

Simone Labs

Cold War in the Baltics

Account of a Partnership

Part V: Farewell in Denmark

There lies a Submarine amidst sweet meadows, green airdomes and hidden bunkers. We are at Langelandsfort. We being women and men from Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Norway, Poland, joined in a Grundtvig Learning Partnership, and coming together here on the Danish isle of Langeland for the last time within this EU project. Museum director Peer-Henrik Hansen and his associate Geese Friis Hansen accompany us over the extensive compound of this fort that was erected for marine defense in the early 1950ies in order to enable the obstruction of entrance or exit from or to the Baltic Sea. It was opened in 1997 as a museum to the cold war. Ever since, it constantly changes its face, and grows with its visitors. Last year saw 35,000.

The submarine, weighing 500 tons, was added in 2005. ,Springeren' was built 50 years ago in the German Rheinstahl-North-Sea-Yards at Emden, originally for the Norwegian navy. This last Danish navy submarine went diving across the Baltic Sea up until 2004.

The bunker system houses several exhibitions, an authentic setup, video installations. Gloomy, when you imagine soldiers performing their service day and night

under the dimness of these narrow corridors and rooms.

The airdomes accommodate one of the famous Soviet MiG-23 fighter jets, minesweeper ‚Askø‘ and a collection of sea mines reacting to magnetic fields, pressure or noise. „Each vessel has its own sound“, Peer-Henrik explains. „It was recorded, and the mines were programmed so they would explode according to the tone.–Every ship its own mine.“ Under glas, to one of the dome’s sides, there hangs a piece of the Berlin Wall. A present from the frontier city’s current mayor Klaus Wowereit. And the most recent exhibit is in process just now. An arts student from Hamburg is to style a stretch of wall on the fort’s grounds these days. Impressed, we watch one of the big 150mm cannons of German design and Czech manufacture that arrived in Denmark already in World War II. In order to send a maximum of six shots through the barrel, 15 men were needed. As in this case, and in lack of their own military equipment, the Danish largely made use of war booty and of war scrap.

The inhabitants of the surrounding parishes disliked these cannons. In October 1962, on the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, with the world at the brink of a new hot war, they complained over the cannon beats being so loud, and the blast waves so heavy that they would unsettle their cows, and cause cracks in their houses. The government subsequently arranged for the cannons to be stationed right along the coastline. Neither them nor the mines would have helped anyway, in case of an emergency, as would the NATO-

Membership. Small Denmark with its rather makeshift military outfit lay right on the frontline. According to the documents available today, we may guess that the Danes would simply have been run over by the Warsaw Pact, or otherwise plainly become extinguished in a nuclear attack. The plans were on the table. When we met at our Polish partners in Borne Sulinowo, we could visit the storage facilities for Soviet nuclear warheads near Podborsko and Brzeźnica Kolonia. From there they would have flown as far as Langeland. „Luckily, I am here only now, as a civilian, and not as a soldier!“, says Dariusz Czerniawski, who was deployed as a reservist in the Polish army for several times in the eighties. And this is certainly not meant to be a joke, as, apart from the nuclear warheads, also Polish troops were destined for deployment in Denmark.

„Then the Danes were in fear of the Polish“, considers Miroslaw Szeligowski, the teacher from Borne Sulinowo. Whereupon Peer-Henrik replies: „Poland was indeed a threat to Denmark. Thank you, Dariusz for coming alone! We were not able to defend ourselves well enough. In Denmark we only played Cold War. We never took it for real. The Danes never realized that it was a deadly game in other countries. And you in the East experienced it in all its full consequences.“

At the department of history of Syddansk Universitet in Odense, where we go on an excursion the other day, historian Thomas Wegener Friis is occupied with these times and the effects of the Cold War on Denmark. He tells us about the Danish attempts to manoeuvre

through world affairs as inconspicuously as possible, and of thrilling cases of espionage.

We use the time left for a walk through Odense and a visit to the ‚H.C. Andersen Hus‘, the cathedral, the town museum or one of the galleries.

For the work on our project we gather in one of the airdomes of Langelandsfort. Regarding the current developments in Ukrainia, Kadri Viires and Ivan Lavrentjev report on its effects on their own country, Estonia, where a high percentage of russian citizens are still living, and where, partly also through media coverage, there are major insecurities. How closely this brings back the history of the Cold War! Once again we are aware how important it is to tell it in its diverse aspects. From now on, the touring exhibition, ‚Faces of Cold War‘, edited, printed, and brought along by our Polish friends, is one way of serving this purpose. We marvel at our collective achievement, result of our two-year long collaboration. This poster exhibition will show in all our places, at Langelandsfort, at the Grenzmuseum of Schlagsdorf, at the Tallinn Museum of Occupations, at the Norsk Luftfartsmuseum in Bodø, and at the Borne Sulinowo community centre. Above that, it may be lent out to schools.

That’s done! And now? What are we to build over the fundamentals that we assembled out of diverse groundstones? In the following discussion ideas fly back and forth through the room. One has already kept us busy for quite a while. It is the idea of integrating artists more intensely into museum design, creating communicative spaces that facilitate access to this part

of history, and connect it with the present. In order to get the project 'Open Skies Over Europe' rolling in this direction, we are considering at Syddansk Universitet in Odense which strategies fit best.

Dariusz Czerniawski from Poland argues for a coffee-table book featuring our places of origin. This induces the idea of a virtual gallery on the internet. Karl Kleve of the Norsk Luftfartsmuseum argues for a biography workshop in which we depict our experiences to one another. Up until now, we had hardly got round to do so. Baffled, we realize how right he is. There was little time in all our talks for this kind of exchange.

We also wish to continue collaboration regarding the educational work in our museums. An exhibition is only one means of telling the history of the Cold War in our countries, and to put local history in the European context. So we need a next workshop. What about Tallinn in December, where we began two years ago? Who can take care of the funding? And so, over the discussion, new tasks are assigned once again. And while some are debating effective steps for implementation, others are working on the final report. All running hand in hand.

And it is this implicitness that is among the most valuable experiences for all of us. „We are a unique group“, says Norwegian Bodil Nyaas. „All are interested, wishing to learn from one another, to exchange with each other. It is such a cordial, sincere atmosphere that prevails.“ Everyone agrees gratefully and happily. And we gained exactly on the different aspects of East and West, at the different historic sites

we visited together. We shall pass on all these experiences, and let them influence our future work. A successful EU project comes to an end. Once again, we are gathered for a last supper on the shores of the Baltic Sea, and raise our glasses. To us, and to new beginnings!

July 2014