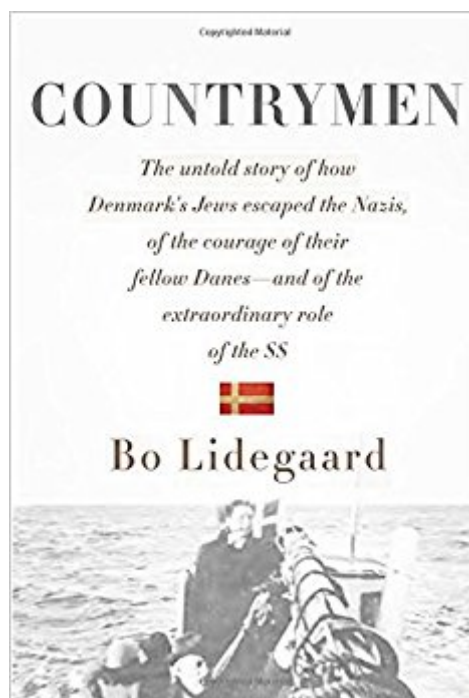




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Countrymen: The Untold Story Of How Denmark's Jews Escaped The Nazis, Of The Courage Of Their Fellow Danes--and Of The Extraordinary Role Of The SS



Synopsis

Amid the dark, ghastly history of World War II, the literally extraordinary story, never before fully researched by a historian, of how the Danish people banded together to save their fellow Jews from the Nazis—told through the remarkable unpublished diaries and documents of families forced to run for safety, leaving their homes and possessions behind, and of those who courageously came to their aid. In 1943, with its king and administration weakened but intact during the Nazi occupation, Denmark did something that no other country in Western Europe even attempted. Anticipating that the German occupying powers would soon issue the long-feared order to round up the entire population of Jews for deportation to concentration camps, the Danish people stood up in defiance and resisted. The king, politicians, and ordinary civilians were united in their response—these threatened people were not simply Jews but fellow Danes who happened to be Jewish, and no one would help in rounding them up for confinement and deportation. While diplomats used their limited but very real power to maneuver and impede matters in both Copenhagen and Berlin, the warning that the crisis was at hand quickly spread through the Jewish community. Over fourteen harrowing days, as they were helped, hidden, and protected by ordinary people who spontaneously rushed to save their fellow citizens, an incredible 7,742 out of 8,200 Jewish refugees were smuggled out all along the coast—on ships, schooners, fishing boats, anything that floated—to Sweden. While the bare facts of this exodus have been known for decades, astonishingly no full history of it has been written. Unfolding on a day-to-day basis, *Countrymen* brings together accounts written by individuals and officials as events happened, offering a comprehensive overview that underlines occupied Denmark's historical importance to Hitler as a prop for the model Nazi state and revealing the savage conflict among top Nazi brass for control of the country. This is a story of ordinary glory, of simple courage and moral fortitude that shines out in the midst of the terrible history of the twentieth century and demonstrates how it was possible for a small and fragile democracy to stand against the Third Reich.

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Customer Reviews

One of the few feel-good stories to emerge from the Holocaust was the protection and eventual rescue of the approximately 7,000 Danish Jews by their fellow Gentile Danish citizens, escaping a scheduled roundup by Nazi occupiers. Lidegaard is a former diplomat and is currently the editor of the Danish newspaper Politiken. As he points out, this mass rescue was extraordinary, since the population and governments of other occupied nations rarely protected their fellow Jewish countrymen. Lidegaard uses diaries, letters, and memoirs of the participants to provide a day-to-day narrative that proceeds on two tracks: the Nazi plans for roundup and the Danish plans to defeat it. The Danish government, including the king, had advance notice of the Nazi plan. A policy of delay and obstruction bought time, which allowed ordinary citizens to organize transport of almost all of the Jews to Sweden. This is a tense, inspiring story of the resistance to oppression by a united people. --Jay Freeman

Lidegaard has painstakingly reconstructed an extraordinary story, and he tells with the assurance of a journalist who knows he's making literature. It's a shame that the epic story of Countrymen had to wait so long to be told in full-length book form. •Allen Barra

I came across the story of the Danish Jews as I was teaching WWII. It, surprisingly, was barely mentioned in the books I had read in the past, so I was very excited when I heard about this book. As interesting as the story is, the book itself was a bit underwhelming. On a positive note, the author clearly did his research on the topic, using quotes from letters and diaries written by the people involved in episode after episode of Danish citizens, Danish Jews, and Germans. The author also has some good discussions regarding human nature and what created the environment where the Holocaust could succeed in some countries but fail in Denmark. However, the book was filled with many very similar stories, many times multiple stories from the same event with only slight variations in perspective. This writing style added length to the book without actually adding significantly to the story itself. Stylistically, the author periodically used present tense verbs, which

was probably meant to create a "you are there" feel for the reader but only ended up creating an awkward writing style. Over all, the book showed good research on a topic that is not very well-known. But the writing style took away from book as a whole. I recommend this book, but mostly because there are so few books about this topic.

Since the history of Scandinavian (not just Danish) Jewry holds a great interest with me, I was quite excited to get this book with which I was not previously familiar. As fascinating as the subject is, the book does not get more than 3 stars from me because of the poor writing. In general terms, it sounds like the author (who, undoubtedly has great academic credentials) wrote in Danish and then did a verbatim translation without much thought to context and meaning. For instance, your eye and mind will get caught on awkward constructions (like "addresses book"), plural possessives (like "the Germans' list" and "Jews' apartments" when an adjective would be the natural choice), strange expressions ("fisherman was doing tricks" (to show how the police were distracted)), jargon ("issue lost its topicality"), and choice of words ("troupe" (of refugees)). The syntax errors are just too many to mention in a review of this kind. I could go on, but there's no sense in doing so as the topic - and the research that went into it - outweighs the shortcomings. Still, I think potential readers should be aware of what they'll be facing when getting this book. Perhaps my review will also alert anyone writing in a foreign language and contemplating doing his/her own translation to get a professional editor to review for all these things I mentioned (and more). Regardless, for anyone interested in the subject of the rescue of the Danish Jews, this is a book worth reading. Just load up on lots of patience! Nothing challenges a reader of an otherwise invaluable book more than when the reading flow is interrupted by the above stumbling blocks, and more.

As an example of exception to the rule of the day, Denmark stood out in its refusal to allow its countrymen to be persecuted by the occupiers during the Second World War. This book examines this exception and theorizes on the circumstances that made it possible. Though the overall story is interesting, I found the read to be a bit tedious. It seemed to repeatedly cycle between preparing and assisting for exodus, the journey, and the welcome in Sweden. After reading through this a few times, my interest began to fade. That said, it is indeed an inspiring story when you consider that a small occupied country was able to say "no" and stand up to (and influence the actions of) the most powerful occupying country.

There are other books about the Danish Resistance, and other books about the Danish rescue of

the Jews. This book has more, though - it traces through the vicissitudes of Danish government and politics during the Nazi occupation. More attention to the possible motives and attitudes of the chief German Nazis in charge of the occupation than other books. The writing isn't zippy, but it is professional and more than adequate. If you want hero stories, pick another book (though there are some here), but if you want the political background this one is your pick.

This is a comprehensive and judicious analysis of the reasons why Denmark's Jews fared so exceptionally better than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe under Nazi occupation. The story is told in great detail and in all its complexity. It leaves two questions unanswered. First, why did the Danish population resist the anti-Semitism that was so common elsewhere? And second, what accounts for the similar exceptionalism of Bulgaria?

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