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A UNIQUE FIND IN THE TEREZIN CONCENTRATION CAMP

Robert W. Case

On our recent trip to the Czech Republic, we toured the Terezin (Theresienstadt) Concentration camp. This camp was not a killing camp, but a “holding camp” for transferring Jews to Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, etc. The Nazi’s used this camp as a “model camp” for the International Red Cross as to how well the prisoners were treated!

Before I describe our “discovery”, I feel that it is important to review in summary the events and details of the Danish Jews who were incarcerated in Terezin. During WWII, there were a total of 486 Jews in Theresienstadt, the vast majority of whom were “stateless”, i.e., they were refugees to Denmark, and had no roots there.

At the outbreak of the war in September, 1939 there were about 8,000 Jews in Denmark. Of these, 3500 belonged to old assimilated families, which immigrated during the 15th century from Germany and Holland, whereas about 3,000 had come from Russia and Poland following the big pogroms at the turn of this century.

The old families were well established, well off and conservative, while the Jews from the pogroms were poor artisans leaning towards socialism and Zionism.

After Hitler’s seizure of power, these Jews tried to make themselves as scarce as possible. Between April 9th, 1940 and May 5th, 1945, Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany. compared to the other occupied countries, Denmark had a unique position that can be summed up in two concepts: (1) Peace Occupation, and (2) The policy of negotiation. The definition of peace occupation was defined by Hitler himself, and meant that Denmark was still considered a sovereign state against whom Germany did not wage war and where the legislative, the executive, and the judicial functions were allowed to proceed without any interference from the occupying powers. Nazi Germany negotiated all occupation matters through the usual diplomatic channels. This self-deception was referred to as “The Policy of Negotiation”.

Due to the “Peace Occupation” and “The Policy of Negotiation”, a “Jewish Problem” in Denmark did not exist officially until after August 29th, 1943. The race discriminating Nuremberg laws were not introduced in Denmark, and Denmark’s participation in the “Endlösung program” was only peripheral, at best .The Danes took a firm stand with the Germans that the rights of the Jews are equal to their own, and the undisturbed freedom of the Jews is part and parcel of the German promise of Danish inner freedom and the independence of their democratic rule. In return, the Danish administrative system agreed not to generate disturbances in the political and economical life of Denmark. The Germans could hardly do without the substantial Danish agricultural production, which of course, would come to a standstill should the Germans become aggressive occupiers.

The active resistance by the Danes against the occupying power, however, caused The “Peace Occupation” and “Policy of Negotiation” to break down in August 1943.

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At this time, resistance against the intruders mounted all over the country until multiple sabotage actions and spontaneous strikes provoked Hitler to order martial law and to abolish the legal government. The Danes discovered that the Nazis formulated plans to initiate an offensive “Jewish Action” on the night of October 2, and that everything was prepared for the raid. At this point, thanks to an incredible effort by the people of Denmark, a dramatic turn in Swedish foreign policy away from German orientation, and a half-hearted effort of the German occupiers, the rescue operation began, and approximately 8,000 Jews made it to Sweden. Following this mass exodus, a Danish underground was established, and there were constant illegal fishing boats carrying Jews from Denmark to Sweden. However, nearly 500 Jews were caught by the Germans and deported to Theresienstadt.

On November 2, 1943, Adolph Eichmann visited Copenhagen, to negotiate an agreement with the Danes about the Jews sent to Theresienstadt, since the people in Denmark were causing the German occupiers great difficulty over this issue by way of strikes, sabotage, and other acts of protest which had a serious impact on the occupation army. The end result of the negotiated agreement was astounding! First, Jews over the age of 60 were not to be arrested or deported. Second, deported semi-Jews or Jews that were in mixed marriages were to be sent back to Denmark. Third, all Jews deported from Denmark, i.e., Jewish refugees (the so called stateless ones) were to remain in Theresienstadt. Fourth, parcels containing clothes (but not food) were allowed to be sent to the prisoners by The Danish Red Cross. Danish authorities would be allowed to visit the concentration camp until the spring of 1944.

In January of 1944 five “misplaced” Jews returned from Theresienstadt to Copenhagen, and told about the horrible conditions and the starvation existing. Despite the prohibition on sending food packages, a fund was created to pay for the food parcels to be sent. This had to be done without the cooperation of the Danish Red Cross, since their agreement was to send only clothing, and they dared not to run the risk of violating the agreement. The money and support came from the Ministry of Social Affairs, a group of clergymen, the medical association, and the employer’s association. Nutritionists were employed to compose a parcel of standard foodstuffs, and the drug industry hastily produced a special vitamin product. Due to the limited availability of meat products, only sausage and pork were included in the parcels, along with cheese, mackerel, soap, and bread butter, and bouillon cubes. The Danish Supply Office produced ration cards for the rationed products, and a large shipping company arranged for the shipping. Due to the regulations, the parcels had to be sent individually. The first food parcels were sent February 21st. In order not to draw attention to this covert operation, ten parcels were sent every second day during the first week. This increased gradually until they were shipping seven hundred a month. Parcels were sent to individuals, and receipt was confirmed. (of course, it was uncertain as to whether or not the right person received the parcel, but the chance had to be taken) the packages arrived fast, as the German railway and postal system worked well, and apparently they were not aware of the Gestapo ban against parcels with food. Only a small amount was stolen.

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And now “*The Perfect Deception*”- the visit of the Red Cross on June 3rd, 1944! This visit was part of the *Eichmann* propaganda campaign, the purpose of which was to prove to the world that the rumors of the extermination of the Jews in the concentration camps were pure fabrication. Eichmann deftly maneuvered between the German Red Cross, The International Red Cross, the Danish Foreign Ministry, and the Jews in Theresienstadt. Thanks to the parcels, the Danes were nicely dressed and in good physical condition. The stage was now set for one of the most farcical “dog and pony” shows ever imagined !

First, the Germans had to insure that nature had to be seen at its best, i.e., with blooming flowers and green trees. Next, the Germans had to provide decent living quarters for a very select group of Danish prisoners. They selected four houses in the town of Teresin (in which the Theresienstadt concentration camp was located), repaired and painted the houses throughout, arranged for austere furniture (tables and chairs were non-existing in the barracks) pictures and stolen goods from Prague embellished the houses, and green plants were put in the windows. A few days before the “visit” they selected four families, as an immense privilege, to lead a family life of their own. The prisoners were expected to follow the exacting rules of behavior during the visit. The Jews had to appear “well-bred and cultured” and answer any questions put to them sensibly. They were definitely advised NOT to make critical remarks about any of the squalid conditions existing in the camp, and if they did not follow exactly, parcels would be stopped immediately, and all the Danes would be transported to Auschwitz. Meanwhile, the Germans arranged for couples to be dancing in the streets, a band, children playing games and singing, women doing knitting, artists painting, etc. – all to demonstrate how well the prisoners were being treated! The Germans arranged for a filming of these “events” to show the Red Cross when they visited the camp.

The International Commission arrived on June 23rd, 1944. It was composed of The Danish Foreign Minister, the superintendent of the National Health Service, and representatives of The International Red Cross and the German Red Cross. Accompanying this group was the Camp Commander and a number of SS guards, one of which spoke Danish. The “tour” lasted almost eight hours, and they were shown the propaganda film “Der Fuhrer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt”. They were then taken over a carefully planned route, and talked to certain selected prisoners who answered questions that were carefully prepared and screened prior to the visit. When the visit was over, the Germans were satisfied that this “show” had gone without a hitch.

When the Commission returned to Denmark, they prepared a report that the visit was predominantly positive! (Considering all the time, effort, preparation, and expense for this fiasco, they could hardly come to any other conclusion!) After the war, the two Danish representatives were severely criticized for their apparent naivety.

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The Bernadotte Action – The rescuing of the Danish Jews to Sweden April 13, 1945. In early April 1945, it appeared that the American and Russian troops would meet at Dresden. If this happened, the northern road from Theresienstadt leading to Denmark would be completely blocked, and the fate of these Jews in the camp was of real concern. The Nazis were getting desperate, and one could not predict their fate. Count Folke Bernadotte, the head of the Swedish Red Cross, who was in Friedrichsuhe, Germany at the time, and was involved in “shuttle diplomacy” between Sweden and Germany. Bernadotte negotiated an agreement with the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler to bring Danish and Norwegian prisoners brought to the concentration camp at Neuengamme. Himmler was indebted to Bernadotte for the abundance of food and cigarettes that the Swedish Red Cross had supplied to the SS, but the favors did not go far enough to bring Aryans and Jews together in the same concentration camp, and the plan was aborted. Bernadotte, on the other hand, was allowed to bring the Danish Jews directly to Sweden. Unfortunately, the essential permission for the evacuation from the Gestapo in Berlin was still missing. Due to an immense effort by Johannes Holm, The National Health Service agent, and Obersturmbannfuher Rennau, and more food, cigarettes, and liquor from the Swedish Red Cross, the necessary papers were secured. However, Bernadotte decided that the Swedish Red Cross should not go to Theresienstadt, and that this operation be purely a Danish project, but Sweden was willing to provide the vehicular transportation. Virtually overnight an armada of 23 busses, 6 trucks, a kitchen van, a workshop van, a crane van, 3 passenger cars and 3 motorcycles were assembled on April 12th. However, the Germans then demanded that the convoy bring 400 Frenchmen from the Neuengamme Concentration camp to Flossenburg before collecting the Danish Jews.

On the morning of April 13, 1945 the appropriate signed and stamped papers from the Gestapo Headquarters in Berlin were delivered to the camp commandant, Karl Rahm by Holm. Chief rabbi Max Friediger, the leader of the Danish Jews was summoned by Holm to find all the Jewish Danes immediately, gather all their possessions, and proceed to an assembly point. The dumbfounded Rabbi was informed that a Swedish convoy would come to get them and transport them to Sweden.

On Sunday, March 15th, the Danes left Theresienstadt, saluted by a forest of waving hands and music played by the camp orchestra, called out for the occasion. The convoy passed through a completely bombed Third Reich, and through the bombed ruins of Dresden and Potsdam. The convoy crossed the border on the 17th of March, and then continued to Copenhagen and on to Malmo, Sweden the following day. The welcome, however, was not very warm, and they were greeted by soldiers armed with machine guns, and people would not touch them without wearing rubber gloves. To condense this story, the Danes returned to Denmark during the 1st week of May 1945.

Footnote: Count Bernadotte was appointed by the UN Security Council on May 20th 1948 as a mediator to seek peace in the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine. On June 11th, 1948, after an enormous amount of negotiation he succeeded in obtaining a truce, and submitted a peace plan to the UN in New York City.

He returned to Jerusalem, and on September 17th, 1948 he was assassinated by the Stern Group, an organization of extreme right wing Zionists.

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And now, the rest of the story.....

On our recent trip to the Czech Republic, we toured the Terezin (Theresienstadt) concentration camp. Much to our surprise, in the village of Terezin there is a private home with a wine cellar which was converted to a “synagogue” by the Danish Jews imprisoned in Theresienstadt !

As previously mentioned, there was a total of 486 Danish Jews in the camp, and how many of them were involved in building of the “shul” is not known. What is TRULY AMAZING is that the SS officers knew about the existence of the “synagogue” and did not punish prisoners for visiting! The room is not very large, probably about 10’ x 12’, and since they could not have any light, there were candles painted on the sidewalls!

Unquestionably, this was one of the highlights of our most memorable trip, which encompassed visiting the Jewish sites in Frankfurt and Berlin, Prague, and Budapest. Since only my wife, Cele and I were touring with our own guides, I feel that we were able to see much more and in greater depth than one would get with a group tour.

This article could not have been written without assistance from the following individuals:

Anita Tarsi, Director, Beit Theresienstadt, Givat Haim Ihud, ISRAEL

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Mr. Hans Sode-Madsen, Seniorforsker archivist of Copenhagen, DENMARK

The following references were used as background material for this article:

“The Perfect Deception” .The Danish Jews and Theresienstadt 1940-1945 by Hans Sode-Madsen presented at “Theresienstadt in der Endlosung de Judenfrage” conference. Prague, Czech Republic, 1942

“ Last Period in the History of the Terezin Ghetto” by Dr. Vojtich Biodig”
In “Theresienstadt Conference, Prague, Czech Republic, 1942

“ The Danish Jews at the Time of The Holocaust” a thesis by HELENA YAHIL
Submitted for a Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1964 to the Hebrew University in Israel.
Encyclopedia Americana , 1988 , Biography of Count Folke Bernadotte.

Finally, this paper would not have been written without the encouragement of my loving wife, Cele, who found several “oxymorons” and anomalies on our trip leading to these unanswered questions, which, hopefully, I have answered in this article.

Robert W. Case
bobcele@yahoo.com

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Highland Beach, Florida

See ADDENDUM For Pictures associated with this article.

ADDENDUM

A UNIQUE FIND IN THE TEREZIN CONCENTRATION CAMP

Hidden “Synagogue in a winecellar in Therezianstadt Concentration Camp



Photo by Robert W. Case

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