

### 4.3. A Nation United

*Denmark was one of only a few European nations to actively work to save its Jewish citizens from deportation to Nazi concentration, labor, and death camps. In this reading, a man named Leo Goldberger, who was only 13 years old at the time, relates how his family got from Copenhagen to safety in Sweden.*

*Source:* Margot Stern Strom, “Reading 13, A Nation United, Part 8, Bystanders and Rescuers” in *Holocaust and Human Behavior Resource Book* (Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Inc., 1994). Excerpt from Leo Goldberger in *Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, edited by C. Rittner and S. Myers (New York University Press, 1986), pp. 92-95. Both used with permission.

The Germans conquered Denmark in the spring of 1940. Although Hitler allowed the prewar government to stay in power and kept only a token military force in the nation, the Danes deeply resented the occupation of their country and some struck back with acts of sabotage, riots, and strikes. In the summer of 1943, the Nazis decided to retaliate. They limited the power of King Christian X, forced the Danish government to resign, and disbanded the Danish army. They also ordered the arrest of a number of Christian and Jewish leaders.

Leo Goldberger’s father, the chief cantor at Copenhagen’s Great Synagogue, was among those the Nazis planned to arrest. They arrived at the family’s apartment before dawn one morning. Goldberger recalls what happened next:

My father came into my brother’s and my room and whispered that the Germans were outside and that he would not under any circumstances open the door. For me, this was the most terror-filled moment I had ever experienced. The insistent knocks of rifle butts. Fearing that they would break down the door any minute, I implored my father to open it, but he was determined not to. Then in the nick of time, we heard our upstairs neighbor’s voice telling the German soldiers that we—the Goldbergers—were away for the summer, and that three o’clock in the morning was in any case no time to make such a racket.

Although the Germans posted a guard outside the building before they left, the family managed to escape. By the middle of September, the crisis seemed to be over and the family returned to Copenhagen. A few weeks later, the Goldbergers and other Jews in Denmark learned that the Germans were planning to round them all up for deportation. The news came from Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German diplomat stationed in Norway. When he received secret orders to prepare four cargo ships for transporting Danish Jews, he passed on the information to leaders in the resistance. They, in turn, informed Copenhagen’s Jewish community. The Jews were urged to hide and then prepare for evacuation to Sweden. Goldberger, who was just thirteen years old at the time, remembers:

Where to hide? Our first night was spent as guests of a wealthy Jewish family who lived in Bedbaek, on the coast some 35 miles away. To our chagrin the family took off for Sweden during the night without even telling us or their Jewish refugee maid. Apparently my father had been asked by our host whether he wanted to chip in for a boat to take us all to Sweden but had been forced to decline. He simply did not have that kind of money. Near panic, but determined to “get tough” and to find a way somehow, my father took a train back to the city; he needed to borrow money, perhaps get an advance on his salary and to see about contacts for passage on a fishing boat. As luck would have it, on the train a woman whom he knew only slightly recognized him and inquired about his obviously agitated facial expression. He confided our plight. Without a moment’s hesitation the lady promised to take care of everything. She would meet my father at the main railroad station with all the information about the arrangements within a few hours. It was the least she could do, she said, in return for my father’s participation some years back in a benefit concert for her organization— “The Women’s League for Peace and Freedom.”

True to her word, she met my father later that day and indicated that all was arranged. The money would be forthcoming from a pastor, Henry Rasmussen.... The sum was a fairly large one—about 25,000 Danish crowns, 5,000 per person, a sum which was more than my father’s annual salary. (Though it was ostensibly a loan, I should add that Pastor Rasmussen refused repayment after the war.) The next step was to head for a certain address near the coast, less than an hour from Copenhagen. After hurriedly getting some things together from our apartment—a few clothes, some treasured papers and family photos, and in my case, [a] newly acquired police flashlight—we were off by taxi to our unknown hosts for the night and our uncertain destiny.

The following night we were standing, huddled in some low bushes along the beach near Dragur, an outskirt of Copenhagen’s island of Amager. It was a bitter cold October night. My youngest brother, barely three years old, had been given a sleeping pill to keep him quiet. My brave and stoic little mother was clutching her bag with socks and stockings to be mended which she had taken along for reasons difficult to fathom rationally. We were anxiously and eagerly waiting for the promised light signal. As we were poised to move toward the signal, I could not help but wonder why this was happening. What had we ever done to be in hiding, escaping like criminals? Where would it all end? And why in God’s name did the signal not appear? Then finally the lights flashed. We were off. Wading straight into the sea, we walked out some 100 feet through icy water, in water that reached up to my chest. My father carried my two small brothers on his arm. My mother held on to her bag of socks. And I clutched my precious flashlight. My older brother tried valiantly to carry the suitcases but finally had to drop them in the water. We were hauled aboard the boat, directed in whispers to lie concealed in the cargo area, there to stretch out covered by smelly canvases; in the event the German patrols were to inspect the boat, we would be passed over as fish. There seemed to have been some 20 other Jews aboard. As we proceeded out toward open sea my father chanted a muted prayer from the Psalms.

A few hours later, bright lights and the pastoral scenery of Skane along the coast outline of Sweden appeared. Wonderful, peaceful Sweden. A welcoming haven, never to be forgotten, where we remained until our return to Denmark at the end of the war in 1945.