

From Whence Their Strength

AASE GRUDA SKARD

"IF I HAD TEN LIVES, I would gladly sacrifice them all to prevent our youth from being brought up in a way which would make them like unto those at whose mercy we have been placed." These were the words of a Norwegian teacher when he was released from a concentration camp, sick and suffering. He had seen the Nazis at close range, and he knew more clearly than ever what he stood for himself.

The incident occurred during the period of the bitterest conflict between the Nazis and the Norwegian teachers in the spring of 1942. Preliminary attempts had been made by the Nazi officials during the winter of 1940-41 to establish the "new order" in the schools. These were met by protests and

strikes on the part of teachers and school children. The real attack came in February, 1942, with an order to all teachers to join the Nazi Teachers' Union and teach Nazism to the children and a command to all children of 10 to 18 years of age to join the Nazi Youth Organizations.

The teachers refused, and they were supported by parents all over the country, by the University and similar institutions, by the State Church and all religious organizations. When the orders were repeated with threats, the teachers resigned from their positions. The result of this refusal to have anything to do with Nazism was concentration camps, torture, deportation, and slave labor for thousands of teachers. Newspapers in this country brought reports of the "death voyage" of 500 of them, all men, who, after severe maltreatment in concentration camps, were transported along the Arctic coast in an old, condemned ship to the Norwegian-Finnish frontier where Nazi cruelty continued during months of hard labor under abominable conditions. After nine months the survivors were released—to give room for new contingents of stubborn teachers. Unbroken in spirit, though many of them were seriously ill, the teachers came home to their pupils. Unbroken, also, were their colleagues who were continuously living under threat of identical treatment, and still today the threat haunts them.

The Nazi invasion of Norway found Aase Gruda Skard and her baby twin boys in Stockholm, Sweden, where she was working on a research project in classroom psychology. Her husband and three-year-old twin girls were caught by the changing waves of the war, and, only after encountering great difficulties, were the members of the family reunited in Stockholm. Then followed their long trek across the Soviet Union, Japan, and the Pacific Ocean to the United States, which they reached in December, 1940. Since that time Mrs. Skard has made Washington, D. C., her headquarters and has traveled extensively, lecturing throughout the country on child psychology and on current happenings in Norway. In next month's Educational Leadership, Mrs. Skard will discuss the courage of the children of Norway.

Where did their strength come from? How could a handful of teachers of one of the numerically smallest nations in the world victoriously defy the armies of the conquering Nazis? How did they dare to raise against machine guns and Gestapo their ideas, ideals, and conviction?

The development of the Norwegian spirit, the history of the growth of the nation, and the conditions in the country may give some explanation.

Education has always been held in high esteem in Norway, even in the old times when children were taught mainly in the homes. The laws regarding schools and education are old; the first laws making education compulsory for every boy and girl date from 1739. Illiteracy has been unknown for generations; the interest of common people in history, literature, sciences, and, not least, in government and social development has been great and increasing. Education, justice, and humanitarian values were major items in thinking and discussions.

Naturally the teachers took an important part in this intellectual life. They came from all classes of the people. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the most natural way for a gifted and ambitious youth from the non-academic classes to secure advanced education was to enter a normal school and become a teacher. This was very often the path to leadership within the community, perhaps to election to the district council, the national parliament, or even to a seat in the national government.

The Norwegians were willing to spend considerable sums on their schools. Education was the largest item

on the budgets of the cities and counties. As a whole the salaries of the teachers were good, which contributed to the high standing of the profession.

The teachers were generally highly respected. Their position was one of honor and trust, and they themselves felt a deep sense of honor in the work. The people knew the teacher and cooperated with him both in the school work of the children and the political and practical work in the community. A teacher was never isolated; he was more often a center of activities and cultural life. The feeling of solidarity and social cooperation was strong in Norway. People felt mutually responsible for each other and for the whole community. The teachers were a leading exponent of that feeling and accepted the challenge of it as leaders, as moral advisers for the growing generation, and as example for the others.

This feeling was strengthened by the religion and the religious situation. The Church was organized as a State Church (Lutheran) to which 97 per cent of the population nominally belonged. The administration of the Church and the school was closely connected; the teachers in the grade schools were required to belong to the State Church and the teaching of religion was in their hands. They felt responsible for the intellectual, moral, and religious education of the children.

The State religion was not limited by strict dogmas, but permitted large variations of personal interpretation. It worked together with general moral demands: Justice must reign in the classroom, as well as in the thinking. Truth was important in the smallest details and in the highest convictions. A

teacher was expected to teach what he thought was *right* according to his best judgment and deepest conscience.

He was also expected to respect and help develop the conscience of every child. During the last half-century or more, respect for the individual, including the individual child, had been increasing. The democratic system and social way of thinking were reproduced in the schools where progressive methods were generally used and cooperation and responsibility emphasized.

This appreciation of the individual also had some connection with the deep respect for human life that prevailed in the nation. Norway had had no war since 1814, capital punishment was abolished around 1870, the country had one of the lowest percentages of crime by violence in all the world. To kill another human being was beyond the imagination of practically all people. And brutality to other individuals or to animals was strongly condemned. Teachers were forbidden to strike a child. In the homes, also, all discipline was supposed to be humane, and maltreatment of children was rare.

With their whole background of development and social conditions, in a country where democracy was well established and deeply beloved and where the humane ideals that go with it had become the very basis of thinking and action, the teachers would, as a matter of course, repudiate Nazism. They could never teach the children the principle of Führer-authority, the brutal discipline of totalitarianism, the cruelty and injustice of the Herrenvolk theory, the secret treachery of the Gestapo methods, and all the other features so strange to every Norwegian.

The teachers' philosophy would never permit them to yield to it; their conscience, their religion, would never allow them to surrender to what they considered wrong.

They were helped in their heroic decision by the attitude of the population. About 98 or 99 per cent of the Norwegians are strongly against the Nazis. The people looked to the teachers with heartache and expectation in this heavy crisis. One of the appeals circulated among the teachers by the leaders of their illegal organization points out: "It [to accept the Nazi order] would mean betrayal of Norway, a desertion from one of the most important sections of the homefront. Remember that when teachers in all types of schools remain united, they cannot be defeated. Not in years will it be possible to procure obedient women and men to take their places. Remember that whoever fails will suffer a stigma for life. Ninety-eight per cent of the country's teachers are behind you when you remain loyal. Our honor and conscience are not for sale, and they are indispensable in our work for Norwegian youth."

The teachers fulfilled the people's expectations. They stood firm. And their example again had a tremendous influence on the rest of the population. It became a slogan in all groups who were threatened by the Nazis: "When the teachers can take it, *we* can." The whole resistance was sharpened and gained new enthusiasm from the teachers' courageous stand.

Their example will mean still more in the time to come. The teachers' sufferings and resistance are the measure of the strength of the ideals of our

democratic school. They have been willing to die for what they think is right, for justice, protection of the weak, respect for human life and individuality, freedom of conscience, truth. These ideals also must be worth living for. The teachers have given to us all a heritage that will live forever.

In the midst of the crisis, when the "death voyage" to the Arctic coast was a threat and about 1,500 men teachers and even some women were already being maltreated in concentration camps, when nobody knew whose turn would come next and what horrors might follow, the Norwegian teachers sent out this declaration of their standpoint, which they all read to their students:

"One of our dearest national songs tells us that 'every child's soul we unfold is another province added to our country.' Together with church and home we teachers have the responsibility to see to it that this unfolding occurs in Christian love and understanding and in conformity with our national cultural traditions. We have been charged with the task of giving you children the knowledge and training for the thorough work which is necessary if every single one of you is to receive complete development as a human being, so that you can fulfill your place in society to the benefit of others and yourself. This is the duty with which we have been intrusted by the Norwegian people, and the Norwegian people can call us to account for it.

"We know also that the sum of the knowledge and will-to-work in a country is the greatest and most lasting of all that country's assets. It is our duty to hold a

protective hand over these resources. We would betray our calling if we did not put all our strength into this task, especially during the trying times which we are now experiencing. Every curtailment in the school's activity is an undermining of the foundation upon which our people's future is to be built.

"However, the teacher's duty is not only to give the children knowledge. He must also teach the children to have faith in and to earnestly desire that which is true and just. Therefore, he cannot, without betraying his calling, teach anything against his conscience. He who does so sins both against the pupils he is supposed to lead and against himself. This, I promise you, I shall not do.

"I will not call upon you to do anything which I regard as wrong. Nor will I teach you anything which I regard as not conforming with the truth. I will, as I have done heretofore, let my conscience be my guide, and I am confident that I shall then be in step with the great majority of the people who have intrusted to me the duties of an educator."

This credo will be the "charter" for future education in Norway. It is the program that the whole people has adopted. Like other great expressions of ideals and purposes, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, the Four Freedoms pronouncement, the Atlantic Charter, it is signed with blood. Through the darkness of Nazi occupation, from concentration camps and medieval torture chambers comes to the world the clear voice of steadfast democratic ideals. Norwegian children are growing up with this voice ringing in their ears.

'Tis education forms the common mind;
Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined.

—Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays*.

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