

Number the Stars



Study Guide

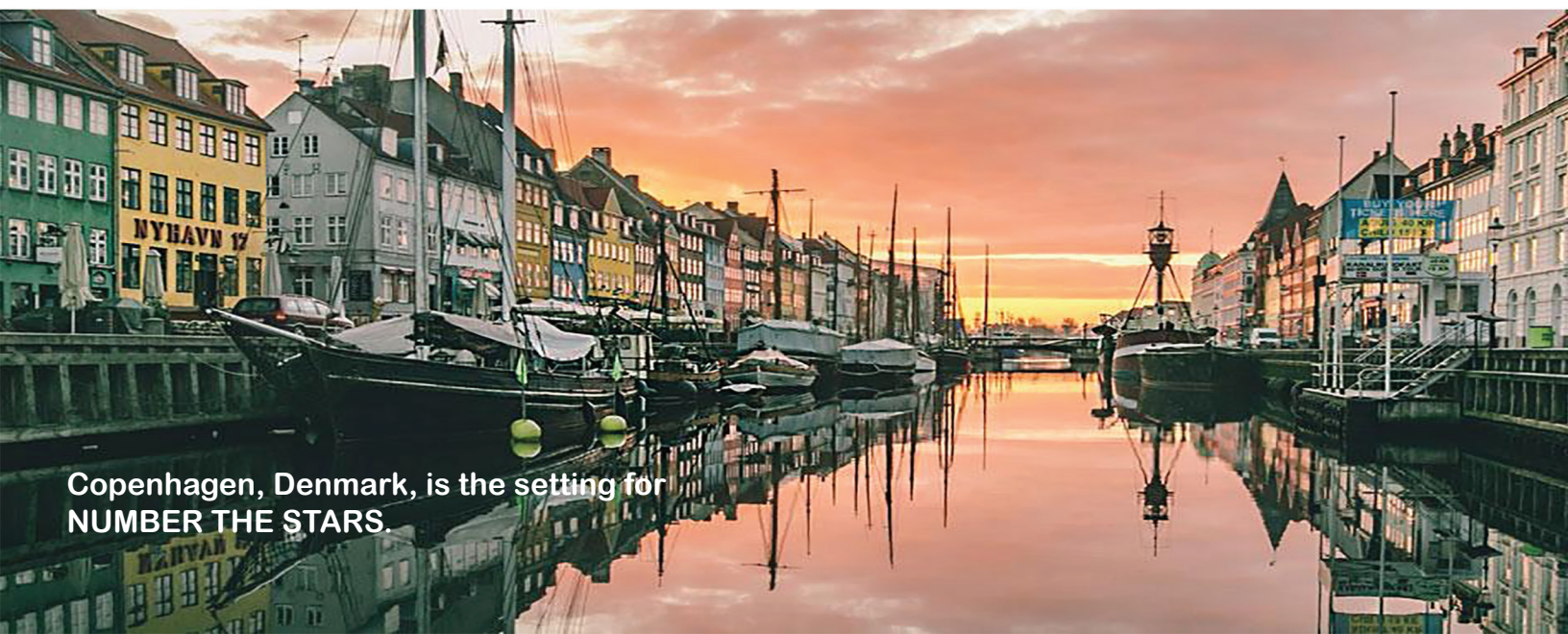
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Setting and Historical Context

Number the Stars takes place in Copenhagen, Denmark during World War II. The story of *Number the Stars* takes place mostly in 1943, after the country had already been occupied by the Germans for a couple of years. Unlike in other occupied countries at the time, Denmark's King Christian X stayed in the country in support of his people and their government. He knew that Denmark was too small to fight back and surrendering would keep them safer. Due to the discrimination of the Nazis and the impending reality of the Holocaust, the Jews of Denmark - like the Rosen family- became less and less safe while the Germans were in the country. The Danes were fiercely loyal in protecting their Jewish friends and their King throughout the war. In 1943, word got out that the Nazis were beginning their process of "relocating" Jewish Danes to concentration camps. However, the people of Denmark – like the Johansen family - resisted by helping their Jewish neighbors to hide and then escape the country into nearby Sweden.

About the Author

Our play is adapted from the novel by **Lois Lowry**. She is an award-winning author of over thirty books for children and adults, and has won the Newbery Medal twice: for *Number the Stars* (1990), and again for *The Giver* (1994). Lois Lowry is also a skilled photographer, and took the photo of the Swedish girl that appears on the cover of the book. Mrs. Lowry did extensive research about the history of WWII and Denmark's role in it when writing this book, and she says she even visited Denmark "to talk to people who had actually participated in the rescue of the Jews. It was important, too, to walk around Copenhagen and feel what the city is like (and imagine what it had been like then) and to go up the coast, through the farmland and the fishing villages."



Copenhagen, Denmark, is the setting for NUMBER THE STARS.

The Danish Resistance

Denmark was occupied by German troops starting on April 9, 1940, though the countries were not technically at war. Denmark had agreed to supply the Germans with necessities and cooperation in exchange for their continued “independence”. Many Danes were unhappy with staying quiet during this occupation, however, and the Danish Resistance movement was formed.



German troops carrying a Danish flag, giving the Nazi salute. The Danes pretended to welcome the Germans, though in reality, they hated their occupiers.

Mrs. Johansen mentions a secret newspaper called “The Free Danes” - “De Frei Danske”, which the Resistance used to communicate behind the Germans’ backs. Such secret communication, acts of spying, labor strikes, and sabotage by Resistance members increased as the years passed. Many Resistance missions were dangerous and became more and more disruptive to the German occupiers. By 1943 the Nazis started arresting suspected members of the Resistance, imposing curfews, and executing young resisters. In *Number the Stars*, Peter and Lise were both members of the Resistance, and both died fighting for the Danes.

Activity idea: When the Germans invaded Denmark, seventeen-year-old Arne Sejr noticed that people in his small town were friendly to the German soldiers, and he was outraged. He went home and typed up a list of “commandments” to his fellow Danes on how they should resist the Germans without engaging in war. Imagine you are living in Denmark in 1943 and your best friend, like Ellen, is being discriminated against. What “commandments” would you write to your friends and family to show your support and encourage them to rebel against the Germans?

Civil Disobedience

To prevent the Germans from taking control of their war fleet in August, 1943, the Royal Danish Navy sunk their own ships with explosives. Within a few weeks of this incident, the Germans put out the call for Jewish citizens of Denmark to report for relocation.



Escape to Sweden

The Danish Resistance began using nearby Sweden as a base of operations, as Sweden was still neutral and was easily accessible across the sea. When the people of Denmark heard that the Germans were going to start “relocating” Danish Jews out of the country, they didn’t know about concentration camps but they knew they had to protect their Jewish neighbors.

Many families were very brave as they hid Jewish friends in their houses, like the Johansens did with Ellen, until they could help them escape Denmark. Members of the Resistance successfully smuggled over 7,000 of Denmark’s nearly 8,000 Jews out of the country into Sweden on fishing boats, thereby protecting them during the rest of the War until they could return home.



Hundreds of people were smuggled across the water to Sweden, often in Danish fishing boats like this one.

Activity idea: The people of Denmark had to be very brave to help their Jewish neighbors escape relocation. Henrik tells Annemarie that bravery is “Not thinking about the dangers. Just thinking about what you must do.”

- 1. Discuss as a group this definition of bravery. Do you agree with it? What would you add?
- 2. What is the difference between bravery and courage?
- 3. Divide into four groups. Assign each group one of the following characters: Annemarie, Ellen, Henrik, Mrs. Johansen. Have each group list the ways in which their character displayed acts of bravery and courage, the choices they made, and why they made them, and select the one act that stood out most for

Ellen’s Necklace

Beginning in the 17th century, the six-pointed star became the official seal of many Jewish communities and a general sign of Judaism, though it has no Biblical connotation. The star was widely adopted by Jews in the 19th-century as an emblem of Judaism, just as Christians used the cross of Christianity. The yellow badge that Jews were forced to wear in Nazi-occupied Europe invested the Star of David with a symbolism that has deepened in the decades since the war ended. The official flag of the State of Israel features this symbol of Judaism.



Secrets & Silence

“Sometimes a lie is needed, in order to protect the things we love.”

While the Germans occupied Denmark, the Danes kept a lot of secrets and had to communicate in code to avoid being caught in their acts of resistance.

When Mr. Johansen calls Uncle Henrik about the girls visiting, he talks in code about sending “cartons of cigarettes” and “going fishing”. Ellen has to pretend to be Lise Johansen when the Nazis visit the house so that she isn’t caught as being Jewish – and Annemarie hides her Star of David necklace too.

Once Ellen escapes to Sweden, the girls are apart for over two years and cannot write to each other in case their messages are intercepted by the Germans. Annemarie still writes to her every day in her journal, because she misses her best friend.

Activity idea: Have students either:

- 1. Design a postcard to send to Mr. Johansen in Copenhagen from Uncle Henrik’s house. Have them use descriptions from the book to draw the postcard. Remember to write the message in code so the Nazis can’t read it!
- 2. Write a journal entry as Annemarie to Ellen (or vice versa) to update her on life while they’ve been apart. Have them use information from the book and from their knowledge of life in Denmark to inform their entries.

Historical Sidebar

Typhus

Mrs. Johanssen avoids having to open the casket at the funeral at Uncle Henrik’s because she tells the German officer that Aunt Birte had typhus.

Typhus is a disease whose name comes from the Greek word, “typhos,” meaning hazy, in reference to the foggy state of mind caused by the disease. The symptoms of typhus could be very extreme, including chills, fever, nausea, and more. It was caused by bites from fleas and ticks, and was common in situations where hygiene was poor.

A little inside joke among the characters in that scene is that typhus, while nasty, isn’t contagious from people, which the Nazi officer doesn’t seem to know.

ARNE SEJR'S COMMANDMENTS

1. You must not go to work in Germany and Norway.
2. You shall do a bad job for the Germans.
3. You shall work slowly for the Germans.
4. You shall destroy important machines and tools.
5. You shall destroy everything that may be of benefit to the Germans.
6. You shall delay all transport.
7. You shall boycott German and Italian films and papers.
8. You must not shop at Nazis' stores.
9. You shall treat traitors for what they are worth.
10. You shall protect anyone chased by the Germans.

Join the Struggle for the freedom of Denmark!

Sejr distributed this list to important people in his town. The commandments were later copied and passed by hand throughout Denmark. This list later became guidelines for members of various resistance groups.

Source: <http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/afmp/stories/denmark.php>

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Cover for "Danish Family" magazine in June, 1945, a few weeks after the war ended, showing a Danish woman sweeping the Nazis out from her country, along with all the things they represented ("torture", "murder", etc).