

Victims of Nazi terror

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Pontus Rudberg, *The Swedish Jews and the victims of Nazi terror, 1933–1945*,
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xii + 398 p.

The Jews of Sweden, no more than 7 044 souls in 1930, formed a small but tightly-knit part of the inter-war national fabric. The response of their leadership to the challenge posed by Nazism, like that of the nation as a whole, has been the subject of a substantial literature. Some previous historians (e.g. Koblik) have been severely critical, arguing that Swedish Jews were reluctant to go out on a limb on the issue, fearing anti-Semitic reactions, and also that they discriminated on a class basis against poor refugees.¹ By contrast, other historians (e.g. Valentin, who, according to Rudberg, offered "a Whig interpretation of Swedish-Jewish history") were more sympathetic towards the policies of Jewish leaders, tending towards apologetics for their wartime conduct.²

Pontus Rudberg analyses the issue afresh, drawing mainly on archival materials. He examines in particular the questions: how did Swedish Jewish leaders act in relation to the Jewish refugee crisis? How much knowledge did they have at each stage of the Nazis' genocidal process? What was the relationship on this issue between the Jewish community and the Swedish authorities? How did Jewish and non-Jewish voluntary groups relate to each other regarding this problem? How constrained were Jewish leaders by financial weakness and by dependence on international Jewish voluntary organizations?

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1. Steven Koblik, *The stones cry out: Sweden's response to the persecution of the Jews* (New York 1988).

2. Hugo Valentin, "Rescue and Relief Activities in behalf of Jewish Victims in Scandinavia", *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 8 (1953) s. 533–560.

The framework within which Rudberg discusses these questions is informed by Giddens's theory of social structuring and agency.³ Rudberg stresses the structural limitations to the Jewish minority's efforts. He focuses on the Jewish leaders as "acting subjects". Such concepts as anti-Semitism, "institutionalized racism", and "bureaucratic distance", he finds useful but in themselves inadequate explanatory tools. He differentiates between efforts designed to facilitate refugee immigration to Sweden and aid to Jews in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe and he distinguishes relief aid from political interventions.

Rudberg situates the discussion by reference to the critique famously offered by Hannah Arendt of the conduct of the "Jewish Councils" established in Europe by the Nazi occupation authorities. He is – in this writer's opinion correctly – critical of her approach. But the comparison of the Swedish Jewish leadership with the *Judenräte* seems not altogether apposite since, of course, Sweden was not an occupied country. A more appropriate comparative context might have been provided by the cases of Jewish communities in other neutral neighbours of the Third Reich such as Switzerland, a similar-sized community that confronted many of the same dilemmas, or the Netherlands before May 1940 (see below).

Results

The main spotlight in this work is on the heads of the Jewish community in Stockholm, the Mosaiska Församlingen i Stockholm (MFST). Rudberg has used its records as well as Swedish government papers, private correspondence, and the files of some foreign bodies such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) and documents in the Central Zionist Archives and the archive of the Yad Vashem memorial authority in Jerusalem.

Rudberg's findings place him closer to the defenders than the critics of the strategy adopted by the Jewish leaders in Sweden. Contesting the widely received picture, Rudberg argues that the effectiveness on the refugee issue of the Swedish Jewish community was not seriously hobbled by internal differences. He takes conscientious note of such figures as the World Jewish Congress representative in Sweden, Hillel Storch, whose pushy tactics apparently succeeded in getting some results. But such cases were untypical. The evidence adduced by Rudberg shows that for the most part there was a consensus on tactics among those primarily involved. Contrary to post-war allegations, Zionist and orthodox Jewish groups at the time rarely opposed or criticized the MFST. Rather than complaining that the official

3. Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Los Angeles 1979), and *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge 1984).

leadership's efforts were inadequate, these elements, even though somewhat marginalized in relation to the liberal-bourgeois Jewish elite, felt a sense of responsibility to cooperate across ideological and social divisions.

The author points to the substantial fund-raising achievements of this small and – apart from a handful of wealthy individuals – not specially affluent community. Leaving aside voluntary contributions, Jewish communal taxes were increased to several times the level for Christians – Jews were additionally obliged to pay half the mandatory state tax for the established Church of Sweden – and the funds thereby raised were devoted, so far as was legally possible and practicable, to aid for refugees in Sweden and Jews trapped in Europe.

Rudberg shows that the Swedish Jewish press carried early, detailed, and quite accurate reports on Nazi persecution and murder of Jews in Germany before the war. "Swedish Jews in general and the community workers in particular," he finds, "were well informed of the persecution in the 1930s". They could not, of course, have foreknowledge of the horrors to come.

During the war, German efforts to restrict knowledge of mass murder inevitably delayed full understanding of the reality of genocide. By late 1942, however, enough information from many sources had accumulated to enable the Swedish Jews and the free world in general to recognize that, as the Allied governments' joint declaration of 17 December 1942 put it, "the German authorities, not content with denying to persons of Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe".

Rudberg rejects the suggestion by Koblik and others that prominent Jews in Sweden were craven or passive in their behaviour towards the government. Rudberg buttresses his view with substantial evidence. What the critics often under-estimate but what Rudberg emphasizes is the "asymmetry of power" between the Jewish organizations and the Swedish state. Nor was the Jewish community heavily dependent upon the political goodwill and, eventually, financial support only of the Swedish government. It also found it necessary at several junctures to bow to the wishes of foreign funding bodies, most importantly the AJJDC.

Koblik's claim that the MFST "had the power of approval of every Jew who applied for the right to live in Sweden" is tested against the archival evidence and found wanting. Rudberg demonstrates conclusively that Swedish Jews played little part in the selection of applicants for immigration to Sweden from Germany. The MFST and its offshoots necessarily operated within guidelines set by Swedish law; unlike some in the Dutch Jewish leadership, at any rate at one point in 1939, they did not contemplate work-

ing outside the law.⁴ The Swedish Jews were constrained, amongst other things, by possibilities, over which they had no control and next to no influence, for future re-emigration to Palestine or the United States, the more re-emigration they could realistically anticipate, the more space would be available for new arrivals in Sweden. In the main, selection of candidates for migration to Sweden by, for example, potential Zionist *halutzim* (pioneers) or prospective pupils of the Landschulheim Kristenehov was undertaken not by Swedish Jews but by Jewish organizations in Germany itself. At least until November 1938, the Swedish government, international aid organizations, and, most significantly, the leaders of German Jewry themselves, laid great stress on orderly emigration of Jews from the Third Reich. They feared giving encouragement to a mad rush for the exits. These constraints left the Swedish Jews with little room for manoeuvre.

On this point in particular, the picture that emerges bears comparison with that in other neutral or unoccupied European countries. As in the Netherlands before 1940, the Jewish leadership in Sweden considered that it would be prudent to follow official indications that the country should be a way-station or temporary refuge for Jews fleeing Nazism rather than a permanent home. As in France and Holland, the Jewish community leaders kept clear of involvement with political refugees, particularly Communists. There is no reference in this book to wartime internment camps in Sweden – as elsewhere – in which undesirable elements, including some Jews, were held.

Rudberg has mined Swedish sources exhaustively and efficiently; international ones somewhat less so. Of course, in dealing with such a subject, the researcher has to make some hard choices and it is impossible to scrutinize everything. But it is a pity that British archives, especially the National Archives at Kew, were not utilized. They contain important material bearing directly on some of the episodes discussed here, notably the "Adler-Rudel plan" of 1943 for the rescue of 20,000 children from Nazi Europe. Rudberg has read widely and drawn sensibly on relevant monographs and secondary literature; but there are a few regrettable omissions.⁵

4. In July 1939 elements in the Dutch Jewish Refugee Committee, acting in concert with Zionist agents from Palestine, and under the benevolent blind eye of some Dutch officials, organized the departure from the port of Amsterdam of a ship, the *Dora*, that successfully transported over 300 Jewish illegal immigrants, mainly German-Jewish refugees, to Palestine. This was the only instance of such a vessel departing from Western Europe for Palestine before the outbreak of the war. It should be noted that in Holland, as in Sweden, the more established elements in the Jewish leadership tended to be strongly opposed to any action outside the law, even if, as in this case, that law was external to the state in which they lived. For more details see Bernard Wasserstein *The Ambiguity of Virtue: Gertrude van Tijn and the Fate of the Dutch Jews* (Cambridge, Mass. 2014) chapter 3.

5. These include: David Engel, *In the shadow of Auschwitz: The Polish government-in-exile and the Jews 1939–1942* (Chapel Hill 1987); David Engel, *Facing a holocaust: The Polish*

Although Rudberg's discussion is generally balanced and comprehensive, some questions arise. The attitudes and policies of Chief Rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis, a central character in the narrative, perhaps require further exploration, for example on the issue of public, as distinct from private, protest, especially in relation to his actions in regard to the threat to Hungarian Jewry in 1944.

The narrative comes to a rather abrupt halt towards the end of 1944. As a result we learn nothing about the community's role, if any, in the Bernadotte-Himmler contacts in the spring of 1945, nor about aid sent to Jews in concentration camps in the immediate aftermath of the liberation – but before the end of the war – nor about refugees admitted to Sweden after the liberation. These are all, surely, an important part of the same story and some discussion of the last two points might help throw into relief the actions, or inaction, of Swedish Jews at earlier periods.

The central thrust of Rudberg's argument, nevertheless, carries conviction. He maintains that, considering Swedish Jewry's response to the crisis in the round, the limited results obtained "are ultimately attributable more to rigid governmental refugee policies, inadequate financial resources, and international pressures, than to a lack of effort or will on the part of Swedish Jews". When it came to pressure on the Swedish government, he shows that the Jewish leaders probably stretched as close as they dared to the limits of what was politically feasible. They also exercised what pressure they could on the UK and US governments, utilizing such contacts or points of influence that they could, though of course their pleas could carry little weight in London or Washington. This reader, at any rate, is persuaded that louder public protest, while it might have salved consciences and perhaps diminished post-war criticism, would probably not have achieved more substantial results and might, indeed, have been counter-productive.

The very fact that the book leaves the reader wanting more is a tribute to its virtues: sound and careful scholarship, judicious and fairminded treatment of the different parties involved, as well as insight into the motivations, attitudes, and human limitations of the main characters. The book takes its place not only within the literature dealing with Swedish Jewish history and Swedish foreign and immigration policies in this period but also within the large historiography dealing with the role of "bystanders", neutral states, international organizations, and Jewry beyond Nazi-occupied Europe, in relation to the Nazi genocide.

government-in-exile and the Jews, 1943–1945 (Chapel Hill 1993); Meir Sompolinsky, *Britain and the Holocaust: The failure of Anglo-Jewish leadership?* (Brighton 1999); Hanna Zweig-Strauss, *Saly Mayer (1882–1950): Ein Retter jüdischen Lebens während des Holocausts* (Köln 2007); Beate Meyer, *Tödliche Gratwanderung: Die Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland zwischen Hoffnung, Zwang, Selbstbehauptung und Verstrickung (1939–1945)* (Göttingen 2013).