



Cooperation

Preben Munch Nielsen

Copenhagen, Denmark... October 1943 – On April 9, 1940, Germany invaded Denmark. The Germans believed that the Danes shared their “Aryan” racial qualities, so they imposed a less rigid occupation in Denmark than they did in countries such as Poland. The Danish government was allowed to remain in power, and although it chose to cooperate with the Nazis, it continued to protect the more than 7,500 Jews living within its borders. Jewish citizens, who were located mainly in the capital city, Copenhagen, were not stripped of their rights, property, jobs, or security. Because the Jewish population was small and had the support of the Danish government, the Germans decided to postpone the persecution of the Danish Jews until after they had won the war.

In the spring of 1943, however, the situation changed. Inspired by the Allies’ progress in the war, the Danish people stepped up their resistance to the German occupation. Labor strikes and acts of sabotage intensified. On August 28, 1943, the German military commander in Denmark declared a state of emergency and commanded the Danish government to institute martial law. Acts of sabotage were to be punishable by death, the press was to be censored, and demonstrations were to be banned. The Danish government refused to accept these measures and resigned. The presiding Nazi official, Werner Best, saw this as an opportunity to begin the deportation of the Danish Jews.

Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German official stationed in Denmark, leaked the news of the pending deportation to Danish leaders, who informed the Jewish community. On September 29, 1943 – the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year – the chief rabbi of Denmark entered the Great Synagogue in Copenhagen, announced

the plans for the deportation, and told the congregants to leave immediately, alert others, and go into hiding. The arrests were set to begin on October 2, but they would not be successful. The people of Denmark – members of the resistance, church leaders, students, policemen, physicians, ordinary citizens – spontaneously came together to thwart the operation. Preben Munch Nielsen, a high school student from Snekkersten, a fishing village north of Copenhagen, was among those who participated.

Preben had joined the resistance as a courier in 1940, and he quickly became involved in the rescue operation. A policeman came to his door and asked him to pick up several Jews at a nearby train station and escort them through the woods to the shore. They would be smuggled by boat across the sound to Sweden (the sound is the body of water they crossed). Preben completed this mission and joined the Friends of the Sound, a group of Danes based in Snekkersten that coordinated the secret crossings to Sweden. A neutral country, Sweden had agreed to accept the fleeing Jews and encouraged its citizens to welcome them.

The Friends of the Sound used the Snekkersten Inn as their headquarters. Many Jews hid at the Inn or in nearby homes before being brought to waiting boats. Preben and his friends worked with local fishermen to take up to twelve Jews at a time across the four-mile stretch of water. In less than a month, they ferried some 1,400 Jews to Sweden. Wanted by the *Gestapo* (German secret state police), Preben fled to Sweden in November 1943. He returned to Denmark when the war ended in May 1945. In the span of one month, October 1943, the people of Denmark helped more than 7,200 Jews escape to Sweden. Ultimately, about 100 Danish Jews died during the Holocaust.

THE JEWISH FOUNDATION *for the righteous*

The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous provides financial support to Christians and Muslims who rescued Jews during the Holocaust and preserves their legacy through its national Holocaust education program.

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Dimitar Peshev

Sophia, Bulgaria... March 1943 – In January 1941, Bulgaria passed anti-Jewish legislation modeled after the Nuremberg laws that Germany had instituted in 1935. The Bulgarian government felt that an alliance with the Germans would enable the country to regain land it had lost decades earlier. Persecuting the nearly 50,000 Jews was a way to show common cause. Some Bulgarian politicians, writers, intellectuals, and church leaders protested the measures, but the government stood firm. Germany saw that it had a loyal partner in Bulgaria and welcomed the country into the Axis alliance in March 1941.

Dimitar Peshev, the deputy speaker of the Bulgarian parliament, supported the anti-Jewish legislation. He felt that Bulgaria's alliance with Germany was in his country's best interests and that the anti-Jewish measures were a shrewd move. The strategy proved a success. In April 1941, Bulgaria participated in the invasions of Greece and Yugoslavia and received portions of each country in return. Another 11,000 Jews came under Bulgarian rule, more than 7,000 in Thrace (annexed from Greece), and some 4,000 in Macedonia (annexed from Yugoslavia). Over the next two years, the Bulgarian government confiscated Jewish property, forced Jews to wear yellow stars, and further limited their rights. The government, however, took no immediate steps to deport the Jews to killing centers.

The situation changed dramatically in February 1943. Bulgaria agreed to Germany's request to hand over 20,000 Jews from its territories. In March, Bulgarian authorities arrested more than 11,000 Jews living in the newly annexed territories, and German army units deported them to the Treblinka killing center in Poland. Because the Bulgarian government had not met the quota of 20,000, it decided to deport Jews of Bulgarian citizenship, namely the 8,000 living in the town of Kyustendil near the Macedonian border. Word of the plan

spread and angered many of the non-Jewish residents. A delegation of Bulgarians boarded a train for Sophia, the capital, to protest the deportation. They were hoping to enlist the support of Dimitar Peshev.

Although he had supported the anti-Jewish laws, Dimitar had done so for practical reasons and he never supported the deportation of Bulgaria's Jews. He, too, wanted to stop it. On March 9, 1943, he brought the Kyustendil delegation, along with several parliament members, to meet with the Minister of the Interior, Petur Gabrovski. Gabrovski denied knowing about the plan, but they knew he was lying and demanded that he cancel the deportation. After a lengthy argument, Gabrovski agreed to do so. Dimitar knew, however, that the Jews were not out of danger.

On March 17, 1943, Dimitar wrote a letter to Prime Minister Bogdan Filov in which he opposed any future deportations of Bulgarian Jews. He convinced 42 of his colleagues in parliament to sign the petition and presented it to the prime minister. Filov was furious that Dimitar organized such a public protest. The parliament voted to remove Dimitar from his position as deputy speaker. Soon thereafter, the government launched a plan to deport all of the nearly 50,000 Bulgarian Jews to Poland. Although Dimitar felt defeated, his actions caused others to intensify their protests. Leaders of the Bulgarian church sent letters to the prime minister and to King Boris III. Prominent writers and intellectuals spoke out, as did groups of lawyers, physicians, and communists. This collective pressure led King Boris III to alter his policy. Despite competing pressure from the Germans, he prevented the deportations by having many Bulgarian Jews assigned to forced labor units in Bulgaria. As a result, no Jews of Bulgarian citizenship were sent to their deaths in Poland.

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