

Jedidut is the publication of the Finland-Israel Friendship Association.
1/2012, pp. 12-13.

Hakehila is the publication of the Jewish Community Center in Helsinki. 3/2012
4/5772, pp. 11-12.

Sigrid Undset – A Friend

David Landau

Sigrid Undset was born in Denmark on May 20, 1882. Her mother was a Dane and her father a Norwegian. When Sigrid was 2-year old, the family moved to Norway. Her father died when she was 11-year old. Taking part in providing income to the family, she matured quickly. She attended a commercial school, and from the age of 17 did secretarial work for 10 years in a big German-owned machinery firm in Kristiania (Oslo). There were periods when she hated her work and felt she was wasting her time and youth. However the experience she gained was useful. Working for an important industrial concern had taught her to manage things systematically and made her a skilled typist.

When Sigrid was 16-year old, she wrote her first novel, but could not find a publisher for it. The next attempts succeeded and during her life she wrote 36 books and numerous articles and essays. In 1928 Sigrid Undset received the Nobel prize in literature for her novels that were situated in medieval time, best known are *Kristin Lavransdatter* and *Olav Audunsson, the Master of Hestviken*.



Sigrid Undset had a clear view of the world. She loved freedom and hated tyranny. She followed closely what had happened in Germany and opposed strongly Hitler and Nazism from the beginning of the 1930s. As a result, her books were boycotted in Nazi-Germany. When the Germans invaded Norway in 1940, she fled to Sweden and from there to the United States. After the war she returned to her home in Lillehammer.

Sigrid Undset died on June 10, 1949 at the age of 67. The next day Eino Parola wrote in *Helsingin Sanomat*:

Even when she became famous, she had not forgotten any of her friends from before, and her hospitality was impeccable. She displayed the shining side of her nature also to the Finns when she visited here during the congress of authors of the Nordic countries in 1935. After that she remained a good friend of our country, and showed it especially during the Winter War.

In her article 'Finland fights for her life – her own and that of Europe: Lies and terror are the Soviet and Nazi weapons' (*America*, March 2, 1940, pp565-566), Undset wrote:

It is not merely that Finland refuses to yield to terror. It is not merely that the renowned Red Army, up to date (January 19), may be said to have made war on the men of Finland with exceedingly small success. Against the women and children of Finland, against patients and nurses in hospitals, they have, up to now, waged war much more successfully.

Undset wrote that Norwegian medical aide volunteers told that the Soviet Union planes bombed civil targets and caused big damage. She concluded the article by writing that Finland's battle was a battle for the future of all Europe and America.

During the Winter War Undset auctioned the medal she received as a Nobel laureate, and donated the money to Finland. She also sheltered three Finnish children which were evacuated from the war zone: 4-year old Elmi, 3-year old Toimi, and 2-year old Eira.

Before the Second World War Undset wrote openly against the Nazis in numerous poignant articles and essays. When the Germans occupied Norway in 1940, Undset had to flee and ended up in the United States. There during the war she told about her country's fight against the Germans.

In America she joined to the Emergency Committee to save the Jewish People of Europe and became a member of its board. The committee was composed of Jewish and non-Jewish members, authors, politicians and other public figures whose aim was to spread to general public information about the annihilation the European Jewry, as well as to put pressure on the U.S. President and congress to act immediately in order to save those Jews that were still alive in Europe.

Undset had a warm attitude towards the Zionist movement. In 1943, in her letter to Professor Klausner she wrote:

The most important issue today is to save the surviving Jews in Europe, as much as it is still possible to save them. The "Emergency Committee" devotes all possible efforts to this gigantic endeavour. I have an additional, not less important, task: the need to create a national home for homeless Jews, and for all Jews who lack the possibility, or the desire, to assimilate themselves among the Gentiles.

I shall hope that we, who see anti-Semitism as a phenomenon despicable, shameful and poisonous, will be able now to hate it even more because of the horrible crimes perpetrated against the European Jewry, and that we will be able

to fight it with outmost determination. The Jewish People is entitled to the right to defend itself in the future, and to become an independent nation, equipped with all institutions necessary for a the function of a nation. Then the Jews will know that they can rely on the support of righteous men and women in the whole world, as well as on the assistance of their brethren in America, in England, in Norway, In Denmark, and in Holland. In the future, enemies will be faced by Jews armed with the strength of a renewed Jewish nation.

In her obituary in *Helsingin Sanomat* Eino Palola wrote:

In 1919 she move to Lillehammer, where she later bought a farm house and have it moved to the place where she lived log after log, object after object. It is amazing how much she had accomplished, as she took care of her house, furnished it in an especially good taste, and did all the chores expected from a housewife, which were quite heavy in the early years of her marriage.

In May 2007 Undset's home, Bjerkebæk, was opened to the public in Lillehammer. The designers of site endeavored to renovate it as close as it was during the time the author lived there. The Norwegian state commemorates Undset: her face is on a 500-crown bill and a 2-crown stamp.

