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From a Safe Distance – Swedish Portrayal of World War II. Astrid Lindgren: *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945*

ABSTRACT

The article refers to the latest methodological reflections on the remembrance culture and presents one of the forms of Swedish collective memory thematization. The 1990s brought an increased interest of the Swedish people in the history of their own country and debates on the stance taken by Sweden during World War II. Diaries, memoirs, autobiographic and documentary novels about World War II and the Holocaust gained recognition among Swedish researchers and readers. Among the latest prose works, coming under this thematic heading, *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945* (*War Diaries 1939–1945*) by Astrid Lindgren, published posthumously in 2015, merit attention. When analyzing the image of World War II presented in the diaries, the following issues were taken into account: the image of everyday life of the Swedes during World War II, the state of knowledge of the situation in Europe and the attitude towards the Swedish neutrality.

KEYWORDS

Astrid Lindgren, Swedish literature, World War II, Holocaust, collective memory, remembrance

Introduction

The 20th century was one of the most tragic periods in the history of mankind; it witnessed two world wars, attempts to implement the criminal ideologies of Nazism and communism and mass murders. Many of those tragic events, in particular the Holocaust, are reflected in literature. According to Pierre Nora, a classic of the remembrance literature, the last three decades

of the 20th century are called the *age of commemoration*, and the increased interest in historical issues should be named *the arrival of the time of remembrance*.¹

The 1990s was a time of heated debate on the role of Sweden during World War II. The transformation process of the collective memory of Swedish people began and there was a need to determine the position of Sweden in the Holocaust world heritage. The public discussion brought about an increased interest of readers and researchers in the literature concerning this period or being a direct account of the Holocaust eyewitnesses (e.g. diaries, memoirs). On the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II, *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945* written by Astrid Lindgren, one of the most recent prose works related to the discussed topic, was issued posthumously. The aim of the article is to analyze the image of World War II presented in this work. The following issues were taken into account: the image of everyday life of the Swedes during World War II, the state of knowledge of the situation in Europe and their attitude towards the Swedish neutrality.

Swedish literature shortly before and after the World War II – a historical outline

Sweden declared neutrality in 1914, which is why none of the actions directly related to the World War II affected it. Information, especially about the situation of neighbouring countries occupied by Nazi Germany (Denmark, Norway), reached Sweden. The Swedish government pursued a diplomatic policy of making political or material concessions to the Third Reich, allowing German soldiers to travel through their territory to Norway or introducing censorship of newspapers and literature that openly criticized the activities of the Nazis. However, many journalists, such as Torgny Segerstedt (“Göteborg Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning”) or Ture Nerman (“Trots allt!”) continued to write critical articles. Also many writers opposed fascism as soon as Hitler rose to power in 1933. The so-called *beredskapslitteratur* (literature of militant preparedness) played a very important role in the 1930s, and it was characterized by idealistic patriotism and humanistic pathos. Writers such as Hjalmar Gullberg, Pär Lagerkvist, Harry Martinson, Vilhelm Moberg and Eyvind Johnson engaged in the fight against fascist ideals, both in Sweden and abroad.² In 1945, Stig Dagerman (1923–1954), at the age of twenty-two, published

¹ P. Nora, “Czas pamięci”, trans. W. Dłuski, *Res Publica Nowa*, 2001, nr 7, p. 37. My own translation of italicized fragments into English.

² S. G. Edqvist, I. Söderblom, *Svenska författare genom tiderna*, Stockholm 1998, p. 189.

his first novel *Ormen (The Snake)*. He was one of the most prominent writers of that period and at the same time one of the most important Swedish prose writers of the 20th century. The novel *Ormen* and a collection of feature articles about Germany *Tysk höst*, ed. 1947 (*German Autumn*) refer directly to the events of World War II and the fear caused by the war.³

Shortly after the war, in the 1960s, the first direct accounts of witnesses of the Holocaust appeared. The Polish-Swedish writer and sculptor Zenia Larsson (1922–2007) made her debut with *Skuggorna vid träbron*, ed. 1960 (*The Shadows at the Wooden Bridge*). She was rescued from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp thanks to the Vita bussarna (White buses) humanitarian action organized by the Swedish Red Cross and the Danish government under the leadership of the count Folke Bernadotte, and came to Sweden in 1945.⁴ Also the work of such writers as Cordelia Edvardson (1929–2012), Ebba Sörbom (1927–2001) and Hédi Fried (born in 1924),⁵ who shared their stories in the form of diaries, memoirs, autobiographic and documentary novels, can be called the literature of the Holocaust.

For a long time, the role of Sweden during World War II was not a topic of any debates. The turning point took place in the 1990s when Swedish people took a much greater interest than before in the history of their country and started to discuss it. A significant contribution to this change was made by Maria-Pia Boëthius, a Swedish writer and journalist, who in her historiographic study entitled *Heder och samvete*, ed. 1991 (*Honour and conscience*) took a critical view of the stance adopted by Sweden during World War II.⁶

The need to determine the position of Sweden in the Holocaust world heritage brought about numerous studies and projects of informative character. In 2000, an international conference devoted to education, commemoration and research on the Holocaust took place in Stockholm. The conference was hosted by the Swedish government and forty five countries were invited to participate. The aim of the conference was to create for the participating states an opportunity to express their will to fight racism, anti-Semitism, ethnic and other conflicts. During panel discussions and while working in groups, the participants could exchange their views and experiences. The conference

³ Ibidem, pp. 318–320.

⁴ A. Ohlsson, "Tal och tystnad i förintelselitteraturen: exemplet Zenia Larsson", *Tidskrift för Litteraturvetenskap*, 2000, No. 2, pp. 29–48.

⁵ Hédi Frieds website, [online] http://hedifried.se/hedi_publicerat.html [accessed: 13.06.2018].

⁶ K. G. Karlsson, "Med folkmord i fokus. Förintelsens plats i den europeiska historiekulturen", *Forum för levande historias skriftserie*, 2008, 6, p. 14.

was closed after a joint declaration was adopted.⁷ Among other things, activities aimed at disseminating knowledge and memory about the Holocaust in schools, universities and institutions were declared. Already in 2003, a governmental institution Forum för levande historia (The Living History Forum) was founded in Sweden. It plays an important role in preserving the Holocaust in the collective memory of Swedish people and supports actions for democracy, tolerance and equality, treating the Holocaust as a starting point for further discussions on such topics as the crimes of communism, racism and homophobia in the society.⁸

Regarding the research in the discussed field, the international research project conducted in 2001–2007, *Förintelsen och den europeiska historiekulturen* (The Holocaust and the European Historical Culture) under the leadership of Klas-Göran Karlsson must also be mentioned. The main objective of the project was to create a common theoretical base for research on the Holocaust and the discussed topics included awareness and historical culture as well as different ways of using history. The project also covered the position of Sweden in the Holocaust heritage.

All the activities discussed above made the little-known Swedish literature on World War II and the Holocaust gain a wide range of readers. On the publishing market new literary works related to the discussed topic appeared. Göran Rosenberg (*Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz*, ed. 2012; *A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz*), a Swedish journalist and writer and Lena Einhorn (*Ninas resa*, ed. 2005; *Nina's journey*), a Swedish writer, screenwriter and film producer shared their experiences from the post-witnesses' perspective. In the latest literature, this thematic movement includes a documentary novel *De fattiga i Łódź*, ed. 2009 (*The Emperor of Lie*) written by a Swedish journalist and novelist Steve Sem-Sandberg, and two literary reportages *Och i Wienerwald står träden kvar*, ed. 2011 (*And in Wienerwald the trees are still standing*) and *1947*, ed. 2016 (*1947: When Now Begins*) written by Elisabeth Åsbrink, a Swedish journalist and writer.

In the field of literary studies, a pioneering monography by Anders Ohlsson from the University of Lund „*Men ändå måste jag berätta*” *Studier i skandinavisk förintelselitteratur*, ed. 2003 (“*But I still have to tell*” *The Holocaust in Scandinavian Literature*) draws special attention. It is the first study of the Holocaust in Scandinavian literature, the authors of which are direct wit-

⁷ Memorial and museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, [online] <http://auschwitz.org/muzeum/aktualnosci/konferencja-sztokholmska,251.html> [accessed: 13.06.2018].

⁸ Forum för levande historias website, [online] <https://www.levandehistoria.se/om-oss> [accessed: 13.06.2018].

nesses – the Survivors. However, it covers only a small fragment of the issue. The literary specialist notes that much research in Sweden is done on American, French or Hebrew, and recently on Polish literature about the Holocaust whereas there is no complex study of Swedish literature in this respect.⁹

I believe that the literature on the events of World War II, written by the Swedes belonging to the second generation of the Survivors, as well as those Swedish writers who are not direct witnesses, not having been explored so far, may become the subject of literary studies, in particular the works referring to the events and characters connected with Sweden (e.g. the literary reportages written by Elisabeth Åsbrink) as well as from other European countries (e.g. the documentary novel *De fattiga i Łódź* by Steve Sem-Sandberg).

Astrid Lindgren: *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945*

Among the most recent prose works related to the discussed topic, *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945* written by a Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren, deserves special attention. It was issued posthumously in 2015, that is seventy years after the end of World War II, with a foreword written by a Swedish writer Kerstin Ekman and the afterword by Astrid's daughter – Karin Nyman, who also transcribed her mother's notes. For sixty eight years, until 2013, seventeen leather-bound diaries lay in a wicker laundry basket at the well-known home address of Astrid Lindgren – Dalagatan 46 in Stockholm.¹⁰ Upon the outbreak of World War II, on 1 September 1939, unknown at the time to a wider group of readers, nearly 32-year-old Astrid Lindgren started to write her diary.¹¹ The day before, she was sitting with her friend Elsa Gullander in Vasaparken in Stockholm. They were talking, expressing their negative opinions of Hitler, but it did not occur to them that a war might break out. The next day, the war was a fact.¹² Writing a diary was a kind of response to the shock and terror, a form of therapy and an attempt to explain the causes and consequences of this incomprehensible conflict.

⁹ A. Ohlsson, "Men ändå måste jag berätta". *Studier i skandinavisk förintelslitteratur*, Nora 2002, p. 15.

¹⁰ A. Lindgren, *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945*, ebook, editor's foreword, Lidingö 2015, p. 14.

¹¹ K. Ekman, the foreword, [in:] *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945*, A. Lindgren, Lidingö 2015, pp. 6–7.

¹² A. Lindgren, op. cit., p. 18.

Everyday life during the war and the state of knowledge about the situation in Europe

Everyday life of a middle class family living in a Stockholm district Vasastan did not change in a significant way. Astrid Lindgren started to think about stocking larger amounts of soap, cocoa and butter because the shops sold only one-fourth of a soap bar at a time, besides it was difficult to buy white sewing thread, but as she admitted herself, these were just trivial worries.¹³ Life went its own way – the children completed, not without difficulties, the next stages of their education, the family and social life of the Lindgren family was flourishing, another Christmas or Easter were coming. The author willingly and in detail described the special occasions, wrote down the lists of presents for children or the special menus. In the following part of the text Astrid Lindgren referred to Christmas in 1940. She expressed gratitude that taking into account the situation in Europe, they live in such favourable conditions.

Här i Sverige har julen firats precis som vanligt, så vitt jag kan förstå. Vi har ätit oss fyrkantiga precis som vanligt. Vi är sannolikt det enda folk i Europa som har möjlighet till det, åtminstone i den utsträckningen. [...] Jag tror, att nästan alla här i Sverige känner precis detsamma som jag julen 1940, att det är en ren och oförtjänt och oerhörd nåd, att vi får fira jul i lugn och ro i våra hem.¹⁴

Astrid Lindgren was aware of the fact that the Swedes, as few in Europe, had the opportunity of peaceful celebration. Everyone was celebrating, as usual, there was no food shortage. Just being in the privacy of her home was an amazing happiness.

The author's aim was not only to take notes on the daily life in Stockholm and the life of her family, but first of all to write an account of life during World War II, as detailed and complete as possible, which includes articles, notes, maps and photos cut out from Swedish newspapers. The following fragment shows that the information in Swedish journals was accurate and enabled an average citizen to be perfectly aware of the situation in Europe.

Råkurret fortsätter. Flygkriget mellan England och Tyskland är totalt. Den 7:e september inledde tyskarna ett fruktansvärt massanfall mot London och sen dess kommer de tillbaka natt efter natt och häver mer bomber över stan i tonvis. Stora eldsvådor rasar och hjälper tyskarna att hitta vägen. Men engelsmännen gör så gott de kan för

¹³ Ibidem, p. 21.

¹⁴ Ibidem, pp. 59–60.

att ge igen, och har i natt bombat Berlin, varvid bland annat Riksdagshuset och konstakademien satts i brand.¹⁵

Astrid Lindgren's knowledge, in this case about the air war between England and Germany in 1940, is confirmed. She knew the details of the actions of both Germans and the English, specific dates and what kind of destruction the war activities had brought about.

Astrid Lindgren, in spite of all her daily duties and professional work, with journalistic obstinacy read many texts about the war, analyzed and pondered, studied the maps and followed the progress of the most important battles. And she did it solely and exclusively for herself, she wanted to know what was happening in Europe and all over the world. Lindgren was particularly interested in the situation in Norway, Denmark, however her greatest concern was focused on the difficult situation in Finland. The following excerpt describes the fights between the Finns and the Russians which took place in December 1939.

Du tid och värld! Finland håller Ryssland stängen på ett makalöst sätt. [...] Förbitttrade strider rasar på Karelska näset och kring Petsamo. Flygbombardemangen har det inte blivit mycket av på grund av väderleken. Ryssarna är mycket illa utrustade och klarar sig dåligt i snöyrän. De ha mist mycket folk och hela världen är full av beundran för det finska försvaret. Men civilbefolkningen uppe i norr, som flyr in över svenska gränsen, har det svårt. [...] Kläder och pengar samlas in i massvis och skickas dit. Själv var jag uppe på vinden i förrgår och rev ihop allt jag kunde, bland annat Stures "kuskrock" och mors [svärmors] makabra kofta. Ehuruval att finnarna är tillräckligt prövade förut – utan mors kofta.¹⁶

Astrid Lindgren emphasizes the Finns' heroism and the poor preparation of the Russians. Many Swedish citizens, including the author, wanted to help their neighbors in a difficult situation by sending, for example, clothes. Astrid Lindgren additionally comments on her own actions with a certain amount of self-irony, expressing the certainty that the Finns will manage without the old jacket anyway.

A year after the war broke out, Lindgren got access to external sources of information as she was offered a job in secret censorship of correspondence where she was one of the persons who censored military and civilian mail from abroad. The letters were steam-opened and read. The point was to find and obliterate all information referring to places of military importance and other secrets related to defenses. As a result, Astrid had an extensive

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 48.

¹⁶ Ibidem, pp. 23–24.

knowledge of the situation in occupied countries. Moreover, she had an opportunity to know the testimonies of the victims who directly experienced the war, in particular the Jews. In her diary, she cites short fragments of this shocking correspondence.¹⁷ Therefore, was Astrid Lindgren one of the few people who were knowledgeable about the situation in Europe of the time and the fate suffered by Jewish people during the Nazi era? That issue often comes up to be the topic of Swedish public debate as it happened in autumn 2014. Jan Guillou, a Swedish writer, upheld his view which he had voiced earlier in his literary work that Swedish people could not have known anything about concentration camps until they had been liberated by the Allies.¹⁸ His stand met with strong opposition and Astrid Lindgren's diaries gave the lie to this thesis; already in November 1940, she wrote about concentration camps in Oranienburg and Buchenwald.¹⁹ In 1942, Astrid read a refugee's diary *Liebe Deinen Nächsten*, ed. 1941 (*Flotsam*) by Erich Maria Remarque and wrote that she herself could confirm the truthfulness of the Jewish fugitive's story on the basis of her professional work.²⁰ Lindgren also knew a lot about the situation of the Jews in Denmark – she wrote about the deportations they were facing and mass escapes in small boats to Scania.²¹ In April 1944, she put in her diary Ivar Harries' review of *Den siste jøde från Polen*, ed. 1944 (*The Last Jew from Poland*) written by Stefan Szende, which is another confirmation of the treatment of Polish Jews, about which she read earlier in *Landet utan Quisling*, ed. 1944 (*Land Without a Quisling*) by Stefan Tadeusz Norwid.²²

The attitude towards the declared neutrality

Apart from her hatred for Nazism, the author of the diaries expressed her fear, which pervades all her diaries, of the communist Soviets, always called Russia by Lindgren. Her fears grew even more when Astrid Lindgren found out in 1943 about the Katyń massacre committed by the Russians.

¹⁷ K. Nyman, the afterword, [in:] *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945*, A. Lindgren, Lidingö 2015, pp. 239–240.

¹⁸ H. Arnstad, *Guillou sprider grov okunskap om Förintelsen*, "Dagstidningen ETC Göteborg" 2014, [online] <https://www.etc.se/kultur-noje/guillou-sprider-grov-okunskap-om-forintelsen> [accessed: 4.05.2018].

¹⁹ A. Lindgren, op. cit., p. 57.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 104.

²¹ K. Ekman, op. cit., p. 11.

²² Ibidem.

[...] Emellertid har den polska regeringen begärt undersökning genom Röda Korset av några fasansfulla massgravar i Katyn (tror jag det hette) där ryssarna dräpt och grävt ner 10.000 polska officerare sedan de annekterat Polen. Ja gudbevare oss för ryssarna!²³

Astrid Lindgren had good knowledge of the situation in Poland – she knew the number of murdered officers and that the Germans and the Russians divided the country between them.

In spite of declared neutrality, the Swedish government agreed to a transit of German soldiers and ammunition by railway, of which she as well as a large part of the Swedish society, disapproved.²⁴ Starting with the first pages of the diary, doubts about the neutral attitude adopted by Sweden interweave with the excitement and amazement about the saved normality. At the beginning of 1940, the author herself did not know what was right, the opinions in society were divided.

”Jag vill vara neutral intill min död”, sa Frida, och likadant säger Per Albin Hansson. Genom någon sorts indiskretion har det kommit ut i pressen (Folkets Dagblad) att finska regeringen begärt direkt militär hjälp från Sverige och fått nej. Per Albin blev tvingad till en förklaring – och den var mer än eländig. Slutsumman var att han hänvisade till sitt utlåtande i remissdebatten för någon månad sen, eller med andra ord att Sverige ”vill vara neutralt intill sin död”. Gud, att man skall behöva vändas så och att man inte vet vilken linje som är den riktiga. Finnarna och många svenskar anser, att det även ur Sveriges synpunkt vore klokast att genast gripa till vapen, därför att det är idioti att tro, att Ryssland, om dom väl en gång knäcker Finland, kommer att stoppa vid Torne älv. Men regeringen i Sverige, som väl bör sitta inne med alla informationer, vill inte ge sig in i öppet krig med Ryssland för att riskera att få Tyskland på Sverige och därmed stormaktskrigets krigsskådeplats i Sverige. Jäkla Tyskland, om vi bara kunde få vara ifred och hjälpa finnarna mot ryssen.²⁵

In the above fragment, Astrid Lindgren referred to the work of a Swedish writer Birger Sjöberg entitled *Fridas bok*, ed. 1922. Per Albin Hansson, the prime minister of Sweden at the time (1932–1946), also wanted to be neutral until his death, but there were some concrete consequences, such as the refusal to help neighbouring Finland. Some Finns and many Swedes believed that Swedish citizens should take up arms because having conquered Finland, the Russians would also move to Sweden. The Swedish government, however, did not want to engage in an open war with Germany and Russia.

²³ A. Lindgren, op. cit., p. 130.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 124.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 34.

The author was full of remorse when she did not have time for writing, even for a short time. However, sometimes she admitted that she was tired and worried, for instance about her daughter's illness and she did not have the strength anymore to worry about the war.²⁶ At the end of 1942, she wrote openly that the attitude of the society towards the war had changed.

Kriget har fyllt tre år och jag har inte firat födelsedagen. Allas vår inställning till kriget har så småningom undergått en förändring. Förr talade man så välsignat om det; nu betraktar man det som ett nödvändigt ont, som man tänker på och talar om så lite som möjligt [...] Och nu börjar den verkliga krigströttheten att göra sig gällande: man är så led på kriget, så man vet sig ingen levande råd, det är så dystert alltihop. Vintern kommer nog att bli rätt så besvärlig för oss i storstäderna åtminstone, men hur det ska bli i andra länder vågar man inte tänka på.²⁷

The author wrote metaphorically about the third birthday of the war, which she did not care about. Citizens' attitude to war had changed. In the beginning, everyone was discussing it. With time the war became unbearable and now everyone was looking forward to the end of the war. Everything seemed to indicate that a severe winter would come, which for the inhabitants of occupied countries could be deadly dangerous.

Conclusion

The diaries *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945* are another important item in the Swedish public debate on the memory of World War II and the Holocaust. They were an inspiration for the exhibition "Hela världen brinner" ("The whole world is burning"), opened in May 2015, presented in various museums throughout Sweden and organized by the foundation Stiftelsen för bevarandet av Astrid Lindgrens gärning. The aim is to discuss contemporary fascist and Nazi sympathies with reference to past experience. Lindgren's concern of the 1940s is in a certain way reminiscent of current moods. Can history repeat itself? What can we do to prevent this?²⁸ *Krigsdagböcker 1939–1945* written by Astrid Lindgren show a new perspective and a way of presenting World War II in Swedish literature. The diaries are a document which, along with private notes, make a peculiar account of the period of World War II. Readers can acquaint themselves with the descriptions of everyday life of an average citizen of Sweden at the time. It is a peaceful and affluent

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 102.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 108–110.

²⁸ More information about the exhibition can be found on the website <http://helavardenbrinner.se/utställningen> [accessed: 14.06.2018].

life compared to the situation of the inhabitants of the countries occupied by Nazi Germany. The author, however, is not mindless and does not keep silent. She knows a lot about the ongoing military operations and is aware of the atrocities that the Nazis commit, for example in Poland because she reads many articles about the war with journalistic obstinacy. The diaries are not only an account of the individual fate of the author, but they present a broader picture of the Swedish society and social moods at the time. It is therefore a kind of cultural memory document. It proves that not all Swedes were passive and unaware of the seriousness of the situation in Europe. Some of them followed the fate of the occupied countries, and they were not indifferent to the suffering of other nations. For the author of the diaries, writing is a duty to bear witness to the truth and to show historical reality which are encoded in, on the one hand emotional and on the other hand relevant records, displaying, among others, the doubts and considerations of the society regarding the neutral attitude of Sweden.

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