

Rescue in Denmark

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When the Nazis planned to arrest the Danish Jews, a German official named Georg Duckwitz gave warning. Word spread quickly. Ordinary Danes hid Jews in homes, shops, barns, and convents. The Germans were able to capture only 484 Jews. More than 7,000 were smuggled to safety in Sweden.

One escape route was organized by Dr. Karl Henry Køster, who recruited most of the staff of Bispebjerg Hospital to the rescue effort. Dr. Køster's most important opportunity to thwart the Germans came on October 7, 1943. On that day, Ole Secher, one of his medical students, paid him an unexpected visit.

"Our student group has discovered forty Jews hiding out in the woods south of Copenhagen," said Secher. "We've made arrangements to have them taken by truck to some fishing boats tomorrow night, but there are quite a few Germans in the woods and we need a better place for the truck to make the pickup. Would it be possible for you to hide them here in the hospital for a couple of hours until the truck arrives to get them?"

"I'm sure we could," replied Dr. Køster. "But how would you get them here?"

"We've thought of that," replied Secher. "We'll stage a mock funeral, dress the Jews in black, have them carry flowers while following a hearse through Copenhagen to the cemetery on the hospital grounds."

"But the cemetery is small," commented Køster. "You can't have the truck pick them up there. It'll be too conspicuous. We often have

Danish fishermen help Jewish refugees escape to Sweden, 1943.



Germans, including the Gestapo, on the hospital grounds. I suggest we keep them in the chapel until the truck comes for them."

"Perfect," said Secher. "We'll have the phony funeral procession go right from the front gate to the chapel. That's an excellent suggestion. You can expect the forty Jews here first thing tomorrow morning."

At 8:30 A.M. Køster received a telephone call from a distressed gatekeeper. "A whole bunch of Danes have just come in for a funeral," he said.

"Well," asked Køster, "what's so unusual about that?"

"We never have funerals here so early in the morning."

"Sometimes we do," said Køster.

"In the thirty-five years I've been gatekeeper we've never had a funeral here so early in the morning."

"But these are unusual times," said Dr. Køster. "We're under the German occupation."

"But nobody told me there was going to be a funeral here this morning," said the gatekeeper. "Why was I not informed?"

"I forgot to tell you," said Køster. "I had an emergency operation to perform last night and it must have slipped my mind. Yes, I meant to tell you to expect about forty mourners."

"There aren't forty," said the gatekeeper. "There are more than a hundred and forty!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Dr. Køster, "let them through."

He ran down to the gate to see for himself, and there, sure enough, were at least 140 "mourners." Included among them was his student Ole Secher. Dr. Køster joined the funeral procession, marching next to Secher.

"What happened?"

"Some of them told others," said Secher, "and I couldn't very well tell any of them not to come. So here they are."

Slowly the funeral entourage made its way up the tree-lined path to the chapel on top of the hospital grounds.

"Have you made arrangements for transportation for the additional refugees?" asked Køster.

"No," said Secher. "There's only one truck for the forty refugees."

"Perhaps it can make two more trips."

"No," said Secher. "The arrangements we've made with the fishermen are for only forty refugees."

Over 140 refugees entered the chapel. A couple of hours later a canvas-covered lorry entered the hospital grounds and drove up to the chapel. Forty refugees chosen at random were loaded inside the truck. As the last of the forty climbed on board, Dr. Køster noticed a Gestapo car pull up several hundred yards down the road.

"What'll we do?" he asked.

"What can we do?" replied Secher. "We'll have to hope they got there too late to notice anything." He signaled the driver to proceed.

As the truck pulled away, the canvas flap at the rear of the truck was suddenly pulled back and one of the refugee children, waving his hand, yelled, "Bye, bye, everybody!" He then let the flap close.

The Gestapo car started following the truck.

Dr. Alan Gammeltoft, who had been working with Ole Secher in rescuing the refugees, said, "They might not have seen the refugees getting into the truck from the chapel, but they must have seen the little boy waving good-bye."

"Maybe they didn't," said Secher. "They were still down the road when it happened."

"Then why are they following the truck now?" asked Dr. Gammeltoft. "We had better not take any chances. I'm going to get into my automobile and ram the Gestapo car. I'll try to make it look like an accident."

He jumped into his automobile and gave pursuit. Outside the hospital grounds, just as Dr. Gammeltoft was about to slam his foot down on the accelerator and crash into the Gestapo car, it turned down another road.

Returning to the chapel with the good news, Dr. Gammeltoft found Dr. Køster and Ole Secher engrossed in trying to decide what to do with the one hundred refugees who had been left behind. They could not remain in the chapel. What was particularly distressing was that there was no way of knowing how long they would have to be kept on the hospital grounds. Obviously it would take at least a day or two for arrangements to be made to have them taken to Sweden. Meanwhile, there were the questions of housing and food. The doctors decided that the department of the hospital with the most room was the psychiatric building. It was also one of the least likely sections to be searched by the Germans. In groups of two and three, with spacings of at least five minutes between each group, the refugees were led from the chapel to the psychiatric building.

The following morning, Dr. Køster received another telephone call from the gatekeeper. "More mourners."

It came as a complete surprise to Dr. Køster. "How many?"

"At least two hundred."

Dr. Køster wondered what the devil was wrong with Secher. Where could they possibly put two hundred additional refugees? There was no more room in the psychiatric building. After the new arrivals were in the chapel, Dr. Køster approached Head Nurse Signe Jansen.

"Do you think you might find room for some of these refugees in the nurses' quarters?"

"I'll speak to my nurses," said Nurse Jansen.

A little while later Nurse Jansen returned to Dr. Køster with a huge batch of keys. "The nurses are willing," she said. "Here are the keys to thirty apartments in the nurses' quarters. Some of the nurses will stay in their apartments with the refugees, sleeping on the couch or on the floor. Others will double up with other nurses."

The two hundred new refugees were taken to the nurses' quarters. Later that afternoon Ole Secher showed up. He knew nothing about the new arrivals. "It must have spread by word of mouth that Bispebjerg is a good place to hide," he said.

"That means we can expect even more refugees."

"I suppose so," replied Secher.

That evening, before curfew, an additional hundred refugees showed up. Dr. Køster was no longer distressed. Bispebjerg was a good place for the refugees to hide. They could sleep in the nurses' quarters and be fed from the hospital kitchen. All that remained were the arrangements that had to be made with fishermen to take the refugees across to Sweden. . . .

In a matter of days, Bispebjerg Hospital became one of the most important collection points for the refugees, with virtually the entire medical staff cooperating to save the lives of their fellow countrymen. The nurses put 130 apartments at the disposal of the refugees, and the only time Head Nurse Signe Jansen had complaints from her staff was when there were not enough refugees in the apartments. The nurses vied with each other in trying to help the Jews.

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Toward the end of October, the Germans increased their vigil at Bispebjerg Hospital, and the rescue of the Danish Jews became more difficult. Occasionally, the Germans would raid the operating theater of Bispebjerg Hospital, and when a doctor was found performing surgery on a Jewish patient, the Germans would machine-gun to death patient, doctor

and everyone else in the room assisting the operation. One of Dr. Køster's closest friends, an outstanding surgeon, was killed in this fashion.

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[One night Dr. Køster's wife warned him that Gestapo officers were waiting for him at their apartment.] Dr. Køster went straight to the home of his friend Peter Heering, owner of the well-known Cherry Heering factory outside of Copenhagen. He remained in hiding there for ten days, after which he was smuggled to Sweden aboard a schooner. In Stockholm, Køster contacted the British Embassy and offered his services to them as a doctor. The British Embassy arranged for him to get to London, like Niels Bohr,¹ in the bomb bay of an R.A.F. "Mosquito."²

While serving as a medical officer with the British armed forces, Dr. Køster was among the first to enter the Bergen Belsen concentration camp in 1945. What he saw there convinced him more graphically than anything else possibly could that he had been right in helping to save the lives of the two thousand Danish Jews.

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"Because the entire medical profession stood together as a single unit in opposition to anti-Semitism, our efforts in behalf of our countrymen of the Jewish faith were that much easier," said Dr. Køster. "We knew that the Germans couldn't arrest all of us." ∞

1 Niels Bohr: famous physicist who traveled to Sweden to persuade officials there to accept Jewish refugees from Denmark.

2 R.A.F. "Mosquito": British fighter plane.

