



## From Day to Day: One Man's Diary of Survival in Nazi Concentration Camps

by Odd Nansen, Edited and annotated by Timothy J. Boyce

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Review by Amy Scheibe

*Heightening the sense of dread are the brilliant footnotes that embellish the diary. By placing them on the page with Nansen's entries, Timothy J. Boyce skilfully enhances this history with enriching detail*

When Odd Nansen was 21, his father won the Nobel Peace Prize, and the surname “Nansen”—already a household name in Norway—became world renowned. Besides being recognised for his heroic efforts post-WWI and the creation of the “Nansen Passport” for refugees, Fridtjof Nansen was also an intrepid explorer who famously crossed Greenland on skis.

Odd Nansen could have let this paternal monolith eclipse his life. Instead, he forged his own humanitarian path by tirelessly advocating on behalf of refugees—in particular Slovakian Jews—in the years leading up to WWII. On March 15, 1939, Nansen and his wife, Kari, witnessed the fall of Prague, and were evicted from the hotel offices of Nansenhjelpen (Nansen Relief), but not before he managed to secure the passage of 260 Jews to Norway. Even so, he admitted in 1940 that, “I felt like an executioner because I had to pick only a few hundred to be saved—we had so little money.” This sentiment would haunt him for the rest of his life.

In 1941, Vidkun Quisling met Hitler in Berlin and Norway's fate was sealed. Nineteen years earlier, when Fridtjof Nansen received the Nobel, Quisling was outraged. He had worked closely with Nansen in the 1920s, and felt snubbed when Nansen failed to mention him. Odd Nansen's humanitarianism represented a thorn that Quisling could pluck and discard, resulting in a forty-month journey through four concentration camps.

*From Day to Day* meticulously recounts Odd Nansen's imprisonment. Initially, he is confident and perhaps even a bit cocky that his incarceration will come to a swift end. He is a child of privilege, after all, with a veneer of entitlement coating his humanist core. He has enough food, and meaningful employment designing huts for the swelling Grini Camp. Nansen is even allowed to go on trips into Oslo to gather materials, and receives frequent visits from Kari and their children. Any reader of Holocaust literature will find it difficult to rouse empathy for these first months, but slowly the injustices mount around Nansen.

As the inevitable deportation to Germany approaches, his resolve to remain optimistic feels painfully jejune.

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Once in Germany, Nansen realises that only through writing and drawing can he make sense of the banal cruelty, to order it, and then let it fall from his memory so he doesn't carry it into the next terrible day. By doing so he creates a kind of literary transference—relinquishing his despair to his diary and pushing his half-full glass of incremental survival back up the hill of German insanity. Being Norwegian, and a sort of celebrity, his personal treatment in the camp is comparatively easy, and he knows it. While others are treated as lowly dogs, underfed and overworked to the daily brink of collapse, Nansen is making toys. The Norwegians receive a semi-constant flow of grocery-laden parcels that the SS dare not pilfer. This privilege is not lost on Nansen, and his existential angst is what ultimately makes *From Day to Day* a remarkable, riveting and important read. Beyond being the only real chronicle of life under Quisling's thumb, it's the immediacy of Nansen's daily diary entries that lifts the familiar German camp situations to revelatory angles.

More than anything, though, it is his moral outrage at anyone who dares to turn an eye away from the suffering of others—especially when that eye is his own—that makes this a timely reissue. By the end of the war, Nansen is poignantly aware of his entitled situation. The humanism he carries into the last camps finds expression mostly in words, as deeds would have ended in a most unfortunate way for both the man and this priceless chronicle.

*From Day to Day* breaks once again the heart of humanity—a “never forget” document that echoes with the ghostly voices of the murdered. —JQ

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