Comments on:

Sigrid Undset: Return to the Future

Translated from Norwegian by Henriette C.K. Naeseth
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In this book Sigrid Undset tells the story of her life, starting from Oslo from the day when the Germen invaded Norway, till the embarkation on board *President Cleveland*, which took her and her son Hans from Kobe in Japan to San Francisco. This is not a travel book, but rather a walk-along with her and learning about her love of freedom, her love for her country and her family, her hatred to tyranny, her hatred to anything German. Undset is revealed as a woman with sharp eyes and a fantastic sense of humor.

On Saturday, the 7th of April, Undset was in Oslo, staying in a small, somewhat old-fashion hotel, where she had stayed when in Oslo since the poorest days of her youth. The sirens sounded at half past twelve.

> It was our misfortune and our stupidity that somehow we could not believe that war, either, was true. War was the kind of thing that happened in other parts of the world, we knew that, of course; but how many of us had ever seriously believed that it could happen in Norway? Finland's fight for life first awakened some of us to a more nearly realistic view of the world which we tried to keep away from our life by our policy of neutrality. But too few of those who, first and foremost, should have been awake.

Earlier this evening she went with her sister to a musical soirée which was given by Finnish artists as a benefit for Finnish aid. One thing she remembered from the soirée: A Norwegian authoress who came sailing in with some German-looking persons. For years this lady had battle heroically to attain a position in Norwegian literary circles,

with a colossal energy and a diminutive talent. That woman was, with the exception of Knut Hamsun, the only Norwegian author who, unwinkingly sided with Nazi Germany.

The hotel guests joked and guessed at what the alarm could mean – practice or something serious? None of them dreamed of a German landing in Norway. However, soon it turned out that there were bombing of two airports and fighting between the coast fortification in the Oslo fjord and German battlefields.

In the morning Undset walked up to the eight o'clock mass at St. Olav Church while planes were cruising back and forth over the city. She decided to try to see if she and her son Hans could get a train north to Lillehammer. For one thing, she had three small Finnish children at home in Bjerkebæk, evacuated from one of the most severely bombed districts of Finland. The train was only one hour late. Some Jews and German-speaking foreigners – refugees from Hitler – came along. “That they showed themselves more nervous than others was certainly quite natural. But we did not understand it than – we whispered a little certainly critically about their lack of self control.”

It was late evening when they reached Lillehammer. At home there were the little parlor maid and the three Finnish children: Elmi was four, Toimi three, and Eira two years old. “But the thought that they had come here because they were to have a refuge from bombing and suffering and death, but now violence and bombers pursued theme here, was such that at times one felt one would suffocate with rage.”

The Norwegians had never taken seriously the native National Socialists, as their ideology was so alien. At time they saw chiefly its comic aspects and dismissed Quisling and his followers with a shrug of the shoulders as hysterical half-men. Now instead of the smile there has arisen a white-hot hate for the Germans' errand boys. How many traitors, nobody knew.

Only two days since there was peace, her two boys and the young sons of all her acquaintances in Lillehammer and other older men were in the war. Evacuees from

other places came to her home. One of them was German priest, a refugee from Hitler regime. His crime at home was that as a director of a Catholic school in a little Bavarian town he admitted Jewish children who were persecuted in other schools. And he had accompanied a wealthy Jew to his grave – a Jew who in years of want had helped needy people and institutions on a large scale, without asking whether they were Jewish, Protestant or Catholic. At the grave he had made a speech in commemoration of the dead man, in Hebrew. “He was undoubtedly a good man and a good priest. But the involuntary aversion to all things German was already so strong – and the man was essentially German. He wore my nerves. With the most unrealistic optimism he prophesied Hitler's early downfall, delivered long lectures about Hebrew grammar, and the development of Church Latin from the last Latin vernacular, and so on. And made the same not very funny witticisms innumerable times each day.”

Days went by. It did not take long before the war arrived also to Lillehammer. The three Finnish children were relocated to a farm, and the German priest was sent to Sweden through the Labor Party's organization. On Saturday, April 20, English troops gave up positions they held south of Lillehammer and German troops were expected to march into the town during the day. “I was advised to leave the town before they come. I had constantly written and spoken against Nazism and had also taken active part in the work of helping refugees from central Europe. Moreover it was said that the Germans were in the habit of taking people who had some position in the country and forcing them to speak over the radio, tell how well the German behave, and the like, or so and so many Norwegian hostages would be shot.”

So Undset, at the age of 57, had just time to put the most necessary things in bag. She had no money in the house and now the banks were closed. Her housekeeper made her take a hundred crowns as a loan. With this money she managed very well to Stockholm. It was the same story everywhere: “We do not take pay from our countrymen now.”

The route of escape was northward. “And the strongest impression from this flight through Norway, always behind our retreating lines, is this: how unspeakably beautiful

this country of ours is! And how incomparably kind and helpful they were, each person we met!" German planes bombarded the railways, the stations, the bridges and the houses, smashing towns and setting them on fire with incendiary bombs. At one farm a band of German parachute troops had been taken prisoners. One of the woman in the farm was certain she recognized one of the soldiers; he had come hiking to the farm one day in August a year before, had been given shelter and a little money before he went on. Now he returned as a soldier in the invasion army as someone who knew the country.

The German were advancing north, so the flight continued. In one stage Undset and other fleeing people went on board two trawlers, full of soldiers, which were going to northern Norway where the country was still free, and continued in the fight.

> We sailed at night; during the day we lay hidden in outports between farthest islands. And day after day the ocean lay quiet and bright, night after night the red of the sunset passed into the red of dawn. And every waking hour and moment I believe we all thought the same thing: that this our country, Norway, is so beautiful; it is past belief that anything so beautiful is real. Stern, wild, with the mountain wall rising straight out of the sea, peaks and crags reaching towards heaven, buried in snow and ice – with few and poor strips of land here and there under the mountain, where there was room for a small farm, or two, or three. Nobody has tried to wrest a living from this country except us – and it is ours, ours. We will not give up our rights to it, if we must wait a hundred years to get it.

> A kind soldier offered me his sleeping bag. Every evening he made it up for me and put me in it. It was hard, but snug and fresh, to lie and sleep out on the deck. In the morning, when I crept out of it, the soldier slipped in and slept some hours.

It had become clear that there was no point going north. An alternative root of escape was going overland to Sweden. They started in the afternoon, on a truck. The road went up over the mountain, winding and turning along the steep cliff. "We jumped to heaven,

as we sat and held our seats by clutching one another – we were slung to left and to right.” The route to arrive at the last farm on the Norwegian side of the border was a four-mile ski trip over the mountain. “It was twenty years since I had last had skis on my fit, and my fur coat was a poor skiing costume – they put me also on the sledge. And pulled by six young men we came at long last to the border farm.”

Still they had to walk to the Swedish side of the border. “...but all I wanted was to get into a house and stretch out full length. One kilometer is roughly a thousand strides. I counted and counted; the one kilometer became two and three. And the counting only made me still sleepier.” Finally they reached a gray hut and a Swedish road worker offered the whole company bread and butter, sausage and cheese, coffee and milk, with warm-hearted cordiality. “His contagiously happy kindness livened us up after fourteen hours of fatigue. Jon Anderson and his pal Jonas, who turned up during the morning, I shall remember with gratitude to the day of my death.”

There were swarms of soldiers everywhere. Sweden was fully mobilized. The uniform of the Swedish reservists who where stationed there was somewhat reminiscent of that worn by Charles XII's soldiers. “It was not quite so idiotic as it must have seemed to the eyes of the foreign press when the Russian dressed their handful of Finnish traitors in Terijoki in old Carolinian uniforms from the museum in Leningrad.”

The Germans invaded Holland and Belgium and some considered it a good news, believing the Germans would meet opposition of equal strength and the German troops would hurry home to set their house in order. Undset wrote: “I was considerably less optimistic; among other things. I have never had a particle of faith in the possibility of Germans' ever giving back anything they have taken, unless it is wrested from them. But the tragedy of the western front was beyond the dreams of my most pessimistic moments.”

The bus they were sent south in was very full. Undset and another woman were ordered to give up their places to two telephone workers: “Then one of them will take the old

woman – that was me – and the other the young girl on his knee. All four of us obeyed with solemn faces, though the one who was allotted 'the young girl' looked as if he would have liked to smile."

Arriving to Stockholm, Undset was told that her older son Anders, age 27, had fallen in the fighting at Segelstad bridge. Her other son Hans, age 20, was safe and would try to join her in Sweden. Norway was not yet conquered. In northern Norway part of the army which was stationed their had been mobilized after the Finnish war broke out, and therefore ready to resist the Germans. "It is a bitter thought – what we could have accomplished against the invasion army in southern Norway if our boys had had sufficient training and war material." Finally Hans arrived. "Seldom have I been happier than that morning I met him at the station in Stockholm."

While waiting for news about Hans, Undset went to visit Hammarby, Linné's estate on the plain outside Uppsala. Since her earlier youth, Linné (1707-1778) had been for her a kind of secular patron saint. Carl Linnaeus (Carl von Linné) gave his country a new position as a great power, in the international world of natural science which was just coming into being. The man "knew what he had always known: God rules the world with a hard, righteous hand; His vengeance overtakes each and every one who has practice deceit and unrighteousness." Linné wrote that "the conquered have a weapon still, they appeal to God."

Norwegian and Allied troops recaptured Narvik on May 29, and it was the first defeat Germany had suffered in this war. However, the Allied were withdrawing their troops and on June 8 Norway had to give up, after sixty days of war. There was, then, no Northern Norway Undset and her son could go, so it had to be America for them. She planned to travel by the way of Petsamo on the Arctic Ocean, but was told by the Finnish consulate that all space on the boats had been taken until late fall. Also nobody was sure how long the steamship connection between Petsamo and America would be open. So the only other alternative was through Russia and Siberia, via Japan and the Pacific Ocean. They left Stockholm early in the morning of July 13.

The title of the next chapter is 'Fourteen Days in Russia.' The journey through that country was a story of watching misery, agony, suffering, dirt, deceases, stupidity, incompetence, and so on.

They flew to Moscow in a Russian plane. Friends who had taken part in the Finnish war could tell harrowing stories of the Russians' dealing with modern machinery of every kind. The first stop was in Latvia, soon to be annexed to the Soviet Union. “A few weeks later Latvia's saga was ended – for the present. Murder and want, blood and filth and mismanagement and stench and lice must have engulf it now.”

The next stop was already in Russia.

> I got some money changed into Russian coins and watched with interest the play of the man's fingers on the abacus. I knew that before they became playthings for babies they had also served in Europe as an aid to figuring, but it was strange to see them in use.

Arriving to Moscow, already while being taken to the hotel, “we got the feeling that we had dropped from the skies into another world.” There was the contrast between the pretentious new building, the show places of the Soviet state, and then the indescribable filth, dilapidation, wretchedness in all the house in which people *live*.

> Hans and I walked the street in Moscow, the four days we were there, all the time except for the hours we spent in delivering papers and fetching them and getting our coupons exchanged for tickets on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. I do not believe there were more such formalities in Russia than elsewhere, but it takes five or six times as longer for Russians to get anything accomplished. They rummage and search in piles of papers and pamphlets and railroad schedules, as if it were the first time they had laid their eyes on these things, for each new passenger who was disposed of. And before they dared to decide that two and two made four, they had to consult their abaci.

What made the most overwhelming impression was the stench: the fetid smell of cotton goods which has been washed again and again, but without soap, of women's unwashed hair, the smell of things which rotted and crumbled and fell into ruin, and the list goes on and on. There were beggars, the pariah population, people whom the system of government had placed outside the social order. Undset and Hans gave them some rubles and kopeks; “that was also the only thing in all Moscow for which we could use our rubles. For there was literally not a thing in all Moscow which we could buy.”

Eventually the time for departure arrived. The four days they spent in Moscow seemed a small eternity. In the train station young women worked as porters – they had already become accustomed to seeing that the Russian women do all sorts of heavy work which at home is considered absolutely men's jobs.

> I wonder if this equality between the sexes in regards to the heaviest drudgery and the roughest manual labor prepares the ground for slave-state systems. Because in Germany it has always existed. In South Jutland, for example, from early times the boundary between the German and Nordic settlements has been clearly marked by the nature of work done by women. Even when the language boundary had been erased, everyone knew that when people and cattle live together in one room (typical of the “Saxon” farm) and the women must perform the kind of tasks which the Danes consider man's work, the Nordics' land ends and Germany begins.

The cars on the Trans-Siberian Railroad must have been the last word in train luxury when they were built early in the century, since they still were in good condition. “For after all I saw of Russian management I am certain that not the least thing had been done to keep them in working order.”

> Actually our journey through Russia and Siberia was not strenuous. It was only a matter of sitting still and getting dirtier and dirtier. The train force did its best to make us comfortable – and that the best was not particularly good was not their

fault.

In the car there was an American doctor who had been with an ambulance in Finland. He, incidentally, acquired a thriving practice little by little – "before we came to Vladivostok, everybody in the car, except me, had been his patient." The worst problem was to accustom oneself to the filthiness. Undset looked forward to the moment when she could throw the bedroom slippers into the Pacific Ocean. As for the food, after four days in Moscow the food that if served at home would have been considered as an insult, was not of the very worst; it was splendid that they have food at all.

One observation that she made was that people in general did not appear obviously undernourished, and there was supposed to be enough bread, and good bread. But a shortage of supplies existed everywhere and became catastrophic from time to time. The totalitarian states do not care a damn about ideas of the minimum of cleanliness and home hygiene and seemingly life goes on in natural gait, after a fashion.

Signs announced that here and there was a railroad restaurant, a stand with newspapers with postal cards, a lunch counter, but none of these had a thing to sell. The Soviet had brought the stations, all built in the time of the Czars, up to date by beautifying them with immense placards with inflammatory slogans, gigantic pictures of Stalin, Molotov, and other Soviet heroes. A light-gray statue of Lenin – everywhere the same one – adorned the little lawn in front of every station.

The train came to Vladivostok on time in spite of the various delays, completing the trip in the scheduled nine days.

> I looked in the waiting-room windows – the everlasting closely packed crowd of dirty people who sat or lay, silent and patient on their dirty bags of bedclothes, the same rancid smell. – But directly under one of the windows sat a little girl I could not take my eyes off her. My own daughter was sick from her second year until she died, at the age of twenty-three, and the little Russian girl resembled her in a

> quite strange way. Under the tightly tied white kerchief, a pair of wide-open gray eyes looked out of a waxen-white narrow face, with the strange patient expression of a child who is accustomed to suffering.

The girl, her name was Oleha, had been very sick and was to go to a people's sanatorium at Krim. Her father was to go with her as far as Moscow and from there she would be sent to the south where all patients with the same sickness as his daughter got well, he has heard – . Undset gave the father some money, and he thanked her very happily. “The evening was sultry, but the child's checks were clammy with cold perspiration when I touched them. I can hardly believe that she reached Moscow alive... Next to the glimpse into the hell of the prison train Oleha was the worst I saw in Soviet Russia.”

Vladivostok was filthy beyond description; one must have seen it to believe the way it looked. And having seen it, one still does not believe it – one imagines one's memory must be plying tricks. A workman in the hotel asked one of the foreign visitors if people in Europe were acquainted with electricity, which Lenin had invented to help the Russian proletariat. “I thought a Five-Year Plan to provide people with umbrellas would have been appropriate in this rain-hole called Vladivostok.

Finally it was time to leave. “I stowed most of the cloths I had used on the train in the clothes-closet in my room – certainly no laundry in the world could rid them of their Soviet smell. And they would surely be of use to whoever found them.” At the custom she was instructed to leave their rubles, in exchange for a receipt; if she ever return to Russia she can get them back. She had only eighty-odd and she regretted that she had not given Oleha all of them.

But everything comes to an end. Finally they came on board the Japanese ship which now looked like fairytale: Japanese sailors in spanking fine uniforms, cabin-boys in shining white jackets, clean cabins with clean berth, tiled bathrooms with quantities of boiling water, an so on. “It was strange that we wanted to like the Japanese, to try to

believe of them that it is probably not the people, it is probably only a clique that is responsible for the policy of conquest and war in China, for Japan's imperialism and its cynical claim of dominion over the people of eastern Asia.”

On board the boat, Undset had already noticed indications that in Japan the man is the head and master of the family, even when he is as young as her son Hans. The waiters turned to him with the menu, served him first, presented him the bill. In the temples in Kyoto the servants and guides led him around , showed and told him – and expected her to trip along behind the youth and keep silent.

At the hotel in Kobe they received the first news from Europe since they left Stockholm. France was disarmed, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were swallowed up by Soviet Russia. England still unconquered. “And still at times we almost forgot it. At times I was so happy that I myself did not understand how I could be.” While waiting for the ship to take them to America, they spent time touring the country, learning its history and enjoining its beauty.

It was difficult to make oneself believe that Japan was a country at war. However, little by little they got the feeling that there too the living-conditions of the populace were subject to the same law which seems to operate in all totalitarian states: the standard of living sinks surely and steadily. The citizens were told it was time to show heroism; now a less material spirit should be born, for the sake of a great and glorious future.

The ship will take them over the pacific Ocean to San Francisco, the train from California to New York.

The last chapter is called 'Return to the Future,' the same as the name of the book.

> After having fled from the Nazi invasion in Norway, through Soviet Russia and Japan, I knew that to come to America would still be to start the homeward journey. Now it is only across America that the road leads back to the future – that

> which we from the European democracies call future.

The assumption is that democracies will finally succeed in hunting down the wild beast. Then man once more – perhaps only after centuries have elapsed – painfully begins to work his way into daylight again. “I am fully convinced that the rulers of the totalitarian states cannot build any “new order.” But nobody can know how thoroughly they will be able to destroy their victims if they can retain power over them long enough. Great culture-building people have before been practically eradicated from the surface of the earth... We have no guarantees that we shall not meet such a fate.”

The task of rebuilding civilization will be enormous. There will be hatred to everything German. “But how in God's name will it be possible to neutralize that hate which consumes all the victims of Germany's lying and faithlessness, German sadism, German rapaciousness and greed...so that it does not completely paralyze all constructive forces in the people?” This hatred is so apparent in Norway. Undset quotes a report to the *New York Times* of March 29, 1941 by David Anderson: “It has been somewhat of a surprise for the British to see the intensity of the Norwegians bitterness against the Germans.” The vice-government of Quisling and his liege vassals could not exist twenty-four hours if the German military might did not protect it.

> Epidemics of mental disorders, which other peoples seemingly at any rate, have outgrown, seem today to lie latent in the German people. Anti-Semitism, for example, is surely no exclusively German phenomenon. But that the mentality from the days of witch-hunting and witch-persecutions could appear again in any other civilized people as we have seen it in the German persecutions of the Jews, that is indeed difficult to believe. In so far as it is possible to place any confidence in the accounts that are made public through the newspapers and radio of the German occupied countries, it appears that France, where there was assuredly before the war much anti-Semitism of peculiar French type – and Italy, where as far as I know there was no anti-Semitism worth mentioning – are only reluctantly adopting the persecution of and injustice toward their Jewish populations along

> the lines decreed by the German lords of these countries, out of their hysteria and wholly paranoiac hatred of Jews.

In 1924 Undset at the age of 42, converted to to Roman Catholicism. It seems that she had never gave an explanation to this act. However, from reading this chapter it is quite clear why she left the Lutheran Church.

> Even in the thought-movement which are essentially the products of German minds, and which are Germany's most important contributions to the European culture milieu – the Reformation and romanticism – both schizophrenic and maniac-depressive traits are predominant.

In this point she ascribed to Luther and most of the German Reformation's "heroes" several expletives which I rather not quote here. Obviously Undset could not have belong to the Lutheran Church if that what she thought about its founder. In the same style she went on describing the majority of the great poets whose names are synonymous with German romanticism's artistic conquests. "For it is true that the threat of destruction of personality in insanity or death very often stimulates gifted individuals to heightened productivity."

The reader gets a glimpse of the source of Undset's boundless hatred towards the Germans from the next paragraph:

> I remember what a terrifying impression it made on me, in my young days, when I was the secretary at A.E.G., Berlin's Norwegian branch, and in the way of business, so to speak, I had as one of my tasks each morning to read through the day's issue of the *Berliner Tageblatt*. There were constantly recurring notices of child suicide, a phenomenon which I had never heard tell of from any other place. Pupils who cannot adjust themselves in school, failures in examinations, adolescent difficulties, children's tragic flight to gain a foothold in the world of adults – all such things one knows well from all parents of the world. But that large numbers of children give up the fight, that such things can drive, not a single

> child, but innumerable children to take their lives, that has at least until now seemed unthinkable to everyone except the Germans.

> Duel morality and it accompanying rules regarding situations in which a man of honor must commit suicide, child suicide, suicide epidemics, which recur again and again in Germay's cultural history, are significant complements of German militarism.

German girls, too, are derided:

> That was what made it impossible for us, in my youth, really to understand German girls of the same age: they could not fall in love without exalting their feelings to the skies and raving about being won and conquered (in practice, of course, they had their artful little methods of captivating and taming their heroes). We could not understand that they thought that whatever wore a uniform was manly and glorious that a man with his face hacked with dueling scars was not unappetizing – quite the contrary.

One thing is certain: Hitler's plan for establishing a new social order in Europe will never be accomplished. Those Germans who have contributed to Europe's cultural heritage are now subjugated or driven into exile or they are perishing in concentration camps. One could only hope that the devastations of this war may be repaired within a surveyable future.

Return to the Future is a book about how an intellectual and an emotional nightmare materialized as an even worse reality. Undset's hatred towards Germany and the Germans had it genesis while still being a teen, that is in the beginning of the 20th century. Few decades later she had had to flee her home in few hours notice. Her older son was killed while defending his country. I can only guess the horror that she felt when the atrocities committed by the Germans during the war were gradually revealed. After the war, when she came back to Lillehammer, she found out that her home was

ransacked by the invading army. While visiting the her home in 2011, the guide told us that Undset refused ever to meet her daughter-in-law because she had a job in the Quisling administration. I can only attempt to grasp Sigrid Undset's rage and loneliness.