

The Road to Freedom

Towards the end of World War II the Swedish Red Cross was commissioned to perform an action to save people from Nazi prison camps. In March 1945 an expedition started involving a great number of people and vehicles, including 36 buses. As the buses were painted white with a red cross the action has become known as the White Buses.

The initial task was to save Danes, Norwegians and Germans holding a Swedish citizenship. Gradually, other nationalities were included.

There already existed a plan for how to move children, women and elderly persons from Skåne to Småland in case Sweden was drawn into the war. This plan was now followed when allocating the refugees. The refugees first came to Malmö and Lund. From there, quite a few had to go on to Småland and other provinces in southern Sweden where camps had been prepared.

In May, when the expedition was concluded, about 15 550 people had been brought to Sweden.

So far, no overall documentation has been made about refugee reception in Kronoberg County 1945. To achieve deeper understanding, Kulturparken Småland has searched archives for information of people with knowledge or personal memories of the event.

The exhibition The Road to Freedom is the result of our research and the first part of Kulturparken Småland's project on the Småland refugee reception during the Second World War.

The Camps in Kronoberg County

The reception of refugees from prison camps in Germany.

World War II caused intensive planning of how to protect civilians if Sweden should be attacked. As Skåne was assumed to be severely affected, preparations were made for relocating its population.

Tens of thousands of civilians were to be offered accommodation in Småland. Consequently, an inventory was made of all club facilities, schools, public buildings and major farms. These buildings would simply be taken over by the Government if necessary.

The Civil Defence Board set up material storage buildings and by the end of the war the planning was largely completed. In late April 1945 Kronoberg County was told to prepare for the reception of a large number of refugees from German prison camps. The time had come for a sharp test of the preparedness of the county.

The authorities took over the designated buildings, whose normal activities were interrupted. Children were relocated to other teaching facilities, religious services were moved and club activities cancelled.

The refugees came empty-handed and many required medical care. The extent of their needs was unexpected. Clothes, shoes, blankets, hygiene articles and bedding had to be arranged at short notice. The mission was solved thanks to great commitment and enterprising individuals.

When the World came to Town

New friends, culture clashes and memories for life.

It was naturally a great event when people from all over Europe were offered shelter and healthcare in the county. The madness of war suddenly came close. Small villages received human beings who had lost their families, homes and all belongings.

Their physical injuries might be cured but their experiences of concentration camps were never forgotten.

A large number of people volunteered in various ways for cooking, cleaning, keeping guard and arranging activities. Above all, there was a need of fellow humans who were prepared to listen and encourage. While many new friends were made, cultural clashes were evident.

Those in charge of the camps might encounter French cooks, Belgian dressmakers, Polish peasants, African colonial soldiers, Norwegian resistance men, Dutch cultural workers and Czech civil servants. Nobody knew Swedish and very few English.

One Lekaryd guard wrote down his experiences from the camp:

"But above all, internationalism and a love of human beings arose among those of us involved, which has made us feel at home both in Tunisia's medinas and the Paris metro. We people from Lekaryd got many memories for life."

The Press

The local newspapers showed interest in the situation of the refugees.

The county's daily press published several articles about the reception of refugees in the summer and autumn of 1945. The articles may be divided into three themes. The first theme deals with the actual arrival, describing all the people who had been exposed to great suffering and precarious conditions. The second theme concerns how local inhabitants, clubs and authorities arrange activities and meaningful occupation in the communities where the camps are located. The final theme describes the journey home and the emotional leave-taking.

The Kronobergaren, May 5, 1945.

The reception at the railway station in Växjö.

Some of them even had to be carried on board the bus. Several of them also wore bandages on various parts of the body and, generally, these pale and thin people gave a harrowing impression of the sufferings they had endured. Still, despite their exhaustion, their faces beamed with happiness at arriving in Sweden and finally being able to look forward to a time when they will receive proper care and humane treatment.

The Smälänningen, June 11, 1945.

The Virestad knitting club invited the Belgian women to coffee, home-baked bread and cakes in the community centre. One woman was deeply touched and conveyed the sincere thanks of the camp.

... it felt as if they had come from the worst Hell to Paradise. We cannot thank Sweden enough for its humanitarian efforts and unique friendliness.

The Smålandsposten, July 3, 1945.

The Romanian women are leaving Slätthög.

Lively southern scenes were enacted at Moheda station yesterday afternoon when the train left and the temperamental young Romanian women said farewell.

The Reception

The civil defense's greatest effort ever challenged every part of the society.

Authorities and representatives of a number of voluntary organizations faced great challenges when trains arrived in Kronoberg County with released prisoners. Hard decisions had to be made quickly.

In addition to organizing accommodation and cooking, a range of other practical issues had to be solved. Who, for example, understood Polish, French and Dutch? Citizens proficient in various languages were sought after and a great many teachers volunteered as interpreters. A Chinese woman who turned up on one occasion caused some anxiety, as it was considered next to impossible to find an interpreter. Eventually, the woman was directed to another county.

The girls' school in Växjö was one of many buildings that were taken over. At short notice, the headmistress had to arrange for new teaching facilities in the Mission Church, the parish hall and the technical school;

"but we are not going to lose heart, and both teachers and pupils have shown the utmost readiness, inspired by the joy to help un-happy human beings."

The school was emptied on a Thursday and the very next day the refugees arrived.

The war in Europe ended in May 1945. At the beginning of June the Director General of the Civil Defence Board gave his view on the situation. He stated that the biggest efforts ever conducted by the Board proceeded at the same time as Sweden's increased war preparedness ceased. The authorities were worried that infectious diseases might spread.

In their opinion, Swedes did not take the risks seriously. In the local papers people were urged to greater cautiousness.

The Camp in Markaryd

The first camp opens. 172 Belgian women arrive to Markaryd.

People from Markaryd were probably the ones who first experienced the transport of camp prisoners to Kronoberg County. On May 2, 1945, the County Administrative Board ordered emergency preparedness for receiving refugees. In Markaryd, the Mission Hall and the Lutheran Mission House had been deemed suitable facilities.

The parishioners were obliged to call off their activities while beds and other equipment were provided. On the very next day, May 3, refugees arrived in Markaryd by train. It must have been a chaotic experience for the camp commandant when he had to receive 172 Belgian women, who were accommodated in the two church buildings.

Exhausted after the transport, 13 of them were immediately hospitalized. As a strict quarantine was imposed, reserve police were recruited as guards. A matron started cooking together with a kitchen help. As it was still cold outside, the commandant requested clothes from the public. Several refugees caught colds and on May 17 even typhoid fever was discovered in the camp.

At the beginning of June the quarantine was lifted.

"We can now hear the sound of foreign tongues, French and Flemish, in the streets of Markaryd and see dark beauties strolling through the town arm in arm singing happily. One journalist observed that there were a striking number of people looking into shop windows and that ladies' hair-dressers were busy."

On June 26 the Belgian ladies left.

"A big crowd saw them off at the train station, where many scenes of southern European emotions were displayed."

The Camp in Ryssby

The camp in Ryssby received Norwegian men and Polish women.

On May 5, 1945, 76 Norwegian men arrived by train at Ryssby, where accommodation had been arranged in two buildings, the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church and the temperance lodge. Three Norwegians were, however, so ill that they had to be hospitalized.

Karl-Erik Grahn, a timber dealer, was put in charge of the church, while his son, Karl-Gustav Grahn, took care of the temperance lodge. A matron was engaged to cook in the parish hall, where the meals were also served. As the Norwegians were in relatively good health, no quarantine was needed. Two representatives of the Norwegian legation in Stockholm soon came to visit.

By May 13 the camp administration received a telegram ordering them to arrange a transport to Tingsryd of a total of 152 Norwegians. The train was to leave Ryssby at 8.24 on the very next day. The same telegram stated that the Ryssby camp should prepare to receive 100 Polish women, a task which required intense work.

The women had endured most severe conditions and many of them were in a very bad state. Quarantine rules now had to be introduced, which meant setting up fences around the buildings and strengthening surveillance.

On May 18, the two facilities were filled with 101 Polish women, two of whom had to be immediately sent to hospital. The presence of these women made a deep impact on the community. Ultimately, some of them became Swedish citizens.

Janka Frommer

Janka watched her children being forced into the gas chambers.

On November 20, 1945, it was announced that 12 Jewish women from Hungary were to be moved from the temporary hospital in Halmstad to a camp in Älmhult. Before the transfer the women had been given winter clothes and a suitcase. The youngest, Magda Lövinger, was 15, and the oldest, Janka Frommer, was 46 years old.

Janka and her family were sent during the war from Budapest to a concentration camp, where her husband was shot. She herself had to work with emptying the gas chambers and taking the corpses to the cremation furnaces.

Janka's unimaginable experience was to watch her own children being forced into the gas chambers, after which she was in the group that had to drag out the corpses. Naturally, these inconceivable experiences left indelible traces.

Janka was rescued by the Swedish Red Cross expedition and after completing her rehabilitation she was offered a job at the Småland textile factory at Lagan near Ljungby. Here she led a quiet life. The workers used to invite her to various celebrations. Still, like many other Jews, she cherished a desire to move to Israel. Hence, her joy was complete when she was finally given a residential permit.

Janka was never to get to know her new homeland. She received a stroke and later died in hospital at the age of 69. Janka Jenone Frommer lies buried in the Jewish quarter of Saint Pauli northern cemetery in Malmö.

Weronica Elmén

Weronica was rescued from the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

A church service is held in a small village near Krakow in Poland. Suddenly German soldiers break into the church and seize some of the worshippers. This happens in spring 1940. Weronica, 21 years old, was taken prisoner and later transported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp where she was forced to work in a nearby ammunition plant.

Food rations were small and work hours long. The conditions kept worsening. Crematoriums and gas chambers were built in the camp complex. Weronica remembered with horror how the Germans picked out young women for atrocious medical experiments. Hundreds of children were born in the camp, but most of them died early.

The approaching end of the war became gradually obvious among the German-speaking prisoners. This gave Weronica new strength. Still, the misery was indescribable and in early 1945 she, too, fell seriously ill from pneumonia, tuberculosis and diarrhea. She was close to dying.

At the last moment there arrived help from Sweden. After receiving initial healthcare in Lund, Weronica was transferred on May 18 to Ryssby together with a hundred other Polish women. She later became a Swedish citizen, married and acquired Elmén as her last name. In the 1980s she lectured in schools about her experiences. Her own explanations for surviving Ravensbrück were her youth and strength when taken prisoner and the circumstance that her family was neither Jewish nor Romany.

Altogether seven trials were held after the war where members of the staff of Ravensbrück were tried. A number of persons were sentenced to death, including physicians and guards. Others were imprisoned.

Weronica Elmén died in May 2018.

About The Road to Freedom

The Road to Freedom is an exhibition produced by Kulturparken Småland 2022 and is based on information from archives and people who know of or recalls the reception of refugees from German concentration camps in 1945.

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