

Denmark under German Occupation

Operation Weserübung ("Operation Weser Training")

Denmark and Norway played an important role in the Nazis' plans for the war. They were to serve as bases for a troop build-up against Great Britain and the Soviet Union, they were strategically important for controlling the North Atlantic and they had agricultural, natural and industrial resources the Germans wanted to exploit.

On 9 April 1940, the invasion of Denmark and Norway, codenamed "Unternehmen Weserübung" ("Operation Weser Training"), began. At 4:15 a.m., German troops crossed the border between Germany and Denmark. German paratrooper and navy units occupied airports, towns and bridges of strategic importance. Infantry units and warships intercepted the flight of the Danish king and his government near Copenhagen. The German ambassador to Denmark, Cécil von Renthe-Fink, threatened to have Copenhagen bombed if the Danes did not cease all resistance immediately. After a few hours, the king and the government surrendered and resistance occurred only sporadically.

At age 14, Karl Salling Møller experienced the German invasion of Denmark:

On 9 April 1940, we were woken by this terrible noise. Hundreds of German Junker planes were flying over our town, and they were flying so low you could actually see the pilots in the cockpits. [...] Mother put on the heater in the hairdresser's shop right away, but hardly any customers came, everyone was too preoccupied. My father said he was too old to go to war, and I was too young. Nothing much happened as the day went on, it was not until evening that German soldiers arrived. There were no major changes, but still it was as if a foreign element had been imposed on our everyday lives. There was rationing and censorship of the press, but no brutality.

Karl Salling Møller from Nibe in northern Jutland was active in the resistance in Ålborg from 1943. He was arrested in May 1944 after being betrayed and deported to the Meppen-Versen satellite camp of Neuengamme in October 1944.

Interview conducted in 2000. (ANg)

**German soldiers on motorcycle
patrol in Åbenrå on 9 April 1940.**

*Photo: L. von Münchow.
(MDF, 02A3802058)*



Ernst Nielsen experienced the German invasion in Åbenrå:

It was a terrible shock and a really awful thing when we were woken early in the morning on 9 April 1940 by the loud noise of planes flying overhead, massive gunfire and short, intense, but hopeless combat in our town. The first victims of the German occupation were the Danish soldiers who were killed that morning. And at the same time, the Nazi contingent among the German minority greeted the arriving superior German troops with cheers and screams of "Heil!"

Ernst Nielsen from Haderslev was arrested in 1944 for resistance activities and imprisoned in the Finkenwerder (Deutsche Werft) and Rothenburgsort (Bullenhuser Damm) satellite camps of the Neuengamme concentration camp in 1945 until his evacuation during Operation Bernadotte.

Manuscript for a talk, 1999. (ANg)

The German occupation regime in Denmark

Danish cattle being taken aboard a German coaster, 7 April 1940.

*Photographer unknown.
(MDF, 25M0100009)*

The Danish government, led by Social Democrat Thorvald Stauning, adopted a policy of cooperation with the German occupiers. After they agreed to the "peaceful occupation" of Denmark by Germany, the king and the government were allowed to remain in office. Officially, Denmark continued to be a sovereign state but had to accept the occupation by the Wehrmacht and a German administration. Economically, Denmark "profited" from the occupation, as the country's unemployment rate was reduced and food exports increased.



On the 72nd birthday of King Christian X on 25 September 1942, Hitler provoked what became known as the Telegram Crisis in order to justify a radical change in Germany's policies regarding Denmark. On 5 November 1942, Dr. Werner Best, who had started his career at the SS Reich Security Main Office and the German Foreign Office, took office as the Reich Plenipotentiary for Denmark.

Following more and more strikes and increased resistance activity, Best demanded that the Danish government declare a state of emergency in 1943. The government declined on 28 August 1943. In response, the new Wehrmacht commander for Denmark, General von Hanneken, declared a military state of emergency in Denmark and deposed the government. This "second occupation" was met with considerable resistance. The Danish military resisted the planned disarmament and bitter battles ensued, which claimed victims on both sides. Eventually, the Danish army was disarmed and its soldiers were interned. The Germans also put the civilian administration of the country directly into the hands of senior civil servants at the ministries.

Helge Hansen was a Danish soldier in Copenhagen at the time:

On 29 August 1943, when the state of emergency began and the soldiers and policemen were arrested, the Germans attacked our barracks at 4:00 a.m. to disarm the Danish military.

One of my comrades was lying by my side. Suddenly, he lost his rifle, and I said to him: "Why did you throw away your rifle?" But it turned out that he'd been hit by a bullet, which had entered his body like this, it had gone right through him. [...] That soldier had been my closest comrade, and that was the reason why I joined the resistance, as a kind of revenge for this comrade of mine.

Helge Hansen from Tingsted, a career soldier, was active in the BOPA resistance organisation and involved in blowing up the Riffelsyndikat arms factory in 1944. He was imprisoned in the Neuengamme concentration camp between January and April 1945.

Interview conducted in 2000. (ANg)

Resistance

A first sign of resistance was the singing of identity-affirming Danish songs in so-called Allsang choirs. Another way of showing dislike for the Germans was to wear a Danish flag, sometimes including the king's monogram, on one's coat, or pins which showed the first letters of well-known slogans. One such abbreviation was SDU for "*Smid dem ud*" ("Throw them out!"). It was also during this time that the first illegal newspapers and satirical leaflets were printed.

And then you came to the shipyard, and it was like in Hamburg and many other places, you knew: most people there were social democrats, and then there was a small group of communists. But they agreed on one thing: it all had to stop. They had to get out of Denmark as soon as possible. [...] But I don't think we had anything against the average German soldier, not at all. Rather, it went deeper. No, it was that Germany, that big country, had occupied us. We couldn't get over that.

Hans Bøjlund Sørensen, interview conducted in 2000. (ANg)

Successful sabotage of a train near Aulum in Jutland, August 1943.

*Photographer unknown,
23 August 1943. (MDF, 08B2001003)*

Resistance against the Danish fascists was organised first and foremost by the Communist Party, which had been banned on 22 August 1941 and many of its members arrested. In addition, a middle-class intellectual opposition began to form which included theologians, historians and writers. The resistance organisation BOPA (Borgerlige Partisaner), which was led by communists, managed to derail a German military train between Copenhagen and Helsingør on the 25th anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 1942. The Holger Danske Group carried out acts of sabotage against factories involved in German armaments production.



In 1943 the resistance gained more and more support. After the state of emergency had been declared on 29 August 1943, the first execution of a resistance fighter was made public on 8 September the same year. On 16 September 1943, the "Danmarks Frihedsrådet" (the Danish Freedom Council) was formed, an alliance made up of different resistance groups whose goal was immediate independence for Denmark. Apart from BOPA and the Holger Danske Group, the alliance also included "Frit Danmark" (Free Denmark), an umbrella organisation made up of different groups from various parts of the political spectrum; "Ringene" (The Ring), a group which provided information about what went on in Denmark, both inside the country and abroad, and which later took to active fighting for the resistance; and "Dansk Samling" (the Danish Confraternity), a Christian party actively resisting the occupation.

The date set for the deportation of the country's Jewish population, 2 October 1943, had been leaked and spread, partly through the efforts of a German civil servant. With the help of the resistance movement and the local population, which showed great solidarity, more than 7,000 Danish Jews and Jewish refugees were taken across the Baltic Sea to safety in Sweden.

The Special Operations Executive (SOE), a secret agency of the British Army charged with operations behind enemy lines, cooperated with the Danish resistance and arranged for weapons and explosives for acts of sabotage to be parachuted into Denmark. The resistance movement began to "liquidate" Danish Gestapo informers. The Germans reacted by assassinating leading members of the resistance.

On 22 June 1944, resistance fighters attacked the Riffel-syndikat arms factory in Copenhagen's free port. Before blowing up the factory, they stole a large number of automatic rifles. In response to this attack, Best and the Higher SS and Police Leader in Denmark, SS-Gruppenführer Günther Pancke, declared a civil state of emergency for Copenhagen. They had eight resistance fighters executed and ordered the Tivoli Gardens amusement park, the Royal Porcelain Factory and other buildings to be demolished. This, in turn, provoked walkouts, a general strike and riots on 26 June 1944. The general strike did not end until 4 July 1944, when the German authorities met the striking workers' demands: an end to the Germans' acts of terror against the population, the promise to forego reprisals, and the withdrawal of the hated Schalburg corps, a unit of Danish reserve policemen. 92 Danes were shot dead and 664 were wounded in clashes during the general strike. Another eleven resistance fighters were executed in the period immediately afterwards.

On 19 September 1944, Pancke seized police power over Denmark and had 2,000 policemen arrested because the Danish police had not intervened during the general strike. Around 1,700 policemen were deported to the Buchenwald concentration camp via Neuengamme. The Danish border police was also disbanded and 337 of its officers arrested. They were charged with insufficient loyalty towards the German authorities. 291 border guards were imprisoned in the Frøslev prison camp near the Danish-German border; 141 of them were transferred to Neuengamme on 5 October 1944. However, these continuing repressive measures by the German occupying power only served to make the Danish resistance movement grow in numbers.

**Barricade on Nørrebrogade in
Copenhagen during the general
strike in the summer of 1944.**

*Photographer unknown.
(MDF, 06G6411001)*

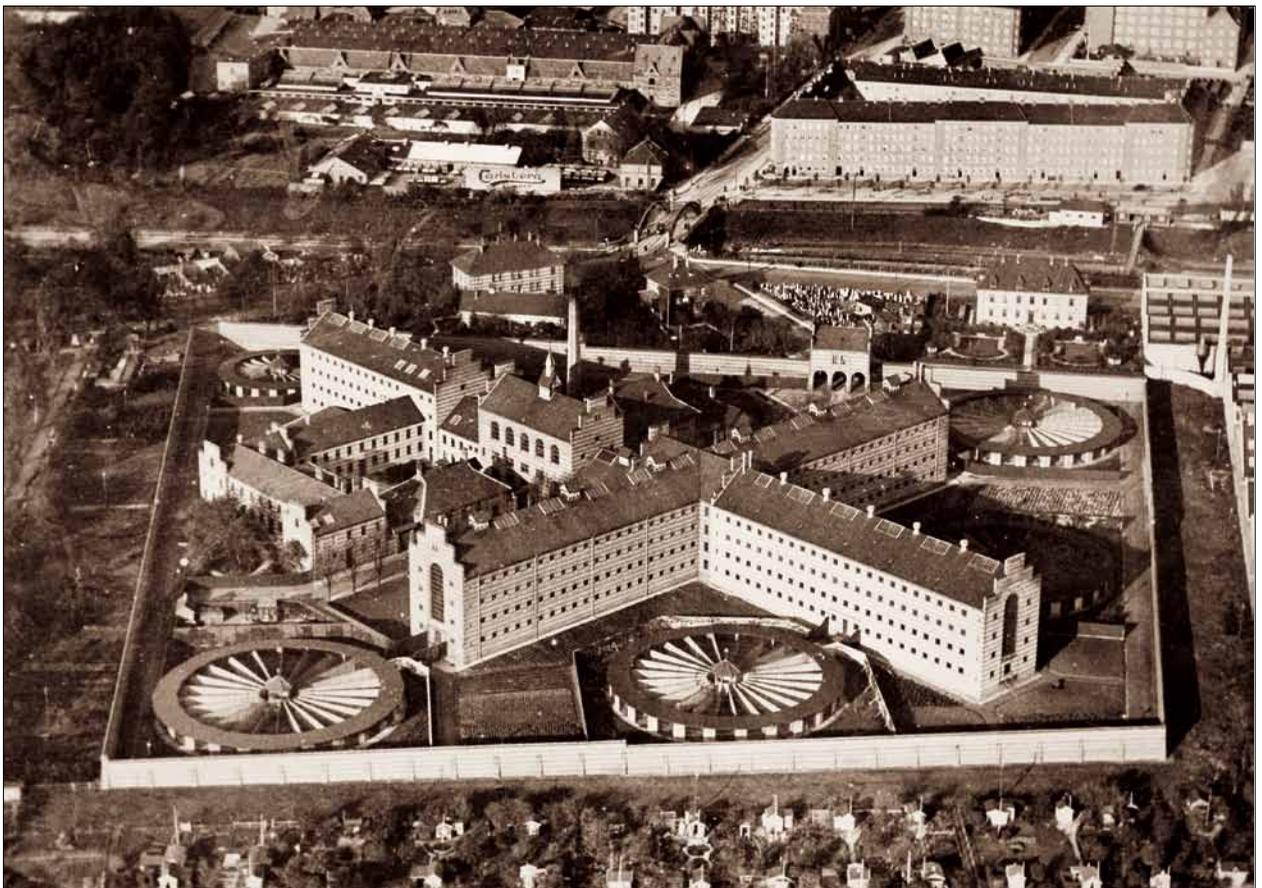


Deportations to Germany

Aerial shot of the Vestre Fængsel prison in Copenhagen, 1944.

*Photo by E. Jensen.
(MDF, 28A000001)*

Several thousand Danish people were taken to prisons and camps inside Denmark for resistance activities. After their arrest and interrogation at the local Gestapo prisons, which often included torture, they were taken to Vestre Faengsel prison in Copenhagen or to the Horserød camp on Zealand.



After we arrived at Vestre Faengsel, we were photographed from all sides and angles, and I was shown lots of pictures of people the Gestapo were trying to arrest. Did I know this or that person? It was surprising how bad my memory and knowledge of these people were. I don't know if the Gestapo actually believed me, but after a while, they just gave up. By then, they must have caught a bigger fish they could try their hands on. We certainly couldn't fail to notice that this usually included torture. At night, we would often hear screams from the bottom storey. I also saw that comrades from the ward opposite ours had to help some of their cell-mates to the toilet. What I could see of them was an unrecognisable pulp, and that sent shivers down my spine. [...]

In late June [1944] the general strike started, and we often heard shots from the town. We thought it was going to start in earnest everywhere now. Our rations were reduced to two slices of rye bread and half a cup of tea per day, and as the water had been turned off, we couldn't even go to the toilet anymore. [...] Shortly afterwards, the German guard in charge of our ward handed me the notification that I was going to be transferred to Horserød camp, so I was heading for better times.

[...] Compared to my stay at Vestre Faengsel, life in Horserød was a walk in the park. It was nice to be part of the large community, to be with old friends and to hear about their exploits. [...] Because the Danish prison administration was feeding us very well, we also needed some form of exercise, and so I became the instructor for the daily morning exercises. [...] But our mood sank when the Germans started taking away our fellow prisoners to be executed. [...]

On 12 August [1944], all prisoners at the camp were woken up at midnight, and we were told to pack our belongings because we would be transferred. We were put onto German buses and lorries, where we sat for several hours and waited as rumours flew around. [...] We were ordered to sit with our hands behind our heads, and then the night journey to Helsingør in blacked-out buses and lorries started. At the quay in Helsingør, there was [...] a large troopship called the Mars, and we were led straight into the hold, several stories below deck.

Hans S. Bruun from Ribe was a soldier who participated in a sabotage campaign organised by the British secret service SOE. He was imprisoned in the Neuengamme concentration camp in September 1944 and then transferred to the 11th SS Construction Brigade stationed at Soest. He was liberated at the Ebensee satellite camp of Mauthausen in Austria in 1945.

From: Hans S. Bruun: På døds-march gennem Hitlers Tyskland, Copenhagen 1976, p. 22ff.

The first Danish people to be deported to German concentration camps were Danes working in Germany. After the state of emergency was declared on 29 August 1943, an increasing number of people were arrested and then deported to the Stutthof and Neuengamme concentration camps. Danish women were taken to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. 477 Danish Jews who had fallen into the hands of the Gestapo were deported to Theresienstadt in October 1943.

In 1944, the German occupying authorities threatened to deport large numbers of Danish prisoners to Germany. Danish officials intervened with the German plenipotentiary Best, and a police-run prison was established in Frøslev on Danish soil. Danish prisoners were to be transferred to the camp from both inside Denmark and from Germany. The camp was run by the Danish state, and rations were organised by the Danish prison administration. Conditions at Frøslev were relatively bearable, prisoners were not brutalised, maltreated, starved or killed. The headquarters were manned by SS members and guard duty was performed by German policemen.

**Danish doctor Paul Thygesen was arrested in Copenhagen.
He remembers:**

We were all loaded onto a lorry. [...] I was standing up, because my posterior was in no condition to be sat upon. [...] We drove south through Jutland. Four kilometres before the German border, we left the main road [...] and drove into the newly established internment camp at Frøslev, i.e. we were still on Danish soil. The atmosphere at this camp was characterised by a spirit of comradeship and security. This feeling of security was expressed every day by prisoners mocking in the ridiculousness of the German administration. [...]

At the Frøslev camp, our connection to the outside world was perfect. Notes were smuggled in and out in various ways, for example in the medicine chest from a nearby chemist's shop. [...] We also managed to smuggle parts for a radio into the camp in this way. They were collected and assembled into an excellent little radio, and certain comrades were put in charge of listening to the BBC every day. The news would spread through the camp, where we were better informed about the course of the war than the guard squads.

Paul Thygesen, a doctor from Klampenborg, went underground in Copenhagen because of his connections with the resistance movement. He was arrested by the Gestapo in August 1944 and imprisoned in the Frøslev camp, from where he was transferred to the Husum and Meppen-Dalum satellite camps of the Neuengamme concentration camp. He was liberated during Operation Bernadotte in April 1945.

From: Paul Thygesen: Læge i tyske Konzentrationslejre, Copenhagen 1945, p. 33ff.

Gunnar Jespersen describes the Frøslev camp in an ironic tone:

In August/September, the camp was more or less finished. There was only some large-scale levelling and excavation work left to do, which was carried out with spades, tippers and wheelbarrows. [...] Of course, there were also some other ways to keep ourselves occupied, for example the strange little special work details like the raking detail or the rat-catchers' detail. And in hut 10, there was straw-working workshop, where the so-called "mattresses" would sit and weave straw "carpets" all day. Since I came from the textile industry, I was naturally intrigued to try my hand at weaving straw mats, but I preferred to stay with my comrades and do the healthy and enjoyable excavation work which, like I said, was far from physically demanding. This and other tasks gave us ample opportunity to reflect on our frustrating work for the resistance, to which we dedicated ourselves with a good helping of self-deprecation.

Gunnar Jespersen was the manager of a textile factory in Herning, Mid-Jutland. He was a member of the Frit Danmark resistance group. After his arrest, he was interrogated and imprisoned in Århus and in the Frøslev police internment camp. In November 1944, he was transferred to the Neuen-gamme concentration camp, from where he was liberated in April 1945 in the course of Operation Bernadotte.

From: Gunnar Jespersen: Danke schön. En antihelts prøvelser, Herning 1978, p. 24f.

Prisoners in Frøslev camp, photograph taken between September 1944 and the liberation by a prisoner with a camera he had managed to smuggle into the camp.

*Photograph by Kjeld Feilberg.
(MDF, 28D0101029)*



On 15 September 1944, despite Best's promise, the Germans began to deport resistance fighters and dissidents to German concentration camps, including Neuengamme. Representatives of the Danish authorities protested these deportations and demanded that the prisoners be taken back to Denmark, based on the right of Danish citizens to live on Danish soil. The first Danes to be deported to Germany from Frøslev were a group of 1,700 policemen who were taken to the Buchenwald concentration camp via Neuengamme. 141 of the 291 Danish border policemen who had been imprisoned in the Frøslev police internment camp were taken to the Neuengamme concentration camp on 5 October 1944.

Around noon on 6 October 1944, the transport made up of the border policemen and 61 resistance fighters from Frøslev arrived at the Neuengamme camp. One of the deportees was border policeman Einar Christian Petersen:

On 4 or 5 October, I wouldn't be able to tell you exactly, we were called up at four in the morning and told to all go to the right side of the hut. Four SS men standing in the hallway came into the huts. They held a sheet of paper in their hands and started reading names from it. Those whose names were read out had to stay where they were. It took around an hour. We had to take everything we had with us. That was when we knew we were going to leave Denmark. [...] At eight o'clock that day, I left the camp on a bus, the others were on lorries, and we arrived at the station in Harrislee. There was a shunting engine there and six wagons. There was also a farmer there selling bales of hay for five kroner. But the Germans allowed only four bales per empty cattle car, and there were 50 of us to a car!

Einar Christian Petersen was a border policeman in Padborg. In September 1944, he was arrested together with the entire Danish border police force and imprisoned in the Frøslev camp. He was transferred to Neuengamme concentration camp in October 1944 and liberated in April 1945 in the course of Operation Bernadotte.

Interview conducted in 2003. (ANg)

From September 1944, large transports left Frøslev for Neuengamme and other concentration camps. Around half of the deportees were political prisoners, but there were also 425 people who had been arbitrarily rounded up as "anti-social elements" and deported to German concentration camps, where they were subject to particular harassment.

In total, the Gestapo deported more than 6,000 men and women to German concentration camps and prisons. Around 600 of them died there.

Danish Prisoners at Neuengamme

The first Danish prisoners arrived at the Neuengamme concentration camp in March 1944 from German prisons. Larger transports of Danish people did not start to arrive in Neuengamme until September 1944. The first transport from Frøslev on 16 September 1944 consisted of 192 men and three women. The women were transported to a prison in Berlin a few days later, from where they were taken to the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp. Between September 1944 and 14 January 1945, 15 transports of Danish prisoners arrived at Neuengamme.

Once we'd arrived in Neuengamme, the doors were thrown open and we were given the order: "Line up in rows of nine! On the double!" There were kapos there with cable ends for whips, with which they would beat people. [...] We came to the bath hut, where we had to take off all our clothes. We had to go into the shower naked and were given a piece of soap that was just like mud. But before that, we were told to lie down on a bench and all our hair was cut off. The man who shaved peoples' hair, even the pubic and armpit hair, was a former SS man from the Freikorps Dänemark [an SS unit made up of Danish volunteers]. [...] My head was only shaved on one side because, as the man who shaved me said, it showed that I might be shot at any moment. [...] I arrived in Neuengamme on 10 or 11 January [1945].

I still had the muddy soap all over my body when the shower was turned off. Then the French and Italians handed us our clothes. This was the middle of January, and they were summer things. I was given a pair of underpants that looked like boxing shorts, a shirt that was much too thin and a jacket that was also much too thin. Fortunately, I was allowed to keep my lace-up boots.

I didn't have to work at Neuengamme, just endure the daily roll-calls. It was clear that we were going to be transferred to the satellite camps.

We arrived at the train stop at Harrislee, just like all the others before us, and then the journey went on to Neuengamme. [...] What a shock! We stopped at the ramp, and what I saw was this enormous mountain of shoes. But that night, late at night, the crematorium was fired up, and flames went up into the air, like at a power station. [...]

But something wasn't quite right, and that was the smell. It was strange, and I still have it in my nose. I've tried to explain this before: It was a mixture of smoke, fog and the fumes of burning corpses, and then there were these urine smells, the stink of urine always hangs over these camps, the smell of dead bodies, and then this terrible draughty wind on the square.

We were led into brick building no. 1 [the western brick building, which still stands today]. Then we went down to the bunker, underneath the building, and there we sat on our suitcases and waited. What for? We didn't know. Then suddenly, these prisoners came in, some of them wearing striped prisoner uniforms, others in civilian clothes marked with painted crosses, and they had scissors and clippers with them. And then they went around, cutting our hair off.

We looked at each other, but despite everything, we had kept our sense of humour. I was sitting next to a man from Nibe, a butcher called Martin. I had to grin, and he asked, "What are you grinning for, Hans?" I said, "I'm grinning because of you." – "Why's that?" "You look strange." And he said, "You don't look any better yourself, you know." Those were the last bits of our sense of humour we'd managed to keep.

Hans Bøjlund Sørensen, interview conducted in 2000. (ANg)

Most of the Danish prisoners of Neuengamme concentration camp were either deployed to the Oortkaten work detail in Hamburg or transferred to the satellite camps at Schandelah, Porta Westfalica, Meppen-Versen, Alt Garge, Hanover-Stöcken, Hanover-Ahlem, Hanover-Misburg, Husum-Schwesing, Hamburg-Finkenwerder (Deutsche Werft), Hamburg-Rothenburgsort (Bullenhuser Damm), Hamburg-Veddel (Dessauer Ufer) and Hamburg-Spaldingstraße.

I became "Red Triangle, Red D no. 69488". There was no longer anything personal about us, no watch, no clothes, no way of looking normal, no names, nothing!

The following days in Neuengamme were, of course, shaped by the new situation of being a prisoner, by the smell in the camp, by the damp and cold that you would get in that area and still do, by the thin clothes and by hunger. We were transferred to one of the wooden huts, in which many different prisoners were housed. They were filled with three-storey bunk beds, and two prisoners were lying in each bed – on a mattress with a grey blanket. People would usually sleep fully dressed to keep warm and because there was nowhere to put your clothes. We learned what to do in order not to be so cold at night: we would curl up very close to each other and put our hands between our thighs.

Evening roll-call was the worst, it often lasted several hours. And that was before we got our small rations.

*Ernst Nielsen, manuscript for a talk,
undated (ANG)*

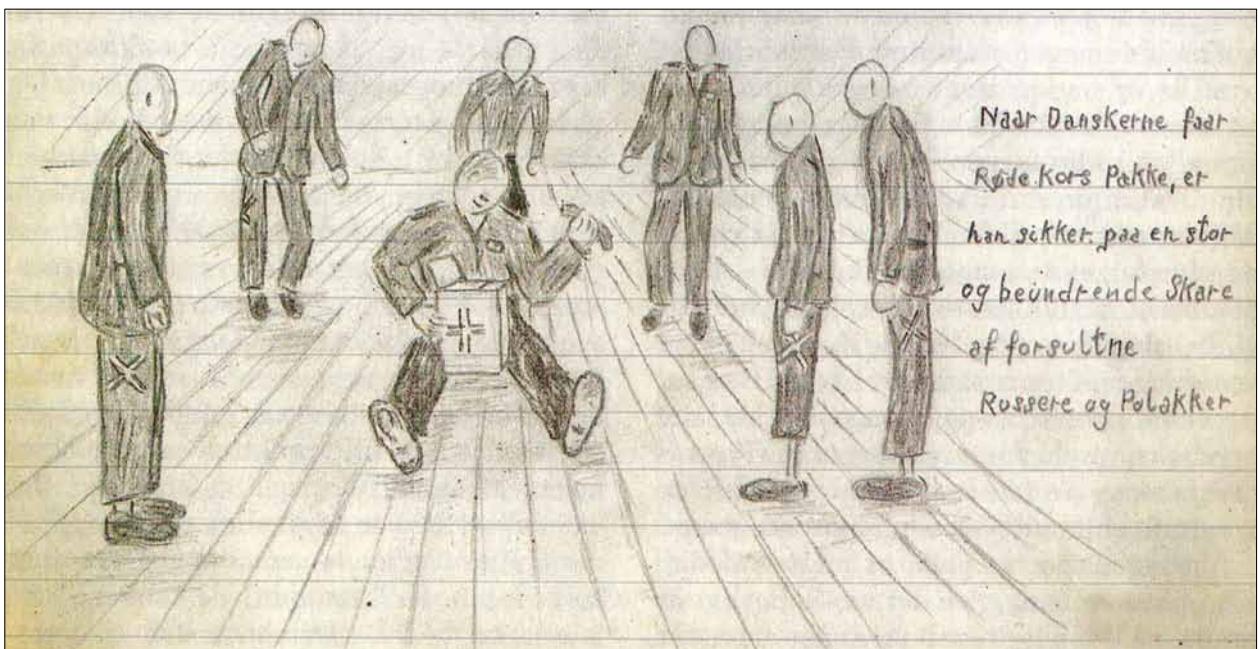
Danish politicians made it one of their central tasks to help their deported fellow citizens. Civil servants and politicians approached the German authorities in charge and pointed out that the Germans had guaranteed Danish sovereignty. At the same time, efforts to locate the Danish prisoners in Germany and to send them parcels were coordinated at the Danish ministry for social affairs. Each prisoner was to receive two to three Red Cross parcels per month. Only two weeks after the first group had been deported to Neuengamme, transporters carrying 200 food packages from Denmark arrived there. These additional rations significantly increased the Danish prisoners' chances of survival.

However, the Danish prisoners' privileged food situation also provoked envy among other concentration camp prisoners.

Drawing by Danish prisoner Jens Martin Sørensen, 1948. He added the following comment: Whenever Danes received Red Cross parcels, you could be sure a large crowd of starving Russians and Poles would gather to admire them.

(FM)

At least 310 of the 4,400 Danish prisoners of Neuengamme concentration camp died. In 1944, preparations for rescue efforts began in Norway and Denmark. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the "Scandinavians' Camp" at Neuengamme and in the evacuation of the Danish and Norwegian prisoners on the White Buses during Operation Bernadotte in the spring of 1945.



The Liberation

Even though Germany's military situation was becoming increasingly hopeless, as an occupying power in Denmark, Germany still waged terror against the population. Danish people were executed as late as March and April 1945. The population was becoming more and more resentful of the occupiers, and the underground army was ready for action. On 3 May 1945, the Freedom Council issued the following appeal to the illegal army: "If the Germans choose to fight, we know that you are prepared. You will all take your positions and do your duty. However, it would be fortunate if the enemy were to come to his senses to spare our country further bloodshed. In that case, it will be your task to guard people, as you were meant to, and to prevent any reprisals against the defeated!"

Because hundreds of thousands of German soldiers were stationed in Norway and Denmark, a peaceful end to the war in northern Europe was of great importance to the Allies. Grand Admiral Dönitz, who had become Germany's head of state following Hitler's suicide on 30 April 1945, had given German soldiers the order to "act in an uncompromising and energetic manner". But after the German forces in northern Germany, the Netherlands and in Denmark had surrendered to General Montgomery on 4 May 1945, the 5-year occupation of Denmark finally came to an end. The German troops were disarmed. However, the last German soldiers did not leave Denmark until the autumn of 1945.