

Reprinted from "The Norseman," Vol. II, No. 2, March-April, 1944.

STATSMINISTEREN
Arkiv

Old Man Norway,

By

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JOHAN NYGAARDSVOLD

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OLD Man Norway is Johan Nygaardsvold, premier of Norway since 1935, a chunky man with a clenched mouth and wide smooth brow, a man built like an ice-breaker, the first of Europe's small-state chiefs to say "No" to Hitler and his gunmen, and shoot back.

He is planning against the day when the legal government which he heads returns to Norway. A tough task awaits. The thousand-year-old kingdom will have to be rebuilt from the ground up, refitted into a new Europe and a new world. But Nygaardsvold has been handling tough jobs, and building, all his life. In Norway he built bridges between political parties which have held solidly for Norway's four most difficult and tragic years, and which still hold. In America, forty years ago, he swung an axe in the western forests, built log huts for work gangs, blasted rock with dynamite and laid steel rails reaching through the Rockies to the Pacific.

If the fates had not caught him by the ankle one day back in his home town of Hommelvik, near Trondheim, holding him back in Norway, he would to-day be an American citizen, free from great responsibilities and State cares, watching events from the comfortable remoteness of a farm in Montana, Wyoming or Oregon.

That story begins one hard winter's day in Hommelvik, near Trondheim, 42 years ago. Johan got up, and found no work to go to. It was a shock. He had not missed a day's work, on farm, in saw or paper mill, or tile factory, since he was 14. Now he was 22 and had a family to support.

He looked West. Across that ocean was a great new land bursting with growth and life. Plenty of work there. He would migrate and send for his family when he was ready.

The spring of 1902 found him in an old 4,000-ton cattle boat in the Atlantic. The big cattle spaces 'tween decks had been hastily partitioned with rough planks into "cabins." Johan's bunk was plank, his mattress a straw-filled sack. Twenty-three others slept in the two tiers of plank bunks in his "cabin." But they ate well, at plank tables nailed together between the sleeping compartments. The British had a war on in South Africa. Hence the ship shortage.

Twelve days later Johan landed in Quebec. He had come this way to America because the fare was so low—only 108 kroner. A little matter of a rate-war between competing shipping lines. As Johan hadn't enough money to continue, he got work with a Canadian company building a couple of wood pulp factories in the Saguenay district. The workers were all French-Canadians except one, and he was another Norwegian. The French-Canadians got a dollar a day, the two Norwegians \$1.25. The boss reckoned a Norwegian did that much more work.

With summer, Johan and his companion shifted across to the east side of the St. Lawrence river and 50 miles into the forest to build camps and carve roads in preparation for the winter logging for the pulp mills. "Stay," said the boss to Johan. "You've got a permanent job here." But Johan shook his head.

In the fall he counted his money. Now he had enough. He headed west into Ontario, meaning to cross Lake Superior from Fort William and get to Duluth in Minnesota. But winter beat him to it, and he found himself frozen in with the ships until spring. Luckily just down the lake they were building a big grain elevator. Johan worked on that job until the ice melted. In May he crossed the lake and went on to Kalispel in Montana.

The railroads were pushing West. Five years Johan worked, helping them on their way to the Pacific ocean. He worked for the Great Northern, the Northern Pacific, and a dozen other companies. It was hard and dangerous work. Many of his friends met with accidents. More were killed or injured, usually through negligent handling of explosives. No room for weaklings there. Men worked a 10-hour day, seven in the morning to six at night, with an hour at noon for lunch.

Reminiscing about those days, Nygaardsvold told me: "In the forests we lived in log huts. Elsewhere, in huts made of wood covered with tarred paper. Summers we lived in tents. I preferred the tents. One winter I slept in a stove-warmed tent high up in the Rockies. It wasn't colder than a healthy worker would expect and must be able to endure."

The first summer Johan worked for the daily wage, which ran \$2.25 to \$2.75. But that winter he was made a gang boss. Bosses got \$75 to \$100 a month. They had to supervise the work, see that each worker did his job well, and they were responsible for the dynamiting.

Without knowing it, Nygaardsvold was laying the foundations of his future political life, and his wide understanding of different kinds of men, and their problems, and how they view them. The workers were mostly Norwegians and Swedes, with some Finns and Icelanders, Italians and Irish. The Northmen stayed together. The Italians had their own camps and canteens, earned only \$2 a day, and worked in gangs headed by one who spoke a little English. The Irish had their own ideas about piecework. They said all piecework increased the output and swallowed the daily wage—"and God knows," remarks Nygaardsvold 40 years later, "if they were not right."

After supper there were two hours before lights-out. Some of the men played cards, but most lay in their bunks and read, or discussed various problems with their friends and neighbours. Johan read, listened, participated in the debates. The workers had great wisdom. Two things the majority did not want: liquor and women in the camp. They had found that both resulted in quarrels and fights, and they wanted to live an orderly, peaceful life.

You could always celebrate—out of camp. Young Nygaardsvold watched men getting restless as soon as they had money in their pockets. They would cast around for pretexts to go to town to buy something "really necessary," something better than the camp store carried. Once in town—good night! One of Johan's men who had to go to town to buy the best shoes, arrived back a week later with a worn-out pair a saloon-keeper had sold him when he was liquored up.

Johan got restless sometimes, but he was saving money to take a chance

as a sub-contractor. It was a risk. The big contractor made deals with sub-contractors to build a piece of track, 5 to 15 miles long. The sub-contractor owned or hired horses or mules, got in building stuff, built camps and roads for workers, hired workers, made contracts with well-known individual workers or a team to build a little piece of line on a piece-work basis.

One gang in Johan's camp earned \$4,200 each in 3½ months, after all costs, including food. Another earned \$13,000 each in 9 months. Two of those men went home to Norway. A third six months later was working for a weekly wage again and had nothing left of his \$13,000 except a six-months-old suit. The fourth bought a farm and settled down to become an American citizen. "He was the most sensible of the lot," says Nygaardsvold.

But these coups depended on "good" rock, easy to dynamite. You could just as easily end up worse off. On his first contract job Johan ended \$60 in the red. But that was better than a gang of Finns who made up their account at the same time. They found they had nothing to come and owed \$100 for food. The field engineer gave them a box of tomatoes each as a consolation prize. "You can eat 'em on your way back to town." Nygaardsvold recalls this as an unwise joke, because one of the Finns threw his box, which hit the joker on the head.

Johan did all right on the whole, and at the end of four years was ready to return to his wife and children. It was the autumn of 1907. He had been away five years.

He had left Norway united with Sweden and acknowledging the Swedish king as its sovereign—an arrangement made in 1814, following a union with Denmark begun in 1381. He returned to an independent Norway, whose Storting had in 1905 elected as king the second son of King Frederick VIII. of Denmark, and crowned him as King Haakon VII. (he still reigns, sharing his government's exile in London). This Norway, under the impetus of the motor and hydro-electric power, was rapidly becoming industrialized.

But Johan wasn't staying. He planned to use some of his earned dollars to set his younger brother up in business, so that he could support their old mother. Then, in the spring of 1909, he would return to America, for good.

But his brother died. Johan's plan collapsed. He could not leave his old mother alone in Norway; nor did it seem possible to take her along with his family to the strange new land of America. So instead of sailing westward, he went back to work as a transport labourer in Trondheim.

But this frustration of his plans and hopes by an unkind Fate made him reckless. He began to dabble in politics. He says, grimly, that he was punished for this. "I lost my status as a free man with a comparatively good reputation!"

He had wanted to lead a quiet, hard-working life, without too much responsibility, and only his own private troubles to bear until he died. But his qualities impressed men in the Norwegian labour union and political jungles as much as they had done men in the forests and mountains of the American West. Almost as quickly as he had been made a work-gang

boss, he found himself made a union boss. Successively he was elected president of his trade union, president of the local labour party, president of the county labour party, president of the co-operative trade association, member of the school board, president of the parish council; and, in 1915, eight years after his return from America, he was nominated candidate for the national Storting (parliament).

"What nonsense," he said to his family and friends. "They will never elect me." But they elected him. He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Anyway, it will only be a short contract." He was wrong. He was elected again and again: in 1918, 1921, 1924, 1927, 1930, 1933, 1936. Through every kind of economic and political weather, through Right and Left swings, they went on electing Nygaardsvold.

He was made secretary, then president, of his party. That was political party business. But the parliamentarians recognised his special qualities, too, and to his astonishment elected him first vice-president and then president of the Upper Chamber of the Storting, and then president of the Storting. He was "boss" of parliament, with politicians to manage instead of workers with axe, shovel, crowbar and dynamite. He found politicians more difficult to handle.

In 1928, he was urged to head a labour cabinet. "No," he said and went home to bed. Some time after midnight the party president called. "Johan, you must see reason." "No," said Johan, and turned over and went to sleep again. Finally he accepted only the post of Minister of Agriculture—for a fortnight. But in 1935 things were different. It was the third year of Hitler's power. Mussolini was grabbing Ethiopia. Spain was boiling. In Norway, Jens Hundseid had been premier, and his Defence Minister was Vidkun Quisling, a political soldier who had seen no fighting, but had been military attache in the U.S.S.R. for a spell, and had wild ideas. For a period, a liberal cabinet tried to stabilize matters, but was not very successful. Unemployment was serious, too.

Now men came to Nygaardsvold and said: "Times are really dangerous. Now you must head the government." And this time Nygaardsvold agreed. In his British exile he sometimes asks himself what this acquiescence led to, and answers himself bitterly. "To the occupation of Norway, hundreds of Norwegians in concentration camps in Norway and Germany, thousands of Norwegian men and women, with their King and government, living in exile." But he did what he thought right, and what he thought right was that Norway should remain neutral.

On Monday, April 8, 1940, he was busy all day in the Storting and the cabinet room handling a delicate matter. The Allied powers had sown mines in Norwegian territorial waters to prevent the Germans using them. Nygaardsvold's government protested. Next day, the Norwegian navy would get its orders to clear those minefields.

Nygaardsvold went home. It was 9-30. He had his daughter Astrid from Hommelvik staying. Astrid had brought her small daughter Halldis to spend her third birthday with her grandparents. Halldis came running and embraced his knee. Had he brought her bicycle? He recalled guiltily that he had promised her a bicycle. But with all these other things on

his mind, he had forgotten it. Stalling, granddad explained that she could not expect the present until her birthday.

Johan dined, sat with his family reading the evening papers, listened to the radio, then saw little Halldis to bed. He went to bed himself, and, tired out, slept at once.

The phone wakened him. Colonel Ljunberg, Defence Minister, was on the line. He had just had news that unknown warships had tried to force Oslo Fjord. Had mines been laid? No, said the Colonel. Is it possible to lay mines in the dark? No.

The Minister added that the night was dark, visibility poor, and it was impossible to distinguish whether the warships were English or German. Nygaardsvold said, sharply: "That's irrelevant. The country must be defended."

It was 11-30 p.m. Twenty minutes later Colonel Ljunberg came through with news that the outer defences of Bølaerne and Rauer were now fighting the ships, whose nationality was still unknown. Nygaardsvold got up. As he was dressing, the sirens howled, and Oslo was blacked out.

Everyone was rather scared. Only little Halldis slept undisturbed. Nygaardsvold realized that the government must assemble as quickly as possible. While he was trying to calm his wife and daughter, Wold, Minister of Justice and Police, phoned to report. The Oslo police chief had just given him the news which Nygaardsvold had already had. "You phone half the members of the government, I'll phone the other half," Nygaardsvold instructed Minister Wold.

They were all to meet at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The town was completely blacked out, and in the dark Nygaardsvold had to feel his way with his stick through the Palace gardens to the Ministry. Some Ministers had arrived; others kept on coming in. News came that fighting was going on in Oslo Fjord—but against whom? At length the Admiral in command recognised the enemy, and reported. German ships were forcing their way through to Oslo, Stavanger, Kristiansand, Egersund, Bergen, Trondheim, and Narvik. And at all these places the defence put up by the Norwegian navy and coastal batteries, although fierce, seemed to have been overcome.

Nygaardsvold realized that Norway was at last involved in the death struggle between the two irreconcilable Great Powers, that they would fight over Norway, and that Norway would in any case have to foot the bill. He phoned to the British Minister to see if he had received any information from his government. But the British Minister was still asleep. At 5 a.m., the German Minister was announced. The attack had been practically carried through by then. The German presented a document containing terms of unconditional surrender.

Nygaardsvold looked around his team. The nods were unanimous. No! Never! We will not surrender without a fight. "Later," says Nygaardsvold, "our people will have to pass judgment on our decision."

It was now clear that in spite of the heroic defence of Fortress Oscarsborg, the sinking of the cruiser *Blücher* and the halting of other German warships, Oslo could not be defended. The government men must leave,

or fall into enemy hands. They ordered a special train to be ready at 7 a.m., and notified the King and the Crown Prince.

What happened after—the journey to Hamar, the meeting and decisions taken that day at Hamar and Elverum under constant threat from the advancing Germans, the close shave Nygaardsvold and his company had when they were sandwiched in the Gudbrands Valley between German troops racing north and parachute troops hurrying south from the mountains, the sixty days of fighting, the rescue by the British navy—all that is official history now.

Three of Nygaardsvold's four children are still in Norway. His wife and youngest son parted from Johan at Elverum, when the King and government decided to stay and fight. They found their own way through eastern Norway into Sweden, then through Finland to Petsamo, sailed in a small fishing boat down the Norwegian coast to Tromsø, and got there on June 7, only two hours before the King and government left Norway after the evacuation of the Allied troops from north Norway. Now they are with Nygaardsvold in England.

In London, Nygaardsvold works daily in his room at government headquarters in the western quarters, presides at the Friday meetings of the cabinet, lunches with the King afterwards. He keeps his team in line, everybody brings his troubles to "the Old Man." Not that at 64 he looks or acts old. When I took John Steinbeck to meet him at lunch one day last summer, he had a schooner of beer with his lobster, topped off his coffee with a whisky-and-soda, and smoked two strong black cigars in the time it took Steinbeck, a lusty six-footer, to finish one cigarette.

He works hard, fights hard, relaxes easily, listens a lot, talks very little. His saga is not ended. Norway, freed, will have grave problems. Her capital equipment is worn out. Her economy has been forcibly geared to the Nazi catherine wheel. Her young men have been enslaved or dispersed. The children are ill-nourished. The land is empty of food, clothing, raw materials. The future of the shipping industry, on which Norway is mainly dependent—and which to-day serves the Allies and enables Norway almost alone of the exiled governments to pay her way and even service her government and some of her municipal debt—is obscure.

But Nygaardsvold from the old days has been used to fighting rock, and tackling the bad patches as and when he comes to them. The next phase is already blueprinted. First, the Nygaardsvold team will co-operate with the military administration of a re-conquered Norway. In proper time, it will take over, and re-establish normal life. Finally, it will resign, and the free people of Norway will decide, in a general election, what they want, and whom they want.

If they want Johan Nygaardsvold to stay on and boss the rebuilding job probably he will stay. He has always been a good soldier. If not—well, if any man has earned his rest, that man is Old Man Norway.

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