

The Roar of the 'Lioness'

Until now no one knew just how tenaciously Sigrid Undset - one of Europe's most important writers in the first half of the 20th century - fought against the Nazis and supported the creation of a Jewish state

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Thousands of letters written by Nobel literature laureate Sigrid Undset during World War II waited 60 years to see the light of day again. Awarded the prize in 1928, the Norwegian novelist was known as the "lioness" and as the "queen of Nordic literature." Her portrait still appears on her country's 500-kroner notes. But until now no one knew that one of the most important European writers of the first half of the 20th century was a tenacious fighter against Nazism, and a particularly vocal activist in efforts to rescue Jews and to establish the State of Israel.

Undset died in 1949 at the age of 67, physically and mentally broken, leaving behind thousands of documents, some of them marked "top secret." These included a precise documentation of attempts to rescue Jews, correspondence with the wartime leaders in the United States and Great Britain, president Roosevelt and prime minister Churchill, and countless petitions and protest letters - all reflecting an uncompromising struggle against Nazi Germany and heartfelt concern for the fate of European Jewry.

The full scale of her activity came to light only six months ago, in the wake of publication of a biography of Undset in her native country, by writer and journalist Sigrun Slapgard, entitled "Dikterdronningen" (Poet Queen), Slapgard was in Israel two weeks ago to attend the launching of the Hebrew translation of Undset's masterpiece, "Kristin Lavransdatter" (a trilogy of novels that originally came out 1920-1922), published by Schocken Books.

Slapgard notes that for years Undset was overshadowed by Knut Hamsun, the Norwegian author who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1920. He was a man, she a woman; his theme, the plight of the individual in the modern age, seemed to be relevant; she wrote romantic novels set in the Middle Ages. But there was also another difference between them: He remained in Norway, expressed support for the Nazi regime and even gave his Nobel medal to Josef Goebbels as a gift. She, in contrast, spoke out against the Hitler regime from the first day, and after the Nazi occupation of Norway, had to go into exile in Sweden and afterward in the United States.

Sigrid Undset was born in Denmark in 1882, the eldest of three sisters, and at the age of 2 moved with her family to Christiania (now Oslo). At 16 she started work as a secretary in the Norwegian branch of the German electronics company AEG, but devoted her nights to writing. By the age of 23 she had already written a first draft of her masterpiece, for which she would receive the Nobel Prize, and had completed another novel, 1,000 pages long. A Danish publisher rejected the later manuscript, but Undset was undeterred.

The old photographs found by Slapgard show a tall young woman (1.80 meters). She wore colorful hats, silk underclothes and enjoyed wearing floral-print summer dresses. It was just after the turn of the new century, and a liberated, independent woman who smoked cigarillos and drank alcohol in

the company of male colleagues was hardly the norm. In 1907, at the age of 25, she published a first novella, in which the protagonist is a woman who is unfaithful to her husband.

In 1912 Undset married Norwegian painter Anders Svarstad, who divorced his first wife to marry her, and brought three small children with him. The couple lived in London and Paris for short periods, before returning to Norway and settling in Lillehammer. In the meantime, they had three children of their own, but separated in 1919.

An opinionated intellectual, Undset, surprisingly, was fiercely critical of women's rights organizations in her country. In 1924 she stirred the wrath of the Lutheran Church in Norway by converting to Catholicism. According to Slapgard, she took no interest in public relations and ignored reports about her in the press. Her image was one of a strong but alienated woman, who almost always prefers her own truth over trying to curry favor with the public.

Great treasure

By the beginning of the 1930s she was a well-known, esteemed writer, a Nobel laureate and president of the Norwegian Writers Union. Her books were best-sellers in Norway and in Germany as well. She had read "Mein Kampf" and was in close touch with German writers, among them Thomas Mann, who were soon forced into exile. Her beloved daughter Mosse, disabled from birth, died in 1939 at the age of 23. If it had been up to Hitler, Undset said of her child, she probably would never have been born at all.

In the meantime, the pro-Nazi National Unity Party had been formed in Norway, under the leadership of Vidkun Quisling, whose name later became a byword for treachery and collaboration. Norway declared neutrality on the eve of the war, but Quisling offered the Germans the cooperation of his party and the use of military bases for their troops. Germany invaded Norway on April 9, 1940, taking the Norwegian forces they encountered by surprise. British, French and Polish forces that tried to assist in Norway's defense were also repulsed, and by June the Germans had completed the country's conquest. Just six hours after the incursion of the German troops, Quisling declared himself prime minister, even though the king and the legally constituted government had fled into exile in London. Parliament was dissolved, freedom of expression became restricted and the Germans took over the judicial system.

From the beginning of the 1930s Undset had been the target of a vitriolic campaign by Quisling's party. Her articles denouncing Hitler were branded as "manipulation by Marxist Jews" who were supposedly exploiting her poor health. Now Undset understood that she could not remain in her homeland; her books had been burned in Germany, and now, she feared, her turn would come.

She left for Sweden in the spring of 1940, and in August went on to the United States. She remained there for five years, while the Quisling puppet government and the Nazi occupation forces hunted down opponents of the regime and decimated the small Jewish community in Norway. Of the 1,700 Jews who lived in Oslo and Trondheim on the eve of the invasion, about 740 died in Auschwitz. A few dozen more perished in Norway itself; all told, half the Jewish community was annihilated.

Slapgard found the great treasure left by Undset almost under her nose, she says: Thousands of documents remained in the writer's spacious home in Lillehammer and she was the first to go through them. Another valuable source she discovered was an exchange of correspondence between Undset and the American publisher Alfred A. Knopf, who was one of the novelist's closest friends during her stay in the United States. Slapgard spend several weeks at Knopf's archives at the

University of Texas, going through 37 crates of letters and documents, whose existence was not previously known.

Immediately upon her arrival in the United States, it turns out, first lady Eleanor Roosevelt asked Undset to write a book about Norway. One of president Roosevelt's important speeches, "Look to Norway" (September 1942), which was aimed at mobilizing American public opinion in support of the war effort, was inspired by Undset. She was also in touch with underground organizations in occupied Europe, and tried to induce the Swedish government to issue laissez-passer papers for 700 Jews in the Budapest ghetto.

One of the recurrent themes in the documents, explains Slapgard, is how to punish Germany after the war. Undset prepared a draft resolution for presentation to the fledgling United Nations, according to which, for every Jew who would be deported or murdered in Europe, a German citizen would be exiled to a tropical island in Africa. Her assumption was that if the Germans knew about this, the persecution of the Jews would come to a halt.

In July 1943, Undset became a permanent member of the Emergency Committee for Saving the Jews and formulated one of its secret resolutions, holding that: "Proper retaliation for the murder of innocent and defenseless people by Germany is destruction of innocent and defenseless citizens of Germany." She was in constant contact with the American League for a Free Palestine and was a guest of honor at an event in which the "Proclamation of the Moral Right of the Stateless and Palestinian Jews" was read out. In 1943 she signed petitions to Churchill and Roosevelt, seeking their intervention to save the remaining Jews in France, Bulgaria and Romania.

Already during the war Undset began to support the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. Among the thousands of documents discovered by Slapgard are letters signed by Undset to Churchill, calling on him to put an end to the British Mandate in Palestine. In 1944, she again wrote to Churchill, requesting that he spare the lives of the two members of the Lehi pre-state Zionist underground in Palestine, Eliyahu Hakim and Eliyahu Beit-Zuri, who assassinated Lord Moyne, British resident minister of state in Cairo. The two, she said, "were driven by pain, despair and millions of Hebrew deaths in Europe." (The men were hanged in Cairo in March 1945.)

Undset had a full schedule in the United States. She appeared at conferences and delivered lectures at universities and other public institutions, trying to persuade anyone who would listen that Nazi Germany must be stopped and the Jews of Europe saved. At one such event, held at Carnegie Hall in New York, she was the keynote speaker. Until almost the end of the war she tried to maintain optimism; she constantly believed that the war was drawing to an end and that the dark curtain that had fallen over her life and over the entire European continent would finally be lifted.

Slapgard notes that despite all efforts to get to the roots of the story of the Nordic "lioness," she has no good explanations for what motivated her. Nowhere did she find evidence that it was her Christian faith that drove Undset to act so vigorously. The war devastated her economically. In 1939 she decided that she could not write anymore. Despite repeated efforts to persuade her to continue, Undset told publisher Knopf that as long as Nazi Germany ruled, she could not write. The huge royalties she received in the 1920s and the early 1930s from the sale of her works in Germany dried up, as her books were banned.

Her return to Norway at the end of the war was not celebrated widely. Under the new social-democratic government, Undset, the Catholic exile, was not perceived as a national or cultural asset. Little is known of her last years, Slapgard says. In June 1945 she wrote to MGM asking the movie

studio not to produce a film based on a work by her compatriot Knut Hamsun, adding: "You must be aware of the fact that Mr. Hamsun was arrested in Oslo late in May for pro- German activities." Nor did Undset change her mind about the punishment that should be meted out to German war criminals. Slaggard notes that one of Undset's last letters, in her own handwriting, was addressed to president Truman; in it she complained of the "lenient treatment" being shown to Nazi criminals. Half a year later, in June 1949, she died, at her home in Lillehammer.