

Proud to be Part of the Human Race:

October 1943, the Rescue of the Danish Jews from Annihilation

By Max Lawson

Although reticent by nature, a few words are in order about my attachment to Denmark and all things Danish.

I taught for six years at the International People's College in Elsinore (of Hamlet's Castle fame) which is on the sea coast about an hour's drive north of Copenhagen. On weekends I took students on excursions. One particularly poignant one was to Gilleleje, the most northern point on the island of Zealand and the closest crossing to Sweden, twenty minutes by boat. Gilleleje, like Elsinore itself further south, was one of the escape centres to Sweden.

I took the students to the local village church in Gilleleje, which had a large loft or attic in which Jews were hidden, pending their escape to Sweden. Indeed they could see Sweden from a large porthole window. One group were betrayed either by a Danish informer or simply the Germans picked up loose gossip around the town. Another group that did not make it were the elderly Jewish residents of a nursing home - they were overlooked.

In all 481 Danish Jews were deported to the Eesienstadt (north of Prague). From this "model" concentration camp many were deported to Auchwitz but the Danes were allowed to stay, a promise the Danish authorities had obtained from Werner Best, head of the German occupation of Denmark.

As mentioned before, 481 Danish Jews were caught, but what about the 7000 or so Danish Jews who escaped to Sweden, a fact that even at the War Tribunal Adolph Eichmann was annoyed by his Danish fiasco.

There were many factors that contributed to the success of

a warning about the impending deportation. But above all, it was the ingenuity and will of many people wanting to protect an oppressed minority that brought it all about.'

When the German commander Werner Best conferred with George Duckwitz, an embassy official, about the impending round-up of the Jews, Duckwitz immediately told the Social Democratic party who in turn passed the news on to the Chief Rabbi. (Imagine what could have happened if the social media facilities of today were available then!)

Events moved very rapidly - the round-up was to occur between the 1st and 2nd of October. How did so many Jews escape within twenty-four hours?

One example: Dr. Richard Ege and his wife organized a rescue group. Doctors, hospital staff and students were instrumental in the rescue work. Jewish fugitives were admitted to hospital with fictitious ailments or hidden in rooms for staff. Even the mortuaries were used. Some two thousand persons passed through Bisperberg Hospital alone.²

The Danish people as a whole presented a solid wall of solidarity with the Jewish fellow citizens. Some examples: ambulance driver, Jorgen Knudsen, searched through the local phone books for addresses of families with "Jewish sounding names". He then drove his ambulance to warn them and if they had nowhere to hide, took them either to the hospital or doctors active in the resistance. Other Jews

¹ The Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Museum of Danish Resistance 1940-1945, October 1948: The Rescue of the Danish Jews from Annihilation. 1993, p. 3.

² Ibid, p. 13.

³ Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, A Force More Powerful: a Century of nonViolent Conflict (London: Palgrave, 2000) p. 223

The German authorities never expected such a massive reaction from the whole of the Danish community. In other countries it had been relatively easy to isolate and deport the Jews.⁴

Following the operation against the Jews, the hitherto declared State of Emergency installed by the Germans was called off, but a new Danish government was not to be formed.

At war's end the day of reckoning came. After the war Commander Best stood before the court in Copenhagen accused as a war criminal. In 1948 Best was sentenced to death by a Danish court, but his sentence was reduced to five years in prison (of which he had already served four years). This created outrage among the Danish public, and the Supreme Court changed the sentence to 12 years. Best was released in 1951. In 1958 Best was fined by a Berlin de-Nazification court for his actions during the war. In 1972 he was charged again when further war crimes allegations arose. He was found medically unfit to stand trial and was released. He died in 1989.

To conclude on a happier note, the nineteen fifties saw the return to Denmark as German ambassador of George Duckwitz who had alerted Danish authorities of the Jewish

⁴ October 1943, p. 18.