



PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

Farewell Norway

BY PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE

This story—an interview with *Jørgen*, the “old man of the mountains”—did not turn out quite the way we expected. *Jørgen*’s ideas are both untimely and extremely controversial. Even so, the editor doesn’t wish to waste the report, and besides, even the most unlikely things sometimes have their purposes.

EDITOR: To get right to the point, sir, what do you think is the best way to make our mountain ranges accessible to as many people as possible—seeing that these areas are still, as far as recreation is concerned, undeveloped?

JØRGEN: I beg your pardon?

I mean areas where visitors still run the risk of bumping into something that’s not in the brochure. Are you in favor of small public cabins or big hotels? Which do you think is better—highways, railroads, aerial cable-lifts, or tunnels for cog railways—as a means of getting as many people as possible into the heart of our alpine grandeur?

Hearts should not be exposed to heavy tourist traffic at all. Up to 1910, maybe, it was appropriate to “open up the mountains.” Nowadays the need is quite the opposite—to lock up the few mountainous areas that are left. The last reserves. Not to people who are really their friends. Just to the ones called “engineer” and “restaurant chain.”

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You mean, “wilderness preservation”?

“Preservation” is a pain to virgin wilderness, the same way that a vaccination hurts a still healthy body. These days we do not even have the chance to “preserve wilderness.” The only hope is to save ourselves from the total *norwegische Apparatlandschaft*—Norwegian Techno-landscape. I have to say it in German, we don’t have a word for it in our own language.

You mean, save ourselves from high tension lines and such?

I mean from the whole filthification of Norway. We have already desecrated the most beautiful places to make room for foreign exchange factories: mountain resorts. Concrete boxes called “Sunnycrest” and “Shady Glade” to entice asphalt gypsies who soon discover that “Sunnycrest” is a parking lot and that the “moist air from alpine cascades” is tainted by the avalanches of garbage from the tourist corral down below; while the “silvery mountain brook” is sucked down the gullet of a hydro project up above.

Now, now (*we say mildly*), maybe it does get a little tacky sometimes, and things happen so fast nowadays that resorts will do almost anything to keep their costs down. But think of all the people who . . .

Who turn around in disgust with a lump in their throat? Ah, they have competitors up there, do they? Ha. If it is going to be dog eat dog, I don’t really care which dog eats which.

Whom are you thinking of, exactly?

I am thinking of the plague of development. I mean the mountain lakes turned into stone-dead, concrete-lined tanks, garnished slag heaps from construction projects. I went trolling in one of those lakes last year. I caught a twenty-eight-pound rusty baby carriage. I am thinking of all the waterfalls dried up by hydro projects, and with them the waterfalls of the Norwegian spirit. I am thinking of mountain plateaus turned into shattered

corpses by the twentieth-century treasure hunt. I am thinking of idiotic roads that are supposed to “ease access,” scabby scars over moors and passes, through undisturbed forests emptied of wildlife, along dried-up rivers and fished-out lakes, flanked by drifts of trash, by the waste products of the last link in the metabolism of resource processing. Look at Vassfaret, look at Fæmundmarka. Words like “barbaric” or “vandalism” do not describe what happened to those beautiful places, we have to resort to words like “treason” to describe the rape that has been committed here. Look at Lake Alta in Bardo—formerly a dream beach, seventy miles of cloudberries and birch forests. Now, with a shout of victory, it has been transformed into thousands of acres of foul, stinking, coal-black mire. They were going to dam the lake and drown the forest, and these easterners got worried that they wouldn’t be able to float their boats or pull their nets through the lake, because they’d get caught on the drowned trees. So they plan the dam so that the water level will come to 60 feet above the treetops. Nobody told them that in winter, when they draw the water level down 120 feet lower than it used to be, that the forest would hang high overhead, the macabre skeletons of birch trees marching down the mountainside. You cannot land a boat on the shore, it’s just rocks and cliffs now; a nightmare-landscape, it is the River Styx you are rowing in, Norway’s grave, Norway emptied to the dregs of its soul. And nobody complains. Nobody wants to be a wet blanket at the celebration of Progress. Young peoples’ interests have already made the leap from farming to hanging out at hamburger stands and girly-mag racks. Hydropower engineers come on the radio and say how sorry they are for the poor little birch trees that unfortunately happened to be hindering the march of Progress. “We need economic growth one way or the other,” they say. They do it for the good of Norway.

Things like that are unfortunate, I admit. But isn’t it a good thing that the village gets electricity?

Of course—but that is not why they build the dams. That is only a come-on. The villages can neither finance nor use all that hydropower. Buyers must be found, interest payments covered, we have to get people to build factories and subdivisions to consume all that electricity. The hydroproject has the village, not the other way around. *“Die ich reif, die Geister”*—“the genie’s out of the bottle.” It’s too late for apologies, and no good to despair. Goodness knows there is enough reason to despair. But the municipality is caught between a rock and a hard place. Look at lake Gjende! In view of the economic benefits they were supposed to get from the project, the farmers there demanded half a million dollars a year in compensation if it *wasn’t* built. These same farmers can’t “afford” to let their daughters sit around at home and wait for a man who doesn’t know the first thing about investments, but is free enough with kindness and affection. No—send them down to the streets of the big city. They can earn a lot there: twenty dollars a night, almost eight thousand a year. Multiply that by hundreds of girls! It’s no worse than prostituting the landscape, anyways.

You’re joking, of course.

It is only a matter of degree. We are in the grip of development Neanderthals. It is embarrassing that they are descended from humans, these lummoxes with blunt, sterile minds. They are not really alive, they can only keep going on economic stimulants. We’re being replaced by people who don’t deserve a healthy Earth. People for whom the only important thing is how big their paychecks are.

Yes, the self-reliant family made way for the money economy. But that’s inevitable, it’s just another part of development. If we want to get something, we have to give something up.

Let me tell you what “development” really is. “Development” is pure panic, an itching of the soul that has to be scratched and clawed at until every stone and every little hill in the country is covered with incurable eczema.

Where is the “philosophy of life,” where is the “vision of the future,” where is the goal that gives development direction? What is Norway after? What is the idea, the intention, the purpose, to its life as a nation?

Well. . . “The greatest happiness for the greatest number,” or something like that. Just like anywhere else in the world.

What you call “happiness,” my friend, is more a description of our frivolous chase than a description of actually being somewhere, having something. “Happiness,” like anything else, can be a means to an end. But nothing can help a person or a people to “get” happiness unless they have the ability to be happy *in themselves*. Those who throw away the present for the sake of the future will never achieve it. People have tried that way off and on for over six thousand years. Where do you suppose it’s gotten us, we who sit here, the result of a hundred generations’ blood, sweat, and tears? We still have a few priceless, uninfected bits of Norwegian wilderness left that could help us bear life the way it is. Instead we blindly and to a man shove real happiness aside and chase after shadows. From one “means” to another to another—and “means” to what? To a spiritual rescheduling of our loans, to a collective psychological deficit that is only renewed, never repaid. And pity the man who tries to slow down, to shout a warning. He’s an outsider, an enemy of the people, he doesn’t deserve to live. Nobody even bothers to argue with him, they just toss him away, with all the other garbage.

Now, just a minute. You make it sound like it’s somebody’s fault. Development, you know, feeds on itself, we can’t really rein it in or direct it anymore. The population is always growing, they assert their demands, they can’t live on gardening and sport fishing; they need more electricity, more industry. It’s as plain as day. You can’t dispute it. Oh? And who said we should increase the population?

My dear Jørgen (we say, with an anxious glance at the way the conversation is going), you can't very well stop life, can you? Life must go on!

There isn't anything called "Life." In any case, it is something that *we* have, not something that has us. It has no metaphysical substance—that is just one of the clever myths we've made for ourselves to keep us from staring truth in the face. The truth is life does not appear from nothing, but is a result of the deliberate decisions of every set of parents. As an old bachelor, I am sure of it. I made a decision to be childless, and I stick to it. That's how much your "life must go on" means. When man became self-conscious, that was the end of "life" as a natural force. Our awakening consciousness laid that specter to rest. Or should have.

But the people—

. . . there's obviously no stopping them. But the day will come when they'll stop of their own accord. Today the total weight of the Norwegian population is 220.000 tons. In this country, the only commonly shared goal is to increase, double, or quadruple the amount of people. The God of our times is called Multiplier. He is omnipotent and omnipresent. He guarantees that six times five is thirty, irrespective of whether this amounts to shit or to lilies. Each and every new cradle is a temple in his honor. Rows of houses with rows of people; apartment blocks with blocks of people; mass production of efficient people. In a world of mathematicians nobody bothers to ask what all these numbers are supposed to mean.

Well, we need these people to maintain vital industries and things, to innovate, to make things better. Besides, these social problems are being worked on by both public institutions and private citizens, everyone is concerned about them.

Yes, the outlook for these problems is pretty grim if we can't raise children to look after them. If there were fewer people instead of more we would be in danger that these problems would disappear, taking with them

96 percent of what makes life interesting, both for the current and future generations. So, of course, we need the clerks and the clerks need electricity so they can design new, endless housing developments for helpless people who need electricity. And one day we'll reach ten million people.

By using up all of our natural resources, draining the last wetland area, building atomic-powered greenhouse skyscrapers, we'll be able to feed twelve or fifteen million.

Wonderful. But it won't stop there, you know. What are you going to do when twenty million wage slaves stand tight as blades of grass, from one end of the country to the other, with the smell of each other's welfare wafting up their nostrils?

Not everyone will be a wage slave.

Quite right. Some will drive bulldozers, others will scurry around picking up the droppings of herds of tourists. And what do you think the tourists will come here to see, anyway? Corrugated iron they have at home.

Well, there are the museums . . .

Ah, yes. I had forgotten about the museums. Somehow it never occurred to me that everything worth seeing could be packed into a display case.

Well, but nature takes care of itself. If the population gets too high, there will be a war or a plague.

And that's what you want for your children.

Well, actually I figure that by that time we'll be able to emigrate to Mars.

Sure, and it'll be exciting the first week. Eventually, though, people will start worrying about how much to tax the uranium mines in order to keep the price of margarine down. Yes, yes—we can certainly look forward to at least *that* relief: the whole thing will repeat itself.

But you forget, Jørgen; people adapt. What seems like an impossible way of life to us will seem commonplace to our descendants, who will never have experienced anything else.

True. A dog is happy being a dog. If our descendants become dogs they surely won't miss Beethoven. Only the transition will be hard. We're going through that transition now, our generation, the last that remembers what Norway was. We are homeless already, linguistically and geographically. We have lost our sense of place. Not like refugees, for even if their home is forever closed to them it still lives in their dreams. We're homeless because we've sold nature's innocence to the technological despots and made her into a ravaged whore; when we look to her we see not a smiling face but a sickly death grin, blackened with swarming flies. There's a bitter irony in Reiss Andersen's poem:

One must take a seven-league step
Away from the picture
In order to see it
The way the master wanted it seen.

Well, Jørgen, you certainly don't mince words. But people are going to call you a misanthropist.

Because I am thinking about the generations to come? They're the ones who will become the "human cog wheels," "the Wheel of Life," as sculptor Gustav Vigeland called it—have you seen the statue in the park in Oslo? Misanthropic? Because I think future generations should not have to suffer this fate? The word means different things to different people.

But you wouldn't go so far as to take someone's life?

That would only increase suffering. There's a world of difference between saying we should level Oslo and saying we shouldn't build a new Oslo in the middle of the wilderness. When I say, with Nietzsche, "*verdorben ist die Erde durch die Viel-zu-Vielen*"—the earth is destroyed by the all-too-many—that doesn't mean that I'd kill anyone. If someone has to die, I'd be the first to volunteer. Figure

it this way: the yet-unborn are always the majority. If you add up all the people living now and all those "waiting in the wings," the sum is always infinite, no matter how many actually get born. We can't fit all the unborn on the earth at the same time; every hour an astronomical number of potential people are "cheated" out of life by people deciding not to get pregnant. Ergo, it's no more barbaric to limit the present population to one million than it would be to limit it to twenty million.

But what's so special about a population of exactly one million?

That's just a number. But if we only had a million people in Norway there'd be ample room for all. Everyone could have as much land as he was interested in cultivating, empty beaches to build on, unexplored terrain for skiing, all the fishing and hunting one could possibly want. Then we wouldn't need to be "managed" by some bureaucracy. Life's problems would not be solved, but they would not be made worse.

But a primitive society like the one you envision couldn't maintain a television system, for example.

Just so.

But you also forget the most important thing: Norway would become a power vacuum, militarily speaking. How long do you think it would take before the vacuum were filled—by others?

Ah, yes. We must continue to bring Norwegians into the world so that we don't get invaded by the Russians. That's something I had not considered.

Well, Jørgen, you're old and wise. But why do you only talk about these things with your old mountaineering comrades? Surely they're hardly a philosophical bunch.

I talk with them because in their sport is a deep philosophy. It touches a piece of the incomprehensible, the magnificent, the consciousness-expanding cosmic adventure of what it is to be a human being in the

world. Its face is turned toward death and nature, not toward the stilted, galling artificiality of human fellowship. I talk with them about it because they still have some of their earthly nature intact, they live in a yet uncontaminated nature. From there will come the fight to turn the tide, if it comes at all. Rocks may be dead, but they are not diseased. The more you climb, the more your body purges itself of the poisons accumulated in human society; when you have enough air under your heel, the poisons lose their grip and sink

into the depths like mustard gas. You become purified, and more: you get an antibody in your system, you can go back into the world and remain immune. You become an antibiotic in a degenerating world.

Do you think it would do any good to talk about this to the youth?

Of course not. But it doesn't matter. I belong to a vanishing breed. That is why I say, "Farewell, Norway! The country is in foreign hands."

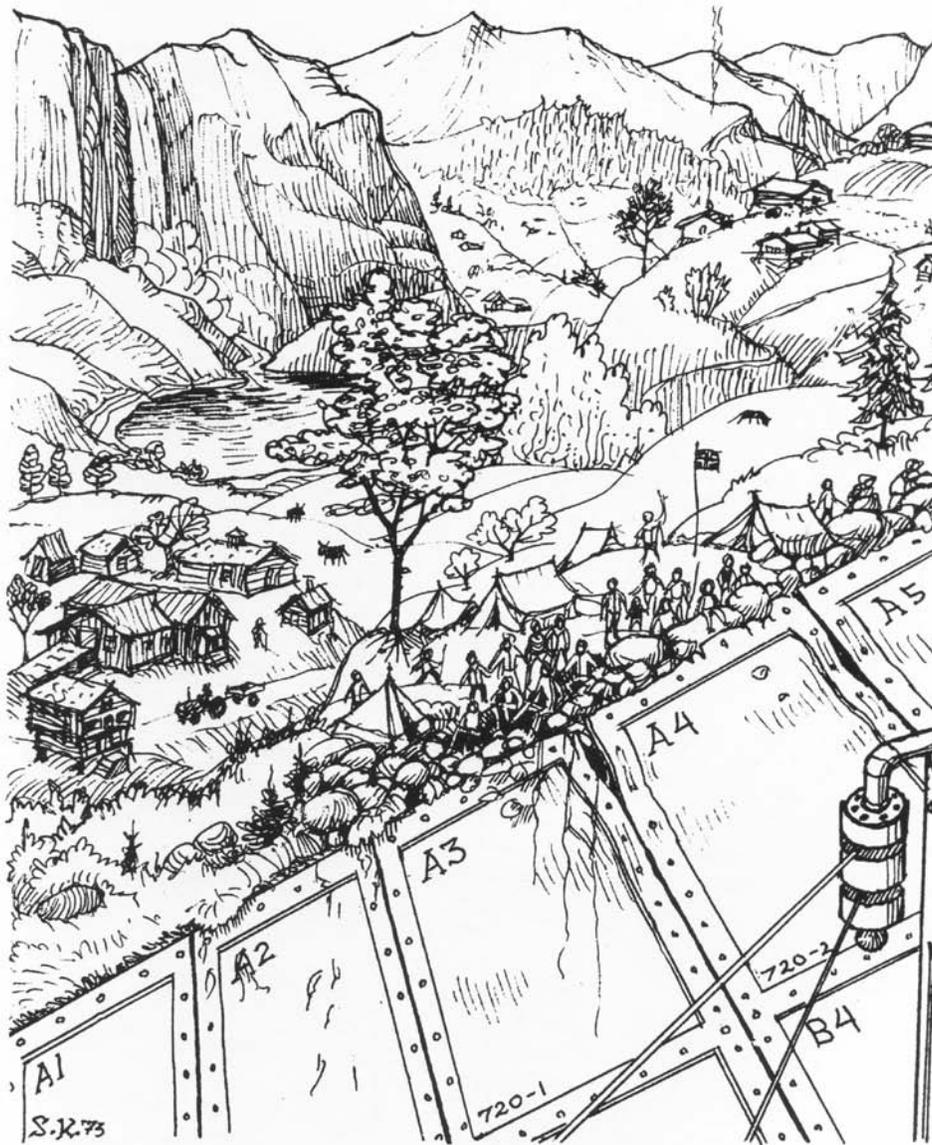


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