

RESCUE IN DENMARK



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

THE OCCUPATION OF DENMARK

In Denmark, a country located immediately to the north of Germany, the population was able to lead an unusually normal existence in comparison to other countries in Nazi-dominated Europe, until 1943. The Nazis considered the Danes to be “racially kindred” and followed a policy of trying to convince them to become willing allies of Nazi Germany. Because of this and the fact that the Danish armed forces did not oppose the Nazi occupation in April 1940, the German occupiers permitted Denmark to maintain her own government and allowed an unusual amount of freedom. This freedom enabled Danish society



Christian X
King of Denmark

to maintain prewar democratic values including respect for the rights of all citizens. The Germans refrained from pressuring the Danes to act against the Jews, since they thought it would hurt their efforts to win them over to the support of Nazi Germany. Some Danes were won over by the Nazis, even joining SS fighting formations; however, many Danes withstood Nazi efforts.

THE DEPORTATION

In spring 1943, with the war more clearly turning against Nazi Germany, anti-Nazi feeling and actions in Denmark became more pronounced. The senior representative of Germany in Denmark, Werner Best, began retreating from the policy of winning over the Danes, and as such in the autumn, he decided it was time to deport the Jews and received permission from Berlin to do so. Just as the deportations were to begin, Best got “cold feet” when he began to think that it might be possible to revive the more lenient policies

toward the Danes. Since he could not retract the order for deportations that had been authorized in Berlin, he decided to disrupt the deportations in another way. Essentially he looked for a way to rid Denmark of its Jews without alienating the Danes. So, Best allowed information about the deportations to be leaked ahead of time to the Danish underground.

He let it be known that secret plans had been made for a massive roundup of the 8,000 Jews in the country to take place on the night of October 1–2. Thanks to the loyalty and humanity of a few prominent Danes, the head of the Jewish community was warned about the upcoming Aktion. On September 29, when Denmark’s Jews assembled in their synagogue for Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) services, they were given the bad news.

RESCUE

Immediately, the Danish underground swung into action. People from all walks of life pulled together and participated in a massive rescue operation. Within a few hours, virtually all of the Jews of Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark and the country’s largest Jewish community, were spirited out of their homes, hidden, and then taken in small groups to fishing ports. The Danish fishing fleet was quickly mobilized to ferry them to safety across the water to Sweden. On October 1, when the Germans began their planned roundup, moving from house to house with prepared lists of victims, their knocks went mostly unanswered. All in all, 7,200 Jews were saved.

One incredible story of courage and rescue took place in Elsinore (Helsingør), on the northern coast of Denmark, located only two and one-half miles across the sound from Sweden. Elsinore has always been renowned for its castles and its beautiful vistas, but in 1943, because of a bookbinder, a reporter, a detective, a bookkeeper, and a physician, it became the site where one of Denmark’s most effective underground resistance efforts took place.

When the Germans decided to implement the “Final Solution” in Denmark, a newspaper reporter named Borge Ronne was in Elsinore, walking past a friend’s house. He noticed ten strangers leap out of two taxicabs and run into a garage that was attached to his friend’s house. Ronne immediately rang the doorbell and told his friend what he had seen. “It’s all right,” was the explanation. “They’re Jews who have come to Elsinore to escape the Nazi roundup.”

This was the first that Ronne had heard of Jewish persecution, and it got him thinking. A few hours later, he bumped into Erling Kior, an acquaintance of his. Kior was deeply upset by a random shooting by German soldiers that had taken place the night before in his neighborhood. Ronne passed on to Kior the news he had learned about the raids to arrest Jews, and the rescue efforts that had been going on in Elsinore. “How about helping the Jews to get across to neutral Sweden?” asked Ronne. “It would be one way of getting back at the Germans.” That meeting was the beginning of the Elsinore group. Ronne and Kior, knowing that they needed additional members, contacted Thormod Larsen, a Danish police officer. They felt that Larsen would be particularly valuable to them because he had access to confidential reports about refugees, underground groups, and Nazi plans in Denmark. For additional assistance, Larsen enlisted the aid of Ova Bruhn. Fishermen were contacted who agreed to cooperate.

Their one concern regarded the transporting of Jewish children. The fishermen knew that if the children cried during their dangerous voyage to Sweden, they would all be in jeopardy. To answer the concerns of the fishermen, Ronne and Kior approached Dr. Jorgen

Gersfelt, a physician who practiced in a nearby fishing village. Gersfelt agreed to help them, using sedatives to keep the children quiet during transport.

They called themselves “The Elsinore Sewing Club.” Using fishing boats, speedboats, and other means of transportation, the Elsinore Sewing Club made as many as ten trips to Sweden every day. Thanks to these five brave Danes, there was a steady stream of Jews going from Elsinore to Sweden, saving the lives of thousands of Jews. After most of the Jewish refugees were safe in Sweden, the Elsinore Sewing Club continued its transportation activities, ferrying to safety non-Jewish political resisters and English and American airmen who had been shot down over Denmark while flying bombing missions over Germany. It’s important to note that most of the fishermen were paid; however, in no case were people left behind because they were unable to pay.

Despite threats, close calls, and raids by the Gestapo, the Elsinore Sewing Club continued its rescue efforts. By the middle of 1944, Thormod Larsen had been critically shot by the Nazis, Borge Ronne had to flee to Sweden to save his own life, Erling Kior had been captured and was a prisoner in the Porta Westfalica concentration camp, and Dr. Gersfelt was forced into hiding with his wife. Only then did the work of the Elsinore Sewing Club come to an end. In the end, only 500 Danish Jews were deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto, where Danish members of the International Red Cross later visited them. These Jews were never sent to extermination camps, and on April 15, 1945, the Danish Jews were released to the Red Cross and returned to Denmark. About 450 Danish Jews survived Theresienstadt.



From left to right: Members of the resistance movement in fight with German soldiers, 1945. Courtesy of The National Museum of Denmark; Fishermen aboard the Marie which made about 10 trips to Sweden during the rescue of Danish Jews, 1943. Courtesy of The National Museum of Denmark; Danish Jews being smuggled by ship to Sweden. Courtesy of Yad Vashem.