

The Danish Resistance

by Thomas Merton

One of the rare glimmers of humanity and reason in the detailed history of Eichmann's patient labors to exterminate the Jews, as recorded by Hannah Arendt's recent series of articles in *The New Yorker*, was the nonviolent resistance offered by the entire nation of Denmark against Nazi power mobilized for genocide.

Denmark was not the only European nation that disagreed with Hitler on this point. But it was one of the only nations which offered explicit, formal and successful nonviolent resistance to Nazi power. The adjectives are important. The resistance was successful because it was explicit and formal, and because it was practically speaking unanimous. The entire Danish nation simply refused to cooperate with the Nazis, and resisted every move of the Nazis against the Jews with nonviolent protest of the highest and most effective caliber, yet without any need for organization, training; or specialized activism: simply by unanimously and effectively expressing in word and action the force of their deeply held moral convictions. These moral convictions were nothing heroic or sublime. They were merely ordinary.

There had of course been subtle and covert refusals on the part of other nations. Italians in particular, while outwardly complying with Hitler's policy, often arranged to help the Jews evade capture or escape from unlocked freight cars. The Danish nation, from the King on down, formally and publically rejected the policy and opposed it with an open, calm, convinced resistance which shook the morale of the German troops and SS men occupying the country and changed their whole outlook on the Jewish question.

When the Germans first approached the Danes about the segregation of Jews, proposing the introduction of the yellow badge, the government officials replied that the King of Denmark would be the first to wear the badge, and that the introduction of any anti-Jewish measures would lead immediately to their own resignation.

At the same time, the Danes refused to make any distinction between Danish and non-Danish Jews. That is to say, they took the German Jewish refugees under their protection and refused to deport them back to Germany—an act which considerably disrupted the efficiency of Eichmann's organization and delayed anti-Jewish operations in Denmark until 1943 when Hitler personally ordered that the "final solution" go into effect without further postponement.

The Danes replied by strikes, by refusals to repair German ships in their shipyards, and by demonstrations of protest. The Germans then imposed martial law. But now it was realized that the German officials in Denmark were changed men. They could "no longer be trusted." They refused to cooperate in the liquidation of the Jews, not of course by open protest, but by delays, evasions, covert refusals and the raising of bureaucratic obstacles. Hence Eichmann was forced to send a "specialist" to Denmark, at the same time making a concession of monumental proportions: all the Jews from Denmark would go only to Theresienstadt, a "soft" camp for privileged Jews. Finally, the special police sent direct from Germany to round up the Jews were warned by the SS officers in Denmark that Danish police would probably forcibly resist attempts to take the Jews away by force, and that there was to be no fighting between Germans and Danes. Meanwhile the Jews themselves had been warned and most of them had gone into hiding, helped, of course, by friendly Danes: then wealthy Danes put up money to pay for transportation of nearly six thousand Jews to Sweden which offered them asylum, protection and the right to work. Hundreds of Danes cooperated in ferrying Jews to Sweden in small boats. Half the Danish Jews remained safely in hiding in Denmark, during the rest of the war. About five hundred Jews who were actually arrested in Denmark went to Theresienstadt and lived under comparatively good conditions: only forty-eight of them died, mostly of natural causes.

Denmark was certainly not the only European nation that disapproved more or less of the "solution" which Hitler had devised for the Judenfrage. But it was the only nation which, as a whole, expressed a forthright moral objection to this policy. Other nations kept their disapproval to themselves. They felt it was

enough to offer the Jews "heartfelt sympathy," and, in many individual cases, tangible aid. But let us not forget that generally speaking the practice was to help the Jew at considerable profit to oneself. How many Jews in France, Holland, Hungary, etc., paid fortunes for official permits, bribes, transportation, protection, and still did not escape!

The whole Eichmann story, as told by Hannah Arendt (indeed as told by anybody) acquires a quality of hallucinatory awfulness from the way in which we see how people in many ways exactly like ourselves, claiming as we do to be Christians or at least to live by humanistic standards which approximate, in theory, to the Christian ethic, were able to rationalize a conscious, uninterrupted and complete cooperation in activities which we now see to have been not only criminal but diabolical. Most of the rationalizing probably boiled down to the usual half-truths: "What can you do? There is no other way out, it is a necessary evil. True, we recognize this kind of action to be in many ways 'unpleasant.' We hate to have to take measures like these: but then those at the top know best. It is for the common good. The individual conscience has to be overruled when the common good is at stake. Our duty is to obey. The responsibility for these measures rests on others . . . and so on."

Curiously, the Danish exception, while relieving the otherwise unmitigated horror of the story, actually adds to the nightmarish and hallucinated effect of incredulousness one gets while reading it. After all, the Danes were not even running a special kind of nonviolent movement. They were simply acting according to ordinary beliefs which everybody in Europe theoretically possessed, but which, for some reason, nobody acted on. Quite the contrary! Why did a course of action which worked so simply and so well in Denmark not occur to all the other so-called Christian nations of the West just as simply and just as spontaneously?

Obviously there is no simple answer. It does not even necessarily follow that the Danes are men of greater faith or deeper piety than other western Europeans. But perhaps it is true that these people had been less perverted and secularized by the emptiness and cynicism, the thoughtlessness, the crude egoism and the rank amorality which have become characteristic of our world,

even where we still see an apparent surface of Christianity. It is not so much that the Danes were Christians, as that they were human. How many others were even that?

The Danes were able to do what they did because they were able to make decisions that were based on clear convictions about which they all agreed and which were in accord with the inner truth of man's own rational nature, as well as in accordance with the fundamental law of God in the Old Testament as well as in the Gospel: thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. The Danes were able to resist the cruel stupidity of Nazi anti-Semitism because this fundamental truth was important to them. And because they were willing, in unanimous and concerted action, to stake their lives on this truth. In a word, such action becomes possible where fundamental truths are taken seriously.

from "The Nonviolent Alternative" by Thomas Merton, 1980. Merton was a Trappist priest who lived in the Gethsemani Monastery from 1941 to 1968, the year of his death.