CHAPTER 5

In the Absence of a Plan: The Rehabilitation of Non-German Displaced Persons in Denmark, 1945–1953

Morten Baarvig Thomsen

In the wake of the Second World War, Europe was awash with refugees and displaced persons of every kind and origin. Some estimates put the total number at eleven million or more.[1] The heart of this crisis lay in Germany and Austria. Amid the smouldering ruins of Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich, around eight million non-German refugees, prisoners of war, concentration camp inmates, and other kinds of so-called Displaced Persons (DPs) filled refugee camps run by The Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) and the newly established United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in the western occupation zones.[2] Some, including the majority of Baltic citizens and a large portion of Poles, would stay in this state of flux for years; while most of these individuals, like the majority of Soviet Citizens, would quickly be repatriated - willingly or otherwise.[3]

This is, of course, not a new tale. The social, political, and humanitarian aspects of this crisis have been tackled in depth by several historians.[4] While such works can hardly be disparaged for their lack of detail, they have focused almost exclusively on the (western) occupation zones. This is understandable. The former Reich was, after all, the nucleus of the post-war refugee 'problem'. What the current historiography tends to neglect, or only briefly mention, is that the post-war displacement crises stretched far beyond Central Europe. In larger retellings of the post-war refugee crisis, territories formerly under German occupation, such as Denmark or Norway, and neutral countries, such as Sweden, have so far only been allowed a walk-on role. Denmark, which this chapter deals with, had to handle the fallout of wartime German civilian and military evacuations. When the dust settled and the refugees that could be immediately repatriated had left, around 200,000 Germans were stranded in Denmark. It would take years before the allied powers allowed them to return to German territory.[5] These were not traditional DPs (non-enemy nationals on enemy territory) and, as such, the situation and camp system for German refugees in Denmark shared only few commonalities with the situation in the allied occupation zones. At the same time, the international literature on this subject has largely overlooked that Denmark also housed around 34,000 'actual' DPs in their own separate camp and care system organised by the Danish Red Cross.[6] This was not a separate crisis. As in the occupation zones, these 'non-German refugees' (or DPs) mostly consisted of Eastern Europeans (26,229) with the largest groups being Soviet Citizens (7,855), Poles (9,435) and Balts (5,950). There were also a variety of refugees from Central and Western Europe (4,835) and a small number from various other nations.[7] Like south of the border, the DPs were a hodgepodge of civilians, forced labourers, concentration camp inmates, prisoners of war and non-German soldiers from the defeated German army.[8] In a European perspective, they constitute a missing piece of the post-war refugee puzzle.

The following chapter provides an overview of the treatment of non-German refugees in Denmark during the years 1945–1953. Since the topic is scarcely studied in Denmark, the chapter starts by sketching out the development of the refugee care system.[9] In the following analysis, I discuss living conditions and rehabilitation efforts within the Danish DP camps. The primary goal is to investigate the efforts made to prepare refugees for a return to normal civilian life. Drawing on reports, meeting minutes and other official state documents as well as published refugee memoirs and local case studies, I argue that the Danish state had not originally envisioned DP camps as sites of rehabilitation. In the absence

of a plan, humanitarian concerns, changes in economic policy, efforts to ease administrative burdens and a hesitantly implemented integration policy nonetheless allowed for the implementation of various piece-meal rehabilitation efforts. These were, in turn, bolstered by the actions of energetic DPs within the camps and hampered by the system's overall lack of resources and standardisation.

CARING FOR NON-GERMAN REFUGEES 1945-1953

The Danish care and camp system for non-German refugees lasted from 1945 to 1953. During this time, operational responsibility changed hands repeatedly from one organisation and government body to another. Preparations had actually begun during the war: in 1944, the headquarters of the allied forces in London agreed with Danish representatives that the Danish state would handle DPs when the occupation ended.[10] In practice, though, when Germany officially surrendered on 5 May 1945, no concrete care system was yet in place. It thus fell to those closest (mostly the local Red Cross and the resistance) to provide food and shelter for DPs wherever they were found.[11] Around 9 May, the Danish Red Cross was officially handed the task of caring for non-German refugees. The organisation opened a special refugee department in Copenhagen led by Dr. Esther Ammundsen and Eigil Juel Henningsen, which quickly set about establishing camps to collect displaced foreigners.[12] At the system's capacity peak in July 1945, 65 camps housed around 18,900 DPs.[13]

Due to negative press coverage of the treatment of Baltic DPs, the partnership with the Red Cross did not last.[14] By 1 October 1947, responsibilities transferred to the National Refugee Administration (Flygtningeadministrationen) which had cared for German refugees since September 1945.[15] At that time, the number of DPs and camps had fallen to around 3,000 and seven respectively.[16] In 1948, responsibility shifted again: This time to the local branch of the International Refugee Organization (IRO), the UN body established during 1946 and 1947 as a replacement for UNRRA.[17] As in the rest of Europe, IRO's primary goal was to facilitate the repatriation or resettlement of DPs who remained in the camps.[18] By 1 October 1950, IRO had reduced the number of DPs in Denmark to 1,453, with over half having been granted residence permits.[19] Within the bounds of an expanded agreement, the Danish IRO branch continued its work until 1 October 1952.[20]

In 1950, as efforts to push the remaining DPs to repatriate or emigrate seemed increasingly hopeless, the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs (Arbejds- og Socialministeriet) established The Committee Concerning Non-German

Refugees, tasking them with closing the care system. This required a solution for the remaining DPs. While overseas resettlement was never fully abandoned, the main task of the committee became to integrate the remaining 'hardcore cases' by helping them find work, education, housing, or an appropriate social welfare program. In their final public report, the Committee described their work as "exceedingly difficult" which they explained was due to the fact that "the most energetic [refugees] had [already] emigrated or acquired housing and work here in the country, and of the group that was left many were physically or mentally ill."[21] An internal report also noted that most DPs came from "east of the iron curtain, and owing to political reasons they do not wish to return".[22] Despite such problems, the committee succeeded. Through counselling, language classes, and pressure on the refugees, it became possible to close the last camp on 1 April 1953. About 1,242 of the original 34,000 non-German refugees had acquired work and residence permits.[23] As far as the Danish state was concerned, the refugee problem had been solved.

THE BIRTH OF A TWO-TIERED CAMP SYSTEM: LIVING CONDITIONS IN DANISH DP CAMPS

Gaining an accurate overview of the day-to-day living conditions in the Danish DP camps is far from a simple task. They evolved much over the eight-year period, and the chaotic post-war conditions of Europe in May 1945 makes grasping the system's origins particularly difficult. Immediately after liberation, it seems that non-Germans were often separated from German refugees wherever they were held even before any official instructions had been issued from Copenhagen. Otherwise, living conditions were contingent on where DPs found themselves. Most, however, likely resembled those found in Svendborg, an old harbour town in Southern Denmark. Here, 1,500 French and Soviet prisoners of war were housed in various school buildings, where they slept on beds of straw. They did not lack sustenance or shelter, but their clothes were tattered.[24]

In the second half of May 1945, the Red Cross sent inspection teams to assess the situation. This reflected a general information deficit for all the relevant agencies: the headquarters in Copenhagen was not yet fully aware of the size of the problem they had promised to handle. As a first step, they needed to know *where* the refugees were. Over the next month, reports came in. One team in Aarhus told of a camp where 206 Russians were sleeping in "paper sleeping bags with straw and blankets". Lice was a problem and the basement, which also housed refugees, was overcrowded and dirty.[25] Such living conditions were hardly envi-

able, but no report speaks of acute shortages of essential supplies (food, water, and medicine) in May or June 1945. Despite the confusion inherent in this early period, there is little evidence that such shortages were widespread.[26] Still, some DPs undoubtedly lived an inadequate existence in the shabby German refugee camps, wandering the countryside seeking shelter with local Danes or fending for themselves.[27]

It took time before a set of general guidelines were laid down. Thus, most decisions during this period were left in the hands of local aid workers, resistance groups and municipal staff. The first guidelines came on 5 June 1945, giving non-German refugees special privileges not afforded to Germans—which was allegedly decided in agreement with the local SHAEF branch in Copenhagen.[28] DPs were to receive a daily ration of about 2,500-3,000 calories per person—corresponding to the regular Danish ration at the time.[29] Besides food and shelter, they were to receive a weekly allowance of 5 Kroner (about 127 Kroner or €17 in 2026).[30] The refugee department also declared that it would attempt to acquire entertainment (books, board games, and radios) from relief organisations as well as cigarettes from the tobacco industry. Healthcare and sanitation were to be handled by local doctors and paid for by the refugee department. The most significant aspect was the near-total ban on stationing armed guards at the camps.[31] In practice, this meant that non-German DPs would not be prisoners and could move freely during the day. This order thus officially cemented a two-tier refugee care system, which had been forming more or less organically throughout Denmark since liberation: German refugees were to be put behind barbed wire under armed guard and strictly forbidden from 'fraternising' with the local population; non-Germans were to live in open camps with few restrictions and near-total access to Danish society.

Despite their significance, the initial guidelines were not very detailed. By December 1945, the Red Cross had gained a greater overview of the refugee situation and the needs of the camps.[32] They then produced a more detailed handbook on camp operations, which made a few basic changes. Food was no longer just described in terms of calories; it also had to be "good and well tasting [...] just as the preferences of the refugees should be followed to the extent it is possible". For healthcare, non-emergency dental treatment was prohibited, as was the purchase of dental prosthetics except "where the patient has no teeth and thus no ability to eat".[33] Refugees could no longer necessarily expect admission to Danish hospitals—even for childbirth. However, healthcare professionals from among the refugees could assist Danish staff. Regardless, in some places,

health services became entirely supervised by refugees.[34] The handbook also set a minimum standard for DP accommodation: each person should have at least 4,25 square metres of living space, and there should be a minimum of one toilet per thirty refugees. Additionally, a camp should have a sewing room, a shoemaker's workshop, and a carpentry workshop so that the refugees could repair furniture and mend their own clothing.[35] Finally, if there were children of school age in the camp, classrooms needed to be established. The guidelines were clearly a reaction to complaints from both staff and DPs, which the Red Cross had received in droves. It was also a response to a general lack of supplies, materials and the high costs of the whole operation. Broadly speaking, the new handbook highlighted the Red Cross's difficult balancing act between economic and humanitarian considerations.

Official guidelines sketched out a camp system with relatively adequate living conditions. Of course, such documents are prescriptive rather than descriptive. It is therefore no surprise that other sources paint a less rosy picture of the actual state of things. In the summer of 1945, many camps were overcrowded and sanitary conditions worsened in some places.[36] It also seems that some camps lacked more than just clothing. In Copenhagen, it was discovered in July 1945 that DPs had not received their full rations.[37] Finally, the Red Cross were seemingly not hesitant in using their disciplinary powers in peculiar ways: In one slightly bizarre case, a DP was imprisoned for sending the Refugee office and the local British Military mission too many letters of complaint allegedly filled with "baseless" accusations.[38] Still, it is clear from most sources that the Red Cross did not see deteriorating living conditions as acceptable. Looking across the initial two years of the system's existence, they broadly succeeded in establishing and running humane refugee camps.[39] When one considers that there were also about 200,000 German refugees in the country, who also required accommodation, food, and medical care, it is a minor miracle that the non-German refugees could be provided with the amenities and standard of living that they did ended up receiving. Of course, any such generalisation must reckon with the fact that every camp was different and that there were as many experiences of the system as there were refugees.

REHABILITATION, OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Nobody expected that the camp system would last forever. DPs had to return to society at some point. But how, if at all, were they prepared for this eventuality? There were three broad phenomena in the Danish DP camps which could be

designated as part of 'rehabilitation' efforts: employment outside the camps, education and political activation.

Employment outside the Camps

Shortly after liberation, many non-German refugees started to seek employment independently of centralised efforts.[40] Danish farmers and factory owners also quickly noted the untapped resource that these 'idle' foreigners represented. Local Red Cross branches soon received requests from employers requesting permission to hire DPs, and often staff were happy to rubber-stamp such arrangements.[41] The resulting employment could be seen as a form of informal rehabilitation. While refugees mainly sought employment to earn money, work likely also served as a respite from prolonged inactivity in the camps.[42] This was not to last, however. The government was concerned that refugees would drive down wages for native Danes and that employment would make it difficult to repatriate the DPs down the line.[43] Thus, from 1 August 1945, employment of DPs required state permission—which was unlikely to be granted.[44] It is unclear how effective this was at deterring enterprising DPs or the farmers who needed cheap fieldhands, but it officially limited refugee labour and thus any resulting rehabilitation.[45]

The situation changed again on 25 May 1946. The remaining refugees who were deemed fit were now ordered to do assigned mandatory paid labour, initially mostly in the agricultural sector. If they refused, they would be sent to a closed disciplinary camp—which effectively functioned as a prison.[46] As a result, thousands of non-German refugees shouldered seasonal and permanent work duty all across Denmark from 1946 onwards. Official documents of the Red Cross carefully avoided using the term, but this arrangement should be recognised as a form of forced labour—albeit with monetary compensation.[47] To the refugees, it was presented as a benevolent gesture for those eager to work. In truth, the scheme was devised due to mounting pressure from Danish employer organisations who argued that they were in desperate need of workers.[48] To save on expenses, the Red Cross simultaneously made working refugees pay rent to live in the camps.[49] As such, economic concerns rather than altruistic rehabilitation efforts forced the doors of the Danish economy slightly ajar for DPs.

Despite the coercion, and the fact that it was not intentionally structured for this goal, it could still be argued that it had rehabilitating effects. Many refugees who wanted to work *were* finally allowed to do so. They were limited to specially assigned jobs, and thus they could not freely choose their own employer, but in the

end, such work was still work. It seems likely that it served to counteract prevalent demoralisation among refugees as some of the professionals in the care system hoped for.[50] On the other hand, the forced labour programme worked against other forms of rehabilitation. Refugees attending higher education in Denmark, for instance, were not exempted from work duties unless they could pay tuition themselves. At the same time, several refugees were given jobs which they were vastly overqualified for.[51] One camp leader minced no words when he expressed to a local newspaper that: "... there is nothing wrong with a professor weeding beet fields!"[52] It is likely that tradesmen and academics became more demoralised by being forced to work in the Danish agricultural sector.

When the Ministry of Social Affairs took charge of the system in 1950, policies changed yet again. Permanent employment became a means (besides emigration) by which refugees could leave the camps permanently. Administrators reasoned that once refugees had secured steady work, direct state responsibility for them could end. After a few months, more than ninety per cent of refugees had secured employment and several disabled persons had been sent into "apprenticeships, reschooling, and retraining" or light employment.[53] While ramping up such efforts, the committee also attempted to make the remaining refugees leave the last refugee camp (Prags Boulevard in Copenhagen). They did this by charging rent and by "encouraging" refugees to save up for the move, or by providing loans.[54] In a few cases, the committee used legal means to force out refugees who had employment and outstanding offers for housing.[55] Some were reluctant to leave the camps, their home for over six years, even after securing an income. This mattered little in the minds of ministry caseworkers: if a refugee had secured meaningful employment, then they should move on.

Teaching and Education

Education may seem an obvious method to ensure refugee rehabilitation from a humanitarian perspective informed by present-day sentiments. By providing refugees with educational opportunities, it helps mitigate the risk that displacement could potentially harm their future prospects. Despite this, it remained a tool that was only occasionally used in the Danish DP camps. Primary and secondary education was the exception to this trend. The refugee department feared that the children might become intellectually: "... handicapped, when they once again had to return to open society and fend for themselves,"[56] and camp classrooms became a requirement in late 1945.[57] Despite the prioritisation of this issue, it took quite some time for schooling initiatives to be established. Administrators

found willing teachers among the refugees, but because many of the early camps contained a diverse set of languages, it only became possible to establish schools once refugees had been separated by nationality. Even then, educators lacked teaching materials. Many children thus likely received an uneven education during their stay in Denmark.

Adult refugees were not afforded structured schooling in the same way, but they were free to attend higher education or trade schools so long as they could pay for it. Internally, the refugee department, knowing that many sought (or dreamt of) emigration to English-speaking countries, also provided DPs access to English classes.[58] These 'courses' mostly consisted of assignment booklets that refugees could fill out and send in for correction. Occasionally, a traveling teacher might show up in the camp, but this was not guaranteed.[59] In a few places, independent and dedicated language classes were set up.[60] While English and other languages could be taught, the teaching of Danish was officially prohibited.[61] This ban was instituted because the refugee department wished to prevent DPs from growing attached to Denmark and thus refrain from seeking repatriation or emigration.[62] Accordingly, an underlying goal of the education policy was to expedite the process of getting refugees out of Denmark.

Things changed drastically when the Ministry of Social Affairs took over in 1950. The Committee working in the last camp in Copenhagen prioritised having the remaining refugee children moved to Danish schools.[63] Some were placed in a German-speaking school, but most probably ended up in regular public institutions. The challenges that these children faced by suddenly attending regular Danish schools after years without formal instruction in Danish were probably significant. Circumstances also changed for adult PDs. To the Committee, education seemed an obvious alternative if a refugee could not find employment—especially for refugees who had become physically impaired during the war. For instance, one Lithuanian who had lost a leg was given a correspondence course in radio engineering which later secured them steady employment.[64] In other cases, previous policy decisions came back to haunt rehabilitation efforts. Some refugees, it turned out, spoke very little Danish which proved a significant hurdle for them when looking for work.[65]

Political Activation: Camp Politics and Refugee Representation

A final phenomenon worth discussing is the political activation of non-German refugees. Unlike educational initiatives, which sought to prepare refugees for re-entering post-war society, these were not aimed at long-term rehabilitation.

Instead, most policies primarily sought to make administrative tasks easier and camp life more bearable to the refugees. Incidentally, they also guided the DPs towards a life as engaged democratic citizens.

A rather simple aspect of the political rehabilitation happened through access to Danish newspapers. Refugees facilitated this aspect themselves when they began publishing their own papers within the camps.[66] These newspapers were likely subject to some censorship as Danish authorities sought to keep a low international profile by limiting anti-Soviet propaganda.[67] DPs were also given access to the anti-Nazi refugee paper *Deutsche Nachrichten*, primarily intended for German refugees. In some camps, radios likewise enabled refugees to receive news from abroad and, if refugees taught themselves Danish, local radio broadcasts could be consumed as well.[68] The primary effect of this access to information from the outside world was probably to alleviate boredom and feelings of isolation, but it also meant that DPs could stay informed and retain their political engagement with the outside world while staying in Denmark.

Non-German refugees were most explicitly politically engaged when they voted for camp or group representatives. This system of democratic representation seems to have manifested organically early on, but it was formally established with the December 1945 handbook. Every national group: "... should find a representative who is chosen by the refugees in the camp without influence from Danish [persons/organizations] or other parties".[69] Representatives spoke for everyone in their refugee groups during negotiations with camp leaders and the refugee department.[70] While they never had any official decision-making power, their job was not merely symbolic in nature. In correspondence from the refugee department, it is normal to find references to statements of refugee representatives in connection to complaints or evaluations of the behaviour of specific refugees.[71] Their wishes or advice were not always followed, but the fact that their opinions were heard and recorded at all shows that their perspectives were seen as at least potentially important. The refugees themselves also took this position seriously, as several cases of violently contested elections illustrate.[72]

The Baltic refugees, who were among those that stayed in Denmark the longest because Danish policy makers refused to repatriate them by force, had an additional layer of political representation in the form of the democratically organised Baltic Committees. These were, in effect, political pressure groups set up by Baltic citizens already living in Denmark to advocate for the interests of their countrymen in the camps.[73] They were especially keen on resisting repatriation efforts back to the Soviet Union, which was viewed as a hostile occupying

force.[74] Because of this, the committees had a fraught relationship with the Red Cross and several Danish ministries. While changing Danish governments, unbeknown to the DPs themselves, consistently refused calls by the Soviet Union to forcefully repatriate Baltic Citizens, no Danish politician wished to spark unnecessary animosity with the new superpower by stating this policy publicly. For this reason, and as a token gesture towards the Soviets, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also eventually ordered the Baltic committees to disband.[75] The Baltic DPs continued to elect representatives locally in their camps but it was clear that their political activism, and thus also any resulting democratisation processes, would have to play out within the confines of a cautious Danish foreign policy.

CONCLUSION: IN THE ABSENCE OF A PLAN

To what degree, then, were the non-German refugees rehabilitated through the efforts of the Danish camp system? As shown, few initiatives (outside camp schools) focused specifically on rehabilitation. This was especially true in the case of language instruction, which remained a sporadic and voluntary initiative until 1951. The opening of the Danish job market was motivated by economic concerns rather than rehabilitation: Denmark simply needed the manpower. Measures around political activation were likewise more practical than idealistic in nature. By allowing DPs to elect representatives and by providing them with radios and newspapers, the Red Cross sought to make camp life more bearable and ease their own workload. No sources indicate an intention to systematically nurture a democratic culture.

Still, even if there was no plan, nobody in the refugee department wanted the DPs to sink into an abyss of inactivity and meaninglessness. In part, this was why so many sporadic initiatives were implemented over the course of the system's eight year lifespan. An overall plan would have made these measures more effective, but it should not discredit, nor distract from the fact that Danish bureaucrats and aid workers cared about the future and well-being of the non-German refugees. The practical issue was that noble intentions had to be balanced against a system, suffering from a lack of standardisation and resources, and an overall refugee policy geared towards repatriation or emigration rather than integration or assimilation.

In the absence of a plan, piecemeal rehabilitation efforts were influenced by the free nature of the non-German refugee camps, the administration's humanitarian orientation, and the energy of those DPs who printed camp newspapers, volunteered as teachers, and acted as local national representatives. The lack of

planning with regard to rehabilitation can probably be put down to the fact that the refugee department was overburdened with the arduous construction and maintenance of the camp and care system. Only in 1950, when less than 2000 DPs remained, and when the government was forced to let a small group remain, did rehabilitation achieve greater priority.