

The Uniqueness of the Rescue of Danish Jewry

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I must admit that the invitation to lecture on the rescue of Danish Jewry somewhat baffled me. I have already dealt with the subject many times, and thought that I had totally exhausted it, that there was nothing more to add. After additional thought on the matter, however, I decided that it would be a good idea to briefly summarize the events and note the key aspects of the rescue of Danish Jewry in an attempt to compare the circumstances of their rescue with similar attempts elsewhere in Europe.

When dealing with the period of the Holocaust, it is very difficult to establish the criteria by which to judge the events. Researchers have been struggling with this problem for years. It repeatedly becomes clear that there were particular conditions which determined the course of events in every country, and even in every town and ghetto. I am referring not only to objective facts concerning the various locations, but also to such subjective factors as the individuals who influenced the course of events, whether they were Germans, local Gentiles, or Jews. We also realize that the results often contradict the predictions we thought we could make on the basis of past experience. Thus, for example, we heard in Sara Neshamit's lecture that given the relations between Jews and non-Jews in Lithuania, it was inconceivable that the local population could perpetrate such a slaughter. In view of the singular degree of freedom and deeply-rooted equality enjoyed by Dutch Jewry there was no reason to assume that the majority of the Jewish community would be destroyed. On the other hand, a large percentage of the Jews in Rumania, a country known for its deep-seated anti-Semitism and its cruel treatment of the Jews, were saved. All these facts make it difficult for us to categorize matters and arrive at a comprehensive evaluation of the activities of Jews and non-Jews during the Holocaust, and this is especially true as far as rescue is concerned. Indeed, one cannot be certain that clear-cut answers exist to all these questions, but I believe that we should at least make an attempt in this direction.

First let us describe the situation in Denmark in general terms. On several occasions, Hitler declared that he planned to establish a “New Order” in Europe which would be based on racial principles. The Aryan race, represented by the German elite, would rule the rest of the peoples, whose racial inferiority was fixed according to a system of racial gradations. The Germans, and especially the elite represented by the S.S., were at the top of the scale, whereas the Jews and the Gypsies were at the bottom. The Slavs were considered the most inferior of the nations on the middle rungs, while the Scandinavians, for example, were at the top of that imaginary ladder. The Nazis presumed that the establishment of the “New Order” meant the annihilation of most of the inferior races. The pre-condition for the incorporation of a country in this order was its “purification” – its being made *Judenrein*. It is obvious that Denmark was supposed to be an integral part of the new political body, since the Nazis considered the Danes to be Aryans. Yet in Denmark, of all places, the elimination of the Jews proved unsuccessful, and was postponed time and again with the full knowledge of the authorities of the Third Reich and their representatives in Denmark. Thus the agreement between Germany and Denmark, which was concluded on the day of the occupation and remained in effect until the end of August 1943, contradicted Hitler’s plan as its explicit and implicit conditions included the assumption, which was shared by both Danes and Germans, that the latter would not harm the Jews of Denmark.

The agreement was cancelled in late August 1943, upon the outbreak of the crisis. Then the kingdom’s internal autonomy, which was based on its democratic constitution, was abolished, creating a new situation. The danger existed that the Germans would institute a totalitarian regime and begin to implement the “Final Solution”. In reality, however, the situation proved quite different.

The rescue operation carried out by the Danes in October 1943 is unique in two important respects:

- 1) more than 98% of the Jews were saved;
- 2) there was a basic consensus among the Danish people that the Jews must be saved.

The high degree of success and the spontaneous unanimity of the rescuers' actions, make this episode an important event in the annals of the Holocaust. This unanimity was the result of a basic democratic-humanitarian approach, and of the policy of the Danish Government during the early stages of the occupation.

Given the significance of this basic approach and its political ramifications before the crisis, we still must outline the special circumstances that set the stage for the rescue of Danish Jewry:

A. In the beginning of the occupation, Denmark was not accorded a central place in the strategic considerations of the Germans, since in April 1940 there was no threat from the direction of the Baltic Sea. As far as the Germans were concerned, the main front was in the West, and therefore Norway became their strategic focal point. They did not consider Denmark a front, and its main importance was as a transit country for German troops. Following the German attack on the Soviet Union, the situation was somewhat altered but the German victories at the beginning of the war minimized the danger from that direction, and as a result, Denmark enjoyed a few years of relative quiet. Only in the summer of 1942 did the tension mount, and a year later when the tide of the war was about to turn the crisis broke out.

B. There were very few Jews in Denmark, and this fact facilitated the Germans' decision to postpone the execution of the "Final Solution" to a more opportune moment. This argument was also advanced at the Wannsee Conference, where Luther, upon instructions from Ribbentrop, noted that the operation against the Jews should be delayed in the northern countries because of the difficulties which had arisen.

C. One of the decisive factors in the fate of the Jews of Denmark was the policy of the Danish Government during the period of the agreement. Labelled the "policy of negotiation", it was actually two-faced. On the one hand, the Danes appeased the German occupiers in practical matters, which were of particular significance to the latter, such as free passage for Nazi troops on their way to Norway and the supply of agricultural and, to some extent, industrial products to Germany. On the other hand, they retained a degree of freedom of action in internal affairs in order to maintain their democratic

regime and their national character. This was no simple matter, and at times the Danish Government was forced to deviate from its principles. Thus, for example, in the summer of 1941 it was forced to take steps against the Communist Party, and in November of the same year it was coerced into joining the Anti-Comintern Pact. These were, in fact, basic concessions since they meant an encroachment of the rights of the political parties, and the end of Denmark's hope of remaining neutral. Yet these tactics helped convince the local German representatives, as well as the central authorities in Berlin, that better results would be attained by allowing the Danes to fulfill the Germans' requests voluntarily. Denmark's status as a "model protectorate" was based on this assumption.

D. It is no wonder that the German representatives in Denmark simultaneously conducted a two-sided policy and tried to serve as intermediaries between the authorities in Germany and the Danes. Nonetheless, some of the German officials, especially members of the Nazi Party and the R.S.H.A., sought to impose a more strict regime in Denmark, but the intermediaries employed various tactics, quite a few of which were highly sophisticated, in order to mitigate the extreme demands on the one hand, and to convince the Danes to accept some of these demands on the other. These complex relations continued until the summer of 1943, when a dramatic change came about as a result of the increasing strength of the Danish underground. With the outbreak of the crisis, the internal struggle among the different German factions competing for control of Denmark also intensified, and the plan for the deportation of the Jews became a tactic as well as a goal. The goal was to expel the Jews from Denmark in preparation for its inclusion in the "European Order". The tactic was to bring in German police forces to carry out the deportation, but even more important to strengthen the position of Plenipotentiary Werner Best in his struggle with the army.

The Danes indeed feared that the failure of the "policy of negotiation" was liable to bring about the persecution of the Jews, yet the *Aktion* of the night following *Rosh ha-Shanah* nevertheless came as a shock. The shock, however, did not paralyze the Danish public, but rather aroused the forces

opposed to the Germans into action. For two of three weeks, the Danes, identifying the Jews' fate with their own, became totally involved in the rescue operations. They viewed the rescue of the Jews as a manifestation of their national revolt against the Germans, and thus the rare situation was created in which it was not the Jews who were asked or sought to prove their identification with the host country, but rather it was the Danes who proved by their response and actions how great the identification was between their national interests and the fate of the Jews. Their existence as an independent nation and the rescue of the Jews became a single goal. This fact explains both the spontaneity and the unanimity of the action. The underground was able to channel this revolt into new organizational frameworks which continued to function later on as well.

The rescue operation was an important lever in the development of the resistance in Denmark. Among its members were Danish Jews who had been rescued and were living in Sweden, as well as Swedish Jews who provided financial assistance and organizational help. Unlike the situation in other countries, however, Jews did not particularly distinguish themselves in the ranks of the resistance. The Jews were accustomed to identifying with the traditional democratic regime, and were only able to act within this framework. During their exile in Sweden they were active in the Danish Refugee Administration, but with the exception of individuals, did not participate in resistance activities. Even before the *Aktion*, the leadership of the Jewish community had opposed all underground activities on principle, and had even taken steps against a group of *halutzim* who had planned to escape. The Jewish leaders were trapped between the hammer and the anvil – between German policy and Danish policy. After the escape of a group of Jewish fishermen to Sweden in the spring of 1943, the Germans threatened the Danish authorities, and the latter in turn warned the Jewish community against a repetition of such acts. Yet at a later date, it was the ambivalent nature of the relations between the Germans and the Danes which made the existence of the rescue organization possible. The Germans did not make a serious attempt to suppress it. Moreover, at this very time the Germans signed a new and better contract with the Danes for the supply of agricultural products. The

contract was signed by the Danish Secretary of State of the Foreign Ministry, who served as the de facto chairman of the Council of Secretaries of State following the resignation of the Danish Government. This council headed the internal Danish administration which was left intact by the Germans even afterwards.

When comparing the rescue operation in Denmark to similar attempts made in other countries, it is possible, I believe, to distinguish between three types of basic situations which determined the activities of the Jews, the local population, the local regime, and the German authorities. This classification does not include the question of external aid, or the lack of it.

A. The first category consists of those countries in which extensive, organized Jewish activity developed – whether it was conducted publicly, in the underground, or in both forms – despite the fact that the local regime and the majority of the population were anti-Semitic and adopted a hostile attitude toward the Jews. The countries in this category are first and foremost Germany, and her satellites Slovakia and Rumania. To a certain extent, Hungary also belongs in this group.

It is obvious that the center of organized Jewish activity, whether it was official, clandestine, or partisan activity, was in Eastern Europe, i.e. in Poland and Lithuania. It is important to note, however, that the conditions in these countries were so different that it is difficult to include them in the comparison we are making. The unique aspect of the situation in the three satellite countries mentioned above was that the Jewish leaders got various factions to support their rescue efforts. The reasons for this support varied – bribery, the desire to realize internal or external political aims, religious convictions, and sometimes a combination of all three. In all these cases, the initiative came from the Jews.

B. The second category consists of the countries in which organized local elements, at times with the cooperation of the local authorities, initiated activities to rescue Jews. Besides Denmark, the countries in this category are Norway, Finland, Bulgaria, Italy, and the southern part of Greece. The efforts made in these countries were relatively successful. Unlike Bulgaria, which abandoned the Jews in the territories it annexed (Macedonia, Thrace, and

Dobrudja), Italy protected the Jews in all the territories it acquired (in France, Greece, and Yugoslavia). In these countries, the Jews had to adapt quickly to the rescue initiatives. The major motivations for the rescue activities were rooted in the social, political, or religious structure of these countries.

C. The third category is comprised of those countries in which there was Jewish activity with the support of local elements, but in most cases without the knowledge of the local authorities. The countries in this category are France, especially Vichy, Belgium, Yugoslavia, and to a certain extent Holland. The administration in Holland was somewhat similar to the one in Denmark at the time of the crisis and afterwards. It seems that countries without political leadership, in which all the power was in the hands of the administration, were much more likely to forgo their independent stance and give in to pressure.

It is obvious that in making such a classification, as in all schematic evaluations, one cannot avoid a certain artificiality, and thus certain countries may be included in two of the above categories. Slovakia is a good example. Part of the Slovak Jews were temporarily saved due to the two-year postponement of the deportations obtained by the "Working Group". The deportations, however, were resumed when the Jews took part in the Slovak Revolt in the summer of 1944.

This categorization, it should be noted, does not take into account the success or failure of the operation. Our aim was solely to delineate the general factors which motivated Jews and non-Jews. It seems that we do not yet have the data which would enable us to clearly delineate the unique aspects of the behavior of Jews and non-Jews. If we consider the forms of government in the various countries, there are satellites with different degrees of internal independence in the first (anti-Semitic countries) and second (initiated activities) categories, such as "independent" Slovakia, which was Hitler's creation on the one hand, and Rumania or Hungary on the other. A country like Norway, however, which was ruled by the Security Police, excelled in its efforts to save Jews. (Although the Quisling government became known as the archetype of a collaborationist regime, Quisling did not have a decisive influence on the course of events in Norway).

The matter becomes more complex when we examine the relations between Jews and non-Jews in the various countries. In those countries with a tradition of tolerance and equal rights, such as Holland, there were no organized rescue efforts and whatever was done was the result of spontaneous action. Yet in a blatantly anti-Semitic country such as Rumania, the situation was different. It seems that the key question is the internal image of the Jewish community during the period preceding the Holocaust – to what extent were the Jews prepared for self-help? There is indeed a relationship between the anti-Semitism in a country and the attitude of the local population to the Jews during the Nazi occupation. Hungary was occupied only in March 1944, and until then there were no large-scale deportations although the Jews did suffer restrictions, persecution, forced labor, and even expulsions. Yet Southern France was also occupied by the German well after the war began – in fall 1942. While the Hungarian population collaborated with the Germans, the French provided the Jews with considerable help even during the occupation. At the beginning of the occupation, the Danes did not exhibit as great deal of resistance to the Germans. The opposition of the people and the authorities to anti-Semitism, however, was very pronounced. It determined the policy from the outset and prepared the stage for rescue when the crisis broke out. The Jewish community in Denmark, on the other hand, was from what we know among the most passive, and its leadership rejected in principle any organized activity for self-rescue. Judged by the success of the rescue operation, Denmark takes first place, but from the point of view of Jewish self-help it is in last place. The explanation for this phenomenon does not only lie in the conditions which existed in Denmark prior to the occupation, since from the point of view of equal rights there was no difference between France and Denmark, nor was there a difference between the two countries in the degree of assimilation of the Jewish community. The situation in Denmark was better than that which existed in Vichy even before the German occupation in 1942. Yet whereas Danish Jewry refrained from engaging in underground work, French Jewry conducted extensive activity, especially in Southern France. In both countries the Christian churches – the Protestant Church in Denmark

and the Catholic Church in Southern France – helped in the rescue of the Jews.

The uniqueness of the rescue of the Danish Jews is rooted, therefore, in contradictory phenomena. Unlike the developments in other countries, the outbreak of the crisis brought about the almost total disappearance of anti-Semitism, which as became clear later on was a factor to be reckoned with even in Danish society. The identification with the Jews was political, and led to planned political activities. On the other hand, the persecutions and dangers paralyzed all organized Jewish activity, and thus the Jews did not undertake any independent political initiatives. It seems that various questions regarding the survival of Jews in the Diaspora, for which we have not yet found any answers, are involved in this episode.

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