

Norwegians recall grim days under Nazi occupation

By MORDECAI SPEKTOR
Assistant Editor

The dictionary defines "quisling" as a traitor who collaborates with those who invade one's country. In fact, this strange word comes from the surname of the Norwegian Nazi leader, Vidkun Quisling. After the German invasion of Norway on April 9, 1940, Quisling was named to the German-made title of "Fører" of Norway — his name would become synonymous with traitor.

Norway's Jewish community numbered only about 2,000 in 1940. Within the first year of Nazi occupation, new identity cards were issued to all Norwegian Jews, stamped with a red letter "J." On May 18, 1941, Jews were dismissed from all state and public institutions, then soon banned from teaching and other occupations.

When the Nazi SS and Norway's Nazi state police began rounding up the Jews in the fall of 1942, the Norwegian Resistance sprang into action and managed to smuggle some 930 Jews across the border into Sweden.

A leader of that action was Gunnar Sønsteby, a fabled hero of the Norwegian Resistance, who recently visited Minnesota. He was accompanied by Jo Benkow, a Norwegian Jew who was the leader of Norway's Conservative Party, and speaker of the Storting, the Norwegian parliament, for eight years until his retirement in 1993. Benkow is regarded as the most influential Jewish politician in Norway's history.

During a stop here on a recent national speaking tour sponsored by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sønsteby and Benkow talked with the AJW in the lobby of the Minneapolis Hilton Hotel. They were accompanied by Ulf S.H.

Christiansen, Norway's consul general in Minneapolis.

Both Benkow and Sønsteby are frequent visitors to these parts, but they explained that their current speaking tour is dedicated to the topic of the Norwegian experience of the Holocaust. Benkow introduced Sønsteby as a "living legend" of the Norwegian Resistance. "He knows a great deal about how to rescue Jews and how it was done during the war," remarked Benkow.

Sønsteby, now 81, is a man of normal appearance, and one would never guess that he was a master saboteur during World War II. He led 17 attacks against German troops, including raids on munitions depots and a raid on an airport that destroyed 44 Nazi aircraft. Sønsteby was the U.S. OSS

(Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA) man in Oslo and he has written of his exploits in a memoir, "Report from No. 24" (Barricade Books).

Speaking of Norway's Jewish history, Benkow mentioned, "One of the things you probably don't know, in our Constitution of 17th of May, 1814, there was a Jewish clause that Jews were not allowed to enter, nor to visit Norway; and that ban wasn't lifted until 1851." He noted that Sweden and Denmark "were much more liberal" in their Jewish immigration policies.

With that background, Benkow discussed the World War II era, the time of Quisling's Nasjonal Samling (National Union, or Norwegian Nazi Party), and its affiliate, the Hird, "a paramilitary terrorist

organization...and they were bad people, indeed."

"They were the same as the SA people in Germany, when [the Nazis] started in '33, you know," Sønsteby added.

The Norwegian Jews trapped in the clutches of the Nazi occupiers and their Norwegian collaborators were shipped off to concentration camps late in 1942. In his recent book, "Pack of Thieves: How Hitler and Europe Plundered the Jews and Committed the Greatest Theft in History," Richard Z. Chesnoff writes, "Out of a total of 739 Norwegian-Jewish deportees, only 26 men survived the war."

As Norway's Jews were being exterminated, the Quisling government set up the Liquidation Board for Confiscated Jewish Property, which registered and pilfered Jewish businesses, real estate and personal property left behind.

Like many European nations, Norway has had a poor record in dealing with Holocaust-era asset restitution issues, but that situation

recently changed.

In 1997-98, the official Skarpmes Commission studied the issue of looted Jewish property during the Nazi occupation years. The government accepted their recommendations for substantial collective compensation to Norway's Jewish communities — and the establishment of a "resource centre for studies of the Holocaust and religious minorities in Norway." Norway also appropriated funds to individuals who lost property during the war, and to heirs of victims.

In regard to Norway's recent acts of *teshuvah*, repentance, Benkow said, "What the Norwegian government and parliament did those days should be a shining example to other nations with great reason to right what they once did wrong."

On a final note: Vidkun Quisling and 23 of his Norwegian Nazi colleagues were executed for treason in 1945. Some 19,000 other Norwegians received prison terms for collaborating with the Nazis.



On Feb. 21, the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) co-sponsored a luncheon at the Minneapolis JCC to honor Jo Benkow and Gunnar Sønsteby. Shown above at the event are (l to r) Norwegian Consul General Ulf S.H. Christiansen, JCRC Holocaust Education Chair Joni Sussman, Jo Benkow and Gunnar Sønsteby. Co-sponsors of the luncheon were the University of Minnesota's Center for Scandinavian Studies, and Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Sons of Norway, and the Royal Norwegian Consulate General.

The American Jewish World
March 10, 2000 / 3 Adar II, 5760