October 1943 – The Rescue of the Danish Jews

Michael Mogensen

The Nazis launched their attack on the Jews in Denmark on the night between October 1 and 2, 1943. On this night the German occupying power carried out a raid across the entire country and caught 284 Jews who were subsequently deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto in the protectorate of Böhmen-Mähren. During October and November two more transports followed carrying 190 people caught while attempting to flee from Denmark to Sweden. Of the 474 deported Jews, 53 died. Most of these were either old or ill. More than 30 people died in the course of the attempt to escape – some drowned in the Øresund, the Sound between Denmark and Sweden, others committed suicide, and in one tragic case a Jewish woman was killed by a lethal shot fired when the Germans were making an arrest. No more than another one hundred Jews, including a number of small children, remained in hiding in Denmark. The rest – more than 7,000 people – fled across the Sound to freedom in politically neutral Sweden.

Considering the Nazi extermination of 6 million of the total 8-9 million Jews within their reach, the fact that 95 percent of the Danish Jews were able to avoid deportation and be brought to safety in Sweden stands out as a light in the darkness of the Holocaust. In contrast to virtually all other nationalities, the Danes did not let down their Jewish fellow citizens in the crucial moment. The account of how the Danes assisted them safely across the water to Sweden has been widely praised, and even as it occurred the rescue operation gained an almost mythological status. The rescue is seen as a unique example of courage and altruism during the Holocaust. Especially in the US and Israel, the rescue established Denmark as a model of respect for human rights.

Leni Yahil’s thesis from 1969, The Rescue of Danish Jewry: Test of a Democracy (original in Hebrew, 1966), is the main body of work in English that has given this view its scholarly validation. The Israeli professor of history proposes the interpretation that the Jews of Denmark – as opposed to Jews in other countries of Europe – were rescued because of the special national character of the Danes, that is, their particularly high moral
standards and love of freedom and democracy. Among historians who had specialized in the occupation period in Denmark, the thesis was received extremely critically. Leni Yahil’s interpretation is regarded as strongly idealized and not sufficiently founded on empirical evidence. However, the thesis is acknowledged for its meticulous study of the position of the “Jewish question” in German occupation policy from the start of the occupation on April 9, 1940 until the deportations three and a half years later. This part of the thesis exhibits solid academic work, including a large number of procedural documents from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Auswärtiges Amt. In this respect Leni Yahil’s work still has not been surpassed. The same applies to her analysis of the German preparations for the operation. However, her account of the German raid and the Jewish escape across the Sound to Sweden is far more superficial and primarily based on the relatively sparse narrative records available at the time of her writing.

Until recently there was consensus that Leni Yahil’s reconstruction of October 1943 could not be based on contemporary sources as the arrests and the hastily improvised escape did not leave traces. This is also a likely explanation of the fact that retrospective narratives have, until recently, been treated as primary sources in the investigation of the events of those October days. However, my previous studies in cooperation with historian Rasmus Kreth have revealed a significant amount of contemporary material generated and preserved on both the Danish and Swedish side of the Sound. We have analyzed this material in the book Flugten til Sverige [The Escape to Sweden] in 1995. Furthermore, contemporary and rich materials have been discovered as a result of my most recent archive studies for the Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. This material can be used to shed further light on the events of those October days. I expect to present this material in a source book within the near future. Hence, it will be possible for a wider circle of researchers to conduct investigations into the rescue of the Danish Jews based on an extensive amount of Danish, Swedish and German archive material. The material allows a new central insight into the underlying motives determining the actions of the German, Danish and Swedish authorities, the many groups of helpers involved, and the initiatives and
efforts of the refugees. This will enable a deeper understanding of how the almost complete rescue of the Danish Jews was possible.

In the following I will draw primarily on the work of Leni Yahil, the Danish experts on the occupation period, namely Jørgen Hæstrup, Hans Kirchhoff and Henning Poulsen, and my previous studies with Rasmus Kreth. I shall also present some examples of the “new” contemporary material in order to investigate the reasons for the failure of the German operation on the night between October 1 and 2, as well as the Jews' success in reaching safe ground in Sweden.

**The position of the Danish Jews under the cooperation policy**

The peaceful occupation of Denmark on April 9 resulted in the Germans keeping their promise to respect Danish “sovereignty”. In this respect, occupied Denmark had a unique status in a Europe controlled by the Nazi regime. In principle Denmark was still ruled by the King, the Government and Parliament. The courts, the administration and even the army and the police retained their independent status.

In daily proceedings it was emphasized that the situation was one of negotiations between two sovereign states, and contact was conducted through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During negotiations both parties were conscious of the fact that the occupying power could overrule decisions. In other words, the Germans could assert themselves if the case in question was of considerable importance. However, the Germans were also aware that this kind of behavior would have consequences.

Already at an early stage the Danish government had stated that it would not concede potential German demands for anti-Jewish laws. The legal status of the Jews was a matter of principle in the cooperation policy. The attitude of the Danish government reflected a Danish society that did not identify with the Nazi perception of a "Jewish problem". Denmark was – in line with the rest of Europe – not sympathetic towards Jewish refugees who sought political asylum as a consequence of the Nazi take-over in 1933. However, the approximately 8,000 people who comprised the Jewish part of the population were in general considered to be an integrated part of Danish society.
The German authorities in Denmark were well aware of the Danish position on this issue. The representatives of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark, first the German plenipotentiary v. Renthe-Fink and later, from November 1942, Dr. Werner Best, attempted in their reports to the Auswärtiges Amt to keep the issue out of the Danish-German relationship. The German negotiators pursued this avoidance tactic based on the clear realization that the question was not only uncomfortable but also politically explosive.

The German negotiators feared that a German demand for anti-Jewish laws would lead to the resignation of the Danish government, and that this would result in unstable supplies of foodstuffs. The propaganda effect of the so-called “normalized” relations between Denmark and Germany would be lost and a significant contribution to German warfare would be endangered. Furthermore, the influence of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs might be threatened as its privileged position was based on the sovereign status of Denmark. Should the cooperation with the Danish government collapse, the diplomats would lose their executive power and would risk having to leave the administration of Denmark to the Wehrmacht or to a Reich Commissioner.

As long as Berlin wished to maintain the agreement of April 9, steps could not be taken with regard to the Jews in Denmark, as opposed to the situation in all other occupied countries. Since 1941 the Germans had prepared for and initiated the mass extermination of the Jews, and from the middle of 1942 they deported Jews to concentration camps from all other Nazi-controlled parts of Europe. Not until the peaceful occupation of Denmark came to an end in the late summer of 1943 did the Danish Jews land in the line of fire.

**The operation is decided upon and sabotaged**

After the turning point of the war, the German defeat on the Eastern Front and in Africa, unrest broke out in Denmark. During the summer of 1943 a belief in the imminent collapse of the German regime became widespread. This resulted in acts of sabotage and fighting with German soldiers. A wave of strikes during July and August had a powerful impact on the country. The unrest did not please Berlin and resulted in a
German ultimatum containing demands for the institution of martial laws and curfew regulations, special courts and the death penalty, etc. The ultimatum was presented in Denmark on August 28 and was promptly rejected by the government and the political parties. The cooperation policy had come to an end.

Early in the morning of August 29 the Danish Prime Minister, Erik Scavenius, received the declaration of the German general in command, Hermann v. Hanneken. It stated that the Wehrmacht had taken over executive powers and that the government therefore had lost its power of authorization. Simultaneously the soldiers of the Danish army and the sailors in the navy were interned. Nevertheless the diplomatic break was not absolute. The police force and the courts remained intact and the practice of cooperation continued after the end of the state of martial laws on October 6, 1943, though it was now left to the remaining permanent secretaries in the Danish administration to represent the official Danish line.

Following the collapse of the cooperation policy on August 29, 1943 a roundup of the Jewish population could not be avoided for much longer. There were few strong arguments left to convince Berlin that the roundup should not be carried out. Dr. Best now had to operate with the strong probability that it was only a matter of time before the persecution of the Jews would also be instigated in Denmark. For tactical reasons related to power politics Dr. Best recommended that the roundup of the Jews should commence during the state of martial law on the night between October 1 and 2, while the Wehrmacht remained in charge of civil order. Thus he would avoid appearing to bear the main responsibility for the operation vis-à-vis the Danish authorities. At the same time he would be able to get a sufficiently large police force to the country, a necessity in terms of re-adjusting the balance of power. However, Dr. Best was aware that an extensive deportation of Jews would make a political comeback difficult given the standpoint of the Danish authorities. The cooperation with the Danish authorities – now with the permanent secretaries in the Danish administration – could hardly be resumed after the deportation of thousands of Jews, even if v. Hanneken were to bear the official responsibility for the operation. Dr. Best's position as representative of the Ger-
man Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark was still dependent on cooperation with the Danish authorities. Indeed, Dr. Best worked intensely to gain increased control of the administration in Denmark. Possibly he even sought to be appointed Reich Commissioner. However, the response from Berlin – or rather the lack of response – must have meant that a desire to preserve the existing agreement dominated.

This is most likely the main reason why Dr. Best leaked information of the up-coming raid to marine attaché G.F. Duckwitz. He in turn informed his Danish contacts, and soon the warning reached a large section of the Jewish population. When the raid was carried out on the night between October 1 and 2, a large majority of the Jews were not at home. This is the main reason why the German operation caught so few members of the Jewish community in Denmark.

**The operation – a failure**

Until the last moment General v. Hanneken attempted to avoid involving the Wehrmacht. He was of the opinion that the operation would damage the honor of the Wehrmacht. He tried hard to postpone the operation until after the state of martial law had been suspended so that Dr. Best would bear the full responsibility for the raid. However, he did not succeed. Berlin sent forces from the police to assist in carrying out the plan. In the days before the operation the German police arrived in Denmark in large numbers. In this manner a force of approximately 1,500 order policemen were gathered under the command of General Major v. Heimburg, and Standartenführer Dr. Rudolf Mildner led an additional 300 security policemen. Both forces were present in full force to execute the direct order from Hitler to round up and deport the Jewish section of the population.

The operation was well prepared. Careful planning and systematic registration of the Jews and their residences preceded the distribution of the approximately 1,800 German policemen in groups all over Copenhagen, the city in which the majority of the Jews lived. Danish Nazis with local knowledge led the many units to their prey. But Dr. Best still managed to leave his fingerprint on the operation. The police were not allowed to break into Jewish homes. This restriction was not always respected and,
in any case, access to the homes was often obtained using keys procured for the occasion.

The operation was a thoroughly planned, countrywide swift action in which brutal force was also used occasionally. As v. Heimburg cynically and laconically stated on October 2, 1943, the day after the nocturnal raid: "Das Ergebnis war gleich Null, da die Juden bereits ihre Wohnungen verlassen und sich andersweitig untergebracht hatten."¹

The mass escape in October 1943

Until the autumn of 1943 the Jews had refrained from attempting to escape from the country. As long as the Danish government had a say in the power game there was no open panic in the Jewish community and its members kept a low profile. Information about the persecution of Jews in Europe did reach the country, but apparently there was little precise knowledge of the Holocaust. The Jews wanted to avoid attracting the attention of the Germans and illegal acts risked doing so. Furthermore, the illegal routes to Sweden had not yet been developed and it was uncertain how Sweden would receive the refugees. After the fall of the Danish government and the warning all doubts were swept away. The Jews risked everything and were forced to uproot themselves and face an uncertain future.

The mass escape started between September 28 and 29. That it started at this point – and not after the operation on October 1 – must be due to Duckwitz's warning on September 28. On the evening of October 2, when Sweden issued an official statement to the effect that it would receive the Jews of Denmark, the first 5-600 Jews had already arrived. The number of refugees grew steadily in the first week after the operation, and the escape culminated on October 8 and 9, when some 2,500 refugees were shipped across the Sound within 48 hours. The number of Jewish refugees in Sweden grew to around 4,500 within a week of the operation. In the last week of the mass escape up to 2,000 more Jews fled across the Sound. Around the middle of October 90% of the Jewish refugees were

¹ "The gain was nil, as the Jews had already left their apartments and had moved themselves elsewhere."

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on Swedish ground and the mass escape ceased. The last refugees arrived mainly in the last two weeks of October, though a number of small children and spouses were shipped off well into November and December.

Almost all refugees fled to Sweden by boat. A handful of crossings of scale brought up to a fifth of the total number of refugees across the Sound. However, it was primarily the 600-700 nocturnal crossings made mainly by fishing boats from all along the eastern coast of Zealand that brought more than three quarters of all refugees across the Sound. Ships departed from more than fifty different places; Copenhagen was the primary port of departure. Up to 3,000 refugees departed from there.

**The Danes and the escape**

That it was possible to transport up to 7,000 refugees to safety in Sweden within a few weeks was a result of the extensive help given to the Danish Jews by other Danes. Much of this assistance was improvised and spontaneous, but during the first week after the German raid a number of aid groups formed to organize and coordinate the flight to Sweden. Despite close cooperation between the groups, no overall coordination of the refugee organization existed. Instead there were many – and often overlapping – initiatives, which occasionally resulted in confusion and misunderstandings.

The aid groups organized supplies while the refugees waited for a place on a ship. They made contact with the fishermen, among others, and made sure that the ships would get safely out of ports and away from coastal areas. Money was collected among the refugees to pay the fishermen, and if the refugees had insufficient funds considerable sums were raised elsewhere. Payment was a central factor in the whole rescue operation organized by the large number of groups. In praise of these groups it must be said that also the poor, old and sick were shipped to Sweden. Many different kinds of helpers were involved: the organizers in Copenhagen, the people who sailed with the refugees to assist them on the way, people in the local areas who guided the Jews to the places of departure, and finally the fishermen and others who transported the refugees to Sweden.

To prevent the escape of the many Jews natural checkpoints would be the harbors and the coastal areas. In these areas a wide-ranging Danish coastal guard system had been established as a result of the cooperation policy of April 9, 1940. It was precisely their task to prevent illegal mi-
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Migration out of Denmark. Instead the Danish coast guard system became an important link in the successful rescue. Many of the officers in the coast guard not only closed their eyes to the rescue efforts; they took active part in the rescue and were invaluable helpers. This was a decisive factor in making so many shipments both possible and successful. The crossings took place precisely in the areas controlled by the more than 1,000 people working in the coastal guard system. Had the coast guard chosen to collaborate with the Germans, the refugee transports from the harbors would have been practically impossible and those from the coastline would have been extremely difficult.

The Swedes and the escape
Help to the Jews did not only take place on the Danish side of the Sound. It was crucial that Sweden fully opened its doors to the Jewish refugees from Denmark. Otherwise the situation would have turned out quite differently. The Swedes had attempted to intervene in Berlin against the planned German operation. When the intervention proved a failure, it was announced on the Swedish radio on the evening of October 2 that all Jews from Denmark would be received. These words were followed up by action. From October 3 the Swedish navy placed patrol boats outside all Swedish harbors at night, from Höganaäs in the north to Trelleborg in the south. To direct the many Danish refugee transports safely into the harbors Swedish patrol boats had all lanterns lit, against normal practice. On October 5 the patrolling was extended to include all Swedish territorial waters. This was a furtherance of the assistance to the refugees. Should German patrol boats be encountered in Swedish waters, orders had been given at the highest level to intervene using all means.

Other Swedish vessels supported the efforts of the navy. To secure optimal assistance at sea, the navy issued fuel and motor oil to around 30 Swedish fishing boats and a couple of towing boats. These ships contributed on a voluntary basis to the Swedish part of the rescue.

For the many Danish vessels carrying refugees the Swedish efforts meant a safer crossing. A large proportion of the refugees were transferred mid-stream from the Danish vessels to the Swedish patrol boats. In some cases refugees were rescued from small, overloaded rowing boats. Also,
after October 2 the Danish fishermen knew that they could land in Swedish harbors without getting into trouble with Swedish authorities.

**The Jews’ escape**

It is impossible to map out the reactions, preparations for the escape and actions of the more than 7,000 Jews. But as the rescue was taking form many Jews went to the harbors of Zealand seeking a place on a ship to Sweden. These trips often took place in broad daylight by means of public transport. Others went into hiding with family and friends and organized the escape from there. Others, often those with no financial resources, hid in parks and forests until the aid groups found them.

Many Jews succeeded in making their own way to freedom in Sweden. In other words, there is no evidence of Leni Yahil’s claim that the Danish Jews were passive and helpless objects of either the German persecution or the Danish rescue. In the beginning the Jews themselves arranged for transport across the Sound. They often had to ask in several places before someone – for example a fisherman – was willing to take them. A week after the German raid the efforts of the aid groups had facilitated the escape. People were instructed where to go and whom to talk to. The escape had entered a more organized phase that spared the Jews unsuccessful attempts and lessened the risk of German arrests. At the same time, as the aid groups established themselves, many Jews arranged for their own escape. Often it was a precondition that the refugee had sufficient financial means to pay for the boat trip.

**The motives for helping**

It is difficult to explain in detail why many Danes took such an active part in the illegal rescue work in October 1943. Many Danes did indeed regard the German operation as an outright crime and a great part of the motivation behind the extensive aid work was based on this attitude: As a real manifestation of Danish outrage at anti-Semitism in the Nazi version. As a centrally placed escape organizer said in October 1943:

*We are, so to speak, all in this country taking part in helping the poor Jews to safety on the other side of the Sound. Of course! Because we are all outraged at the brutality of the Germans. When one hears about and sees the different exam-
It was of course not all Danes who took part in the rescue. But the rescue received widespread support in the population as a whole, and there was a strong feeling of indignation at the German rounding-up of the Jews. This included the Danish church. When the bishop of Copenhagen was informed of the plans to persecute the Danish Jews, he resolutely addressed a protest on behalf of the Danish bishops to the German authorities in Denmark against Nazi anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jews. In an impressive effort the protest was distributed to all ministers and on October 3 was read aloud during service in all churches in the country. The full transcript reads as follows:

On September 29 of this year the bishops of this country have through the permanent secretaries addressed a statement to the German authorities with the following content:

The attitude of the Evangelical Lutheran church in Denmark towards the Jewish question.

Wherever Jews are persecuted for racial or religious reasons, it is the duty of the Christian Church to protest against such persecution.

1. Because we shall never forget that the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, was born in Bethlehem by the Virgin Mary according to God’s promise to his own people, Israel. The history of the Jewish people up to the birth of Christ contains preparation for the salvation God has intended for all people in Christ. This is characterized by the fact that the Old Testament is part of our Bible.

2. Because persecution of Jews opposes the view of human beings and the love of one’s neighbor which is a consequence of the gospel that the church of Jesus Christ has the task to preach. Christ knows of no respect of persons, and he has taught us to see that every human life is costly to God. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3.28)

3. Because it conflicts with the understanding of justice rooted in the Danish people and settled through centuries in our Danish Christian culture. Accord-
ingly it is stated in our constitution that all Danish citizens have an equal right and responsibility under the law, and they have freedom of religion, and a right to worship God in accordance with their vocation and conscience and so that race or religion can never in itself become the cause of deprivation of anybody's rights, freedom or property. Irrespective of diverging religious opinions we shall fight for the right of our Jewish brothers and sisters to keep the freedom that we ourselves value more highly than life.

The leaders of the Danish Church have a clear understanding of our duty to be law-abiding citizens who do not unreasonably oppose those who execute authority over us, but at the same time we are in our conscience bound to uphold justice and protest against any violation; consequently we shall, if occasion should arise, plainly acknowledge our obligation to obey God more than man.

29/9 1943
On behalf of the bishops
H. Fuglsang Damgaard

The protest of the bishops found resonance among the churchgoers who in many churches spontaneously stood up during the reading.

This is just one example of the abhorrence and protest that was voiced in those October days in Denmark. Using more profane language, but in many ways with a similar content, many other institutions raised their voices in public and sharply denounced the attack on their Jewish fellow citizens. This included the King, the universities, the Supreme Court, the permanent secretaries of the administration, politicians, students and a large number of other Danish organizations. The indignation was not only expressed in words but in many cases was followed up by action, as many participated in the extensive and spontaneous rescue.

There is good reason to agree to some extent with Leni Yahil when she describes the reaction of the Danish population as unique in the history of the Holocaust. Many other nationalities were passive spectators to the process of isolating the Jews and feeding them into the Nazi death machine. However, her categorical and generalizing descriptions tend towards idealization. Was the question of aid – or lack of aid – to the perse-
cuted Jews in Europe controlled by the Nazis primarily a question of differences in inner moral standing and attitudes?

The timing of the rescue action undoubtedly played a role in the extensive help extended in Denmark. The rounding up of the Jews commenced only after an increase in moral opposition against the occupational power had taken place and after the cooperation policy had come to a dead end. This was of crucial importance in the degree of help given to the Jews. The efforts of the Danish coast guards were definitely determined by the breakdown of negotiations on August 29, 1943.

The collapse of the cooperation policy was probably of decisive importance for the moral climate that fostered support by the population as a whole for the rescue. Had the operation against the Jews been initiated before 1943 the course of events undoubtedly would have been different. The coast guard and the population at large would not have taken an active part to the same extent, and politically neutral Sweden would hardly have received several thousand Jews with the same readiness.

Many Danes protested against the Germans in the period of the sudden change of atmosphere and the strikes in August 1943, and the assistance to the Jews was in all likelihood also a form of protest in line with the attitudes expressed all over the country during the summer's succession of strikes. With the attempt to round up the Jews, a situation suddenly arose in which the numerous helpers – for whom the rescue was the first and somewhat hesitant step into illegal work – had an acceptable and feasible way to protest against the occupational power without embarking on armed resistance and sabotage, something that many people had strong reservations about.

Furthermore, we should pose the question whether the rescue of the Jews was solely an ideological action and an expression of collective altruism, as it has been claimed in international research in the area. There are several contemporary testimonies from those who were rescued that do give the impression of a collective, altruistic humanitarian effort. Here are two typical examples from the Swedish side of the Sound. The first is a testimony of a rescued Jewish refugee from October 1943:

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With an outstanding willingness to help the whole of the Danish population has stood by the Jews, provided them with shelter, helped them in every possible way...one would think that what happened must be an exaggeration, if one saw it in a movie.

Another Jewish refugee states:

You have no idea of the atmosphere at home. A rage has gotten into the whole population. Everyone is out to help... Seen from our side, we owe a debt of gratitude that would be impossible to ever pay back.

The question of payment

However, it should also be said that many of the testimonies mention very considerable amounts of money in connection with the rescue. Far from all refugees were of the opinion that the payment was reasonable. People in the resistance movement shared this view. From the coast of the Sound one of the most active organizers of the escape writes the following toward the end of October 1943:

Unfortunately many of the Danish skippers have used the opportunity to amass money in a distasteful manner. In the beginning these cons were not of great significance, as the funds were sufficient, but it is necessary to fight this gold rush. And that is probably also possible. There are by now so many people who have offered their boats that the price must fall. There are wealthy people who have in the beginning paid many thousands of kroner per person for the crossing. Now the most common price is 500 kr. for those who are able to pay, and those who have no money are of course allowed on board as well – this has been the case all along, but the issue is that the rich people should not have given their money to the skippers directly, but to the people who negotiated the prices per boat with the skippers. Many have also been conned by giving money to people who have pretended to want to help but then consequently let them down. Yes, it is sad to have to admit such things.²

A systematic study of the Swedish police reports, written when the Danish Jews landed on the Swedish side of the Sound, shows that in the first days of the escape the crossing to Sweden was reserved for the richest among the refugees. In many cases those without sufficient means had to go into hiding and wait for an opportunity to cross. When the demand was at its highest the price per person for a crossing averaged 2,000 kroner. The price fell to 1,000 kroner and in the final period the price was down to 500 kroner. At this point most of the refugees with no funds had reached Sweden, which must be added to the list of honorable deeds performed by the many groups of helpers. Apart from the Jewish funds, these groups managed to raise large amounts from other sources, accounting for around half of the total payments for the crossings.

It was mainly the skippers of the vessels (fishermen and others) that received payment. To a lesser extent payment was given to Danish members of staff in the coast guard and drivers and others who took on the task of transporting the Jews on land.

The payment for the crossings could be seen as a kind of insurance for the material risk taken in shipping refugees across the Sound, or as a security for the families of rescuers if arrested by the Germans. At this point the Sound was dotted with mines, and some fishermen were convinced that the Swedish authorities might confiscate the vessels. On top of this came fuel costs and lost earnings. These are all factors to take into consideration. However, this is not sufficient to reject the notion that a desire to profit from the situation also played a role in a number of cases, even if a person also had humanitarian motives.

Altruism no doubt motivated the large number of helpers who passed on the warning and offered shelter or other assistance on land without charging money, as well as a number of fishermen and others who did not take fees. However, the dominant principle was that the Jews should pay for the crossing to Sweden. Most people charged a considerable amount considering the fact that the average hourly wage for skilled and unskilled workers in industry was around 2 kroner. It is impossible to determine whether the prices for the crossing were dictated by the relationship between supply and demand, but from examples in Gilleleje the
majority of the Jews had to pay amounts equivalent to a year and half's worth of wages when the demand for crossings was at its peak. It was the size of these payments that was decisive for the numbers of fishermen and others who risked taking Jews to Sweden. But what were in actual fact the risk factors connected with helping the Jews?

**Risk factors**

Though the matter has not been studied systematically, it is safe to say that helping the Jews did entail risks in a Europe controlled by the Nazis. We do know that the Nazis killed several people on the spot in Eastern Europe for what they called *Judenbegünstigung*, and that the punishment for the same "crime" in Western Europe was often deportation to concentration camps. Yet this was not the case in Denmark, a matter I will clarify in the following.

Tragic episodes did occur on the coast of the Sound when the Gestapo got in the way of the transports. An example is an incident on the night between October 9 and 10, 1943: A number of young students were helping a large group of Jewish refugees on board the fishing vessel *K 591 Matador* in Taarbæk harbor when the Gestapo suddenly appeared. The two Gestapo officers quickly realized that refugees were being taken aboard the ship and resolutely fired shots in the air and shouted: "This is the German police". A shoot-out followed between the students and the Gestapo in which the 18 year-old student Claus Christian Heilesen was shot.

In another case the Gestapo fired shots at a fishing boat that was leaving Gilleleje harbor with Jews on board because the skipper ignored the order to stop. In this case no one was hurt, but the example goes to show that it was dangerous not to follow orders when the Gestapo discovered a transport. However, these tragic incidents were exceptions to the rule. If caught, people who assisted the refugees were not sent to concentration camps or sentenced to death.

As a consequence of the cooperation policy Danish authorities set the punishment for assisting the illegal migration of the Jews. In October 1943, the Gestapo arrested 57 rescuers, most of who were caught red-
handed. They were handed over to the Danish authorities to be charged with illegal migration. The maximum punishment in the Danish courts was 3 months imprisonment under relatively lenient conditions in a Danish prison, but the majority got away with little or no punishment.

The helpers could not have known this in advance, and many undoubtedly feared that they were taking a serious risk. What is a relevant question is whether the special circumstances of the occupation and the relatively mild German procedures in Denmark – which were still predominant even after the increased tension following the fall of the government – should also be considered in attempts to understand the background of the extensive Danish effort to rescue the Jews? Would a swiftly executed German death sentence for helping Jews have reduced the rescue activities considerably, as was the case in other countries?

The Germans and the flight
In his book, October ‘43, Aage Bertelsen, possibly the best-known person who helped Jews to flee, mentions that the Germans chased the Jews as long as just one remained in Denmark, day and night, in their homes, in the streets, in their hiding-places, along the shores and at sea in their flight towards rescue. Others however saw the matter differently. A contemporary illegal report states, "...as far as the circumstances permit, the German authorities in Denmark close their eyes to the large-scale flight to Sweden and in essence prefer to have as many people as possible escape in order to 'solve' the Jewish question in the least painful way."

In other words, the question is to what extent the Germans actually attempted to stop the flight of the Jews to Sweden.

The Navy
As mentioned above, the Danish coast guard service was no impediment to the flight of the Jews. Concerning German knowledge of the disloyalty of the coast guard service, Leni Yahil argues that it took a good while before the rather orthodox Germans realized that the Danish police officers were not obeying their orders, but that on the contrary they had

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3 Ibid., note 1.
taken matters into their own hands and were assisting the Jews. This means that the flight of the Jews was well under way before the German side became aware of the "irregularities" involved. But was this indeed the case?

As early as September 1943 the Abwehr had received several proofs of the failure to assist the Danish sea and coastal police. And the German marine had noticed that the Danish police was disloyal and harbored significant doubts about the force. Admiral Dänemark’s war diary of 30 September describes the situation on the Sound in the following terms: "Der Ausfall der früher durch dänische Patrouillenfahrzeuge ausgeübten Sundüberwachung, sowie der vorübergehende Ausfall der dänischen Küstenpolizei ermöglichten in zahlreichen Fällen die Flucht von dänischen Militär- und Zivilpersonen nach Sweden." 4

Contrary to what Yahil states, the German side was aware of the fact that the Danish coastal police did not to any appreciable extent take action to prevent illegal departures from the country. It came as no surprise to the Germans that the coastal police did not take action vis-à-vis the fleeing Jews. But what course of action did the Germans decide on as a result? Did they bring in their own personnel to prevent illegal departures from the country?

No German effort at sea prevented the Jews from escaping to Sweden. Not a single one of the 600-700 illegal transports carrying Jewish refugees was caught on their way to Sweden. A review of all relevant source material brings to light only a single case in which the German navy caught a Danish vessel carrying refugees: On October 18, a skipper sailed for Sweden carrying eight non-Jewish refugees. The cutter stalled in mid-sea and while the skipper attempted to repair the motor, a German patrol boat arrived on the scene to assist it. The Germans towed the cutter to Elsinore where the refugees were arrested.

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4 Ibid., note 1., "The desertion of the surveillance of the Sound by Danish patrol boats, as well as the temporary desertion of the Danish coastal police in many instances made possible the escape of Danish military personnel and civilians to Sweden."
In short the German navy gave the handling of naval tasks priority over police surveillance. The war diaries of the German navy do not mention surveillance during the month of October 1943. The use of German patrolling vessels was terminated on October 1, when the crews were transferred to mine sweeping duty. In a great many cases flight helpers and others on the Danish side described these vessels as German patrolling vessels, but they undertook naval responsibilities only. The German navy did not take any part in the surveillance of the civilian traffic on the Sound before November 8, 1943.

The German police
Until my work with Rasmus Kreth in 1995 it was assumed that only a weak German police force, incapable of arresting any large number of Jews, was present in Denmark in the days of October 1943. This assumption was problematic, as it was not based on any precise knowledge of the strength of the German police. Moreover the assumption suffered from the fact that no systematic examination had been undertaken of the extent to which the German police had been brought into action to prevent the flight of the Jews to Sweden. In fact the German Police did virtually nothing to prevent the flight.

Order Police
From the war diaries of the German order police it is clear that the resources of the police were concentrated on the Danish political opposition, which to an increasing extent had whipped up anti-German feeling. The Jews came second. The war diaries show that on October 16, SS Untersturmführer Westermann of the Gestapo secured a lorry and eight members of the order police to support the security police: "...zum Einsatz gegen die Flüchtlingsbewegung auf der Küstenstrasse von Kopenhagen nach Helsingør". This arrangement, however, came into force at a time when a majority of the Jews were already safely in Sweden. Apart from this, the war diaries record no other measures that may be linked to the actions against the Jews after October 2.

5 Ibid., note 1, "...to counter the movement of refugees on the coastal road from Copenhagen to Elsinore."
We cannot dismiss the possibility that this small branch of the police command may have succeeded in its purpose. However, absolutely no evidence points to the 1,500 German gendarmes being used to any significant extent to prevent the illegal departure of Jews from Denmark.

General v. Heimburg expressed concern at the result of the purge of the Jews. He made clear that the purge would further increase anti-German feeling and might be a decisive factor for the situation in Denmark. In particular he feared that future cooperation with the Danish police would be very difficult. Presumably, this was the reason why the order police's subsequent action against the Jews was very limited. As shown this was not due to any lack of police staff. It is true that one police battalion, Dänemark, was transferred to Funen and Jutland from October 13 in order to support the Gestapo's struggle with the political opposition, and later, on November 4, Battalion 15 was transferred to Italy. However, during the period when almost all Danish Jews crossed the Sound to Sweden at least 1,300 to 1,400 German order policemen were present in Copenhagen. Nonetheless, Copenhagen was the most important port of embarkation.

It is somewhat surprising that on November 3, 1943 the Chief of the Danish Police – the single Danish person of authority, if any, who had a thorough knowledge of the activities of the German police – stated to the police districts: "At no time have the German order police undertaken arrests". This characterization was largely correct, as the Chief of the Danish Police seemed to exclude the action on October 1 and the few other cases in which the German uniformed police were brought in.

Security Police
The German security police caught the majority of those arrested. Yet there is no evidence to suggest that all available personnel (about 300 people) were utilized to target this "problem". In fact one single Gestapo officer and his few men were responsible for the arrest of the majority of the Jews caught.

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6 Ibid., note 1.
The source material shows that many arrests were made in the Elsinore police district. Through these actions a total of more than 100 Jews were apprehended. This means that this one police district provides information on the arrests of more than half of the total number of arrested after the action on 1 October. As shown the shipments of Jews were evenly spread out along the coastline of eastern Zealand, though most of them took place in the vicinity of the Copenhagen metropolitan area. It is thus not the case that the large number of arrests made in the Elsinore area reflects a situation where the Jews were predominantly shipped from there. Other factors help explain this phenomenon.

In Elsinore the Kriminaloberassistent Hans Juhl, also known as "Gestapo Juhl", represented the German security police. He was the commanding officer of the German border control at Elsinore and had his office on the premises of the ferry port. There are many contemporary sources that describe Juhl's particular zeal in attempting to capture Jews. Throughout the month of October Gestapo Juhl and his handful of staff patrolled the stretch of coast north as well as south of Elsinore with great fervor.

On October 2, present in the passport control office at the Elsinore ferry, Juhl received news that the Danish steamer *Ydun* had dropped anchor at the roadstead after picking up some Jewish refugees who had been found in distress in a small rowing boat in the waters west of the island of Hven. The Elsinore pilot had been called by the steamer and the captain asked him to ensure that the Danish police picked up the party concerned. However, when the pilot got ashore Juhl confronted him and demanded an account of what had just occurred. The pilot was then told to take Juhl to the steamer. Juhl went onboard and apprehended the Jews. He arrested eight Jews, including two children, who were first taken to the Horserød camp. Subsequently all eight Jews were deported to Theresienstadt.

Another example of Juhl's zealosity is illustrated in a report written by the Danish police sergeant Mortving in connection with the cutter H 211 Dannebrog's attempted departure from Gilleleje harbor on October 5, 1943. The sergeant was present at the Gilleleje police station when he heard several shots fired from the pier at 9:45 pm. He went quickly down
to the harbor and realized that the shots had been fired by Juhl and three 
or four other Gestapo people. Then Juhl ordered the cutter to stop, or 
more shots would be fired, but the skipper of the cutter did not respond 
to this and continued to sail. Juhl then fired another 20 to 25 shots in the 
direction of the cutter, which immediately shut down its motor. The 
vessel drifted towards the eastern pier of the harbor where Juhl took up 
position in order to cut off the escape route of the fugitives. He must 
have called for reinforcements because shortly afterwards a lorry of 
Wehrmacht soldiers arrived at the harbor and immediately the Jews were 
loaded onto the vehicle and taken to the Horserød camp. Later that night 
Juhl recounted that 19 Jews, among them several women and children, 
had been arrested.

Other examples demonstrate that catching the Jews was a top priority of 
Juhl's. On October 9, 1943 Wilhelm David Søndergaard, who had helped 
Jews to flee, was arrested at Elsinore station in the company of three 
Jews. When he presented his identification, Juhl took this and on realiz-
ing that he was named David, he said, "David – oh, a Jew. You must join 
the others". The party remained in the office until about 3am during 
which time the German police, led by Juhl, went on several roundups. As 
he put down his Tommy gun on his chair back in the office, Juhl said, 
"Ahh, seven Jews, must celebrate",7 upon which the five German police 
officers each had a bottle of lager.

The quoted examples, however, are not among Juhl's major successes. 
The best-known example is the roundup of 85 Jews hidden in the Gil-
leleje church attic during the night between October 6 and 7, 1943. Juhl's 
force, in addition to the Wehrmacht troops summoned to help him, un-
dertook several raids during that same night in a number of other places 
in the area. During that particular night the Nazis arrested a total of 107 
people in the Gilleleje area, among them several women and children. In 
comparison with the rest of Denmark Juhl adopted drastic measures in 
the area under his control.

7 Ibid., note 1.
In contrast to the cases above the German security police chose a different method in another case: the Gestapo arrested two families in Aalborg on October 12 and 13, 1943. The Germans knew that the individuals in question were Jewish, but despite this fact they decided to hand them over to the Danish security police with a request that an investigation be instituted against them for attempting unlawful departure from Denmark. One of the families, Salum Chanan and Slowa Rubinowitz and their two children aged eight years and four months, told the Danish police in Aalborg that they would return to their place of residence in Copenhagen. The following day the family had left the area of Danish jurisdiction and was outside the reach of German police officers. As early as October 16 at 9 p.m. the family had left Copenhagen in a fishing boat that arrived safely around midnight in Landskrona, Sweden. Presumably the other family, the Altschuls, also found an escape route to Sweden. By all accounts they were not deported to Theresienstadt.

It must be said, however, that the Aalborg case deviates from the general pattern, as Jews were also arrested in a number of other places. What the testimony of the source material clearly shows is that the effort varied significantly. In the Elsinore area, for example, Gestapo Juhl went to work zealously, while in Aalborg and in a number of other places less zeal was demonstrated. Naturally, this led to fewer Jews being caught.

The Wehrmacht

As we have already seen, the Wehrmacht was involved in some arrests in the Elsinore area. Yet no evidence points to the capture of Jews being a general Wehrmacht priority at this time. Even if it seems clear that the Wehrmacht was instructed to assist the security police in the roundup of the Jews, all evidence indicates that to all intents and purposes it was passive and generally only took part in concrete cases at the request of the security police. This is confirmed by contemporary sources and numerous testimonies that show the military patrols to be very cautious and generally disinclined to interfere with the transfers to Sweden.

By and large only a few roundups undertaken by the German security police led to large numbers of arrests. The assumption that the German police were incapable of arresting large numbers of Jews is incorrect. In
reality the order police – i.e. the part of the German police force that had the strength in numbers to arrest large number of Jews – did not undertake any systematic roundups after October 2.

On September 28, Dr. Best reported to the Auswartiges Amt: "Die Aktion soll in einer einzigen Nacht durchgeführt werden". Later, on October 4, Thadden of the Auswartiges Amt stated: "Judenaktion ist in Nacht von 1. zum 2. 10. durchgeführt und inzwischen abgeschlossen worden". Nothing indicates that the Germans to any considerable extent moved beyond the originally intended course of action for October 1 and 2. Certainly Jews were still arrested, but this did not occur in large-scale systematic roundups.

Dr. Best and the October flight
Several different factors may explain the fact that the German authorities did not make the arrest of the Jews a high priority after the unsuccessful Aktions-attempt of the night between the October 1 and 2, 1943. One of the most significant, however, was Dr. Best’s attitude towards the issue. In October 1943 he remained in control of the German police in Denmark. Hence, it was of great significance that Dr. Best was of the opinion that after the roundup the result achieved would have to suffice. Further drastic measures should be avoided in order to be able to resume the policy of negotiation, which had been interrupted on August 29.

After October 2 Dr. Best informed the Danish authorities that no further measures would be taken against the Jews. He expressed this attitude on October 4, 1943 when he received Director Svenningsen from The Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Dagmarhus. On behalf of the civil servants and, in particular, the permanent secretaries, Svenningsen made clear that they were all deeply shaken and outraged by the treatment that Danish citizens had been subjected to. Taking the future relationship between Denmark and Germany into consideration, Dr. Best was made to realize that the Aktion had made it impossible to work for mutual

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8 "The action will be completed in only one night."
9 Ibid, note 1, "The Judenaktion is completed during the night between October 1 and October 2 and thereafter discontinued."
understanding between the two nations. At the same time Svenningsen stated that it was unlikely that the civil servants would give up their posts as long as the Nazi regime refrained from imposing new extreme measures against the Jews. In other words, the condition for a renewed understanding was peace to work.

On his side Dr. Best diplomatically gave these views a sympathetic hearing and found occasion to remark that he personally saw no reason to regret that a number of Jews had managed to escape to Sweden. From a German point of view it was above all a question of cleansing Denmark of Jews; whether this happened through the Jews’ escaping to Sweden or through their deportation to Germany was in itself of no consequence. It was not a question of rounding up as many as possible.

That this possibly was Dr. Best’s view is also illustrated by his reports to Berlin. This is most clearly expressed in a telegram sent the day after his meeting with Svenningsen. His conclusion goes as follows:

**Da das sachliche Ziel der Judenaktion in Dänemark die Entjudung des Landes und nicht eine möglichst erfolgreiche Kopfjagd war, muss festgestellt werden, dass die Judenaktion ihr Ziel erreicht hat. Danemark ist entjudet, da sich hier kein Jude, der unter die einschlägigen Anordnungen fällt, mehr legal aufhalten und betätigen kann.**

Later that month in a conversation with an SS colleague, Dr. Six of the Auswärtiges Amt, Dr. Best was honest about the insignificant number of Jews rounded up. He admitted that the German police had not been put into action on the relevant stretch of the east coast of Zealand in order to prevent the Jews’ escape to Sweden. It is interesting, if not surprising, that the Auswärtiges Amt backed Dr. Best’s approach to reestablishing good working relations with the Danish authorities and with that in mind considered it less important that the Jews had slipped out of their

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10 Ibid., "As the objective goal of the Judenaktion in Denmark was the de-judaization of the country, and not a successful headhunt, it must be concluded that the Judenaktion has reached its goal. Denmark is de-judaized, as no Jew who falls under the relevant legislation can stay or work here any more."
hands to Sweden. As Dr. Six concluded in his report to Berlin after the meeting:

All in all it can be established that since the “Judenaktion” of October 1 and 2, 1943 Denmark has been cleansed of Jews and for this reason in the future the Jewish question will not impede constructive solutions to issues of the Danish-German relationship. Faced with this fact the limited number of arrests and deportations...is of less importance.11

The fact remains that it was not until after the Jews’ successful flight to Sweden that Dr. Best really took action to close the Sound. With the required will and with relatively limited means it clearly would have been possible to seize a large number of the well over 7,000 Jews whose October escape to freedom in Sweden went unimpeded.

Conclusions
There was widespread opposition among the Germans in Denmark to interfering with the flight of the Jews. The Wehrmacht and the German navy insisted that they were present to carry out military tasks. Moreover, both the German military and leading police authorities were clearly interested in avoiding a brutal solution to the so-called Jewish problem in Denmark. Thus, an acceptable cooperative position towards the Danish authorities might be achieved. However, Dr. Best was the prime mover in ensuring that the German police largely refrained from apprehending the fleeing Jews. By adopting this policy, he hoped to re-establish cooperation with the Danish authorities, a prerequisite for maintaining his own position as the leading German authority in Denmark.

Indirectly the Danish attitude towards the horrifying persecution of their Jewish fellow citizens was the determining factor in the almost complete rescue of the Jewish community. Yet without the special circumstances during the occupation – where the occupying power to a large extent took measures to secure the continuation of acceptance of diplomatic relations by the occupied subject – Danish indignation and activism on its own would hardly have been enough to ensure the October 1943 mass

11 Ibid.
rescue of Danish Jews. Other crucial factors include Sweden opening its doors and giving the Jews access to freedom only a few sea miles away, as well as the convergence of the onset of the persecution and increasingly strong moral opposition to the occupying power. All these conditions aided the Danish rescue – a rescue that would otherwise not have been possible. Furthermore for some economic motives may have played a part in the rescue efforts. However, all this does not mean that the rescue of the Danish Jews should lose its power of fascination. Seen as an isolated event the rescue shows what a population can do when acting together from a shared moral standpoint. This lesson from the events of October 1943 certainly deserves to live on.

Bibliography
The attempt to compile a complete bibliography of literature on the rescue of the Danish Jews (books, journals and newspaper articles) can be found on the website of The Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at http://www.dchf.dk

Here is a selection of the most important literature:

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