



New Exhibition: The White Busses Back to Freedom and Life

The National Museum of Denmark has opened the doors to its special exhibition on the White Busses, which rescued 17,000 prisoners from German concentration camps during the final weeks of the war.

During the last weeks of World War II, convoys of white busses painted with red crosses drove in a constant loop between Denmark and the concentration camps of Germany. On board were freed prisoners from German concentration camps. When Germany surrendered in May 1945, 17,000 prisoners were brought to safety in Denmark and Sweden in the nick of time – 7,000 Danes and Norwegians, and 10,000 prisoners from other countries.

From June 19th 2015 – January 3rd 2016 the National Museum of Denmark's special exhibition 'The White Busses' tell the dramatic and moving story of one of the largest rescue missions in Danish history.

The exhibition tells the story of the bus drivers, nurses and doctors who volunteered, risking their own lives to rescue others from suffering and death. This is a story of the heroism and harrowing experiences that left scars on the souls of many – a story of compassion, self-sacrifice and active citizenship in one of the darkest moments of human history. But it is also a story of irresolvable moral dilemmas.

In a set inspired by Lars von Trier's film *Dogville*, visitors are led through 15 scenes. The story starts with a perfectly ordinary, Danish living room in 1944 with a door that opens directly into a moving cattle truck on its way to a German concentration camp. From here the story continues in the camp itself.

The visitor becomes one of the 6,100 Danish resistance fighters, police officers, border guards, Jews and others who were deported to German concentration camps and robbed of their dignity, identity, and ultimately their lives.

In the concentration camp the exhibition offers a glimpse of the hope the so-called Red Cross parcels gave the prisoners. The parcels contained food, tobacco and clothes – incredible riches in the brutal world of the concentration camp where everything was scarce. These parcels saved the lives of countless Danish prisoners.

In the exhibition visitors can follow the planning of the rescue operation, the participating volunteers, and the journey home with the white busses. Only a few of the original busses have survived, but the National Museum owns one of them, which gives a vivid impression of the conditions on the journey home from Germany.

The Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte, Vice President of the Swedish Red Cross, has become the symbol of the evacuation on the white busses. He played a key role in initiating and organising the rescue operation, which especially outside of Denmark it is often referred to as 'the Bernadotte Mission'. But the origins of the operation were part of a lengthy and complex process, in which Swedish, Danish and Norwegian initiatives all played a crucial role. Many of the participants in the operation itself were Danish.

Of the estimated 6,000 Danish resistance fighters, police officers, border guards and Jews in the camps, 600 did not make it home alive. And many of the surviving prisoners and the volunteers who rescued them were marked for life by their experiences.

A recurrent theme in the accounts of the evacuated concentration camp prisoners and their families is their deep gratitude for the operation, and the exhibition includes some of the small gifts and letters they sent to their rescuers.

And this is where the exhibition could be expected to end – as a clean-cut tale of wartime heroism. But the story is darker and more complex, and the exhibition also challenges visitors with a series of ethical dilemmas and choices that can seem almost impossible to resolve.

The rescue operation was focused on Danish and Norwegian prisoners, but what about the prisoners from other countries? This dilemma was most acute in Neuengamme near Hamburg, where Scandinavian prisoners from throughout Germany were to be gathered before being transported to neutral Sweden. But the German camp commander demanded that critically ill prisoners of other nationalities be removed to make space for the Scandinavians – and he demanded that the white busses drive these critically ill prisoners to another concentration camp where conditions were even worse. Was obeying these orders legitimate, and was making a deal with the Nazis a legitimate way to save one's own people?

Time and place: 'The White Buses', June 19th, 2015 – January 3rd, 2016. The National Museum of Denmark, Ny Vestergade 10, 1471 Copenhagen K.

Press images available - please contact Henrik.schilling@natmus.dk

Facts about the White Busses

- During World War II, 6,000 Danes were deported to German concentration camps and prisons. Many were transported in cattle trucks. Most of them were resistance fighters, police officers, Jews, communists, border guards and so-called 'anti-socials' and criminals. Around 600 Danish prisoners died during their imprisonment.

- The busses ran from December 1944 until the liberation of Denmark on May 5th, 1945. The vast majority of the convoys took place after April 20th, 1945. A total of 200 Danish and Swedish vehicles took part in the final phase of the rescue operation.

- Around 450 people participated in the operation. The drivers were largely conscripts from the Auxiliary Emergency Services. There were also voluntary drivers, doctors and nurses, as well as volunteers from the Women's Voluntary Services for Civil Defence.

- A total of around 17,000 people were rescued by the white busses. Around 7,000 of them were Danish and Norwegians. 10,000 of the rescued prisoners were from other countries.

- On April 15th, 1945 the Danish Jews in Theresienstadt who had not been included in the agreement to gather Scandinavian prisoners in Neuengamme were also collected and transported to Sweden.

- With the exception of the Danish communists imprisoned in Stutthof concentration camp in present-day Poland, which was cut off by the Russian advance, almost all the Danes imprisoned in Germany were evacuated on April 21st, 1945.

- The White Busses operation was the result of negotiations between the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Nazi Germany. To begin with sick police officers were to be brought home in December 1944, but later the agreement included all Danish and Norwegian prisoners.

- Only five of the white busses with red crosses on the side that participated in the operation have survived worldwide. One of them belongs to the National Museum of Denmark. When not part of this special exhibition it can be seen at the Frøslev Camp Museum.

For further information and to book interviews please contact:

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