The story of the Danish Jews

For Charlotte and Ronen Thalmay, Jom Kippur 2017 in the Synagogue of Copenhagen was a very special experience. Both are 3d generation Jews, born and raised in Copenhagen, Denmark. For the first time in 400 years of Danish Jewish history, they were met by Danish military when they arrived for the Kol Nidrei service. Things had changed in the peaceful country of Denmark after a terror attack in February 2015 where the Danish Jewish security guard Dan Uzan was killed.

The first Jews arrived in Denmark in 1622. Although the Jewish people in Denmark have always been a very small minority group, they have made significant contributions to the economic, political, cultural, and scientific development of the country – e.g. Nobel prize winner Niels Bohr, entertainer Victor Borge, and academy award winner Susanne Bier.

The first Jews arrived in Denmark in 1622 at the invitation of King Christian IV. Aiming to propel trade and economic growth, the King gave the Jews – who were successful merchants from Amsterdam and Hamburg – extensive trading privileges and freedom from religious persecution. Prominent Jews held high ranking positions including physician to the royal family and governor of the Danish West Indies – now the U.S. Virgin Islands.

IMMIGRATION FROM EASTERN EUROPE EARLY 1900

Escaping from pogroms and antisemitism in eastern Europe, more than 100.000 Jews passed through the port of Copenhagen on their way to "Di Goldene Medine", America. Approximately 3.000 of them ended up settling in

Hardworking Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Copenhagen 1910

Denmark instead of going to America. However, they were not welcomed by the well-established middle and upper-class Danish Jews who were afraid that the wave of Jews arriving would negatively impact their smooth relationship with the general Danish population.

They felt that their position in society was endangered, because the immigrants unlike them were poor and either Zionist, socialist, or very orthodox. They did however in some cases try to help these immigrant by offering them a ticket for the next boat to Ellis Island!

The ancestors of both Charlotte and Ronen Thalmay came from Poland and Russia and were part of this wave of Jewish immigrants who settled in Copenhagen. Working 15-20 hours a day, they managed to build up a new life. Charlotte's great grandfather Salomon Bornstein established a very successful clothing factory in the heart of the city.

WWII - THE MIRACULOUS RESCUE OF JEWS IN DENMARK

The rescue of the Danish Jews occurred during the Nazi

Reconstruction of Danish Jews escaping to Sweden in October 1943

occupation of Denmark. In September 1943, Adolf Hitler gave the order to arrest and deport all Jews in Denmark. Despite great personal risk, Danes spontaneously organized a rescue operation and helped the Jews reach the Danish coast, where brave fishermen then ferried them to neutral Sweden. In cooperation with the Danish resistance movement, they managed to evacuate approximately 7.000 Danish Jews, plus around 600 non-Jewish spouses.

Jacob Thalmay, Charlotte Thalmay's grandfather, was one of the very few Jews involved with the Danish resistance movement.
He had managed to organize a rescue opportunity on the

The Copenhagen Synagogue, build in 1833

Jacob Thalmay after his arrest in November 1943, before he was deported to Auschwitz

fishing boat Elisabeth in the village of Dragør for his wife and 8-year old son.
Turning around on the pier, he shockingly announced that he had unfinished business in Denmark and would therefore not join them. His decision turned out to be fatal.

He managed to help saving many Jewish lives, but in his ambition to stop the deportation of family members Jacob ended up being arrested by the Gestapo. He was eventually send to Auschwitz and died on the death march in March of 1945. In the WW2 memorial park, the name Jacob Thalmay is engraved amongst the 104 resistance fighters who were killed outside of Denmark.

Ronen's great grandfather, Isak Waniewitz, who was 70 years old in 1943, lived in the Jewish old age home during the war. Unfortunately, he did not get away in time. He was brutally captured by Nazi soldiers and together with 481 other Danish Jews sent to the concentration camp Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia close to Prague.
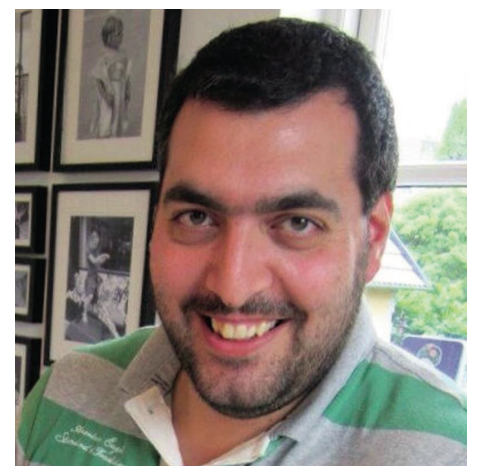
After the deportation of the Danish Jews, leading Danish civil servants persuaded the Germans to allow packages of food and medicine to be sent to the prisoners in Theresienstadt. They also managed to convince the Germans not to send the prisoners to the extermination camps in occu-

pied Poland. This was achieved by persistent Danish political pressure, using the Danish Red Cross to frequently monitor the condition of the Danish Jews in Theresienstadt. In total, 52 Danish Jews died in the camp, but Isak Waniewitz survived 20 months of captivity.

More than 98 % of the Danish Jews returned to Denmark from Sweden and Theresienstadt in May 1945 and thus survived WW2.

THE RISE OF ISLAMIC ANTISEMITISM

For more than a decade, Europe has experienced a rise in anti-semitic events. There have

Dan Uzan, the sescurity guard, who was killed on February 15, 2015

been repeated attacks against Jewish institutions and Jews in Belgium, Sweden, England, and France.

After the terrifying attack against the newspaper Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket in Paris on January 2015, the Jews in Denmark felt the threat of terror getting closer. Only 3 weeks later the worst nightmare became a reality to the Danish Jews.

On February 15, 2015, Ronen and Charlotte were guests at a Bat Mitzvah-party, celebrating Hannah's big day. After midnight, a guard came in screaming: "Stop the music, run to the basement".

A second security guard, Dan Uzan, who was guarding outside the building, had been shot and killed by a radicalized Muslim whose intention was to force his way into the Jewish community center.

The perpetrator succeeded in escaping police captivity, and a Danish anti-terror unit was summoned to evacuate the 40 adults and children who were hiding for more than 2 hours in a very tiny room in the basement. Nobody knew if more terrorists were waiting to shoot from a rooftop out there in the dark.

For Charlotte, Ronen, and all the other guests – 20 of them children – it was a very traumatic experience. There was no cellphone signal in the basement, so it was not possible to reach family and friends to notify them of the situation, and the chaotic noise of people running upstairs caused people to fear the worst.

The aftermath of the terror attack has been a high increase in security in all Jewish institu-

Chairman of the Danish Jewish Community, Dan Asmussen, greets the Danish soldiers outside the Synagogue at the Jom Kippur service in 2017

tions, carried out by the Danish Police and the Danish military. The expenses, 20 million USD per year, are covered by the Danish state to support the safety of the Jewish minority.

As the Danish prime minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, concluded at a Rosh Hashanah reception in September 2015: "Danish Jews are and will always be an invaluable part of Danish society".

STILL GOING STRONG

In spite of many dramatic events through the past 400 years, the approximately 7.000 Danish Jews are still living a prosperous life in a vibrant community. The Jewish school is just about to re-open in beautiful new buildings in 2018, to ensure Jewish life in Denmark for many years to come.

ABOUT CHARLOTTE AND RONEN THALMAY

Charlotte and Ronen Thalmay are running the tour company **Jewish-Copenhagen.dk** specializing in Jewish tours in Copenhagen, telling the dramatic and inspiring story of the Danish Jews.
As guides they share their personal family stories about survival, prosperity and catastrophes.

Occasionally they travel abroad to tell the story of the Danish Jews to Jewish communities and institutions around the world with their multi-media presentation. Besides running the guide company

Ronen is the lead-singer in the klezmer band Mazel, and a psychotherapist and Charlotte has a bachelor in tourism and is the vice president of the Zionist Federation in Denmark.