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## The Rescue of the Danish Jews: Moral Courage under Stress

Leo Goldberger, editor

Gerald Rasmussen, reviewer

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## Book Reviews

### **The Rescue of the Danish Jews: Moral Courage under Stress**

*edited by Leo Goldberger, New York University Press,  
New York and London, 1987*

Reviewed by GERALD RASMUSSEN

We enthusiastically recommend a new book about the rescue of the Danish Jews during the Second World War. In fact, that is the name of the book: **Rescue of the Danish Jews: Moral Courage under Stress**. It was edited by Leo Goldberger and published by the New York University Press in 1987.

Several books have been written about this event, but they are not well known. These include monographs, first hand accounts and at least one historical novel.

This book is quite unique and has its own special significance. It consists of a collection of thirteen essays by twelve contributors and its purpose is to present some thoughtful reflections on the subject of the Danish rescue and especially to explore the answer to the question: Why, when representatives of governments and religions all over the world remained silent, did the Danes risk their lives to rescue their Jewish fellow citizens from the Nazi attempt to round them up and send them to the death camps?

**Rescue of the Danish Jews** is more than just an unusual book. It was published as a result of an unusual set of circumstances.

Firstly, it arises from the fact that in Denmark the citizens rose in protest against the German action; then shielded and rescued their fellow Jewish citizens and helped them get to safety in Sweden.

Secondly, after the war an international group of Jews founded an organization, Tribute to the Danes, in order to recognize and commemorate that heroic and successful effort and to perpetuate knowledge of the event.

In 1983 Tribute to the Danes, in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee, sponsored a conference entitled Moral Choice under Stress. This conference was held in New York as part of a continuing effort to keep the story of the rescue alive and also to explore for answers to the question: Why did Danes involve themselves in the fate of the Jewish Danes? Some of the papers presented at the conference, which commemorated the 40th anniversary of the event, are included in this book. The editor added additional essays to round out the discussion and give a more complete picture of the rescue.

The thirteen essays are organized into three sub-headings and an epilogue. The first three are called Introduction and Historical Background. The next five appear under the heading, Personal Narratives. Essays nine through twelve appear under the title, Moral Courage under Stress. It is these essays which try, successfully, I think, to explain why the Danes, as a people, almost alone among the Europeans, believed that the Danish Jews were entitled to exactly the same civil rights and protection as all other Danes.

Of special interest in this regard is the essay entitled "Grundtvigs Influence" written by the American Lutheran theologian, Jaroslav Pelican, Sterling Professor of History at Yale University. In this essay the author advances the view that Grundtvig was the "fountain of a Christian Humanism . . . whose moral fruit we can find in the events of October, 1943." After establishing Grundtvig's significant influence on the Danish Lutheran church, Dr. Pelican goes on to claim that because of Grundtvig's influence there was something in the national character of the Danes which almost required them to protect the Jewish Danes as they would have

protected Lutheran Danes or non-church going Danes. Pelican makes a convincing argument. He reviews Grundtvig's theology relating to the monotheistic God, the Creator. He explores the importance of community to Grundtvig. And he discusses the oft quoted famous phrase "human first and the Christian." All of which worked toward the blend of nationalism, humanism and Lutheranism which Pelican believes help explain why the Danes acted as they did.

The epilogue was written by the editor, Leo Goldberger, who lived in Copenhagen during the war. His father was the cantor of the synagogue there. It is both summary and conclusion. After reading and re-reading his essay one must conclude that there was indeed something special about rescue of the Danish Jews and that the reasons for it are both ascertainable and understandable.