

The White Buses

**The Swedish Red Cross rescue action in Germany
during the Second World War**

Research: Agneta Greayer and Sonja Sjöstrand

Editing: Martin Wikberg

Translation: Annika and Peter Hodgson

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Foreword

The Swedish Red Cross rescue action with the White Buses to Germany in the last phase of the Second World War has through the years been described in many books, essays and publications.

Contradictory information has occurred. The parts played by the different participants has been questioned and debated. Information concerning how many were rescued by the White Buses has varied greatly. Neither has it been established how many of those were Jewish. Questioning the aim of the rescue expedition and Folke Bernadotte's role has been amongst the more serious accusations.

The latest media debate, by the radio programme "Take the Jews last" in spring 1998, resulted in the Swedish Red Cross inviting historians, archivists, media representatives and other experts to a historic seminar in May 1998.

As a result of this the Swedish Red Cross gave external researchers free access to the organisations archive material. We have also ourselves continued working with this issue, a work that amongst other things has resulted in this document.

In 1995 the Foreign office released its classified documentation of the rescue action after 50 year. Large amounts of documents were made available for research. During spring 1999 we found even more classified Red Cross documents in our archive. We also re-discovered Folke Bernadotte's two missing pocket diary's from 1944 and 1945.

We have now gone through all this material and will add it to the existing collections at the National Archive in Amingen and present the diary's to Folke Bernadotte's family.

Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, when Germany was heading for military and political breakdown, the large Swedish lead rescue action known as 'the White Buses' was accomplished. It was initiated by the government and was carried out by the Swedish Red Cross, lead by its vice president Folke Bernadotte.

During some dramatic weeks, from the middle of March to the beginning of May 1945, more than 15000 prisoners were rescued from German concentration camps.

Amongst them were nearly 8000 Norwegians and Danes. Apart from Scandinavians, citizens from 20 other countries, mostly France and Poland, were rescued. How many of them were Jewish was never accurately established. One reason for this was that Sweden did not register system of belief when the liberated prisoners arrived.

Already before the war there was a distinct difference in the way the Germans treated civilian prisoners and military prisoners of war. The prisoners of war were protected by the third Geneva Convention, which the Germans respected. When it came to civilian, political prisoners no conventions existed to regulate their treatment.

At the end of the Second World War this difference was more than obvious. Work to found a forth Geneva Convention to protect civilians in a war was quickly initiated by Folke Bernadotte. At the XVII International Red Cross Conference, held in Stockholm 1948, the founding of a

fourth convention and the modernisation of the existing conventions were negotiated successful and a year later the new conventions were ratified in Geneva.

Folke Bernadotte never experience this moment though, as he was murdered during a UN assignment in the newly founded state of Israel on September 17, 1948.

Background

In 1933 Adolf Hitler, as leader of the National socialist party, was elected leader of Germany. The people, suffering from the depression, welcomed the change of power, which gave hope of a new, strong Germany.

The new regime's attitude towards those of different opinions became clear quite quickly. Even before the outbreak of the Second World War, the nazis where accused of limiting freedom and rights of its citizens, and for interning political prisoners in 'work camps'.

This lead to reactions and protests from Sweden - the Swedish Red Cross acted by means of pleading and démarcher through its president, Prince Carl. In April 1933 he wrote to the German president Hindenburg protesting against the Nazis limitations of the freedom and rights of the Jews.

During autumn 1933 and winter 1934 prince Carl wrote several letters to the president of the German Red Cross and asked him to investigate the alleged cruelties of the nazi regime towards persons suspected or imprisoned for their political opinions.

The Swedish Red Cross offered to visit the camps as an independent party, and in this way help clear Germany from the accusations. The German Red Cross replied, on January 31 1934, that they themselves had access to the camps. The matter of the camps were, in their opinion, internal German business for which the national Red Cross society was responsible for. The request from the Swedish Red Cross was construed to be distrust of the German Red Cross activities. The German government opposed all international inspections of the concentration camps.

The Swedish Red Cross also informed the International Red Cross Committee of the letter to the Germans. ICRC welcomed the Swedish initiative. They had also been in contact with the German Red Cross and urged them to attend to the political prisoners' destinies from a humanitarian point of view.

Swedish press politics

Europe was politically insatiable at the end of the thirties. In 1938 Germany started its expansion policy by annexing Austria and the sudet-german parts of Czechoslovakia. War was in the air and the Swedish government warned the press not to publish anything that would endanger Sweden capability of maintaining its neutrality and safety. The government reserved its right to cancel newspapers that held an anti-German position.

This right was seldom used; instead there was a trust in "informal" pressure and the "good judgement" of the editors. In 1940 the Board of Information was established to control information received by the Swedish press. This "informal censorship" turned out to be very effective and the majority of journalists respected the demands of the government.

There were exceptions though. The most important anti-nazi publisher was Torgny Segerstedt at Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning (Gothenburg Trading and Shipping paper). It was feared that his campaigns would bring Sweden in to the war.

The temperance of the Swedish press played an important role in the preparations of the Red Cross rescue action in the final stage of the war. During negotiations between National minister and SS-commander Heinrich Himmler's Folke Bernadotte, Himmler' demanded that there be complete

press silence. He feared that Hitler, if he found out about the concessions, would immediately stop the releases.

Hitler had already stopped the Swiss government trying to release prisoners, since the press had noticed a previous, successful try. Bernadotte could fairly easily agree to the demands. The Swedish press had already demonstrated its silence.

Sweden's post-war strategy

Germany's luck started turning in the summer of 1942. It became more apparent that the allied forces were stronger, and after allied victories at Stalingrad and El Alamein, it was seemed that the Nazis could lose the war.

By the beginning of 1943 the Swedish government saw the need to start planning its post-war strategy. Foreign policy was focused on creating a counter weight to the traditional friendly relationship Sweden had maintained with Germany and instead build firmer bonds with the Western Powers and the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile Germany had increased its prosecution of the Jews and started applying the so-called "Final solution". Hitler built annihilation camps to which Jews and other "threats to the Arian race" were transported to be executed. In Norway Jews and members of the resistance were deported to camps in Germany and Poland.

The Swedish Foreign Ministry warned Germany that relations between the two countries would be affected if this continued. The warning had no immediate effect, and half of Norway's Jews were brought to Poland. Sweden then offered to take Norway's remaining Jews, around 700, and intern them in Sweden.

Germany refused this offer too, so Sweden allowed the Norwegians to cross the border and gave them asylum.

In August 1943 the nazis proclaimed a state of emergency in Denmark and announced that they would begin applying "the final solution" there too. Sweden opened its borders for the Danish Jews, as she had before for the Norwegians. Ninety five percent of them, about 7 300 Jews, and many members of the resistance managed to escape to Sweden.

The change in Swedish foreign policy was apparent. Relations with the neighbouring Scandinavian countries improved considerably and Sweden became a place of refuge for Danish members of resistance. As a sign of Sweden's willingness to help Norway the Norwegian minister Niels Ditleff was accredited in Stockholm on December 15, 1943. Ditleff would later become a key person in the White Bus rescue action.

The rescue action take shape

In 1944 the war seemed to head towards its end and there was increasing worries about what would happen to the Scandinavians interned in German camps. If the war ended in chaos, it would be potentially dangerous for the prisoners. There were plans of blowing up camps and of mass executions before the allied forces reached their objectives.

Discussions of a rescue expedition had been going on for a while in both Sweden and Denmark, but no concrete plans had been made so far. The Danish Foreign Ministry had previously reached certain agreements with the Germans and were allowed to bring home small numbers of prisoners and deliver food packets.

During the summer Sweden started mapping out the Scandinavian prisoners; where and how many there were. A great help in this was the Norwegian professor Didrik Arup Seip. He had earlier been a prisoner in a concentration camp but was released at the turn of the year 1942-43. Since the Germans, during autumn 1943, had forbidden Swedish Red Cross

consignments of food and medication, he had found other ways to supply necessities to the Norwegian prisoners. Food and medical supplies were sent via the Foreign Ministry to the Swedish embassy in Berlin, which in turn supplied Seip and his men so they could forward the aid to the prisoners. These activities made it possible for Seip to discover the names, numbers and places of the Scandinavian prisoners.

At the end of August 1944 Ditleff, at the Foreign Ministry, received a list of approximately 6000 prisoners. Ditleff's contacts with the Danish Rear-Admiral Carl Hammerich and his Norwegian wife Borghild, who also worked for the Scandinavian prisoners, had turned earlier plans of rescuing Norwegian prisoners into a rescue action that also included Danish prisoners.

On 7th September the Swedish ambassador in Berlin, Arvid Richert, handed over an appeal to the German government calling for the release, or surrender to Sweden of the Norwegian prisoners, primarily the students. The Germans did not respond but twenty days later the deportation of Norwegians stopped. On November 2, Hitler decided to send home sick Norwegian prisoners, which meant that approx. 130 Norwegians were repatriated.

The condition for the German concession was press silence, and it was understood that if no publicity were given, all Norwegian students would eventually be sent home. The German concessions gave hope to the possibility of bring home all Scandinavians from Germany before the end of war. Considering this, on the 30th November the Norwegian Minister Ditleff presented a proposal to the Foreign Ministry to send a Swedish Red Cross delegation to Germany. After some delay Ditleff's proposal was accepted and he received the Swedish Foreign Minister Christian Günther's full support.

Plans were made for a rescue expedition. It was to be executed by the Swedish Red Cross under the guidance of Folke Bernadotte. The aim was to rescue Scandinavians, irrespective of religion, and preferably bring them to Sweden before the end of the war.

Bernadotte's negotiations

A key person in the rescue action was the National minister and SS commander Heinrich Himmler, being the only person with interest and power enough to pursued Hitler. He had, during the summer of 1944, realised that Hitler would not win the war and had tried to make separate peace with the western powers. The allied showed no interest in his tentative offers, so to show his good will Himmler released the five so called 'Warsaw Swedes'. They were businessmen who, in 1943, were sentenced for espionage. Behind the releases was Felix Kersten, Himmler's personal masseur, who was living in Sweden. After contacts with the Foreign Ministry he agreed to negotiate with Himmler for the release of the Swedish prisoners.

On the 10th February, 1945, the Swedish ambassador in Berlin, Arvid Richert, was told to inform Germany that Sweden would be willing to receive all the Jews from German concentration camps, with the addition "especially those in Theresienstadt and Bergen-Belsen". Hopes for a positive reply on the offer were not great.

That same day the Foreign Ministry decided to send Bernadotte to Berlin to negotiate for the release of the Scandinavian prisoners. Felix Kersten, who until then had not been involved in the rescue action, was asked by Foreign Minister Günther to call Himmler to prepare for Bernadotte.

After formal instructions from the Red Cross president, Prince Carl, Bernadotte flew to Berlin on February 16 to begin the negotiations. By way of introduction Bernadotte met with the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, head of national security

Obergruppenführer Ernst Kaltenbrunner and Himmler's aide-de-camp Brigadeführer Walter Schellenberg.

On the 19th February he started negotiations with Heinrich Himmler. The Swedish Foreign Minister's instructions before the negotiations were to "try to secure the realise of all Norwegians and Danes from Germany to Denmark or Sweden". The instructions were no more precise than that. Günther gave Bernadotte more or less a free hand in trying to achieve as concrete and as extensive a concession as possible. The negotiations included all interned Norwegian and Danish citizens in Germany, consequently even those of Jewish birth.

Himmler would not agree to move the Scandinavians out of Germany. However he did authorise a Red Cross expedition to gather all the Scandinavian prisoners in the Neuengamme camp, to be moved near to the Danish border. He also agreed to allow old men and women, sick and mothers, after gathering in the camp, to be separated and transported out of Germany. He also allowed Swedish born German women with children to travel to Sweden. Himmler insisted that all these agreements were to be kept unofficial.

"The Swedish government's success in creating the least possible publicity around the expedition contributed to a great extent to Himmler's willingness to make concessions further ahead.

" (Steven Koblik, "If we were silent, the stones would cry out")

Transportation was to be organised by the Swedish Red Cross, which would also assist the Scandinavian prisoners in the Neuengamme camp. The Germans were not able to manage transportation themselves.

The results from the Bernadotte negotiations were better than anyone had dared to hope for. It really seemed like the rescue action would become a reality. No details concerning the transportation had been worked out, so when the rescue expedition started in March it had to be adjusted to the turn of events and to the current state of war.

"Once the decisions had been made for the Red Cross expedition to Germany, its success depended on Bernadotte and his personal skills and the important help he received from Kersten in the negotiations with Himmler. Decisions were made 'on the spot' and it was up to Kersten and Bernadotte to make sure there wasn't any counter orders from Himmler and his aides-de-camp. Schellenberg was a sturdy support for both of them during the following two months." (Koblik, "If*")

On his return to Stockholm Bernadotte received a letter from Gillel Storch, leader of the Swedish branch of the Jewish World Congress, W.J.C. Storch asked Bernadotte to increase the rescue action so as to include non-Scandinavian Jews. Bernadotte was positive to the idea, but at this time the government was not interested in increasing the action. Storch then turned to Felix Kersten, who promised to try to make Himmler agree to a programme for aid to the Jews. It would include sending medicine and food to the camps, to gather all the Jews in a few of the camps and attempt to get five- or ten thousand Jews surrendered to either Sweden or Switzerland.

When Kersten went to Berlin for the third time he had apart from Storch's commission also been asked by Foreign Minister Günther to help Bernadotte with his continuing negotiations.

In the beginning of March the Foreign Ministry informed the British ambassador of the planned Red Cross expedition. The areas in which the Red Cross was to work were under intense allied air attacks. The Foreign Ministry asked for suggestions on how to carry out the action as safely as possible. The British authorised the expedition, but made it clear that they could give no guarantees for its safety. They suggested that the buses were painted white, so that they could be easily identified. The same request went to the USA too, but the answer, although positive, was delayed until the middle of April when the rescue action had already commenced.

To insure that the current agreement was still valid and to solve remaining problems, Bernadotte went back to Germany on March 6. He met with Kaltenbrunner and Schellenberg. Bernadotte managed to negotiate further German concessions. As well as trying everything to secure the success of the rescue action, the Germans indicated that the interns at Neuengamme, under a second phase, would be surrendered to Sweden. They also allowed for all Scandinavian Jews in German camps to be transported to Neuengamme. Now everything was ready to start.

The rescue action begins

The Swedish rescue action was to be carried out by the Swedish Red Cross, so much was ready. Some problems remained though. The Red Cross had neither resources nor personnel for an operation of this type. It required an organisation that could work in a belligerent country. This required special knowledge. The problem was solved when the army supplied personnel and material.

After the government decision the head of the army, lieutenant general Douglas, was assigned to organise a detachment. This body was made up of professionals and conscripts who volunteered. As it wasn't possible for military personnel to act in a belligerent country, they would be free from duty under the duration of the rescue action. They would officially be Red Cross volunteers in the detachment.

Gathering in Hässleholm on March 8 the detachment consisted of three ambulance platoons with 12 buses each, one transport platoon with 12 lorries, a supply service platoon and baggage with cook, workshop and medical supplies. There were a total of 75 vehicles, of which 36 buses, with a manpower of 250 men, which was the number permitted by the Germans. The detachments total transport capacity was approximately 1000 people per trip. In shorter trips the lorries could be used too, which allowed for the transportation of around 1200 people.

Colonel Gottfrid Björck was appointed head of the operation and a Red Cross delegation of around twenty doctors and nurses accompanied the detachment under the supervision of Red Cross doctor G A Rundberg.

The journey from Hässleholm went in to stages, as there wasn't space for all the vehicles on the ferry to Copenhagen. The first group went on March 9 and the second on the 10th. Before

this the Foreign Ministry ordered the buses painted white. It took all night to paint them. One of the units was all ready loaded on to the Copenhagen ferry so all of Malmö's painters were called in to get the vehicles painted. The work was finally completed during the voyage over to Denmark.

The Swedish rescue expedition arrived to Friedrichsruh near Hamburg on the 12th-13th of March 1945. Neuegamme camp, where all Scandinavians were to be gathered, was only a few miles away from the Danish border.

Plans for how the transportation of the prisoners would be done were drawn up. The platoon lead by Major Sven Frykman was assigned to collect all the Danes and Norwegians from the Sachsenhausen camp, north of Berlin. The rest of the detachment had a few days to prepare before making the long journey to southern Germany and Austria.

The first trip to Sachsenhausen was made on the 15th of March. The extraction did not go without complications. There were demands that the buses should be driven by German drivers within the camp, or the prisoners would be forced to walk two kilometres to the outside of the camp. After long negotiations the Swedish drivers were permitted to drive the buses one at a time each with a German guard.

The busses were escorted by the Gestapo who made sure that the detachment followed all their conditions for the extractions. During the following days ten trips were made to Sachsenhausen. They left Friedrichsruh at 5 p.m. and arrived in the camp at 1 a.m. This was the safest time to avoid the air raids against Berlin. Between the 16th and 30th of March 2161 prisoners were extracted from Sachsenhausen.

On the 19th of March two columns left for the south of Germany with a total of 24 buses and 134 men. The goal was the camps at Dachau, Mauthausen and Natzweiler. The columns were divided into three. The largest one went to Dachau, whilst the other two went to Mauthausen and Schömburg. Five days later the buses returned to Neuegamme with 313 Danes and 143 Norwegians from Dachau, 2 Danes and 68 Norwegians from Mauthausen and 33 Norwegians from Natzweiler. They were forced to leave behind 67 prisoners suffering from contagious diseases.

3000 Scandinavians were now gathered at the Neuegamme camp, which could no longer receive more prisoners. It was therefore considered necessary to move a few thousand prisoners to other camps. The Germans were not able to arrange this, and demanded that the detachment relocate the prisoners. Colonel Björck was extremely unwilling to agree to this, but considering how the Germans usually transported their prisoners, it was felt that they would be more comfortable on the detachment buses. On the 27th and 28th of March the prisoners were brought to Walderstädte in Hannover. In return the buses brought back 72 Danes from Hannover-Stöcken. The transports were a shock for the Swedes.

Since the German race policy regarded Danes and Norwegians as "pure Arian" they'd had a more favoured situation than prisoners of other nationalities. The food packets they received through the Red Cross had kept the Scandinavians in quite good condition. The prisoners transported from Neuegamme were French, Belgian, Dutch, Polish and Russian. They were extremely emaciated and many of them suffered from dysentery. The Gestapo men that accompanied the transports were very brutal to the prisoners and the Swedes found it difficult to hide their contempt and disgust for the Germans. The prisoners were brought to

Braunschweig, Waldenstädte and Wamstedt. What happened to them later has never been established.

More columns left on the 30th of March to collect Danish policemen interned in different camps in the southern Germany. They also managed to bring home many other prisoners, amongst them a number of Norwegians. When all the columns had returned to Neuegamme they had brought back 1251 prisoners.

By the end of March there still remained a number of Danish policemen, the Scandinavian Jews and a number of other prisoners. Around 1700 prisoners were at Neuegamme when the rescue action began and another 600 had been transported there by Germans. By the total evacuation of the Neuegamme camp the Swedish detachment had transported approximately 5000 prisoners (including prisoners accounted for later in this report, such as convicts, Scandinavian women from Ravensbrück and others)

New negotiations, the action is extended

Stockholm considered the removal of the Scandinavian prisoners to Neuegamme as only part of the objective. The intent was still to transfer the Danes and Norwegians to Sweden, something that Himmler continued to refuse.

On the 26th of March Bernadotte met with cabinet secretary Boheman and Counsellor Von Post at the Foreign Ministry. They agreed to try to extend the rescue action considerably. The primary objective would be to achieve Himmler's approval for the transfer of all interned Scandinavians in Neuegamme to Sweden. A secondary objective would be to extend the action to include even other nationalities.

On the 2nd of April Bernadotte returned to Germany for new negotiations. Any chances of extending the rescue action depended increasingly on Himmler's own interest and ambition to make a separate peace with the western powers. At the discussions on the 2nd of April he was mostly interested in discussing the question of separate peace and wanted Bernadotte to act as intermediary. He refused Bernadotte's request to transport the Scandinavian prisoners to camps in Sweden, but he did agree to all Norwegian and Danish women, all sick Scandinavians and a number of Norwegian students to be sent to Sweden. Furthermore he agreed to allow all Danish policemen to be transferred from Neuegamme to Denmark, where, after a short time of being interned, they could be released.

Some Frenchmen and Norwegians, among them professor Seip, were granted exit permits. Himmler refused to allow interned French women from Ravensbrück to be moved to Neuegamme, but a few days later he gave permission to send 15000 gift packets to them. Even though Himmler did not agree to Bernadotte's request to transfer the Norwegian and Danish prisoners to Sweden, the Swedish embassy in Berlin continued to bring pressure on the Germans, Schellenberg, amongst others, tried to reach an agreement to this effect.

Help from Denmark

At the beginning of April part of the Swedish detachment returned to Sweden as planned. The remaining personnel and vehicles, 130 men in two platoons of 12 buses each, were regrouped under supervision of Major Sven Frykman, who now relieved Colonel Gottfrid Björck. With the Danish policemen collected most of the detachment's original tasks were

done. The expedition had been running for a month and many of the men were forced to return to their regular duties.

More resources were needed in order to be able to carry out the extended expedition that was being planned. At an early stage Norway and Denmark had offered to help; Norway with ten or so buses and Denmark with sixty or so, but the government had been of the opinion that the whole action ought to be Swedish and be carried out by the Swedish Red Cross. Bernadotte now accepted the help from Denmark. The Danish vehicles and personnel were put to the expedition's disposal by the Danish Social Ministry and were to answer to the Swedish detachment. On the 1st to the 3rd of April the first Danish contribution arrived; two columns with 33 buses, 15 ambulances, six lorries and seven cars. At the evacuation of the Neuegamme camp a further 90 buses, eight to ten ambulances, ten lorries, five cars and five motorcycles were added.

The Danish reinforcement consisted of a total of 450 people, amongst them ten doctors and 16 nurses. The division of responsibilities was quite clear. The Swedish columns handled transportation between German camps and Neuegamme, whilst feeding, quarantine and removal to Sweden and Denmark were handled by the Danes.

Their first assignment was to repatriate the policemen from Neuegamme to Denmark.

Between the 3rd and 10th of April they transferred 1717 people to the Fröslöv camp in southern Denmark.

The first prisoners arrive in Sweden

Bernadotte's positive outcome at the negotiations on the 2nd of April immediately led to action. The transportation of the Scandinavian women and the sick to Sweden commenced immediately. As far as possible they tried to avoid publicity of the newcomers, in accordance with Himmler's demand so that Hitler would not stop the rescue action. The self-censoring and temperance of the Swedish press again contributed to the later extension of the rescue action.

On the 8th of April around 100 Scandinavian women were collected from Ravensbrück to be sent on to Sweden via Neuegamme. A smaller column, led by lieutenant Hallström and doctor Carl Krebs had at the same time visited Bergen-Belsen and returned the same day with one Dane and ten Norwegians. On the 9th of April the first transferrals of sick from Neuegamme commenced. In total 818 sick were transferred to Denmark. On the morning the same day 12 buses left to collect around 200 convicts from some twenty different places in the Leipzig-Halle and Torgau area. On the 11th of April the column returned with 27 Danes, 153 Norwegians and 11 Swedes. Between the 13th and 14th of April other columns returned to Neuegamme with a total of 326 Norwegians and 201 Danes.

The two remaining problems concerning the Scandinavian prisoners i.e. the collection of the Scandinavian Jews at Theresienstadt and the transportation of all Scandinavian prisoners from Neuegamme to Sweden, came closer to its solution by the middle of April.

The Scandinavian Jews at Theresienstadt are collected

On the 12th of April 35 buses left from Friedrichsruh to collect the Scandinavian Jews at Theresienstadt, north west of Prague. Head of operations was Captain Harald Folke. On the

way to Theresienstadt the column brought 400 Frenchmen that the Germans had released from Neuegamme.

The French were supposed to be left at Flossenburg, but on arriving at the camp they found it being disbanded, so they brought the French to Theresienstadt, where they were later picked up and brought to Switzerland.

The Danish doctor Johannes Holm and Obersturmbahnführer Dr Rennau put a great deal of effort into obtaining clearance for the removal of prisoners to Theresienstadt. Dr Rennau explained that even though Himmler had given permission for the collection of the Danish Jews, there was a strong opposition amongst the lower ranks. Head of security, Kaltenbrunner, was strongly against the transports and did not want to allow the collection of the Scandinavian Jews. Finally permission was granted to collect them.

The column with its 423 passengers reached Lübeck on the 16th of April. From there they were brought to Malmö, where they arrived two days later. These were virtually all Jews from Denmark. Most of the Norwegian Jews had been executed or died in other ways immediately after deportation. Only a few survived.

The Scandinavian prisoners in Neuegamme are evacuated

On the 19th of April Bernadotte arrived at Friedrichsruh where there was a feeling of depression. An order had arrived to stop the rescue action and the German liaison officer did not think the buses could continue. But later that same day an order suddenly arrived from Himmler's headquarters that all Scandinavians in Neuegamme were to be transported to Denmark. Further transportation to Sweden was not allowed though. Only if the fighting spread to Denmark would the prisoners be allowed to be moved to Sweden.

The Red Cross only had one day to accomplish the transportation of around 4200 prisoners. Contacts were made with the Danish Jylland korps, which were to be activated at the end of the war. In Padborg 94 buses, eight to ten ambulances, ten lorries, five cars and five motorcycles were gathered, formed into six columns. The buses were painted white and were marked with red crosses and Danish flags. As a joint force the Swedes and Danes managed to transport the Scandinavians from Neuegamme to Denmark within the stated time. The last buses left only 30 minutes before the deadline.

New negotiations

On the 21st of April Bernadotte met with Himmler again to negotiate for more concessions. Earlier the same day Felix Kersten had met with Himmler with the same intent. He had after lengthy negotiations been promised the release of 1000 Jewish women from Ravensbrück. Bernadotte received permission to transport all of the women from Ravensbrück.

"Immediately before Bernadotte's related meeting with Himmler, Kersten accompanied by Norbert Masur, a member of the World Jewish Congress Swedish section, had for the first time met with the SS-commander. Kersten hereby managing to secure Himmler's consent to several Swedish requests, which the Foreign Ministry had assigned him to do, such as the release of a number of named prisoners in concentration camps in Germany and Norway.

Kersten's attempt to obtain the release of interned Jews was less successful. According to Masur's information Himmler released 1000 Jewish women from Ravensbrück after long negotiations. Bernadotte, as mentioned above, later that day on his petition to Himmler, managed to secure the removal of all the women from Ravensbrück.

(The Foreign Ministry's White Book "The 1945 rescue expedition to Germany")

Two days later, on the night between the 23rd and 24th of April, Bernadotte met for the last time with Himmler in Lübeck. The state of the German front was now critical. Allied forces broke through in the west and the Soviet Union was pressing in on the east.

Himmler was getting desperate in his attempts to negotiate with the western powers. He now gave Bernadotte permission to transfer whoever he wanted. In return Bernadotte would deliver a message to the Swedish government to be forwarded to General Eisenhower. It was a request for a meeting to discuss capitulation of the whole western front.

Transportation from Ravensbrück

As soon as the Red Cross detachment in Friedrichsruh received news of the of the negotiations with Himmler preparations started to collect the women of Ravensbrück.

On the 22nd of April a column left with 15 Danish ambulances under supervision of Dr Arnoldsson. Their main aim was to collect women that were very sick. Information varies, but between 100 and 200 women were brought out.

A second column led by Captain Harald Folke and lieutenant Åke Svensson left the next day. The 25 vehicles collected 786 women from Ravensbrück. 650 of them were French, the rest were Belgian, Dutch and Polish. The Swedes learned that the commander of the camp a few days earlier had released several thousand Czech and Russian women who without food, money or proper clothing now tried to get home on foot.

The Swedes realised with great sadness that they were unable to rescue these women due to lack of resources. When the column left they left Obersturmbahnführer Danziger and Captain Ankaröna in the camp to prepare for more transportation's.

On the evening of the 24th of April a column led by lieutenant Hallqvist arrived in Ravensbrück. The column collected 706 women of different nationalities and headed for Denmark. They spent the night in a forest and divided the column in two the next day. An allied fighter plane attacked the Hallqvist group on the Schwerin road. Information of how many were killed and injured varies. The driver Ringman was killed instantly and lieutenant Hallqvist was badly injured. Amongst the passengers several women were killed and fifteen or so were injured.

The other column, which took the Wismar road, was also attacked and several prisoners were killed or injured. Another ten or so were killed and twenty injured when the remains of the Hallqvist column, now led by lieutenant Löthman, was fired on again, this time at Plön.

The same day a Danish ambulance column, led by engineer Pontoppidan Sörensen, collected 114 women from Ravensbrück.

The next day Åke Svensson returned to Ravensbrück for the last time. Conditions were severe and on the way to the camp the column was fired on again. The twenty white buses left the camp with 934 prisoners from many nationalities, mostly Polish Jewish women and fifty children.

On the way from Ravensbrück they saw two Red Cross vehicles in the ditch, shot to pieces. This turned out to be the remains of the Hallqvist column.

This the last bus transport of the expedition was an eventful one. On the way to Denmark a baby was delivered, and a German spy was revealed and turned over to the Danish police in Krusaa. When arriving to Padborg, the Danish Red Cross took care of the women and children.

The ghost train

When Svensson's group returned the white buses had fulfilled their duties in Germany. The front was closing in rapidly and it was clear that it would be impossible to manage the evacuation from Ravensbrück with the transportation available. Negotiations began with the railway authorities and with the assistance of the camp commander, Captain Suhren, they managed to get hold of a train with room for 4000 people.

On the 25th of April the train left for Lübeck, and was estimated to arrive the next day. At the end station everyone waited in vain. The train did not show up, not that day or the next few days. Nobody knew where the train was or what had happened. It was called "the ghost train". On the night of 29th of April it finally arrived. From Lübeck it was brought on to Padborg station where 3960 women could get off, and later be brought to freedom in Sweden.

A few days later, on the 2nd of May, a second train with 2873 women unexpectedly rolled into the station. It was the commander of the women's prison in Hamburg who had sent the women who had been interned in camps around the town.

Transports to Lübeck

After the evacuation of Scandinavians from Neuengamme there were tens of thousands of prisoners of different nationalities left. They were evacuated by the Germans and transported by rail to Lübeck during the period 20-26th of April. They were brought onboard ships in the harbour and were kept in inhuman conditions.

Dr. Hans Arnoldsson received an anonymous letter on the 29th of April where he was informed of this evacuation, and was asked to help the prisoners on one of the ships, "Athena". Arnoldsson made an offer to the German authorities that he would take care of 250 prisoners from France, Belgium and Holland. There were 2200 prisoners onboard, mostly Russians. Arnoldsson did not have the resources to transport more prisoners, but offered to come onboard to see if he could help. He was denied permission.

Meanwhile Björn Heger, a Norwegian doctor and ex-prisoner, who worked with Hans Arnoldsson had gone to Süssel north of Lübeck. He had received a request from a German officer for the Red Cross to take care of 300 prisoners, these were more French, Belgian and Dutch nationals. The prisoners were temporarily accommodated in a barn and came from the evacuation ship "Cap Arcona" outside of Neustadt. When Heger's convoy with five lorries from the International Red Cross arrived at the barn a terrible sight awaited them. The prisoners were in very bad condition.

Björn Heger experienced one of the most difficult moments of his life when many other prisoners also tried to get on the lorries. The 300 prisoners were brought to Lübeck harbour and put onboard the Red Cross ship "Magdalena" for transport to Sweden. The ship's crew was very unpleasantly affected by the state of the prisoners. The 250 prisoners Dr. Arnoldsson had rescued were already onboard.

At the same time Arnoldsson had been able to arrange for transport to Sweden on the ship "Lillie Mathiesen" for approximately 300 women from Ravensbrück. Both ships sailed from Lübeck on the 30th of April.

The expedition is concluded

The detachment's assignments were now divided into two sections. One section, under Captain Melin, was assigned to transport Scandinavians from the camps in Fröslöv and Horsens to Sweden. The remaining section, based at Lübeck, was to make sure that food supplies and fuel was transported to Denmark.

Early in the morning on the 28th of April the column left Lübeck. Around nine on the 1st of May the first Swedish Red Cross detachment arrived in Copenhagen. Crowds of people shouted with joy when the columns rolled in. They threw flowers on to the vehicles, cheered and waved flags.

Many of the ex-prisoners were brought to Ramlösa Spa outside Helsingborg. Other prisoners, in better health, were taken by train to newly established barracks in southern Småland.

Germany was defeated and the country was shattered. Vast amounts of people had become refugees, hungry, homeless and in need of help.

In May the allied countries turned to Sweden through UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) with a request to provide care and refuge for another batch of ex-prisoners. Sweden agreed to receive 10 000 people.

This new detachment was to go via Lübeck, the only German port that remained functional. The Civil Defence Board in consultation with the Red Cross recruited volunteers and on the 19th of June the new Lübeck detachment departed with Dr Arnoldsson at the head of the expedition. The work in Lübeck lasted from the 25th of June to the 25th of July. During that time 9273 ex-prisoners were transferred to Sweden.

Epilogue

The expedition with the white buses was a daring and dangerous venture that was carried out in a chaotic time, without any protection from international humanitarian laws. Decisions were made on the way based on the few possibilities that presented them selves, and from the path the war was taking. It is easy to imagine how individuals had to make on the spot decisions and with no possibility of asking for advice from a superior, decisions that afterwards may seem difficult to understand, but at the time they were the only ones possible. It was all about rescuing human life, and only one opportunity was given.

The expedition and its leader Folke Bernadotte have through the years been criticised on some points. Serious accusations have been made concerning Bernadotte and the Red Cross detachment making priorities for Western European prisoners - Belgian, British, French and Dutch - instead of Eastern European prisoners when collecting and transporting. The Foreign Ministry had received applications from respective countries concerning Swedish participation in bringing their citizens' home. In the Foreign Ministry directions given to Bernadotte this had been taken into consideration, for example concerning the French women at Ravensbrück.

One must keep in mind that the initial objective was to rescue Scandinavians, but was extended gradually, more through possibilities of diplomacy and practice rather than through conscious priorities.

How many were saved then?

According to the Swedish National Encyclopaedia the total was 30000, other sources stop at 19000. The totals vary drastically from various sources. According to our own calculations it is very difficult to state an exact number. A result depends on which criteria's are included. The highest result has included transportation's that were not a result of Bernadotte's negotiations. According to our calculations the Bernadotte expedition rescued around 15000 from the concentration camps when the last prisoners were brought out of Germany. More than half of these, around 7800, were Scandinavians. this number does not include the train that unexpectedly rolled in to the station with 2800 women. It is true that the Red Cross personnel took care of the women, but the train transport was not organised by the management of the Red Cross. We have also made some corrections for double counting for example when a detachment's commander changed after coming under fire during the journey.

The figures above are, as far as we can tell, as close to the truth as possible from existing sources. A limiting factor is that the documentation from the last weeks of the war, for obvious reasons, is very sparse. Even if it halves the total stated in the National Encyclopaedia, it is still a fact that the white bus expeditions were the largest individual rescue action during the Second World War.