

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous

Rescue in October...the Rescue of the Danish Jews

October 2013 marked the 70th anniversary of the rescue of the Danish Jews. To commemorate this anniversary, we prepared a unit of study on the Danish rescue for you to use in your classroom. The rescue of the Jews of Denmark is an inspiring story. When the Danes learned that a major *aktion* against their Jewish citizens was planned for the first day of *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, ordinary citizens went into action. Strangers helped their fellow Jews – to cross dangerous waters in the dark of night to freedom in neutral Sweden.

We begin with an Introduction that will provide you with a brief history of the Danish rescue. We also include the necessary tools to introduce this subject to your students. The unit of study is designed to be covered in one or two classroom periods. Suggestions are also provided for additional projects.

Materials include:

1. Historical Background
2. Essential Questions
3. Student Outcomes
4. Suggested Approaches
5. Documents for Suggested Approaches
6. Bibliography/Webography
7. Videography
8. Timeline

Hopefully your students will come away from this unit not only with factual knowledge, but also with an understanding of rescue activities during the Holocaust. Thank you for your continued efforts in helping others to learn about and understand the Holocaust in general and the Danish rescue in particular.

“Whoever saves a single life is as if one saves the entire world.”
- *Talmud*

Introduction – The Rescue of the Danish Jews

From the time Hitler invaded Denmark without warning on April 9, 1940 to the time the Danish government resigned on May 5, 1943, the approximately 7,500 Jews in Denmark were living a relatively normal life. Jewish life was quite similar to that of non-Jews. Just as King Christian X kept his crown, activity in Jewish schools and religious services went on as usual (Pundik, P. 21). The reason for this relative normality is that even though the Danish government collaborated with the Germans, they gave social, political, and judicial protection to the Jews. This protection included that of Jewish property. The Danish Jews were never asked to wear a Jewish star. The story of King Christian X and his family wearing the Jewish star is thus a myth. King Christian X had the option of fleeing the country with his family, but instead remained in Denmark and rode his horse through the streets of Copenhagen to rally his citizens.

Since Denmark did not resist the German invasion and since the Danes possessed the preferred racial qualities, they were granted a level of autonomy that did not exist in other countries under German rule (Hilberg, P. 559). The Germans signed the Danish-German Agreement of April 9, 1940, saying that “in accordance with the good spirit that has always prevailed in Danish-German relations, the Reich’s government declares...that Germany does not intend now or in the future to interfere with Denmark’s territorial integrity or political independence” (Werner, P. 9). Due to this agreement, the Germans decided that it was in their best interest not to disturb the small Jewish population that dated back to 1622. The Danish government only accepted Jewish refugees if they could prove they were relatives of a Danish citizen living in Denmark and that they would be financially independent (Yahil, P. 19). While under Nazi rule, the Jewish community obeyed orders given by the Danish government, not taking part in any illegal acts or trying to escape to other countries.

Shortly after the occupation began, the Danish resistance movement was formed, consisting of a number of small groups located throughout the country. Increasing acts of sabotage led the Nazis to create a curfew, to apprehend hostages, and to implement a reign of terror on all citizens. On August 28, 1943, the Germans called for martial law, prohibited all demonstrations and rallies, and decreed total censorship of the press (Yahil,

P. 234-5). They also declared that any act of sabotage would result in death. The Danish government did not accept martial law and resigned. This resulted in the Nazis declaring a state of emergency, imprisoning the Danish army – it had until then been allowed to exist – and taking control of the Danish navy. The Danish navy scuttled its ships so the Germans would not receive them in usable condition (Barfod, P. 18). German Reich plenipotentiary, Werner Best, saw this as a prime opportunity to deport the Jews. Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German diplomat, maintained friendly relations with the leading Danish Social Democrats and alerted them of the planned roundup of all Jews (Dwork, P. 327).

On the morning of the first night of *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, September 29, 1943, the chief rabbi of Denmark, Rabbi Marcus Melchior, entered the Great Synagogue in Copenhagen and announced that a Nazi *aktion* was pending in Denmark the next day and ordered everyone present to leave, to go into hiding, and to warn others (Goldberger, P. 5).

Preben Munch Nielsen, a member of a resistance group based in Snekkersten, a coastal village north of Copenhagen, began to hide Jews in homes near the sea (Dwork, P. 327); and soon, with the assistance of local fishermen, began rowing Jews across the Oresund, the body of water between Denmark and Sweden. Some fishermen initially opposed the operation and demanded funds for their aid (Yahil, P. 203). What began as a disorganized plan to save the Danish Jews soon became an organized effort. Almost overnight, a rescue plan was put into action that helped about 7,200 Jews and their 700 non-Jewish relatives escape to Sweden in less than three weeks time (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005209>). The cost of the rescue was 12 million Danish crowns, of which the Jews paid about half themselves; the other half was covered by Danish contributions (Yahil, P. 261-3).

When the *aktion* against the Danish Jews began, German authorities received dozens of protests from both organizations and individuals, including King Christian X and Church leaders (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005209>).

In total, the Nazis were able to capture less than 500 Jews, most of who were living in a Jewish old age home in Copenhagen. Approximately 80 Jews who were hiding in the attic of the seaside Gilleleje Church (Goldberger, P. iv) were also caught when they

were denounced to the Germans. These Jews were deported to Theresienstadt where they were permitted to receive care packages from the Danish Red Cross. In 1945 Count Bernadotte arranged for them to be brought to Sweden by the Swedish Red Cross. After liberation, the majority of the Jews returned to their homes in Denmark and found them untouched. Many of their friends and neighbors had tended to their property while they were gone (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005209>).

About 100 of Denmark's Jews died because of persecution; approximately 50 in Theresienstadt or other camps, about fifty during their journey to Sweden. (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005209>) Approximately 3,000 members of the Danish resistance who were killed. In total, less than 2% of Denmark's Jews died.

Even though Hitler had planned for the murder of all of Denmark's Jews, his plan failed miserably. Although Denmark did rid itself of its Jews, it was not in the way the Nazis had planned; it was a result of the Danish resistance to save its Jewish citizens. Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Authority, honors many individuals who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust and confers upon these men and women the title of Righteous Among the Nations of the World. The members of the Danish resistance are the only Righteous to be honored as a group by Yad Vashem. Also honored by Yad Vashem are King Christian X and Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz (http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/related_sites.asp).

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http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/related_sites.asp

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Essential Questions

1. Why is the Danish rescue story unique?
2. Who were the major players in the rescue of Danish Jews?
3. Why did King Christian X ride through the streets of Copenhagen on his horse? What did he convey to the Danish people by doing so?
4. What were the risks to a non-Jew who became involved in rescue activities?
5. What forms of resistance took place in Denmark after the German occupation?
6. Why did such a large percentage of Danish Jews survive the Holocaust?
7. How were the Jews received in Denmark when they returned after the war?

Student Outcomes

The student will.....

1. Understand that despite the extreme danger of rescue attempts under German occupation, non-Jews and Jews could overcome the hardships they faced each day and organize help for others.
2. Recognize how the nature of German occupation in Denmark affected the daily lives of Danish Jews until October 1943.
3. Explore the role that the neutral government of Sweden played in rescuing Jews.
4. Recognize that rescue and resistance are viable choices in the face of genocide and oppression.
5. Understand how the geography of Denmark and its nearness to Sweden determined how the Danish rescue took place.
6. Determine and express ways in which rescuers can serve as models for our own lives.

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Suggested Approaches

1. Using the map found at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website (http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_nm.php?ModuleId=10005185&MediaId=437), analyze the geography of Denmark. Specifically, look at the location of Denmark, a country under German occupation, and its neighbor Sweden, a neutral country. You can also go to (http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_da.php?ModuleId=10005209&MediaId=99) to download a picture of a Danish rescue boat. What were the difficulties in conducting a rescue by sea? What were the difficulties that Danish fishermen faced with respect to the structure of the boats used in the rescue effort – most of which were small, wooden, open boats that had to be rowed?
2. Using the historical background, rescue stories and the Bishops' Declaration, explore the various ways in which individual Danish citizens helped the Jews. Visit our webpage to find the rescue stories of Knud Christiansen, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, Knud Dyby, Jorgen and Elsebet Kieler, Preben Munch Nielsen, Knud and Karina Parkow and Henry Christen and Ellen Margrethe Thomsen. <http://www.jfr.org/pages/rescuer-support/stories/Denmark>
3. Using the rescue stories of Jørgen and Elsebet Kieler and Preben Munch Nielsen, compare daily concerns of these people to those of a contemporary teenager. Have students discuss what their concerns are and have them list their daily and weekend activities. Have students brainstorm what the daily concerns were of the rescuers, in particular Preben, who was a teenager in October 1943. How are the lists similar? How are they different?
4. Listed below are 7 quotes that address the concept of rescue. Divide the class into groups and give each group a quote to discuss. How does each quote apply to the rescue of Danish Jews? Bring the groups together to share the ideas that emerge. Encourage them to consider other examples in history and today that are relevant to these ideas.

“The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”

- Edmund Burke, British statesman, champion of Human Rights

“It was a matter of decency, we had no choice.”

- Preben Munch Nielsen, Danish rescuer

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead, American anthropologist

When people read this story, I want them to know that I tried to open my door. I tried to tell people, "Come in, come in." In the end, I would like to say to people, "Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances that will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision of your own, not about other people but about yourself." I would not say more.
- Magda Trocmé (Courage to Care), French Rescuer, Le Chambon, France

The first question that the Levite was asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the good Samaritan came by and he reversed the question, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" That is the question before you.
- Martin Luther King, Jr., April 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, the night before his murder.

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I'm only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when?*
- Mishnah 14, collection of oral Jewish Law

To remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all.
- Eli Wiesel, novelist, journalist, and Nobel Prize Winner

Supplemental Activities

1. A mural project depicting the Danish rescue.
2. Creating a monument to the Danish Rescue; must be a three dimensional product.
3. A student can assume the role of a reporter and write a newspaper account of the Danish rescue.
4. Although the story of King Christian X wearing a yellow star is not true, it has become very popular. Research the history of the legend. Why do you think the myth has continued throughout history?

Declaration from the Danish Bishops

This is the Danish Church's reaction to Nazi antisemitism and German persecution of Jews in Europe. The Pastoral Letter was drafted by the bishop of Copenhagen, Hans Fuglsang-Damgaard (1890-1979), but signed by all the other bishops. It was read aloud in all the country's churches at the Sunday service on October 3, 1943.

The attitude of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark towards the Jewish question.

Wherever Jews are persecuted for racial or religious reasons, it is the duty of the Christian Church to protest against such persecution.

1. Because we shall never forget that the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, was born in Bethlehem by the Virgin Mary according to God's promise to his own people, Israel. The history of the Jewish people up to the birth of Christ contains preparation for the salvation God has intended for all people in Christ. This is characterized by the fact that the Old Testament is part of our Bible.
2. Because persecution of the Jews opposes the view of human beings and the love of one's neighbor which is a consequence of the gospel that the church of Jesus Christ has the task to preach. Christ knows of no respect of persons, and he has taught us to see that every human life is costly to God. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28)
3. Because it conflicts with the understanding of justice rooted in the Danish people and settled through centuries in our Danish Christian culture. Accordingly, it is stated in our constitution that all Danish citizens have an equal right and responsibility towards the law, and they have freedom of religion, and a right to worship God in accordance with their vocation and conscience and so that race or religion can never in itself become the cause of deprivation of anybody's rights [to] freedom or property. Irrespective of diverging religious opinions we shall fight for the right of our Jewish brothers and sisters to keep the freedom that we ourselves value more highly than life. The leaders of the Danish Church have a clear understanding of our duty to be law-abiding citizens that do not unreasonably oppose those who execute authority over us, but at the same time we are in our conscience bound to uphold justice and protest against any violation; consequently we shall, if occasion should arise, plainly acknowledge our obligation to obey God more than man.

29/9 1943
On behalf of the bishops
H. Fuglsang Damgaard

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MS = Middle School; HS = High School; A = Adult

Websites – The Rescue of the Danish Jews

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous

www.jfr.org

This website provides information on The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous and educational materials, including this unit of study on the Danish rescue.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

www.ushmm.org

This website has a range of information on the Holocaust and on the Museum's exhibits. One can search for details on a specific topic, event, figure, or country.

Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority

www.yadvashem.org

This website gives a general history of the Holocaust, talks about happenings at Yad Vashem, and provides information about rescuers.

Videography – The Rescue of the Danish Jews

Act of Faith

28 min B/W MS+ VHS

This dramatic story of the heroic Danish resistance movement was originally presented on CBS. Filmed in Denmark, it is a firsthand account of the role played by the Danish people in saving their Jewish countrymen from Nazi extermination.

The Bookseller

30 min BW General Audience VHS

This is a dramatization of the book, "Rescue in Denmark," depicting the heroic actions of the people of Denmark during the Nazi occupation of the country, and of their rescue of 98% of Denmark's Jews.

A Day in October

96 min Color MS VHS, DVD

This video is set against the backdrop of the Nazi occupation of Denmark in 1943. It tells of a Danish resistance fighter and one Jewish family caught up in the forces of history. The story emphasizes the power of ordinary citizens and how they were able to resist evil.

Rescue in Scandinavia

55 min Color & B/W HS VHS

This video focuses on the courageous acts Christian rescuers performed in order to guide thousands of Jews to safety in Sweden. Narrated by Liv Ullmann, it recounts the role of the Swedish government and its citizens in providing sanctuary for Jewish refugees. It details the assignment of Raoul Wallenberg who, with the assistance of Per Anger, was credited with saving the lives of 100,000 Hungarian Jews. This video also tells about Finland's Ambassador Max Jakobson and his role in the rescue program, and pays tribute to the citizens of Denmark and Norway who saved the lives of their Jewish countrymen.

Rescue in October

15 mins Color MS VHS

A JFR film featuring rescuers of the Danish Jews.

Timeline – The Rescue of the Danish Jews

1933

April 12 King Christian X participates in a celebration held in the Copenhagen synagogue to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of its existence. Some people thought the king would not participate because of the events occurring in Germany, but he did not cancel his appearance simply because a boycott of the Jews in Germany had been announced.

1940

April 9 Germans occupy Denmark and declare that they will respect Denmark's autonomy and neutrality.

Danish Jews, unlike Jews in other countries occupied by the Germans, are not required to wear the Star of David.

1942

January 20 At the Wannsee Conference the implementation of the Final Solution in Denmark is postponed because it might result in too many problems for the Germans.

1943

August 29 The Danish government resigns to avoid German demands. The Germans declare a state of emergency and decide to initiate their planning for the deportation of Jews from Denmark.

August 31 Jewish addresses are confiscated from an office nearby the synagogue in Copenhagen. Danish officials ask German authorities about talk of deportations. German officials deny that an *aktion* is about to take place.

September 15 The deportation of Danish Jews is authorized by German authorities.

September 28 German diplomat, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, leaks word of the deportation to Danish leaders who in turn inform the Jewish community. The Danish population responds quickly, organizing rescue efforts to transport over 7,500 Jews and about 700 of their non-Jewish family members to safety in Sweden.

- September 29 During morning religious services, the Jews are warned about the *aktion* planned for the next day, the first day of *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year. Others are told by friends. The Danish Lutheran church sends a protest letter to German Reich Plenipotentiary, Werner Best. The letter states “Despite different religious views, we shall therefore struggle to insure the continued guarantee to our Jewish brothers and sisters of the same freedom we ourselves treasure more than life itself.”
- October 1 *Rosh Hashanah* – Germans begin to arrest Jews, but have little luck. Danish leaders do not cooperate with the Germans and protests by non-Jewish Danes quickly begin. Many Jews are hidden by friends or even complete strangers. In total the Germans arrest about 500 Jews and deport them to Theresienstadt.
- October 2 The Swedish Government informs Germany that it will take in all Danish Jews. At first this offer is refused, but later that night Swedish radio announced that all Jews would be accepted. In about a month’s time, over 7,500 Jews and about 700 of their non Jewish relatives find haven in neutral Sweden.
- October 3 Pastoral letter written by the bishop of Copenhagen, Hans Fuglsang-Damgaard, is read aloud in all the country’s churches that Sunday morning. The letter urges citizens to resist German attempts to round up and deport their Jewish neighbors.
- October 6 80 Jews hiding in the attic of the Gilleleje Church are betrayed and deported to Theresienstadt.
- November 2 The Danish Government demands information on the status of their Jewish citizens who were deported. Representatives of the Danish Red Cross visit the Danish Jews in Theresienstadt, which results in the Germans temporarily giving the camp a facelift. Approval is given for Danish Jews to receive care packages from the Danish Red Cross.
- December 30 Hitler demands the death of those involved with acts of sabotage. A Danish clergyman, Kaj Munk, is murdered for assisting in the rescue of Jews.

1944

- September 19 Majority of the Danish police force are arrested, and many are sent to concentration camps.

1945

April 15 Himmler releases the Danish Jews from Theresienstadt and permits them to relocate to Sweden in a rescue operation hosted by Count Folke Bernadotte, the vice president of the Swedish Red Cross.

May 4 Germans surrender in Denmark. A couple of weeks later, those Jews who had found haven in Sweden return to Denmark. For the most part, Jewish-owned property is left untouched; much of it was tended to by non-Jewish friends.

1947

April 20 King Christian X dies.

1955-1958

Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz served as German ambassador to Denmark.

1971

March 29 Yad Vashem recognizes Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz as a “Righteous Among the Nations”.

Yad Vashem (date unknown) has also recognized King Christian X, the Danish Resistance, and the Danish people as “Righteous Among the Nations”.