

## Ole Secher: A True Hero of Anesthesiology\*

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The Hippocratic Oath is still sworn by physicians on their graduation from medical school. It states that a physician will only use his or her power to help those in need and under no circumstances will a doctor use his power in a malevolent way or with the intention of hurting another.

The influence – or lack thereof – of the oath prevailed also during the Second World War and the Holocaust. The period marks one of humanity's darkest hours. The genocide perpetrated by the Nazi regime was often actively assisted by the medical profession. Two groups of physicians that were geographically closely situated and whose medical culture was rooted within the oath acted in very divergent ways. On one hand there were the Nazi doctors who debased the oath by their participation in the 'selection' process, their participation in the euthanasia program, and the testing of drugs and surgical techniques on camp inmates. In contrast, the medical community of a neighboring northern European country, Denmark, reacted to events during the war completely differently. In a systematic fashion, the Danish medical community joined the country's resistance movement in rescuing thousands of Jews and shipping them to neutral Sweden.

Consequently, the medical community is obliged to remember those individuals who epitomized morality during that period of madness. One such individual was Ole V. Secher, who as a medical student risked his life to save Danish Jews. He would later become an internationally reputed anesthesiologist, renowned humanitarian, and role model.

### Medical school training and the Resistance

Ole Secher was born in 1918. His father Knud Secher was a professor of Internal medicine. In his youth Ole was a keen athlete, excelling in rowing and winning many national and international competitions (16 Danish and 3 Scandinavian championships), and at one time ranked third in Europe. His dedication to fitness served him well in the drama that was about to unfold in his life.

Professionally he followed in his father's footsteps. Ole entered medical school during the German occupation of his homeland. He was active in student politics and served as chair of the Medical Student Council. Like many medical students the young Ole joined the resistance. He cooperated with the agents

of the Special Organizational Executive that were parachuted into Denmark, bringing weapons that were smuggled in from Britain.

Ole was arrested by the Gestapo in December 1943 following a raid on the Bispebjerg Hospital and was imprisoned for six weeks. He was lucky to have been caught only once. Certainly, his dedication to the cause, together with his peak state of physical fitness helped him endure harrowing interrogations. This association with the resistance was obviously a manifestation of his deep commitment to social justice. He continued his association with his former comrades after the war, joining a committee of resistance veterans called "The 16."

### The rescue of the Jews

The dark clouds of war did not escape neutral Denmark. On 9 April 1940 Germany invaded Denmark. At that time the country's Jewish population numbered approximately 7500; about 80% were Danish citizens and about 20% refugees. The vast majority of these people lived in Copenhagen, the capital.

Initially the German occupation regime was relatively benign. For various strategic reasons the Nazis allowed the Danish government to continue running the country but dictated its foreign policy. The Germans were keen to develop cordial relations with the Danes, whom they viewed as "fellow Aryans." Two factors probably protected the Jews: their small numbers, and the steadfast support that they received from their fellow Danish citizens. The welfare of the Danish Jews was of great importance to the king and the Danish government. Consequently, Germany initially decided not to make a major issue of the "Jewish question" in Denmark. In 1941, Foreign Minister Erik Scavenius commented to Hermann Goring "There is no Jewish question in Denmark." Reflecting the general goodwill that the Danes demonstrated towards the Jews in December 1941, after the synagogue in Copenhagen was set alight, the king sent a letter of sympathy to Rabbi Marcus Melchior.

By early 1943 the initial Allied victories convinced the Danes that Germany could be defeated. In contrast to the early years of the occupation that were typified by minimal resistance against the Germans, in 1943 labor strikes and acts of sabotage strained relations with the Nazi occupiers. Rather than yield to new demands in the summer of 1943 the Danish government resigned.

On the night of August 29 the German military commander proclaimed a state of emergency. It was at this point in 1943 that the persecution of the Jews began in earnest. Denmark was the only occupied country that actively resisted the Nazi regime's

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attempts to deport its Jewish citizens. On 28 September, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, a German diplomat, secretly informed the Danish resistance that the Nazis were planning to deport the Danish Jews to the camps as part of the "Final Solution." Because of this leak, King Christian X of Denmark and his subjects were able to save the lives of most of the Jews. The Nazi police began arrests on the night of 1 October 1943, but found few Jews. The Danish police did not cooperate.

The Danish resistance, including the medical student Ole Secher and assisted by many ordinary Danish citizens, organized a partly coordinated partly spontaneous rescue operation. Because of prior knowledge of the German plans, Jews began to leave Copenhagen and other cities – by train, car, and on foot. The resistance helped the Jews find hiding places in private homes and hospitals.

With the aid of fishermen the resistance transported these refugees to neutral Sweden, saving the lives of 7200 people. Furthermore, the Danish government continued to work to protect the few Danish Jews captured by the Nazis. When the Jews returned home after the war they found their houses and possessions waiting for them, just as they had left them. Those actions involved great personal danger.

The Danish rescue differed from all other such initiatives because it was nationwide. Sadly, it was not completely successful: almost 500 Danish Jews were deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto in Czechoslovakia. However, the survival rate among these victims was relatively high. All but 51 survived the Holocaust, largely because Danish officials pressured the Germans with their concern for the well-being of those who had been deported. The action of Danes such as Ole Secher proved that widespread support for Jews and resistance to Nazi policies could save lives.

### After the War

After he graduated from medical school in 1945, Dr. Secher began an internship at the municipal hospital Roskilde. This initial training was supplemented by further experience at the Finsen Institute's Department of Surgery and the Bispebjerg Hospital's Department of Internal Medicine. During this period, while still an intern, he served as a part-time anesthesiologist at the Rigshospital (University Hospital). At the same time Dr. Secher held several other positions as an anesthesiologist. From 1945 to 1951 he was a research fellow at the Institute of Pharmacology. The subject of his investigation was the peripheral effects of ether. This research resulted in his MD dissertation, which he defended in 1952. On completion of his work at the Institute of Pharmacology he traveled to the United States, where he completed a residency in Anesthesiology at the University of Pennsylvania and at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

The first anesthetic in Denmark was administered in the surgical department, Almindelig Hospital in Copenhagen in February 1847, yet it took more than 100 years for the specialty to be recognized in Denmark. On completion of his residency in the U.S., Dr. Secher returned to Denmark where he qualified as a specialist in the newly recognized field of anesthesiology. Although, as a

specialty, Anesthesiology was relatively new in Denmark at this time, it was an aggressive and innovative discipline. The first intensive care unit was established at Kommunehospitalet in Copenhagen in December 1953. The pioneer of this new approach was the Danish anesthesiologist and colleague of Dr. Secher, Bjorn Ibsen MD. Both had been active in the resistance and the rescue of Danish Jews. The driving force for this new initiative was the polio epidemic that ravaged Europe at the time.

Dr. Secher rapidly climbed the leadership ladder in Danish Anesthesiology. In 1953 he was appointed head of the Department of Anesthesiology at the Rigshospital, and in 1964 became the first full Professor of Anesthesiology in Denmark. Ole Secher helped found the Danish Anaesthesiologists Association, and served as its chair from 1949 to 1951. When the Association was reorganized into the Danish Society of Anesthesiologists he again served as chair in 1955–57 and 1965–67. In addition he was also instrumental in establishing the Scandinavian Society of Anesthesiologists. He served as a Board member and later as chair. In 1966 he served as president of the Second European Congress of Anaesthesiology held in Copenhagen. Prof. Secher was an associate editor of *Acta Anaesthesiologica Scandinavica*, and a prolific author with more than 130 published works.

Dr. Secher participated in numerous medical missions. In 1952–53 he was a member of the Danish Military Medical Mission sent to the conflict in the Korean peninsula. He returned to South Korea in 1958 following the establishment there of a Scandinavian Medical Center. In 1955 he was sent by the World Health Organization on a medical mission to Egypt. Later, in 1956, he partook in a Red Cross mission sent to help during the Hungarian uprising. He participated in another WHO mission to Bulgaria in 1966. In the early 1970s, under the auspices of the WHO, he was instrumental in setting up the Western Pacific Regional Anesthesiology Center.

Ole Secher served as visiting professor in the Americas, Europe and the Middle East. He received a special reward from the Jewish Hospital in St. Louis in gratitude for his role in rescuing Jews in Denmark during the Second World War. Other awards he received included a Danish Knighthood, the Jutlandia medal, the United States Service Medal (Korea), the Korean Presidential Citation, the Korean War Service medal, and the Danish Red Cross Order of Merit.

Professor Secher passed away in 1996. He will always be remembered.

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3. <http://www.auschwitz.dk/Denmark.htm>. This is an excellent website with numerous resources outlining the history of the Jewish community of Denmark during the Nazi occupation

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