

#360: RJUKAN, NORWAY



Image: Norsk Industiarbeider Museum (The Norwegian Industrial Workers Museum), prior site of the Vemork Hydroelectric Power Plant.

Rjukan, Norway is located in Telemark County just a few hours west of Oslo in the municipality of Tinn. The town, with approximately 3,500 residents, is named after Rjukanfossen (“The Smoking Waterfall”), which is close by. Rjukan is surrounded by the beautiful Hardangervidda National Park and Gaustatoppen—Telemark’s largest mountain that boasts views spanning over one sixth of the Norway’s landmass. The town is primarily known for its heavy water factory and the sabotage that took place there in 1943.



Rjukan was established in the early 1900s when Norsk Hydro started fertilizer production there. With the waterfall close at hand, the setting was perfect for a hydroelectric power facility that was needed to run the fertilizer plant.

The Vemork Hydroelectric power plant in Rjukan was finished in 1911. Its construction exceeded the projected budget and manpower needs. An estimated 12,000 workers from across Scandinavia filled the new town. To accommodate the workers, railroads, homes and businesses were built and the town was formed. It quickly became an industrial hub within Telemark.

In 1934 heavy water, a by-product of the fertilizer production process was discovered. Used in the production of nuclear weapons, this discovery meant that whoever had access to heavy water had a significant advantage.

When WWII started, Norsk Hydro was the only plant in Europe to produce large scale amounts of heavy water. Since German scientists were on the verge of creating the first atomic bomb, Hitler wanted to take control of the plant. When the German army swept into Norway and took control of the country, they quickly took over the Vemork factory and started doubling the production of heavy water.

The possibility of the Nazi’s creating an atomic bomb from Norway’s heavy water became a real possibility. In response, a secret Allied mission was arranged by Winston Churchill, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and Norwegian resistance fighters. Operation Gunnerside was underway on February 16, 1943. Twelve Norwegians were dropped into the nearby mountains of Telemark with the necessary provisions. Mission leader, Joachim Ronneberg remembers making his way down the steep gorge and perilous cliffs when skiing to the factory on that cold winter night. The men made it into the factory by sneaking past heavily armed Nazi guards. Ronneberg was able to detonate the electrolysis chamber room that held the delicate heavy water. Remarkably unscathed, the men escaped and skied to safety away from thousands of pursuing German troops.





The Vemork hydroelectric plant in 1935. The heavy water was produced in the front building (the Hydrogen Production Plant).

Ronneberg remembers the mission being extremely dangerous, but recalls it as being “the very best skiing weekend [he] ever had.” The heroes of Telemark had completed their heavy water sabotage. It was another victory for the allies and the Norwegian resistance.

Today the factory is home to the *Norsk Industriarbeider Museum* (The Norwegian Industrial Workers Museum). Tours of the factory that include the history of the town and the story behind the heavy water sabotage make Rjukan a must see tourist attraction in the heart of beautiful Telemark County.