THE DANISH JEWISH MUSEUM

MITZVAH

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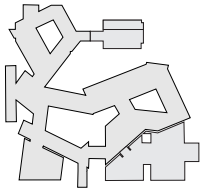
MITZVAH

One cannot underestimate the importance of the saving of the Danish Jews to the perception of Denmark's role under the German occupation. With time, the story has attained mythical proportions. However many factors, amongst these German duplicity, contributed to the high degree of success of the rescue operation.

Mitzvah



Letters become corridors

Written in the room

The architect Daniel Libeskind was inspired by the Jewish concept of Mitzvah on which he has based his design of the inside of the Museum. The Hebrew word Mitzvah has numerous meanings, two of which are: "the duty to do the right thing" and "a good deed". The Hebrew letters denoting Mitzvah have been interlaced to form the pattern of the corridors within which the guest moves through the exhibition. Thus the public moves within the text, which is a direct reference to and an ethical reminder of the rescue of the Danish Jews in October 1943. Libeskind's architectural design of the museum is in itself a story within a story about Danish Jewry.

THE OPERATION AGAINST THE DANISH JEWS IN OCTOBER 1943

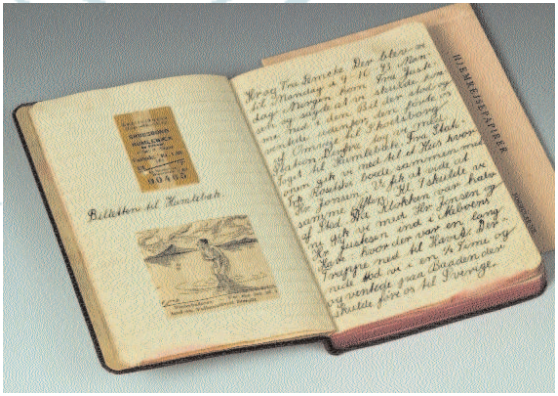
Within the first years of the German occupation, the Germans had often raised the question of the status of the Danish Jews. However the Danish government had consistently refused to engage in any debate on the "Jewish question" as they insisted there existed no "Jewish question" in Denmark. It became increasingly clear to Berlin that if they wished to maintain a peaceful occupation and secure the collaboration of the Danish government, it would be opportune not to put pressure on the government. It was abundantly clear that a compromise was out of the question, and as long as the Danish government adhered to collaboration the "problem" was put aside.

However, matters were soon to change. On August 29th 1943, an internal struggle for power between Werner Best and General von Hanneken resulted in the former sending a telegram on September 8th to the German Foreign Office in Berlin on the question of the Danish Jews.

As a result of Best's telegram, Hitler ordered on September 17th that Endlösung was also to encompass Danish Jews. German police forces were ordered to carry out the operations; however, surprisingly the decision aroused intense criticism within the Nazi machinery. Not of course out of respect for the Jews. The implementation of the operation was seen as putting at risk all future hopes of collaboration and of destroying the frail ties to Danish permanent secretaries and others who were beginning to accept the main precepts of collaboration.

Werner Best's close associate at the Legation in Copenhagen, C.F. Duckwitz, who had established close personal ties with leading Danish Social Democrats travelled to Berlin - in all likelihood with the approval of his boss - ostensibly to intercept Best's telegram but most probably to create the impression that Best was against the imminent operation. On September 23th, the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ribbentrop, raised the matter personally with Hitler. He emphasised that any operation against the Danish Jews would be intensely detrimental to the future of Danish collaboration and only create problems for the German occupation. It was all to no avail. Once the Führer had given an order, the order was irreversible.

Postcards from Theresienstadt.



Diary belonging to a boy describing the flight to Sweden and his sojourn there.

Diary given to the writer's grandchild in the hectic October days of 1943 with the words "here is my entire life" The diary survived the war buried in the grounds of a summer house.

THE OPERATION

As the date for the operation grew nearer, Duckwitz was, again with the possible approval of his boss, engaged in various attempts to save the situation. On September 22th he travelled secretly to Stockholm where he managed against all odds to meet with the Swedish Prime Minister. Duckwitz informed him of the imminent operation against the Danish Jews. His information sparked a flurry of diplomatic activity. The Swedish Legation in Denmark was ordered to provide travel documents for all Danish Jews. On October 1st, the Swedish Delegation in Berlin offered to intern all Danish Jews in Sweden. They received no answer.

Rumours of the impeding operation began to spread in Denmark by the end of September. On September 28th, Best received the final order to implement the operation and on the same day he informed Berlin that the operation would take place on October 2nd.

On the same day, that is September 28th, Duckwitz met with Hans Hedhoft in Copenhagen and informed him of the impeding operation. He also urged him to pass on the information and spread the warning. Hedtoft immediately contacted the Chairman of The Jewish Community in Denmark, Barrister of the Supreme Court C.B. Henriques, as well as passing on the information through other channels. Next morning, on September 29th, early service was celebrated at the synagogue where the congregation was informed of the imminent operation and by word of mouth the warning was spread to almost all Jews in Copenhagen and the provinces.

Until then, only a few members of the Resistance and a small number of Jews had fled across the Sound. The whole concept of transporting thousands of people to Sweden within a few weeks seemed impossible to the authorities, especially if the transport were to be legal. Finally the authorities decided that an operation against the Danish Jews could result in voluntary internment in a camp at Horserød. It was a difficult and extremely unpleasant decision. By the time this solution reached Best, the German operation was under way.

In the days preceding October 1st, most Danish Jews took refuge with Gentile friends and acquaintances or made their way haphazardly towards various harbours on the coast of the Sound, seeking a passage to Sweden. As a result, the Gestapo who led the German raid on the evening of October 1st, found very few Jews at home. The Nazis had also decreed that the Gestapo might only enter those homes that voluntarily opened their doors. That night, "only" some 200 of the 7,000 Danish Jews were arrested. These were mainly the elderly, sick and

lonely, who had neither the initiative nor the will to flee. They were put aboard a waiting ship and deported to the concentration camp Theresienstadt in occupied Czechoslovakia.

Next day, on the October 2nd, Werner Best declared in a telegram to Berlin that the operation had been a success. Denmark was now *entjudet*, that is – free of Jews. Very few had been captured – but the fact was – they had left Denmark, and that was of the first importance.

RESCUE

On the whole, the refugees met spontaneous help from their fellow citizens who were shocked and appalled by this unexpected attack on their innocent neighbours, acquaintances, colleagues and family members. All sections of society were involved in small or larger rescue operations, and for many this was their first meeting with underground, illegal operation. The well-known escape routes established and used by the Resistance to Sweden could hardly absorb the present demand. Especially members of the Resistance, doctors, priests, hospital workers and students improvised new routes. Societies, companies and private persons raised money in order to finance the transport of Jews to safety. Numerous people lent a helping hand in devising hiding places along the coast for the many refugees awaiting transport.

From a variety of harbours, the Jewish refugees were transported at night in all forms of boats and ships to Sweden or to the Swedish coastguards on open sea. The Swedish authorities, Swedish Jewish organisations and Danish refugees combined to do all that was possible in order to facilitate these transports and to participate in organising the shipment of Danish Jews. On the whole, the operation went well, although certain accidents did happen in the panicked situation in which both the refugees and their helpers were involved.

The attic in Gilleleje Church
The largest single catastrophe occurred in Gilleleje where, on October 5th 1943, the Security Police surprised a convoy in the harbour and returned the next day to arrest some 80 Jewish refugees. A number of these were hiding in the attic of Gilleleje Church.

Bound North with the train
Many Danish Jews took the train to North Zeeland from where they were sailed across the Sound to Sweden. Some bought return tickets in order not to arouse suspicion.

The story of the Danish people's spontaneous reaction and help at this critical time in history has been told and retold and still lives in the memory of many who survived or are affected by the Holocaust. However, our understanding of the events will never be complete unless we understand the importance of the Danish, Swedish and – perhaps especially – German authorities' actions and positions. With time, the story has attained mythical proportions. However many factors, amongst these German duplicity, contributed to the high degree of success of the rescue operation.

From Bo Lidegaard: *Survival – Danish Foreign Policy 1914-45*, Copenhagen 2003

IN FLIGHT

The story of the Skop family's flight across the Sound. In October 1943, the family consisted of Frederikke and Samuel Skop and their children, Miriam 11 and Aron 9.

October 1st 1943
Simon Altermann contacted his sister Frederikke Skop to warn her of the imminent Nazi operation against the Jews. "You must hide". The same night the family hid in an attic. German soldiers knocked on their door and searchlights were trained on the apartment. However, receiving no response, the Germans were forced to move on empty handed.

October 2nd 1943
Samuel Skop contacts Master Baker Petersen, an acquaintance who both lives and owns a shop in the same block of apartments, to ask him for help in hiding his family and if possible in establishing contact with a fisherman. The Master Baker immediately offers to help and the family is hidden in a small room of his.

October 4th 1943
The Master Baker has established contact with a man who has promised to help them across the Sound. It is agreed that the family is to take the train to Snekkersten Station the following day where a man carrying the daily paper Politiken will meet them.

October 5th 1943
The family leave for Snekkersten. They carry no luggage but wear as many clothes as they can without arousing suspicion. It has been agreed that the Master Baker will advance DKK 4,000 to the contact to cover the expenses of the journey to Sweden. To raise the amount needed, Samuel pawns his gold watch with the baker for the sum of DKK 500.

As agreed, the contact meets the family at Snekkersten Station and leads them to a small attic room at an Inn. The contact now demands extra payment, which the family is unable to provide, as they have no money left. The contact then disappears.

October 6th 1943
Despondent and almost resigned to their fate, the family takes to the road early in the morning and heads for the Coast Road. Suddenly a woman who was up early cleaning her windows waves them aside. She has guessed that they were a Jewish family on the run and invites them into her home. She then immediately contacts an acquaintance Dr. Jørgen Gersfeldt who at once promises to help them. On the same day, the family move into a summer cottage at the disposal of the doctor.

October 7-10th 1943
The family remain hidden in the cottage. Their mood ranges from despair to hope.

October 11th 1943
The family are told to keep themselves at the ready. Late in the afternoon, a garbage truck filled with blankets picks them up and drives on to a number of other summer cottages where other Jewish families are hiding. As soon as the truck is filled with refugees it drives on to a wood where everyone are told to get out. In groups of ten, the Jewish refugees are led through the woods to the coast where large rowing boats carry them out to the waiting fishing boats.

Despite motor problems, the fishing boat arrives at Helsingborg an hour later, where soldiers in green uniforms greet the refugees. The green uniforms awaken unpleasant associations, however soon the refugees realise that they have indeed arrived in Sweden and that they now are safe.

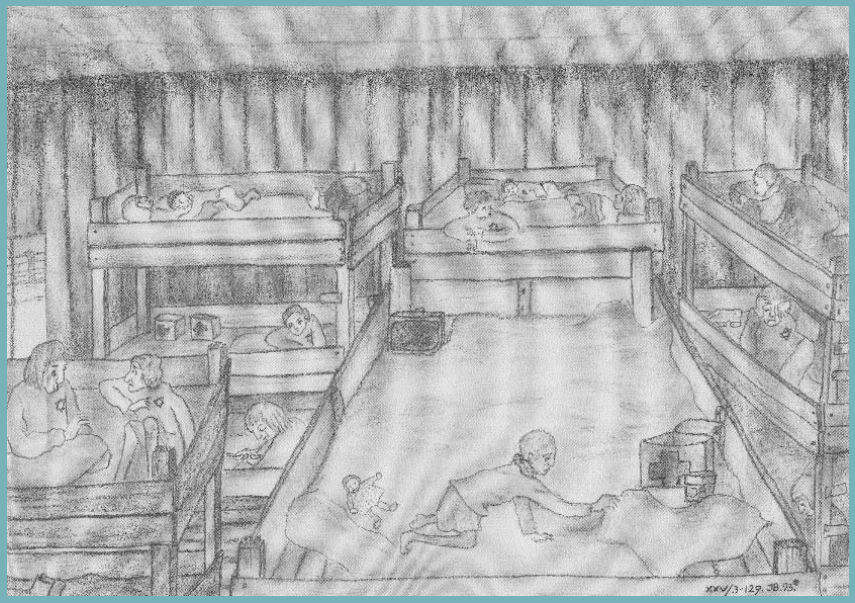
Around June 1st 1945, the family returns to their apartment in Copenhagen, which kind neighbours have taken care of in their absence.

IN THERESIENSTADT

Everyone slept in bunk beds in the barracks.

Each bunk bed contained a "sackcloth" mattress made of brown, compressed paper and filled with straw. The mattresses were very lumpy and uneven as well as being filthy. They smelt of dust and were alive with lice and fleas. The single blanket allotted to each of us was stiff with dirt. We were under orders to keep our bunks in perfect order, which was somewhat difficult due to our living conditions. We were not allowed to leave things on the floor, so each bunk contained all our belongings: suitcase, food, a bowl, a spoon and our clothes.

We had to stay in our barracks and be as quiet as possible. So I spent most of my time in my bunk playing with my doll Meta. In one of my games, Meta and I went visiting. This meant that each corner of the bunk was a place to be visited, and by pummelling the straw in my mattress I could form a wall and create a boundary. Or I used a suitcase or a coat. It was exciting to hide behind these walls and play at being in imaginary worlds. My doll Meta and I travelled from corner to corner, visiting aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins. The corners were both Theresienstadt and yet not Theresienstadt. When we paid a visit these corners became part of Sweden, where we knew that our family was safe. However, as soon as I caught sight of the mattress' uneven texture I knew I was back in my bunk in the Concentration Camp – Theresienstadt.



Jytte Bornstein

Before we were caught and taken away, most Sunday mornings my brother and I used play at being lions in our parents' double bed. When our parents had got up and drunk their coffee, the sound of my father running the bath water and my mother's voice in the kitchen speaking with our maid was the signal for us to start our game. We each built a cave of blankets and pillows in opposite corners of the large bed. We then had games wrestling against one another, and of course we both wanted to win. We uttered dangerous roars as my brother had taught me lions did. He was four and a half years older than me and had grown into a large, dangerous lion that invariably defeated me. Whenever I built my corners in my bunk, I thought of him and our "battles" back in the peaceful days in another world.

Excerpt from Jytte Bornstein: *My journey back*, 1994

DANSK JØDISK MUSEUM
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Only few Danish Jews experienced
the full evil of Nazism.
Four hundred and eighty-one Danish Jews
were sent to Theresienstadt,
while 7,000 made it safely across
the Sound to Sweden.