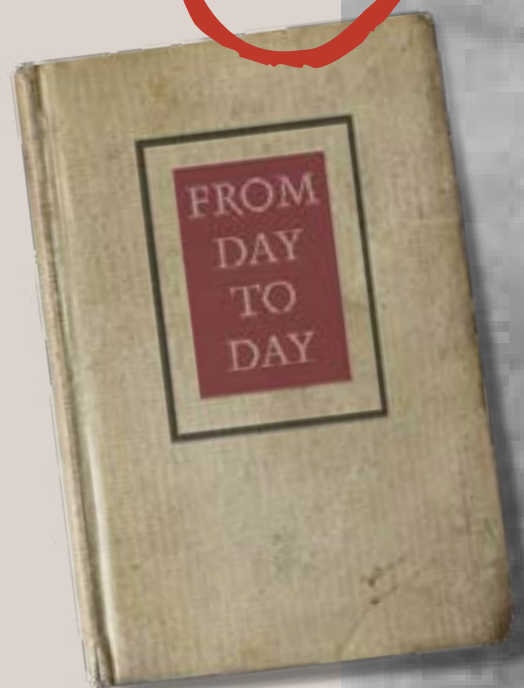


Odd Nansen and His *Secret Diary*

The writings of Odd Nansen, son of Norway's beloved statesman, chronicle an important chapter in WWII history. *By Timothy J. Boyce*

Most Norwegian-Americans know of Fridtjof Nansen—polar explorer, statesman and humanitarian. His memory and achievements are widely celebrated in Norway, as attested by the October 2011 sesquicentennial celebration of his birth. But far fewer in America know about the remarkable life and achievements of his son, Odd Nansen, and in particular his World War II diary, “From Day to Day.”

Odd Nansen, the fourth of five children of Fridtjof and Eva Nansen, was born in 1901. He received a degree in architecture from the Norwegian Institute of Technology (NTH), and from 1927 to 1930 lived and worked in New York City. His father's failing health brought Odd back to Norway, and after Fridtjof's death in May 1930 Nansen decided to remain. Following in



June 1945: Odd Nansen is reunited with his family after WWII.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF ODD NANSEN'S FAMILY

Fridtjof's humanitarian footsteps, Odd Nansen helped establish *Nansenhjelpen* (Nansen Relief) in 1936 to assist Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. This work, his family's close connection to the Royal family and his vehement disagreements with Vidkun Quisling all led to his arrest by the Nazis in early 1942.

Nansen spent the remainder of the war in concentration camps in Norway and Germany. Through it all he kept a

secret diary, recording his experiences, hopes, dreams and fears. Nansen knew that its discovery could lead to severe punishment—or worse. Nevertheless his compulsion to write overcame his fears. “I must unburden my memory,” he recorded. Nansen never intended to publish the diary, but wrote it simply as a way to communicate with his wife Kari, and as a means of sorting out his thoughts and impressions; it became, he wrote, his “private manner of forgetting.”

From Day to Day
The diary, later published as “From Day to Day,” spans three and a half years, from Nansen's initial arrest and imprisonment in Grini Prison, located outside Oslo, to his experience as a slave laborer in Kvænangen in Troms County, to his final eighteen months in Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp north of Berlin, which by war's end housed over 58,000 prisoners from every country in Europe. Of the approximately 40,000

Norwegians arrested during the war, almost 7,500 were sent abroad, to Germany, France and Poland, many never to return.

With an unsparing eye Nansen recorded the casual brutality and random terror that was the fate of a camp prisoner. A typical entry: “[A] transport of prisoners reached the camp. As usual they were counted. ... There were two men extra. ... And German figures *must* and *shall* come right. A few revolver shots ... worked out the sum. ... The two were carried away.”

His entries also reveal the quiet strength, and sometimes ugly prejudices, of his fellow Norwegian inmates, his constantly frustrated hopes for an early end to the war, his longing for his wife and children, and his horror at the especially barbaric treatment reserved for the Jews. These latter were consigned to the “trotting gang” in Grini, and were forced to perform all work at double time. Jews were not allowed in the hospital or infirmary, nor permitted to purchase tobacco, privileges accorded even to criminals.

The diary depicts Nansen's daily struggle, not only to

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survive, but to preserve his sanity and maintain his humanity in a world engulfed by fear and hate. And through it all he wondered whether anyone would “believe this when we come to describe it.” In fact Nansen was unsure he could adequately describe all that he saw and heard; it “was so horrible, so incomprehensible in ghastliness, that it defies all description.”

Nansen initially smuggled diary pages out of Grini

to Kari under various subterfuges: slipped into a visitor's pocket; hidden in the surrounding woods for later pickup; Nansen even bribed a German soldier to deliver a section directly to Kari at home. En route to Kvænangen, Nansen entrusted diary sections to complete strangers in hopes they would make it back to Kari. Once in Germany, however, Nansen needed to devise a more ingenious method for preserving

his writing in light of the thorough searches every incoming and outgoing prisoner faced. In a moment of inspiration, he realized that he could safely hide his work in the hollowed-out interior of the one item routinely allowed to all prisoners—their breadboards. Upon liberation in April 1945 by the Swedish Red Cross, Nansen and five friends spirited out his entire record for the preceding eighteen months, right under the noses



Nansen AND WWII

1933

January 30 Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany
May 17 Vidkun Quisling founds Nasjonal Samling (NS) Party

1934

May 11 Thomas Buergethal born in L'ubochňa, Czechoslovakia

1936

July 12 Construction of Sachsenhausen begins
Fall/Winter Nansen forms *Nansenhjelpen* (Nansen Relief)

1939

September 1 Germany invades Poland; start of WWII in Europe

1940

April 9 German invasion of Norway
June 9 Norway surrenders; King Haakon VII establishes government-in-exile in London

1941

June 12 Grini Prison opened as a *Polizeihaftlingslager* (police detainee camp)
June 22 Operation Barbarossa: Hitler invades Russia



January, 1945: Norwegian right-wing leader Vidkun Quisling, left, meets with Adolf Hitler.

1942

January 13 Nansen arrested, sent to Grini Prison
February 1 Vidkun Quisling installed as Minister-President
August 5–November 22 Nansen sent to Veidal Camp (Kvænangen) to work on snow tunnels
October Border pilot attempting to help nine Jews escape to

Sweden kills border policeman; Jews are blamed. With the shooting as a pretext, all Jewish men over age 15 are arrested

November 26 First deportation of Norwegian Jews to Europe aboard SS Donau; most sent

immediately to gas chambers at Auschwitz



1943

October 6 Odd Nansen sent to Sachsenhausen in Germany

1944

June 6 D-Day, the Allied invasion of Europe begins
July 20 Assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler



Sachsenhausen Prison

1945

January 17 Thomas Buergethal starts Auschwitz Death March
February 16 Nansen meets Buergethal
March 20 Nansen transported to Neuengamme Prison, Germany
April 28 Odd Nansen evacuated from Neuengamme on White Buses to Denmark, then Sweden
April 30 Hitler commits suicide



Roll call at Grini Prison

May 8 V-E Day, the Allied military mission arrives in Norway to coordinate German capitulation
May 9 Quisling arrested
June 7 King Haakon VII returns to Norway
June 10 Odd Nansen returns to Oslo and is reunited with family
October 24 Quisling executed at Akershus Castle

1946

Odd Nansen is first director of Norwegian Aid to Europe (now Norwegian Refugee Council)

1950

Odd Nansen visits Germany on behalf of UNESCO



IMAGES COURTESY OF (TOP RIGHT) AP IMAGES (BOTTOM LEFT) TOM BUERGENTHAL (TOP LEFT) HERALD & WEEKLY TIMES LIMITED PORTRAIT COLLECTION
IMAGES COURTESY OF (TOP) GUY SHACHAR, WWW.GUYSHACHAR.COM (BOTTOM) LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION

of their SS guards. In fact, despite all his travels and adventures over almost 40 months in prison, only one segment of the original diary failed to survive the war.

Nansen's Humanity

Nansen's diary is replete with examples of how he tried to help those less fortunate, and more vulnerable, than he. "It isn't well to be 'well off' among so many who are badly off. The only possible relief is to share the material goods which are divided among us so unequally and unjustly," he wrote. In the Darwinian world of the camps, where many looked out only for themselves, Nansen often shared a kind word, a willing ear, some clothes or an extra scrap of food. In February of 1945, as the war's violence was reaching a crescendo, Nansen encountered Tommy Buergethal. A 10-year-old Jewish boy, Buergethal had recently survived the evacuation of Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen—known today as the Auschwitz Death March. In the process his feet were so badly frostbitten that several toes had just been amputated. Injured and forlorn, he was recovering alone in the

From Day to Day



Drawing of Sachsenhausen Prison by Odd Nansen

Shirer, called it "extraordinary," "profoundly moving" and "the best realization . . . in either film or print . . . of Nazi concentration camps." The book has been out of print for over 60 years, and today is virtually impossible to find. Timothy J. Boyce, a member of Norsk Carolina 3-679, is currently editing "From Day to Day" and hopes to see it republished in the near future. Thomas Buergethal will contribute a preface to the revised edition.

In the words of William L. Shirer, author of "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich," Odd Nansen's diary stands as an eloquent testament to "how noble and generous the human spirit can be in the face of terrible adversity." It was a bestseller when it appeared in Norway, and was praised following its U.S. publication in 1949 by G.P. Putnam's Sons. Critics, including

infirmaries, an infernal place that Nansen called "the first step to the crematory." Nansen immediately befriended him, writing: "For the very first time [I] saw you, you went straight to [my] heart." As Buergethal acknowledges, largely through Nansen's efforts, young Tommy made it through the final, deadly months of the war. In his own memoir, "A Lucky Child" (Little, Brown and Company

2009), Buergethal writes: "Much later I realized that Mr. Nansen had probably saved my life by periodically bribing the orderly . . . with cigarettes and tobacco to keep my name off the list of 'terminally ill' patients."

In 1951 Buergethal emigrated to the U.S. and today is a world-renowned authority on International Law and Human Rights Law; from 2000 to 2010 he served as a Justice on the International Court of

Justice at The Hague. Almost 70 years after their first meeting, Buergethal, who now teaches at The George Washington University Law School, remains grateful to Nansen, the man who, he writes, "not only helped me to survive, but more importantly, taught me to forgive."

After the war Nansen continued his humanitarian work, among other things serving as a consultant to UNESCO, assisting in the formation of UNICEF and acting as the first director of what is now the Norwegian Refugee Council. Nansen died in 1973. ☺

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