

# **Denmark and the Holocaust**

**Edited by Mette Bastholm Jensen  
and Steven L. B. Jensen**

**Institute for International Studies  
Department for Holocaust and Genocide Studies**

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## **Preface**

With this book the Department for Holocaust and Genocide Studies publishes the third volume in the Danish Genocide Studies Series – a series of publications written or edited by researchers affiliated with the Department and its work on the Holocaust and genocide in general, along with studies of more specifically Danish aspects of the Holocausts.

I extend my thanks to all the contributors to this volume, as well as Gwynneth Llewellyn and Marie Louise Hansen-Hoeck for their translation work, Rachael Farber for her editorial assistance, and Jacob Fræmohs for devising the layout of the book. Finally, I would like to thank Steven L. B. Jensen and Mette Bastholm Jensen for planning and editing this publication.

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Copenhagen, April 2003

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## **Introduction**

Mette Bastholm Jensen and Steven L. B. Jensen

As one of the major transformative events of the twentieth century, in all areas of society, politics and culture, the Second World War continues to interest and fascinate people. The massive devastation, displacements and social and political transformations caused by the war have left their mark on individuals, communities, nations and continents until the present day. They have also left their clear traces in national historiographies; therefore a comprehensive understanding of the war must appreciate the disparate nature of these experiences.

This book addresses key aspects relating to Denmark and the Second World War and attempts to convey a more profound understanding of them. There are events and developments in the Danish wartime experience that stand out or differ from those of other countries. For example there was no Danish exile government in London to play the role as a symbol of resistance to the occupying power like the Norwegian, Belgian or Polish governments among others. There was no famine facing the country as the liberation was approaching – similar to what occurred during the last months of the German occupation of the Netherlands. There are, moreover, specific issues which are integral to understanding Danish aspects of the Holocaust. The beaches of Normandy and the beaches north of Copenhagen may not have the same importance in the history of the Second World War but both were the sites of significant events in their own right – the latter being where the rescue of the Danish Jews took place in October 1943.

By 1945, two out of every three Jews living in Europe in 1939 were dead. Behind this tragic fact one finds widely varying national rates of victimization. At the extreme, Poland's Jewish population was annihilated almost in its entirety. In contrast to this the small Jewish community in Denmark all but escaped devastation and physical destruction. Yet, what establishes Denmark as an historical aberration is not the *rate* of survival

among its Jews (app. 98%), however extraordinary.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the anomaly lies in the fact that the threat of deportation of the Danish Jews provoked something resembling a popular movement, involving virtually all parts and strata of Danish society in an effort to save the minority. In the course of just a few weeks, in the early autumn of 1943, more than 7,000 persons were hidden in churches, schools, hospitals, and private homes until they could be guided to points up and down the shores of the Sound, where fishing boats awaited to carry them to safety in Sweden. In most cases, no prior relationship existed between those who lent a helping hand – or a house, a boat, or know-how – and those who, three relatively quiet years into the occupation, suddenly found themselves among the beleaguered ranks of Nazi prey.

The rescue of the Jews is one of the few events in Danish history that has attracted significant international attention. It is surrounded by a wealth of myths and half-truths, both in Denmark and abroad. Today most Danes are aware of the mythical nature of one of the most popular stories – that of King Christian X wearing the yellow Star of David on his daily horseback rides through the streets of Copenhagen – but abroad the myth persists. Expressions of doubt frequently meet with disappointment, if not outright disbelief when the validity of the story is challenged.

The story behind the myth, though somewhat less inspiring, is hardly less fascinating than the myth itself, as its origins are indicative of the precarious situation that the country found itself in. The myth was shaped and promoted by a group of Danish citizens in exile who exploited an opportune story of doubtful origins – most likely a cartoon in a Swedish newspaper – to carefully manipulate Denmark's image and interests abroad. As Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson shows in his article, the image of the King and the Star was only one among a number of fabrications more or less deliberately planted in allied media. With Denmark's future reputation in mind, the group of exiles used such stories in their

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<sup>1</sup> It is often overlooked that a majority of the members of the Jewish population survived in almost half of the nations and regions occupied by or allied with Nazi Germany (Fein, H. 1979. *Accounting for Genocide: Victims – and Survivors – of the Holocaust*. New York: The Free Press 1979, pp. xv-xvi).



attempts to gain goodwill in America and dispel doubts about Denmark's right to membership in the ranks of the allied nations.

According to Vilhjálmsón's analysis, there is little reason to believe that the fabrications were related to the situation of the Danish Jews in either intent or practice. Nevertheless, the King and the Star has become the myth most closely associated with the 1943 rescue of the Danish Jews. Perhaps one reason for its continuing appeal is the way in which certain myths relate an approximated truth beyond their concrete content. From this perspective, the story of the King and the Star – though false – is a marvel in all its simplicity, as it communicates something of the nature of the rescue effort and, indeed, of the predominant response to discriminatory Nazi policy. Among high and low, the rescue was an expression of solidarity towards fellow Danes.

Such solidarity and long-established democratic values and principles stand at the core of Leni Yahil's 1969 book, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry: Test of a Democracy*. Though it remains the standard work on the rescue in the English-speaking world, its insistence on solidarity and democracy as *causal* variables seems today somewhat dated and certainly idealized. Since the 1960s and particularly in recent years, many contemporary sources have been discovered in both Denmark and Sweden. Together, they provide significant new insights into the events of October 1943 and their central actors among Danes, Germans, and Swedes. Michael Mogensén's overview article presents the newest research and clearly demonstrates that some of this material reveals motives and contingencies that put aspects of the rescue in a somewhat less flattering light than tradition would have it. Whatever the payments that changed hands or German tactical considerations, however, the central fact nonetheless remains that in the hour of need thousands of Danes contributed in whatever way they could to helping their Jewish compatriots to escape from the threat of Nazi deportation. Furthermore, in many cases the help did not end with the Jews' safe arrival to Sweden. Once the allied forces had defeated the German army and Denmark was liberated, many Jews returned to Denmark to find that their homes and even businesses had been maintained by friends and neighbors, coworkers, and sometimes

strangers, just as the Torah scrolls of the synagogue had survived in the custody of a nearby church.

This more or less spontaneous and varied outpouring of help unquestionably counts among the nation's finest hours, yet the concept that most Danes immediately associate with the Second World War is the German occupation rather than the rescue itself. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the topics most closely associated with this period of the five-year Nazi presence in Denmark are the questions of active resistance and the policy of cooperation – or the policy of collaboration or negotiation, depending on whom you ask. To the extent that the term, *Holocaust*, has gained any credence in Danish language usage it is generally understood to refer to something that happened elsewhere and, hence, it is not immediately relevant in describing the Danish experience. Its title notwithstanding, the present volume is not trying to dispel this impression. Indeed, compared to other occupied nations, there was no Holocaust in Denmark. However, from the survival rate of the Danish Jews, or even from the broad popular support for the rescue effort, one should not infer that Denmark, or Danes, did not contribute to, or facilitate, the perpetration of the Holocaust.

The present volume presents evidence of some of the ways in which Danes, too, contributed to the Nazi genocide. In this it complements the history that has been well established and acknowledged for decades, namely the unique experience of the Danish Jewish community during the Second World War, and tries to readjust and rectify the exaggerated impressions of a saintly society. This effort must be understood within the context of a slow, ongoing process of reconsideration, most of which has occurred within the cocoon of Danish – and Danish language – historical discourse. In the most recent years there have been serious efforts to uncover and scrutinize some of the less flattering and certainly less known aspects of Danish wartime history. As the research presented in the following chapters shows, a harsh refugee policy, SS volunteers, and a rather calculating construction of Denmark's image abroad belong alongside the rescue effort in regard to Denmark's Holocaust record. The failures of humanity take nothing away from the magnificence of the rescue, but they do contribute to a more nuanced picture of Denmark's

role during the Holocaust. Though our collective imagination and identity would like it to be otherwise, in Denmark, too, democracy, tolerance, and resistance to discrimination coexisted with sympathy for aspects of Nazi ideology.

Besides engaging and challenging the mythology of Danish occupation history, this fuller appreciation of its darker aspects contributes to our knowledge of the Holocaust as a whole. A careful consideration of the relatively small ways in which Denmark aided and abetted the Nazi extermination effort, alongside what created a uniquely different situation for Jews in Denmark, does contribute to our understanding of the multitude of factors that made the Holocaust possible. The "success" of the Nazi attempt to rid Europe of its Jews depended not only on overcoming the logistical and human challenges in Germany itself, but also on the responses of the nations around it and beyond. The case of Denmark gives some indication of the direct and indirect ways in which even those nations most hostile to the *Endlösung* were instrumental in facilitating the persecution of millions. Denmark, like many other nations, did facilitate this persecution by closing its borders and leaving Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe to their fate. Consequently, it is instructive to consider the interaction and differences between internal attitudes toward a German occupation power and a country's own Jews, and external relations with governments and citizens of other countries. While the Danish population and authorities were united in their disgust towards the Nazi plan to deport Danish Jews, the period up to October 1943 saw more ambivalent expressions of sympathy with the plight of Europe's Jews. If the rescue was a wholehearted attempt to save Jews in Denmark regardless of their passports, the authorities throughout the 1930s and even during the war were rather more particular about whom they designated and treated as Danes.

Though a future including extermination camps seemed inconceivable in 1933, the events of the *Kristallnacht* left little doubt that Jews in Germany were facing an increasingly difficult situation. Fearing the effects of large-scale immigration, most countries in Europe and beyond made their borders virtually impenetrable to Jewish refugees from Germany and Eastern Europe. Denmark was no exception to this unwelcoming rule. Its

refugee policy remained unwaveringly restrictive, even as the Nazi regime tightened its grip on much of the continent and practiced its policy of racial cleansing with more or less fervor throughout the territories it controlled. Far removed from the direct persecution of the Jews, officials and officers in the Danish Foreign Ministry, the Aliens Division, and the border police, among others, scrupulously followed the letter of the law, permitting little definitional flexibility even in cases where an individual was clearly threatened, yet failed to meet the narrow requirements for political asylum. In her article, Lone Rünitz describes one such case illustrating the lengths to which governments were prepared to go to in their reluctance to grant a more permanent reprieve from the threat looming in Nazi Germany.

Viewed in the larger European context, Danish refugee policy from the early 1930s exemplified the *banality of evil*, the mundane, professional implementation of ultimately destructive policies. It was not ill will on the part of officials. Indeed, some administrators even justified the closing of the border, however individually detrimental, with larger, presumably benevolent concerns: Were more refugees to reside in Denmark it might invite anti-Semitism and incite Nazi sympathies.

Some Danes facilitated the perpetration of the Holocaust and the Nazi war of extermination in rather more direct ways than those of officials in the Aliens Division. Based on research in recently opened archives and interviews, a group of young Danish researchers document here not only Danish participation in and support of Nazi brutalities, but also some of the contributions of ordinary *Waffen SS* soldiers to massacres and concentration camps. In contrast to common expectations, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that a battalion of Danes would be any less inclined to commit racially motivated atrocities than German Nazi perpetrators. Neither, it seems, is there any reason to believe that Danish volunteers in the *Waffen SS* remained unaware of the Nazi war of extermination and the Holocaust that – if not in effect, then by extension – they were involved in.

As Claus Bundgård Christensen, Niels Bo Poulsen and Peter Scharff Smith explain, by all accounts they were ordinary men who did not devi-

ate from the psychological or social profile of other Danes. Unlike Browning's *Ordinary Men*, however, the Danish volunteers and collaborators represented only a small minority of their population of origin. Relative to the prevailing sentiments and actions of the society they came from, then, they were rather less ordinary. Again, the significance of illuminating the actions and knowledge of some thousands of Danish perpetrators must be viewed not only in the larger European context, in which their concrete contributions were minuscule – though telling of the activities of regular *Waffen SS* soldiers – but also against a Danish frame of reference that traditionally has paid very little attention to their complicity. The 6,000 Danes in volunteer *Waffen SS* service, along with the collaborators who operated within the borders of Denmark, must be considered alongside other actors and events related to the story of Denmark's role in the Holocaust. In Denmark, too, as in other countries, good and evil coexisted, a fact that is often overshadowed by the rescue effort. While consciousness of the duality may dull the gleam of Denmark's image as a whole, it only puts into sharper relief the unique experience of the nation's Jews, especially the triumph of the active collective effort to save them.

Today's youth is two or three generations removed from the Holocaust. Many organizations around the world strive to bridge this generational divide, through study programs, literature, moving images, exhibitions, etc. that challenge youth to appreciate the past and learn from it. Both the possibilities and limitations of such exercises are evident in the final article in this collection, by Cecilie Banke, which follows a group of high-school students on a study trip to Auschwitz. The name of this, the largest of the Nazi extermination camps, has become a word redolent with the anguish of the greatest human catastrophe of the twentieth century. Few Danes saw the inside of the camp while it was in operation, but the present book suggests that this should not lull us into believing that the Holocaust is a concept of no relevance to Danish history.

## **The Politics of Asylum in Denmark in the Wake of the *Kristallnacht* – A Case Study**

Lone Rünitz

The past 30-40 years have seen the publication of an extensive international literature about the fate of the Jews from 1933 to the *Final Solution* and the complicity of many democratic states that remained passive towards Germany and were unwilling to grant asylum to the victims of Nazi race policy. Only recently, however, has the issue attracted scholarly interest in Denmark. The lack of interest reflected, among other things, the perception that a small country like Denmark played only an insignificant role as a place of refuge. Other reasons possibly include the vast 1943 collective effort to rescue the Danish Jews. Unlike other European countries, whose Jewish populations perished, Denmark has not experienced the same need for critical self-examination. Moreover, the rescue effort doubtlessly generated a certain disinclination to allow the "national legend" to be tarnished. Denmark was recognized and revered throughout the world and focusing attention on the treatment of foreign Jews prior to October 1943 would only serve to diminish the achievements of that period.

Thus, only intermittently have occupation history and the literature on the rescue encompassed Danish policy towards Jewish refugees. Examples include Leni Yahil's dissertation, *Test of a Democracy* (published in Danish in 1967), and a string of anthologies published much later, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the rescue.<sup>1</sup> In addition, literature with other primary foci have touched upon the issue, e.g. Jørgen Hæstrup's work on Jewish agricultural trainees and Aliyah-children in Denmark, Steffen Steffensen's work on the influence of intellectual immigrants on Danish science and culture, and Bent Blüdnikow's book on the German-

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<sup>1</sup> See the following, all published in 1993: Strange, John, Ole Farver, and Ove Nathan (eds.), *Rescue-43: Xenophobia and Exile*, Munksgaard 1993, especially Hans Uwe Petersen, "The Historical Perspective in Denmark: The Treatment of Refugees in the 1930s"; Blüdnikow, Bent and Klaus Rothstein (eds.), *Dage i oktober 43: Vidnesbyrd*, Centrum 1993; Sode-Madsen, Hans (ed.), *Føderen har befalet: Jødeaktionen oktober 1943*, Samleren 1993; and Stræde, Therkel, *En mur af mennesker: Danmark i oktober 1943*, Tiderne Skifter 1993.

Danish Jew Hugo Rothenberg, whose connection with Hermann Göring enabled him to aide Jews in Germany.<sup>2</sup>

In the years from 1985 to 1988, historian Hans Uwe Petersen published a series of excellent articles on Danish refugee policy prior to and during the occupation.<sup>3</sup> Petersen conducted this ground-breaking work on exile as part of a research project about Hitler-refugees in Denmark, and his articles deal with all groups of refugees in the 1933-1941 period, but emphasize political opponents of Nazi Germany.

Not until *Danmark og de jødiske flygtninge 1933-1940* ("Denmark and the Jewish refugees 1933-1940", 2000) was there a considered attempt at providing a broader account of the Danish response to the Jewish refugee question from the beginning of the persecution in 1933 to the occupation. This work emphasized the role of responsible politicians and officials, the Danish-Jewish community, and the Jewish refugee committee.

Nevertheless, it was a newspaper article that led to research into this particular chapter of Danish history.<sup>4</sup> The article was written by Vilhjalmur Örn Vilhjalmsson, an Icelandic researcher, under the heading, "Den største myte" (The Greatest Myth). In it, Vilhjalmsson describes how Danish officials, during the occupation, expelled 21 stateless Jews, handing them over to the German authorities. As a result several of them subsequently perished in the extermination camps. The article aroused

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<sup>2</sup> Hæstrup, Jørgen, *Dengang i Danmark: Jødisk ungdom på træk 1932-1945*, Odense Universitetsforlag 1982; Steffensen, Steffen, *På flugt fra nazismen: Tysksprogede emigranter i Danmark efter 1933*, C.A. Reitzel 1986; and Blüdnikow, Bent, *Som om de slet ikke eksisterede*, Samleren 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Petersen, Hans Uwe, "Viel Papier, aber wenig Erfolg. Dänemark und die internationale staatliche Hilfsarbeit für Flüchtlinge vor dem deutschen Faschismus (1933-1939)", *Exil*, no. 2, 1985, p. 60-84; "Die Dänische Flüchtlingspolitik 1933-41", *Text und Kontext, Sonderreihe*, Band 21, Kopenhagen 1986, p. 73-94; "Flygtninge fra Hitler-Tyskland. En indføring i eksilforskningen", *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 1985, vol. 2, p 258-289; "Danmark og Hitler-flygtningene fra Czekoslovakiet 1938-45", in Blüdnikow, Bent (ed.), *Fremmede i Danmark*, Odense Universitetsforlag 1987; "De nordiske lande og Hitler-flygtningene – Internordisk samarbejde i flygtningespørgsmålet 1938-39", in Johansson, Rune and Hans Åke Persson (eds.), *Nordisk Flyktningepolitik i Världskrigens Epok*, Lund University Press 1988.

<sup>4</sup> *Berlingske Tidende* (a leading Danish newspaper), February 6, 2000.

considerable debate in the media because of its attack on Danish self-understanding as the rescuers of Jews. The Danish government decided to initiate an investigation into Danish refugee policy from 1933-1945. The investigation is conducted by the Department for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and is expected to be completed by 2004. The following article is part of this research project and focuses especially on the situation around *Kristallnacht*.

By the night of November 9, 1938, now referred to as *Kristallnacht*, Denmark, like most European nations, had closed its borders to Jewish refugees. Over a month earlier, on October 6, 1938, government regulations had instructed both border guards inside Denmark and Danish representatives abroad to refuse entry to foreigners "who, having left their country of origin with the intention of emigrating due to the difficulty of their situation, could not or did not wish to return to their country of origin." Entrance would be allowed only if they were in possession of either a Ministry of Justice entry permit or a visa allowing them entry into a third country.<sup>5</sup> The only other exceptions were to be political refugees who were, as previously, covered by the rights of asylum, in so far as they were defined as "person(s) who, due to political activities or political convictions, (were) liable to severe punishment should (they) remain in (their) country of origin". Unfortunately for the Jews, who comprised the vast majority of refugees from Nazi Germany, they were not covered by this definition, and were not regarded by the Danish authorities as having a right of asylum.<sup>6</sup>

The closing of the Danish border was not, as in other countries sharing a border with Germany, a result of Denmark having already accepted large numbers of Jewish refugees. On the contrary, it was a combination of factors – namely the inability of Jews to qualify as political refugees, the rigid policies toward foreigners already granted residence in Denmark, and the fact that it was immensely difficult for foreigners in the country to obtain work permits – that made it difficult for Jewish refugees to

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<sup>5</sup> Foreign Office, UM 36.Dan.53.a.

<sup>6</sup> Parliamentary Debates (Rigsdagstidende 1938/39, Folketinget II) column 3599-3650, and the *Inter-Nordic conference on the question of aliens*, June 21-22, 1938, Ministry of Justice 3. Office, JM 1938/1108.



remain in Denmark for any substantial length of time. As of October 1, 1938 – just five days before the new, harsher regulations were introduced – Danish police figures show that there were 727 such refugees in the country. 119 of them were children.<sup>7</sup>

Neither was the closure of Denmark's border a consequence of the relatively few refugees in the country at that time being in any way a burden on public funds. In fact in cases where refugees were unable to support themselves, they were supported by private funds raised and donated either by family or friends, or by *The Committee of the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, 1933*, the Danish-Jewish community's refugee committee.

In reality, the decision to close the border was solely a defensive measure taken by the Danish authorities to avoid an influx of foreigners whom it appeared likely would be next to impossible to get rid of again. This attitude was mainly the result of two realities of the times: first, the Danes were well aware of Germany's "emigration policy" towards the Jews which prevented them from returning to their country of origin. Second, those in power in Denmark also realized the immense reluctance of other countries to accept the Jewish refugees as immigrants. In the opinion of one Ministry of Justice official, Denmark, or more properly Copenhagen, was already "saturated" with foreign Jews.<sup>8</sup> Were more to come, he claimed, it would give rise to anti-Semitism and give the Danish Nazis wind in their sails.

The worsening situation for Germany's half a million Jews during 1938, along with the incorporation of Austria into the Third Reich in March of that year, which brought its 180,000 Jews under the lash of Nazi jurisdiction, obviously led to increased pressure on the Danish border. In response the Danish police throughout the summer of 1938 consistently turned people away at the border. Furthermore, the Danish authorities interpreted certain provisions of the Alien's Act with great stringency, especially those relating to the expulsion and/or turning away of for-

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<sup>7</sup> JM 1938/2527. The number does not include the young Jewish farming students who had a temporary residence permit on the condition that they left for Palestine before a certain date.

<sup>8</sup> Protocol, September 19, 1938, JM 1938/719.

eigners who either lacked sufficient means of subsistence or whose acceptance into Denmark was deemed contrary to the interests of the nation.<sup>9</sup> However, between June 31 and October 1, while 291 persons were turned away at the border, 236 nonetheless succeeded in getting through the eye of the needle, despite the ever-vigilant border guards.<sup>10</sup> This state of affairs was deemed unacceptable and was not to be allowed to continue, and so, on the basis of a Ministry of Justice review entitled "Measures to Limit the Immigration of Non-Aryan Foreigners," the government, at a September 29 cabinet meeting, acceded to the joint recommendation by the Ministry of Justice and Chief of the National Police to close the border.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas other foreigners would qualify under the laws of political asylum, Jews were now unable to enter the country and stay for three months, a right laid down in the Alien's Act. The only remaining possibility would be for them to apply for entry and residence permits through either the Foreign Office or the Ministry of Justice. The main criterion used in deciding such cases was the strength of an applicant's ties to Denmark.<sup>12</sup> What denoted "ties" was a matter to be decided solely by the Minister of Justice and his officials. The narrow definition used at this stage demanded that the applicant should previously have been a Danish citizen and should have retained close links to Denmark.<sup>13</sup> Male spouses and grown-up children, however, could not receive entry and residence permits based on this interpretation. According to the Minister and his officials it was deemed that, in view of the consequences, it would have been simply impossible to grant residence permits to all foreigners who had married a Danish woman.<sup>14</sup> Neither did the fact that one's parents, children or siblings lived in Denmark give one the right to a residence permit. In the official phraseology, these were "insignificant

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<sup>9</sup> Commissioner of Police's Report to the Ministry of Justice, September 13, 1938. JM 1938/719.

<sup>10</sup> Minister of Justice K.K. Steincke's radio speech, printed as two articles in the daily newspaper *Social-Demokraten*, November 25-26, 1938.

<sup>11</sup> Summary of meeting. Cabinet meetings 30.4.1929-27.1.1940, Private archive 11010.

<sup>12</sup> K.K. Steincke's radio speech, *Social-Demokraten*, November 26, 1938.

<sup>13</sup> JM 1938/34.1-34.262 and 1939/34.1-290.

<sup>14</sup> Resolution of March 13, 1939, JM 1939/34.8.

ties," which at the most could earn one the right to a short visit, insofar as he or she was able to promptly and easily return to Germany afterwards.

The above is a brief description of the state of Denmark's refugee policy on the eve of *Kristallnacht*. By relating it to the fate of one particular refugee, what follows provides an account of how the terrible events that then transpired in Germany affected Danish policy towards refugees. It should be noted that the concrete case is not representative of the German Jews who fled to Denmark at this time, as no one else crossed the border in quite as dramatic a fashion. The case has been chosen to illustrate the reaction of the Danish authorities to one particular victim of an extraordinary event – the *Kristallnacht*. The exceptional character of the situation notwithstanding, the bureaucratic process is representative of administrative practice at this time.

Early on the morning of November 10, 1938, a Jewish farmer who had been grievously beaten up was quite literally dumped on the Danish-German border near Frøslev. Upon his discovery, he was promptly arrested by the Danish border guards for illegally entering the country and was admitted to the infirmary of Sønderborg prison.

In the hours prior to his arrest, 47 year-old Alex Wolffsohn and his family had experienced events hardly fathomable just days before.<sup>15</sup> Between 3 and 4 in the morning, at their farm near Flensburg in Northern Germany, they were roused from their sleep by the harsh sounds of shouting and gunshots coming from their farmyard. One shot killed the family dog. Upon opening his bedroom window, Wolffsohn was informed that his "visitors" were the Gestapo, and he was ordered by them to come down and meet them immediately. Still in his nightshirt and dressing gown, he complied with their demand, leaving his wife alone in their bedroom. Upon hearing her husband's cries for help and the sound of a gunshot smashing the lamp illuminating the main entrance of their home, Mrs. Wolffsohn and her mother-in-law ran down to the farmyard, only to find Mr. Wolffsohn surrounded by 10 to 15 men, who were beating him with

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<sup>15</sup> Reports to the Foreign Office from The Royal Danish Consulate in Flensburg November 11-12, 1938, UM 140.N.33a.

truncheons. When the men from the Gestapo dragged him to a car, the two women on attempting to intervene were pushed aside and Wolffsohn's 70 year-old mother was knocked down several times. Bleeding profusely, he was taken away and dumped by the Gestapo on the Danish border, they threatening that he would lose his life should he be seen in Germany again.

At the farm, a woman resident tried to alarm the police and after some time representatives from the Gestapo arrived and ordered all those on the farm, among them 23 Jewish agricultural trainees, to accompany them to Flensburg, where they were placed under arrest. One police officer stayed behind, assuring Wolffsohn's mother that he would ensure the protection of their property.

After three hours of interrogation the women and the Polish and stateless agricultural trainees were released, while men of German nationality were detained. The agricultural trainees were ordered to leave Flensburg and to return to their homes. Upon returning to the farm, Mrs. Wolffsohn and her mother-in-law encountered a distressing sight: the contents of their home had been smashed to pieces and items of furniture had been thrown through windows and onto the farmyard. They were then made to clean up the mess themselves so that the destruction could not be detected from the outside.

The two women could not remain in the wreckage of their home, so they sought shelter in a Danish boarding house in Flensburg. They were received only after the owner made inquiries to the police as to whether he would risk reprisals for housing them. The next day they approached the Danish Consul, Dons Møller, to enquire whether Alex Wolffsohn was in safety in Denmark. A telephone call to the Chief Constable in Gråsten confirmed that he was. The women then pleaded that he be allowed to stay in Denmark, fearing justifiably that his life would be in danger if he were sent back to Germany. In addition, they also took the opportunity to hand in their own applications for entry and residence permits to Denmark. When questioned as to their economic situations, they answered that they possessed merely one hundred *Reichsmark*; a month

previously the authorities had "taken charge of" their money, ostensibly to prevent smuggling of money.

It was not long before the Danish press got hold of the story, and on November 12, the *Arbejderbladet* (The Workers Post) published a front-page article on Wolffsohn's experience under the headline "The Tragic Story of a German Jew – Hunted across the Border Bleeding from his Wounds".<sup>16</sup> The newspaper had not succeeded in getting any further information either from the police or from the border guards; no one, it seemed, wished to give any account of the state of affairs on the border. Nonetheless, the newspaper felt able to report that the numbers of refugees crossing the border had increased considerably as a result of the terror that was raging in Germany. The Chief Commissioner of Police had responded by strengthening the forces guarding the border. The *Fyns Tidende* (The Fyn Times) also published the story under the heading "A Savagely Maltreated Victim of the Terror against the Jews in Germany Flees to Denmark."

The press coverage persuaded Wolffsohn's wife and mother to once again press the Danish Consulate regarding their applications for entry and residence permits, stating that the publicity was making them anxious about possible consequences not only for Wolffsohn but also for themselves if they remained in Germany.<sup>17</sup>

Had Wolffsohn been in a position to choose, he would hardly have chosen to seek sanctuary in Denmark, where the very purpose of the nation's refugee policy was to prevent Jewish refugees from entering the country in the first place, and, if they did manage to enter, to get rid of them once again as rapidly as possible, preferably by sending them overseas.<sup>18</sup> How the authorities would act in his case was a question waiting to be answered. Under normal circumstances, as already mentioned, he would have been sent back across the border. However, the sequence of events

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<sup>16</sup> State Police, Alien's Division, Immigration File No. 65315.

<sup>17</sup> Application for entry permit November 12, 1938 attached with letter from the Consulate in Flensburg November 14, 1938, UM 17.T.96.

<sup>18</sup> Statement from Foreign Office representative at the *Inter-nordic conference on the question of aliens*, Stockholm May 10-12, 1939. JM 1938/1108.

in his particular case had been of such a gross nature that the Ministry of Justice, on November 14, approached the Foreign Office on the matter and asked whether a report of what had taken place should be sent to the German government.<sup>19</sup> Since the Ministry of Justice had not yet decided whether or not Wolffsohn should be sent back to Germany, the Foreign Office decided it was not a good idea to do so; due to the potential threat to Wolffsohn's security, it was thought that it would be inadvisable to follow such a course of action until the decision was made.<sup>20</sup> The Foreign Office was acting on the assumption that the German Government, when dealing with the situation, would declare its innocence, possibly expressing regret at what had happened, and state its readiness to accept Wolffsohn's return.

The Foreign Office was right in assuming that the German authorities would wish to play down the assault. In fact, as early as November 10, the head of the Gestapo in Flensburg approached the Danish police seeking information about Wolffsohn. He tried to make light of what had happened by commenting that it must have been an expression "of the state of depression the German people had found themselves in" after the assassination of the German secretary of the legation in Paris, vom Rath.<sup>21</sup> The acts in question were certainly not committed by the German police or by other German officials, he claimed. Nevertheless, a later investigation revealed that they were committed principally by the national socialist *Kreisgeschäftsführer* in Flensburg, with the assistance of *politische Leitere* and an SS *Sturmführer*. The *Gauleiter* in Kiel was incensed at what had occurred, not so much because of the injury suffered by Wolffsohn, but because of the stupidity of his own men in chasing their victim across the border. Ultimately, the *Kreisgeschäftsführer* was transferred, while the others got away with a warning.<sup>22</sup>

If the obvious interpretation of the rules regarding the right of asylum had been followed, Wolffsohn would have received asylum in Denmark.

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<sup>19</sup> Memo by Paul Ryder, Foreign Office November 16, 1938, UM 140.N.33.a.

<sup>20</sup> Added in hand-writing. Memo dated November 17, 1938.

<sup>21</sup> Memo from the police in Krusaa November 10, 1938, Immigration File No. 65315.

<sup>22</sup> Confidential report to the Foreign Office from Dons Møller, The Royal Danish Consulate in Flensburg dated January 25, 1939, UM 140.N.33.a.

The Ministry of Justice, however, did not interpret the right of asylum in such a way; its recommendation was that Wolffsohn be sent back to Germany. Simply put, he had no ties that bound him to Denmark. Further, in the light of developments in Germany around that time, it seemed that, if Wolffsohn were allowed to stay, there might well be serious consequences for Danish policy if more refugees with similar cases were to claim the same right. The Foreign Office was then asked if it had any objections to this course of action.<sup>23</sup> The Foreign Office did in fact object, finding it totally unacceptable for Danish authorities to returning him against his will.<sup>24</sup> The Consul in Flensburg had informed the Foreign Office that it would doubtlessly be dangerous for Wolffsohn to return to Germany.<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding what had taken place, he would certainly be charged with having left Germany without a passport and without going through a border checkpoint. This being the case, he was certain to be incarcerated in a concentration camp upon return. Furthermore, P. Munch, the social-liberal Foreign Secretary, had found occasion to mention Wolffsohn's case at the November 16 meeting of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, on which occasion he expressed the opinion that after what had happened Wolffsohn and his family could not very well be refused residence permits, if they requested them.<sup>26</sup>

Eventually rumours that the Ministry of Justice was considering sending Wolffsohn back to Germany reached the ears of certain members of parliament. This persuaded a social democrat, Hans Hedtoft, to send a note to his party fellow, the Minister of Justice K.K. Steincke, in which he wrote: "Have heard a rumour that (Wolff?), the Jew who was badly beaten up and who recently made a run for it across the border is to be expelled to Germany. The decision was apparently made on the grounds that a German official has declared that the beatings were inflicted by 'irresponsible [unreadable, LR]. Appeal urgently that you yourself consider the case and do not allow expulsions for the present. Yours, Hedtoft." Another member of the party, I.P. Nielsen, also found occasion to

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<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Justice Protocol November 12, 1938, Rigspolitiet, Alien's Division, immigration file no. 65315.

<sup>24</sup> Added on memo November 17, 1938, UM 140.N.33.a.

<sup>25</sup> Depeche no. 777 dated November 11, 1938, UM 17.T.96.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes, the Committee of Foreign Affairs, UM 3.E.92.

send a note to Steincke: "The police should be enjoined not to give information to the general public about refugees who cross the border. Those already here who are in prison should not be expelled to Germany".<sup>27</sup>

Private individuals also reacted. A journalist on the *Aalborg Stiftstidende* appealed to Steincke in a personal letter, "If the North Sea in its rage tossed a foreign mariner onto our shores we would not cast him back into the sea. Should the refugee in question be returned to Germany it would be the same as casting the mariner tossed onto our shores back into the sea. K.K. Steincke, I plead in the name of our common humanity that this will not happen".<sup>28</sup> Aware that expulsion was the usual procedure in cases of foreigners coming to Denmark without a passport or money, he declared himself ready to undertake to support Wolffsohn economically.

While imprisoned in Sønderborg Wolffsohn had requested help from the Jewish refugee committee in Copenhagen, *The Committee of the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1933*.<sup>29</sup> The Committee immediately expressed its readiness to help "in this extraordinary instance".<sup>30</sup> After providing Wolffsohn with clothes the Committee wrote to the Ministry of Justice requesting that he be allowed to travel to Copenhagen to discuss his plans for the future. The Ministry of Justice, however, was not disposed to release Wolffsohn as long as it remained unclear whether he should be returned to Germany.

Not until December 9, a month after his arrest, did Wolffsohn receive permission to travel to Copenhagen.<sup>31</sup> On his release it was made clear that this step should not be regarded as a decision as to his right to remain in Denmark. It was only to allow him to discuss with the refugee committee his possibilities of travelling to another country, no more and no less. At that time it was next to impossible for a Jewish refugee to obtain an entry and residence permit within the borders of Europe. Only in Britain was there a minimal chance of obtaining such a permit. Due to

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<sup>27</sup> Immigration File no. 65315, the two hand-written notes are undated.

<sup>28</sup> Immigration File no. 65315.

<sup>29</sup> Letter dated November 10, 1938, Immigration File no. 65315.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Barrister Kai Simonsen to Deputy Commissioner of Police Begtrup-Hansen dated November 11, 1938, Immigration File No. 65315.

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Justice's letter of December 7, 1938, Immigration File no. 65315.



the extraordinary character of the *Kristallnacht* events, Britain admitted a considerable number of refugees from Germany. However, it goes without saying that the British officials were not inclined to receiving refugees whom it would seem were already in relative security outside the reach of the Third Reich.

In Germany Wolffsohn's wife and mother were still waiting for an answer to their application for an entry and residence permit in Denmark. Their farm had now been "sequestered" by the city of Flensburg and a rumour circulated that the army had plans for the area.<sup>32</sup> Threats forced them to leave the area and move to family in Berlin. Yet despite the Foreign Secretary's recommendation to approve their application the Ministry of Justice remained silent. Pending a determination of Wolffsohn's residency status such an application could of course not be processed. On November 25, after receiving a reminder from Dons Møller, the Foreign Office pressed the Ministry of Justice for a decision on the matter.<sup>33</sup> Receiving no response a telephone call was made to Police Headquarters on January 5, 1939. The caller was informed that Wolffsohn was now resident in Copenhagen. His and his family's case would be considered at a Cabinet meeting and the Foreign Office would be informed of any decisions.<sup>34</sup> Having received no communication by February 1, the Foreign Office decided to press for an answer once more. On February 4 it was announced that the case lay now in the Ministry of Justice.<sup>35</sup> On March 24 the Ministry of Justice in a new communication to the Foreign Office confirmed that the case was still in the Ministry, adding that it was considered unlikely that Wolffsohn would be granted a residence permit.

On May 11 the Foreign Office inquired again whether an answer from the Ministry was to be expected in the near future. On July 4 the Ministry

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<sup>32</sup> Confidential report to the Foreign Office from Dons Møller, The Royal Danish Consulate in Flensburg dated January 25, 1939, UM 140.N.33.a.

<sup>33</sup> UM 17.T.96

<sup>34</sup> Added in handwriting on Foreign Office letter to the Ministry of Justice November 25, 1938. UM 17.T.96. From the not very informative minutes from the Cabinet meetings it seems that the issue was not touched upon.

<sup>35</sup> Added in handwriting on extracted version of the letter sent from Dons Møller in Flensburg to Head of Office Gustav Rasmussen in the Foreign Office. UM 17.T.96.

of Justice announced that the case must remain in abeyance until the British Home Office had informed the Jewish refugee committee whether they would grant an entry permit. The Home Office had already refused it once. If they refused once again the Ministry of Justice would decide whether the family might receive a more permanent right to residence in Denmark.<sup>36</sup>

Immediately after his arrival in Copenhagen the Alien's Department interrogated Wolffsohn at police headquarters.<sup>37</sup> The police wanted to know what plans he had made to leave Denmark. This man, who in the course of a few hours had been badly beaten and separated from his family, whose property and means of existence had been taken away, and who had then been imprisoned for four weeks in Denmark was now obliged to explain what steps he had taken towards acquiring a German passport and investigating the possibilities of emigrating overseas. According to the information available to him it appeared impossible to acquire a visa to a third country within the first couple of years. He was living temporarily in a rented room and was being supported by *The Committee of the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1933* who gave him DKK 10 (about 10 shillings a week then) and meal tickets to the soup kitchen for Jewish immigrants.

He was interrogated again on March 8, 1939 as to his plans for the future. He repeated that he was trying to get a German passport but that the German Consulate had informed him that it would probably take some months. This situation was not uncommon. At this time the Germans generally refused to issue or renew passports once Jews had left Germany. The authorities usually tried to drag out the procedure, which is one reason why Jewish refugees stranded in Denmark during this period. They were simply unable to get a passport that would enable them to leave for a third country. Wolffsohn said that he was in touch with a committee in Britain that was trying to get him a teaching position at an agricultural college for Jewish refugees. Furthermore he had corresponded with relatives in the United States who thought that his farming background might help him acquire a visa to the States. For the present

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<sup>36</sup> Memo by Paul Ryder, Foreign Office, UM 140.N.33.a.

<sup>37</sup> Report from December 19, 1938, Immigration File no. 65315.

both he and his wife were registered at the American Consulate in Hamburg. When asked, *The Committee of the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1933* confirmed this information. In their estimation there was a chance that an agricultural college in Britain might employ Wolffsohn as he had previously worked unremittingly to train young Jewish agricultural students preparing to migrate to Palestine.

The Alien's Division of the headquarters of the National Police Force was not convinced. They inquired at the American Consulate whether visa applications from farmers were actually treated preferentially. The consulate confirmed this, but was unable to say when Wolffsohn might expect to receive a quota number.

On May 12 the Alien's Division pressed the refugee committee for an answer. The committee replied that it had not heard from Britain. A reminder had been sent drawing attention to the case but at this point the committee in Britain was overloaded with work. There was little to do but wait until they got to Wolffsohn's case. Criticism of the British committee's failure to deal promptly with Wolffsohn's case is hardly justified. In their work they were compelled to concentrate first and foremost on aiding the thousands of desperate Jews in Germany to escape. The Danish authorities would have to exercise patience.

Wolffsohn was interrogated again on June 3, 1939, partly in response to his wife and mother's application for an entry and residence permit and to the regular reminders sent by the Foreign Office to the Alien's Division. During this interrogation something strange took place. Wolffsohn requested that their applications be annulled. They had been submitted without his knowledge and against his wishes. It was his conviction that it was unnecessary to burden Denmark with their presence, as the country was already flooded with refugees. He thought that the applications had been submitted while they were still in a state of shock after he had been attacked, but now they no longer seemed to be in any danger in Germany (!).

The situation of *The Committee of the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1933* may provide some explanatory clues. As previously mentioned the Committee was expected

to undertake the support of refugees who were without means of subsistence to ensure that they did not burden public funds. Furthermore the authorities expected the Committee, with the help of other Jewish organizations abroad, to cover the travel expenses of destitute Jews leaving the country. As far as possible the Committee tried to prevent the families of refugees coming to Denmark. Their travel expenses would have to be met as well, further increasing the very considerable financial burden.<sup>38</sup> It is quite obvious that Wolffsohn's choice of words was not his own.

However, in the course of the interrogation it became apparent that Wolffsohn wished to come to an agreement with the authorities. He informed them that he was trying to get his wife an entry permit to Britain. The British-Jewish Refugee Committee had just informed her that her chances of being granted a visa were good, provided that the Home Office received a declaration from Denmark that her husband had obtained a residence permit in Denmark for the foreseeable future. Wolffsohn hastily added that he did not want such a declaration for selfish reasons. It was a matter of indifference to him whether he remained in the country with or without such a permit. However, as the matter stood the British authorities demanded such a declaration for fear that he, too, would apply for an entry and residence permit. Was it not possible, he asked, for the Danish authorities to issue a declaration stating that he had been granted a residence permit in Denmark for a period of six months, with the possibility of an extension? This would give his wife the opportunity to get out of Germany. Once the application for a visa to the United States of America had been processed both he and his wife would leave for that country.

The Ministry of Justice was now facing a dilemma. On the one hand the Ministry clearly did not wish to grant Wolffsohn a residence permit because of the risk of being unable to get rid of him again. If his wife's application for a visa to Britain was granted, he himself would apparently be unable to get an entry permit to that country. On the other hand,

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<sup>38</sup> Rünitz, Lone, *Danmark og de jødiske flygtninge 1933-1940*, Museum Tusulanum 2000, p. 188-89.

if his wife did not receive a visa to Britain the Danish authorities would have to seriously consider her application for a Danish entry and residence permit. The Ministry approached the British Consulate in an attempt to cajole them into stating whether the Home Office in fact had demanded that Wolffsohn present a Danish residence permit. The Consulate neither could, nor would, provide a statement on Home Office procedures in such cases.<sup>39</sup>

On June 13 Wolffsohn contacted the Alien's Department and showed them a letter his wife had received from the Domestic Bureau of the Central Office for Refugees in London, requesting her to find work in Britain. The aid organization would then assist her in obtaining a work permit. Furthermore she was requested to produce a document confirming that her husband had been granted a residence and work permit in Denmark. Once more Wolffsohn requested a declaration to that effect. He repeated yet again that this declaration was only to ensure his wife a residence permit in Britain. The official dealing with the case in the Ministry of Justice added the following comment in handwriting to the police report: "Wolffsohn cannot stay here. He is to be given a short respite to get himself to another country. What is happening with his departure for Britain?!"

As a result of the above the Alien's Division called Wolffsohn to another meeting to inform him of the ruling that he now only had a short respite before he would have to leave Denmark.<sup>40</sup> He was obliged to accept this decision, but he noted that it meant that his wife would not receive an entry visa to Britain, given the condition of entry that he did not follow in her wake. Consequently he had to re-open her application for an entry visa to Denmark. He considered it impossible for her to remain in Berlin where her life was at risk.

Regarding his own plans to leave the country he informed the Alien's Division that he had had a medical examination at the American Consulate. He had been informed that within about a month he would be noti-

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<sup>39</sup> Alien's Division, report June 10, 1939, Immigration File no. 65315.

<sup>40</sup> Alien's Division, report June 26, 1939, Immigration File no. 65315.

fied of their decision as to whether he would be granted an agricultural preference number. He further produced a number of letters. As expressed in the report in the words of the police officer present, they seemed to show "that he had been in touch with half the world to get an entry visa."

On June 27 he received notice that his application for an entry visa to Britain had been refused. On August 8, 1939 he was deprived of his German citizenship, effectively making him a stateless subject. However, at the same time he received confirmation that he had been granted a visa to the United States. As he no longer held a German passport, this meant the Danish authorities would have to provide him with a Danish certificate of identification. Normally the authorities were not particularly eager to issue such a certificate as it gave a person the right to return to Denmark within a year. Since it was a prerequisite for receiving an American visa Wolffsohn was nevertheless given the certificate already on the following day. Due to the outbreak of war in September and of the difficulties in finding a means of transport, the date of departure was delayed and Wolffsohn did not leave for America until November 27, 1939 – a year after he had been dumped on the Danish side of the Danish-German border.<sup>41</sup>

Just before his departure this polite and humble man sent a letter to the Danish authorities thanking them for the way he had been treated in Denmark. Indeed, because of the commotion created by his case, he was right to regard himself as being privileged in comparison with other illegal refugees, whom the police quietly expelled to Germany.

It remains unknown whether his wife was able to join him or not. Nor do we know anything of his mother's fate.<sup>42</sup> The Foreign Office looked at the relevant files on July 1, 1941, when a note in the margin was added: "The case was taken out of the archives on 1/7/1941 – no further action to be taken".<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Alien's Division, report August 8 and 9, October 26, 25, and 27, and November 27 1939, Immigration file No. 65315

<sup>42</sup> The immigration files seem to have disappeared.

<sup>43</sup> UM 17.T.96.

As is apparent the *Kristallnacht* did not lead to a change in policy towards Jewish refugees despite the fact that the authorities were fully aware of developments wherever Nazi hegemony extended. In the words of the Minister of Justice, K.K. Steincke, in a speech on the radio on "The Emigrant Problem", after the *Kristallnacht* our little land was not under any circumstances "able to contribute in any substantial way to solving the so-called Jewish problem, even were it to be assumed that it was possible to solve that problem".<sup>44</sup>

In the wake of the *Kristallnacht*, however, elderly relatives of Danish citizens were able to a certain extent to obtain entry visas, provided, however, that their relatives were able to provide considerable economic guarantees and written statements vouching that they would never become a burden on Denmark and would never apply for a work permit.<sup>45</sup>

Despite its border with Germany, Danish policy enabled the country to keep the numbers of Jewish refugees under a thousand – if we disregard the children and young people who received temporary residence permits on condition that Jewish organizations paid their expenses and guaranteed that they went to Palestine within a certain time limit.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1936 immigration policy debates in the Danish Parliament<sup>47</sup> the social democrat Hans Hedtoft noted that Denmark had a time-honoured tradition of respect for human rights and freedom. How can we explain that a country like this could disregard this tradition so markedly when people from a neighbouring country were clamouring at the gates? This is one of the questions that the Department for Holocaust and Genocide Studies will attempt to answer in its study of Danish refugee policy in the period from 1933 to 1945.

*The name Alex Wolffsohn is fictional in accordance with the provisions of the law on access to archives stipulating that a pseudonym be used.*

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<sup>44</sup> *Social-Demokraten*, November 25, 1938.

<sup>45</sup> State Police, Alien's Division, Immigration Files.

<sup>46</sup> Hechaluz and the Youth Aliyah movements.

<sup>47</sup> *Parliamentary Debates (Rigsdagstidende 1935/36, Folketinget)*, column 2523-2524.

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## **October 1943 – The Rescue of the Danish Jews**

Michael Mogensen

The Nazis launched their attack on the Jews in Denmark on the night between October 1 and 2, 1943. On this night the German occupying power carried out a raid across the entire country and caught 284 Jews who were subsequently deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto in the protectorate of Böhmen-Mähren. During October and November two more transports followed carrying 190 people caught while attempting to flee from Denmark to Sweden. Of the 474 deported Jews, 53 died. Most of these were either old or ill. More than 30 people died in the course of the attempt to escape – some drowned in the Øresund, the Sound between Denmark and Sweden, others committed suicide, and in one tragic case a Jewish woman was killed by a lethal shot fired when the Germans were making an arrest. No more than another one hundred Jews, including a number of small children, remained in hiding in Denmark. The rest – more than 7,000 people – fled across the Sound to freedom in politically neutral Sweden.

Considering the Nazi extermination of 6 million of the total 8-9 million Jews within their reach, the fact that 95 percent of the Danish Jews were able to avoid deportation and be brought to safety in Sweden stands out as a light in the darkness of the Holocaust. In contrast to virtually all other nationalities, the Danes did not let down their Jewish fellow citizens in the crucial moment. The account of how the Danes assisted them safely across the water to Sweden has been widely praised, and even as it occurred the rescue operation gained an almost mythological status. The rescue is seen as a unique example of courage and altruism during the Holocaust. Especially in the US and Israel, the rescue established Denmark as a model of respect for human rights.

Leni Yahil's thesis from 1969, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry: Test of a Democracy* (original in Hebrew, 1966), is the main body of work in English that has given this view its scholarly validation. The Israeli professor of history proposes the interpretation that the Jews of Denmark – as opposed to Jews in other countries of Europe – were rescued because of the special national character of the Danes, that is, their particularly high moral

standards and love of freedom and democracy. Among historians who had specialized in the occupation period in Denmark, the thesis was received extremely critically. Leni Yahil's interpretation is regarded as strongly idealized and not sufficiently founded on empirical evidence. However, the thesis is acknowledged for its meticulous study of the position of the "Jewish question" in German occupation policy from the start of the occupation on April 9, 1940 until the deportations three and a half years later. This part of the thesis exhibits solid academic work, including a large number of procedural documents from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the *Auswärtiges Amt*. In this respect Leni Yahil's work still has not been surpassed. The same applies to her analysis of the German preparations for the operation. However, her account of the German raid and the Jewish escape across the Sound to Sweden is far more superficial and primarily based on the relatively sparse narrative records available at the time of her writing.

Until recently there was consensus that Leni Yahil's reconstruction of October 1943 could not be based on contemporary sources as the arrests and the hastily improvised escape did not leave traces. This is also a likely explanation of the fact that retrospective narratives have, until recently, been treated as primary sources in the investigation of the events of those October days. However, my previous studies in cooperation with historian Rasmus Kreth have revealed a significant amount of contemporary material generated and preserved on both the Danish and Swedish side of the Sound. We have analyzed this material in the book *Flugten til Sverige [The Escape to Sweden]* in 1995. Furthermore, contemporary and rich materials have been discovered as a result of my most recent archive studies for the Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. This material can be used to shed further light on the events of those October days. I expect to present this material in a source book within the near future. Hence, it will be possible for a wider circle of researchers to conduct investigations into the rescue of the Danish Jews based on an extensive amount of Danish, Swedish and German archive material. The material allows a new central insight into the underlying motives determining the actions of the German, Danish and Swedish authorities, the many groups of helpers involved, and the initiatives and

efforts of the refugees. This will enable a deeper understanding of how the almost complete rescue of the Danish Jews was possible.

In the following I will draw primarily on the work of Leni Yahil, the Danish experts on the occupation period, namely Jørgen Hæstrup, Hans Kirchhoff and Henning Poulsen, and my previous studies with Rasmus Kretz. I shall also present some examples of the "new" contemporary material in order to investigate the reasons for the failure of the German operation on the night between October 1 and 2, as well as the Jews' success in reaching safe ground in Sweden.

#### **The position of the Danish Jews under the cooperation policy**

The peaceful occupation of Denmark on April 9 resulted in the Germans keeping their promise to respect Danish "sovereignty". In this respect, occupied Denmark had a unique status in a Europe controlled by the Nazi regime. In principle Denmark was still ruled by the King, the Government and Parliament. The courts, the administration and even the army and the police retained their independent status.

In daily proceedings it was emphasized that the situation was one of negotiations between two sovereign states, and contact was conducted through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During negotiations both parties were conscious of the fact that the occupying power could overrule decisions. In other words, the Germans could assert themselves if the case in question was of considerable importance. However, the Germans were also aware that this kind of behavior would have consequences.

Already at an early stage the Danish government had stated that it would not concede potential German demands for anti-Jewish laws. The legal status of the Jews was a matter of principle in the cooperation policy. The attitude of the Danish government reflected a Danish society that did not identify with the Nazi perception of a "Jewish problem". Denmark was – in line with the rest of Europe – not sympathetic towards Jewish refugees who sought political asylum as a consequence of the Nazi take-over in 1933. However, the approximately 8,000 people who comprised the Jewish part of the population were in general considered to be an integrated part of Danish society.

The German authorities in Denmark were well aware of the Danish position on this issue. The representatives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark, first the German plenipotentiary v. Renthe-Fink and later, from November 1942, Dr. Werner Best, attempted in their reports to the *Auswärtiges Amt* to keep the issue out of the Danish-German relationship. The German negotiators pursued this avoidance tactic based on the clear realization that the question was not only uncomfortable but also politically explosive.

The German negotiators feared that a German demand for anti-Jewish laws would lead to the resignation of the Danish government, and that this would result in unstable supplies of foodstuffs. The propaganda effect of the so-called "normalized" relations between Denmark and Germany would be lost and a significant contribution to German warfare would be endangered. Furthermore, the influence of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs might be threatened as its privileged position was based on the sovereign status of Denmark. Should the cooperation with the Danish government collapse, the diplomats would lose their executive power and would risk having to leave the administration of Denmark to the *Wehrmacht* or to a *Reich* Commissioner.

As long as Berlin wished to maintain the agreement of April 9, steps could not be taken with regard to the Jews in Denmark, as opposed to the situation in all other occupied countries. Since 1941 the Germans had prepared for and initiated the mass extermination of the Jews, and from the middle of 1942 they deported Jews to concentration camps from all other Nazi-controlled parts of Europe. Not until the peaceful occupation of Denmark came to an end in the late summer of 1943 did the Danish Jews land in the line of fire.

#### **The operation is decided upon and sabotaged**

After the turning point of the war, the German defeat on the Eastern Front and in Africa, unrest broke out in Denmark. During the summer of 1943 a belief in the imminent collapse of the German regime became widespread. This resulted in acts of sabotage and fighting with German soldiers. A wave of strikes during July and August had a powerful impact on the country. The unrest did not please Berlin and resulted in a

German ultimatum containing demands for the institution of martial laws and curfew regulations, special courts and the death penalty, etc. The ultimatum was presented in Denmark on August 28 and was promptly rejected by the government and the political parties. The cooperation policy had come to an end.

Early in the morning of August 29 the Danish Prime Minister, Erik Scavenius, received the declaration of the German general in command, Hermann v. Hanneken. It stated that the *Wehrmacht* had taken over executive powers and that the government therefore had lost its power of authorization. Simultaneously the soldiers of the Danish army and the sailors in the navy were interned. Nevertheless the diplomatic break was not absolute. The police force and the courts remained intact and the practice of cooperation continued after the end of the state of martial laws on October 6, 1943, though it was now left to the remaining permanent secretaries in the Danish administration to represent the official Danish line.

Following the collapse of the cooperation policy on August 29, 1943 a roundup of the Jewish population could not be avoided for much longer. There were few strong arguments left to convince Berlin that the roundup should not be carried out. Dr. Best now had to operate with the strong probability that it was only a matter of time before the persecution of the Jews would also be instigated in Denmark. For tactical reasons related to power politics Dr. Best recommended that the roundup of the Jews should commence during the state of martial law on the night between October 1 and 2, while the *Wehrmacht* remained in charge of civil order. Thus he would avoid appearing to bear the main responsibility for the operation vis-à-vis the Danish authorities. At the same time he would be able to get a sufficiently large police force to the country, a necessity in terms of re-adjusting the balance of power. However, Dr. Best was aware that an extensive deportation of Jews would make a political comeback difficult given the standpoint of the Danish authorities. The cooperation with the Danish authorities – now with the permanent secretaries in the Danish administration – could hardly be resumed after the deportation of thousands of Jews, even if v. Hanneken were to bear the official responsibility for the operation. Dr. Best's position as representative of the Ger-

man Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark was still dependent on cooperation with the Danish authorities. Indeed, Dr. Best worked intensely to gain increased control of the administration in Denmark. Possibly he even sought to be appointed *Reich* Commissioner. However, the response from Berlin – or rather the lack of response – must have meant that a desire to preserve the existing agreement dominated.

This is most likely the main reason why Dr. Best leaked information of the up-coming raid to marine attaché G.F. Duckwitz. He in turn informed his Danish contacts, and soon the warning reached a large section of the Jewish population. When the raid was carried out on the night between October 1 and 2, a large majority of the Jews were not at home. This is the main reason why the German operation caught so few members of the Jewish community in Denmark.

#### **The operation – a failure**

Until the last moment General v. Hanneken attempted to avoid involving the *Wehrmacht*. He was of the opinion that the operation would damage the honor of the *Wehrmacht*. He tried hard to postpone the operation until after the state of martial law had been suspended so that Dr. Best would bear the full responsibility for the raid. However, he did not succeed. Berlin sent forces from the police to assist in carrying out the plan. In the days before the operation the German police arrived in Denmark in large numbers. In this manner a force of approximately 1,500 order policemen were gathered under the command of General Major v. Heimburg, and *Standartenführer* Dr. Rudolf Mildner led an additional 300 security policemen. Both forces were present in full force to execute the direct order from Hitler to round up and deport the Jewish section of the population.

The operation was well prepared. Careful planning and systematic registration of the Jews and their residences preceded the distribution of the approximately 1,800 German policemen in groups all over Copenhagen, the city in which the majority of the Jews lived. Danish Nazis with local knowledge led the many units to their prey. But Dr. Best still managed to leave his fingerprint on the operation. The police were not allowed to break into Jewish homes. This restriction was not always respected and,

in any case, access to the homes was often obtained using keys procured for the occasion.

The operation was a thoroughly planned, countrywide swift action in which brutal force was also used occasionally. As v. Heimbürg cynically and laconically stated on October 2, 1943, the day after the nocturnal raid: "Das Ergebnis war gleich Null, da die Juden bereits ihre Wohnungen verlassen und sich andersweitig untergebracht hatten."<sup>1</sup>

### **The mass escape in October 1943**

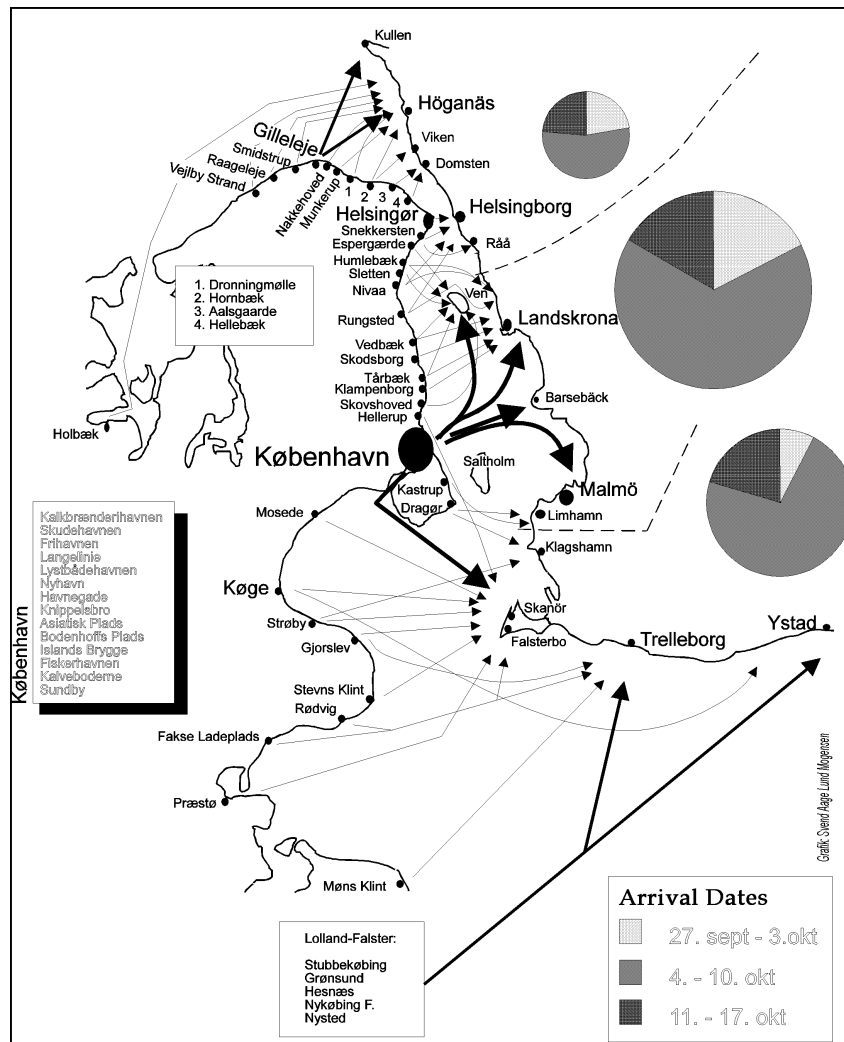
Until the autumn of 1943 the Jews had refrained from attempting to escape from the country. As long as the Danish government had a say in the power game there was no open panic in the Jewish community and its members kept a low profile. Information about the persecution of Jews in Europe did reach the country, but apparently there was little precise knowledge of the Holocaust. The Jews wanted to avoid attracting the attention of the Germans and illegal acts risked doing so. Furthermore the illegal routes to Sweden had not yet been developed and it was uncertain how Sweden would receive the refugees. After the fall of the Danish government and the warning all doubts were swept away. The Jews risked everything and were forced to uproot themselves and face an uncertain future.

The mass escape started between September 28 and 29. That it started at this point – and not after the operation on October 1 – must be due to Duckwitz's warning on September 28. On the evening of October 2, when Sweden issued an official statement to the effect that it would receive the Jews of Denmark, the first 5-600 Jews had already arrived. The number of refugees grew steadily in the first week after the operation, and the escape culminated on October 8 and 9, when some 2,500 refugees were shipped across the Sound within 48 hours. The number of Jewish refugees in Sweden grew to around 4,500 within a week of the operation. In the last week of the mass escape up to 2,000 more Jews fled across the Sound. Around the middle of October 90% of the Jewish refugees were

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<sup>1</sup> "The gain was nil, as the Jews had already left their apartments and had moved themselves elsewhere."

on Swedish ground and the mass escape ceased. The last refugees arrived mainly in the last two weeks of October, though a number of small children and spouses were shipped off well into November and December.



Source: Kreth, Rasmus and Mogensen, Michael, *Flugten til Sverige. Aktionen mod de danske jøder oktober 1943*, Gyldendal 1995, p. 48.



Almost all refugees fled to Sweden by boat. A handful of crossings of scale brought up to a fifth of the total number of refugees across the Sound. However, it was primarily the 600-700 nocturnal crossings made mainly by fishing boats from all along the eastern coast of Zealand that brought more than three quarters of all refugees across the Sound. Ships departed from more than fifty different places; Copenhagen was the primary port of departure. Up to 3,000 refugees departed from there.

#### **The Danes and the escape**

That it was possible to transport up to 7,000 refugees to safety in Sweden within a few weeks was a result of the extensive help given to the Danish Jews by other Danes. Much of this assistance was improvised and spontaneous, but during the first week after the German raid a number of aid groups formed to organize and coordinate the flight to Sweden. Despite close cooperation between the groups, no overall coordination of the refugee organization existed. Instead there were many – and often overlapping – initiatives, which occasionally resulted in confusion and misunderstandings.

The aid groups organized supplies while the refugees waited for a place on a ship. They made contact with the fishermen, among others, and made sure that the ships would get safely out of ports and away from coastal areas. Money was collected among the refugees to pay the fishermen, and if the refugees had insufficient funds considerable sums were raised elsewhere. Payment was a central factor in the whole rescue operation organized by the large number of groups. In praise of these groups it must be said that also the poor, old and sick were shipped to Sweden. Many different kinds of helpers were involved: the organizers in Copenhagen, the people who sailed with the refugees to assist them on the way, people in the local areas who guided the Jews to the places of departure, and finally the fishermen and others who transported the refugees to Sweden.

To prevent the escape of the many Jews natural checkpoints would be the harbors and the coastal areas. In these areas a wide-ranging Danish coastal guard system had been established as a result of the cooperation policy of April 9, 1940. It was precisely their task to prevent illegal mi-

gration out of Denmark. Instead the Danish coast guard system became an important link in the successful rescue. Many of the officers in the coast guard not only closed their eyes to the rescue efforts; they took active part in the rescue and were invaluable helpers. This was a decisive factor in making so many shipments both possible and successful. The crossings took place precisely in the areas controlled by the more than 1,000 people working in the coastal guard system. Had the coast guard chosen to collaborate with the Germans, the refugee transports from the harbors would have been practically impossible and those from the coastline would have been extremely difficult.

#### **The Swedes and the escape**

Help to the Jews did not only take place on the Danish side of the Sound. It was crucial that Sweden fully opened its doors to the Jewish refugees from Denmark. Otherwise the situation would have turned out quite differently. The Swedes had attempted to intervene in Berlin against the planned German operation. When the intervention proved a failure, it was announced on the Swedish radio on the evening of October 2 that all Jews from Denmark would be received. These words were followed up by action. From October 3 the Swedish navy placed patrol boats outside all Swedish harbors at night, from Höganäs in the north to Trelleborg in the south. To direct the many Danish refugee transports safely into the harbors Swedish patrol boats had all lanterns lit, against normal practice. On October 5 the patrolling was extended to include all Swedish territorial waters. This was a furtherance of the assistance to the refugees. Should German patrol boats be encountered in Swedish waters, orders had been given at the highest level to intervene using all means.

Other Swedish vessels supported the efforts of the navy. To secure optimal assistance at sea, the navy issued fuel and motor oil to around 30 Swedish fishing boats and a couple of towing boats. These ships contributed on a voluntary basis to the Swedish part of the rescue.

For the many Danish vessels carrying refugees the Swedish efforts meant a safer crossing. A large proportion of the refugees were transferred mid-stream from the Danish vessels to the Swedish patrol boats. In some cases refugees were rescued from small, overloaded rowing boats. Also,

after October 2 the Danish fishermen knew that they could land in Swedish harbors without getting into trouble with Swedish authorities.

### **The Jews' escape**

It is impossible to map out the reactions, preparations for the escape and actions of the more than 7,000 Jews. But as the rescue was taking form many Jews went to the harbors of Zealand seeking a place on a ship to Sweden. These trips often took place in broad daylight by means of public transport. Others went into hiding with family and friends and organized the escape from there. Others, often those with no financial resources, hid in parks and forests until the aid groups found them.

Many Jews succeeded in making their own way to freedom in Sweden. In other words, there is no evidence of Leni Yahil's claim that the Danish Jews were passive and helpless objects of either the German persecution or the Danish rescue. In the beginning the Jews themselves arranged for transport across the Sound. They often had to ask in several places before someone – for example a fisherman – was willing to take them. A week after the German raid the efforts of the aid groups had facilitated the escape. People were instructed where to go and whom to talk to. The escape had entered a more organized phase that spared the Jews unsuccessful attempts and lessened the risk of German arrests. At the same time, as the aid groups established themselves, many Jews arranged for their own escape. Often it was a precondition that the refugee had sufficient financial means to pay for the boat trip.

### **The motives for helping**

It is difficult to explain in detail why many Danes took such an active part in the illegal rescue work in October 1943. Many Danes did indeed regard the German operation as an outright crime and a great part of the motivation behind the extensive aid work was based on this attitude: As a real manifestation of Danish outrage at anti-Semitism in the Nazi version. As a centrally placed escape organizer said in October 1943:

*We are, so to speak, all in this country taking part in helping the poor Jews to safety on the other side of the Sound. Of Course! Because we are all outraged at the brutality of the Germans. When one hears about and sees the different exam-*

*ples of this, one has to shake one's head in disbelief and hope that it was just a bad dream... Is it then any wonder that we stand together and help those who can be helped?*

It was of course not all Danes who took part in the rescue. But the rescue received widespread support in the population as a whole, and there was a strong feeling of indignation at the German rounding-up of the Jews. This included the Danish church. When the bishop of Copenhagen was informed of the plans to persecute the Danish Jews, he resolutely addressed a protest on behalf of the Danish bishops to the German authorities in Denmark against Nazi anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jews. In an impressive effort the protest was distributed to all ministers and on October 3 was read aloud during service in all churches in the country. The full transcript reads as follows:

*On September 29 of this year the bishops of this country have through the permanent secretaries addressed a statement to the German authorities with the following content:*

*The attitude of the Evangelical Lutheran church in Denmark towards the Jewish question.*

*Wherever Jews are persecuted for racial or religious reasons, it is the duty of the Christian Church to protest against such persecution.*

*1. Because we shall never forget that the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, was born in Bethlehem by the Virgin Mary according to God's promise to his own people, Israel. The history of the Jewish people up to the birth of Christ contains preparation for the salvation God has intended for all people in Christ. This is characterized by the fact that the Old Testament is part of our Bible.*

*2. Because persecution of Jews opposes the view of human beings and the love of one's neighbor which is a consequence of the gospel that the church of Jesus Christ has the task to preach. Christ knows of no respect of persons, and he has taught us to see that every human life is costly to God. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3.28)*

*3. Because it conflicts with the understanding of justice rooted in the Danish people and settled through centuries in our Danish Christian culture. Accord-*

*ingly it is stated in our constitution that all Danish citizens have an equal right and responsibility under the law, and they have freedom of religion, and a right to worship God in accordance with their vocation and conscience and so that race or religion can never in itself become the cause of deprivation of anybody's rights, freedom or property. Irrespective of diverging religious opinions we shall fight for the right of our Jewish brothers and sisters to keep the freedom that we ourselves value more highly than life.*

*The leaders of the Danish Church have a clear understanding of our duty to be law-abiding citizens who do not unreasonably oppose those who execute authority over us, but at the same time we are in our conscience bound to uphold justice and protest against any violation; consequently we shall, if occasion should arise, plainly acknowledge our obligation to obey God more than man.*

29/9 1943

*On behalf of the bishops*

*H. Fuglsang Damgaard*

The protest of the bishops found resonance among the churchgoers who in many churches spontaneously stood up during the reading.

This is just one example of the abhorrence and protest that was voiced in those October days in Denmark. Using more profane language, but in many ways with a similar content, many other institutions raised their voices in public and sharply denounced the attack on their Jewish fellow citizens. This included the King, the universities, the Supreme Court, the permanent secretaries of the administration, politicians, students and a large number of other Danish organizations. The indignation was not only expressed in words but in many cases was followed up by action, as many participated in the extensive and spontaneous rescue.

There is good reason to agree to some extent with Leni Yahil when she describes the reaction of the Danish population as unique in the history of the Holocaust. Many other nationalities were passive spectators to the process of isolating the Jews and feeding them into the Nazi death machine. However, her categorical and generalizing descriptions tend towards idealization. Was the question of aid – or lack of aid – to the perse-

cuted Jews in Europe controlled by the Nazis primarily a question of differences in inner moral standing and attitudes?

The timing of the rescue action undoubtedly played a role in the extensive help extended in Denmark. The rounding up of the Jews commenced only after an increase in moral opposition against the occupational power had taken place and after the cooperation policy had come to a dead end. This was of crucial importance in the degree of help given to the Jews. The efforts of the Danish coast guards were definitely determined by the breakdown of negotiations on August 29, 1943.

The collapse of the cooperation policy was probably of decisive importance for the moral climate that fostered support by the population as a whole for the rescue. Had the operation against the Jews been initiated before 1943 the course of events undoubtedly would have been different. The coast guard and the population at large would not have taken an active part to the same extent, and politically neutral Sweden would hardly have received several thousand Jews with the same readiness.

Many Danes protested against the Germans in the period of the sudden change of atmosphere and the strikes in August 1943, and the assistance to the Jews was in all likelihood also a form of protest in line with the attitudes expressed all over the country during the summer's succession of strikes. With the attempt to round up the Jews, a situation suddenly arose in which the numerous helpers – for whom the rescue was the first and somewhat hesitant step into illegal work – had an acceptable and feasible way to protest against the occupational power without embarking on armed resistance and sabotage, something that many people had strong reservations about.

Furthermore, we should pose the question whether the rescue of the Jews was solely an ideological action and an expression of collective altruism, as it has been claimed in international research in the area. There are several contemporary testimonies from those who were rescued that do give the impression of a collective, altruistic humanitarian effort. Here are two typical examples from the Swedish side of the Sound. The first is a testimony of a rescued Jewish refugee from October 1943:

*With an outstanding willingness to help the whole of the Danish population has stood by the Jews, provided them with shelter, helped them in every possible way...one would think that what happened must be an exaggeration, if one saw it in a movie.*

Another Jewish refugee states:

*You have no idea of the atmosphere at home. A rage has gotten into the whole population. Everyone is out to help... Seen from our side, we owe a debt of gratitude that would be impossible to ever pay back.*

#### **The question of payment**

However, it should also be said that many of the testimonies mention very considerable amounts of money in connection with the rescue. Far from all refugees were of the opinion that the payment was reasonable. People in the resistance movement shared this view. From the coast of the Sound one of the most active organizers of the escape writes the following toward the end of October 1943:

*Unfortunately many of the Danish skippers have used the opportunity to amass money in a distasteful manner. In the beginning these cons were not of great significance, as the funds were sufficient, but it is necessary to fight this gold rush. And that is probably also possible. There are by now so many people who have offered their boats that the price must fall. There are wealthy people who have in the beginning paid many thousands of kroner per person for the crossing. Now the most common price is 500 kr. for those who are able to pay, and those who have no money are of course allowed on board as well – this has been the case all along, but the issue is that the rich people should not have given their money to the skippers directly, but to the people who negotiated the prices per boat with the skippers. Many have also been conned by giving money to people who have pretended to want to help but then consequently let them down. Yes, it is sad to have to admit such things.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> See forthcoming publication of sources edited by Michael Mogensen relating to the rescue of the Jews. Expected date of publication Summer / Autumn 2003.

A systematic study of the Swedish police reports, written when the Danish Jews landed on the Swedish side of the Sound, shows that in the first days of the escape the crossing to Sweden was reserved for the richest among the refugees. In many cases those without sufficient means had to go into hiding and wait for an opportunity to cross. When the demand was at its highest the price per person for a crossing averaged 2,000 kroner. The price fell to 1,000 kroner and in the final period the price was down to 500 kroner. At this point most of the refugees with no funds had reached Sweden, which must be added to the list of honorable deeds performed by the many groups of helpers. Apart from the Jewish funds, these groups managed to raise large amounts from other sources, accounting for around half of the total payments for the crossings.

It was mainly the skippers of the vessels (fishermen and others) that received payment. To a lesser extent payment was given to Danish members of staff in the coast guard and drivers and others who took on the task of transporting the Jews on land.

The payment for the crossings could be seen as a kind of insurance for the material risk taken in shipping refugees across the Sound, or as a security for the families of rescuers if arrested by the Germans. At this point the Sound was dotted with mines, and some fishermen were convinced that the Swedish authorities might confiscate the vessels. On top of this came fuel costs and lost earnings. These are all factors to take into consideration. However, this is not sufficient to reject the notion that a desire to profit from the situation also played a role in a number of cases, even if a person also had humanitarian motives.

Altruism no doubt motivated the large number of helpers who passed on the warning and offered shelter or other assistance on land without charging money, as well as a number of fishermen and others who did not take fees. However, the dominant principle was that the Jews should pay for the crossing to Sweden. Most people charged a considerable amount considering the fact that the average hourly wage for skilled and unskilled workers in industry was around 2 kroner. It is impossible to determine whether the prices for the crossing were dictated by the relationship between supply and demand, but from examples in Gilleleje the



majority of the Jews had to pay amounts equivalent to a year and half's worth of wages when the demand for crossings was at its peak. It was the size of these payments that was decisive for the numbers of fishermen and others who risked taking Jews to Sweden. But what were in actual fact the risk factors connected with helping the Jews?

### **Risk factors**

Though the matter has not been studied systematically, it is safe to say that helping the Jews did entail risks in a Europe controlled by the Nazis. We do know that the Nazis killed several people on the spot in Eastern Europe for what they called *Judenbegünstigung*, and that the punishment for the same "crime" in Western Europe was often deportation to concentration camps. Yet this was not the case in Denmark, a matter I will clarify in the following.

Tragic episodes did occur on the coast of the Sound when the Gestapo got in the way of the transports. An example is an incident on the night between October 9 and 10, 1943: A number of young students were helping a large group of Jewish refugees on board the fishing vessel *K 591 Matador* in Taarbæk harbor when the Gestapo suddenly appeared. The two Gestapo officers quickly realized that refugees were being taken aboard the ship and resolutely fired shots in the air and shouted: "This is the German police". A shoot-out followed between the students and the Gestapo in which the 18 year-old student Claus Christian Heilesen was shot.

In another case the Gestapo fired shots at a fishing boat that was leaving Gilleleje harbor with Jews on board because the skipper ignored the order to stop. In this case no one was hurt, but the example goes to show that it was dangerous not to follow orders when the Gestapo discovered a transport. However, these tragic incidents were exceptions to the rule. If caught, people who assisted the refugees were not sent to concentration camps or sentenced to death.

As a consequence of the cooperation policy Danish authorities set the punishment for assisting the illegal migration of the Jews. In October 1943, the Gestapo arrested 57 rescuers, most of who were caught red-

handed. They were handed over to the Danish authorities to be charged with illegal migration. The maximum punishment in the Danish courts was 3 months imprisonment under relatively lenient conditions in a Danish prison, but the majority got away with little or no punishment.

The helpers could not have known this in advance, and many undoubtedly feared that they were taking a serious risk. What is a relevant question is whether the special circumstances of the occupation and the relatively mild German procedures in Denmark – which were still predominant even after the increased tension following the fall of the government – should also be considered in attempts to understand the background of the extensive Danish effort to rescue the Jews? Would a swiftly executed German death sentence for helping Jews have reduced the rescue activities considerably, as was the case in other countries?

#### **The Germans and the flight**

In his book, *October '43*, Aage Bertelsen, possibly the best-known person who helped Jews to flee, mentions that the Germans chased the Jews as long as just one remained in Denmark, day and night, in their homes, in the streets, in their hiding-places, along the shores and at sea in their flight towards rescue. Others however saw the matter differently. A contemporary illegal report states, "...as far as the circumstances permit, the German authorities in Denmark close their eyes to the large-scale flight to Sweden and in essence prefer to have as many people as possible escape in order to 'solve' the Jewish question in the least painful way."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the question is to what extent the Germans actually attempted to stop the flight of the Jews to Sweden.

#### **The Navy**

As mentioned above, the Danish coast guard service was no impediment to the flight of the Jews. Concerning German knowledge of the disloyalty of the coast guard service, Leni Yahil argues that it took a good while before the rather orthodox Germans realized that the Danish police officers were not obeying their orders, but that on the contrary they had

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., note 1.

taken matters into their own hands and were assisting the Jews. This means that the flight of the Jews was well under way before the German side became aware of the "irregularities" involved. But was this indeed the case?

As early as September 1943 the *Abwehr* had received several proofs of the failure to assist the Danish sea and coastal police. And the German marine had noticed that the Danish police was disloyal and harbored significant doubts about the force. Admiral Dänemark's war diary of 30 September describes the situation on the Sound in the following terms: "Der Ausfall der früher durch dänische Patrouillenfahrzeuge ausgeübten Sundüberwachung, sowie der vorübergehende Ausfall der dänischen Küstenpolizei ermöglichten in zahlreichen Fälle die Flucht von dänischen Militär- und Zivilpersonen nach Sweden."<sup>4</sup>

Contrary to what Yahil states, the German side was aware of the fact that the Danish coastal police did not to any appreciable extent take action to prevent illegal departures from the country. It came as no surprise to the Germans that the coastal police did not take action vis-à-vis the fleeing Jews. But what course of action did the Germans decide on as a result? Did they bring in their own personnel to prevent illegal departures from the country?

No German effort at sea prevented the Jews from escaping to Sweden. Not a single one of the 600-700 illegal transports carrying Jewish refugees was caught on their way to Sweden. A review of all relevant source material brings to light only a single case in which the German navy caught a Danish vessel carrying refugees: On October 18, a skipper sailed for Sweden carrying eight non-Jewish refugees. The cutter stalled in mid-sea and while the skipper attempted to repair the motor, a German patrol boat arrived on the scene to assist it. The Germans towed the cutter to Elsinore where the refugees were arrested.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., note 1., "The desertion of the surveillance of the Sound by Danish patrol boats, as well as the temporary desertion of the Danish coastal police in many instances made possible the escape of Danish military personnel and civilians to Sweden."

In short the German navy gave the handling of naval tasks priority over police surveillance. The war diaries of the German navy do not mention surveillance during the month of October 1943. The use of German patrolling vessels was terminated on October 1, when the crews were transferred to mine sweeping duty. In a great many cases flight helpers and others on the Danish side described these vessels as German patrolling vessels, but they undertook naval responsibilities only. The German navy did not take any part in the surveillance of the civilian traffic on the Sound before November 8, 1943.

### **The German police**

Until my work with Rasmus Kreth in 1995 it was assumed that only a weak German police force, incapable of arresting any large number of Jews, was present in Denmark in the days of October 1943. This assumption was problematic, as it was not based on any precise knowledge of the strength of the German police. Moreover the assumption suffered from the fact that no systematic examination had been undertaken of the extent to which the German police had been brought into action to prevent the flight of the Jews to Sweden. In fact the German Police did virtually nothing to prevent the flight.

### Order Police

From the war diaries of the German order police it is clear that the resources of the police were concentrated on the Danish political opposition, which to an increasing extent had whipped up anti-German feeling. The Jews came second. The war diaries show that on October 16, SS *Untersturmführer* Westermann of the Gestapo secured a lorry and eight members of the order police to support the security police: "..zum Einsatz gegen die Flüchtlingsbewegung auf der Küstenstrasse von Kopenhagen nach Helsingör".<sup>5</sup> This arrangement, however, came into force at a time when a majority of the Jews were already safely in Sweden. Apart from this, the war diaries record no other measures that may be linked to the actions against the Jews after October 2.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., note 1, "...to counter the movement of refugees on the coastal road from Copenhagen to Elsinore."

We cannot dismiss the possibility that this small branch of the police command may have succeeded in its purpose. However, absolutely no evidence points to the 1,500 German gendarmes being used to any significant extent to prevent the illegal departure of Jews from Denmark.

General v. Heimburg expressed concern at the result of the purge of the Jews. He made clear that the purge would further increase anti-German feeling and might be a decisive factor for the situation in Denmark. In particular he feared that future cooperation with the Danish police would be very difficult. Presumably, this was the reason why the order police's subsequent action against the Jews was very limited. As shown this was not due to any lack of police staff. It is true that one police battalion, *Dänemark*, was transferred to Funen and Jutland from October 13 in order to support the Gestapo's struggle with the political opposition, and later, on November 4, Battalion 15 was transferred to Italy. However, during the period when almost all Danish Jews crossed the Sound to Sweden at least 1,300 to 1,400 German order policemen were present in Copenhagen. Nonetheless, Copenhagen was the most important port of embarkation.

It is somewhat surprising that on November 3, 1943 the Chief of the Danish Police – the single Danish person of authority, if any, who had a thorough knowledge of the activities of the German police – stated to the police districts: "At no time have the German order police undertaken arrests".<sup>6</sup> This characterization was largely correct, as the Chief of the Danish Police seemed to exclude the action on October 1 and the few other cases in which the German uniformed police were brought in.

#### Security Police

The German security police caught the majority of those arrested. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that all available personnel (about 300 people) were utilized to target this "problem". In fact one single Gestapo officer and his few men were responsible for the arrest of the majority of the Jews caught.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., note 1.

The source material shows that many arrests were made in the Elsinore police district. Through these actions a total of more than 100 Jews were apprehended. This means that this one police district provides information on the arrests of more than half of the total number of arrested after the action on 1 October. As shown the shipments of Jews were evenly spread out along the coastline of eastern Zealand, though most of them took place in the vicinity of the Copenhagen metropolitan area. It is thus not the case that the large number of arrests made in the Elsinore area reflects a situation where the Jews were predominantly shipped from there. Other factors help explain this phenomenon.

In Elsinore the *Kriminaloberassistent* Hans Juhl, also known as "Gestapo Juhl", represented the German security police. He was the commanding officer of the German border control at Elsinore and had his office on the premises of the ferry port. There are many contemporary sources that describe Juhl's particular zeal in attempting to capture Jews. Throughout the month of October Gestapo Juhl and his handful of staff patrolled the stretch of coast north as well as south of Elsinore with great fervor.

On October 2, present in the passport control office at the Elsinore ferry, Juhl received news that the Danish steamer *Ydun* had dropped anchor at the roadstead after picking up some Jewish refugees who had been found in distress in a small rowing boat in the waters west of the island of Hven. The Elsinore pilot had been called by the steamer and the captain asked him to ensure that the Danish police picked up the party concerned. However, when the pilot got ashore Juhl confronted him and demanded an account of what had just occurred. The pilot was then told to take Juhl to the steamer. Juhl went onboard and apprehended the Jews. He arrested eight Jews, including two children, who were first taken to the Horserød camp. Subsequently all eight Jews were deported to Theresienstadt.

Another example of Juhl's zealousness is illustrated in a report written by the Danish police sergeant Mortving in connection with the cutter H 211 Dannebrog's attempted departure from Gilleleje harbor on October 5, 1943. The sergeant was present at the Gilleleje police station when he heard several shots fired from the pier at 9:45 pm. He went quickly down

to the harbor and realized that the shots had been fired by Juhl and three or four other Gestapo people. Then Juhl ordered the cutter to stop, or more shots would be fired, but the skipper of the cutter did not respond to this and continued to sail. Juhl then fired another 20 to 25 shots in the direction of the cutter, which immediately shut down its motor. The vessel drifted towards the eastern pier of the harbor where Juhl took up position in order to cut off the escape route of the fugitives. He must have called for reinforcements because shortly afterwards a lorry of *Wehrmacht* soldiers arrived at the harbor and immediately the Jews were loaded onto the vehicle and taken to the Horserød camp. Later that night Juhl recounted that 19 Jews, among them several women and children, had been arrested.

Other examples demonstrate that catching the Jews was a top priority of Juhl's. On October 9, 1943 Wilhelm David Søndergaard, who had helped Jews to flee, was arrested at Elsinore station in the company of three Jews. When he presented his identification, Juhl took this and on realizing that he was named David, he said, "David – oh, a Jew. You must join the others". The party remained in the office until about 3am during which time the German police, led by Juhl, went on several roundups. As he put down his Tommy gun on his chair back in the office, Juhl said, "Ahh, seven Jews, must celebrate",<sup>7</sup> upon which the five German police officers each had a bottle of lager.

The quoted examples, however, are not among Juhl's major successes. The best-known example is the roundup of 85 Jews hidden in the Gilleleje church attic during the night between October 6 and 7, 1943. Juhl's force, in addition to the *Wehrmacht* troops summoned to help him, undertook several raids during that same night in a number of other places in the area. During that particular night the Nazis arrested a total of 107 people in the Gilleleje area, among them several women and children. In comparison with the rest of Denmark Juhl adopted drastic measures in the area under his control.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., note 1.

In contrast to the cases above the German security police chose a different method in another case: the Gestapo arrested two families in Aalborg on October 12 and 13, 1943. The Germans knew that the individuals in question were Jewish, but despite this fact they decided to hand them over to the Danish security police with a request that an investigation be instituted against them for attempting unlawful departure from Denmark. One of the families, Salum Chanan and Slowa Rubinowitz and their two children aged eight years and four months, told the Danish police in Aalborg that they would return to their place of residence in Copenhagen. The following day the family had left the area of Danish jurisdiction and was outside the reach of German police officers. As early as October 16 at 9 p.m. the family had left Copenhagen in a fishing boat that arrived safely around midnight in Landskrona, Sweden. Presumably the other family, the Altschuls, also found an escape route to Sweden. By all accounts they were not deported to Theresienstadt.

It must be said, however, that the Aalborg case deviates from the general pattern, as Jews were also arrested in a number of other places. What the testimony of the source material clearly shows is that the effort varied significantly. In the Elsinore area, for example, Gestapo Juhl went to work zealously, while in Aalborg and in a number of other places less zeal was demonstrated. Naturally, this led to fewer Jews being caught.

### **The Wehrmacht**

As we have already seen, the *Wehrmacht* was involved in some arrests in the Elsinore area. Yet no evidence points to the capture of Jews being a general *Wehrmacht* priority at this time. Even if it seems clear that the *Wehrmacht* was instructed to assist the security police in the roundup of the Jews, all evidence indicates that to all intents and purposes it was passive and generally only took part in concrete cases at the request of the security police. This is confirmed by contemporary sources and numerous testimonies that show the military patrols to be very cautious and generally disinclined to interfere with the transfers to Sweden.

By and large only a few roundups undertaken by the German security police led to large numbers of arrests. The assumption that the German police were incapable of arresting large numbers of Jews is incorrect. In



reality the order police – i.e. the part of the German police force that had the strength in numbers to arrest large number of Jews – did not undertake any systematic roundups after October 2.

On September 28, Dr. Best reported to the *Auswartiges Amt*: "Die Aktion soll in einer einzigen Nacht durchgeführt werden".<sup>8</sup> Later, on October 4, Thadden of the *Auswartiges Amt* stated: "Judenaktion ist in Nacht von 1. zum 2. 10. durchgeführt und inzwischen abgeschlossen worden".<sup>9</sup> Nothing indicates that the Germans to any considerable extent moved beyond the originally intended course of action for October 1 and 2. Certainly Jews were still arrested, but this did not occur in large-scale systematic roundups.

#### **Dr. Best and the October flight**

Several different factors may explain the fact that the German authorities did not make the arrest of the Jews a high priority after the unsuccessful *Aktions*-attempt of the night between the October 1 and 2, 1943. One of the most significant, however, was Dr. Best's attitude towards the issue. In October 1943 he remained in control of the German police in Denmark. Hence, it was of great significance that Dr. Best was of the opinion that after the roundup the result achieved would have to suffice. Further drastic measures should be avoided in order to be able to resume the policy of negotiation, which had been interrupted on August 29.

After October 2 Dr. Best informed the Danish authorities that no further measures would be taken against the Jews. He expressed this attitude on October 4, 1943 when he received Director Svenningsen from The Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Dagmarhus. On behalf of the civil servants and, in particular, the permanent secretaries, Svenningsen made clear that they were all deeply shaken and outraged by the treatment that Danish citizens had been subjected to. Taking the future relationship between Denmark and Germany into consideration, Dr. Best was made to realize that the *Aktion* had made it impossible to work for mutual

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<sup>8</sup> "The action will be completed in only one night."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, note 1, "The *Judenaktion* is completed during the night between October 1 and October 2 and thereafter discontinued."

understanding between the two nations. At the same time Svenningsen stated that it was unlikely that the civil servants would give up their posts as long as the Nazi regime refrained from imposing new extreme measures against the Jews. In other words, the condition for a renewed understanding was peace to work.

On his side Dr. Best diplomatically gave these views a sympathetic hearing and found occasion to remark that he personally saw no reason to regret that a number of Jews had managed to escape to Sweden. From a German point of view it was above all a question of cleansing Denmark of Jews; whether this happened through the Jews' escaping to Sweden or through their deportation to Germany was in itself of no consequence. It was not a question of rounding up as many as possible.

That this possibly was Dr. Best's view is also illustrated by his reports to Berlin. This is most clearly expressed in a telegram sent the day after his meeting with Svenningsen. His conclusion goes as follows:

*Da das sachliche Ziel der Judenaktion in Dänemark die Entjudung des Landes und nicht eine möglichst erfolgreiche Kopffagd war, muss festgestellt werden, dass die Judenaktion ihr Ziel erreicht hat. Danemark ist entjudet, da sich hier kein Jude, der unter die einschlägigen Anordnungen fällt, mehr legal aufhalten und betätigen kann.*<sup>10</sup>

Later that month in a conversation with an SS colleague, Dr. Six of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, Dr. Best was honest about the insignificant number of Jews rounded up. He admitted that the German police had not been put into action on the relevant stretch of the east coast of Zealand in order to prevent the Jews' escape to Sweden. It is interesting, if not surprising, that the *Auswärtiges Amt* backed Dr. Best's approach to reestablishing good working relations with the Danish authorities and with that in mind considered it less important that the Jews had slipped out of their

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., "As the objective goal of the *Judenaktion* in Denmark was the de-judaization of the country, and not a successful headhunt, it must be concluded that the *Judenaktion* has reached its goal. Denmark is de-judaized, as no Jew who falls under the relevant legislation can stay or work here any more."

hands to Sweden. As Dr. Six concluded in his report to Berlin after the meeting:

*All in all it can be established that since the "Judenaktion" of October 1 and 2, 1943 Denmark has been cleansed of Jews and for this reason in the future the Jewish question will not impede constructive solutions to issues of the Danish-German relationship. Faced with this fact the limited number of arrests and deportations...is of less importance.<sup>11</sup>*

The fact remains that it was not until after the Jews' successful flight to Sweden that Dr. Best really took action to close the Sound. With the required will and with relatively limited means it clearly would have been possible to seize a large number of the well over 7,000 Jews whose October escape to freedom in Sweden went unimpeded.

### **Conclusions**

There was widespread opposition among the Germans in Denmark to interfering with the flight of the Jews. The *Wehrmacht* and the German navy insisted that they were present to carry out military tasks. Moreover, both the German military and leading police authorities were clearly interested in avoiding a brutal solution to the so-called Jewish problem in Denmark. Thus, an acceptable cooperative position towards the Danish authorities might be achieved. However, Dr. Best was the prime mover in ensuring that the German police largely refrained from apprehending the fleeing Jews. By adopting this policy, he hoped to re-establish cooperation with the Danish authorities, a prerequisite for maintaining his own position as the leading German authority in Denmark.

Indirectly the Danish attitude towards the horrifying persecution of their Jewish fellow citizens was the determining factor in the almost complete rescue of the Jewish community. Yet without the special circumstances during the occupation – where the occupying power to a large extent took measures to secure the continuation of acceptance of diplomatic relations by the occupied subject – Danish indignation and activism on its own would hardly have been enough to ensure the October 1943 mass

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

rescue of Danish Jews. Other crucial factors include Sweden opening its doors and giving the Jews access to freedom only a few sea miles away, as well as the convergence of the on-set of the persecution and increasingly strong moral opposition to the occupying power. All these conditions aided the Danish rescue – a rescue that would otherwise not have been possible. Furthermore for some economic motives may have played a part in the rescue efforts. However, all this does not mean that the rescue of the Danish Jews should lose its power of fascination. Seen as an isolated event the rescue shows what a population can do when acting together from a shared moral standpoint. This lesson from the events of October 1943 certainly deserves to live on.

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The attempt to compile a complete bibliography of literature on the rescue of the Danish Jews (books, journals and newspaper articles) can be found on the website of The Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at <http://www.dchf.dk>

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## **The Danish Volunteers in the *Waffen SS* and their Contribution to the Holocaust and the Nazi War of Extermination**

Claus Bundgård Christensen, Niels Bo Poulsen and Peter Scharff Smith

In the international history of the Holocaust one event stands out as a unique episode in the midst of endless stories of death and tragedy: The rescue of almost 7,000 Danish Jews in 1943 during the German occupation of Denmark.<sup>1</sup> This impressive and extraordinary operation has tended to overshadow everything else in the historiography concerning Denmark and the Holocaust. Less flattering aspects of Denmark's role in the Holocaust have been left more or less aside – or have remained unknown up until the last decade. Ever since Leni Yahil's path-breaking work from 1966, *Test of a Democracy: The Rescue of Danish Jewry in World War II*, it has furthermore been a common assumption that a special Danish mentality contributed to the rescue effort – primarily in the sense that deeply ingrained democratic values made Danes unreceptive to anti-Semitism.<sup>2</sup> This theory has since surfaced in many different versions and different contexts. An example is Leo Goldberger's *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (1987), where the author refers to "the special character and moral stature of the Danish people" proposed earlier by Yahil. According to Goldberger the Danes were able to resist "the cruel stupidity of Nazi anti-Semitism" because their decisions "were in accord with the inner truth of man's own rational nature, as well as in accordance with the fundamental law of God in the Old Testament ... thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Of the almost 7,000 Jews in Denmark the Germans deported only 474 (of whom 53 died) while the rest were rescued in fishing boats across the sea to Sweden. See Kreth, Rasmus and Michael Mogensen, *Flugten til Sverige*, Gyldendal 1995, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> For a historiographical analysis of the rescue of the Jews in October 1943, see Sofie Lene Bak, *Jødeaktionen oktober 1943. Forestillinger i offentlighed og forskning*, Museum Tusulanums Forlag 2001, especially pp. 35 and 150-166 for an account of interpretations of the relationship between the rescue and Danish mentality.

<sup>3</sup> Goldberger, Leo (ed.), *The Rescue of the Danish Jews. Moral Courage under Stress*, New York University Press 1987, p. 208.

A more recent scholarly work that picks up this thread is Daniel J. Goldhagen's best-selling *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1997). Goldhagen strengthens his thesis about the special German "eliminationist anti-Semitism" by a reference to the heroic Danes. Goldhagen rhetorically asks if a battalion of Danes (or Italians) would have slaughtered, deported and hunted down Jews in the same way as the German perpetrators. According to Goldhagen this notion "strains credulity beyond the breaking point" because the Danes allegedly treated their Jews as human beings.<sup>4</sup> But can the Danish rescue of the Jews – magnificent as it was – support such conclusions? Would one not want to base any claim of a specific Danish mentality on a broader case? In fact, recent Danish research demonstrates that foreign Jews were treated with significantly less heartfelt warmth and suggests that anti-Semitism perhaps was not so uncommon in Denmark in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

In this article we will not focus specifically upon the issue of a possible distinct "Danish mentality", but we will put forward material that describes how the 6,000 Danes in German service in the *Waffen SS* by words or in action contributed to the Nazi war of extermination and the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that any theorizing about general Danish non-anti-Semitic or non-violent mentality needs to address the fact that Danish

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<sup>4</sup> Goldhagen, Daniel J., *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Abacus 1997, p. 408.

<sup>5</sup> Bak, Sofie Lene "Historiografien om antisemitismen i Danmark i 1930'erne og under besættelsen. Betragtninger over en dansk antisemitismeforskning" in Michael Mogensen (ed.), *Antisemitisme i Danmark?*, Arbejdsrapporter fra DCHF 5, 2002. Concerning recent studies into Danish anti-Semitism, see also other contributions to the latter work by Martin Schwarz Lausten, Karl Christian Lammers, Michael Mogensen, Knud V. Jespersen and others.

<sup>6</sup> In the present article, the Nazi attempt to exterminate the European Jews will not be treated in isolation but will be viewed as an integral part of a more general racially-ideologically motivated policy for German dominance and extermination, decimation and enslavement of a variety of ethnic and other groups in Eastern and Central Europe. This climaxed in the Nazi war of extermination against the Soviet Union – a war in which 6,000 Danish *Waffen SS* volunteers participated. Hence the twofold title of this article; *The Holocaust and the Nazi War of Extermination*. While the Danish SS-soldiers' part in the rounding-up of the Danish Jews will be discussed briefly, this article has as its main focus events outside Denmark. Hence, the involvement of a number of Danish SS-soldiers in various types of police and terror units employed in Denmark will not be addressed.

citizens had a share in the crimes of the Nazi regime. The following will be the first international presentation of the Danish participation in or support of the crimes of the Nazi regime in occupied Europe. Furthermore, new sources cited in this article will document how ordinary *Waffen SS* soldiers in a host of ways and in different parts of the SS organization could contribute to the fulfillment of Nazi racial policies.<sup>7</sup>

Another frequently asked question by scholars is, how much did "they" know about the Holocaust, be it civilians in Germany, politicians and other decision-makers abroad, or soldiers at the front? In the case of the Danish *Waffen SS* volunteers we will therefore also take a close look at the question of how much the average Danish soldier – and thereby in effect the average *Waffen SS* soldier – knew about the ongoing Nazi war of extermination and the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup>

#### **The Danish volunteers in the *Waffen SS***

On April 23, 1940 no more than two weeks after the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, Himmler ordered the establishment of a *Waffen SS* unit which was to include volunteers from these two countries: The *SS Standarte Nordland*. The recruitment of Scandinavians to *Nordland* was designed to overcome the strict limits imposed on the growth of the *Waffen SS* by the *Wehrmacht*. The *Wehrmacht* had established a near-monopoly on recruiting in Germany, forcing the *Waffen SS* to look outside Germany in its search for manpower. In the end around 13,000 Danish citizens volunteered for German armed service during the Second

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<sup>7</sup> The authors' research into the history of the *Waffen SS* (and the Danish volunteers) is based on an extensive collection of sources from various archives and organizations in Germany, Russia, the Czech Republic, and Denmark. Sources have also been gathered from private collectors and a number of former Danish *Waffen SS* volunteers have been interviewed. For an extensive account of the history of the Danish *Waffen SS* volunteers, see Christensen, Claus Bundgård, Niels Bo Poulsen and Peter Scharff Smith, *Under hagekors og Dannebrog – danskere i Waffen SS 1940-45*, Aschehoug 1998 (henceforth: *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*). Although slowly growing the scientific literature on the *Waffen SS* remains limited. The two basic works are still Stein, George H., *The Waffen SS – Hitler's Elite Guard at War*, Cornell University Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1990 and Wegner, Bernd, *Hitlers politische Soldaten. Die Waffen SS 1933-1945*, Schöningh Verlag, 5<sup>th</sup> enlarged ed., 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning some of these questions see for example Breitman, Richard, *Official Secrets. What the Nazis Planned, What the British and Americans knew*, Hill and Wang 1998.



World War, some 7,000 of whom enlisted. The vast majority – around 12,000 – volunteered for the *Waffen SS* and the organization admitted around 6,000. The greater part of these Danes served in three different formations: *Frikorps Danmark* (The Danish Legion), *SS Division Wiking* and, after the disbandment of the so-called legions in 1943, in *SS Division Nordland*. Approximately 1,500 Danish volunteers hailed from the German minority in southern Jutland and served mainly in the *Division Totenkopf* and to some extent in the 1st SS Brigade.

Up until June 1941 recruitment did not make serious progress, but the German assault on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 made hitherto politically sceptical groups potential volunteers. The anticommunist theme now became dominant in recruitment propaganda designed to appeal to right-wing nationalist groups who were not necessarily National Socialists. Furthermore, physical requirements for volunteers diminished in subsequent years, as the engagement at the eastern front took a heavy toll in human lives. Right-wing nationalist, but non-Nazi groups were encouraged to enlist on the grounds that the war against the Soviet Union was a crusade to "protect Europe against Bolshevism". A new type of SS formation was created in order to absorb Germanic volunteers of lesser physique and without direct Nazi affiliation: the national legion. In Denmark the so-called *Frikorps Danmark* was established; in Norway the *Norske Legion*. Similarly, legions were established in the Netherlands and in Flanders shortly after the attack on the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> The Legions were organized in co-operation between the SS *Hauptamt* in Berlin and various national Nazi parties. By supporting such an arrangement the different Nazi parties in occupied Europe hoped to underline their patriotic anticommunist devotion as opposed to the popular belief that they were unconditionally pro-German. Furthermore, upon return SS soldiers could become the core of national Nazi armies, which could be used in a *Machtergreifung*, a seizure of power modeled on the experiences of the German Nazi party in the early 1930s. The biggest Danish Nazi party, the DNSAP (Denmark's National-Socialist Workers

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<sup>9</sup> See Stein, op. cit., chapter six, and Christensen, Claus Bundgård, Niels Bo Poulsen and Peter Scharff Smith, "Legion Norge. Forskelle og ligheder med de øvrige 'germanske' legioner i *Waffen SS*", *Historisk Tidsskrift*, vol 100(2), 2000, pp. 419-448.

Party), eagerly involved itself in establishing a national Danish unit in the ranks of the SS. The establishment of *Frikorps Danmark* boosted recruitment, though still mainly from among Nazi circles. In other words, around 50 percent of the 6,000 Danish *Waffen SS* volunteers were members of the DNSAP, and many others were (or became) more loosely affiliated with the Nazi movement. During the last years of the war volunteering actually became a sort of refuge for many members of the DNSAP who wanted to escape a hopeless situation in Denmark, where Danish Nazis were harassed and became more and more isolated.

The first group of Danish SS volunteers was deployed in combat already in the summer of 1941 when *Division Wiking* participated in the attack on the Soviet Union. The number of Danes in this division was limited to a few hundred at a time, located mainly in the previously mentioned *Standarte (Regiment) Nordland*. After two years of service at the eastern front most Danes in *Wiking* were transferred to *Division Nordland*. A large contingent of Danes was still undergoing training in *Frikorps Danmark* when *Wiking*, as part of the German Army Group South, fought in the Ukraine.

With 1,200 men *Frikorps Danmark* was sent to Demyansk south of Novgorod in May 1942. In less than three months the corps experienced the loss of close to 350 men who were either killed or wounded.<sup>10</sup> After a one-month refreshment and propaganda leave in Denmark the corps returned to the front in November 1941. Originally, *Frikorps Danmark* was supposed to join 1st SS Brigade in Byelorussia in its indiscriminate killing of civilians in areas associated with Soviet partisans.<sup>11</sup> However, due to the deteriorating situation at the front both the 1st SS Brigade and the *Frikorps* were instead sent to frontline duty at the Russian town of Nevel, some 400 kilometers west of Moscow. In the spring of 1943 – as a conse-

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<sup>10</sup> Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg, Germany, RS4/1312, Kriegstagebuch Freikorps *Danmark*.

<sup>11</sup> On 1st SS Brigade in Byelorussia see Boll, Bernd, "Aktionen nach Kriegsbrauch". Wehrmacht und 1. SS Infanteriebrigade 1941" in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, vol. 48, 2000(9), pp. 775-788; and *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, p. 267f.

quence of further losses and inadequate reinforcements – the corps was down to 633 men and was withdrawn from the frontline.<sup>12</sup>

In the summer of 1943 the Danes from the *Frikorps* and *Wiking Regiment Nordland* were united in the new *SS Panzergrenadier Division Nordland*. The majority of the Danes were placed in one of the division's regiments of motorized infantry: *24 Panzergrenadier Regiment Danmark*.

*Nordland* was first sent to Yugoslavia in order to combine training and anti-partisan combat. In December 1943 the unit was then transferred to the German defense perimeter around the so-called Oranienbaum kettle outside Leningrad. From there the division participated in the German retreat to Estonia and later to Courland in Latvia. In January 1945 it was shipped to Germany. The *Nordland* division was obliterated in Berlin in May 1945 as one of the last fighting units there.

Out of approximately 6,000 Danish *Waffen SS* volunteers some 2,000 lost their lives. After the war most of the remaining Danish SS soldiers were tried for having volunteered to fight for the Germans. Hence, on June 1, 1945 the new Danish government adopted legislation regarding the collaboration with the German occupiers. While not criminalizing the official co-operation between the Germans and the Danish government/administration, the new law criminalized various forms of collaboration and made armed service for Germany punishable. The average sentence for military service was 2 years in prison. Approximately 3,300 former soldiers were sentenced under this law, the majority having served in the *Waffen SS*.<sup>13</sup>

#### **The Nazi war of extermination and the Holocaust**

In evaluating the involvement of Danish *Waffen SS* soldiers in war crimes and crimes against humanity an important background consideration is the question of whether the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* as a whole were

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<sup>12</sup> National Archives, Washington, Microcopies, T.175, reel 59, p. 2574736ff, RFSS Amt VI, 3.3.1943.

<sup>13</sup> *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, pp. 386. For a general account of the Danish post-war legislation and trials of collaborators see Tamm, Ditlev, *Retsopgøret efter besættelsen*, Jurist og Økonomforbundets Forlag 1984.

involved in crimes, or whether it was limited to certain branches or individual units, isolated in place and time.

The German conquest of large areas in Central and Eastern Europe brought millions of Jews within the reach of the Nazis. The systematic murder of selected groups of Polish Jews began shortly after the German occupation of Poland. However, it was not until the attack on the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 that a plan for the total extermination of a country's Jewish population, that is, the Soviet Jews, became evident. The so-called *Einsatz* groups carried out the execution of Polish and Soviet Jews, with ordinary *Wehrmacht* units, the *Waffen SS*, military police, and local civilians also taking part.<sup>14</sup> The method of execution was typically mass shootings, but it eventually became clear that this way of proceeding was problematic. One of the greatest concerns was the psychological effect of the killings on the executioners. In order to calm their nerves and endure the gruesome work, members of these execution squads consumed often quite large quantities of alcohol. In addition, the brutal work meant that nervous breakdowns were common among the perpetrators. Consequently executions were sometimes rather chaotic.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the war massacres continued to take place behind the frontlines, but it became apparent during 1941 that other methods would have to be employed if all Jews under German control were to be completely eradicated. The genocide was therefore partially transferred in 1942 to the extermination camps, where the captives were systematically exterminated, primarily using gas.

While the overall features of the concentration camp system have been publicly known since the days of the Nuremberg trials, during the last decades a great number of studies have demonstrated in greater detail the genocidal character of the war at the eastern front and the implementation of the Holocaust "in the field". In addition to publications on such topics as local collaboration in the Holocaust, a number of detailed studies of German occupation practices in distinct

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<sup>14</sup> Krausnick, Helmut, *Hitlers Einsatzgruppen. Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges 1938-1942*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Browning, Christopher R., *The Path to Genocide*, Cambridge University Press 1992, p.169ff.

territories have highlighted the participation of the *Wehrmacht* and a variety of German government agencies in the Nazi war of extermination and exploitation.<sup>16</sup> These studies have reiterated that the basic components of the German occupational regime in the Soviet Union included the policy of total destruction of the Jews and other "undesirables," the deliberate starvation of civilians and POWs, mass killing of civilians under the pretext of anti-partisan combat, looting and destruction of infrastructure, industry, and housing as part of the scorched-earth policy, and forced recruitment for labor duty in Germany. Nonetheless, given the size of the occupied territory, the number of German and Axis units and other bodies active "in the east," and the fact that the German-Soviet part of the war lasted almost four years, more studies are still needed of local occupational practices, individual units, and local modes of collaboration and resistance.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Some recent works include: Bartov, Omer, *The Eastern Front 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, Oxford University Press 1985; Bartov, Omer, *Hitlers Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich*, Oxford University Press 1992; Benz, Wolfgang and Marion Neiss (eds.), *Judenmord in Litauen: Studien und Dokumente*, Metropol 1999; Boog Horst et. al (eds.), *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1991; Chiari, Bernhard, *Alltag hinter der Front: Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weissrussland 1941-1944*, Droste Verlag 1998; Dean, Martin, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941-44*, Macmillan Press 2000; Dobroszycki, Lucjan and Jeffrey S. Gurock (eds.), *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941-1945*, Gerlach, Christian, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944*, Hamburger Edition 1999; Heer, Hannes and Klaus Naumann (eds.), *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944*, Hamburger Edition 1995; Kaiser, Wolf (ed.), *Täter im Vernichtungskrieg: Der Überfall auf die Sowjetunion und der Völkermord an den Juden*, Propyläen 2002; Pohl, Karl Heinrich (ed.), *Wehrmacht und Vernichtungspolitik: Militär im nationalsozialistischen System*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1999; Schulte, Theo J., *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia*, Berg Publishers 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Schulte, Theo J., "The German Soldier in Occupied Russia", in Paul Addison and Angus Calder (eds.), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939-1945*, Pimlico 1997, pp. 274-283. See also Pohl, Dieter, "Die Wehrmacht und der Mord an den Juden in den besetzten sowjetischen Gebieten", in Kaiser (ed.), op.cit., pp. 39-53 for an evaluation of the state of the art concerning the study of the German armed forces and the Holocaust. On the need for comparative studies, see Ganzenmüller, Jörg "Ungarische und deutsche Kriegsverbrechen in der Sowjetunion 1941-1944: Eine Kleine Konferenz in Freiburg und die methodischen Probleme eines Vergleichs", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, vol. 49 (2001), H.4, pp. 602-606. For the need for further studies into the crimes committed by front-line units

Any study of Axis units in action on the eastern front must proceed from these considerations, which make it seem very likely that most individual soldiers had a fair picture of the barbarous character of the Nazi war of extermination. The likelihood that they were involved in atrocities is considerable. With this in mind, the old claim of the *Waffen SS* soldiers – that they were "Soldaten wie andere auch"<sup>18</sup> – rings with a new and ironic tone. Much more effort has gone into documenting the actions of the Wehrmacht, but the few serious studies available specifically of *Waffen SS* units also point to a high frequency of crimes. Some *Waffen SS* units periodically served as nothing but substitute *Einsatz* groups, but also frontline units committed various crimes.<sup>19</sup>

As with the *Einsatz* groups, the massive concentration camp system was also under the control of the SS. In addition to the actual concentration camps, the camp system consisted of innumerable reception camps, processing camps, work camps, and so on. The total number of camps remains unknown, but in Poland alone the number exceeded 5,000.<sup>20</sup> The camps took on great economic significance, especially in the second half of the war, as forced labor was exploited for production. It is estimated that slave workers under German control numbered about twelve million. Among these a great number were Polish, Jewish and Russian prisoners who were "hired out" from the concentration camps by the SS for a

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see Gerlach, Christian, "Verbrechen deutscher Fronttruppen in Weissrussland 1941-1944" in Pohl (ed.) op. cit., pp. 89-114.

<sup>18</sup> In English: "Soldiers like others"; meant to signify that the *Waffen SS* was purely a military formation like the German army. On the postwar efforts to rehabilitate the *Waffen SS*, see David Clay Large, "Reckoning without the Past: The HIAG of the *Waffen-SS* and the Politics of Rehabilitation in the Bonn Republic, 1950-1961" in *Journal of Modern History*, no. 59, 1987, pp. 79-113.

<sup>19</sup> The most notorious *Waffen SS* units were 1st and 2nd SS Brigade, SS Cavalry Brigade, SS Cavalry Division Prinz Eugen and SS Brigade Dirlwanger. For examples of crimes committed by SS front units in various theatres of war see Fjørtoft, Kjell, *De som tapte krigen*, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag 1995, pp. 19-21, 138-139 and 166; Gentile, Carlo, "Politische Soldaten: Die 16. SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division 'Reichsführer-SS' in Italien 1944", in *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, vol. 81, 2001, ; Stein op. cit., pp. 250-280 and Sydnor, Charles W., *Soldiers of Destruction. The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945*, Princeton University Press 1977, pp. 106-109 and 152-160.

<sup>20</sup> Schwarz, Gudrun, *Die nationalsozialistischen Lager*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1996, p. 85

number of purposes. Conditions were terrible and the majority lived well below the starvation limit. Destined for eventual annihilation anyway, Jewish slave workers received the worst treatment.<sup>21</sup>

### **Ideology and atrocities among the Danish *Waffen SS* volunteers**

The Danish volunteers saw action primarily at the eastern front and therefore were in a good position to become acquainted with the kind of Nazi racial policies and brutal warfare that characterized the occupation regime in Central and Eastern Europe. The units containing the majority of Danes were mainly involved in frontline duty, and research suggests that they took part in the war of extermination on more or less the same level as most other *Waffen SS* frontline units. The Danes were also ideologically schooled as most other *Waffen SS* soldiers. Potential officers from the so-called Germanic countries received special schooling at the Bad Tölz Officer Academy in Bavaria, but the rank and file also received ideological education.<sup>22</sup> Contemporary diaries and letters from volunteers illustrate how they were mentally prepared for the war in the east. A later regimental commander in *Division Nordland*, the Danish SS officer Per Sørensen, for example, attended the lectures at Bad Tölz in the winter of 1942. He tells his parents about a field trip to Dachau and an asylum:

*The other day we visited a large lunatic asylum near Munich and attended a lecture on racial science. It was fantastic to watch the mob of human wrecks they'd gathered there, I just wonder why they keep them alive (...) Afterwards we visited the famous concentration camp Dachau and saw it from one end to the other. It was a great experience; you all know what one hears about concentration camps in Denmark, like the rest it's lies from end to end [sic.]. You can't*

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<sup>21</sup> Yahil, Leni, *The Holocaust*, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 159ff. For an authoritative discussion on when it was decided to destine all European Jews for annihilation see Browning, Christopher R., *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*, Cambridge University Press 2000, chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup> Concerning ideological schooling of both the officers and the rank and file, see Smith, Peter Scharff, Niels Bo Poulsen and Claus Bundgård Christensen, "The Danish Volunteers in the *Waffen SS* and German Warfare at the Eastern Front" in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 8(1), 1999, pp. 73-96. For a general account of the SS officers' academies with emphasis on Bad Tölz, see Hatheway, Jay, *In Perfect Formation: SS Ideology and the SS-Junkerschule Tölz*, Schiffer Military History 1999.

*imagine how amazing the order and cleanliness is around here and what incredible work is being performed there.*<sup>24</sup>

At Bad Tölz that kind of excursion and ideological education in general was combined with sports activities, occasional classical concerts, and lessons in good manners in order to promote the SS code and the racial ideal as a highly civilized moral code (the medieval knight being the great ideal). Thus an atmosphere was created where anti-humanitarian beliefs were combined with a supposedly gentleman morality. This combination implied a potential brutality, because the perspective of the "ideal" National Socialist permitted the "Germanic" soldiers – as representatives of the *Herrenvolk* – to kill the supposed sub-humans without any loss of morality or integrity.<sup>25</sup>

Naturally education of the rank and file was on a different level but incorporated nonetheless an endless number of ideological elements, from ordinary lectures in *Weltanschauung* to bayonet practice on Jewish-looking cardboard figures.<sup>26</sup> Correspondence also illustrates how several Danish volunteers identified with Nazi values. But whereas it is easily shown how many Danish volunteers became radical anti-Semites and otherwise ideologically inflamed, it is less easy to document the extent to which the Danish *Waffen SS* soldiers were involved in criminal actions against civilians and enemy POWs. Unfortunately, only a limited number of official documents related to the *Waffen SS* field units in question (such as war diaries and orders-of-the-day) are available today. To this should

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from Per Sørensen, in authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers. A year later another volunteer informs about a similar trip to an asylum from Bad Tölz, see *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, p. 292. To further highlight the link to the Dachau camp Bad Tölz housed in its basement a cell complex with room for up to 50 concentration camp inmates whose job it was to maintain the school. Hatheway op. cit. p.83.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Per Sørensen, in authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers. A year later another volunteer informs about a similar trip to an asylum from Bad Tölz, see *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, p. 292. To further highlight the link to the Dachau camp Bad Tölz housed in its basement a cell complex with room for up to 50 concentration camp inmates whose job it was to maintain the school. Hatheway op. cit. p.83.

<sup>25</sup> An interpretation brought forward also by Bartov in *Hitler's Army*, op. cit see for example p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, pp. 295-307.



be added that although *Frikorps Danmark* overwhelmingly consisted of Danes (approximately 1,800 in total), the remaining 4,000 Danish volunteers were often scattered in smaller groups in various functions in the previously mentioned *Divisions Viking, Totenkopf, and Nordland*, and elsewhere in the *Waffen SS*.<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that the 6,000 Danes are rather hard to locate in the remaining archival material. Furthermore, war crimes are very seldom recalled in letters sent from the front (which were subject to strict censorship) or for that matter in interviews and memoirs. Nevertheless we can document a number of incidents.

During *Frikorps Danmark*'s first frontline engagement in the so-called Demyansk pocket near Lake Illmen in northwest Russia, a trooper tells his diary that a Russian POW was shot by a Danish *Waffen SS* volunteer, apparently because he stole cigarettes from the troops.<sup>28</sup> The diary also mentions that a Russian boy soldier around 12 was sentenced to death because he attempted to escape a prison camp. Furthermore, evidence from different sources suggests that in a specific attack that included most of *Frikorps Danmark* a number of Russian POWs were shot in retaliation for the death of *Frikorps* commander von Schalburg. Von Schalburg was killed during the early phase of the assault and this apparently enraged the Danes. A Danish officer wrote home, "no prisoners were taken that day".<sup>29</sup>

One especially brutal description, concerning the killing of a civilian Jew, also dates from the Demyansk period. It is one of the very few clear-cut

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<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that the *Waffen SS* Divisions in question numbered between 14,000 and 20,000 men.

<sup>28</sup> Museum of The Danish Resistance 1940-45, FM 20, H.G.'s diary. Names of lower ranking and publicly unknown Danish SS soldiers have been anonymized by the authors.

<sup>29</sup> This statement is also found in a memoir by a Danish SS volunteer and was further backed up by an interview with a *Frikorps Danmark* member. The interviewee was asked whether they took any prisoners that day and he responded, 'But the Russians don't do it either. The Russians don't take prisoners'. This negative way of confirming a war crime is normal in connection with oral history (on the few occasions that the interviewed accepted any talk at all about war crimes). *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, pp. 155ff

illustrations of how ideology and war crimes could be directly related. Thus another diary-writing soldier notes the following:

*A Jew in a greasy Kafkan walks up to beg some bread, a couple of comrades get a hold of him and drag him behind a building and a moment later he comes to an end. There isn't any room for Jews in the new Europe, they've brought too much misery to the European people.*<sup>30</sup>

After the disbandment of the *Frikorps Danmark* the men were transferred to the newly established *Division Nordland* and sent to Yugoslavia during the fall of 1943. Here they became involved in a very brutal fight with local partisans. On at least one occasion Danes from "Regiment Danmark" burned down an entire village from which shots had been fired, and despite finding no adult men there they apparently killed the inhabitants.<sup>31</sup> The Danish officer Per Sørensen relates a story that might be addressing the same situation or perhaps one like it. In a letter that escaped censorship by travelling with a colleague to his parents, he brags about having killed 200 "reds" without suffering a single casualty.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Danes as concentration camp guards**

The *Waffen SS* was the military branch of the SS and was therefore to a certain degree separated from the concentration camp system. However, there was a clear connection between the two parts of the organization in the form of personnel transfer. In 1939 about 6,500 members of the so-called *Totenkopfverbände*, who were responsible for guard duties in the concentration camps, were transferred to the newly established *Totenkopf Division*.<sup>33</sup> In April 1941 Himmler created a direct connection between the camps and the *Waffen SS* when he ordered that the guard personnel should formally be seen as a part of the armed (*Waffen*) SS.<sup>34</sup> However, this did not mean that the guards were sent to the front. The amalgamation was primarily an administrative manoeuvre. In practice, the massive

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<sup>30</sup> Christensen et. al. 1999, op. cit pp. 91-92.

<sup>31</sup> *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, pp. 204 ff.: according to an interview with a former Danish SS soldier the villagers were also shot down.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>33</sup> Bedürftig, Friedemann (ed.), *Lexicon III Reich*, Carlsen 1994., Stein, op. cit., pp. 258f.

<sup>34</sup> Stein, op. cit., p. 260.

system of camps remained independent of the *Waffen SS*. Nevertheless, an exchange of personnel between the concentration camps and the front units did take place throughout the war.<sup>35</sup> During legal proceedings after the war, the commanders of the Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Neuengamme camps estimated that about 1,500 of their subordinates had been transferred from the front.<sup>36</sup> The total number of soldiers from the *Waffen SS* who were sent to serve in the camps, or had come from there, is unknown.

Danes were also sent to the concentration camps as SS personnel. Apparently measures were taken in 1941 to stop certain non-German citizens from performing duty in the camps. Himmler might have feared that stories about mass killings in the camps would spread throughout Western Europe via the volunteers. On November 17, 1941 he commanded that volunteers from reinforcement ("*Ersatz*") units attached to the legions (until 1943 Danish, Norwegian and Flemish legions were in operation) should no longer be used as guards in the concentration camps.<sup>37</sup> *Ersatz* units were reserve units in which recruits and convalescents were stationed until they were sent to their units. Himmler's order also applied to the Danes in the *Ersatz* unit of *Frikorps Danmark*. For unknown reasons the order was never implemented, and SS soldiers from all parts of Europe continued to be attached to the camps throughout the war. Implemented or not, it is interesting that this order came at a time when decisions about the *Endlösung*, the total physical eradication of the Jews, were moving in a direction that located the actual extermination process within the concentration camps system. In December 1941 the first experiments were performed using mobile gas chambers in the Chelmno extermination camp. Shortly afterwards, in the beginning of January 1942, the first extensive killings began using Zyklon-B gas in stationary

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<sup>35</sup> This has been documented for the *Totenkopf* and *Wiking* Divisions by Charles W. Sydnor in his book on this Division. Sydnor op. cit., pp. 9, 467, and 475. The notorious Dr. Mengele, infamous for his medical experiments in Auschwitz was for a period a frontline physician in the *Wiking* Division. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, Basic Books, 1986, p. 340.

<sup>36</sup> Karyn, Miroslav "Waffen SS und Konzentrationslager" in *Jahrbuch für Geschichte*, Band 33, 1987 (East Berlin), p. 247.

<sup>37</sup> Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg, Germany, N756/234SS Führungsamt to all Ersatz units November 17, 1941.

chambers in Auschwitz.<sup>38</sup> The highest-ranking Danes in the concentration camp system did not come from the ranks of the *Waffen SS* however. A Danish *Hauptsturmführer*, Dr. Armand Langermann, served from summer 1941 to summer 1943 as chief veterinarian in the Auschwitz extermination camp complex. Another Dane, the doctor Carl Værnet, was among the doctors in Nazi service who conducted medical experiments on inmates in the camps. During autumn 1944 in the Buchenwald concentration camp Værnet implanted an artificial "sexual gland" in 15 homosexual or effeminate male inmates in order "to cure them" from their "wrong" sexuality. The experiments were authorized by Himmler personally. Though some of the prisoners submitted to Værnets "treatment" died, Værnet managed to avoid a post-war trial, despite undergoing short internment and investigation by the Danish authorities.<sup>39</sup> Danish court material related to the punishment of former SS volunteers after the war is one of the primary sources on the Danish volunteers' relationship to the concentration camps. During their court hearings some of the volunteers reported that they had served in the camps, but the prosecution rarely explored the matter further. The issue was largely ignored until the 1990s. In the authors' review of 625 city court cases, 10 volunteers were found who had admitted to the authorities that they had been attached to a concentration camp for some period of time.<sup>40</sup> Assuming that this percentage can be applied to the total number of Danish volunteers, around 100 Danes did service in such places. Most likely this underestimates the true number, as the accused would hardly have found it expedient to talk about their participation in concentration camp work.

The 10 volunteers who talked about this part of their *Waffen SS* service had been attached to different camps. Four had served in Neuengamme, four in Dachau, and one in Sachsenhausen, while the last one said he had

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<sup>38</sup> Yahil, op. cit. pp. 365ff.

<sup>39</sup> Dlugoborski, Waclaw and Franciszek Piper (eds.), "*Auschwitz 1940-1945.*" *Studien zur Geschichte des Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslagers Auschwitz*, volume 1, Verlag des Staatlichen Museums Auschwitz-Birkenau 1999, pp. 315-316; Nielsen, Hans Davidsen et. al., *Værnet: Den danske SS-læge i Buchenwald*, JP Bøger 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigsadvokaten, 1349, Domsudskrifter *Waffen SS*. See also Tamm, op. cit., p. 641, Nielsen, Hans Davidsen, "Konfrontationen med Kohud", *Weekendavisen*, August 8-14, 1997.

been a guard at a concentration camp at Sennheim in Elsass. In other words, none of these volunteers had been in any of the extermination camps.<sup>41</sup> Not much is known about what tasks the Danes performed in these camps. Most of them insisted that they had worked as cooks or had other more or less innocent jobs. It is doubtful that this is true in all cases. The admissions from the volunteers came out during court proceedings against them and revelations about participation in executions and the like would not have helped their cases.

While little information is available about the nature of most of the Danish concentration guards' work, a few cases involving Danish concentration guards were investigated more in-depth by British military courts. In March 1947, in the so-called Fifth Bergen-Belsen process, a British military court sentenced a 39-year-old Danish *Waffen SS* volunteer from the German minority in Southern Jutland to death. He had headed the guards in the Aussenkommando Wilhelmshaven-Banterweg concentration camp in Northwest Germany in the winter and spring of 1945. His atrocities culminated with him leading a death march of prisoners from this camp to Bergen-Belsen. During the march in early April 1945 most of the 200 prisoners under his command died from malnutrition, diseases, and exhaustion. Upon arrival to Lüneburg close to Bergen-Belsen the fittest prisoners were admitted into the camp while the Danish guard presided over the shooting of the remaining 52 prisoners "to avoid spreading typhus". He personally shot 6 prisoners. In addition, during his time as a guard from November 1944, he tortured and mistreated inmates on a number of occasions.<sup>42</sup>

Himmler's order, cf. above, indicates that transfers to concentration camp service often took place when the volunteers were stationed in *Ersatz* units. On February 5, 1942, for example, the SS Hauptamt informed Himmler's staff office of a number of transfers within the *Ersatz* system. Out of 4,948 soldiers from these units, 202 men had been transferred to

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<sup>41</sup> The volunteers came from the following units: Division *Totenkopf* (3), Division *Wiking* (2), Division *Das Reich* (1), *Frikorps Danmark* (1), unknown unit (3).

<sup>42</sup> Danish National Archives, Udenrigsministeriets arkiv, 87G 5/212.

service in a number of different camps, including Dachau and Auschwitz.<sup>43</sup>

Even though it was the general policy to return soldiers to their original companies, it was a convenient time to shuffle the men around when they were stationed behind the front in *Ersatz* units with no particular duties. Similarly, in many instances soldiers were directed out to do "odd jobs". This happened, for example, during the brutal crushing of the Jewish revolt in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, where troops from the *Waffen SS Ersatz* units stationed in the town were involved.<sup>44</sup>

During the fall of 1942, when the *Ersatz* company of *Frikorps Danmark* was stationed in Bobruisk behind the front in north-west Russia, it was assigned to guard duty with a work command of Byelorussian Jews. According to an interview with a former volunteer in the *Ersatz* company he personally experienced the following:

*Further away [from the barracks of the Ersatz company] was a KZ-department [i.e. a concentration camp] for Jews, and we were assigned to guard them – I'll never forget it. There were 300 Jews in a wooden hut, they were hardly given any firewood, and as it froze between 40 and 50 degrees during the night, it was fortunate for them that they slept closely together. The food they were provided was barely edible and fierce dogs were watching them. We had duty one week at a time and one night I was given duty between 4 and 8 in the morning. As I walked along the perimeter of the KZ camp, I noted a glade between the pines, and I approached it. A big hole had been dug – I lit it up with my flashlight – it was a mass grave in which the dead were piled up. ... All were killed with shots in the head – 40 ragged bodies.<sup>45</sup>*

There are at least two other accounts in which volunteers who had served in *Frikorps Danmark* confirmed this, though without ever mentioning that the Danes did guard duty. In one of these cases a former volunteer recalled during his court hearing what he had seen (presuma-

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<sup>43</sup> Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, Germany, NS19/3519, SS Hauptamt to Himmler February 5, 1942.

<sup>44</sup> Stein op. cit, p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> Rasmussen, Vagn, *Krigsskæbner*, Margit 1995, pp. 42f.

bly) in Bobruisk: "Beside the camp he saw two mass graves, filled with the naked bodies of murdered Jews from a Jewish concentration camp."<sup>46</sup> According to the interview quoted above, not only did the Danish volunteers guard the camp, some of them also experienced an execution of six Jews, and at least on one occasion did a Danish guard kill one of the Jews with his rifle butt – allegedly out of mercy.<sup>47</sup>

### **Reasons for transferring frontline personnel**

Many of the volunteers transferred to serve in the concentration camps were former wounded who had minor disabilities and were found unsuited for actual service on the frontlines. In July 1944 a former *Frikorps* soldier wrote to German army headquarters in Denmark seeking employment in Denmark. He applied for a position as a guard and attached a *curriculum vitae* in which he related that he had experience with guard work. After being wounded during the corps' first assignment in Demyansk, he had served as a guard in the Dachau concentration camp.<sup>48</sup> This was also how the above-mentioned Danish guard from the Bergen-Belsen trial entered the concentration camp system. Doing front service in the *Waffen SS* in 1941-42 he was seriously wounded and was hospitalized for 2 years in German military hospitals. Upon release he was seconded to the concentration camp system.<sup>49</sup>

J.G., who was attached to the *Totenkopf Division*, describes how transfers like these could take place. J.G. was wounded by a sniper and returned to his company after his convalescence. However, he was still not fit enough to take part in the fighting at the front and was initially offered a position in Copenhagen. He refused this and asked instead to be released from service in the *Waffen SS*. His request was denied. However, J.G. was offered a different type of service, the nature of which he did not really understand. An officer with a conscience warned him: "Then he said, 'You know what J.G., you're from Denmark, you aren't suited to go

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<sup>46</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigspolitiet 1349, Domsudskrifter *Waffen SS*, Kolding, 140/1945.

<sup>47</sup> Rasmussen op. cit. 1995, p. 43.

<sup>48</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigspolitiet, Centralkartoteket, Bovruparkivet, B.641, Dagmarhus ansøgning, July, 1941.

<sup>49</sup> Danish National Archives, Udenrigsministeriets arkiv, 87G 5/212.

there.' So I said, 'What is it?' Then he said, 'I can't tell you, but don't do it.' I later found out that it was a concentration camp.<sup>50</sup>

Although it is impossible to establish with certainty whether it was actually service in a concentration camp that J.G. was offered, there is little doubt that it was often in cases like this that a direct connection between the volunteers and the Holocaust was established.

Despite the connection between the *Waffen SS* and the camps there was not a complete amalgamation. Of the many soldiers who served in the *Waffen SS* only a minority ended up serving in the camps, but presumably Danish volunteers numbered about 100 among them.<sup>51</sup>

#### **Extermination of civilians**

In addition to the Danes who served in the concentration camps, another group begs mentioning in this context, namely the Danes attached to units in the *Waffen SS* whose primary job was to kill civilians in the field. While there are no well-documented examples of Danes who served in the regular *Einsatz* groups<sup>52</sup>, it is well established that some were attached to units whose activities were, in reality, the same. This is true, for example, of the two Danes stationed in the so-called *Dirlewanger Brigade*.<sup>53</sup> This unit, which was one of the most bizarre and sinister units of the Second World War, was established in 1940 and originally recruited poachers and other prisoners from jails and concentration camps. During the war with the Soviet Union the unit began to enlist primarily soldiers who had been convicted in military courts. Some 10-15 percent of these

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with J.G. conducted by the authors 1995.

<sup>51</sup> Danes have also been claimed to have been among the guards of the Kaunas ghetto, see Zingeris, Emanuelis (ed.), *The Days of Memory*, Baltos Lankos 1995, p. 510.

<sup>52</sup> A possible exception could be a person with the very Danish sounding name Iver Jensen, who was assigned to *Einsatz* group A in Latvia from the *Waffen SS*. However, this name can also be found south of the Danish-German border. See Ezergailis, Andrew, *The Holocaust in Latvia 1941-1944*, The Historical Institute of Latvia 1996, Appendix 2. German and Latvian SD in Latvia, p. 381ff. Furthermore, the Danish tabloid journalist Erik Haaest claims to bring an interview with a former member of an *Einsatz* group in his semi-documentary book *Frikorpsfolk*, Bogan 1995, pp. 88ff.

<sup>53</sup> Danish National Archives, HS16, files of Danish POWs in Soviet custody during and after WWII.



came from the *Waffen SS*, while the rest came from the army, the air force, and the navy, or from concentration camps. The brigade was only rarely involved in normal military activities. It typically took part in massacres of civilians behind the front, often with such bestiality that even the SS filed complaints over the unit's misdeeds. How the two Danes ended up in the *Dirlewanger Brigade* remains unknown, but the most plausible explanation is that they were found guilty of some crime or other committed in another *Waffen SS* unit and were then enrolled in the brigade.<sup>54</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> SS Brigade was a significantly larger unit than the *Dirlewanger Brigade*, but it basically carried out the same types of tasks.<sup>55</sup> Shortly after the start of Operation Barbarossa, the unit was involved in the extermination of Jews in Russia. The 1<sup>st</sup> SS Brigade continued performing such activities up until 1943. The unit included an unknown number of Danes. In April 1942 Himmler ordered those volunteers from the German minority in Denmark who did not meet the physical requirements for enlistment in the *Waffen SS* divisions sent to the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Brigade.<sup>56</sup> How closely this order was observed is not known, but it was more than just rank-and-file volunteers from the German minority that joined the brigade. Shortly after Operation Barbarossa began three Danish officers were sent from the SS officer school in Bad Tölz to the brigade where they were to function as observers. The three were Knud Børge Martinson, the later commander of *Frikorps Danmark*, and officers Poul Ranzow Engelhardt and Bent Worsøe-Larsen. All three were stationed with the brigade from June 30 until August 25, 1941. Thus, they were present in the brigade while it was deeply involved in murder and brutalities against innocent civilians. From the entry into the Soviet Union on July 27 and up until the departure of the three officers, the brigade's war diary testified to daily shootings of Jews and alleged communists. For example, on August 4 the 10<sup>th</sup> SS Infantry Regiment's third battalion, where Ranzow Engelhardt was stationed, shot 732 Jewish men and 225 Jewish

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<sup>54</sup> On the Dirlewanger Brigade see MacLean, French, *The Cruel Hunters: SS-Sonderkommando Dirlewanger*, Schiffer Military History 1998.

<sup>55</sup> See Boll op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> *Beretning til folketinget afgivet af den af tinget under 8. Januar 1948 nedsatte kommission i henhold til grundlovens § 45*, J.H. Schultz A/S Universitetsbogtrykkeri, 1950, XIV, vol. 1, p. 407.

women in the town of Ostrog. Given the limited size of the unit and the extent of its murdering, it is very unlikely that the three officers failed to get the clear impression that one of its most important tasks was to capture and execute Jews and communists.<sup>57</sup> In this way some of the senior officers among the Danish volunteers were schooled by the SS system.

It is an open question whether or not Danish volunteers were among the soldiers from *Division Wiking*, which assisted in the extermination of the Jews in Western Ukraine in the summer of 1941. According to statements from captured German soldiers to Soviet interrogators the division on several occasions participated in the killing of Jews.<sup>58</sup> The core of these statements are confirmed by a British interception report of a radio message from *Einsatz* group C, in which the group emphasized that it had received assistance in killing actions against Ukrainian Jews from Norwegian and Flemish volunteers, which by all accounts come from *Division Wiking*. During a visit to the Swedish embassy in Berlin in October 1941, two Swedish SS-soldiers reported that the soldiers in the division treated its prisoners with utmost brutality and they further revealed solid knowledge of the killing of the Soviet Jews. During the visit they told the Swedish defence attaché that,

*...prisoners were seldom taken by the Waffen SS. Unless they surrendered in greater number than company size they would be shot on the spot. The prisoners were treated harshly and were moved forward by kicks and beatings. 'Flintenweiber' [female soldiers] were killed instantly. The SS was not alone in doing this, so did the Wehrmacht; the exception being that there Jews were not immediately singled out for execution. ... In the occupied areas so-called 'SS Son-*

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<sup>57</sup> Berlin Document Centre, file no. 6400035225 P. R. Engelhardt and file no. 6400050813 B. Worsøe-Larsen. The Royal Library, Copenhagen, HS 4705, P.R. Engelhardt, vol. 1, section B, "Min første fægtning med Vaaben SS". On the activities of 1st SS Brigade see a reprint of its war diary in *Unsere Ehre heisst Treue – Kriegstagebuch des Kommandostabes Reichsführer SS. Tätigkeitsberichte der 1. Und 2. SS Inf-Brigade, der 1. SS-Kav-Brigade und von Sonderkommandos der SS*, Europa Verlag, 1965.

<sup>58</sup> For the pitfalls and possibilities concerning Soviet interrogation reports see Poulsen, Niels Bo, "German POW Statements in the Files of the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission as a Source to the Holocaust and other German Mass Killing Actions in the Soviet Union 1941-1945", in the forthcoming conference proceedings from IV Scientific Conference on The Lessons of the Holocaust and Modern Russia, Moscow, October 2002.

*derkommandos' were willingly informed by the civilian population about who were Jews, upon which they would later execute even women and children.*<sup>59</sup>

In evaluating the relevance of these sources for the 216 Danes serving in *Wiking* on the eve of Operation Barbarossa, it should be noted that *Wiking's* companies mixed Danes, Swedes and Norwegians. There might therefore also have been Danes involved, although this cannot be confirmed from the existing sources.

As mentioned above, many Danish volunteers were ideologically prepared for the genocidal implications of the war against the Soviet Union. A letter from the later *Frikorps Danmark* commander von Schalburg, dated August 25, 1941 when he served in *Division Wiking*, suggests that he at least was not a stranger to the idea of a physical elimination of the Jews.

*The Jewish rule in the Soviet was far greater than even I believed. The population hates the Jews more than Aage H. Andersen himself could dream of [editor of the Danish anti-Semitic newspaper, 'Kamptegnet']. These people just remind me very much of V. [presumably one of Von Schalburg's acquaintances]. They are so damned passive, despite all their hate. Many lives would have been saved, most of all their own, if they cut down the Jews before they fled from us. I think that that will come.*<sup>60</sup>

Later the same year another Danish volunteer from the same division similarly indicated that the extermination of the Jews was on the agenda:

*The Russians are sorry to fight, since they are beginning to work out that they are being filled with lies. It's unbelievable what the damned Jews have told them. They think that the SS soldiers have steel plates under their uniforms. Yes, we'll eradicate these Jews from the surface of the earth, because while there are Jews,*

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<sup>59</sup> Westberg, Lennart, "Svenska frivilliga i tyska *Waffen SS* 1941-1945" in *Meddelande XXXXV-XXXXVI Armemuseum*. See also Bosse Schön, *Svenskarna som stred för Hitler*, Mån-pocket, 2000, for a recent and somewhat popular account of the approximately 260 Swedes in the *Waffen SS*.

<sup>60</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigspolitiet, Centralkartoteket, Bovruparkivet, B.269, extract of a letter from von Schalburg to his wife, August 25, 1941.

*there is also war. Now, I can imagine that some who would say that the Jews are humans too. My answer would be that rats are also animals.*<sup>61</sup>

A year and a half later the Danish soldier returned to the same theme and was even more explicit this time: "Yes, the fighting is hard and bitter and tough, but the war must be won and the Jews must be killed."<sup>62</sup>

### **Rounding up the Danish Jews**

Service in concentration camps or participation in executions at the front were not the only ways in which the volunteers were involved in implementing the Nazi racial policy. Danish *Waffen SS* soldiers were also assigned to assist in rounding up the Danish Jews in the autumn of 1943. In an attempt to win popularity in Berlin after the resignation of the Danish government on August 29, 1943 the German plenipotentiary in Denmark, Werner Best, suggested that an initiative be undertaken against the Danish Jews. As a result, deportation of the Danish Jews was approved in late September 1943.

As previously mentioned the result of this deportation attempt is well known: out of more than 7,000 Danish Jews, only 474 were caught by the Germans while the rest escaped across the narrow sound that divides Denmark and Sweden. The unfortunate who were taken by the Germans were mainly transferred to the Theresienstadt concentration camp – a showcase camp – in which many actually survived the war, in contrast to Jews in most other camps. The end result was that around 95 percent of the Danish Jews fled to Sweden, while 53 of the 474 deported died.<sup>63</sup>

The capture of the Danish Jews was to be organized by the SS, which had two police battalions transferred to Denmark for the purpose.<sup>64</sup> The operation began on the night of October 1. A group of Danish volunteers

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<sup>61</sup> Authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers. No. 62, November 10, 1941.

<sup>62</sup> Authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers. No. 62, March 19, 1943.

<sup>63</sup> Kreth and Mogensen, op. cit., p. 11. See also Sode-Madsen, Hans (ed.), *Føreren har befalet*, Samleren 1993.

<sup>64</sup> Kreth and Mogensen, op. cit., p. 14ff. Yahil, 1966, op.cit., p. 136ff.

from the *Waffen SS Regiment Dänemark*, just arrived in Copenhagen on leave, were among those who took part.<sup>65</sup>

This participation can be followed from the diary of the volunteer H.G., who arrived in Copenhagen on September 30, 1943 and was ordered to report to *SS Ersatzkommando Dänemark* – the official office of the *Waffen SS* in Denmark. Here he received orders to meet on the evening of the October 1. There was "something in the air".<sup>66</sup>

On Friday, October 1, about 50 Danish volunteers assembled at the *Waffen SS* headquarters where they were divided into two groups and instructed that they "would be acting as guides during the Jewish operation."<sup>67</sup> The two groups were then sent to German police barracks at two different locations in Copenhagen.<sup>68</sup> Danish SS soldier Henning Emil Brøndum was among those who reinforced the police force. He later became a notorious member of the German terror apparatus in Denmark. After the war, awaiting execution in a Danish prison, he wrote an extensive, yet apologetic and self-justifying description of his experiences in German service. Among other things, he describes his participation in the operation against the Jews. Together with other *Waffen SS* volunteers he arrived at the Police station at Pile Allé in Copenhagen: "*Here we were distributed among the various vehicles as guides. I was assigned to a truck, which was to go to Rungsted and Hørsholm [two towns on the outskirts of Copenhagen], and we had, as best as I can remember, six addresses that we had to search and then detain the residents.*"<sup>69</sup>

It appears from Brøndum's account that a Danish constable also assisted on that October evening in 1943, but it is not known whether he was aware of the nature of their errand. They left Copenhagen early and stopped at the coastguard station near Rungsted harbour.

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<sup>65</sup> Kirchhoff, Hans, "Endlösung over Danmark" in Sode-Madsen (ed), op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>66</sup> Museum of The Danish Resistance 1940-45, FM 20, H.G.'s diary, entry September 30, 1943.

<sup>67</sup> Royal Danish Library, HS 1979/126, Brøndums memoirs, p. 122..

<sup>68</sup> Museum of The Danish Resistance 1940-45, FM 20, H.G.'s diary, entry October 2, 1943..

<sup>69</sup> Royal Danish Library, HS 1979/126, Brøndum's memoirs, p. 122.

*I did not know all these side roads very well, so I went into the police and asked directions. They were extremely polite and helpful, and I was given permission by the acting supervisor to borrow a young constable who knew the area particularly well. When the time came, we started our round with the constable in the front as a guide. There was no-one at home at the first 4 addresses, and since the last two were in Hørsholm, we sent the constable home after he had given us directions.<sup>70</sup>*

Further to the North the group went into action:

*Luck was with us at the first place in Hørsholm. We didn't find the man we sought – who owned the house – but someone else entirely. We found a Jewish family consisting of husband and wife and a son with an Arian wife. The oldest couple were German Jews, and though they tried to bluff initially, they were unable to speak reasonable Danish. While the four people got dressed we searched the house. Every cupboard we opened was overflowing with pre-war goods: tobacco, cigarettes, unsmoked pipes, alcohol, wine, preserves, chocolate – a family of five could easily have lived for a year off the hoard we found there. The Jewess began to talk about her bad heart and showed me powders, pills and medicine bottles, and the man offered me [Danish] kroner 15,000 in cash to let them go (I counted them before I tore them in two).<sup>71</sup>*

After this, the German father tried to arouse the compassion of the SS men by talking about his time as an officer in the German army. But according to Brøndum they could see in his military papers that he had attained his rank as an inspector at a weapons factory. Brøndum was not impressed and showed no sign of compassion:

*That was an odd specimen I had come into the company of. The son, however, took it like a man. He was only concerned about his wife. The first time I asked her she had said she was a Jewess, but when I looked through her papers I found that she was the daughter of a well-known man in Esbjerg, a consul if I remember correctly. Our orders were to detain only 100 percent Jews, so I said that she*

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<sup>70</sup> Royal Danish Library, HS 1979/126, Brøndum's memoirs, p. 122.

<sup>71</sup> Royal Danish Library, HS 1979/126, Brøndum's memoirs, p. 122.

*should not come with us. When she asked to be allowed to stay with her husband as long as possible, we let her come along with us in the truck.*<sup>72</sup>

Then they drove to Langelinie in Copenhagen, where a couple of ships waited to transport the prisoners to Germany. What must have been a gripping scene was now played out, as the married couple from Brøndum's vehicle said goodbye to each other, possibly forever – "the young wife said goodbye to her husband", is all that Brøndum says. He did show the woman some courtesy though, presumably because she was not "fully Jewish". He helped her onto a truck going to Rådhuspladsen (the main square in Copenhagen). After this the papers of those arrested were thoroughly checked again so that only "100 percent Jews" were taken. Finally, he took a last look at the assembled captives waiting to set sail:

*It was quite a mixed group that had been loaded onto the ship. There were types of Jews I had never seen loose in the streets of Copenhagen before, with prayer scrolls and other unusual symbolic adornments. Half of them no doubt originated from some Polish ghetto.*<sup>73</sup>

Among the group of volunteers sent to the police station at Allégade was H.G.:

*We marched in along Vesterbrogade. Having arrived at the barracks we remained in the canteen until 8:30 pm, passing the time drinking beer and liquor. We were then divided into teams, four Germans and one Dane, and each team was given a stack of envelopes with the names and addresses of the Jews who had to be arrested. I was put to work in Strandboulevarden, Bergensgade, and Kristianagade, it was a posh area. But they were all gone, they had caught wind of us and had disappeared in time. My team didn't score. Out of the four teams in the truck, one team scored two old Jewish women from Kastelvejen and a poor tailor from Rügensgade with his wife and 11-12-year-old son. The tram depot on Strandvejen, just before Svanemøllen, was the gathering point to which the prisoners were taken. Then we drove back to the barracks and finished by 6 am.*

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<sup>72</sup> Royal Danish Library, HS 1979/126, Brøndum's memoirs, p. 122.

<sup>73</sup> Royal Danish Library, HS 1979/126, Brøndum's memoirs, p. 122.

*The Jews were allowed to take two blankets, enough food and drink for 3-4 days, and any valuables that they could carry in a suitcase. It wasn't a job I was especially interested in doing, but orders have to be obeyed as long as you are in uniform. According to the rumours the Jews were sent to Danzig.*<sup>74</sup>

A written judgment from the judicial hearings confirms that also Danes from other *Waffen SS* units were used. A volunteer from *Division Wiking* was also on leave at the time of the operation. After the war he explained in court that on October 1 he had been sitting at Fatty's Inn in Vesterbro in Copenhagen when at 2 pm he and "the others" received a call ordering them to present themselves at Jernbanegade at 5 pm "to take part in the operation against the Jews."<sup>75</sup>

It was logical to call in the Danish volunteers since the operation was carried out under the auspices of the SS. The rounding-up of the Danish Jews would not be the last time that volunteers were employed to do various tasks while stationed in their homeland. During the anti German unrest in Copenhagen in summer 1944, the so-called people strike, a Dane from *Division Wiking* was commanded to do guard duty at an SS building in Copenhagen.<sup>76</sup> A soldier from *Regiment Danmark* was involved in a more serious event while on leave on September 19, 1944, when he took part in the arrest of the Danish police. He watched policemen during their transport to Copenhagen harbour. From there the prisoners were sailed to Germany to be interned in concentration camps.<sup>77</sup> A volunteer staying at a field hospital in Vojens in Jutland also took part in the operation against the Danish police. He was used as an interpreter to communicate with the policemen who had been arrested.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Museum of The Danish Resistance 1940-45, FM 20, H.G.'s diary, entry October 2, 1943.

<sup>75</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigspolitiet 1349, Domsudskrifter *Waffen SS*, 132/25/46. See also Sode-Madsen (ed.), op. cit. p. 102.

<sup>76</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigspolitiet 1349, Domsudskrifter *Waffen SS*, Frederiksberg 1. Afd.

<sup>77</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigspolitiet 1349, Domsudskrifter *Waffen SS*, København 22. Afd

<sup>78</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigspolitiet 1349, Domsudskrifter *Waffen SS*, København 22. Afd.



The incidents above show that there was no clear distinction between regular military service and policing in the *Waffen SS*. The volunteers were serving in a criminal organization where the step to participate in various crimes could be a short one.

**How much did they know?**

One of the questions that arise in connection with the Nazi genocide and the volunteers is how much the Danes in the *Waffen SS* knew? This question has often been raised with regard to the German public, although no definitive conclusion has been reached. It is incredibly difficult to give a simple answer to such a complicated issue, and this applies also in the case of the Danish volunteers.

The known examples of Danish volunteers participating in the persecution of Jews and other atrocities in themselves reveal some kind of knowledge of the brutalities that took place. However, these examples apply only to a minority of the total number of Danes in the *Waffen SS*. Analyzing the dissemination and character of the knowledge of the brutalities which took place on the eastern front one should not focus solely on those who committed these acts. Other sources of knowledge include eyewitness accounts and rumours. In October 1941 *Frikorps Danmark* company commander Per Sørensen, writing from Poland, related the following incident to his parents:

*By the way, I heard an amusing story recently, which is typical of SS methods. The bridge over the Warta River just north of the monastery here was blown up during the Polish campaign by Polish civilians. An SS commando quickly rounded up the 300 Poles who lived closest to the bridge and asked whether anyone knew who did it or could help clear up the matter. Nobody answered, whereupon every fifth Pole was shot. When still nobody answered, every third one of those remaining was shot. Then at last one of those remaining forced out an answer. After that, the rest of the 300 were shot.<sup>79</sup>*

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<sup>79</sup> Authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers, letter from Per Sørensen, October 9 1941.

Another widespread rumour about a mass killing carried out by the SS flourished during *Frikorps Danmark's* stay at the above-mentioned barracks in Treskau, Poland. Before the German occupation the barracks, located in a former monastery, had been an institution for physically disabled and mentally ill. During November 1939 the SS in the nearby woods executed approximately 900 out of 1,000 patients and the *Waffen SS* took over the premises.<sup>80</sup> Even two years later, upon the arrival of the *Frikorps*, stories about what had happened to the residents circulated. H.G. wrote in his diary that the 1,200 patients who were at the institution had been taken away by the SS and none of them had been seen again.<sup>81</sup> Per Sørensen gave a more detailed account in a letter to his family: "The barracks here were formerly an institute for idiots, and before that a monastery. Then the Germans moved in here and shot all the idiots and fitted it out as very nice SS barracks."<sup>82</sup>

The rumours spread in this manner, and if at all interested the Danish SS troops had ample opportunity to reflect on how space was cleared for them in Treskau. H.G., in any case, concluded the episode in his diary with the words "of course it really doesn't matter."<sup>83</sup>

Rumours about the experiences and activities of the *Frikorps* at the eastern front even made it all the way to the Danish government. In the autumn of 1942, during a meeting at the highest level (in the so-called Nine-Man Committee), the Danish Minister of Justice, Thune Jakobsen, stated that a member of *Frikorps Danmark* reportedly had taken part in the shooting of 30,000 Jews.<sup>84</sup>

In any case the volunteers gained their first practical impressions of the racist implications of the German occupation politics during their stay in

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<sup>80</sup> Riess, Volker, *Die Anfänge der Vernichtung 'lebensunwerten Lebens' in den Reichsgauen Danzig-Westpreussen und Wartheland 1939/40*, Peter Lang 1995, p. 247ff.

<sup>81</sup> Museum of The Danish Resistance 1940-45, FM 20, HG's diary, entry September 29, 1941.

<sup>82</sup> Authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers, letter from Per Sørensen, September 25, 1941.

<sup>83</sup> Museum of The Danish Resistance 1940-45, FM 20, H.G.'s diary, entry September 29, 1941.

<sup>84</sup> Lund, Joachim, "Lebensraum og kollaboration 1941-43" in *Den jyske historiker* vol. 71, April 1995, p. 25.

Treskau. In September 1941 one dispatch to *Frikorps Danmark* stated that "any social contact with the Jewish or Polish civilian population is absolutely forbidden."<sup>85</sup> This prohibition was made because there was a large number of forced labourers of Jewish and Polish origin in the area where the corps was now stationed. In the beginning of 1941 a reception camp was established near the town of Posen. The Jews waited here to be transferred to the ghetto in Lodz and then eventually to the Chelmno death camp.<sup>86</sup> Obviously the volunteers might not have known the final fate of the prisoners, but many knew of the existence of the reception camps. It is likely that the Jewish and Polish forced labourers who worked around the volunteer corps' barracks came from there. L.L. observed these prisoners during his stay at the barracks: "The Poles were of course marked with a P, front and back. So you could say they were second-class people, and we didn't like that [sic.]. They moved over to the side when we approached, out into the gutter."<sup>87</sup> The letter "P" referred to by L.L. points to the mark that Polish forced labourers had to have sown or painted onto all their clothes.<sup>88</sup>

In Croatia, Danes in *Division Nordland* witnessed and/or participated in several brutal actions and observed the results both of Ustashe methods and the German occupation policies in general. The great majority of Danes in the Balkans must have known about the policy enforced toward the civilian population. However, German brutalities here occurred in a context that undoubtedly led many soldiers into accepting them as retaliations against brutalities committed by the partisans.

Many volunteers also witnessed the persecution of the Jews to a lesser or greater extent. Of course this has already been established, since some did service in concentration camps, but the most common confrontations with persecution happened by chance while travelling or while stationed

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<sup>85</sup> Danish National Archives, Rigspolitiet, Centralkartoteket, Bovruparkivet, B.619, *Frikorps Dagsbefaling*, 16.9.1941.

<sup>86</sup> Schwarz, Gudrun, *Die nationalsozialistischen Lager*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1996, p. 143.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with L.L. conducted by the authors 1995.

<sup>88</sup> Burleigh, Michael and Wolfgang Wipperman, *The Racial State. Germany 1933-1945*, Cambridge University Press 1994, 4<sup>th</sup>. Ed., p. 299.

in barracks. B.R. remembers the following episode from his way to the front with his *Regiment*:

*The train stopped beside a concentration camp. I can't remember which one it was. I am not sure, but I think it might have been Auschwitz. Anyway, there were a couple of prisoners lying between the train and an open gate with a sign saying, 'Arbeit macht Frei'. I looked down at them and threw them down a packet of cigarettes. I thought, 'those poor, frail people'.<sup>89</sup>*

B.R. got in trouble over the episode and a German officer threatened that he might end up in the camp himself. This was not the first time B.R. was confronted with these aspects of Nazism in practice. On the training ground in Grafenwöhr he saw the conditions under which a group of Russian prisoners of war were confined. "I would rather have bitten myself to death than lived in there", was B.R.'s comment to their living conditions.<sup>90</sup>

Apparently B.R. was upset when he observed such things. Another soldier in barracks near a concentration camp expressed relief in a letter home that his unit did not have to serve there: "Things are pretty boring here in Oranienburg. We are right beside a concentration camp, but luckily we don't have anything to do with it."<sup>91</sup>

A private who was attached to a *Waffen SS* medical platoon in Poland was not very happy either about staying near a concentration camp. In a letter to his wife he talked about his first night on duty: "It could have been a lovely night, but the sinister atmosphere surrounding the prison camp suppresses one's mood."<sup>92</sup>

In these few lines the two writers express a certain horror over their encounter with the camps, but we do not know how much concrete

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with B.R. conducted by the authors 1995.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with B.R. conducted by the authors 1995.

<sup>91</sup> Authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers. No. 9, September 14, 1941.

<sup>92</sup> Royal Danish Library, HS 474, letter from a Danish volunteer in SS Röntgen Sturmabteilung, May 26, 1943.

knowledge they possessed about what was happening behind the fences. As already mentioned the guard duty in Bobruisk by the *Ersatz* company of the *Frikorps* implies that a substantial number of the men got an insight into Jewish life on the verge of destruction. As recalled by another volunteer in his reminiscences:

*In the [Ersatz unit] camp I had the opportunity to see one branch of the Germans' Jewish camps which later became so infamous. It was, by the way, the only one of that kind of thing which I have seen in my life, and I can't deny that I felt sorry for these people. Personally, I am against Jews since in my opinion they are a kind of parasite on the nations which host them; but I am absolutely opposed to their treatment by the Germans. You can't first weaken a person with hunger and then afterwards beat them half to death because they can't work. In my view, it would have been more humane if the Germans had shot them immediately. The way these people were mistreated is unforgivable.*<sup>93</sup>

His reaction to the brutalities he witnessed is interesting. Despite his open anti-Semitism he viewed the treatment of the prisoners as repugnant. In this case it might be discounted as a post-war adjustment of his feelings, but similar reactions also appear in contemporary letters and diaries. H.G., the diary writer, reacted in a fairly similar way in the winter of 1941 when he observed how six Jews doing gardening work in the front of the residence of the *Frikorps Danmark* commander in Treskau were beaten by a German soldier. He wrote in his diary that he certainly did not like Jews, but even so: "I don't think they should be subjected to abuse by a lousy *Sturmmann*."

The next day he made further comments about the German soldier's actions: "One of the 'star of David' wearers died during the night and another walked past the barracks this morning with his face all bloodied and beaten. The *Sturmmann* says he should manage to kill them all before the New Year."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Authors' own collection of memoirs by former SS soldiers, H.H.'s memoirs p. 77.

<sup>94</sup> Museum of The Danish Resistance 1940-45, FM 20, H.G.'s diary, entry November 28-29, 1941.

Such statements do not appear to imply that the SS soldiers objected in principle to "a radical solution to the Jewish question" as such. They might simply have been appalled by individual acts of sadism and abuse. Others, such as a *Frikorps Danmark* company commander, explicitly consented to the treatment of the Jews. In a letter to a friend in the DNSAP from the barracks in Treskau he writes: "I have seen a lot of things and, if nothing else, I could give a great talk on how the Jews should be treated."<sup>95</sup>

A soldier attached to *Division Wiking* was not overcome by compassion either when he encountered Jewish slave work during a stay in Poland. In a letter dated April 13, 1942 he writes: "Dear all, We are nearing the front now. We have to wade through thousands of Jews, but we treat them as we see fit. They work all day under a heavy hand. Yesterday they came here to clean and you should have seen how we harried them."<sup>96</sup>

In the autumn of 1942 another volunteer passed through the Polish town of Lublin, which had a large Jewish population. The idea of copying the treatment of the Polish Jews to Denmark appealed to him:

*You can't possibly imagine how nice it is to see a Jew working, not with money that is, but with a pick and shovel. I have to admit, though, that it costs us a great deal of effort to teach them, but learn they do, and that's the most important thing. And the Danish Jews will learn too, I guarantee it (...) when we finally come home we will be such able teachers that we will be able to teach even the most stupid and lazy Jew to become a conscientious worker. They have come so far that they can produce the stars they have to wear themselves, and then after that they can put up the barbwire fence around the concentration camp themselves, and build the barracks where they are going to sleep.*<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Provincial archives of Zealand, Lolland-Falster & Bornholm, Københavns Byret, 24. Afd., no. 31/1945, Frits Clausen, pk.14, letter dated May 28, 1942.

<sup>96</sup> Authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers. No. 7, April 3, 1942.

<sup>97</sup> Authors' own collection of copies of letters from Danish volunteers. No. 62, October 20, 1942.

Evidently the Danes were able to observe during their stays in barracks in various places the terrible conditions the Jews were subjected to. We find yet another example in *Division Totenkopf's Ersatz* unit, which was stationed in Warsaw in Poland for a prolonged period. There were many Danes in this division, most of them coming from the German minority in the south of Jutland. During their stay these troops could hardly avoid learning about the city's large ghetto where the inhabitants lived in desperate conditions. This is confirmed by J.G. who was attached to the division. One day, when he was going for a walk with a fellow soldier, the following occurred:

*We suddenly discovered there was a ghetto, a Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. We walked around and had a look. There were clothes hanging out of the windows and there was barbed wire around the walls. There was someone standing there half-dressed in an SS uniform. It was Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. They did guard duty in the ghetto. The following Sunday we went down there and had another look. We saw the same clothes hanging there again. So we said to one of them, 'I think those are the same clothes hanging there'. They answered in broken German, 'Ja, sie rauskommen, wir schiessen'.<sup>98</sup>*

When J.G. returned to Warsaw later in the war the ghetto had been cleared.

These kinds of experiences are not an indication that the soldiers possessed detailed knowledge of the full scope of the Jewish extermination. It is also doubtful that many knew of the existence of gas chambers or the systematic way in which the murders were carried out. The SS tried to hide the scope of the genocide, especially from the world around them, but also from the soldiers on the front. One should therefore be careful not to judge the volunteers' observation of individual episodes with the knowledge that the world gained after the fall of the Third Reich – that is, that there was a systematic extermination of all the European Jews. On the other hand it is quite unlikely, for example, that the Danish officers participating as observers in the 1<sup>st</sup> SS brigade failed to get the clear impression that what was happening was part of a large-scale attempt to

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with J.G. conducted by the authors 1995.

kill at least the Soviet Jews. All in all there are many accounts that bear witness to the fact that Danish volunteers gained insight into significant aspects of the Third Reich's crimes against humanity. Not all reacted with outright support or mere acceptance, but as shown above knowledge of large-scale atrocities taking place at the eastern front was common knowledge among the soldiers.

The soldiers were also affected by the results of the Holocaust in another way, indirectly and presumably entirely without their knowledge. A sinister document bears witness to this. In December 1944 the concentration camp in Oranienburg passed on information that they had more than 27,000 watches in the camp's stores. Himmler therefore decreed that these watches be distributed to the *Waffen SS* divisions. They were to be given primarily to snipers and to soldiers who had distinguished themselves in the destruction of enemy tanks. *Division Nordland* was not left out. The gifts distributed among the soldiers in the division included 750 pocket watches, 115 alarm clocks and 140 wristwatches. In this bizarre and sinister way some of the volunteers received a share in the stolen property left behind after the victims.<sup>99</sup>

#### **Ordinary Danes or inflamed Nazis?**

For an assessment of the relationship between the actions of various Danish SS soldiers described above, their motives, and the overall correspondence to the Danish population in general, it should first of all be recalled that the Danish *Waffen SS* soldiers were volunteers and not drafted soldiers. In a political sense then, the volunteers differed significantly from Danish society as a whole. The Nazi movement never commanded more than a few percent of the voters and was completely marginalized during the war. While many other motives besides Nazi ideology also contributed, it is safe to claim that a majority of the volunteers did share overall goals and values with the Nazi organization they served. Still, the men did not volunteer in order to become concentration

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<sup>99</sup> National Archives, Washington, Microcopies, T.175, reel 74, p. 591845ff. Betr. Uhren Verteilung an Angehörige der Waffen DD, 29. November, 1944. See also Sydnor, op. cit., p. 332 concerning the distribution in the *Totenkopf* Division in May 1943 of 500 watches from Auschwitz.



camp guards or assist the *Einsatz* groups. Upon volunteering they would most probably have had a fairly blurred vision of their future duty.

While the sources do not allow us to pinpoint the exact relationship between ideological outlook and deeds, it is striking that quite a number of volunteers in letters and diaries interpreted and justified their experiences and actions in the *Waffen SS* by reference to Nazi ideology. In January 1942 for example, the Danish head veterinarian in Auschwitz asked through his wife to receive the most notoriously anti-Semitic and radical of all Danish Nazi newspapers, *Kamptegnet*, in the camp.<sup>100</sup>

Still, criminological and psychological studies after the war documented that the former Danish *Waffen SS* volunteers did not differ significantly from the general Danish population. They were not psychopaths or criminals, and they represented a reasonably broad spectrum of professions and social groups.<sup>101</sup> Only a low percentage of the former volunteers returned to the prison system after serving their sentence for treason ("*landssvigeri*") and most reintegrated fairly well into society. In this sense the Danish volunteers resembled the "ordinary men" from a German working-class background in 101 Police Battalion, who dispassionately participated in mass murder in Poland, as portrayed by Christopher Browning.<sup>102</sup>

As mentioned above, while the *Ersatz* company guarded Jews in Bobruisk, the rest of *Frikorps Danmark* was destined to assist 1st SS Brigade in clearing the woods and swamps of Byelorussia of fleeing Jews, suspicious locals, and alleged partisans. In a number of large-scale operations in this area the brigade killed thousands of innocent civilians and sent others to Germany for slave labour and confiscated their livestock and property.<sup>103</sup> Only the incidental need for fresh troops at the front saved the men in *Frikorps Danmark* from participating in this full-scale genocide. All evidence indicates that if they had been sent out to kill women and

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<sup>100</sup> Danish National Archives, Dansk Antijødisk Liga, box 22, letter 15.1.1942.

<sup>101</sup> *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, p. 31.

<sup>102</sup> Browning, Christopher, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, Harper Perennial 1998.

<sup>103</sup> *Under hagekors og Dannebrog*, pp. 267-277.

children in large-scale actions, the Danish volunteers would have "done their duty". They were not only "ordinary men" but also soldiers in the *Waffen SS*.

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## **The King and the Star Myths created during the Occupation of Denmark**

Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson

Every now and then the pleasantly edifying tale of the popular King Christian X of Denmark and his alleged use of the Yellow Star of David during World War II is revived. In June 2001 some members of The House of Representatives in the United States Congress honored King Christian for his morning horseback rides through the streets of Copenhagen wearing a yellow armband. The occasion for this latest revival of the myth was a decision in 2001 by the former Taliban terror regime of Afghanistan to order Hindus and others to wear a yellow badge to distinguish them from Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

As most Danes know, the story of the King and the Star is a myth. Usually the story is denounced as fiction, as it is thought to have been put into circulation after the escape of the Danish Jews to Sweden in 1943.<sup>2</sup> While no one really knew when it was first circulated, it has also proven impossible to lay this myth to rest.

### **Exodus**

Perhaps the most important reason for the persistence of the myth is that it appeared in the widely read novel *Exodus* (1958) by Leon Uris. It also appeared in the screen version of the book from 1960:

*From the German occupation headquarters at the Hotel D'Angleterre came the decree: ALL JEWS MUST WEAR A YELLOW ARMBAND WITH A STAR OF DAVID. That night the underground transmitted a message to all Danes.*

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<sup>1</sup> Congressman Gary Ackerman, U.S. House of Representatives. *Ackerman's Statement on International Relations Mark-up, Statement by Mr. Ackerman 6-6-01. H.Con.Res. 145, Condemning The Recent Order by the Taliban Regime to Require Hindus in Afghanistan to wear Symbols identifying them as Hindus.* See: <http://www.house.gov/ackerman/press/taliban.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Danish historian Lone Rünitz commented on the statement from the House of Representatives to the Danish press agency *Ritzau*, stating that the myth about the King and the Star originated from the US. *Ritzau Bureau News* release number 20010609: RTZ: 2939 of June 8, 2001. The news release was for some reason entitled "USA hædrer Christian X for jødeskrøne" which reads "USA honors Christian X for a Jewish cock-and -bull story".

*From Amalienborg Palace, King Christian has given the following answer to the German command that Jews must wear a Star of David. The King has said that one Dane is exactly the same as the next Dane. He himself will wear the first Star of David and he expects that every loyal Dane will do the same. The next day in Copenhagen, almost the entire population wore armbands showing a Star of David. The following day the Germans rescinded the order.*<sup>3</sup>

### **Mention of the tale in 1943**

A version of the tale about the King and the Star became widely known in October 1943. An article by the Danish minister (ambassador) to the United States released by the *Independent Jewish Press Services, Inc.* appeared in a full or an abridged version in several American newspapers and magazines in 1943. *The Jewish Ledger* of Springfield, Massachusetts, published the article on October 12, 1943. Ambassador Henrik von Kauffmann, on this occasion using the name Henrik *de* Kauffmann, wrote:

*Instances are familiar of King Christian X's uncompromising manner and dignified bearing toward the German aggressors. Some of those instances relate to the King's response to the Nazi insistence upon introducing their anti-Semitic measures in Denmark. Thus, on one occasion his answer was: "We Danes do not consider ourselves inferior to the Jews; therefore, we do not have any Jewish problem in Denmark." .... And most recently, after the introduction of German military dictatorship in Denmark and their rounding up of Danish Jews, the King is reported to have declared: "If Jews in Denmark are required to wear a yellow badge, I and the Royal Family will also wear it as a sign of distinction."*<sup>4</sup>

On October 13, 1943 the London daily, *Evening Standard*, reported:

*A NOBLE voice comes out of Nazi-occupied Denmark, a voice of tolerance and defiance, and of faith in humanity. "If the Germans want to introduce the Yellow Star for Jews in Denmark," announces King Christian, "I and my whole family will wear it as a sign of the highest distinction" ..... King Christian makes no*

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<sup>3</sup> Uris, Leon, *Exodus*, Garden City 1958, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> WL: Wiener Library, London: Microfilm PC 6; Reel 156: *Jews in World War II. 2D.1 Denmark.*

*empty gesture. His brave defiance expresses the call of conscience that humanity should be degraded no longer by crimes committed in the name of a false race theory and a wicked creed. Those Jews who perished in Warsaw, fighting Nazi panzers to the last, converted the Ghetto into a fortress. Now Denmark's King converts the Yellow star into a flame.*<sup>5</sup>

*The American Jewish Committee's Bulletin Review of the Yiddish Press No 14 of October 15, 1943 reported the great interest shown by the Yiddish press in America on the rescue of the Danish Jews:*

*Particular prominence was given to the Stockholm dispatch that King Christian of Denmark, when informed of the German intention to force every remaining Danish Jew to wear a yellow Star of David on his sleeve, said: "If the Germans want to introduce the yellow Star of David in Denmark I and my whole family will wear it as a sign of the highest distinction."*<sup>6</sup>

From the above quotations it is clear that the story was already well known on both sides of the Atlantic in October 1943. This means that the myth may have been put into circulation during or immediately after the rescue of the greater part of the Jewish community of Denmark when they were sailed to Sweden in October 1943. However this was not the case. But when was the myth really created?

#### **The real origin of the myth**

Already in 1942 the story of the King and the yellow star was in circulation. On September 4, 1942 *The Jewish Telegraphic Agency* in London released the following news, which caught the attention of a large number of readers:

*The full story of the part played by King Christian of Denmark when the Danish Government rejected the German demand for the introduction of the anti-Jewish legislation in Denmark, has just reached Free Danish circles here from a reliable source. According to this report the King, when he learned that anti-Jewish measures were threatened said: "There is no Jewish question in this country.*

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<sup>5</sup> WL: Microfilm PC 6; Reel 156: *Jews in World War II. 2D.1 Denmark.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



*There is only my people"..... When the King was told the Germans were going to press for the introduction of the Yellow Badge for Jews, he declared: "When this happens, I shall wear the Yellow Star on my uniform in public and I shall order the entire Royal household to follow my example."*<sup>7</sup>

It has previously been argued that the source of the myth was a cartoon, which might have appeared in a Swedish newspaper in 1942. On May 15, 1942 the Danish Listening Post (see below) reported the appearance of such a cartoon without citing the newspaper in which it appeared.<sup>8</sup> Though the report on the cartoon and the cartoon itself seemingly were not published in any allied newspapers and thus never became known to the general public, the story and the myth about the King and the Star were now on their way.<sup>9</sup>

There is no doubt about the Danish/Scandinavian origins of the tale of the yellow star and the Danish King which later evolved into the story of the King riding around Copenhagen proudly wearing the yellow star or a yellow armband. It first appeared at least a year before the rescue of the Danish Jews in 1943 and was not triggered by that event, contrary to what many scholars believed.

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<sup>7</sup> WL: Microfilm PC 6, Reel 156. *Jews in World War II. 2D Denmark and Norway General: Press release entitled: Danish King's Reaction to German Demand for Anti-Jewish Legislation in Denmark; Snubs Germans By Paying Ceremonial Visit to Synagogue.* London.

<sup>8</sup> *The Danish Listening Post*, November 15, 1942, p. 4. The Danish Listening Post was distributed by the privately run office of the *Friends of Danish Freedom and Democracy* in New York.

<sup>9</sup> The cartoon in question was drawn by Norwegian artist, Ragnald Blix, (who used the pseudonym Stig Höök), and was published in Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning on January 10, 1942. It shows Danish Prime Minister Stauning and King Christian. Stauning says: "What are we to do Your Majesty if Scavenius succeeds in making our Jews wear yellow stars?" The King responds: "Then we will probably all have to wear yellow stars";. Jens Lund writes: "I have been unable to locate any corroborating information regarding the cartoon". Jens Lund also assumed that the Swedish daily, Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning, published in Gothenburg, had published the cartoon, but was never able to find it. Lund concluded (note 70): "My inquiries to the Göteborg Handels- och Sjöfartstidning regarding the cartoon have not yet received any reply". Lund, Jens, "The Legend of the King and the Star", *Indiana Folklore* 8, 1975.

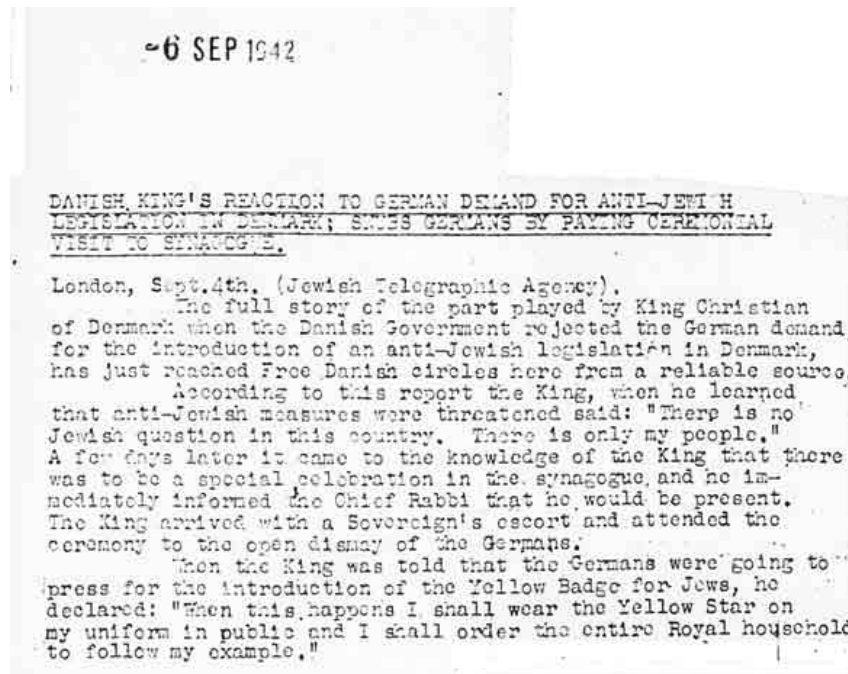


Fig. 1. The news release from The Jewish Telegraphic Agency September 4, 1942.

### Why the legend?

The tale about the King and the Star was not just a fairy tale which can be analyzed in folkloristic terms.<sup>10</sup> There were those who deliberately put this story, along with similar fabrications, into circulation, believing them to be beneficial to the interests of Denmark abroad. The story can be seen as a response to the criticism Denmark received in the Allied press between 1940 and 1943. King Christian, wrongly accused, became a symbol of the lack of Danish resistance to the German invasion of Denmark on April 9, 1940. This can be illustrated by one example. In 1942 *The Washington Post*, in an illustrated quiz on the victims of the war, ironically asked its readers for the name of the ruler whose nation put no armed might in the way of the Nazis. This bad reputation had to be corrected, and it is likely that the popular King was used as an instrument in the

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<sup>10</sup> As argued by Lund (1975).

hands of Danish citizens in exile. The legend of the King and the Star was most likely created to gain goodwill in America.

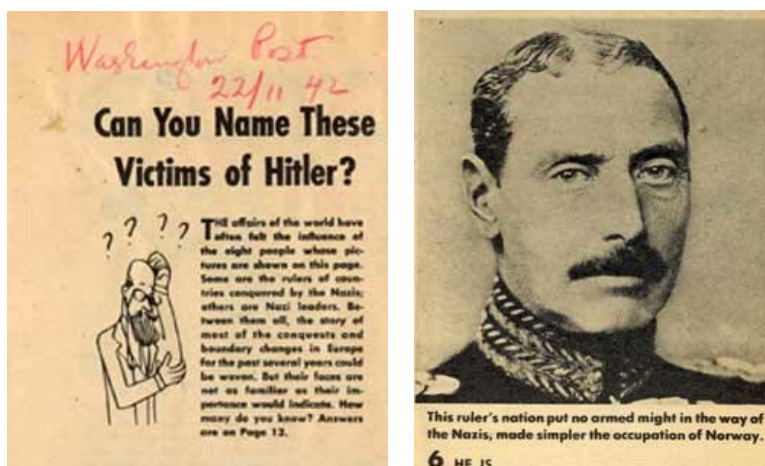


Fig. 2. The quiz was published in *The Washington Post* on November 22, 1942. The quiz included seven other portraits of "victims" of Nazism.<sup>11</sup>

The people behind this legend represented the *The National America Denmark Association* (NADA). The association was founded in May 1940 in Chicago and was an umbrella organization for a series of Danish-American associations. NADA's goal was to promote a positive view of Denmark. An office of the *Friends of Danish Freedom and Democracy*, run by private donations, opened in New York immediately after the occupation of Denmark in April 1940.<sup>12</sup> The objective was to collect and pro-

<sup>11</sup> The clipping from the *Washington Post* is in the personal diary of one of the counselors in the Danish Embassy in Washington 1941-45.

<sup>12</sup> Hæstrup, Jørgen et al., *Besættelsen, Hvem Hvad Hvor*, Copenhagen 1985, pp. 100-101. The men behind the very successful New York office were Caspar Hasselriis, the founder of the Danish Luncheon Club and ship owner Hans Isbrandtsen. *The Danish Listening Post* was edited by Mrs. Signe Toksvig. The "Father of Public Relations and Spin" and nephew of Sigmund Freud Edward L. Bernays (1890-1995), was also hired by the *Friends of Danish Freedom and Democracy* as a consultant. See also Hasselriis, C.H.W., *Danmark i USA under besættelsen*, Forlaget SIXTUS 1978.

vide the American press with news of Danish affairs. Quickly this task evolved into a fortnightly bulletin, *The Danish Listening Post*.

### **Stories for all purposes**

King Christian and the Danish Jews were also the objects of other fabricated news from Danish organizations in the U.S. and Britain in 1941-43.

The "Jewish question" in Denmark was raised on several occasions by the Germans during 1941. The Danish response was definite and firm. On November 25, 1941 when Foreign Minister Erik Scavenius visited Berlin he met Hermann Göring. Göring mentioned that Denmark in the long run could not avoid the issue of solving the "Jewish question". Scavenius responded, "*There is no Jewish question in Denmark*". The government as well as most members of the Danish parliament backed this position.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the firm Danish standpoint the following news about anti-Jewish measures accepted by the Danish government was publicized. In January 1942 *The Daily Telegraph* published news from "a special correspondent" with "Scandinavian sources" who reported that King Christian had threatened to abdicate if any measures were taken against the Jews. There is no basis in fact for this report and it should rather be perceived as a political proclamation or wishful thinking.

### **DANISH KING MAY ABDICATE**

#### ***Anti-Jewish Threat***

*By a Special Correspondent*

*According to news reaching London from Scandinavian sources, King Christian of Denmark has threatened to abdicate because of German insistence that Denmark adopt anti-Jewish laws.*

*King Christian's threat came last Saturday as a climax of a long series of political manoeuvres by three pro-Nazi members of the Danish Government and their German backers.*

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<sup>13</sup> Yahil, Leni, *Et Demokrati på Prøve: Jøderne i Danmark under Besættelsen*. Gyldendal 1967, pp. 55-57; Stræde, Therkel, *Die Menschenmauer. Dänemark im Oktober 1943: Die Rettung der Juden vor der Vernichtung*. Copenhagen 1993, p. 46.

*The trouble started when anti-Jewish legislation was prepared and presented to the Cabinet by Erik Scavenius, the Foreign Minister; Gunnar Larsen, the Minister of Transport, who, incidentally, is head of a Portland cement company, and T. H. Jacobsen<sup>14</sup>, the Minister of Justice.*

*At a meeting of the Ministers on Thursday their proposals were rejected by other Ministers, and the Prime Minister, M. Stauning<sup>15</sup>, refused to present them to the King.*

*When Scavenius subsequently approached the King and asked him to over-ride the Cabinet, the King refused to, and indicated that he would approve the proposals only if they received the Parliament's unanimous support.*

*The pro-Nazi Ministers then presented the proposals to a special committee, which rejected them unanimously on Saturday. The Germans thereupon demanded that the laws be accepted immediately.*

*It was then that the King announced that if they persisted in these demands and attempted to force their acceptance he would abdicate. It is not known whether the Germans have backed down. If they persist in their demands the King's abdication may be expected within a few days.<sup>16</sup>*

After this story about the imminent abdication of King Christian was released, a similar story reached the Foreign Office in London in early 1943 from Lisbon showing that the tales of the King and his Jews had already been widely circulated:

*Political Memorandum Denmark No. 1 to P.I.D. from Mr. Ridley Prentice (Lisbon), 4th Jan. 1943.*

*Danish Jews.*

*Six months ago, the Germans put into force the Nuremburg laws against Jews. The King personally went to synagogue<sup>17</sup>[sic.] in Copenhagen where there was*

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<sup>14</sup> Minister of Justice Thune Jacobsen.

<sup>15</sup> The Prime Minister's name was Thorvald Stauning.

<sup>16</sup> WL: Microfilm PC 6. Reel 156. *Jews in World War II. 2D Denmark and Norway General*; The news was also published in other British newspapers.

<sup>17</sup> King Christian did not visit the main synagogue in Copenhagen during the German occupation. After an arson attack on the synagogue in 1941 by Danish Nazis, the King wrote a New Year's greeting on December 31, 1941 expressing his concern to the assistant Rabbi, Marcus Melchior, see Melchior, Marcus, *Levet og oplevet*, Copenhagen 1965, pp. 162-63.

*an official ceremony. This was an event hitherto unprecedented in Denmark, and later the Germans withdrew the Nuremburg decree as regards Denmark.*

An intelligence officer in the Foreign Office wrote a comment to this memorandum:

*I should not grade this informant very highly. The statement in parag. 4. that the Germans introduced anti Jewish Legislation is incorrect. They only threatened to. Mr. Clarke. 19/1 1943.*<sup>18</sup>

Others were just as sceptical. In a "Political Review of Denmark of 1942. From Foreign Office Minute, Mr. Gallop, 2nd Feb. 1943" the following remarks appear:

*.... Proposed Anti-Semitic Legislation.*

*5. 1942 went out to the accompaniment of insistent rumours that measures were about to be taken against the Jews. It is an established fact that anti-Semitic measures legislation had been drafted for future use by the pro-Nazi lawyer M. Popp-Madsen<sup>19</sup>, but reports from Sweden suggesting that the matter had followed similar course to that of the Anti-Comintern Pact (though with a different issue) were almost certainly false, and their inclusion in the Danish broadcast of the BBC did some injury to the high reputation of the latter in Denmark ...*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Public Record Office (PRO), FO 371/36787, *Situation in Denmark 1943*. The cover of the file reads: "Situation in Denmark: Transmit copy of political Memorandum Denmark No.1 dated 30th December 1942 addressed to Political Intelligence Department discussing. .... 4) Danish Jews."

<sup>19</sup> M. Popp-Madsen is lawyer Carl Popp-Madsen (1900-73), a Danish Nazi and one of the founders of the Danish Nazi terror unit "Schalburg-korpset", who among other things organized the recruitment of thousands of Danes for the German army and Waffen-SS. Popp-Madsen only served three years of the ten-year sentence he received in 1946.

<sup>20</sup> PRO, FO 371/36786, *Situation in Denmark 1943*. From Foreign Office Minute, Mr. Gallop, 2nd Feb. 1943.

Other stories were told and distributed about the commitment of Danish patriots:

*DANISH PATRIOT ARRESTED FOR DEFENDING JEWS.*  
*Stockholm, Mar. 15th. (Jewish Telegraphic Agency)*

*The reason for the arrest, for the second time, of the famous Danish patriot, Lacour<sup>21</sup>, is revealed in the "Goeteborgs Handels och Shjoefarts Tidningen."*  
*M. Lacour's arrest was due to his open opposition to the introduction of anti-Jewish laws in Denmark. He had also together with other Danish patriots, attacked the anti-Jewish measures adopted in Germany.<sup>22</sup>*

Danish historian Vilhelm la Cour was arrested for a short period by the Germans at the beginning of 1941 for his resistance to the German occupation and views published in a booklet called "Ord til os i Dag" (Words to us Today).<sup>23</sup> In 1942 la Cour was arrested again and imprisoned for four months for his fight against the German occupation. After his imprisonment he was interned at a manor house until the spring of 1943. The Gestapo had plans to arrest him again and la Cour fled to Sweden in December 1944. There is, however, no indication that la Cour was especially concerned with matters relating to a possible implementation of the anti-Jewish laws in Denmark.

### **The internment of Jews in Denmark**

Probably the most malicious tale involving Danish Jews, which the representatives of Danish interests abroad tried to introduce in the allied press, was a story about Jews who allegedly contacted King Christian X asking him to intern them in a concentration camp.

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<sup>21</sup> Vilhelm la Cour (1883-1974), a Danish historian and vocal opponent of the German NS-occupants in Denmark.

<sup>22</sup> WL: Microfilm PC 6. Reel 156: *Jews in World War II. 2D Denmark and Norway General: News distributed by The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, registered at the Wiener Library on March 16, 1942.*

<sup>23</sup> Vilhelm la Cour. *Ord til os i Dag: Noter til Øjeblikket, Birkerød 1941.*

*DANISH JEWS' PATRIOTIC OFFER TO LESSEN COUNTRY'S DIFFICULTIES.*

*New York, Feb. 8th [1942] (Jewish Telegraphic Agency).*

*Denmark's Jewish population, numbering more than 5.000, is reported here to have asked King Christian for internment in a Danish concentration camp as a measure to forestall possible deportations by the German occupation authorities.*

*The National America Denmark Association, attributing the report to an "authoritative source," said that King Christian had declined the proposal as being incompatible with Denmark's tradition of religious freedom. The request of the Danish Jews, in the form of a petition, was presented to the King by the leaders of the Jewish communities. "We have always been well treated in this country and we understand that our being here is one of the difficulties between you and the German Government. If we can make things easier for you by being interned, please intern us," the petition read.<sup>24</sup>*

A story like this is only likely to have grown out of the traditional view of the Jews as "a problem".<sup>25</sup> Possibly the creator of this story knew about the Danish internment camp at Horserød in North Sealand, a WWI camp which was extended and rebuilt in the late 1930s. In 1940-41 it was used for the first time to imprison 71 refugees, many of whom were later to be extradited to Germany in August 1941.<sup>26</sup> Among the prisoners held on

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<sup>24</sup> WL: Microfilm PC 6. Reel 156. *Jews in World War II. 2D Denmark and Norway General.*

<sup>25</sup> Vilhjálmsson, Vilhjálmur Örn, "Vi har ikke brug for 70.000 jøder", *Rambam; Tidsskrift for jødisk kultur og forskning*, 1998, nr. 7, pp. 47-50.

<sup>26</sup> Leif Larsen and Thomas Clausen have in their book *De Forrådte: Tyske Hitler-flygtninge i Danmark* (1997) argued (p. 40) that The Jewish Community in Denmark, *Mosaik Troessamfund*, was more successful than the Danish Social-Democrats because the community managed to have 14 Jewish prisoners released from the Horserød internment camp. Their assumption is incorrect and is based on the fact that only two non-Jewish Social Democrats were released after intensive correspondence on the matter between Danish Social Democrats and the Danish authorities. In the available sources about the 14 Jewish prisoners in Horserød, it is evident that their release was not mediated by the Jewish Community, nor the Jewish relief organization *Komiteen af 4. Maj 1933*, which had been banned in 1940. When all available sources are taken into account, it is more feasible to conclude that a total of 21 refugee-prisoners released from the Horserød camp in 1940-41 were eventually



the order of the Danish State Prosecutor for special affairs and the Danish State Police were 14 Jewish refugees. In May 1940 the Danish authorities contacted the Nazi occupants in order to initiate negotiations for the expulsion of refugees whom the Danish authorities wanted to get rid of. The prisoners in Horserød were among those whom the Danish authorities asked the *Sicherheitsdienst* to take back. To begin with Germans rejected the suggestion to receive stateless Jews whom the Danish authorities were hoping to send out of the country.<sup>27</sup>

None of the Jewish refugees who were held in the Horserød camp in 1940-41 were expelled to Germany in August 1941 along with German socialists.<sup>28</sup> This was not due to measures taken by Danish officials or Jewish organizations to demand the release of the Jewish prisoners. Without receiving any demands or requests from the Germans for the expulsion of the prisoners in Horserød, the Ministry of Justice had already in late July 1941 prepared and signed the expulsion orders for most of the Jewish prisoners held in Horserød 1940-41.<sup>29</sup> With the exception of one who had fled in a rowing boat to Sweden and another who committed suicide due to his fear of being arrested again by the Danish authorities, most of the Jewish prisoners released from the Horserød camp in 1941 were arrested in July 1941 by the Danish Police and held in custody while the Danish Justice Department waited for the Germans to decide when the deportations could take place. However the Germans refused to accept prisoners from the Horserød camp other than German political activists.

After the war the officials responsible for the imprisonment of refugees in Horserød in 1940-41 proudly explained to the Danish public in special

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released on the decision of the Danish Ministry of Justice because the Nazi-occupants were not willing to accept Danish wishes for their extradition to Germany.

<sup>27</sup> Vilhjálmsón, op. cit., pp. 50-51; Danish National Archives, Justitsministeriets 3. kontor, journalsag nr. 1120/1940.

<sup>28</sup> Only a few of the Jewish prisoners in the Horserød camp in 1940-41 were, or had been politically active. Those who were had been ordinary members of the German Social Democratic Party in the early 1930s.

<sup>29</sup> Danish National Archives, Justitsministeriet, 3. kontors kopibog for 1941.

publications that the purpose of the internment had been to protect the refugees from the Germans.<sup>30</sup>

The news release of 1942 reporting that the Danish Jews wanted to sacrifice themselves to improve the relations between Denmark and Germany is thought-provoking for another reason. On September 29, 1943 the director of the Danish Red Cross, Helmer Rosting, contacted *Reichsbevollmächtigter* for Denmark, Dr. Werner Best, and proposed a sinister trade. He suggested an internment of Danish Jews to ensure a gradual release of Danish soldiers held by the Germans. *Reichsaussenminister* von Ribbentrop rejected this plan.<sup>31</sup>

Also in September 1943 a similar plan for the internment of Jews in Denmark was suggested at a meeting in the Foreign Ministry in Copenhagen. In that case, it was allegedly to prevent the evident deportation action against the Jews in Denmark.<sup>32</sup> The Chairman of the Danish Jewish community, C. B. Henriques, describes this in the following manner:

*When I went home, I was called to the Foreign Ministry to participate in the meeting of the permanent secretaries. All of the permanent secretaries were present, as well as the Private Secretary of the King. The situation was discussed; one did not really know how to act. One permanent secretary mentioned the possibility of an internment of the Danish Jews, so they would remain in Denmark, but the feeling – specially of the Private secretary of the King – was negative towards initiating any negotiations with the Germans, one should rather stress the protests, so one could see that the public reacted fiercely against the persecution. The permanent secretary suggested that I went to the King, but*

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<sup>30</sup> Minister of Justice in 1940, Harald Petersen, and permanent undersecretary in the Ministry of Justice, Jens Herfelt, wrote that the Horserød camp was a place where the "emigrants could stay under tolerable conditions"; Harald Petersen & Jens Herfelt, "Retsvæsen og Politik under Besættelsen", in Aage Friis (ed.) *Danmark under verdenskrig og besættelse, Vol 1*. Odense 1946, p. 49; Vilhjálmsson, op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>31</sup> Dr. Best defined the proposals as "Typical of the National socialists .....in Denmark" ; Yahil, op. cit., pp. 161, 423-24; The Danish Red Cross director Helmer Rosting (1893-45) also proposed to use interned Jews as hostages. They were to be deported if the acts of sabotage against the Germans did not cease.

<sup>32</sup> Yahil, op. cit., pp. 161, 201; 424 note 91.

*I felt that that would be difficult and embarrassing for the King, because he himself was in a way interned. The permanent secretary then promised to go to the King himself because he was certain that the King would not have any objections, which was also the case. The Germans did not want to receive the King's protests.<sup>33</sup> The meeting thus ended without result, as one did not know what one could really do to prevent the current situation, and one didn't see any other alternative than to flight.<sup>34</sup>*

Fortunately the idea of interning the Danish Jews in September 1943 was abandoned. Whether the motives behind the suggestions made by some of the permanent secretaries of the Foreign Ministry to intern Danish Jews were the same as those of the director of the Danish Red Cross is worth studying in greater detail than previously has been done. The idea at least was not unfamiliar to some Danes as the above-mentioned press release of 1942 clearly shows. Whether the idea also included plans to intern and not to deport non-Danish Jews, is not known.

#### **A story less known**

The above-mentioned myths and fabricated stories about King Christian X and the Danish Jews during World War II were originally introduced for the sole purpose of improving the reputation of occupied Denmark abroad. The tales certainly did not and most likely were not intended to improve the situation of the Jewish population in Denmark. Out of all these stories about the Danish King and Jews, the myth about the King and the Star grew to be the favorite. It was believed to have been created in the US due to the great good-will Denmark had received overseas for the rescue of Danish Jewry in 1943.

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<sup>33</sup> *Reichsbevollmächtiger* in Denmark, Werner Best, rejected receiving a letter from the King. See Yahil, op.cit., pp 55-57.

<sup>34</sup> Account given by C. B. Henriques to historian Ole Barfoed ten years after the event; Published in Hæstrup, Jørgen, *Til landets bedste; Hovedtræk af departementsstyrets virke 1943-45*. Udgiverselskabet af Danmarks Nyeste Historie 1966, vol. 1.; Blüdnikow, Bent & Klaus Rothstein (eds.) *Dage i oktober 43*, Forlaget Centrum and Det Mosaiske Troessamfund, 1993 pp. 81-82. Another version and interpretation of this meeting in the Foreign Ministry is given by Hans Kirchhoff in "Endløsning over Danmark", in Hans Sode-Madsen (ed.), *"Førelsen har befalet!"* Viborg 1993, pp. 90-96.

Fortunately most Danish Jews never bore the yellow racial badge. Those Danes who were forced to wear the yellow star on their garments were for instance Jews deported from Denmark to Theresienstadt in 1943, as well as many Jews born in Denmark who, in their time of need, were not admitted back into their native country by the Danish authorities.

From August 1940 to early 1944, 21 stateless Jewish refugees, three of them children, were expelled from Denmark to Germany – not because the Germans demanded it, but because Danish officials in charge of refugee matters worked ardently for the expulsion of unwanted individuals from Denmark.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See book *In Prep.* by the author of the present article; Vilhjálmsson (2000), "Den største myte". An article published in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*, February 6, 2000. 1st section, p. 12; for an English translation see: [http://www.dchf.dk/staff/vov\\_artikler/greatest\\_myth.html](http://www.dchf.dk/staff/vov_artikler/greatest_myth.html)

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## **The Smell of Death – A Visit to Auschwitz**

Cecilie Banke

In September 2000, 20 Danish high-school students went to Poland to visit the death camp at Auschwitz.

"Some people say it smells of death there, and I won't be able to prepare myself mentally for it, because I have no idea what death smells like." It is Friday afternoon in Elsinore. The sun is low in the sky and it is the day after the referendum on Denmark's participation in the European Monetary Union. According to some people it is the day after a disaster struck the country, for others it is just another day. A class of high-school students from Elsinore High School is to visit Auschwitz as part of an interdisciplinary course in history and religion. The trip is organized by the Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. The students arrive one by one, some with their boyfriends or girlfriends, some with their mothers. They are all going on the trip to learn about the Holocaust and to see the sites first hand. The students gather in little groups, boys in a separate group. Some of the girls are smoking. In the gym other students are practicing the Lanciers for next Friday's school ball. In other words it is a normal day at the college, 55 years after Soviet troops entered the largest of the Nazi extermination camps and uncovered one of the most incomprehensible tragedies in European history.

"We know what happened, but it's really different to see the place for yourself. A place where people were murdered by the million. It makes no sense," Nikolai says. It is Saturday morning, somewhere on the road between the Polish cities of Stettin and Warsaw. Nikolai sits in the back of the bus with Anders and Martin. They are the history nerds of the class. They know all about types of airplanes, battle fronts and the explosive power of bombs. And they know World War II inside out, battle for battle. But they have never been in a concentration camp. "When you hear about that kind of thing on the news it seems completely unreal. Now we're going to visit a place that was built with the sole purpose of killing people," says Nikolai.

"The weather will probably be good on Tuesday," says Martin and refers to today's bright sunshine, "and that's weird, because somehow I imagine it always rains in Auschwitz." "It's hard to imagine that anyone can feel so much hatred inside that they are able to kill even children," Nikolai continues. "You hear the figure of six million, but you still have no idea what these people went through. Maybe we'll get a better understanding of it though we won't experience what they did. People don't think about it so much any more. We consider ourselves civilized, and yet it's not more than fifty years ago that a nation wanted to exterminate a whole people, just because they were of a particular kind. It's worth considering whether something similar is possible today."

Anders tries to imagine what visiting Auschwitz is like. "We'll experience things with all our senses. We'll see, hear and feel the whole atmosphere. That's as close as you can get to something that happened in the past," he says.

"And yet it still seems so remote from our world," Martin says. "Auschwitz must not be turned into a tourist attraction. That's not the purpose of the place. The purpose is to make us remember and learn so that something similar may never happen again."

"Visiting Dybbøl [site of a major battle in Danish history in 1864, CB] is like going to any other tourist attraction," says Nikolai. "You don't really learn anything. The events just seem even more remote."

"Kronborg [Danish castle in Elsinore, CB] is one big show," Anders says. "I don't think they will have made Auschwitz that way; at least, I hope not. People don't go to Auschwitz without knowing the history of the place. We've read about anti-Semitism, about the Jews in Poland, and about Holocaust; we know the historical context. If you're just told that this is a death camp...well, so what, it's impossible to grasp what that means!"

**Knowledge rather than pity**

Next day's program includes a tour of Warsaw starting in the city center, then proceeding to the new "old town" that was rebuilt after the war,

then passing the big monument that commemorates the Warsaw uprising, and finishing in the area that was the Jewish quarter until 1940. Today this area is filled with Soviet-style multi-storey buildings. When the Germans occupied Poland all the Jews in the city were moved to a ghetto on the outskirts of this area.

Julia and Emilie are standing in front of the memorial at the gates leading into the ghetto. It has been a long day of wandering through the city. The students have heard about Poland during the Second World War, the uprising, the Polish-Jewish author Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Jewish community in Warsaw and about the memorial to all those who were killed.

"You get to the point where you can't take in anymore. We are bombarded with images on TV. We've already seen so much death on TV that it doesn't have an impact on us any longer, and that's scary," says Julie. "I don't think it's possible to become totally immune, but we do get an overdose," says Emilie. "It has also got something to do with our upbringing. We are taught to feel pity for other people, and if you don't, you feel egoistic and have a bad conscience," Julie continues. "Here we are in our perfect lives, and when we're confronted with things like these, we are not able to absorb them. That's a result of trying to take in too much. At some point it becomes too normal. It's not good for anyone to expect of themselves that they must feel pity," Emilie concludes. "When I think about the people who died in the concentration camps I don't think any of them would want us to pity them," says Julie. "Knowledge is good, and it's good that we've been told so much before we came here but personally I wouldn't want people to pity me fifty years after my death. I wouldn't want anyone to feel sad and suffer because of me. That's not the purpose. We're not meant to take on the sufferings of others, only the knowledge."

### **Guilt and innocence**

Departure from Warsaw early Monday morning. Tiredness is the dominant mood at breakfast, and the atmosphere is marked by it. By now the students just want to get there. It is a long drive to Krakow on a winding road in heavy traffic. Twice we get caught in traffic jams that delay us for



almost two hours. Fields pass by on both sides of the bus; long stretches with nothing but fields and small clusters of houses.

The fields are newly ploughed, and the soil still looks newly turned by the plough. There are red apples hanging on the trees along the road. The bus drives so slowly that we can get a good view of people along the roadside: Mothers with children, women on their way somewhere waiting at the bus stop. A couple of times we see a horse-drawn cart loaded with coal. The soil looks rich and fertile. When the bus finally arrives in Krakow Gry, Karen and Julia are engaged in a discussion about the Germans and the question of guilt. *Who* wanted to exterminate the Jews?

"It's wrong to say that it was the Germans," says Julie. "It was Nazi Germany. It's also wrong to blame the Germans. The descendants of the Nazis should not feel guilty. It was a dark chapter of German history. The German population complied, but who wouldn't have? I feel sorry for the German population in this respect. You can't blame present-day Germans."

A long discussion followed on the seduction of the masses, on the role of the strong leader, and about how the Germans could accept the extermination of the Jews without protesting. Julie and Gry finally reached agreement on their way into Hotel Europejski. They hurriedly picked up their keys, to avoid interrupting their discussion. "The reason must be that it is easier to ignore that people are being taken away in railway carriages. The easiest thing to do is simply to close your eyes. But I don't think it could ever have happened if Hitler had not been around. Then it would perhaps just have been similar to the discussions on immigrants in Denmark today," Julie says. "It's fifty years ago and there are still wars going on. People can't agree when differences exist between them. We haven't learnt our lesson from history," Gry says. "People had complete faith in Hitler. He was able to make people hate the Jews. That's why I think Pia Kjærsgaard [front figure of a Danish right-wing, nationalist party, CB] is insane."

### **The silence**

Gry, Emilie, and Karen didn't sleep until half past three in the morning, because Karen had kept the others awake by telling jokes. Gry is tired. She has been in the shower and washed her hair but she cannot find her brush. Emilie can hardly keep her eyes open. She just nibbles her roll silently while the others chat away. There is an atmosphere of tiredness, expectation and nervousness. The students are concerned about how they will react. Will they be able to stand it, or will it be too horrible? Or perhaps they will just distance themselves from it all? At eight o'clock the next morning the bus departs for Auschwitz. It is raining as it is supposed to. There are 40 kilometers to go. On the way we hear the story of the German Jew, Adolf Oppenheimer, who tried to get out of Germany and obtain political asylum in another country, but in vain. He ended up in Auschwitz in 1942.

Suddenly history is a living experience.

Arrival at Auschwitz. Everybody is quiet. Most of the students have had a nap on the bus. We enter the camp the same way as the prisoners would have done. Until 1942 Auschwitz was a concentration camp for political prisoners. After that the mass exterminations started. 75% of those who came here were sent directly to the gas chambers. When they arrived the prisoners still believed that they were about to start a new life in the camp. As they got out of the railway carriages they could see the chimneys of the two crematories of the first camp. Each of the crematories could burn 1,800 people per day. We enter the prisoners' buildings that have now become a museum of life in Auschwitz I, the first camp in the enormous complex that Auschwitz developed into.

We are looking at photos of people taken when they arrived by train, a map of Auschwitz I, II and III, and a model of a gas chamber. A heap of empty cans is displayed behind a glass screen. These are the cans that contained the gas *Zyklon B*. All of the cans have been opened. On some of them the name of the factory that made them is still visible. It was called *Degesch*. Orders for gas sent to the factory lie there too. It took half an hour to gas 2,000 people. Behind another glass screen is a mountain of

old pots, pans and bowls marked by use and rust. They could be mistaken for an art exhibition.

Another display case shows 7,000 kilos of hair from gassed women. An enormous mountain of grey and white, no color. Then there are the glasses that have been tangled into a solid mass of frames, glasses that once belonged to people who could not see without them. Most of them are round frames, but a few are also black or made of horn. The smell is pervasive in an indefinable way; an odd mix of memory, old dust and moisture. There is the hair and the shoes of the gassed children, pots that they urinated in, shoes they wore. Some have high heels; others are ordinary shoes with laces. A single sandal has preserved a tint of red and is lying right at the front of the display. Gry is overwhelmed. "I really can't take anymore," she says and turns her face away from the display, fanning herself with one hand.

We walk through the house where the cells have been preserved. This is how they lived. This is how they died. The punishment cells are in the basement. They are extremely narrow and dark. To pass through it is necessary to walk in a single line. Nikolai falls behind, looks through the holes into the cells. "We're walking too fast," he says, looking intently at every cell. "This tour guide is a real nuisance. We don't get enough time to see anything," he continues. There is the death cell where prisoners lived before they were taken out to be shot. There is the cell for prisoners who had been sentenced to starve to death. And there is the one where suffocation of prisoners was carried out. "I suppose they just crammed a lot of people in there so the air got used up," says Nikolai. The next group of tourists have arrived and the next one after them. We have to move on. When we are outside again Julie refuses to speak.

"I just think it's horrible. I just need to get it at a bit of a distance and out of my system. I'll be all right in a little while," she says and grabs Karen's hand to go for a walk. She wants to be left alone. She does not want to talk. Talk seems irrelevant. None of them are talking. It is as if the scale of the horror has struck them in a way that they cannot quite formulate yet. Only afterwards when the visit is over and we are walking towards the entrance to have lunch Gry says:

"It wasn't even all the things lying there. The shoes and the hair, the brushes. It was more the fact that we walked on the same floors as them. And then the smell. I mean, we try to imagine what it must have been like, and then it must just have been a thousand times worse than it feels here and now. It must have been total misery. Seeing all the coffee tins and the cans of gas that they used to kill the Jews. You could even see the holes they made to let the gas out. And then all that barbed wire really made me feel trapped. I could hardly breathe down there."

### **The grotesque**

"Man, this is enormous," says William, as he gets off the bus at the death camp at Birkenau. This was where the prisoner transports ended when they went by the direct route. Most of the Hungarian Jews were brought here in 1944 when the Nazis started the last phase of 'Die Endlösung', the so-called Final Solution of the Jewish problem. The tracks went right down to the crematories that could burn 1,800 people a day. The sheer numbers somehow make the extent of the crime more comprehensible. 1,3 million people died in Auschwitz. One million of these were Jews, 150,000 were Poles. In 1943 the genocide of the Gypsies commenced. 21,000 Gypsies died in Auschwitz alone. "No wonder they chose this place," says William before we enter. "It's not exactly a place where anybody is going to come by and ask, "What the hell are you doing here?"

The area is vast. 175 hectares open field where 300 barracks used to be. The barracks contained up to 1,000 persons each. That is 300,000 in all.

The rain has stopped and instead a light mist covers the whole area and dewdrops hang in the straws of grass. "It's impossible to call this place beautiful even though that's what it is," says Marie quietly, as if she didn't dare say it out loud. " If the sun were shining it would be hard to imagine what kind of place this really was." A flock of deer skip across the meadow, a forest lies on the other side of the fields. The air smells fresh. No smell or sign of dead people – just the barracks and the tracks left behind.

"1,000 people on 800 square meters," Esben says when we are inside the barrack where the women and children lived. Julie cannot believe this.

"It's simply impossible to fit 1,000 persons in here," she says, and tries to imagine the women and children who lived here in their striped prisoner's clothes without insulation and with a cold stone floor. She's been looking at the drawings made by the men for the children that for some incomprehensible reason have been left hanging on the walls of the barracks. "I don't get it. How could the Nazis allow the children to look at drawings when they knew that the children were going to be exterminated?" she asks the tour guide, who can offer no logical explanation. "If 1,000 people lived here there must have been eight people in one bunk bed," says Esben who is still absorbed by the numerical facts. A bunk is two meters wide, at the most. It seems impossible. They must have been lying on the floor as well, he reasons. That leaves five to six people per bunk. "Imagine what the air must have been like when they were all in here," Julie says. "It must have been better to be in the children's barrack. They take up less space," she argues.

We walk around the building and through the camp in the wet grass. The atmosphere is less gloomy now. "It's strange but it's almost better to be here," someone says. "This is just barracks." Standing by the memorial at the end of the tracks Julie is engaged in a discussion of the school system in Denmark and the difference between being taught what to think and learning to think for oneself. By the big crater made when the Germans bombed the crematories shortly before the end of the war the discussion turns to the mosquitoes and the humidity of the air. It is enough now. The students cannot absorb anymore.

A man pulls his bike calmly across the grass and disappears behind the trees to look for his dog. "Look at that guy," Nikolai says loudly. "He's just walking here with his bike as if he didn't have a clue about anything. Imagine that, walking your dog in a concentration camp. That's grotesque!" The rest of the group look in the same direction and marvel along with Nikolai, and yet everything is slowly returning to normal. Men are simply walking dogs in the dusk.

The last stop is the part of the camp where the Gypsies were detained. Only some of the students are still following the guided tour. Emil is walking with his hands in his pockets and is thinking out loud: "Every

time you hear the word Jew, you immediately think of Auschwitz. When it comes down to it, it's really about exterminating people. When you look at it that way, it seems more relevant. That it was human beings who were murdered. That's a useful way of thinking about it to focus more on tolerance and ethics, and not just to hear about one oppressed people. The important thing is to learn to tolerate that which is different, people of another color or religion. There were also Russian prisoners of war in Auschwitz. There were all the Poles and the Gypsies. The most amazing fact is that the Third Reich just murdered left and right. That's what makes it so grotesque and pointless."

It is almost dark now. The bus is waiting for us. Three young Poles are passing by on their mountain bikes. Everything looks completely normal. Martin runs back across the tracks to use the restroom. "WC", it says on the white neon sign. It's a strange feeling going to the toilet in Auschwitz, but he has to. This basic human necessity seems to draw us back into the normal, everyday world in which men walk their dogs and youngsters fool around on their mountain bikes out of the vale of horror we have passed through.

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