

Manuscript

EBU production

Title: Danger - mines !

Speak: 2.21

Denmark - spring 1945.

After five years of hardhanded occupation the hated and despised German occupying forces capitulate.

Speak 2.35

The British General Montgomery rides in a victory parade through the Danish capital, Copenhagen. Denmark is once again a free country.

Speak: 2.45

But something was left behind. Something that needed to be cleaned up. During the war the Germans placed 1,5 million mines along the Danish west coast. Now they needed to be removed. The question was by whom? The Danes or the Germans. Not surprisingly, the choice fell upon the German soldiers.

Helge Hagemann 3.05

What characterized the summer of 45 was hatred, feelings of inferiority ... revenge!

Willi Bjerregaard: 3.12

I got very upset, and I felt very strongly that this story shouldn't be allowed to die, because it's an ugly story. Making children do work like that.

Helge Hagemann: 3.23

In the summer of 45, Germans weren't considered good for much. Whether they died out there in the dunes or not didn't raise many eyebrows.

Speak: 3.30

This is the story of a 400 kilometre long coastline. Here you can still spot the remnants from the world war that divided Europe.

Speak: 3.44

But it is also the story of two men, who 60 years later found each other and established an odd friendship. One is the son of a German sapper and the other the son of the Danish officer responsible for the Germans who removed the mines.

Speak 4.05 :

All of the Danish west coast was, just like the coastlines of France, Norway and Belgium, part of Germany's great plan to build a gigantic Atlantic rampart to prevent a potential allied invasion from the waterside.

4.17 (Enthusiastic German commentator from a film about the construction of the Atlantic wall) :

"Yet again one of the countless giants in the Atlantic rampart is done."

Speak: 4.21

The Atlantic rampart was an enormous construction which required thousands of men and even more material.

4.29 (Enthusiastic German commentator from a film about the construction of the Atlantic rampart):

"Armies of workers were engaged in this work, and the whole coast was dug out."

Speak: 4.34

But apart from huge fortifications the Germans also placed millions of land mines. The beaches were transformed into impervious and deadly terrain.

4.47 (Enthusiastic German commentator from a film about the construction of the Atlantic rampart):

" From the North Cape and all the way down to the Pyrenees, an impenetrable system of bunkers and various kinds of defence positions stretches out. Together with dense mine fields, panzer barrages and ditches it is the most effective fortification in the world."

Speak: 5.04

Also in Denmark the beaches along the west coast were littered with mines. The mines were spread out on the beaches and in the dunes.

Today, 62 years after the war, the mines are gone thanks to German soldiers who, at gunpoint, cleaned up after themselves. It cost the lives of at least 150 soldiers.

Speak5.29

Only here at Skallingen is the beach still closed off because the sand hides thousands of lethal secrets yet to be found. They lie as deeply buried as the Danes memory of what happened here on the westcoast in the months after the war enden.

5.45 Commentator from old Danish film from 1946 on the Mine sweeping

"One and a half million land mines were placed by the Germans on Danish territory. They got the privilege of removing them too!"

Speak: 5.56

During the war Helge Hagemann is just a little boy. He grows up in a small suburb to Copenhagen and his family lacks for nothing.

Helge Hageman 6.04

I remember an episode on Ordrupvej when a German soldier came over to me and pulled at my curls. I had red curly hair and he said: "What a cute boy". As I was walking away from him with my mother I said: " Is it okay to

say hello to such a Nazi swine?". That's one of the few episodes that I remember.

Helge Hageman 6.24

My father was a professional soldier. He was a captain in the engineering-troops.

He wasn't great at it. His thinking was different and he never actually cared for his job!

He was very intellectual and felt that he was more intelligent than all of his colleagues and significantly more so than his superiors. This isn't exactly the best attitude to have as an officer.

Speak: 6.58

But 2 years before the war ended Helge's father, captain Florian Larsen, made a decision that would have a great impact on his family. He fled to Sweden, joined the Danish brigade - an exile-army of Danish soldiers who had fled to the free and neutral neighbouring-country. Later on he travelled to England.

Helge Hageman 7.18

He received training in mine sweeping in England by a Major Holland, and in the summer of 45 he got the thankless job of being one of the leaders on the Danish side of mine sweeping on the west coast.

7.39 Commentator in and old Danish film from 1946 on mine sweeping

" The mines! We can't see them, but they're there. As devilish and lethal as they were during the war. It can still cost countless lives. They have to be removed! They must be rendered harmless!

Yes! And they will. Already on May 5th one of the British Army's experts on mine sweeping, Major Holland, arrived in Denmark. He was accompanied by the Danish Captain Florian Larsen who studied various kinds of German land mines while in England. In an office at Dagmarhus these two officers, Major Holland is the little dark gentleman and Florian Larsen the tall man with glasses, organized the disarmament of the land mines placed on Danish territory by the Germans. Most of which in a belt along the Jutland coastline."

Speak: 8.25

On a personal level, their Helges parents marriage is rocky. The father's escape to Sweden in 43 and the many years of absence have left marks on the family and on wife Gerda in particular.

Helge Hageman 8.36

She felt let down. She felt betrayed, and after the war she accused him of being a coward for running away. He didn't have to. He didn't have much to say about it except that he had participated in building the brigade and felt that he had contributed. They never did see eye to eye on the matter, and I think that those two years ruined my parents' marriage. There was too much bitterness bottled up in both of them.

Speak: 9.18

For Willi Bjerregaard the mine sweeping of the Danish west coast is still in his thoughts. He is the result of a love affair between a young Danish girl and a German soldier who was stationed in Denmark during the war.

(Willi looks at photos and picks up one of him and his mother)

Willi Bjerregaard: 9.32

I was born in 1945. I was born a few months after the war ended in the beginning of July and my mother was very young. She was 17 years old and we were living in Horsens. She had an intimate meeting with my father in the fall of 44 while the war was still on. But there was the complication that he was a German soldier.

Speak: 10.04

Ruth's pregnancy by the German soldier Wilhelm Willitz was not popular. Danish girls who got involved with German soldiers were called German tarts and were ostracized from society. And even though her family took it surprisingly

well, Ruth is shipped off to a home for mothers to have the baby. The German soldier and Ruth stay in touch through letters.

Willi Bjerregård 10.25

He stayed closely in touch with her throughout that winter and wrote a string of letters. Almost like a teenager. He was almost 30 at that time. But he declares his love time after time and writes at the strangest hours. In the middle of the night in a guard's room, where he must stay awake, and on different kinds of paper.

Speak: 10.51

When the war ended the German soldiers were asked to leave Denmark immediately. Many of them walk towards the border passing British tanks going into Denmark. But Wilhelm Willitz is not among those who leave the country.

Willi Bjerregård 11.11

There was this group of men who were welcome to stay. They were the ones who had placed all the mines along the coast, and of course he was one of them.

Speak: 11.31

Wilhelm Willitz and 1000 other German soldiers were sent to the west coast. They began removing the many mines. They were guarded by the Danish brigade and by German officers. Square meter by square meter they had to poke the ground so as to locate the dangerous mines. Some of the soldiers were professional sappers, but many of the others had no training in this line of deadly work. Very soon articles started appearing in the local newspapers.

Willi Bjerregård 12.09

Immediately after the war it's being said that it serves them right. That it is appropriate that they should be the ones to remove them. But more and more terrible accidents happen in the mine field, and it gets worse and worse, and more and more people are wounded. Usually fingers and eyes. Typically they would get their eyes blown out. It gets so bad during that summer that it reaches a point where you just *know* it's wrong.

12.38 Commentator from an old Danish film from 1946 on the mine sweeping

"150 German soldiers lost their lives removing the mines and 350 were wounded. "

Helge Hageman 12.45

When they had spent the day sweeping an area they were sent through it in order to make sure that it had been properly swept. That cost lives. They called it "the death march," which pretty much says it all ... about how they must have felt in the evening after a day like that.

13.09 Commentator from an old Danish film from 1947 on the mine sweeping

"Thousands of mines. Thousands of death traps are piled in storages and taken by the loads to the beach where they are brought to explosion."

(Visual of explosion)

Speak: 13.23

As an adult Helge Hagemann becomes a lawyer and a historian. But one day his past unexpectedly resurfaces.

Helge Hagemann 13.29

By sheer coincidence I happen to go to our attic and there was a stack of old newspapers. I believe it was Politiken and it was June 13th. It was turned up revealing the headline : "Germans to remove land mines themselves." I picked up the paper and read on and then I saw it: "Hey, my father was part of that." And that set off a lot of things. And I said: "What actually happened?" And I got permission from the Record Office to go over any material they might have on the mine sweeping, and it was shocking to me.

Speak: 14.15

In addition to the many accidents the papers revealed the lousy conditions under which the German soldiers were working. The equipment was incredibly bad and the food rations far below what was required. So they were in a very poor mental and physiological state. And on top of that there was the great pressure of time.

Speak: 14.37

The British, who had originally ordered the Germans to sweep the mine fields, had from the very beginning voiced a demand that the soldiers should remove a mine every five minutes. A demand that would turn out to be entirely unrealistic. In reality the soldiers removed one mine per man per hour.

Speak 14.53

Hence the morale in the German camp was at an all time low. Not least due to the fact that the soldiers on several occasions were promised bigger food rations and other provisions. Promises that were never kept.

Speak 15.06

On July 28th the German leader of the mine sweeping writes a desperate and angry note to the Danish leader - Florian Larsen.

15.15 Note: (to be read with a male voice)

"The atmosphere among the troops is worse than ever before. Our officers are slowly turning into ridiculous characters unable to give orders ...

The men have experienced so much disappointment that they don't believe in anything anymore. The soldiers have now reached a point where they have to be forced

to venture into the mine fields, which they then do quivering all over. It's impossible to order the men about. They only say: "Whether we lose eyes, hands, legs or die attempting to sweep the field, or whether we're shot by the English is of no consequence to us."

Speak 15.51

This note is one of thousands that Helge Hageman reads at the Record Office in Copenhagen.

Helge Hagemann 15.57

It was very revealing files, about how miserably Denmark treated the German prisoners of war. They never got the provisions they needed, and their equipment was poor. It was just pathetic. They never had a visit by the Red Cross. No one bothered to pay an interest in the poor soldiers out there. It was up to the Germans to fix it and so they did. But it must have been wretched.

It was very interesting to see and to have my suspicions confirmed – that a war crime had taken place, although this is a strong word. You cannot order prisoners of war to sweep a mine field. This rule was violated for three months and no one stood up for them. There was no one. Germany effectively ceased to exist on May 8th. The Germans themselves call it "Stunde 0" or "Jahr 0". They had nowhere to turn.

They were little boys, 17-18 years old. It would say: "Six died at this and that accident. The head flew in that direction ..." It was brutal. 25% of them died or were severely injured. That's a very big number for peacetime. I think it was beastly!oh no

Speak: 17.50

But officially the German privates were not prisoners of war. The leaders of the allied forces had renamed the group of soldiers that they wanted to detain for mine sweeping. They were now called abandoned hostile personnel, so in a stroke they lost all the rights that are automatically bestowed upon prisoners of war by the international convention. In the files Helge Hagemann read that his own father – Florian Larsen – questioned the decision to use German soldiers for mine sweeping.

Helge Hagemann 18.23

My father wrote a note to the brigade on April 28, 1945 in which he was to pass on his experiences of mine sweeping. He ends it with the following: "But I assume that German prisoners of war will not be used to remove the mines as this would be in violation of the convention." In the margin it said: "No! They capitulated. They are not prisoners of war!" The little captain should keep his ideas to himself.

Speak: 19.09

Willi Bjerregaard was born a few months after the end of the war. At that time his mother was still in contact with Wilhelm Willitz, the German father of her child. He wrote her letters saying that she shouldn't worry about him and that he's thinking of her a lot. But suddenly the letters stopped.

Willi's mother decided to file a paternity suit in order to get child support for herself and little Willi. But during the trial she received shocking news. Wilhelm Willits had died 4 months previously.

Willi Bjerregaard 19.41

Two weeks after my birth he died at Lemvig hospital. Two days earlier he'd been involved in an explosion that cost two boys their lives. German soldiers, that is, but in reality mere school boys. And he himself was so badly wounded that he subsequently died.

Speak: 20.02

Ruth was devastated and felt that she should personally deliver the news to Wilhelm's parents in Germany. She wrote a letter to Wilhelm's mother telling her that she'd given birth to a son. The two women exchange several letters.

Willi Bjerregård 20.17

But in the third letter she told my mother that she is not his mother. She is his wife, and they have two children down there. But they stayed in touch, and when the two girls got a little bigger the older one, a girl of 14 called Edeltraut, started writing letters and even asked for a Danish dictionary, so that she might learn a little Danish.

Speak: 20.46

Later on Willi's mother married a widower. Willi grew up poor in a big family of brothers and sisters. His mother was everything to him. Willi's new stepfather refused to adopt him.

Willi Bjerregård 21.01

He didn't care for me much. Especially when I was very young. I remember clearly all the times he'd say: "He should go to a reformatory." That was the ultimate punishment for not finishing your dinner or failing to fetch water at the pump. It was a rough and primitive life in the country. There was always something you hadn't done as there were so many chores.

Speak: 21.22

The mother protected Willi as best she could. Together they looked at pictures and read old letters from Willi's father and letters from the family in Germany. Letters and pictures kept in an old candy box. But when Willi was 17 years old, Ruth died of cancer.

Willi Bjerregård 21.39

The box, or rather candy box, that my mother kept the pictures and letters in – she stayed in touch with those people for a long time – it was sitting on the desk at the house, and all of a sudden it was gone. I didn't dare ask my father where it was, because I was fairly certain that he had gotten rid of it. What was it to him? But when he died not long ago, about 10 years, we were cleaning and suddenly I held it in my hand again. Shivers ran down my spine. It hadn't been opened for 30 years. I reread everything and could recall most of it. And that 's when it all started for me. The thought that this was something I should know more about.

(Passage with Willi reading letters from the box out loud)

" to Ruth....Roses are red....."

Speak: 22.43

At that time almost 20 years had passed with no contact between Willi and his family.

He now wrote letters to them all telling his story and asking them if they had any information about his German father. And they certainly did.

Willi Bjerregård 22.58

It's fascinating to hear new stories about someone who is somehow close to me. It's 50% of my gene pool and then again nothing to do with me at all. So I was pleased to hear that he was a charming, nice and friendly ... caring person. Qualities I recognize in my daughter, as well as in myself.

Speak: 23.26

While Helge Hagemann was writing a book on mine sweeping and the German soldiers' destiny he received a telephone call from a man he didn't know.

Helge Hagemann 23.34

He called me up one night. His name was Willi, and he said: "My father was a German mine sweeper. Are you interested in seeing some of his papers or whatever I may have?" I got to know Willi and it was quite moving to meet him ... a son of a so-called Danish hero and the son of a German mine sweeper.

Willi Bjerregård 24.05

He found it extremely interesting. I remember the energy he got from meeting someone who hadn't actually been there, but who was part of the story. It matters to us, just like it matters to him a lot. His father and the part he played ... it's also part of my family's story.

Helge Hagemann 24.27

We grew up without ... I mean Willi completely without a father, and me with a father who was probably affected by participating in the mine sweeping, and the rest of my family paid for that.

Speak: 24.45

Helge's book, and the claim that Denmark in 1945 violated international conventions by having the Germans remove the mines along the west coast, result in an outcry of indignation. Not least from old member of the Danish Brigade who participated in this work.

Helge Hagemann 25.01

And when I told them that they were in fact war criminals, they of course ... they couldn't understand what I was trying say. They thought I was lying and exaggerating and up to no good. But later on, several people from the brigade called me up and said that their world had fallen apart. They had seen it, and they had read what I'd written, and it just couldn't be true, and they just felt really bad from reading my book. I never meant to make anyone uncomfortable

Speak: 25.58

Some part of the truth lies here at the graveyard in Lemvig. On a tiny patch of grass at the very back of the yard some of the German soldiers killed in the mine sweeping are laid to rest. Willi's father is also buried here next to the two young soldiers who were 16 and 17 and who died that same day.

Speak 26.19

The first time Willi came here was 10 years ago, when he first embarked on uncovering the truth about his father's destiny.

Willi Bjerregård 26.27

Standing there ... gave a sort of closure. No more defensive mechanisms telling you to not concern yourself with it. So there was little of that. It was like a door being opened and a haze disappearing . I thought "This is something you have to deal with."

Willi Bjerregård 26.50

This has prevented me from having the life that I should have had and which was all but laid out by fate or biology.

We could have lived either here or in Germany. And you have to consider the fact that it's my mother's lover lying there ...

I think I did think about that too.

(Willi and Helge visit a grave yard. They put down flowers)

Helge: This is for your father...

Willi: That was sweet of you

Speak: 27.36

Today the mines are gone from the Danish west coast and the old bunkers that were part of the German Atlantic rampart remain there as silent witnesses.

Only here at Skallingen on the southernmost part of the coastline is the work still being done. But not by young German soldiers looking for mines. These are highly trained Danish sappers.

Skallingen is the only place where they couldn't find all the mines. Last year they found 60 mines in the dunes. Half of them were still functioning.

Mikkel - sapper 28.11

The reason why they couldn't find all the mines at Skallingen is that there is such a strong dynamic in the area down there. The sand moves around all the time So a mine placed on the sand in 1944 could one year later be covered by several meters of sand.

Speak: 28.26

After a storm, mine debris still pops up. Some of the mines may be buried as deep as 6 meters under the surface because the sand moves around. But there are also other problems in locating the mines.

Mikkel - sapper 28.39

The reason why we're even involved in this process is that in 1945 or 1944, when the mines were placed, the beach was actually 200 meters further to the west, so apparently the coast has moved eastwards since then. And this

means that the mines originally placed on the beach are now 200 meters from land and in the water.

Speak: 29.02

It is estimated that there are still up to 8000 mines at Skallingen. But due to the very special weather conditions it will take up to 5 years to locate them all.

Speak 29.18 :

As an adult Willi has tried to reestablish contact with his German half-sisters .

29.25 Willi Bjerregaard

I just wanted to know if they still existed and I also needed for them to know that I exist ! So I have talked to them on the telephone a couple of time. But haven ´t done anything further about it.

Speak 29.36 :

Helge Hagemann has now retired. And Even though he sticks to his claim that the German soldiers illegaly were forced to remove the mines, he understands why it could happen.

29.48 Helge Hagemann

Nobody liked the Germansand I am not saying that they should. I understand. But to let strong feelings take over in military dealings - that is not a good thing !