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TNR

Bo Lidegaard *Countrymen*, translated from the Danish by Robert Maass, New York: Knopf, 2013.

This magnificent book states its central argument in its title. Danish Jews survived, when other European Jews did not, because Danish people regarded their Jewish neighbors as countrymen. There was no 'us' and 'them', just us. When in October 1943, the Gestapo came to round up the seventy five hundred Jews of Copenhagen, the Danish police wouldn't help them smash down the doors; the churches read letters of protest to their congregations; neighbors helped families to flee to villages on the Baltic coast, local people gave them shelter in churches, basements and holiday houses and local fishermen loaded up their boats and landed them safely in neutral Sweden.

Bo Lidegaard, editor of the leading Danish newspaper *Politiken*, has retold this story using astonishingly vivid unpublished material from families who escaped, contemporary eyewitnesses, senior Danish leaders including the King himself and even the Germans who ordered the round-ups. The result is an intensely human account of one episode in the persecution of European Jews that ended in survival.

The story may have ended well, but it is a complex tale. The central ambiguity is that the Germans themselves warned the Jews and let most of them escape. Lidegaard claims this was because the Danes refused to help them, but the causation may also have worked in the other direction. It was when the Danes realized the Germans were letting some Jews go, that they found the courage to help the rest escape. *Countrymen* is a fascinating study in the ambiguity of virtue.

The Danes knew long before the war that their army could not resist a German invasion. Instead of overtly criticizing Hitler, the social democratic governments of the 1930's sought to inoculate their populations against the racist ideology next door. It was then that the shared identity of all Danes as democratic citizens was drummed into the political culture, just in time to render most Danes deeply resistant to the Nazi claim that there existed a "Jewish problem" in Denmark.

Lidegaard's central insight is that human solidarity in crisis depended on the prior consolidation of decent politics, on the creation of a shared political imagination. Some Danes did harbor anti-Semitic feelings, but even they understood the Jews to be members of a political community, and hence, that any attack on them was an attack on the Danish nation as such.

The nation in question was imagined in civic rather than ethnic terms. What mattered was shared commitment to democracy and law, not a common race or religion. We can see this in the fact that Danish citizens did not defend several hundred Communists who were interned and deported by the Danish government

for supporting the Hitler-Stalin pact. The Danes did nothing to defend their own Communists, but did stand up for the Jews.

The Danish response to the Nazis invites thought-provoking comparisons. Why did a similar civic sense of solidarity not take root in France? Why did liberty, equality and fraternity not apply to the citizens driven from their homes by French police and sent to deportation and death? This becomes a harder question to answer in the light of the Danish counter-example.

One possible explanation is that the Danes were not actually occupied and hence maintained a capacity to defend Jews that was never possible in the occupied zones of France. Instead they were allowed to keep their King and a democratically elected coalition government.

Both the King and the government decided that their best hope of maintaining Denmark's sovereignty lay in co-operating with Hitler's Reich. Denmark's farms helped feed Germany throughout the war. This collaboration was both a source of profit for some Danes and a source of shame for many others, and the shame reinforced the Danish population's hostility to the Germans in their midst.

The Germans put up with this frigid relationship because they needed Danish food, because Danish co-operation freed up German military resources for battle on the Eastern Front and because the Nazis wanted to present their relationship with Denmark as a model for a future Europe under Hitler's domination.

From very early on in this ambiguous relationship, the Danes, from the King on down, made it clear that harming the Jews would bring co-operation to an end and force the Germans to occupy the country altogether. The King famously told his Prime Minister that if the Germans forced the Danish Jews to wear a yellow star, then he would wear one too. Word of the royal position got out and even though the King never did wear a star, he didn't have to, because the Germans never imposed such a regulation in Denmark.

When the order came down from Eichmann and Himmler in late summer 1943 that the local German authorities had to rid Copenhagen of its Jews, these authorities faced a dilemma. They knew the Danish politicians, police, media and society as a whole would resist and that, once the co-operation of the Danes had been lost, the Germans would have to run the country themselves.

The Germans in Copenhagen were also beginning to have second thoughts about the war itself. By then, the German armies had been defeated at Stalingrad. While the Gestapo in Poland and Eastern Europe faced the prospect of defeat by accelerating the infernal rhythm of extermination in the death camps, the Gestapo in Denmark began to look for a way out. The local *gauleiter*, a conniving opportunist named Martin Best, did launch the round-up of the Jews but only after letting the Jewish

community find out in advance what was coming, giving them time to escape. He did get his hands on some people in an old age home and dispatched them to Theresienstadt, but all but one percent of the Jewish community escaped his clutches.

When Adolf Eichmann came to Copenhagen to find out why so many Jews had escaped, he did not cashier the local Gestapo. Instead, he backed down and called off the deportations of Danes who were half Jewish or married to Jews. Bo Lidegaard's explanation is simply that the churches, the bureaucracy, the police, the media, all refused to go along. Without their co-operation a final solution in Denmark became impossible.

When they got wind of German plans in September 1943, the Danish government resigned and no politician agreed to serve in a collaborationist government with the Germans thereafter. After the round-ups of Jews were announced, leading Danish politicians of different parties issued a joint statement declaring "the Danish Jews are an integral part of the people and therefore all the people are deeply affected by the measures taken, which are seen as a violation of the Danish sense of justice."

Such bipartisan support across Danish society seems to have empowered the Jews of Copenhagen. When the Gestapo came to search the Jewish community's offices in September 1943, the treasurer, Axel Hertz, did not hesitate to ask the intruders, "By what right do you come here?" When the German answered, "By the right of the strongest," Hertz replied, "That is no good right." Jews in Denmark behaved like rights-bearers not victims in search of compassion.

When the Germans arrived to begin the deportations, Jews had already been warned and they simply vanished into the countryside, heading for the coast to seek a crossing to neutral Sweden. There was little or no Jewish communal organization and no Danish underground to help them. What ensued was a chaotic family-by-family flight, made possible simply because ordinary members of Danish society feigned ignorance when Germans questioned them, while sheltering families in sea-side villages, hotels and country cottages.

When the Gestapo did seize Jewish families hiding in the church of a small fishing village of Gilleleje, the people were so outraged that they banded together to assist others to flee. One villager even confronted the local Gestapo, shining a flashlight in his face and exclaiming: "The poor Jews!" When the German replied, "It is written in the Bible that this shall be their fate," the villager replied "But it is not written that it has to happen in Gilleleje."

Dutch police on the coast warned hiding families when the Gestapo came to call and signaled the all clear so boats could slip away to Sweden. The fishermen who took the Danish Jews across the Baltic demanded huge sums for the crossing, but managed to get their frightened fellow citizens to safety.

Why did the Danish behave so differently from most other populations in occupied Europe? First, they were the only nation where escape to a safe neutral country lay across a narrow strait of water. Second unlike the Poles, they were not subject to exterminatory pressure themselves. They were not directly occupied and their leadership structures from the King down to the local mayors were not cowed into submission. The newspapers in Copenhagen were free enough, for example, to report the deportations and thus assist any Jews still not in the know to escape. The relatively free circulation of information also made it impossible for non-Jewish Danes to claim, as so many Germans did, “of this we had no knowledge.”

Most of all, Denmark was a small, homogeneous society, with a stable democracy, a monarchy that commanded respect and shared national hostility to the Germans. Denmark offers some confirmation of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s remark that virtue is most easily fostered in small republics.

Lidegaard is an excellent guide to this story when he sticks close to Danish realities. When he ventures further and asks bigger questions, he goes astray. At the end, he asks, “Are human beings fundamentally good but weak? Or are we brutal by nature, checked and controlled only by civilization?” He wants the Danish story to answer such questions, but it cannot bear such weight. There simply are no general answers to the question of why humans behave as they do in times of extremity. The point about Lidegaard’s story is that history and context are all. Denmark is Denmark. That is all one can truthfully say.

Lidegaard makes the argument, in his conclusion, that had resistance been as strong elsewhere in Europe as it was in Denmark, the Nazis might never have been able to drive the ‘final solution’ to its conclusion. He writes:

Hatred of the *different* was not some primordial force that was unleashed. Rather it was a political convenience that could be used as needed, and in most occupied territories the Nazis followed their interests in pursuing this with disastrous consequences. But without a sounding board the strategy did not work. It could be countered by simple means—even by a country that was defenseless and occupied—by the persistent national rejection of the assumption that there was a ‘Jewish problem.’

This strikes me as only half-right. Anti-Semitism was indeed not “a primordial force” that the Nazis simply tapped into, wherever they conquered. Jews met very different fates in each country the Nazis occupied, but it does not follow that what the Danes did other peoples could have done also. The Germans faced resistance of varying degrees of ferocity in every country they occupied in Europe. Where they possessed the military and police power to do so, they crushed that resistance with unbridled cruelty. Where, as in Denmark, they attempted a strategy of indirect rule, they had to live with the consequences: a population who could not be terrorized

into doing their bidding, and who could, therefore, be counted on to react when fellow citizens were arrested and carried away.

One uncomfortable possibility that Lidegaard does not explore is that the Nazis sought a strategy of indirect rule precisely because they saw the Danes as fellow Aryans, potential allies in an Aryan Europe. This would explain why the Nazis were both so comfortable in Copenhagen and so shaken by Danish resistance. The Poles they could dismiss as *untermensch*; the French as ancient enemies, but to be resisted by supposed Aryans was perversely disarming. Why else would a ferocious bureaucrat like Adolf Eichmann melt before Danish objections to the arrest of Jews married to Danes? One paradoxical possibility is that the Nazis bowed to Danish protests because their delusional racial anthropology led them to view the Danes as members of their own family. To their eternal credit, the Danes exploited this imagined family resemblance to defy an act of infamy.

Countrymen is a story about a little country that did the right thing, for very complex reasons, and got away with it, for equally complex reasons. It is a story that reinforces an old truth: solidarity and decency depend on a dense tissue of connection between people, on long-formed habits of the heart, resilient cultures of common citizenship and leaders who marshal these virtues by their example. In Denmark, this dense tissue bound human beings together and indirect rule made it impossible for the Germans to rip it apart.

Elsewhere in Europe, it was ripped apart in stages, first by ghettoizing and isolating the Jewish people and then by insulating bystanders from the full horror of Nazi intentions. Once Jews had been stripped of citizenship, property, rights, connections, once they could only appeal to the common humanity of persecutors and bystanders alike, it was too late.

There is a message here for the human rights era that came after these abominations. If a people come to rely for their protection on human rights alone, on the mutual recognition of common humanity, they are already in serious danger. The Danish story seems to tell us: it is not the universal human chain that binds peoples together in extremity, but more granular ties: that particular consciousness of time, place and heritage that led a Danish villager to say to the Gestapo: no, it will not happen here, in my village.

So the story of one small country has resonance beyond its Danish context: it should be read by anyone seeking to understand what precise set of shared social and political understandings can make possible acts of civil courage and uncommon decency.

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