

Denmark Rescue

By the end of WWII, approximately 6 million Jews and millions of others had perished in Nazi-occupied Europe as a result of genocidal persecution. In contrast to other European countries, the majority of the citizens of Denmark protected their countrymen.

Approximately 7,800 Jews out of a population of 3.6 million people lived in Denmark when Nazi Germany occupied the country in 1940. Unlike his practice in many other occupied countries, Hitler granted the Danish Government autonomy in handling its domestic affairs. For the Danish Government, this meant the rejection of any effort to alter the protected status of Jews in Denmark. As an illustration, the government refused to adhere to the Nazis' demand to segregate and isolate the Jews by forcing them to wear the Star of David. For the next three years, relations between the Danes and the Nazi occupiers steadily deteriorated. By August 1943, the Danish Government could no longer meet the Nazis' increasing demands, which included a mandatory death penalty for resistance work. The Danish Government resigned, the King was placed under house arrest, and the Nazis declared martial law. For Dr. Werner Best, the highest-ranking Nazi official in Denmark, the time was ripe for action against the Danish Jews. Dr. Best forwarded this message to Hitler and in return, Hitler sent a message that a roundup of the Danish Jews was scheduled for the night of the Jewish New Year, the night between October 1 and 2, when families would most likely be at home. "A courageous man, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, the German delegation's attaché for shipping affairs and a confidant of Dr. Best, leaked word of the impending roundup to a few Danish politicians; they, in turn, warned the Jewish leadership, barely three days before the Germans were to begin. The alarm spread quickly and most Jews went into hiding immediately" (Goldberger 5).

Without hesitation Danes took risks without regard for the consequences (which could have been death). The rescue was spontaneous, decentralized, and with no command structure. Every imaginable group, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, men and women, young and old, assisted.

- Political parties publicly denounced the Nazi campaign.
- Friends, acquaintances and strangers hid Jews in their homes and churches; they arranged escape routes across the bodies of waters that separated Denmark from Sweden; they financed the escape.
- Underground newspapers published articles encouraging the Danes to stand in solidarity with their Jewish fellow countrymen.
- On behalf of all the Danish Lutheran Bishops, the Bishop of Copenhagen prepared a document denouncing the persecution of Jews, which was sent to the Nazis and was read in Lutheran State Churches during services.
- Doctors falsified documents and hid people in hospitals (Rittner G14).

As a result of this courageous effort, approximately 7,200 people made it safely to Sweden. 464 Jews were sent to the concentration camp Theresienstadt; even then, the Danish government ensured their safety. The government, via the Danish Foreign Ministry and Red Cross, continually visited the camp, provided the prisoners with food parcels, and insisted on a constant reporting of their whereabouts. As a result of this effort, Danish prisoners at Theresienstadt suffered relatively few deaths (Abrahamsen 9).

After the war, Danes who had been targeted for persecution by the Nazis returned to Denmark and received a warm welcome. Unlike other Nazi-occupied countries, Denmark had cared for their neighbors' homes and belongings and kept their jobs waiting for them. For many returning Danes, this welcome reestablished their dignity as human beings and provided them the strength to rebuild their lives.

References

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