

“Denmark 1943”: Using Music to Teach Holocaust Rescue

David H. Lindquist

Addressing the topic of rescue efforts poses particular challenges for teachers planning Holocaust curricula. While the issue leads many students to develop an engaged empathy with rescuers, teachers must avoid overemphasizing what was a limited occurrence within the overall Holocaust.

The idea of goodness makes rescue appealing to students, but creates a pedagogical dilemma for teachers. Studying the Holocaust involves examining humanity's starkest aspects, and students who confront the evil that is central to the event rightfully seek relief from that confrontation. The Holocaust, however, provides little relief from encounters with death and destruction. Students thus gravitate to stories of rescue as a sign of hope, a reassurance that right will triumph in the end. This was not the case in the Holocaust, of course, yet rescue is a vital part of Holocaust history.

This article presents a plan for using music to teach about the Danish Rescue. It discusses the need to contextualize rescue within the Holocaust's larger story; overviews the rescue; introduces the song “Denmark 1943”; and provides notes and details about the lesson plan. The song's lyrics, a list of names and places mentioned in the song, and a discussion guide are also included.

Contextualizing Holocaust Rescue

Rescue unfolded in all areas affected by the Holocaust. The scope of rescue efforts varied greatly—influenced by the course

of the war, geography, particular German occupation policies, the number of Jews living in a given area, and pre-existing local levels of antisemitism. Similarly, rescuers spanned all social and economic classes, religions, occupations, educational levels, behaviors, and personalities.

The fact that many resources on rescue exist may give the impression that rescues occurred with much greater frequency than was the case. In reality, “less than 0.5 of 1 percent of all people in Nazi-occupied Europe were rescuers.”¹ This statistic can be problematic for teachers as they consider how much attention to give to rescue stories. The study of rescue should be included in Holocaust curricula, but overemphasizing the topic, or portraying rescuers idealistically, romanticizes what happened and distorts reality.

It is critical, therefore, that rescue be contextualized within the Holocaust's overall history. Rescue should be discussed only after major Holocaust themes, such as persecution and annihilation, have been studied. Conversely, placing rescue at the end of a Holocaust unit may leave students with the distorted view that “all is well with the world. ..., in the end, justice was done.”²

Rescue's overall dynamics should be considered before specific cases are presented. Students should understand that becoming a rescuer brought practical, and sometimes life and death, considerations into play as individuals decided how to react when rescue opportunities presented themselves.

Historical Overview

While most of German-occupied Europe bore the brunt of severe policies soon after invading forces arrived, Germany implemented a comparatively mild occupation in Denmark from April 1940 until mid-1943. Because Nazi racial policy depicted Danes as Germany's “Nordic cousins,” the brutal policies enacted in places where locals were “non-Aryan” were not implemented in Denmark. Also, because Denmark's economic situation was favorable to Germany's war effort, the Danes were subject to relatively few restrictions. Similarly, and notwithstanding the apocryphal legend of the yellow star, anti-Jewish policies enacted in other conquered nations were not enforced in Denmark, a unique circumstance during the Holocaust.³ Thus, occupation policies applied to Jewish Danes were not noticeably different from those placed on the general Danish population.

In mid-1943, when sabotage against German interests increased dramatically, Germany tightened its control on Denmark and prepared to move



Rabbi Marcus Melchior, the Danish chief rabbi, who warned his congregants about the German plan to round up Denmark's Jews, is pictured above in Copenhagen, Denmark, before his 1943 escape to Sweden.

(Courtesy of The Museum of Danish Resistance 1940–1945)

LESSON PLAN

1. Discuss Holocaust rescue in general and the Danish Rescue in particular, if these topics have not been studied previously. Identify complications and dangers involved in being a rescuer.
2. Play “Denmark 1943” for the class. During this initial listening, discussion and writing should not occur.
3. Distribute the song’s lyrics, maps (World War II Europe; Denmark and Sweden), and the discussion guide to each student. Because this is an activity that will lead students to learn and conceptualize historical facts, emphasize that there are no specific answers to the discussion items.
4. Students complete the discussion guide, working alone or in small groups, while the song is played repeatedly. Students are likely to become more engrossed with the song each time it is played. They should be encouraged to consider the song on denotative (historical) and connotative (interpretive) levels. As the song is played repeatedly, some students may hum along (and perhaps sing along) to the lyrics (especially the chorus), thus generating an engaged atmosphere and cadence in the room.
5. Conduct a group discussion after the students have completed the discussion guide. Consider each item at both levels noted earlier. Most items are designed to lead students to consider both levels.

Objectives of the Lesson Plan

Through this lesson plan, students will develop:

1. an awareness of the course of the rescue, beginning with the occupiers’ planned roundup, the passing of information to the resistance and the general Danish population, the unfolding of the actual rescue, and the postwar return of Jews to Denmark;
2. a sense of the rescue’s spontaneous, almost random nature;
3. an understanding of how Danes viewed Jewish Danes, a critical element if the rescue’s “why” is to be understood;
4. an appreciation of the fact that heroes are often average individuals who choose to act courageously in times of moral crisis;⁵ and
5. critical thinking skills through analyzing an artistic work at multiple levels.

Notes on Teaching the Lesson

1. Students should have a solid background in Holocaust history before studying rescue. Presenting rescue efforts without first establishing the historical context will cause students to develop faulty perceptions about rescue and its place within the Sho’ah.
2. This lesson may last several periods depending on the length of each session, student grade level and historical knowledge, and the depth of critical thinking students display in discussing the song.
3. Stress that the song describes real people and actual events.⁶
4. Emphasize that Danes felt protecting their fellow citizens was “the natural thing to do.”

against Jewish Danes. A roundup was set for Rosh Hashanah (October 1). However, German economic attaché Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a man with strong personal ties in Denmark, told Danish politician Hans Hedtoft about plans for the roundup and deportation of Denmark’s Jews. Danish resistance groups were alerted, and a spontaneous rescue operation quickly unfolded. Neutral Sweden agreed to accept all refugees from Denmark, and “The miracle of the Danish Rescue” began. Ninety-eight percent of Denmark’s 7,000 Jews, non-Jewish relatives, and Danish resisters were ferried to Sweden, where they lived in relative comfort during the war’s last

year and a half. Most Danish Jews who were arrested and deported survived, a result of direct, ongoing intervention on their behalf by the Danish government.

After the war, Jews returning to their homes throughout Europe were often treated horribly by their fellow citizens and, in some cases, were murdered. In Denmark, however, a warm welcome greeted returning Jews. Their businesses and homes, gardens and pets had been cared for by their fellow Danes. Thus, the Danish Rescue is an unparalleled event in the Holocaust, a demonstration of humanity encircled by the greatest of inhumanities. The Danes, however,

saw the event simply as Danes helping fellow Danes.

“Denmark 1943”

Composer Fred Small commemorated this remarkable event with his song “Denmark 1943,” which focuses on real people and portrays historical events and the implications that may be drawn from them.⁴ “Denmark 1943” traces the Danish situation from the rescue until the Jews’ return to Denmark a few weeks after the European war ended. The song allows the listener to learn what happened while sensing why it happened.

continued on page 321

Lyrics

Handout

©Fred Small, 1988 Reprinted by permission of the composer

1. And it's Eichmann and Himmler are turning the screws,
The Fuhrer they say grows impatient,
"How can it be Denmark's Jews still walk free
After three years of kind occupation?"
5. We will take them like sheep in their beds as they sleep
On the second night of their new year
Devoutly at home they'll be helpless alone
When they cry out no one will hear."
9. But Duckwitz the German tells Hedtoft the Dane
"My friend, I have dangerous news
In three hours the transport ships will set at anchor
You must warn them, warn all the Jews."
13. Soon good Rabbi Melchior stands in the synagogue
"There'll be no service today
The raids come tomorrow, dwell not on your sorrow
By nightfall we must be away."

CHORUS

*And it's fire up the diesel and look out for swells
We're leaving Espergærde behind us
Who strike at our friends strike us as well
We'll pray the patrol boats don't find us
When the sirens are wailing and shouts fill the night
Never will you stand alone
So it's over the Öresund
Till the day we can welcome you home.*

17. Sompolinsky the tailor on the eve of Rosh Hashanah
Gathers his family near
"The Lord is my light and salvation
Whom on this earth shall I fear?"
21. When a young Danish gentile steps into the glow
Of the candle with tears flowing down
"Good neighbors, flee—I pray you believe me"
And as quickly the young man is gone.
25. Christian policemen, shopkeepers, and teachers
Tell their friends of the quickening storm
While students on bicycles race through the streets
Searching for Jews to be warned
29. And Katlev the foreman blurts out to the trainman
"My family has no place to hide."
"Well bring 'em to my house," the stranger replies
"And we'll spit in the damn Nazis' eyes."

CHORUS

33. Ellen Nielsen the fishwife in the port of Dragør
Has no use for political views
She'll call out the catch "Fresh salmon! Fresh cod!"
Comes a whisper, "Please help. We are Jews."
37. "But if you are Jews you're not safe on the street
I know a man with a sail."
Till moonrise they sleep in the shade of her eaves
And escape on the fisherman's keel.
41. Rabbi Melchior hires a young trawlerman
To ferry his family across
After twelve hours afloat in a scurvy old boat
Morning light shows the same Danish coast
45. Says the skipper, "I'm afraid of the German blockade
So we've motored in circles around."
The rabbi gives a shout, with one blow knocks him out
And steers a straight line 'cross the sound.
49. Frozen with fright in the October night
Families huddle in basements and barns
Mistaking each breath for the angel of death
The Gestapo, the shot, the alarm
53. Then down into the hold with the stench and the cold
And drug all the babies with schnapps
Someone shouts, "Valkommen till Sverige
You are in Swedish waters at last."
57. Seven thousands of Jews smuggled over to Sweden
By fishermen, nurses, and priests
Hitler sends Eichmann to hunt them down
But his quarry have vanished like mist
61. When the war's over the Jews return
Cheers and flowers adorn their way home
"We're not heroes or martyrs," so say the Danes
"We were just looking after our own."

CHORUS

*... And today we will welcome you home,
And today we welcome you home.*

Discussion Guide

Handout

Develop written responses to these items (using additional pages). Your responses should indicate historical knowledge of the Danish rescue and an understanding of the implications. (Lyrics on opposite side.)

1. Explain the meaning of "After three years of kind occupation" (Line 4). Why was the German occupation different in Denmark than in most of occupied Europe?

2. Discuss the remarkable circumstance in which Duckwitz told Hedtoft about the upcoming raid. Speculate about Duckwitz's rationale. What risks was he taking (Lines 9-10)?

3. Locate Esperagærde and the Öresund on the map of Denmark and Sweden (Chorus, Lines 2 and 7). Discuss how Denmark's geography made a large-scale rescue possible.

4. Discuss the vital importance of "Who strike at our friends strike us as well" (Chorus, Line 3) and "Never will you stand alone" (Chorus, Line 6). What pledge are the Danes making to Denmark's Jews? Why?

5. Based on "Till the day we can welcome you home," speculate about how Danes viewed Jewish Danes before the occupation. How did this perspective differ from that found in most of Europe (Chorus, Line 8)?

6. Discuss the importance of the fact that "Christian policemen, shopkeepers, and teachers" spread the word about the raid (Line 25)? Note that this same implication may be made about "Seven thousands of Jews smuggled over to Sweden / By fishermen, nurses, and priests" (Lines 57-58).

7. Discuss the behavior common to the situations described by "When a young Danish gentile steps into the glow / ... / And as quickly the young man is gone" (Lines 21-24) and "While students on bicycles race through the streets / Searching for Jews to be warned" (Lines 27-28).

8. Katlev is helped by a stranger (actually, the conductor on a train that Katlev rode daily) (Lines 29-32), and Nielsen hides total strangers (Lines 33-40). Explain what this says about the rescue's nature. Discuss the relevance that Nielsen "has no use for political views" (Lines 33-34).

9. Although some structure developed as the rescue evolved, the incidents related in the song were spontaneous, almost random. Note why this was critical, especially during the early part of the rescue.

10. Discuss the significance of the fact that the young trawlerman was afraid and, as a result, "... motored in circles around" (Line 46). Describe what Melchior does in response (Lines 47-48).

11. Based on " 'Valkommen to Sverige ...' " (Line 55), speculate about how the Jewish Danes were treated while in Sweden.

12. Discuss the situation described by "When the war's over the Jews return / Cheers and flowers adorn their way home" (Lines 61-62). Speculate about how this situation differed from the reception surviving Jews often received when they returned home after the war throughout Europe.

13. Analyze the critical importance of " 'We're not heroes or martyrs,' " so say the Danes, ..." (Line 63).

14. Note the subtle difference between the lines of the chorus when it is sung the first two times (after Lines 16 and 32) and the third time (after Line 64).

15. Discuss the "Why did it happen?" of the rescue. Identify the phrase from the lyrics that summarizes this idea. Given what usually happened in most of Europe during the Holocaust (i.e., hostility to Jews or apathy about their plight), explain what the rescue says about the human capacity to act along the behavioral continuum of "ultimate evil to ultimate good" and about the ideas of personal choice and responsibility.

16. Explain the idea that "The Danes saw the Jewish Danes as part of their [the Danes'] *universe of obligation*." Define this term. Identify important social, moral, and ethical issues imbedded in it. Explain your response.



The Museum of Danish Resistance 1940–1945

Very little photo documentation exists of the rescue of Danish Jews. This photo depicts a meeting between the Swedish packet boat Margit of Malmö (right side) and the Danish motor schooner Anø, near Kullen (Sweden), where refugees of the Danish resistance switched from one ship to the other.

DENMARK 1943 *from page 318*

Conclusion

This lesson allows students to examine a compelling historical situation and engenders critical thinking as they consider the complex circumstances that led to the Danish rescue. The plan also provides opportunities for considering the behaviors and motivations of ordinary people in times of great stress and personal danger. In addition, using music to teach history encourages students to connect history with the fine arts while moving beyond textbook-driven instruction. Through its rich historical content and symbolic meaning, “Denmark 1943” serves as a vehicle for examining human behavior at its most profound levels. 🌐

Notes

1. Pearl M. Oliner and Samuel P. Oliner, “Righteous People in the Holocaust,” in *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, ed. Israel W. Charny (London: Mansell Publishing, 1991), 363.

2. Samuel Totten, Stephen Feinberg, and William Fernekes, “The Significance of Rationale Statements in Developing a Sound Holocaust Education Program,” in *Teaching and Studying the Holocaust*, eds. Samuel Totten and Stephen Feinberg (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001), 17.
3. According to the legend, King Christian X of Denmark wore a yellow star in support of the Jews and thus, along with his subjects, prevented Germans from being able to identify Jews. However, Jews in Denmark were never forced to wear an identifying badge, and the yellow star incident about the king never occurred.
4. “Denmark 1943” is on the CD *I Will Stand Fast* (Fred Small [Composer/Artist], Chicago: Flying Fish Records, FF 70491, 1988). The CD may be obtained through the Rounder Records Group (www.rounder.com).
5. Most rescuers eschew the title of “hero” for themselves. See Gay Block and Marla Drucker, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust* (New York: TV Books, 1992), 20. Note Line 63 of the song “Denmark 1943.”
6. In an interview with the author, composer Fred Small noted that different sources disagree about whether Melchior struck the trawlerman. Melchior’s son has said that his father could “Knock you down with words,” adding that his father would never assault anyone physically.

DAVID H. LINDQUIST is an assistant professor at Indiana U. Purdue U. Fort Wayne in Indiana. He is also a Museum Teacher Fellow and Regional Museum Educator for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. He can be reached at lindquid@ipfw.edu.

NAMES AND PLACES

Eichmann: SS officer, directed deportations across Europe

Himmler: SS chief, architect of “the Final Solution to the Jewish question”

Duckwitz: German official in Denmark, informed Hedtoft of the planned roundup, later West German ambassador to Denmark, honored by Yad Vashem as a “Righteous Among the Nations”

Hedtoft: Danish politician contacted by Duckwitz, informed Danish resistance of the planned raid, later Danish prime minister

Melchior: acting chief rabbi of Denmark, alerted Jewish Danes to the deportation plan

Espergærde: one of the towns from which boats departed to Sweden during the rescue

Öresund: narrow channel between Denmark and Sweden

Sompolinsky: tailor whose family was alerted to the planned roundup of Jews by a young Dane acting on behalf of the Social Democrats

Katlev: foreman in a factory, rescued along with his family by a railroad conductor whom he saw on daily rides to and from work

Nielsen: “fishwife” who helped more than 30 Jews escape during the rescue, later worked for the resistance until arrested by the Gestapo

Dragør: fishing village across the Öresund from Sweden