

The Norwegian Lodge in London during World War II

Bro. Helge Horrisland

IN THE WAKE OF ONE OF THE SADDEST CHAPTERS OF MODERN BRITISH MILITARY history, the 'Norwegian Campaign' in the spring of 1940, more than 10,000 Norwegians fled to the United Kingdom. Most of these Norwegian refugees ended up in the London area, among them around a hundred members of the two Norwegian Masonic Grand Lodges that existed at that time:

1. The Grand Lodge of Norway (Swedish Rite), recognized by London in 1749 and
2. The Grand Lodge of the Polar Star, that worked according to the German *Zur Sonne* System, but was not recognized by the United Grand Lodge of England, and merged with the present Grand Lodge of Norway in 1946.

What sort of Masonic conditions did these refugees meet in London? The Second World War, like most of its major predecessors, found Britain at best half-ready. The War Office knew so little about Germany's immediate plans of campaign that, misled

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by mistaken intelligence reports,¹ it feared the Luftwaffe would attempt an immediate ‘knock-out-blow’ against London. At 11.27 on the morning of Sunday 3 September, barely a quarter of an hour after prime minister Neville Chamberlain had ended his broadcast with the news that the nation was at war, air-raid sirens wailed over the capital. War Office staff in Whitehall, from top brass to junior clerks, went head over heels down to the air-raid shelter in the basement. There they listened apprehensively to a series of muffled explosions above them, which a former military attaché with first-hand experience of air-raids during the Spanish Civil War identified as ‘a mixture of anti-aircraft fire and bombs dropping.’ When the all-clear sounded, the War Office staff emerged from the basement and discovered to their surprise that there had been no air-raid, and that the ‘explosions’ had been caused by the noise of slamming office doors echoing down the lift shafts.²

In the first few days of the war the United Grand Lodge of England (hereafter UGLE) seriously considered a complete evacuation of Freemasons’ Hall and the cessation of all activity. But after a couple of weeks of postponed meetings full activity was resumed, and this continued uninterrupted for the rest of the war. Here is a situation report from 1940 during the Blitz:

The meeting in one of the lodge rooms is well under way. Suddenly the air raid alarm is on. No sirens or similar unarticulated sound is heard. Instead all lights are out in the whole building. It is pitch dark, but only for a few seconds. Then lights are on again, but only for five minutes. Then lights off again, except for the air raid lights. Hundreds of elderly brethren are wandering around in the gloom. The younger members were already in uniform and on their way to strange and far away places.³

Making your way to the air-raid shelters in the basement, you first had to go to the cloak-room on the main floor to get your gas mask, obligatory dress code in those days. You could be fined by the police or reported by the notorious air-raid-warden of your district for wandering about without it. The next stop was to make your way to the entrance hall to be directed to the shelter, depending on the lodge room from which you had evacuated. In the entrance hall a display on the wall gave following calming message: ‘The air-raid shelters can withstand any bomb attack – except perhaps gas.’

In the Grand Lodge archives there is a report, dated a week after the war broke out, that gives an exemplary description of one of the cardinal virtues of the Britons – the ability to improvise – here in wartime Masonic embodiment:

¹ C. Andrew, ‘Churchill and Intelligence’, *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 3, No. 3, 1988 204–5, here, C. Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm. The Authorized History of MI5* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 241, fn. 1 Deception 1.

² B. Bond (ed.), *Chief of Staff. The Diaries of Lieutenant General Sir Henry Pownall* (London: Leo Cooper, Ltd., 1973), Vol 1 223n, here, Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm*, 241, fn. 1. /Deception 2.

³ Report to Grand Secretary 07091939, Grand Lodge Archives, London.

We have decided not to publish any year book this year. We can't get printing paper anyhow. The whole library, more than 100,000 books is being moved out of the building. The air raid shelters are more or less functioning. But there is a lot of equipment lacking.

We hope to start up normal meeting activity next week. The Connaught Rooms are closed and we expect they will ask for a reduced rent. This may effect our financial situation considerably. I am cutting expenses where possible. Last night there was a Grand Lodge meeting. Both the Deputy Grand Master and the Grand Chaplain had been mobilized and forgot to give notice. It took us more than an hour to find replacements. We ended up with a former Deputy Chancellor [?] who had not been in office for 17 years. The ceremony was performed accordingly. At the closing of the meeting he forgot the prayer – all in all a historic meeting...

The Grand Master's Secretary, Miss Haig, had been mobilized as ambulance driver five nights a week and needed leave. She described how Jews were sitting on the pavement along Whitechapel Road from early morning, waiting for the shelters to open:

Yesterday we had 1,500 people in our shelters. Most of them are grateful. The biggest problem is the poor air quality. We have to spray with disinfectant every morning. It smells like a pig sty. One of our regular customers is a Chinese nobleman who appears in tartan trousers, spotless white shirt, velvet jacket, pink umbrella and a green-beige handbag – with gasmask. I give up trying to describe his hat. His only objection on the conditions is the lack of a cocktail-bar (!) on the premises. All in all the gratitude of our guests make our work worthwhile...⁴

Preparing for the worst, in September 1940 when Battle of Britain was at its peak, Grand Secretary Sydney White wrote a rather cryptic letter to his colleagues in Canada, New Zealand, and New York asking to keep the enclosed sealed envelope unopened, and return it unopened upon receiving a telegram with following wording: 'Return Envelope.' Today I can reveal the contents of that envelope, a single sheet of paper containing the words: 'South-West Dual Entrance, first door, left under stairs.' On that specific spot here in Freemasons Hall a vault had been prepared for the most important documents of the Grand Lodge, if the political conditions had made it necessary and Britain had been occupied.

The main Norwegian rallying point in London was the South Kensington Hotel in Queen's Gate Terrace, Kensington. This was not exactly a working class area, neither then nor now. Unlike refugees from most other countries who came to London in the first years of war, most Norwegians had money – a lot of money. The Norwegian government had managed to get the gold reserves of the National Bank smuggled out of Oslo, while the Germans entered the city in the morning hours of the occupation, and

⁴ Letter from Grand Secretary to J. Russell McLaren (Brighton), 08091939, Grand Lodge Archives, London.

was consequently able to finance its stay in exile, unlike most other exiled governments, which struggled through the war years at the mercy of Churchill's shifting policy on the matter. Many Norwegian citizens were also well-off, coming to London with their pockets full of 'danger money', seamen's wages, that had increased three and four times since September 1939 owing to the U-boat warfare. Thousands of Norwegian seamen and whalers put their stamp on the life in the big city. And the South Kensington Hotel in fashionable Kensington was bought by the Norwegian Government and became the main meeting place for Norwegian refugees. South Kensington Hotel was actually an upgraded boarding house for retired colonial officials, who up to the war had lived a quiet bourgeois life on their pensions. When the war broke out, many were mobilized and ended up in the war-bureaucracy that popped up everywhere while others ended up in the Home Guard and a substantial part left London for good for quieter parts of the realm.

Britain's golden age as an empire was over, and servants' quarters in the basements stood empty to be rented out to the new occupants of the city. They came in their thousands; exile-government officials, soldiers, sailors, and whalers settled down in Kensington and transformed the area for the rest of the war. A Norwegian cabaret song from those days describes how the stiff-upper-lip owner of a Kensington mansion complained of his situation: 'Poles in the attic and Norwegians in the basement . . . what remained was waiting for the Frogs to arrive and occupying the rest.'

The common Londoner had more experience of war-like conditions than his new Norwegian tenant, who came from a country that had not experienced war for more than 200 years. Consequently, when the Blitz came, not only the bombing, but lack of gas and electricity for weeks on end in the middle of a freezing winter and the introduction of food-rationing took its toll on the newcomers.

The first meeting with British society on the war-path was for many refugees quite a shock. Most Norwegians, who came by boat over the North Sea, arrived on the Scottish east coast. Many of them took their first steps on British soil in the Stonehaven or Aberdeen areas, were met by representatives of Dad's Army, and spent their first night in the local prison. After an initial screening by local police they eventually arrived at Euston Station, and were met by armed soldiers or a police escort, ushered into a car, and brought out of London to a mysterious mansion in a big park in Wandsworth, the Royal Victorian Patriotic School – or 'Sing Sing' as it was known among the Norwegians – MI5's clearing station for refugees from occupied Europe.

This majestic Victorian building, had an eighty-year history as hospital, children's home and school for girls. And from its magnificent tower England's patron saint, St George, was looking gloomingly down on the strange creatures that were led into the building: '... the Polish military in full uniform looked like they had come from an oper-

etta, the Norwegian civilians as if they had arrived directly from the Arctic . . .⁵ And no one would forget the seriousness during the interrogations there. MI5 conducted long and thorough interviews. The purpose was evident and twofold: to prevent German spies entering Britain and get as much intelligence information as possible out of the newly arrived refugees. Several Norwegian Freemasons were recruited directly into allied intelligence work after such interviews. As soon as MI5 was satisfied, Norwegian authorities waited for their turn with the refugees.

The Norwegian Registration Office was situated in No. 35 Cornhill Street facing the Bank of England. Without registration there were no ration books and without ration books there was no food, no clothes, and no beer. There is not much left from those days in the neighbourhood today. But only two houses down from the former Norwegian government office, one of the most important British institutions – the pub – is represented by Simpson's Tavern, according to one of the Norwegian social workers an institution just as important for Norwegians as for Britons during the war.

Today Simpson's Tavern is mostly occupied by Armani-dressed bankers with Brexit-problems and unanswered e-mails. Seventy-five years ago the clientele was unsophisticated Norwegian refugees with their first-ever pint in one hand and a brand new Norwegian refugee passport in the other – the key to their new home address – Greater London.

There is also another reminiscence from the war in the Cornhill area that was often frequented by Norwegian sailors with new passports in one pocket and the seamen's wages in the other – the perfume shop Penhaligon's founded in 1870 and still going strong. When the young sailors had ended their visit with the bureaucrats and had tasted their first pint, the next stop was to find a present for the girl that waited somewhere in the big city. The present proprietor Mrs. Diversham can tell stories about Norwegians as their best customers in the start of the war. They always bought the expensive stuff. Today is another world – bankers in a hurry and price level accordingly.

One of the Norwegian refugees described his situation:

The new country was exciting.
Soon the refugees knew their way around Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus as if
it was their local port back home.
But even though the temptations of the big city was queueing up,
homesickness was never far away.
They came from the smallest of places to one of the world's metropolis.
But they all knew that one day they would return home.
That was why they had left in the first place.

Trygve Sørvaag

⁵ K. Gleditsch & N. H. Gleditsch, *Glimt fra kampårene* (Oslo: 1954), 265.

Understandably, a Freemason seeks a Masonic environment. Most of the Norwegian brethren established such contacts through their wartime occupation. Military brethren got in contact with military lodges, brethren in shipping with lodges with members from that industry, and of course there were lodges that already had Norwegian born members. One of the Norwegian Freemasons described his situation: 'I was looking for a place where I could let off steam from all the frustration, aggression, depression and social unrest.'⁶

One of these frustrated Norwegian Freemasons in exile was Colonel Johannes Ravnsborg,⁷ a fifty-nine-year-old artillery officer with more than ten years' experience as a leading member of a lodge⁸ in the Norwegian city of Gjøvik, situated a couple of hours' drive north of Oslo. In 1936 he reluctantly had to give up his position as Worshipful Master, when he was appointed Quartermaster General of the Norwegian Army and moved to Oslo. In his new position he had the opportunity to make regular visits to meetings in his mother lodge, *St Olaus til den hvide Leopard*, ('St Olaf to the white Leopard') in the Grand Lodge building in Oslo, where he had been initiated in 1923 and received the 10th degree in the Swedish Rite in 1937.

Ravnsborg was already a celebrity in 1913, when as an impatient young lieutenant he had been responsible for the so-called 'bombing of the capital.' As an artillery officer he had made it his business to study a special German invention in the artillery family, which had emerged as early as 1870, called die *Fliegerabwehrkanone* or in short *Flak*, a special sort of artillery device for shooting down 'flying objects' as the term was in those days. And he was alarmed when in 1913 both Germany and Britain organized these 'objects' into military units later known as *Luftwaffe* and RAF. He assembled a small 'clique' of young colleagues from the coastal fortresses that guarded the entrance to the Oslo Fiord which were totally without air defence. There was no air force either in 1913, neither by friend or foe – but never mind. Six impatient lieutenants, four of whom subsequently became Freemasons, formed a committee, and started a defence lottery to buy air defence guns from Germany.

The committee ran into considerable opposition, especially after they rented the biggest outdoor gramophone available and played German military marches and provocative cabaret songs all over Oslo city centre, while a rented aeroplane threw 50,000 fly-

⁶ Kjeldsen, Lars Grimelund: *Norske frimurerbrødre i London 1940-1945*, St. Andreaslogen Oscars 50års jubileumsberetning.

⁷ Johannes Ravnsborg, (1879 Ravnsborg/Asker-1993 Oslo). Norwegian military officer (Colonel, Artillery). 1904: Military Academy. 1915: Artillery Constructeur. 1921-36: Director Raufoss Ammunition Factory. 1936: Quartermaster General. 1940: Military Attch', London later Bern. 1941: Leader Norwegian Purchasing Mission, New York. 1942-45: Quartermaster General, London. 1945: Retired.

⁸ Gjøvik Frimurer Broderforening. 1927: Founded. Oktober 1962: Deputasjonsloge. Oktober 1976: Lodge No. 28 «Den Hvide Svane» (The white Swan). 2017: 386 members.

ers in the streets around the Parliament with the following message: 'Just as well as this leaflet is falling, a bomb can be thrown upon your head. Support the Defence Lottery.'

When war came to Norway in April 1940, the horrified Norwegian commander-in-chief of the army was dismissed after less than twenty-four hours of fighting, and one of the first orders given by his successor, General Otto Ruge, was to reorganize the general staff. Older, irresolute, and defeatist officers were either pensioned on the spot or put to staff work in the rear.

One of these older officers was Colonel Ravnsborg, who, instead of leading a regiment in combat, was sent together with the Norwegian foreign minister, Halfdan Koht, to Britain to get political support and military help. It was more than five years before he saw his fatherland again.

After the allies had withdrawn and the Norwegian forces had capitulated in June 1940, Ravnsborg was installed in London as assistant military attaché at the Norwegian Embassy. Then in 1941 he was sent to the USA to create and organize a Norwegian military purchasing mission situated in New York City.

Ravnsborg observed, as he travelled the American continent on the hunt for supplies for the Norwegian military forces, the importance of the two Norwegian-American Masonic lodges, Viking Lodge and Norsemen Lodge, in the New York area for Norwegian Freemasons who either visited or lived in the 'Big Apple'. And when he returned to a staff position in London late in 1942, he was determined to found a Norwegian lodge on British soil.

To start a Norwegian lodge in London was not an insurmountable task, as long as the laws and regulations of the UGLE were complied with. Through the war years more than seven hundred new English lodges were founded. But Ravnsborg soon found out that there was no interest whatsoever among his fellow countrymen for an English lodge with 'blue' Craft ritual for Norwegians. What they wanted was a Norwegian lodge with rituals according to the Swedish Rite as they were used to back home – and most importantly – performed in Norwegian language.

The exiled Norwegian monarch King Haakon VII's nephew, George, Duke of Kent, had been initiated as the UGLE's Grand Master as late as July 1939, but he was killed as an active RAF pilot in August 1942, and was succeeded by his uncle, the Earl of Harewood, who had been the representative of UGLE at the Grand Lodge of Norway for several decades. His positive attitude to 'the Masonic vikings', as he called them, was essential in the formation of a Norwegian lodge.

In 1943 Masonic lodge life in London had adapted to wartime conditions. Meetings were held all through the day at the most awkward hours, except what one was used to – afternoons or early evenings. Blackouts, curfew, and air-raids made it impossible to have meetings in the evening. Instead lodges met earlier, even in the morning, to make it

possible for brethren from the outskirts to get safely home before the curfew and night bombing took over.

It was a tedious business to attend a meeting. Public transport was not trustworthy. Many Masons walked long distances to the meetings. Food was scarce for the meals, but lodge meetings were especially important for many that had their families evacuated out of the London area and lived a more or less secluded life in their scanty dwellings. All this moving around made it difficult for lodges to continue to hold regular meetings, and a lot of dispensations were given under the brave motto [?]: ‘better with some sort of Masonic activity than nothing at all.’ Many lodges lost their lodge rooms in the bombings with regalia, furniture, libraries, and archives. The list of enquiries for copies of lodge patents grew on the General Secretary’s desk in Great Queen Street.⁹

Colonel Ravensborg knew the Norwegian shipping business environment in London pretty well from his work as procurement officer, and he made contact with two prominent Norwegian shipowners who were Freemasons, Sigurd Skrender and Ingolf Hysing Olsen. Both had lived in London for decades, were member of London lodges, and worked during the war for the nationalized Norwegian merchant navy, Nortraship, the world’s largest shipping company during the war with more than 4.000 ships under their flag. These two brethren had excellent contacts in Freemasons’ Hall.

The Grand Master, the Earl of Harewood, informed his Grand Secretary, Sidney A. White, and together with the two Norwegian shipowners, they became the key persons Colonel Ravensborg relied on in the work that now started.

Contrary to English Masonic tradition Scandinavian Freemasonry had a very restrictive attitude towards foreign visitors in their lodges, a policy that was sharpened in the 1930s with the arrival of Masonic refugees from Central Europe to Scandinavia, and as a result of increasing anti-Masonic activities that also reached northern shores. Here in England the doors remained open for foreign visitors, a policy that had been established and maintained for hundreds of years.

For centuries German, French, Dutch, Italian, and Polish Freemasons were used to practising their Masonic work in their own native tongue and in their own lodges here in London and with the blessing of the UGLE. The rituals, with few exceptions, were translations of the English Craft ritual with necessary adjustments.

In addition to these ‘foreign’ lodges there were quite a few regular London lodges, where foreigners were the majority of the members. One example is Lodge of Joppa No. 188, which had opened its doors for Jewish Masonic refugees. Let us have a look at one of these ‘foreign’ lodges that over the years were visited by Norwegian Masons.

⁹ Annual Report 1941 from Grand Secretary, UGLE Archives, London.

Pilgrim Lodge No. 238 is one of the two London lodges that used German ritual language and was founded in 1779. This was a time when a considerable number of German Freemasons were connected to the Royal Court. The German language was used from the start in this lodge, and up to 1846 the lodge used the German *Zinnendorf* ritual, a modified German edition of the Swedish Rite ritual and still used by hundreds of German lodges belonging to the Grand Lodge *Grosse Landesloge der Freimaurer von Deutschland*.

In 1815 Pilgrim Lodge had an impressive thirty-three members of German nobility and not less than eighty members without permanent residence in Britain. In 1795 the lodge decided to deny Jews as members after pressure from its German Grand Lodge, but the UGLE prevented this. Therefore when Pilgrim Lodge occasionally today practise their original *Zinnendorf* ritual on festive occasions, it is, as far as I know, the only lodge in the world that is doing it according to the original ritual. One of Pilgrim Lodge's leading personalities was Prince Augustus Frederick, the Duke of Sussex, better known as 'the most charming beggar in Europe', and not so famous as the 37th and last Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge of England. He visited Pilgrim Lodge regularly, because, as he said, 'it consisted of pure Lutherans only, not this Church of England mumbo-jumbo.' In 1832 the lodge had to give in and accept the first Catholics as members. At its 150th year jubilee celebrations in 1904 representatives of no less than 314 German lodges were present. The Grand Master of the UGLE at the time, Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught and Strathearn (1901–39), was present and commented as he looked over the congregation of German uniforms: 'The only one not present is Kaiser Wilhelm.'

After the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 the two German lodges in London became a problem for the UGLE. They were allowed to continue their work for a year, but in June 1915 they were asked to close down their work temporarily 'for the peace and harmony of the Craft.' The next meeting of Pilgrim Lodge took place fourteen years later in 1928. But during World War II no such sanctions were ever introduced on any lodge on British controlled soil. In April 1943 a German refugee connected to the code-breakers at Bletchley Park was raised to the second degree and no less than 139 English brethren attended the meeting. It was a historical meeting with uniforms from practically all the allied European nations with eight Grand Lodges and twelve nationalities present.

Several Norwegian Masons who lived permanently in London during the war years attended meetings of Pilgrim Lodge. Its *Zinnendorf* ritual was the closest to the Swedish Rite that was available on these shores.

Grand Secretary Sidney White's first help was to make sure that Norwegian Masons received invitations for meetings in London lodges, which led to regular visits for many Norwegian Masons to Freemasons' Hall in the winter 1942/43.

By that time it was clear that the war would last for several years, and that exiled life in London would continue for years. It would make it worth while to start establishing a Norwegian lodge. Discussions went on for months. The constitution of the Grand Lodge of Norway did not allow the formation of lodges abroad. But the Norwegian brethren were not interested in forming an English lodge with Craft ritual. They longed to see and hear their own ritual performed in their own native tongue. They knew that their approach was not by the book. All communication with the leadership of Norwegian Freemasonry back home was cut off. It was known that the Norwegian Grand Master Rønneberg had died of a heart attack, after having been forced to sign the document that abolished Freemasonry in the presence of three Gestapo officers in 1940. However they counted on forgiveness when they returned to Norway and normal Masonic conditions had been restored.

The Grand Master, the Earl of Harewood, confirmed that he was in favour of a Norwegian lodge being formed, but this had to be without getting into conflict with the UGLE's rules and regulations. He also asked Colonel Ravensborg to be its first Master. Regalia and other necessary equipment was organized by the Swedish Ambassador to the exiled Norwegian Court, the Swedish Freemason Baron Beck-Friis, who smuggled in the items by diplomatic post from Stockholm via Lisbon to London. After the war he became the first foreigner to receive the highest award given to Freemasons by the Grand Lodge of Norway.

It was now up to the Grand Secretary, Sydney White, to find out how to proceed. In English Freemasonry's long history up to 1943 there had been no example of a lodge connected to a foreign Grand Lodge, and with a aberrant ritual, working on English soil. And Bro. White was determined not to break this tradition.

The constitution of the UGLE is crystal clear on this point: 'pure Antient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more.'

This constitutional paragraph had been under discussion on several occasions, but never as a result of war conditions and exiled Masonic milieus. But when the plans for a Norwegian lodge slowly ripened in 1942 the tradition had already been broken and the constitution had been slightly bent.

The UGLE had in September 1941 approved a proposal that the Czech Grand Lodge be allowed to operate temporarily on English soil and consecrate new lodges. Like the Grand Lodge of Norway the Czech Grand Lodge was without an official elected Grand Master owing to his death after the German occupation. But, unlike the Norwegians, the Czechs had an active Grand Officer among their members in London. He was, with

the approval of the UGLE, made temporary Grand Master *ad interim* with the power to consecrate new lodges.

Late in 1941 the Czech lodge, Comenius in Exile, was founded. It used Czech rituals which had little to do with Craft Freemasonry. The Czech Grand Lodge had its patent from the German Grand Lodge *Zur Sonne* in Bayreuth/Bavaria which, on top of everything, was no longer recognized by the UGLE and was abolished after Hitler came to power in 1933.

In May 1942 the lodge building where the new Czech lodge worked (No. 4 Wells Rise, South Hampstead) was destroyed by bombs, and the UGLE offered the Czechs the use of Freemasons' Hall for their meetings. The first Czech meeting in Freemasons' Hall took place in August 1942. Another barrier had been broken. It was now possible for other foreign Freemasons to create their own Masonic environment not only on English soil, but also in the headquarters of English Freemasonry in London.

While the Czechs organized their lodge, the Norwegians used one of their brethren, the former Master of Lodge Tyssen Amphe No. 2242, Bro. Otakar Lostak, as a consultant in how to establish a Norwegian lodge. The contact between Czech and Norwegian brethren had been established as early as autumn 1940, when Czech and Norwegian instructors operated on the same secret SOE training camps in Scotland. The Czech SOE-group that assassinated Reinhard Heydrich, and the Norwegian group that destroyed the heavy water plant in Norway did part of their training together on the Scottish west coast.

In his report for 1942, the Grand Secretary of the Czechoslovakian Grand Lodge in Exile wrote that

the current year has truly been characterized as a year of intensified relations between Czech brethren and their English hosts, and also the contacts with Scottish, Irish, Norwegian, Dutch, and other Allied Masons.

The result of all these 'allied' considerations was, however, that the Norwegians could not copy the Czech model, because there was no Grand Officer among the Norwegian Masons in London, and a proposal to make Colonel Ravnsborg a temporary Grand Officer was too much for the UGLE, as there was no such possibility according to the Norwegian Masonic constitution.

Oddly enough, no attempt was made to contact the remaining leadership of the abolished Freemasonry back in Norway, and none of the brethren in London knew about the secret Masonic underground organization, 'The Card Club', that was organized in Oslo in the winter 1942/43, and concentrated its work on plans for the reintroduction of Freemasonry in Norway after peace was established.

Colonel Ravnsborg and his companions therefore had two possibilities:

- either to start up a Norwegian lodge based on English Craft rituals translated into Norwegian. This was the only way to have a complete lodge with the possibility of initiating new members
- or have a slightly different version of a 'lodge of instruction' with the Swedish Rite ritual in the Norwegian language, but without initiations.

After nearly six months of internal discussions and external negotiations with the UGLE a compromise was reached. The UGLE agreed that the Norwegians could start up their version of a 'lodge of instruction' which has no equivalence in the Swedish Rite, but reflects best an organizational Masonic construction by the Scandinavians called a *broderforening*, which has a ritual with complete opening and closing of the lodge, but no initiation.

Ravnsborg and the two elected members of the founding committee, the liaison officer to MI5, Major Skjold Brodin, and the shipping agent, Sverre Farstad, knew very well that none of the UGLE officers had ever seen a Norwegian Masonic ritual being performed. Therefore, and in secrecy, they extended the agreement slightly in the interest of a good outcome, and worked out a plan B, which was not revealed to the UGLE, as befitted: 'They don't have a clue, so why bother?' and used an already initiated Norwegian brother as the candidate. The brother who got this job was the vicar in the Norwegian Seamen's Church in Albion Street, Rotherhithe, the Revd Johnny Ursin, who acted as initiate at every meeting. He commented in the following way:

I must be one of the pillars of the Church of Norway abroad; I am baptized twice (the first was a so-called 'emergency christening') and I have been initiated as Christian Freemason thirteen times. Whether I have become a better man is a question only my family can answer – I have never dared to ask my wife.

As a sort of compensation all instructions were held in English for the benefit of British and other allied Freemasons that attended the meetings.

In October 1943 all fifty-five known Norwegian Masons on British soil received an invitation to a non-ritual founding meeting at Norway House in Cockspur Street. Nearly all gave a positive response to the initiative.

On 1 December 1943 twenty-six brethren met in Norway House in Cockspur Street for the first and only non-ritual meeting in the history of the Norwegian Lodge in London. The lodge was constituted according to Norwegian traditions under the name *Den Norske Broderforening i London* ('Norwegian Lodge in London') and a board of officers was elected. The founding committee was given the mandate to organize the founding ritual meeting at Freemasons' Hall two weeks later. At the foundation meeting on

22 December 1943 the Grand Master, the Earl of Harewood, attended the meeting and said in his speech:

They are poor. Apart from their enthusiasm, they have little means because their modest belongings were destroyed by the enemy. But they believe that their diligence and work – just the same as the whole nation in their endeavour to rebuild their country – will rebuild their temples, those centres of Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance and Justice.

Let the beautiful verse of Robert Burns express the fervent wish of Masons all over the globe in these times:

May freedom, harmony, and love
Unite you in the great design
Beneath th' Omniscent eye above,
The glorious Architect Divine!
That you may keep th' unnerving line
Still rising by the plummet's law
Till Order bright completely shine . . .

The lodge room had been laid out according to a temple in the first degree in the Norwegian tradition of the Swedish Rite, with the exception of the special tracing board: it was impossible to get one to London in time. The only English Freemason to participate in a ritual capacity at the meeting was a hired Outer Guard, necessary here in England but a totally unknown officer in the Swedish Rite. According to the Minutes 'the ritual was performed according to memory.'

The list of names of the lodge officers has no relevance here, but I will mention that the Master was a procurement officer, his Deputy was the dentist of the exiled Norwegian King, popularly called 'The King's Torturer', the Senior Warden was a ship's agent, the Junior Warden an engineer connected to the intelligence fraternity, the Treasurer a Captain and Norwegian liaison officer to SOE, the Secretary a bureaucrat in the Norwegian Ministry of Shipping, and the Director of Ceremonies a major in the Norwegian High Command. So what about the Deacons? There were no Deacons, as this position is not used in the Swedish Rite.

In addition to being the only Norwegian lodge that has worked outside our borders, the Norwegian Lodge in London is also the only one in Norwegian Masonic history that had a Worshipful Master that was never installed in his office. As there was no Norwegian Grand Officer in England, and no installation ritual available, it was decided to skip the installation ceremony totally. As Colonel Ravnsborg said after the war: 'None of us remembered the ritual anyhow, so we skipped it!' The Grand Master, the Earl of Harewood, volunteered to perform the installation but 'was told politely that he was not qualified.'

After the meeting a ritual meal was held in the traditional Connaught Rooms and, according to unknown sources, was one of the real historic Masonic feasts in our history, only surpassed by the reunion-meeting in Oslo after the liberation. I will come back to that.

The Norwegian Lodge also worked with charity together with 'The King Haakon VII's Benevolent Fund' and concentrated its work on help to the Norwegian Boarding School at Castle Drumtochty in Scotland, where more than two hundred Norwegian children spent part of their childhood.

The first ordinary meeting took place at Freemasons' Hall on 23 February 1944, with Grand Secretary Sydney A. White as a special invited guest. For his help he was awarded Knight of the Royal Order of St Olaf, the highest Norwegian award. He is the only Freemason who has been awarded the highest Norwegian decoration for Masonic work. The decoration was presented at a lunch in the Norwegian Embassy.

For English Masonry the element of foreign flavour in their Masonic work was both inspiring and interesting, and the enthusiasm that was shown inspiring. It led to a new interest in continental Freemasonry, continued by this lodge, Quatuor Coronati, in the first years after the war, when foreign Masonic rites were presented at its meetings.

English brethren supported Norwegian Masonic work in different ways. Norwegian-born Sigurd Skrender worked as a go-between, and received the Knights Cross of the Order of Saint Olaf for his social work among Norwegian refugees. London's two Lord Mayors during the war, Sir Frank Newson Smith and Sir Frank Alexander, both showed great hospitality. When the latter received his third degree, several Norwegian Brethren were present. Former Grand Master of Tasmania, Sir Claude James, who was married to a Norwegian lady, and the High Commissioner for Northern Ireland, Sir Ernest Cooper, were also among English Freemasons who helped the Norwegians in many ways.

And last, but not least, the Swedish minister at the Norwegian Court in Exile, Baron Johan Beck-Friis, acted as a go-between when the Norwegian Masonic headquarters was occupied by the *Wehrmacht* in April 1940, but also during the founding of the Norwegian Lodge in London. On the first official meeting of the lodge he presented a cheque for £5,000 from the Grand Lodge of Sweden, which made The Norwegian Lodge financially independent for the remainder of its history. Later on he smuggled necessary regalia camouflaged as diplomatic mail, from Stockholm via Lisbon to London. Beck-Friis is the only foreigner who has been awarded Norwegian Freemasonry's highest decoration – the Badge of Honour.

All meetings in The Norwegian Lodge were held in Freemasons' Hall. At every meeting a part of the English *Book of Constitutions* was read to convince English brethren present that Norwegian Masonic work was performed according to the Old Charges.

Gradually it became customary in the London lodges where Norwegian brethren regularly attended to play the Norwegian anthem, and at the meal to present a toast to the Grand Lodge of Norway; a Norwegian brother returned the gesture. The lectures were comprehensive and included: English Freemasonry, symbolism in the Swedish Rite, the start of Norwegian Freemasonry and ritual use.

The last meeting in London took place on 25 March 1945. At that time it was clear that peace in Europe was round the corner. It was therefore decided that The Norwegian Lodge in London would ask for official recognition by the Grand Lodge of Norway, as soon as the return to Norway was accomplished, and then decide if the lodge should be abolished or continue on English soil.

There was broad agreement among the lodge members that, as soon as war was over, they would seek recognition from the Grand Lodge in Oslo to continue the Masonic work among many Norwegian Freemasons in England.

After the return to Norway Colonel Ravnsborg sent on 6 November 1945 a report on the work of the lodge to the new elected Norwegian Grand Master, Hvinden-Haug. It was also a petition for recognition as a 'lodge of instruction.' But the leadership in the Norwegian Grand Lodge was negative and declined a future life for a Norwegian lodge in London. As far as I have been able to investigate, the decision was purely Norwegian. There are no traces of any correspondence linked to the Norwegian lodge in UGLE's archives after May 1945.

No life without death – no death without life. At a meeting in the Oslo lodge, 'the white Leopard', on 8 December 1947 an unofficial wake was held for The Norwegian Lodge in London. Around thirty of its members were present. And, according to unofficial sources, very late that evening the Most Revd at the Norwegian Seaman's Church, the previously mentioned vicar Johnny Ursin, was seen standing on a table uttering the words that have brought him fame in Norwegian Masonic history: 'I am the world's greatest Freemason, because I have been initiated thirteen times . . .

Most Norwegians were grateful for the British hospitality that was shown during the war. Here are some lines from a grateful brother:

We thank you for your hospitality, for indulgence with our faults, for tolerance with our language problems, for hosting us and for showing us your quiet endurance and patience. We will always remember England.





Bro. Helge Harrisland

Helge Bjorn Harrisland (born 1950) is a Norwegian Masonic historian, specialising in Masonic history in the twentieth century and repatriation of Masonic belongings after World War II. He is working as International Repatriation Coordinator for The Association of Masonic Museums, Libraries and Archives (AMMLA), Brussels, is a member of the Masonic Library and Museum Organisation (MLMA), Washington DC, and is being used as consultant by governmental and Masonic institutions in repatriation matters. He was initiated in Lodge *Orion* No 6,

Kristiansand, Norway (1984) and was Master of Chapter Lodge *Sorlandet Kapitel Broderforening* (2003–06), held various positions in the Grand Lodge of Norway, such as Grand Lodge Historian (2014–16), founder of the Grand Lodge Historical Archive (2013) and Member of The General Purposes Committee. He was Deputy Master of the Norwegian Lodge of Research *Niels Treschow*, Oslo (2009–16), is a member of research lodges in various European countries, and is frequently used as speaker in international forums. Harrisland has been awarded the highest honour of Norwegian Freemasonry – The Grand Lodge Honorary Shield (2012). He is a retired ship's agent living with his wife in Kristiansand, Norway and Palm Beach Gardens/Florida.

Bro. Andreas Rizopoulos, the Worshipful Master said: