

## **WHEN THE DANES SAID NO TO HITLER**

### **PAGE 1 The Nightmare Begins**

Only seventy years ago Adolf Hitler was writing another bible. Point: God had decreed the Jews a Chosen People and promised His blessing on those who would bless them. Counterpoint: Hitler cursed the Jews as his misfortune. Point: God promised to love, chasten, protect and preserve the Jews—and to make their end more glorious than their beginning. Counterpoint: Hitler ordered the final solution of the Jewish problem—just murder them all. Point: Jesus Christ blew away the sin of neutrality during a war between good and evil so that there could be no "fifth amendment" in failing to get involved on behalf of suffering Jews or any other people. ("Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.") Counterpoint: Hitler's word and forces cowed his subjects and, after the pathetic "do nothing" allied conference concerning the Jews at Evian, the Nazis knew that the world would not interfere with their killing of Jews.

There was one national exception. Hitler hadn't counted on the Danes, who never subscribed to his "Mein Kampf" unholy scriptures nor to the sin of silence. They became the sole example of an entire nation rising almost as one man to protect its Jewish citizens.

Because Denmark is famous for its cheeses, you remember the old hack that "There's something rotten in Denmark." To his dismay, Hitler found that there was something right in Denmark. This story of how Danes became their brother's keeper ought to be taught in every city and hamlet of America and worldwide. Let me share some facts.

While millions of Jews in Eastern and Western Europe were being herded toward gas chambers and ovens, over ninety percent of Denmark's 8000 Jews were saved. "They were taken into the homes of Christians, hidden in church attics and cellars, admitted to hospitals under Christian names, wherever there was a safe haven, until they could be transported by fishing boat across the Sund which separated Denmark from neutral Sweden. For the remainder of the war, the Danes maintained the homes, shops, libraries, religious treasures and community institutions of the absent Jews so their neighbors could return in 1945 to begin life anew."

Jews had lived in Denmark for some 300 years, ever since King Christian VI invited Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam and Hamburg to settle in Denmark. Once in Denmark, Jews had risen to some of the highest and most noble positions in the land, not because of Gentile expediency nor Jewish craftiness, but because they were Jewish Danes of ability.

Then in April 1940, the Jewish nightmare in Denmark began. Their land was overrun by Nazis. Hitler prepared to remove Jews to the extermination camps

beyond Denmark's borders. His own Nazi warlords sent to govern Denmark cautioned him not to move on Danish Jews. Though Hitler detested Danish Jews walking free in a land he had conquered, he was warned by even the crazed monster from Auschwitz, Rudolff Mildner, that Danish Christians would never stand by idly while Jewish blood was spilled.

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### **PAGE 2 When the Church did not play chicken**

From the political throne to the pulpit to the pew, Denmark took its stand. When King Christian X was asked about the "Jewish question" he formally replied: "There is no Jewish question in this country. There are only my people." When reproached by the Nazis for his "negligence of the Jewish problem," the king devastated them with, "Gentlemen, since we have never considered ourselves to be inferior to the Jews, we have no problem!" Before he was made a virtual prisoner of war, the king even ordered synagogues that Nazis had burned be repaired at his cost.

Finally, the Nazis decided that they would have to move on the Jews without Danish help. Transport ships with S.S. troops arrived to begin the raids. Hitler demanded that Denmark be "Judenfrei" (free of Jews). But he hadn't reckoned on the Danish pulpit and pew. To fight Danish political power on the throne was bad enough. To face a theology where Christians were prepared to back up their beliefs with their lives was worse.

Let "The Miracle of Denmark" account given by the National Conference of Christians and Jews publication take you back in time. "All across the land of Denmark, the official church of Denmark (Lutheran) took its stand. Pastors stood to share with their congregations the message that their Danish bishops had sent to the German authorities through the heads of the government departments: 'Wherever Jews are persecuted as such on racial or religious grounds, the Christian church is duty-bound to protest against this action.

Because we can never forget that the Lord of the Christian church, Jesus Christ, was born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary according to God's promise to His Chosen People, Israel. The history of the Jewish people before the birth of Jesus contains the preparation for the salvation God has prepared for all mankind in Christ. This is shown by the fact that the Old Testament is part of our Bible.

Persecution of the Jews conflicts with that recognition and love of man that are a consequence of the gospel which the Church of Jesus Christ was founded to preach. Christ is no respecter of persons, and He has taught us to see that every human life is precious in the eyes of God...

Despite differing religious views, we shall therefore struggle to ensure the continued guarantee to our Jewish brothers and sisters of the same freedom we ourselves treasure more than life itself. We will therefore unambiguously declare our allegiance to the doctrine that bids us obey God more than man." The stage was set. The fight was on!

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### **PAGE 3 From Throne to Pulpit to Pew**

Seventy years ago, Adolph Hitler tested the world—and the Church—to see if there would be massive protest and action against his mass murder of Jews. While individual Christians risked their lives in opposition to Hitler's hatred for Jews, the Church worldwide was deathly silent. A few puffs of protest. But no call to mammoth and rousing action.

The exception was the Church of Denmark. We learned how Denmark decided, from the throne to the pulpit to the pew, to oppose Nazi elimination of Danish Jews. Word was sent to Hitler from the Danish church that Danes would have to obey God rather than man.

Suddenly, the Jews of Denmark just disappeared. Not to German transport ships and extermination sites. Danish Jews seemed to be plucked out of thin air by Danish Christians. The National Conference of Christians and Jews in New York states in their article "The Miracle of Denmark": "There had been no plan, but suddenly an entire nation seemed to know exactly what to do and set out to do it. Taxi drivers drove through the residential sections stopping at every Jewish home to warn them. Hospitals released Jewish patients and then re-admitted them under Christian names. Ambulances picked up Jews and brought them to hospitals for hiding. And ambulances spirited them away when a hiding place or passage on a ship was secured. Danish storekeepers, farmers, businessmen and housewives all took Jews into their homes, their stores, their cellars, their attics, their barns. By nightfall practically all of the 8,000 Jews had simply vanished into thin air."

One farmer, who took in a rabbi and his entire family, even kept kosher during the long months out of respect for the rabbi that the farmer was risking his life to save. There would be no Christian cop-out in Denmark. Not after the Pastoral Letter from the Danish Bishops had been read by every Lutheran pastor in Denmark—instructing Danes to protect Jews. And who was responsible for getting word to those pastors when Hitler's forces controlled the mails? Seminary students were enlisted as couriers in taking this message of action love on behalf of the Jews across the land. "Jorgen Glenthoi, who later became a pastor, was a 21 year old theological student-courier in 1943. On a visit to the United States, he spoke of those days: 'I remember clearly how much joy and satisfaction we felt and good conscience that now we would be able to do real things against the Nazis and for the people who were in trouble. As Christians we never forgot that Jesus was born a Jew, and therefore we must help our fellow Jewish citizens, for they are our countrymen.'"



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### **PAGE 4 The Penetrating Question**

The Nazis made their raids on the Jews—but Danish Christians had been there first. The German vessel, *Wartheland*, capable of carrying more than one thousand Jewish prisoners, departed Copenhagen with only 202. Another vessel left empty. The following day, Adolph Eichmann was sent to solve the riddle. Though he believed it would not be possible for Danes to hide their Jewish countrymen much longer, he left Denmark a few days later in a rage. Only 472 of Denmark's 8,000 Jews had been arrested. These were sent to Theresienstadt—but even here were not allowed to be sent to their deaths. Danish citizens kept up continuous pressure on the Nazis, demanding a report on the welfare of their Danish citizens. Within a year and a half, all of the captured Jews, except for 52 who had died of age or illness, were released. And the thousands of others who had been hidden by courageous Christians were now smuggled safely into neutral Sweden.

When the 420 Jews were released from Theresienstadt, they were driven by the Nazis into the Danish capital of Copenhagen. Here the buses were surrounded by hundreds of thousands of Danes carrying welcome signs that read, "Velkommen Til Danmark!" The NCCJ reported that Jews on the buses stood up and sang the Danish National Anthem. Only when angry Nazis fired their rifles and threatened to return the Jews to Germany did the crowd fall silent, still waving their flags and throwing kisses to the Jews.

In Germany, Poland, Austria, Hungary and other countries, Jews had perished by the millions. Even in Italy, France and the Netherlands, Jews had died. While there were individual heroes who had acted, many paying with their lives, most of these individuals had to care for Jews without the support of the organized churches of the lands or the churches' appointed leaders. The Danish church had been a scriptural exception.

The NCCJ article closed with a penetrating question: "If I had been a Christian in Denmark in 1943, would I have cared enough, and dared enough, to risk my own life and the lives of my family to save the lives of my countrymen who were Jews?" That question is not impossible to answer. Hatred of Jews and Israel is with us—and growing. Sooner or later it may rear its ugly head in our own communities. May we give a Danish answer!

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### PAGE 5 When All The Closets Open

I wrote this poem in 1985. It is as relevant today as it was then.

They were tightly locked for forty years:  
Closets with dark secrets that revealed us for  
who we really were.  
And, oh the lies we guarded behind those pad-  
locked doors, as we smiled and said,  
"Ours is not to mull over the past; we must  
move on—to the future."

No wonder we shook our heads in mock  
disgust  
At those who would not let us forget the  
Holocaust—  
When the wholesale slaughter of Jews was at  
fever pitch And we tried to blame it only on  
the nazi killers themselves.

We were afraid our closets would be  
discovered,  
And from those dark, sunless hiding places  
truth would escape—and start talking.  
Yes, truth would scream or whimper or  
whisper that it took more than nazis to murder  
Jews.  
It took free men—out of reach of Hitler— to  
cause six million final gasps.

But the locks and hinges weren't strong  
enough to keep what was in those closets from  
escaping.  
For along with our lies of, "There was nothing  
we could do"—lies content to exist forever in  
dark closets;  
We had tried to put truth in a pitch black  
corner  
And ask it to remain there—silent.  
But truth can be stifled, squelched and  
suffocated,  
And yet become pregnant with its own  
inherent life  
And demand a hearing to tell what we try to  
hide,  
As we shrink back in shame at our open  
closets.

What is that awful stench coming from the  
statesman's closet?  
Tales of unbombed railroad tracks to  
Auschwitz?  
Of Jewish children sent to their deaths,  
rather than even a corner of our vast, empty  
places in America?  
Of State Department lies and Presidential  
indifference?  
And the open closets of the educator, the  
social worker, the cultural leader,  
Those who spoke for justice and hope and  
concern  
Were now eerily, deathly silent as Jews wept  
and wailed and wasted away,  
While the world pretended not to notice.  
There were Jewish closets, too:  
Closets that wanted to be sealed from prying  
fingers and peering eyes;  
Jews who were safe in America  
and the good life,  
And refused to rock the boat by demanding  
fellow Jews be saved—at any cost.  
But the saddest closet of all is the Church's  
closet.  
For the secrets are out on a trumpetless clergy  
and somnolent pew  
Who salved our fearful and uncaring  
consciences  
By pontificating Jewish fate as "due to their  
rejection of Christ."  
Called to bless Jews, we cursed them  
through indifference.  
Called to comfort, we let others lay on them  
the impossibly hideous,  
While we sang our hymns and preached our  
sermons...



And passed by on the other side.  
But Jesus, who Himself came as a Jew,  
Told us nothing could be covered that  
would not be revealed.  
And things hidden in the closets of  
carelessness and cowardice  
Are now proclaimed upon the housetops—  
fifty years after the closets were locked.

And the lesson these closets give to all Is  
the warning that people still suffer as  
victims both near and far away.  
And that each of us will answer for what we  
could have done— should have done—  
When truth has the final word and all the  
closets are opened

