

The NORWEGIAN TEACHERS' RESISTANCE

Letters and diaries from Edvard Brakstad during his internment by the Germans tell a remarkable story of courage and conviction



BY CARTER G. WALKER

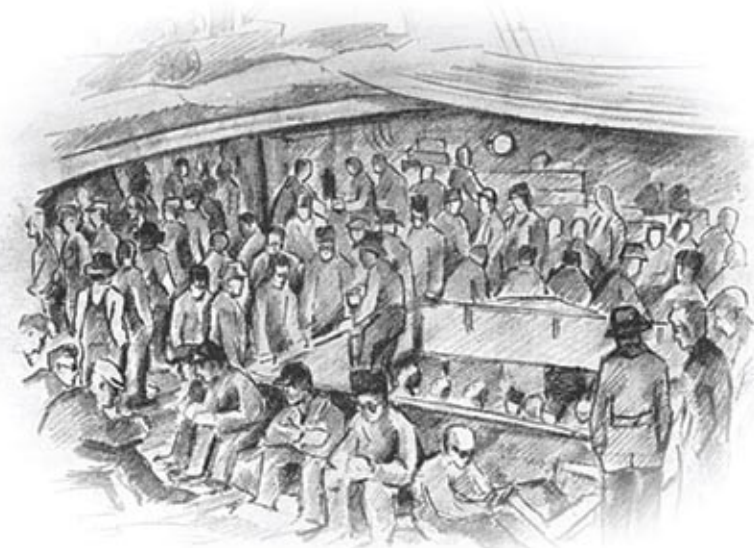
When the Nazis invaded Norway on April 9, 1940, the Norwegian army managed to resist militarily until its formal surrender two months later. But resistance within the country by judges, clergy, trade unions, teachers, parents and civilians to the Nazification of Norway was well-organized, steadfast and ongoing throughout the five-year occupation.

Among the largest organized oppositions was the nonviolent teachers' resistance in 1942. After Vidkun Quisling declared himself "Minister President" on February 1, 1942, he put forth a series of laws announcing, among other things, the formation of a Teacher Association and the Nazi Youth Movement, both designed to indoctrinate Norwegian students in Nazi ideology.

In the first ten months of occupation, despite the outlawing of radio and newspapers other than those that were German state-sponsored, the Norwegian population had put together a network of underground communications including more than 300 newspapers. Through that network, the teachers learned in advance that in order to keep their jobs they would be required to join Quisling's new Teacher Association. Before the Nazis had a chance to officially present the new association to the

teachers, the teachers created and individually signed their own identically-worded declaration, more than 12,000 of which were posted simultaneously on Feb. 20, 1942. It read in part: "I find I will not be able to contribute to the education of Norway's youth along the lines that are

laid out by the National Socialist Youth Association, as this goes against my conscience. ... I cannot regard myself as a member of the Teacher Association." By pre-empting the Germans with a declaration that spoke to their shared conscience, the teachers created a larger problem for the



In April 1942, 499 teachers were packed onto a 250-passenger ship, the D/S Skjerstad, and sent to prison camps near Kirkenes. Conditions on the 17-day journey were brutal, with little food, one bathroom and not enough space to lie down.

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Quisling government. Despite threats of dismissal and the withholding of salary for those who refused to join, the teachers held firm. Recognizing that they were not making any headway and that more than 90 percent of Norway's 14,000 teachers opposed the Teacher Association, the government closed the schools for a monthlong holiday on February 27, claiming it was a war-time fuel-saving measure.

In March, when it was clear that the teachers were not going to back down, 1,100 teachers were arrested.

One such man was Edvard Brakstad. Born in 1888 on a farm

country. The head administrator of the school supported Quisling and the Nazis.

Along with two other teachers from his school, Brakstad was arrested on April 1, 1942, and taken to Grini, the country's largest prison camp, outside of Oslo. Many of the arrested teachers were sent by railway cattle cars to Jørstadmoen, north of Lillehammer. At both places, the men were terrorized by the Nazis in an effort to pressure them into joining the Teachers' Association. Just as Quisling and the Germans knew they had to break the teachers to have any influence over the people of Norway, the teachers believed their ability to stand their ground was critically important for the war efforts and for the future of Norway.

Though they had no way to anticipate the punishment the Germans would inflict, the teachers remained resolute. What transpired was a nearly 8-month battle of wills.

Edvard Brakstad wrote to his wife and two children over the course of his nearly six-month-long ordeal, and faithfully made notes on loose pages that he hid from the Germans. His son, Olav Brakstad, who was 20 at the time of his father's arrest, emigrated to the United States in the 1950s. Inspired by his own son's keen interest in the matter, about 10 years ago Olav gathered Edvard's letters and journal pages. Together with his son, Erik, Olav translated and posted the writings online. Olav and

Erik shared these materials with *Viking*, giving us a remarkable look into the events of 1942.

Of the 1,100 teachers arrested in late March and early April, 636 of the youngest and healthiest men were transported from Grini and Jørstadmoen to Trondheim, where 499 men were packed onto a 250-passenger ship, the *D/S Skjerstad*, and sent to prison camps near Kirkenes in Arctic Norway. The journey was brutal: There was very little food, one bathroom and not even enough room for the men to lie down. In addition, the *D/S Skjerstad* was providing cover for a German ammunition ship, the *Santos*, which sailed between the *D/S Skjerstad* and shore. The waters off the coast were mined, and the teachers anticipated Russian air attacks at any time. The harrowing voyage lasted from April 11 to April 28. Edvard Brakstad was among the 147 men who sailed a few weeks later in less cramped conditions.

Elvenes at Kirkenes, June 7, 1942

Dear all three,
We arrived here the 11th of May, live in barracks, 14 men in my room. Great guys all of them. We managed the trip well, good weather, interesting to see North-Norway. ... Work outside, usually road work and other outdoor work. ... Time passes quickly. Things are all right. You need not worry about me. Hope we will be released some time during the summer. What is uppermost in our minds is the concern for you back home. Be calm, we will meet again before long. ...

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The men worked long days with little food. They were sustained by their friendship, their shared mission, and what little news they could get from home and the ongoing resistance effort. Brakstad's journal entries, which begin even before he wrote to his family, reflect the conditions in which the prisoners lived.

May 25, 1942

A quiet day for most of us, but work for some at Kirkenes. The biggest thing that happened was a [smuggled] letter read aloud, from our leaders in Oslo. Main points: They are following closely what is happening to us. ... Our families get all the financial help they need. Six-hundred-sixty-three clergymen have resigned. ... The schools, for the most part, are in session although the teachers have not signed the loyalty pledge. ... Youth mobilization also dropped. Teachers' [Association] probably also dropped. There is "feverish" activity to secure our freedom. The letter caused a quiet optimism amongst us. It is a common belief that we might be let free fairly soon. Our action has brought about big results.

Among the myriad hardships the men endured, perhaps the worst was the un-

certainty of if and when they might be released. In addition, their work unloading ships in Kirkenes put them in grave and constant danger of air raids. Surprisingly, only one teacher died during the ordeal. Olaf Hale from Tjølling was killed during the unloading of a ship.

May 29, 1942

No big happenings these days. ... People think that we will be free soon — maybe as soon as the first of June. I think we must be prepared for a longer stay here. Yesterday there were air raid alarms and bombing in Kirkenes — today also. I am going to Kirkenes tomorrow to work at 6:30 a.m. ... Nesse tried to steal sausages from the Germans, was caught and beaten up. ... It is a shame the way this is handled.

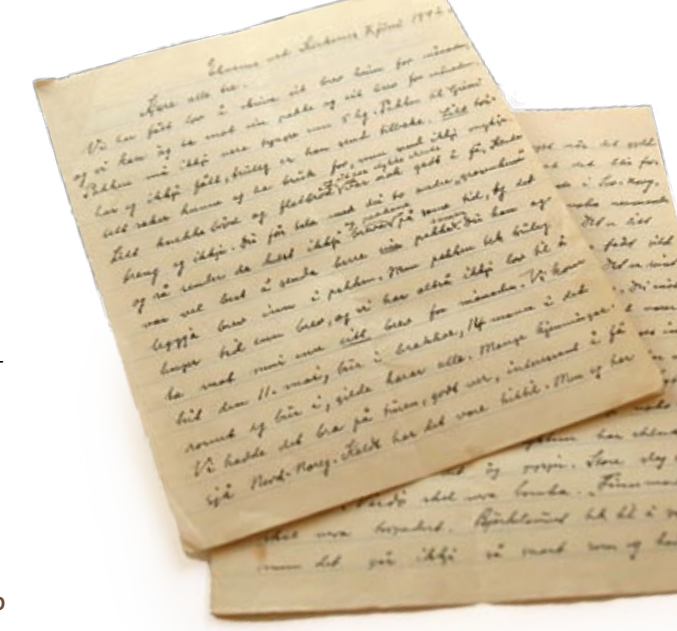
Despite the grueling labor and wretched living conditions, Brakstad's notes and letters always reflected a remarkably positive outlook on his experience.

Date unknown

Great weather the past two days. Yesterday morning I got up at 5, sunned myself and washed my entire body, got coffee and had breakfast. A magnificent morning. ... Now it is full sum-



Above: Teachers and students gather for a covert Syttende Mai celebration in the Brakstad home.



Above: The Brakstad family, from left: Olav, Aagot, Åse and Edvard. Over the course of his nearly 6-month-long ordeal, Edvard Brakstad wrote letters to his family and kept a journal, which he hid from his German captors.



In Kirkenes, the teachers unloaded German ships, which put them in constant danger of air raids.

outside Molde, Brakstad was the first in his family to attend school. He was, according to his grandson Erik Brakstad, an ambitious student, a vociferous and lifelong advocate of Nynorsk and, in his adulthood, a highly respected teacher and administrator. In 1942, he was a teacher at the Eidsvoll Lands gymnas, a state-run prep school for students 16 and older from across the

ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF KIRKENESFERDA | CAPPELEN FORLAG. PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF OLAV BRAKSTAD.

mer, and the leaves are almost fully grown. We have stayed around the tents and sunned ourselves. This really is just vacation living!

Still, there was never any lack of clarity in his notes as to why Brakstad was there.

June 24, 1942

... But we pull ourselves together and keep calm. We are fighting for our people and for our freedom, our country and our children. For humanity. And we're hoping for better times. I hope things are going well back home. So I live with the hope that that I will see my family before very long. ...

In mid-July, Brakstad fell extremely ill with what he was told was an inflammation of the colon. He was unable to eat or work for several days and even-

tually found himself on a doctor's list of prisoners who should be sent home first. Still, the men awaited news each day about their release.

August 2, 1942

New month. Our stay here has lasted longer than most of us had expected. Now summer is on its way out, and we are still sitting here. We haven't heard much about our return trip. Nothing more than the lists that the doctor has put together. ... All this uncertainty here is hard on all of us. Yesterday it was said that the schools in Oslo are going to start on September 1st. Most of us take that as a good sign. ...

Brakstad wrote his last entry on August 23 and was released later that month. The remaining teachers were released over time with the

last group leaving Kirkenes in early November. Brakstad and his compatriots endured another perilous trip back home—his ship narrowly escaped a Russian bomb.

The teachers returned to their schools over the course of the autumn. Brakstad later took over as head administrator of his school—without ever having to join a Teachers' Association. The battle was won. Thanks in part to the teachers' unwavering conviction and valor, the Norwegian people continued to resist Nazi tyranny throughout the war.

Editor's Note: To read the complete diaries of Edvard Brakstad, visit tinyurl.com/brakstadiary. The writer wishes to thank Olav and Erik Brakstad for sharing their research and insight on Edvard Brakstad and the teachers' resistance.