

# The Flight of the Danish Jews in 1943 – “Rescue” or “Escape”?

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**ABSTRACT:** For 70 years the flight of the Danish Jews to Sweden in 1943 has most commonly been referred to as “the rescue of the Danish Jews,” while similar events from that time have been referred to as “escapes.” This terminology comes at the expense of a historically accurate portrayal of the decisions and actions of the Danish Jews during September/October 1943. “Rescue” and “escape” have different connotations, and those differences have consequences when applied to historical events. This article examines the use of these two terms in historical narratives, the forces behind them, and their impacts. Where this article turns to the discussion of popular and scholarly literature, the author has examined both texts and their book covers.

**RÉSUMÉ :** Depuis 70 ans, la fuite des Juifs danois vers la Suède en 1943 a été plus communément désignée comme « le sauvetage des Juifs danois », tandis qu’il a été référé à des événements similaires de cette époque comme des « évasions ». Cette terminologie est utilisée aux dépens d’une représentation historiquement correcte des décisions et actions des Juifs danois pendant les mois de septembre/octobre 1943. « Sauvetage » et « évasion » ont des connotations différentes et ces différences ont des conséquences lorsqu’elles sont appliquées à des événements historiques. Cet article examine l’utilisation de ces deux termes dans les récits historiques, les forces qui les sous-tendent et leurs impacts. Lorsque cet article se penche sur les littératures populaire et savante, l’auteur a examiné tout à la fois les textes et les premières de couverture.

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**A**s described by Jensen and Jensen, “by 1945, two out of every three Jews living in Europe in 1939 were dead” (7). In sharp contrast to this, approximately 98 percent of Denmark’s Jews survived the Nazi German occupation of that country from April 9, 1940 to May 5, 1945. In the fall of 1943 approximately 7,000 Jews escaped from occupied Denmark across the Øresund to safety in neutral Sweden. This historical event is often described as a “beacon of light in a time of darkness.” It is one of the most thoroughly researched and extensively described events in Scandinavian history. Throughout this body of work, the event is most commonly referred to as “the rescue of the Danish Jews,” and its popular understanding as such has become an important element in the self-image of the Danes themselves as well as in the image of Danish society from abroad.

To reduce our understanding of the event to a rescue has had, and continues to have, great appeal, but it comes at the expense of a historically accurate portrayal of the decisions and actions of the Danish Jews themselves during the fateful days of September/October 1943. To describe an event as a “rescue” provides the connotation of action and bravery to the rescuer and that of more or less helpless victim to the rescued. Although there was no shortage of bravery on the part of those Danes who helped the Jews escape to Sweden, recent research, including that conducted for this article, has confirmed that the conduct of the Danish Jews in 1943 was characterized by courageous decisions and actions taken under exceedingly difficult circumstances.

Post-World War II popular English-language literature has included the immensely popular “escape” genre. P. R. Reid’s *Escape From Colditz* and Paul Brickhill’s *The Great Escape* are but two of the better-known examples of the countless British and American books, films, and TV productions that tell the stories of Allied soldiers and airmen making their way through occupied Europe to safety in neutral countries or to Allied lines. Almost without exception these stories are described as an “escape,” no matter how utterly dependent the soldier or airman may have been upon Dutch, Belgian, French, (or Danish) resistance organizations for his survival and success in reaching neutral or allied-controlled territory.

Since the end of World War II the Danish Jews who accomplished the same thing as the Allied soldiers described above have overwhelmingly been described as having been rescued rather than having escaped. There are historical reasons for this, which will be discussed in this article, but the central point is that there is no historical justification for denying the term “escape,” with all its positive connotations, to the Danish Jews of 1943.

## Historical Background

On April 9, 1940 the people of Denmark woke to the news that their country had fallen under the onslaught of Nazi German military aggression. What would follow would be three and one-half years of increasingly intense existential anxiety for Denmark's approximately 8,000 Jews.

From the outset of the German occupation, a fiction was maintained between the German and Danish governments that was to have very real impacts on the lives of its Jewish population. That fiction was that in exchange for non-interference with German military hegemony, Germany would treat Denmark as a sovereign and neutral state. (This was later extended to include trade practices that met German needs for Danish agricultural products.) This meant that most Danish political, administrative, legal, law enforcement, and military systems stayed in place almost as if nothing had happened. This somewhat incredible state of affairs lasted from April 1940 to August 1943.

The Danish government's policy of cooperation was and is to this day hugely controversial. Any honest discussion of the Danish government's policy of cooperation must, however, recognize that within that policy was a determination to prevent the introduction of legislation that would discriminate against that country's Jews. It was recognized that as long as Denmark's internal democratic structure remained in place and was accepted by the Germans (as was the case until August 1943), major persecution of the Jews could not occur unless discriminatory legislation was passed by the Danish parliament.

In late 1941 official Danish national governmental policy in defence of the nation's Jews began to coalesce. A high governmental advisory committee "agreed that any mention of a legislative act in connection with the Jewish question was unacceptable. On December 22, Danish Prime Minister Stauning announced that this was also the final decision reached by his coalition cabinet of eight ministers" (Hæstrup in Goldberger 30). Official national policy was now set. This policy was maintained by the succeeding governments of Vilhelm Buhl and Erik Scavanius. At a time when almost everything seemed to be negotiable, this issue, ultimately, was not.

As the Jewish community came to understand that the above-described state of affairs provided them with real protection against major persecution by the Germans, they began to come to the conclusion that their chances for survival would be enhanced by maintaining a low profile as long as the Germans allowed the Danish government to have authority over the country's internal affairs. It was during this time that the myth of Danish Jewish passivity first gained ground. The leadership of the Danish Jewish community was in contact with the leadership of the Danish government throughout this period and received reinforcement from government officials as to the wisdom of that approach (Arnheim in Kirchoff 2002, 28-30; Yahil 1983, 200). This approach extended to the discouragement of

attempts to escape from Denmark. It was felt that as long as the protection of the Danish government effectively extended to the Jewish community, individual acts that called attention to the Jews could place the entire community in jeopardy.

From the earliest days of the occupation through 1942, the policy of cooperation seemed to be a satisfactory state of affairs to the Danish people and the German occupying power. The exception to this were those Danes who belonged to the Communist Party who had been imprisoned and driven underground shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. In the spring of 1942 the, by then, illegal Danish Communist Party decided to begin organized sabotage against industries that contributed to the German war effort (Kirchhoff, Lauridsen, and Trommer 238). By the summer of 1943, however, much had changed. Allied encouragement of Danish resistance rather than cooperation increased dramatically in 1943 as evidenced by a BBC broadcast to Denmark of that period:

The entire attitude taken by official Denmark may prove fatal for the future position of Denmark in post-war Europe, if the Danish nation does not in time, in an unequivocal manner, make it clear to the free world that it is wholeheartedly on the side of the United Nations.  
(Petrow 187)

Acts of sabotage that had numbered two in 1940, 12 in 1941, and 59 in 1942 leaped to 816 in 1943 (Kirchhoff, Lauridsen, and Trommer 238). One of the most important factors in the Danish change of attitude was the obvious change in the tide of the war. Allied victories at Stalingrad in January 1943 and at El Alamein two months earlier, which led to Churchill's powerful "end of the beginning" speech, caused people everywhere, including Denmark, to rethink their perceptions of the likely outcome of the war. The winds of war had clearly shifted, and this did not go unnoticed by the people of Denmark.

In August 1943, the country erupted into a series of popular strikes and demonstrations. These popular uprisings were directed both at the German occupying power and the Danish government's policy of cooperation. On August 28, the German plenipotentiary in Denmark, Dr. Werner Best, presented the Danish government with an ultimatum that would have abrogated basic Danish civil rights. The Danish government rejected the ultimatum. At 4:00 a.m. the following morning the German army imposed a state of emergency and declared martial law to be in effect. The citizens of Denmark, including its Jews, no longer had the protection of its elected government. No longer would Danish legislation be a prerequisite for the implementation of German persecution of Denmark's Jews. On September 8, Best sent a telegram to Berlin recommending "that measures should now be taken toward a solution of the problem of the Jews" (Yahil 1983,

138). It was decided that those measures would take place during the night of October 1/2.

On September 28, German shipping attaché Georg Duckwitz informed several Danish Social Democratic Party leaders of the pending action against the Danish Jews. Immediately upon being informed, these political leaders set to work using their extensive labour union and other contacts to warn as many Jews as possible of the action scheduled for the night of October 1/2. Many of Denmark's 8,000 Jews were warned in this manner.

There is one event, however, that is given primacy in the comprehensive accounts of the warning—the warning given by Acting Chief Rabbi Melchior at the special synagogue service on September 29 beginning the Jewish New Year observation. Even Hans Hedtoft, one of the leading Social Democratic political leaders who had been warned by Duckwitz and who played a prominent role in spreading the warning, gave Melchior's warning primacy in his Introduction to Bertelsen's *October*' 43 (16-19). This primacy is continued up through more recent scholarly works, such as Sofie Lene Bak's chapter on the subject in the 2002 *Gad's leksikon om dansk besættelsestid 1940-1945*, edited by Kirchoff, Lauridsen, and Trommer (257). Rabbi Melchior described his warning to the Jews gathered that morning in the Synagogue in his book *A Rabbi Remembers*:

At a very solemn moment, I interrupted the service and told the more than one hundred persons gathered there at this early hour of the ominous developments. I called upon them to pass on the information immediately and to ask its recipients to become messengers themselves. In this way, the news would become known to the entire community within a matter of hours. Largely, this did indeed happen, and each person, each family, had to set out on the desperate task of sneaking away from homes and places of work of every kind and to find ways of contacting Gentile friends who might be willing to grant them temporary shelter.

(M. Melchior 179)

At the moment of crisis, the Jewish community's religious leadership successfully conveyed to the approximately 180 people in the Synagogue that morning the urgent need to act swiftly. Not content with that, Melchior gave two of his children lists of 25 names of Jews who had not been at that morning's service and had them bicycle throughout Copenhagen spreading the warning (A. Melchior). This, together with his admonition to those who had attended the service to pass the warning along to any Jews who had not been present, helped ensure that the warning went widely throughout the entire Jewish community and, together with the efforts of the Social Democratic leaders, resulted in almost no Jews being at home on the night of the German raid. These responses to the crisis do not fit the characterization of "passive objects" that would later be applied by some historians.

In many cases, the decisions had to be made by family units involving family members from the most elderly to the very young. The required family discussions and decisions are nearly unimaginable. Nearly all earthly possessions, no matter how treasured, would have to be left behind. Family members too old or too sick to flee would have to be left behind to their fate at the hands of the Germans. Jobs and income, neighbours, the physical and emotional comfort that one's home had provided for years—all left behind on a moment's notice with absolutely no certainty of ever being able to return. In many cases the warning was received too late to allow for the gathering of personal financial assets. The decision to flee was often also a decision to be destitute. In cases of mixed marriages, especially if the non-Jewish spouse was employed, impossibly difficult decisions had to be made about whether or not to split up the family. There was uncertainty about the degree of risk to either spouse in a mixed marriage. Those families with children that decided that the non-Jewish spouse would remain in Denmark then had to decide whether the children would flee or stay. Additionally, as has been documented most recently in Sofie Lene Bak's *Ikke noget at tale om* (2010) [*Nothing to Speak of*, 2011] some parents, out of fear of the dangers and uncertainties of being on the run from the German authorities, made extraordinarily difficult and heartbreaking decisions to leave very young children in hiding with foster parents in Denmark (2011, 45–66).

At this critical moment the fate of the Danish Jews was in their own hands. If they could not or would not leave their homes within three days they would be captured by the Germans. How the Jews responded to this warning and how history has treated that response are the fundamental elements of this article that lead to its central conclusion regarding the symbolically important and powerful choice of title (“escape” or “rescue”) by which the flight to Sweden is known.

## Escape vs. Rescue

Since the end of World War II there has been a seemingly endless supply of English-language works written about the flight of Allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen from capture in German-occupied Europe. In almost all of these narratives that which takes place is described as an “escape,” not a “rescue,” with all of the connotations of those two words. The predominant use of “escape” to describe these events is in spite of the fact that, in many cases, the successful flight of Allied servicemen was entirely dependent upon escape organizations in Western Europe and often was substantially aided by the official escape and evasion organizations MI-9 in Britain and MIS-X in the United States.

One of the best known of the indigenous escape organizations was the Comet Line, which operated in Belgium and France. This organization is credited with having saved more than 800 Allied servicemen from capture (Dear 135). Escaping

Allied servicemen who had the good fortune to find themselves under the protection and guidance of this organization came completely under its rules of conduct, to the point of being told when they were allowed to move about in one of its safe houses so as not to arouse the suspicions of neighbouring tenants. Yet, again and again, these events are described as “escapes” not “rescues.” This is in sharp contrast to the overwhelming use of the term “rescue,” which is applied to the situation of the Danish Jews. This juxtaposition is emphasized by titles of popular works from the escape genre. Lloyd R. Shoemaker’s 1990 work *The Escape Factory* could just as easily have been titled “*The Rescue Factory*.” The subtitle on its cover reads: *The Story of MIS-X, America’s Ultra-Secret Masterminds of World War II’s Greatest Escapes*. The term “rescue” is found nowhere on the cover. Turning once again to the Comet Line, we find a 1990 work by George Watt that was originally titled *The Comet Connection*. Republished in paperback, the title was changed to *Escape from Hitler’s Europe: An American Airman behind Enemy Lines*. An example that seems to be quite analogous to the Danish situation in terms of broad civilian help is that of Leo Heaps’ *The Evaders*. This book provides accounts of approximately 250 Allied soldiers who were left behind by the withdrawal of the 1st British Airborne Division from Arnhem in Holland in late September 1944 and who had managed to avoid capture. Many of them were hidden by Dutch civilians scattered throughout the area. A combination of intensive work by MI-9 and courageous actions by the Dutch civilians resulted in 175 of these soldiers returning safely to Allied lines. Again, the term “rescue” is nowhere to be found on the cover. The subtitle of the book is *The Most Remarkable Mass Escape of World War II*.

One of the starkest examples of this phenomenon is the 1958 publication of David Howarth’s *Escape Alone*. This book describes a story of survival in Norway in 1943. Lt. Jan Baalsrud was the sole survivor of a British Special Operations Executive (SOE) operation in northern Norway. A later (2000) retelling of the story by Astrid Karlsen Scott and Tore Haug estimates that more than 60 Norwegian civilians assisted in getting Baalsrud to Sweden. If ever there was an escape that was decidedly not alone, the events described in Howarth’s *Escape Alone* are it. Scott and Haug continue the “escape” theme, the title being *Defiant Courage: Norway’s Longest WWII Escape*. In addition to the title, the term “escape” is also found on the back cover. The term “rescue” does not appear.

The term “escape” is applied to the activities of the servicemen attempting to avoid capture by the Germans and gain safety in a neutral country, precisely what the Danish Jews were attempting to do in 1943. To describe someone as “escaping” is to use the grammatical active voice, which describes action on the part of the subject, in this case the Allied servicemen. The overwhelming application of the verb “escape” to the situation of the Allied servicemen, regardless of their dependency upon MI-9, MIS-X, or especially indigenous escape

organizations such as the Comet Line, provides an image of heroic decision-making and action on their part.

In contrast to this, the efforts of the Danish Jews to gain the safety of neutral Sweden have been described in an entirely different manner. The agency of action has been attributed not to the Jews who were trying to get to Sweden, but to the non-Jewish Danes who helped them get there. In this case the events are not described as an escape but as a rescue. The verb used in application to the Danish Jews rather than being in the active voice, i.e. “escape,” is in the passive voice, i.e. “to be rescued.”

The English-language literature describing the flight of the Danish Jews to Sweden has overwhelmingly used the descriptor “rescue” rather than “escape” over the years, starting with Harold Flender’s 1963 *Rescue in Denmark*. Leni Yahil’s seminal scholarly work *The Rescue of Danish Jewry: Test of a Democracy* was published in 1969. Richard Petrow’s *The Bitter Years: The Invasion and Occupation of Denmark and Norway April 1940-May 1945* was published in 1974 and contains a chapter on this subject titled “The Rescue of the Danish Jews.” In 1987 *The Rescue of the Danish Jews: Moral Courage under Stress* by Leo Goldberger was published. In 2002 Emmy E. Werner published *A Conspiracy of Decency: The Rescue of the Danish Jews During World War II*. The fact-oriented *Denmark and the Holocaust* was published in 2003 (Jensen and Jensen). The title of its chapter on this subject is “October 1943 – The Rescue of the Danish Jews.” In 2006 a new documentary film was released on this subject—its title: *The Danish Solution: The Rescue of the Jews in Denmark*. And in 2007 Isi Foighel published *The Miracle in Denmark: The Rescue of the Jews 1943-1945*. The record is rather consistent. In sharp contrast to the image of heroic “escaping” Allied servicemen, the image of the successful flight of Danish Jews to Sweden, presented by both popular and scholarly English-language literature, is that of passive victims who only survived as the result of the heroic acts of others. The research conducted for this article leads to the conclusion that this image is not historically accurate, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is in itself a further victimization of people who had suffered through the Holocaust.

## The Debate over Alleged Jewish Passivity

### Leni Yahil

Any serious study of the escape of the Danish Jews to Sweden during World War II must take into account historian Leni Yahil’s *The Rescue of Danish Jewry: Test of a Democracy* ([1966] 1969). This is a scholarly work that has set the standard for thoughtful study and analysis of this subject.

Yahil’s view of the subject of this paper is made very clear in the concluding chapter in her book: “All in all, the Jews in Denmark were and remained an object:



an object of persecution and an object of rescue, an object of the political decisions of others—now the Germans, now the Danes” (389).

This is a puzzling conclusion in that the very genesis of the successful escape was the fact that on the night of the German raid almost no Jews were at home. Rabbi Melchior’s warning and the subsequent distribution of that warning, mostly by the Jews themselves as well as the warnings conducted by the Social Democratic political leaders, had been met with startling swift action on the part of the Danish Jews to go into hiding. To use Yahil’s own words, “most of the Jews left their homes within a few hours and also passed on the news to one another” (239). That any group of several thousand people could react this quickly, especially considering that in most instances the decisions and actions had to be taken by extended families, is astonishing. Yahil’s influence regarding these matters has been strong and long lasting. As an example we can turn to the highly respected Danish historian Hans Kirchhoff, who in 1993 wrote “Lederne forholdt sig passive, ofre for både hjælpere og bødler, som fremhævet af zionisten Leni Yahil” [The leaders remained passive, victims for both helpers and tormentors, as pointed out by the Zionist Leni Yahil] (in Sode-Madsen 99). Yahil does describe the efforts of a small group of Jewish agricultural students who attempted to escape, but describes them as “the only group which became stirred and tried to find a way out of the trap...and even here the really active were few in number” (1983, 203). In any case their efforts, though acknowledged by Yahil, were insufficient to alter her conclusion that the Danish Jews were passive “objects.”

Yahil’s perspective on the events of October 1943 becomes difficult to fathom in parts of her 1990 masterwork *The Holocaust*. At one point she states, “in Denmark, a daring and decisive operation was launched to rescue the Jews” (463). It is difficult to understand how Yahil could have come to this conclusion. There is broad consensus among scholars that if anything characterized the help that the non-Jewish Danes gave to their Jewish brethren it was its widespread spontaneity. Indeed, this is one of its most laudable characteristics—that so many Danes from all walks of life reacted on the spur of the moment to help the Jews escape. Yahil’s phrase here suggests that there was a single, coordinated “operation.” This was simply not the case.

## Yehuda Bauer

Yehuda Bauer has been a preeminent Holocaust historian for decades. He has written 14 books and over 90 articles on the Holocaust. Bauer takes a different view on the issue of Jewish passivity than does Yahil.

In 2001 Bauer wrote *Rethinking the Holocaust*, a sort of summation piece of where all of his study and research had led him. In *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Bauer rejects the notion of Jews as passive victims as advanced by Yahil and others. In his analysis, Bauer writes:

In all of the books discussed so far, books that claim to have unlocked the secret of the Holocaust – to explain what caused it and provide a picture of that cataclysmic event – certain major deficiencies become obvious, and the fact that they are common to all the books makes one wonder. In all of them, the Jews are passive victims... The basic issue of Holocaust history is to tell it in such a way as to advance the prospect, dim though it may seem, to prevent genocides, Holocaust-like events in particular. In terms of prevention, the behavior of the victims of the Holocaust is of universal moral, social, and political importance, not to mention philosophical or theological considerations... That the overarching attempts in these books do not deal with the Jews except as murdered victims distorts the picture completely. What we see here may be an unconscious treatment of the Jews as the quintessential Other.  
(111-12)

Speaking directly to the notion of passive victims advanced by Yahil and others, Bauer writes:

Victims are not passive except in their last moments. We must know how the Nazi's victims behaved, what cultural baggage they had to start with, and whether their behavior or their baggage was useful in any way. We must know what they thought, how they reacted, what they did. Therein lies a lesson, possibly, or a warning, possibly, or an encouragement, possibly... The persecutors are not the subject and the Jews merely objects, but both are subjects reacting to each other. This is the kind of history that needs to be written.  
(xv, 118)

Bauer's perspective on these dynamics could not be more different from Yahil's description of the Danish Jews as "objects": "an object of persecution and an object of rescue, an object of the political decision of others – now the Germans, now the Danes." Bauer concludes:

It is important to strike a reasonable balance between nostalgic hero worship of Jews during the Holocaust and attempts to downplay all forms of *amidah* (resistance). The importance lies, among other things, in the need for truthful analyses of reactions of victims of genocide generally to further the educational process that may provide at least an outside chance of preventing future tragedies like the Holocaust or other genocides.  
(166)

## Pressures for the Use of the Term "Rescue"

Yahil and Bauer provide adversarial scholarly positions that frame the debate over whether the Danish Jewish response to their persecution by the German

occupying power was one of passivity or action. As discussed earlier, both scholarly and popular literature have overwhelmingly used the term “rescue.” One reason for this is that there have been and remain to this day tremendous pressures to extol the actions of the non-Jewish Danes in helping their Jewish brethren to escape. The internal Danish pressures are clear enough. The policy of the Danish government of cooperation toward the occupying German power is a controversial issue to this day. There had been some doubt as to whether Denmark would be considered to be a forcibly German-occupied country by the victorious Allies and admitted to the newly-formed United Nations. Denmark needed to emphasize the help that its citizens had provided to the Jews just as it needed to project an image of a resistance movement that in terms of size, strength, and effect was far beyond what had actually existed during the German occupation. These pressures within Denmark were enormous, but it is doubtful that they alone would have had an overbearing influence on as dedicated a scholar as Yahil for example.

There was another broader pressure regarding the alleged passivity of the Danish Jews during World War II. As one studies the Holocaust, it is easy to get discouraged about the human condition. The history of the world in terms of acting to save European Jewry is singularly horrible. The human need to find an exception to this dark fact is enormous. And the more the Danish story can be presented as an exception to this inaction, the more comfortable we become in relying on the Danish “beacon of light in a time of darkness” to reassure ourselves that Anne Frank was right, that “in spite of everything...people are really good at heart” (Frank 237). Part of this construction is that the Danish Jews did little to help themselves. This is an essential part of the legend, for the less that the Jews did for themselves, the more it can be argued that the Danes rose up as a people and saved their Jews, that they rescued the innocent but helpless victims. If we cannot believe in Danish exceptionalism to the record of the Holocaust, the conclusions we are left with are all the more depressing.

Danish historian and journalist Bent Blüdnikow presents an additional factor that may have contributed to the tendency of many historians to describe the Danish Jews as passive victims:

Når der endelig blev skrevet beretninger, var det atter og atter flugten i 1943 og den store taknemlighed over for den danske befolkning, der blev beskrevet. Derved kom de danske jøder til at fremstå som passive ofre, der blot lod sig transportere over til Sverige.  
(Sode-Madsen 1993, 170)

[When personal accounts were finally written, what was described over and over again was the escape in 1943 and the great gratitude to the Danish people. In that way the Danish Jews came to appear as passive victims who simply allowed themselves to be transported over to Sweden.]

Blüdnikow expands upon this theme, focusing primarily on the Danish Jewish leadership, but in many respects his theory could be applied to the general Danish Jewish population of that time:

Menighedens ledelse var desuden opvokset i en tradition, hvor man holdt en lav profil i det danske samfund. Man nøjedes med at fortælle historien om de gode danskere, der hjalp ved flugten i 1943, og af beskedenhed og af tradition fortalte man ikke om sine egne gøremål i offentligheden. Derfor blev rollefordelingen således, at danskerne var de modige helte, medens jøderne var de passive ofre.  
(171)

[The (Jewish community's) leadership was, moreover, brought up in a tradition whereby one kept a low profile in Danish society. One contented oneself with telling the story of the good Danes, who helped with the escape of 1943, and out of modesty and from tradition one did not publicly talk about one's own doings. In that way the roles were cast such that the Danes were the brave heroes, while the Jews were the passive victims.]

## **Jewish Decision-Making and Action in Response to the Warnings of September 1943**

Central to the argument of this article is how the Danish Jews responded to the warnings of their pending arrest in September 1943. If they responded with passivity as suggested by Yahil and others, then the term “rescue,” which has been applied to their successful flight to Sweden for 70 years, is appropriate. If, however, they responded with swift decision-making, followed by appropriate action, then their courage and resolve are as deserving of the positive connotations of the term “escape” as is the flight of the downed Allied flier who was assisted by an escape organization. This section examines evidence, found in both primary and secondary sources, that attempts to answer the question of alleged Jewish passivity in response to the warnings of September 1943. Due to space limitations, the author has had to be selective in his inclusion in this article of examples of Jewish decision-making and action in 1943. Similarly, I have described only one example from the 70 accounts of the Barfoed Collection discussed below, but it is reflective of most of the accounts in that collection.

### **David Sompolinsky**

One of the earliest English-language works on the flight of the Danish Jews is Aage Bertelsen's *October '43*, published in 1954. Bertelsen was the leader of an escape organization centred in Lyngby. His book is a firsthand account of his

experiences helping Jews escape to Sweden. Early in his book Bertelsen writes of David Sompolinsky.

In a sense this young Jew was the actual founder of the relief action in Lyngby. A few days before the persecutions began he had appealed to the principal and the teachers of his old school...and asked them whether they could possibly help him to hide a number of Jews who had no personal contacts outside Jewish circles....

Incessantly, day and night literally, David was being busy helping, completely disregarding his own dangerous situation... He was on the go everywhere, and everywhere he looked up Jews and helped them out, always bubbling with activity, yet always well balanced, cheerful, but also cunning and levelheaded. When he slept – and that was usually only for a couple of hours – he spent the nights wherever it could be arranged, most often on the divan in our sitting room with the door leading to the veranda ajar, in case there should be a visit by unwelcome strangers.

(31–32)

This account of David Sompolinsky's efforts, in spite of the danger to himself, is similar to the actions of Rabbi Melchior's son Arne who, after the family had fled from Copenhagen, went *back* to the city in order to warn as many additional families as possible and to raise funds to help pay for the costs of the escape (Bernth).

### **The Rabbi Marcus Melchior Family**

American historian and journalist Richard Petrow in *The Bitter Years* (1974) provides a description of the escape of the family of Rabbi Melchior, an event in which the escaping Jews were hardly passive:

The vessel set sail shortly after nightfall on the evening of October 8. If all had gone well, they could have expected to reach Swedish waters by morning, but their inexperienced skipper grew confused in the dark. Daybreak found the vessel sailing in large circles near the Danish port of Gedser...a particularly hazardous area because of German naval activity in the vicinity. When the fisherman realized where he was, he suggested that the boat, with its refugees, return to Hæsnæs to try again another day. Alarmed at his suggestion, the refugees insisted on taking over command of the vessel and themselves set a course which successfully took them into Swedish waters.

(222–23)

## The Barfoed Collection of Firsthand Accounts

During the 1950s Ole Barfoed worked with some 70 Danish Jews who had escaped to Sweden during World War II and persuaded them to write down their accounts of their experiences from that time. The majority of these firsthand accounts were written by Jews who were well connected in society, and who also, for the most part, were above average in terms of personal financial status. They provide an invaluable insight into the thoughts and experiences of Danish Jews in 1943. Many of the 70 individual accounts involve multiple generations, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, friends, etc., and therefore describe the experiences of far more than 70 people. One of the most striking aspects of these accounts is the extent to which many of the decisions that had to be made by the Jews upon receiving the warning of the impending German action were often extended family decisions including elderly grandparents as well as very young children. The difficulty of this decision-making process can only be imagined and yet, as is shown by the number of Jews who escaped to Sweden, nearly everyone who was able *did* choose to attempt to escape.

The complexity of this decision-making process was increased if the family consisted of mixed, Jewish and non-Jewish, marriages. The Barfoed collection contains heart-breaking accounts of these kinds of decisions, including what was best to do in regard to the children if one spouse stayed in Denmark while the other attempted to escape to Sweden.

The following account is typical of those found in the collection. The collection is made available to researchers by the Danish National Archives (Rigsarkivet) on the condition that identities of non-public individuals are not revealed. That requirement is honoured in this article.

The particular account under analysis was written by a Jewish woman who was married to a non-Jew. (It can be found in the Barfoed Collection, Korrespondence og beretninger 1, Box #224.) She begins her account by stating that the first reaction that she and her husband had to the warning of the pending arrest action was to find hiding places for her closest Jewish relatives. She then moved in with her mother-in-law while her one and one-half year old twin sons stayed at home with her husband. Within a few days the family tried unsuccessfully to gain passage on a fishing boat from Kastrup to Sweden. Her sister had dyed her hair blonde, and the day after the author's failed attempt the sister succeeded in escaping on a boat to Sweden.

The author lived at her mother-in-law's home in hiding for several weeks and dyed her hair blonde as her sister had. Her mother-in-law had hired a hairdresser, "der farvede mange mørkharede jøder" [who coloured many dark-haired Jews]. Late in October the family received information that the authorities were looking for her, and they decided that it was necessary to make

another attempt to escape to Sweden. They contacted a Swedish consul for help, but he was not able to offer them any assistance.

An escape possibility was found in Snekkersten, and the author was given 30 minutes to get her twin boys, with no time to get extra clothing for them. She, her husband, their twins, and her brother-in-law all met at the Copenhagen central train station. On the train to Snekkersten they sat in a compartment with several Germans. They had given their twins sleeping potions, but they did not fall asleep. A member of the underground met them at Snekkersten. At this point the author and her twins were to be taken by taxi to a villa on the coast, and her husband was to return to Copenhagen. In her account she has written simply "Farvel til min mand" [Goodbye to my husband].

The woman and her twins were then driven to the villa where "a major saboteur," her brother-in-law, and one or two other fugitives had gathered. She and her twins were the only Jews. She was now in a much more dangerous situation because, although the German handling of captured Jews varied, their attitude toward saboteurs was invariably severe and often fatal. By traveling in their company, the risks to the author in the event of capture were significantly increased. The party of eight or nine went down to a jetty to wait for an expected fishing boat, but after a wait of several hours they went back to the villa.

The following night the same group set out in a rowboat with an outboard motor to meet a fishing boat. The twins started to cry, and according to the author one of the men in the boat threatened to throw them into the water but her brother-in-law intervened. After two or three minutes the motor gave out and they had to row: "vi roede og roede i timevis" [we rowed and rowed for hours]. They passed several German patrol boats, at least one of which saw them, but none pursued. They never did meet the fishing boat. They were able to get the motor started again, only to have it stop once more. They rowed for many hours in a night of pouring rain but decided to try for the Swedish coast in the rowboat. While still a good distance out from the Swedish shore, they encountered a current against which they could not make any headway. They subsequently gave up rowing and drifted. A Swedish vessel eventually picked them up, but by this time both sons were unconscious. Both twins recovered, but the one most seriously affected had after-effects that lasted for years.

In reading the accounts in the Barfoed collection one is struck by the number of times that the warnings of the pending German raid came from other Jews, primarily family and friends. It also becomes clear that in most of these cases it was the Jews who took the initiative to locate places where they could hide. It was most often the Danish Jews who would call or visit their non-Jewish friends or acquaintances to ask if their family could stay for an uncertain amount of time. Certainly there were some cases where this was volunteered by non-Jews on their own initiative. The important point is that regardless of who initiated the contact, the great majority of Danes responded positively. Nonetheless, in the 70 or so

accounts in the Barfoed collection most of these contacts were initiated by the Jews themselves.

Within the Barfoed collection we can turn to the choice of words of the Danish Jews themselves for some indication of how they viewed the events of 1943. Variations of “flugt” [“escape”] appear about 166 times in the Barfoed accounts and variations of “redning” [“rescue”] about 13.

Collectively these accounts present a strong image of the Danish Jews of 1943 as a people reacting to limited information by quickly making the most difficult decisions imaginable and then acting on those decisions under extraordinarily difficult circumstances in an ultimately successful manner. One is hard-pressed to think of another civilian population of extended families that acted more swiftly or effectively than did the Danish Jews of September/October 1943.

## Recent Trends

The image found in the English-language literature of the Danish Jews as passive victims being rescued is grounded in Harold Flender’s 1963 *Rescue in Denmark* in terms of the popular literature and Leni Yahil’s 1966 *Test of a Democracy: The Rescue of Danish Jewry in World War II* in terms of the scholarly literature. This image has continued through more recently-published material although the debate about this alleged passivity has become lively in recent years. Both popular and scholarly literature continue to be examined as both are relevant to the central thesis of this article.

### Kreth and Mogensen, *Flugten til Sverige* [*The Escape to Sweden*]

In 1995 Danish historians Rasmus Kreth and Michael Mogensen broke new ground with *Flugten til Sverige* [*The Escape to Sweden*]. The title itself is telling and sets the tone for the entire work, which breaks from the traditional image of the Danish Jew as passive victim. In their work, Kreth and Mogensen use variations of the word “redning” [“rescue”] approximately 20 times, of “flugt” [“escape”] approximately 205 times, and of “flugthjælper” [“escape helper”] approximately 99 times. The English summary of the book uses variations of “escape” five times and “rescue” not at all (171–75). Whereas Yahil’s central thesis was the notion that there was something uniquely good about the Danish national character that caused the society to rise up and protect its Jews, Kreth and Mogensen suggest that the lack of all-out pursuit of the Jews by either the German or Danish authorities after the initial raid, the Jews own initiative, the Swedish decision to accept the Danish Jews, and the Danish “flugthjælperne” [escape helpers] were all important factors (11). Kreth and Mogensen also point out that approximately 69 Jews had escaped across the Øresund to Sweden on their own initiative prior



to September 28, 1943 (39). The authors further note that in the beginning of the escape, especially during the first week after the raid, “the Jews themselves arranged their transport over the Sound” (52). As stated by Danish historian Henrik Dethlefsen in his review of Kreth and Mogensens’s work, “prisværdigt lykkes det forfatterne at nuancere Leni Yahils ret stereotype billede af de danske jøder som ‘objekter for redning’” [commendably the authors succeed in providing nuance to Leni Yahil’s stereotypical picture of the Danish Jews as ‘objects for rescue’] (255).

**Hans Kirchhoff (ed.), *Nyt lys over oktober 1943* [*New Light Over October 1943*]**

In 2002 Danish historian Hans Kirchhoff edited *Nyt lys over oktober 1943* [*New Light over October 1943*]. The summary on the back cover makes no mention of “flugt” [“escape”], only “redning” [“rescue”]. This use of “redning” is continued in the foreword by Uffe Østergaard. This perspective is reinforced by Kirchhoff, who writes in his introduction that “den (redningen) er blevet en del af vor nationale identitet og selvforståelse” [it (the rescue) has become a part of our national identity and self-image] (9).

Danish historian Michael Mogensen, in his chapter, describes the actions taken by the Danish Jews as follows:

efter advarslen den 28. september tog mange direkte ud i de sjællandske havne for at skaffe sig overfart til Sverige. Andre gemte sig hos venner og bekendte, for der at arrangere overfart. Atter andre, oftest de ubemidlede, søgte skjul i parker og skove, indtil de blev fundet af hjælpegrupperne. Variationerne er utallige. Det lykkedes mange på egen hånd at finde vej over til friheden i Sverige.  
(50)

[after the warning on September 28 many immediately went out to the Zealand harbours to obtain passage to Sweden. Others hid at friends’ and acquaintances’ homes to arrange passage. Others, most often those with little means, hid in parks and forests, until they were found by helping groups. The variations are countless. Many succeeded in getting to freedom in Sweden on their own.]

And then in direct contrast to Yahil and others states, “der findes altså ikke belæg for forestillinger om, at de danske jøder var et passivt og hjælpeløst objekt for tysk forfølgelse eller dansk redning” [there is therefore no basis for the image of the Danish Jews as passive and helpless objects for German persecution or Danish rescue] (50).

The final chapter in *Nyt lys*, written by historian Therkel Stræde, is “Nye tendenser i udforskningen af Holocaust” [*New Trends in Holocaust Research*],

and deals directly with the traditional view by Holocaust historians of the Jew as passive victim. Aligning himself with Yehuda Bauer on this issue Stræde writes:

Hvad perspektiv – og dermed videreudvikling af Holocaust-forskningen, åbning af nye synsvinkler - angår, er det klart den forskning, der sætter ofrenes situation, oplevelser, valg og reaktioner i fokus, som er mest spændende og frugtbar. Og det er – med Yehuda Bauer – tillige den historie, der klarest peger fremad imod en ændring af menneskelig adfærd og praksis.  
(85)

[As regards perspective – and the further development of Holocaust research, opening of new points of view – it is clearly the research that sets the victims' situation, experiences, choices and reactions in focus that is the most exciting and fruitful. And that is – as Yehuda Bauer writes – also the history that most clearly points forward toward a change of human behaviour and practice.]

Stræde then deals with the issue of the alleged passivity of the Danish Jews in the following passage:

Der forekom selvmord og desperate handlinger blandt jøderne i Danmark, da det blev klart for dem, at jagten på dem var gået ind; men det store flertal reagerede hensigtsmæssigt og med snarrådighed. Jødernes adækvate reaktion - som indebar at hjælpe hinanden indbyrdes på tværs af de sociale, politiske og religiøse skel, som vitterligt var store blandt jøder i Danmark, samt at vise tillid til ikke-jøder (ofte endda vildt fremmede, om hvilke man ikke kunne ane, om de måske ville stikke en) – har en væsentlig del af æren for den succesrige redningsaktion, men er af forskningen – udover en ansats hos Leni Yahil – blevet behandlet som en biomstændighed.  
(88)

[Suicide and desperate actions did occur among the Jews in Denmark when it became clear to them that the hunt for them had been decided on, but the great majority reacted appropriately and with resolution. The Jew's appropriate response, which involved mutually helping each other across the social, political and religious differences that were notoriously great among Jews in Denmark, together with showing trust toward non-Jews (often complete strangers, about whom one could not know if they would perhaps turn you in) – were an essential part of the success of the rescue, but have been handled by the research – along the lines of Leni Yahil – as an incidental circumstance.]

Stræde then levels his most serious charge against those who portray the Jews as passive:

Hvis man reducerer den ene side til passive objekter, går man i en vis forstand gerningsmændenes ærinde, indskrænker sin historie til deres del og skruer sit blik ind i deres optik. Og man udsletter af den historiske erindring mindet om dem, der gjorde noget, dem der stod imod... Ligesom forskningen mindre og mindre behandler tyskerne som systemets og strukturernes viljeløse objekter, er det på høje tid, at den kommer ud over at behandle jøderne og andre ofre som passive objekter for tyskernes og deres kollaboratørers overgreb og forbrydelser.  
(88–89)

[If one reduces the one side to passive objects, in a sense you play the perpetrators' game, limiting the history to their part and turning its glance to their point of view. And one destroys the historical remembrance of those who acted, who stood and resisted . . . Just as the research deals less and less with the Germans as the system's and structure's weak-willed objects, so is it high time we get out of treating the Jews and other victims as passive objects for the Germans and their collaborators' assault and crimes.]

Stræde saves his final salvo for the sometimes overly dramatic approach of American literature on this subject: "Litteraturen om rescuers kommer mest fra USA og har ofte en vammel hagiografisk tendens" [The literature about rescuers comes most often from the USA and often has a cloying hagiographic tendency] (93).

**Hans Sode-Madsen (ed.) *I Hitler–Tysklands Skygge* [*Under the Shadow of Hitler's Germany*]**

In 2003 Hans Sode-Madsen produced *I Hitler–Tysklands Skygge: Dramaet om de danske jøder 1933–1945* [*Under the Shadow of Hitler's Germany: The Drama Over the Danish Jews 1933–1945*]. Hans Kirchhoff, who contributed both the introduction and a chapter, presents a fairly traditional view of the non-Jewish Danes as heroes and the Danish Jews as primarily passive victims. In fact he seems to imply that historical research that comes to a different, more nuanced conclusion regarding the national legend has a high hurdle to overcome if it is to be considered anything other than "pale" ("gusten") revisionism:

Også i den danske selvforståelse indtager jødernes redning en vigtig plads. I besættelsestidens historie . . . glimrer oktober 1943 som en of de få stjernestunder, der kunne samle hele nationen. Fra kongen til studenten, fra Grossererersocietetet til fiskeren – ja selv politikerne nåede med i protestens sidste runde... Således har oktober '43 gennem et halv århundrede strålet som besættelsesgenerationens *finest hour*, uberørt af nogen gusten revision.  
(15)

[The rescue of the Jews takes an important place in the Danish self-image. In the history of the German occupation . . . October 1943 gleams as one of the few great moments that could unite the whole nation. From the king to the student, from the Merchants' Guild to the fisherman – even the politicians involved in the protest's latest round... Thus has October '43 shined through a half century as the occupation generation's *finest hour*, untouched by any pale revision.]

Kirchhoff ventures into troubling territory when he suggests a religious motive for an alleged passive response of “many” Jews to Nazi persecution when he later writes: “mange af ofrene så det (Holocaust) som Guds straf, man måtte bøje sig for” [many of the victims saw it (the Holocaust) as God’s punishment to which one must yield] (19). It is not clear if Kirchhoff is writing here of the Holocaust in general, or rather of the Danish experience, the field in which he is a prominent historian. If it is the latter, it is not consistent with the historical fact that most of the Danish Jews who were able to do so fled from their homes and went into hiding within hours of receiving the warning of the pending German raid.

The final chapter in the book, “Holocaust i erindring og på museum” [“The Holocaust in Memory and in the Museum”] by Thorsten Wagner, is reflective of new trends in historical research, providing a new focus, as Wagner puts it, “nemlig at ofrenes stemme høres igen” [namely that the victims’ voice be heard again.] (294). Wagner expands upon this in an earlier passage:

Holocaust danner således grundlaget for et konsensuelt sæt af værdier, der anerkender folkedrab som det ultimative onde, nedprioriterer betydningen af den “heroiske” nation og fokuserer på ofrenes lidelser i stedet for på “helte” eller gerningsmænd.  
(287)

[In this way the Holocaust forms the foundation for a consensual set of values that recognizes genocide as the ultimate evil, giving a lower priority to the significance of the “heroic” nation and focusing on the victim’s suffering rather than on “heroes” or perpetrators.]

Wagner implies that this is replacing or at least supplementing the traditional approach:

I årtier har en række nationale erindringskulturer, der blev domineret af myter om selvpofrende og bred national modstand mod nazismen, båret præg af, at de jødiske ofre og overlevende næsten var fraværende.  
(294)

[For decades a number of national remembrance cultures, which were dominated by myths of self-sacrificing and broad national resistance against Nazism, were marked by the characteristic that the Jewish victims and survivors were almost absent.]

At first glance there seems to be some justification for suggesting that the treatment of the events of the Holocaust by historians, including the Danish experience, is trending away from national heroic “emplotments” (to use historian Hayden White’s phrase) and toward a more nuanced description that includes attention to the Jews as something more than passive victims. An example of this trend is Jensen and Jensen’s (eds.) *Denmark and the Holocaust* (2003), which generally avoids national heroic discourse and the depiction of the Jews as passive victims.

An examination of several of the more recent relevant publications available, however, leaves some doubt as to the current status of historiographical treatment of the escape of the Danish Jews in World War II. One of the most recent American general-circulation publications on the subject is Emmy E. Werner’s *A Conspiracy of Decency: The Rescue of the Danish Jews During World War II*. Published in 2002, this book is primarily a traditional approach to the subject, with an emphasis on the Danish “rescuers.”

In 2007 Isi Foighel published *Miraklet i Danmark: Jødernes redning*, which was translated into English that same year with the title *The Miracle in Denmark: The Rescue of the Jews, 1943-1945*. The wording on the cover of the book (“A unique story of fear and hope, of evil and humanity, and especially of helpfulness and courage. A story about people in Denmark who had a responsibility, or shouldered one, people who showed their true colors and made a difference.”) is little different in terms of its dramatic nature from that found on the cover 44 years earlier of Flender’s *Rescue in Denmark*, although the text of Foighel’s book is more balanced than the cover would suggest.

Another relevant Danish book published in 2007 is historians Hans Kirchhoff and Lone Rünitz’s *Udsendt til Tyskland: Dansk flygtningepolitik under besættelsen* [Deported to Germany: Danish Refugee Policy during the Occupation]. Kirchhoff and Rünitz include a chapter on the escape of the Danish Jews in 1943. Similar to Kreth and Mogensen in *Flugten til Sverige*, Kirchhoff and Rünitz provide a list of reasons for the success of the escape of 7,000 Jews to Sweden. As mentioned, Kreth and Mogensen list the lack of all-out pursuit by either the Danish or German authorities, the Swedish decision to accept the Jews, the Danish escape helpers, and the Jews’ own initiative (11). Kirchhoff and Rünitz list the first three, but make no mention of the Jews’ own actions as a contributing factor to the success of their escape (425).

In 2010 Sofie Lene Bak published *Ikke noget at tale om: Danske jøders krigsoplevelser 1943*. The English translation, *Nothing to Speak of: Wartime Experiences of the Danish Jews 1943-1945*, was published the following year. Bak’s work focuses

almost entirely on the experiences and perspectives of the Danish Jews and primarily uses the word “flugt” rather than “redning” [rescue] in her Danish text and writes that “a new understanding of the active role of the Jews also requires a linguistic or terminological adjustment, where flight rather than rescue appears to be the appropriate word to describe the events of 1943” (2011, 44). The choice of translating “flugt” as “flight” rather than “escape” strikes the author of this article as taking two steps forward and one step back.

That there is a difference in connotation between “escape” and “flight” is evident. The “escape” genre English-language literature described earlier uses “escape” not “flight” almost exclusively. The stronger positive imagery is undeniable and historically justifiably applied to the decisions and actions of the Danish Jews of 1943. “Escape” is the first choice for the English translation of “flugt” by Gyldendal’s *Dansk Engelsk Ordbog* (2007). Surely it is time to acknowledge the decision-making and actions of the Danish Jews in 1943.

Or perhaps not. In 2013, Hans Kirchhoff published *Den Gode Tysker: G. F. Duckwitz; De danske jøders redningsmand* [The Good German: G.F. Duckwitz; the Danish Jews’ Rescuer]. In this thorough biography of Duckwitz, Kirchhoff reiterates the rescuer motif. The focus, understandably, is on Duckwitz’s undeniably critical and personally brave warning on September 28 and other activities of his in 1943. However, in Kirchhoff’s references to the events relating to the Jews after the warning, it is almost exclusively in terms of “redning” [rescue] with no attribution of agency on the part of the Jews as they made their way to Sweden.

Published in both Danish and English in 2013 is Bo Lidegaard’s *Landsmænd: De danske jøders flugt i oktober 1943*. (The English edition is titled simply *Countrymen*.) Lidegaard uses the term “flugt” almost entirely throughout his Danish text, which is nearly always translated as “escape” throughout the English version. Equally importantly, the entire work is structured around and focused on the description of the two-week ordeal of an extended Jewish family as they struggle, ultimately successfully, to escape to Sweden. One wishes that Lidegaard had not allowed his American publisher to revert to the hagiography on the cover and flyleaf that is equal to that found on the cover of Flender’s work of 50 years ago, including the assertion that “no full history of it (the escape of the Danish Jews) has been written,” an assertion that would come as a surprise to historians and authors going back at least to Yahil.

Ironically, the most recently published reference to the events of September/October 1943 of which the author of this article is aware is also the most dismissive of the Danish Jews’ efforts. A February 16, 2015 article in *USA Today* mentioned “Denmark, who rescued its Jewish population during World War II by sending them to neutral Sweden...” (Herr) denies any agency whatsoever to the Danish Jews in influencing their own fate in 1943. That the quote is from a popular American newspaper suggests that this is the commonly-held perception in this country.

We are left with conflicting examples of both scholarly and popular literature, extending from the immediate postwar years all the way to the present day, some of which perpetuate national myths and some of which recognize the decisions and actions of the Jews as important factors in their successful escape to Sweden. At the conclusion of “The Use of Historical Myth” Skov suggests that “to gain perspective on Denmark’s occupation history, the Danes will have to wait for the passing of not only those of us who witnessed the event, but also one or two further generations” (109). I suspect he may be right.

## Conclusion

The debate among historians as to the alleged passivity of the Danish Jews during World War II is reflective of the larger historical debate regarding European Jews in general during the Holocaust. This examination of primary and secondary source material has led the author to the conclusion that in 1943 the Jews of Denmark acted with courage and decisiveness that were indispensable to the fortunate outcome of the survival of 98 percent of the Jews of this Nazi-occupied country.

The choice of “escape” or “rescue” to describe this historical event is symbolically powerful because the two words have significantly different connotations, and the use of one or the other as the one-word descriptor in the public domain will form the image in the minds of large numbers of people as to what happened. As has been mentioned, the downed World War II Allied airmen or the escaped Allied prisoner of war who was fortunate enough to find his way to an indigenous escape line and who then while under the total command and control of that underground organization was spirited to Spain or Switzerland, has for 70 years almost always been described as having made an “escape,” with all of the connotations of bravery and agency of action that attach to that term. During the same period the Danish Jews who managed to reach safety in neutral Sweden have almost always, especially in the English-language literature, been described as having been “rescued” with all of the connotations of passivity and lack of agency of action that that term implies. The evidence suggests otherwise—that these members of a civilian community, given limited information, having to make exceedingly difficult decisions, often in extended family units, overwhelmingly made those decisions quickly and followed them up with courageous and effective action.

That many Danes opened their doors to their Jewish brethren, helped them to escape, and just as importantly welcomed them back in 1945, has been recognized for almost 70 years. There is no prospect of this not being recognized for the next 70 years and beyond. Danish bravery, both Jewish and non-Jewish, should be able to be recognized simultaneously. We should be at a point where the story can be told in a way that is respectful of the good deeds of the Danes of

October 1943, but not at the expense of the very people whom they helped escape from the Nazi German authorities.

This inquiry has dealt with the Danish corner of the incomprehensible evil of the Holocaust. In his chapter “Veje til Auschwitz. Folkedrabet på Europas jøder: Tolkninger og tendenser i den nyere Holocaustforskning” [The Road to Auschwitz. Genocide of Europe’s Jews: Interpretations and Tendencies in Recent Holocaust Research] in Sode-Madsen (2003), Danish historian Therkel Stræde wrote:

De tyske nationalsocialister indledte en bølge af jødeforfølgelser, der med Tysklands angrebskrige og erobringer kom til at omspænde det meste af Europa og kostede henvend 6 millioner jøder livet. At fatte dette enestående barbari til bunds er nok umuligt. Men at opklare, hvad der faktisk skete, og forsøge at forklare det må være en af historievidenskabens vigtigste opgaver.

(63)

[The German Nazis instituted a wave of Jewish persecution that with Germany’s wars of aggression and conquests came to envelope most of Europe and cost nearly 6 million Jews their lives...It is probably impossible to truly understand this singular barbarity. But to clarify what factually happened and try to explain it must be one of historical scholarship’s most important tasks.]

If Stræde is correct in his assessment of the importance of historical examination of the Holocaust, then there is no place for influence of national pride or comfort-seeking idealism in the search for historical truth in one of the very few places where the Holocaust met with near total failure. History should recognize the bravery of action of both the Danish Jews and the Danish non-Jews who helped them in their escape.

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### NOTES

1. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

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