

HOW NORWAY'S GOLD WAS SAVED

KURT SINGER

THE day was April 10, 1940, one day after the landing of the Germans in Norway. This was the beginning of a Norwegian epic. It is the story of the flight of one man who, with the help of a few Norwegian soldiers, wandered up and down the country for months, passing through burning villages and mined fjords, to save a quarter of a billion kroner in gold from the hands of the Nazis. Pursued by Nazi troops, airplanes, warships, the Gestapo, the Secret Service and by Quisling's traitors, he fought the net cast for him by General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst (the "conqueror" of Norway) and Admiral Wilhelm Canaris (head of the Nazi Secret Service).

* * * * *

Fredrik Haslund is small for a Norwegian, no more than five feet seven, with honest, sparkling blue eyes and an ardently patriotic heart. He had never had much military training. Originally he had been an engineer and had studied in Germany. He is Secretary of the Social Welfare Committee for Norwegian Seaman in America. The night of the invasion Haslund received a telephone call asking him to go to the Storting at once. He was with King Haakon and the Cabinet members at the time when the German Stukas attempted to facilitate Nazi occupation of Norway by exterminating the constitutional rulers. The same night the government officials, together with the King and Crown Prince, took flight. They were almost captured by parachute troops in the vicinity of Dovre. King and Government were pursued day and night through forests buried under deep snow; the chase moved ever northward into colder regions. The fugitives, one of whom was the aging King Haakon VII, were subjected to the greatest physical trials of their lives.

The Nazis were all the more eager to capture the Government because they thought the King and his party had taken the Norwegian gold reserve with them. However, the prudent Minister of Finances, Oscar Torp, had had the entire gold reserve loaded on trucks early that morning. It was transported out of Oslo to a well-guarded concrete cellar somewhere north of

the capital. This place had been built by Torp years before, in case an invasion should make it necessary to hide the country's gold.

Haslund left the retreat of the King and his Government, and taking an army car, escorted by a single soldier, returned a few days after the invasion to the vicinity of Oslo, which in the meantime had been completely occupied by the Germans. He drove through German lines so fast that he was not stopped. His task was to rescue fifteen hundred cases of gold, worth a total of two hundred and forty million kroner.

The town where the gold was hidden lay asleep. Not a light showed; the blackout was complete. A group of soldiers waited and waited in the icy night air, for even in April Norwegian nights are freezing cold. The wind howled around them; the soldiers gritted their teeth and stamped their feet. Then came the sound of distant motors. Friend or foe—which was it? Had the Nazi spies discovered the hiding place of the gold?

Then the soldiers heard low-voiced commands. They breathed easier; the commands were in Norwegian. Armed policemen surrounded the area. Then truck after truck arrived over the dark road, bringing the loading crew. None of the workmen knew what they were loading, and none asked. The police and soldiers stood with naked bayonets flashing in the moonlight.

Fifteen hundred boxes were loaded on the trucks, and taken to the nearest railroad station. Here a train stood ready, the locomotive puffing smoke. The boxes were unloaded and loaded again into the train, while the checkers strained their eyes in the darkness to count the boxes. Armed soldiers accompanied the train. For hours they rolled over the gleaming tracks, their confidence mounting because no Nazi planes passed overhead. As daybreak approached, when the German searching planes would surely be abroad, the train, which had reached a valley in Central Norway, ran off on a spur to await the protection of the night.

The parachute troops out to capture King Haakon were still haunting this valley through which ran the only railroad line to the coast. But during the day the Norwegian troops rounded up all of the parachutists, and by nightfall the train was able to proceed. It moved slowly, for no one knew whether the Nazis might not have mined the railroad-line. Troops went ahead, searching every inch of the way. The following morning, Andalsnes, the first stopping-place, was reached. But if Fredrik

Haslund and his faithful followers thought their difficulties were over, they were bitterly disappointed. The British had just landed in Andalsnes, and Goering's *Luftwaffe* was concentrating its forces upon the town. Bombs fell incessantly. Haslund at once reported to Finance Minister Torp that Andalsnes was too dangerous a place for his precious cargo. He was ordered to proceed several miles to the south, and there to await a warship which would transport the gold to Britain.

The Norwegians took their train to a small railroad station in the vicinity, and waited. They waited and waited, while their distant superiors negotiated with the British Secret Service and the British Admiralty. The station was, fortunately, so unimportant that the Nazis paid no attention to it. All Haslund and his group could do, however, was to wait for a telephone call from Andalsnes. A member of the party, one of Norway's best-known younger poets, Nordahl Grieg, sat for hours at the telephone. The little party were in the valley between Romsdalshorn and Trolltinnene, hemmed in by mighty precipices. Above the mountains constant air battles raged, and one day two heavy bombers swooped into the valley to destroy the railroad. The bombs just missed the train and destroyed a section of the track. A railroad employee and ten soldiers repaired the damage in three hours.

At last, one night, the opportunity came to transfer some of the gold. A British warship moved into the dock at Andalsnes. While the British troops were disembarked and all the equipment of warfare was being unloaded, some of the boxes of Norwegian gold were carried on board.

Fredrik Haslund himself has described that night:

A peculiar mood prevailed. The snow-covered peaks gleamed like gems in the clear air of this spring night. All about us was the profound night silence of the mountains. But the tiny centre formed by the ship seethed with activity. The cries and the rumbling of our work went on and on. At last, when day broke, we had to stop and the cruiser was able to depart.

Once more the rescuing of the gold had not gone according to program, for only a small part of the gold had been loaded aboard the cruiser. Andalsnes had become too dangerous; the Nazis were raining bombs upon the waterfront installations, and the cruiser did not dare linger after dawn. In fact, the Germans were intent on sinking every British warship they sighted, for they had meanwhile got wind that the gold was somewhere

in the vicinity of Andalsnes and would be taken aboard a British vessel.

That May morning Haslund learned that the Nazi ground forces had broken through the Norwegian lines in the valley. He received the alarming news that the Nazis might enter Andalsnes at any moment. Again he must take flight, and this time he did not dare to employ the train. An unprotected train was too big an objective for the German bombers to miss a second time. All the preparations in Andalsnes had been in vain, since only a small part of the gold had been shipped on the British cruiser. The only chance was to load the remaining thirteen hundred cases of gold on trucks and follow the coastal road northward. Haslund set about requisitioning trucks that were intended for the transport of munitions.

Within half an hour he had rounded up twenty-six trucks. The drivers had not slept for twenty-four hours; they were near collapse, and now they were being asked to drive for at least another twenty-four hours. One complication succeeded another. The coastal road was broken by various fjords. Ferries would be needed to get the trucks across them. The trucks drove several miles apart, so that the Stukas would not find them too easy prey. But they had been underway scarcely half an hour when four Nazi planes appeared, dived low, and spattered machine-gun fire at the column. Fredrik Haslund, driving a private car at the head of the column, sought cover in a thicket on the side of the road. Together with Nordahl Grieg, the poet, he crawled under a bush. During the worst of the machine-gunning, the Norwegian poet spoke to him of the beauties of approaching spring as symbolized in a small white flower that had bloomed too early above the snow. The Nazis did not suspect that the trucks contained the long-sought Norwegian gold, and so they abandoned the attack after some three-quarters of an hour of strafing. No one in the column had been injured, and the convoy of gold was able to proceed.

The trucks still had to pass through Andalsnes, which had become a no-man's land. As the first cars entered the town, a building was struck directly by a heavy bomb. Great blocks of concrete and sections of brick wall were hurled across the road. The men had to stop and clear the way before they could continue. Finally the road was clear, and they went on, despite the roar of planes overhead. In the afternoon they reached the first ferry crossing, but there was no ferry in sight. The only ferry had been

bombed the day before, they were informed, and there was no other to be had.

By frantic telephoning, Haslund arranged for two small passenger ferries to come to their aid from another point.

The drivers and accompanying soldiers were utterly exhausted. Now they had six hours' rest, for Haslund had decided not to risk ferrying the gold across until nightfall. For the interval, the trucks were driven into the woods and camouflaged. The two ferries took six hours to transport the twenty-six trucks across the fjord, since each ferry could take only two trucks at a time. Once they had got across, other difficulties developed. The trucks that had been hastily assembled were, for the most part, intended to carry loads of no more than a ton and a half. All of them had been loaded with two or three tons of gold. Soon one of the overloaded trucks broke down. There was nothing to do but unload it and place even more weight on the others. The Norwegian coastal road is both curving and narrow, and each breakdown caused the halting of the entire column until the road could be cleared. Their goal was Molde, in the Northwest, where they had been expected for the past twelve hours. A concrete cellar had been prepared here to hide the remaining gold.

The journey began with twenty-six trucks. Four broke down on the road; three replacements were secured. In spite of great obstacles, all the gold arrived safely in Molde.

* * * * *

The truck drivers, although they had scarcely slept for days, returned to the vicinity of Andalsnes to continue their task of transporting munitions. The rest of the group waited for an opportunity to get their gold to a ship. Their vigil took place in a burning town, for the Nazis had bombed Molde unmercifully. For five days they waited, while all around the town was reduced to rubble. Molde, once known as the "City of Roses", was wrecked as thoroughly as Warsaw and Rotterdam.

In Molde a British warship lay at anchor in the burning port, receiving aboard King Haakon and the members of his Government. Haslund hoped he would be able to transport the gold on this same ship. But all the piers had been shattered or burned by bombing; there seemed to be no way to get the gold aboard the 10,000 ton cruiser. At last he decided to bring the gold alongside the ship, using small boats. Meanwhile the German planes were steadily attacking the cruiser. The British

felt concern for the safety of the King, and urged haste. The loading and unloading of the small boats was proceeding with painful slowness. Haslund decided to risk four trucks out on a burning pier. Through shattered, littered streets the trucks fought their way and at last reached the port. From the ship one of the Government members cried out encouragingly to him, "You must try to get through to the north."

Haslund gathered a new fleet of trucks. He later wrote that he did not know how they drove the trucks out of the city through the flames and an incessant hail of machine gun bullets. But at last his convoy reached the open road, and headed northward. After several hours' journey along the coast, they came upon a small passenger ship that was taking refugees on board. Haslund insisted on requisitioning the boat.

His small group now had no orders, nor any information. The King and the Government were on their way to England; Haslund had no idea how far north the Germans had already driven. He concealed the cases of gold in the woods and arranged for the loading to be done at night.

In the course of the day the small ship was bombed and driven aground. This ship was their last hope. Haslund and his men resolved to attempt repairs and float the ship again. After frenzied labors by men who knew little about ships, they succeeded. The gold was loaded on board, and then began a journey in June down hundreds of Norwegian fjords. The ship had no radio; no one knew what districts were already in the hands of the Nazis. Haslund wanted to go to Namsos to establish contact again with the British, but on an island he was told Namsos had been abandoned by the British.

Meanwhile, the Nazi Secret Service had learned that the ship with the gold was under way. Seaplanes were sent to attack it. A captured Norwegian torpedo boat was manned by Germans and lay in ambush in a fjord for Haslund's ship. But the Norwegian Secret Service discovered the trick in time, and informed Haslund. At last, on an island in one of the Norwegian fjords, he obtained two small fishing boats from Norwegian patriots. The remaining five hundred and fifty cases of gold were placed aboard these boats and again the flight began.

The two fishing boats sailed northward. Planes circled overhead, but saw no more than two shabby and harmless small vessels and did not attack the Norwegian "fishermen". Another time the boats passed within twenty feet of a U-boat, which also

did not attack. Haslund took the risk of hastily going on land and informing the Norwegian naval command in the area, which had not yet been taken by the Germans. A few hours later the submarine was sunk. At last the expedition reached Tromsøe and from there the gold was shipped directly to England.

* * * * *

This is the story of a modern Viking, a modest man whose amazing feat is hardly known. In the summer of 1940 he came to America to foster the activities of the brave Norwegian merchant marine which had contributed over one thousand vessels to the cause of the Allies. Haslund has charge of some twenty-five thousand Norwegian sailors. When he has some time for himself, he works on the problems of post-war reconstruction in Norway.