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A Beacon of Hope in the Darkness; The Danish Resistance

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A Beacon of Hope in the Darkness; The Danish Resistance

“To those thousands of Danes for whom heroic acts were ordinary choices.”¹

Despite the differences in the research materials, there appeared a common thread in description: Light. Every source without fail described a sense of light.² This irrefutable image of hope stood out in the dark and despair of Nazi occupation and the horrors of the Holocaust. Here, seemingly lost in the dusty volumes of history lay a defining moment in the lengthy narrative of humanity. The Danish Resistance. A story untold by text books, yet one that reveals the inherent goodness of humanity, set in a struggle that suggests the perseverance of good, even in the depths of evil. But what is even more incredible is a lack of righteousness, only a sense of duty.³ In simply making the “right” decision, the Danish people were able to accomplish something seemingly impossible; they were able to lead ninety five percent of their Jewish population to safety.⁴ Through the unwavering belief in equality and fraternity, the people of Denmark were able to create a unified political and social resistance movement in order to defend those persecuted by the Nazi regime, through the support of the Danish Church, the legal forces, and public figures such as King Christian X.

The German invasion in April of 1940 would be met with the Danish people’s hatred of war, and desire to live peacefully. The BBC announced the news of Denmark’s invasion with the following announcement:

¹ Leo Goldberg, *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York, 1987), dedication.

² Gunnar S. Paulsson, “The ‘Bridge over the Øresund’: The Historiography on the Expulsion of Jews from Nazi-Occupied Denmark,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 431 (1995), 432. PDF. Paulsson also notes “the metaphor of light and darkness as a recurring motif.”

³ Harold Flender, *Rescue in Denmark* (New York, 1963), 10. In an excerpt from Aage Bertleson’s account *October ’43*, Flender notes that Bertleson risked his life to aid the Jew with the explanation: “These people were in mortal danger and had no alternative. We had to do what we did.”

⁴ Samuel Abrahamsen, *The Rescue of Danish Jews* (New York, 1987), 3. Reprinted from *The American Scandinavian Review*, vol. 60, no. 3 (June 1972).

“The British Broadcasting Corporation brings in its first announcement in Danish a special message to the Danish people. Here is it.

For the second time Denmark has been brutally invaded by Germany.”⁵

Compared to the invasion of other countries during WWII, the take over of Denmark was met with very little resistance. The reduction of the Danish army following WWI is regarded by Niels Aage Skov as a “humanistic argument that war per se was uncivilized and [was] to be avoided in all circumstances.”⁶ The fact that Denmark was a very small country without the reserves necessary to fend off German attack, as well as a belief that war was “foolish and futile,”⁷ led to an easy victory for Germany. In response to Denmark’s willingness to submit peacefully, Germany granted Denmark a large degree of autonomy.

Denmark was allowed to retain an unprecedented amount of freedom, including its own government, foreign office, and armed forces. With Germany’s pledge to not interfere in Denmark’s political independence, this “model protectorate”⁸ was allowed to uphold its Bill of Rights and legislative practices. Although occupied by Germany, Denmark became exempt from many of the extreme policies practiced in most other Nazi-controlled countries. However, Jørgen Hæstrup comments on the sheer impossibility of balancing the authority of both the Nazis and the Danish government, as “the more the concessions the two governments made, the more the [German] authority was undermined,” along with stopping the German authorities from “forcing concessions through so brutally...that co-operation became useless” not to mention extracting

⁵ Jeremy Bennet, *British Broadcasting and the Danish Resistance Movement* (Cambridge, 1966), 1.

⁶ Niels Aage Skov, “The Use of Historical Myth: Denmark’s WWII Experience Made to Serve Practical Goals,” *Scandinavian Studies* 72, no. 1 (2000).

⁷ Niels Aage Skov, “The Use of Historical Myth: Denmark’s WWII Experience Made to Serve Practical Goals,” *Scandinavian Studies* 72, no. 1 (2000).

⁸ Denmark is called a “model protectorate” by both Leni Yahil in *The Rescue of Danish Jewry* (xix), as well as by Samuel Abrahamsen in “The Rescue of Denmark’s Jews” in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (4).

useful results so as to “retain maximum confidence and authority among the population.”⁹ Although ultimately such dual-authority would not be able to balance and coexist for a lengthy time, the Germans took a more collaborative stance, which allowed them to use the resources, such as foodstuffs, and raw materials that Denmark had to offer, to aid the Nazi agenda.^{10 11}

For now, Denmark’s relatively small Jewish population was safe from the Concentration Camps, humiliation, and fear that plagued Jews across Europe. In general, Denmark had never possessed the same hostility towards those practicing Judaism, as much of Europe had. The claim that the people of Denmark held to anti-Semitic beliefs is not entirely true.¹² However, this basic idea of acceptance is emphasized by Leni Yahil in her analysis of the factors that allowed the Danish Resistance to be successful. Yahil states that besides geography, population, social and political factors, it was “the special character and moral stature of the Danish people and their love of freedom and democracy”¹³ that allowed the Danish Resistance to achieve success. Leon Falik includes the Danish proverb; “a man is a man even if he is not bigger than a mouse.”¹⁴ This proverb exemplifies the general belief that all people have rights. Although anti-Jewish sentiment existed within the belief system of Denmark, the Danish Jewry enjoyed a larger degree of acceptance, even under Nazi rule, than many other European countries.

This general acceptance was especially visible in prominent social figures, especially King Christian X. The king had historically been a friend to the Danish Jews. Even before the war, he

⁹ Jørgen Hæstrup, *European Resistance Movement, 1939-1945: A Complete History* (London: Meckler Publishing, 1981), 137.

¹⁰ Levine, Paul A. “Sweden’s Complicated Neutrality and the Rescue of the Danish Jewry” in *The Routledge History of the Holocaust*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 306.

¹¹ Mogensen, Michael. “October 1943 – The Rescue of the Danish Jews” in *Denmark and the Holocaust*, ed. Mette Bastholm Jensen, and Steven L.B. Jensen. Translated by Gwynneth Llewellyn and Marie Louise Hansen-Hoeck (Højbjerg: Werks Offset A / S, 2003), 41-42.

¹² Leon Falik, *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), xii-xiii.

¹³ Leni Yahil, *The Rescue of the Danish Jewry* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), xvii.

¹⁴ Leon Falik, *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), xii-xiii.

attended a festival in April of 1933, despite a boycott in Germany against Jews, in order to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the Copenhagen synagogue. His legacy is immortalized in the legend of the Star of David. While only fiction, the myth claims that upon hearing that the Germans were commanding all Jews to wear a Star of David, King Christian proudly wore a yellow star while riding around Copenhagen. The myth has been perpetuated in film, literature, and lore, and has become an important part of the rich fabric of the resistance. Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson analyzes the myth and tries to seek an explanation, proposing that perhaps the goal of the fictitious story was to appeal to the Americans, and promote a positive view of the Danish people.¹⁵

Although the story is but a legend, it does contain a kernel of truth. King Christian X publicly ignored German soldier's salutes, and to a certain extent refused to allow the Germans to persecute the Danish Jewry. King Christian X stood as a symbol of national spirit, and remained a steadfast advocate of the Jews. As a well-respected leader, he gained the reverence of not only the Danish people, but also the respect of his enemies. His refusal to submit to the will of the Nazis set an example for the Danish people to follow. Although the extent of his public resistance to German policies has been greatly exaggerated, he did advocate policies that protected the Danish people as a whole.

Within the Jewish community, C. B. Henriques acted as an important link between the government and the Danish Jewry. His work as a well-respected court-barrister put him in contact with many Danish authority figures. Within the Jewish community, Henriques acted as an admirable leader. Henriques is credited with "steering the fate of the Jews"¹⁶ by encouraging the Jew-

¹⁵ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, *The King and the Star: Myths created during the Occupation of Denmark* (Højbjerg: Werks Offset A/S, 2003), 107-108.

¹⁶ Jørgen Hæstrup, "The Danish Jews and German Occupation" in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 17.

ish people to trust both the King and the government. By advocating placing faith in the leaders of Denmark to the Jewish community, Henriques was ensuring a continuing relationship between the Jewish community and the authority. However, this almost absolute trust that Henriques placed in the Danish authority nearly led to crisis. Henriques was so convinced by both religious authorities as well as legislative authorities, which had been misled by Dr. Best, that the rumors of imminent persecution were false, that Henriques refused to accept the news delivered to him by the Social Democratic leaders.¹⁷ Eventually, Henriques was able to accept the warning and with his support, the message that the Jewish New Year would be used by German soldiers to ensure the deportation of Danish Jews spread quickly.

As for the Church in Denmark, Copenhagen's bishop H. Fuglslang Damgaard made it clear to Christians across Denmark that a doctrine of acceptance and tolerance applied to *everyone*. On October 3, 1943, Damgaard issued a statement regarding the Church's position on Judaism. Eloquently and directly, Damgaard asserted that:

Wherever the Jews are persecuted because of their religion or race, it is the duty of the Christian Church to protest such persecutions...our religious views notwithstanding, we shall fight for the cause that our Jewish brothers and sisters may preserve the same freedom which we ourselves value more highly than life itself.¹⁸

This address demonstrated that the intellectual elite were willing to put themselves at risk in order to protect the moral and ethical values of Denmark. When the imposition of anti-Semitic measures were announced in October of 1943, Jørgen Hæstrup notes that "both the Church as a Church and the individual clergy closed ranks in the face of the occupying Power's violations."¹⁹

¹⁷ Leni Yahil, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 207.

¹² Samuel Abrahamsen, "The Rescue of Denmark's Jews" in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews 1972*, ed. Leo Goldberger (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 4.

¹⁹ Hæstrup, Jørgen. *European Resistance Movements, 1939-1945: A Complete History* (London: Meckler Publishing, 1981), 91.

The reaction of the Church in support of the Resistance Movement not only created resistance organizations, but alternately clergy members joined existing organizations like The Council of Freedom, to show support for the Jewish minority in a predominately Protestant country.²⁰ Those seeking to promote justice and equality came from all walks of life, and protected the Jewish population, even if it went against beliefs or orders.

The public figures aiding the Danish Resistance were not all Danish, as Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz aided the movement by supplying invaluable information in order to promote justice. A German by birth, Duckwitz had first become familiar with Denmark in the late 1920s and early 1930s. However, during the German Occupation, he held a very important position. As a confidant and trusted advisor of the German Reich plenipotentiary, Dr. Best, Duckwitz was able to intercept a telegram detailing new plans to deport the Danish Jews. Duckwitz was now faced with a very crucial choice. Either he could allow the transport of Danish Jews to Concentration Camps, or he could inform Danish officials of the treacherous plan. In the end, the greatly disillusioned Duckwitz decided to divulge the plan to Danish political leaders. Duckwitz is said to have met with the Danish Prime Minister, Hans Hedroft, and announced; “The disaster is going to take place. All the details are planned. Your poor fellow citizens are going to be deported to an unknown destination.”²¹ By alerting the Jewish community to the planned action only a few days away, Duckwitz allowed them time to plan their escape.²² The meeting that followed between Henriques and the Prime Minister marked a departure from the sense of security the Jews had previously been given. New developments in the war and German losses had rekindled the Nazi

²⁰ Hæstrup cites that 97% of the populations were members of the Protestant Church (90).

²¹ Herbert Pundik, “Personal Narratives” in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 82.

²² Jørgen Hæstrup, “The Danish Jews and German Occupation” in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 15.

desire to exterminate the entire European Jewish population and to enforce a strict Nazi regime in all German-occupied countries.

Hitler's view of Denmark changed drastically in 1943, as unsuccessful battles and growing Allied power threatened to destroy the Nazi regime. The Nazi loss at the battle of Stalingrad and the invasion of Italy by the Allies began to change the fate of the war. With the Third Reich losing power and control, Hitler decided to exert his dominance in the small, forgotten country of Denmark.²³ Hitler's decision that Denmark should be included in the "Final Solution,"²⁴ meant that Hitler's anti-semitic agenda would be brought to Denmark. Harold Flender also points out that the disillusionment many Danish people felt with the Germans began to manifest in violence and protest against the Nazi occupation.²⁵ With the number of anti-German sabotage activities rising, such sabotages of trains carrying supplies to German troops across Europe, the Germans felt that it was necessary to assert their authority in order to gain back control. A telegram was sent to Dr. Best detailing a raid which would oust and deport the Danish Jewry to Theresienstadt, a Concentration Camp. The raid was planned for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, when the Germans knew all the Jews would be at home. In response, an ultimatum was delivered to the Danish people by Dr. Best. At last, the Nazi regime began to introduce the severe policies that had made them so famous. Labor strikes were prohibited. Curfew was introduced. Acts of sabotage and the possession of arms were announced to be punishable by death. Horrified by the implications of these policies, the Danish government rejected the ultimatum. In August of 1943, the Danish government came under the direct control of the Germans after the Danish authority was dissolved. The resignation of the cabinet and the lack of a King meant the Nazis were now

²³ Jørgen Hæstrup, "The Danish Jews and German Occupation" in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 37-38.

²⁴ The final solution (*die endlösung* in German) was the Nazi's plan for the extermination of Jews in Europe.

²² Harold Flender, *Rescue in Denmark* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 37-38.

in control of Denmark.²⁶ The telegram received by Dr. Best from the Nazi Headquarters marked a transition in policy. The Jews had now become a target.

With the German persecution of the Danish Jews but a few days away, an escape plan was devised. It was announced that The Jews would join escaped Danes in neutral Sweden.²⁷ On 2 October 1943, the Swedish state radio broadcast that “the minister has put forward an invitation from the Swedish government that it is prepared to accept all Danish Jews in Sweden.”²⁸ The news of the persecution marked a change in the Danish resistance mentality from passive to public. In Denmark, the Danish Jewry found an abundance of aid as they sought to make their way safely to Sweden. Many Danish citizens offered Jews places to stay as they awaited a chance to escape. The massive effort by a large Copenhagen hospital from the very beginning of the occupation, led by Dr. Køster, gave Danish Jews fake charts and identities, so as to inhibit the Nazis from finding the Jews.²⁹ The kindness of many Danish citizens was viewed as the proper course of action, and a multitude of Danes helped to aid the Jews even though it risked their personal security.

Thus began the mass exodus of Danish Jews to Sweden. From October to November 1943 it is estimated that 7,220 Jews were able to safely reach Sweden. They were ferried across the Øresund Strait by fisherman, often for a price. The massive success of the operation is attributed to the Resistance Movement’s involvement with legal forces, such as the police force and the

²⁶ Michael R. D. Foot, *Resistance: European Resistance to Nazism, 1940-1945* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 276.

²⁷ For all intents and purposes, Sweden was declared neutral. However, as Paul Levine points out in his article *Sweden's Complicated Neutrality and the Rescue of the Danish Jewry*, Sweden’s neutrality is implicated by the fact that they provided Germany with resources and raw materials. By supplying the Germans with materials necessary to continue their Nazi agenda, Sweden was able to ensure greater autonomy without the enforcement of Nazi control and policy.

²⁸ Levine, Paul A. “Sweden's' Complicated Neutrality and the Rescue of the Danish Jewry” in *The Routledge History of the Holocaust*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 305.

²⁹ Leni Yahil, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 241-242.

coast guard, which Morgenson comments on stating that “many of the officers...not only closed their eyes to the rescue efforts; they took active part in the rescue and were invaluable helpers.”³⁰ The aid of these legal forces was invaluable in aiding the Jews to safety, and effectively placing the German forces at a disadvantage. Additionally, the German soldiers were completely unprepared for the organized system of smuggling which managed to become greatly mechanized in such a short amount of time, and thus had to scramble to recover the upper hand.³¹ But the reality was far more emotional. In his *Personal Narrative*, Herbert Pundik cites an article from a Swedish newspaper which describes the arrival of the Jews from a Swedish perspective.

Here they come, hunted from house and home, driven from their jobs and sometimes torn from their relatives, and here they come singing, as if they were approaching the gates of Paradise, from death to life.

The boat draws alongside the quay...The refugees hurry on land with their small bundles. Many fight to keep back their tears, their reactions overwhelming. A Jew kneels and kisses the soil of Sweden It is no theatrical gesture...Swedish soil has become holy soil for those who were hunted like animals and had to flee for their lives .³²

The impassioned arrival of the Jews in Sweden was for them an opportunity available to very few during the darkness of the Holocaust. Although they had lost much in the journey, the Jews, now safe in Sweden, had kept their freedom and their identity.

What few mishaps stemmed from the escape generally came from either boat malfunctions, late boat arrivals, and other such complications. Informants, patrol boats, and the German police

³⁰ Mogensen, Michael. “October 1943 – The Rescue of the Danish Jews” in *Denmark and the Holocaust*, ed. Mette Bastholm Jensen, and Steven L.B. Jensen. Translated by Gwynneth Llewellyn and Marie Louise Hansen-Hoeck (Højbjerg: Werks Offset A / S, 2003), 41-42.

³¹ Herbert Pundik, “Personal Narratives” in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 93.

³² Herbert Pundik, “Personal Narratives” in *The Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 93.

Pundik makes a note that the Jews would sing the Swedish national anthem, “Du gamla, du fria” upon arrival in Sweden.

were all threats that the escaping Jews had to be wary of. In the end, Yahil calculates that only 2.3% of the Jewish population were captured.³³ Of these captures, only 472 ended up in Theresientadt.³⁴ Of those deported to a Concentration camp, only fifty three died. None of the Danish Jews were ever deported to other Concentration Camps that were far crueler, unlike many other Jews who only experienced the “model camp,” Theresientadt, as a brief stop on a journey ultimately towards death.³⁵ The Danish Jews within the camp were kept safe due to pressure from inquiry and pressure from Danish officials, and unlike many other prisoners, they were kept relatively well-nourished and clothed. Packages sent from Denmark contained clothing and food, and reminded the Jews that even though they were no longer in Denmark, they had not been forgotten.

Throughout the duration of the war, the Jewish community was never neglected. Through a united front, the passive movement was able to ensure a high degree of safety for all people of Denmark. From the beginning of the occupation, the people and leaders of Denmark recognized the humanity in everyone. Even in extreme crisis, the kindness of a large percentage of the Danish people demonstrated a willingness to do what they considered just, even with the threat of death and torture if they were caught. The consistent willingness of so many to put their lives and safety in danger to protect the persecuted showed a moral rectitude which defended the basic rights for all. In Denmark, there existed support and fraternity, even in the chaos and despair of the war. The continued resistance against the occupation and the protection of the Jews, confirmed the power and courage of the human spirit, even in times of almost complete darkness. The Danish Resistance remains a reminder of the idea that in unity, even the greatest feats can be accomplished. As a beacon of hope in the darkness, the Danish Resistance has come to symbol-

³³ Leni Yahil, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 275.

³⁴ Harold Flender, *Rescue in Denmark* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 209.

³⁵ Harold Flender, *Rescue in Denmark* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 215-219.

ize the strength of humanity, the power of acceptance, and the importance of cooperation in forging a path to a brighter future.

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