

A SWEDISH DIPLOMAT AND HIS REPORTING ON THE HOLOCAUST

by **Mose Apelblat**

There are no worse or better nations. There are worse and better governments. Nations don't like wars. The governments conduct politics that lead to wars; then, they ask the nations to sacrifice.

I was an insignificant little man. My mission was important.

All nations under Hitler's occupation suffered losses, millions of victims. However, all the Jews were victims. Let no nation, any government or church appropriate this holy and cursed term. The Holocaust belongs to the Jews.²

Jan Karski

I started this study with the objective of finding Göran von Otter's missing report. The result of my modest effort to clarify the whereabouts of his reporting will be described in this article. The article also draws attention to the moral dilemmas that both Karski and von Otter must have faced, in very different circumstances, when learning about the atrocities and reporting about them in order to arouse their governments and world opinion.

Göran von Otter was a Swedish diplomat with a baron's title ("friherre" in Swedish). His grandfather had been prime minister of Sweden. He did his military service in the Swedish navy, graduated in law, and practiced a few years at a Swedish court before joining the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the Second World War he served as legation³ secretary at the Swedish legation in Berlin where he mainly worked with judicial questions and the return to Sweden of Swedish Jews.⁴ After the

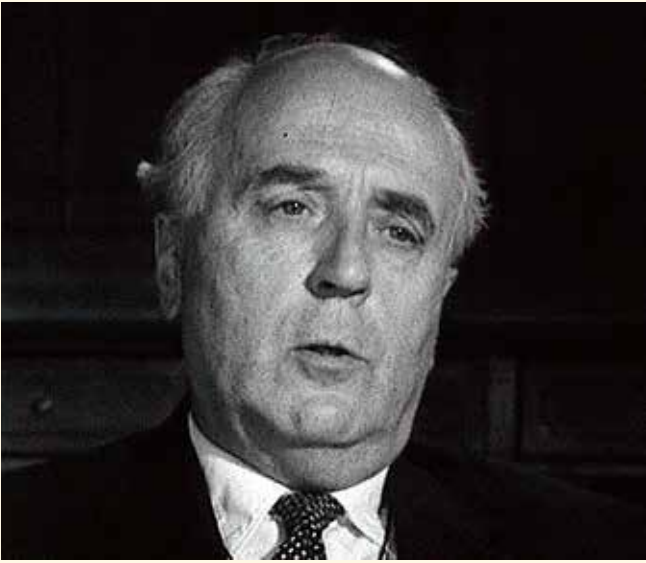
war he continued his career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with different assignments at the ministry and abroad until his retirement in 1973.

Von Otter happened to meet Kurt Gerstein, an SS officer who had studied engineering and medicine and become department head at the "Institute of Hygiene" of the Waffen SS at the central SS headquarters.⁵ There, he soon was in charge of "disinfection" and the delivery of poisonous gases. However, he was deeply Christian with a moral conscience. After his sister-in-law had died mysteriously at a mental hospital, he decided to expose the Nazi extermination machinery and undertook to collect information from within. His wish was to convey the information to a neutral country and to drop leaflets on Germany in the hope of raising public opinion against the Nazi regime.

The two met accidentally on a train between Warsaw and Berlin, presumably on the night between the 20th and 21st of August 1942. Von Otter was returning to Berlin after having met some arrested Swedish businessmen in Warsaw. Gerstein was returning from the extermination camp Belzec, where he had witnessed mass killings of Jews by gas, which had completely devastated him. Unable to rest, he had to tell someone about his feelings. He noticed that von Otter had lit a cigarette with a Swedish match and turned to him. A person from neutral Sweden, a diplomat as it turned out, was the perfect person to trust –and in whom to confide a secret to be published. Or so Gerstein must have thought.

Jan Karski and his reporting⁶

At about the same time that von Otter met Gerstein, a Polish officer and diplomat named Jan Karski⁷ embarked on a "highly dangerous mission"⁸ in his occupied country. Born in Łódź in 1914, a city known for its textile industry employing many Jewish work-



Göran von Otter.



Jan Karski, 1944.

ers,⁹ he trained as an officer in the Polish army, studied law and international relations, and started to work at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the outbreak of the war, he was mobilized and fought in eastern Poland. After the collapse of the war effort, he stayed behind and acted as a courier between the Polish government in exile in London and the resistance movement in Poland, and made secret trips between Poland, France, and Britain. At one point he was arrested and tortured by Gestapo but managed to escape.

In the summer of 1942, according to Robert Wistrich,¹⁰ Karski toured the Warsaw ghetto with Jewish guides¹¹ and saw the results of the deportations and the Nazi German extermination policy at first hand. He also visited eastern Poland and scouted in the vicinity of the Bełżec death camp.¹² He identified Treblinka and Sobibór as places of mass extermination for Jews. In describing what went on in Bełżec, he specifically mentioned murder by poison gas.

On his return to London in November 1942, Karski informed the Polish government, which on December 10, 1942, formally appealed to the Allied governments to speak out against the extermination of the Jews. This resulted a week later in an Allied declaration that condemned for the first time the Nazi “bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination” and threatened to “ensure that those responsible for these crimes shall

not escape retribution”.¹³ In practice, however, not much was done to stop the genocide and save any surviving Jews. The war against the Nazi German armed forces took precedence, and any military action to bomb the extermination camps was seen as a distraction and never carried out. The Allied powers might also have been afraid that any military measures against the extermination of the Jews would have fueled the Nazi propaganda that the Allies were fighting for the Jews.¹⁴

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Karski did his utmost to inform British and American leaders, including the British foreign minister Anthony Eden and the US president Franklin Roosevelt, and to urge them to act. In October 1944, he published a book, *Courier from Poland: The Story of a Secret State*¹⁵ (republished in 2013), on the underground Polish state in occupied Poland, including information from his mission, which still makes painful reading.¹⁶

WISTRICH WRITES THAT Karski encountered “a mixture of political hypocrisy, narrow national self-interest and sheer indifference in those Western political and military leaders who had the possibility of ameliorating the Jewish tragedy in a larger or smaller way.”¹⁷ After the war, Karski settled in the US, where he became a professor of political science at Georgetown University. For his outstanding deeds during the war he was awarded the highest Polish civil and military decorations.

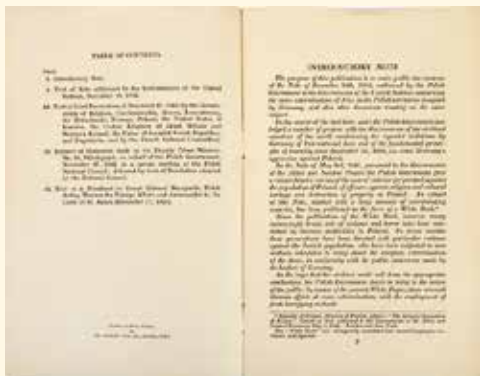
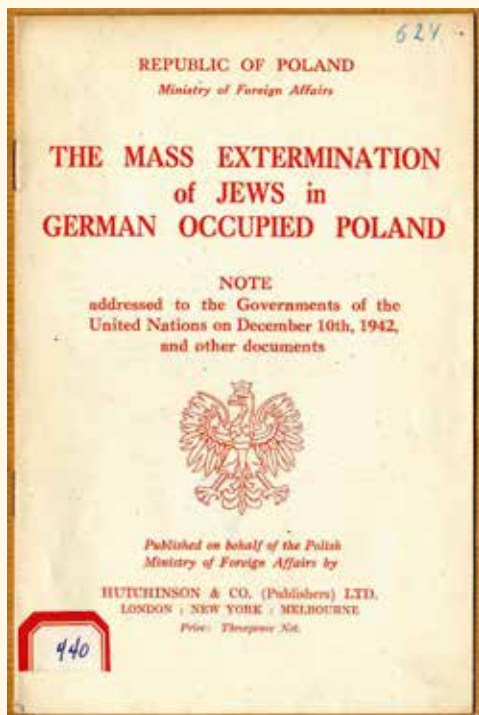
abstract

The Polish officer Jan Karski (1914–2000) risked his life reporting on the Holocaust. A Swedish diplomat, Göran von Otter (1907–1988), is also assumed to have reported in late 1942 on the Holocaust. But there seems to be no trace of von Otter’s report.

During the war von Otter worked at the Swedish legation in Berlin. In 1942 he met an SS officer, Kurt Gerstein, who had witnessed killings by gas at the Bełżec extermination camp. Gerstein joined the SS to oppose the Nazi regime from within and he asked von Otter to report to his government on the atrocities. At that time the official policy¹ in Sweden was to not anger Nazi Germany by publishing reports on war crimes. There is much obscurity about von Otter’s report.

KEY WORDS: Holocaust, international relations, WWII, diplomacy, Nazi Germany.

Otter met Gerstein. This is a fact. But could he have saved him?



In December 1942, the Allied Powers were informed about the mass extermination of Jews in occupied Poland.

In 1982 Yad Vashem in Jerusalem recognized him as “Righteous Among the Nations”, and in 1994 he was made an honorary citizen of Israel. In 2012 he was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Honor in the US.

It should be mentioned that Jan Karski and Göran von Otter were not the only ones who, each in his or her own way, reported in the summer-autumn of 1942 on the Nazi German extermination machinery. The reports transferred by Gerhart Riegner, the representative in Switzerland of the World Jewish Congress, to the American administration are well known and have been the subject of historical research.¹⁸ On the 1st of August 1942, Riegner learned from a German industrialist that Hitler had ordered the exterminations of the Jews. The use of gas as the instrument of murder was even specified.¹⁹

After a week of investigation and additional confirmation, Riegner met with an American vice-consul on August 8, 1942. The latter took him seriously and transferred a report on the same day to the State Department, but there it was met with “universal disbelief” and was not disseminated to all concerned. Riegner did not give up but continued to meet American diplomats in Switzerland in September and October and to provide them with more documents. The information given by Riegner was finally released by the State Department on November 24, 1942. Riegner provided the US government “with its first specific evidence of a German plan for the total extermination of the Jews”.

Historians on von Otter

The first historian who seems to have researched the whereabouts of von Otter’s report is Steven Koblik.²⁰ In his book from 1987, he states that von Otter reported the meeting with Gerstein to the deputy head of the Swedish legation in Berlin, Eric von Post, and that the head of the legation, Arvid Richert, also heard about the reporting on his return to the legation. However, what was done with von Otter’s report has not been clarified. No document has been found in Stockholm.²¹

According to Koblik, information was probably given orally to a limited number of officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and not in such detail as Gerstein had intended. In an appendix with documents, Koblik again states that, apparently, no written report was sent to Stockholm. However, he doubts that von Otter left no written documentation about his meeting with Gerstein, as detailed information on the meeting appeared in an aide-memoire in English of August 7, 1945, drafted by the Swedish embassy in London.²²

Ingvar Svanberg and Mattias Tydén,²³ in a book published in 1997, also mention von Otter’s meeting with Gerstein. They share Koblik’s opinion that it is still not clear what happened to von Otter’s information and whether it reached Stockholm at all or remained at the legation in Berlin. Unlike Koblik, however, they discovered von Otter’s letter of July 23, 1945, to the Swedish embassy in London. The aide-memoire that Koblik mentioned was obviously based on a letter from von Otter.

Tydén²⁴ confirms that von Otter’s letter is the only document (apart from the aide-memoire in English) that has been found

hitherto in the archives of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This does not exclude the possibility that there could be other documents that haven't been found. If it turns out (see below) that von Otter did report, at least orally, to top officials in the ministry, the search should be directed to those officials for any internal or private papers on their meeting with von Otter. Such a search, however, is outside the scope of this paper.

Paul Levine discusses at more length what could have happened to von Otter's missing report, and the importance of its information, in his dissertation on the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Holocaust.²⁵ He doesn't exclude that a report may exist, since not writing a report would have contravened any standard reporting procedures. He also refers to interviews by other authors with the head of the law department at the ministry, Gösta Engzell. Engzell claimed that he was informed about the "Gerstein file" quite early, but he could have been mistaken.

The most recent, and probably final, account of Sweden during World War II is Klas Åmark's book from 2011,²⁶ the result of a collective research program over several years. Despite its comprehensiveness, the book does not mention von Otter. According to the author,²⁷ the importance of his reporting (whatever happened to it), has been exaggerated in view of other reporting that appeared in autumn 1942 from other sources and in Swedish media. It appears that it was the Swedish embassy, rather than the Swedish government, that was the main obstacle to the dissemination of von Otter's information.

In 2012,²⁸ the Swedish author and journalist Göran Rosenberg published a novel about his father, who was from Łódź. He survived Auschwitz and arrived in Sweden after the war. The book is partly non-fictional, as it is based on memories, private correspondence, and public reports.²⁹ In an interview, he mentioned von Otter's report and concurred with the common view in Sweden that the report had been misplaced somewhere in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which would explain why no attention was paid to it.

Von Otter's testimonies

It is difficult to acknowledge that von Otter's report was never intended to reach the decision-makers in the ministry, and that if it reached them in some form, it was deliberately ignored and buried by them. However, that is what emerges from a reading of testimonies given by Göran von Otter himself and by his daughter Birgitta von Otter. The testimonies were published in 1985 and 1991, respectively, but for some reason they were not taken into account in the later historical research referred to above.

The Swedish journalist Omar Magnergård published³⁰ in 1985 an anthology of 26 articles on Sweden during WWII, which had appeared in the daily *Svenska Dagbladet* in 1984-1985. One of the articles was an interview with Göran von Otter under the headline "Request to Swedish Diplomat".

In the interview, von Otter revealed that he had carried a burden since his meeting with Gerstein in August 1942 and that he blamed himself for not doing enough. He appears to have had a bad conscience for two reasons: for not having been able to rescue Gerstein, who had been arrested as a war criminal, and

for failing to act sooner and to make a bigger fuss about what he had been told.

Concerning his conscience with regard to Gerstein, he acted by writing a letter dated the 23rd of July 1945 to Karl Gustav Lagerfelt, first secretary at the Swedish embassy in London, obviously in the hope that the latter would transfer it to the Allied powers. The letter has been found in the archives and is quoted in full in the interview. The meeting between von Otter and Gerstein is described in detail in the letter, as is the latter's information on the extermination he had witnessed in Bełżec. Von Otter also mentions in the letter that he had checked or compared ("col-lated") the information with a protestant clergyman and founder of the Confessing Church, named Otto Dibelius.³¹

HOWEVER, GERSTEIN DIED in prison on July 25, 1945, the same day as Lagerfelt received von Otter's letter. It is not clear whether he committed suicide or was murdered by Nazi prisoners. Much later, in 1981, von Otter would visit Gerstein's widow, Elfriede Gerstein.

"For Göran, that train trip keeps living on," Magnergård writes. That very morning, on his return to Berlin, he started to draft a report—a report, however, which has not been found and may have been destroyed. To his disappointment, his superiors at the legation—no names were mentioned in the interview—told him to stop writing: "He had better report orally on what he knew on his next journey home to Stockholm." His journey would be delayed by four months, during which time apparently no report was made to the ministry.

But when von Otter finally reported to the ministry—in the interview he does not mention to whom in the ministry—the "superiors in the ministry received my account with an indifference which made me both disappointed and surprised." "I still blame myself for my omission to act quicker and to make more noise about my information", von Otter told Magnergård.³²

To this, Magnergård added that, according to the history professor Wilhelm Carlgren, information about mass executions of Jews can be found as early as in a handwritten letter from Juhlin Dannfelt³³ to the head of military intelligence Carlos Adlercreutz, dated October 29, 1941. The source was a Swedish noncommissioned officer who had joined the SS. The letter had been read by the head of the Swedish central command, ÖB Olof Thörnell, and his deputy general, Samuel Åkerhielm, and been reported to General Nils Björk, head of the operational department in the central command.

However, no one in the higher military and political echelons in Sweden had apparently paid much attention to this report, and von Otter's presumably more detailed (though oral) and shocking report met the same fate. The earlier report could possibly have been dismissed as unverified information on war crimes in the wake of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, but von Otter's report was much worse, as it told about systematic killings of Jewish civilians—men, women, and children—by gas, with the source a German "insider".

What is missing in Magnergård's unique interview with von Otter is one question: Why didn't you try more to disseminate



Kurt Gerstein.



Gerhart Riegner, probably at the meeting of the World Jewish Congress in Montreux, Switzerland.

the information? Luckily, some answers to this unasked question can be found in Birgitta von Otter's book from 1991.³⁴ The book is mainly an anthology of articles previously published in Swedish media, dailies, magazines, and radio, but with two chapters added at the end, about the Swedish legation in Berlin during the war and her father's meeting with Gerstein.

As a child, between the ages of 2 and 5 years, Birgitta von Otter lived in Berlin, where her father had been moved in November 1939 after having served shorter periods at the legations in Vienna, Budapest (where Birgitta was born), and London. He was second legation secretary, and in 1942 became first legation secretary. She tells us that about 60 to 70 people worked at the legation in Berlin. On November 22, 1943, the building was totally destroyed in an Allied bomb attack. No Swedish casualties were reported. In the autumn of 1944, the family was relocated home to Stockholm, where they lived until the end of the war. In May 1945 her father moved with the family to a new post in Helsinki, Finland.

According to Birgitta von Otter, only two persons at the legation knew of her father's meeting with Gerstein: the ambassador himself, Arvid Richert, and his deputy, legation counselor Eric von Post. The reason for some kind of secrecy at the legation was that the staff feared that a German spy was working there, namely Richter's own secretary, who was married to a German Nazi. It was confirmed after the war that she had been spying.³⁵ Richert himself is described by Birgitta von Otter as having had to walk a tightrope not to antagonize the Germans, who often were angry at the alleged anti-German tone in Swedish media.

In the current situation it's better to be careful, and it seems to me that it's really desirable that several of our newspapers should adopt a more dignified tone, and a correct and less wishful treatment of the news and a less transparent assumption that Germany will finally lose the war.³⁶

Birgitta von Otter obviously felt that her father had been falsely accused of lying when he had told researchers, such as Koblik, that he never had written a report about his meeting with Gerstein. Her father didn't talk very much about what had happened, and she remembers only one occasion when he told the children about it, or rather replied to their questions. This seemed to have happened around 1970. She also refers to some other interviews her father gave to foreign media and researchers (some of which she found on tape in her parents' home).

She does not exclude the possibility that her father might have confused what really happened with what he learned afterwards. She hardly mentions anything about her father's personality and opinions, but stresses the similarities between her father and Gerstein. Von Otter was 35 and Gerstein 37 years old when they met, each had two children, and they were both 184 cm tall. Birgitta von Otter dwells more on Gerstein and his upbringing and personality and describes him as a person who took his Christian faith seriously. She quotes letters between Gerstein and his father that indicate the existence of a moral dilemma.

Göran von Otter, on the other hand, remains a rather unknown figure to people outside his family. He lived and passed away before the Internet era, and if he ever wrote anything, besides formal reports and documents in his diplomatic service, it cannot be found on the web.³⁷ If he did write about his work, his family does not know of any papers or letters left behind which could help us to understand him and his meeting with Gerstein.³⁸ According to Birgitta von Otter, her father never wrote a report about his meeting with Gerstein. He was instructed by Richert, the head of legation, to report orally at his next meeting at the ministry in Stockholm. Why?

Two possible explanations are given by Birgitta von Otter. First, the Swedish legation is said to have already known about the persecution of Jews, thanks to information that its military attaché had received from oppositional German officers. Furthermore, the Swedish consul in Stettin, Yngve Vendel, had, just a few days before von Otter returned to the legation after his train journey, reported “about the same things, although not in such detail”.³⁹ Vendel’s report was sent to the ministry with a cover letter signed by Eric von Post on August 22, 1942. Whether this is convincing or a justifiable reason will be discussed in the next section.

However, Birgitta von Otter also quotes her father as stating that the existence of previous information was an acceptable explanation (i.e., for the order to stop writing the report that he had started writing on his return), although he was aware that Vendel did not report on “details such as that people were forced in naked and that Ukrainian guards were used to extract the gassed people”. Instead, von Otter reported orally to the ministry as he had been instructed to do, namely, to the head of the political department of the ministry, Staffan Söderblom.⁴⁰ Von Otter also learned that Söderblom had reported on their meeting to other civil servants in the hierarchy of the ministry, Deputy Minister Erik Boheman and Foreign Affairs Counselor Gösta Engzell.⁴¹

SECOND, IT APPEARS that von Otter himself did not believe in the possibility of influencing Nazi Germany’s extermination policy, and in this he obviously shared Richert’s opinion. He met Gerstein about half a year later in Berlin. Gerstein was eager to know what von Otter had done to inform the Swedish government. Von Otter told Gerstein (according to an interview in 1966)⁴² that he had informed his superiors but that he was not optimistic about any concrete results. In another interview, from 1963, he said: “I don’t believe that any country or government could have influenced Hitler, who had his own ideas on how Europe should be formed after the war. In this Europe there was no place at all for the Jews, and he was fully determined to implement his *Endlösung*.”⁴³

Reporting in August 1942

The absence of a written report on von Otter’s information from the Swedish legation in Berlin to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Stockholm can be contrasted with the reports that actually were sent from the legation during the relevant period in 1942.⁴⁴ It

turns out that there was a flow of daily reports from the legation on a diversity of issues, as if the main occupation of the legation was to keep the ministry constantly updated. Among other dispatches, the legation drafted press reviews on news in German media and German reactions to news in Swedish media. The legation also reported on meetings with German officials or visits by Swedish officials or personalities to Germany, for example, the visit in Berlin in June 1942 of the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin (reported on June 11, 1942).

The archive files also include reporting from the ministry to the legation, such as the visit in August to the ministry by the German ambassador in Stockholm, complaining about the publication in Swedish media about Norwegian King Haakon’s 70th birthday, which was considered propaganda against Nazi Germany (reported on August 8, 1942). Another report from the ministry in August 1942 is a translation of a pro-German article from the Swedish consulate in Prague (dated August 17, 1942). A political report from the legation, dated August 21, 1942, deals with the German occupation in Europe, but without mentioning anything about the fate of the Jews. The report refers to an “easing of tension” in the relations between Nazi Germany and Sweden.

The most dramatic report from August 1942 is no doubt the one drafted by the Swedish consul in Stettin, Yngve Vendel. The report was signed by him on August 8, 1942, and sent on the 22nd of the same month to R. Kumlin, a head of department at the ministry in Stockholm, with a cover letter signed by the legation secretary Eric von Post. The report was registered by the ministry on August 24, 1942, and distributed internally and to other legations and to the military command. Noteworthy is that the report also reached Swedish prime minister Per Albin Hansson, as his initials appear on the cover letter.

This arrangement appears to be typical of the correspondence between the legation and the ministry. Reports were drafted by different people at the legation and accompanied by cover letters that summarized their content or drew attention to the main points in the reports. In this case von Post writes that the report is based on Vendel’s impressions from talks with different people during a journey he made in “eastern Germany” with the permission of Richert.

Two pages of Vendel’s seven-page report deal with a conflict between Heinrich Himmler and the former minister of food and agriculture, Richard Walther Darré, and this is highlighted and constitutes the main part in the cover letter. A sentence at the end of the cover letter states that “Vendel reports about the conditions in the General Governorate (Poland under Nazi German occupation), statements by Ribbentrop, and conditions on the large landed estates etc.”⁴⁵ There is no word about any persecutions of Jews in the cover letter. Whatever information the report contained about the situation of the Jews was easy to overlook or underestimate.

The situation of the Jewish population is mentioned twice in the report. On page 3, Vendel refers to the food conditions in the general governorate. According to his source, it is often heard that “Die Juden haben alles” (The Jews have everything). Vendel is critical of this statement and is of the opinion that it is only true of a small number of “affluent Jews in the Warsaw ghetto”. He corrects

PHOTO: GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVE



The German Order Police from Orpo descending to the cellars on a “Jew-hunt”, Lublin, December 1940.

PHOTO: GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVE



Jewish women in occupied Lublin, September 1939.

PHOTO: GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVE



Jewish men are transported from the Warsaw Ghetto by Wehrmacht soldiers, Poland, 1941.

the statement to “durch die Juden kan man noch alles haben, die Juden beschaffen alles” (through the Jews you can get everything; the Jews can supply everything) which must have been a gross exaggeration and a prejudice.⁴⁶

The next page in his report contains a paragraph with information of such a nature that “it hardly can be rendered in writing”. Vendel therefore “limit[s myself] to some brief information”. He mentions that the treatment of the Jews differs in different places, depending on whether there are ghettos or not. However, “the intention is gradually to exterminate them”. The figure of the Jews already killed in Lublin is estimated at 40,000. In particular, people over the age of 50 and children under the age of 10 are being killed. He writes that in one town (not named) the Jews were assembled to be “disinfected” but in reality they were gassed to death and buried in mass graves. He is of the opinion that his source is trustworthy and that there “cannot be the slightest doubt about the veracity of his information”.

This is all that is said about the Jewish situation. It is clear that there was a huge difference between Vendel’s brief information above and the detailed information von Otter received from Gerstein during a whole night of talking in the train between Warsaw and Berlin. Von Otter himself indicated in his letter to Lagerfelt at the Swedish embassy in London the detailed account he received of the extermination machinery in Belżec. Lagerfelt repeated the account, without mentioning von Otter’s name, in his aide-memoire and added that his source had been shown “documents, identification cards and orders from the commandant of the camp for the delivery of hydrocyanic acid”.⁴⁷

Furthermore, Gerstein himself wrote a lengthy report during his imprisonment at the end of the war.⁴⁸ It is likely that von Otter received more or less the same information from him when they met. It is therefore difficult to understand how Vendel’s brief report could have motivated the legation to suppress von Otter’s reporting as superfluous.

Conclusions

As emerges from the above, Göran von Otter did explain why he did not report in writing. According to Birgitta von Otter, he received instructions from his superiors not to write a report. Birgitta von Otter is a close relative and may be biased, but there is no reason to doubt her account on this point. It is also possible that Göran von Otter was of the opinion that a written report would not have made any difference. This could explain his inaction in 1942—which he later regretted—but could also be an ex-post justification.

The result, however, might have been the same, considering the overall Swedish policy at that time, when Nazi Germany was at the height of its power, of appeasing the Nazi regime and avoiding doing anything that could anger it, even invoking a variety of measures to suppress press freedom in Sweden.⁴⁹ It is also striking that some people in Sweden – including some among the clergy, the military, and the government – who received reports on the Holocaust, shared anti-Semitic stereotypes.⁵⁰ If they supported Nazi Germany or believed in its victory, they were less inclined to arouse any public opinion or issue any government statements against the ongoing genocide of the Jewish people.

It is, of course, impossible to know what would have happened if a written report had been delivered by von Otter.⁵¹ However, in the author's opinion, it cannot be dismissed that a written report, made public by the Swedish government or transferred secretly to the Allied powers, could have added more credibility to the other reports from the same period (forming a "critical mass") and pressed the US and Britain to act more forcibly. It might have induced the Allied powers to act sooner to condemn Nazi Germany and to intervene to stop the daily killings. A written report could also have been studied and revived later by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs – after all, the horrors of the Holocaust had become fully known only after the liberation of the camps—and prompted the Swedish government to do more by way of rescue operations towards the end of the war when it no longer had to fear any Nazi German reprisals.⁵²

Von Otter may have felt that he had betrayed Gerstein, who, with his own life in danger, had asked him to immediately transfer the information to his own Swedish government and through it to the Allied powers. He did not manage to save Gerstein's life because he seems to have acted too late and in an indirect way. Gerstein turned himself in to the French forces on April 21, 1945, and was sent to a prison in Paris towards the end of May. We cannot know if and when von Otter learned about Gerstein's imprisonment and trial. Did he actively try to find out his whereabouts? The newspaper *France-Soir* reported about his trial on July 5, 1945. Only on July 23, 1945, did von Otter write his letter to the Swedish legation in London.⁵³

As mentioned in the beginning, the role of different civil servants at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is outside the scope of this study. However, the role of the person whom von Otter met in Stockholm, the head of the political department, Staffan Söderblom, seems at first glance questionable.⁵⁴ The head of the legation in Berlin, Arvid Richert, was biased in his attitude towards Nazi Germany and sometimes pursued his own agenda. Both Richert and his deputy, von Post, seem to have opposed any public Swedish appeals or the issuance of Swedish protective passports for the Jews even in February–March 1945.⁵⁵ When instructing von Otter not to finish his written report, Richert may have abused his power. If Richert was afraid that a written report might have been discovered by the Germans, he should, of course, have instructed von Otter to travel immediately to Stockholm to report. A Swedish report would have supported other reports from this time and could not have been easily dismissed by the Allied powers. Richert was probably not aware of these other reports, but in suppressing von Otter's report he deliberately took a decision that showed his attitude towards reporting on the Nazi German crimes against humanity.

TO UNDERSTAND retrospectively von Otter and his reporting, one must take into account the environment at the legation in Berlin and the ministry in Stockholm during the war. It appears that it was influenced by pro-German feelings – dating from long before the outbreak of World War II – and a fear of antagonizing Nazi Germany, at least when it looked as if Germany would win the war.⁵⁶ Von Otter was a man with a conscience – this is proven

by his attempt to save Gerstein – but it also appears that, if there was any conflict between conscience and career he may have given priority to his career. It is tragic that he not only did not succeed in transmitting Gerstein's information to the ministry in an effective way, or make it public in some other way, but also failed to save the life of Gerstein, the person he obviously felt an obligation to save.

However, it would be unfair to compare von Otter with Karski. Jan Karski was a Polish officer who fought for his own country under occupation by Nazi Germany and who felt a strong empathy for his persecuted people, irrespective of religion. Karski was prepared to risk his own life by entering ghettos and camps in disguise to collect firsthand information on the ongoing extermination, and then to secretly travel to Britain to inform the Polish government in exile and the Allied powers. Karski was both an eyewitness and an emissary on behalf of the Polish government in exile.

VON OTTER DID NOT have to risk his life and, luckily, hardly anyone did in the Swedish legation or the ministry. He happened by chance to receive information from a trustworthy witness who begged him to forward it to the Swedish government. After having met Gerstein on the train, he met the protestant clergyman Dibelius in Berlin to verify the information. We will never know what Dibelius told him, but he might have been the wrong person to ask for advice. Von Otter was probably not aware that Dibelius was an anti-Semite and that the information may have fallen on deaf ears.⁵⁷ He managed more or less to carry out the mission—which he had not chosen himself—but in a way that did not leave any trace in Sweden and did not have any impact whatsoever on the course of events. The responsibility for the latter, however, falls on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both von Otter and Karski met with indifference and disbelief in their reporting.

One can speculate as to whether another person in the same situation would have moved heaven and earth to disseminate the information, even though it might have caused him or her discomfort. Von Otter was a civil servant of relatively low rank at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the same background as most people in the ministry at that time, and did as he was instructed by his superiors, who all expected that Nazi Germany would be victorious. On the other hand, von Otter belonged to a distinguished noble family. Possibly, he could have tried harder to deliver a written report on Gerstein's shocking information, especially as he had taken some trouble to verify who Gerstein was. It cannot be totally excluded that such a report does exist somewhere.

Nonetheless, the meeting with Gerstein made a strong impression on him, which explains why he remembered it years later. It was not his fault that his report—which according to him was presented orally—did not attract the interest of his superiors at the ministry. This was rather the result of inconsistent reporting procedures at the ministry and the inability on the part of von Otter's superiors to distinguish between important and less important reporting. Their judgment can be questioned, in particular, that of Staffan Söderblom, who happened to be head of

PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF NATIONAL REMEMBRANCE



Deportation of 10,000 Polish Jews to Treblinka during the liquidation of the ghetto in Siedlce beginning August 23, 1942.

PHOTO: JEWISH HISTORICAL INSTITUTE



Jews being loaded onto trains to Treblinka at the Warsaw Ghetto's Umschlagplatz, 1942.

the political department of the ministry at the time and who only a few years later would mislead his own ministry and fail in the Wallenberg affair.⁵⁸ ✕

Mose Apelblat, former official at the European Commission.

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references

- 1 Although no prior censorship was applied, news about alleged war crimes and atrocities was considered “cruelty propaganda” and suppressed in various legal ways. Newspapers may also have applied self-censorship. See Klas Åmark, ed., *Att bo granne med ondskan: Sveriges förhållande till Nazismen, Nazityskland och Förintelsen* [To be neighbors with evil: Sweden’s relation to Nazism, Nazi Germany and the Holocaust] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2011), ch. 6, “Tryckfrihet and presspolitik i andra världskrigets skugga” [Freedom of expression and press policy in the shadow of WWII].
- 2 Quotation from Maciej Sadowski, *Jan Karski Photobiography* (Warszawa: VEDA, 2014).
- 3 The Swedish diplomatic representation in Berlin before and during the Second World War was called a legation, which was lower than an embassy. After the war it was upgraded to embassy.
- 4 Birgitta von Otter, *Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar* [Umbilical cords’ and Fools Mirrors] (Stockholm: Alba, 1991), 268. The author does not give any more details about this task.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 280 (excerpt from Gerstein’s own account).
- 6 See papers from the international conference in Zamość in November 2013, “Jan Karski: Witness, Emissary, Man”, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Memory-of-Polands-Jan-Karski-early-reporter-of-the-Holocaust-honored-330959>.
- 7 He was born Jan Kozielski. During the war he adopted Karski as his nom de guerre and became known to the world by this name.
- 8 Robert Wistrich, *Hitler and the Holocaust* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001), 213.
- 9 Jan Karski had Jewish friends at school in Łódź and Jewish teachers at the university in Lvov. After the war, in 1965, he married Pola Niréńska, a choreographer and dancer of Polish-Jewish origin. About one third of the 670,000 inhabitants in Łódź before the war were Jews. Almost immediately after the Nazi German occupation, a ghetto was established in Łódź. When the ghetto was liquidated in August 1944, 200,000 Jews had been killed.
- 10 Wistrich, *Hitler*, 213–214.
- 11 Marian Marek Drozdowski, *Jan Karski Kozielski, 1914–2000: The Emissary who Sought Help from the Allied Powers for the Polish Underground State and Holocaust Victims* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza ASPRA, 2014), ch. 8.
- 12 The two persons whom Karski met in Warsaw have been identified as

- leaders of the Jewish resistance organization, one representing the Zionist organizations and the other the Jewish socialist organization Bund. In their desperation they asked Karski to convey to the allied powers that they should bomb German cities without mercy and drop leaflets telling the Germans about the fate of the Jews in Poland, threatening them that this would also happen to the Germans during and after the war. They thought that this was the only way to put an end to the Nazi-German atrocities. According to Nir Rakovski, Karski was not taken to Belżec but to a transit camp in Izbica Lubelska, halfway between Lublin and Belżec, where he witnessed awful scenes. See Jan Karski, *Courier from Poland: The Story of a Secret State*, French to Hebrew trans. Nir Rakovski (Tel Aviv: Sifrei Aliyat Hagag, 2014), 374 and 390.
- 13 *The Joint Declaration by Members of the United Nations*, a statement issued on December 17, 1942, by the American and British governments on behalf of the Allied powers.
 - 14 According to Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 213–217, when the invasion of the Soviet Union did not go as planned, Hitler changed strategy and the extermination of the Jews became his main wartime policy. For a comprehensive analysis of what the Allied powers knew and the possible reasons for not understanding and not acting, see Daniel Tilles, *Passive Accomplices or Helpless Bystanders? British and American Responses to the Holocaust, 1941–1945* (Craków: Galicia Jewish Museum, 2008) 110–135.
 - 15 Jan Karski, *Courier from Poland: The Story of a Secret State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944).
 - 16 Two of the last chapters in his book describe his secret visits to the Warsaw ghetto and the transit camp Izbica Lubelska in vivid and terrifying language. What he witnessed defies human comprehension.
 - 17 Wistrich, *Hitler*, 214.
 - 18 Arthur Morse, *While Six Millions Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Random House, 1968), 3–36.
 - 19 According to Wistrich (*Hitler*, 144), Riegner had already on March 3, 1942, sent a “remarkably detailed report on the fate of the Jews in Poland and the rest of Europe”, which reached the Vatican through the papal nuncio in Bern. It spoke of “more than a million Jews exterminated by the Germans”, pointing out that the old, the sick, and women and children were being systematically deported, a measure that clearly could not have been implemented for the purposes of forced labor.
 - 20 Steven Koblik, *Om vi teg, skulle stenarna ropa: Sverige och judeproblemet, 1933–1945* [The Stones Cry Out: Sweden’s Response to the Persecution of the Jews, 1933–1945], Swedish trans. Erik Frykman (Stockholm: Norstedts Förlag, 1987), 66, 67, 148–150, 266.
 - 21 As is mentioned later on in the study, only Richert and von Post knew about von Otter’s meeting with Gerstein. Von Post normally attached cover letters to the reports drafted by the embassy staff.
 - 22 The aide-memoire is based on a letter dated July 23, 1942, from von Otter to Lagerfelt, first secretary at the embassy in London (see Koblik, *Stones Cry Out*, 266–267). Von Otter’s letter, although drafted almost three years after his meeting with Gerstein, gives quite a detailed account of the meeting; see excerpt in Birgitta von Otter, *Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar*, 271. The letter is included in extenso in Omar Magnergård’s interview with Göran von Otter, *I andra världskrigets skugga*. Birgitta von Otter also quotes an interview on tape with her father, made in the beginning of the 1980s when he was well over 70 years old, where her father reproduces, in detail, what Gerstein had told him about the killing of the Jews in death chambers using exhaust gas from trucks (*Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar*, 273). This information was probably not known to Koblik.
 - 23 Ingvar Svanberg and Mattias Tydén, *Sverige och Förintelsen: Debatt och dokument om Europas judar 1933–1945* [Sweden and the Holocaust: debate and documents on the Jews of Europe 1933–1945] (Stockholm: Arena, 1997), 38, 236–237. The authors give a detailed overview of the reporting on the Holocaust in Swedish newspapers, with extensive extracts from the articles. The persecutions and mass murders of the Jews in Nazi-occupied countries were known in Sweden as early as 1942. What was less known, before 1943, was how the killings were carried out.
 - 24 Clarification by e-mail of June 9, 2013, from Tydén to the writer.
 - 25 Paul A. Levine, *From Indifference to Activism: Swedish Diplomacy and the Holocaust* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1996), 123.
 - 26 Åmark, *Granne med ondskan*.
 - 27 Clarification in e-mail of June 17, 2013, from Åmark to the writer.
 - 28 Göran Rosenberg, *Ett kort uppehåll på vägen från Auschwitz* [A brief stop on the way from Auschwitz] (Falun: Bonnier, 2012).
 - 29 At about the same time as von Otter met Gerstein, “between 3 and 12 September 1942, 15,859 children, sick and elderly people from the ghetto in Łódź had been killed in gas vans in Chelmo” (Rosenberg, *Kort uppehåll*, 55).
 - 30 Magnergård, *Skugga*.
 - 31 Gerstein also disclosed his information to Dibelius, who, according to Birgitta von Otter (*Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar*, 271), conveyed it to the Swedish archbishop Erling Eidem. Regarding Dibelius and the church in Germany, see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), [references to 1997 paperback ed.], 108–114. According to Goldhagen, Dibelius had described himself as an anti-Semite even before Hitler came to power and had expressed the logic of the reigning eliminationalist anti-Semitism. According to Åmark (*Granne med ondskan*, 330, 334–336), Eidem’s activity with regard to Nazi Germany and the persecutions of the Jews is disputed. Koblik, who devotes a whole chapter in his book to Eidem and the Swedish organization for the religious conversion of Jews (SIM, Svenska Israelmissionen), paints a more detailed picture of Eidem’s role, but reaches the same conclusion: He did not act on the information he received from Dibelius among others because he was influenced by the Swedish government, which considered information about the Nazi German extermination campaign a “potential security risk” against Swedish interests and relations with Nazi Germany (Koblik, *Stones Cry Out*, 106). When he refused to issue an appeal for the Hungarian Jews, he first asked the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs whether it would be the correct thing to do. The reply was affirmative (Ibid., 112). This happened as late as July 1944, when it was only a matter of time before Nazi Germany would be defeated, and Sweden had little to fear from its reaction.
 - 32 Magnergård, *Skugga*.
 - 33 Curt Juhlin Dannfelt was military attaché at the Swedish legation in Berlin during the whole Nazi period (1933–1945) and was considered a competent and reliable person. However, the Swedish security or intelligence service reported to the government only at its own discretion (Koblik, *Stones Cry Out*, 147). An investigation by the security service during the war showed that up to 10% of the officer corps were suspected of being Nazis or pro-German (Åmark, *Granne med ondskan*, 298). Though a small minority, it was more than in the general population. The pro-German “National Sweden–Germany Society” had many officers among its members, some of them with high rank. The commander of the defense forces, Olof Thörnell, had himself congratulated Hitler on his 50th birthday. Åmark (*Granne med ondskan*, 300) writes that a general, Samuel Åkerhielm, had been compromised because of (presumably) pro-German statements. Both Olof Thörnell and his successor Helge Jung favored a Swedish military intervention on the side of Finland against the Soviet Union. (This would effectively have put Sweden on Nazi Germany’s side and could have been a secondary motive among pro-German officers. Author’s comment.)
 - 34 Von Otter, *Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar*.

- 35 Ibid., 258.
- 36 Ibid., 259, letter by Richert on September 2, 1942, to the ministry. Richert is characterized by Åmark as one who staunchly advocated that Sweden should conduct a friendly and positive policy towards Nazi Germany to secure its role in a Nazi-dominated Europe after the war (Åmark, *Granne med ondskan*, 101, 108).
- 37 Judging from von Otter's letter to Lagerfelt, he was a good writer, and his Swedish still reads well and is easy to understand.
- 38 E-mail of August 22, 2013, from Ann Sofie von Otter to the author of this article.
- 39 Von Otter, *Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar*, 274.
- 40 Staffan Söderblom, the son of Nathan Söderblom (Sweden's most famous archbishop before the war), was head of the political department during 1938–1944. During 1944–1946 he was Swedish envoy (ambassador) to Moscow, where he dealt with the Raoul Wallenberg affair. An official Swedish commission (SOU 2003:18) on the Wallenberg affair and its management by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was very critical of Söderblom's reporting and handling of the affair. It appears that his policy was to do anything to avoid antagonizing the Soviet government. See *Ett diplomatiskt misslyckande: Fallet Raoul Wallenberg och den svenska utrikesledningen* [A diplomatic failure: The case of Raoul Wallenberg and the Swedish foreign authorities], SOU 2003:18, 151–161, <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/108/a/1455>. In the report Söderblom's reporting from Moscow is described as whitewashing. A colleague describes his management of the political department in Stockholm as a dictatorship. In 1954 Söderblom was put on leave for personal reasons. Birgitta von Otter has drawn my attention to an interview with her father in Paris in 1981 by Gitta Sereny, according to which Staffan Söderblom told Göran von Otter, at their meeting, to forget everything and wished him a pleasant vacation. See Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth*, (London: Vintage Books, 1995), 355–359.
- 41 Gösta Engzell was head of the legal department of the ministry during the war. After the war he told authors who interviewed him that he had been informed about Gerstein much earlier. For an evaluation of his role as administrative rescuer in a situation of moral ambiguity, see also Paul Levine's paper "Teaching the Hero in Holocaust History: The Case of Raoul Wallenberg and Gösta Engzell", October 14, 1999, <http://www.yadvashem.org/download/education/conf/Levine.pdf>.
- 42 Von Otter, *Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar*, 286.
- 43 Ibid., 286–287.
- 44 The correspondence from and to the embassy during the months June–September 1942, is in the Swedish National Archives (Riksarkivet) in Stockholm. The documents referred to in the text can be found in dossiers HP 1 Ct vol. 321, 322, 323, 324, 325 (UD 1920 dossier system).
- 45 Vendel, P.M. (Promemoria/Memorandum), dated Berlin, August 22, 1942, quotation from cover letter (Swedish National Archives).
- 46 Vendel obviously never entered the Warsaw ghetto, as Karski did. If he had, he would not have written as he did. From autumn 1940 to July 1942, about 92,000 Warsaw Jews died of starvation and disease. (Karski, *Courier from Poland*). In July 1942, the first deportations to the extermination camp Treblinka started. By September 1942, about 300,000 Jews had been murdered. After two months of killings in the ghetto and deportations to Treblinka perhaps 60,000 Jews remained in the ghetto. See also Snyder, *Bloodland*, 263–269 on the deportations to Treblinka and 280–292 on the uprising in the ghetto.
- 47 Koblik, *Stones Cry Out*, 267.
- 48 Von Otter, *Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar*, 291–297.
- 49 Åmark, *Granne med ondskan*, chap. 6–7.
- 50 Ibid., ch. 11. It is noteworthy that Söderblom, in one of his reports from Moscow, describes the purging of Jews in the administration as a means of avoiding the reoccurrence of anti-Semitism in the country (SOU 2003:18, 154). See also Åmark, *Granne med ondskan*, 368, on the influence of anti-Semitism in the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- 51 Daniel Tilles is skeptical as to whether an additional report would have had any effect in inducing a firmer response from the US or UK (e-mail of January 28, 2015, from Tilles to the author). According to Tilles, both countries already had plenty of information; the problem was (a) the collation and analysis of that information, but also, and more importantly, (b) the lack of willingness to act on the information (for various reasons). Klas Åmark shares the assessment (e-mail of December 9, 2013, to the author) that it was the aggregated reporting on the Holocaust that influenced the Allied powers during the war, and that it is not very likely that their willingness would have been affected by a written report by von Otter directly after his meeting with Gerstein.
- 52 Koblik, *Stones Cry Out*, 157–158.
- 53 In his aide-memoire of August 7, 1945, Lagerfelt does not mention von Otter by name but refers to a "member of a neutral embassy in Berlin". On August 14, 1945, Lagerfelt informed von Otter about his aide-memoire and pointed out that von Otter's name was not indicated (von Otter, *Navelsträngar och Narrspeglar*, 300).
- 54 According to Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's "Final Solution"* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 65–67 (reference is to the German translation in paperback, 1982), Söderblom said about von Otter's report: "We thought that it was too risky to transfer information from one belligerent party to another." He is also said to have remarked that many rumors were floating around during that time. Laqueur wrote that Söderblom's argument could hardly be taken seriously, since there were, of course, different means and ways to forward the news without implicating the Swedish government as the source.
- 55 Koblik, *Stones Cry Out*, 255–257.
- 56 The role of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not been studied in detail by the author of this article. The ministry could have asked von Otter to write a report after hearing him, but evidently did not. Åmark (*Granne med ondskan*, 536) mentions that the head of the legal department at the ministry, Gösta Engzell (who, according to Göran von Otter's testimony, had been informed by Söderblom about his meeting with Gerstein), was engaged in the Swedish activities at the end of November 1942 to rescue Norwegian Jews. Von Otter's meeting with Söderblom took place around January 1943, so any information from that meeting could not have influenced Engzell (unless he had known about the information much earlier). Altogether, 1100 Jews fled from Norway to Sweden with the support of the Norwegian underground movement. In October 1943 the majority of the Danish Jews (7900 persons, according to Åmark, *Granne med ondskan*, 538) were rescued by boat to Sweden. However, the action came too late for the 770 Norwegian Jews who had been deported of whom the majority were murdered in Auschwitz. Sweden felt a special responsibility for the Jewish citizens in a neighboring Nordic country and for Jews with a connection to Sweden. For a detailed overview of the reporting and protests in Sweden against the deportation of the Jews in Norway, see Svanberg and Tydén, *Sverige och Förintelsen*, ch. 12.
- 57 See note 31.
- 58 See Ingrid Carlberg's article, "Raoul Wallenberg: Sveriges svek", *Dagens Nyheter*, January 17, 2015, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/sveriges-svek/>. She describes the handling of the disappearance of Wallenberg as a Swedish betrayal and diplomatic failure, in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs failed to act on information and uncritically accepted disinformation. A key person was Staffan Söderblom, the envoy in Moscow, who in his meetings with the Soviet authorities accepted their allegation that Wallenberg had fallen victim to an accident.