



## Heart

**By Amanda Johnson-Zetterstrom, Westside High School**

“Lying is done with words and also with silence.” Quite simply, Adrienne Rich is right. True moral courage requires standing up for what you know is right, and raising your voice for what you know is wrong. Though it may be a huge cliché, my family makes me proud. Why? My grandparents didn’t lie. They didn’t sit silently; they stood for what they knew was right. When the Nazi’s changed the face of Europe, they met resistance from one country in particular. That one country saved 7,800 people. That one country looked at people as people, not as labels. That one country saved a generation of their Jewish citizens. That one country had moral courage. That one country was Denmark. The elaborate plan of the Danes, fueled by the help of the Swedish people for two years, saved thousands of people.

My grandparents have shaped who I am and who I am going to be. They are two selfless people who live in a modest apartment in Landskrona, Sweden. They own a cat named Charlie, who is treated more like the crown prince than anything else. No one would realize these average people have demonstrated innate respect and dignity throughout their lives. As they approach the end of their lives, I know they’ve really lived them. In a society where too many people are afraid to reach out and live, let alone shown moral courage, I know that I am blessed to have had the opportunity to meet my grandparents and be able to call them family.

When Germany invaded Denmark on April 9, 1940, the Danish people barely put up a fight. Denmark’s small army had no chance of defeating the Germans, and without the ability to fight Germany openly, a resistance formed. That resistance made a difference when the news of the Jews being exported to concentration camps broke in Denmark. They created a plan in which Jews were hid in hospitals until they could be transported underneath fishing boats to Sweden. There, they were taken

care of, all 7,800 of them. Of the 450 people who were captured, 51 did not survive.<sup>1</sup> The moral courage of the Danes saved them because the Jews were Danish first and foremost.

Growing up with a mother from Skåne, the most southern part of Sweden, the culture of Denmark has always been close to my heart and homeland. People from Skåne show moral courage every day, and it only makes sense given what we did. The stories of the Swedes who opened their houses for years and the Danes who left their lives across the sound are often forgotten. For two years, they were without possessions, without anything material. However, they were not without love from the Swedes.

In Sweden, 18 year-olds have to serve a mandatory military service. At the time of the Danish Jews being carried to the neutral state of Sweden, my grandfather served his. As the fishing boats filled with Jews sailed across the sound to Sweden, my grandfather surreptitiously docked the boat and removed the people. He took them to a large commons place in the town, where they were taken care of. Copenhagen's Jews all stood in the town square where I have spent my summers licking on ice cream cones. There they stood, silent, wondering whether it was all just a surreal dream in which their old lives had been robbed. They were taken care of by people like my grandmother, whom at age 15 volunteered almost every hour of her day to help them. This little town came together for 8,000 people.

After a while, they became a part of the town that had nearly quadrupled in size. Many stayed after the war because they had felt so at home there. As the war progressed, people who had escaped from concentration camps had filtered to Sweden. My grandmother recalls having to take showers with them because they were so afraid that they were trying to be killed. My grandfather remembers watching emaciated men die because there was no way they would ever be able to eat and continue to survive. My grandmother remembers her heart breaking every time she saw a parentless child. My grandfather remembers his heart jumping when he welcomed the ship across the sound. I remember the swell of pride I felt when my grandparents told me their story.

Some people are going to contend that Richard and Gunhild Zetterström aren't heroes, and that's fine, because they will agree with you any day. They don't think of themselves as being special, they just think that taking people into their own homes for over five years in some cases is just normal. The thing is, it isn't. People in the Danish resistance were treated very harshly and tortured brutally. My

grandfather held the communications between Sweden and the resistance going. Again, he just thinks that's what anyone would have done.

In the same commons area in which the Copenhagen Jews stood, awaiting the next card in their fate, *The Beatles* later sang, "All You Need is Love." Frankly, the message didn't need to be told in this town.<sup>2</sup>

You ask me in this contest to show the rescuers, those that had moral courage. I can't help but tell you the story of two people who happen to be my grandparents. Moral courage involves defying what's wrong and standing for what is right no matter what the risk. Moral courage has the ability to reach out and touch someone because it's a power so great it can perform miracles. My grandparents embody moral courage. As I stand before you, I am just a storyteller relaying a message my grandparents would never think anyone would want to hear. My grandparents knew nearly 20 years before *The Beatles* did that "all you need is love." Every time I see them, they prove to me once again how they knew. *Hjärta* is something my grandparents have always followed and demonstrated. It's what didn't silence them and kept them from lying. It's heart.

<sup>1</sup> – "Danish Resistance." Natmus.

<sup>2</sup> – Lena Johnson-Zetterström. Interview 2.3.2005

Entire Story – Gunhild and Richard Zetterström. Interview. 2.1.2005