The Arctic ship *Veslekari*

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ABSTRACT. The ship *Veslekari* was launched in 1918 from Christian Jensen's shipyard near Kristiania (present-day Oslo), where Roald Amundsen's ship *Maud* had been built. Although primarily a sealer, she was also used extensively for other expeditions to the Arctic. She participated in several relief expeditions, including one in 1936 to Jan Mayen to evacuate people during a series of earthquakes, and another in 1939 to northeast Greenland to evacuate Count Gaston Micard, who was seriously ill. In 1928 *Veslekari* participated in the search for Roald Amundsen and his plane in the waters off Bjørnøya. Tryggve Gran, a member of Robert Falcon Scott's last expedition, sailed with her at that time. She was chartered four times as expedition ship for the American Arctic explorer Miss Louise A. Boyd. In the summer of 1940 *Veslekari* sailed to northeast Greenland to relieve Norwegian hunters and the crew of the Norwegian weather station, but she was impounded by British and Norwegian forces and taken to Scotland on order of the Norwegian government in London. She was chartered by the Ministry of War Transport and was based in Scotland and Iceland. In 1943 she was renamed HMS *Bransfield* and was prepared for service in the Antarctic. After the war she resumed sealing under Norwegian ownership until in 1961, when she was wrecked in the ice in the sealing ground off Newfoundland.

Contents

Introduction

The ship *Veslekari* was a sealer and expedition ship engaged in numerous commercial and scientific expeditions to East Greenland between the two World Wars. During the 43 years she sailed in Arctic waters, *Veslekari* participated in several important phases of Arctic maritime history: confrontations and negotiations between the Soviet Union and Norway regarding sealing in the White Sea, disagreement between Denmark and Norway about the sovereignty of the east coast of Greenland (finally settled at the international court in The Hague in 1933), the Arctic region as an arena for weather forecasting during World War II, and numerous Arctic expeditions and rescue operations.

Like Roald Amundsen's ship *Maud, Veslekari* was designed and constructed by Christian Jensen. She was built of oak, pine, and greenhart — including materials left over from the building of *Maud* — on the same slip as Amundsen's ship. She was launched from Jensen's shipyard in Asker, just outside Kristiania, on 28 May 1918. Even though built for commercial sealing, she had traits characteristic of both *Fram* and *Maud*, although she was the strongest of all Norwegian wooden sealers. Most sealers at that time had vertical bows that were designed for pushing ice floes aside, like a plough. *Veslekari* had a curved bow profile that enabled her to slide up on to the ice and crush it beneath the weight of the ship (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

Veslekari was 282 gross tons, with dimensions of $125 \times 27 \times 14$ feet. She was ketch-rigged. Her two-cylinder steam engine from Skiens Verksteder A/S turned out 290 hp, giving her a maximum speed of 10 knots and a cruising speed of 8 knots. She carried 50 tons of fuel in coal bunkers but needed a further 160 tons of coal for sealing voyages. This was achieved by filling her blubber containers with coal. As this was used up, the containers were emptied and cleaned and refilled with blubber. She carried 10 tons of fresh water for her sealing crew of 22 (Ottesen 2001).

Veslekari was contracted by Winge & Co A/S. Her ownership was transferred to Skibsaktieselskapet Freda, but Winge & Co A/S continued as her managing company. They also owned another well-known sealer, *Vesleper*, later re-named *Norvegia*, under which name she became famous as an Antarctic expedition ship. At the time when they were built, *Veslekari* and *Vesleper* were the two largest ships in the Norwegian sealing fleet. *Veslekari* means 'little Kari,' Kari being a common Norwegian girl's name.

Greenland in the 1920s

In 1919 *Veslekari*, captained by Johan Peter Kornelius Olsen (1879–1958), sailed on her maiden voyage to Davis Strait and Baffin Bay. Olsen came from Ålesund, a seaport on the west coast of Norway, and was a highly experienced sealing and whaling captain who had achieved fame for his skill as an ice pilot. *Veslekari* returned from her maiden

Fig. 1. *Veslekari* at Blomvåg, June 1926. Photo: Thor Iversen.

voyage with a catch of 18 rorquals and 225 walruses. In the early spring of 1920 she was sealing in the White Sea and later that year she returned to the whaling grounds of the Davis Strait where she and *Vesleper* hunted together (Fig. 1). The vessels were equipped with a whaling cannon bolted on the foredeck and two bottlenose cannons fitted aft. The total catch of the two vessels that season was 58 whales (Isachsen 1932).

The Norwegian economy expanded considerably during World War I but suffered during the depression that followed. There was little profit in whaling, and in 1921 both *Veslekari* and *Vesleper* were laid up near Bergen. The following summer, however, Olsen led a whaling expedition to the Davis Strait with a fleet that included a floating refinery, *Veslekari* and *Vesleper*, and a modern steam whaler. Whales were towed to the floating refinery *Lille*. This expedition yielded 140 whales, mostly minkes, but the production of 4300 barrels of oil did not cover the expenses (Tønnesen 1969). During the autumn, *Veslekari* and *Vesleper* continued whaling in the mid-Atlantic at the latitude of Gibraltar.

After World War I considerable disagreement arose between Denmark and Norway regarding the sovereignty of Greenland. In 1921 the Danish government declared sovereignty over all Greenland and forbade foreign vessels from entering its territorial waters.

The next year, *Veslekari* and *Vesleper* remained outside Greenlandic waters, but in 1923 *Veslekari* landed once to replenish her fresh-water supply and also sailed into calm waters just off the coast to carry out engine repairs. She was impounded by the Danish inspection vessel *Islands Falk* and given four hours to conclude her repairs and leave Greenlandic waters. Later, off Disko, four Greenlanders came alongside with a message from a local official, informing Olsen that the natives were short of whale meat and requesting assistance. *Veslekari* therefore returned to Greenland's territorial waters to flense two whales as food for the local population. While *Veslekari'*s crew was busy flensing, *Islands Falk* appeared again and impounded her once more. This time ship and crew were held for three weeks while Olsen was interrogated. He tried in vain to telegraph the owner, but eventually *Veslekari* was released. Having lost three weeks of good weather, *Veslekari* returned home with a poor catch of 14 rorquals.

In 1925 another Norwegian whaling vessel, the sealer *Hvalbarden* under the command of Captain Paul Lillenes, had a similar experience with the Danish authorities. The dispute between Denmark and Norway over the sovereignty of northeast Greenland subsequently was brought before the International Court in The Hague in early 1930s; during the hearing, the incidents of *Veslekari* and *Hvalbarden* were specifically mentioned (Blom 1973).

Meanwhile, while whaling off the coast of West Greenland, Olsen discovered large stocks of cod and halibut, and subsequently revealed his discoveries at a lecture before an audience of skippers and ship-owners. In 1924 a Norwegian fishing vessel sailed to West Greenland and filled its hold with salted cod and halibut in 17 days. In addition, the Norwegian oceanographic vessel *Michael Sars* sailed to the fishing ground and confirmed Olsen's observation. As a result, in 1925, a fleet of 40 Norwegian fishing vessels and some 1000 fishermen sailed to the grounds. That year Olsen signed off as master of *Veslekari*, following sealing in the White Sea; he would return as her captain in 1933. Olsen signed on as master on another well-known Arctic vessel, *Polarbjørn*, and later became master of *Helder*, the mother ship of a British–Norwegian fishing expedition to West Greenland. Olsen's

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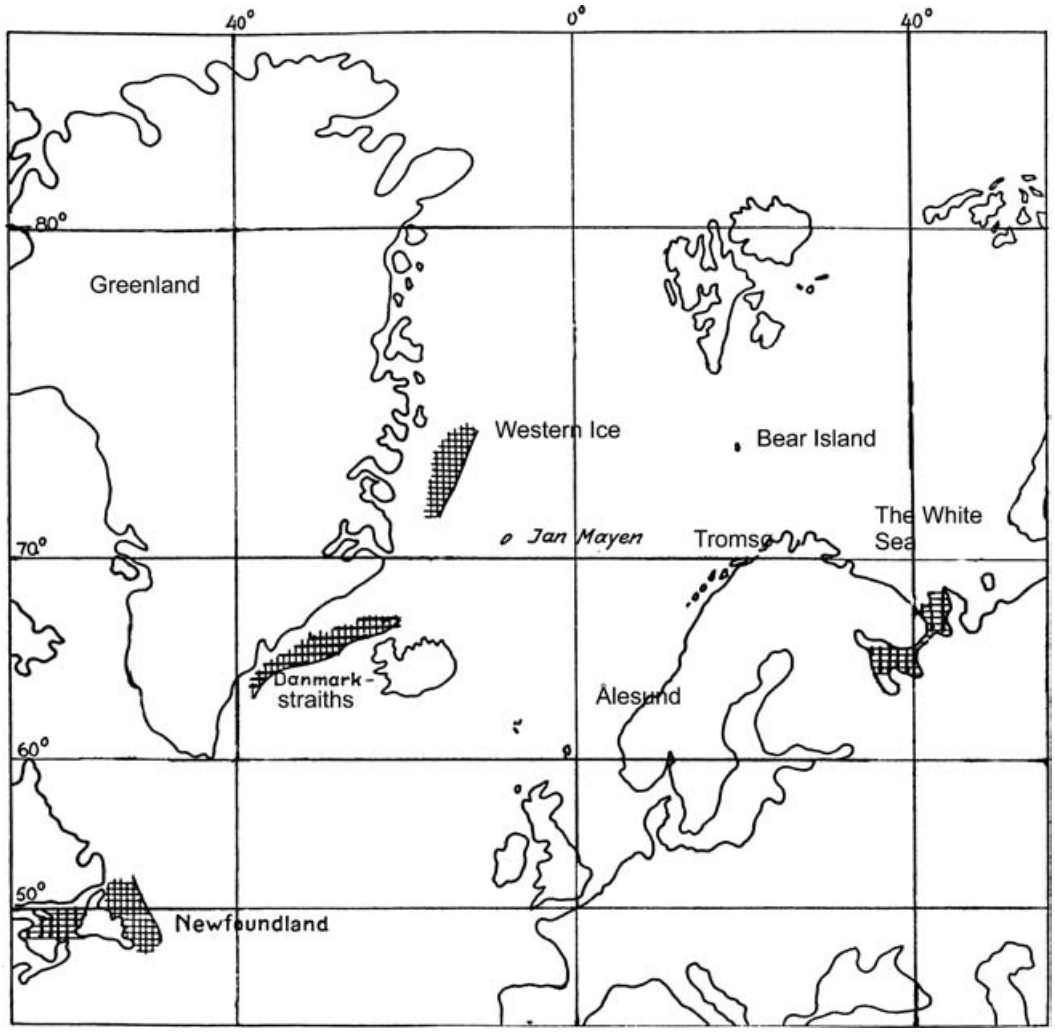

Fig. 2. Map highlighting the voyages of *Veslekari* and the sealing grounds.

observations during *Veslekari*'s whaling voyages led to a very profitable international fishery at West Greenland that lasted until after World War II.

The White Sea

Norwegian sealing experienced a boom during World War I and many sealers were built. That put pressure on the sealing grounds in the Greenland Sea and, as a result, many sealers moved to the outer part of the White Sea (Fig. 2). The White Sea is narrow and shallow; strong tidal currents carry the ice floes about and make the sealing ground dangerous. Each season, sealers were crushed in the ice and lost. In 1928, for example, 19 of 125 Norwegian vessels were lost (Hoel 1949). Despite the frequent loss of vessels, loss of life was rare. When a vessel became a total wreck, the crew usually marched across the ice to neighbouring vessels, and transport home was organized for the shipwrecked crew aboard sealers about to start homeward.

Veslekari first sailed to the White Sea in 1920 under the command of Olsen, and she returned with a catch of 5000 seals. She returned to the White Sea almost annually during the 1920s and 1930s, several times rescuing the crews of wrecked sealers.

The Russians considered the area up to 12 nautical miles from the outer points of the headland as part of Russian territorial waters. During the 1921 sealing season, three Norwegian sealers were impounded by the Russians inside this sector and not released until the end of the year. The next year more sealers were impounded, but *Veslekari* returned home with a catch of 7000 seals.

Both *Veslekari*'s managing company, Winge & Co A/S, and her owner, Skibsaktieselskapet Freda, were concerned that they might lose their vessels if the tidal current swept them inside the Russian sector. Halfdan Bugge, the manager of Winge & Co A/S, initiated a programme to negotiate with the Soviet Union. In the following years, agreements were reached by which Norwegian sealers were allowed to hunt north of a limit line between Cape Orlov and Cape Kanushin (Iversen 1928; Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

In the middle of the 1920s the Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries carried out a research programme on the harp seals in the sealing grounds. In 1925 Thor Iversen,

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a fishery consultant, sailed to the White Sea aboard *Veslekari* to collect data. The scientific programme continued the following two years on board other vessels (Iversen 1928).

Despite relations between the Russians and Norwegians being regulated by agreements, there were several incidents. In 1932, 10 vessels, including *Veslekari*, were taken into custody by the Russian patrol vessel *Purga*. *Veslekari* had been swept inside the Russian sector by the tidal current and became beset in the ice. Her master, Captain Paul Lillenes, argued that she was at least six nautical miles outside the Russian sector at the time she was impounded. Lillenes and other Norwegian sealing masters were held in custody for 36 hours (Ruben J. Brandal, sealer aboard *Helgehorn*, personal communication, 2003).

Veslekari and *Vesleper* did not turn out to be good investments, and in 1926 Skibsaktieselskapet Freda was declared bankrupt. *Veslekari* was sold to A/S Furenak in Vartdal but was managed by the sealing company Elling Aarseth & Co A/S (Ellefsen and Berset 1957). *Vesleper* was sold to a Norwegian whaling company and renamed *Norvegia*. She sailed for four seasons exploring new whaling grounds in the Antarctic, during which Bouvetøya and Peter I Øy were annexed as Norwegian dependencies.

By the end of the 1930s the White Sea had ceased to be an important sealing ground due to the decrease in the numbers of seals. In addition, Norwegian sealers experienced increasing difficulties with Soviet inspection vessels. In 1938 Norwegian sealers started sealing off Newfoundland. *Veslekari* was not suitable for the new sealing ground owing to her steam engine. Crossing the Atlantic Ocean, completing sealing, and then returning to Norway with the catch without refuelling necessitated propulsion by diesel engines.

Norwegian Arctic research

At the peace settlement following World War I the sovereignty of Svalbard was transferred to Norway, effective from 1925. In 1928 the Norwegian government established a research organization for the Arctic, named Norges Svalbard- og Ishavsundersøkelser (NSIU, that is, Norwegian Svalbard and Arctic Ocean Exploration), which was led by Adolf Hoel, a geologist. The government required more knowledge about the Arctic, particularly Svalbard, for which Norway now had administrative jurisdiction and responsibility. Concurrently, the dispute between Denmark and Norway regarding the sovereignty of northeast Greenland increased and tension developed between the two countries. The Norwegian authorities not only required more information about northeast Greenland, but felt the need to demonstrate both presence and activity in the area. At the same time, commercial exploitation of unused resources in the Arctic was organised through the establishment of a company named Arktisk Næringsdrift A/S (Arctic Commercial Enterprise Ltd) led by individuals who cooperated closely with the leadership of the NSIU (Blom 1973).

In the summer of 1929 the first extensive expedition organized by NSIU and its commercial partner headed for northeast Greenland. The expedition vessel was *Veslekari*, captained by Hans Rekdal. When she left Ålesund her deck cargo reached almost to the wheelhouse windows, making her so heavily loaded that she needed an exemption to leave the port. Nevertheless, in Rekdal's opinion she managed remarkably well during the voyage (Orvin 1930).

Geologist Anders K. Orvin led the expedition. He also had the responsibility for the scientific party, which consisted of two botanists, a zoologist, two topographers, a doctor, a telegraph operator, and a news reporter. The leader of the commercial party was Hallvard Devold, a trained telegraph operator and experienced trapper who had wintered several times on Svalbard and Greenland. A third party was a group of officials from the Norwegian port authority investigating the potential for building a harbour at Jan Mayen (Orvin 1930).

The 1929 expedition was the first of a series of Norwegian expeditions to northeast Greenland organized by the NSIU and Arktisk Næringsdrift A/S. With the exception of 1942–45, they continued annually until the Norwegian weather station in Myggbukta was closed in 1959.

Hallvard Devold spent several winters in northeast Greenland as telegraph operator and trapper. He was the leader of a group of five trappers who hoisted the Norwegian flag at the Myggbukta meteorological station on 27 June 1931 and annexed the area for Norway, naming it Eirik Raudes Land after a Norwegian Viking chieftain who fled to Greenland. Adolf Hoel and his colleagues did a great deal of work behind the scenes and instructed Devold to hoist the flag. The Norwegian government accepted the move and gave Devold police authority in the area. But this decision created a political and diplomatic crisis between Denmark and Norway that was finally settled in Denmark's favour four years later by the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

The 1929 expedition on *Veslekari* brought eight musk-ox calves from Greenland to Ålesund, where they joined 10 others that had been landed by sealers. The 18 calves were taken on board *Veslekari*, which sailed to Svalbard. On 24 September *Veslekari* sailed into Adventfjord and the calves were released at Hiorthamn (renamed Moskushamn). Alendal (1980) suggested that the transferring of musk oxen from East Greenland to Svalbard had political and economic undertones regarding Norwegian sovereignty of Svalbard. One of the calves died during the voyage. The remaining 17 formed the basis of a small population that survived until the 1970s. The final musk ox on Svalbard, an old cow, was last seen alive in 1985 (Nicholas Tyler, University of Tromsø, personal communication, 2004).

In 1930, NSIU and Arktisk Næringsdrift A/S sent a second expedition to northeast Greenland to continue

Fig. 3. Louise A. Boyd — 'the Arctic Queen' — aboard *Veslekari*, which was the expedition ship for four of her Arctic expeditions. Photo: Norsk Polarinstitutt.

Norwegian activities. *Veslekari* was again the expedition vessel, although she had a new master, Captain Paul Lillenes (1877–1950) (Ellefsen and Berset 1957). Adolf Hoel arranged that each NSIU expedition carried a Norwegian artist: a writer, painter, or musician (Paul Røer, Oslo lawyer and a close friend of Hoel, personal communication, 2001). In 1930 this was Dagfin Werenskiold, a well-known Norwegian painter and woodcarver, who made an oil painting of *Veslekari*.

Louise Arner Boyd: the Arctic queen

In 1931, 1933, 1937, and 1938 *Veslekari* was chartered by Miss Louise A. Boyd as expedition ship for her private scientific expeditions to the Arctic region, including Greenland, Svalbard, Jan Mayen, and the Greenland Sea.

Louise Arner Boyd was born in 1878 in San Rafael, California, and subsequently inherited a large fortune. She developed a special interest in the Arctic and, during several decades, spent significant sums exploring Svalbard, Franz Josef Land, and Greenland and its adjoining waters (Ellefsen and Berset 1957). She was not trained as a scientist but on all her voyages took along a staff of geologists, botanists, zoologists, and hydrologists. Miss Boyd organized, financed, and led the expeditions herself and was personally responsible for much of the photo-documentation (Boyd 1948).

In the 1920s Boyd chartered *Hobby* of Tromsø, a small, wooden cargo ship equipped for Arctic voyages, as her expedition ship. In the summer of 1928 she led a search expedition for Roald Amundsen after his disappearance, another search also being conducted from *Veslekari* (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

The next decade, Boyd chartered *Veslekari* as her expedition vessel for voyages to Greenland and the Greenland Sea; *Veslekari*'s home port, Ålesund, was the expedition base (Fig. 3). When Boyd arrived in Ålesund to start preparations for her expeditions each year the centre of the town looked more like an informal public festival. Boyd gave sweets and ice cream to the children. Once, in the general exuberance, a drunken young man dived into the sea from *Veslekari*'s crow's nest (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

Boyd's first voyage in *Veslekari* took place in 1931. She had had a laboratory installed in special deckhouses on the front deck. Her master was Lillenes, who had sailed in the Greenland Sea and near the coast of East Greenland for 25 years. In 1910 he had saved the lives of Ejnar Mikkelsen and Iver P. Iversen who had been stranded after their expedition vessel had been wrecked. For this, Lillenes received a gold watch from the Danish government. Mikkelsen was soon to become a famous ice navigator, expedition leader, and author. Both Mikkelsen and Lillenes were high-profile activists regarding the conflict between Denmark and Norway. *Veslekari* was the first ship to visit the Myggbukta meteorological station after the Norwegian annexation of northeast Greenland. Lillenes greeted the annexation with great enthusiasm. Boyd, an American citizen, stayed neutral (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

Boyd's second voyage aboard *Veslekari* was in 1933 when Captain Olsen returned to his old ship. On this voyage an echo sounder was installed, making *Veslekari* the first Norwegian vessel equipped with such a device. The echo sounder was used for charting in the Norwegian Sea, in the Greenland Sea, and in the fjords of northeast Greenland. After the voyage the manufacturer named the model 'The Veslekari Echo Sounder' (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

In 1937 Boyd sailed on her third expedition aboard *Veslekari*, captained by Olsen and with Peder Eliassen as first mate. Eliassen had captained the sealer *Bratvaag*, when the remains of Andrée's expedition had been

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discovered on Kvitøya in 1930. On the 1937 voyage of *Veslekari*, an ocean bank between Jan Mayen and Bjørnøya was discovered and later named the Louise A. Boyd Bank (Boyd 1948).

The 1938 Boyd expedition sailed with almost the same officers and crew as previously. Much valuable information was obtained about sea depths, and when the United States entered World War II, Boyd was engaged as a consultant to the US political and military leadership. As a result of this distraction, her book on the voyages in 1937 and 1938 — *The coast of northeast Greenland with hydrographic studies in the Greenland Sea* — was not published until 1948 (Boyd 1948).

Johan Olsen was without doubt Boyd's favourite Arctic navigator and her confidential adviser. Correspondence between them during the summer of 1939 shows that Miss Boyd was planning a voyage to the Magnetic North Pole in 1940 or 1941, but that she found chartering *Veslekari* too expensive. She considered instead the Arctic vessel *Isbjørn I* of Tromsø. She wanted Olsen, Eliassen, and some of the crew transferred to her new expedition ship. Boyd informed Olsen about her plans and demanded his total secrecy (Olsen 1935–53). Ultimately, the expedition never sailed, due to World War II.

Rescue operations

Through the years, *Veslekari* took part in a great number of rescue operations, saving sealers from vessels that had been wrecked. In addition, she played a role in the attempts to find Roald Amundsen in 1928. Vessels from Italy, France, Russia, and Norway took part in this search. A fund-raising campaign led by the newspaper *Aftenposten* (Oslo) financed Olsen's expedition. *Veslekari* was chosen as expedition ship and Hans Rekdal was signed as her master. Among the members of the search party was Tryggve Gran, a member of Robert Falcon Scott's last expedition (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

In 1935 *Veslekari* was chartered by NSIU for charting the fishing grounds off the west coast of Svalbard. *Buskø*, which had been chartered for NSIU's summer expedition to northeast Greenland, was beset in ice and called for assistance. *Veslekari* sailed to her aid but came close to being wrecked herself. *Veslekari* ran into severe difficulties in the ice pack at Cape Hold With Hope. The ice pressure gave her a heavy list to the port side, and water poured into the engine room and extinguished the fire under the port side of the boiler, nearly stopping the engine that produced electricity for the radio that transmitted distress signals. Fortunately the ice pressure suddenly decreased and both vessels managed to navigate into open water and return to Ålesund (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

In the late autumn of 1936 Jan Mayen was hit by a series of earthquakes. Members of the staff at the meteorological station insisted on being evacuated. A relief expedition was launched on *Veslekari* under Olsen. *Veslekari* struggled through darkness, storms, and ice, and eventually replaced some of the men at the station (Einar P. Olsen, Captain Olsen's son, who served as an able seaman on the voyage, personal communication, 2000).

In the summer of 1938 NSIU's expedition vessel *Polarbjørn* went aground in a fjord in northeast Greenland. *Veslekari*, cruising in the same waters on Boyd's fourth expedition, came to her assistance. The same summer the wealthy French Count Gaston Micard sailed far north along the coast of Greenland, wintering at Germania Land. The next spring Micard became seriously ill and had to be evacuated. *Veslekari* had just returned from a sealing voyage when Micard's distress call was received. A float-plane was taken aboard and transported to the edge of the pack ice where it took off. The plane returned with the Count, who was carried to Norway for medical treatment (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

Veslekari in World War II

Veslekari was sealing in the West Ice when German forces invaded Norway on 9 April 1940. Two days later the masters of the Norwegian fleet gathered on board *Veslekari* to discuss the situation, with particular attention to the German sealer *Sachsen*, which was close by. The masters feared that the German sealer might reveal their positions to the German Navy, and that they would then be attacked by submarines. The consensus was that they should sink the German vessel. *Veslekari*, as the largest and strongest vessel, was selected to carry out the task by ramming *Sachsen*. *Veslekari*'s master, Johan P. Brandal, agreed. His willingness to risk his own ship was perhaps attributable to the fact that he had been informed by radio of the sinking at Narvik of the armoured cruiser *Norge* on which his son, Bernt, served. More than 100 men lost their lives in this disaster, but Brandal did not know that his son was on leave and survived (Bernt A. Brandal, personal communication).

However, before any action could be taken, the German sealer succeeded in escaping in the fog east to Murmansk (unpublished document dated 4 September 1940, held by Per I. Myklebust; Helge Ødegård, who was in the West Ice in 1940, personal communication, 2004). Thereafter, *Veslekari* and other sealers proceeded to Svalbard where they took on board coal, both for their own consumption and as cargo, and then returned to northern Norway, which was not yet occupied.

In the summer of 1940, a few months after the German occupation, NSIU and Arktisk Næringsdrift A/S sent *Veslekari* to northeast Greenland, where 14 Norwegians were wintering, in order to change the crew at the meteorological station and replenish supplies. The expedition leader, John Giæver, later indicated that *Veslekari* was allowed to sail because the Germans planned to use the expedition as propaganda, showing their willingness 'to help Norwegians in the Arctic in their distress' (Giæver 1964). The Germans accepted open radio communication on the voyage but Giæver had to accept a photographer from a German newspaper in Norway as an observer. In reality the photographer was a captain in the Abwehr (Steen 1960).

Fig. 4. Captain Johan K.P. Olsen, many times master of *Veslekari*, met HRH Princess Elizabeth in 1952.

From Ålesund, *Veslekari* sailed to Tromsø, where the British consul was informed of the voyage. He gave Giæver mail to be 'handed over to British authorities which we were expected to meet' (Giæver 1964). *Veslekari* also brought letters from the Danish Foreign Office to Danish trappers and scientists. In addition three men from the Knuth Greenland expedition sailed with her. Giæver had to reject several Norwegians who wanted to sail in order to leave the country. *Veslekari* sailed from Tromsø on 1 August for Longyearbyen, where a cargo of coal was taken aboard before proceeding to Greenland.

Veslekari entered the ice at 74°N and proceeded to Claveringfjord, visiting stations along the coast. Sailing out of the Antarctic Sound, Brandal informed Giæver that 'something that looks like a war ship is approaching us from Ella Island' (Giæver 1964). The intelligence service of the Norwegian government in exile in London had been informed about the voyage and considered it a Nazi enterprise, so they had ordered the Norwegian Navy vessel *Fridtjof Nansen* to capture *Veslekari*. She was taken to Reykjavik and later to Orkney, where the crew and expedition members were jailed before being transferred to Pentonville Gaol in London for interrogation. Subsequently all 'detained aliens' except the photographer were released (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

In the autumn of 1940 the war leadership feared that the Norwegian meteorological station on Jan Mayen might fall into German hands and ordered the station to be evacuated. The following spring the decision was reversed, and *Veslekari* and the trawler *Honningsvåg* were commissioned to sail north with personnel, provisions, and equipment for the new Jan Mayen station. It was successfully re-established in March 1941 and in November *Veslekari* returned with provisions (Steen 1960).

Following this voyage *Veslekari* was stationed at Reykjavik, where she assisted ships that had been badly damaged while on convoy duty. Captain Brandal died,

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Fig. 5. The last voyage of *Veslekari*, which was beset in the ice near Newfoundland before being crushed. Photo: Edvard Hole.

and the first mate, Olaf Lillenes, son of the former master, became the new master (Rise 1940–43). In September 1943 the British Navy signed off the Norwegian crew, renamed *Veslekari* HMS *Bransfield*, and made preparations for service in the Antarctic. However, the ship appeared to be in such a bad state that she did not sail (Ottesen 2001).

What happened to *Veslekari* after this is not fully known. She was probably laid up in Scotland, possibly in Greenock (Ottesen 2001). After the war she was returned to her owners in Ålesund in very poor condition.

After World War II

There had been almost no sealing during World War II and the number of seals had increased considerably. There was considerable optimism in the sealing business as a result and several Norwegian sealing companies contracted new vessels for work in the grounds off Newfoundland. The vessels of the 'new generation' were much larger and capable of sailing from Europe to Newfoundland and back without refuelling. Most of the vessels were built from welded steel, not riveted, and were equipped with powerful diesel engines.

In 1948 *Veslekari* had an extensive reconstruction. Her steam engine was replaced by a Crossley diesel engine of 600 hp and the following year she sailed to the Newfoundland sealing grounds under the command of Einar Liavåg. The first Norwegian steel sealer sailed to the Newfoundland sealing grounds in 1949. More steel vessels followed and *Veslekari* lost her position as one of Norway's leading Arctic ships.

During the summers of 1947–51 *Veslekari* served as expedition vessel for KGH (Royal Greenland Trade in Copenhagen) (Ottesen 2001). During these years she was commanded by several masters including, again, Johan Olsen (see Fig. 4) (Helge Ødegård, personal communication, 2004).

The last years

After 1950 *Veslekari* was converted into a fishing vessel, although she continued sealing. She followed a firm programme as a sealer and a fishing vessel all year round. In January and February she was engaged in the herring fishery off the coast of western Norway, where, equipped with purse-seine, she made a good profit. From early March until May she usually sealed off Newfoundland. During summer and early autumn she was either engaged in fishing herring off the coast of Iceland or cod off the coast of West Greenland. Late autumn was usually dedicated to maintenance. *Veslekari*'s master during most of her last 10 years was Captain Peder A. Brandal, whose father had previously captained her.

In 1957 Einar S. Ellefsen and Odd Berset, both from Ålesund, published the book *Veslekari: En fortelling om is og menn* ('Veslekari: a story about ice and men'). Ellefsen had himself sailed with *Veslekari* as a journalist on her rescue voyage to Jan Mayen in November 1936. Captain

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Olsen was an important source for the book and wrote an introduction (Ellefsen and Berset 1957).

In March 1961 *Veslekari* sailed to the Newfoundland sealing grounds but became trapped in ice, and on 7 April her hull was crushed (Fig. 5). Water poured in and when it reached the top of the main engine Brandal gave the order to abandon the ship. The crew of 24 marched 10 km across the ice to the sealer *Polarbjørn*, which was also beset. They navigated through the snow by means of a lifeboat compass and were guided by *Polarbjørn*'s whistle and searchlights. The first mate on *Polarbjørn* happened to be Johan Olsen Jr, son of *Veslekari*'s first master. Olsen Jr had sailed as an able seaman on board *Veslekari* under his father in the 1930s (Johan Olsen Jr, personal communication, 2000). The crew was flown by helicopter to Newfoundland and then on to Norway (Olav Barstad, member of *Veslekari* crew, personal communication).

The wreck of *Veslekari* was held in the ice for a couple of weeks. Unable to continue sealing, the *Polarbjørn* crew visited the wreck several times and managed to tow some 400 sealskins across the ice to *Polarbjørn*. Then one day she was suddenly gone (Magnar Aklestad, a *Polarbjørn* sealer, personal communication).

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