

**Your On the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**The Baltic Sea Tour:
Oslo, Norway**

The Baltic Sea Tour

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Chapter 2: Oslo, Norway¹ Report 1



August 4, 2008

This morning we pulled into the port of Oslo, Norway. After securing our breakfast through *six* food lines---each one offering tailored treats, we left the ship to take a walking tour of downtown Oslo.

I was eager to revisit this city. Before I retired from the bits and bytes of life, I conducted some lectures about the Internet for a software firm here. I liked the Norwegians' good nature, the informality, and their humorous self-deprecation. They were (and are) gracious people. Even though I was brought across the pond as a hired hand, they invited me into their homes for dinner.

Our tour guide's name was Jarl. He greeted us with, "My name is Jarl. It's a Viking name. You'll be happy to know my name is my only similarity to the Vikings." Even in Norway, home of the Vikings, the Vikings are disparaged. No home-field advantage here.

The Vikings were hearty, ambitious, and brave people. I'm certain part of their infamy came from their being pagans, and during their early times of the raiding of England and many parts of mainland Europe (800 – 1100 AD), they captured a lot Church property. Most historians of those times were priests who, reasonably enough, were not prone to write positive critiques about the Vikings' fierce warriors, deadly longboats, love of free love, and love of others' booty.

¹ For the remainder of these reports on the Baltic, I have included a number of conversations I had with Europeans, and placed them within quotation marks. For this trek, I did not use a tape recorder for my reporting. I took notes. With some exceptions---and borrowing a technique from my hero Mark Twain---the quotations do not represent a word-for-word recitation of these conversations. But they are accurate reflections of the discourses. I trust you will tolerate my taking license with the quotations. It will provide an easier flow of the narratives.

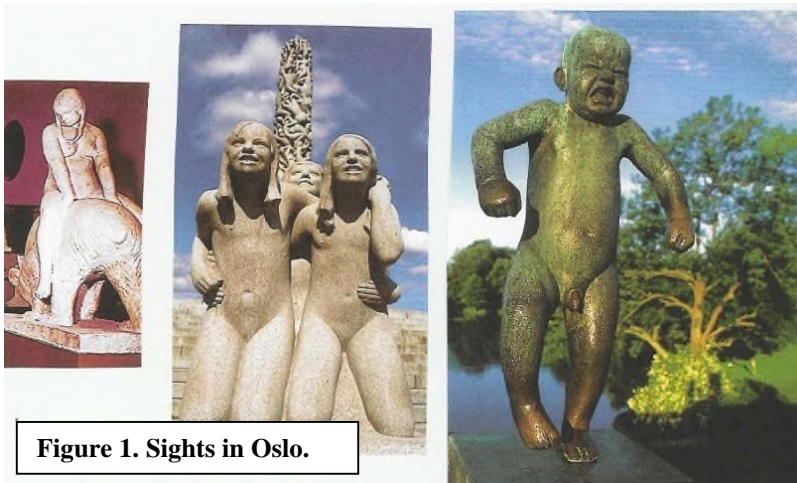


Figure 1. Sights in Oslo.

Even today, parts of this Nordic culture would not appeal to some of America's citizens. At the town squares in Norway, you will find no Ten Commandments plaques, but you will find statues of naked people. A few examples are shown in Figure 1.²

Our first stop was at the Akerhus Castle, positioned on the Baltic Sea Harbor, and seen in Figure 2. The Vikings established a settlement here in the 11th century, and the fortress was built in the early 1300s. For centuries, the fort was the front line for protecting Oslo from its neighbors, notably the Danes and the Swedes. According to Norwegian historians, between 1308-1716, this castle and its town suffered nine major invasions from Sweden or Denmark.

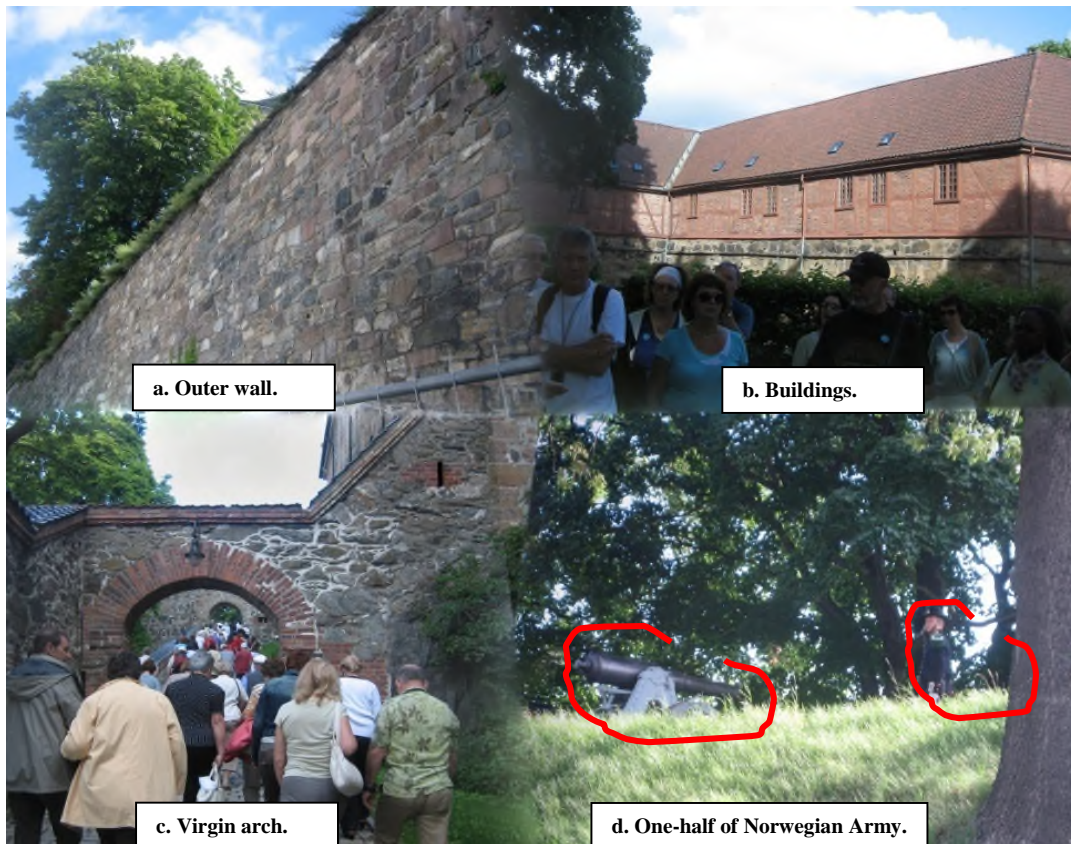


Figure 2. The Akerhus Castle.

² Normanns Kunstforlag, photos, *Oslo*, ISBN 978-82-7670-006.0, p. 29.

Even after the 18th century, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark had their falling-outs. But today, these folks are as peaceful and contented with each other as sets of turtle doves. What happened? Why have they disposed themselves to disavow aggression? After all, the tribes in Africa and the religious sects in the Middle East have managed to keep the revenge cycle going for centuries. Why are the Nordic tribes and sects different? We will explore these questions as we proceed through these reports. For now, let's continue the castle tour.

Figure 2a. shows the outer wall of the castle. Figure 2b. shows one of the buildings inside the castle walls. Figure 2c. is a snapshot of tourists walking around the castle keep and underneath an arch. Jarl informed us that in the old days, guards and trumpeters were positioned on top of this escarpment. The guards were on the lookout for incoming Danes or Swedes, soon to arrive to pillage the town. The trumpeters were there to sound the alarm to the citizenry, to warn them to hide their silver and virgins before their Baltic Buddies landed to take the booty. Jarl interjected, "The trumpet sounds initiated frenzied efforts to the hiding of a lot of silver."

Figure 2d. shows a soldier and a cannon positioned on top of one of the castle's walls. Jarl told us, "This represents one-half of the Norwegian Army. The other half is guarding the Russian border."

I had forgotten the northeast part of Norway has a border of about 90 miles facing Russia. Many years ago, the Norwegians and Russians had some tense moments in that part of the world. During WWII, as the defeated Germans left Russia, Jarl told us many of the German troops returned to Germany via Northern Norway. He said the Germans, "...used a scorched earth policy, and left little behind them."

WWII is on their Minds

As we continued our walk around the castle grounds, Jarl informed us how most political leaders and citizens did not cooperate with the Germans, and how the leaders of the Norway resistance worked with the government-in-exile in London to thwart the German occupation. After the war, and the return of the King and government, about 90,000 cases of treason and defection were brought before various Norwegian councils and courts.³

There are different takes on what happened in WWII Norway. Uncontested is the fact that in 1942, Germany installed a puppet government under Vidkun Quisling, who did the bidding of the Germans.

To some critics, the Norwegians did not do enough, "In 1941, the Germans were able to run occupied Norway with just 806 administrative personnel.⁴ ...and more than one in five of Norway's military officers had voluntarily joined Quisling's neo-Nazi (system)... ."⁵

Granted, but compared to what? Almost all populations in German-occupied Europe behaved in the same way. As one example, France was administered by Nazis with only 1,500 Frenchmen. In a country of 35 million people, only 6,000 German police and militia were assigned to keep the French under control. The same was true for the Netherlands, "...the main support of the German

³ According to most historical recounts.

⁴ Tony Judt, *Post War: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 809.

forces in the police sector and beyond was the Dutch police.”⁶ Not to mention that 23,000 Dutchmen volunteered for the Germany SS.⁷

It seems obvious that Germany could never have done what it did to the Jews if each occupied country had resisted the German’s ongoing occupation. But with some exceptions, after a country was overwhelmed by the German army, the conquered citizens settled in to being, yes, conquered citizens.

In my three decades of traveling around Europe, I have come to sense both a defensiveness and guilt many Europeans harbor about WWII, the Nazis, and the treatment of the Jews. I think it comes down to the average European posing, “How does a single person combat evil?” Along with, “But how could we not, as a people, indeed combat it?” There is also this attitude, “Yes, we should have done something. We’ve since tried to make amends. But we were not living during those times. Why must we keep looking over our shoulders?”

The critics respond to these opinions by their assertion that a country as a whole must be judged for its actions regarding genocide. Thus, debates continue about the WWII non-Jews and their treatment of the Jews, about Turkey and Armenia, about European Americans. and the American Indians.

Citing the concentration camps in Europe, critics contend it is disingenuous for many private citizens to claim they never knew about them. Some were near cities. Many of them gave off signs (smells, etc.) of exterminations going on.

During Jarl’s ambulatory lecture about Norway, the castle, Quisling, and WWII, I was walking alongside another tourist in our group. I was not sure of his nationality, but I gathered he was French, Swiss, or Austrian. As we chatted about Quisling, he offered:

- Person, “When will they stop looking back?”
- I did not know exactly what the man was getting at, but I suspected it dealt with war crimes.
- For lack of knowing what to say, I responded, “I guess it depends on if ‘they’ are Jews or not. I think people tend to take things more personally if they are personally affected.”
- “You’re an American.” (How did he know? Ha.) “How about the Indians?”
- “Many were wiped out, like the Jews.”
- “Yes, and were you responsible?”
- “Of course not. I wasn’t even born.”
- “And I wasn’t born till after WWII.” (I then learned his nationality and the reasons for his tirade.) “As an Austrian, I continue to be slandered because of events I had nothing to do with.”
- “I don’t know what to say.” And I didn’t.
- We left it alone.

⁶ Judt, 39.

⁷ Judt, 809.

It was a short bitter and sad exchange. The man seemed to be resentful about Jarl's proclamations of Norway's noble behavior in WWII. But then, Jarl was an Oslo tour guide, not a social psychologist.

Still, this man's comments stuck with me. Looking at the issue from his perspective, he posed to me: At what point do we humans stop looking in the rear view mirror? I cannot answer all aspects of this question, because I am not, say, a Jew, an Armenian, or an American Indian. If I were, I suspect I would take a different stand on the question. But this I know in a part of the world to which I can relate: I regret what happened to the American Indians. But I have no guilt or remorse about it. How can I? I had nothing to do with it.

This is where I take issue with the continuous and continual efforts of single-issue groups who keep themselves stoked by attempting to imbue innocent generations with guilt because of the sins of past generations. I believe these actions to be unfair to those living today and dishonest to those of the past.

As a race of supposedly decent beings, we should be appalled and repelled by what our predecessors did. We should visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. and the concentration camps outside Berlin. But we should not flagellate ourselves as individuals because our race is inherently flawed. Each of us should do our own cleansing. In that way, perhaps our collective souls will eventually become less cluttered with guilt, remorse, and resentment.

I am sure I will be receiving emails on these last few paragraphs. Holly had this to say about my thoughts regarding the war and the Jews, "It is important to look back to yesterday, to our mistakes. Only in that way can we protect tomorrow."

Anyway, a dubious legacy: The word *quisling* (non-capitalized) refers to a traitor. Quisling got his reward for his duplicity. He and 23 other men were tried and executed in 1945. The Norwegians, who had abolished capital punishment in 1876, restored it for these lucky exceptions. Jarl showed us where Quisling was executed. It is part on the castle grounds and shown in Figure 3.

The Town Hall

On a lighter note, one of the highlights of our walk was the Oslo Town Hall. The entrance is shown in Figure 4. A fine looking set of doors. But the insides of the Hall were the attention-getters. As we filed into the building, Jarl informed us this site is the place where the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded each December 10.

I was under the impression these prizes were awarded in Stockholm, Sweden, because Alfred Nobel (the founder and funder of the prizes) was a Swede. The physics, chemistry, physiology/medicine, economics, and literature awards take place in Stockholm. The peace prize ceremonies take place in the room shown in Figure 5.



Figure 3. Where Quisling met his fate.



Figure 4. Entrance to the Town Hall.

The left photo in Figure 5 shows two sides of the room where the peace prize ceremony takes place. The middle photo is a closer look at one of the murals on the walls. The right photo shows Jarl ignoring one mural scene. (He was concentrating on his presentation to us.) As mentioned earlier, Norwegians have more of an open-minded bent than many Americans. They seem to be more open to freedom of thought and its open expression. Whatever the case, I cannot imagine seeing this mural in the Hayden, Idaho, city hall.

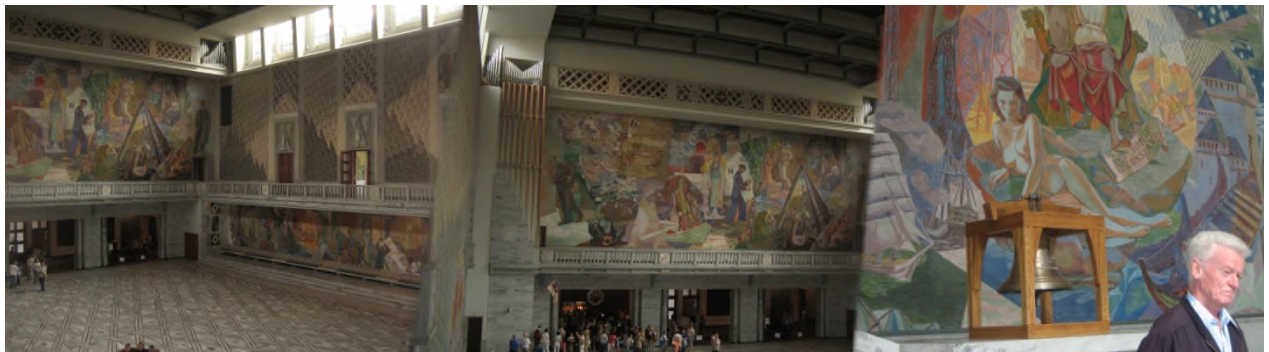


Figure 5. Inside the Town Hall.

Most of us know the background of Alfred Nobel. While I was walking around this room, some of this man's résumé came to mind:

- Early in his career, he lived in St. Petersburg, where he developed mines, torpedoes, and other explosives.
- Later, in Sweden, he tried to find a safe way to handle nitroglycerin, which led to his production of dynamite.
- Still later, he produced one of the first smokeless dynamite powders.
- At his death, Nobel owned many factories that manufactured explosives.

In view of its creator, some of my blue friends believe the Nobel Peace Prize to be a contradiction of terms. Some of my red friends find the idea to be a fitting metaphor for our species:

- The blues say, “An ounce of peace must be purchased with a pound of good will.” To which the reds respond, “An ounce of peace must be purchased with a pound of dynamite.”
- The blues say, “Peace is made through charity.” To which the reds respond, “Peace is made through TNT.”

I am staying clear of this explosive issue. For now, we left the Town Hall and continued our walk around downtown Oslo. After a half hour or so, we approached The Royal Palace, the residence Norway’s royal family. (See Figure 6.)



Figure 6. The Royal Palace.

The palace sits on a hill overlooking one of Oslo’s central and most beautiful boulevards, named Karl Johansgate. Each year, thousands of children flock to this street to celebrate spring. Jarl showed us a photo of the parading children taken from the front of the palace. Pretty impressive: A couple miles of tiny humans, bedecked in colorful costumes, probably wondering what the fuss was all about.

No Barriers Here

While Jarl was conducting the tour, he would often stop at special places, talk to us, and field questions. During our time at a statue of the Queen near the palace, one of the tourists asked Jarl,

- “I noticed there are no security barriers in front of any of your government buildings. Why not?”
- Sure enough. Look again at the photos in this report. Granted, the castle (Figure 1) did have barriers at its gates, but they were built 700 years ago.
- Jarl’s response was, “The only security barriers in front of buildings here are at the American and Israeli embassies.”

The crowd offered no follow up remarks, nor did Jarl. I suspect any anti-American (or anti-Israel) tourists kept their thoughts to themselves, as many of the folks on our tour were obviously Americans. It was easy to detect us: our accents, chewing gum, and baseball caps.

As we proceeded down the street in front of the palace, I thought, “How about the German embassy? They were the guys who decimated Norway. What about the Danish or Swedish embassies? For centuries, they laid waste to Oslo. Why Americans?”

Jarl was walking ahead of the tour group with a couple of men, guiding us to the statue of Henrik Ibsen. For this two-week trip, I had decided to make it a point to talk to the Europeans about their views of WWII, the Cold War, and America. I caught up with our guide:

- “Jarl, I’m doing a survey during my trip through the Baltic. What do Norwegians think of Americans?”
- He paused for a moment, and then replied, “We love Americans. But we’re not too fond of America.”
- “I don’t understand.”
- One of the men decided to join in. He was a Norwegian. “We still remember what you did for us in WWII. We remember the Marshall Plan. Why, some of my parents’ friends were given free trips to America to learn more about your coal mining. We know you through your movies. We know you are a generous people.”
- “And?”
- “You’ve replaced Russia as the world’s bully.”
- “Really. How?”
- “What gives America the right to meddle in everyone’s affairs?”

I wanted to continue this dialogue with Jarl and his colleagues. But toward the end of our walk, a huge downpour scattered everyone. Holly and I slogged back to the ship.

“Bully.” Does this accusation come from envy? Jealousy? Does it matter? Should we care? I let it ride.

But I do think a country’s “meddlesome index” is directly proportional to how many tools a country has in its national toolbox. What are those tools? Wealth and weapons.

We need only look at the history of Europe: When the Norsemen, Celts, Normans, Danes, Swedes, French, British, Dutch, Portuguese, Romans, Spaniards, Poles, Italians, Greeks, Germans, Austrians, Bulgarians, and Romanians had the most tools, they tended to meddle.

So, they became the meddlers. When they did not have the tools, they became the meddles---a new word for the dictionary.

Some countries never became meddlers, because they never possessed a big enough tool box. Luxemburg, Monaco, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia come to mind. Switzerland has been the shrewdest of all. It sets up the banks that fund the meddlers’ tool boxes.

Anyway, some countries meddled on the *pretext* of spreading religion. Some on the pretext of spreading their language and culture. Others on the pretext of realizing a political philosophy. Pretext? Nonsense. The truth is that for centuries, Europe engaged in almost constant warfare for...not religion, language, togas, or voting rights. They fought for power and turf. For all his sickness, Hitler offered an accurate insight into the ways of mankind:⁸

We sir, are feverishly in pursuit of power...For us the pursuit of power is not an anemic theory; the will to power is for us literally the whole meaning of life.

Which do we prefer: To be the meddler or the meddled-with? On which side of the power curve do we wish to be?

Until human nature changes, I will take my chances with a wealthy and well armed country. If I have a choice, I prefer my country to meddle and not be meddled with. But as I have stated in other essays, there is a smart way to meddle and a not-so-smart way. Since the ending of the Cold War, America's meddling has been....to put it charitably, maze dull.

Anyway, until Darwinian DNA is engineering out of our genes, it will take both wealth and weapons to stay powerful....and stay wealthy. And for the wealthy and powerful countries, it will require considerable judgment and often restraint to stay on top of the pyramid. I say this because many of you know my belief in the Law of the Instrument, exemplified by a child who, upon picking up a hammer, looks for something to pound.

As stated many times in these essays, I think democracies and the rule of law travel better than other philosophies, and I think in the long run, if those in power are patient enough, democracy and the rule of law will prevail.

But a cautionary note is sounded, one that it took the western Europeans centuries to understand:⁹

The most dangerous thing about power is to employ it where it is not applicable.

The writer of this quote, Mr. Halberstam, is telling us that we children must be careful about what we choose to pound with our hammers.

For the next report, we learn about several of Norway's famous citizens.

⁸ Hermann Rauschnig, *The Voice of Destruction*, 19, 1940, in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001), 628.

⁹ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 6, 1972, in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001), 628.

Oslo, Norway Report 2

August 4, 2008

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. We continue the report on Oslo, Norway, with a look at four of Norway's famous citizens.

Henrik Ibsen

During our tour of Oslo, our guide Jarl took us to some of the places where Henrik Ibsen hung out. Jarl told us about the love the Norwegians have for this man and his plays. But then, they are not alone in this regard. Currently, *Hedda Gabler* is running on Broadway.

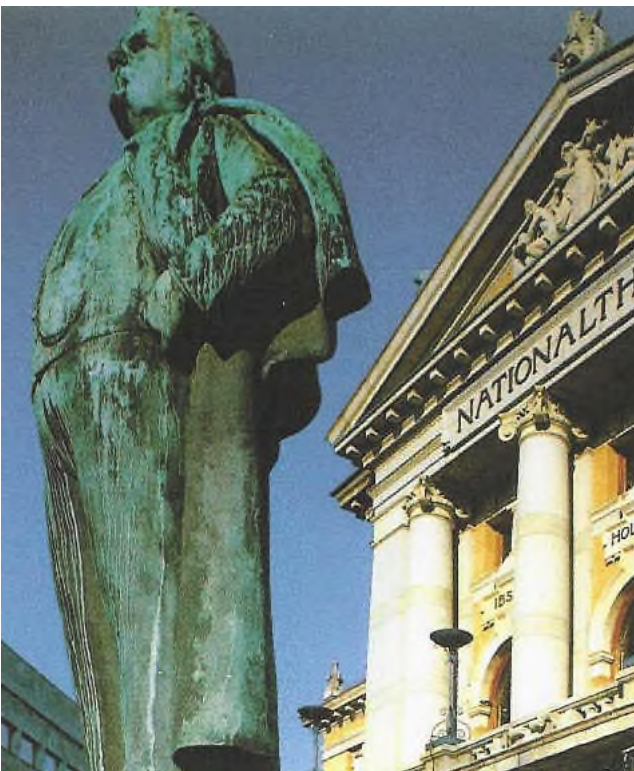


Figure 7. Henrik Ibsen.¹⁰

Could this man write! Not only are his plays interesting and his characters intriguing, he had a great deal to say about the human race. My favorite is *Enemy of the People*. I have witnessed his fictional characters of this play in action many times. During a contentious meeting of the owners' water association for our Virginia home in the Shenandoah Valley, one of the members was attacked (almost physically) for her truthful statements to a newspaper about our water problems. She reminded me of the hero of this play.

Jarl took us by his statue and spoke about this quirky man's habits. He was a clock-watcher. He had no writer's block and consistently wrote from 9AM to 11:30AM. Jarl said, "Not one minute more and not one minute less." Nearby his statue (as seen in Figure 7), a memorial clock (not shown) has been erected to honor Ibsen and his contributions.

Edvard Grieg

While listening to Jarl's homage to Ibsen, I was reminded of one of my favorite classical music compositions, *Peer Gynt*. It is based on Ibsen's drama of the same name. If you've not listened to his masterpiece, give it a go. It is not rock or C&W, but it is melodic and powerful. You cannot do the Texas Two Step to it, but then you cannot do the Texas Two Step to rap.

¹⁰ Normanns Kunstforlag, 11.

Thor Heyerdahl

We did not have time to visit the museum that houses Kon-Tiki, the balsa raft Thor Heyerdahl sailed 4,300 miles around the Pacific Ocean. He took this 101-day trip using this boat, old navigational devices, and other tools to recreate voyages made by our predecessors from Polynesia to Peru.

Having recently done some sailing in the Caribbean Sea, I have come to appreciate the bravery and boldness of Heyerdahl. And even more, the bravery and boldness of those ancient mariners. We must wonder what drove these people to leave Polynesia. Perhaps they were forced to leave. Perhaps they were just curious. Perhaps, but the old saying, “Curiosity killed the cat,” is an appropriate thought about such a dangerous journey. But then the other old saying, “Satisfaction brought the cat back,” might be the answer.

Heyerdahl also led other sailing expeditions to Easter Island and the Galapagos to prove or disprove similar migration and navigation theories. Which reminds me of yet another old saw, “When curiosity turns to serious matters, it’s called research.”¹¹

Roald Amundsen

One of the most impressive Norwegians must surely be Roald Amundsen:¹²

From 1903 to 1906, he led his first important expedition in the small sloop *Gjøa*. During this voyage he sailed successfully through the Northwest Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and determined the position of the north magnetic pole. His next expedition (1910-1912) sailed in a larger ship, the *Fram*, and gained fame as one of the most successful undertakings in the history of Antarctic exploration. With his companions, he lived in Antarctica for more than a year, conducting explorations and scientific investigations. On December 14, 1911, he reached the South Pole, becoming the first person known to have accomplished this feat. He had favorable weather conditions during the voyages, but his success was due primarily to his knowledge of polar conditions, his attention to minute details, and his ability to endure great physical stress.

I have read much about the man and his South Pole trek, a fantastic accomplishment. He and his men were tough as nails and of more importance, they succeeded in their dangerous mission because of their detailed and common sense planning. For example, much of their journey was accomplished by using cross-country skis and dog sleds.

Common sense? Of course, but Amundsen’s English rival to reach the South Pole, Robert Falcon Scott, disdained dogs, sleds, and skis. Instead he chose horses (that died of exposure), motor sleds (which succumbed to the cold), and man-hauling tons of supplies.

Scott and his men died of exposure, exhaustion, and starvation during their return from the Pole--- after seeing the Norwegian flag already planted there. Talk about a downer.

¹¹ Marie von Ebner-Edchenbach, *Aphorisms*, 26, in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001, 179.

¹² “Roald Amundsen,” *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*.

Those proud Englishmen! Their way or the highway, or the frozen horse trail, or whatever. Even today, in spite of Scott's arrogance and incompetence, he is revered by many English:¹³

Though naught but a simple cross
Now marks those heroes' grave,
Their names will live forever!
Oh England, Land of the Brave!

To which I would add, "Pride goeth before the fall....eh the freeze."

For a great read, see *The Last Place on Earth*. It's the story of Scott vs. Amundsen. I reread the book and still found it a page turner, even when I knew the ending.

A hang-out for Ibsen, Nobel Laureates, and Your on the Street Reporter



During our walk, Jarl took us by the Grand Hotel (Figure 8). I mentioned to Holly that this hotel was where my clients put me up during my work in Oslo. As we passed by, Jarl told us Ibsen took his nightly dinner in the Grand Hotel restaurant and the Nobel Peace Prize winners were housed there.

I am not a famous person groupie, but I appreciated staying at a place where such noted people also stayed. Of course, I also sought out the Willard Hotel in Washington, DC because I thought Abraham Lincoln stayed there. In any case, I am often reminded of the quote from Andy Warhol: That in the future, everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes.

Reporterette keeps me on an even keel, "U, you are famous indefinitely to fifteen people." And aren't we all? Unless of course, we have fewer than fifteen relatives.

Figure 8. Hang-out for the famous and not so famous.

Scandinavian Friends

We are nearing a wrap on the reports about Oslo and Norway. During my stay here, as well as in Denmark and Sweden, I was impressed by how well these former archenemies now get along. Jarl informed us that modern day Scandinavia is Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. Instead of killing one another over gold and virgins, they kill with (interchangeable) jokes. Jarl said to us, "Teasing with good friends is just that: teasing."

¹³ Wikipedia, key in Robert Falcon Scott.

Sure, but some of the people in the Middle East will slit your throat if you compose a tease about their ways of life. Not the Scandinavians. Jarl told this one, “Every fourth child is a Norwegian. That’s why the Swedes only have three children.”

Try this one in a Sunni country that is overhead by a Shia: “Every fourth child is a Shia. That’s why the Sunnis only have three children.”

It’s time to continue our journey through the Baltic. Next stop: Copenhagen, Denmark.