

Courage in Denmark: Resistance to the Nazis in WWII

By The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
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World War II (WWII) was a global conflict that lasted from 1939 to 1945. It involved more than 100 million people and over 30 countries. The Allied powers – including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union – worked together to defeat the Axis powers, which consisted of Germany, Italy, and Japan. During this time, Germany was led by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, which planned and executed the mass killing of over 11 million people, including more than 6 million Jews. This was called the Holocaust. At the beginning of WWII, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway declared that they were not taking sides in the conflict. They were hoping to avoid repeating the horrors of World War I, although this did not prevent the German government from invading the territories and taking away the rights of citizens of these countries. As you read, take notes on ways that people stood up against discrimination and violence in Denmark during World War II.

- [1] Most individuals in occupied Europe did not actively collaborate in the Nazi¹ genocide.² Nor did they do anything to help Jews and other victims of Nazi policies.³ Throughout the Holocaust, millions of people silently stood by while they saw Jews, Roma (Gypsies),⁴ and other “enemies of the Reich”⁵ being rounded up and deported.⁶ Many of these bystanders told themselves that what they saw happening was none of their business. Others were too frightened to help. In many places, providing shelter to Jews was a crime punishable by death.



"Spectators at the former German headquarters in Dagmarhus destroy flag, which has been thrown out from the building" is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

In spite of the risks, a small number of individuals refused to stand by and watch. These people had the courage to help by providing hiding places, underground escape routes, false papers, food, clothing, money, and sometimes even weapons.

1. The Nazi party, led by Adolf Hitler, ruled Germany between 1941 and 1945. They were responsible for planning and carrying out the Holocaust, the mass murder of over 6 million European Jews. Members of many other minority groups were targeted and killed at this time as well.
2. **Genocide (noun):** the deliberate killing of a large group of people from a specific race or religion
3. The murder of Jewish people and other minorities during the Holocaust was preceded by a series of policies that paved the way for the killings. These included laws that prevented Jewish people from serving in public office, restrictions on the number of Jewish students allowed to study at German universities, and restrictions on the freedom of movement of German Jews. Many of these policies were aimed at making it near impossible for Jewish citizens to hide their ethnic background, which made it easier for the Nazis to target them once the killings began.
4. The term “Gypsies” refers to members of a traveling people who speak Romany and traditionally make their living through seasonal work, trade, and fortune-telling.
5. “Reich” is a German word that literally translates to “realm.” It has historically been used to denote the periods of rule of different empires in the region. The Third Reich refers to the period of Germany history between 1933 and 1945, when the country was under the rule of Adolf Hitler.
6. **Deport (verb):** to remove from a country, often on the grounds of illegal status or for having committed a crime

Denmark was the only occupied country that actively resisted the Nazi regime's attempts to deport its Jewish citizens. On September 28, 1943, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German diplomat, secretly informed the Danish resistance that the Nazis were planning to deport the Danish Jews. The Danes responded quickly, organizing a nationwide effort to smuggle the Jews by sea to neutral Sweden. Warned of the German plans, Jews began to leave Copenhagen, where most of the almost 8,000 Jews in Denmark lived, and other cities, by train, car, and on foot. With the help of the Danish people, they found hiding places in homes, hospitals, and churches. Within a two-week period fishermen helped ferry⁷ some 7,200 Danish Jews and 680 non-Jewish family members to safety across the narrow body of water separating Denmark from Sweden.

The Danish rescue effort was unique because it was nationwide. It was not completely successful, however. Almost 500 Danish Jews were deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto in Czechoslovakia.⁸ Yet even of these Jews, all but 51 survived the Holocaust, largely because Danish officials pressured the Germans with their concerns for the well-being of those who had been deported. The Danes proved that widespread support for Jews and resistance to Nazi policies could save lives.

- [5] There are numerous stories of brave people in other countries who also tried to save the Jews from perishing at the hands of the Nazis. Nearly 12,000 Jewish children were rescued by clergymen in France who found housing for them and even smuggled some into Switzerland and Spain. About 20,000 Polish Jews were able to survive in hiding outside the ghetto⁹ in Warsaw because people provided shelter for them in their homes. Some Jews were even hidden in the Warsaw Zoo by the zoo's director, Jan Zabinski.

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7. Transport by boat.

8. Theresienstadt was a concentration camp established by the Nazis during World War II in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. Tens of thousands of prisoners died there; some were killed outright and some died of malnutrition, starvation, or disease.

9. Historically, the term "ghetto" has referred to an isolated or segregated area, particularly one that is home to a majority-Jewish population.