

HUMANITY IN ACTION

PRESENTS

NARRATED BY RABBI BENT MELCHIOR & INA-MIRIAM ROSENBAUM

Voices in the Void

DENMARK, OCTOBER 1943



PRODUCED BY JUDITH GOLDSTEIN & IRENE BRAAM
WRITTEN BY SAMUEL GEORGE DIRECTED BY JUAN PABLO DE GAMBOA
ILLUSTRATED BY CARLOS MARTINEZ ANIMATED BY OSCAR ORJUELA



HUMANITY IN ACTION



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF DENMARK



EMBASSY OF DENMARK

criteria
animation

Synopsis

"Voices in the Void" tells the story of the Melchior family in occupied Denmark in 1943 and their escape to Sweden, thanks to the assistance of their Danish compatriots, particularly clergy and fishermen.

Pushed to the brink, theirs is a story of rescue, return, and compassion. The 14-year-old son, Bent Melchior, later became Chief Rabbi of Denmark. He narrates his own story along with the Danish actress Ina-Miriam Rosenbaum. This animation gives a new kind of visual life to this important chapter of history, bringing it to new generations.

Seventy-five years after the fall of Nazi Germany, academics, intellectuals, artists, and everyday people continue to grapple with the immensity of the Shoah. This film illuminates profound contrasts that remain unresolved inhuman nature: lightness and darkness, beauty and evil, and the humanity that is inherent in both. Stark images of death camps in Eastern Europe underscore the deep void of the six million souls lost. Yet, fleeting moments of bravery and generosity, demonstrated by Danish resistance leaders, rescuers and Jewish survivors, remind us of our capacity for courage and compassion even under the most harrowing circumstances.

"Voices in the Void" brings those moments to life. Despite the existential risks, thousands of Danes refused to abandon their Jewish neighbors. Later in life, many expressed that they did not view themselves as heroes, but rather as regular people who did what they had to do. Their stories resonate today as we need to look to those who will protect the vulnerable and provide examples of decency, dignity, and courage.

Production Context

Voices in the Void is the first part of a trilogy of films produced by Humanity in Action that originated in a coincidental encounter of two Judys- Humanity in Action's founder and executive director Judith Goldstein and photographer Judy Glickman Lauder. A conversation between the two following the publication of *Beyond the Shadows*, a photography book by Lauder, which depicts the story of Jews in Denmark during WWII. That conversation inspired Judy Goldstein to contact her friend Rabbi Bent Melchior, whose family was smuggled to safety in Sweden in 1943. She asked for permission to bring the story of his family's remarkable rescue to life in the form of an animated film, and generously, he agreed.

Next, Irene Braam, the experienced Executive Director of the Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), got on board and brought along writer Samuel George and director of animation Juan Pablo de Gamboa. The last piece of the puzzle was the former Danish Consul General in New York and current ambassador of Denmark to Israel, Anne Dorte Riggelsen, granting the project the support and funding it needed to come to life. Together they produced *Voices in the Void*, released in 2020.

The success of this first film encouraged the team to expand the project further and produce two additional films telling related, yet different, personal stories, *Two Trees in Jerusalem* and *My Father's War* (2021). The three films deal with this dark and horrifying time of WWII and the Shoah from three angles: *Voices in the Void* tells the story of a country that protected its Jews, *Two Trees in Jerusalem* tells the story of a German non-Jewish family that risked its life to save the lives of the persecuted, and *My Father's War* tells the story of a Dutch father-son dialogue looking at the effects of trauma on one Jewish family. In spite of the uniqueness of each story, all three carry a universal message that remains extremely relevant today. As authoritarian tendencies are on the rise in many parts of the world, these stories, with the historical and moral knowledge they provide and the sense of community they convey, allow a wide audience to empathize, learn and find inspiration for their own acts of resistance.

In order to do so, the films create a poetic yet direct line between the historical events and their impact on the future of next generations. Humanity in Action's mission, therefore, was to create a powerful visual narrative that would be truthful and represent the passion that Bent Melchior, Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen, and David and Peter Hein share in their own texts, and then to enable access to these stories to audiences that couldn't be reached otherwise. This mission, says Judy Goldstein, goes back to the origins of Humanity in Action, which came into being to engage young adults in issues of resistance, of courage and of hope, and its goal of strengthening democracies that support diverse societies and protect vulnerable minorities.

The medium of animation, though usually associated with younger people, resonates with people of all ages due to its unique ability to add emotional depth to informative narratives and provide insights into the emotional world of the protagonists and into why people act as they do, in spite of the often heavy price they have to pay for staying true to their convictions. In addition, the multiplicity of the

thousands of images that are manipulated to express emotion takes the viewer into another world, allowing them to imagine more than is seen. Through the dissolving and reemergence of time, the relevance of these historical narratives today is brought to the foreground. With this, the film series aims to reach, move, and inspire younger and older audiences to take action in the face of injustice. In our own times of growing instability, uncertainty and change.

THE DANISH EXCEPTION- JEWS IN DENMARK DURING WWII

Denmark, forced into war in April 1940, was prepared for defeat and provided little resistance to the German invasion. The war was over in sixteen hours. The government surrendered after incurring little damage. Denmark became a collaborating country—an Aryan-like country that did not incite the racial hatred of the Germans. The king did not flee for his life or express outspoken opposition. The Danish government continued to function under the light hand of German authority. The king and government disowned and discouraged acts of sabotage on the part of small, besieged Resistance movements.

However, the Danes—the king, civil servants, and population—threatened outright opposition if the Jews in Denmark were isolated or punished. Conditions were met: from 1940 to 1943, Jews led utterly normal lives, no different from their Christian neighbors, avoiding the calamitous fate of other Jews throughout Europe.

The turning point for the Jews in Denmark came in the summer of 1943 when German authorities insisted that the Danish government execute their countrymen who were in the Resistance movement. The Danes would not turn on their own—except against the Communists. The Danish government resigned and abdicated authority to the Germans. In August and September, the Danes suddenly had had enough of their own supine behavior. Denmark's deep-seated, traditional anti-German sentiment rose to the surface. In those crucial weeks, the nation turned toward the underground and gave widespread support to the Resistance forces. The Germans abandoned the so-called "model protectorate," took control of the government, and moved to capture all the Jews in Denmark.

On September 29, two days before the projected roundup on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Marcus Melchior, the acting chief rabbi of the Krystalgade synagogue, implored his stunned congregants and the whole Jewish community to go into hiding immediately. Two passenger ships, docked in Copenhagen's port, were ready to ship approximately five thousand Jews to Germany on their way to Theresienstadt. Buses were to take the remaining two thousand. Suddenly Danish Jews, who had made few preparations for a possible roundup, had to flee. Decisions had to be made in a matter of hours and days about the dangers ahead: the safety of fleeing with infants and young children; whom to trust along the treacherous routes of escape.

Fortunately, Danish Christians were ready to face the danger that faced the Jews. From all strata of Danish society and in all parts of the country, clergymen, civil servants, doctors, nurses, students,

store owners, farmers, fishermen, and teachers protected the Jews. First hidden in hospitals, homes, churches, and schools, the Jews were then guided by their compatriots through cities, villages, forests, and railroad stations to fishing boats in coastal towns. Funds were raised to pay fishermen who risked their boats and livelihoods to defy the Germans. At night, Jews were hidden in vessels and carried across the Øresund to safety in Sweden. With this extraordinary escape route at hand, and Sweden just across the sound, in just a few weeks, 7,056 Jews fled to safety, as well as 686 non-Jewish spouses.

Four hundred and seventy-two Jews were captured and sent to Theresienstadt for the duration of the war, but German leaders in Denmark agreed that none of the Jews would be sent east to the death camps. Fifty Danes died of starvation within the first six months of imprisonment. After that, Danish civil servants and nongovernmental groups ensured the survival of the Jews in the camp by sending them food, vitamins, and clothing. A month before the end of the war Swedish and Danish white buses liberated the Jews from the camp and drove them to safety in Sweden.

Within Europe's formerly democratic nations that the Germans occupied, the Danish Jewish community was the only one that escaped devastation and destruction. Ninety-nine percent of the Jewish population was rescued and survived the war years. Thus 6,500 Jews, refugees in Sweden after the escape from Denmark in 1943, returned to their homes two and a half years later to find the great majority of their homes and businesses intact. As Rabbi Bent Melchior, the former chief rabbi of Denmark, has said: it was not unusual for Jews to have to leave their homes—in this they were usually aided by others, eager to see them go. But to be welcomed home by their countrymen—that was unique!

What was it that made Denmark stand out on the background of other occupied countries in Europe? There was widespread frustration and anger within the Danish population over serving the German idea of the "model protectorate." Progressive, democratic values strongly emphasized both group and individual responsibilities—attitudes that drew upon Danish Lutheran beliefs imbued in the educational and political life of the country. An inclusive Danish social system, developed after World War I, greatly reduced class conflicts and allowed for the continuing integration and assimilation of the small Jewish community. The persistent activities of Denmark's small, tenacious Resistance movement, growing ever stronger by 1943, infuriated the German command. A conflicted German leadership in Denmark compromised its roundup of the Jews and enabled thousands to escape deportation to the East. And finally, the natural proximity of a country situated close to neutral Sweden, which by 1943 was willing to accept thousands of Jews as well as Danish insurgents in flight from the Germans, contributed to the rescue.

As rescuers the Danes have a special claim to participate in Europe's "restored humanity." They defined empathy and defied indifference. The Danish story is overwhelmingly one of resisters and survivors through a collective national fight on behalf of a beleaguered and defenceless minority.

(Adapted from Judith S. Goldstein: The Danish Exception, Published in [Beyond the Shadows: The Holocaust and the Danish Exception by Judy Glickman Lauder, Aperture, 2018](#))

Film Stills



Deportation of Jews from occupied Denmark

The Melchior family leaving its home on route to Sweden





SS troupes arriving in Copenhagen

14-year-old Bent Melchior and his family on the run





Finding refuge in the home of a Danish priest

Arrival in Sweden



About the Protagonist

RABBI BENT MELCHIOR



Bent Melchior was born in Germany in 1929 to Danish parents and in 1933 his family moved back to Denmark. At the age of 14, Melchior escaped from the Nazis during the German occupation of Denmark and lived as a refugee in Sweden between 1943 – 1945. The animated short film *Voices in the Void* follows his family’s story during World War II. He later became Chief Rabbi of Denmark from 1970 to 1996, and the first and only honorary member of the Danish Refugee Council in 2008. In addition, Melchior was an associate professor in Classical Hebrew literature at the University of Copenhagen from 1971 to 1984, has translated the Five Books of Moses to Danish in the period from 1977 to 1987, and acted as the President for B’nai B’rith Europe from 1993 to 1999. He has written numerous articles and books on issues relating to religion, Judaism and refugees and continued to be an outspoken advocate for the rights and dignified living conditions of refugees in Denmark. Melchior was one of the founding members of Humanity in Action Denmark. Until his passing in 2021, he served as chairman of the board of the recently founded organization “Brobyggerne” (Bridge Builders), which he co-founded with former member of Danish Parliament Özlem Cekic.

About the Filmmakers



Executive producer **Dr. Judith S. Goldstein** received a Bachelors degree from Cornell University in 1962 with a concentration on European and American history. As a Woodrow Wilson Scholar at Columbia University, she then studied for a Masters degree in European history. In 1972, Judith completed her doctoral studies at Columbia University after writing her dissertation on “The Politics of Ethnic Pressure: The American Jewish Committee Fight Against Immigration Restriction: 1906-1917.” This work was the beginning of a sustained concentration on immigration and diversity in America and Europe. She then continued to work at Columbia University over 10 years by focusing on an oral

history project on Ethnic Groups and American Foreign Policy. In 1992, William Morrow published her book *Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities*. In 2006, Rutgers University Press published *Inventing Great Neck: Jewish Identity and American Dreams*.

Judith worked as the Executive Director of *Thanks To Scandinavia*, started by the Danish pianist Victor Borge to acknowledge Scandinavians who resisted Nazism and protected Jews during the Second World War. In 1997, Judith founded *Humanity in Action* and has served as its Executive Director ever since. Programs have included fellowships and internships in Europe and the United States, annual publications, photography exhibitions, films, and conferences. Over 23 years the organization has engaged over 2,500 college and university students in its programs and raised over \$31 million. Judith serves on the Board of *The Frances Perkins Foundation* and the *Somes Pond Center*, and is a member of the *Council on Foreign Relations*.



Executive producer **Irene Braam** joined the Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), Inc. as Executive Director in April 2016. She is also the first vice president and board director of the Foundation’s Board of Directors. Since joining the Bertelsmann Foundation she has overseen the transformation from a traditional Washington think tank to a pioneer in tackling complicated policy issues on film. During that time, she executive produced 12 documentary films.

Irene is an experienced lawyer and media expert, and worked for over ten years with the Bertelsmann company. She began as director of government relations of the Brussels Liaison Office in 2005 and became senior vice president of government relations in 2011. After studying law at Maastricht University, the Dutch native began her professional career in the music industry. Irene was head of international, legal and business affairs at Naïve Records in Paris, in charge of business development for Midbar Tech Ltd. in Tel Aviv, and served

as both director of public policy and government affairs, and director of legal and business affairs at the Universal Music Group in London and Brussels.



Director of animation **Juan Pablo de Gamboa** is a seasoned storyteller with a special interest for animated documentary films. With more than 20 years of experience writing, directing and producing stories all around the world, he has developed a distinctive approach to the creative process that makes his films stand out. Powered by passion, inspired by the ordinary, Juan Pablo has developed an international network of artists who collaborate consistently across many projects, always with a clear goal in mind: to make every film unique.



Writer **Samuel George** is a documentary filmmaker, writer, and an analyst of international affairs. His films bring viewers up close and personal to people and communities facing the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. From the Turkish-Syrian border, to the maquiladora districts of Juarez, Mexico, to incipient political movements in Naples, Italy, George's films offer candid reflections of daily life that allow viewers to draw their own conclusions.

Serving as the Bertelsmann Foundation's Global Market & Digital Advisor, his recent documentaries include *Out to Vote*, *Go-Go City: Displacement & Protest in Washington, DC*, and *Swing State Florida*. His written projects include the graphic book *The No Collar Economy*, and its follow-up, *Our Digital World*. George holds a master's degree in international politics and economics from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, DC. He is currently completing a PhD at that same institution.

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18 minutes

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