



Background

Prisoner of War: Paintings and Poems

About Odd Grønfur Olsen

When Germany invaded the neutral country of Norway on 9 April, 1940 Odd Grønfur Olsen (nicknamed Olly) crossed the mountains from his home in Bergen for Voss. He later returned from Voss, where he was being hunted by the SS.

In August 1941 Olly secretly boarded the motorboat Lyrnes and was spirited across the sea to Shetland – not even his family were told where he was going. From Scotland he made his way to London, determined to join the RAF and fight for the liberation of Europe from the Nazis. After joining up he was sent to Canada for training in “Little Norway” near Toronto.

Mr Grønfur Olsen, who was born in 1915, subsequently returned to the UK to become a navigator aboard a Halifax bomber in 76 Squadron. His third mission was as part of the mass raids on Hamburg, known as Operation Gomorrah, in 1943, which did immense damage to German military production but cost tens of thousands of civilian lives.

The Halifax was hit by enemy fire and several of the crew parachuted to safety while the pilot and Segeant Olsen remained aboard and attempted an emergency landing.

His daughter, the artist Bodil Friele, said: “As the plane descended they were hit again. The pilot ordered my father to get to the back of the plane while he did what he could, but there was no chance of a safe landing.

“The pilot, Erik Bjerke, was killed but by a miracle my father survived. He spent five days on the run – hiding by day and moving by night – before being captured. He was then sent to a prisoner of war camp. When he got back to Bergen the first thing he did was to visit the parents of the pilot and thank them for the way their son gave his own life to save him.”

It was also quite a shock to Olly’s own family when he arrived home as they had no idea about what had become of him. According to Bodil he asked straight away what had become of a young woman called Karen who “he had been fascinated by” before the war. They soon met up again, married, and Bodil was born in 1946.

Olly then led what she describes as “an ordinary life” and went into business. He opened up links with the UK and with Germany, believing that strong international relations were vital and often saying “we should forgive but not forget.”

While he rarely talked about the war, it left deep scars. Many prisoners did not survive imprisonment in Stalag IV B Luftlager 1. Weakened by hunger, many died of disease. Mr Grønfur Olsen attempted to escape but was foiled. By the time the camp was liberated he was so unwell that he had to be sent to Switzerland for rehabilitation.

Bodil said: "Sometimes in the night he would wake up screaming. I would ask him what it was and he said it was dreams about not having food, about barbed wire and desperation."

At that time little was understood about conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which seems the likely explanation for the dreams.

Bodil said: "Sometimes you would look at him and see his mind was in another place, somewhere far away. And every 27th of July, the anniversary of when he was shot down, he would sit on the cliffs and look out to sea. He would have a glass and drink perhaps a bit too much, remembering that day and the actions of the pilot who died."

Olly died in the 1980s and his daughter often wished she had known more about his time as a prisoner, and also how he felt about having taken part in a bombing campaign that killed so many ordinary Germans. Just last year, however, she discovered a book containing poems he had written during two years in the camp. This not only answered some of her questions but led her to create paintings inspired by the experience of her father and other airmen.

Some of the poems show despair, but in others Bodil senses a feeling of hope: "I think my father had hope – hope that the war would end, that he would be free again, that he could go home to his family, his old life, and the people he loved and missed."

Verses from two of Olly's poem's

3 PoW Stalag 4b

*Instead of the bombs
Hill 60s and Sommes
Let's beat all our swords
Into ploughs*

PoW Stalag 4b

*To look forward and peer
Like some prophet or seer
Is never my aim or desire
I wish only my folks
My chair and my smokes
And maybe a bright blazing fire*

The Leith exhibition

Leith School of Art is based in the oldest Norwegian church outside Norway, which was set up 150 years ago as a place where seaman docked in Edinburgh could worship. The LSA is working with Bergen-based The Helping Hand Trust to preserve the church as a historic icon and to nurture cultural links between the two countries.

Bodil's exhibition is the first fruit of what the organisations hope will be an ongoing series of exchanges between Norwegian artists and artists linked to the LSA.

While it will be Bodil's first time in Scotland her long-term partner, Trond Mohn, is very much looking forward to returning. His own background very much reflects the internationalist outlook of Mr Grønfur Olsen, as he was born in Scotland and then brought up in Norway.

The exhibition in Scotland will be one of three linked to Bodil's father. The first was in Norway at a museum commemorating World War II and the experiences of PoWs. Another will be held in Bad Liebenwerda, the German town near the Stalag IV B camp where Olly was imprisoned.

Bodil said: "I think it is quite wonderful to have had this invitation and to hold an exhibition in the town near where my father was in prison."

LSA and the Norwegian church

Leith School of Art is situated in the oldest Norwegian Lutheran church outside of Norway. It was built in 1868 by the Norwegian Seamen's Mission to serve the seafaring community around Leith Docks. It was the first church built outside of Norway by the Mission and illustrates close historic links between Scotland and Norway.

Scottish architect James Simpson and Johan Schroder of Copenhagen designed the church. The fish-scale tiles on the spire are of particular interest as is the spire itself – with its characteristically Scandinavian tall and slender design. The stained glass windows in the main sanctuary (now a studio) show a crucifixion with fish and Christ fishing with his disciples.

A founding stone can be seen inside the main entrance behind the double doors with script in Old Norwegian.

In the garden is the Vim Stone. In 1937 a ship named Vim, sailing from Norway with a cargo of timber, ran aground, letting in water. However, a fragment of rock broke off, and plugged the hole. This prevented the ship from sinking and it safely reached Leith. The stone was removed from the ship and carried to the church and a service of thanksgiving was held for the protection of the ship and preservation of the sailors' lives.

The Norwegian community used the church for Sunday worship and also as a community centre for Scandinavians in Edinburgh.

The Norwegian Seamen's Mission sold the church about 30 years ago. It passed through a succession of owners before being bought by Mark and Lottie Cheverton in 1988. The Chevertons repaired and restored the building and converted it for use as an art school. In 1991 the Chevertons were killed in a car crash and the future of the church again looked uncertain. However, Philip Archer, a colleague and friend of the Chevertons was appointed as Principal. The school has gone from strength to strength.

The church is still consecrated and continues to be used by the Norwegian community for special services and events.

The Helping Hand Trust

In 1985 the Helping Hand Trust was founded. The trust works towards maintaining the Scandinavian Lutheran Church as a cultural monument on Scottish ground and to promote Norwegian–Scottish relations. The Trust is based in Bergen, Norway. See more about the Helping Hand Trust on www.leithseamenschurch.no

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