# The Grini Circle Artists

**A few of the many** drawings made by Odd Nansen in his secret prison diary.

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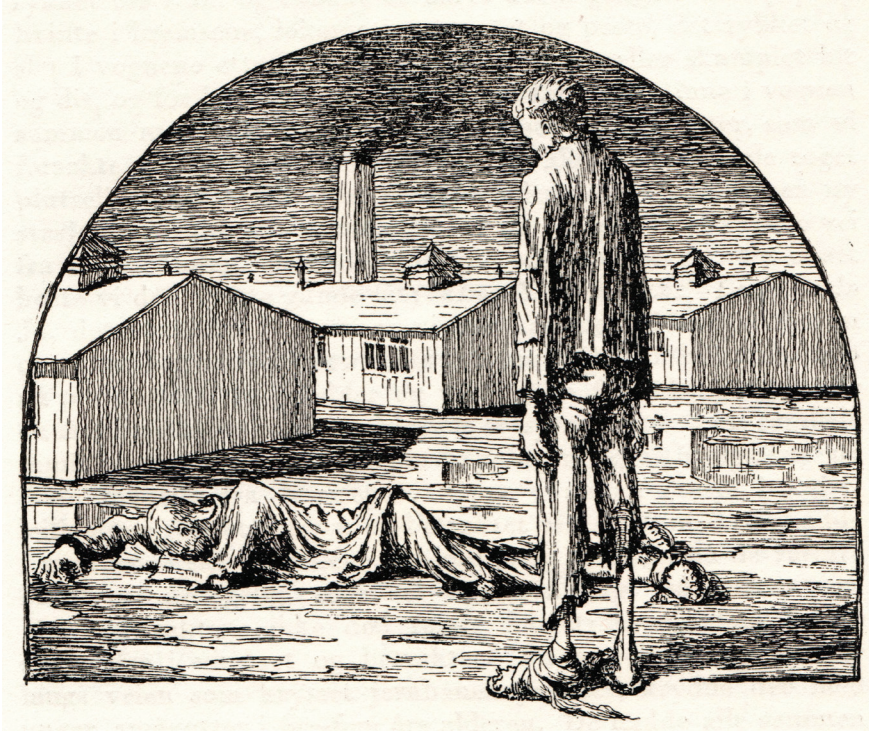
THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY WAS A PERIOD OF TREMENDOUS anticipation in Norway's art world. Following 19th-century innovations by such artists as Christian Krohg, Eric Werenskiold and Frits Thaulow, through whom a distinctly national sensibility had emerged, Norwegian Expressionists such as Edvard Munch and Harald Sohlberg had gained international acclaim for their work pioneering the aesthetic aims of Modernism—then sweeping Europe and gaining more prominent attention in the United States. In 1912, a landmark exhibition organized by the early American-Scandinavian Foundation had brought a survey of Nordic artists to the U.S. for the first time, further establishing the prominence of those artists

*How an unlikely cultural circle forged within Norway's prison camps—pioneered by architect Odd Nansen and artist Per Krohg—left an important legacy of WWII.*

By Timothy J. Boyce



within the international art world.

In the midst of this period of cultural innovation, the 1940 German invasion of Norway and subsequent occupation profoundly impacted the lives of many of Norway's artists. It also, unexpectedly, led to a unique and unusual collaboration: a circle of artists who met within the confines of a prison camp, spearheaded by the architect Odd Nansen and the painter Per Krohg. The relationship that developed as a result helped shape the creation of two important and rare artistic artifacts of the war years in Norway: a rare visual look into life within the Nazi prison camps, and a frieze that has since served as an essential feature of the United Nations headquarters in New York.

*Completed just months prior to Odd's birth, Polhøgda was awash with art, with paintings throughout.*

## ODD NANSEN

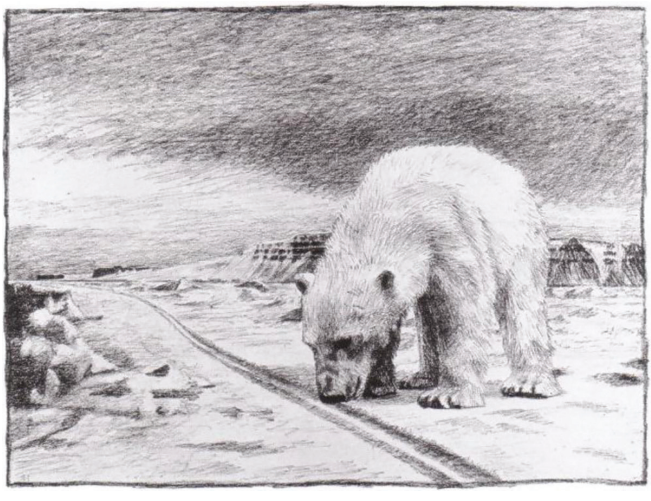
WHEN ODD NANSEN, ARCHITECT, HUMANITARIAN AND concentration camp survivor, was born on December 6, 1901, he entered a personal world brimming with art, and into a tightly interconnected web of artists. His mother Eva Nansen (née Sars), a celebrated soprano, had long had a natural gift for drawing as well; his father Fridtjof Nansen, famed as a scientist, polar explorer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, had once dreamed of becoming an artist. Instead, he had chosen a career as a scientist, more specifically, as a zoologist. Nevertheless, in a world where microphotography did not yet exist, the elder Nansen studied drawing and watercolor under the guidance of artist Franz Schiertz to improve his depictions of his research findings. Schiertz may not have known much zoology, but he did know art. "Be a painter, that's your gift," Schiertz is reported to have advised the young Nansen. Though in the end Fridtjof chose to remain with science—perhaps feeling that one artist in the family was enough, given that his half-sister Sigrid Louise Bølling was a painter—he thereafter always carried a pocket sketchbook with him to capture important scenes and events. Nansen also continued to indulge his interest in art, drawing all his own illustrations for his PhD thesis and his subsequently published works, such as his history of polar exploration, *In Northern Mists* (1911). Moreover, as Odd's older sister Liv relates in a family biography, "the sums that he . . . dispensed to help . . . artists, and others in difficulties, were no trifles."

**Ludwik Szaciński,** *Fridtjof Nansen with his family at Polhøgda*, 1902. Clockwise from top: Fridtjof Nansen, Liv, Kåre, Immi, Odd in Eva's arms.

IMAGE: COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY

Odd Nansen's boyhood home, christened Polhøgda ("Polar Heights"), was located in Lysaker, a residential area west of Oslo. The imposing, neo-Romanesque structure was built with the earnings from Fridtjof's book and lectures describing his polar expedition of 1893-96. Completed just months prior to Odd's birth, Polhøgda was awash with art, with paintings

**Frontispiece to Fridtjof Nansen's** *In Northern Mists: Arctic Exploration in Early Times*, 1911.



**A Fridtjof Nansen sketch** of a polar bear, 1902.

PHOTOS: CREATIVE COMMONS

**Erik Werenskiold's** wall painting (1904-1907) in the Polhøgda dining room illustrating the Norwegian folk song "Liti Kjersti."

throughout. Many of these works came from the Nansens' neighbors—there were so many artists living near Polhøgda that they eventually became known as the "Lysaker Circle," part of an even larger group, including writers, musicians and thinkers, that gave Lysaker an intellectual flair all its own.

Chief among these artists was Fridtjof's lifelong friend Erik Werenskiold, who painted portraits of Eva and Fridtjof, as well as an imposing mural which continues to dominate Polhøgda's dining room to this day. Werenskiold made his reputation illustrating classic Norse folk tales and is said to have used Fridtjof's striking looks as a model for many of his medieval Norse heroes. At Werenskiold's suggestion, Fridtjof Nansen again took up drawing and lithographing late in life. Other painters in the Lysaker Circle included Werenskiold's wife, Sophie Marie Stoltenberg Thomesen, Eilif Peterssen and Gerhard Munthe, whose wife Sigrun would later divorce him to marry a now-widowed Fridtjof in 1919. Other notables in the group included two of Eva Nansen's brothers; the professors Ernst and Ossian Sars; art historian Andreas Aubert; and singers Thorvald and Mally Lammers (Mally was another of Eva's siblings).

PERHAPS UNSURPRISINGLY, THE YOUNGER NANSEN children developed an interest in art. Odd's sister Irmelin ("Immi") took art lessons at the Norwegian National Academy of Fine Arts and eventually married her professor, the artist Axel Revold, whose works are now included in the National Gallery of Norway. Axel and Immi's daughter Dagny Hald would also become an artist and also has works in the National Gallery.

Odd Nansen also considered a career in art but instead opted for a surer and steadier pursuit in architecture, graduating in 1927 with an architecture degree from the Norwegian Institute of Technology in Trondheim, where he had illustrated the school newspaper. Upon graduating, Nansen quickly married Kari Hirsch and, together with his new bride, moved to New

PHOTO: JAN DALSGAARD SØRENSEN/COURTESY FRIDTJOF NANSEN INSTITUTE

Below: **Polhøgda ladies'** drawing room with Erik Werenskiold's portrait of Fridtjof Nansen.

York City. He soon found success, including taking third place among 257 entrants in a competition to design the prototypical "airport of the future" for the fledgling commercial airline industry. But the young family's stay in America was cut short in early 1930 by news of Fridtjof's worsening health; the Nansens returned to Norway and elected to remain following Fridtjof's death on May 13, 1930. Soon thereafter Nansen opened his own architectural practice and by the mid-1930s was designing terminals for Oslo's airport, Fornebu.

In the turbulent 1930s many central European refugees (mostly Jewish)

PHOTO: MARYANNE RYGG/COURTESY FRIDTJOF NANSEN INSTITUTE


**A self-portrait of Odd Nansen** writing his prison diary at night (left).
**The drawing *Muselmann*** from Odd Nansen's diary depicts another prisoner in Sachsenhausen. Muselmann (meaning "Muslim" in German and Norwegian) was a label given to prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps who were at death's door (right).

desperately sought safety and shelter in far-off Norway. Nansen, following in his father's humanitarian footsteps, established Nansenhjelpen (Nansen Relief) in 1936 with the goal of helping these refugees obtain Norwegian visas. Unfortunately, neither Norway's distance nor its oft-proclaimed neutrality proved a barrier to war, which arrived at its doorstep on April 9, 1940, in the form of a surprise invasion by overwhelming German forces.

## THE WAR YEARS

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE WAR ARRIVED AT NANSEN'S very own doorstep. In late December 1941 the British launched two commando-style raids against Norway (Operations Anklet and Archery). In retaliation, the German overlord of Norway, Reichskommissar Josef Terboven, ordered the roundup of 20 "court hostages," that is, prominent friends of the exiled Royal Family. Odd Nansen, whose late father had been instrumental in 1905 in convincing a young Prince Carl of Denmark to become Norway's new king, Haakon VII, was targeted as one of those 20 hostages. He was arrested on January 13, 1942.

For the next three and a half years Nansen kept a secret diary, recording his daily experiences in Polizeihaftlager [Police Detention Camp] Grini, located outside of Oslo, Gefangenenlager [Prison Camp] Veidal, located above the Arctic Circle, and Kazettenlagers [Concentration Camps] Sachsenhausen and Neuengamme, both located in Germany. Nansen also

**Axel Revold,** *Sketch for a Frescodecoration in the University Library in Oslo*, 1933 (top).

**Per Krohg,** *Peace, the Artist with His Family*, 1940 (left).

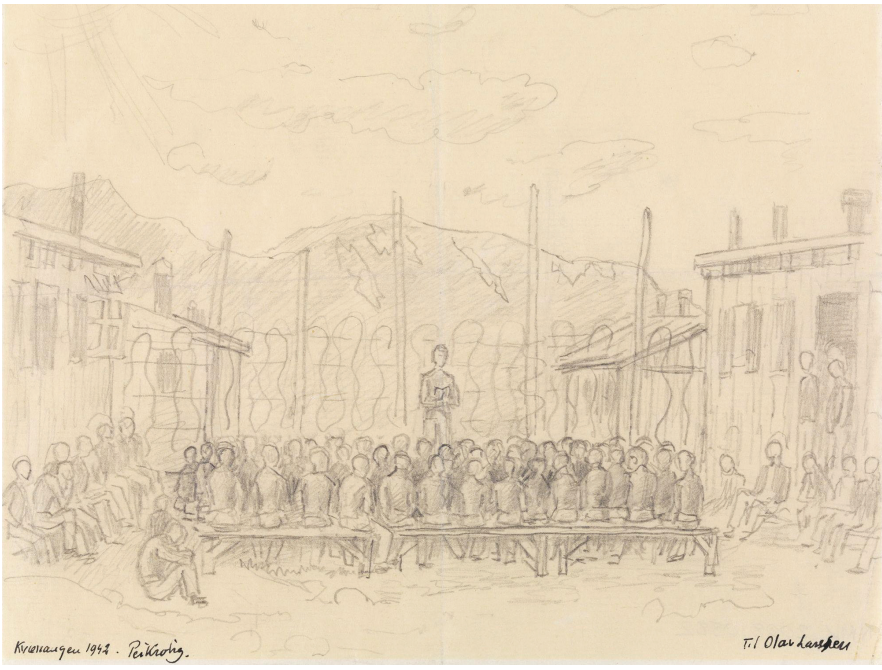
IMAGES: COURTESY NASJONALMUSEET

**Odd Nansen** sketch of outdoor church service at Veidel.

used his diary to depict in vivid sketches the everyday life and horrors of his fellow camp prisoners. Despite the grim circumstances, he tried to retain the ability to view his surroundings through the eyes of an artist. On arriving at Camp Veidel, Nansen marveled at a beautiful sunset that "shone out far over the mountains to the north, east, and south, and charmed the loveliest colors out of mountain and fjord."

WHILE PRISON OFFICIALS FORTUNATELY REMAINED unaware of Nansen's diary, his artistic abilities were noticed and used by his captors, who forced him to produce cards, signs, posters, paintings, as well as carvings. It was not long before Nansen began, whether consciously or unconsciously, to recreate his own "Lysaker Circle" within the camp's walls, with fellow Norwegians like architect Frode Rinnan and writer Francis Bull. And, on April 14, 1942, Nansen recorded the arrival of yet another welcome "visitor": the artist Per Krohg.

By that time, Krohg's reputation as an artist was already well established. Born in 1889, the son of artist Christian Krohg (a professor at the Norwegian Academy of Arts), young Per and his family soon moved to Paris, where from an early age he displayed considerable promise; Auguste Rodin is said to have expressed great expectations for his future as an artist. By age 20, Per, like Axel Revold before him, was studying under Matisse. In time he even became a great admirer and follower of Axel Revold, and Krohg and Revold soon became known as the "fresco brothers." Some of his most



**Per Krohg**, *Fra Kvænangen*, 1942.

notable early works include the Grand Café mural in Oslo and the interior gallery of Oslo's City Hall.

IN HIS DIARY NANSEN EXPLAINS THAT HE AND PER KROHG "were old and great friends," and they soon became painting partners. On Sunday, September 6, 1942, a day off from working in Camp Veidel, Nansen recorded a description of the small study his friend composed during one of these sessions: "a mighty sky, with sunbeams piercing through the clouds, arches or rather towers up over the little flock of people between a few rickety little houses on the ground along the mountains. And then the slight figure of the priest in the middle, with fluttering hair and burning eyes. Houses, priest, and congregation—indeed, even the mountains—look so crushingly small against the mighty, sun-dripping vault of sky . . . I tried my hand at it too and made a pencil sketch, but it didn't turn out as I wanted." Krohg would later complete his version of this painting for the Kvænangen Municipality, Troms, in 1945.

Nansen and Krohg, along with Francis Bull and others, also started a lecture series in prison. Krohg discussed painting, lecturing on topics such as Picasso and other surrealist artists; Nansen focused on architecture, as well as his experiences with the refugee crisis. These relationships—and the cultural stimulation—provided comfort to the circle throughout their confinement. On February 23, 1943, Nansen notes, "We have our little traditions, and our life is pleasant—and uncommon. If only it hadn't been in

**An Odd Nansen**
sketch of Per Krohg (left).
**Detail of the ceiling**
painting in Odd Nansen's dining room at the home built adjacent to Polhøgda (right).

prison, it would have been downright grand."

The circle also provided its members with support. When Nansen was pressed into service by Grini's commandant to draw caricatures of 30 Germans for a party the commandant was throwing in just two days, Nansen enlisted Krohg, as well as fellow prisoners Alv Erikstad, Joachim Grøgard, Bendt Winge and Gunnar Bratlie, for help. Bratlie was a particularly ideal candidate for the job, having been imprisoned in February 1943, along with his editor, for a magazine cover caricaturing the collaborator Vidkun Quisling as an unsteady skater, being helped along by a man in a Hitler mustache.

DESPITE THE RELATIVE COMFORT THE CIRCLE'S activities provided, the horrors Nansen nevertheless witnessed were "so incomprehensible in ghastliness" as to defy all description. Indeed, he wondered whether anyone after the war would believe what he was attempting to describe in word and image: the casual brutality and random terror that was the fate of a camp prisoner, especially the camp Jews, for whom no barbarity, no degradation, seemed evil enough for the guards.

Nothing inside the camps remained the same for long, and even the "Grini Circle" gradually unraveled. As part of an amnesty granted by the German authorities in connection with the Constitution Day events of May 17, 1943, Per Krohg was released from Grini. Despite Krohg's great relief in leaving, the parting was painful. "He will be a great loss—greater assuredly than I can yet realize," Nansen wrote in his diary shortly afterward. "The parting was brief as lightning, but painful, and the void is increasing as the hours pass. Our nocturnal trio is crippled; now only Francis and I remain, and

IMAGE: COURTESY VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY PRESS

we are both, as yet, too strained and anxious to settle down to a duet. It feels worse each time holes are made in the circle." (May 19, 1943). Bendt Winge was released in December 1943; others, such as Francis Bull, were left behind in Grini when Nansen was later sent off to Sachsenhausen.

EVEN AS SOME OF THE ARTISTS REGAINED THEIR freedom, their legacies remained. Diarist Myrtle Wright, an English Quaker who was caught in Norway at the time of the German invasion and thus stranded in the country for the duration of the war, relates in her diary "a good story from Grini in which [Krohg] figures." She writes: "At Christmas the prisoners had decorated the barracks and Per Krohg had painted a frieze. [Siegfried] Fehmer, from the Gestapo . . . came to inspect. He was evidently impressed and stopped in front of Per Krohg's frieze with the remark, 'It is remarkable what a primitive nation can produce under German control.' This became a byword in Grini and, when prisoners were digging ditches in slow tempo or on some other work, they would say to each other, 'It is wonderful what a primitive nation can produce when under German control.'" (After the war, Fehmer, one of the most despised members of the German occupation forces in Norway, was convicted of war crimes and executed at Akershus Castle on March 16, 1948.)

Nansen, unlike Krohg, was never part of an amnesty, nor any other early release. Indeed, just months after Krohg's departure, Nansen ran afoul of Grini's commandant. His punishment: to be banished to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. There he remained, except for a final, brief stay in Neuengamme, until the closing weeks of World War II.

TIMOTHY BOYCE

**The United Nations** Security Council mural by Per Krohg was first publicly displayed on April 5, 1952.

## THE POSTWAR ERA

AFTER THE WAR NANSEN, KROHG AND THEIR SURVIVing friends began to pick up the threads of their prior lives. Nansen returned to Polhøgda, where he lived until he could construct his own residence nearby. He oversaw Polhøgda's subsequent renovation and conversion into a home for the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, an independent foundation focused on international environmental, energy and resource management politics and law.

Meanwhile, Per Krohg soon turned his attention to one of the most public commissions of his life. Early in 1946, as Nansen and Krohg were adjusting to postwar life, the newly organized United Nations was focusing on its two most immediate tasks: selecting a Secretary-General and finding a permanent home. Trygve Lie, the Foreign Minister of Norway's government-in-exile during the war, was quickly selected for the top post. Soon thereafter New York City was selected as the site for the UN's headquarters, and a daring, modernist design was settled upon.

Arnstein Arneberg, Norway's leading architect of the day, was chosen to design the UN's Security Council chamber. According to Norwegian art historian Ingeborg Glambek, "Lie was fully aware . . . the Security Council was the most prestigious [chamber] . . . and would attract greater

PHOTO: NEPTUUL/CREATIVE COMMONS

*Many commented on the power of Nansen's illustrations, particularly for their dramatic realism.*

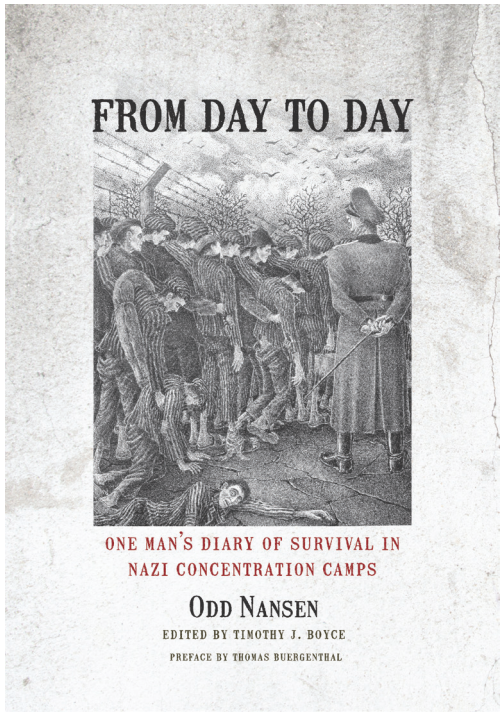
public attention." The process by which Arneberg was selected for this prestigious post remains murky to this day but has Lie's fingerprints all over it; Arneberg was a close friend of Lie's and had even designed his *hytte*, or country cabin.

Arneberg had also been a part of the Nansens' Lysaker Circle; for a time, young architect Odd Nansen served as his protégé, before setting out on his own. He was also well acquainted with Krohg—one of Arneberg's most notable projects was the Oslo City Hall, whose interior gallery was painted by Krohg. It is therefore unsurprising that Arneberg would recommend Krohg for the interior decoration of the Security Council as well.

THERE WAS JUST ONE PROBLEM. THE UN ART PANEL, which was charged with the mandate of insuring that all art be consistent with the overall design of the building and suited to the function of the chamber, balked at Krohg's preliminary sketch. The panel felt Krohg's monumental artwork, measuring 16 by 26 feet and dominating the eastern wall of the chamber, would prove so distracting to the delegates they would be unable to focus on their work. After much discussion and no small amount of arm-twisting the panel relented, and Krohg proceeded. Today, Krohg's work, as Glambek writes, "represents, in an extremely simple and unambiguous manner, the new, harmonious, bright world that has conquered the forces of evil" and is considered one of the most iconic features of the Security Council chamber, if not the entire UN headquarters.

In addition to his work restoring Polhøgda, after the war Nansen resumed work on Fornebu's terminals and was later joined in his architectural practice by two of his children, son Eigil and daughter Siri. He also designed a special *hytte* for the U.S. Ambassador to Norway, L. Corrin Strong. (The *hytte* was assembled in Norway, seasoned, then disassembled and shipped to an island off the coast of Maine, where it was reassembled and where it still stands today, the subject of periodic articles in home and architecture magazines.) Nansen also continued in his humanitarian efforts, serving for a time as an assistant to the Director-General of UNESCO. Throughout his life, he would continue to inhabit a tightly interconnected world of art and artists, who continued to inspire him until his death in 1973.

Most importantly for posterity, Nansen found time in 1947 to publish his secret diary, *Fra Dag til Dag (From Day to Day)*, which soon became the most widely read book in Norway. When translated into English in 1949, the diary received rave reviews. The *Times Literary Supplement* (London) hailed it as "a masterpiece"; other reviewers called it "one of the great documents to come out of the war" and a work "that often reads like




**The book cover** of *From Day to Day: One Man's Diary of Survival in Nazi Concentration Camps* by Odd Nansen.

great literature." Many commented on the power of Nansen's illustrations, particularly for their dramatic realism. In 2016 the diary was republished by Vanderbilt University Press.

WHILE THE ARTISTS OF THE "GRINI CIRCLE" ARE NOT known to have formally reunited after the war, they never forgot their shared experience, and the legacy of that circle continues to reverberate. Nansen's vivid and detailed record and Krohg's imposing mural reflect the twin lessons of the war and its aftermath. Progress in shaping a better world—the world Per Krohg depicted in his monumental frieze—can only come through a spirit of collaboration and mutual respect and support, the very goals of the United Nations. Likewise, it is important to never forget (and to work to more fully understand) the horrors depicted in Odd Nansen's monumental diary, most importantly its concluding words: "What happened was worse than you have any idea of—and it was the indifference of mankind that let it take place!" The Grini Circle, for all its evanescence, remains a symbol of both.

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**Timothy J. Boyce** is the editor of *From Day to Day: One Man's Diary of Survival in Nazi Concentration Camps*, written by Odd Nansen (Vanderbilt University Press). His articles about Nansen's diary and about the Nansen Passport have appeared in *Viking Magazine* and *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History.* (www.timboyce.com)

IMAGE: COURTESY VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY PRESS