

Til Ungdommen – To Youth

by Robert Powell

*“This is your shield, and this is your sword:
a belief in yourself and in the value of human life.”*

Ten years ago, on the 22nd of July 2011 Anders Behring Breivik, a thirty-two year old Norwegian, set off a car bomb outside government buildings in Oslo killing eight of his fellow countrymen. An hour and a half later, after a twenty-five mile drive and a short ferry crossing, he landed on the small island of Utøya where the Norwegian Workers' Youth League was holding its annual summer camp. There, dressed as a policeman, he shot and killed sixty-nine more people, some of them at point blank range. His victims included fifty-five teenagers, one of whom was just fourteen.

A few days later, one of the journalists outside the courtroom in Oslo is reported to have told Breivik's lawyer to 'tell (his) client to burn in hell'. The reaction of thousands of other Norwegians, especially young ones, was altogether more interesting and very typically Scandinavian. They came out onto the streets and they sang.

In the days that followed the mass killings the world's press descended on Oslo. The backdrop to their reports almost always seemed to be the same: streets filled with crowds of people, sometimes carrying candles, sometimes holding red roses in the air, sometimes holding each other closely in their grief, but almost always singing, and singing one song in particular. There was, in all the sorrow, through all the tears, a thread of defiance. You could see it in their faces and you could hear it in the way they sang. 'Døden skal tape!' – 'Death shall not prevail!'.

Til Ungdommen – To Youth – was written in 1936 by the poet Nordahl Grieg (a distant relative of the composer Edvard Grieg). It was then set to music by Otto Mortensen in 1951. In the post-war years it became a modern classic throughout Scandinavia.

For me personally, Til Ungdommen was part of the soundtrack to an exceptionally happy and creative part of my life – the year I once spent teaching in Denmark and visiting schools in southern Scandinavia. When I heard it being sung on the streets of Oslo after the massacre of 2011, I felt compelled to learn more about it, and even to make my own translation into English.

Grieg was a controversial figure who lived in troubled times. Born in 1902, he was brought up in Bergen. He went on to study at the University of Oslo and, for a short time, at Wadham College, Oxford. He interrupted his studies to work as a seaman on a cargo boat that took him first to Australia and then home via the Suez Canal. This experience, and the conditions in which his shipmates were obliged to serve, left a lasting impression on him and did much to shape his politics. Pursuing a career as a writer, he travelled extensively in Europe, and also to China during the civil war. He spent two years in Moscow and then went to Spain during the civil war there – all the time working as a war correspondent or gathering material for novels and plays. For a while he was Chairman of the Norwegian Friends of the Soviet Union.

When the Germans invaded Norway in 1940, Grieg volunteered for service in the army. Eventually, like many of his fellow countrymen including his king, he made his way to England. He became a war correspondent once again, but this time as part of the military and with the rank of captain. In 1943, while reporting on a raid on Berlin, his Lancaster bomber was shot down. He and all his crewmates were killed.

Nordahl Grieg died a soldier in the Norwegian army, yet his most famous legacy is an anthem to non-violence. I doubt if the irony would have been lost on him.

*“ . . . War is contempt for life. Peace is creative: throw yourself into it.
Death shall not prevail!”*

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