

## Could you tell us some background about the toy monkey?

The story is, during my father's childhood he had this toy monkey that he kept clipped on the handlebars of his bicycle in Berlin. He was a happy-go-lucky boy, like most kids were. The toy monkey was something that he rode around with and looked at all the time. It was his talisman, his good luck piece. When the Nazis came to power and after Kristallnacht, it was clear that my father would have to leave Germany. His parents arranged to have him get out through a *Kindertransport* to Sweden. My father packed a small suitcase and left in the spring of 1939. In that suitcase he packed away his toy monkey. It was a tiny toy monkey, only about 4 inches, made by the German toy company Steiff. This was really the only object from his childhood that he took with him and he kept it with him for more than 60 years. My father kept it privately in drawers, a hidden reminder of his childhood, his family, and his parents. He never talked to me about it and I'm his son, his only child. It was a very private thing.

In the year 2003, an archivist from the Jewish Museum in Berlin and acquaintance of my father, Aubrey Pomerance, came to visit at his apartment here in Manhattan. Aubrey began talking to my dad and said, "we [the museum] are looking for objects to get people to understand more of what it was like for Jewish children growing up during the Nazi period. We have letters, we have documents, but do you have anything that is very personal." My dad thought it over; he knew he had this toy monkey. It was a precious object from his childhood, but he also wanted the story to be told in a way that would connect people on a personal level. He gave Aubrey the monkey and it was put on display in various exhibits at the Jewish Museum in Berlin.

In 2015, a young woman named Erika Pettersson from Sweden was at the museum with her boyfriend. They had spent several hours at the museum and it was the end of their visit when Erika wandered up to this exhibit, the very last exhibit they looked at in the museum. It was a display of things that belonged to children and the stories of Jewish children who had lived in Berlin in the late 1930s. The objects were displayed in wooden boxes; you would lift the lid of the box and see images and objects with the story of a child. Erika lifted only one lid, beneath was a picture of the toy monkey. She was fascinated by it. I think a lot of people felt very connected because a stuffed toy is something most of us have. She read the story about the boy; his last name was Berliner. It turned out that Erika's mother's name was also Berliner. She was very interested in this, but did not think that much about it, just "what a strange coincidence."

When Erika returned to Sweden, she said, "this strange thing happened at the museum. I went and saw this display and there was a toy monkey. There was this story of a boy named Gert Berliner." Erika's mother Agneta became especially interested because they shared the same last name and because she knew that she had a family connection to Berlin. She went on an internet search and found my father's website, my father is a photographer and a painter. On that website, my father had his e-mail address. Agneta wrote him a letter with her phone number and they connected by phone. Funnily enough, she started talking to my dad in Swedish, my father hadn't spoken Swedish in 60 years. He answered very briefly in Swedish and

she said, "I think you're my cousin." It turned out, they are in fact related and we have this whole family in Sweden that we never knew about.

My father discovered this in his nineties. It was a great, wonderful gift to him late in life. And to me too, and my family. My father's parents were murdered in Auschwitz, they didn't survive, and he was their only child. He came to America as an orphan and we were a very small family as part of our family was wiped out in the Holocaust. It wasn't simply discovering that you had some relatives, but to discover you have this family and that the family survived, succeeded, and thrived. It was a wonderful thing.

### **How did your father receive the monkey?**

I have asked him about that, but he doesn't really remember. It must have been a gift from his parents.

### **You said it was the only object from his childhood, was he able to keep anything else?**

Well, it was his only childhood toy. He has a lot of letters, his identity card, and some school reports. So there were other things, but the monkey was his one toy.

### **Did your father have a name for his toy monkey?**

No. My father didn't have name for him, at least not any that he remembers. A lot of people have asked that and we have also talked about whether we should name him. We decided no, because the toy monkey has done so much great work without a name. It just wouldn't feel right to give him a name now.

### **When did you first learn about your father's toy monkey?**

It wasn't really until 2015. I didn't know about it and the way I learned about it was when he discovered he had these relatives in Sweden. He told me, "I got connected to this Swedish family." I asked how did that happen, so he told me about the toy monkey. This was three years ago, I had never known about it before. We had never talked about it before, so it was a complete surprise to me. I was amazed. It was a family object of great importance to him, but we had never talked about it. The way we got connected with the Swedish relatives through the monkey was astounding and in some ways a life changing and I want to learn a lot more about it.

### **Do you know if your father ever talked to your mother about the monkey?**

That's a really good question. I don't know. My parents divorced when I was quite young. My mother was also a refugee from Europe, from Vienna. He may have, but I don't know and I don't think my mother would remember now. I know my stepmother, his current wife, knew about it. But I didn't, because, for whatever reason, we never talked about it.

### **How did your father meet Aubrey Pomerance?**

My father had met Aubrey years and years before. I don't know exactly when, but it was probably 10 – 15 years before in Berlin. Aubrey was a student, in a group of young Jewish students, and somehow my father got connected to them. My dad described Aubrey as a sort of hippie with really long hair, he called him "The Hippie." They stayed in touch. Then Aubrey got this job as an archivist. When he came to visit my father 15 years later in New York, he knocked on the door and was all dressed up with short hair. I don't think my dad even recognized him, but it was the same guy. Aubrey visited in his position as an archivist, but they were friendly, they had known each other.

### **Was it an easy decision for your father to give the toy monkey to the Jewish Museum in Berlin?**

It was definitely a conflict for him. His wife, Frances, didn't want him to give it away because it was so personal. But, I think my father's priority was that his monkey was a part of history, a part of testimony and he wanted people to understand what happened and remember, not in some sort of dry abstract way, but in the most personal way through the horrors of what happened and the experience of individuals. A child's toy is a very powerful thing. I think he understood that and that the display of a child's toy would speak to people. Aubrey certainly expressed that to him. I think he felt that it was his duty to give it away.

### **What do you think people at the Jewish Museum in Berlin can learn from the toy monkey?**

I think the story speaks for itself. I think a childhood toy is something that connects with people. No matter your background, age, or religion, a child's toy is universal. I think that's one reason it resonated so much. When my father talked about the toy monkey, how it sat on his bike and packing it away, for the first time, I could imagine my father as a child, picture his childhood, and what he was like as a young boy. That is a very hard thing to do, because you always imagine your parents as adults. This allowed me to put myself in his shoes, obviously not completely, but enough to imagine what his life was like. It opened up a lot of feeling between us.

### **Since you discovered the toy monkey and your Swedish relatives in 2015, have you found out more about your father's own background?**

Yes, we have talked in ways that we never had before. This has opened up a whole new way for us to discuss his past and our family history and it made it a lot easier in some ways. Also, I decided that I wanted to tell this story on the radio. I am a radio reporter, so I was allowed to pursue my family story at NPR (National Public Radio) where I work. I interviewed my father for this story for hours and hours on end. We really talked a lot about his childhood, his memories of Kristallnacht, of when the Nazis came to power, the last days and final goodbye with his parents, leaving for Sweden, his life in Sweden, discovering that his parents were murdered,

and coming to America. Things that I knew about in broad detail, but never the granular, personal specifics. We talked about this for the first time in hours of interviews that we did together.

**You didn't know of the monkey until after it was on display in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, how did you feel the first time you saw it?**

It was quite an experience. As part of my reporting trip, of course, I had to go see the toy monkey. I went to the museum last summer accompanied by a photographer, who also helped with research, and met Aubrey there. The toy monkey had actually been in storage, as they were redoing parts of the museum. Aubrey had to take it out of cold storage. We got together in a room and Aubrey, wearing white gloves, took it out of a box. It was in delicate paper, almost like tissue paper. I put on white gloves, picked it up, and examined it. I didn't realize it was that small; it's tiny. It was pretty beat up, missing a hand and a couple of feet, but you can see that it has been through a lot. It had some personality.

**How did you feel about not having known about the toy monkey and about your father giving it away?**

The monkey was kind of a catalyst. This will be more personal about my relationship with my father. My parents divorced when I was young. There were times when I didn't see my father that much and then there were times where it was difficult for us to talk openly about things, and one of those things was his childhood, the murder of his parents, and what that was like for him. The monkey was really the catalyst that allowed us to explore that much more deeply. I did a lot of it as a journalist, which was a little bit strange to do a very personal story but as a journalist. There were hours and hours of recordings that I was doing for the radio story where we talked about these things for the very first time.

**Do you think that by wearing the hat of the journalist, it made interviewing your father easier for you to do?**

Yes, that may have been the fact. But, I also think that my father might have been more resistant, because here I am showing up to his apartment with these headphones on and a big microphone, and he knows this is going to go out to this huge audience. The initial purpose of our conversation was to talk about how this monkey reunited our family. It was a very happy story that followed a very painful tragic experience in his life. This was a happy development late in life, so he had something good to talk about. I think that opened up the way for us to talk about things that were much more painful.

**What was the response to the toy monkey's story on NPR?**

I put the story out and was overwhelmed by the response. Hundreds and hundreds of people reaching out on Twitter, emails, just responding in one way or another. Some of them had very

similar experiences, some had refugees in their family, some were Holocaust survivors or had lost family in the Holocaust. Then there were people who had left other wars and conflicts, who had reached out and shared experiences of things they had taken with them from other places. In fact, after my story came out, NPR decided to reach out to our audience and asked people to share with us their experience of things they took with them when they left a war, a conflict, or a disaster. We had an amazing response and did five stories of people who had left various places. They shared what they took with them and why these objects were significant.

**Did you notice a similarity in the objects that people took with them?**

Only that most of them were connected to childhood, but there was a wide variety. There were books, samovars that you make tea with, jewelry, crucifixes. There were all kinds of things.

**Is the story still reverberating? Are there still more stories that are unfolding?**

I was just on a panel at an event. It was the screening of a film about the *Kindertransport*, the program that allowed some Jewish children to escape before the war started. I will also be talking to a class. So yes, it is still reverberating in a number of ways.

**Does your father know about our engagement with you and how does he feel about it?**

He knows I'm here right now talking to you. I think he is very glad that I have become so interested in his family's history, that I've written about it and done the radio story. He is happy to see what has come out of it, somewhat surprised, but very happy.