

The history of a Faroese, whose father was a British soldier during WW2

The Son who found His Way Home

This article is written by Sissel Svendsen and appeared in the Norwegian War Cry 2013. The history is also published in the book in Faroese in the book "Njál", published in 2019

This particular Major, Njál Djurhuus, has often searched for missing people along the riverside in Oslo and in the cafés where dropouts tend to congregate. He has regularly asked various drug addicts for help as he searches for a runaway teenager whose desperate parents have pleaded for help. And other situations have been the opposite way round where drug addicts have asked for his assistance in being reunited with their parents. None of those that asked for his help were aware of quite how much all this has meant to Major Njál Djurhuus. He never told any of them that he, himself experienced a deep emptiness and longing in his own life. The Salvation Army officer from the Faroes never found out about his own father until he was 71 years old. Njál was just 21 when he became an officer in The Salvation Army. The early years of his officership were spent as a corps officer in charge of the local Army church fellowship. But in 1985 Njál and his wife Erna were put in charge of the Harbour Light Centre in Grønland, Oslo. – „I sensed a distinct call to this place and to help these needy people“ he says. At the Harbour Light Centre there was always a never ending list of tasks to do trying to help desperately needy people. And for the next 14 years Njál tried to be available to those in need who asked for help. Day and night his jacket was ready by the door so that he could answer any call in a crisis. The longing and questioning he had regarding his own father was buried under all these other cries for help. He suppressed his own feelings and hid his own questions from all but the very closest family members. At the same time he was conscious that all this uncertainty could actually affect his own well-being. Looking back he admits that his own way of dealing with his own issues was to bury himself in work. Born in Poulsens car Njál was raised by his grandparents as their eleventh child. These grandparents along with his mother created a loving, caring, family atmosphere that exuded security. Up to the age of 9 Njál felt that he lacked for nothing. Apart from a dad. As he started to question why all of his mates had a dad apart from him, he took courage and asked his grandma carefully where his father was and who he was. Njál confirms that his grandma was a wonderful person. But she answered his question by saying that he was simply found in the back seat of Dr Poulsens car. His grandma followed this up by asking the 9 year old if he was dissatisfied living where he did? He felt uncomfortable and didn't fancy answering such questions in front of his family members. The subject was now clearly closed. But from time to time he registered that mention was made of a nameless British military soldier. He wondered if there might be some truth in these rumors but felt helpless to do anything about the empty feelings that were there. His grandparents were members of The Salvation Army. And through this network the boy, Njál sometimes borrowed the key to the local Salvation Army hall in Torshavn and sat there in quietness thinking through his unanswered questions. Despite the care and security of a loving family he nonetheless couldn't help but be curious as to who his father was. „It's been nagging away at me all through my life, if I'm honest“ – he confesses with a sad voice. „Today I am convinced that such information is something that everybody deserves to find out. It should be everybody right to know this.“ It's your father In 2004 Njál finally received

the confirmation he had been looking for. After a long exchange of correspondence the information finally arrived in his letter box in Oslo. Copies of legal papers proved that the father of the child that 16 year old Sofie Djurhuus had given birth to in Torshavn in April 1941 was JAMES HUCK MACKAY. Njåls legal father was from Scotland a small copy of his passport photo was attached to the legal document. „He looks fairly kind“ says Njål as he shows me the photo of a man in military uniform. Shortly after this discovery Njåls mother became seriously ill so Njål made the journey to The Faroe Islands to talk with her about his father. In one of the family albums he found a photo where he recognized his father. He pointed out the man to his mother and asked her who this was? My mum went all quiet. I knew it had to be him. Then in a quiet voice she said warmly „That's your father.“ Njål then explained to his mum that as an act of solidarity and unification he and his own family had decided to take his fathers surname turning their own family name into Mackay Djurhuus. His mother whispered warmly „Mackay, that's the most beautiful name in the whole world. It was a relieved and grateful Njål that travelled back home to Norway. He wanted to find out more but knew this was almost impossible as he didn't have his fathers National Insurance number. Common sense told him that he ought to just be satisfied with what he had found out. But those same feelings of emptiness in him protested. Njål confessed that for some reason or other he had always avoided visiting England. It is fairly typical that members of The Salvation Army from all countries around the world are interested in visiting the UK, home of the armys birth and especially the place in London where the International Headquarters is situated. But there had always been something that hindered Njål in making such a journey. „It's especially strange for a person such as me, who just loves football and William Booth! But I always suspected that my father or some of his family would be lurking there.“ But Njåls own children had no plans on giving up the search just yet. They had noticed through the years how this whole business affected their dad and how not knowing things seemed to really get to him. So after pressure from his children Njål made enquiries in England to the police, the military, private individuals and also the Salvation Army. But none of these leads bore fruit. The Salvation Army's own Missing Persons Department in Oslo have been tracing families since 1897. In 2011 they managed to find over 300 missing people. But they couldn't help Njål. It would need to be The Salvation Army in England that did the searching. But because of the laws of that country only a select few public establishments are given information about biological parents. And The Salvation Army are not amongst these. Heading for Aberdeen The breakthrough actually happened one day at Strømmen shopping centre where Njål was selling the copies of The War Cry. His daughter rang him on his mobile phone and began by saying that she hoped her dad wouldn't be cross with her for what she'd done. She had nominated him to be part of a TV programme called „Tore på sporet“ which tried to help people track down missing friends and family. And now Njål needed to prepare himself because the presenter of the TV programme, Tore Strømøy would be ringing him in about 5 minutes. Njål has probably never been as quiet for 5 consecutive minutes as he was then. Well, what happened was that three days later Njål was on a plane to Trondheim to meet Tore Strømøy armed with his little passport photo and documents of his father. The next time he heard from Tore and his TV crew was the following summer. Suddenly he received a text message asking if he was ready to take part in an overseas trip that could involve some surprises. Ten days later Njål met the TV crew at Oslo airport as they set off for a four day trip that included Tore Strømøy, journalists and camera crew, all from TV channel NRK. They flew first to Stavanger where they boarded a much smaller plane. On board this plane Njål got a huge surprise as his daughter and her husband joined the party. The chief stewardess on the plane announced that they were now ready for take off to Aberdeen. Welcome to Scotland Once in Aberdeen the visiting group organized themselves into hire cars and set off for a village that Njål had never heard of called Skerray. They were now on the final leg of a journey that had taken Njål over 60 years. At nine o'clock that evening they broke the news to Njål that his father had actually died in 1995. The next morning Njål was able to visit the grave of his father. The tv programme 'Tore på sporet' had published a photo of Njåls father in an article on their

website and an American family tree researcher had recognized it. This all led to a whole new supply of family history that opened things up. Njål could now access much of his family history. Last Sunday The Salvation Army officer got to tell his whole story on national TV during prime time viewing. He is now able to tell War Cry readers how important it has been for him to discover where and who he comes from. „A person loses something important when they are denied the chance to hold hands with their own father. When I finally got to visit his grave I used these words: We didn't quite manage to meet in this life, dad, but we will meet each other in heaven.“ That was an extremely big moment for me. The TV viewers were also told about the action packed few days spent in Scotland. The journey continued from Aberdeen down to a little town near Glasgow called Denny. This was the place where Njål was introduced to his new family for the first time. As they drove into Denney there was a large banner hanging beside the road saying „Welcome to Scotland, Njål“. Njål had been told that he would be meeting Nora who was a widow to one of his cousins. But what they had not told him was that there would be 22 other members of his new family waiting there to surprise him. They honoured Njål's visit with good food, a specially written poem for the occasion and singing and laughter that lasted for hours. „Is it any wonder that I cried“ says Njål. Just the previous evening I had been confronted with the news that my dad had passed away. But I knew nothing about all these wonderful Scottish relatives that I was going to meet. None of them knew that I existed before Tore Strømøy had contacted them. And what an amazing welcome they gave me. It was all quite wonderful. Later that same day we all drove to a churchyard to visit the grave of Njål's Scottish grandfather and grandmother. They had passed away when Njål's dad was just 7 and then 14 years old respectively. That graveyard was filled with sunshine and whilst they were there they saw and heard the branch of a tree snap off from the trunk. It was a symbolic moment that just happened very gently. Before he travelled back to Norway Njål was given the news that his father had married but had never had any more children. Njål was indeed his only child. Further details about his dad filtered out. His father had been a keen trainer of a boys football team even though he was not a parent to any of the boys in the team. He was also a man that enjoyed writing songs and poetry. This was a talent that Njål had also developed by writing many songs for family celebrations. Now it felt as though their family bond was finally established. „And then I found out that he was sometimes referred to as Ghandi. Because people round him saw up to him as a man of peace. He was sometimes used as a mediator in situations of conflict. My father was clearly a good man. And I have always known that my mother was a fine woman. Gratitude and joy. So Njål had finally found the answer to his main question. But as time went by there were several follow-up questions that he wondered about. Why did his mother and father lose contact? Did his father support his childhood financially? And what sort of life did his dad live in England? Njål managed to find out that his father was stationed in Southern Europe soon after his birth and was never stationed in The Faroes again after that. Njål was also pleased to discover that his father paid every installment of maintenance money to The Faroes that he was instructed to pay after 1942. And it was also possible to trace that his father had paid an extra amount of money that should help support his schooling when he began primary school. So how do you feel now? This was the question that was posed to Njål. Njål let his arms hang straight down, eased his head back and then could confirm the following: „I know one thing. I am certainly not bitter towards anyone or about anything in my past. It's as though my body and my mind have finally come into balance. I now know who I am and that fills me with a huge joy and gratitude that doesn't go away.“

Translated from Norwegian to English by Chris Pender.



The father, James.



Njál and his daughter Helene at the border to Mackay land.



Njál and Helene at the James' grave.



Njál with his father's family