

THE BRAVE LITTLE BOAT

Study Guide

Denmark Guide

Invasion of Denmark: Historical Perspective

The German army invaded Norway and Denmark on April 9, 1940. Because the Danes offered no resistance to the Nazis and because of their “racial” qualities, they enjoyed a level of autonomy not found in other areas under German occupation. The Danes had a government, a succession of prime ministers, a Parliament, a Foreign Office and an army.

German agencies in Denmark were limited in what they could do in the country. The German troop commander, for example, was not a military governor. The German representative in Copenhagen was a diplomat, not a Nazi-governor. Any intrusion in Danish domestic affairs was deemed unacceptable.

In November 1942, when Dr. Werner Best, the new German envoy arrived, he attempted to introduce anti-Jewish laws. After Danish Prime Minister Scavenius threatened to resign along with his cabinet would if the laws were implemented, he backed down.

Deportation of the Jews began on the night of October 1-2, 1943. The Danes alerted the Jews and the rescue began in earnest.

Why Didn't the Danish Jews Flee Earlier?

1. As long as the agreement with the Germans allowing the Danes to remain autonomous remained in effect, they did not want to do anything that might disturb the status quo. The safety of the Jews depended on continued law and order in Denmark. Doing anything that could be construed as breaking the law might have jeopardized this arrangement. The Danes did want to give the Germans any excuse to do so.

When Niels Bohr, the famous Danish physicist, for example, was invited by the British government to escape to Denmark during the summer of 1943, he refused. He feared that it might have serious consequences for the German refugees who worked in his institute and for the entire Jewish community.

2. Not only did the Jews fear what the Germans might do if they broke this arrangement, but also what the Danes might say as well. They might have felt that the Jews were willing to live with them during good times, but the moment there was trouble, they abandoned them.

3. The most logical place for Jews to escape to was Sweden. Before October 1943, this was not an option. Danish fishermen were not eager to risk taking Jews there. In April 1940, some had helped Jews to flee to Sweden, but were arrested by the Germans. Minefields and German patrols were another deterrent.

Furthermore, the Swedes discouraged Jews from escaping to Sweden in order not to endanger their arrangements with the Germans.

4. Before the summer of 1943, the Danish resistance movement was small and did not enjoy the support of most Danes. Hiding their own underground members was quite difficult; getting them to Sweden was virtually impossible.

5. Zionist members of Hechalutz, who were training to go Palestine, tried to escape via the Balkans to Turkey and from there to Palestine. All attempts failed. Five people were killed in the process. For two years they trained and tested ways to leave, but were forced to cease their attempts.

In the spring of 1943, ten Hechalutz fisherman trainees succeeded in reaching Sweden, after a very dangerous crossing. The Germans demanded that these attempts stop. The Jews complied so as not to complicate the problems with the Danes or their fellow Jews. (Yahil, op.cit., pp.201-206.)

How Many Jews Were Saved?

Seven thousand two hundred Jews escaped to Sweden along with 686 non-Jewish Danes, who were related to the Jews; 475 Jews were deported to Theresienstadt; 300 left Sweden during the occupation or were in hiding or died. Only 120 were caught by the Germans. (Yahil, pp. 25,275.)

Experiences in Denmark Taught Germans A Lesson

Implementing the “final solution” was not easy when the people with whom Jews lived opposed their persecution. (Yahil, op.cit, p.191.)

Keeping Rescue In Perspective

Jewish tradition requires *hakarat hatov*, recognizing good deeds. This is why there is an obligation to tell how the rescuers/ helpers helped save Jews. Dr. Mordecai Paldiel, director of the Department for the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, saw his work to acknowledge and honor the “Righteous Among the Nations” as a moral imperative. By saving Jews, they “rescued the spirit and idea of man, as expressed in the best Biblical tradition.” (Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*. (Toronto, Canada: Key Porter Books, Ltd.2003), p.442.

“For the first fifty years after the Holocaust,” observed Abraham Foxman, who was saved by his nanny in Vilna, “survivors bore witness to evil, brutality and bestiality.” (Ibid.p. xvii.)

After the war, they needed to tell about their suffering, the loss of their families and friends, and about Jewish resistance and revolts. But as Foxman added, the survivors also had to bear witness to the “goodness” they experienced because each one who was saved by a non-Jew was “living proof that even in hell, even in that hell called the Holocaust, there was goodness, there was kindness, and there was love and compassion.” (Ibid.)

There is another reason as well: “Racial and religious hatred is a luxury in which no nation or group can indulge without the danger of setting its own house on fire. It is like playing with dynamite or even worse! -- with hydrogen bombs,” warned Father John O'Brien of the University of Notre Dame. "The insensate fury which such hatred releases comes back to purge and bestialize the hater it degrades, demoralizes, and dehumanizes him as no external enemy can possibly do."

The rescuers demonstrate that individuals and groups can make a difference. They remind us “we are all traveling in the same boat. The occupant who drives a hole under the part where his neighbor is seated, finds that the water engulfs him as well and carries him to destruction."

In practically all cases where a Jew was rescued, more than one person was involved. That was true in Denmark as well as elsewhere.

To keep rescue in perspective, we must understand that it is a minor part of the history of the Holocaust. Issues of abandonment, passivity and complicity and the willingness of the West to accept the existence of the Jews and other minorities living in its midst as distinct entities with their own group consciousness are the central issues. Antisemitism and racism are still insidious elements in American society." (Arthur Hertzberg, "Anti-Semitism and Jewish Uniqueness," The B.G. Rudolf Lectures in Judaic Studies (April 1973), pp. 19-20.)

Our challenge is to keep these accounts of heroism in perspective without neglecting the entire history of the Holocaust. We owe that to the rescuers and to those who perished.

What Type of People Were The Rescuers?

They were ordinary men and women who made a critical decision to help Jews. For the most part, this assistance was “individual and irregular;” requiring action that could not be discussed with others. After the war, these helpers did not form any organization, but remained “a loose collection of

individuals” as they had been throughout this period. (Dienke Hondius, “New Insights on Holocaust Survivors and Their Helpers,” in *Those Who Dared: Rescuers and Rescued*, Alex Grobman, ed. Los Angeles, California: Martyrs Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust, 1995).

In Denmark and Norway, the underground movements played a critical part in rescuing Jews, yet spokesmen for these groups have asked that individuals not be mentioned by name. (Ibid.)

In Denmark, the clergy, the police, universities and the physicians played a key role in the rescue. The clergy openly expressed their outrage about the persecution of the Jews in newspapers and religious publications—even from the pulpit.

When rumors of the deportation of the Jews proved to be true, all the Danish churches read a protest to their congregants on October 3, 1943.

The police helped organize escape routes and alerted them when the Germans were coming to deport them from their homes. The police also warned when German patrols searching for them at sea. They acted as guards, escorts and used their boats to take them to safety.

Students helped Jewish families escape to the coast where they were taken to Sweden.

Jews transferred homes, businesses and valuables to their Danish friends and business partners. Danes hid Jews in their homes and in institutions when the Germans sought to deport them. Jews paid for food if they afford to do so. Those who could not were not charged.

Hospitals throughout the country hid large number of Jews under the supervision of the doctors. If caught, the physicians would admit to all being involved so that the Germans could not arrest them all. An estimated 2,000 Jews passed through the Bispebjerg Hospital in Copenhagen.

Members of the Danish Sports Club organized its members to locate Jews hiding in the woods to help them escape.

Average Danes who met Jews on the street or on trains would give them money and offer to help them. (Yahil, pp. 232-249).

Nechama Tec, a sociologist and a child survivor who was hidden by Christians in Poland during the war, suggests that rescuers had a number common characteristics including:

- a. A high level of individuality, independence, and self-reliance that caused them "to pursue personal goals regardless of how these goals" were perceived by others.
- b. A commitment and involvement in helping the needy that had preceded the war.
- c. A belief that their rescue activities were not heroic or extraordinary but part of their duty.
- d. An "unplanned and gradual beginning of rescue at times involving a sudden, even impulsive move".
- e. A "universalistic perception of the needy" that "overshadowed all other attributes except their dependence on aid." (Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced The Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.180).

In Denmark, Jorgen Gersfelt, a physician in Rungsted

The Legends of King Christian X King of Denmark: Are They True?

Unlike Jews in other German occupied lands, Danish Jews were not forced to wear the yellow star. At the time, few people could understand why. This led to speculation that King Christian X had warned that if the Jews were forced to wear the yellow star, he would be the first to wear it. This is not true. The myth began to circulate from 1943 on when American and British newspapers reported that the king threatened to abdicate if anti-Jewish legislation was introduced. (Yahil, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry*, op.cit., pp. 82-83.)

Another myth is that the king participated in a service at the synagogue in Copenhagen during the German occupation. The king was present at the synagogue's hundred-year anniversary service in 1933, but not during the occupation. (Ibid p.82.)

Why did these legends develop? King Christian X personified and "symbolized" the spirit of the Danish people to live in freedom, which made these alleged responses so believable.

Glorifying the Rescuer/Helper

Hondius warns us to be careful about lionizing the image of the rescuer/helper. We should not overlook the fact that these were ordinary individuals. For the most part, the assistance provided by the rescuer/helpers lasted for a short period, and did not reflect on the other areas of their lives and personalities. A number who helped Jewish children did not always treat them properly. Our focus, therefore, must be on their “*ordinariness*.” (Hondius, op.cit. p.54)

Some had “objectionable aspects of their lives,” that cannot be overlooked. There were people active in the resistance in the Netherlands, for example, who held antisemitic views. Others did not consider what was happening to the Jews a major priority. (Ibid.)
(Ibid)

Resisting the desire to “generalize, dramatize, simplify or glorify” the experience of those who helped or rescued Jews, enables us to convey a more realistic picture of what happened. It also allows us to teach ordinary people to respond in times of crisis, for if ordinary people “could rise to the occasion,” and behave in such an “exemplary” way, perhaps many more can do so as well.(Ibid.)

By acknowledging this heroic behavior, we demonstrate that even in times when “civilized values are being undermined,” human beings can find “the strength of character and purpose to resist the evil impulses of the age, and to rescue the victims of barbarity.” The history of the righteous is not merely a story of courage and acts of resistance, but an example of what human beings can accomplish even when confronted with life threatening circumstances. (Gilbert, op.cit.,pp. 443-444.)

Classroom Activities

1. Hold a discussion about the differences between what people say and what they do; and the differences between attitudes and behavior. It was possible, for example, to have negative views towards Jews and yet take risks to ensure they were not hurt or murdered? How can one hold such conflicting beliefs?

Here is one example: Before the war, Zofia Kossak-Szatkowska, a pious Polish Catholic from a prominent family, had distinguished herself as a writer of historical novels. As a nationalist with well-known right-wing sympathies and membership in the Catholic organization Front for a Reborn Poland (F.O.P.), she did not appear to be someone likely to champion the cause of oppressed Jews.

Nevertheless, she actively worked with the underground as a representative of the F.O.P. During the summer of 1942, Zofia wrote "The Protest," an illegal leaflet condemning the "annihilation" of the Jews and the silence of America, England, and the Poles. "This silence," she asserted, "can no longer

be tolerated. Whatever the reason for it, it is vile Whoever is silent becomes a partner to the murder. Whoever does not condemn, consents."

Although she demanded that Catholics and Poles raise their voices in protest against these atrocities, she assured them they need not give up their negative attitude toward Jews. "We continue to deem them political, economic, and ideological enemies of Poland," (but this does) "not release us from the duty of damnation of murder."

Zofia's call for the establishment of an underground organization to save Jews, which she made after the publications of the leaflet was realized on December 4, 1942, when the Council for Aid to Jews (known by its code name "Zegota") came into existence.

Zofia did not become a member of the Council but she did continue her work with the Jews as well as her other activities in the underground. This led to her capture in 1943 and incarceration in Auschwitz for almost a year. After being discharged, she began saving Jewish children by placing them in convents and other religious institutions.

Although Zofia and the small number of other antisemitic rescuers viewed the presence of Jews in Poland as a social and economic threat to their well-being, they did not envision systematic mass murder as the solution. Some were concerned that their antisemitic views might have "indirectly or symbolically" played a role in the extermination of the Jews.

The war stripped the Jews of these negative attributes, revealing a people who, despite their strange and different ways, were part of a common struggle with the Poles against the Nazis. The Jews were now seen as human beings, as the underdogs, who were badly in need of help. To atone for their antisemitic attitudes, these rescuers tried to save Jews. (Tec. op. cit. pp. 104-112; and Joseph Kermish, "The Activities of the Council for Aid to Jews (Zegota) in Occupied Poland," in *Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust*, Yisrael Gutman and Efraim Zuroff eds. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem,) pp. 367-398.)

2. We make ethical choices throughout our lives. What are some of the choices we make every day? What motivates us to behave morally when there is no one watching?

3. Professor Tec outlined a number of common characteristics she found of people who saved Jews. Discuss these traits. Is there anything we can do to teach people to respond to the suffering of others? Should we try?

Are there any characteristics Prof. Tec might have overlooked? What about people who were motivated by religious belief? What role do you think that might have played in their response?

In eastern Poland, the Baptists were convinced that God had sent Jews who desperately needed their help to them to test their Christian faith.

4. Many rescuers/helpers are uncomfortable about being called heroes and being treated like ones. Why do you think they are uneasy? Are they heroes or did they perform a heroic act? What is the difference?

Is there a danger of calling them heroes? Aren't we expecting too much from them? If we put these people on a pedestal, doesn't this make it more difficult for us to identify with them, to try to behave like them?

5. What role do you think fear played in determining the extent to which a person helped Jews? What would they fear? Hondius found that

6. How could people defy the

7. In July 1942, Rente-Fink, the German envoy in Copenhagen, asked why the Danish Jews had not left Denmark. Why do you think they stayed? What were their alternatives? What countries would allow them to seek refuge?

8. Show the the film "Miracle at Midnight" about the Danish rescue of Jews by Disney. Starring Sam Waterson and Mia Farrow, this film is very emotionally engaging for children (and adults). This film should be previewed to ensure appropriateness for the class.

9.) Divide the class into two groups. Have one group write a story from the perspective of the Danish sailors who risked their lives by smuggling Jews in their fishing boats. Have the other half write a story from the perspective of the Jews who were fleeing for their lives and huddled in the bottom of the boats. Ask students from both groups to share their stories.

10.) Make a packing list. Envision that you are the captain of a small fishing vessel and you are taking Jews to safety. What provisions will you need? Ask students to write down lists of supplies and compare lists.

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