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An unexpected meeting with the German President

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As a young man during World War 2, Leif Hovelsen fought in the Norwegian resistance. He was captured by the Gestapo and sentenced to death in a concentration camp, but a series of unexpected delays to his execution meant that he survived. An encounter with God while in prison led Leif to forgive his captors and after the war he worked in Germany sharing his experiences of suffering and forgiveness and working to rebuild relationships and trust.

There are as many different ways to feed our faith as there are people. What has meant most to me is obedience – learning to obey the spirit of God in my heart.

Some years ago I travelled from Oslo to Caux, the Initiatives of Change conference centre in Switzerland. As I changed train in Hamburg I picked up a newspaper and read that the German Bundespräsident, Gustav Heinemann, was going to make a State Visit to Norway. I knew that there were people in Norway who did not want this to happen and would demonstrate against the President when he arrived. As the train went along I pondered these issues.

Then a thought struck me: maybe I should do an interview with the President! Writing an article about him, I thought, might help in the preparation for his visit to Norway. By the time I reached Caux I had worked out 12 questions to ask – provided the President would agree to see me. I wrote to him giving the time when I would be in Bonn. While in Bonn I got a message that he would receive me the next day.

Early the next morning I read my 12 questions again and felt rather satisfied that all would work out well. But then in my time of quiet meditation a thought struck me like lightning: 'do not ask any of your questions, neither take along your tape recorder or notebook, but tell the President about yourself, about Norway and the people he is going to meet.' I was shaken and did not know what to do. 'God', I mumbled, 'this cannot be right. It is obvious that a journalist cannot have an interview without asking questions.' As I was quiet and listened anew, the same thoughts came as earlier. I felt lost and helpless. The only thing I knew for certain was that those thoughts had not come from me. Finally I decided to obey those ideas which had shaken me so deeply.

Rather helpless and nervous, I entered the office of the President and was warmly welcomed by him and his chief press officer, Müller Gerbes. Obeying the morning thoughts, I told him about myself, about the time in the resistance when our country was occupied by Hitler's Nazi regime, then how I came to their country with MRA (as IofC was known then) and how I learned to love Germany and the German people. I told them about Norway, the feelings and attitudes of our people with regard to Germany and about the personalities whom the President would meet. I noticed that he relaxed more and more as I spoke. Then he started to tell me about his deep concern about the evil that Hitler's Germany had done to her neighbours and how difficult it had been to resist the Nazi regime. Finally he expressed the hope that his State Visit to Norway would help make up for some of the past. After 45 minutes of a rather intimate time, new visitors were waiting to see the President. As we broke up he told Müller Gerbes to make photocopies of all the articles they had collected from his state visits to Denmark and Sweden. It

would take some time to do this, so we agreed that I would come by in the late afternoon.

When I came to pick up the heap of articles, the Chief Press Officer said 'I have a message to you from the President. He wanted to know how much it meant to him to meet a journalist who did not ask any questions and did not want to get something out of him, but who just came to give.' Then he told me that the President also wanted to ask me a question. He had been told that during World War 2 King Olav of Norway had sworn that he would never again speak German. So the President wanted to ask me if he should in speak English to the King. 'No', I answered, 'the President must speak in his own language.'

The article about Heinemann was written, but before it went to the newspapers throughout the country, I had the thought one morning to send it to my friend Peter Anker who had served as our ambassador to Germany for some years. A couple of days later he phoned me to say that he had sent the article to the King. So I told the ambassador every detail of the interview that had taken place with President Heinemann. A week later I ran into the ambassador in a bookshop and he said 'yesterday I had dinner with the King and I told him everything about your time with President Heinemann.'

When the German President and his delegation arrived in Norway, King Olav gave a dinner for the guests at his royal castle. The following evening, the German Ambassador gave a reception in his residence for some invited guests to meet the German President. As I arrived there, Chief Officer Müller Gerbes saw me. He rushed over and told me 'it was a most wonderful dinner at the royal castle yesterday. And do you know what happened? King Olav spoke in German!' Then he told me how much this had meant to President Heinemann and the other Germans with him.

Reflecting on all these things, I knew deep down inside me that if I had insisted on my 12 important questions and done it in my way, the most essential would not have happened. It strengthened my faith that when we human beings choose to obey, God is doing the miracles.

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