

YOM HASHOA APRIL 2021

BIRGITTE'S SPEECH ON ZOOM FOR SNAC, NETANYA, ISRAEL.

Hi I feel it an honor to be one of the speakers tonight, and I want to say thank you to Shelli, who asked me if I wanted to tell my family story.

Most of you know me from before, but for those who don't, my name is Birgitte Savosnick. I am from Norway, and I am the fourth generation Savosnick in Norway.

Norway got its own constitution in 1814. And it had 110 paragraphs. In the second paragraph it was written that Jews were not allowed to enter the country. So this was not the last paragraphs, number 110, but one of the most important, the second.

In 1851 the paragraph was cancelled, and Jews started to move to Norway in small numbers.

My mother was born in Malmö, in Sweden, while my father was born in Trondheim, in Norway.

As you probably know from before, Sweden was neutral during the Holocaust. My grandparents in Sweden did host some Norwegian Jews who had escaped from Norway during the war.

The story of the Norwegian Jews was very different from the Swedish Jews. As the family on my mother's side was safe during the war, the case was completely different for my father's family in Norway.

My great grandparents Savosnick moved from Sweden to Norway about 1890. They got eight children. Six were born in Sweden, and the last two in Norway. My grandfather, Ernst Savosnick, was born in Norway. Six of his siblings moved back to Sweden many years before the war. My grandfather, and his sister Jenny, decided to stay in Norway and continue their life here. Who would know that their choice would have such a tragic impact on their life?

My grandfather Ernst married Dika and they got two children: My uncle Michael, and my father Robert, who was born in 1915. The family built a good life in Trondheim, Norway. My grandfather Ernst was a watchmaker, as his father Michael. Ernst went three years to New York in Amerika where he studied his profession. When he came back to Norway he build a successful business with watches, clocks and musical instruments. He had ten watch makers employed. My grandfather Ernst also received an award for his clocks, at a world exhibition in Paris, in France.

On the 9th of April 1940 Germany occupied Norway. My father was then 25 years old.

In January 1942 instructions were given to the police across the country, to arrange so Jews would get a "J" stamped in their passport. Still, most Jews in Norway did not believe it could get worse.

My father's brother, my uncle Michael, was involved with the resistance, and the Germans were searching for him. He managed to escape to Sweden. Because of this the Nazis took my grandfather Ernst instead. He was later transported to Auschwitz, where he was killed. His sister Jenny was also killed in Auschwitz. In October 1942 the Germans decided to arrest all the Jewish men in Norway. At the time, my father was a medical student in his third year. He was in practice at a hospital in Orkdal, outside Trondheim. One evening, a police officer knocked on his door. He told my father that he has got an order pick him up the next morning, and to bring him to the Nazi office in Trondheim. He was actually one of few Norwegian policemen who were kind; he gave my father the chance to escape before the next morning.

But my father decided to stay, and he was still there when the police came the next morning. The reason why he stayed was because he knew that when his brother had escaped to Sweden they took his father instead. He thought that if he escaped, they would take his mother instead. So this kind Norwegian policeman brought my father in a taxi to the family's home in Trondheim, so my father could get his suitcase. And again, the policeman gave my father the chance to escape. The policeman was waiting in the taxi, while he let my father go alone into the house.

My father packed his suitcase and went back to the taxi. He was kept in prison for a few weeks. On the 26th of November 1942 my father, together with **531** other Jews, were brought by Norwegian taxi drivers and Norwegian police to the port in Oslo. There the big German nazi ship Donau was waiting for them. They were transported to the port of Stettin, and then in a freight train to Auschwitz.

Because of the limited time, I will not talk about my father's horrific experiences in the camps. He survived 2.5 years in Auschwitz, on death marches, and in Dachau. Of the **532** Jews who were transported by Donau only 9 survived. One of the nine survivors was my father, Robert Savosnick. He was 29 years old, and weighed only 36 kilos when he was liberated.

My father returned to Norway in 1945. His mother managed to escape to Sweden and came back to Norway. His brother Michael, who escaped to Sweden in the beginning of the war decided to stay in Sweden. My grandfather Ernst was killed in Auschwitz. Even though my father was only 36 kilos when he was liberated, he was just waiting for some five months before continuing his medical study. He became a doctor in 1948 and later specialized as a pediatric doctor. In 1950 he married my Jewish mother Britha from Sweden. She was a nurse and midwife They got four daughters, and I am the youngest.

One of the main reasons that my father wanted so strongly to survive the concentration camp was that he felt that he had to tell the rest of the world what was happening to the Jews during the Holocaust. He felt it was his duty.

He testified to the Norwegian court in 1945/46. The reason he was asked to testify, was because many relatives returning from Sweden were not allowed to get their property and values back after their relatives were killed. The insurance company and government did not accept they were actually dead, before a survivor could say the name and was sure that he knew he was dead.

For some years after the war, he did not tell people about what had happened. The reason was not that he did not want to tell, but he was afraid that nobody would believe him. After maybe 10-15 years he started to do what he had promised himself.

He was interviewed many times in the Norwegian newspapers, radio and television. He was working as a full time medical doctor, and he worked a lot. He had his own private practice in many many years, and he made a lot of house calls in the evening and in the weekends.

Although he was so hard working, he never forgot his duty, and he started to travel around to different schools and talked about the Nazis and the concentration camps. He did this for many years. He wanted to write a book about his life in the concentration camps, and after ten years of preparations he published a book in 1986 with the title I did not want to die. And the title was as I said before, he had to tell the world what was happening. My father was well known in Trondheim, Norway. And the book was sold out very quickly. The book was also purchased by a government agency to be distributed to all the libraries in Norway.

My father passed away in 1998. In Norway we have an organization called Aktive fredsreiser, in English travel for peace. They travel with classes in buses from Norwegian schools to the concentration camps. They travel with 15 000 children each year. In 2004, my sister Desiree was in contact with them and they wanted to publish a second edition of the book. They decided in 2004 to have my father's book as part of their program. The children also sold the book to family and friends. All the income was used to cover their own trip. Many schools in Norway has a set of the book for one full class in the library. When my mother retired from her work as a midwife, and my father had passed away, she started to travel with Aktive Fredsreiser (Travel for Peace) as a witness on behalf of my father. She did this several times a year until she was 85 and became very sick with cancer.

In 2017, I became aware of that the book had been sold out for a while. I contacted Aktive Fredsreiser (Travel for Peace), and had several phone calls, and they decided to publish a third edition. It is also sold by them. In 2018 I arranged so the book can be bought at the Jewish Museum in Trondheim, the Jewish Museum in Oslo, at the Norwegian Holocaust Center in Oslo.

Two years ago, I was also contacted by some people from Germany. They asked the family for permission to publish the book in German. Which I and my sisters agreed with. I had several emails and send them a lot of pictures, and I also had a meeting with them at the airport in Oslo. It will be published any day now in Germany.

When I came to Israel in 2004 together with my husband and our three children the plan was to stay for only a year. I decided very early on that I would use my time to get the book published in English at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. It was accepted by the editors, and planned to be published as part of a book series funded by the Elie Wiesel fund in a few years' time. This did not happen as he lost much of the money in the Madoff scandal, and book was put on hold.

I have been in contact with Yad Vashem many, many, times during the following years. Two years ago, my sister Desiree and I decided to give a donation towards publishing. Yad Vashem was very happy for this. During the last year I have been involved almost daily with this project, looking through footnotes, and old photographs. Yad Vashem also asked me if I could write an epilogue, as a daughter. A daughter of a survivor. I was very glad to be asked, and I wrote a 9 page epilogue about my father, and how he was the most harmonic person I have ever met. Yad Vashem considered the manuscript to be very good, but they wanted to add some old pictures from the 1940s in the book. So I have been through all the old photo albums and managed to figure out the correct year for each photo. About 15 pictures from this have now been included in the book. It has been a very emotional journey for me.

On the 4th of December 2020, I felt the circle about my Jewish Norwegian family was completed. I have to tell you why in a few sentences.

As mentioned, in 1814 the Jews were not allowed to enter Norway.

In 1851 the Jews were allowed to enter Norway.

In 1942 the Jews were not considered as Norwegians, only as Jews, and not allowed to stay in the country.

In 1945, when my father was still in the concentration camp after liberation, some people told him that the Red cross had come with white buses to pick up the Norwegians and take them back home to Norway. My father went to the buses and said I am Norwegian, and I have heard you are going to bring me back to Norway. They asked him if he was Jewish. He said yes. Then he was told he was not a Norwegian, and they would not take him back to Norway. The white buses went back to Norway without my Jewish Norwegian born father.

So what made the circle complete in December last year is that the Norwegian branch of UNESCO's Memory of the World Register announced that my father's history and holocaust experiences will be part of the Norwegian documentary heritage.

This includes papers and photos relating to his family history, background information relevant to his book, material concerning his fight against Holocaust denial, antisemitism, and racism, as well as many other of his personal holocaust related documents, letters, and photographs, which he had kept.

It is a huge recognition of my father's efforts and of the importance of these documents for the history of Norway.

This is the whole circle with my Norwegian Jewish family Savosnick.

As I have said before, my father got four daughters. His brother never got any children. Many members of Snac have asked me why I have kept my family name. Even our three children have got my family name as their last name.

As you might understand, my father's story is the reason.