

**ROYAL DANISH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

AND THE MUSEUM OF DANISH RESISTANCE 1940-1945



# OCTOBER 1943

## THE RESCUE OF THE DANISH JEWS FROM ANNIHILATION

**THERKEL STRÆDE** is professor of contemporary history at the University of Southern Denmark, Odense, specializing in World War II and Holocaust studies. His exhibition “Denmark in October 1943: The Rescue of the Jews from Annihilation”, prepared for the Museum of Danish Resistance 1940-45, has been seen by 500,000 people in 30 countries since 1993. He has published on 20th century history, the Nazi concentration camps and anti-Semitism; numerous contributions to the Danish National Encyclopedia and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos. “Congressional Citation” award by the US House of Representatives 2001.

Front page photo: This fishing boat took 15 Jews including 5 children on a ten hour trip from southern Denmark to Sweden, arriving only after daybreak. One of very few authentic photos from the Oct.'43 rescue operation.

## The final solution'

'The final solution of the Jewish question' -- such was the Nazi term for the genocide which from 1941 to 1945 cost the lives of more than half of the ten million Jews in German-controlled Europe.

Lists of the Jewish population, country for country, are among the extant documents from the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, where details were discussed following the decision to exterminate the Jews. Tabulated in cold, bureaucratic columns are the populations to be murdered for the sake of the National Socialist racial utopia: an 'ethnically pure', 'Jew-free' Europe under German rule. 5,600 is written next to Denmark -- a small figure in a larger context. But no one will be overlooked.

## An exception

5,600 Jews (and an inaccurate figure at that) make up a little group, even in relation to the 4 million Danish inhabitants. The Danish government is opposed to any and all racial legislation. So in Denmark, the Germans decide, 'Endlösung' can wait. Autumn 1943 is a pivotal point. The 'August Uprising', a large-scale protest movement, succeeds in bringing close cooperation between the Danish government and the occupying power to

a halt. In September, the Germans decide to strike against the Jews. An action to deport them to German annihilation camps is unleashed on the night of October 1st/2nd.

The majority of the Danish Jews manage to slip away from the German police, though. They go underground in a matter of hours, and within just a few days more than 7,000 Jews are illegally sailed to safe haven in nearby neutral Sweden. Close to 500 end up in Theresienstadt, where they share the hardships of the other ghetto inhabitants, however without being subject to further deportation to the extermination camps.

## The rescue action

was spontaneous and improvised, driven by civilian resistance against the German occupation and the barbarous Nazi world view. Until then, occupied Denmark was a somewhat opportunist, half-hearted nation. Anti-Semitism and xenophobia were not at all unknown, and oftentimes foreign refugees fleeing from dictatorships throughout Europe found Danish borders closed. However, in the autumn of 1943 many people were now taking a stand and helping the refugees.

Many factors contributed to the success of the rescue action, among them the

fact that German sources leaked a warning about the impending deportation. But above all, it was the ingenuity and will of many people wanting to protect an oppressed minority that guaranteed the successful outcome.



*Arriving in Sweden -- safe at last*

## **Europe, Autumn 1943**

World War II still rages after four years. Following the Blitzkrieg conquests and the campaign against the Soviet Union, Germany now controls the vast majority of the European continent.

However, the Third Reich now faces difficulties. The German troops in Stalingrad have given up, and the Red Army has since forced the German Eastern Front hundreds of kilometers back. The

German navy has lost 'the Battle of the Atlantic': Britain has not been cut off from American supplies.

Allied troops have forced the Germans out of North Africa, and have landed in Italy. In September 1943, Italy surrenders, so Germany is forced to occupy northern Italy as well as the Balkan areas formerly held by Italy. Meanwhile Allied air raids make the German population feel the reality of war ever more.

## **National Socialism**

The war was a consequence of Nazism. From the very inception of Adolf Hitler's dictatorship in 1933, Germany's prime objective was to expand its imperial 'Lebensraum' and carry out an 'ethnic cleansing' of Europe.

The National Socialist ideology was based on crude Social-Darwinism: human beings were seen as fundamentally unequal, some peoples and races as more valuable than others; those who were best suited should survive. Others would have to subject themselves to the rulership of the 'master race' or perish. According to Nazi ideology, the Germans were chosen to be 'rulers'.

National Socialism was a racist ideology, and anti-Semitic in its core. Anti-Jewish sentiment was one of the most

recurring elements in Nazi politics. Jews were assigned the role of the ultimate evil in the Nazi world view. They were referred to as parasites, vermin and disease, and were deprived of all human traits and rights.

## Persecution and annihilation of the Jews

One of the most important objectives for the Nazis was to marginalize the Jews from the rest of society. As soon as they came to power they began doing so. From 1933 on, the encroachments against the German Jews worsened step by step, leaving them isolated and robbed of all means of existence. Two thirds of the 500,000 Jews living in Germany (including Austria) felt forced to flee.

After the attack on Poland in September 1939 and the ensuing war of expansion, Germany had assumed control of the majority of Europe's 10 million Jews. These Jews were now subjected to ruthless oppression and discrimination, confined to ghettos and conscripted to forced labor. The Holocaust was launched in 1941, aiming at the systematic annihilation of all Jews. Even without a previous master plan, the genocide was carried out with cold-blooded, calculating efficiency. Several hundred thousand German

perpetrators and collaborators from many occupied countries were involved.



*Auschwitz-Birkenau: The largest of all the German extermination camps. A train has arrived carrying Jews. 10-15 % are selected for forced labor, the rest are sent directly to the gas chambers.*

## Denmark in the 1930's

A small island state with 4 million inhabitants living from agriculture, industry, fisheries and shipping. A homogenous population, Danish-speaking and Lutheran, with only small ethnic and religious minorities. A country that had taken in many immigrants from Germany, Holland, Sweden and Poland over centuries, quickly integrating them into the majority society.

Danish foreign policy - after the armed conflicts with Germany 1848-51 and 1864 - was consensus-seeking and peace-oriented. Denmark was neutral during WWI and supported the League of Nations after the war. Military forces had been reduced to a minimum.

### **Peacefulness and a strong democracy**

typified Denmark's domestic situation. A gradual, organic growth in industry eventually replaced farming as the country's most important trade. The vast class of self-employed family farmers, saw their political dominance dwindle in relation to the well-consolidated, albeit moderate labor movement.

From 1924 to 1982, the Social Democratic Party formed the government with but a few short intervals of Liberal-Conservative rule. The Social Liberal Party, pacifist in conviction and supported by smallholders and the intelligentsia, was its solid support and a regular participant in the government during most of this period. A fusion of regulated market liberalism and social solidarity - or what has come to be known as 'the Scandinavian model' - characterized Danish politics throughout 'the short 20th century'.

Denmark saw little of the radical class divisions that polarized many societies during the inter-war period. Like today, the standard of living was among the highest in the world. In many ways the Danish people were highly privileged and steeped in self-complacency.



*Copenhagen, Denmark's capital and largest city by far, was the center of Jewish life and culture. The Synagogue from 1833 is at the far right edge of this photo, within walking distance of the University, City Hall and Lutheran Cathedral.*



*Denmark: 43,000 km2 of islands and one peninsula bridging Scandinavia and the European continent.*

## April 9, 1940

Germany attacked Denmark despite the 1939 non-aggression pact that had been signed at the initiative of the Germans. The attack was part of an operation to occupy Norway. Foreign Minister Peter Munch expressed the Thorvald Stauning cabinet's defense policy in this manner: Denmark can only be defended by way of diplomacy, not by military means; social justice, integration and democratic reform are safer means to security than arms and soldiers. Therefore, the Danish military was limited and defensive, designed merely for a position of neutrality. So fighting was quickly stilled. The occupation lasted five years until May 5, 1945.

## Occupied Denmark

The Social Democratic/Social Liberal coalition agreed to continue and took in auxiliary ministers from the Liberal and Conservative Parties. A government proclamation on April 9, 1940 laid out the course:

“The Danish government shall strive to protect our country and the Danish people from the disasters of war. At the same time we encourage all to exert the utmost calm and restraint in the face of the present situation. Law and order must prevail throughout the country and all

who have official duties to carry out should be met with loyal behavior.”

The Germans had granted Denmark certain guarantees at the outset: they did not come with hostile intent and would abstain from intervening in Danish domestic affairs, they said. Since Denmark was not formally at war with Germany, the government saw an opportunity to retain at least a part of Danish autonomy and national sovereignty. So the political system continued to function. Its objective was to avert any warfare on Danish soil, limit the extent of German influence and block the Danish Nazis from rallying support.

## Cooperation and resistance

The Danish authorities began cooperating closely with the occupying power. For Danish businesses to survive, the highly export-oriented economy to sell its goods, and energy needs to be met, it was seen as necessary to appease the German demands. The Danish populace and government were in agreement: the majority was pro-British but admitted that Denmark had no other choice than to adjust to German

dominance in Europe. The term collaboration was avoided, but it covers the attitude of the Danish government and people very well.

At the same time, a wave of national sentiment washed over the country. But not until after the German attack on the Soviet Union and the outlawing of the Danish Communists on June 22, 1941 did an actual resistance movement emerge which grew only slowly. On the other hand, the Danish ambassador in Washington, Henrik Kauffmann, made it clear as early as in 1940 that he would not accept orders from the German-controlled government in Copenhagen but would instead represent 'the independent Denmark'. Later Eduard Reventlow, the ambassador in London, also declared himself independent, pressurized to do so by 'The Danish Council', an exile organization founded by activist Danes in London, including Danish seamen, who had joined the Allied forces in great numbers.

### **Denmark in the Nazi 'Grossraum'**

Denmark's situation under the 'peaceful occupation' was calm until 1943, and German policy very moderate. In Berlin, Denmark was referred to as a 'model protectorate'. The British contemptu-

ously called Denmark 'Hitler's parakeet', although they showed understanding for Denmark's difficult position at Nazi Germany's doorstep.

Germany's moderate occupation policy had pragmatic as well as ideological reasons. Germany did not rob Denmark, but took out considerable amounts of supplies -- without actually having to pay, since the Danish National Bank offered credits that would hardly be paid. Equally important was the fact that the Danes were considered 'Germanic', 'Aryan' -- in other words 'of good race'. In the long run, as it were, the Danes would be part of the German people, and the Danish territory would become part of the German Empire.

Few Danes fell swoon to National Socialism, though. Besides the ethnic German minority in the southern Jutland region bordering Germany, their warring parties gained little support. By the 1930's, Anti-Semitism - a part of mainstream Danish culture during the 19th century - had been contained to the far right fringe. From here, the Waffen-SS recruited some 7,000 Danish volunteers. Danish National Socialist parties never achieved more than 2-3 % of the vote, not even at the 1943 elections where they had generous German sponsorship. The occupying power was unable to find a malleable Quisling-type in Denmark.





*The Danish military was powerless in face of the modern German offense.*



*Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning addresses Parliament April 9th, urging calm and composure.*



*German inspectors at a Danish export slaughterhouse: Denmark became an important part of the German war economy and was able to gain political maneuvering space. The need for supplies and racial considerations motivated the moderate German occupation policy 1940-45.*

## King Christian X

The Danish king - in spite of the occupation - continued his morning rides on horseback through the capital with only two plain clothes police escorts following him on bicycles. He became a symbol for rich and poor alike, a positive contrast to German militarism and to the cult of the Führer. The king had only symbolic power in a constitutional monarchy such as Denmark, but the democratic government unanimously protected the Jews.



During the war a rumor surfaced in the free world that Christian X had countered German demands for anti-Jewish legislation by threatening to wear the 'Star of David' in protest. The king in fact never did such a thing, but in December 1941, after an arson attack on the synagogue in Copenhagen, he did send a

letter of sympathy to Rabbi Marcus Melchior. The Jews were not registered, nor forced to wear the yellow star, because the Germans never brought forward the proposal, knowing that the government turn it down.

“There is no Jewish question in Denmark”, were the words of Foreign Minister Erik Scavenius when approached by the top Nazi Hermann Göring in Autumn 1941. Scavenius was willing to make far-reaching concessions to the Germans, but even for him, three issues were out of the question: the death penalty, Danish participation on the German side of the war, and racial laws.

### **The Jews during the occupation**

The German occupation put Danish Jews under enormous strain. The persecution of Jews in Germany was well-known via newspapers and personal acquaintances. Early on, the Danish government proclaimed that it would oppose all racial legislation and discriminatory measures. But would it be able to withstand intensified German pressure?

The synagogue, Jewish schools and other institutions were discreetly put under the surveillance of young Jews and hooked up to the Danish police alarm system. The Jews were advised to avoid

public exposure and direct contact with Germans. They tried to live as normally as possible but were constantly on the alert.

### **Hitler-refugees and Palestine pioneers**

During the 1930's, some 200 young Zionists came to Denmark each year in order to receive training in agriculture and fishing and prepare for emigration to Palestine, where they would help build a Jewish state. The farming students (“Haluzim”) were highly regarded in Denmark for their determination and work ethic.

Following the pogrom in Germany - ‘the Crystal Night’ on November 9, 1938 - Danish women’s organizations took the initiative to help hundreds of Jewish teenagers come to Denmark. German Jewish parents who were unable to escape themselves sent off their children, hoping they would be saved from persecution and eventually make it to Palestine.

Jewish refugees had already come to Denmark during the first years of the Hitler regime. However, it was difficult to get visas and work permits as Danish refugee policy became increasingly restrictive. When the Germans invaded Denmark, Jewish aliens suddenly became very vulnerable. A few were even handed

over to the Gestapo, but as it turned out, the Danish authorities protected the vast majority of the Jews in Denmark, whether they were Danish citizens or not.

## The first Jews in Denmark

The first Jews came to Denmark in the 17th century. They were wealthy Sephardic Jews summoned by King Christian IV to help modernize the country. Doctors, mint masters and jewelers settled and lent money to the Crown.

Before long though, less wealthy Ashkenazic Jews from Central Europe made up the majority. They were shopkeepers, merchants and entrepreneurs of such new branches of industry as tobacco and manufactured textiles. Jews had been excluded from the traditional trade guilds and mainly had to operate in niches of the economy. But Jewish stockbrokers, for example, played an important role as credit agents during the Danish maritime exploits.

## The flourishing 1800's

Free trade became a reality in 19th century Denmark, as did democracy. The emancipation of 1814 gained the Jews equal judicial status, the first democratic

constitution in 1849 brought equal political rights. Many younger Jews took advantage of the newly attained opportunities to gain higher education. The 19th century was a prosperous time for the Jewish community in Denmark. Many pioneers in business, politics, and cultural life who became the architects of modern Denmark were of Jewish background.

## Community life and assimilation



*Jewish tailors at Feldstein's tailor shop in Copenhagen, recent immigrants from Russia, about 1914.*

Since 1833, the large main synagogue was the center of community life in Copenhagen. A flourishing infrastructure with Jewish schools, homes for the elderly and philanthropic institutions was established. Abraham Alexander Wolff, Chief

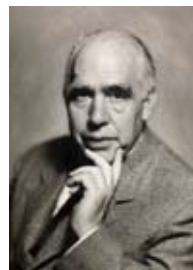
Rabbi from 1829 until shortly before his death in 1891, participated actively in the public debate on politics, morals and religion, enlightening the majority population about Judaism and at the same time trying to unite the congregation in favor of moderate reforms that would render it more attractive to young Jews. But many chose to assimilate -- nearly half of the young Jews married outside the community. So the Danish Jewish Community never had more than 2-3,000 members, and outside Copenhagen, community life eventually died out in the course of the 20th century.

### **Pogrom Jews' from Russia**

During the early 20th century, tens of thousands of Jews fled persecution and pogroms in Russia, Poland and the Baltic. Around 3,000 ended up in Denmark, bringing not only renewal to local Jewish community life but also Yiddish culture to the country. 'The Russians' were poor workers and petty craftsmen, though clearly upwardly mobile.

Another wave of Jewish refugees came in the 1930's from Germany, Austria and German-occupied Czech lands. Around 1970 several thousand refugees fled from anti-Jewish campaigns in Communist Poland. The idea of ethnic homogene-

ity was strong in modern Danish society and urged new immigrants to adapt to Danish cultural norms. A mild, but insistent urge for assimilation left little room for minority identities. So although immigration was substantial, as seen relative to the 'old' Jewish families, the total percentage of Jews never comprised more than 0.3 % of the Danish population. And only a few migrated to Israel after 1948.



*Writer and critic, Georg Brandes (1832-1927) and nuclear physicist, Niels Bohr (1885-1962, Nobel Prize 1922) were two of the many prominent personalities from the Danish Jewish community.*

## Denmark under growing German pressure

The German occupation policy was moderate in Denmark. But as time went on, the atmosphere grew more tense and German encroachments worsened steadily. The Blitzkrieg strategy allowed the Third Reich to succeed in winning victories that would not burden the German population severely. Indeed, Hitler had been reluctant to put demands on the German people, even though by late 1941 it became clear that the war would be long and costly. Instead, the policy was to exploit the occupied countries all the more.

In the autumn of 1941 the Germans pressured Denmark to join the Axis powers' "Anti-Comintern Pact". A year later, the Danish king's chilly reply to a birthday greeting from Hitler unleashed a serious crisis, accompanied by German demands to appoint pro-German ministers. General Hermann von Hanneken was sent to Denmark as new Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht, and SS-General Werner Best was appointed the German Reich's Plenipotentiary and head of the German civilian administration.

Hanneken and Best were meant to tighten German rule in Denmark, but

Best opted for continued cooperation with the Danish government and business community. In fact, in 1943 he even allowed parliamentary and local elections to be held.

## 1943: the change of tides

Stalingrad, El Alamein, the landing of Allied troops in Italy, and major bombardments of German cities like Hamburg -- all of these events helped to produce a change in the Danish stance from compliance to defiance. The resistance got off the ground. Illegal publications and newsletters were circulated in ever larger numbers. German military targets and businesses working for the occupying power were increasingly subjected to sabotage actions as resistance fighters became more experienced and daring, and received air-dropped explosives and training instructors from Britain.

By July/August 1943, the Wehrmacht feared an Allied invasion on the Jutland coast. Danes sensed the panic and fostered the hope that a German defeat was impending.

## **‘The August Uprising’**

A wave of sabotage actions hit the country in the summer of 1943. Unrest at Danish factories and shipyards is on the increase: social and political demands are voiced, authorities and organizations are meeting open criticism for their cooperation with the Germans. The unrest culminates in massive strikes supported by vast gatherings in many cities.

The occupying power senses the gravity of the situation, and reacts sharply in some spots, flexibly in others. The uprising continues however for most of August. Many Danes want to end what they see as indignant collaboration with the Nazis.

## **August 29, 1943**

The Germans declare a military state of emergency, so authority is handed over to the Wehrmacht Commander-in-Chief who hopes to edge out Best. Best is called to the Führer’s headquarters and reprimanded for yielding too much to the Danes. Two days later, however, Hitler returns the ultimate political responsibility to Best. He directs his energies at assuming dictatorial power in Denmark and requests that Berlin send police battalions to support it. He now intends to govern Denmark “with a hard hand”.

## **German action against the Jews**

The systematic genocide of the Jews had been going on since 1941 at astonishing pace. By August 1943, 3 million Jews had already died in massacres or extermination camps. Earlier German advances at raising ‘the Jewish question’ in Denmark have been weak, though, mainly aimed at pacifying racial activists in Berlin. A small Jewish population like the Danish one could wait, but now the time had come.

As the Danish government ceased to function on August 29, 1943, and the Danes announce that no new government would be formed, the cooperation policy between Denmark and Germany seemed to have collapsed. Best had used the strategy of punishing the Jews for resistance in the majority population earlier when he was stationed in France, and now the state of emergency proved to be an opportune time for anti-Jewish action in Denmark: protests could be easily suppressed, and Best could blame the Wehrmacht and thus keep the door ajar for resuming cooperation of some sort with the Danes in the future.

## **“The time has come”**

On September 8th, Best sent a telegram to Berlin: hitting hard at the Jews is part of his new ‘strong hand’ policy, so

“it is my opinion that if this new course of action is to be carried out fully in Denmark, the time has come to turn our attention to the solution of the Jewish question.”

One week later Hitler approved the deportation of the Danish Jews. Plans were immediately undertaken. A German police battalion was set up under the leadership of SS-Lieutenant Colonel Rudolf Mildner, former Gestapo chief in Katowice, Poland, and leader of the political department at Auschwitz. Specialists from Adolf Eichmann’s department at the Reichssicherheitshauptamt arrived in Copenhagen. Special German police forces were called in from abroad. The Wehrmacht, however, promised only logistic support, and would have no direct part in the manhunt.

The actual commencement of the operation was postponed somewhat, probably because the Germans wanted to end ongoing trade negotiations on next year’s Danish supplies to the Reich first. On October 1, 1943 they were brought to an end, and on that very evening the operation began.



*August 1943: the funeral of an executed saboteur in Aalborg develops into a mass gathering, and demonstrators boldly assault German soldiers.*



*The ‘August Uprising’ is also directed against the Danish authorities’ compliance with the occupying power. Here, a Danish police vehicle is overturned by protesters during the general strike.*



*Odense, center of the protest movement: the Germans suppress the general strike by force, but keep most troops in the barracks. A back door is kept open for a continuation of cooperation with the Danish establishment.*



*SS-General Werner Best, lawyer and head of the German occupation administration in Denmark 1942-45. Best was a National Socialist fundamentalist and former deputy of Reinhard Heydrich.*

*Best had masterminded the Gestapo and designed the special Einsatzgruppen which were responsible for numerous massacres of Jews in the occupied Polish and Soviet territories. According to Best, Germany should clamp down when it came to 'inferior' peoples, and on the other hand be flexible towards people 'of good race'. Werner Best called for the deportation of the Jews in Denmark. After the liberation, at the war crimes trial against him in Copenhagen, he claimed that he had attempted to avert the operation. The initiative was, however, his alone.*

## **Denmark's Jews in danger**

On the day the state of emergency was declared, hostages were interned, among them prominent Jews. Since the Danish authorities had not conducted any registration of the Jews, the Germans and their Danish collaborators raided the Danish Jewish Community offices for address lists. Panic and uncertainty spread among the Jews: was there an action impending? Many went underground, some fled to Sweden. Danish officials confronted the Germans with the rumors, which were immediately dismissed. But an anxious calm prevailed during the month of September.

## **The German police action**

On the night of October 1st/2nd, 1943, the German police operation begins. Throughout the country Jews are arrested. In Copenhagen, the synagogue is defiled and used as a pick-up spot. Despite the fact that it was Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) many Jews left their homes. A few hundred persons were arrested -- among them the elderly from the community's old people's home.

As a rule the Germans don't break into Jewish homes, since the action is supposed to appear 'sober' and not look like pillage. Most of the Jews have



sought refuge at the homes of friends and acquaintances, or even complete strangers who spontaneously lend a hand. Others have fled to beach cottages and forests.

### **The warning**

During September it had become quite clear that an action was impending, and on the 28th an unequivocal warning was issued. On this day, Werner Best received the final go-ahead from Berlin. He informed Duckwitz, a German secret agent with contacts among the Danish Social Democrats, that the operation was at hand, and Duckwitz conveyed the warning straight away.

Leading Social Democrats immediately inform persons in the Jewish community. C.B. Henriques, Supreme Court attorney and head of the Danish Jewish Community, first responds with disbelief. For three years now, Danish legislation and cooperation policy has protected Danish Jewry, and it is hard to admit that the legalistic strategy has failed to avert the disaster.

On the next morning the warning is conveyed further during the service in the synagogue and through informal Jewish networks. Others receive word through gentile friends, business acquaintances or strangers wanting to help.

“Here was something Eichmann and his men weren’t accustomed to: the Jews had slipped from their very grasp and disappeared, so to speak, behind a living wall raised by the Danish people in the space of one night.”

(Leni Yahil: *The Rescue of the Danish Jewry. Test of a Democracy*. Philadelphia 1969)



*G.F. Duckwitz (1904-73), a long-time Nazi party member, worked for the German embassy in Copenhagen as an expert on maritime issues and was a member of the German intelligence*

*agency Abwehr. In September he worked closely with Best and leaked the warning of the impending deportation to the Danes. In the 1950s he served as ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Denmark.*



*Hans Hedtoft (1903-55, Prime Minister 1947-50), Member of Parliament and chairman of the Social Democratic Party.*

*Although a proponent of the cooperation policy, he was forced to step down by the Germans*

*for not being willing enough. 1944-45 he became a central link between the politicians and the underground resistance. Hedtoft and other leading Social Democrats were the first to be warned about the impending operation against the Jews*



*Richard Ege M.D. (1891-1974) and his wife organized a rescue organization which helped Jewish refugees hide and flee the country. Doctors, hospital staff and students were instrumental in the rescue work, as were boy scouts, socialist activists and others.*

## Arrested in Copenhagen

“On October 1st at 10 p.m. there was a sudden banging on my door. I had no choice but to open up. Before my eyes were two enormous German soldiers with guns at their sides, along with three civilians waving their revolvers at me. They commanded me to get dressed immediately, meanwhile ransacking all my drawers. Hardly five minutes had passed, then they commanded me to come along, at the same time mumbling almost confidentially that it was all right to bring cash and other valuables.

The soldiers let me walk several steps ahead of them, and I have to admit I did consider whether there was any chance of escaping. But I didn't dare take such a major risk.

Finally they stopped in front of the gates of Forum, where a number of German officers were standing. One of them was particularly aggressive and gave me a couple of hard knocks on the head so that I fell to the ground, and I had barely got to my feet when another officer forced me up against the wall.

Where I was standing was fully lit by floodlights, but it was still impossible to see the military person who gave the command “Anlegen!” I stood calmly and coolly, waiting to feel where the first bullets would hit me and hoping my life would end quickly, without prolonged agony. During those few seconds I thought about my family. Then suddenly I heard a new voice commanding me to get into a truck waiting nearby.

I got to the truck, crawled up and remained there a while in total darkness. The door had been locked. Then it was opened, people got in, and the door was shut again. The truck was gradually filled in this manner, to the degree that we had to hunch together to make more room. Finally we were driven off to some place -- but where exactly, no one knew.”

(Account in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem; Forum was a Copenhagen sports arena that the German police used as an assembly spot.)



*A warehouse at Asitisk Plads in Copenhagen docks (today the site of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs): a group of Jews waiting to be taken by boat to safe haven in Sweden. Suddenly, people were torn out of their everyday lives and forced to flee in the middle of the night. Uncertainty and despair were too much of a strain for some, and they chose to take their lives in despair.*

## **A wall of people**

It was widely felt among the Danes that the German action against the Jews transgressed all decency and violated Danish jurisprudence. No matter if you thought of Jews as aliens or ordinary Danes, you would have to help them in order to save your self-esteem. And 30-40,000 or more did so spontaneously by conveying warnings and organizing hiding places, food and transportation to the coast. In spite of the uncertain and trying, illegal conditions, rescue networks cropped up overnight, working with amazing efficiency.

The helpers represented all walks of life and diverse political beliefs, and they went to great lengths to help. The Danish police and coastguard also took sides with the oppressed by refusing to assist in the manhunt and informing helpers of the Germans' movements. Even some individual Germans offered help, and at roadblocks Wehrmacht soldiers sometimes looked the other way -- moved by compassion or bribes.

## **Crossing the Øresund**

Geography was important. In some places, the Swedish coast was only 5-10 kilometers away. But getting across could be perilous; the Germans had only few patrol boats operational, but the crossing represented a risk factor, as did German airplanes.

Many fled in small craft or even kayaks at first. Tragic accidents were unavoidable in the leaky, over-filled dinghies that many inexperienced Jews set out in. Tragic deaths occurred when young,

daring Jews attempted to swim across and got taken by the currents.

Fishermen played a vital part in the rescue operation. Even if the German coastal surveillance was not all that efficient, they had reasons to believe that their boats, business and the livelihood of their families were at stake if they got caught smuggling Jews. Some operated for free, others demanded high prices for saving lives.

When rescue organizations intervened as intermediators, prices were standardized and dropped. They also made provisions so that wealthy Jews would pay more, enabling those who couldn't pay to get across as well. In today's prices, the cost of an average crossing equaled 5-6 months wages for an unskilled worker, so substantial funding was needed. The money came from Danish organizations, companies and private individuals -- and from the Jews themselves.



*Børge Laursen and his mate Jacob Andersen operated the small fishing boat K1657 "Marie" from the Copenhagen Skudehavn harbor. In early October 1943 they made about ten crossings, each time with 2-3 Jewish fugitives hidden under the herring nets. October was the peak season for herring, which is why the many nocturnal trips didn't raise suspicion.*



*A rowing boat that was used to ferry Jews from the beach to fishing vessels waiting offshore is now on display at the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem, Israel. Behind it a panorama of the harbor of Gilleleje.*

## Gilleleje

Gilleleje, a medium-size fishing harbor, lies at the northernmost point of the island of Zealand with train connections to Copenhagen. About 20% of the Danish Jews escaped to Sweden via this town. Fishing boats as well as coastal freighters took part in the operation.

Jews were familiar with Gilleleje from countryside summer holidays and came to the area in droves. A committee of local people was quick to initiate rescue aid, even before representatives of Copenhagen-based rescue organizations arrived. Many helpers were needed to organize hiding places and food. In a small town

like Gilleleje it was next to impossible to keep anything secret.

## The Gestapo is coming!

On the evening of October 5, 1943, a Gestapo search unit came to Gilleleje. A boat carrying fugitives had set out despite warnings and was stopped by German gunfire. Rescuers tried to round up and quickly hide new groups of refugees flocking to the town. Further sailing from the harbor was impossible, so the shipping-out of Jews was relocated to open beaches.

## A tragedy

The following evening the Gestapo returned with reinforcements. They found a large group of fugitives hiding in the parish hall. The church was surrounded with floodlights and machine guns. Yet another group was hidden in the church attic. That night the Germans arrested 80 Jews, the majority of whom were deported to Theresienstadt.

The Gestapo, unfamiliar with the area, demanded that the Danish police assist in the raid, but the Danish police refused. A local informer, however, led the Germans to the church. Tragic as

it was, this was the only case of a large number of Jews being caught during the clandestine rescue operation.

### The illegal crossings

In an illegal sealift named “Small Dunkirk” by the resistance fighters, seven thousand persons were conveyed by fishing boats and other small craft in the course of just a few days. Nothing had been planned in advance, so improvisational talent and courage were vital keys to success.

The contacts and experience that the rescue operation provided benefited the resistance in the long run. A whole network of illegal service routes was developed. One of these - the Danish-Swedish Refugee Service - was established by Zionist activists in Sweden. Some Danes proceeded from helping Jews to joining the resistance movement which also had a much easier time collecting money for its activities after October 1943.



*The Gestapo arrested a large number of Jews who were hidden in the church attic, but one young Jew escaped by climbing the clock tower and hiding there.*



*Gestapo officer Hans Juhl from Flensburg led the raids along the northern coast of Zealand in October 1943 and arrested more than a hundred Jews.*

## The rescued and the lost

“We hadn’t even noticed it, we weren’t even afraid, when suddenly the news went from one person to the next: ‘We’ve passed the three-mile boundary! We’re in Sweden! Free! Saved!’ Despite our exhaustion our hearts took to beating again furiously, this time from sheer emotion and joy.

The boat wasn’t very big at all. The sixteen stowaways, aside from the infants, had all managed to get up to the deck. There, I saw my mother, my sister and my brother. All looked pale and miserable. I probably looked the same way. Seeing each other again, we didn’t utter a word. We were in safety now, and the feeling was so overwhelming that we simply couldn’t speak. I felt an irrepressible desire to cry.

We docked at Trelleborg. Despite the early morning hour the harbor was teeming with people. Civilians and police officers were standing along the dock and the jetties. It was a time of massive welcoming. The refugees from Denmark were going ashore.

Our mood was beyond description. Everyone was telling their life stories. Discussing the war and its possible outcome -- hopefully, it would end soon. Stalingrad. Those despicable Nazis. Uncertainty about the fate of relatives. Fear for one’s own life was now replaced by the fear for the lives of others. Surely it was the luck of a traitor to have been brought to safety. Was it fair that one hadn’t shared the fate of the unfortunate? Everyone talked and gesticulated, as if the words could assuage the unspeakable fear that now had passed.

Then the grey, shabby-looking fishing boat was finally moored. It was a long way up to the asphalt on the jetty, but the officers stood ready to give a hand, lifting people and taking their small bundles.

We stepped onto Swedish soil, now standing on solid ground. But even that solid ground was still moving, rocking to and fro like the sea that had carried us across.”

(Hanne Kaufmann: Hvorfor er denne nat anderledes end alle andre nætter. Copenhagen 1968)

## Danes and Jews

On October 10, 1943 medical officer H.G. Widding, who received refugees in Höganäs, Sweden, made the following note in his diary;

his observation was typical for many Danish Jewish families because of widespread integration and assimilation:

“Many of the children were frightened and couldn’t understand why they themselves had to

flee. They were Danes and never gave it a thought that they were also Jews.”

(Chr. Tortzen: Gilleleje, October 1943. Copenhagen 1970)

The illegal transports departed from harbors on the islands of Zealand, Lolland, Falster and Møn, sometimes even from open beaches. A few crossings were even made from the distant coast of the Jutland peninsula.





## German failure

The German police succeeded in catching only a small part of the Jewish population. Wartheland, the steamship that was to sail the arrestees to Germany, left harbor as planned from Copenhagen October 2nd with only 202 Jews aboard. 150 Danish Communists were deported along with them. A special train carrying Jews from the western parts of Denmark also ran more than half-empty. During the ensuing weeks the Gestapo made more arrests, but the total number of deported did not reach 500, whereas over 7,000 Jews managed to escape and reach Swedish harbors.

Adolf Eichmann and his deputy Rolf Günter, who lead the operation in Copenhagen, had both suffered a defeat. Werner Best's ambivalent policy had played into the hands of the Danish rescue activists. He tried to give the poor result the impression of a victory, proclaiming: "Denmark has been cleansed of the Jews". At least, the Jews had been expelled from German-controlled territory. His superiors in Berlin were more than skeptical, though.

## A victory for civil resistance

The success of the rescue was due to several factors. The Jewish population was small and Sweden was close by, so the evacuation itself was a swift operation. Moreover, the time that lapsed between the declaration of the state of emergency and the actual commencement of the German Aktion was long enough for the Jews to get organized and into hiding, not to mention the role of the warning that was given. But above all, it was due to local help: ordinary Danes were willing to take personal risks in order to help others in need. It was a widespread feeling in those days that any persecution of minorities was a breach of the values of democracy and Danish culture that had to be fended off.

The German authorities had never expected such a massive reaction -- in most other countries, it had been easy to isolate and deport the Jews. But many Danes saw protecting Jews as a way of defending basic human standards, Danish sovereignty and self-esteem. And they were eager to deliver a blow to the occupying power before it was too late.

## The deportation

The arrests had been violent, there had been shouting and occasional shooting -- but only to a certain extent, since news media from around the world were watching the events. The Germans largely refrained from breaking into Jewish homes, and there was no confiscation of Jewish property. Few locals used the opportunity to enrich themselves at the cost of the haunted.

The deportees were brutally treated, especially when they arrived in Germany. Danish Communists interned in 1941, now being conveyed to a German concentration camp by the same transport, witnessed rude assaults on frail and aged Jews, kicked, beaten and shouted at by young Gestapo officers. The Jews were then crammed into cattle wagons destined for Theresienstadt.

## Jewish refugees in Sweden

The Danish-Jewish refugee community in Sweden numbered 7,906 persons in May 1945, including "half-Jews" and 686 non-Jewish spouses, most of whom were women. There were 1,364 children under 15 years of age, including babies born in Sweden. Among the Jews from Denmark were 1,376 stateless exiles and 435 agricultural students (Haluzim) and

Aliyah children who had come to Denmark from the German-Austrian territory before the occupation.

## Danish protests

Rumors of the impending campaign against the Jews were enough to incite Danish protests. The king protested. Leaders of the Social Democratic Party - with 43% of the voters Denmark's largest party - expressed

"(...)the deep grief that these actions have brought upon the Danish people. The Danish Jews are a vital part of the Danish people, and the people as a whole are therefore deeply affected by the measures taken, which, we feel, violate Danish jurisprudence."

Organizers and business people protested, and Lutheran priests read aloud a pastoral letter which viewed the persecution of Jews as conflicting with Christian beliefs. The university closed down for a week, enabling staff and students to participate in rescue efforts.

## Jews for Danish soldiers?

The Danish military had continued to function after April 1940, albeit in reduced form, since Denmark was still

considered an independent nation -- at least that was the fiction that served the interests of both Danish and German sides. Only on August 29th, 1943 did the Wehrmacht violently disarm and intern the Danish forces.

When released again in October, the Germans justified this move with the successful "removal of the Jews from Danish society". This propaganda trick failed, though. The Danish heads of defense sharply opposed the alleged causality, calling it a defamation of the Danish armed forces.

## Aid to the deportees

A new Danish government was not formed, even though the Germans called off the state of emergency. Parliament also stopped working. But the Danish civil service continued functioning, as the state secretaries formed an administrative cabinet to head daily business in informal contact with leading politicians. Thus, Danish cooperation with the occupying power resumed, albeit in a more distanced mode.

One issue of continuous contact was the effort to help the deportees in Theresienstadt and in German concentration camps. Attempts at obtaining the repa-

triation of the deportees were, however, only of little success.



*"Denmark caused us more difficulties than anything else." Adolf Eichmann at his war crimes trial in Jerusalem 1961. Even then, the organizer of the deportation of Jews from all over the German sphere of power to the extermination camps was still annoyed by his Danish failure.*



*Hans Fuglsang-Damgaard, bishop of Copenhagen, made the Danish Lutheran church denounce the persecutions in spite of cautious clergymen who were afraid of German reprisals, and a small faction of anti-Semitic priests.*



*Nils Svenningsen, Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was in charge of contact with the German authorities in Denmark 1943-45. His proposal that the Danish authorities intern the Jews, made in the hope of keeping them on Danish soil, would have involved the Danish police in the manhunt and delayed the deportations marginally at best; but the Germans turned it down.*

## Theresienstadt



*Work detail outside Theresienstadt. Jo Spier, a prisoner, had to make 18 hand-painted lithographic prints that pictured ghetto life as idyllic normalcy. The prints were given to the Danish officials who visited the ghetto in 1944. The inspectors, ignoring the plight of the other prisoners, pretended to believe the beautified image in order to nail the Nazis on guarantees for the Danish Jews.*

The Jewish deportees from Denmark were taken to Theresienstadt between Dresden and Prague. Here were tens of thousands of Jews crammed together in an old fortified city that served as a special ghetto. Of all the Danish Jews, these were the only ones who were forced to wear the Star of David.

Theresienstadt was the destination for Jews who were not intended for immediate annihilation. Conditions were not quite as extreme as in regular Nazi concentration camps, but the prisoners were starved, and suffered from depriva-

tion and forced labor. A Jewish administration, appointed by the Gestapo to help distribute misery and organize transports to the death camps, tried to keep up morale by organizing cultural and sport events, school classes etc. But the real rulers were the SS.

Frequent transports were dispatched to Auschwitz, where most Jews were killed immediately upon arrival. The Jews who had been deported from Denmark were, however, allowed to stay in the ghetto -- a promise the Danish authorities had obtained from Eichmann via Best. The Danes had no success in pushing for repatriation, but their wish to send inspectors to Theresienstadt was supported by Best who wanted to improve relations with the Danish authorities and business circles. Eichmann for his part was hoping to present to the world an idealized propaganda image and use Theresienstadt to conceal the fact of mass genocide, which by autumn 1943 had cost the lives of 3 million Jews.

### **A Danish commission visits the ghetto**

On June 23, 1944 Danish officials inspected the ghetto and were presented with a heavily made-up stage set. The camp had been hastily remodeled, and thousands of prisoners had been sent off

to Auschwitz so that the camp would not appear overcrowded. Each of the prisoners who were chosen to speak with the inspectors were instructed about what to say, and knew that a false word would have grave consequences for themselves and their fellow prisoners.

Members of the commission represented the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Danish and International Red Cross. They obviously realized that they were implicated in a major Nazi charade, but hoped that by playing along they would be able to secure the Danish Jews at least minuscule protection. Soon, Denmark was also able to send food and medicine to Theresienstadt, and thanks to these supplies the Danish deportees experienced lower mortality than any other group in the ghetto.

### **Horribly unhygienic conditions**

Alex Eisenberg came to Denmark from Leipzig, Germany as a young boy in 1939 and was a prisoner at Theresienstadt from 1943-45:

“At night, when the entire side of my body is exposed to attacks from holes in the mattress, I fling my hands about frantically to catch the fleas and crush them. But they attack from all sides. First this spot, then that spot, then all over. Here!

There! And everywhere! My body is studded all over with flea bites and reddened swellings that itch and itch.”

(Alex Eisenberg: Theresienstadt-elegi. Aarhus 1993)

### **Safe in a Swedish harbor**

When the Swedish government was given notice that the Danish Jews would be deported to Germany, it announced that its borders were open. The nuclear scientist, Niels Bohr, fled to Sweden in September 1943 and arranged that the new Swedish policy be made public on Swedish radio. This convinced doubtful Jews that the situation was grave -- and that there was in fact a refuge.

### **Refugee life in Sweden**

45 camps were established in Sweden, along with Danish schools in the major cities. Exiled Danish administrators started a refugee administration under the auspices of the Danish legation in Stockholm, which had by then declared itself independent of Copenhagen. Work was done in cooperation with the Swedish authorities, but by and large, funding for the refugees came from Danish sources.

The refugees tried to establish a relatively normal life under the circumstances. Nevertheless they were plagued by inactivity and anxiety about the fate of the Theresienstadt prisoners and relatives still in Central Europe. Some, however, were able to leave the refugee camps to work and study in Sweden. And many of the artists among the refugees contributed to Swedish music and cultural life.

For Sweden, sheltering the Danish Jews meant a turn away from a compliant policy toward German rulership. It wasn't long before the underground army, built up by the Danish resistance began receiving weapons illegally from Sweden, and Danish exile forces, 'The Danish Brigade', were trained in Sweden for deployment in case of a German collapse and possible Communist revolt (which Stalin's Danish followers actually never contemplated).



*Homesickness: the Danish coast was visible from Sweden. There were many children among the Jewish refugees -- over 1,000 under the age of 10.*

## Denmark during 1944

Following the operation against the Jews, the state of emergency was called off. Without the reconvening of Parliament or the forming of a new government, the Danish administration, agriculture and industry still cooperated with the Germans, only more reluctantly. A kind of dual power situation prevailed, as the Danish population distanced themselves from the 'old politicians' who had engaged in the collaboration and increasingly looked to the Danish Freedom Council (an umbrella body of all left- and right-wing resistance organizations).

The August uprising in 1943 provoked a more 'heavy-handed' German policy. On December 30, 1943 Hitler ordered new terror measures: in response to acts of sabotage, newspaper offices, amusement places and Danish businesses refusing to supply armaments were to be blown up by the Germans and auxiliaries recruited among Danish Nazis.

The resistance had become ever more accurate in its attacks against pro-German businesses and attempted to block the transport of Wehrmacht troops by blowing up railway installations. The occupying power responded by issuing death sentences and sending many members of the resistance to German concentration camps. On September 19,

1944 they even interned and deported the Danish police force.

### ... and 1945



*Growing support for the freedom movement was countered by terror by the Germans and increasingly desperate Danish Nazi collaborators. A Danish newspaperman was murdered in retaliation for resistance actions.*

The final battles of the war did not take place in Denmark. On May 5, 1945 the occupiers capitulated, and the freedom movement presented itself to the public. An interim 'liberation cabinet' was founded, composed of equal numbers of ministers from the resistance and the parties that had been in charge during 1940-43, the latter gaining the more powerful posts.

Suspected collaborators were interned, and traitors, SS volunteers and war criminals brought before the courts. The trials were later criticized for hitting 'the small fry' hard and letting 'the big fish' off the hook, but lynching was widely avoided. Many lives were lost during the liberation days, though, as small, desperate groups of Danish Nazis refused to surrender and resorted to sniper activity and fierce fighting.

### The White Buses



*Scandinavian and other prisoners were evacuated from German concentration camps in a Danish-Norwegian-Swedish rescue operation during the last months of the war.*

During the last months of the war, Danish and Norwegian prisoners in German prisons and concentration camps were successfully rescued and sent on to Swe-

den. The initiative had come from Norway, manpower and supplies were mainly organized in Denmark, and the Swedish Red Cross joined in effectively during the last stretch. Count Folke Bernadotte's negotiations with SS leaders gave rescuers 'in the field' maneuvering space to negotiate large numbers of prisoners out of the camp commandants' grasp. But anti-Semitism was persistent in the Third Reich until the very end, and Bernadotte did not insist on rescuing the Jews at Theresienstadt. Senior members of his staff secured their release through bribery nevertheless. Also, thousands of Jewish prisoners from the women's concentration camp Ravensbrück were freighted to Denmark and on to Sweden during the last weeks of the war.

## **The homecoming of the Danish Jews**

Weeks passed before the refugees from Sweden could return to liberated Denmark. For some, the homecoming was not a joyous moment. The escape had been costly for many, and people had been forced to flee from jobs and businesses without warning. Civil servants, however, were given back their jobs and received salary all through their absence.

In general, abandoned Jewish property had been left untampered with. But in some cases strawmen to whom properties had been turned over refused to step down. And there were many apartments that had been let to other tenants due to the acute housing shortage, so some Jews had to live in provisional housing for months or even years.

Post-war Denmark was not free of anti-Semitic sentiments. The Nazi persecution had in fact transformed the Danish Jews into something they hadn't been previously: a separate and visible group.

The exiled refugees from Central Europe faced a dilemma: should they return to places where Jewish culture had practically been eradicated, or should they try to root themselves among the Danes? Only after a considerable amount of red tape could those who wished it receive Danish citizenship.

## **Jewish life in post-war Denmark**

Community life and the Jewish institutions were quickly re-established, and life returned to normal. Some concluded that even the most total integration could not guarantee against anti-Semitism, so for that reason one should uphold the Jewish heritage. Few, however, chose to immigrate to Israel.



Many felt that the Nazis had forced a Jewish identity upon them which they wanted to rid themselves of as quickly as possible. Community membership fell: many wished to resume and speed up the assimilation process they had been torn out of. At bottom, they wanted to return to what they had prior to October '43: an altogether ordinary Danish life. And due to the lucky combination of motives and circumstance that secured the survival of the vast majority of the Jews of Denmark, this option was offered to them to an extent that was seldom seen in the vast areas of Europe that had been under Nazi rule.

In 1993, to mark the 50th anniversary of the October '43 events, the Museum of Danish Resistance 1940-1945 produced a travelling exhibition on the rescue of the Danish Jews from annihilation. The exhibition presents the story of Danish Jewry, the rescue and its Danish and international background on 36 large placards. Versions in a number of languages have since been displayed in 30 countries and visited by an estimated 500,000 spectators in Europe, Australia and the Americas. The booklet that accompanied it now circulates on its own, and has been used in schools in many countries. Latest update: January 2010.



*Chief Rabbi Max Friediger, having returned from Theresienstadt, presides over the first service in the synagogue in Copenhagen at its reopening on June 22, 1945.*

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[www.um.dk](http://www.um.dk), [pdk@um.dk](mailto:pdk@um.dk), and

The Museum of Danish Resistance 1940-1945,

Churchillparken, DK-1263 Copenhagen K.

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