

20.06.2009

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From rescue to escape in 1943: de-victimizing the Danish Jews

*Paper at the conference
"Towards an Integrated
Perspective on Nazi Policies
of Mass Murder",
arranged by Task Force for
International Cooperation
on Holocaust Education,
Remembrance and Research,
Oslo, Norway, June 20, 2009*

The object of this paper is to offer a scholarly status and insight into public debates on the rescue of the Danish Jews during the Holocaust. The paper will focus on two closely connected themes that have occupied both scholars and public debate in recent years: the *assessment of risk* and the *question of money*. The discussion of these topics has severely challenged the perception of the rescuers, but has also increased our understanding of the rescue – and the conditions of rescue. Furthermore, the paper will reveal some less-known aspects of Danish collaboration with German forces and introduce new research conducted at The Danish Jewish Museum that not only shifts focus from perpetrators and rescuers to the victims themselves but also changes the perception of the victims.

8,000 people were rescued to safety in Sweden in October 1943, Jews (in Nazi and Jewish definitions) and their Gentile relatives and children, all victims of Nazi persecution as *Jews*. They constituted 95 % of the Jewish Community in Denmark and included German-Jewish refugees with residence permit in the country (about 2,000). The rescue succeeded with the help and assistance of thousands of their fellow citizens and the heroic act of the Danes is *rightfully* world famous.

However, a brief introduction to the historical facts is necessary:

The German authorities in Denmark postponed persecution of the Danish Jews – despite pressure from Berlin – until the autumn of 1943. That is almost a year later than the raids against the Norwegian Jews. The – so called – *policy of cooperation* in Denmark protected the Jews, but came with a price: As recent research has shown, Danish authorities actively complied with German demands in expelling German-Jewish refugees to Germany – and certain death. 20 Jewish refugees were expelled from Denmark after the occupation in 1940¹. Moreover, public debate were silent on every aspect of "the Jewish Question". Danish government offered several concessions: no Jews in dominant public positions and gave in to German pressure to

¹ Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson: *Medaljens bagside. Jødiske flygtningeskæbner i Danmark 1933-1945* [The reverse of the medal. Jewish refugee stories in Denmark 1933-1945]. Copenhagen 2005 (in danish), Hans Kirchhoff and Lone Rünitz: *Udsendt til Tyskland. Dansk flygtningepolitik under besættelsen* [Expelled to Germany. Danish refugee-policy during the German occupation]. Odense 2007 (in danish).

keep Jewish people off the radio (as speakers and topics). A few public figures were forced to resign: All part in a strategy to prevent that the Jewish question was raised². And most Jews continued their daily life almost untouched by the occupation.

With the fall of the cooperation policy on August 29th 1943 the protection of the Danish Jews and the German Jewish refugees, who had a residence permit in Denmark, vanished. Preparations of a final solution of the Jewish question in Denmark began immediately.

Preparations were made for a raid on the evening of October 1st, when most Jews were considered to be in their homes celebrating *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year. The raid was efficient, well planned and carefully executed – parallel to raids all over Europe – but it was one night only and had to be concluded in 3 hours.

Crucial to the escape of almost 95 % of the Danish Jews was a warning that could be trusted. It came from the highest level of the German hierarchy. The shipping expert at the German embassy, G.F. Duckwitz, a close associate of the plenipotentiary in Denmark Werner Best – as well as several other anonymous Germans – leaked the crucial information of the time and date of the raid. The warning spread like wildfire. Only those too old, sick or alone who could not or would not take refuge spent the night at home. The element of surprise was almost completely absent. Only 202 were arrested in Copenhagen³.

The warning has puzzled scholars ever since. And recent findings just add to the puzzle. Contrary to speculations, Werner Best had all the police forces he needed to hunt down and capture the Jews of Copenhagen. More than 1,800 German policemen participated. But apparently he took every step to ensure that the raid would not produce results. To Best the ambition to create a *judenrein* territory could be achieved either by means of deportation (and subsequent elimination) or by expulsion. A forced expulsion was a preferred strategy in Denmark. It accommodated both his ideological perceptions and his pragmatic view of the policy of cooperation in Denmark. A *Kopfjagd* ("head-hunting") was never in question.

There were no round ups of Jews after the raid on October 1st 1943. The persecution of the Jews after the raid was left to a small group of Gestapo men. About half of the Jews deported after October 2nd – 197 in total – were arrested due to the intervention of a single man – the Gestapo chief in Elsinore. Of these 50 alone were deported after an informer betrayed Jews hiding in the fisherman's town of Gilleleje on October 6th.

Jews were often caught by coincidence, usually at harbours crowded with people. In Taarbaek, a small fishing hamlet north of Copenhagen, for example, two Gestapo agents who were tipped off arrived at the port just as a fishing boat with refugees was leaving the quay. Thirteen people were arrested that night; five were later deported to Theresienstadt. Witnesses at the judicial purge after the war, however, reported that there were quite a lot of people at the harbour,

² Sofie Lene Bak: *Dansk Antisemitisme 1930-1945* [Danish Antisemitism 1930-1945]. Copenhagen 2001 (in danish).

³ Rasmus Kreth and Michael Mogensen: *Flugten til Sverige. Aktionen mod de danske jøder oktober 1943*. [The Escape to Sweden: The Action against the Danish Jews, October 1943] Copenhagen, 1995 (in danish). Se also: Michael Mogensen: "October 1943 – The rescue of the Danish Jews". In: Mette Bastholm Jensen and Steven B. Jensen (eds.): *Denmark and the Holocaust*. Copenhagen: Institute for International Studies, Department for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2003.

among them several Danish police officers, who assisted the escape. Danish law during the occupation prohibited leisure boating and unauthorized traffic in the harbours. A crowd of 30 maybe 40 people in the middle of the night during curfew can hardly be considered discreet. The situation cried to heaven – and activated an informer, who alarmed the Gestapo.

Furthermore, Werner Best had taken steps to prevent Jews being caught at sea. There was no German police surveillance over the strait between Denmark and Sweden in October 1943. German patrol boats performed only naval duties. Any surveillance boats available were allocated for minesweeping. Not a single one of the 600–700 illegal transports carrying Jewish refugees was seized by German police at sea. The Wehrmacht were ordered not to interfere⁴.

Rescuers caught by the Gestapo were handed over to the Danish courts to be charged with assisting illegal migration. The maximum penalty was three months imprisonment under relatively lenient conditions in a Danish prison. Most of the cases, however, never came to court, or court officials let the rescuers slip away through the back door. Thus the rescuers faced only very limited sanctions. Contrary to myth, the rescuers did not risk their lives to save the Jews⁵.

It is essential to consider the difference between assessments made today and the perception of the people involved at the time, who did not perceive – or only partly perceived – German motives. Yet in recent years the taboo surrounding the fact, that the Jews paid a considerable amount of money for their transport has been severely challenged. Danish historians now cautiously question the fairness of the high price the fishermen demanded for taking the Jews safely to Sweden⁶. The cost per person ranged between 500 and 2,000 kroner – when the average hourly wage for an industrial worker was about two kroner. To get an idea of the value in preset day-money: multiply the amounts with 20. The source material tells us of families that paid exorbitant sums of up to 50,000 kroner for the crossing. Prices were subjected to the mechanisms of supply and demand, regardless of the need for insurance for the material risk taken by the fishermen, or security for the families of the rescuers in case of arrest. Desire to profit from the situation was intertwined with humanitarian motives. It is a fact that several rescuers made a living – and fortune – on the rescue.

The rescue of the Danish Jews has been a part of the history of the Danish resistance movement ever since the event. The myth was already under construction while fisher boats were still transporting Jews across the Oresund to Sweden and it was fortified after the liberation. The question of money of course did not fit the perception of heroic, altruistic men and women who considered the rescue of the Jews an integral part of the fight for the freedom of Denmark. However, the perception that it was the Danish resistance movement that saved the Jews didn't fit either: most rescuers were in fact not part of the resistance and disappeared when it was all over. The rescuers didn't necessarily perceive the help as an act of resistance nor as a protest against the policy of cooperation. Rather it was perceived as *civilian disobedience* supported

⁴ Sofie Lene Bak: "Jødepolitik i Danmark: Deportation eller uddrivelse?" [German Anti-Jewish policy in Denmark: Deportation or Expulsion?]. In: Hans Kirchhoff (ed.): *Nyt lys over oktober 1943* [New light on October 1943]. Odense 2002 (in danish).

⁵ Kreth and Mogensen 1995, op.cit. p. 94.

⁶ Henrik Dethlefsen: "Ud af mørket – den danske modstand og redningen af jøderne i oktober 1943" [Out of the darkness – the Danish resistance and the rescue of the Jews in October 1943]. In Hans Sode-Madsen (ed.): "*Føreren har befalet!*" *Jødeaktionen oktober 1943* [On the Führer's Order: The Aktion against the Jews, October 1943] Copenhagen, 1993 (in danish), Kreth and Mogensen 1995 op. cit., Bak 2001 op.cit.

not only by Danish government and authorities but – as we have seen – by the Germans. Several eyewitnesses report of Wehrmacht soldiers that looked the other way.

472 Danish Jews were deported to the concentration camp Theresienstadt in the protectorate of Böhmen-Mähren, where they stayed until liberation. They were allowed to receive letters and monthly parcels with clothes, medicine and food. These privileges were extended to German Jews deported from Danish soil. The arrangements in Theresienstadt were the result of an agreement between Adolf Eichmann and Werner Best, who insisted that Danish Jews were not to be deported to Eastern Europe⁷. In Theresienstadt, 52 people deported from Denmark died.

Why did Best go out of his way to ensure that Danes stayed in a camp without gas chambers, and with provisions that secured their survival? Why did he postpone the raid and issue the warning? And why did both the Wehrmacht and the German police try to prevent an action against the Danish Jews? The answer is persuasive: the policy of cooperation. Denmark accepted the terms of April 9th 1940 and tried extensively to comply with German demands. Yet the policy of cooperation did allow for mutual concessions. Moreover, the Danish government refused to accept any discriminating measures regarding the Jews. On this point they were in consonance with the vast majority of the Danish population. Best realized that any further action against the Jews would make it impossible to work for a mutual understanding between the two nations. The Germans did not have freedom of action when it came to the Jews. The attitude of Danish government and population is thus a fundamental precondition of the rescue and the conclusion not only broadens our understanding of the conditions of rescue, it also leaves us with complicated – almost metaphysical – questions: Why did the Danes insist that there were no “Jewish Question” in Denmark? Why did they continuously stress that the Jews in Denmark were an internal affair?

These questions are not easier to answer when confronted with aspects of collaboration with the German forces that not only resembles situations all over Europe, but could have had terrifying consequences for the Danish Jews and subsequently for the reputation of the Danish nation⁸.

The source material relating to the persecution of Danish Jews tells of the unpleasant – albeit law-abiding – collaboration of train staff and coastguards. The latter did, in some instances, contribute to the rescue operation, but most collaborated with the German police. The train staff at The Danish State Railways all remained passive eyewitnesses to the brutal deportation of Jews. The Danish State Railways’ report on the deportation transports state that the staff behaved ‘correctly’ and that “the entire dispatch proceeded in orderly fashion; there were no untoward incidents of any sort.”⁹ No protest, relief or rescue was attempted.

The line between involuntary passive and active collaboration is of course blurred. Administrative collaboration served the goal of keeping the wheels of society turning and sheltering the daily

⁷ Leni Yahil: *Test of a democracy. The rescue of Danish Jewry in World War II*. Jerusalem 1966.

⁸ Sofie Lene Bak: *Between tradition and new departure - the dilemmas of collaboration in Denmark*. In: Beryl Belsky (ed.): *Antisemitism Worldwide*. Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, Tel Aviv University (To be published 2009).

⁹ Quotation from the report from the Danish State Railways, printed in Hans Kirchhoff: “Endlösung over Danmark”. In Hans Sode Madsen (ed.): *“Føreren har befalet!” Jødeaktionen oktober 1943* [On the Führer’s Order: The Aktion against the Jews, October 1943] Copenhagen, 1993, p. 103. My emphasis.

life of the population. Yet faced with fellow human beings brutally forced on board the wagons and the distressing conditions in the cramped cattle trucks or with Jews in the harbour areas desperate to escape persecution, in practice the *policy of cooperation* meant preventing the obvious disorder, hindering the illegal nature of the flight and observance of the timetable regardless of the fact that the cargo was human beings. In addition, the departments displayed a most remarkable orthodoxy and *esprit-de-corps*.

The plan for an internment of Danish Jews proposed by the permanent secretaries is yet another object lesson of bureaucratic inertness, and the loyalties and limits of civil servants influenced by conservative bureaucratic traditions – a phenomenon that recurred all over Europe during the Holocaust. The permanent secretaries – that remained in their positions and represented ‘official’ Denmark after August 29th – offered to intern the Danish Jews, if necessary with the assistance of the Danish police – that is, by force if needed. The plan was never executed. The plan weren’t presented to Best until the evening of October 1st and Best promptly refused the proposal. The raid against the Danish Jews was in full swing, and Best was trying to disassociate himself from the events and the responsibility.

The successful rescue and the actions of the Danes who helped their fellow human beings to escape must be seen in this context of reluctant and self-restraining Germans. Without minimizing the deeds of the rescuers, the exceptional circumstances that made the escape possible should be understood. What would have happened if the raid had been carried out in 1942, when deportations began in the rest of Europe, at a time when the prospects of German defeat were not evident? What if the population of 8,000 people could not flee across the water to Sweden, but had to stay underground in Denmark for months and years depending on the help, housing and provisions of their fellow Danes? What if the punishment for helping the Jews had been long imprisonment, concentration camps or even the death penalty?

Attempts at an answer might come from a new research project conducted by The Danish Jewish Museum. The project titled *War experiences of Danish Jews 1943-1945* aims at collecting testimonies and objects related to the occupation years, the escape to Sweden, exile in Sweden, deportation to Theresienstadt and the return to Denmark in 1945. The findings challenges the notion of the Jews as passive victims, that needed saving. Rather the Jews were active *players*, who tried their best to secure their possessions and belongings, who managed to obtain the cash needed for the flight – with short time on their hands. Who organized transport not only for their immediate family but also for relatives and friends. Recent finding also states, that the flight began in late September 1943 – several days before the official warning – and that the earliest transports often were conducted in small rowing boats. These navigations were extremely dangerous – not because of the risk of exposure – but because the rowing boats, which were sold to the Jews, were often in very poor condition. Many of the known drowning accidents happened in the beginning with these small boats.

Moreover the research project has uncovered that a still unknown number, but approximately 130 Jewish children – between 10-20 % of the total number of children affected by the Nazi persecution – were placed with foster families or at children’s homes, when their parents fled to Sweden. Small children were considered a security hazard, some rescue routes refused to accept small children and rumours circulated that children, who could not keep quiet, were choked. Some children stayed with their foster families until Liberation, for 22 months. In none of the cases I have uncovered, money were involved. And the children were well cared for, even

loved. It was pure compassion and altruism. But the stories were repressed by the families and forgotten by the public.

In Denmark – as well as in the rest of Europe – the persecution of the Jews were often overshadowed by the celebration of the resistance movement and the victims of political persecution. The persecution of the Danish Jews has always been an integral part of the commemoration of the resistance. Hence focus has been on the rescuers rather than the victims. Furthermore Danish research has followed the international trend of *Täter forschung*. Scholars have carefully uncovered the political conditions of the rescue, that is German and Danish players, but in focusing on the victims themselves, their sacrifices and loss, new light is cast on an event, that was formerly thought to be one of the most documented part of Danish history.

The heroic image of the rescue is not defiled neither by the fact of collaboration, by the fact of the low risk nor the considerable money involved. In stead it increases our understanding of the processes and circumstances that generated passive collaboration rather than moral action.

The Danish myth of the battle against evil, tells of ultimate victory due to the superiority of Danish democratic and political culture. Comprehending the consequences of cooperation and the universal cost-benefit matrix of rescue and relief is part of a painful compromise with the myth. Yet, a flexible and realistic perception of the rescue in 1943 has much to offer. It enables identification and understanding to a greater extent than do emotional statements of the national spirit and visions of heroic freedom fighters. In “de-victimizing” the Jews and “de-heroizing” the rescuers we can preserve the power of identification and education in the world’s most fabulous escape.