Ry – a Refugee Camp in Denmark, 1945-1949

By Birthe King

Growing up in Silkeborg in Denmark not very far from Ry, I was aware that there had been a refugee camp, and I remember as a child being taken to see the then-overgrown landing strip at the German airport. As an adult I have visited the local museum in Gammel Rye, which has a very interesting section on the Ry refugee camp beginning with the development of the local air strip in the 1930s, continuing with the takeover by the Germans at the occupation of Denmark April 9, 1940, and ending with detailed information from the camp including a reconstruction of a room in a wooden barracks with original artifacts and a painting by one of the refugees.

The material for this article has been collected over a number of years, and I was lucky to be offered the Maak items as a “collection.” It provides a human take on life from the inside for this family but also, through the contents of the letters, of the young and old – mainly women – in another camp, as well as life in Germany for the family trying to survive in the aftermath of the war.

From the beginning of 1945 until the end of World War II in Europe in May, refugees of many nationalities fled to Denmark, mainly Germans, Poles, and Russians, including nationals from the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania with whom Scandinavia has a special historic relationship. At the end of the war, the Allied powers in Germany (Great Britain, France, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R) did not want immediately to accept the return of approximately 250,000 refugees from Denmark.

These refugees were spread all over Denmark, and the Danish Government set up a special organization, the Refugee Administration (Flygtningeadministration) to oversee all aspects of the administration of the refugee camps. The 1950 publication, Flygtninge i Danmark 1945-1949, is the official account of the period. During the summer of 1945 all refugees were registered to distinguish the different categories to be dispersed among the smaller or larger camps. Camps for German refugees were administered by the National Civil Defense (Statens Civile Luftværn), while camps for allied refugees or displaced persons were administered by the Danish Red Cross (Dansk Røde Kors).

Many families had been split up during the war and the flight towards the west, and letter writing among the refugees was permitted at an early stage, that is “inter-camp” correspondence, and censorship took place in the camps. Letters abroad were permitted from December, 1945, although postal arrangements to Germany were not reopened until April, 1946. As the refugees were not allowed Danish money, the mail from many of the Jutland refugee camps was franked by the Danish authorities with the Esbjerg machine franking.

Ry, which is located southeast of Silkeborg between Århus and Jelling, had been a German air field, and just after the war the buildings and barracks were used to house 1,100 German refugees. The camp population increased as many other smaller camps were closed. According to the National Civil Defense official list of June 1, 1946, there were 6,132 inhabitants. At its largest, the Ry camp had a capacity of 10,500, including two hospital buildings.

The German Family Maak

The Maak family, a father and his daughter, were interned at the refugee camp at Ry Flyveplads. From the material available, they stayed there from at least June 6, 1946 to December, 1948, when they spent some further weeks at the transit camp at Kolding, before returning to Germany, presumably to the British Zone.
Herman Maak, born May 17, 1886, and his daughter Lisbeth, born January 14, 1925, were in the Ry camp together with Elsa Maak, whose relationship with Herman and Lisbeth cannot be established. Gertrud Maak was Lisbeth’s sister and was in Berlin in May, 1946. It appears from the correspondence that their mother might have been somewhere in the Russian Zone. Their cousin, Gerhard Maak, married to Minni, originates from the east, but was then in Cologne, whereas their niece, Annedore Wesel, lived in Essen with her mother.

During June, 1945, Danish health authorities undertook the vaccination of all German refugees against typhoid, paratyphoid, and dysentery. Everybody under 18 years of age was also vaccinated against diphtheria, and this was later extended to everybody between 18 and 50 years. Tests regarding tuberculosis were carried out, and all persons with negative results were immunized. The vaccination card (Fig. 1) shows that Herman Mack (sic) was vaccinated for paratyphoid in June, 1945 and again in 1946 by Statens Seruminstittut, while he was checked for tuberculosis in October, 1945 (Fig. 2).

A child’s drawing (Fig. 3) illustrates refugees collecting branches near the barracks. A permit allowing Lisbeth and Elsa Maack (sic) to collect fir branches at the back of Barracks 9 and at Blidsø Lake is shown. The August 29 permit (Fig. 4) carries the two-line hand-stamp, *Flygningelejren Rye Flyveplads*, and a signature.

Refugee mail was only permitted to other camps in Denmark until December, 1945, and it was not until April, 1946 that mail was permitted.
to Germany. Lisbeth had many friends in the refugee camp at Rom near Lemvig in northwest Jutland. Their letters tell what they are up to. One friend, Meta, writes about their mutual friends in the camp. There had been a dance in the camp the previous Sunday, and there would be a film another evening.

“Do you also go through the barbed wire?” Meta inquires. “Mia and Dora were caught. They are now both in the prison barracks. Do you also have a prison barracks?” Refugees were not allowed outside the camps and fraternization with the local population, or the young Danish guards patrolling the camps, was forbidden. The letter (Fig. 5) from Rom was machine franked in Esbjerg August 3, 1946, at the inland rate 20 øre and has the three-line camp censor mark, CENSURERET Flygtningelejren Rom Lemvig, on the reverse.

Lisbeth received a number of letters from her relative, Annedore, in Essen in the British Zone (Fig. 6). They tell about the daily hardship of surviving in the aftermath of Germany’s collapse and how family members search to find if relatives are still alive and where they might be. The sister Gertrud, who was in Berlin, has traveled into the East to look for their mother, and the Wesel family would like to offer accommodation for Gerhard and Minni, but the Essen authorities are allowing no more refugees. Many Germans from the eastern part of the country, which was now part of Russia and Poland, wanted to settle in the zones occupied by Britain and the U.S. Annedore writes that there is hardly any food, just bread and potatoes, and everything is very expensive and only available on the black market. In a later letter she has heard from friends in Poland, who are being treated terribly by the Poles. “Be glad, that you are treated well and have good food …even if you are behind barbed wire.” It is very cold in the office, and they have to keep their coats on. The good news is that despite much difficulty Gerhard and Minni have obtained a housing permit to come to Essen.

Family News – Good and Sad

Many of the refugee camps had different censor handstamps using different colors. The illustration (Fig. 7) is an example from the Rom camp dated January 7, 1947. This letter also has lots of family news, good and sad. A son had returned from the Russian Zone to join his father in the British Zone, but the son
died four weeks later from typhoid. There is also good news about relatives having babies. The girls in the Rom camp had a good Christmas and received parcels with food and toys. They hope “that 47 will bring us better luck.”

On January 27, 1947, Lisbeth received a letter from Gerhard, who is now in Cologne, also in the British Zone. He is hoping to get his mother to join him there, but “the City does not want to admit refugees.” He continues that the weather is very cold; there is no coal and no food, so things can only get better.

By November 15, 1947, having been in the Ry camp for almost 2½ years, Herman Maak is unwell, and he gets a prescription (Fig. 8) signed by the camp doctor (Lagerartz) with the two-line handstamp, *Flygtningehospitalet Rye Flyveplads*.

It appears that Herr Maak has sent an inquiry about the whereabouts of his wife, Therese Maak, as the Search Service Liaison secretary (*Suchdienstverbindungsssekretär in Lg. 37-09 Rye*) has received a letter March 12, 1947 (Fig. 9) from Flygtningeadministrationen with information to be passed to him that the Registry is searching for Therese Maak, and they will be contacting him in due course.

Lisbeth continues her correspondence with her friends in Rom where new refugees have just arrived as of March 19, 1947, including a family that Lisbeth knows. The friend Gertrud hopes to return to Schleswig-Holstein that year and Agathe, also in Rom, has learned that her son is a prisoner of war in England.

Easter greetings April 6, 1947, from Annedore includes the bad news that an aunt has died in a Russian camp leaving her two sons behind; they were on their way to join her husband, and there is still not much food in Essen – “Wait until you see how slim we all are.”
Another letter June 26, 1947, from Gertrud in Rom, confirms that many refugees want to return to the part of Germany that was in the British Zone, and many new refugees have arrived in the camp. Although the authorities in the Russian and American Zones appear to allow refugees back, the British are not yet doing so. There was a debate among the Allied occupying powers aimed at achieving some sort of proportional parity in the numbers of refugees permitted to return to the different zones. Gertrud expects to have to wait a while longer to be allowed into the British Zone, and writes, “I can see myself sit here yet another winter.” This letter has another three-line camp handstamp, Postkontoret Flygtningelejren Rom pr. Lemvig Telf 312 (Fig. 10). On August 22, 1947, Lisbeth’s sister, Gertrud, writes from Hanover to “Meine Liebes Lieschen u. Vati!” (Fig. 11). She has written many letters and sent tobacco and cigarettes and even a photo, but she has had no acknowledgment and wonders if they have received anything. The gossip is that apparently somebody has spread a rumor that she is expecting a baby, but “Thank God, that is not true.” A glimpse of normality is that she is looking forward to a visit from a friend from Berlin. So, some travel must have been possible at that time.

Although almost all inter-camp letters have a censor handstamp from the sender’s camp, a few have none. Figure 12 is one such example from the Oksbøl camp near Esbjerg to Lisbeth in Ry in June, 1948. It has no censor markings from either the sending or receiving camp.

**Conclusion – Leaving Denmark**

The negotiations about when and where to return the refugees had begun in earnest during 1946. A number of criteria were drawn up to decide to which of the four occupied zones, including Berlin. A deciding factor was *Angehörigkeit* (“where they belonged”), that is, where they had family, property, or other connections. Approximately 116,000 refugees could thus be returned to the appropriate zone, but the remaining 74,000 were declared stateless. To facilitate the return, a number of camps were designated as collection points – for example, in Ålborg, Århus, Rom, Grove-Gedhus, Oksbøl, Kolding, Skrydstrup Tønder, and Kløvermarken in Copenhagen. These places had housed the largest camps, or they were strategically placed on railway routes to Germany.
We know that Lisbeth, and presumably her father, were in the transit camp at Kolding because they needed permission in writing to attend a hospital outside the transit camp. Lisbeth Maak and one other person received a pass on December 19, 1948, from Camp No 30-1, and again on January 9, and February 6, 1949, from Camp 34-01, both Kolding transit camps (Fig. 13). All the passes had three-line handstamps (Gennemgangslejren Kolding LEJR IV) and were signed by the camp supervisor.

The last refugee left Denmark on February 15, 1949. Lisbeth and her father were definitely among the last. The photo (Fig. 14) shows refugees on their way to board a train in Kolding.

We do not know whether the family was reunited with Therese or with the families in Essen and Cologne, or where they returned to in Germany, but for tens of thousands of displaced persons in Europe, the Maak family’s experience was shared by a generation now in their 70s or long since dead. There will soon be no oral evidence, leaving only their postal history and associated ephemera to speak for them.

Endnotes:
1 The spelling of the place-name Rye/ Ry varies. Rye is used when referring to illustrations or the village of Gammel Rye. Otherwise, the modern spelling of Ry is preferred.
2 The text uses the most common spelling of the family names, e.g., Herman Maak and Lisbeth Maak. When referring to illustrations, the spelling on the item is used.

References:
Gammelgaard, Arne. Mennesker i malstrøm (Destinies in a maelstrom), Herning, 1981.