

**PIONEERS**

Breaking through Walls: A Look at the Life of Leif Hovelsen

Christoph Beat Spreng

Submitted: January 2011

Accepted: March 2011

Published: May 2011

■ Abstract

As a student, Hovelsen was active in the resistance against the Nazi occupation of Norway. He was betrayed to the SS, got arrested and was taken to Grini Concentration Camp. There he was put into solitary confinement and was interrogated, tortured and threatened with a death sentence.

A profound transformation came about which led Hovelsen to devote his life to reconciliation between individuals and nations. This experience brought him to the industrial Ruhr area of Germany where he worked with others to build up a new, different kind of country. Informally, and in hindsight, effectively, he later contributed to a new relationship between the governments of Bonn and Oslo.

Still later he was engaged in creating coalitions of conscience on both sides of what was still the Iron Curtain; a personal contribution to what became visible by the fall of the Berlin Wall and also the Glasnost and Perestroika process.

■ Keywords

concentration camps, forgiveness, European reconstruction, citizen diplomacy, initiatives for change

1. BACKGROUND AND FAMILY

Leif Hovelsen had a modest, wholesome family upbringing. His father was a sportsman, and a professional skier. He was known to have made a ski-jump whilst playing a Souza tune on his accordion without interruption, and eventually became famous in the USA, touring with the renowned Barnum & Bailey Circus and promoting skiing in the State of Colorado. For papa Hovelsen hardly anything seemed impossible to do. Leif's mother was the devoted caregiver and believer. Leif seemed to thrive during his school years in Oslo. And with the war of ideas at large in the Europe of the 1930s his eager mind and heart grappled with concepts in philosophy and

psychology. His childhood beliefs seemed too small to him now. Although attracted by the writings of Karl Marx, he was not convinced by them and continued searching for an all-embracing perspective. He was keen to be somewhere at the forefront. And sure enough, with the occupation of Norway by Nazi Germany, it did not take long before a clandestine shortwave radio receiver was mounted underneath the desk in his room. He had just begun his university studies and would excuse himself from the family room to 'do homework upstairs'. But he was listening to messages of the exiled King Haakon VII and government from London, distributing them via underground press and eventually being responsible for equipping others with shortwave receivers. In his



autobiographical book¹ he writes about these days: “Mother was suspicious at my eagerness to do homework. One day she surprised me when she entered my room. I had forgotten to lock it. I feared that my enterprise was foiled, at least in our home. But smilingly she asked: ‘Would you also get me a headset?’ Later, the three of us would often sit there and listen.”

2. WAR, PRISON CAMP

“It was night time. Somebody was hammering on the house door and woke me up. I was afraid. Suddenly boots thumped up the stairs and the door was pushed open. The Gestapo!”, writes Hovelsen. He had been betrayed. He was picked up on 9 June 1943, and taken to the well-known Grini Concentration Camp and tortured for most of the nearly two years he was held there, at times moved to the occupiers’ headquarters in down-town Oslo for interrogation.

Camp life had many aspects. There was the pressure to conform to the ideas of people of a certain mindset, the temptation to compromise, as well as a little space for heroism. All of this formed a tough learning environment. For the first time, he also met people from other strata of Norwegian society. In some way, the inmates represented a cross section of the country’s elite, such as an econometrist who was to later win the Nobel Prize. But between themselves they also mirrored pre-war domestic divisions. Some more senior prisoners eventually became his esteemed conversation partners. Eiliv Skard, a history professor, can be identified as one of them, having had a sustained influence on the young Hovelsen. With some of his own generation he was connected by solid comradeship. All the more testing when some of them were singled out, to be driven away to execution. Scenes of the final farewell under these conditions have deeply etched themselves into the memory of the survivors. Decades later, when publishing his book, Hovelsen would describe it like this: “...(I decided on the spot) when I saw Olav’s face on that last evening never to deny or to betray”. It is worth noting that such testing moments have not forged a tough hero, but an insightful, warm-hearted person. Maybe the following words of his help to shed some light on this: “(The ability) to stick to this promise (over the years has shown that it) was not a question of success or failure, but one of grace and commitment... Olav and his friends have become like part of my heart beat.”

The following piece is very central to Hovelsen’s life; therefore it is best conveyed in his own words, drawn from a speech² he gave in Switzerland at a commemoration of 50 years of the end of World War II:

“One of my friends from the Resistance had betrayed me. He had been misled to collaborate with the Gestapo. I was kept in solitary confinement for several months.

After some weeks of gruelling interrogations, the Gestapo officer in charge told me that I was on the list of those to be executed. ‘But your case needs to go through the Police Court,’ he added. Everything inside me screamed for life at this bitter point in time. I cried in desperation. Then I experienced that no evil, no man-made hell in the world can obstruct the love of God from reaching a human being. As I stretched out my hands to heaven in utter distress I felt God’s power beyond my physical existence and my intellect. I was given an inner freedom and joy that could not be destroyed by any diabolic force. I knew the Gestapo had no power over me anymore, neither death nor the fear of execution. I was at peace with God and myself. It was as if a bridge had been built across the chasm between life and death towards eternity.

Some weeks later a senior officer of the Gestapo visited me. He was so exceedingly friendly that I could not imagine why he had come. Finally he let the cat out of the bag. He wanted to strike a deal. He suggested that it was much better to work together with them than to be executed: ‘We can free you soon and you can tell us what is happening in the resistance movement.’ This came so unexpectedly; I was dumbfounded. There was the person who held my fate in his hands. I felt small and powerless. Then, something broke through in me, and I heard myself saying: ‘No, I cannot do this. It is against my conscience.’ He looked at me, astonished: ‘I don’t understand you. You have been betrayed; betrayal is normal.’ After a while he continued: ‘If we release you today, you can go home to your parents, pick up your studies at the university and do what you like. Wouldn’t that be what you want? We can guarantee that no human being will ever know that you are informing us.’ Again, it came from inside my heart: ‘No, I cannot do this. It is against my conscience.’ He got up without a reply. At the door of the room he said: ‘Think about it. I’ll be back in a week. Then we can reach an agreement.’

During that week a lot of things went through my mind. I argued that my parents would understand if I accepted the offer. Would it not be more intelligent to stay alive? In my mind I was tempted to say yes. But faced with the possibility of becoming an informant I felt in my heart

1 Leif Hovelsen (2009). *Durch die Mauern – Wege zur Versöhnung*. Munich: Taschenbuch. 187 pages. ISBN 978-3-00-027271-4

2 *Caux-Information*, Nr. 5-6, 1995



that there was no other option than a clear 'No'. As I was about to take this deep resolve, something extraordinary took place. I experienced the contradiction of being truly free at the unique point of having lost everything.

But the Gestapo officer never returned."

The uncertainty and threats against prisoners continued, as did the process of their elimination. Eventually it transpired that those similarly sentenced and still held at Grini were due to be shipped to Germany, destined for the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. At one such selection for transportation, Leif knew this was the road to a certain end. He wrote a letter of encouragement to his parents and had it smuggled out. In the hustle of being moved from place to place, four inmates, among them Leif, were not made to board the vessel with the 36 others headed for Germany. Some time later, news arrived that the vessel had hit a mine in the sea and sunk; only four survived, being saved by Swedish fishermen. This loss of colleagues hit Hovelsen very badly. He was tormented and could not understand why they had to perish while he was still alive.

3. LIBERATION AND FINDING FREEDOM

The spring of 1945 was characterised by the nervousness of the occupying forces, which influenced camp life – and eventually Nazi Germany capitulated, the event the Grini inmates had all hoped for and believed would happen one day. The days, weeks and months that followed were a mix of utter joy, jubilation and pride as well as mourning, dealing with loss and revenge.

At one point, Hovelsen and a colleague were put in charge of guarding Wehrmacht prisoners in Akershus Fortress. One day, a truck full of new prisoners wearing Luftwaffe uniforms arrived. To his great shock, Hovelsen immediately saw through the deception; they were the Gestapo commander and his guards unit of the Grini Camp, where Hovelsen had been held all that time. The superior, a British colonel, was shocked and gave Hovelsen and his colleague a free hand. So, tables turned, they gave the German officers the tough punishment drills which they, as inmates, had suffered at Grini. One of them became so worn out, he asked for water to drink. Hovelsen filled a bucket and threw the water in the man's face and shoulders. Loud, malicious cheers went up from all

his fellow countrymen who had watched the scene. This event was going to make the rounds in many subsequent conversations. One time, someone said, as if jealously: "You should have been tougher on them!" Hovelsen had become popular, kept telling that story, but he was not the happier for it.

This and all the other experiences before and after liberation were of such intensity, they were difficult to get over. Once, during a train ride, the punishment drill dealt to his former captors leapt back into his mind. It occurred to him that the battle which had given him inner freedom and victory in captivity, had now been lost and needed winning again. After much torment, he eventually accepted the tough truth that in his heart were the same seeds which he had so strongly condemned in the occupiers and their treatment of him and his fellows. He overcame his natural reserve and sought an encounter with one of the former Gestapo men whom he had never wanted to meet again; he had tortured Hovelsen. During his next guard duty he fetched him from the cell. "The evil you did to me is forgiven. I will not litigate against you... By the way, my mother asked me to tell you that she is praying for you." The man did not reply but after a while he was shaking all over. Hovelsen accompanied him back to his cell.

Many months later, he heard from the prison chaplain of Akershus Fortress. The man had been tried and condemned to death and prior to execution had asked for the Holy Communion. This news contained a dimension which Hovelsen could not cope with. It took time for him to understand what had happened, not least to himself. He had not wanted to meet his tormentor but when he did he felt liberated from bitterness and hate; he had found the grace of charity. But he was still unaware that this was going to be a very useful asset in the years to come.

His studies of history and philosophy at the university progressed well. The professor who had been such a good advisor at the Grini Camp was meanwhile promoted to Chair of the History of Ideas and hosted groups of students at his home for debates and for fellowship. Hovelsen and three other students became close friends as they searched for clarity on the meaning of life. How could alternatives to the power of weapons and repression become relevant? The arms race of the late 1930s had played out so horribly, the alternative of Moral Re-Armament³ was worth looking into as a road from the ruins. Professor Skard suggested they look into this matter at an international conference in Caux, Switzerland.⁴ In 1947, Hovelsen and his three friends were part of a bigger student delegation taking part in the

3 Initiatives of Change, its precursor movement was known as Moral Re-Armament. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moral_Re-Armament

4 Caux International Conference Centre, Switzerland. See www.caux.ch/.



proceedings there. It turned out to be an inspirational experience for students who had been so limited in their freedom of movement due to the war.

It should be added that the Swiss Conference was able to draw on more than ten years of intensive thought and work preceding World War II. One of the short-term concepts offered was: "Sound homes, team work in industry, a united nation". At the time, "team work in industry" served to pioneer the collective bargaining policies between workers and employers organisations, an aspect that was to be relevant in Hovelsen's future activities.

Upon returning to Norway after the conference, they started developing student activities and they received visitors from other parts of Europe. Then, on a family outing into the mountains, it occurred to Hovelsen that he should free himself from his studies to go to Germany and assist in trust-building initiatives as part of the reconstruction effort. This idea was an enormous challenge, both to himself and to his family, as he was the first generation to have made it to university. The idea of joining a movement in Germany had come up through a study trip to London, but Hovelsen had reacted with caution. Now, the idea came back to him with force and eventually he understood the deep meaning, seeing it in the perspective of having been spared whilst some of his friends had lost their lives. In spite of critical remarks, like "wasting his time on the Germans" or "betraying Norwegian interests" he took up this special assignment.

4. WITH COAL MINERS, STEELWORKERS

A similar understanding had prompted some of the regional post-war leaders of North Rhine-Westphalia to invite the teams, which Hovelsen then joined.

At that time, 60% of Germany's industrial capacity was in this relatively small area. Half a million miners produced the annual hundred million tons of coal from pits going as deep as 1000 metres. From the furnaces came 20-30 million tons of steel, and the largest river port of Europe lay adjacent to these enterprises, which ran all day and night in three shifts. The struggle in the hearts and minds of de-

cision-makers was also of some magnitude. All of that was to become home to Hovelsen for several years. His studies and the events in his life gave him many opportunities for open, honest encounters.

At the many meetings and international exchange visits there were theatre productions as well as printed materials with which to interact. One of these plays was "The Forgotten Factor" by Alan Thornhill,⁵ a drama that aptly featured the human dimension of the industrial Ruhr area. Groups of people from the industries would be sent to the same international conferences that Hovelsen and his friends knew in Caux, Switzerland.

One of the Marxist-minded workers' council leaders returned home from there, saying: "I have sung the 'The Internationale'⁶ most of my life, but there I saw it lived out for the first time." Over the years, a change in the industrial negotiation climate occurred. The end no longer justified all means. Instead "what is right, not who is right" became a working hypothesis.

It should be added that under the Western Allied Command, checks and balances had been brought into economic policy, which foresaw places for workers' representatives on boards of larger companies, what later became well known as the *Mitbestimmung* (co-determination). Initially it had been introduced as a safeguard against possible reactionary tendencies, but it proved to be a key to the post-war economic recovery of Western Germany. Hence the relevance of the time invested by Hovelsen, his friends Jens-Jonathan, Aage, Geoffrey and many, many others.

It is worth remembering here that the macro-level of European cooperation began with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which, in the words of French Prime Minister Robert Schuman, would henceforth "make war not only unthinkable, but materially impossible".⁷ Thus, the approach of "sound homes, team work in industry..." which developed in the Ruhr Area was considered by analysts to ultimately constitute one of the basic elements of the Schuman Plan. Edward Luttwak⁸ later stated: "They (the Caux conferences and Moral Re-armament [MRA] programmes) did not invent the Schuman Plan, but facilitated its realisation from the start. That is no small achievement in view of the vast importance ..."

5 Rev Alan Thornhill. <http://www.uk.iofc.org/node/38728>.

6 The Internationale: Anthem of international socialism, originally written at the time of the Paris Commune in 1871.

7 European Coal and Steel Community: Robert Schuman's proposal of 9 May 1950, founding of the means of gathering the European nations into a peace-enhancing union. Source: <http://schuman.info/>

8 Edward Luttwak in Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson (eds.) (1994), *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, page 55. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-510280-0.



5. THE POWER OF EVIL

Hovelsen's talent for action seemed paired with that of reflection and analysis. In the full swing of post-war reconstruction work, he realised that promoting an alternative to the ideologies of Nazism and of Communism had its own inherent risk; that of a sense of superiority and with it of stagnation. Marx, Darwin, Freud and belief in progress had been influential in his studies. But these had not grasped the true nature of Evil. In the 1950s he met a Danish editor who told him about the efforts of the founder of the MRA movement, Dr Frank Buchman, to try to influence and change some Nazi leaders before the war. A meeting had taken place with SS leader Himmler at which the Danish editor was present. He told Hovelsen how depressed Buchman had been afterwards, remarking to the editor: "It is too late. The Demonical has already taken power." This had been his own clear perception when he was in solitary cell B24. How could this take-over have happened? Briefly put, it would begin with small and then bigger compromises until, under certain circumstances, one passed the point of no return. He shuddered to think what might have become of him if he had agreed to collaborate. Reflections like these led him to treasure the tenets of Christian belief; redemption had become an experience.

Other events, like the breakout of the Cold War left him puzzled and wondering.

Hovelsen had come to realise that for insights, which help to go forward in life, there was a price to pay, often born out of pain, and then somewhere along the way unexpected openings would bring visible progress. With time he learned to trust, or rather wait for, that mysterious Unexpected.

6. CITIZEN DIPLOMACY

With the rapid economic recovery of Western Germany came the negotiations of post-war reparation payments to victims of formerly occupied countries. The relations between the different capitals of Western Europe in mid-1958 had become weighed down with this issue. This was also the case between Oslo and Bonn. The media were venting discontent. Hovelsen took time to analyse the reparation issue, returning from Germany having been notified of the wish of the Federal Government to make progress on it.⁹ Busy with other work he arranged

to meet his Prime Minister Gerhardsen, asking him how he saw the issue and presenting him with nine points he had elaborated. Gerhardsen wanted to make headway on the reparations issue, expressing the idea that starting to negotiate and settling with smaller states like Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands might help to overcome the deadlock. They agreed that Hovelsen would sound out Bonn about this idea.

Hovelsen again met the minister in charge in Bonn who, after consultations, was glad to inform him that the Federal Chancellor warmly welcomed Gerhardsen's idea. It meant that the intended method for obtaining reparation from the Federal Republic – a single channel for all claims planned by the Allied Countries – needed to be modified. This modification was eventually initiated by Norway. To cut the story short, Norway was able to sign a Reparations Treaty on 7 August 1959. Denmark did the same with Bonn on 24 August. The Netherlands followed a bit later, on 8 April 1960, because it also included resolving a territorial issue. In Oslo some criticised the deal as being insufficient. Gerhardsen replied that it was a "favourable settlement". Much later, Hovelsen had the opportunity to plough through the Foreign Ministry reparation files and discovered that the 'one channel for all claims' method would have left Norway with half the reparation amount; so, Gerhardsen had been right and the settlement was indeed favourable.

The funds had come from a Bonn budget section, whose minister had visited Oslo in May of the same year – just before the crisis, and then too Hovelsen had worked hard to help arrange a dignified welcome to Oslo. That may well have been another thread in the tapestry of the Reparations Treaty. Essentially, Prime Minister Gerhardsen and Hovelsen were of the same view: the payments were obviously important to avoid continued hardship to victims and/or their dependants, but one should not lose sight of the core issue of the Reparations Treaties, that of restoring relations. This could not be achieved in a one-for-all-channel approach. Also, they had a clear perception of the need of the young Federal Republic to take steps to regain the confidence of each of its neighbouring countries. Such understanding was the totally unexpected fruit of the recent painful and trying years; they had both been inmates of the Grini Concentration Camp.

In the following years Hovelsen would repeatedly find himself in situations of support and guidance to leaders of his country and of Germany to overcome the pain of the past and to rebuild relationships. In 1970, this culminated

⁹ Leif Hovelsen (2009). *Durch die Mauern – Wege zur Versöhnung*. Munich: Taschenbuch. 187 pages. ISBN 978-3-00-027271-4



in Hovelsen preparing the German Federal President Heinemann's state visit to Norway, where King Olav V himself made personal moves to organise a dignified and constructive event.

While preparing the Heinemann state visit, Hovelsen was granted time for an exclusive press interview with the President, as a means to enlighten public opinion at home. Just before the interview, he felt impelled to forget the usual list of questions and instead tell the President of the life journey that had led him to be what he was and do what he did. He also offered his own view of the situation and the personalities that the President would meet in Oslo: a very unusual thing to do. The President in turn told him of the troubles he had had resisting the Nazi powers and of his wish to help open a new chapter in bilateral relations. Afterwards, Hovelsen got feedback from the presidential Press Secretary, who conveyed personal thanks and appreciation from his chief. The Press Secretary added: "The personal angle is precisely what the President appreciated, this happens so rarely: diplomats who come to see him tend to say things that are already known to us in most cases." It should be added that Hovelsen did get an article written prior to the state visit and discovered with pleasure that the main Norwegian news agency had distributed it to the media without any substantial changes.

7. BREAKING THE WALLS

The experience of tyranny in his youth had given Hovelsen a sharpened outlook. However, dictatorships were not eradicated with the end of World War II. Other such regimes continued to exist. Those who lived under these regimes and believed in and worked for freedom and human rights would find a natural friend in him. So they shared their lives with Hovelsen and discussed lessons to be drawn from events in the hope of making things better. Over the years he became friends with Yugoslav leader Milovan Djilas, a comrade of Tito, author of "The New Class" who was deposed and jailed. Other friendships with those who had suffered included Vladimir Maximov, Sergej Kovaliov and many others. Hovelsen was also actively involved in the nomination of Russian Scientist Andrej Sacharov¹⁰ for the Nobel Peace Prize. He, Sacharov and his wife Jelena Bonner remained close to each other for years to come.

Although mutual friends had repeatedly suggested that he meet Alexander Solzhenitsyn, it actually never hap-

pened. But Hovelsen launched a campaign when he discovered that the Geneva and New York UN Headquarters had banned the sale of Solzhenitsyn's books on their premises. He was outraged at the infringement on freedom of speech in the very places that had launched the universal declaration of Human Rights. Together with friends working in the media and diplomats he succeeded in lifting the ban although it was never disclosed who had initiated it.

The sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, is known to have dared to challenge Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev publicly to his face. He had this to say: "When I met Leif Hovelsen, we became friends immediately. We realised that the most important thing in this life is human dignity and that our belief in this is independent of our achievements or of merit; it is a commandment from above and forms the foundation of our walk on this earth." It should be added that when Soviet leader Khrushchev died, his family asked Neizvestny to create the family tomb stone. Another of his sculptures is depicted on the cover of the Norwegian and German editions of Hovelsen's book, in fact inspiring its title: "Through the Walls – Ways to Reconciliation".

8. FINAL REMARKS

Section 6 lends itself to a much more detailed description. Also, further exploration could follow, such as to what extent supporting international developments of the kind would be replicable and under which set of conditions. Nevertheless, the most important characteristic of Hovelsen's work is his focus on building honest, trustworthy relations with people. His effort on public issues that needed solutions was blessed with success because of the prevailing personal trust. And inherent to the story is that the relationships had not been developed as a means to an end. It is worth noting here that this genuine people-centred approach took some courage on Hovelsen's part, and at times represented a challenge to depart from the moulds of convention. Undoubtedly, this part of the activities described is what was later termed Track Two or Multitrack Diplomacy, the subject which Joseph V. Montville first wrote about in 1981.

In this pioneer narrative we have traced the journey of an individual as it interacted with some decisive events of 20th century Europe. This interaction did not unfold as a previously prepared plan but as a wholehearted response to challenges as they occurred. This shows us some aspects of conscience-based decision-making in the context of personal and societal responsibility. ■

¹⁰ Andrei Sakharov and Human Rights (2010). Council of Europe Publishing, 170 pages. ISBN 978-92-871-6947-1



Recommended citation

SPRENG, Christoph Beat (2011). "Breaking through Walls: A Look at the Life of Leif Hovelsen" [online article]. *Journal of Conflictology*. Vol. 2, Iss. 1. Campus for Peace, UOC. [Consulted: dd/mm/yy].

<<http://www.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/journal-of-conflictology/article/view/vol2iss1-spreng/vol2iss1-spreng>>

ISSN 2013-8857



This work is subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivative-Works 3.0 Spain licence. It may be copied, distributed and broadcasted provided that the author and the source (*Journal of Conflictology*) are cited. Commercial use and derivative works are not permitted. The full licence can be consulted at: <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/es/deed.en>>

About the author

Christoph Beat Spreng
c.spreng@caux.ch

Christoph Beat Spreng is a Council Member of Caux-Initiatives of Change, Switzerland. He was Programme Coordinator for the Caux International Conference Centre for ten years. For five years he has represented Initiatives of Change-International at the INGO Conference of the Council of Europe and serves as Special Advisor for Intercultural Dialogue. Originally a mechanical engineer, NGO activities have led him to work on industrial relations, minority issues, post-conflict situations and in the media.



**CAMPUS
FOR PEACE**



Universitat Oberta
de Catalunya
www.uoc.edu