

# THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

## How thousands of Danes —and one brave German— defied the Nazis to rescue Denmark's Jews

By Duane Schultz

**QUIET HERO**  
German diplomat  
Georg Duckwitz  
(right), risked his  
life to warn  
Denmark's Jews of  
an imminent  
roundup.

**SWEDEN BOUND**  
Danish Jews  
(opposite) smile  
with relief as their  
sailboat approaches  
the neutral haven.



**I** KNOW WHAT I HAVE TO DO,” the man wrote in his diary. But even the prospect of what Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz had to do that day, September 28, 1943, would have left many lesser men petrified with fear. For Duckwitz, a high-level staff member of the German embassy in Copenhagen and a member of the Nazi Party, was about to betray his country—and risk execution—to try to save the lives of nearly 8,000 Danish Jews.

He knew that in two days’ time Denmark’s Jews were to be rounded up and shipped off to internment camps. Eight days earlier, already sure of his course, and aware that he was suspected by the Gestapo of being untrustworthy, he had taken an enormous risk by traveling secretly to Sweden and persuading the still-neutral Swedish government to take in all the Danish Jews who

**‘That small country caused us more difficulties than anything else.’**

**—Adolf Eichmann**



could get out of Denmark in time.

But now his mission verged on the suicidal. After a brisk walk to 22 Roemer Street in downtown Copenhagen, he slipped inside to meet with a leading Danish politician. That man, Hans Hedtoft, remembered that Duckwitz looked “white with indignation and shame.” The reason for that became clear over the next few minutes as Duckwitz outlined precisely what his Nazi brethren had in store for the Danish Jews, and when.

What followed directly from that meeting was the miraculous rescue of almost the entire Jewish population of Denmark. And while Duckwitz’s brave warning sparked the operation, it was the Danish people themselves who then rapidly and selflessly carried it out—hiding and caring for their Jewish compatriots, transporting them to boats on the coast, and then ensuring the vast majority made it safely to Sweden.

When the Germans came to get them on October 1, very few Jews could be found. They had already packed small bags, put on as many layers of clothing as they could, and fled. The decency and compassion of one German and an entire occupied nation literally saved their lives. As Herbert Pundik, who was one of those who got away, wrote 55 years later: “The rescue of the Danish Jews shows that often you can do something. People can accomplish something—even fight against a superior power—if only they dare make a choice.”

**T**HE JEWS OF DENMARK knew what had been happening in the rest of Europe—how the Germans had rounded up millions of Jews in every country they occupied and shipped them to the East, where some said they were all being put to death. But in Denmark, Jews were still living in their homes in 1943, three years after the Germans invaded. They went about their ordinary lives. Their children attended regular schools like everyone else’s and no one was forced to wear yellow stars. Their businesses ran unchallenged, and they were allowed to keep their jobs. In fact, there had been no restrictions on Danish Jews at all. So far, they had been lucky.

And so had all the Danes, ever since April 9, 1940, the day the Germans overwhelmed the small Danish army in just two hours. Hitler felt an affinity for the Danes, considering them fellow Aryans. He permitted the Danes to keep their govern-

**‘People can even fight against a superior power if only they dare make a choice.’**

**—Herbert Pundik**



**BEFORE THE STORM** Herbert Pundik at age 16, just weeks before he and his family fled by boat to Sweden.

ment and king, and to fly their own flag. Very little changed in their daily lives at first, except for one thing. They were a conquered people ruled by a foreign power. They felt fear, but also a growing resentment and rage.

A resistance developed, slowly at first, without violence. As the war continued, strikes, mass demonstrations, and open acts of sabotage proliferated. By 1943, Hitler had become outraged by the Danes’ disrespect for their Aryan brothers. It was time to rule Denmark with an iron hand, and that included getting rid of all the Jews.

The orders to round up the Jews came in two telegrams on September 22—one from General Alfred Jodl in Berlin to the German army commander in Copenhagen, and the other from Hitler’s foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, to Werner Best, Germany’s governor of Denmark. It was Best who told his friend Duckwitz what was about to happen; it is very likely he knew what Duckwitz would do with that information.

The roundup had been thoroughly planned. On August 31, armed men had broken into the law offices of the leader of Copenhagen’s Jewish community and stolen files containing the names and

addresses of Denmark’s Jews. Two weeks later, German police openly raided the headquarters of the Jewish Community Center and took away its archives, which also included names and addresses. Not all Jews were listed in either set of stolen files, but most were. By the time two German cargo ships docked at the Langelinie Pier in Copenhagen harbor on Wednesday, September 29, newly arrived Gestapo and other German police were prepared to carry out detailed raids on Jewish homes.

What happened next was a miracle of compassion, decency, and courage not seen on such a scale in any other country in occupied Europe. First, Georg Duckwitz acted. Duckwitz had worked for a German company in Copenhagen before the war and was fluent in Danish. Returning with his wife to Denmark’s capital after Germany invaded, he had become friendly with many Danes. Still, those friendships hardly explain the enormity of his decision to try to save Denmark’s Jewish population, and he said very little about it then or after the war. After Duckwitz brought his alarming message to Hans Hedtoft, the Danish politician swiftly spread word to leaders of the Jewish community, and it was instantly passed on to Jews and non-



**CLEAN HANDS?** There is some evidence that the Nazi governor of Denmark, Werner Best (right, with Danish Prime Minister Erik Scavenius), fearful of riling the Danes, made sure they were tipped off about Berlin's order to round up Danish Jews.

Jews alike. Duckwitz's act of courage was multiplied thousands of times over by individual Danes who quickly sounded the alarm throughout the country—by phone and word of mouth—and took whatever action was necessary to hide Jews from the Nazis and spirit them out of the country to Sweden.

Most Danish Jews knew they had to get away, but where could they go? Who would hide them? "From one hour to the next we had become homeless," said Herbert Pundik, who was 16 years old at the time. "We were on the run in our own country. All I owned was a bag with a few kilos of clothes....We were frightened, lost, and alone."

Fortunately Pundik's father knew someone who would provide shelter, at least for a while. But most Jewish Danes did not have non-Jewish friends or business associates they could turn to for help.

One girl and her family, burdened by layers of clothes, bags, and suitcases, headed for the central railroad station in Copenhagen and found thousands of others who seemed just as lost and afraid. "Finally," she wrote, "we reach our destination, a small town, at the end of the line, at the open sea, enveloped by endless darkness. Hundreds and hundreds seem to have summoned each other to this place. Unhappy, tortured people. From the small railway station they seep in all directions, cautiously they are being taken into the lowly fishermen's cabins, stuffed together like sheep in their enclosure, ignorant about their fate."

But as discomfiting as the upheaval was, their fate was life rather than death, and help awaited at every turn. Mendel Katlev was a 36-year-old factory foreman with a wife and two children. When he heard the news, he rushed home to prepare



**'WHIPPED CREAM FRONT'** Two weeks after Germany's swift and nearly bloodless invasion in 1940, heavily armed soldiers elicited smiles from a bus full of Danes.

his family to flee, but he had no idea where they would go. On the tram ride home, he saw the same conductor who had been punching his ticket every day for many years.

"How come you're going home so early today?" the conductor asked. "Are you sick?"

Katlev told the man the Germans planned to round up all the Jews.

"That's awful," the conductor said. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. We'll have to find a place to hide."

"Come to my house," insisted the conductor. "Get your wife and your children and bring them all to my house."

Katlev was stunned.

"But you don't know me," he said. "You don't even know my name, and I don't know yours." The conductor held out his hand and introduced himself. Mendel Katlev was no longer alone.

Similar selfless acts occurred throughout Denmark in the weeks following Duckwitz's warning. A prominent Jewish physician remembered that a woman he had never met approached him, introduced herself, and said calmly, "This is my address and here is the key to my house if you should ever need it." When a Jewish woman in Copenhagen heard the story

after the war, she said, "Oh, yes, the same thing happened to me. At one point I had four keys in my pocket for houses entirely unknown to me."

Ellen Nielsen, a widow with six children, worked as a fishmonger on the docks. One day two young brothers who worked in the flower market next door asked if she knew any fishermen who would take them to Sweden. They said they needed to escape the Germans who were coming for the Jews. Nielsen had not known they were Jewish; she hardly knew them at all. Nor did she know the Germans were planning to round up the Jews.

"But if the Germans are arresting the Jews," she asked, "what are you boys doing walking around here? Shouldn't you be in hiding?"

"Yes, but we don't know where to hide."

"You can stay at my house," she said without hesitation.

She arranged for their successful escape and went on to help many others, none of whom she had known before. Over the next several weeks more than 100 Jews passed through her tiny house and on to Sweden.

As word spread about these events, more and more Danes stepped in to help. More than 2,000 Jews found safe haven in a

hospital while the staff arranged for their escape to Sweden. The Scandinavian Bookstore, directly across the street from Copenhagen's Gestapo headquarters, was used as a gathering place to shelter Jews while plans were made for boats to take them to Sweden. Whenever a book by a certain poet was displayed in the window, that was a signal that it was safe to come inside. As many as 600 Jews hid in the store, sometimes for days, before being transported to freedom. This went on for several weeks; the Gestapo never caught on.

Four days elapsed from the time Herbert Pundik and his family left their Copenhagen flat until they reached Sweden. Two dozen people had helped them directly, or at least knew about their flight—and did not turn them in to German authorities.

“The last I remember of Denmark on that October night was the faint sound of the boat cutting through the water as the fisherman poled it away from the shore toward the open sea,” he recalled. “Looking back, I saw two people kneeling on the sand. One was our host, a friend of my father’s, the other was the wife of the fisherman who was going to smuggle us through the German lines from occupied Denmark to neutral Sweden. Their hands were lifted toward heaven.

“They remained within my sight until the Danish coastline was lost from view. I counted the minutes. From the time we left Denmark, where Gestapo patrols tried to round up the seven thousand Jews, to the moment the fisherman called us on deck and told us that we were safe, exactly 37 minutes had passed.”

**J**EWES WHO HAD NOT been warned, who had not believed the warning, or who were too old and sick to leave were captured. A few others had found the warning credible but viewed their capture as inevitable. They assumed there was no escaping the German occupiers.

The prisoners were too few to fill even one of the two ships the Germans had waiting in the harbor. But those unfortunates—including mainly families with children, and elderly men and women—had been dragged from their homes and shoved into police vans. At the Jewish Home for the Aged, next door to a synagogue, 150 German police stormed the building



**UNCERTAIN FATE** The 500 Danish Jews the Nazis managed to grab were sent off to the Theresienstadt concentration camp (above).

**The Gestapo brutally grilled all of the elderly Jews at one home; yet many German soldiers simply turned a blind eye to the exodus.**

and seized everyone there. One frail old woman, who had been bedridden for 11 years, was tied roughly to a stretcher and carried next door into the synagogue where all the rest were assembled. The Gestapo brutally interrogated all of the elderly, and hit and kicked them when they said they did not know anything about the Danish underground and its operations. The Germans then took everything of value from the synagogue and relieved themselves inside the sanctuary, to openly demonstrate their contempt.

Yet part of the unprecedented success of the rescue must be attributed to the Germans themselves. While the special police and some soldiers treated their prisoners brutally, many German soldiers simply turned a blind eye to the exodus.

There were no elite frontline German army units in Denmark. The soldiers there were older men, soldiers recovering from severe wounds, and young recruits with little training. They were reluctant to rile the local population; being stationed in beautiful, peaceful Denmark—which the Germans referred to as “the Whipped Cream Front” because food was plentiful and the duty was easy—was far preferable to serving on the Eastern Front fighting the Russians.

One Jewish man remembered running into a German army officer in the dark. He panicked. “Take it easy,” the German said, “I won’t harm you,” and he walked away. German soldiers

**HOMEWARD** In 1945, before Germany surrendered, Denmark and Sweden sent a fleet of buses to Theresienstadt to rescue Denmark's Jews.

sat on some of the same trains that were taking hundreds of Jews fleeing from Copenhagen to the coast, and each group pretended the other was not there.

By German standards—judged by the string of successes in rounding up Jews in every other country—the attempt in Denmark was a failure. Of the 7,800 Jews in Denmark at the time, 7,220 escaped to Sweden, along with 686 non-Jewish spouses. Only 464 Jews were taken prisoner and transported to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. Thirty people died attempting to escape; some drowned, others committed suicide rather than risk capture. Up to 100 hid out in the countryside until the war ended. Estimates of the number of non-Jewish Danes who helped in the massive escape to the coast range as high as 10,000, but the exact number is unknown.

Still, there were no recriminations or reprisals for the escape of Danish Jews against anyone, German or Danish, because the German governor of Denmark, Werner Best, could truthfully report to Hitler and Himmler that he had carried out his orders and that Denmark was *Judenrein*—cleansed of Jews.

**B**UT WHAT OF THE NEARLY 500 JEWS shipped off to Theresienstadt? The Danes—this time the Danish government—had another miracle in the works. From the moment of the Danish Jews' transport to the camp, the government and the king maintained a persistent flow of inquiries to German headquarters to lobby for their humane treatment. Meanwhile, Danish officials visited the homes of people who had been arrested to select clothing they might need in the camps. These items were sent, along with a steady stream of packages containing vitamins and food, to the Danish prisoners.

The Danes, aware of how the German bureaucracy functioned, forwarded their packages with a receipt that had to be signed and returned to the sender. The Germans dutifully and efficiently followed the rules, signing for the packages and deliv-



**‘We helped the Jews because they needed us,’ a Copenhagen housewife said 20 years after the war.**

ering them immediately. All records were maintained in proper German order.

The aid and pressure worked. While thousands of prisoners at Theresienstadt from other countries were routinely sent on to death camps at Auschwitz and elsewhere, the Danish Jews—properly clothed and with just enough food and other supplies to survive—were spared. The relatively few who perished were ill or old.

A month before the end of the war, the Danish government, working closely with Swedish diplomats, arranged for a convoy of 36 white buses with large red crosses painted on the tops and sides to drive the 600 miles from Denmark to Theresienstadt. There they collected the Danish prisoners and drove them through war-torn Germany to Sweden. (The Germans only agreed to release the prisoners if they were taken to a neutral country.) No other nation was able to spring its citizens from the camps before the war ended.

It was when the Jews returned to Denmark from Sweden and elsewhere in the summer of 1945 that the last of the Danish miracles transpired. First they were greeted by cheering crowds, garlands of flowers, and signs that proclaimed, “Welcome to Denmark.” As Rabbi Marcus Melchior wrote, “It is Denmark’s undying honor, the truly great deed, that the repatriates were met with a hearty ‘welcome home’; that there was a sincere expression of joy at our good fortune; that many insisted that only now that the Danish Jews were back home was Denmark whole again.”

But equally astonishing, most of the Jews returned to find their homes, jobs, and businesses intact, ready for them to resume the lives that had been interrupted. Employees had run companies and shops on their own, drawing only their regular salaries and depositing the profits to the owners’ accounts. Homes had been kept in immaculate condition; upon their

return, many found that their apartments and houses had been cleaned and freshly painted, with several days' worth of food stocked in the refrigerators.

"All our stuff was completely where we left it, nothing was stolen," one girl recalled. "The car my father had bought before the war was still standing there." Another young woman wrote how amazed she was to find her home in perfect condition. "I remember my surprise at opening my closets in my room and seeing all the things I owned. My father had at the last moment transferred his considerable wine cellar to a friend's house. The friend was very upset that one bottle of brandy was missing and kept apologizing for this to my father."

Virtually all of the Jews who escaped returned home immediately after the war: Herbert Pundik arrived from Sweden on May 6, the day after the Germans in Denmark surrendered, and went on to become a prominent journalist. Meanwhile, the man squarely at the center of the rescue also happily returned to Denmark some years after the war ended. Georg Duckwitz had stayed on at the German embassy in Copenhagen until 1945—

his heroic treachery undetected by his Nazi masters. After the war he led a distinguished but quiet life as a career diplomat. In 1955 he became the German ambassador to Denmark, and in 1971, two years before his death, Duckwitz was honored by Israel as one of the Righteous Among the Nations.

In the years since the miraculous rescue, many Danes have been asked why they made such heroic efforts to save the Jews. Why risk their freedom, even their lives and those of their families, to help people who, in many cases, they did not even know? The question is usually received with a look of disbelief that anyone would even ask.

"We helped the Jews because they needed us," a Copenhagen housewife said 20 years after the war. "How could anybody turn their back and not do everything possible to prevent the slaughter of innocent people? Perhaps the citizens of other countries had forsaken their Jewish brethren. But it did not happen in Denmark. By saving Jews, we saved ourselves. We kept our integrity and honor. We struck a blow for human dignity at a time when it was sorely lacking in the world." ★



**WARM WELCOME** Many Danish Jews (above) were astonished upon their return to find that their homes and jobs awaited them.