

THE WHITE BUSES

Exhibit at the Malmöhus Museum

The buses are painted white

In the spring of 1945 at the end of World War II, Germany was losing the war. Britain was bombing the country day and night. That was when the Swedish Red Cross implemented a major rescue operation to fetch prisoners out from the Nazi concentration camps.

When the British heard about the rescue operation, they demanded that all the buses must be painted white with the Swedish flag on the side and the roof. That would make the buses easier to detect.

That is how the rescue operation came to be called The White Buses. The governments in exile of Denmark and Norway and the Swedish government worked together to assembled equipment and personal. The first plan was only to rescue Scandinavians and bring them to Sweden.

The negotiations that were kept secret from Hitler

In the middle of February 1945 the vice-president of the Swedish Red Cross, Folke Bernadotte, began negotiating with Heinrich Himmler. Himmler was Germany's Minister of the Interior and head of the Gestapo, the German secret police. All the decisions and negotiations were kept secret and occurred behind the back of Adolf Hitler. If he had found out about the rescue operation it would have been prevented.

At first Himmler refused to free the prisoners. Finally he agreed to assemble all the Scandinavian prisoners in the Neuengamme camp outside Hamburg. Only old people, sick people, and mothers from Norway and Denmark were allowed to leave Germany. Bernadotte and Himmler met four times. After each meeting the Swedish Red Cross gained permission to fetch more prisoners out of various camps.

On the evening prior to the last meeting on 21 April the Swedish negotiator Norbert Masur, who represented the World Jewish Congress, was also allowed to meet Himmler.

Masur's special task was to get as many Jews as possible freed. When Bernadotte later met with Himmler one last time, he was given permission to take anyone he wanted and however many he wanted.

The rescue operation concluded on 1 May 1945 before the war ended. But the Swedish Red Cross continued to rescue people. During the spring and summer about another 10,000 men and women came to Sweden.

A highly dangerous mission

During the rescue operation the drivers drove day and night to fetch prisoners from various concentration camps. The trips took between one and five days. There were two drivers in every bus and they took turns to drive.

Fuel, food and medical supplies for the prisoners were loaded onto trucks. Messengers and motorcycles rode ahead to make sure the roads were passable.

It was a highly dangerous mission. Allied airplanes were bombing Germany around the clock. During one truck home from Ravensbrück camp the vehicles were shot at. The Swedish driver Erick Ringman died together with a number of the liberated prisoners.

Choosing one person before another

The primary task of the White Buses was to bring Scandinavians home. Himmler ordered that the Scandinavian prisoners were to be assembled in the Neuengamme camp which quickly became overfull. Therefore the White Buses had to transport sick prisoners to other camps in Germany. The drivers faced an ultimatum. They were forced to select who would go and who would stay.

Driver Bertil Collin wrote the following in the official journey log book.

“27 March. At 13.30 all the buses plus four of our trucks left to drive German political prisoners, that is Belgians, Dutchmen, Poles, Germans and others from Neuengamme to Braunschweig. This was done to make room for Scandinavian internees in Neuengamme. These prisoners were in a desperate condition, starved and beaten. The convoy returned at about 07.00 the following day.”

How do we choose one fellow human being over another? Above all, did they have any real choice? Many of the prisoners who were moved between the camps died, but a number of them survived.

In total, about 15,500 people were rescued from the Nazi concentration camps.

In addition about 1,500 civilian Swedes in Germany were rescued.

Of everyone who was rescued, half were Scandinavians and about 7,000 were Polish citizens. At least 4,000 were Jews.

During the rescue operation, 36 Swedish military buses were used. The personnel consisted of 308 people, all volunteers.

When the rescue operation was expanded, a number of Danish vehicles and personnel joined up.

Friedrichsruh Castel outside Hamburg was the headquarters for the personnel and vehicles.

