



## Odd Westeng

Odd Westeng was a member of the Norwegian Resistance. His role was to guide various people, usually those wanted by the Gestapo, to the Swedish Border.

Before his death in 1989, Odd and his friend Brede wrote a detailed memoir, 'Secret Path to Freedom', recounting some of their experiences.

### The Secret in the Forests

It was dawn in early May 1942. Through my cell window I was probably one of the last to see them alive. They were eleven friends, huddled together in the cold morning mist at the Grini gate. They stood there surrounded by a troop of German SS ready to shoot at the slightest movement, whilst waiting for the Chief of the Gestapo to take charge. He came through the control post gesticulating and shouting, using a leather whip on the prisoners, driving them into the waiting truck bound for Gardemoen and execution, 30 miles away.



Odd Westeng

That evening in the prison we knew for certain that they had been executed, and the sinister minds of our ruthless enemies had made them dig their own graves. Theirs was a sad story; attempting to escape, spied upon and reported by an informer and captured at sea in a fishing boat bound for England, they were shot after spending two months at the concentration camp at Grini.

This execution was partly in reprisal for a joint British / Norwegian Commando raid on the West coast of Norway in which two senior Gestapo officers were killed.

This was Norway in 1942, occupied by Hitler's Germany, stricken by war, terror and the Gestapo. (We were) people struggling for survival and freedom with thousands of patriots captured, tortured and killed, and thousands more fleeing their homes across mountains and valleys, forests and rivers to escape to neutral Sweden to find a boat, however small, to take them across to England.

So it happened that with my good friend Brede, we became directly involved in helping people to escape by taking them to the frontier and across to the coveted freedom from fear and torture that was Sweden in those desperate days of Norwegian history.

The Resistance was making great strides in opposing the Nazi forces and a secret army was being built to assist the Allied forces once they landed on Norwegian soil. The Germans knew that military supplies of all kinds were coming in by sea, by land and by air, and they felt threatened, despite their 200,000 troops. The Gestapo, in turn, was brought to a pitch of alertness and action to stamp out this new enemy - an army that could not be seen, yet bridges of strategic importance were being blown up, goods



trains de-railed and ships in the harbour destroyed or sunk with limpet (mines) dropped by parachute to the secret forces deep in the forests.

It was the task of the Gestapo to destroy this enemy, and in the process they revealed new levels of torture. Therefore new solutions had to be found by the Resistance, because it was quite clear that those who had been arrested could not withstand the mental and physical pressures for more than a few hours before revealing perhaps the name of a person or a location which could



The 'Germanske / Norse' armband worn by Odd.

endanger the entire large part of the section involved. It was imperative that the next link in the chain likely to be arrested should be warned and brought to a 'safe place'. These 'safe places' were empty or occupied apartments made available by patriots whose activities, if possible, were confined to making this service available. A certain section (Export) then took over the responsibility of finding ways and means of getting these people in and out of the country, either to Sweden or to England.

It was a hazardous task. A network of escape routes along the border was set up to cater for the anticipated flow of refugees. This work was mainly carried out by local members of the Resistance who knew intimately the pitfalls; the checkpoints and danger areas where the Gestapo was most active. There were many casualties - people were arrested, shot or sent to concentration camps never to return but the majority reached their destination. This was a remarkable achievement against very heavy odds, where the enemy controlled all means of transport by land, sea and air, with the Norwegians limited to using their feet and their bicycles. Flexibility of mind as opposed to the German rigidity and ingrained discipline probably played a large part in making it possible.

From Vestmarka and Ljoner in the centre to the prohibited border area, Brede and I also had a difficult task to perform. Hailing from Oslo, we were complete strangers to the district, and needed first and foremost a very good knowledge of main and secondary roads, farm roads, paths and terrain generally; the local people and their political attitudes, and the all-important pattern of control and road blocks as normally followed by the Border Police and the Gestapo.

Once this was achieved and firmly imprinted on our minds, we took to the wilderness and the deep forests of fir and pine. We spent about a week linking together trails in the forest which in the end became our route to the Swedish border. It began north of the Lake of Havsjoen and ended slightly south of the Lake of Tannsjoen. The total distance was some 12 miles and based on our many 'test runs' both by day and by night, we estimated that the journey would take a minimum of five hours in daylight and seven hours in the dark, always depending on weather conditions and the number of refugees.

The trail went through hilly country, then forest being interspersed with lakes and rivers, but also crossing some forest clearing and moors - dangerous perhaps, but



unfortunately necessary. We also had to cross the main road from Vestmarka to Setskog, frequently used by the German forces, and calling for a very careful approach combined with a speedy crossing, two people at a time, as and when the road was clear.

The fact that Brede and I had taken jobs as lumberjacks was the perfect cover and enabled us to obtain the special 'Border District Pass'. This gave us the advantage of being able to move freely anywhere in the border zone of Vestmarka. We even made a call at the border Police Station at Belfoss to Bjorkelangen from Ljoner! In the course of the conversation they became quite friendly and we were advised to keep away from Mangen road because, they said, illegal traffic was not uncommon there. We gratefully thanked them for their help and asked them to drop in and see us if they came our way.

To reach Vestmarka we had caught the train from Oslo to Kongsvinger, a garrison town normally occupied by Norwegian recruits but now dominated by the German forces including the Gestapo. Before we were allowed to leave the train we were bodychecked, our luggage pulled apart, and our papers scrutinized. Even then we were held until they had obtained confirmation from Ljoner that we were due to begin our work there as lumberjacks.

We set off for Ljoner which we reached by late afternoon, met the forestry people, signed up and got all the necessary details together with the key to the log cabin. We had four miles to cover on a rough timber track which was almost too bad for heavily loaded bicycles, and it was dusk by the time we reached the proximity of the cabin. We stopped on the crest of a hill, and looking through the pines we saw the silvery glitter of a little lake and on the other side was the cabin, the weather beaten logs blending naturally with the surrounding countryside.

"For our purposes, what a place!" exclaimed Brede, and it really seemed to have all the features needed for maximum security as well as a pleasant 'home'. Just as we were mounting our bikes, a family of ducks crossed the road disappearing into the grass towards a little brook winding its way to the lake. They too were seeking shelter.

We named our home 'Lingen' and on close scrutiny we found the position ideal for security. To the west and the north we had the clearing and a marsh with a view of the road from Ljoner and the path leading to 'Lingen'; to the south of the lake, and to the east, the perfect getaway - the forest just 25 yards away.

Inside was a bit sparse perhaps, being split in two - one end consisting of a large room with bunks, a table, benches and stove in the centre for heating and cooking; at the other end a stable for three horses. However, this being our second year on assignment as 'lumberjacks', we were used to living under all sorts of conditions. For me it was my third year in the rough including a spell as a prisoner in Grini Concentration Camp where some of us tried to beat the pigs to their troughs; where we listened into the stillness of night and suddenly heard heartbreaking screams coming from the interrogation chamber.



Here we could use our freedom against the enemy, and help all those who needed our help to find that freedom.

We were excited about our new pocket-sized radios with earphones, and having the freedom of listening to the BBC saying, "This is London calling", and feeling part of the cause to eradicate the ugly scar of Nazism off the Earth. Of course in Norway, the Gestapo had confiscated all private radios soon after their arrival in 1940, and Goebbels had been given the task of making the country a pro Nazi state.

To be in possession of a radio was considered a serious crime and anybody caught (with one) would be sent to a concentration camp. Brede and I agreed therefore, that we would keep 'Lingen' clear of illegal items. To that end we built a little hideaway in the forest some five minutes walk away which we called 'Anton'. This is where we kept our radio equipment, weapons, ammunition, frontier maps, codes, etc, etc. it was a bit hard sometimes after 12 hours of walking with refugees not to go for the bunk rather than 'Anton', but until such time that we were actually under suspicion by the Gestapo, that was the way it had to be.

I sometimes sat at 'Anton', completely hidden from sight, checking our weapons and studying maps, or perhaps waiting for the BBC to come on air, and my thoughts would inevitably turn to some of the people we had taken across the frontier. I had particularly kind thoughts for two British agents who had just completed their mission on the west coast of Norway. They had originally come by sea, but something had gone wrong for the return journey, hence their going home via Sweden with the help of the Resistance. We had a fast and uneventful trip, and we ended having a smoke together and a friendly chat on the actual border. As they were saying goodbye, they said, "Well, you might as well have these. We shan't need them in neutral Sweden," and they handed us two Smith and Wesson .38 pistols and four Mills hand grenades. We thought of them often, Brede and I, and admired their cool and phlegmatic approach during our five hour walk together.

In the solitude among the trees at 'Anton', I learnt to understand and respect nature's challenge to man and it naturally followed that I felt in close harmony with the vast forest around us. I looked upon the trees as our best friends, always offering shelter and protection, helping us in our search for safety. Even the birds in the trees gave us help, giving us warning signals of any oncoming enemy. We walked in unison with life in the forest, gently, quietly, not even a twig was trodden on. We took pride that the stillness of nature was not disturbed.

I remember a woman coming over to me on the route to the border saying, "Please tell me how to walk like that. You don't even step on a twig and I keep breaking them all the time and yet I try and I try." She was also a friend of the forest, but she was more than that. She was a courageous woman, lonely with her husband a prisoner in Belsen concentration camp in Germany and her two sons flying with the RAF in England. "My house was so miserably empty," she said, "that I offered it to the Resistance as a 'safe place'. In due course it was discovered by the Gestapo, but by the time they came to make the arrests we had gone and the house was empty."



So many people, so many faces of courage, of despair, of sadness and of determination; the will to survive driving them forward through the woods, across the valleys; miles and miles of uncertainty and danger, hour after hour. They walked with a natural pride as if that was the day of hope, that by the evening their long years under enemy occupation would be ended. They were Norwegians, but also other nationalities, joining hands helping each other as a friend to a friend in adversity.

## Russian Interlude

It was a glorious day in mid-October. The sun was shining up, and I had taken to my favourite pastime at Lingen, chopping wood and attending to the peaceful, but less important details of our everyday life in the forest of Ljoner.

Being alone for a change, with the stillness of nature in complete command, the deepest thoughts came to the surface as if they wanted to speak to me and remind me of old friends from peacetime and also of all those whose friendship meant so much in the vicious world of the Nazi concentration camp at Grini. When I was arrested in February 1942, Grini was a small prison camp and the numbers of prisoners had hardly exceeded 2000 in all. Subsequently it went up into many thousands, I believe by the end of the war some 25,000 prisoners had passed through the gates of Grini.

I remembered the Norwegian Jews who had to wear the yellow star for identification. The Gestapo selected work for the Jews that was purposely designed to humiliate and destroy the spirit of those people. When I met my friend Herman, with whom I had played soccer since my schooldays, I found him filling two buckets brimful of water down in the basement of the main prison building. He then had to run with the full buckets up to the fifth floor where he emptied the buckets, run down again to the basement, fill the buckets and once again run to the fifth floor and empty the buckets - up and down - up and down - fill and empty - fill and empty - all day and every day for ten hours. When I first saw him I called, "Herman, what are you doing?" he answered, "Can't stop. Can't stop. Can't talk to you." It was distressing to see a friend in such torment. He and the other Jews were shipped out to Germany the following week and placed in a concentration camp there. They never came back - not one of them.

For a short period I was assigned to an indoor job, washing the floors of the corridors in the German section, and also the floors in the hospital. There I met a man who had been in the hospital for nine months and was still unable to walk around his bed because of the injuries inflicted upon him by the Gestapo during interrogation. They



Odd's Border Pass.



had broken just about every bone in his body, but not his spirit. He had held firm and at 67 he was accepted by all his fellow prisoners as the symbol of fortitude and courage, and they continually found new ways of helping him to recover.

I was pulled away from my thoughts of Grini when I heard Brede return. "Hey," he said as he came through the door, "the job is on for tomorrow. The message came through just before I left - seventeen people all told including six foreigners, four of whom are Russian POWs."

(The next morning) we left Lingen about 10 o'clock and arrived at our rendez-vous with ten minutes to spare; a good thing too because we hardly reached the knoll before we saw a long column of 17 people coming up the path.

We identified the Russians by their clothing - a mixture of Norwegian garments and remnants of Russian military coats. On their feet they had tied strips of military coat in a woven pattern and they also carried some strange looking weapons with them. They seemed alert and keen and moved with energetic strides even though they had been on the run from the German POW camp for about three weeks.

The leader of the column had already started on his return journey when we decided to descend the knoll. Within minutes we were surrounded by four Russians, full of smiles, and handshakes. They spoke to us in broken German, but after a while we understood each other perfectly well. They were full of praise for all the help they had been given along the route and they said they knew that Norwegians would be executed if they were caught helping Russians to escape.

The Norwegians had hardly slept for three days and one had a twisted ankle which was very painful and they were worried about slowing down the column.

As Brede and I were leaving the cabin, two young men aged about 20, got up and followed us outside. They spoke to us in English and explained that they were Polish students from Warsaw. They wanted to know how long the journey would take and smiled happily when we told them they would be in Sweden within seven hours. They had escaped from Warsaw five months earlier when they had heard on their way home from school that their homes had been raided and their parents taken away. They had taken a train to Gdansk planning to stow away on a ship bound for Sweden, but they were arrested leaving the train. Eventually they were sent to Norway with ten other students as slave labour.

They escaped on a goods train and reached a town called Elverum, where they got a taxi and simply asked for help. Luck was with them because the taxi driver happened to be a member of the Resistance and he did indeed organise their escape to Sweden. What they didn't know was that Elverum was a garrison town for the Nazis and 5,000 troops were stationed there!

Returning to the cabin we were astonished to meet four stark naked Russians in the doorway heading for the little lake 100 yards away. The lake was still covered with a thin layer of ice after the frost the previous night.



Shortly after one o'clock we got ready to leave. I was very pleased to see that the Norwegians had recovered well but the man with the damaged ankle could not walk and thought he would have to stay behind. Everything went quiet in the cabin and I called out, "Does anybody know how to make a stretcher?" one of the Russians came over and simply said, "We will make one. This used to be our work on the Leningrad front. We carried a lot of wounded comrades this way and we would like to carry him also."

Brede joined the Russians with his axe and they found a young rowan, pliable and strong enough to take the weight. The stretcher was made and the patient put on it.

At long last the column was ready with Brede up front. We changed our route to minimise the problem of carrying the stretcher and the journey began.

We passed the eight mile mark before Brede gave us a danger signal and within seconds the column had merged with the undergrowth of the forest. We soon heard the reason for the alarm; it was a slow truck climbing the hills from Ljoner, burning charcoal and coming our way for a load of lumber. The danger soon passed and we continued, the smell of charcoal a reminder that danger could come when least expected - Brede and I had not seen a truck on this road for at least three months!

We bypassed Ljoner and joined the derelict road for another mile. Just to make certain I slowed down to check on the stretcher and was pleased to find the Russians in good spirits and seemingly unaffected by the arduous job. I resumed my scout position just as we were reaching the point of crossing the main road. Once again we had to take cover from trucks, but this time vehicles of a much more sinister nature. There were four German military transports full of soldiers! Soon they were gone and Brede and I felt gratified that our scout signal system seemed to keep us safe from such dangers.

We passed Rudsvika after a careful survey, this being the spot on the route most frequently used by the Border Police for interception of refugees. It was all clear. The last 200 yards were quickly covered, and there it was, the coveted strip of land which for so many had meant the gateway to freedom from the Nazis. The Russians handed over the stretcher to the Norwegians, we said farewell and they parted with grateful smiles and handshakes.

Turning around we saw the Russians sitting down on the actual frontier and Brede and I went over and joined them. Then one of them said: "We would like to do the things you do - helping other people to escape. Can you let us come with you and work with you? We would like to do that because we don't want to go home".

"Why not?" I said.



As a soldier during the war, winter 1944/45. I am the one to the left and the others two friends of mine.



" It's difficult to explain. There is a Russian Commissar in Sweden and we think that we will be sent to Siberia because we were taken prisoner."

" You can't mean that."

" Yes," came the answer, "Sometimes that's the way it is."

" Well, we could most certainly do with your help, but unfortunately we live in a community where everybody knows us, and we would have no chance of keeping you hidden."

" We hoped, but we understand," they said. Then they brightened up, smiles came over their faces and they said: "These are presents for both of you," and they gave us two beautiful carved cigarette boxes.

"For you to remember us by as friends - friends forever." Then they came across and gave us Russian bear hugs before disappearing down the path into Sweden.

In Oslo, May 1945, at the Parade Ground of Akershus Castle, we practised the Victory Parade with the other Allied Forces. A Russian Company passed us close by, singing beautifully, and there we saw our Russian friends and we smiled and waved and smiled and waved, but no. There was no recognition. "Friends forever," they said to us on the border. Could anything have changed that?