



## Denmark

The southernmost country in Scandinavia. Approximately 7,800 Jews lived in Denmark before World War II. Of those, some 6,000 were native Danes, and the rest were refugees, many of whom were children from the Youth Aliya and Zionist Youth Movements. Other refugees had fled to Denmark in the years preceding the war. However, between 1934 and 1938 the rules regarding foreign refugees were tightened, thus the majority of the 4,500 Jews who had sought shelter in Denmark, left the country.

The German army occupied Denmark on April 9, 1940. The Danes did not challenge German control, so the Germans agreed to let them continue running their government and army independently. Included in the agreement was a clause calling for the protection of the Danish Jews, a point that the Danes stubbornly insisted upon. Thus, for the next few years, the status of the Jews did not change.

However, by the spring of 1943, the situation deteriorated. Encouraged by the victories of the Allied forces against the Germans, Danish resistance groups increased their activities. This caused tension between the Danes and the Germans, leading the Germans to rethink the status of the Danish Jews. When the Zionist youth discovered what was happening, many tried to escape the country. Some tried to flee to southern Europe by hiding under train cars, but their attempt failed. Others succeeded in escaping to Sweden from Bornholm Island by boat.

In late August 1943, after refusing to comply with the Germans' new demands regarding the Jews, the Danish government resigned in late August 1943. Werner Best, the German minister in the Danish capital of Copenhagen, decided conditions had ripened for a proposal to the Nazi leadership in Berlin that Danish Jews be deported. He subsequently developed second thoughts, for fear that his own relationship with the Danes be harmed. Despite this, on the eve of October 1-2, 1943, German police commenced arresting Jews. However, several German sources, chief among them the German legation's attache for shipping affairs, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, leaked this



information to Danish groups, who immediately warned the Jews. The Danes—reacting spontaneously and humanely—helped Jews reach the beach, and Danish fishermen took them to Sweden aboard their boats. The Swedish government announced that it would accept all refugees from Denmark, and the Danish resistance organized the escape of the remaining Jews. The king of Denmark, Christian X, in conjunction with the heads of the Danish churches, objected to the deportation. Within 3 weeks, 7,200 Jews and about 700 of their non-Jewish relatives were taken to Sweden.

Even though Rolf Guenther, Adolf Eichmann's assistant, failed in his general mission to deport Danish Jewry, approximately 500 Jews were still arrested. Of these, some Zionist Youth and Youth Aliya children were sent to Theresienstadt. The Danish government strongly protested the deportations, demanding a group of Danish representatives be allowed to visit Theresienstadt. In the summer of 1944, the Nazis set up a fake "model ghetto" for the visit of the Danes and an International Red Cross group (see also Red Cross, International). Even so, no Danish Jews were sent to Auschwitz. Most were moved to Sweden just before the war ended.

The manner in which the Danes looked after and saved their Jewish community is considered one of the most heroic and humane aspects of World War II, and is still admired today. Legend has it that King Christian X himself donned a Jewish badge, in solidarity with the Jews of Denmark (see also badge, Jewish). The story is fictional (as Danish Jews were never forced to wear badges), but it powerfully depicts the Danish king as a model of courage and a symbol of commitment to his country's Jews.