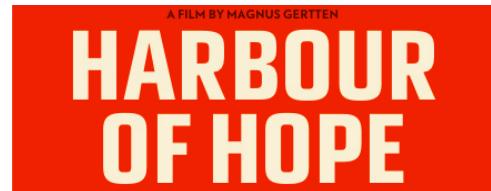


Harbour of Hope:
Background information on the historical event
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Harbour of Hope

Background information on the historical event

Many curious locals gathered in the Malmö harbour as concentration camp survivors started arriving in March and April 1945. Swedish media was not allowed to report on the events until the 28th of April, when newspapers as well as film teams covered the arrival of ships with survivors.

Only very few Malmö citizens had any idea of what they were about to encounter. The first witness reports in the newspapers from the newly liberated concentration camps in Nazi Germany didn't appear before the end of April.

Until these final moments of the second world war, Sweden had been proclaimed neutral and kept its borders closed. Very few political refugees had been allowed to enter Sweden. Taking care of nearly 30 000 survivors during 1945 marked a radical change. It became the starting point for the modern and open immigration policy that Sweden is now known for, especially when it comes to political refugees.

Why did thousands of concentration camp survivors arrive in Malmö, Sweden in 1945? Most of them came on the White Buses, a Scandinavian Red Cross rescue operation led by the Count Folke Bernadotte. During only a few weeks at the end of the war, the White Buses collected around 20 000 prisoners from Nazi concentration camps like Ravensbrück, Theresienstadt, Sachsenhausen and Neuengamme.

The White Buses operation became possible after direct negotiations between Bernadotte and Nazi leaders like Himmler and Ribbentrop, hoping to somewhat better their reputation at the last minute, literally as Berlin was being surrounded by the allied and Soviet troops.

To start with, the operation's only official concern was Scandinavian prisoners, but it soon developed into something bigger. In the end, prisoners from many different countries were saved under chaotic circumstances. Some of the buses were bombed by allied airplanes, causing several deaths, including one of the Swedish Red Cross drivers.

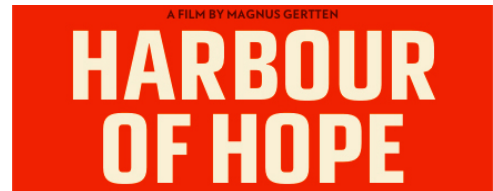
The liberated prisoners were transported on the White Buses to Denmark and then further on to neutral Sweden, one of very few possible places to go for refugees in Europe at that particular time.

The biggest group was Polish concentration camp prisoners, along with quite a few Danes and Norwegians. Altogether survivors from 27 different countries were saved by the White Buses action.

In May, June and July, another 10 000 survivors were transferred to Malmö and Sweden by boat from Germany. Many of them came from camps like Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz. It's been estimated that around 11 000 of the total 30 000 people were Jews.

The rescue operation led to a massive mobilization by the authorities in Malmö and other parts of Sweden, in order to provide for the survivors. In Malmö several schools, sports facilities, dance halls and the main city museum were closed for public use and instead put in shape for the reception of refugees. New hospital facilities and sanitation stations were prepared.

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Several authorities co-operated in taking care of the survivors. Many volunteers from the Red Cross youth organization, and others like it, contributed. The mobilization was strongly supported by the Malmö citizens. Many wanted to help, after finally facing the cruel realities of the war and the Nazi regime.

During the 1930's and the beginning of the 1940's many Swedes, especially in the south, had a strong cultural relationship to Germany. Combined with the fear of Soviet communism, it led to many Swedes placing their sympathies on the German side at the beginning of the war.

But there were also organized anti-Nazi groups working in Sweden. One of them was called the Tuesday Club. In Malmö, the director of the main museum was one of its leading members, and he immediately opened the building for survivors at the end of April 1945.

The survivors stayed in Malmö for a period before being transferred to other places in Sweden, like hospitals, temporary refugee camps, etc. In Malmö they got the first helping hands with food, clothes, medical care and human compassion.