Finn Bøe – war, medicine, music

In January 1944 the Norwegian Resistance Movement placed a radio transmitter in the attic of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the National Hospital (Rikshospitalet), Oslo. Knut Haugland (1917–2009) used this to send messages to the Norwegian government-in-exile in London. The transmitter was discovered by the Gestapo, and German troops surrounded the building on 1 April 1944. Haugland survived a dramatic escape.

While the transmitter was in operation, Haugland lived with senior registrar Finn Bøe (1906–70) and his family in a hospital apartment. Bøe risked his own life and that of his family to assist during a dramatic phase of the resistance struggle.

Bøe had completed a focused and purposeful clinical and academic training when he was appointed senior registrar at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the National Hospital, in 1943. He was professionally ambitious. His thesis from 1938 was disqualified, but four years later he submitted a new, experimental thesis which he successfully defended in 1945. In 1955, Bøe became the first senior consultant at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Aker hospital. Under his leadership, it became the largest in the Oslo area, and one of the most active in Norway with regard to science. Several of Bøe's own academic works on placental morphology and blood circulation have become classics.

Outside of medicine, his great interest was music, and not only as a piano player. He also wrote a book about his fellow townsman Edvard Grieg.

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MAIN MESSAGE

The gynaecologist Finn Bøe (1906–70) risked his own life and that of his family by providing necessary help to the Norwegian Resistance Movement during the Second World War.

Finn Bøe achieved international recognition for his studies of the placenta, while he also developed the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Aker Hospital in Oslo.

The old, monumental building of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology on Stensberggata has a dignified red-brick façade. In 1995, the City of Oslo Historical Society placed one of its blue cultural-history plaques near the main entrance. The plaque reads: «This was the site of the Norwegian Resistance Movement's radio transmitter Barbette Red» (Figure 1).

Background, material and method

Our interest in this story – and in Dr Finn Bøe's part in it – was aroused in 2007, when the National Medical Museum Foundation invited the radio operator, Knut Haugland, who was nearly 90 years old at the time, to hold a lecture about the events of 1944 in the auditorium at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

As background to our article we have used databases providing access to newspapers, books and medical material (Retriever, bokhylla.no, Bibsys, PubMed, Web of Science), interviews with the family, colleagues and friends of Finn Bøe, as well as Knut Haugland (1917–2009) and his wife Ingeborg Haugland (1921–2014). We have also been granted access to Knut Haugland's private archive.

Furthermore, we have reviewed the archives of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo, in the National Archive for the years 1938–55 with regard to the assessment of the two theses Bøe submitted for evaluation for the doctoral degree in medicine and his application for a professorship in 1952. With regard to Bøe's application for a readership in 1951, we were assisted in searching through the archives at the University of Bergen and the Ministry of Education and Research in Oslo.

War

«Primus», which is written on the plaque at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, was the code name of Knut Magne Haugland, radio operator in the Linge Company. After the sabotage at the heavy-water plant in Rjukan in February 1943, he escaped to England in August by way of Sweden. In November he was back in Norway. His task was to train radio operators in the resistance movement and to set up a transmitter for contact with London. None of this was a manageable task for a single man. The resistance movement exercised caution, and for reasons of safety, as few people as possible were informed about the activities of others in case they should be arrested and tortured. The resistance movement's radio stations never remained long in any one place, and very few were aware of their locations.

The idea for a cover address for Haugland came from the resistance leader Gunnar Sønsteby («No. 24», «Optimus») (1918–2012) (1). Sønsteby established contact with Finn Bøe through Finn Haugland (1907–81), Principal Officer, who was active in the civilian organisation of the resistance movement and who had recommended Bøe as a safe and trustworthy man (1). Finn Haugland was an actuary, and before the war he had helped Bøe with the

Figure 1 *To the left of the main entrance to the former building of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the National Hospital, we can see one of the blue plaques of the City of Oslo Historical Society. In the winter of 1944, the resistance movement's radio station Barbette Red was located in the attic. The radio operator, Knut Haugland, succeeded in making a dramatic escape on Saturday 1 April 1944. Photo: Erlend Hem*

numerical work for his first major scientific article (2).

Initially, Bøe's apartment was used as a cover address by two students who were to escape to Sweden in February 1943 (3), and later in 1943 by Sønsteby himself. Finn Bøe had been employed at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology since 1940 (Figure 2). The family lived in a service apartment on the second floor. The plan was that Haugland would live there (1, 4) and that the radio transmitter would be located elsewhere.

Haugland described the meeting with Bøe and his wife Aslaug (1906–98), who was heavily pregnant, and how he quickly made clear the risks involved in hiding him. Bøe helped him find his way around the clinic premises. Dressed in a white coat to make him look like a medical student, he was taken on a tour of the entire building. In Haugland's words, there were «a total of six exits, and it was also possible to jump out of the window on all sides. The place was absolutely ideal for an agent» (5).

Following the original plan – living in Bøe's apartment at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and making the journey back and forth to the transmitter – proved to be impractical. Instead, Haugland would try to send the transmissions from the clinic's attic. He found a suitable, small «space» in a shaft, and wrote that «the only person informed was the doctor, a man in whom I had absolute trust» (5). He was concerned about security, and because the transmissions took place in broad daylight, he went up to the attic dressed in dirty overalls carrying a spanner in his hand. When the Germans later interrogated the caretaker, it transpired that he had been taken for an electrician. Nobody should see him enter or leave Bøe's apartment (4).

Bøe's help included not only the cover apartment and his information about the layout of the building. In the beginning, he also came to the attic to make sure that nobody could hear Haugland transmitting from within the airshaft, and he learned how to encrypt and decipher telegrams to be able to help out at busy times (3). In the autumn of 1944 there were plans to kidnap Kriminalrat Siegfried Fehmer (1911–48) and take him to England. This hazardous operation was cancelled, but Bøe was a man that Sønsteby trusted also on this occasion (6).

Haugland has described his stay with Bøe, where he lived like a family member, including when other friends of the doctor came to visit (4). Bøe had hatched a credible cover story. He said that his friend had lived on Munkedamsveien, which had been completely destroyed by the huge explosion at the Filipstad pier on 19 December 1943. At the time, the newspapers appealed for people to help the homeless. Nobody thought it strange that the Bøe family would lend a helping hand (4).

Haugland's dramatic escape has been described in a number of sources (1, 4, 7, 8). The descriptions diverge somewhat, but it is clear that on 1 April 1944, the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology was surrounded by a large number of heavily armed German troops while Haugland was busy sending a radio message to London (9). After a wild chase through narrow airshafts, down a steep flight of back stairs to the basement and over a two-metre high board fence topped with barbed wire, Haugland made it to safety outside the hospital area. During his escape he is reported to have fired shots at four Germans (4, 9), but we have no information as to whether they were killed or only wounded. There are no reports of casualties from this raid (9).

When the Germans struck, Finn Bøe was in his office in the apartment and had just taken out his radio to listen in secret to the three o'clock news from London. While the Gestapo raid was unfolding, he burned Haugland's papers (4). The Germans searched the two lower floors of the building when the transmitter was discovered, but Bøe's apartment in the wing of the second floor was not searched. As Haugland wrote, they must have assumed that the transmitter was located in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, but that the operator lived somewhere else. After his escape, Haugland was concerned about the safety of the Bøe family. He quickly contacted Bøe and asked him to flee with his family to Sweden, where they would be provided with necessary help. Bøe, however, felt that this was not necessary, since he believed that the family was above suspicion (4).

We have no grounds to believe that any others at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology were aware of Haugland's presence in the attic or the identity of the stranger in Bøe's apartment. The Bøe family remained in the service apartment until the end of the war, and despite the events of April 1944 it was perceived as a safe cover apartment. Sønsteby himself lived there again in January 1945 (1).

Thus, the radio transmitter was placed in the attic of a hospital building in which 2 700 births took place in 1944. The situation was extreme, and the resistance movement made use of hospitals on a number of occasions. Fehmer wrote about the raid at the National Hospital that «at the time, he wished that the choice of location for the transmitter had been coincidental», but that «to his dismay» he discovered another radio transmitter in a hospital in October 1944, this time at the Radiumhospitalet (8).

Further resistance activity also occurred elsewhere at the National Hospital, including at the Department of Ophthalmology, the Bacteriological Laboratory and the Institute of Forensic Medicine (10, 11).

There are serious ethical problems involved in using a hospital area in the way the resistance movement chose to do in 1944. Values that are hard to compare were in conflict – the resistance struggle, the rules of war and concerns for society. The times were *not* normal, and in hindsight all actions can be subject to debate.

Bøe was among those who risked their own lives and that of their families by providing invaluable help during a dramatic phase of the resistance struggle (Figure 3).

Medicine

Finn Bøe graduated from medical school in 1933 and had a focused and purposeful training behind him when he was appointed junior registrar in 1940 and senior registrar in 1943 at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the National Hospital (12). He had previously been employed at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Bergen and at the Oslo Municipal Maternity Clinic.

He started his research activities at an early stage, publishing his first article in 1935. His main interests were endocrinology and the placenta, and his key scientific works focus on placental circulation and vascular morphology. He was also active as a gynaecological endocrinologist, clinically and organisationally as well as in the role of editor.

For two years starting from 1935 he had his workplace at the Department of Pharmacology, University of Oslo. The animal experiments that he conducted in 1936–37 formed the basis for his first major academic work, which he submitted for adjudication for the doctoral degree in medicine in 1938 (2). The committee found it «unworthy of defence» – it was described as «immature» (13). Disputations were rare in those days, and submission of a thesis by someone in their early thirties was an even rarer occurrence.

However, the rejection did not bereave Bøe of his courage or energy, and four years later he submitted another thesis based on animal experiments about the placenta and the length of gestation (14). Because of the war, the public defence could not be held until three and a half years later, in December 1945 (14). The topic of the thesis was «in actual fact outside the gynaecological specialty», and none of the members of the adjudication committee were gynaecologists (15). This was the twelfth doctoral thesis by a gynaecologist in Norway, and the first of an experimental nature (16). After completion of his duties as senior registrar at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1947, Bøe was employed for several years at the Biological Laboratory of Nyegaard & Co, and from 1950 as its director.

Figure 2 *The medical staff assembled outside the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the National Hospital, in 1942. From left: junior registrar Finn Bøe (1906–70), senior registrar Carl Andreas Hiorth Schultz (1903–87), professor Anton Sunde (1882–1969), senior registrar Einar Amundsen (1903–90). Excerpt. Photo from the image collection of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, National Medical Museum*

In 1951, a readership in obstetrics and gynaecology was established at the University of Bergen. Finn Bøe was the only applicant. He was found academically competent and appointed reader in September 1951. Senior consultant Kristjar Skajaa (1890–1956) at the Oslo Municipal Maternity Clinic, who was a member of the committee, stated that Bøe «undoubtedly» was «the one gynaecologist in the country who is best versed in endocrinology» (17). Professor Jørgen Løvset (1896–1981), head of department in Bergen, was also a member of the committee and from the recommendation it is clear that he wanted Bøe (17). Bøe was foreseen to head the establishment of the Hormone Laboratory (18). However, the wage conditions were not approved by

Figure 3 *Finn and Aslaug Bøe with Knut Haugland in front of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, the National Hospital. Year unknown. Photo: Private*

Figure 4 *Finn Bøe, recently appointed senior consultant at the new gynaecological department at Aker Hospital, photographed on 29 September 1955. Photo: Jan Greve/NTB scanpix*

the Norwegian Medical Association, and Bøe did not go to Bergen.

The following year he applied for the professorship vacated by Anton Sunde (1882–1968) on his retirement. At the time, there were only two professorships in this discipline in Norway, in Oslo and Bergen. The other applicant was Ernst Harald Schjøtt-Rivers (1901–82), senior consultant at the Department of Gynaecology, Radiumhospitalet. The recommendation from the expert committee is comprehensive, occupying 80 pages of the University's annual report (15). The committee unanimously ranked Schjøtt-Rivers on top with reference to the solidity and volume of his works. However, the difficulties involved in comparing Bøe's experimental works with the clinical ones undertaken by Schjøtt-Rivers were emphasised throughout the recommendation.

Bøe was lauded for having «attacked problems that are especially difficult and complex», for his «enthusiasm and indefatigable energy» and his «extraordinary talent for experimental research». Løvset pointed to Bøe's «affinity with problems that are new and relatively unexplored». One work that had been submitted after the expiry of the deadline and therefore had not been taken into consideration was described by Skajaa in panegyric phrases as «one of the most outstanding and valuable works ever written in Norwegian medicine» (15). This work was later to ensure Finn Bøe international recognition (20).

He was invited to the USA to present his results – not an everyday occurrence for a Norwegian gynaecologist in the 1950s. According to professor Per Bergsjø (1932–2010), the work had «the quality of a classic» (21). One of the figures showed the arterial-capillary-venal vascular network in a tertiary villus at 18 weeks of gestation. It was reproduced in numerous articles and books. The standard reference book *Pathology of the human placenta* includes the diagrammatic presentation in all of its six editions (1967–2012), and many of Bøe's works continue to be cited (22).

In 1953, Bøe was appointed consultant in gynaecology at Aker Hospital. Two years later he became the first senior consultant at the newly established department there (Figure 4). He developed the department into the largest of its kind in the Oslo region and one of the most scientifically active in Norway. The medical staff increased in number and he could go back to his research, which resulted in a series of articles, the last of which was published in 1969, the year before his death. His works from the late 1960s are still included as reference material in the specialist literature on the placenta.

Bøe held a number of elected academic offices. He served as chair of the Norwegian Association of Endocrinology, Oslo Gynaecological Society and the Norwegian Gynaecological Society, he was national editor of *Acta Endocrinologica* and *Acta Obstetricia et Gynecologica Scandinavica*. He especially appreciated his presidency of the second Acta Endocrinologica conference in Oslo in 1956 (23, 24). Bøe also acted as opponent in public thesis defences held by a number of prominent Norwegian gynaecologists – Per Agnar Nilsen (1912–2000) in 1963, Knut Bjøro (1925–2010) in 1966 and Narve Moe (born 1932) in 1970.

Finn Bøe also wrote for a wider audience, including in the *Medisinsk årbok* (*Medical Yearbook)*, Familieboka (*The Family Book*) and *Nye medisinske fremskritt* (*New Medical Progress*), he was an expert contributor to the Gyldendal Large Encyclopaedia and headed the publication of the Norwegian edition of *Kvinnens egen legebok* (*Medical Handbook for Women*) in 1952.

He and the abortion committee at Aker Hospital were caught up in the conflict that arose over the practical application of the Abortion Act after 1964. It caused a stir that under the same Act, less than half of all applications for abortion were approved at the Oslo Municipal Maternity Clinic, but more than 90 per cent at Aker Hospital (25). Also elsewhere in the country the letter of the law was subject to varying interpretations. This formed an important backdrop to the realisation by the political establishment that the law had to be amended. The change came in the 1970s, ending with women being granted the right to make the final decision regarding termination of pregnancy before the 12th week of gestation.

Music

That doctors are interested in music is more than just a saying. It has been documented that they are more musically active than

other academics, as instrumentalists, singers and listeners (26). Finn Bøe was part of this tradition. In 1950 he provided a recount of his life during the first 25 years after his baccalaureate (27), one of the briefest and most laconic texts in a book in which his class of students provide an account of their lives and careers. Bøe's contribution mentions not a single word about the war; it is a very brief overview of his life in medicine and concludes with the information on his avocation: «Music». All those who knew him refer to his outstanding musicality and his knowledge about and interest in music. According to Per Bergsjø, there were two topics that would enliven the otherwise taciturn man: the placenta and Edvard Grieg. The portrait interview with him in the *Aftenposten* daily on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday refers to him in the headline as «Finn Bøe, gynaecologist and musician» (28).

Bøe's interests went beyond just playing. In 1949 he published a monograph on his fellow townsman Edvard Grieg (29). A testimony about him as a musician and what music can do, is rendered in Knut Haugland's obituary of Bøe. He recounts the immense pressure he was under while staying with the Bøe family at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (30): «(...) we were treated as full family members. It cannot be overestimated what this meant to us in the situation we were in. The adversity would often be too much to bear for us. At these times, Finn Bøe would sit down at his beloved piano and conjure up the tones of the great masters to chase away our sorrows» (30).

Conclusion

All those who knew Bøe describe him as a quiet and reserved man. He told nobody about his and his wife's activities during the war. Per Bergsjø, who was junior registrar with Bøe for three years in the late 1960s, wrote that he did not learn about Bøe's war efforts until much later (21). This was not touched upon, neither in daily life, nor in Bøe's later written summaries of the life he had lived. There is no trace of the war in his brief autobiography from 1950 (27), nor in *Norges leger [The doctors of Norway]* (12) – in contrast to what we can read about many others in both of these works. Finn Bøe's scanty posthumous papers contain no reference to the war, with the exception of his Defence Participation Medal from 1946. His name was briefly mentioned in the newspapers in the context of Arne Skouen's film *Omringet* [*Besieged*] (1960), which was based on the events at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in 1944.

Finn Bøe died of cancer in 1970, at the age of only 64 years. Nobody except his closest kin knew of his illness (30). «On the day that he died, he performed a very strenuous operation,» according to his obituary in the Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association (31).

Colleagues and friends collected funds to erect a bust of Bøe. It was donated to Aker Hospital and unveiled in 1978. The gynaecological department at Aker Hospital closed in 2000, but Bøe's bust still stands in the hall of building no. 2.

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