

# The Danish School in Gothenburg 1943-1945

Leo Goldberger mindes her med taknemmelighed sine skoleår ved den danske skole i Gøteborg under Anden Verdenskrig. Sammen med sin familie flygtede han til Sverige i oktober 1943 og tilbragte sit sjette til ottende skoleår sammen med andre flygtninge på den danske skole. Efter opholdet i Sverige vendte han tilbage til Danmark med sin familie og emigrerede i 1947 til Canada.

*Af Leo Goldberger*

For starters I must say that one of the most memorable aspects of my and my family's stay in Sweden from October 2, 1943 to June 6, 1945 as refugees from Denmark was the generous hospitality and genuine concern for the welfare of all of us by the Swedes – from officials to the ordinary folks one might encounter, their goodwill towards us was most heartening in our time of need.

Beginning with the major influx of the Danish Jews during October, 1943, totaling some 7,000, there were also a growing number of non-Jewish Danes, about 10,000 in all, who (often accompanied by their immediate family) were on the run from the Nazis because of their involvement in the resistance movement. Needless to say, it became quite a logistical problem for the Swedes to ensure they were all properly housed and fed, if not also placed in suitable jobs across the country to the extent possible.

How best to provide for the hundreds of youngsters of school age and older students in various stages of completing their education was obviously a top priority. The educational issue was so expeditiously addressed that hardly a day of schooling was lost for most of us. My own experience in continuing my education took place in Gothenburg (Göteborg in Swedish), Sweden's

second largest city, and will be the main focus here.

Our school in Gothenburg accommodated some 200 students at its peak, rivaled in number of students and scope only by the 210 enrolled in the Danish School in Lund. In addition, the city of Helsingborg had some 100 students in its school, which was limited to the lower and middle grades, while Stockholm, Northköping, and Jönköping only serviced the lower grades.



*Næst efter skolen i Lund var Den Danske Skole i Gøteborg den største i Sverige og havde, da den var på sit højeste, omkring 200 elever. Den dækkede hele skoleforløbet og havde således både små elever i underskolen såvel som unge mennesker i gymnasiet. Foto: Dansk Jødisk Museum.*

To so quickly establish a well-oiled school system on par with and credentialed as such by the authorities in Denmark in terms of scope, curricula, textbooks, and exams and manned by a cadre of qualified Danish teachers was of course quite a daunting challenge. In Gothenburg, as elsewhere in Sweden, committees aiding refugees pursuing educational goals were rapidly established by prominent Danish academics – professors and educators who themselves were refugees – working jointly with their Swedish colleagues. These committees ultimately served as guarantors of the financial side of the establishment of the school, with the support of the local Swedish school system and the backing of the central Danish refugee organization. This organization had already been established at the behest of the Danish embassy in Stockholm under the leadership of professor dr.jur. S. Hurwitz, himself among the Danish-Jewish refugees. Though much of the expenditures for running the schools as well as the many boarding facilities for kids separated from their parents, the summer camps, etc. relied on donations from private sources, the main burden ultimately fell on the Danish governmental sources.

In a remarkable show of cooperation from all sides, the Danish School in Gothenburg was able to open its doors on November 9, 1943, with Gudrun Henriques as principal, Karl Hyldegaard-Jensen as administrator, and Jes Schytt, the local Danish Consul general, as patron. The initial student body, numbering some 50, spanned the entire educational spectrum, from the grades (1-5) through middle school (1-4) and *gymnasium* (1-3) leading to matriculation, the coveted red-banded white cap of passing the “Student Exam”, which allowed entry to the university level.

At first the school was far from fully operational due to difficulties in locating suitable classroom facilities; Gothenburg was quite strapped for available facilities. While several Swedish educational and other institutions (such as the Jewish community center which hosted the grade school) made some spaces available, this was a rather makeshift arrangement and entailed splintering the student body into several different locations. It also restricted the school hours, at least for the mid- and

upper-level classes, to the afternoon hours, with classes meeting only four days a week. As many of us were already attending Swedish schools (*Hvitfjelska Läroverket*, in my case), the transition to the Danish school on an afternoon basis – at least for the first few months – allowed us simultaneously to continue Swedish school in the mornings and to continue making friends among Swedish classmates.

Perhaps the key to the success of our Danish school was not just the flexibility shown by the powers that be, but the spirit of being in a common boat, all of us determined to make the best of our refugee stay without losing faith in our ultimate hope of returning home to Denmark. Though we rarely spoke about our traumatic escape or about a parent who might have had the misfortune of being incarcerated in *Theresienstadt*, we eagerly followed the progress of the war and spent as much free time together as was possible, seeing memorable movies – such as *Casablanca* and *Scarlet Pimpernel* – going to dances and week-end outings, and various festivities on national holidays, special concerts, and theater performances organized by the school or the local refugee club as well as by generous Swedes. We were indeed a close-knit community.



*Fotografiet viser Leo Goldbergers klasse på Den Danske Skole i Gøteborg. På bagerste række fra venstre er Leo Goldberger, Paul Anton Rasmussen, Ernst Peter Weis, Torben Bendix, Bent Helge Skov, Abraham Beilin, Aaron Engelhardt, Preben Bornstein. På første række fra venstre sidder Gunver Helweg Meyer, Lone Blatt, Judith Eismann, Salli Besiakov, Corrado Diena, mens Kurt Michael Hansen og Hans Jørgen Goldschmidt står op. Læreren er Carl Scousboe. Foto: Dansk Jødisk Museum.*

In my own case, the sense of community was furthered by my having joined the Boy Scouts troop, entitled *Holger Danske*, to commemorate the legendary Danish hero of old. The troop – as well as a parallel Girls and Cub scouts groups – numbered around 40 and was established by our school with the blessings of the official Swedish scout organization. Our troop was led by one of our much beloved teachers, Holger Michelsen, a resistance fighter from the South of Jutland and it had among its assistant leaders the charismatic senior student Isi Vogel (Foighel), later to become Minister of Taxation and prominent professor of law and a judge in the European Human Rights Court in Strasbourg. Another prominent fellow scout, and life-long friend, was the journalist Herbert Pundik, for many years the chief editor of the Danish daily *Politiken*, who among other age-eligible scouts in our troop volunteered for The Danish Brigade in Sweden (i.e. the military group of some 5,000 volunteers trained to join the allied forces as they neared the liberation of Denmark in May 1945).

Another significant event in our troop's history was the week-long camping meet in rural Gränna (in Småland on Lake Vättern near Jönköping) highlighted by the personal visit by the head of the Swedish scouts himself, Count Folke Bernadotte. An autographed copy of his photo still hangs on my wall as a memento of the exciting days around the fire there.

As for the academic side of our school, the most fantastic thing about it was having all the Danish textbooks, offering a curricular coverage identical to that we would have had at home, and thus ensuring that no time would be lost upon our eventual return. Having the books was largely due to the initiative of a most thoughtful educator in Denmark, Chr. Friis-Sørensen of Elsinore's *Højere Almenskole* who right after our mass exodus recognized the need for the Danish textbooks for his fellow countrymen on the other side of the Sound. Through various intermediaries he contacted, the illegal shipments were successfully arranged, for which all of us owe him deep gratitude. Thanks also must go to the Danish donors, mainly the publishers, the Danish Jewish community's account, and the ministry of education who covered the cost involved.

As for the teaching staff, growing to some 30 in all plus half a dozen teachers of Swedish, I can readily vouch for the fact that they were an extraordinary, heterogeneous group of dedicated men and women. Some had extensive backgrounds in elementary and secondary schools, and quite a few were drawn from the ranks of university professors. In addition, when needed, several university students were employed as adjunctive staff.



*Leo Goldbergers lillebror var også elev ved Den Danske Skole i Göteborg. Her ses hans klasse (1. klasse) i første halvdel af 1945. I forreste række fra venstre er Birthe Marcus, Margit Blachmann, Henni Lachmann, Helen Arnby, Kirsten Cantor, Eva Garde-Jørgensen, Gitta Kempinsky og Martha Sachs. I midterste række fra venstre er Erik Goldberger, Jan Igelsky, Henning Blachmann, Allan Fogel og Even Bukrinsky. I øverste række fra venstre er Bent Chmelnik, John Gordon, Arne Bodnia, Finn Bentow, Per Popp Hansen, Georg Blachmann, Dan Sobol og Allan Meyer. Lærerinden er Else Baadsgaard. Foto: Dansk Jødisk Museum.*

By and large, with relatively small classes, the atmosphere was uniquely warm and personal, with a sense of one-on-one-ness prevailing. And, again, the fact that we were “all in the same boat” Jew and Gentile alike – no matter what our prior socio-economic and class backgrounds were – added immensely to the general tenor in as well as outside the classroom. However, that aside, my own most enduring memory was a particular lesson we had in geometry, conducted by our school's outside math inspector, Niels Bohr's younger brother, professor Harald Bohr, a mathematician. Standing at the blackboard he

enthusiastically tried to convey the “obviousness” of the Pythagorean theorem for solving the parallelogram, not arithmetically but “intuitively” by having us simply look at the lines he scribbled on the board. We were all a bit dumbfounded and in frustration he kept saying: “can’t you see it; just look at the board, it shines out at you!”

Yet another not-to-be-forgotten experience we all had was listening to our fellow student (Ernst) Peter Weis play Bach on the piano for a whole hour at our unconventionally marvelous music and art teacher Carl Scousboe’s behest – rather than simply lecturing us. Peter, who unfortunately passed away at the young age of 51, was an unusually gifted pianist, of whom we were all proud. He had been a student of the famous Danish-Jewish composer-pianist Herman D. Koppel – also a refugee in Gothenburg.

In addition to the teaching staff, numerous others were involved in ensuring a comprehensive school system. Thus we had a couple of physicians aboard, a nurse, ready access to dental care – as well as the service of a school psychologist. For the substantial number of my fellow students who boarded out, there were also several group homes, one with at least 40 students, and a few smaller pensions, all manned under supervised conditions. In the absence of parents, the boarding students were even recipients of a weekly stipend in pocket money. In addition, care was taken to house the few orthodox Jewish kids whose parents did not live in the area and provide them with kosher food, permitting a larger group of observant students to join them at mealtime.

Clearly, the Gothenburg School did an as fine and dedicated job as one could wish for under the trying times that prevailed. That this is so is most evident in the report issued upon the school’s final day, June 9, 1945. In its 67 pages, including several photos, the report meticulously documents all the details that comprised the school’s birth and 20 months’ existence. It cites the names of us all – students, teachers, and supporting cast. It provides our birth dates, first and last day of attendance, previous school affiliation and, for those matriculating with a final exam, their grades. Similarly, the teachers are listed by their prior jobs, courses taught and specific classes taught, and the text used.

Of course all significant school events are listed, as are the prizes that were given to the most deserving of us. Mentioned as well is the farewell gift of a book presented to each of us on our last day of school by professor Axel L. Romdahl of *Riksföreningen for Svenskhetens bevarelse i utlandet* (The national organization for the preservation of Swedishness abroad): Sten Selander’s anthology *Svensk dikt från fem sekel* (*Swedish poetry from five centuries*); the grade-schoolers received Selma Lagerlöf’s *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (*The wonderful adventures of Nils*). Completing the report one will find the financial accounting to the very last penny of all monies spent and received.



*Fotografiet af studenterne i 1945 er fra bogen Den Danske Skole i Göteborg, som rapporterer om skolens forløb fra dens grundlæggelse i november 1943 til dens afvikling i juni 1945. Bogen befinder sig på Dansk Jødisk Museum.*

In my view, the final report of the school represents an archival gem of Danish cultural ways of treasuring every morsel of history. I was fortunate to receive a copy of the report from one of my younger brother Erik’s 1st-grade teachers, Else Baadsgaard (Brøndsted). She was a young resistance fighter who had fled to Sweden and whom I met by chance in 1986 during one of my occasional visits to Odense, where I was a psychological research consultant at the University Hospital and her husband was the university’s principal. She expressed her own fond memories of the time spent in our school – as did I.