

Complete Interview - Rabbi Bent Melchior

Written by B'nai B'rith Europe

The first member of the Melchior family came to Denmark in 1720. He had 8 children, so the family soon had many branches. I am from a line with many rabbis, but it was never a dynasty. Usually there was a rabbi in at least every second generation. My father was the Chief Rabbi of Denmark from 1947 to 1969.

My mother's family came from Austria and Czechoslovakia. Her father, Dr. Max Schornstein, was also a rabbi. He came to Copenhagen in 1905 and served as Chief Rabbi from 1910 to 1919. He left the rabbinate and went into business in Germany, until he as a widower went on aliyah in 1935. His hobby was birds, and he brought a number of birds to Tel Aviv and opened an exhibition. When all had seen his birds, he bought some monkeys and later a tiger. The municipality negotiated with him and took over all the animals. So my grandfather is remembered as the founder of Tel Aviv Zoo, and my material inheritance from him is free entrance to the area!

When my father graduated as rabbi from the Hildesheimer seminar in Berlin there was no position vacant in Denmark. Having tried to be headmaster of the Jewish school in Copenhagen, he decided to take a position as rabbi in Beuthen, in Oberschlesien, Germany. There I was born as the 4th child of my parents in 1929. When Hitler came to power in 1933, we moved back to Denmark, and my father tried to earn a living through teaching, lecturing and writing.

I was 10 years old, when the 2nd World War broke out. In April 1940 the Germans occupied Denmark. Thanks to an agreement between the occupier and the Danish government, Denmark was allowed to limited local authority. The Germans promised not to introduce special legislation for the Jews in Denmark, so we lived like all other Danes, but were told to keep a low profile. That lasted until August 1943, when the Germans requested from the Danish government to introduce death penalty against those, who were fighting the Germans. The government resigned without a new government being established, and the Germans took over completely.

The Gestapo planned their raid to arrest and deport the Danish Jews for the night between the 1st and the 2nd of October. This was a Shabbat, the night after 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah. Fortunately a German officer gave away the secrets about the plans to Danish politicians, who brought them to us. I remember a lady, who came to my parents house on a Tuesday evening just before the start of that nights curfew. My father stopped the service next morning - erev Rosh Hashanah - in the synagogue and concluded in two messages: 1) No Jew should stay at home Friday night. 2) Pass this message on to as many Jews as possible.

This is not the place to tell the story of, how the vast majority of Danes joined in an effort to save the Jewish population, and how more than 95% of us succeeded in escaping over the sea to Sweden. I was 14 years of age, and I remember how we found rescue from all sides, although we also had problems with the fisherman, who was responsible for our transport over the Baltic Sea, so that several miracles were necessary, before we reached the Swedish coast. Even if we were received in a very nice way, I learned what it meant to be a refugee.

Contrary to many other refugees we were lucky to be able to return to our homes, when

Denmark was liberated in May 1945. I became chairman of Zeire Mizrachi - later B'nai Akiva - and member of the board of the Zionist Federation. I passed my examination for entrance to university, but the situation in Palestine took more time than the studies. We were 3 young boys, who started a news bulletin on, what happened in Palestine, and after the UN decision in November 1947 we started a Danish section of Haganah.

That brought me to Palestine/Israel in May 1948 as a volunteer - Machal - to the Israeli army. I had never touched any weapon, and all the sudden I was in the frontline with some iron - a sten gun - in one hand and a spade in the other facing the Egyptian tanks and air raids in the south of the country. From that position I witnessed how Israel survived the first weeks and months of its existence in spite of lack of weapon and soldiers. I met with David Ben Gurion, and I attended the ceremony, when Chaim Weizmann in January 1949 was brought to Jerusalem from Rehovot as the first elected President of the State of Israel.

Again this is not the place to tell the story of Israel's War of Independence. I learned that it can be necessary to go to war, but I also learned to hate war and love peace.

Having served one year with the Haganah and Zahal I returned to Copenhagen at the end of March 1949. By coincidence the evening I arrived, the Jewish youth organization performed a revue on events in the community and in the Jewish world. One of the stars of that evening was a 17 year old girl, who had been a member of the board of Zeire Mizrachi, when I was chairman. She sang about the history of the Jewish people, and afterwards I suggested that we should spend an evening together. I was 19 years old at the time. Since then we have been dating - now for more than 63 years.

Lilian and I got married in December 1951, we have four wonderful sons, eleven grandsons and one granddaughter, and until now - May 2012 - eleven great grandsons and four great granddaughters.

Seven of the grandchildren are still not married. The majority of the family is now in Israel, but we have also descendants in Copenhagen, London and Oslo. We are in very close contact with all parts of the family on a weekly and sometimes almost a daily basis.

Lilian survived a very serious illness a year ago in Jerusalem. At our Diamond Wedding last December I could tell the young members of the family that love does not culminate at the time of honeymoon. It develops and can be even stronger after 60 years of joined efforts and experiences.

During the decade after my year as a soldier I was a teacher in the Jewish community and the Jewish Day School. I passed a few examinations in philosophy and economy, but I had no complete formal education. Since I was a generation younger than other teachers in Jewish subjects, I was quite popular among the children, and I introduced modern ways of teaching. At the same time I was responsible for the department of information in the Zionist Federation, I was chairman of the Jewish Youth Organisation and travelled around the country to lecture to non Jewish organizations about Israel and Judaism.

Already a father of two boys I decided to try to become the next headmaster of the Jewish school, but that required a proper academic qualification. I therefore got a job as teacher in New York, where I wanted to take a course at Yeshiva University. But when I applied for leave from my work in Copenhagen, the leaders of the community wanted me to take a full course to become rabbi. It had not been in my mind, and my mother wanted to protect me from the problems she had experienced first for her father and later for my father, none of them had been well treated by the Danish Jewish community. But my father had forgiven them and wanted very much to see another generation in the rabbinate.

So after much consideration Lilian and I accepted the call, and London was chosen as the best place at Jews' College, which at the time had big scholars such as the rabbis Isidore Epstein, Koppel Kahane, Zimmels, Wieder and Eli Cashdan as teachers. We spent 5 years of learning in London, where we won a great number of friends and also pupils, who came to our house in groups to learn.

In 1963 I was ordained as a rabbi, and I was elected as the assistant to my father in the Copenhagen community. When my father died suddenly in December 1969 I was elected Chief Rabbi of Denmark. I also became a lecturer in classical Hebrew literature at the Copenhagen University from 1971 to 1984.

To be Chief Rabbi in a small country means that you are responsible for all details in connection with education, shechitah, Beth Din (including divorces and conversions) and representation towards the community at large and also in connection with the international Jewish organizations. I had to officiate at more than 60 funerals and up to 25 weddings a year. Above all I had to give time to many, many private people, who wanted me to listen to their personal problems. Most of them were Jews, but it could also be Christians and even Moslems.

It was at a time, when the Danish Jewish community received more than 2000 Jewish refugees from Poland and had to work hard to try to integrate them in the community, although the majority was not aware of their Jewish heritage, before they met discrimination from the Polish regime.

During those years I took upon myself a most interesting task to make a new Danish translation of the Pentateuch. To have a Jewish understanding of our holy scriptures was and is very important. The five books appeared during the years 1977 - 1987, and I also modernized my father's translation of the Pesach Haggadah. All the books were printed in Jerusalem with the Koren Publishing Hebrew text. After my retirement I worked on a new translation of the Jewish Prayerbook, which appeared in 2002.

At an early stage I became active in the battle for human rights. I was one of the first members of Amnesty International in Denmark. In the 60es I was a member of the clerical committee to oppose the American bombing in Vietnam. Later I joined committees for human rights in Greece, in South Africa, in Argentine, in Czechoslovakia, in Kurdistan, in Bosnia, you name it, and I was in, because the organizers claimed that if I was not a member, people would not join. I was so to say the hechsher of the cause.

I became very active in the Danish Refugee Council and was for many years during the 90es and in the new century a member of its executive and chairman of their Asyl Committee. I have become their first and only honorary member, and I am still part of the public debate on the subject.

During the 70es and 80es the question of Sovjet Jewry was a top priority. I took initiative to have both a Jewish and a general committee for the cause, and at the first world conference in Brussels in 1971 I became a member of the international presidium, which had the chairman of Jewish Agency as its president. We met regularly in various countries, also in Copenhagen. Copenhagen developed to become a center for younger people travelling to visit Jewish communities in Moscow and Leningrad and to bring material for teaching Hebrew and Jewish festivals. We also organized food parcels to many refuseniks. For this I was refused visa during those 20 years to the Sovjet Union.

I still consider the action for Sovjet Jewry to have been one of the most successful campaigns in Jewish history, and to be a close witness to the fall of Sovjet and the exodus of more than one million people to Israel was a great experience.

Everything has a price, and my public appearance also in the debate about Israel and its neighbours earned me a lot of threats during the 20 years following the terrible massacre at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972. At almost a regular way I received all kinds of messages, how I would be attacked, tortured and killed. Personally I did not take too much notice of all that, but Lilian and I were mostly worried that something should happen to our younger children. The police offered me all kinds of protection, but I refused to have a personal guard. I did not believe that such a guard really could help, if anybody would try to harm me.

Best known was a plan to assassinate me in connection with a visit to Israel with a group of Jews and non Jews, who wanted to celebrate Israel's 40 years anniversary. The Danish police warned me two months ahead about the plans, but I decided to carry on. The terrorists would have won, if we would cancel our plans to visit Israel. This has been my attitude throughout the threats of terror. When actually the Copenhagen Synagogue was bombed in 1985 - without any people being hurt - I insisted that we had our services in the Synagogue the following Shabbat.

At the same time I was one of the first well known Zionists, who had a public debate with an official representative of the PLO in 1988. I insisted that we should try to make peace with our enemies. Peace is for me the most important element for having a strong democratic Jewish state.

Fortunately, I received not only negative reactions to my public activities. I have met kings and queens, presidents of state, the Pope, political and religious leaders from many countries. I have received the knighthood of the first degree in Denmark, I was given a high order from the German Bundesrepublik, honored by Israel for my service in the war of independence, and given the Jerusalem Price in 2006 I was given the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters at the Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut in 1997. Most important, I am being greeted with smile and positive remarks, whenever I walk through the streets of Copenhagen, where people, I do not know, recognize me as a representative of the Jewish people.

In January 1964, 3 months after I had become rabbi of Copenhagen, I became a member of B'nai B'rith. BB in Copenhagen had my late grandfather as one of its founders, and my father was one of the most active members. I became Vice President in 1974 and President 1978-1980, and again in 1983-1984 in order to organize the convention of District 19 European Continent. I was made an honorary brother of my lodge in 1992, when the lodge celebrated its 80th anniversary, and the first honorary president of my lodge in 2012 at the 100th anniversary of the lodge. At the convention in Israel in 1993 I was elected President of District 19 and continued until in 1999 in Holland Districts 15 and 19 joined into BB Europe. During my period as President I was very active in BBI as a member of Board of Governors.

Since 1999 I have been an Honorary Life President of BBE. I have tried to continue to be active especially on our efforts to help the communities in Eastern Europe. As President I had applied for money from the Dutch funds for help to survivors from WW II. Our projects were so much appreciated that we received 1.3 million US Dollars. Seymour Seideman, who was my successor as President, asked me as Mentor to implement the projects, I had set up, and I like to believe that we did a lot of good things with the money. The work in the Ukraine to feed the hungry and assist them with medical help has been continued to this day, mainly thanks to our brother Alex Faiman from London.

I regard BB to be the most important membership organization in the Jewish world. It is independent and non-sectarian, it is social, cultural and political. It cares about everything Jewish as well as humanitarian. It should be inclusive and not exclusive.

Like other organizations with an ideology it has a problem to renew itself and recruit new members. We have traditions and rituals, and there is a tendency to protect the symbols and forget that symbols must symbolize something real. How can we get sufficient new blood into our activities?

We have taken some steps in the right direction. We have an annual youth forum, but we do not follow up to recruit the participants into our ranks. We should also make use of the success of the Birthright program. In many countries a lot of young people return from Israel with a lot of enthusiasm, but only in a few places that enthusiasm is being followed up by the community to keep the interest in the service of our causes.

The old BB was surrounded by an atmosphere of being secret and confidential. This is no longer the case. But we are not very good at telling about our activities. We must improve our PR. It is also necessary to make it less expensive to become a member. The young people compare with the price of other clubs and organizations. I know that charity is part of our *raison d'être*, but we cannot include the charity in our membership fees.

We also have to confront ourselves with the very difficult problem of mixed marriages. I know as much as anybody else about the danger of mixed marriages to minorities. But after a century or more of condemning mixed marriages and turn our back to those, who do "marry out", we face the fact that the number of mixed marriages continues to go up. Our strategy has failed, and a very big number of Jews are living with non Jewish partners. We simply cannot afford to turn

our back to such a big percentage of our people.

I suggest that the basic point of interest must be, whether the so called mixed couples will educate their children to become Jews or not. Many non Jews would gladly support that their children go to Jewish schools and clubs. This is not the place to go into details how we shall welcome people from this group, but we must open a new chapter and understand that we have failed in our efforts to keep an open door to many, who wanted to join us.

Being almost 83 years of age I feel a responsibility to make use of every day to do something for somebody. Life is not only a question of getting up in the morning in order to wait for the right time to go to bed. I was born the same year as Anne Frank from Holland. Why she should die in a Nazi camp in 1945, whereas I am still alive, nobody knows. But it gives me a responsibility to make use of the time I was given. As long as one can think, you have the duty to look at things with a fresh mind, and to try to contribute to a better life.

I believe in the messianic age to come to this world. I am not so much believing in a Messiah arriving at my doorstep. The messianic age will be a result of our joined endeavors. To be a Jew obliges you to make a big contribution towards that goal. A member of BB has to contribute even more.