

## World War II in Norway

By Henning Irgens

I was born Deaf to a hearing family and grew up learning to understand and speak a spoken language. My ability to communicate was limited, until I enrolled at a state school for the Deaf in Oslo, Norway.

It was during World War II. Norway was invaded and occupied by the German Forces from April 9, 1940 through May 22, 1945. Long before 1940, we had seen newspapers full of stories of German military maneuvers occupying various parts of Europe. When I was a child, we could see pictures and read text of Hitler's activities, such as the "Brownshirt Bullies" pressing upon minorities in Germany. We read about Hitler's trusted men, such as the highly effective PR man, Goebbels; the activities of the German Luftwaffe's hero Herman Goering; Ambassador Von Papen's secret diplomatic overtures; Von Ribbentropp's foreign alliance movements that lead to the takeover of Austria, Sudetenland (a part of Czechoslovakia) and other smaller countries.

I was ten years old in August of 1939, when I traveled throughout Northern Germany with my father. We visited our ancestral town of Itzehoe, the place where our ancestors were born before they relocated to Norway and began our branch of the family tree.

While there, I vividly remember the Brownshirts rushing by in cars and trucks. This gave me a strong feeling of fear, and a sense of insecurity, which I later labelled as "war mood." On the way back through Germany, while traveling by train, I saw troop movements traveling eastward near Kiel. I noticed a civilian, an older man, following my father and I until we reached the border of Denmark. Later, I came to understand that it was the

custom that foreign travelers in Germany would have older German males following their movements. It was only a few weeks after this episode that I understood the reason for the massive troop movements on the trains going east. It was during the "pretend" quarrel over Danzig in Poland, which started World War II in September of 1939.

I also remember reading about the umbrella-carrying Englishman, Chamberlain, who was in Munich signing an accord of "détente" with Hitler to refrain from future aggression. Norway also participated in the accord, making efforts to preserve its status as a neutral country. During this time, Oslo newspapers had features about German spies in Norway who had been arrested for activities such as gathering information about maps and defense installations. One German name I could remember very well as a child was "Ratenfels." To me, no matter how horrible a spy he was, I felt his name was pretty because it was so easily pronounced.

Life remained uneventful until the night of April 9, 1940. I was at the state school for the Deaf located several miles outside of Oslo, in the forested, uphill country. The older boys, including myself, were sleeping in a large room that contained about 25 to 30 beds. During the night, some of us were awakened by large airplanes flying low, so low that we thought they barely missed the Norwegian anti-aircraft cannons as they passed over the tall spruce trees swaying in the wind. A hard of hearing friend named Hans, who later became a champion Olympic skier many times over, came to me and together we sneaked out of the room and got up into the loft, where we placed chairs to stand on while peering out into the opened skylight. And what a sight it was!

We saw a brief air dogfight, but mostly we witnessed dots of smoke in the weak moonlight where cannons peppered the sky in an effort to down German airplanes,

which we could identify by their double black and white crosses. We saw parachute soldiers sailing down from high, only to disappear into the woods. That night, we all developed stomach cramps caused by the fear and reality of war. We heard the reverberations of powerful cannons and the roar of junker style planes. Some of the Deaf kids crawled under the bed in fear. The women house parents, with whom we could not communicate well, were nowhere to be seen but later showed up to explain the situation with the help of some of our hard of hearing peers.

Later, during a day lost to sleep and worry, my older sister (Sis) had telephoned a message that I was to prepare to come home. She lived and worked in Oslo and had taken the streetcar to pick me up at the school. Together, we traveled to the center of the city of Oslo.

It was there that I witnessed a sight that I have never forgotten. When we got out of the underground streetcar station, we started walking down a big street. There were German soldiers lined up along the curbside training their machine guns upon civilians who walked down with their suitcases and backpacks. Sis and I walked with our hearts in our throats to the railway station, where we boarded a train traveling some three hours to our hometown south along the coast of Oslofjord. At home, our parents, who had seen nothing of the gruesome display of war reality that I had just seen, welcomed us. Due to my lack of ability to communicate, I was not able to describe the scene I had left hours ago.

Nearly two months passed before we saw the first German Occupation Force moving about our town. At the time, I was happy to be home, and felt secure in the absence of war mentality. Newspapers were controlled and told nothing of the war movements in Norway. My family would listen to the radio (which was later

confiscated by the Germans and members of the Nazi party), but could not tell me much. The neighbor boys took pains to explain what was happening. I was able to tell them in limited fashion what I had seen on the night of April 9<sup>th</sup>.

Life went on rather tranquilly as those of us who were young pursued soccer playing. My mind became occupied with dribbling the football. It was not until fall, when we were called back to the state school for the Deaf, that I became increasingly aware of the true extent of the war.

That fall, we had a male substitute teacher. Our regular teacher, who had gone to the United States for a visit, was unable to get back into Norway. At that time, sign language was forbidden at the school. However, braving the potential wrath of the school officials, the substitute teacher combined both sign language and speech in his story telling and took us far away from the realities of the impending war. He told us stories of his childhood, of living in Africa with his missionary parents, of facing the dangers of reptilian invasions as well as dangerous animals such as lions and leopards. Those tales took us away from the fear of war for six wonderful months.

When the regular teacher arrived, we were once again entertained, this time by her tales of traveling by train from New York to San Francisco. She mapped out the interesting landscape she covered, managing to teach us to study the map of America. Upon hearing tales of cowboys and Indians, we developed a penchant for adventure in America. She used the oral approach, but proved to be very efficient in relaying information to us. Our class consisted of the same classmates with the same teacher, who became sort of a mother confidante, teaching us in all subjects over an eight-year period.

Due to the increasing scarcity of food and clothes, we were on strict rationing. As the five-year period of German occupation evolved, our food supply dwindled, so we had to cultivate more vegetables in the field, as well as in galvanized buckets filled with soil and organic wastes. The potato became the king of survival. We had hot potato porridge for breakfast, potato soup for lunch and fried potato "steaks" over and over again, day after day, with an occasional supply of fish. Bread was scarce because much of the food in Norway was taken to support our "Masters" fighting out in the eastern and western fronts. Clothes had to be mended and recycled into hand-me-downs. Sugar did not exist but we had saccharine, a substitute sweetener in the form of tiny pills found in pocket sized wooden boxes, similar to snuff boxes. We carried these around to use for adding to drinks or even coffee, which was made of scorched beans or grains. During the war, dentists had fewer customers, as we had almost no cavities due to the diet we were living on.

I remember having dry skin, which was paper-thin, and one could see the tiny veins through. It often happened that the other boys and I would go skiing and brush into the branches of spruce trees, getting scratches on our hands and faces, and leaving open wounds that would take many weeks to completely heal.

Occasionally we would get our hands on boxes of sardines, which we would hide in our knickers. There was a limited supply of such luxury items, and we hid before eating them, sharing only with our best friends. Since the school required a complete blackout of lights in buildings, the rooms were completely dark, and we would have to feel our way around to the bathroom. I remember opening a sardine box under the cover of my blanket and eating the entire box, which was drenched in olive oil. The next day, those of us who had eaten the

sardines could see a slight transformation of our dry skin to a normal hue, and a complete healing of our scratches. But that would not continue for long.

Once in a while, we would observe the women personnel in the dorm, as well as in the kitchen, and noticed that they were well fed, rotund and healthy. This raised suspicion among us brighter boys that they had helped themselves to the food that was designated for the Deaf children at the school. At least once a week, when we had terrible hunger pangs, some of us would take turns going on secret missions downstairs to the basement where the kitchen and food storage were located. We would put on our knickers and move stealthily along the wall of the stairs, not touching the banister, then wait for the night watchman to come out of the locked kitchen door. We would move behind the door as he walked past us up the stairs, and just as the door would close, one of us would move in quickly, letting the door close slowly to give off the normal sound of shutting. After waiting a few seconds, we would sneak inside the kitchen area and stock sandwiches into our pant knickers through the knees, and then move cautiously back to our bedroom hall, sharing with those who could keep their mouths shut about our stealing. We did that for a time until we found our fingers painfully caught by big rat traps placed inside the steel containers holding the pre-prepared sandwiches. By that time, disease was found rampant among the kids living in the cold damp stone buildings. I had a slight touch of illness and, to my joy, was sent home before Christmas, along with many other students.

Those of us who were sent home missed school for half a year. My mother decided I was not to be allowed to loaf around and took me by ear to the dining room table where I was forced to read. To her horror, she discovered I that I had not learned the fundamentals of reading.

Although I could grasp the content, I was sorely lacking in the implicatory aspect of what I read, and I had difficulty reading "between the lines." That was when I came to a better understanding of her language and more capable of understanding spoken Norwegian than any of the other foreign languages that I was to learn years later.

Thus, I was learning more at home than at school, which proved that home was more conducive to learning, especially since my parents had thousands of books in our home library that filled four walls. I could not help but delve into the various sets of encyclopedias. I soon earned a reputation for being a "walking encyclopedia."

Returning to school was sort of a pain, but I enjoyed the comradeship, and growing up with both girls and boys sharpened my sense of what I was and what preferences I was to develop. I completed school by confirmation as the custom was, for all education was designed to help us understand the bible as a fundamental guiding factor for future living. At the age of fourteen, I found myself at home. I spent some time at my younger sister's farm. She and her husband had met at the university, but it was closed during the war as required by the Occupation Forces. The Occupation Forces feared that the university was a breeding ground for more intelligent resistance to Nazism. My sister and her husband decided to buy a farm and conduct agronomic work, where I found myself working as a farmhand.

It was a peaceful existence and the food produced from the animals was good. We had cows, pigs, and chicken, as well as various vegetables and grains such as wheat and oats. Working as a farmhand, I developed a rugged constitution. I did stable cleaning, tilled the fields by horse drawn plow, cut big birch trees, herded and milked cows, hayed and completed harvesting of soil products (such as grains and potatoes, sugar beets and

other important foods to be stored in underground caverns for winter sustenance). It was hard work for a fourteen-year-old boy who became a man early. Also, the years I spent on the farm made me a voracious reader of most of the classics that I had missed at the state school for the Deaf.

Because of that positive experience, I had gradually built up an "inner language" from reading that enabled me to speechread very well, by anticipating the context of words spoken by non-deaf people. On the weekends, I spent time away from the farm with my parents, who lived in town. During the winter when there was not much work expected of me, I stayed at home.

Then the German High Command in our town demanded occupation of our house, which was cradled higher up the mountains with a gorgeous view of the fjord. This was possibly to insure that their officers would not be harmed living with us. Thus, we had six German officers living with us, occupying three of our bedrooms and reserving one of the bathrooms for their sole use.

We would talk with some of the homesick officers, who would engage in conversations with my parents because they were fluent in German. This created a friendship with some of them that continued by letter exchange long after the war was over. These officers proved to be well educated and some of them were real scholars. It was then that I developed a high respect for their knowledge, although they were "hedging" under Nazism as proselytized heavily by members of the Nazi party in Norway as well as the Gestapo, which was the German security police. Generally members of the German Army would show great respect for Norwegian individuals with an educational background, so my parents were left alone.

After two months, however, the High Command gave an order for us, my parents and I, to evacuate our home to provide a living habitat for more officers. They found an apartment downtown that had been vacated by our town's newspaper editor, whose family had fled secretly to Sweden, a neutral country. They were wanted for questioning related to suspected anti-political activities against Nazis. We lived in that apartment for one year until the war was over.

Because I had no Deaf friends living in my hometown, I would seek the company of hearing friends, who often gathered at a local canteen to sip pop. They were high schoolers, and talked a lot about school issues. My association with them whetted my curiosity for learning at their level, which I quickly found was similar to my own abilities. Sometimes I would show ignorance about difficult topics, much to their amusement. I noticed that the less learned teens were the ones who laughed at my ignorance because it made them feel that they were a notch above me, which they did not fail to point out. There were areas where I had inadequate knowledge, such as expressing myself in acceptable spoken Norwegian. Nevertheless, I formed deeper relationships with those who had greater maturity. It was with these friends that I was able to associate. As I became more aware of the cultural patterns of the hearing community, I was able to mingle quite comfortably among my peers. In fact, I adopted a kind of bi-cultural posture because of the two worlds that I was living in. Occasionally, I would meet older Deaf adults, with whom I could communicate using signs, which felt more natural and unrestrained than the communication I had with my hearing peers.

While living in town, I found myself getting into mischief with a few hearing boys my age. Once, we found that a German had parked his military BMW motorcycle

by the wayside, and two of us decided to "borrow" it! We would take turns running the powerful motorcycle up and down the snow-clad road, skidding around fast turns. My friend went up the road while I stood waiting for his return. Soon I had a pistol stuck up my back, held by a German soldier! As soon as my friend came down about halfway, I waved my arm to warn him, which he saw in the distance, and he jumped off the motorcycle, disappearing in the plowed snow heap by the side of the road. As the soldier ran to catch my friend, I saw my chance to disappear into the snow, and I dove into the soft heap, burrowing into it. I could hear pistol reports shortly after I went into hiding, but I stayed mouse-still in the snow long after, until I felt safe. When I could hear (through vibrations) the motorcycle rumble away, I rose up and walked a circuitous route back home, shaking but not telling my parents about the escapade.

During the week I would bicycle up to the farm, which was located in another county. For traveling from home to my sister's farm, I would have to have passport clearance from the German High Command. I would go to the farm when we needed supplies, to get food such as smoked bacon, ham and eggs, as well as meat cuts, all of which I carried in my backpack.

Once, I was approaching a curve around a knoll not far from home when I found myself stopped by the German Security Police. There was a line of people, walkers and bikers, carrying bags and backpacks, who were being searched for contraband items such as food, war important items, illegal weapons, or parts for radios or other electronics. Up on the knoll was a machine gun nest, and another one was down by the side of the road. People were nervously opening up their bags for confiscation. I was stopped and was about to open my

backpack when the inspector was distracted by some commotion in the crowd. I saw a chance to close up my bag and put it on my back, as if having completed inspection. I waved to two soldiers standing up front with rifles at the ready. Casually, I began riding my bicycle, pedaling easily, then gradually speeding down the road. Soon, I heard and felt the vibrations of the deep rumble of the military BMW motorcycle being started up and when I dared to glance back, I saw two soldiers holding up machine guns, one on the cycle and the other in the sidecar!

Fast and furiously, I pedaled down the hill and had to go around another curve shielded by tall spruce hedges when I saw a chance to go uphill, a hill that I normally would walk my bike up. But fear lent me powers unknown and I raced fast uphill to another curve and around a jutting residence before taking a different route to my parents' house.

I did not tell my parents about the incident, but being hot and wet, I bathed and changed into fresh clothing, then rested a while before sauntering down to a neighbor's house where my best friend lived. He told me that he had heard a machine gun spraying nearby not long ago, so I assumed that it had been intended for me!

During the winter doldrums, there was not much socializing allowed due to the dangers inherent at night. Some evenings I had to dress like a man and accompany my sisters to parties so that the Germans would not accost them—as the Germans had a reputation for bothering single women on the road. Other times I participated in a weekly chess club. This was our only diversion other than reading. One time, I had stayed late because a strong opponent played well against me. As I left the club after the game was finished, there was total darkness on the street. I was stopped by a machine gun on my belly and

then a light flashed into my face. A German soldier was in front speaking, so I said what I had learned as part of my survival lessons, "Ich bin taub" pointing to my ears, and of course holding my hands above my head and then showing my passport identification. I was let go after he screamed loudly "Auf!" which I saw and heard faintly. I still had to walk along the wall side of the street, as it was dark. Soon a cloud parted, allowing the moon to shine so I could see more clearly with the snow reflecting the light.

Passing an alley, I saw a German standing with an open long coat wrapped around a struggling woman or girl. I saw at once that he was attempting to rape a Norwegian. I started making several hard snowballs, fortified myself with them, then approached the German, bombarding him with the hard snowballs so he had to let the female go—who then proceeded to run out of the alley. The female shouted a "thank you" to me as she left, or at least that is what I guessed she had said.

I ran up the street and ducked into a recessed door of a town building and saw the German in the long military coat walking by. I was shocked to see it was one of the cultured officers whom I had met at our home prior to the time that we had been driving out of it the year before! From that time on, I became wary of "educated and cultured" people. I understood they were all minds, with little or no soul. Today, I see the proponents of pure oralism in the same way, supporting an ideal, yet exhibiting a total lack of human caring for the needs of Deaf people. It was an enemy who taught me that concept—at only fifteen years of age.

The war years taught me many things, mainly through observation. Prior to the war I saw people who were upright Christian turn into members of the Nazi party. These individuals held onto the idealism of social equality through moral mind power, keeping the race pure as

propagandized by Goebbel's machinery. They were the ones who actively reported on any perceived anti-Nazi behaviors of Norwegians. They were the ones that would help round up hostages in the event of the sabotage of bridges, ships, or war machinery. They would also drive big trucks to pick up people wearing anti-Nazi colors such as those on the Norwegian flag— red, blue and white. I recall having lost one red cap, which I wore to show my patriotism, and as a result, I spent a few hours in a very crowded jail.

Before the war, I used to play with boys who came from alcoholic homes, or homes where their fathers were out at sea sailing around the world on freighters, or on whaling ships from our hometown. These boys were rough and uncouth and were looked down upon, but they were still friendly with me. I could see beneath their exteriors that they were good, and I showed no fear of them as my other neighborhood friends did. The neighbor boys had older brothers who were very courageous, showing strong patriotism by working underground, doing sabotage work, and blowing up railway bridges used for German military war material. These men formed a resistance that often suffered a loss of life by execution or torture. Along with men of all other classes, they lived in the mountains and forests, surviving by their wits. Sometimes good folks would venture up and provide the boys with food, as my sister and her husband did. They had to be very careful so as not to be caught by spies or the Germans. Since I was one of the few who had a transit passport from county to county, I once had a mission as a carrier to bring a radio part from a family acquaintance to another person near my home. I was not to know their names as I could reveal them if I was caught or tortured. Fortunately, I was not caught, but there had been many times when I was routinely stopped to have my bag or passport searched.



The war ended in May of 1945, and there was much celebration, as well as "witch hunting" of Nazis, fraternizers, and women who had consorted with them. We saw them being paraded on the streets, some having had their heads shaved and stripped of the belongings that they had acquired from patriots during the war. Our home was found in a terrible state. The furniture was damaged from drunkenness and lascivious living by German soldiers and German women, or "gray mice" as we called them. We had to fumigate the whole house, replace the tapestry, wall texture and repaint the walls and doors, repair some of our antique furniture, reupholster sofas and chairs, and touch up paintings that had been sprayed by liquor or other things. It took us several weeks to do the necessary repairs before we could move back into our home.

In the house I found helmets, gas masks, belts, and leather holsters for holding weapons, which the former occupants had left. The underground civilian Norwegian soldiers, with the help of English and American soldiers, rounded up the German military and had them shipped back to Germany by midsummer.

It took five years for Norway to get back on its feet and produce the food and clothing needed for general living. When I entered Gallaudet College in 1952, I worked at the Washington Post Weekly at night to earn extra money. I bought food packages and some clothes to send to my parents, who were grateful for the gifts I sent overseas. Thus ended the indelible experiences I had as a Deaf person during the war years in Norway.

Henning graciously submitted his story involving his post-war experiences in the next chapter. Please turn the page to find out more about his life after the war.