

**Sigurd Syversen**

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\* August 13, 1921 (Vestre Aker/Norway)

† November 29, 2016 (Oslo)

Arrested in 1942 for being active in the resistance; deported to Sachsenhausen concentration camp; arrived in Neuengamme concentration camp on March 30, 1945 in the course of the "Bernadotte Rescue Operation", where he witnessed the establishment of the "Scandinavians' camp"; evacuated to Sweden on the Swedish Red Cross's White Buses on April 20, 1945; returned to Norway in late May 1954; resumed working for the Norwegian national radio network.

## Sigurd Syversen

Sigurd Syversen was born on August 13, 1921 in Vestre Aker near Oslo. His family were supporters of the Norwegian Labour Party. Syversen's father worked as an upholsterer and later as a factory worker and was a shop steward at both of his workplaces. Sigurd Syversen was politically active as a member of various small theater and agitprop groups, which brought him in contact with the Labour youth organisation early in his life.

*"Because my father was interested in politics, he very early on brought back a book by somebody who had been imprisoned in what was then the Oranienburg concentration camp. [...] I read about the atrocities that were being committed at Oranienburg. For a young person like me, who believed in peace and peaceful coexistence, reading this book was terrible. Back then it wasn't like today, where you get all this news about war, murder and mayhem from all over the world. This was new – certainly that you could be tortured or even killed for your political opinions."*

(Sigurd Syversen, interview conducted on July 17, 2002 in Oslo. ANg. All following quotes are also taken from this interview.)

Syversen closely followed political developments. In 1936, it was announced in Norway that German pacifist Carl von Ossietzky, who had been imprisoned in the Esterwegen concentration camp since 1934, would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This became an important issue for members of the Labour youth organisation, who organised solidarity campaigns on his behalf. German political refugees working with the Labour Party in Oslo also informed the young people about what was happening in Nazi Germany.

Syversen left school after seven years. *"I didn't feel like going to school any more."* He worked for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation, first as an errand boy, then as a trainee radio technician and later, after attending technical college, as an engineer.

Syversen experienced the German invasion of Norway as an important turning point in his life:

*"[...] and when I saw the German troops with their steel helmets and rifles march through the streets of Oslo on April 9, 1940, I realized that something was going to happen. That was a painful day!"*

After the political press was banned, the underground began producing many illegal publications and leaflets which the members of the Labour youth organisation helped distribute. In late 1940/early 1941, Syversen became involved in distributing the *Fri Fagbevegelse* ("Free Trade Union") paper, which he would collect in Oslo. On March 5, 1941, a friend warned him that he might be arrested and should therefore stay away from his home. Syversen hid with a couple he had befriended through the youth organisation.

However, the next morning, another member of the underground who was also staying with them was arrested, and the Gestapo took Syversen with them as well.

Syversen was taken to the Gestapo prison at 19 Møllergata in Oslo, where he was interrogated and locked in a cell with other prisoners. He knew that the Gestapo used torture to extract statements from prisoners, and he was shown the torture instruments.

One of his cell mates had been imprisoned for establishing radio contact with Britain and was convinced he was going to be shot. He gave Syversen all the information he had because he was planning a risky escape. Syversen did not want to join in the escape attempt. When his comrade tried to climb out of the window on his bed sheet the Gestapo discovered the escapee, locked him up and severely maltreated him in a cell on the ground floor of the building. Syversen could hear the beating in his cell.

*"I have to admit that I was lying there in my cell, shaking all over, because I was afraid that, under torture, he might tell them I knew about the radio contacts. That was the trouble. It was terrible to have to listen to that. And I knew it was him who was being beaten. I heard the screams all night long, and then the following nights it started all over again."*

**19 Møllergata, the Oslo police headquarters and prison. Photograph from the 1930s.**

*Photographer unknown. (NRM)*



On Holy Saturday, April 4, 1942, Sigurd Syversen was taken to the Grini police prison in Oslo.

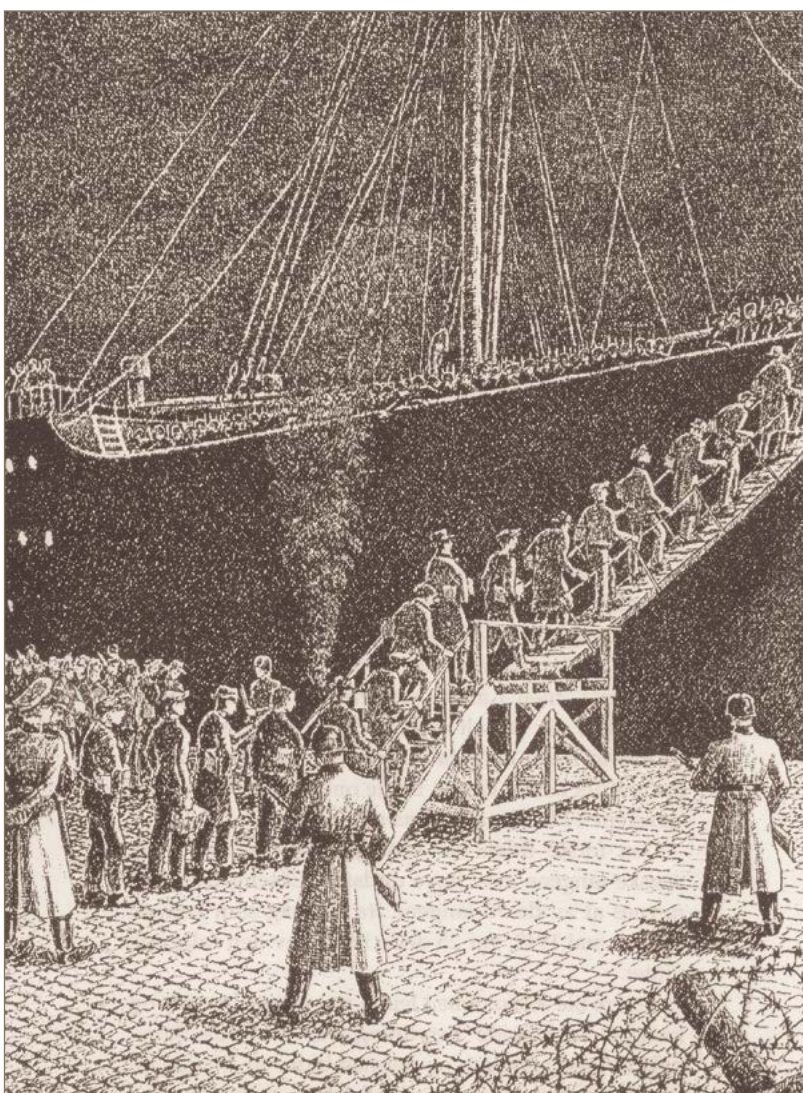
*"The very next day, they sent a large group to Sachsenhausen. Other prisoners had been sent from Grini to Sachsenhausen before, and eventually death notices had come back to Norway. The whole thing with Germany and Sachsenhausen was a threat that was constantly hanging over Grini. [...] We slowly began to understand that we were in danger of being sent to Germany."*

A group of prisoners was told to get ready for a transport to Germany on February 15, 1943. The prisoners hoped that this transport was not destined for Sachsenhausen, but rather some industrial site.

Shortly before the transport to Germany, Syversen was assigned to a group which was to bring potatoes from Oslo to Grini. He managed to arrange a brief meeting with his parents and grandmother in Oslo.

*"I remember that shortly before we said our farewells, my grandmother said, 'God bless you, my boy.' On February 15, we were driven to the pier in Oslo. [...] Altogether, there were more than 125 of us who were taken away on one of the so-called slave ships, the Monte Rosa. [...]"*





Drawing by Odd Nansen. He added the following caption: "In the dark of night, lit only by weak lamps, those who are to be transported to Germany board the ship in Oslo's port."

Odd Nansen, the son of polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, was imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp until March 1945 and then in Neuengamme for several weeks. He managed to keep a diary during his entire imprisonment and to take it back to Norway with him.

From: Odd Nansen: *Fra dag til dag*, Vol. 1, Oslo, 1946.



After their arrival in Århus (Denmark), the entire group of prisoners was marched from the port through the town to the train station. On the way, Syversen recognized a man carrying a briefcase under his arm. He had been a member of a group of Danish Social Democrats who were in close contact with their Norwegian comrades. Syversen was able to talk to the man, who then sent word to his parents in Norway about their son's arrival in Denmark.

The Norwegian prisoners were taken to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp by train, where the new arrivals were assigned to the shoe testing detail. They had to test footwear on a testing track for the Reich Office for Economic Expansion. Later, Syversen was transferred to the external work detail at the DEMAG metalwork factory. Shortly afterwards, the Falkensee satellite camp was established especially for the prisoners working at DEMAG. Living and working conditions there were atrocious. In another satellite camp that also served DEMAG, the Norwegian prisoners received the first food parcels from the Red Cross.

In early 1945, a rumor went around that the Danish and Norwegian prisoners were to be rescued by the Swedish Red Cross. They were first transferred back to the Sachsenhausen main camp for several weeks. On March 30, 1945, they were ordered to line up and were then allowed to walk through the camp gate.

Outside the camp, there was a long row of the White Buses from the Swedish Red Cross which took the Scandinavian prisoners to the Neuengamme concentration camp.

**White Buses, taking prisoners to Neuengamme concentration camp, near Wittenburg.**

*Photographer unknown. (SKR)*



Syversen was initially housed in a wooden hut where only Scandinavian prisoners were kept. He and his comrades found the conditions in the Neuengamme concentration camp considerably worse than in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

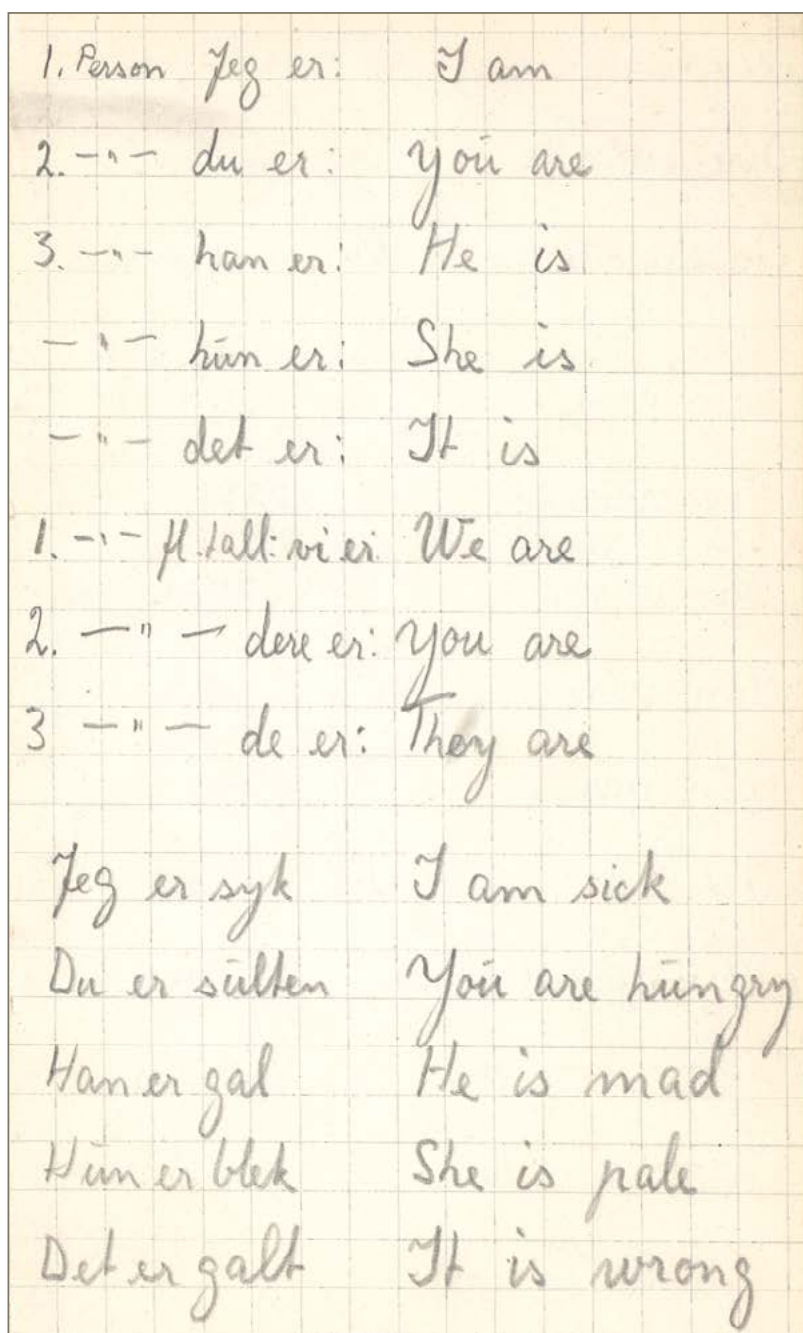
*"I remember that I entered a hut where prisoners were lying on the floor. I knew one of them, Trygve Bratteli, who later went on to become Prime Minister of Norway. The way he looked and the state he was in, I didn't think he was going to survive!"*

After a short time, the Scandinavian prisoners were transferred to the newly established Scandinavians' Camp in the brick building located directly on the camp street, which had been used as the so-called convalescence block. Syversen learned that the spokesman for the Norwegian prisoners, Sverre Løberg, had demanded from the camp's commandant that the dead bodies be taken out of the brick building. Otherwise, the Scandinavian prisoners would not move in. Eventually, the SS forced the Scandinavian prisoners to clean the building themselves. Many of them were very uncomfortable with the situation because the privileges they got to enjoy as Scandinavians came at the expense of other prisoners.

The establishment of the Scandinavians' Camp considerably improved the situation of the Scandinavian prisoners. They no longer had to work, they were not beaten and they received Red Cross parcels. They had hardly any contact with prisoners from other countries.

In anticipation of his liberation by Allied troops and to prepare for the postwar period, Sigurd Syversen took English classes.

*"I remember that one of our fellow prisoners, Josef Berg, spoke several languages. He had been in Auschwitz. He gave lessons to those of us who didn't speak English so we would know what to say if we came into contact with Allied soldiers."*



Sigurd Syversen was able to take one of his notebooks from the English classes back home when he was freed. In the spring of 2004, he donated it to the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial.

(ANG)

Syversen was among the last of the Scandinavian prisoners who boarded Swedish Red Cross buses and vehicles from the Danish Jutland Corps at Neuengamme on April 20, 1945.

After a long wait, a bus finally arrived for Syversen and his comrades. However, as it was late in the evening, it only went as far as Friedrichsruh in the Sachsenwald forest, where the newly liberated prisoners spent the night.

*"We were ordered to lie down outside in the open. That's another one of those experiences I will never forget. I could go anywhere I wanted and lie down. That was new. And I slept. The next morning, I went back to the buses because that was where our food was. You see, Count Folke Bernadotte had been given permission to take us from Neuengamme across the Danish border."*

The convoy's journey through Denmark turned into a triumphal procession.

*"You see, for us it was sort of like May 17 [Norway's independence day]. There were flags, and people lined the streets, cheering, greeting us and handing us this and that. And our guards became more and more relaxed and allowed things they wouldn't have during the earlier stages of the journey."*

On May 1, 1945, Sigurd Syversen and his group arrived in Sweden, where they received medical care or were taken to hospitals if necessary. Syversen was first billeted in the small village of Bolmen and then transferred to the Ramlösa Brunn sanatorium.

*"All of us Norwegians were taken to the same place [...] to recuperate. We were also paid a small sum of money. Those of us who worked for the state were given a little more. One day, some of us went into the nearest town to buy some jackets and shirts, some nice clothes. We looked so good! And in late May 1945, we came home to Norway, to Grandmother and my parents."*



**Liberated Norwegian prisoners  
in Ramlösa Brunn, undated.**

*Photographer unknown. (NRM)*



After his return, Syversen resumed working for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation. However, because of his experiences in the concentration camps, he found it difficult to work in enclosed spaces and was therefore assigned to field duties.

He and his comrades found it impossible to talk about the time of their deportation. He did tell his wife and children about his experiences in the camps, but he did not discuss them with the rest of his family. In addition, he distanced himself from people whose fate had been similar and who wanted to discuss their experiences.

Syversen remained a member of the Labour Party.

*"We all agreed: Now that World War II was over, all this fighting and cruelty would also end. Now nobody would even think of starting a new war, not least because of the atomic bomb. All those horrors during World War II, 50 million people lost their lives! But it started all over fairly quickly: Korea!"*

In the mid-1980s, the White Buses to Auschwitz association in Norway began to organise trips for schoolchildren to the sites where Norwegians were persecuted and killed during WWII. Former prisoners accompanied the children on these visits. Around the same time, schools increasingly began to invite survivors to talk about their experiences in history lessons. Sigurd Syversen participated in the trips to Auschwitz and also spoke in schools. In addition, he volunteered as a guide at the Grini museum and served as the chairman of the Association of Political Prisoners 1940-1945 for many years.

Before his retirement, Sigurd Syversen held the post of Head Engineer at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation.

He died on November 29, 2016.

