



Interview with Ronald Sagatun by Ebba Moi

Act 5: Denmark, Finland, Norway & Sweden, November 25, 2006



Top of collage: "Something scary is happening."
Bottom of collage: "The first time I saw a woodpecker was outside my grandmother's window. When it started to peck, my grandmother said: I am dying."

I met Ronald Sagatun in a café in Oslo to talk about his background as a Norwegian and as a Sea Sámi.

I am 35 years old and come from the Norwegian part of the area in Northern Scandinavia called Lapland. In two generations, we have gone from being Sámi people to being Norwegians. Now we are trying to be very "Norwegian", without really getting the hang of it and without knowing who we were.

So, only two generations ago you were just Sámi. What does that imply exactly?

I grew up with my grandmother who wrote and spoke Norwegian and Sámi, but preferred to speak Sámi, particularly with her own generation. My father understands Sámi, but was not allowed to speak it. Personally I did not know that our family was Sámi until I was 13-14 years old.

Why was your father not allowed to speak Sámi?

This is where we encounter colonialism. There are two areas in Norwegian Lapland. One is the part that has visibility because of the *Sámediggi* (the Sámi Parliament), reindeer herding, etc. However, the biggest Sámi population that was Norwegianized lived by the coast – namely the Sea Sámi, who I represent. Much of the reason why my father does not speak Sámi is that the Germans burnt down the municipality during the Second World War, also destroying my grandparents' farm. To receive the Marshall Aid, which was offered to all the occupied countries after the war, they had to sign an agreement saying that their children would not learn to speak Sámi. Their children should be *Norwegian*.

What exactly has the Marshall Aid got to do with the Sámi people?

It was the Norwegian state who wanted *one* state; and they were afraid of the Sámi people as a group – something they have been up until the Alta Conflict (the development of a hydroelectric power plant in Alta, translator's comment) in the 1970s. The Sea Sámi as a group was much easier to control than the Mountain Sámi. They were permanent residents (not nomads); they represented a big group and lived of fish by the coast – something that has always been a very important resource in Northern Norway. My father says that when he started school after the war, they had to spend several hours in the village hall where they had to look at people wearing *bunad* – different Norwegian national costumes – dancing Norwegian folkdances. They were given stocks of stereotypical Norwegian housewife magazines like *Allers*, *Norsk Ukeblad* and *Hjemmet*; they had to read and memorize.

They were to become Norwegianized?

Yes, they were. They were to learn everything about Norway and at the same time forget where they came from. This invisible colonialism is the reason why, when I was 10 years old and asked where we came from, they told me "Gudbrandsdalen" or "Østerdalen" – two "stereotypical Norwegian" valleys – in the south of Norway. It was something they had to do.

Were you supposed to say to everyone that you came from Gudbrandsdalen?

Yes, within the family there was never said anything else than this, in order to create an artificial family history. Every time I asked, they told me the same, both my grandmother and my father.

So they were loyal to the Marshal Aid even regarding the most private details?

Yes, the indoctrination that was occurring at the time was vast. But the main problem regarding “the Norwegianization” in my family was that they became shameful, something I can feel even today. I know my father felt shame when he had to say who he was. He is now 65 years old, and until he was 60 years old his background was a big problem for him. Needless to say, my father is an educated man, a teacher and a sailor who used to sail all over the world.

Do you think he is shameful because he denied his background or because he is a Sámi?

I think both. It is a difficult situation. He does not deny it rationally, but emotionally he denies it.

He was only a child when it happened.

Yes, and all those children were supposed to become something else. The country was to be rebuilt and everyone within the Norwegian state borders were to become a uniform, homogenous group in the Labour Party state. Because the state has not made a settlement in this matter, it is still a very heated and difficult case. I have come into conflict with people in my class at school because I now say that I am a Sámi and they deny it.

How did you find out that you are a Sámi?

When I was 13 years old, I read somewhere that the Sámi people were separated into three groups. It said Reindeer Sámi, Eastern Sámi, and Sea Sámi. When I read about what differentiates the Sea Sámi from the others; that they live on small holdings (farms) by the coast of Troms and Finnmark, and when I remembered that my grandmother speaks Sámi, I went to her and asked if we were Sámi people ourselves? She said that yes, we were, but that I should never think about that again; if I were to survive in this world I had to forget it. From I was 13 years old, more than twenty years have gone by before my father and I could speak about it.

So actually no one from the Norwegian state has apologised for this?

They have – to the Reindeer Sámi, but not to us Sea Sámi. Because the Sea Sámi speak Norwegian now and have lost their language and culture, it is as if we never existed. We have ended up in a position “in between” something. You can still see traces of the Sámi culture in the coastal communities in Northern Norway, where people read signs in the nature and in animals for things that will happen.

Could one say that it is no longer the state of Norway who is the oppressor, but people’s own conception of themselves, in the form of the shame and guilt that have been created?

I believe the state is still exerting oppression; however, it is very subtle and invisible. For example the Sea Sámi youth is not a part of the quota system of e.g. universities, in which a fixed number of Sámi youth is accepted each year. Because they don’t speak Sámi, they are not qualified.



Top of collage: “Knife and fork are difficult to use.”

Bottom of collage: “We’d rather eat with our fingers. But since we are Norwegian now, we do it secretly.”

Note

1. Collages by Ronald Sagatun.