside of his boat, the controls, the forward cabin and the wheel house to give me an idea of how they were constructed and what they looked like back in the day. Now his book goes back to 1928 but again it's the same almost identical construction.

I've also, I just got back in June I went to Connecticut to Mystic Seaport where there is another Danish boat called *Gerda III*, (G-e-r-d-a III) and *Gerda III* is actually owned by the Jewish

Heritage Museum, I believe it is called, in Manhattan but they very wisely put the boat in the

care of Mystic Sea Port and this is an in-water display this boat. Wonderful story about *Gerda*

III. The 17 year daughter of the owner of *Gerda III*, *Gerda III* was a lighthouse supply servicing boat and the owner of the boat and his daughter lived in the lighthouse that was out on an island off of Copenhagen. Every day *Gerda III* would go out and visit the lighthouse and come back, all during the war the Germans were very used to seeing Gerda going back and forth to the island.

When in 1943 the Germans instituted the anti-Jewish laws, the story goes that the daughter of the owner went to her crew and she asked them what they thought about what was going on and they didn't like it and she asked them if they wanted to do something about it and they said yeah they

would. She went to her father and all she asked him because she didn't want to tell him too much about what was going on. She said, "Would you mind if we deviate from our schedule a little bit? We'll still come to the lighthouse but we have some other things we want to take care

of?" He sort of gave tacit approval through his silence, he didn't say no. They would take roughly ten people per trip aboard this boat, take them to Sweden and then go service the

lighthouse and then come back to Copenhagen and made thirty five trips and saved over 350

people on that boat alone. It's a wonderful boat, it's a wonderful story. I was able to go up
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through the approval of the museum that owns her and Mystic Sea Port, who is the caretaker for her, and I was able to go up and crawl on her...

LM: Oh wow!

WH: I was able to meet my counterpart as a volunteer who is responsible for maintaining Gerda III, very interesting gentleman. We both have the same awe of what these people went through, what the rescuers went through as well. When I got on the boat, he was showing me the various places and he went down to the forward cabin which is an area of great interest to me because we know our boat had a forward cabin. It didn't have one when we got her and we want to re-build that. So I went down to look what the forward cabin was built like and from there I could look into the central hold area, which is where they hid these people. As he saw me looking into that area he said, "Yeah, that's sort of hallowed ground on this boat." It's quite an emotional experience to sit down there and to look into that area and to realize what the people must have gone through who were being transported. Fear of discovery, fear of catastrophe, people who had never been on boats before were taken and hidden below decks in these very dark and cramped areas with only a couple of personal possessions and an uncertain future. It must have been supremely difficult for them and to be able to sit down there and just contemplate that for a few moments was a very moving, very interesting experience.

LM: How many people, from you actually seeing what the outside of that boat looked... how many people do you think would have been able to fit down there?

WH: They would take ten at a time.

LM: They would take ten. Ten people, would that have been quite cramped?

WM: Actually it was a fairly large area. Their hold is different than ours.

LM: Okay.

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WM: The hold in ours is very interesting because the center of it is actually wet. There are holes drilled through the hull of the center section of our boat that allow the sea water to come in so that the center hold section was basically a live well. That's where they put the fish when they caught them. On either side of that is an equipment hold. One on each side of the boat that would be used to put sails and lines and rigging and spares and all that kind of thing, buoys and so forth. Depending on the type of fishing, if they were doing long line fishing, fishing with nets, that kind of equipment would be stored in those areas. What they did is they would empty those areas out and they would hide in our type of boat they might get three or four people in each side. They would be separated, much more cramped, much smaller area, very dark. I've been down in our boat and sat in that area and that is also a very moving experience. To imagine sitting there, just sitting there while the boat is on land is challenging enough. To get in to there in a pitching boat on a pitching sea in the dark if you are not familiar with being on a boat must have been terrifying, especially for children and elderly. It must have been a very difficult thing for them to do. Some of those boat trips only lasted them a half an hour. Others lasted them all day depending on their route and the patrol craft and ways that they had to go. Even if it was a very short journey it would have been a very emotionally draining experience.

LM: You said you first heard about this in 2011...

WH: I think it was 2011, yeah.

LM: How long after that did the actual restoration part begin?

WH: I wrote a proposal. What we looked at doing was first there were materials on the boat that clearly did not belong there, that were not original. We cleaned out the boat first. We took out all the stuff that was not original to the boat. We undertook a very interesting measurement project in July of last year where some people from the East Carolina University came to the University of Houston

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museum and using what's called a total station, it's an electronic survey instrument, very much...it's the same as what you see surveyors using on the side of the road. What this instrument has the ability to do when coupled with a software program called Rhinoceros, incidentally, allows you to identify points in three dimensional space and you reference that to known data points, for instance, the side of the wall in a museum which is not going to move around. You essentially tell this machine where it is and then you measure where these points are and we measured over a two week period in July, we had a wonderful group of volunteers come and help us, we measured over 3,500 data points and from that we developed a virtual model of the hull of the boat.

LM: I'm sorry I don't know a lot of boat terminology. What is the hull?

WH: The hull is the body of the boat.

LM: We measured every board, every timber, every rib, the keel, the deck members, everything on the hull of the boat and then put that into this program and we get this virtual model that we can disassemble, we can rotate, we can look inside it, we can hold it up and look underneath it. It's a wonderful tool. The very first thing we did with that data, which was the next phase of the project was to design a new cradle for it. The boat had originally been displayed in its shipping cradle and that let the boat sit flat on its keel and really the boat is designed not to be sitting on the keel. The keel should be deeper at the back or the stern than it is at the bow. As a result the boat was sitting sort of nose down and by having those measurements we were able to determine what an even keel should look like and designed a cradle to fit that shape. Our good friends at Swift Ships in Morgan City, Louisiana, a ship yard over there built the cradle based on our design and shipped it to us, donated it to the museum. It's about a \$35,000 cradle that they just donated to us.

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LM: Oh wow!

WH: The shipping which was done by EPT, a logistics company, a very large logistics company. TNT Crane did all of the heavy lifting for us, took it off the truck and set it in place. We had to lift the boat up and set the boat on the new cradle. All of that was donated. I think the whole project including shipping and the crane and everything probably was somewhere around \$50,000 worth of donations. Just a wonderful assistance that we got from these companies.

What's interesting is when you tell the story of the boat to people like those who have helped us so far, they sort of get this warm glow about them and want to help and will do anything. They have been just amazingly helpful to this whole effort. In reality that's what the boat really represents. The boat represents the way that people spontaneously came to the aid of those who were in trouble, who were endangered. Now the boat's endangered! She is literally rotting in place, we have to do some things to check that and now to restore her to her original appearance. When people get that they bend over backwards to be part of that effort and what's interesting is you know we have some terminology here at the museum we call people who come to the aid of others. We call them upstanders. That's what this boat represents. We have a growing list of upstanders who are coming to the aid of the boat which is a very interesting phenomena.

LM: I'm trying to get my timeline. I remember when... are you familiar with the company that was collecting our donations? Are you familiar with that story with what happened? I believe Glenn Beck talked about the anti-Semitism, can you talk a little bit about that?

WH: Sure we have a professional conservator. Here I go with names again...I will think of his name in a moment.

LM: And he is located where you are originally from..?

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WH: He's from Pennsylvania, yeah. He's a Pennsylvanian and he is a pro... Brian Howard is his name.

LM: Brian or Ryan?

WH: Brian Howard.

LM: Brian. Okay.

WH: His company BR Howard and Associates was commissioned by the Museum. After I gave my proposal, Brian came out and looked over the boat and gave his proposal and I was very happy to see that we both recommended essentially the same things it's just that Brian recommended a whole bunch more than I did and that's rightfully so because he's a pro and I'm an amateur. That was fine. Brian thought, what a wonderful story this was. He put it out on his company website thinking that people would really enjoy the story and maybe that he could develop some donations for the museum. Instead of that he gets this horrific, anti-Semitic, foul, angry, diatribe from this caller who calls into his voice mail. His son, Brian's son, who also works for the company checked the voice mail and heard this rant and thought, "What am I going to do with this?" He made a YouTube presentation out of it and put it on YouTube. Glenn Beck got ahold of it and aired it on his radio program, I think twice. All of the sudden the interesting reaction to this awful, anti-Semitic rant that was on this program, is that donations started pouring into the museum. I think we raised over \$20,000 from places as far away as Australia and Guam. People heard this and sent money into the museum. The joke among myself and the volunteers who work on the boat, we try to keep our sense of humor up. We said, "Gee you know, a little hate can go a long way!" Whenever we can remind people of that point-counterpoint, the antitheses of what the boat represents it does have a tendency to encourage people to give more money which is great.

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LM: That is really awesome. How many volunteers do you have working on the boat right now?

WH: I've got about a list of probably about thirty or thirty five but only about ten or twelve and that's pretty typical. Actually, it's a pretty large percentage the way that volunteer programs go. Anytime I have a work party we will have generally ten maybe twelve people will show up and it's the same ten or twelve. What's really interesting is that if I need anything I'll put an email out and we have some wonderful volunteers. We have a marine architect, we have a couple of marine engineers, we have a marine archeologist, we have a shipwright who has over twenty eight years working on schooners, he knows extremely knowledgeable people. If I need something I just put an email out to my volunteers. For instance when I wanted to get the cradle designed, I sent an email out. I said, "If any of you engineers would be interested in designing this cradle I really need to have this thing designed." The first two responses that I got were from a marine engineer. He's retired so he's got like 30 years of experience and another of my volunteers is not only a formerly professional boat restorer but he is also a designer. He uses all of the automated design systems that are compatible with that automated measurement project, the Rhino that I talked about. So the two of them got their heads together and they designed the cradle, again for free. That was another \$5,000 worth of donation that we got there. The first two that I got were exactly what I needed so I responded to them, "Wow thanks very much! You're on." I had to turn down the next si people who volunteered to help. I have this wonderful pool of great talent that I can draw from.

LM: Now do all the volunteers have a background with some sort of boat or are these just people who heard this story on the news and decided, "Hey you know what? I'm retired right now, I don't have a job and I just want to help out."

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WH: Yeah there's a mix. I belong to the Woodworkers Club of Houston. So I went and gave a presentation there and I got about ten volunteers from there and I also belong to the Gulf Coast Historic Ship Models Society. I gave a presentation there at the Houston Maritime Museum and I got another six or so volunteers from there. There is the core right there, the woodworkers, their ship modeling enthusiasts and the ship historians. That's where my marine archeologists and those kind of people come from. Then I have some lawyers and I have a wonderful family who came to visit to the boat one day and came to visit the museum and they were looking at the boat and the wife or the mother was there with her son who has cerebral palsy. He is confined to a wheelchair, brilliant young man who has his own cerebral palsy foundation. We started talking and they had lots of questions, very interested in the boat and I said, "You know we need volunteers to do research." The mother's sister was a librarian and she's a teacher. She said, "Yeah we'd like to volunteer." So they are on my list. They get my newsletters and so forth. Very responsive people. We have all kinds of people. And we have something for all kinds of people to do.

LM: I know you kind of gave me I call it like a mission statement of why you are doing this but could you repeat it one more time? Why is it important to restore a boat like this?

WH: This boat is an icon of an event in history. It represents the heroic efforts of Danish fisherman and the Danish citizenry in general. although as personified by the fisherman. Who risked everything that they had, they risked their lives, their boats, their livelihoods, their freedom to help their fellow citizens when they saw that their safety and security was being threatened. It is a wonderful example to all of us about how we should behave toward our fellow man.

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LM: Do you know of any local Holocaust survivors who, I know that they have conventions or that sometimes they come, have you heard of any of them who have talked to the museum who said, "I've met someone who survived a fishing boat or I know of somebody's cousin." or something like that?

WH: Yeah we have one here in the museum Dana Rudaizky I believe her name is. Dana's parents and grandparents, I believe, were rescued. They are Danish, she is Danish, Rudaizky (R-U-D-A-I-Z-K-Y). She gave a presentation here at the museum here about that, some wonderful historical stuff that she presented to us. That's one and one of my volunteers who is... Joe Babcock is his name. Joe is a shipwright, a very knowledgeable guy and in fact he is at a boat show in Louisiana showing a tub boat that he has just built. Joe's wife is Danish and her father was a delivery man in Copenhagen during the Second World War and he used to go around making deliveries on a motorcycle with a side car. The Germans were very familiar with him. They saw him putt-putting around all the time and when he heard what was going on his contribution was, and this really is at the heart at what the boat represents, He would hide one person at a time in his side car and drive them down to the docks so that they could get on a boat and escape. That's what it comes down to. One person at a time. One on one. That's as small as it gets but it's as important as it gets. It shows it demonstrates what's at the heart of this. That individuals can overcome oppression when they are properly motivated. That is what drew Joe as a volunteer to this project. He has this feeling this kindred spirit that draws him to the boat from that family experience.

LM: Wow. I can see why, talking about this, can you express how you feel just all this attention that this boat has received recently?

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WH: When I first saw the boat and I first heard of this story I realized that everybody needs to know this story and certainly the museum is beautifully positioned to tell this story because we have thousands of school children who come through here and thousands of adults, families come through here. They get to see the boat and they get to see the video that tells the historical elements of the story and we have docents who take groups around and they give... unfortunately because of the amount of time that they have they really don't get a chance to spend much time about the boat. What I've learned from my own research goes way beyond anything that I've learned at the museum. There are so many stories that show the importance, what the boat represents. Both on the Danish side and on the German side. It's very interesting how all of this transpired, the historical significance of all of it. Yet there are too many people in this community who don't know the story of the boat. So I will go out and speak, I've spoken at synagogue and I've spoken at churches. I'll speak where anybody asks me to. I think I've made a presentation at classes at Clearlake... it's a senior program in Clearlake where they like guest speakers and I'm going out in November to Blinn College to give a presentation on the Boat out in Brenham, Texas. I'll go anywhere because I love to talk about the boat and spread the word about what the boat represents.

LM: You mentioned both the Danish as well as the Germans. What has some of your research shown about how the Germans reacted to this Danish fishing boat?

WH: The story very briefly is that Denmark was invaded in 1940. By 1943 the underground effort in Denmark had grown from near nothing to a pretty viable force. They were doing some really nasty stuff in the middle of 1943 including encouraging doc strikes, blowing up ships, and causing a lot of problems. In August of 1943 they actually blew up the building in Copenhagen where the German high command was located and so the Germans had about enough of that. The

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key figure here, Dr. Verna Best, who was in charge, he was the SS leader in Copenhagen. He sent a report to Hitler and he said, "Hey I think it's time to initiate the anti-Jewish laws." They had been unsuccessful in initiating the anti-Jewish laws in Denmark because the King, King Christian the 10th, had when the Germans first invaded Denmark the King negotiated with the Germans and was able to retain local control of his government. Brilliant move, but a very risky move because it looked like he just gave up. But he gave up in order to keep some measure of some control, it was very clever on his part. Unfortunately over time and especially as the underground gained strength, his ability to maintain control finally dissolved. In fact he dissolved the government on the day that the Germans declared martial law and his government went to Sweden. So Verna Best is the guy who is in charge, he's the bad guy here. He tells his associates what the plan is. The plan is that on the Jewish New Year when they know that all the Jews are going to be home, they are going to go and round them up. They had already broken into the synagogues and they had stolen all the membership lists and they knew where everybody lived and so they figured this was going to be a real simple operation. Well among his staff was a guy named George Duckwitz. Duckwitz was the maritime attaché for the Germans and he recognized that if the Germans initiated these anti-Jewish laws, he understood the Danes well enough, he knew that they would not stand for it. He went to a couple of his friends and told them what was going to happen. The word got through to the chief rabbi, Rabbi Melchior, at that time. I think he was acting chief rabbi at that time on September 28th. Jewish New Year fell on October 1st. That was the day they were going to round them up. The rabbi gets up in his congregation and he says words to the effect of, "You should not be here. You need to go home, you need to pack a bag and you need to go into hiding because they are going to come and round you up in two days or three days. That's all you've got you need to get out of here." He

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basically dismissed them all. The way the story goes is that the word spread throughout the Danish population. Now, remember the Jewish population in Denmark was relatively small, we're talking about 8,000 people. Only about 1,900 or so of whom were actually Danish citizens. The rest them were all either married to Danish citizens but didn't have citizenship or else they were refugees from Germany or from Finland and other places nearby where they had come to Denmark. Most of these people weren't even Danish citizens, it didn't matter to the Danes. They saw that their neighbors were being threatened and they spontaneously approached their Jewish neighbors and friends and offered them money, a place to stay, a place to hide, anything to help them to escape this deportation to the concentration camps. The stories about how they did that are legion and are wonderful. The hospitals opened up their doors and hid people. They made false charts showing that they were Christians who were sick and put them in beds. The mental institutions took people in and hid them there. The reason that our boat is such an important icon is it comes from a little town called Gilleleje. Gilleleje was a very popular, it's a delightful-- you can go visit it on Google earth, it's a delightful quaint little fishing village up in the northern part of Zealand which is the one promontory of Denmark. It was a very well-known vacation part. A lot of the Jewish people knew about Gilleleje, they knew it was on the coast. There was a lot of talk about you need to get to a ship captain so he can get you to Sweden. Gilleleje was inundated with people trying to escape and people in Gilleleje were hiding escapees in their toolsheds and in their attics and so forth. The church in Gilleleje became a central place, the attic at the church, they would put as many as a hundred people in the attic of the church at a given time. Those people would be there for several days waiting for people to identify a captain who would be able to take a family or take a group to Sweden. The story is that a young girl in Gilleleje, remember the Germans had been an occupying force for three years

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now, she had fallen for a German soldier. The German soldier had been sent to the Eastern front which was tantamount to sending him to his death at that time. She knew what was going with the church in Gilleleje, she thought if she shared the intelligence with the Germans that they would bring her boyfriend back to her and she would end up-- classic teenage romance story. She told the story, she told the secret. The Gestapo came on an evening when oddly enough there was no one in the attic and they searched the place, they found no Jews there and they left so everybody figured "Wow! They've searched so they won't come back." They had eighty people in the attic the next night and the Gestapo came back and they arrested about 80 or 88 people that they took out of the attic. When you consider that there were only 464 Jews who were taken to Theresienstadt from Denmark and you think that 88 of them came from that attic, that was a pretty large number of the total number who were actually deported. Anyway our boat comes from Gilleleje and is directly tied to that story even though she wasn't there at the time. She still represents those Gilleleje ship captains. Getting back to George Duckwitz, he's a pretty interesting guy because Duckwitz had a number of friends in the German Admiralty and I was talking about how the Germans were affected by this too. The German Navy didn't have a lot of time for the German SS, they didn't think very highly of them. Duckwitz found out that a hospital ship was initially going to be used to transfer the Jews to Theresienstadt, and he knew the captain of that ship. He called him on the phone and he said, "Hey did you know what your ship was getting ready to be used for?" The captain said "Oh no it's not." They cooked up this story where the ship had engine problems and wasn't able to make the trip and so they had to go and find some other ship to take them. Duckwitz also knew a guy who was the harbor captain, or he was in charge of the harbor in Copenhagen and all of the patrol craft along the northern part of that coastline fell within his jurisdiction, his responsibility. When Duckwitz told him what was

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going on, he recalled all of his patrol craft for as much as two weeks for maintenance, put them into maintenance. During those first couple of weeks, the evacuation took place over about a three week period from the last couple of days of September through the middle of October. During those first couple of weeks there were no patrol boats operating, because the Germans had recalled them and in effect allowed this escape to take place. Which I think was, my take from that is, when you do something good, when people know you are doing the right thing, its infectious. It makes other people want to do the right thing and I think that is what was going on here. Those were some of the most important people between George Duckwitz who played a key role in saving and getting the word out. Hans Hedtoft was a politician in the Danish Parliament, a Social Democrat. He was the one who actually got the word to Rabbi Melchior, he was an associate of or had a relationship with Duckwitz. That chain of connection is what allowed the word to get out and allowed people the opportunity to do the right thing.

LM: Now once the Jews went to Sweden after the war, what happened to them?

WH: That also is very interesting. First of all there were organizations in Sweden who helped the Jews to establish a community there. They helped them to gain employment, to get food, to live and so forth. After the war ended, when the Danish Jews returned to Denmark and the vast majority of them did, they found that their neighbors had kept up their homes, their farms, their businesses, their apartments. They were able to move back into their homes. Now that was not necessarily an immediate process, Dana tells about how her parents, when they came back, someone was renting their home and it took them a while to get those people out and back into their home. But when you contrast that with the rest of Europe where when the Jews were released from the concentration camps, they had nothing, they had lost absolutely everything but the clothes on their backs. They had lost their bank accounts, their homes, their apartments, their

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furniture, their artwork, their savings, everything had been stolen. In some cases, when they tried to come home they were shot at and people tried to beat them up and arrest them and kill them. Once again the Danish experience was the antithesis of what was going on in the rest of Europe at the time. Again it says so much for the Danish people. They did not look at their Jewish citizens as being any different than anybody else. They did not distinguish because of religion, they were citizens. They were fellow human beings first, they were Danes second and whatever else they were came after that. It's a refreshing way to think about how we ought to be thinking about one another.

LM: Do you think that if more people, if more countries had treated their Jews like the Danes had, I mean I know you are not a historian but after seeing this amazing example of how the loss of life in Denmark was minimal compared to other countries. Granted, I know they didn't have as many Jews, do you think that if more countries had done that the number of loss wouldn't have been as high?

WH: I think that the political and the... the position of other Europeans was different than Denmark. Anti-Semitism had been rife in Europe since before the First World War. Not so in Denmark. Apparently not so in Bulgaria either. I don't know the Bulgarian story, but I understand that Bulgaria is the other country where they protected their Jewish neighbors and they did things very similar to what went on. They kept them from having to wear the yellow star and that kind of thing. What was the human dynamic that caused the rest of Europe and especially Eastern Europe, to be so harsh toward its Jewish citizens I think was decades and decades of anti-Semitism that was not present in other parts of the world, like Denmark. What is unfortunate when you look at that is that the norm appears to have been an anti-Semitic view toward the Jewish population. It was the exception. When you look at other stories, and there

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have been movies and books written about how people saved their employees, their neighbors or whatever. These are isolated individuals who felt that things were not right. That the Germans should not be treating Jews this way. They were isolated individuals, far different. They behaved that way contrary to what was then the norm which was an anti-Semitic fervor. That is not the story in Denmark, in fact the absolute opposite was true. Now was Denmark 100% pure? No, there was a Danish socialist party, Danish Nazi party, there were anti-Semitic Danes. I understand that they were very harshly treated at the end of the war. They were punished for their actions and their activities, for those beliefs. So would that the rest of the world was more like Denmark? Yeah, sure. But that was not the reality of the situation.

LM: Getting back to our boat, after the boat is fully restored, well first of all, what do you think the timeline is of when it will fully be restored?

WH: I'm going to guess probably about two years.

LM: Ok.

WH: Because we have a tremendous project ahead of us. The good news is that the keel and most of the ribs are in pretty good shape. The bad news is that only the keel and most of the ribs are in pretty good shape. Just about everything else is going to have to be replaced.

LM: Would you do the restoration here?

WH: Oh yeah

LM: Ok

WH: It's going to be done in place. It's going to be done by volunteers. It's going to be done, hopefully with lots more donations of money, lumber and all the things that we need. As a result it's going to take a lot longer than if we took it to a shipyard and...

LM: Right.

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WH: and had some professional do it.

LM: I think it makes it more personal, when you know how many hands have....

WH: Oh absolutely! It's a wonderful feeling to drive up to the museum and look over at the boat and say "I did that. I was part of that." We have a number of people who can say that and they're very proud of that. Our volunteers are really very proud of the work they do on the boat.

LM: Money issues is not a good topic to talk about, but curious, how much more money is needed to be raised in order to....

WH: My standard answer to that is a hundred thousand dollars.

LM: More than what we have?

WH: Yeah. If we get a hundred thousand dollars and somebody asks me "How much more money do you need?" I'm going to say a hundred thousand dollars, because a wooden boat is not something that you fix and then you're done with. This is a perpetual project. We have to restore the boat., then we have to maintain the boat. We have to clean the boat, periodically. It will take, you know, we need to nurture this artifact for the rest of its existence. We will never be in a situation where we don't need any more money. That's one of the, that's one of the unfortunate parts of having a boat, but any boat as any boatman will tell you. A boat is not an investment, a boat is an expense. The reason that people still have boats, and I build wooden boats but nobody has a wooden boat anymore. They're all fiberglass. What people who buy fiberglass boats don't understand is fiberglass need to be maintained just as much as a wooden boat. What draws people to own a boat is more infatuation, it's a love affair. We fall in love with boats and that's where I am with this boat. I've fallen for this boat, my volunteers have fallen for this boat and every time we bring a group of people to come see the boats, somebody else falls in love with her too. That's what endears us to her and makes us want to make her shine again.

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LM: That's really cool. Then, our museum has a boat. The Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. Are there any other museums that you know of in the United States that has a....

WH: The only other one is the Gerda III, which is at Mystic Sea Port.

LM: Is that because after the war it's harder to find boats from that time period or is it just a story that not a lot of people know about? I mean 'cause really when people focus on the Holocaust it's not of the Danish fishing boat.

WH: Right.

LM: It's not the Danes, it's of the camps and the ghettos. Why do you think.....

WH: Well I think that this was not a highly publicized story and one of the reasons for that is just the way that the Danes are. The Danes did not make a big deal out of this, because they just felt that they did the right thing. They didn't think that there was anything heroic about their actions. They didn't think that it was special and remember that a lot of what was done was done under the auspices of the underground. There were no records kept, there were, out of secrecy there was not a lot of documentation about what went on. It was only many, many years after the war and unfortunately after a number of the key people had passed away that all of a sudden there became this interest in this story. A number of books have been written, one of the best that I just read and that I would highly recommend is "Conspiracy of Decency" a great story. It's full of oral histories and personal accounts. It goes into some of those details about the relationship of the German Navy I told you about, very well documented and researched book. There are a few others, but I look at this and I see a fantastic movie should be made about this story. It's a tremendous story! It's got all of the elements that make for great Hollywood. Somebody ought to do a movie, write a screenplay for this, because it really deserves it.

LM: I'm curious, have you read the book *Number of the Stars*

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WH: Oh yeah.

LM: OK.

WH: Now *Number of the Stars* is a is a fictionalized...

LM: Right.

WH: Account. It's a nice story. It is targeted at a young audience which is great, because young people need to get this as early on as possible. *Conspiracy of Decency* is more of a historic account that is very well documented. I mean it is an historic account, no fiction involved. As very often happens, truth is stranger and in many cases better than fiction.

LM: Wow! Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you really want the public to know about this boat and this ongoing restoration project that's going on?

WH: I want the public to know that we're here, that they can come and see this boat anytime that they want. That the museum is open, that this is the 70th anniversary of the rescue, which I think is something worth celebrating. I believe that the museum has a lecture program that's associated with it. That information is available on the museum website. We have always need for volunteers so if anybody wants to volunteer, I will gratefully and happily welcome them to the project. We hope to begin construction, we've been in a demolition, measurement and then repositioning on the cradle phase, but now we're getting ready to start construction here. We're going to start putting a new deck on the boat and so forth. It's going to be some exciting times coming up. We're actually going to make some sawdust here and start building something, which will be exciting. I want people to feel that they are part of this because it's a wonderful feeling to be part of creating something that will be here for future generations to come and learn this story and learning about the importance of doing the right thing.

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LM: I'm honestly, I'm really inspired, because you know you didn't know anybody who survived this and you just happened to learn about it from hearing about it. You have so much passion and so much knowledge about something. The fact that you're, you know continuing to lecture to, you know, schools, and stuff about an aspect about the Holocaust that really not a lot of people know about. I want to really, honestly, I want to thank you for what you are doing and you've inspired me to talk more about the Danish fishing boat and you definitely did your job.

WH: Good. Good. I need more research done too, so if you are in to doing research I need somebody to tell me more about Aagh Anderson and Valdemar Sørenson.

LM: Ok.

WH: I certainly I would love for our boat to have been a rescue boat.

WH: You never know the whole story until you turn the page, until you look behind what you see. Valdemar Sørenson was a fisherman, what was he doing before 1947?

LM: Right.

WH: Could he have been involved in this? Aagh Anderson was a shipwright, he built these boats. Could he have built any other boats that were involved in the rescue? I think that by looking back further into their histories, it will put us in closer contact with this event and will make our boat all the more meaningful. I've been trying for two years to get somebody to do the research on Anderson and Sørenson and I haven't found anybody yet. There is the challenge. That's what I really want. I want somebody to go back and shut the church records in Juelsminde, and what's funny is, I mean, I've been told how to do this. I just don't have the resources to go to Denmark and do it. I have a family right now in Denmark that has offered to help me. I said "Wow, that's great. What I need you to do is go to the church in Juelsminde and search the church records and find out who Aaga and Valdimor were and see if there are any

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descendants of theirs still alive and go talk to those people!" That's the key in my view. That's the way to do it. I just haven't been able to find somebody who's willing to go up and knock on a door and do the deed.

LM: Just starts with one person and it's like the Danish fishing boat. I guarantee it probably started with one person saying I don't like how they're being treated so...

WH: That's exactly how it's done, but what was interesting is they all got it at once. Remember there was no internet, there was no Twitter. Yet the word spread just as, faster than if those social media products had been available at the time. Very interesting.

LM: Well thank you so much and go ahead.

WH: My pleasure.

End of interview.

