Denmark and the Holocaust

Carol Rittner

The story of the Danish Jews is *sui generis*, and the behavior of the Danish people unique among all the countries of Europe – occupied, allied with the Axis, or neutral. Denmark was a country where the Holocaust failed. Why? According to sociologist Helen Fein in Accounting for Genocide, two factors accounted for the higher or lower degree of victimization of Jews during the Holocaust: 1) the pre-World War II level of antisemitism in each of the occupied countries, and 2) the pattern of relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish communities in those countries.

Jews in Denmark

Jews had lived in Denmark since the 17th century. When they first arrived in 1622, Jews were allowed to live only in certain towns, but by 1814, they were granted full Danish citizenship. When Denmark abolished its absolute monarchy in 1849 and adopted its free Constitution, Jews received full political equality, with access to the university, to commercial opportunity, and to social status. They were accepted and respected as full partners in the new democracy, but even with such an enlightened attitude, and with a tradition of religious tolerance, Denmark wasn't completely free of antisemitism.

The Invasion and Occupation of Denmark

When Nazi Germany invaded Denmark on April 9, 1940, the Royal Danish Army put up scant resistance. The Royal Navy surrendered without firing a shot. In the beginning, whatever negative attitudes the Danes had about the Germans were expressed through passive resistance, or giving them the "cold shoulder," rather than by open defiance, armed resistance, or sabotage. The Danes were given a degree of autonomy unheard of in any other German occupied country in Europe.

Throughout the occupation, the Danish Government insisted there was no "Jewish problem" in Denmark. They were like all the other citizens of Denmark and would be treated no differently. In practice, this meant that Jews were not forced to wear the Yellow Star of David, were not segregated or isolated, and were not barred from restaurants, public place, schools, cinemas, or theaters. Their property was not confiscated, and they were never dismissed from their jobs. Their movement was not restricted, by day or night. Jewish communal activities remained undisturbed despite the presence of German troops. Still, democratic Denmark had been defeated and occupied by a foreign country. Danes began to ask themselves whether or not as a conquered people they could maintain a democratic way of life. Can confidence, identity, and unity be restored when national pride is shaken to its core?

The Public Significance of Ideas

It was not the first time Danes had been confronted by such challenges. In 1864, after being defeated by the Prussians, Denmark was swept by a profound malaise. It was Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig (1782-1873), a remarkably talented and versatile poet, educator, historian, theologian, and Christian humanist, who reinvigorated the Danish spirit of democracy and humanity. Grundtvig was a man of deep biblical faith with a high level of tolerance and respect for other cultures and religious traditions of the world. His spirit was ecumenical. In all that he did and wrote, he emphasized the biblical doctrine of creation: "First a human being, then a Christian: this alone is life's order. "People", he said, "are bound to one another with ties more profound than any of the barriers of human history, including the history of religion, may have constructed". Through the Danish folk high schools, which he founded for young people, his ecumenical spirit caught on among "ordinary" people in Denmark. In the twentieth century, during the German occupation when the Danes again needed help in restoring their national, Grundtvig's ideas proved their enduring significance.

Hal Koch (1904-1963), a theologian and professor of church history at the University of Copenhagen, recognized that fascism and Nazism were dangers to democracy. After the April 1940 invasion and occupation, Koch

_____

decided to give a series of lectures, open to the general public. He knew well that Denmark was privileged compared to other conquered countries. He had even supported the "policy of negotiation," but he was becoming more aware of the "high price" Denmark paid for its relative autonomy under German occupation: "we have said many a Yes and many a No which have not come from our hearts, and that our talk has taken on a fateful hypocrisy"

Like Grundtvig before him, Koch found in the language of biblical morality the principles of civic virtue. These principles prompted certain questions: Am I my brother's/sister's keeper? Who is my neighbor? What are the boundaries of obligation? What is the connection between the actions of individuals and the common good? What is the relationship between how we Danes act and our self-understanding as citizens?

Examining the biblical tradition so familiar to Danes, Koch highlighted its public significance. He helped people to find, embedded in their biblical roots, universally accepted ideas. He illuminated and emphasized the self-understanding Danes held about themselves and about democratic values and ideals in their society.

From Apathy to Action

Between April 1940 and August 1943, Danish attitudes toward their German occupiers underwent significant transformation. German demands kept escalating until the Danes were no longer willing to compromise, to engage in the "policy of negotiation," to rely only on passive resistance and the "cold shoulder" technique. By the Fall of 1942, the Danish resistance movement began to gain support. In the Summer of 1943, sabotage activities, reprisals, strikes and street unrest across Denmark mounted to a high pitch. In addition, Danes were unhappy with the Germans because they were experiencing food shortages.

On August 28, 1943, SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Dr. Werner Best, informed the Danish Government that it was declaring a "state of emergency." Public gatherings of more than five persons were prohibited, as were strikes and financial support for strikers. An 8:30 p.m. curfew was imposed. Firearms and explosives were confiscated, press censorship was imposed, and Danish

_____

special tribunals for dealing with infringements of these prohibitions and regulations were to be established. Sabotage was to be punished by death.

At the end of September 1943, news of an impending German Aktion reached the Jews through Danish political leaders who were forewarned by Georg F. Duckwitz, the German legation's attaché for shipping affairs in Copenhagen. On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Wednesday, September 29, 1943, Rabbi Marcus Melchior told his congregation that the Germans planned a mass roundup of Jews the next day, when the Nazis knew families would be gathered in their homes for the holiday. "The situation," Rabbi Melchior said, "is very serious. We must take action immediately."

As word spread, non-Jewish Danes "spontaneously" began to do what they could to help. Friends and even strangers hid Jews in their homes and in hospitals, churches and convents in Copenhagen and up and down the east coast of Denmark. Every imaginable group protested German efforts to round up the Jews. Political parties issued statements; underground newspapers published articles. Virtually the entire country responded to German threats to harm the Jews, including the official State Church of Denmark, the Lutheran Church.

Ninety percent of the Danish population belonged to the Lutheran Church. Between 1940 to 1943, the Danish Lutheran Church took decisive measures to combat antisemitism and to include Jews within the bounds of the "universe of concern". When the crisis – the impending round-up of the Jews – came in September-October 1943, the Church was ready. The Bishop of Copenhagen, Dr. Hans Fuglsang-Damgaard (1890-1979) prepared a written statement which he signed on behalf of all the Danish Lutheran Bishops. It was sent to the German occupation officials and was dispatched, via theological students, on Saturday, October 2, 1943 to all the churches in his diocese. On Sunday, October 3rd, the protest was read aloud in Lutheran churches throughout Denmark. The Danish Lutheran Church helped to rally the people and provided immeasurable amounts of assistance – from hiding people and Torah scrolls to gathering money, food, and other resources.

Almost the entire rescue operation was successful – nearly 8000 Jews in Denmark were saved – but there were some failures. On the night of October

6, 1943, for example, some 80 Jews hiding in the attic of the Gilleleje Church, located in a fishing village north of Copenhagen, were betrayed, arrested and deported. While the tragedy at the Gilleleje Church was an exception to the "spontaneous" help given to the Jews by the Danes, it is instructive to remember that even in Denmark, where the Holocaust failed, some people forgot that Jews were within the "boundaries of obligation" we owe one another as fellow human beings.

Unlike so many in Nazi-occupied Europe, most Danes saw themselves as human beings linked to others through a shared humanity, not as individuals inhabiting a world divided into "us" and "them". The Danes helped for a variety of reasons - because they were paid to do a job; because they hated the Germans; because they wanted to outwit the Germans; because they were determined to prevent the Nazis' genocidal policies from being implemented in Denmark. Whatever the reason, the civic and religious institutions played decisive roles in preparing the Danish population to respond. While we must not discount the role of the Danish Lutheran Church in this effort to help the Jews in Denmark during the Holocaust, the Danes probably responded, as Thomas Merton once wrote, not so much because they "were Christians, as [because] they were human. How many others were even that?"

Source: Carrol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith & Irena Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World,* **Yad-Vashem 2000, pp. 97-100**