

Ernst Nielsen

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*February 28, 1924 (Haderslev/Denmark)

† March 17, 2012 (Denmark)

arrested in December 1944 for being active in the resistance; deported to Neuengamme concentration camp in January 1945; imprisoned in Finkenwerder (Deutsche Werft) and Rothenburgsort (Bullenhuser Damm) satellite camps in Hamburg; transferred back to Neuengamme main camp on April 11, 1945 where he was sent to the "Scandinavians' camp"; evacuated to Sweden on the Swedish Red Cross's White Buses for recuperation; returned to Denmark on May 9, 1945; worked as an engineer.

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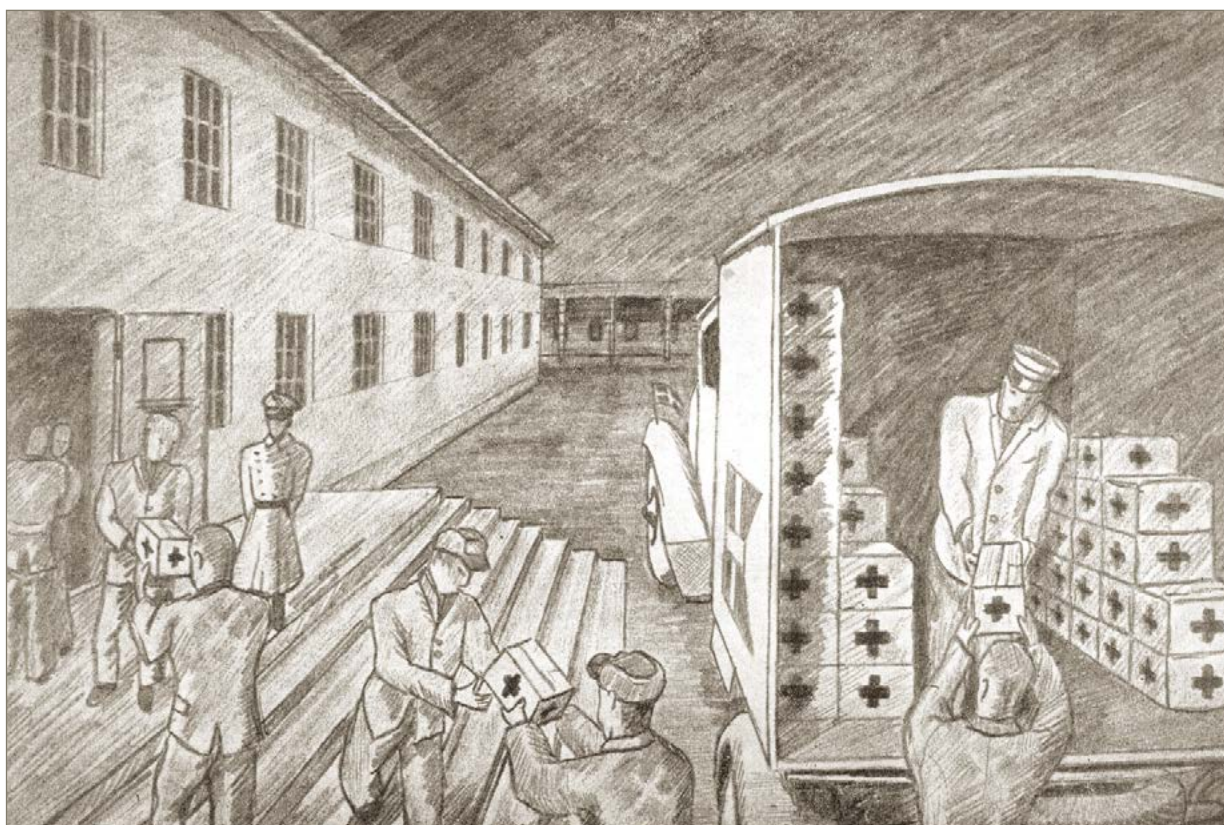
Ernst Nielsen was born on February 28, 1924 in Haderslev, Denmark. Because of the proximity of his home town to the German border, he was familiar with the German language and culture.

In 1943, he was studying engineering in Copenhagen and was a member of a student resistance group against the German occupiers which belonged to the large *Frit Danmark* (Free Denmark) resistance organisation. Shortly before Christmas 1944, Nielsen was arrested by the Gestapo and taken to the Vestre Fængsel prison in Copenhagen. Sixteen days later, he was deported to Germany. Nielsen arrived at the Neuengamme concentration camp at midnight on January 14, 1945.

The SS at Neuengamme was looking for engineers and fitters for forced labor in armaments production in the satellite camps. Nielsen volunteered and was transferred to the Finkenwerder (Deutsche Werft) satellite camp a few days later, where he mainly had to work on clearance detail. In late March 1945, he was transferred to the Rothenburgsort satellite camp on Bullenhusen Damm. There, he also had to perform strenuous physical labor, including reprocessing rubble from bombed-out houses. Because the Danish Red Cross knew the names and whereabouts of the Danish prisoners in German camps by that time, a representative from the Danish consulate was able to visit Nielsen and give him a parcel from his parents.

Danish and Norwegian prisoners in the German concentration camps not only received private parcels from family and friends, but also food and clothes parcels from the Danish and Swedish Red Cross.

Drawing by the Danish former Neuengamme prisoner Hans Peter Sørensen. From: Hans Peter Sørensen: Neuengamme Erindringer – 20 Tegninger af Grænseovergåendarm. Hans P. Sørensen, Sønderborg, undated [1946].



On April 11, 1945, the Danish prisoners of the Rothenburgsort satellite camp were separated from the rest during a roll call and taken to the "Scandinavians' Camp" at Neuenamme on one of the Danish White Buses on the same day.

"A [...] white Danish bus with a Danish flag painted on it stopped there [on Bullenhusser Damm]. The bus came from my home town, the bus driver was from Haderslev as well, and I knew him. [...] Then something happened which seemed like a miracle to us. We hadn't heard anything about this aid campaign, [...] about the chance of getting back home. It was as if all of the horrors we'd experienced had been wiped out at once. [...] So we got to the "Scandinavians' Camp", were taken to bed [...] and then this surprising thing happened: We were each given our own bunk and clean sheets. [...] It was warm there in the block, small stoves had been put up by the walls, and that wasn't what we were used to. [...] It was quite simply a miracle, it all consisted of miracles."

(Interview with Ernst Nielsen conducted in 1999. ANg. All further quotes have been taken from this interview.)

Ernst Nielsen and his comrades received medical care from the Danish and Swedish Red Cross staff.

"When I saw this Swedish doctor in his uniform, I reacted in the way I'd learned in the concentration camp: I took off my

cap and stood to attention. Only later did I realize that that must have been slightly ridiculous, because he was wearing a Swedish doctor's uniform, not an SS uniform."

On the afternoon of April 17, 1945, Ernst Nielsen, too, was taken to Sweden to recuperate on the Red Cross's White Buses.

"We drove through Germany under a clear, blue, high spring sky. The trees were just coming into leaf. You could say we experienced that spring three times: First, there was this fantastic joy of being free and driving through the country towards the Danish border; then we had the experience of arriving in Sweden in spring, and then we experienced spring once more [upon the return to Denmark]. [...] It was a kind of rebirth, with the weather being as it was, and us suddenly being able to foresee our return home. [...] It was a kind of euphoria, but sometimes we were tired. And then there was the joy and a lingering feeling of surprise at what had so suddenly happened to us."

Friends and relatives were waiting at the German-Danish border to welcome the homecomers. Ernst Nielsen, who had weighed 74 kilograms before his arrest, only weighed 34 kilograms.

"My mother was also there. She stuck her head in the bus and asked my comrade, who was sitting next to me, if I wasn't with them as she couldn't see me. That was a very strange experience for me, but it also showed that we weren't exactly pudgy at the time."

Word got around quickly in Denmark that transports of Scandinavian concentration camp survivors were on their way to Sweden. Ernst Nielsen remembered the next stage of the journey to Fredericia as follows:

"That journey was unforgettable because the whole towns knew that these concentration camp prisoners were coming. The streets were black with people who waved at us, called out to us, threw chocolate and greeted us. The journey therefore unintentionally became a kind of triumphal procession. It was a fantastic experience. [...] But in Sweden, too, it was like a dream to wake up every morning and not be in a concentration camp any more. That was fantastic!"

On May 9, 1945, one day after the end of the war, Ernst Nielsen returned home.

"I arrived home [...] in the middle of the night and woke up my parents. It was a great miracle for them, and for me as well."

After his return to Denmark, Nielsen wanted to stay in touch with other former prisoners and tell other people about his experiences in the camps, but Danish society at the time was not particularly open to hearing about the experiences of concentration camp survivors.

"When you tried to tell others what had happened, it was: 'Forget it, make sure you get ahead quickly. Finish your studies and forget it!' [...] In truth, we all suffered from this because there was no way for us to get it off our chests. [...] Eventually, I managed to leave it all behind me, but for at least a whole year I was a nervous wreck."

Nielsen worked as a fire prevention engineer and did not join the Landsforeningen af kz-fanger fra Neuengamme, the Danish association of Neuengamme survivors, until after he retired:

"First and foremost to commemorate the dead and then to help prevent the rise of neofascism. But also to just get together and thereby help alleviate our problems a little. Because we all had our problems with our time in the camps. Many of us have become invalids due to the long-term effects of our concentration camp imprisonment."

The starting point for Nielsen's increased involvement with the survivors' association was a "pilgrimage" organized in

April 1995 by the association in collaboration with the Bernadotte Association of former aid workers from the rescue campaign. On old Danish and Swedish White Buses, the participants, including Nielsen, visited the sites from which they were rescued by the Red Cross in April 1945 and re-traced the paths of their liberation 50 years later.

Ernst Nielsen was an active member of the Danish survivors' association, which became a foundation in 2005. He was also one of the vice presidents of the international Neuengamme survivors' association, the Amicale Internationale KZ Neuengamme.

He died on March 17, 2012.

A Swedish White Bus on the former roll call square of the Neuengamme concentration camp during the pilgrimage on the 50th anniversary of the White Buses rescue campaign in April 1995. In the background to the right is the western brick building, the former prisoner blocks 1 to 4, which contained the Scandinavians' Camp in March/April 1945.

Photographer unknown. (ANg, F 1995-2660)



A Danish White Bus on the former roll call square of the Neuengamme concentration camp during the pilgrimage on the 50th anniversary of the White Buses rescue operation in April 1995.

Photographer unknown. (ANg, F 1995-2653)



