



UNDERGROUND IN DENMARK DURING WWII

Below is Soldier Erik Holbek's report in his own words about his time in the "Underground Army" in Denmark during WWII.

"I was born in 1921. Like most "Army brats", we moved often as my officer father was stationed to different posts. In 1933, he served as a military attaché in the Danish delegation to Potsdam/Berlin in Germany where he saw the growing strength of the German military machine. He warned us when he returned home that there might be another war in Europe. We spend also two wonderful years at Kronborg.

He was a Lieutenant Colonel in Roskilde when the Germans invaded on April 9, 1940. His superiors sent him to Faxe Ladeplads, mobilized in March, but not a shot was fired there even though it was part of the Copenhagen defense.

In 1942, now a full Colonel, he was moved to Fredericia with his regiment. He was angry at the posting, as he believed that when you capitulate you should be able to go home and take the uniform off. The Germans had allowed the Danish infantry to remain. All other services were disbanded. A German Colonel with 2000 troops had been in Fredericia since the occupation of Denmark. Later that year he was moved again, this time to Kerteminde.

I was called up to serve in the military in 1942 but I refused to wear a uniform during occupation. The captain for our company was an old friend of my dad's and he understood my point of view. I volunteered instead to be a fireman' in CBU summertime. In winter, I was studying architecture in Kolding, so I traveled to school by train from Fredericia. The trains burned peat for fuel and were slow and unpredictable. On some days one could bicycle faster. So, I moved to Kolding.

Then came August 29, 1943. The Germans disbanded the Danish Government and civilian resistance increased. My father began tracking the Germans, hoping for a peaceful end to the war. My brother Kai was in Sweden, having to spend much of the war there after ferrying Jews to Sweden. My sister was producing an underground newspaper. Our Mother and her youngest child were at home not knowing where the rest of us were.

Fredericia was headquarters for the German telegraph and phone system and had a large Gestapo presence. As I traveled a lot between Kolding and Fredericia, I became familiar with the train tracks. I also noted the size of German convoys and observed movements of German vehicles, including their plates and makes, and I took notes. A friend who knew of a group sabotaging German tracks put me in contact with a member. I joined a group that was formed in early 1943. We all took false names and carried false identification papers. I was given the alias of Egil Hansen, as my mother had embroidered my linen with an E.H.

When the groups, began sabotaging the tracks, they did their job in daylight (there were no German guards). After August of '43 we had to work in darkness. All was well organized. Our leaders listened to BBC broadcasts at selected times and learned where and when explosives should take place. We did have to meet them at different addresses to get the explosives and assignments. We were ordered never to go out by ourselves. We used a plastic material for the explosives (we called it butter) It was detonated by timers set for varying hours. Only the tracks were blown. There were two reasons for this: We could not be sure if the trains were German or Danish and further, if one German was killed by an action five Danes were shot in retaliation. Now the tracks were guarded and our worst problem was the guard dogs. The Germans brought in new tracks for replacement, stacking them at intervals along the length of the tracks, and repairs were done in no time. We complained to our boss. His answer was, "If you keep a whole division on guard duty and track repair that is one division Germany cannot send to Russia".

We determined that the best time to lay the "butter" was as a train was moving slowly up a hill. We dug the gravel away beneath the passing wheels and left our explosives and timers in the cavity. The noisy trains protected us from the ears of the guard dogs.

We used bicycles to get to the tracks. If it was not safe to go back to the bikes, we walked home. As a precaution against violating the curfew, we carried a beer bottle and played drunk if we should encounter a guard. We picked up our bikes the next day.

When members of the group did not follow the directions of the leadership severe consequences could occur. One 18 year old went out on his own to lay "butter" and was caught by the Germans. He was tortured by the Gestapo and

named the group. Five members were shot in Ryvangen. Our program was then stopped. All of our operations were shut down. The boy later took his own life. All of us had to go underground for months.

On the street again, Minerva Film in Copenhagen gave me a movie camera and I was told to photograph the end of the occupation for history. It was concealed so that I could photograph through a buttonhole in my coat. On May 4, I was photographing and a German soldier yelled at me and confiscated the camera. Later I went down to the Gestapo and got a receipt for the camera (typical Germans). They were packing up and did not take the time to deal with my camera. I could have run, but why be shot the last day of the war.

Fredericia was a fortified town with ramparts, moats and large barracks buildings. The town helped repulse the Germans in 1848, but not in 1864 or 1940. 2000 Germans were quartered in the town. On May 4th, 1945 we meet at a farm outside of Fredericia. Each town had an "underground army". They were not the best trained, though half were old soldiers. Old infantry officers ran the hidden army. The weapons we had were dropped by the RAF or from Sweden. Some were stolen from the Germans. Word had it that the war would be over on May 5th. About 300 of us marched into town and there was no resistance. Citizens were welcoming us. A friend and I had a British Bren gun, but we never had to fire a shot though we had studied the instruction for operation. Twelve of us were sent with a sergeant to guard the Little Belt Bridge. Six thousand Germans passed over the bridge. The British had allowed half of the Germans to carry their rifles to the border. Now that peace was here, two rifles were sufficient to stand against 3000 of the German army."

After the War Erik lived underground in Fredericia, and only came out at night times. He studied to be an architect in Kolding. Shortly after he took his bike to Copenhagen and got into the royal academy for architects. He finished in 1952 and in 1953 he left for the US because he could not find any Architect jobs in Denmark.

First he worked in New York for \$2.5 an hour. In 1954 he drove by car across the US and ended up in San Francisco. He found an Architect job in Santa Rosa and later opened his own firm. He mainly build houses, apartments and small business.

Erik died shortly after this interview in 2015.