



## Denmark in the 1930s and During the German Occupation

### **ETERNAL ECHOES**

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

## Denmark in the 1930s and During the German Occupation

The question of refugees was vividly discussed in Denmark and other European countries in the 1930s. The politicians faced a difficult dilemma. On one hand they wanted refugee politics based on democratic principles, on the other hand they had to consider the economic crisis and the unemployment that prevailed in the country.

At the end of the 1930s the debate on refugees was characterized by a great worry. If Germany escalated its cruel treatment of the Jews it could perhaps be expected that the number of Jews who applied for resident permits in Denmark would increase like an avalanche and bring new antisemitic currents. And if Denmark received Jewish refugees it could create annoyance in Germany. So how would one relate? In October 1938 the "problem" about the Jewish refugees was partly solved as the Germans started to stamp the Jewish passports with a J, at the insistence of Switzerland and Sweden. The Danish government at once instructed the passport police that people with such passports were not allowed in the country if they hadn't got a special permit.

In September 1939 Germany invaded Poland. The 9th April 1940 Denmark was occupied by Germany. Denmark was geographically well situated in view of the German attack on Norway, which was the main objective of the German attack. As the war went on, the Germans confiscated agricultural products, which the Danish farmers were able to produce. Among other things, they wanted butter, pork and eggs. Also industrial products for the armaments industry were delivered to Germany.

Through a treaty April 9 1940 between the German and the Danish governments it was decided that the Danish government would remain and have continued influence in most areas. When it came to the economy and to combat the resistance against the occupation forces the Danish government was relatively cooperative and agreed to German demands. At this time there were around 7 000-8 000 Jews in Denmark. Most of them lived in Copenhagen. The Germans had forced other countries in Europe to introduce special laws against Jews. Denmark didn't have to do this. The Danish Jews were protected through this consensus politics, which was based on giving and taking from both Germany and Denmark. The consensus politics remained generally up to August 1943, when the situation in Denmark was drastically changed.



From October 1938 the Germans marked passports belonging to Jews with the letter "J". In Denmark people with such passports were not allowed to enter unless they had special permission.



German troops going ashore on Langelinje in Copenhagen 9 April, 1945.



## Denmark in the 1930s and During the German Occupation

In the spring and summer of 1943 the Danish resistance grew stronger and got help from the English who gave support with weapons, explosives and instructors. For the German occupation power it was obvious that the government could no longer control the inhabitants and they demanded that capital punishment would be imposed for sabotage. When the government rejected the proposition, the occupying power answered August 29 1943 by introducing a state of emergency in the whole country and depositing the government. In addition the lawyer and SS-general Werner Best – who belonged to the national council in the German-occupied Denmark – in a telegram proposed to the government in Berlin to get rid of the Danish Jews. The telegram was sent on September 8 1943 at 1.10 pm with a request that it would immediately be forwarded to the German Foreign Minister:



German troops march into Denmark 9 April, 1940.



Werner Best (t. H.), German Nazi politicians and the highest representative of the German occupation of Denmark together with the Danish Prime Minister, November 1942.

With reference to your telegram number 537 from 19.4 1943 and my report on 24.4 1943 I inform you due to the new situation which has arisen following the Jewish question. If the new course in Denmark is to be implemented consistently it is my opinion that one also has to think about a solution of the Jewish question [...] in Denmark. The measures concerning this should be taken before the current state of emergency ceases, as a later date could provoke reactions in the country, which could mean that the general state of emergency must be introduced again, and then probably in worse circumstances than today. From several sources, I have heard that a possibly functioning constitutional government would resign and the king and the parliament would stop cooperating [...] To at once to be able to arrest and deport about 6 000 Jews (including women and children) it will be necessary to put in the police forces I have asked for in my telegram nr 1001 on 1.9 1943 and which almost exclusively would be used in Greater Copenhagen where most of the Jews in the country live [...] Off-site transfer should primarily be done by sea why the ship should be routed here in good time.

The text which here is translated to English , originates from the book *Aktionen mod de danske jøder oktober 1943* by Michael Mogensen, Peder Wibben, Otto Rühl (2003)

It was decided that the action would take place the night between October 1 and 2 1943 during the Jewish New Year. Many people had time to reach safety as many important persons quickly got to know about the action and were able to warn the Jews. An important person in this context was Georg F Duckwitz. He served at the German embassy in Copenhagen and took care of Maritime affairs. Duckwitz got to know about the action through Best and did everything to stop it.

## Denmark in the 1930s and During the German Occupation

He personally travelled to Berlin, but too late. Hitler had already decided that the Danish Jews would be cleared out of the way according to Best's telegram. Then Duckwitz went to Sweden where he met Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson and requested that the Danish Jews would be granted asylum in Sweden. When he returned to Denmark he contacted the social democratic leader and informed him about what was going to happen. The latter in his turn immediately started to spread the information and told the rabbi Marcus Melchior, that there was a few days left till the action would be started.

Wednesday September 29 the rabbi in his turn informed the Jewish congregation in the synagogue of Copenhagen that a German raid was planned. During the raid all Danish Jews were to be arrested and deported. The rabbi advised everybody to prepare through finding hiding places or leave the city and seek shelter at non-Jewish friends and acquaintances the next few days. Melchior, the rabbi, also asked them to warn others who weren't in the synagogue and heard his message.

The rabbi's warning started a fervous activity. Friends were called, relatives were visited, and proxies were written for flats, labour and office spaces. Some wouldn't be willing to break up during the New Year celebrations, one of the most important holidays in Judaism. Others meant promptly that it wasn't possible that such things could happen in Denmark: The Jews were under protection of the king and were Danish citizens.

The father and big brother of Klara's best friend knew what had happened to Jews in other European cities and were worried about what could happen in Copenhagen. October 1 they tried to persuade their neighbours to leave their home and offered to let the family sleep in their flat. But Klara's father was sure the Danish authorities wouldn't allow anything like that to happen and meant that they could safely stay in their own home. The family didn't know that Gestapo a week earlier secretly had confiscated the addresses of the Jewish congregation in Copenhagen and therefore knew where the Jewish members lived.

Most of the Jews understood that they had to escape, but where? And who would help them? It turned out that help was closer to home than you might think. The Danes, who had contacts within the resistance and with fishermen in Öresund helped to hide Jews in all possible places, like hospitals, basements and empty summerhouses belonging to non-Jewish families. October 2 there was an official message in Swedish radio that Sweden was prepared to receive the Danish Jews. The voyages over Öresund were carried out during the following weeks from small fishing ports and deserted beaches using all kinds of boats, both big fishing boats and small rowing boats.

More than 7 000 Jews were rescued to Sweden. 45 refugee camps were established in the towns, above all along the southern coast: Helsingborg, Landskrona and Malmö. Those who were able were put to work in for example forestry or industry. It was arranged that students could get on with their studies and the younger children started Swedish schools. Also purely Danish speaking schools were established. Many of the refugee families moved to the major cities where they



© Wikipedia Commons

Georg F. Duckwitz at the German embassy in Copenhagen made a significant effort to save the Danish Jews from deportation to concentration camps.



© The Royal Library, Denmark

Chief Rabbi Marcus Melchior warned that German raids would take place at the Jewish New Year in 1943.



© The Museum of Danish Resistance (Frihedsmuseet)

This is one of the boats that were used to rescue Danish Jews to Sweden.



## Denmark in the 1930s and During the German Occupation

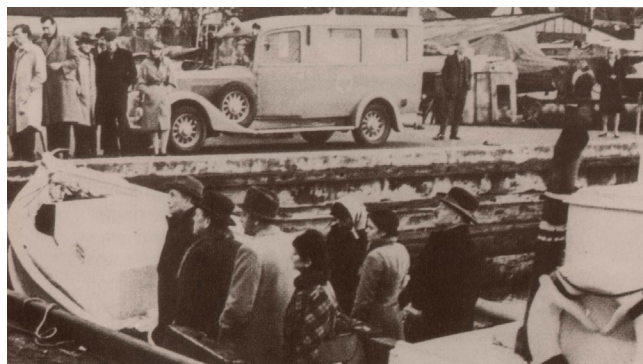
stayed with friends and relatives. After the war most of them returned to Denmark.

The Jews who hadn't fled to Sweden or hid were taken away by the Nazis in an action during the night between October 1 and 2 1943. German police went round in covered vehicles and stopped at every house where Jews were known to live. But thanks to the massive rescue action only 472 Jews were imprisoned. Among them were Klara and her family, who along with others were transferred to the Langelinie quay where transport ships were waiting to take them to the concentration camp Theresienstadt (in today's Czech Republic).

Theresienstadt was a small town about 50 km north of Prague. It was founded by the Austrian emperor Josef II at the end of the 18th century. There was a quite small urban dwelling, military barracks and a small fortress used as a prison. After Nazi Germany's annexation of Böhmen and Mähren (now the Czech Republic) 1939 the hunt for resistance members started and the prisons were filled with political prisoners. Gestapo then started to use the prison in the small fortress in Theresienstadt and the town itself became a German military base.

The Germans soon saw an opportunity to exploit the walled city for the internment of Jews. In November 1941 the deportation of Jews to Theresienstadt started. The Jews were placed in the barracks. Then the Germans forcibly moved the town's resident inhabitants, and in the autumn of 1942 all Theresienstadt became a concentration camp under SS's control. Totally 140 000 Jews passed through the camp. 87 000 were transported further to Auschwitz-Birkenau and other death camps. Apart from the Danish Jews Czech, Austrian and German Jews were transported here. Many were artists, musicians, theatre people, authors and scientists. Following an agreement between Werner Best and the SS leader Heinrich Himmler the Danish Jews, as the only major group in Theresienstadt were excluded from further transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Even today there are divided opinions why this agreement was established.

In 1944 the Danish and International Red Cross visited the camp. Before the visit the Nazis wanted to show a prosperous society. But that was a false picture. Theresienstadt in effect doubled as a ghetto and a concentration camp. Inspired by the success of the Red Cross visit the camp commandant Hans Günter took the initiative to a propaganda film on the flourishing of culture in Theresienstadt. The film would be shown for various humanitarian organizations in the world. In the film clips from the children's opera *Brundibár*, which premiered at a Jewish orphanage in Prague 1942. The year after the composer Hans Krása and the children were deported to Theresienstadt, where the opera was played until the composer and many of the children were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.



Danish Jews come ashore in Sweden in October in 1943.



Headlines about the Danish-Jewish refugees in Malmö, October 1943.

## Demark in the 1930s and During the German Occupation

© A picture of Theresienstadt from the book  
"Theresienstadt Kultur och barbari", Lund 1995, Elena Makarova



Picture from Theresienstadt made by the artist Ferdinand Bloch. He was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942 and was murdered in Theresienstadt in 1944.

© Yad Vashem | Židovské Muzeum V Praze, Praha, Czech Republic



People crowding in a dining room in the overcrowded camp Theresienstadt.

© 2014, 2019 the authors and the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism

Text: Anita Marcus and Sarah Forssell

Translation: Elisabeth Sannar

Fact checking: Palle Roslyng-Jensen. Associate professor emeritus, The University of Copenhagen

Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy

Sources:

*Theresienstadt, Kultur och barbari* Tekst Elena Makarova et al, Red. Elisabeth Haglund et al, Lund: Kulturen 1995.  
 Marcus Forssell, *Natten är mörk och lång*, Lund 1997.  
 Poul Borchanius, *Historien om de danske jøder*, København: Fremad 1969.  
 Therkel Stræde, *En mur af mennesker. Danmark i oktober 1943. Jødernes redning fra udslettelsen*, Århus: Tiderne Skifter 1993.  
 Herbert Pundik, *Det kan ikke ske i Danmark. Jødernes flugt til Sverige 1943*, Viborg: Systime 1993.  
 Michael Mogensen, Peder Wiben, Otto Rühl, *Aktionen mod de danske jøder oktober 1943*, Viborg: Systime 2003.  
 Sofie Lene Bak, *Jødeaktionen oktober 1943. Forestillinger i offentlighed og forskning*, København: Museum Tusculanum 2001.