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Early public libraries in the arctic

A part of the library history of Longyearbyen, Svalbard

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Introduction

The main community in Svalbard is the little Norwegian mining town Longyearbyen. Close to 2000 inhabitants make their living from coal mines, tourism and some employment related to education and science. The first impression of Longyearbyen is that this appears to be a rather ordinary small Norwegian village: people going to their jobs, ordinary houses, a hospital, a school, cars, stores and also a public library. This library should in fact surprise the reader!

In Norway are the public libraries an official issue for the local authorities due to The Norwegian Library Act. But in Longyearbyen there were no real local political authority until in 2002, and the public library is managed and owned by a company, where the Norwegian state is the shareholder. Additionally is the Norwegian Library Act not valid for Svalbard. It is the Svalbard treaty and The Law of Svalbard which restricts Norwegian jurisdiction and provides that all 40 countries that signed this treaty and their citizens will be treated equally and has the same rights to exploit the resources in Svalbard. This treaty is unique, and is superior to the Norwegian jurisdiction for the islands. Norwegian state authorities has since 1925 been represented by The Governor of Svalbard. This institution has the formal responsibility for police services and also to practise the Norwegian sovereignty of Svalbard.

In a drawer in a back room at the Longyearbyen public library, I found a lot of documents related to the management of the library. The record from the first library board meeting in 1949 gave me an important clue: Longyearbyen public library was in fact a fusion of the Church library and the Miner's Union Library. This information, the unusual physical conditions and jurisdiction inspired me to learn more about the library history of Svalbard.

Approach, theory and sources

This paper tries to answer the question how did the library history start on this remote island and what were the conditions for running libraries in this little mining town?

When we are studying libraries, and try to understand how they developed like they did, one have not to just look at the internal life, one have also to take a look at the society around and see how this have influenced the activity. The social life, the political and economical environment have influenced and affect the management of the library as a function of its surroundings. This way of studying libraries may also make the approach a bit broader, and could maybe also attract an audience beyond librarians.

The ambition is to try to combine hard facts and figures from the archives with contemporary descriptions to reconstruct the activity and development of the libraries. Svalbard has been like a magnet to many writers and historians, but there is hardly a single line written about the libraries, so we have to go to the archives to find out more about them.

There are quite a lot of sources that in between the lines and fragmentary describe the social life and general conditions in the early days of Longyearbyen. Both the coal company's own people and the miners have given their version.

This paper describes four separate libraries in this order: the first union library in 1919, the second union library established in 1925, the church library started in 1920 and briefly the Longyearbyen public library which was a result of the fusion of the union library and the church library in 1949.

Daily life in the early Longyear City

During the whole period who here is described (1905-1949), Longyearbyen was a real "company town". The miners were only hired for one summer- or winter season, they lived 2-6 workers in one small room in big huts. It was a frequent replacement of workers from one season to another and this caused an unstable situation and a difficult social life.

The foremen and administration had their own flats or houses, their own cooking and many privileges (Amundsen 2002 p. 213). It was in fact a class segregated town (Evjen 1995 p. 256). In the first 20 years it was several serious labour conflicts and strikes. Once nearly the whole stock was fired and sent to Norway under assistance of armed Norwegian forces.

The company had until the 1970's briefly the whole responsibility for the infra structure and most of the social functions in the community. The company owned and run all housing, the hospital, the school, the church, the store and they even had their own bank notes. This was a man's world (Arlov 1996 p. 368), and until the mid 1970's it was very unusual that the miners were permitted to bring their families or was awarded a flat to live in.

The first industrial settlements

It was the rich layers of coal who attracted the first settlers. An English company started the first small coal mine in 1905 and the year after had an American bank man and investor opened another mine and build a little camp. His name was John Munro Longyear, and the camp was of course named Longyear City [the name of the settlement have obviously nothing to do with a “long year”]. The first winter it was only 40 workers in the camp, but later it raised to about 300 miners (Mork 1983 p. 93).

A library in Longyear City?

The company was named Arctic Coal Company, and its detailed history was written by Nathanael Dole with the partly misleading title *America in Spitsbergen : the romance of an arctic coal-mine* (Dole 1922). Here is nothing at all mentioned about libraries, but it contain detailed descriptions of the company and the daily life through the eyes of the company. Conflicts with the workers were common. One example of the hard regime of the American Coal Company is the description of the archive with marks on the miners: “out of 1490 names, 522 had been blacklisted for cause, not including those marked ”no good”. (Dole 1922 b. 2, p. 246). This strange ”tradition” was still alive in the 1970’s (Kongssund 1997 p. 107).

Another remarkable example concerning the company’s attitude to the lazy and troublesome Scandinavian miners was that the company seriously considered importing labour from China (Dole 1922 b.2, p. 202).

The workers conditions in Longyear City caused attention in Norway. A miner who stayed the winter 1912-1913 told a newspaper about his experiences, and gives a clue: “Earlier we could loan books from the public library in Trondheim, but later have the company sold us books for 1 crown for a kilogram.” (Skogheim 1973 p. 140)

Trondheim is the second/third biggest town in Norway, and the public library archives contains information that they sold at lest 1000 used scraped books to the Arctic Coal Company on Svalbard during 1909 to 1913 (Trondhjem folkebibliotek 1902-1946). There is not found any proof that the company operated any library, but somebody in Longyear City had probably the opportunity to read them.

The Norwegians are coming

In 1916 had Mr Longyear due to problems related to the 1st World War and economical reasons, had enough of Svalbard. The whole installation was bought by a Norwegian syndicate named Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (which means ”Great Norwegian Coal Company”, in daily talk: “Great Norwegian”) (Arlov 1996 p. 270).

The conditions for the miners were improved, but the labour conflicts continued. The first trade union was also established the first year with the Norwegian company (Westby 2004 p. 87, Amundsen 2001 p. 64).

Demonstrating for a library

A week before the 1st of May 1918, came a committee from the miners and asked the manager if they could have that day off and borrow the workers mess room. They also wanted to get permission to bye painting for the banners and ingredients for baking some cakes. This

was accepted and the committee guaranteed for no disturbance during that day (Westby 2003 p. 123).

On the very day the “whole village” participated in this first demonstration on Labour Day. The banners demanded 8 hours working day, a children’s school, bathing facilities and a public library. (Westby 2003 p. 124, Nerdrum 1985 p. 5, Lund 2003 p. 53)

We do not know if the workers demand of a library had any effect on the management. A year later a new union committee asked the manager for a contribution from the company to a library. The union would themselves rise 500:- crowns and asked the manager for the same amount (Westby 2003 p. 152). A day’s wage was about 10:- crowns for a miner (Westby 2003 p. 158). This was probably enough to buy a smaller collection and open a library. The miners union approved “Statutes for the Workers library” in the autumn. The library was open three times a week and the elected librarian had two assistants. This was a serious thing, and they wrights: “One of the elected will be the librarian, the other two have to control that the librarian is doing his duty and not commit injustice.” The library was in the statutes open for everybody in the company. This was not necessary to write, because the officers had their own mess house and library, where the workers had no admittance. The company had probably not any objections against the union’s public-like library, because they have also signed the statutes (Spitsbergen Arbeiderforbund 1919). This winter lived 228 workers and foremen, 12 in the management and additional 17 woman and 20 children (Westby p. 158). There is not found any more information about this institution, which probably was the first one with public library intensions on Svalbard.

New union, new library

The same year as Norway got the sovereignty of Svalbard, in 1925, a new union was established. Longyear City Arbeiderforening (“Longyear City Workers Union”) decided to join the Norwegian Federation of Trade Unions, and this union still exists in 2005. During the first year they managed to get a tariff regulations and a wage agreement.

Sometime during the autumn of 1925 and the spring of 1926 was the Workers Library established. The exact date has not been found, but in the records from the unions meeting it is possible to see the library grow up. The records are rather fragmentary, but it is easy to see traces of engagement, seriousness and conflicts in “The Library matter” as it was called in the records for many years ahead. The fragmentary records indicate that it could have been written separate records for the library, but such records have not been found. The library is mentioned for the first time in October 1925:

The Workers Library: 2 cases with books have arrived and they belong to the workers. The librarian has promised to take care of the lending. The union leader has asked the company for bookshelves.

Decision: The books can be lent from the reading room. If the company cancel the production, the books have not to be so connected to the present library, that they not are available to the workers continuously. All agree.

The union members were obviously aware of the economical problems of the company, and wanted to secure their properties. The formulation does not answer who was the librarian, where were the reading room and why did they write “the present library”? Next meeting 25 October 1925 explains a lot:

” ... when the leader of the union talked to the priest, he refused to take care of our books if he were not allowed to brand them “Our Lords Church”. All except one voted against this. In the near future the union will get their own local, and then we can take care of our own books. Two proposals to vote for: 1. The Church can continue to keep our books. 2. The workers should take care of the books themselves. The 2nd proposal won against one vote.”

This is written in the way that it is reasonably to believe that the mentioned ”librarian” was the priest and the ”reading room” was connected to the church. When the priest wants to stamp the books with the name of the church, this have the consequence that the workers will establish their own library. The church will be treated later in this issue.

Sometime later was the Workers Library opened (18 April 1926):

The Library will close [for the season] April 20. All agree.
[...] On what purpose shall we use the money from the entertainment committee.
[...] after some discussion it was decided against 5 votes, that the Library should get the money.

So now they have opened! They have got a room and some money to spend. Unfortunately there are no details on what the other suggestions to spend the money could have been. They apparently needed more money for their ambitions, because they write a letter to the Federation of Trade Union of Norway and ask for a contribution (6 June 1926). There is not found any evidence that they got anything from them. It then appeared money from a closer distance: In the records of August 22 1926 there is an account from negotiations with the company. They have granted 1000:- crowns to purchase books. The meeting assumed that this could be a nice collection of books together with their own money.

Consolidation of the Workers Library

“The Library matter” and “The Library” continue to be a fixed article in the records from the union. The dominating matter is the economy and elections of responsible persons to the library. The problem with continuation and replacement in elected positions is a well-known problem throughout the history of this union. Short-time contracts and shift work is the reasonable answer. There are little information about the practical management of the library. This should indicate that it had its own records and accounts.

The union took a decision in November 14 1928 which states that ”the books can only be loaned by the members of the union”. This could have a connection with the decrease of memberships that season. In 1927 was 70% of the workers organized, the year after just 28% (Evjen 1995 p. 231). Maybe was the admittance to the library used as a benefit for the members?

The size of the library collection is difficult to estimate. But the records shows that they had a surprising control: ”Four books lost in the fire at Nettet 14 February 1929. The books have the following numbers: 421, 493, 494, 534” (28. mars 1929). This is also gives the

information that they had a branch at the coal shipping harbour Hotellneset. This little camp is just 5 km from Longyearbyen, but rather isolated because of no road connection.

There is not found any figures or statistics about the loans. The circulation was probably high because in June 9 1929 the secretary told the members that it was 40-45 books that needed repairs. The collection represented a high value for the union, and they decided to insure it in 1933. The year after the Library Committee change name to the Border of the Library, witch indicates a change of status.

The Workers Library is now well established with routines for the management, loans and purchasing of books. They had their branch at Hotellneset and also discussed to open another in Sverdrupsbyen, a part of the settlement that was erected in 1939 in connection with a new mine. The members relayed on the border of the library and they could act more independent.

The economy and the relation to the company

The union had from the beginning got contributions from the union's entertainment committee. Later directly from members meetings, and once from a border meeting. The first year they got an amount from the company, and they asked them for a contribution twice, in 1931 and 1932. It is not possible to find out if the company accepted. In 1933 the company awarded the library with 200:- crowns without any notable question from the union. The company give most likely the rent for the library room for free. Despite of a high level of internal efforts, the library was dependent of goodwill from the company. In 1929 did the managing director announced that the collection is to be regarded as the property of the workers (Enne & Myrene 1993 p. 14). Since the first years there are many statements related to the problem of assembly rooms for the workers. This was an everlasting problem, and it was real serious in 1920 (14 August) when the manager wrights: "After dinner came a proclamation from the union that they demand an assembly room for free disposal, otherwise strike again from Monday morning" (Westby 2003 p. 200).

The officers mess hall

The officers had their own collection of book in their mess house. This was probably remains from the Americans. In the 1930's the collection have decreased and were in a bad shape. The company's doctor in 1938-1940, describe it like this:

We arranged evenings with shooting concurrences once a week in our mess house. I have to mention that we had a little library there. This was not much in use, except by a little mouse, who often stayed at the lowest bookshelf were the Encyclopædia Britannica stood. When we were bored, we turned down the lights and shoot at the mouse, but this was more harmful for the Encyclopædia than to the mouse (Lindqvist 1998 p. 43).

The Church is established in Longyear City

Nearly simultaneously with the unions was the Church established in Longyear City. The background for the establishment of the Church has been discussed by others (Opdøhl 2003) and will not be a subject in this paper. It was the private Norwegian home mission who solved this spiritual issue. After a summer visit in 1919 by a professor in theology and the manager

of The Home Mission, it was decided that the company would erect a church building and hire a priest (Østenstad 1974 p. 26). The young priest Østenstad was also employed to manage a lower primary school. He was allowed to conduct services in the workers reading room until the church building was finished (Østenstad 1974 p. 37). The company's manager writes that the church building also should contain a room for the school and a library (Westby 2003 p. 228). The church is finished after 50 days of work and is dedicated 28 August 1921 (Westby 2003 p. 235).

The Church library

The church building contained an annex of 3 x 5 m. This should have the function of both school and library until 1937. Among all gifts to the opening, there was also a dedicated unknown amount for books to the future library (Østenstad 1974 p. 39, 41).

Østenstad stayed in Longyear City for 4 years. He had probably both a lot of time and the spirit to establish a library. He definitely had a local and some money:

Library work

As soon as the first church and the reading room was finished, the question of books was raised. In the officers mess hall there was a rather large collection of books, but they were only accessible to the officers. The priest wrote in a newspaper in Norway about the need of books during the isolation and dark season on Svalbard and asked for help to rise a library. Soon small and bigger book gifts arrived. [...] During 1922 all this was fixed and catalogued and the same autumn we could start the lending from a collection of ca 1100 books [...]. The company had build book cabinets that looked nice in the reading room. [...] All this has taken a lot of time, but everybody says that it is a well spent time (Østenstad 1974 p. 84-85).

In 1932 did the priest declare that the library contains ca 1500 books and additional 140 books for children. In 1929-1932 it was registered 17 000 loans (Østenstad 1974 p. 85). This gives a mean of 8,5 loans a year for each of the ca 500 inhabitants. In Norway was the figure between 3,3 and 4,2 those years. In 1934 tells the priest Sefland that the children loan at least one book a week (Arnesen 1935 p. 88).

The next priest in Longyearbyen was Just Kruse. He stays until 1941, and he also seems to be a library man, especially for the children: ... they are so eager to loan books that we have to stop them ... “ (Kruse 1939 p. 74). During his period was a catalogue printed. The first priest, Østenstad, summarize the first 21 years: It's a joy to see how both the school and the library have increased their services in later years (Østenstad 1974 p. 85).

Some details about the management of the Church library

There is not found anything about the library in the official archives from the Church in Longyearbyen. In the local archives of Longyearbyen public library an account book from the Church library 1936-1941 turned up. From this book can we get some information: the library have these years a variable economy. The last annual balance of accounts is a cash balance of 2127,38:- crowns.

Income

The library have its income essentially from bazaars held by the Women's Society and the Church society. They have also got a small annual state subsidy from the Church department. This confirm that the Library Office counted this like a public library. The coal company also contributed with free house rent and heating. Twice the company give the library 200:- crowns. Under "income" is also the 0,10 crown penalty for not keeping the borrowing period.

Expenses

As presumed are the greatest expenses on books. During these six years they order books 15 times. They order both from religious bookstores and from the Public Library Office. It is also entered an order of "second-hand books for children's library".

The library took care of the collection. It is spent over 1100:- crowns on binding books. The collection of ca 2300 books were insured for 5000:- crowns since 1937. Most of the book orders are signed Eline Kruise, the priest's wife. Maybe she got some payment for her duty: "Wages: 200:-" is notified twice.

2nd World War on Svalbard

On the 31st July 1941 was Longyearbyen visited by an allied marine force. The Governor of Svalbard and the coal company get instructions that all the 765 Norwegians will be evacuated shortly. All leading officers are ordered to bring their archives. The coal deposits and all important machinery was destroyed concerning the enemy's expected attack before the boats went for Scotland. The Norwegian mainland had one year earlier been occupied by the Nazi German forces, but Svalbard was not involved in the war. During 1942 Svalbard was reoccupied by a small allied force. In the autumn of 1943 the main settlements on Svalbard was attacked by the battleships Scharnhorst and Tirpitz. In Longyearbyen was all houses bombed or burned, only the few houses in the upper part of the valley spared.

After the war

The management of the coal company established an exile office in London. Nobody knew how destroyed Longyearbyen was so they planned the rebuilding for different degrees of destruction. The made plans for 1st, 2nd and 3rd season after he war. After these issues were in order, they planned: "Later: assembly house, church, school ... (Westby p. 430). The company produced more coal the 2nd year after the war than any year earlier.

Back in Longyearbyen

The church was burned, and so the library. The new priest, Riiber, was now engaged by The Norwegian Church. He arrived the first autumn after the war was ended. He had difficulties to work as a priest due to the lack of house, but he continued as a teacher (Nødtvet 1974 s. 62). The new church was not erected until 1958 (Østenstad 1974 p. 68). There was no attempt to reopen the Church Library after the war.

The Union: Library on the calendar

On their first meeting after the war, the Union start with the election of a negotiation committee and to restart the sickness insurance found. The next article starts: "As soon as possible start the work to establish a library." Two men is elected to search trough all remaining buildings for books belonging to the old library. It is interesting to observe their preferences.

A new union library

The new union library opened probably in November 1946. From that time loans are registered in the diary that also includes some loan statistics. The archive also contains the borrower's register, a catalogue, and some accounts. From these documents it is possible to reconstruct some of the activity to the library.

Patrons and loans

The library was just open in the winter season; it opened after the last boat had left for Norway and closed before the first boat arrived in the spring. It is reasonable that the activity was more stable during the isolated period. The library was open three times a week. The first season it was open for 41 days and it was 3322 loans. It was 218 patrons this season. That will say ca 15 loans for each patron. It was 300 out of 340 workers who were organized (Evjen p. 231). The total population was 610 with wages from the company and additional 34 woman and children (Evjen 1995 p. 53).

The patrons had to pay a deposit when they were registered. This was paid back at the end of the season. Not all of the patrons did so, and some of them gave this amount to the library.

Income

The economy of the library was unstable. The first season there was only the small amounts from the penalties for not keeping the borrowing period. The Governor of Svalbard contributed with 25:- crowns. The 2nd season there was a state grand of 425:- crowns. This indicate that the library had established contact with the Church Department. This is not enough; the border of the library ask the union annual meeting of a contribution of 1000:- crowns. The meeting approves the question. Later the library borrow 1500:- crowns from the union. The 4th and last season for this library, there is a mark in the accounts that is a bit cryptically: 8500:- crowns from "K.ir.f.ering –Arb.for.". This means probably "The Church Society – The Worker's Union". This grant is not mentioned in the union's records.

Expenses

The only expenses the first years is the rubber stamp with the name of the library. The 3rd and 4th year was it ordered books for over 2000:- and 5000:-.

Some details of the management

After the first year was three "library people" elected to support the library border. It was probably difficult to keep the library open, and the year after these people were elected from different shifts. Sometime during the season 1947-1948 was the library moved from Sverdrupsbyen to Nybyen, the new part of the city.

In 1934 was the Swedish mine Sveagruva bought by the Norwegian coal company. Before the 2nd World War there were just a small crew there for a short period of time. After the war this old mine was opened for a small production. The workers in Longyearbyen did not forget their friends, and according to the records the library sent cases of books to them.

Longyearbyen public library

21 November 1949 was the new public library opened. What happened with the union's library and what was the plan for the Church library after the war?

Nine months earlier was it held a meeting at the Governor of Svalbard's office. The purpose was to establish a border for a new public library. Together with the Governor was the priest, two representatives from the union and one from the Woman's Society. The border was constituted and they decided to fusion the union's library and the church library to Longyearbyen Public Library (LFB 1947-1988).

The background for the fusion is complicated and detailed. The records says that the question of a fusion was discussed in different forums since 1947 or maybe even in 1945. There had also been some kind of contact between the Library Office in Oslo and the leader of the union, Kjartan Olsen, during 1947.

The Church library was in fact just a bank book and the insurance money from the war. The priest was a member of the board together with the Woman's Society, who was the greatest supporter of the former Church Library. They had probably nothing to loose on this new construction.

The union had a hard time to create a library with continuously activity. The turnover was high and it was hard to get volunteers to the library. They knew that it was difficult to get enough money to the management of the library. A new public library guaranteed all inhabitants a permanent library. The union had still influence with their two members in the border. The union had either nothing to loose.

The fusion and the new institution was a result of co-operation by local institutions with different experiences of managing a library. Longyearbyen Public Library was in 1949 most certainly the first public service were not the coal company was implicated.

The Miners Code, a Royal regulation on conditions related to the mining activity on Svalbard was declared shortly after the Svalbard Treaty. One section contains regulations to the workers security and social welfare. Here is an article of our interest: "The Department can, when required, instruct the companies to hold a collection of books in a language that the

workers understand” (Svalbard. Lover 1925b). It is not found any proof that this article have been used or even discussed by the department or others in this matter.

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Statistics

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