

Denmark

Why did the Danes save their Jewish neighbors when so many others in Europe turned their backs on Jews during that period?

Was it because King Christian X, when asked about the "Jewish Question," replied: "There is no Jewish Question in this country. There are only my people"?

Was it because the people, inspired by their churches, said: "A Dane is a Dane and nobody comes between us"? Other Danes explained it this way: "It was the natural thing to do." Or: "It was exactly the same as having your neighbor's house on fire. Naturally you want to do something about it."

Was it because some of the Germans in Denmark turned a blind eye when Jews were rescued? Some say that the German soldiers, stationed in Denmark for years, were influenced by the tolerant attitude and actions of the Danish people.

The World

There are lessons from this period in history that are relevant to political and social issues today as well.

How do leaders of countries help to shape the role and attitudes of their countrymen and women (for good or evil)?

What role can institutions (religious organizations, schools, etc.) play in influencing people?

What role can individuals (teachers, mentors, celebrities, etc.) play in influencing societies?

Ourselves

We can also engage in personal reflections about what this story says about the potential of individuals.

How is it that some people (even soldiers, who learn to be disciplined) will disobey orders that they believe to be immoral, while others go along unquestioningly?

What values or qualities does a person need to possess in order to do the right thing under difficult or even dangerous circumstances?

What does it mean to be a hero? Is heroism something that only exists in dire situations, or can we incorporate heroism into our daily lives?

Are there ways that we can, or do, help those who are suffering or in need in our own lives?

Victor Borge's "The Legend"

"The Legend" is a dramatic performance written by Victor Borge about the rescue of Jews in Denmark. Mr. Borge was born in Denmark and came to the United States just as Denmark was being occupied by the Nazis. He became a successful performer, comedian, and pianist. In 1963, he and New York attorney Richard Netter founded Thanks To Scandinavia in order to commemorate the extraordinary efforts of ordinary people to rescue Jews in Scandinavia.

Thanks To Scandinavia is an educational institution that commemorates the rescue of Jews in Scandinavia and other European countries during World War II. Thanks To Scandinavia awards scholarships to young people from these countries in lasting gratitude and in an effort to build new bridges of friendship. Thanks To Scandinavia has granted over 3,000 scholarships to teachers and students for study in the United States, Israel, and within Europe and helped to promote understanding of this history of rescue and its enduring message about courage and human dignity.

"Courage and humanity are enduring messages that our generation and every generation to come must hold dear."

—Richard Netter, president, Thanks To Scandinavia

For more information about TTS and "The Legend" performance and CD contact:

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Thanks To Scandinavia is a nonprofit organization and an Institute of AJC (www.ajc.org).

Credit: Frihedsmuseet, courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

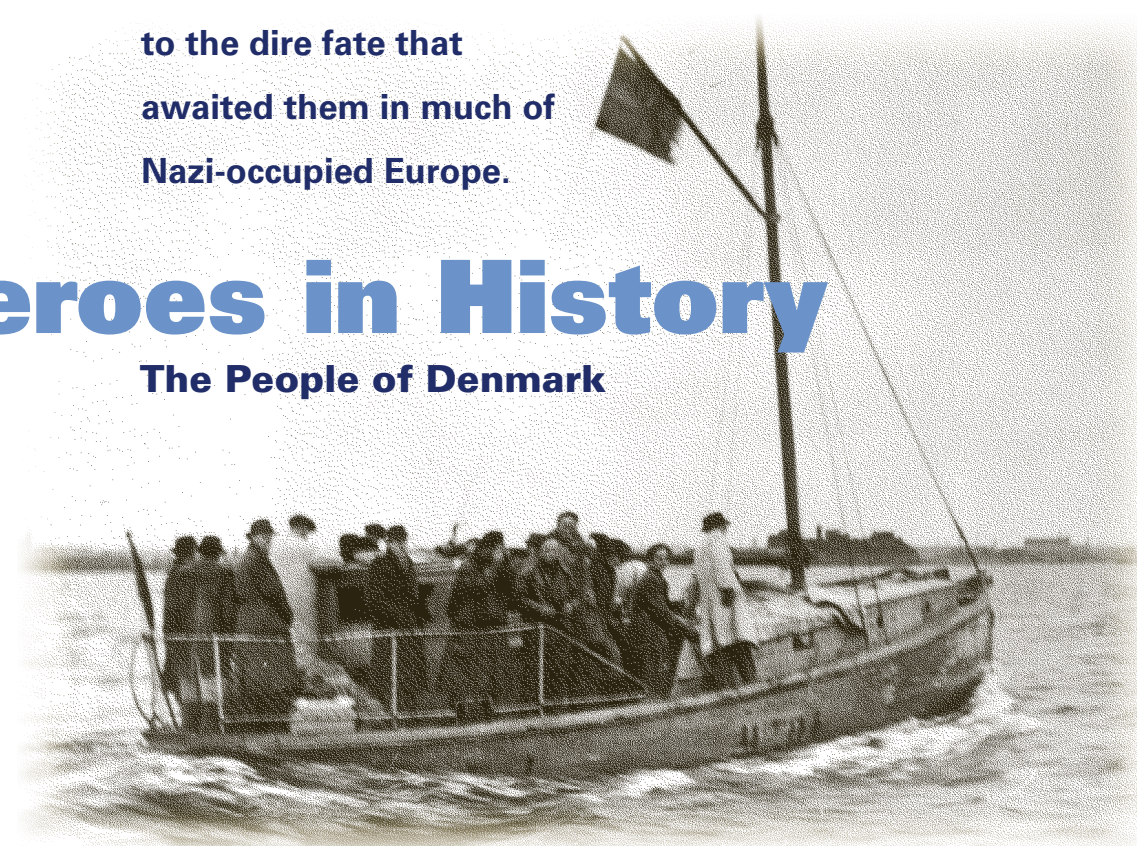


**Jewish children rescued from the Holocaust
pictured here in Sweden**

**During the darkest chapter
in human history, the people,
churches, and governments
of a few countries refused
to cede their Jewish citizens
to the dire fate that
awaited them in much of
Nazi-occupied Europe.**

Heroes in History

The People of Denmark



Thanks To Scandinavia
An Institute of AJC

1939
1945

Hitler and his Nazi party came to power in Germany in 1933 and remained until 1945—only twelve years in total. And yet, by the end of Hitler’s regime, the world had been plunged into global world war, Europe was in shambles, and nearly 30 million people had died. Among the dead were six million Jews—men, women, and children—who were systematically slaughtered because of the Nazis’ racist ideology.

Some Jews were rescued throughout the Scandinavian countries and in other European countries by heroic actions of individuals and communities. The following story focuses on the successful efforts of the Danish people to save the Jews in their country.

Credit: Hagstomer and Oviberg Fandkommission AB, courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives



Passport photograph of Raoul Wallenberg

rescuers

- The Swedish government, which remained neutral during the war, offered to take in all the Danish Jews. Scientist Niels Bohr played a role in convincing Sweden to do so. But the Nazis wouldn’t hear of it. In response, Danes created an underground to ferry the Jews across the sound waterway to Sweden. People from all over Denmark took part in this effort. Some even helped to raise the money needed for the passage.
- Pharmacists donated drugs to keep the children quiet and sedated during the difficult stages of the boat passage to Sweden. Taxi drivers treated the Jews as regular fares, driving them to the coast. Hospitals released all of their Jewish patients and then readmitted them with new Christian-sounding names. They took in other Jews who were not sick and registered them as patients.

Denmark: a nation with a conscience

Denmark

In the spring of 1940, the army of Hitler’s Nazi Germany occupied Denmark. Initially, there was little resistance from the people. Their attitude, combined with the Nazis’ need for Danish farm products and their belief that Germans and Danes shared “Aryan” racial qualities, led to a rather loose occupation. The Danish government was left in place under King Christian X.

Despite its precarious position, this government refused to carry out German anti-Jewish legislation. Jews were not seen as being a separate ethnic minority in Denmark. A newspaper report at the time stated: “It is impossible to separate the Jews from Danish cultural tradition.” If forced to cooperate with the Germans in persecuting Jews, the government of Prime Minister Erik Scavenius said it would step down.

The Threat

In 1943, the situation deteriorated. The Danish government resigned and the King declared himself a prisoner of war.

That September, Hitler decided that as part of his “Final Solution” the Jews of Denmark would be deported to Nazi concentration camps. The plan was tantamount to a death sentence. But it was not to be realized in Denmark.

When George Duckwitz, a German marine attaché, learned of the order to prepare ships to take the Jews to concentration camps, he quickly revealed it to Danish leaders, who in turn informed the Jewish community. On Wednesday morning, September 29, 1943, the day before the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Marcus Melchior stood before his congregation and spoke these words:

“There will be no service this morning. Instead, I have very important news to tell you. Last night I received word that tomorrow the Germans plan to raid Jewish homes throughout Copenhagen to arrest all the Danish Jews for shipment to concentration camps. They know tomorrow is Rosh Hashanah and our families will be home. The situation is very serious. We must take action immediately.

You must leave the synagogue now and contact all relatives, friends, and neighbors you know who are Jewish and tell them to warn the Jews. By nightfall tonight we must all be in hiding.”

Another German army commander in Denmark played a key role; General Hermann von Hannecken refused to use his troops to cooperate in carrying out the plans, forcing the Gestapo to do the work themselves, door to door.

But the word had indeed spread with lightning speed: the Jews were not to be found.

The Rescue

During and after the planned raid, Danes from all walks of life participated in hiding Jews, secretly transporting them to the coast, and ferrying them to safety in Sweden. By the end of October, nearly all of the 7,700 Jews of Denmark had been evacuated.

Five hundred Jews were caught and taken to the Theresienstadt camp, but even they were not forgotten. The Danish government and Red Cross lobbied for food and clothing to be sent to them.

For the remainder of the war, a number of Danish families took care of Jewish religious articles of their neighbors. They preserved Jewish homes and businesses. When Danish Jews returned after the war, they were welcomed. Some of their homes were freshly painted; their business profits held in escrow.

Norway

Norway’s resistance movement courageously defied the German occupation and the Quisling government and was able to rescue half of its Jewish population.

Finland

Finland, though a cobelligerent of Germany, refused to deliver the Finnish Jewish community for Hitler’s “Final Solution.”

Sweden

Risking Nazi retaliation, neutral Sweden provided sanctuary for Jews escaping from Denmark, Norway, and other European countries. And, in 1944, the Swedish government working with the U.S. sent Raoul Wallenberg to Budapest to save tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews.

Denmark

Although occupied by the Germans, Denmark saved nearly all of its Jewish population from the Nazis.

Scandinavia and Bulgaria

For more information about the stories of rescue in other countries, contact Thanks To Scandinavia (information on back page).

Bulgaria

Despite continuous efforts by Hitler’s Nazi regime to win King Boris III as an ally, the Bulgarian people and the Orthodox Church managed to save almost 50,000 Jews.

“Funeral” processions were arranged to facilitate the movement of Jews from place to place. Children served as lookouts, and many homes were turned into way stations along this underground railroad. Ambulances were used to bring Jews to the waiting ships.

Pastor Krohn distributed blank baptismal certificates for the Jews to use. On October 3rd, this declaration was read in every congregation of the Lutheran Church of Denmark: “Wherever Jews are persecuted as such on racial or religious grounds, the Christian Church is duty bound to protest against this action. We shall therefore struggle to ensure the continued guarantee to our Jewish brothers and sisters of the same freedom we ourselves treasure....”