

First Missions – Norway, Prisoner of War Days

First Missions – Pioneering Workers – Norway, Prisoner of War Days

Norway

Published October 10, 2010

“My Prisoner of War Days”

By Alma Lee

January, 1989

It was October 14, 1942.

Edith Hanson and I (**Alma Lee**) were visited by the Sheriff in Arnes, Norway and were told, "You are arrested."

We asked, "Why?" And [he told us that] he did not know. But [he told us that] we had to follow him to his office and we would find out. After getting to the Sheriff's office, he called the German Gestapo in Oslo.

They said, "Bring them to the Criminal office." The Sheriff was very much shook up, as it was his first experience to bring ladies to the German Criminal office. He got another man to come along on this trip.

When we got to the office, he asked the officers in charge, "I have these American ladies here. What have they done?"

The answer was, "Nothing, but the Americans have interned the Germans in America." However, this was not true (we found out later) so they had to intern us. We were taken to a Concentration Camp near Oslo, at the well-known place called the Grini Prison. Many political Norwegians were taken there. This seemed to be the end of life—as we thought of this place. On the bus over there we met **Ben Carson**, another of the workers. And later on we met Rena Husom the next day.

All Americans in Norway were gathered up—even people who had only been in America for a short while. Such, of course, were sent home after a few weeks, as even Ben was, because his father had been a Norwegian citizen until Ben was nine years old.

Life at Grini Concentration Camp:

Life at Grini was not all pleasant. We feared to look out of the windows to see what was going on, as we were told that anyone looking out of the windows could be shot. We were twenty-eight in the room. Where we were, there were three-story beds. So the girls who slept on the top had a good view of what was going on outside. One Sunday afternoon they saw a number of Jewish men being chased up a hill and jumping as rabbits, then running down the hill. This continued for two hours. At last some of these poor men got so weary that they fell, and the Gestapo came and kicked them. We found out we could get on our knees and peek out our windows and therefore saw more than we wished. Often the police wagon would come up, which we called the Black Maria, getting prisoners. We heard they were often taken to a place called "Trandum." That was the end of them, as they were shot. Other times some were taken to a boat and sent to Germany.

Already, the next day, some of the elderly ladies asked Edith and I if we would read the Bible to them or have a little meeting. We feared this was not possible. But they encouraged us, saying that we would only hear "No."

So that first forenoon I stood by the door, speaking, when I heard someone on the other side of the door trying to find the right key to get in. It was a friendly young German who said, "Are you having a meeting?"

I replied, "Yes."

"Are you reading from the Bible?"

I replied again, "Yes."

He said, "Good." And he closed the door. This gave us courage for our daily meeting. We even sang.

In the evenings, the women prisoners on the other side of the hallways would say, "Please sing to us." This we did every evening until the last evening there when they asked if we would sing to them for the last time, as we were leaving for Germany the next day.

We asked, "What would you like to have us sing?"

They said, "Nearer My God to Thee." We sang about two verses when they knocked at the door, and one of the German lady guards came to tell them, "Tell those American ladies that this evening they are not to sing."

Later this same lady guard came in to us and said, "Tomorrow, you are leaving here."

I asked, "Where are we going?"

She replied, "It does not matter to you where you are going, you are only leaving here." We had been told by a young man who was a prisoner, which came to do black-out in the hall opposite to us, we often talked to him through a large hole. This evening he told us we would be leaving for Germany the next day. He was an interpreter for the Germans. And when they were not around, he listened to London news over the radio, wrote it for us on toilet paper, and gave [it to] us thru the key hole. We had to be careful that when read, that we destroyed it.

Meals:

Before I go on telling about leaving this Camp, I will mention a little about our meals there. Our first supper was four very thin slices of sour bread. This bread was made from un-ripened grain from Poland (mixed with paper and acid to hold it together) a small piece of margarine, and one tablespoon of plum jam that was almost as thin as water. As for the plum jam and margarine, we were to use one half of it for our supper and save the rest for breakfast, but we did not do this. So for breakfast we had four pieces of this sour bread again, and a cup of water from the faucet. This was every supper and breakfast, except once we got a tablespoon of sugar, and another time we got a half piece of thin sausage. Our dinners were three times a week what the prisoners called "Storm Soup." It was brought to us in a large wooden pail. It consisted of potatoes and rutabagas cut up with their peelings. Sometimes, a few peas were added. Other times, a few beans were added. We were not able to eat this, except for a few spoonfuls, but it made us sick. The other three days a week we got two small potatoes boiled with their peelings. In the bottom of the pails, each time, were dirt and sand. We also got one piece of half-rotten fish.

Twice during our stay there, we were brought out for twenty minutes airing, which we were to play games. Sometimes we were taken into a large room for showers. We washed our clothes and hung them on the radiators or over hot water pipes to dry. Not having much with us, we often had to wait for our clothes to dry before we had any to wear.

December 10, 1942 – Leaving Grini:

December 10, 1942 was the date we left camp Grini. It was with mixed feelings as we listened to one of the commanders tell us, "You have had it good here, haven't you? But you will have it even better where you are going."

Outside the camp was the prison wagon, or Black Maria, waiting for us. The bus driver was a friendly Norwegian man, who assured us he would be alone on his return after delivering us. There was a loose seat in the back where we would be sitting that we could put any letters or messages we would like to send and they would be taken care of by him. "And trust me, they will get to their destination." I had a couple of letters, and Rena wrote a message that this man could give our friends in Fredrickstad by phone. Others had their messages. We heard later that they all came through.

We were taken to a boat by the name of "Leda," which we nine American ladies and two political Norwegian ladies entered, also three German ladies who were our guards. Under us were German soldiers who were going home for the holidays. There was also another boat with American men (ten, all said) and they also had soldiers along, going home for the holidays. And in company with us were three war ships.

We were all sailing under the American flag, The sea was rough, and some of us got seasick. The first evening we sat in a living room where there was a piano. We asked the Captain if we might sing some hymns. This we could do.

Then he told us of the danger of our travel. The dining room was filled with boxes of mines, and we were traveling between two mine belts. If anything would happen, we would be blown to pieces into the ocean. This was on a Thursday night. At midnight we anchored in the ocean, as they did not have enough crew for the journey and these needed a rest. On Saturday at 5 p.m. it was noticed that five Russian planes were over us. They circled all night until morning.

Edith and I had a room together. I said, "I think I will go to bed." At first she could not understand my thinking, but I sat down to read just what the Bible opened up to me. It was the Psalm 121. This gave me great comfort, and assurance. Why should we worry? The God of Heaven was watching this journey, and whatever would happen, we were in His hands. I shared these thoughts with Edith, and read this Psalm to her. She too, decided we might as well try and get some sleep, as we did not know what the next day might

bring.

When we awakened, several of the ladies who traveled with us stood in the door and said, "You have been sleeping all night, and we have walked in the hallways all night. Just now the Russian planes left us." It was Sunday morning, and before many hours we would get into Stalin. We got there at about 12 o'clock. At 1 p.m. we got off the boat, met by five Gestapo, and were brought to the train. Two other Gestapo met the two political ladies. We never heard more about them.

Well, we finally got to Berlin. Our lunch on the train was bread and sardines and nothing to drink. We passed depots where it said, "Wasser." We said, "Please, give us water to drink," but no water was given. In Berlin we had to exchange depots, so some of the Gestapo stayed with us, and others went to get what they called a bus. To us it seemed like a cattle truck. One by one we were loaded on from the back, with the Gestapo getting on last. So on we drove. It seemed ages to get to the next depot.

I was reminded that we were handled like cattle. Everything was quiet. I picked up courage to break this quietness by saying, "Moooo," and they all laughed. The Gestapo had a hearty laugh, but soon there was the quietness again, so I picked up courage to again try something. This time I said, "Baaaa," and there was another laugh until soon we got on the train again.

We had a whole night on the train and until about 1 p.m. we got to a depot they called Macklenburg, I believe. A lady guard also joined us from Berlin, but all went on with the train, and a new Gestapo met us with a cart, to carry our few belongings. We walked ahead of him, and he called out once in a while, "Rect" (right) or "Links" (left).

Camp Libenau in Germany:

It was about three kilometres, so not so far. Our new camp was called "Libenau." This was a place where the Germans had their (what the English called) lunatics. There were still many there, but the English had been interned there for already two years. And a number of Americans had come in from the different occupied countries, so all together we were about 609 people. I don't know how many lunatics there were. We were told by the English people that several hundred lunatics had been given a shot and hauled away to be buried, so there could be room for the internees.

Our lifestyle was much better there. We had rooms with good beds and warm bedding. But there was no heating before Christmas day, then we got heating part of the day. We could put on our coats and go out for a walk during the day on the Camp grounds. Another girl from the Camp Grini and I got into a room where there were six ladies from Poland that were supposed to be American. Only one really spoke English. When we came in, one was in there who only could speak a few words. There was no place to hang our coats or put our belongings. She answered us when we questioned, "In the bed or under the bed?" We got a few dishes, and they were in the bed during the day and under the bed at night time. We got places to eat in the dining room, but the Polish ladies got their plates and went to bed. It was nice to get a few things to do. I helped to carry food from the kitchen, which was in another building, and then three stairs.

After meals Edith and I washed dishes for ourselves and a few others. At 10 a.m. I carried water up stairways that had been heated over briquettes, and served water for those who wished, for coffee, tea or hot water bottles. There was a library there, so we could get interesting books to read. Sometimes, the guards would take us on walks, from one to three hours. This was interesting. There were many farms with lovely orchards. In the fall we were given fruit by the farmers—all we could carry to our rooms. The German ladies would come in with their aprons full of choice fruit and give us when we were out on walks. This place being a Catholic place, the nuns would ask the internees if they would be willing to gather apples. We would get apples to eat all winter. I offered to help, like many others did. And I thought it was interesting to get outside the camp.

Mathilda Smeen (another of the workers) was in this camp about one month ahead of us. So when the camp heard about us coming from Norway, **Mathilda** supposed we were amongst them. There was a vacant bed in the room. She was amongst people from Holland. For a while we had gospel meetings in their room, and a few came in. On Sundays we changed off having services—the English church and we that is. The Catholics had their own services.

Food and Parcels:

Our food was quite different to that at Grini camp, but it was still food we were not very much used to. But there was a little variety. We got one piece of white bread once a year when the Catholic priest had his name day. And good there was no sour bread there. To begin with, we got Red Cross parcels every other week: "we," from America, "the English," from England. And other countries [received parcels that were] connected with them, so we got a variety. After a while, we got parcels each week and a card was in each parcel. It instructed us that if there was anything lacking in the parcel, we would like just to say so. At that time there were no jams or soap, so it wasn't long before we got both. But every week the English and Americans would exchange certain things, so that was a busy day. To get our parcels we would line up from room to room and stand in line to the canteen where the parcels were stored. Every now and again the Red Cross would visit us, asking us if there were anything we would be in need of. And after that there came supplies. Many times there were dresses and sweaters which came that did not fit us. So we took them apart, made dresses to fit us,

and we unraveled the sweaters and made them over. It gave us something to do as well. We often did knitting for the Red Cross and other Camps where there were Jewish children. We made tasty foods from our Red Cross parcels and enjoyed them.

There were transports that left and exchanges made, so that both the English and Americans left. After a year Mathilda was amongst them. But then the Germans sent Jewish people without a passport, and Germans were sent in return from America. The Jewish people never got farther than Kits Island and were interned there until after the war. Those from Norway were called and asked if we would like to go back to Norway. We said, "Yes."

But questions followed about whether we had any brothers in America. I answered that I had four at that time.

"What ages?" I was asked.

They all happened to be in the war age military service age, so I was refused and so were the others.

I asked, "Why?"

The reply was that they could be found fighting against the Germans. Months again went by. Finally, we were asked if we would like to return to America. Of course we said we would. So a large transport was planned for January 23, 1945. Before this we could hear that the war was getting nearer. We could hear the shooting.

Leaving camp:

It was a good day when we left the camp. We got on a very long train—many from our camp, but also from other camps. Many were Jewish men, who had been in Ghettos. Some of them were husbands and sons of some of the Jewish women from our camp. These had American passports. Thirty of the men got on because of them [their passports]. It was a terrible sight to see how they looked. One of the Greek-American girls had been sick for some time. Her sister was along, so I offered to go with her to the front of the train to get some water. The Jewish men looked very sick. They had only rutabagas to eat for a whole month. They were dirty, no haircut nor shaved for a long time. Their clothes worn to the skin, to say the least. Some of these well-dressed Jewish ladies had found their husbands and sons. It was quite a contrast to see them sit together. The smell was just all we could take as we passed through the cars.

When evening came, the train stopped. The Red Cross came around with a hot chocolate drink and sandwiches, somewhere between 9:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. This tasted wonderful. The Red Cross were then going through the train all night. We sat on those hard seats all night. At 9:00 a.m. we were commanded to get off the train. We had now got into Switzerland. Some of us were taken into a Military camp, others to a school in our camp. The Jews were taken to a nearby house. We saw the Red Cross going in and out bringing in clean clothes, coming out with their old clothes and burning them outside the camp. We were there for five days and five nights, wondering what [was coming] next.

There happened to be here a number of Mexican musicians, also some from Cuba. These had been in Germany for some time, and seemingly sent on our transport. It was some terrible days and nights—mostly nights, as these found the Swiss guards and ordered strong drinks to be brought in each evening. This continued, and after two hours, which was about 10:00 p.m., they started to dance in the hallway.

There were two-story beds there. We were given each a blanket because of the cold weather, which was 20 below. We kept our coats, caps, mittens and overshoes on day and night. We were about 90 in that room. On the other side of the wall there were just as many, if not more. Straw was the covering on the beds, and much of [that] got into the hallway where the dancers made a lot of dust. We had two woodstoves there, but one made such smoke we could not use it. So someone was firing in the other one day and night.

We had an elderly Jewish woman about 86 years old]who slept near us. She had gotten three blankets. Some Cuban must have noticed this and came when all was quiet to rob her of her blankets. Rena happened to sleep next to her. We all awakened to see the fight for the blankets. We won the war, and the Cuban was chased to the other end of the building where the Mexicans and Cubans were. This was never repeated.

After five days and nights were over, a Swiss guard came in about 5:00 a.m. and said we were to leave in one hour—no washing, no dressing at all this time. So it was easy to get ready. We were given a piece of bread and something to drink and one piece of bread for our journey—no butter, nor anything else. When we finally got on the train again, we met up with some of those who had been in the school house. Many of the Jews were also there. They would wake up in the morning to find a Jewish person dead lying beside them.

Arriving in Geneva, Switzerland:

Our next stop was Geneva, Switzerland. There we were taken off the train 50 at a time and were brought to a place where we got something to eat. This was evening, so we were plenty hungry. [I] believe it was soup of some kind. We continued all night on the train. Next forenoon we got into France. The train stopped again. Looking out through the windows we saw many American soldiers, speaking English [and] pushing carts with food. They came with trays of turkey dinner and all the trimmings, even white bread. Soon they came again and asked if we wished for more. But it was more than we could eat.

We said, "Thank you, thank you!"

But they said, "Don't thank us, but thank Uncle Sam," And so we realized we were "free."

Later, in the afternoon the train stopped again, and again the soldiers came on. This time they came with a wet wash cloth and some tomato juice for us to drink.

Arriving in Marseilles, France:

Finally, we got to Marseilles, France. There we got a Swedish boat hired by the Americans. There was also another boat that would take the Jewish people to Johannesburg, South Africa. These would be interned there until the war was over. We were in Marseilles for a week. There we met up with the F.B.I. They had several booths there. The poor Jews met up with a lot of questions, while we received our passports back, and that was all to that. The Jews went unto the other boat. That is, those who did not have passports. We never heard more about them.

Finally bound for America:

When all was over, we were bound for America, sailing under the American flag. It was lovely and mild as we passed through the Mediterranean Sea. But when we got into the Atlantic Ocean, it was rough. For several days several of us sat on deck in deckchairs. There were about 80 soldiers on the boat. These had been in prison, shot down from planes, etc. Many were in a sad condition. When we got to New York some were carried off the boat in baskets as they had neither arms nor legs. The soldiers who were able helped us who were on deck. All I could take for three days was grapefruit. It was a welcome sight to at last see the Statue of Liberty. Then the seasickness seemed to leave us all.

Arriving in America:

When we got off the boat we were served hot chocolate and doughnuts. It was not long before our friends found us—Edith Hanson, Rena Husom, and I. Harold Boone was the main one who took us quickly from one office to another. And soon we were in the car on the way to the Boone home. There was a beautiful decorated table awaiting us and a number of friends and workers. In the centre of the table was a large cake. On it was written, "Welcome Home. We have a place for you." This was now February 23, 1945. It was good to get cleaned up. Our clothes were washed or sent to the laundry before we traveled on. We stayed there several days. A telegram was sent to our people saying we had reached there safely.

One day there was a meeting arranged for us to speak in. After the meeting we shook hands with about 300 people, white and black, and all our friends. On our way west we stopped in Detroit, Michigan, where Arnold Scharmen came to see us. He was at the time caring for his aged father. After a few days we came to Minneapolis. There were Nicol and James Jardine, Kenneth Dismore and many others. We were there a few days, and there the three of us parted, and we went each our ways.

Finally going home:

I stopped off in Henning, Minnesota to see Cleon Parks, who was then staying with his parents as he was not very well. From there I went by train to Erskine, where my brother Olaf and family lived. I was there a few days, and Olaf called home to my parents. My brother, Emit, answered the phone and said to bring me home right away. I had then been gone almost 13 years and many changes had taken place.

My grandparents were gone, my sister and three brothers were married and I had nieces and nephews which I had never seen. My parents had gotten older looking. It took me a long time to get reacquainted. When I came to town and heard the 9:00 o'clock whistle blow, it reminded me of air-raids when the English came by planes at night and the Americans by day to bombard. It still bothers me.

Postscript:

Another thing seemed so different: when 8:30 p.m. came, the Waha (as we called him), or guard, came to see if we were in our room and by our beds. It happened sometimes that we were not, so we had to go to the guardhouse at six in the morning to report. They only smiled when we came. It only happened once for me.

Special Note:

This was written by Alma M. Lee, in January of 1989. Alma, a native of the Roseau, Minnesota area, labored many years in Norway before World War II. After recuperating from her “prisoner of war years”, she returned to Norway. She was in the work there until 1988, when her health failed and she returned to live near her relatives in northern Minnesota.

Sometimes we forget the “price” some have paid – it’s good to be reminded and should make us more thankful.

Alma Lee – January 1989 – Arnes, Norway; Berlin, Germany and Minnesota
(Internment Camps: Grini, Norway and Libenau, Germany)

TTT Editor’s Note: In the absence of a written account, the above information has been compiled by the TTT Editor from various sources. Corrections or additions are most welcome; as well as other historical accounts for this country [Email TTT](#)