# Letter from a Norwegian in Vienna

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Ine Gundersveen [1] 25 July 2011

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"We are a people in mourning." So we are. Wherever we are.

The poverty of words is striking right now. As I sit here I stream news from the Norwegian broadcasting corporation NRK over the internet while trying to come to terms with the enormity of the crimes committed by Anders Behring Breivik on Friday 22 July 2011. 93 people are now confirmed dead. Several more are badly injured in hospitals. He actually managed to kill nearly a third of the kids at the Labour Party's youth camp on Utøya. A third. He killed them with a coldness I am unable to fathom.

There are people killed in terrorist actions every day in other countries. And millions have been starved and killed through other bestial methods throughout our bloody European history. I lived in London for a few years and got used to the many posters encouraging vigilance and asking people to report any unattended luggage anywhere in case it were a bomb. I've been one of those alerting the bus driver to an unattended bag, causing a traffic jam in London's busy streets. In London you get used to being a small piece of the total randomness of bomb threats. When 7/7 happened, I was on Liverpool Street Station 20 minutes before the blasts went off. The Internet and mobile network broke down with people's attempts to get hold of each other and my own mum panicked when she was unable to get hold of me. Millions in London can make similar statements. It's almost no big deal. It doesn't make it right or good,

But this? This is unprecedented. Since WWII, there have been no major mass deaths in Norway. It is known as one of the world's most peaceful nations. Norwegian negotiators were behind the Oslo Deal. This is the country where King Olav could join the rest of the population using public transport during the oil crisis in 1973. My father was asked by foreign guests: "What about security? Where are his body guards?", to which he answered with a smile "He has 4 million of those."

Since then, the population has increased, partly thanks to our immigrants, the exposure to the outside world has grown, xenophobia has grown, the royals have more and clearly visible body guards. Still we managed to keep conflict on a discussion level. If you had an opinion you were free to express it as long as you did so in words. So though security in Norway too has grown over the years, we never really felt threatened by -- anything, really. As for me, whenever I visited, it was my childhood paradise I visited. My country of birth and upbringing became my holiday resort, the place I went to rest my soul and get a break from the somewhat busier and pressurized life I usually lead.

Now one of "ours" has turned it all upside down. The threat didn't come from without, it came from within. A good looking man in his early thirties, still very young, turned himself into the worst mass murderer Norway has ever seen, and now he sits in police interrogations and calmly justifies his actions. And I don't think there is a single Norwegian who in some small way would mind seeing him

hung, quartered and drawn in the most medieval fashion after the horrors he inflicted on hundreds of kids assembled on an island, and randomly in Oslo. At the same time we all know how futile that would be. It wouldn't bring back a single one of the lives he destroyed.

Since Friday 22 July, I have watched the news and listened to hour-long programmes analysing Mr Behring Breivik's actions and personality, none of which have brought me any closer to understanding how such a normal person could turn so completely evil and without even the slightest empathy. I don't think there is a single book on personality disorders that can make me understand or accept his complete liberation from a conscience. I am not used to people with no conscience. I don't think I have ever met one. Forgive me: I am naïve. But then again, I am Norwegian.

I feel closer and yet farther away from Norway than ever. I know no other Norwegians here in Vienna. Not because there are none here, our paths just don't cross. And so I suffer ever so slightly from "absent survivor's grief", if there is such a thing. I spent Saturday bursting into tears the more I read and heard about the killing spree on Utøya. I read Parbleen Kaur's [9] first-hand account and cried more. I translated it to English [10], and cried. My two dogs were deeply upset and very clingy all day. The skinny dog refused to eat, the fat one is a comfort eater so he stole the skinny one's food before he went back to whimpering again. My fiancé declared his support on Facebook and gave me lots of hugs, and as friends and family reported in as safe I cried some more.

I and mine are safe. But like all others from Oslo, I know people who either heard the bombs in Oslo or know victims of the shooting. I have several friends who work close to the government district as well as in the government offices themselves. This is the bomb-randomness I knew from London. Also when there, and during the IRA time before I moved there, I got used to contacting my nearest and dearest to make sure they were ok whenever a bomb went off. I never thought I would have to do that with my Norwegian friends and family. I am relieved that they are well. I am deeply grieved that others are not. I am extremely angry that the madman targeted children, young people who would probably have had active political lives ahead of them, our future politicians and leaders.

And the more I read of his "manifesto", the more angry I get. Because these are not really the writings of a madman. I can't even write him off as a lunatic! His self-aggrandising writings are not actually ramblings, they are considered, based in history – albeit his own interpretation of it – and he has given himself a ridiculously grand place in contemporary history. He seems to think that he will hold a position as some sort of heroic soldier. A martyr of Christianity and Norwegian nationalism. It bears a frightening resemblance to militant Islamists. Does he expect a load of virgins when he dies too?

Speaking of dying: I am proud to be Norwegian when I see my friends' reaction to a Facebook survey asking if Norwegian law should be change to once more allow the death penalty. They have replied with a resounding NO! Then he would in some twisted way have won his one-man battle against humanity. Norwegian law has 21 years as maximum penalty for murder. If that is all he gets, he would still have a fair amount of life left in him on his release. Do I think 21 years for Mr Behring Breivik is enough? Not by a mile! But I shall not take the law into my own. Norwegian justice is as it is for a reason and I shall follow the process against him closely. I have the right to express my agreement or disagreement with his sentence when it falls, but until then I trust with confidence in my fellow countrymen, our justice system, police, and the vast majority of Norwegians who are equipped with a healthy conscience and lots of common sense.

Today I really wish I could hug a Norwegian. As Bishop Ole Christian Kvarme said in his memorial service in Oslo: "We are a people in mourning." So we are. Wherever we are.
**Country or region:** Norway
Austria
**City:** Vienna

View the discussion thread. [11]

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Ine Gundersveen is editorial assistant and webmaster of eurozine, a network of European cultural journals. She blogs at midgetviking.wordpress.com [12]

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