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**WELFARE, REFUGEES AND RESCUE:
DENMARK AND THE JEWISH QUESTION FROM 1933 TO 1945**

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Abstract

The favorable image of Denmark as a safe haven for Jews during the Second World War has during the past decade gone through changes, following new trends and tendencies within both the scholarship of a new generation of historians and a new European political culture, influencing the way national history is being interpreted. New books about a less flattering side of Denmark's history during the occupation have tainted the previously pristine image and have fuelled renewed controversy about the hitherto widely accepted 'policy of cooperation' raising questions about whether it was the wisest path a small occupied country like Denmark could follow, given the circumstances.

This paper, based on a presentation at the Remarque Institute, New York University, in October 2007, examines the relations between the restrictive Danish policy during the 1930s toward German Jewish refugees, the establishment of a national welfare state, and the rescue of Danish Jews in October 1943. Denmark has been hailed within the field of Holocaust research as one of the few countries that managed to rescue its Jewish population. The Danish rescue in October 1943 stands as an exemplary model for how a democracy, despite everything, takes action under Nazi occupation. Around seven thousand Danish Jews were saved from deportation to the concentration camps. But how did liberal, democratic Denmark react before the war toward the very un-liberal phenomenon in neighboring Germany, the persecution of the Jews? And how should we understand the connection between Denmark's restrictive refugee policy in the 1930s and the rescue of the Danish Jews today?

Welfare, Refugees and Rescue: Denmark and the Jewish Question from 1933 to 1945

PRESENTATION, REMARQUE INSTITUTE, NYU, OCTOBER 19, 2007

First, let me thank the Remarque Institute for giving me the opportunity to come to New York and share some of my ideas and results with you at this seminar.

The following presentation is based on my book *The Darker Side of Democracy: Refugees and Human Rights in Denmark Before the Holocaust* ('Demokratiets skyggeside: Flygtninge og menneskerettigheder i Danmark før Holocaust'), published in 2005 as the result of several years of research at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) on refugee policy in Denmark during the 1930s.

My book is one of four volumes on Danish refugee policy from 1933 to 1945, published as the result of a major survey carried out by the Department for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the DIIS. The Refugee Project, as it was called, was commissioned by the then Social Democratic Prime Minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen as a response to the national debate concerning Denmark's share of responsibility for the Holocaust.

In early 2000, just after the first Stockholm International Forum in January, an article in the daily *Berlingske Tidende* argued that the Danish authorities during the Second World War refused 21 Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany entry into the country, and sent them back to an unknown fate, ultimately meaning death in Auschwitz. The story generated considerable controversy, and the political response was a government-financed investigation into the official Danish policy towards German-Jewish refugees.

Considering the well-known history of the rescue of the Danish Jews in October 1943, it may in some ways seem odd that Denmark should also examine its response to the killings of European Jews during the Second World War and its national share of guilt. To quote just one author who wrote on the Jewish rescue, Nechama Tec:

Denmark, for example, represents a very special case: the conditions for the collective rescue of Jews were favorable in virtually every regard, and the Danes took

full advantage of them. First, Danish Jews numbered only 8,000, making up a mere 0.2 percent of Denmark's total population. Second, this small group was highly assimilated. Third, the Nazis defined the Danes as a superior 'Aryan' race. Partly because of this definition, they were left in charge of their own political destiny retaining the pre-war government. One effect of Denmark's local autonomy was that the Jews were left alone (Tec, 1986, p. 5-10).

Tec, who bases her description of the Danish circumstances primarily on Raul Hilberg and Lucy Davidowicz, authors of two of the classics in Holocaust literature, also states that it was 'precisely the minimal interference of the Nazis in the internal affairs of Denmark that made the idea of a righteous Denmark superfluous.' Circumstances changed, however, in the fall of 1943, when a plan for the deportation of the Jews of Denmark was concocted in Berlin. For, as Tec writes, 'the Danes refused to obey.'

According to Tec, Jews in Denmark were considered Danes, and therefore the Danes refused to hand over their Jews, even when ordered to do so. Instead, a heroic rescue action took place during the first days of October, when the Danish underground in cooperation with other Danes relocated the country's Jewish population to Sweden. The Danish resistance to the Nazi authority even saved the 481 Danish Jews who were actually being deported to Theresienstadt. Compared to the treatment of other deportees, the Danes in Theresienstadt experienced far better conditions, and were not transferred to Auschwitz, as was the fate of many others. When explaining the reason for the Danes' protection of their Jews, Tec emphasizes a low degree of anti-Semitism and 'a strong adherence to democratic principles.'

Yet this extremely favorable image of Denmark as a kind of safe haven for Jews has gone through changes during the past decade, following new trends and tendencies within both the scholarship of a new generation of historians and a new European political culture, influencing the way national history is being interpreted. New books about a less flattering side of Denmark's history during the occupation have tainted the previously pristine image and have fuelled renewed controversy about the hitherto widely accepted 'policy of cooperation' raising questions about whether it was the wisest path a small occupied country like Denmark could follow, given the circumstances.

The current historical debate in Denmark can be seen as taking place between two main schools: the moralists and the realists. Those who maintain a practical view as to what was possible for Denmark (comprising the older generation), represent one side of the debate, and those who hold a more moralistic view as to what Denmark could have done and how Den-

mark should have behaved, the other. I think this division reflects how differently history can serve a society in the present, and how things that seem just and fair to one generation, can be considered opportunistic by another.

The Danish case, like so many others, shows to what extent the Holocaust as a scholarly field has been dramatically Europeanized during the past ten to fifteen years, raising new questions and provoking renewed debate in national historiography. I will come back to this issue later, because it can be explained by changes within European political culture following the fall of the Berlin wall, and because it can also be explained by mounting interest in the Holocaust.

The thesis of my book places me somewhere in the middle, between the realists and the moralists. The thesis argues that Denmark followed a very restrictive refugee policy towards German Jewish refugees during the 1930s, not because of widespread anti-Semitism in the Danish government or society, or simply in order to please the Germans, but rather because of simultaneous efforts made by policy makers and social-liberal politicians to establish what later became a national welfare state.

Although the term, welfare state, was not used at the time, important steps were taken during this period towards building a universalistic welfare state with a high degree of social planning, which aimed to improve not only the living standards of the population, but also, through social engineering, the general quality of it. This effort, which I call prophylactic social policy, had the goal of creating a better population through progressive social planning -- it really had a qualitative dimension -- and avoiding future social problems.

At the same time Hitler was creating a new refugee problem for Germany's neighbors with his anti-Jewish laws, the Scandinavian countries were in the middle of a socio-economic debate about demographics and declining birth rates. This issue had been a general European concern since the First World War, especially in countries like France, Germany, and Great Britain, but it was first put on the political agenda in Scandinavia in 1934 by the Swedish social democrats Alva and Gunnar Myrdal with their classic work 'Kris i befolkningsfrågan' (Crisis in the Population Question).

Gunnar Myrdal was an economist of the Stockholm School, and, together with his wife Alva Myrdal, was a highly influential social democratic intellectual, at least during the 1930s and 1940s. Later, Alva Myrdal became Swedish Minister of Disarmament at a time when Sweden was one of the important players in international politics – or at least thought it was. And Gunnar Myrdal was internationally renowned for his 1944 study *An American Dilemma: The*

Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, which influenced the 1954 Supreme Court decision to outlaw racial segregation in public schools.

When I initiated my study on refugee policy in 2000, my knowledge of the Holocaust and my expertise in anti-Semitism and Jewish history did not exceed what could be expected from an average historian trained in 20th Century European History. However, I did know something about social policy during the 1930s and the ideas developed throughout the decade about a progressive, caring, and protective national welfare state.

Before delving into Holocaust studies, I dealt with the relationship between state and society in 19th and 20th Century Europe. My dissertation from 1999, 'Social ingeniørkunst i Danmark: Familie, stat og politik fra 1900 til 1945' (Social Engineering in Denmark: Family, State and Politics from 1900 to 1945) describes the ideas behind social planning that emerged in Northern Europe as a response to the First World War and were later further developed by several European governments. As part of my research, I also came across the relative influence of fascist ideas on social thinking, not only among right-wingers, but also in social democratic circles (Banke 1999).

Therefore, I proposed a study for the Refugee Project, examining the development of national welfare with a view to refugees. I wanted to see how these two topics intermingled in the general discussions at that time (Banke 2001).

My initial inquiry involved how Denmark could maintain a restrictive policy towards "German-Jewish emigrants" (a misleading term used officially and publically for people who were, in fact, political refugees) allowing only approximately 2,000 to enter Denmark between 1933 and 1940, most during the first two years of Nazi rule, while policy makers and demographers were simultaneously debating the future of the total population.¹

In my research, I read headlines like 'Will Denmark become a nation of geriatrics?', referring to the declining birth rate, and articles suggesting that 'Sweden will have to import Danes.' If

¹ In April 1940 there were 2.198 refugees in Denmark. 302 were German social democrats and intellectuals. 142 communists. 1.680 were Jewish refugees, divided into three main groups: 377 Hechaluzs with a temporary permission to stay to learn agriculture and prepare for Palestine, 265 were Alijah-children aged 13-16 years, and 1.000 Jewish refugees coming to Denmark on individual basis. See Kirchoff & Rünitz 2007, p. 35-37 & p. 419-431.

the declining population was considered a looming threat, and if the prospects of a nation getting older and older haunted the public debate, why not let German Jewish refugees in?

Of course, this was a rhetorical question, and I could easily come up with an explanation, as had scholars before me, citing the economic crisis, unemployment, and, to a certain extent, the fear of anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, I wanted to combine these two types of social questions, immigrants and welfare, because to me they are crucial to understanding the European nation-states. Who were considered members of the national community? In what way did the emerging national welfare state respond to people who did not belong? Could they become 'belongers'? What was the reaction in neighboring Denmark to the persecution of Jews in Germany? At a certain level, this question is unique to Denmark, since the relationship between Germany and Denmark was based on mutual esteem and admiration, but also on fear, anxiety, and feelings of inferiority.

You may notice that my way of framing this research made it into a general examination of how the state acted when confronted with a new group of immigrants, and how it defined itself in relation to this new group of 'others'. I was lucky to be part of a larger research team, which allowed me to do this kind of study.

My colleague Lone Rünitz would do the archival work in the Justice Department; aided by a group of research assistants, she went through 80,000 files on foreigners coming to Denmark from 1933 to 1945. Among the 80,000, approximately 8,000 left Germany as a result of political, religious, or racial persecution. It is very uncertain if any Sinti or Romas at all came to Denmark during the period. Most of the refugees were political, either communists or social democrats, and Jews. Not surprisingly, several were both, especially during the first wave, that is from 1933 to 1935 (Rünitz 2005, p.13-15).

What my book describes, then, is not so much the exact treatment of the refugees by the Danish government, but the public debate about Jews, about refugees, and about the so-called 'Jewish question', which was discussed among writers and intellectuals in the more politically correct circles. And finally, whether anti-Semitism was an issue at all.

Since one of the main themes permeating discussions regarding the Jewish refugees concerned Palestine and the idea of a Jewish homeland as a solution to the refugee problem, I dedicate one to this very important subject. The way Jewish settlement in Palestine during the 1930s was described and praised in Danish newspapers and journals shows how ethnically based the idea of community was, and how, according to this way of thinking, not only Jews, but also

Europe as a whole would be better off with a Jewish homeland similar to historic homelands like the Danish, which are based on a shared culture, religion, history and language. Some writers would even highlight Denmark and Switzerland as the two most original *folksgemeinschaften* after Israel, the original Jewish homeland.

So, what did I find out? Was my approach a fair one within the field of Holocaust studies? This concern actually prompted serious deliberations. The more I delved into the history of the refugees, and thus, by extension, into the Holocaust, the further away I got from my original thesis, which concerned the relationship between the creation of a progressive and universalized welfare state and the treatment of German Jewish refugees.

I found out that, to a certain degree, the social thinkers and policy makers inspired by socialist ideas were not trained, or willing, to see 'the Jewish question' as more than a social and economic problem. The research I conducted into the debate among the progressive left-wingers uncovered that the 'Jewish problem' was considered superfluous, contrived by the reactionaries, and as something that would disappear the moment a classless society came into existence. When that happened, all social and economic inequalities would vanish, and so would anti-Semitism and the 'Jewish question'. Both were regarded as mere products of capitalist society.

This reaction was, of course, very romantic, but it shows how the persecution of Germans with a Jewish background was not fully understood in these circles. I believe that this is still one of the crucial questions within Holocaust studies, i.e. the repercussions of anti-Jewish policies as shown by both Raul Hilberg and Saul Friedländer.

However, it was among the same libertarian circles in the Danish public sphere that I would find opposition towards the government's restrictive refugee policy. Unsurprisingly, the resistance was driven by a strong aversion towards the social democrats and their government, whom the left-wingers, or 'libertarians,' as they would call themselves, saw as renegades and outright class traitors, working as lackeys for the Nazi government in Germany. The social-liberal government was considered a front for 'the exploitatious dictatorship of capitalist society'. In that sense, the German refugees became part of an internal discussion within the labor movement about how to achieve a socialist society - through reform and negotiations, or through revolution.

What, then, could I conclude from a broader perspective? Was my research framework suitable for the subject? And how could I solve the problem with Holocaust studies and my

thesis? Could a description of how the emerging welfare state responded to a refugee crisis be combined with Holocaust studies? This was a big dilemma for me, and I am still not sure I have solved it.

One of my answers would be that since the Holocaust, in my view, has become a paradigm, it would be reasonable also to view Holocaust studies as a unique prism for understanding 20th Century European History, which is in fact what I did in my book. I used the Holocaust as a prism to discern some of the crucial facets of developing the European nation-states.

According to British historian Tony Kushner, a special field within Holocaust research has emerged during the past decades focusing on the liberal democracies' reaction to the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Most of this research concerns the refugee policies in the individual countries and how they responded at the political and administrative levels. This area of research studies the reaction of the bureaucracy to a refugee crisis, and how the solution of this crisis depended on the international situation (Kushner 1994; Morse, 1968; Wyman, 1968; Friedman, 1973; Feingold 1970; Sherman 1973; Gilbert 1981; Moore 1986).

Important political decisions must also be seen in light of the circumstances under which these decisions are made. These circumstances not only include the international events, but also the national contexts and the attitudes of the population. Especially in a liberal democracy, an understanding of the popular reactions can contribute to a more complete picture of the reality in which politicians acted. In trying to explain the reaction of the liberal democracies to the Nazi persecution of Jews, including the individual refugee policies and what affected them, analysis of the political and administrative level must be complemented by a study of public attitudes. What did people actually think about the Jewish refugees? What did the politicians need to consider in their political and administrative choices?

However, in contrast to the United States and Great Britain, where opinion polls were carried out and could be used as indicators of public attitudes, no such system existed for the Danish population. Gallup polling had not yet been established in Scandinavia, so in order to conceptualize the *Zeitgeist*, so to speak, I used what Timothy Garton Ash has labeled 'history of the present', namely writings from journalists and others describing what was going on at the time (Garton Ash 2000). I went through vast amounts of newspaper material, journals and books and combined these readings with research in the archive.

Very early on, the Danish press was placed under restrictions by foreign minister Peter Munch, who encouraged Denmark's newspaper and magazine editors to handle the 'emigrant

question' with the utmost caution. This caution served to constrain the emergence of a genuine debate about refugee policy, just as it hampered the actual flow of news from Germany.

As a result, the refugee question could not become the kind of topic which engages the public today. One could be shocked over the Nazis' persecution of the Jews, but there was little coverage of Danish government policy toward the refugees. As I explained earlier, the refugees were labelled as emigrants, both by the German regime and the Danish authorities and aid committees, and this is also what they were called in the public sphere. This distinction only served to underscore the lack of recognition of the refugee problem, which Germany imposed on other countries at the time. The term 'emigrant' was in fact directly misleading, inasmuch as the term 'emigration' connotes a voluntary departure from a country. Whether they were social democrats, communists, or Jews, all had been forced to flee as a result of the political conditions in Germany. They were all political refugees, not emigrants.

In the same way as the refugees were euphemistically referred to as 'emigrants', Danish refugee policy was not discussed in the public sphere. The Danish government maintained a very low profile, and this was reflected in the reduced coverage of the refugee question in the media of that time. Under these circumstances, opposition to the existing policy could not be anything but sporadic. Such opposition was limited to the 'libertarian' circles, as mentioned. These were the public dissenters, opposing both the Nazi regime and the restrictive refugee policy. But it existed, and made its views felt in the discussion of the 'Jewish question' and of the Nazis' persecution of the Jews.

As mentioned earlier, Denmark has been hailed within the field of Holocaust research as one of the few countries that managed to rescue its Jewish population. The Danish rescue in October 1943 stands as an exemplary model for how a democracy, despite everything, takes action under Nazi occupation. Around seven thousand Danish Jews were saved from deportation to the concentration camps.

But how did liberal, democratic Denmark react before the war toward the very un-liberal phenomenon in neighboring Germany, the persecution of the Jews? And how should we understand the connection between Denmark's restrictive refugee policy in the 1930s and the rescue of the Danish Jews today? Is there any connection at all?

I believe there is, and it has to do with the emerging welfare state and the well-defined national community. The very system which in the 1930s was so busy protecting itself and its own

by keeping Jewish refugees out was the same system that during the Jews' flight to Sweden cared for their belongings back in Denmark (Bak 2006).

As Tony Kushner writes, the Nazi persecution of the Jews was an attack on one of the most fundamental features of liberalism, namely the freedom of the individual. An essential aspect of the liberal credo, especially in British and American liberalism, was the idea of tolerance (Kushner 1994).

Nevertheless, the reaction of the liberal democracies toward the persecution of the Jews was full of contradictions and very complex. It was precisely the strong belief in liberal tolerance which prevented democracies such as the United States and Great Britain from conducting a more refugee-friendly policy.

The belief in the infallibility of liberalism and in the system itself, i.e. the state bureaucracy, led to complacency and passivity regarding the issue of the Jewish refugees. The liberal system could not err, and, in this case, acted ostensibly as it had in all other cases, both rationally and justly. The problem, however, was that the persecution of the Jews was both irrational and unjust, so that aiding them required a completely different mindset in terms of liberal tolerance.

In this sense, the refugee issue clashed with what sociologist Max Weber has described as one of the most characteristic features of the modern state, the bureaucracy, where the system's rules and regulations have a higher priority than humanitarian considerations.² This characteristic feature of modern bureaucracy is prevalent in many of the cases described by Lone Rünitz and her research team (Rünitz 2001).

Reason triumphed over emotions, *realpolitik* over humanitarian considerations and charity. Some people were surprised by the Nazis' actions and attempted to explain the 'Jewish problem' in Germany by the country's complex nature as a nation. Others ultimately came to assign Jews a part of the blame -- had the Jews been better at integrating themselves into the nation-states, there would presumably have been no 'Jewish problem' in the first place. In

² On Max Weber and modern state bureaucracy, see *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1921. See also Arthur Mitzman 1970, *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber*; Robert J. Holton and Bryan P. Turner (eds.) 1989, *Max Weber on Economy and Society*; Scott Lash and Sam Whimster (eds.) 1987, *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*; Bryan P. Turner 1992, *Max Weber from History to Modernity*.

other words, there was some truth to the accusations that the Jews controlled all the money and ran the world.

In this sense, liberal tolerance had its own limitations. The liberal democracies viewed the Jewish minority in terms of how good they were at assimilating the bourgeois national values. In Denmark as well, the discussion about 'the Jewish question' reflected the extent to which Jews were viewed as a part of the national community.

For Denmark, the 1930s was the decade during which a new social contract was finally established. Denmark became a national community consolidated around the state as the all-embracing instrument of social security. The 1930s saw the groundwork laid for the post-war welfare state, even though two decades would pass before the 'welfare state' concept first appeared in the public debate. The rudiments of a social security system, based upon universalism and preventive measures, were already present in the 1930s. And it was this system that confronted the German-Jewish refugees escaping Nazi persecution.

The welfare state can be interpreted as a way of managing modernization and the break-up of the village community and its replacement by life in the big city. The welfare state is a modern form of social patronage, where the state, in the same manner as the feudal lord, takes care of its populace. According to this new social contract, the state offers social security in exchange for individual contributions thrown into the common pool, administered by the state bureaucracy.

The progressive economists and politicians of the interwar period used much of their energy to develop and disseminate precisely this idea and thus could not immediately grasp the repercussions of the refugee problem that the Nazis had created with their policies.

They could condemn it, they could distance themselves from it, but they could not bring refugees into the new social patronage model. The refugee lay outside their field of vision.

Yet, if one examines an economic analysis of the 'Jewish problem' at the time, it becomes clear how much immigrating Jews were placed outside the economic community in the nation-state. We can see how Jews were considered a problem, and we can see how many people really wanted Jews, especially the East European Jews, out of Europe in order to avoid a social problem.

The idea of justice that was pursued in the crisis-ridden Denmark of the 1930s was a social justice. It was aimed at the population as a national collective. That was as far as rights-based thinking had developed in Denmark. It was limited to ensuring social rights for the national collective's own citizens, and this necessarily led to limitations for those who were not viewed as members. The idea that non-members of the collective, i.e. non-citizens, also had rights – what we today call human rights – had not yet penetrated into the Danish social justice discourse.

The period between the First and Second World War reveals efforts made by several states to integrate the citizens into a social whole and make them a part of a community where all are economically and socially equal; these efforts are especially prominent in Northern and Western Europe. It was a norm meant to ensure stability and welfare and consolidate the community around the common foundation, around the state. However, the welfare states which evolved after the Second World War were based on homogenous national states which had already constituted themselves as cultural nations. These states were based on what nationalism researcher Anthony D. Smith calls 'ethnic nations' (Smith 2003; Smith 2000; Gellner 1994; Hettne, Sörlin & Østergård 1998).

The welfare state takes as its point of departure the principle that it can only be effectuated on an exclusionary basis. We can therefore examine how this exclusionary principle began to operate, whether it was immediately before the war or after the war, or even earlier.

The important point here is that the social economic thinking of the 1930s about an all-embracing, equality-based state – whose primary task was to prevent social discontent – led to a system which viewed refugees in a rigid, restrictive manner, based, as it was, on the principle of protecting the country's own citizens and its national labor market.

Hence Denmark had to be protected against immigrant labor, even if these immigrants were, in fact, refugees from a totalitarian system, fleeing discrimination, persecution, and eventually deportation as well. In this sense, the national community that had been the foundation for the welfare state turned out to be a very closed community, unable to meet the challenges of ethnic and religious persecution in a neighboring state.

The interesting point here is that the exclusion of Jewish refugees to Denmark was not based on Danish racism, it was based on a Danish welfare ideology. Danes sought to be both humanistic and exclusionary at the same time, which is one of the many paradoxes in the history of the Holocaust.

The Danish state's administration of immigrants and refugees during the 1930s says something decisive about the fundamental nature of a national community. It reveals something about who were viewed as members, and how central liberal values such as tolerance and individual freedom were interpreted.

The encounter with the German Jews as 'the Other' became the litmus test of how far this liberal credo extended. That there were limitations to liberalism in the 1930s only emphasizes the degree to which liberal democracy was actually in crisis in Denmark during this period.

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