
Dutch and Danish Jews in the Theresienstadt Ghetto /

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Dutch Jews in Theresienstadt Ghetto

Dutch Jews were deported to Theresienstadt in 1934-1944 and were the fourth largest group in the camp after Czech Jews (from the Protectorate) and Jews from Germany and Austria. They were a heterogeneous group of 5,000, a small portion of the entire population of Dutch Jewry (less than 5%), who met the numerous requirements of "privileged Jews" and were approved by Eichmann for deportation to the "preferred" Theresienstadt camp .

They were mostly high-class Jews: war invalids and decorated Jews who served in World War I, including women decorated for their service as nurses, and their families, who immigrated to Holland from Germany and Austria after the Nazi rise to power. They also included the Jewish spouses of Germans, children whose parents were already deported to Theresienstadt, and 150 Jews who were members of the Dutch Nazi Party, as well as Protestant Christians of Jewish descent, or Jews who were baptized and were under the protection of the large Dutch Protestant and Reformed Churches, and the Calvinist and Catholic churches; 300 Portuguese Jews, the "wellborn", members of the Spanish-Portuguese-Israelite community in Holland; 50 members of the "Blue Rider Group" that belonged to the German Expressionist art movement; the Barneveld group of 650 Jews selected for their exceptional contribution to the Dutch State and its culture – for example the President of the Dutch Red Cross, the deputy-Governor of Dutch Indonesia, scientists, intellectuals, artists, physicians, industrialists and others, who were brought to Barneveld in 1943 under the protection of Karel Johannes Frederiks, then-Secretary General of the Dutch Interior Office, and were transferred to

Theresienstadt on September 4, 1944. Over half of them were Jews of German descent. They were protected from the transports from Theresienstadt until the liberation. Most of the deportees arrived from the Westerbork transit camp in Holland but also from the Bergen-Belsen camp in Germany – while most of Dutch Jews were deported directly to the extermination camps of Sobibor and Auschwitz .

4,924 Jews Arrived in Transports from Holland to Theresienstadt :

- .1 On April 22, 1943 transport XXIV/1 from Amsterdam with 297 prisoners, mostly German Jews.
- .2 On January 20, 1944 transport XXIV/2 from Westerbork with 872 prisoners.
- .3 On January 27, 1944 transport XXIV/3 from Bergen-Belsen in freight cars, 283 prisoners in bad condition .
- .4 On February 26, 1944 transport XXIV/4 from Westerbork with 809 prisoners.
- .5 On April 7, 1944 transport XXIV/5 from Holland with 289 prisoners.
- .6 On August 2, 1944 transport XXIV/6 from Holland with 223 prisoners.
- .7 On September 6, 1944, transport XXIV/7 from Westerbork with 2,081 prisoners, the largest transport to Theresienstadt .

Life in Theresienstadt

The Jews who were deported from Holland included privileged individuals of various citizenships who discovered to their distress that even the "preferred" Theresienstadt camp had transports going east. Though Dutch Jews were deemed a single group by the veteran prisoners of Theresienstadt, upon their arrival in the ghetto they were divided into two groups according to their country of origin, and each group adjusted

differently to life in the camp. Most of the "German Dutch" who immigrated to Holland from Germany and Austria were adults, were fluent in German and were more involved in the life and the work on the camp. The situation was different for the "Dutch Dutch" who arrived as entire families. The more educated among them who knew German could be integrated into the prisoners' community but for the uneducated Jew who did not know German, life in Theresienstadt was more difficult .

In January 1944 the technical department and the housing department of the ghetto were required to evacuate within four days 3,300 Czech women and children who lived in the Hamburg barracks, and transfer them into the other barracks which were already overcrowded. The Hamburg barracks were cleaned and disinfected and prepared quickly to accommodate the transports from Holland which were considered preferred. The rooms prepared for them were designed for a smaller number of people and did not include bunk beds. Giving Dutch Jews the preferred rooms and the worsening conditions of the Czech women and children caused deep animosity between Czech and Dutch Jews. According to Siegfried van den Bergh, a Jew of Dutch descent, this made the Czechs want to get back at the Dutch, con them or slander them before Rahm the camp Commandant Rahm with unfounded complaints, and the Dutch Jews realized bitterly that all the preferred jobs were at the hands of the Czech Jews. Due to the different characteristics of the deportees from Holland it was difficult for them to unite into an influential group in the ghetto. Most of the Dutch parents did not want to place their children in the children's houses and youth houses and therefore only few children who arrived in the transports form Holland were placed in children's houses in the ghetto. In the spring and summer of 1944 Prof. Judah Lion Palache organized classes and a children's house for 100 Dutch children up to the age of 14 in the Hamburg barracks, where Dutch was the spoken language. The Dutch Jews were the only group which did not

receive packages from outside, so the third Elder of the Jews, Dr. Benjamin Murelstein, organized special meals for the Dutch children, and took care of clothing for those Dutch Jews whose luggage was confiscated .

The Exploitation of Dutch Jews for the Germans' Deception Efforts

The first transport of privileged Jews from Amsterdam, mostly native of Germany, arrived in passenger cars, because Seyss-Inquart, the Commissioner of the Reich in Holland, regarded it as a propaganda maneuver, as if it was a "transfer of residence". In January 20, 1944 the German photographed the arrival of a transport of Dutch Jews which included well-known personalities, and their reception by the second Elder of the Jews, Dr. Paul Eppstein, for a planned Nazi propaganda film about Theresienstadt. In the course of beautifying Theresienstadt for the visit of the international Red Cross delegation on June 23, 1944, special attention was given to improving the accommodations and the facades of the buildings where Dutch and Danish Jews lived, which were within the path of the visit. The most privileged among them were later selected by the Germans to forcibly participate in the propaganda film shot in the ghetto in September 1944 – "Theresienstadt – a Documentary from a Jewish Resettlement Region ."

Representation of Dutch Jews in the Ghetto's Elders Council

Early in September 1944, Prof. David Cohen, one of the former heads of the Joodse Raad in Holland, arrived in Theresienstadt from Westerbrok. He was added to the Elders Council as the representative of Dutch Jews, but according to van den Berghe, who previously worked in the Joodse Raad, Cohen concentrated in the welfare of his cronies and ignored the rest of Dutch Jews in the ghetto, who remained without protection. In December 1944 Edward Moritz Mayer, who was a

Professor at Leiden University, was elected to the Fifth Elders Council as the representative of Dutch Jews and indeed acted on their behalf .

3,010 Dutch Jews (61.5%) were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. 169 Dutch Jews died in Theresienstadt .

The Liberation

On February 5, 1945, 433 Dutch Jews, 286 women and 147 men, were selected to leave on a holiday transport from Theresienstadt to Switzerland. On Liberation Day on May 8, 1945, there were 1,295 Dutch Jews in Theresienstadt. Including those who left for Switzerland, then, 1,728 Dutch Jews survived in Theresienstadt, out of 4,924 (35%) of the deportees from Holland, a high percentage compared with the low percentage of Dutch Jews who survived in Auschwitz (1.48%). On June 6-8 Dutch Jews left Theresienstadt for Pilsen and from there went to Holland. However, the return of the "German Dutch" was full of difficulties, since they did not have Dutch citizenship and could not demand their return to Holland .

Danish Jews in Theresienstadt Ghetto

Danish Jews comprised the smallest group among the Jews in Theresienstadt (less than 1%), but their arrival had an enormous impact on the life of the rest of the prisoners and on the ghetto's external development. Early in October 1943 the Germans planned the extermination of Danish Jews. Following the combined efforts of the Danish authorities, the Danish underground, and the Jewish community, most of the Jews of Denmark (over 7,000) were smuggled to Sweden on boats. Still, the Germans captured 476 Jews who were left behind, and they were detained and deported to Theresienstadt ghetto. On October 5, 1943 the first transport arrived with 83 deported Danish Jews, on October 6 the second transport arrived with 198

people, and on October 14 arrived 175 people. They were 464 in total (including 8 Jews who arrived in the ghetto individually. Among them was the rabbi Dr. Max Friediger, the former chief rabbi of Denmark, who was added to the Elders Council in the ghetto as the representative of Danish Jews until the liberation. On November 4, 1943, it was agreed between Adolph Eichmann, who headed the department of "Evacuations and Jews" IVB4, which oversaw the execution of the "Final Solution", and Werner Best, the Reich Commissioner of occupied Denmark, that all Danish Jews (including Jews without citizenship who were in Denmark as refugees) who were deported from Denmark will remain in Theresienstadt (i.e. will not be sent to Auschwitz), and that the representatives of the Central Danish Administration and of the Red Cross will visit them. The Reich Main Security Office approved the agreement with one reservation: "It is undesirable that the visit will take place before the spring of 1944". The date of the visit was postponed again and again in order to have time to prepare the ghetto. The Germans' approval of the visit, and the developments following the visit, had decisive implications for the character of the Theresienstadt ghetto later on, and for the fate of its Jewish prisoners in the spring and autumn of 1944 .

The Reception of Danish Jews in the Ghetto

In contrast with the usual proceeding, upon their arrival in Theresienstadt, those on the first transport from Denmark were not sent with their luggage to the waterfront (the Schloise), but had a sort of "official welcome reception" held by Dr. Paul Eppstein, the second Jewish Elder in the ghetto, in the Aussig barracks, with the ghetto command, Haindl's men (Gestapo), and other S.S. personnel present. Eppstein told them that each one of them was supposed to work according to his qualifications, and told them about the self-government of the town, its institutions and well developed cultural life. All this to convince the "newcomers" to write

soothing postcards to Denmark. After the postcards were collected, the newcomers "earned" their actual reception to the camp – their money and all their valuables were taken from them, and they were compelled to wear the yellow star on their clothing (which they did not have to wear in Denmark) like all the rest of the prisoners in the ghetto. Initially the Danish Jews were confined to isolated cabins which became vacant after the children from Bialystok were sent from the ghetto. Later, they were housed in better accommodations inside the ghetto, though only few of them were deemed "privileged". In contrast with the other Jewish prisoners who lived in oppressively overcrowded barracks, separated from their families, Danish Jews could be housed with their families. They were allowed to send and receive letters, received a regular shipment of food and medicines from private Danish organizations, under the auspices of the Welfare Ministry and the Social Security office in Denmark, and from June 1944 through the Danish Red Cross. The food packages were beneficial for their health and were used for trade with other prisoners, with the Czech gendarmes and with S.S. personnel, and occasionally for bribing as well. Those packages were also important for their psychological impact – they were evidence that the prisoners were not forgotten, and that there was hope that someone would act to rescue them. Of all the privileges given to the Danish Jews who were deported to Theresienstadt, the most important was the immunity from transport, which applied to everyone deported from Denmark whether or not they were Danish citizens .

The Visit of the International Red Cross Delegation in Theresienstadt and its Consequences for the Danish Jews and for the Ghetto

In October 1943 the Danish request to visit the Jews who were deported from Denmark to Theresienstadt, and the persistent requests of Dr. Ronald Marty, the head of the international Red Cross delegation in Berlin, from the Reich authorities,

to visit Theresienstadt and examine the living conditions of the Jews in the ghetto, were approved in principle by Himmler. The success of the visit was very important for Himmler, under the assumption that presenting the "good" condition of the Jews in Theresienstadt will refute the reports on their extermination and will serve as his alibi, and will help his negotiations with the Western allies against the Soviet Union and Communism, and to save Germany. Vast plans for "beautifying the town" were made by the German authorities before the visit of the international Red Cross delegation in Theresienstadt, which was set for June 23, 1944, in order to show it off to international organizations as a model Jewish camp and as part of the Nazi propaganda campaign. Since the Danish Jews were at the core of this visit, early in June 1944 those of them who were considered by the German to be the most representative were moved to separate apartments and were allowed to have their own family life. All the other Danish Jews were moved to three renovated furnished houses with single beds, which had tables and chairs, which were not in the prisoners' residences in the camp. The sick and exhausted were also moved there in case someone asked about them, so that they could be presented easily. On June 22, 1944, one day before the day of the visit, all the Danish men were summoned by Eppstein for a muster. With Eichmann's representative Ernst Moehs and the camp Commandant Karl Rahm present, he announced the German instructions, how to behave and what to answer during the visit. Finally, he threatened them that if they do not follow the instructions fully, the German will halt the food shipments, and all the Danish Jews will be sent from the ghetto on the next transport "east". On June 23, 1944 the international Red Cross delegation arrived in Theresienstadt, and included two representatives from Denmark: Frans Hvass, the director of the political department in the Danish Foreign Office, Dr. Juel Henningsen, an inspector from the Health Ministry in Copenhagen, a representative of the Danish Red Cross; and Dr. Maurice Rossel, a representative of the international Red Cross .

In 1972 Hvass explained that during the visit in 1944 he and Henningsen directed their attention at the health condition of the Danish Jews, their clothes and their living conditions. "In Denmark there was an impression that Theresienstadt was a very primitive concentration camp, full of 'Muselmänner' collapsing in the street and dying in multitudes." Their impression was very different and led to the positive tone of the report which did include several critical comments on the housing accommodations which were "overcrowded". They were told that Theresienstadt was not a transit camp but a final destination and the Germans announced explicitly that no Dane was transported from there. After the visit had been concluded the Danish representatives compared their impressions with those of the Swiss representative and found that they were similar. The visit of the Danish representatives in Theresienstadt had positive consequences for Danish Jews imprisoned there. The Germans reconfirmed officially that they will not be deported from Theresienstadt. The shipment of packages to them was officially allowed and was organized from that point on by the Red Cross, which undertook their mail service, and a big shipment of books was delivered to them Denmark at their request .

However, the German satisfaction with the visit in the ghetto had tragic ramifications for the Jews in Theresienstadt, of whom 18,402 were deported to Auschwitz in October 1944, and for those who were deported from the ghetto to the "family camp" built for them in Birkenau. Immediately after the visit their fate was decided, and they were selected for extermination like the rest of the Auschwitz prisoners. There were 11,000 Jews left in the ghetto, those 65 years and up and all the Danish Jews.

The Liberation of Danish Jews and its Influence on the Prisoners in Theresienstadt

In February 1945, the Count Folke Bernadotte, Vice President of the Swedish Red Cross, met with Himmler and succeeded to get his consent for the immediate release of all Scandinavian prisoners from the concentration camps: first to transfer them to the Neuengamme concentration camp in Germany and later to Denmark and to Sweden. The Germans, however, did not agree to include Jews among them. Since

Bernadotte elected to continue the rescue efforts in Theresienstadt without the Danish Jews, the Danish prisoners decided to rescue their country's Jews from Theresienstadt by themselves. Dr. Johannes Holm, head of the Danish Health Services in the combined Red Cross branch of Denmark and Sweden, was assisted by S.S. Obersturmbannführer (Lieutenant Colonel) Dr. Rennau, Himmler's liaison with Bernadotte. With great effort the two managed to receive from the Gestapo in Berlin the necessary documents for the release of Danish Jews, and to immediately travel to the German command center in Theresienstadt. The camp Commandant stipulated that Danish Jews could be released only with the consent of the Minister of State Karl Hermann Frank. Holm and Rennau traveled to Prague and received Frank's consent. Rabbi Friedberg was summoned to the command center and was notified that all Danish Jews should pack their belongings for their release. The morning of April 15, 1945 was an exciting day for all the prisoners in Theresienstadt. 425 Danish Jews (50 of whom died in the camp) boarded the buses of the Swedish Red Cross, "the white buses". Among them were three children born in the ghetto, four women (Czech Jews) who married Danes and Danish born Jew who joined their group in the ghetto .

The departure of the Danes symbolized the realization of the dream of all the Jews in the ghetto, who had been dreaming for years of going back home. "They were not envied... they were loved, because thanks to them vital food provisions were received by the inhabitants." All the prisoners came to say goodbye. "Swedish drivers drove slowly from the ghetto outside and led Jews to life, to freedom. People stood there dazed, shouted and waved... crowded up to Q7 and 'Victoria' and into the closed quarter... The orchestra played, and a spring morning was above in its glow." Two days later they arrived at the Danish border town of Padborg and from there they were transported by ferry to Malmo, Sweden .