

Simone Labs

Cold War in the Baltics

Account of a Partnership

Part III: Frozen Frontlines

A midsummer trip took Danes, Germans, Estonians and Poles to northern Norway, about one hundred Kilometres beyond the Arctic Circle to the Grundtvig partners in Bodø. This was the third meeting in the course of this EU Learning Partnership.

It begins with a typical meal of shrimps on the city's sunny harbour mole, freshly off the north Atlantic cutter. Back dropped by the Vestfjord and the ridges of the Lofoten. A view that immediately stirs everyone's enthusiasm. And yet to be surpassed once more that day, when after official welcoming we set off for a midnight outing up the town hill Keiservarden. The 'Kaiserwarte', so-called after German Emperor Wilhelm II, who in 1889 had himself carried up his peak. In red and gold the sun shimmers over the waterline of the horizon. A short rest and we climb with majestically tardiness. Similarly, many are still on their way, on foot, by bike, with paragliders. It seems, no one considers going to sleep these days. Winter, with all its darkness comes soon enough. Sleepless in Bodø.

The next morning we meet at the Norsk Luftfartsmuseum, and our Norwegian friends in their workplace. On our way there we pass the military base-,Bodø Main Air Station (Bodø-MAS)' with its

runway. It is the roar of the planes and not the sun that separates day from night in summer here. Take-off and landing are certainly interesting photo subjects. Some of us ignore the no trespassing signs, and have hardly hit the release, that they are being requested by vigilant watchmen to delete their photos again.

Lying behind the military area, the modern museum building has the form of a propeller. The left wing features the exhibition on military, while the right wing focusses on civilian aviation. They open to a rotunda decorated for instance by a model of one of the early balloons from 1783. Guided by Bodil Nyaas, Head of Education and Public Programs, we fly through more than a hundred years of Norwegian civilian aviation, and through wide, impressing variably designed halls. On display are the most diverse types of planes and equipment. The walls tell stories of air pioneers, like that of Einar Sem-Jacobsen, who in 1914 taught the famous arctic explorer Roald Amundsen how to fly. Women are there as well, such as Gidsken Jacobsen, namesake to the museum cafe. Not only did she raise a scandal as one of the first female pilots; moreover, she also started her own airline in 1932.

Due to the natural features, and the increasing development of the northern hinterland, aviation quickly gained importance in Norway after 1945. The rugged coastline is best accessible from the air. Most popular was a little green aircraft named 'Twin Otter', also called the coastal 'work horse'. Like many other models, it has found a place in the exhibition.

„And finally, we can fly south for a while in winter, away from darkness and cold“, says educational assistant Tone-Lise Lyngeng. She indicates a small mediterranean styled court in white and blue shades with a neighboring airplane showing touristic commercial clips on ‚Syden‘ (the south).

Joined by Ann-Kristin Maurdal, Tone-Lise follows up our tour with a presentation of some of their educational offers and methods. A staff of three serves about 7,000 pupils and students. Their office is costume shop and workshop in one, and once again, we are amazed how generously endowed this museum is.

Historian and curator Karl Kleve takes us over to the other, the military side of the museum that recounts the years of the Second World War and the decades of the Cold War. A log cabin reminisces the exile of Norwegian troops in a Canadian training camp termed ‚Little Norway‘. A winter landscape with aircraft debris refers to a German Junckers, JU88 that burst in Finmarksvidda in 1942 after losing fuel due to some damage. The crew managed to escape. Like this plane, other German bombers were in the air over northern Norway to attack soviet convoys. From the wrecks local inhabitants made many useful things, such as shoes. The invasion of the German Wehrmacht started on April 9th, 1940, and hit the neutral Norwegians unprepared. With regard to military power, they had hardly anything to oppose it. Just as surprising came the air raid on Bodø that almost completely destroyed the town. For the construction of transport routes, fortifications and strongpoints that were to secure the hinterland of the

German-Soviet front, thousands of forced labourers were brought to the northern country over the ensuing period. The occupation of the whole country ended with the German surrender, while the eastern part of the so-called 'Finnmark' far up north had already been liberated by Soviet forces.

As a result of the war experiences, Norwegians decided to join NATO in 1949. This new, cold war entailed an elaboration of the border to the Soviet Union. During the war in Korea, fears grew of a Soviet invasion into Western Europe, and so the USA financed a widespread weapons aids programme. In this context, seven major military bases cropped up in Norway, particularly towards the Kola Peninsula. The largest one is Bodø MAS on which building began in 1952. Thus ended the existence of the small fishing town on the Vestfjord. Along with the military bases came the planes and the hangars, similarly financed by the Americans as well as NATO. Thousands of military personal as well as civilian employees were attracted to this town that underwent a quick economic upturn.

The section 'Isfronten' ('Frozen Frontiers') at the aviation museum keeps alive memories of times of high armament, nuclear threat and espionage. Karl stops at an American U2, and tells us the story of the American pilot Francis Gary Powers: The U2 was the most famous reconnaissance aircraft of the sixties. It was on such a plane that the captain took off from Peshawar in Pakistan on May 1st, 1960 for a reconnaissance mission over the Soviet Union, and then to land in Bodø.

However, he was shot down over Soviet territory by an S-75 surface-to-air missile south of Sverdlovsk, after having already photographed missile launch pads and the nuclear plant of Mayak. Upon landing with his parachute he was arrested, and two years later exchanged with the Soviet spy Rudolf Abel on Glienicke Bridge at Berlin. This incident led to one of the major crises in international relations those days, also because it became apparent that there was a spy in Bodø who had delivered every information on U2 flights for Norway to Soviet military. This is one of the many stories being told in these rooms.

Over the following days we often found opportunity to discover one or another detail from the impressive exhibitions. On location, whether on the grounds of the Norwegian military headquarters J3 Air in Reitan—a huge bunker underneath a mountain—, whether at Bodø MAS or the Hangar Area 96, we get an impression of the military presence in this enchanting landscape. Hangar Area 96 was erected in 1960. 331 squadrons were based here up until 1996. The galleries and halls in the mountain encompass 10,000 m² (12,000 square yards/2.47 acres), and should provide protection against nuclear attacks. Someone has decorated the high, whitewashed walls with peaceful images. Blue mountains with white caps, a yellow moon, the sea, seagulls, small sailboats, a couple. In front there is a decommissioned fighter jet with a side reading: „Remove Gun Plugs Before Flight“. In a recess lies an old rocket. Karl thinks of it as a suicide weapon. It's range amounting merely to 45 kilometres (28 miles).

Surely worthy to be preserved as an oddity for a museum, just as the whole hangar—an architectural monument to the cold war. Renovation costs are already calculated.

In one of the buildings, in the ‚Alert Shelter East‘, opposite the tunnel system, friends of the F-104 Starfighter have found a home, with a bar, pennants, photos—a traditionalist club. Right next, in the adjacent hall, stands one of these green Starfighters. Its friends are about to renovate it. It will fly again, one day, they declare. And they recount reckless adventures. Up to 1,500 Soviet reconnaissance flights the Pilots claim to have observed in those years of active service.

Enthusiastically, Erik Dahlen and Helge Andreassen tell about their flights. „It’s like driving in a race car, and getting paid for it!“, says Helge, and admits: „Of course training was tough, and no one knew what would happen in case of an attack. On our flights we took thousands of photos of Soviet aircraft and vice versa.“ „And occasionally, we would wave at each other“, Erik adds. „The Starfighters were right here in the tunnels, and at combat alarm we were in our suits, termed ‚Frankenstein‘, in less than four minutes, and ready for battle.“

Later on, at our nightly barbecue on the beach, Karl mentions that Russian planes or ships still happen to trespass on Norwegian territory. These incursions have increased since Vladimir Putin came to power.

Naturally, Norwegians would pay back accordingly...

Besides our excursions, we work on our touring exhibition ‚Faces of Cold War‘, revise the layout, and

finally decide on the topics of the individual posters. Until we meet again in September in Mecklenburg, we want to collect the necessary material. Until the end of June, the interim/progress reports are due to be delivered at the national agencies. And we need a project presentation for the EU database „European Shared Treasures“. Teacher Beate Behrens from the Werkstattsschule of Rostock presents ‚Grenzen überwinden‘ (‚Overcoming Borders‘), a project in which school pupils from Rostock and Eutin collaborated on the former inner German border strip, and in the Grenzhuis Schlagsdorf. Also, we discuss possibilities for a collaborative arts project with delegates from Northnorwegian artist associations. This exchange of ideas is to be continued. In the end, Andreas Wagner of the Politische Memoriale society lays out the programme for the fourth meeting in September in the Grenzhuis Schlagsdorf.

So, there remains much to be done, and to be discovered.

December 2013

Notes:

Kleve, Karl L., The many faces of the cold War, Norwegian Aviation Museum, 1999.

¹ Dedial, Jürg, Flug über verbotenes Land. Vor 50 Jahren erschütterte die U-2-Spionage-Krise die Welt – Chruschtschew liess Eisenhower am Gipfel von Paris abblitzen, in: Neue Züricher Zeitung, April 30, 2010.

<http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/startseite/flug-ueber-verbotenes-land-1.5598039>

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