

Sweden

A considerable number of rescued Jews stayed in Sweden. Today, they and their children comprise a large part of the nation’s Jewish population of 18,000.

Sweden maintained its status as a neutral country during the Second World War. What were the moral implications of this stance in the particular historical situation, and what are the pros and cons of maintaining neutrality in conflict situations today?

Numbers come up often in this story. Do you think that something of the human dimension is lost when we speak in abstract numbers, such as “six million” murdered? If so, what can we do about it?

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

Amid the horrors of the Holocaust and the near-universal ambivalence of the bystanders to the fate of European Jews, Raoul Wallenberg was a towering moral exception. In less dramatic ways, we have all confronted situations in which our own courage was tested. Can you think of a time when you spoke out for justice when others remained silent?

What does it mean to be a hero such as Raoul Wallenberg? 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?

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 3,500 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, contact:
Rebecca Neuwirth, Executive Director
Thanks To Scandinavia
165 East 56th Street
New York, NY 10022
Tel (212) 891-1403
Fax (212) 891-1415
TTS@ajc.org
www.ThanksToScandinavia.org

Thanks To Scandinavia is an institute of AJC (www.ajc.org).

For further reading, see Dr. Paul A. Levine’s *From Indifference to Activism: Swedish Diplomacy and the Holocaust 1938-1944* (Stockholm, 1998) and Steven Koblik’s *The Stones Cry Out: Sweden’s Response to the Persecution of the Jews 1933-1945* (New York, 1988).

Brochure created by David Kipp and Erica Heller with assistance from Eric Post and Katrine Sypli Kohl; thanks to Dr. Paul A. Levine, Uppsala University (Sweden), Dr. Ingrid Lomfors, Gothenburg University (Sweden), and Lena Posner-Körösi, president of the Jewish Community of Stockholm.

During the Second World War, neutral Sweden became home to tens of thousands of refugees. Swedish diplomatic efforts to save Jewish lives during the course of the war embodied a dramatic shift from indifference to the plight of European Jews to humanitarian activism.

Rescued by Sweden



A Jewish family from Denmark, who was ferried to safety in Sweden, has Christmas dinner at the home of a Swedish family in Landskrona.

Thanks To Scandinavia
An Institute of the 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.

The following story focuses on the successful efforts of the small Swedish Jewish community, its non-Jewish friends, and the Swedish government to save the lives of thousands of Jewish individuals.

Sweden

Swedish war policy

Keeping up with its 100-year tradition of neutrality, Sweden managed to keep out of both world wars. Though Sweden harbored close cultural and economic ties to Berlin in the 1930s, the vast majority of Swedes did not favor the Nazis. As the German army suffered major defeats in the beginning of 1943, the Swedish government’s fear of Nazi invasion lessened. This paved the way for a more proactive policy toward helping refugees of the war, though Sweden still maintained its trade with Germany.

From indifference to activism

Throughout the 1930s, the Swedish government refused to open its borders to those fleeing Nazism, and maintained tight restrictions on Jewish immigration. It was up to the Jews of Sweden to advocate for the liberalization of Jewish immigration laws. In the late 1930s, they established several relief committees – some in cooperation with non-Jews.

When Germany, which had occupied Norway in 1940, began persecuting the Norwegian Jewish minority in the spring of 1942, the Swedish government was shocked into action. Half of the Norwegian Jews – about 900 men, women, and children – managed to escape and were offered refuge in Sweden. The other half perished in Auschwitz.

This first move of the Swedish government to accept Jewish refugees had major implications. It was followed by requests from a variety of domestic and international sources for Sweden to use its diplomatic might to help rescue other Jewish communities.

More refugees

In the fall of 1943 the Jews of occupied Denmark went underground to avoid German capture and deportation. All but 500 of the 7,700 Danish Jews made it safely across the sound to Sweden, where many stayed until the end of the war. Among the Danish Jewish refugees was the renowned scientist Niels Bohr, who helped negotiate the admittance to Sweden and who later was part of the team of scientists who developed the American atomic bomb was later used to end the war in Asia.

Aid to the Jews of Hungary

By 1944, Hungary had the largest Jewish population (approximately 800,000) left in Nazi-occupied Europe. Faced with major German setbacks in the war, the Hungarian government tried to back out of its alliance with Germany. Germany responded by invading. Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann was sent to Hungary to arrange for the deportation and murder of Jews there. Within less than three months, Hungary’s Jews—with the exception of those in the capital, Budapest—were sent to their deaths. At this point Sweden and the United States War Refugee Board joined forces to help the Jews of Budapest. The relative success of this venture was due to the heroic intervention of individuals who risked their lives to save others and in particular to Raoul Wallenberg.

In total, Sweden accepted almost 180,000 refugees during the war. About 10,000 were Jews, who otherwise would have faced certain death. When the war ended, the Swedes took in thousands of survivors of the Nazi camps and did everything possible to help them restart their lives.

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 later in the war provided sanctuary for Jews escaping from Denmark, Norway, and other European countries.

Denmark

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

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.

rescuers

- In 1944, Sweden sent Raoul Wallenberg to Budapest with a mission to save as many Jews as possible. He helped save the lives of tens of thousands Jews in the city through a variety of measures, among others, the issuance of “protective letters,” an invented diplomatic document that sometimes successfully hindered deportation of Jews by suggesting a relationship to Sweden. When Soviet troops liberated Bu-

dapest in 1945, Wallenberg disappeared. Russian authorities have declared that Wallenberg died in a Soviet prison. He remains today a symbol of heroism and bravery.

- As the war drew to an end, Heinrich Himmler, the second most powerful Nazi leader, was interested in making tactical concessions in order to appease the West. Sweden used this to get permis-

sion to start a rescue mission to the concentration camps led by the Swedish Red Cross with Count Folke Bernadotte at the helm. Fifteen thousand prisoners were saved and brought to Sweden in white buses that later became a symbol of humanitarian action. It is impossible to say how many of them were Jewish, but the numbers run from 2,000 to 5,000.

- In the late 1990s, the Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson created the “Living History” project—an innovative educational campaign focusing on the history of the Holocaust. Sweden has also been leading efforts to focus educational initiatives in Europe and around the world on teaching about the Holocaust and, more generally, about the evil consequences of ethnic and religious hatred.



Passport photograph of Raoul Wallenberg

Credit: Hagstromer and Ouberg Fondkommission AB, courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives



Swedish Red Cross buses in Germany during WW2. Courtesy of Swedish Red Cross.