

Rescue: Ordinary Individuals Making Extraordinary Decisions

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE: METTE SHAYNE



Mette Shayne was born on October 9, 1934 in Copenhagen, Denmark where her family's genealogy can be traced back 300 years. Her father, Poul Hannover, was an engineer who was president of an electric company, similar to our General Electric.

They lived a comfortable life, without being extravagant. Mette lived in a home with her father, mother, and older brother, as well as two maids. Her family was completely assimilated. She did not know she was Jewish, none of her friends were Jewish, and she knew nothing about the danger she was in until the day she learned that she and her family had to flee, when she was almost nine years old.

The Germans occupied Denmark on April 9, 1940, and life for Mette continued uninterrupted. Her family listened to the BBC; the news in Denmark was already controlled by the Germans. She remembers German planes dropping leaflets informing the public that the invasion was "friendly." German soldiers were stationed close to Mette's house. Sometimes, she and the other young people wore RAF colors to demonstrate defiance. She also remembers bombardments when her family hid in the shelter they had built in their own home.

On Rosh Hashanah, September 30, 1943, a German official, [Georg Duckwitz] who was in touch with the Danish Ministry about the fate of the Jews in Denmark, informed the Danish government that the action was going to take place. In turn, the Danish government notified the chief rabbi of Copenhagen [Rabbi Marcus Melchior], and at Rosh Hashanah services that morning, he told his congregation that all Jews had to flee, and to tell everyone to flee.

And so all the Jews went into hiding, and the Danes opened their homes. It was September 30, 1943. That night, Mette, her family, and her aunt and uncle and their two children left Copenhagen on a train heading to the Southern Island. Her uncle had a good friend who was part of the freedom fighters, and he accompanied them and was to arrange for a boat to take them to Sweden.

There was no boat. As the evening wore on, the freedom fighter arranged for Mette's family to spend the night at a farmer's house. There was to be a Hunt of the Year the next day; this was safer because a lot of people were expected, and this would look less suspicious.

The next day, October 1, 1943, Mette's family was picked up by cabs and taken to a forest, where they were promised there would be a boat that night, but no boat materialized. The adults broke into a summer camp and put the children on the mattresses and covered them with their coats. They were freezing and distraught all night.

On October 2nd, they were picked up again by cabs, which was dangerous, because they didn't know if they could trust anyone, and they were taken into a nearby town. Then, there was news that there was a boat, and other people had joined them. About 20 people walked five miles to a ferry landing and hid in the bushes. Mette's father paid the skipper and the tiny fishing boat took off at 7:00 PM. "The Lemon," [Jorgen Haagen Schmidt], a famous freedom fighter, was on their boat.

It was a bad night. The weather was stormy, and it was very cold. There were 24 people on a boat built for three. The fishermen got lost, and when they finally saw land, they did not know if it was Germany or Sweden. Mette stayed hidden and quiet at the bottom of the boat, where everyone was seasick, and buckets were set up for people to throw up in, and it was horrible. But the Swedes were wonderful in welcoming them when they landed in Ystad.