CHAPTER V: I Didn't Ask Him His Name

The war was changing in Denmark, too. In August of 1943, the Germans officially dissolved the Danish government. It was time for the Jews to flee.

The stranger who came for my grandmother on his bicycle led her by bike through the country.

HANA DUBOVA: I didn't ask him who he was. What he was. Where he was from.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: They biked down south to a tall white church that sat like a crown against the sky.

HANA DUBOVA: And he said goodbye and left.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: The shadow of a pastor appeared in the doorway and led her to the bell tower where she found a dozen other people already waiting.

HANA DUBOVA: The minister was hiding other Jews whom I did not know. And also was hiding some Danes who were underground.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: The bell tower was dark and cold. The walls were built from raw wood. A few small round windows dotted the attic, just enough natural light to remind the refugees that day always becomes night.

HANA DUBOVA: We slept on straw mattresses. They brought us some food, up to the bell tower and told us to hold our ears when somebody comes and rings the bell every hour on the hour. And we were told that there's going to be a certain code and when there is a code we have to run to the beach. And a couple days later the code came and we ran to the beach. And we hid under the upside down-turned sailboats.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: Some sailboats they found on the shore.

HANA DUBOVA: And then there was another code. A whistle. To run to the fishing boat.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: While Hana had been waiting in the church tower, she'd learned that the illegal crossing to Sweden cost money.

HANA DUBOVA: My head said, he will not take me. I am here. In hiding. But he will not take me. I have nothing. I don't have a penny.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: She ran to the boat with the rest of the refugees. She said to the fisherman:

HANA DUBOVA: I have nothing to give you. No money. He says to me, I didn't ask you.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: He let her on the boat anyway. And for the second time in her young life, my grandmother fled.

BENT MELCHIOR: [sigh] To tell who I am.... Well, I am Bent Melchior. That is for sure. I am a person who has been married for sixty-seven years. We have four sons. We have twelve, had twelve grandchildren. We are great grandparents to twenty-one. So, already there we have a good background.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: That's how Bent introduces himself. He doesn't start with the fact that he was a professor, that he became the chief rabbi of Denmark, or that he's dedicated his life to fighting for refugee rights. He doesn't boast that at 90-years-old he's still able to get a group of young children to sit still while he tells his life stories. He is wise and he's gentle.

BENT MELCHIOR: When people have to give an old man a compliment, they cannot say you are beautiful. You are handsome. All they can say is that you are a very wise man. Laughter

RACHAEL CERROTTI: I met Bent in 2015. My grandmother had told me that when the fisherman smuggled her to Sweden, that she happened to be on the same boat as a famous rabbi.

HANA DUBOVA: He was there with his wife and 4 children. Some of them were in their teens my age.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: Bent was one of those teens. He was fourteen at the time of the rescue. Four years younger than my grandmother. The rabbi was well known in Denmark and after the war, he'd actually become the chief rabbi. And years later, his son, Bent, would follow in his footprints and do the same.

When I first came to Denmark, I wrote to Bent. I remember walking into his home. Up the three flights of stairs from a busy Copenhagen Street to the rabbi's apartment. I sat on his couch with a bold claim. I told him that my grandmother had crossed the Baltic Sea with him as a young refugee in 1943. He asked me a lot about her.

BENT MELCHIOR: Was she eighteen in 1943? But when she came to Denmark, she was fourteen?

RACHAEL CERROTTI: I told him all about how she got to Denmark. How she left Czechoslovia with her friends from the Zionist Youth Group. And that the fact that I was sitting in his living room right now was because their lives intersected for one terrifying night in 1943. And, then I asked him to retell the story of the rescue. As he remembered it. I'd read his account before. Some of it matched up with my grandmother's version. Some of the details clashed. But this is the fun of family stories. Everyone remembers things differently. His story of the rescue operation -- what would be known as the Rescue of the Danish Jews -- begins on that recurring date. September 29th. In the year 1943.

BENT MELCHIOR: My father became central to the story of the whole refugee period because he was the one who actually announced what's going to happen.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: For much of the war, German soldiers called Denmark the "whipped cream front," because by comparison, it was a lovely place to be stationed. While their fellow soldiers were facing bullets on the Eastern front, the Germans stationed in Denmark had luxuries like cake and bacon. There were blond girls to date and beaches to sit on. There was an air of normalcy in Denmark during a violent time.

Denmark received preferential treatment from their occupiers. With their blond hair and blue eyes, Hitler saw Denmark as being the ideal German protectorate. He thought that it would be the example of how Europe would look under his control. So, he let their government stay intact. And since Denmark's constitution forbade any discrimination on the basis of religion, the Jews remained safe in Denmark -- their protection became a symbol of Danish autonomy.

Denmark's King, King Christian the Tenth, would ride his horse around Copenhagen to show his authority in spite of the German presence. Pedestrians and cyclists would enthusiastically parade behind him.

But all of that changed in 1943. As the Germans faced defeat in the east, and the Danish resistance gained momentum, Hitler decided Denmark would no longer receive its preferential treatment. The time of the "whipped cream front" was coming to an end.

Germans dissolved the Danish government and started arresting prominent leaders. They instituted martial law and made a plan to deport the Jews of Denmark. But someone leaked those plans -- actually a German officer did.

BENT MELCHIOR: A German officer, which in itself of course is also very important to underline, that there were good Germans.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: A man by the name Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz was serving as a diplomat in occupied Denmark for Nazi Germany. He joined the Nazi party in 1933 and although continuously disillusioned by the party's politics, he accepted the job during the war. When he learned about the plans to deport Denmark's Jews, he leaked the news to a Danish politician who passed the news on to Bent's father. And then the German diplomat traveled to Sweden, where he started planning with Swedish leaders how they could receive the thousands of people who would soon become Danish refugees.

BENT MELCHIOR: He told the story to some politicians, and as it happened the then chief rabbi of Denmark was already arrested by the Germans and therefore the message came to my father.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: On September 29, 1943, when the Jewish community gathered at the Great Synagogue in Copenhagen for Rosh Hashana -- the Jewish New Year -- Bent's father prepared his remarks. I imagine him, like a biblical prophet speaking into the distressed crowd. He stood at the front of the synagogue and told them it was time to flee.

He said, quote, "You must also speak to your Christian friends and ask them to warn any Jews they know. You must do this immediately, within the next few minutes, so that two or three hours from now, everyone will know what is happening. By nightfall we must all be in hiding."

BENT MELCHIOR: He was the one that said, 'Don't be at home on Friday night. Pass the message on.'

RACHAEL CERROTTI: And that's what happened. Jews found refuge with Christian friends in the city and the countryside. And with neighbors and employers. When Gestapo officers arrived at the homes of Jews, they found empty apartments and houses. The Jews were being hidden in summer homes, basements and on farms. Hospitals in Copenhagen checked in Jews as pretend patients. Giving them typical Danish names. Entire medical staffs, and most countrymen and countrywomen, cooperated to save Jewish lives. In the weeks during the rescue, even staying silent about the underground efforts was a form of resistance.

The plan was for the Jews to hide. And then to flee. To Sweden -- a country that had remained neutral throughout the war. The German diplomat had succeeded in organizing with the Swedish government to receive the Danish refugees.

For ten days, Bent and his family hid in a priest's home. They were one of the last families to flee Denmark. By this time, the Nazis had caught on, so the Danes were now directing refugees down south. A boat ride from southern Denmark to Sweden would take longer, but it'd be less likely to be caught by the Germans.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: Can you recount this part of the story for me?

BENT MELCHIOR: Well, we started out where we were hidden in a priest's house. So, we went by train. You know this was also a problem because I had a little brother who was five years old.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: They worried a five-year-old could say something to give them away on the train.

BENT MELCHIOR: So we put my mother and my little brother into a first-class wagon for themselves.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: In the first-class compartment, they'd have more privacy -- and less chance of being noticed.

BENT MELCHIOR: So we were a little bit shocked when we saw that the other woman in that compartment was taking out a German newspaper. Every person was a possible enemy.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: On the night of October 8th, the first night of Yom Kippur, Bent and his family arrived to their next hiding place -- to a bishop's home by the coast.

BENT MELCHIOR: And he had sixty Jews in his house. And we were there only a number of hours. And, it must have been around half past six, seven o'clock that the cabs came and took us to the boats.

What I remember from that place was that there was a policeman in full uniform. A Danish policeman who helped us and wished us what he could wish us in that situation. The whole town must have known about it. And that was a good sign. A good feeling. Because what we did was really not legal.

HANA DUBOVA: The fisherman put us all in the hull of the little fishing boat and first he put linen and put herring on top of us. Slew and slew of little herring which he caught. So we were laying under there. With layers and layers of herrings on top. And we took off...

BENT MELCHIOR: We were nineteen on our boat.

HANA DUBOVA: You could hardly breath. Some people were getting seasick and fish sick and throwing up on each other.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: The refugees sailed into the night. The dark sky mirrored the depth of the sea. Everyone lay silent, unsure of where they were going or what exactly they were running from. Hana carried a smile vile of poison, gifted to her by her father in 1939, in case of an emergency. Everyone understood that arriving to Sweden was a matter of life and death. The only other options were to drown or be caught by the Nazis.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: When day broke, the boat was drifting. No land was in sight. They should have been there by now. Rumors started to spread among the nineteen people huddled in the boat. Maybe the fisherman was a criminal. Maybe he was a drunk. Maybe he was just lost. He then confessed to the passengers. He had never sailed into open waters before. He didn't even know how to use a compass.

BENT MELCHIOR: We were told that we would have up to eight hours trip. And we did it in almost eighteen hours instead of eight. If we had not, by coincidence, hit Sweden, what would have happened to us? I realize how close we were to end the days there.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: I want to note that we are crossing the Baltic Sea right now and you crossed the Baltic Sea with my grandmother almost seventy-five years ago. That's pretty incredible.

BENT MELCHIOR: It's amazing. I feel you are quite right.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: The bridge we crossed didn't exist in 1943. It was built about twenty years ago. It's five miles long.

We arrived to the Perssons home within an hour of leaving Copenhagen and were greeted by a cool August breeze. The salty air filled our noses. It was like time froze here. The smell was the same. The coastline was the same. Together, Bent and I walked down to the sea.

I looked down at the stones beneath my feet, grabbing a few and rubbing the smooth edges like a good luck charm.

BENT MELCHIOR: It happens that stones can tell stories.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: I pocketed one. A perfectly round, light tan stone with barely any blemishes.

BENT MELCHIOR: When I am standing there at the beach, looking at that water. I see myself on the bottom of that sea.

RACHAEL CERROTTI: The Rescue of the Danish Jews saved nearly ninety-five percent of Denmark's 8,000 Jews. In just over three weeks, more than 7,000 people -- including non-Jewish spouses and members of the underground -- were illegally ferried across the Baltic Sea to Sweden, whose government promised immediate and unconditional sanctuary for all those fleeing Denmark. Fewer than 500 Jews were caught by the Germans and deported to concentration camps.

And in this tiny little house on the coast of Southern Sweden, the story is preserved.

BENT MELCHIOR: It is something outstanding. You enter this place. It's not a big place. And you, you feel something special. Because they collected every little bit. Every note in any newspaper. It is in a shrine.

It smells of yes, something happened. A place is not holy by itself. It's a question of the people that are there that make a place a holy place. It is the actions by human beings that can change a place from a normal house into a holy place. And I think that is the kind of feeling I have to enter this little house.

The event of October '43 has been central in the life of this family. To them, this event, meant now their life had become meaningful. They have saved lives. They have meant something to nineteen people who somehow, stranded, arrived within their reach. You cannot help the whole world. But, those that are within your reach, you can treat and respect as human beings.