



# Totalitarianism in Europe

THREE CASE STUDIES

*by Hannes H. Gissurarson*



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Two of the papers which follow practically wrote themselves: I originally had no intention of putting them together, but in my general research I came across, or rather stumbled upon, topics which deserved, I felt, further pursuit. When I was editing a republication of an extract in Icelandic of Elinor Lipper's book, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*, I found very little information about the author so I went and obtained documents about her from archives abroad, mainly in Switzerland. As often happens, the truth turned out to be much more intriguing than what one could have imagined. Lipper had been a Comintern courier; most likely, but then very briefly, Ignazio Silone's lover; a mother in the Soviet Gulag; and in the Cold War a powerful and persuasive witness against communism, not only in a French court, but also on the lecture circuit.

Likewise, when I was browsing in the personal files of communist leader Einar Olgeirsson for my study of the Icelandic communist movement, I found letters between him and a prominent East German scholar, Dr. Bruno Kress, about an incident about which I had had no idea: that in the late 1950s at a communist gathering in Iceland, a Jewish refugee from Germany, Henny Goldstein, had recognised Kress as an ardent pre-war Nazi. I then discovered yet another connection between the two German pre-war residents in Iceland. Whereas Kress had been working on Icelandic grammar with a grant from *Abnenerbe*, the notorious SS 'research institute', Goldstein's brother had been sent from Auschwitz by the same *Abnenerbe* to participate in grisly experiments, which led to the so-called 'skeleton collection' in the Natzweiler camp.

Certainly the cases of Lipper and Goldstein are in some ways different. But what links them together is that they are about victims, and in some cases survivors, of the totalitarian menace threatening Europe in the last century, indeed for a while controlling most of the continent.<sup>1</sup> Lipper was kept in a Soviet camp, Magadan, Goldstein's brother in a Nazi camp, first Auschwitz, then Natzweiler. It is true that the Soviet camps was not operated in order to exterminate prisoners, but rather in order to wrest as much hard labour out of them as possible. But even if the

communists did not aim directly at exterminating people, they certainly wanted to exterminate certain ideas, and if they had to sacrifice human lives for that aim, they did so without qualms. What national socialism and communism had in common was that everything was permissible for the good of the cause—of which neither group felt any doubt. The consequences for ordinary Europeans, caught up in the totalitarian tempest, were of course disastrous, as these two papers amply illustrate.

The third case study is not as much about the victims of totalitarianism in the 20th century as about one of its apologists, Icelandic writer Halldor K. Laxness, the 1955 Nobel Laureate in Literature. In this study, I draw on an unauthorised biography of Laxness which I wrote in three volumes in 2003–5 and on a paper on Laxness I read to the regional meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society in Iceland in 2005. Even if the account is of a successful Western intellectual in a peaceful, remote country, a few victims of totalitarian communism briefly pass over the pages: Vera Hertzsch whose arrest Laxness witnessed in 1938 perished in a labour camp in Karaganda in 1943, and presumably her little half-Icelandic daughter died long before that. Two Czech friends of Laxness survived, Zdeněk Němček and Emil Walter, but both of them had to leave their country after the 1948 communist takeover and they died as broken men. If the idea of 'collective responsibility' makes any sense, then it is an interesting question, not explored here, whether the apologists of communist rulers such as Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot, share some responsibility for their misdeeds.

Indeed, an important difference between national socialism and communism is that there have been no Nuremberg trials of the communists. Their misdeeds, unlike those of the Nazis, have not been etched into the memory of mankind. It is therefore a task left to historians to try and tell the truth about a social experiment which everywhere ended in misery, costing the lives of 100 million people.<sup>2</sup> These three papers form, I hope, a small contribution to that immense task.

Reykjavik, 19 February 2018.

*Hannes H. Gissurarson*

<sup>1</sup> In mid-1940, there were only six functioning democracies in Europe: the United Kingdom, Ireland, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland and Iceland.

<sup>2</sup> Stéphane Courtois (ed.), *Le livre noir du communisme* (Paris: Laffont, 1997).



# The Survivor ELINOR LIPPER

## A Brief Note on a Little-Known Episode of the Cold War

*Elinor Lipper's Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps, published in 1950, was widely read and discussed as a gripping, yet sober account of life in Stalin's labour camps. But in contemporary works on the Gulag or the Cold War where she is mentioned incomplete or inaccurate information is provided about her. In her book, she did not say much about herself, either. It turns out that her life before and after the prison camp was quite complicated. Born in Belgium in 1912, she came from a family of German Jews. She was a European courier for the Comintern in the 1930s, seemingly had a brief affair with Italian writer Ignazio Silone, had an arranged marriage to obtain Swiss citizenship, bore a child in a Soviet prison camp, made a huge impact by her book and by her testimony in court and at conferences, and then she suddenly withdrew from public life, living in Madagascar and Switzerland, and passing away in 2008.*

In a 2002 collection of personal stories from the Gulag, the editors mention Elinor Lipper, the author of a much-quoted book published in 1950, at the height of the Cold War, *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps*.<sup>3</sup> The editors say that Lipper was a “Belgian communist” who entered the Soviet Union in 1937 and that she spent the years 1937 to 1948 in Soviet prison camps. They add: “In 1955, while attending an anti-Communist conference in Berlin, Lipper disappeared. Rumors were that the Soviets had kidnapped her, or worse. The only trace of her in history remained her frightening revelations of the reality behind the illusion of socialist equality in the Soviet Union.”<sup>4</sup> This information is not entirely accurate: Lipper was not Belgian and she was not kidnapped, although she chose in the 1950s not to become a professional Cold Warrior. In another 2002 book, on propaganda in the Cold War, the author identifies Elinor Lipper, “a native of Germany”, as an anti-communist writer having some impact in the United States. He goes on to complain in a footnote: “I found little information on Elinor Lipper.”<sup>5</sup> The author is certainly right that not much information about Lipper is readily available, for example online. But even if Lipper’s family was originally German, she was not a native of Germany. A third example is that in a 2015 book about the musician Nicolas Nabokov, Lipper is called a “Dutch citizen”.<sup>6</sup> This is also incorrect; she was a Swiss citizen. What follows is a brief note on Elinor Lipper, in order to set the record straight on a short, but important episode of the Cold War.<sup>7</sup>

## The Comintern Courier

Eleonore Lipper truly was a European cosmopolitan. Born in Etterbeek, a district of Brussels in Belgium, 5 July 1912,<sup>8</sup> she came from a well-to-do German-Jewish family. Her mother, Lilli, was born Katz in 1884. Her father, businessman Oskar Salomon Lipper, born in 1874, lived in Brussels with her mother before the First World War. He was the son of Jacob Lipper from Aachen and his wife, Eleonore Laura, born Mayer.<sup>9</sup> A German citizen, Oskar Salomon Lipper was briefly interned in the beginning of the First World War when hostilities started between Germany and Belgium.<sup>10</sup> He and his family then moved to the Netherlands where Eleonore Lipper was brought up, mostly in the Hague. In 1921, Oskar Lipper divorced his wife and moved to Switzerland where he died seven years later in Locarno. During the War, his best friend and brother-in-law, Bernhard Mayer, also originally a German citizen, had moved from Belgium to Switzerland.<sup>11</sup> A wealthy furrier and art collector, Mayer was a friend of the anarchist Kropotkin and known for his radical sympathies. He and his wife, Auguste Mayer-Lipper, had a place in Zürich and a house in Ascona. When Eleonore’s parents divorced, her mother got custody of her and continued for a while to live in the Hague. Eleonore however regularly visited her father and the Mayers in Switzerland. Her mother Lilli later remarried and moved to Palma de Mallorca in Spain.<sup>12</sup>

In 1931, at the age of 19, Eleonore Lipper started studying medicine in Germany, first in Freiburg and then in Berlin.<sup>13</sup> Witnessing the abject poverty in

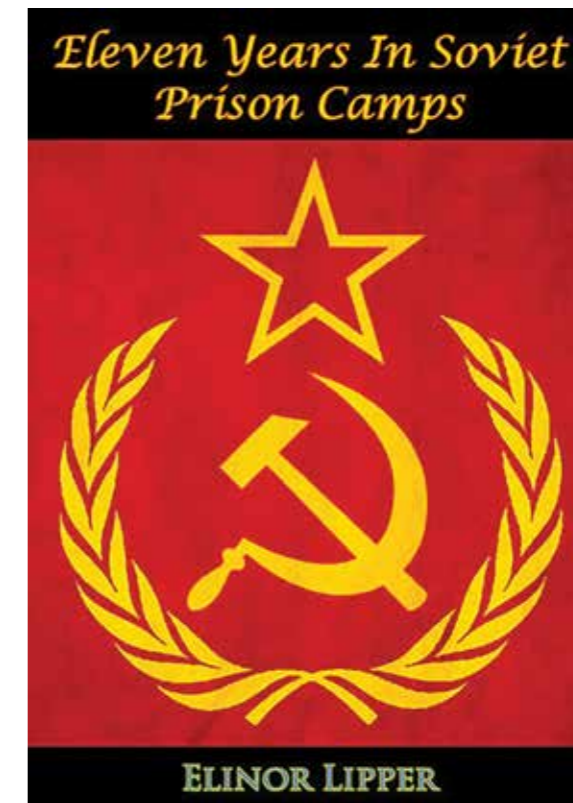
some of Berlin’s worker districts, she became a committed communist and in October 1932 joined the ‘red students’ association of Berlin.<sup>14</sup> As both a communist and a Jew, she became especially vulnerable after the Nazi take-over at the end of January 1933. When her flat in Wilmersdorf was searched, copies were found of the illegal *Red Front* (Rot Front), the organ of the communist paramilitary Red Front Fighters League (Roter Frontkämpferbund), already banned in 1929. From 1 March 1933, Eleonore Lipper was on Gestapo’s list of wanted persons, being indicted in January 1934.<sup>15</sup> She managed to flee to her relatives in Switzerland, entering the country on 15 March 1933.<sup>16</sup> In the autumn of 1933, Eleonore Lipper moved to Turin in Italy, planning to continue her medical studies there. She could not, however, do so for lack of necessary documentation from Germany.

After a few months, she returned to her relatives in Switzerland, studying physiotherapy in Zürich and Ascona. In the spring of 1935, she spent three months with her mother, now Lilli Obermayer-Katz, in Palma de Mallorca.<sup>17</sup>

When Eleonore Lipper returned in the summer of 1935 to Switzerland, she encountered a problem. The Swiss Police had discovered, in a raid on the headquarters of a communist front organisation, that she had in May 1934 joined the Swiss Communist Party.<sup>18</sup> Apparently, she participated in some underground activities organised by the Swiss communist—and Soviet

agent—Willi Trostel although she later refused to reveal anything about them.<sup>19</sup> According to Comintern files, but probably unbeknownst to the Swiss police, in the mid-1930s she worked for the international department of the Comintern, usually called OMS after its Russian initials. A German citizen, and only on a temporary visa in Switzerland, Lipper was expelled from the country in September 1935, allegedly for working there illegally, whereupon the Party arranged her marriage to a Swiss citizen, Konrad Vetterli, born 10 October 1912, from the municipality Hirzel in Zürich canton. Vetterli was unemployed and interested in going to the Soviet Union. He and Eleonore Lipper were married in London 11 December 1935.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Eleonore Lipper became a Swiss citizen by marriage. The Swiss Embassy in London issued her a passport, and she could continue her clandestine activities for the Soviet Union: She travelled around under different names and with different passports, as Selma Reichmann from Austria in 1935–1937, as Jeanne Stein from Luxembourg in 1935, and under her real name, Eleonore Vetterli from Switzerland.<sup>21</sup> It seems however that her nominal husband Konrad Vetterli handed his passport over to a German communist, Wilhelm Friedrich Dannemann, born 4 April 1901, who was like Eleonore Lipper working for the communist underground movement and travelling under different names. Dannemann had been briefly imprisoned in 1920 and served as a Comintern courier in various countries in



3 Elinor Lipper, German edition *Elf Jahre in Sowjetischen Gefängnissen und Lagern* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1950); UK edition *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps* (London: World Affairs Book Club, 1950); US edition *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951).

4 Donald T. and Agnieszka Crichtlow, *Enemies of the State. Personal Stories from the Gulag* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), pp. 17 and 20. The source of the kidnapping story seems to be Marvin Liebman, *Coming Out Conservative: An Autobiography* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992), p. 89.

5 Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Rhetorical Presidency, Propaganda, and the Cold War, 1945–1955* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002), p. 103.

6 Vincent Giroud, *Nicolas Nabokov: A Life in Freedom and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 231.

7 Professor Peter Huber kindly put at my disposal documents from his research into Soviet prisoners from Switzerland. Dr. Vilhjalmur Orn Vilhjalmsson helped me to trace some European Jewish families.

8 Swiss Federal Archives: Nachforschungen nach Schweizern. Spezielle Fälle. File on Ruth Zander. E 2001 (E) 1967-113, 3913, 71, Notiz betr. Eleonore Vetterli-Lipper 6 December 1947. Hereafter only the last number of the Ruth Zander file will be quoted.

9 Germany, Selected Births and Baptisms, 1558–1898 (online database, www.ancestry.co.uk). Oskar Salomon Lipper from Brussels, b. 1874, is confused with Oskar Lipper from Bochum, b. 1882, in Fritz Ostkämpfer, *Die Familien Lipper und Benjamin* [The Lipper and Benjamin families], [http://www.jacob-pins.de/?article\\_id=325&clang=0](http://www.jacob-pins.de/?article_id=325&clang=0)

10 Bernhard Mayer, *Interessante Zeitgenossen. Lebenserinnerungen eines jüdischen Kaufmanns und Weltbürgers*. Ed. by Erhard Roy Wiehn (Konstanz: Hartung-Gore Verlag, 1998), pp. 203–204. (Both in German and English.)

11 Peter Huber, *Stalins Schatten in die Schweiz. Schweizer Kommunisten in Moskau: Verteidiger und Gefangene der Komintern* (Zürich: Chronos, 1994), p. 540.

12 Swiss Federal Archives: Kommunistische Bewegungen [Communist Movements], E 4320 (B) 1978-121 879, 11. Feststellungen i. S. Eleonora Lipper, 13 December 1950. Hereafter only the last numbers of the file on Kommunistische Bewegungen will be quoted.

13 Lipper was registered as a medical student at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (now Humboldt University) from November 1931 to March 1933, with “Matrikelnummer” 1970-122, <https://www.hu-berlin.de/de/ueberblick/geschichte/juedische-studierende/namensliste>

14 Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, RGASPI: 495 205 3364. File on Elinor Lipper-Vetterli, alias Ruth Zander. Copies of documents from the personal file of Peter Huber. Hereafter quoted just as RGASPI. Also, Lipper, *Eleven Years*, p. 13.

15 Hans-Joachim Fieber, Klaus Keim and Oliver Reschke, *Widerstand in Berlin gegen das NS-Regime 1933 bis 1945* (Berlin: trafo, 2004), 5, p. 100.

16 Swiss Federal Archives: Kommunistische Bewegungen, 879, 11. Feststellungen [Identification].

17 Swiss Federal Archives: Kommunistische Bewegungen, 879, 1. An das Polizeinspektorat [To the Police Authorities], 23 July 1934. Same file, 11, Feststellungen [Identification]. Same file, 13. An den Leiter des Nachrichtendienst [To the Director of Intelligence], 28 December 1950.

18 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 9. Personenschäden [Personal Damages], 4 November 1957. Kommunistische Bewegungen, 879, 1. An das Polizeinspektorat [To the Police Authorities], 23 July 1934.

19 Huber, *Stalins Schatten in die Schweiz*, pp. 203–204. Huber interviewed Lipper in January 1990.

20 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 57. Bericht von [Report by] Insp. H. Fatzer, 27 October 1950. U.K. National Archives: England and Wales, Marriage Index, 1916–2005, Vol. 1b, p. 200 [online database], ancestry.co.uk. Huber, *Stalins Schatten*, pp. 204–205.

21 RGASPI: 495 205 3364. File on Elinor Lipper-Vetterli, alias Ruth Zander.



Elinor Lipper just after her release from Soviet prison camps, where she had spent 11 years, 1937–1948. Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv.

the 1930s. The task of such couriers was to transfer money and documents secretly between different places.<sup>22</sup> “Millions passed through my hands, but not one Kopek was ever lost,” Dannemann later said to the Soviet secret police.<sup>23</sup> In 1928, he had married another communist agent, Erna, born Wiegand. Briefly in 1935, the Comintern was about to send all three, Eleonore Lipper and Wilhelm and Erna Dannemann, to Brazil where the local communist party was planning an insurgency, but the mission was aborted.<sup>24</sup>

## From Hotel Lux to Prison Camp

The secrecy surrounding Comintern’s operations makes accounts of its agents and collaborators at times somewhat complicated. While Konrad Vetterli’s registered wife was working for OMS around Europe, he himself went to the Soviet Union in February 1937, on the recommendation of Viktor Zander, alias Wilhelm Dannemann, using himself a passport in the name of Jakob Fischbacher. Vetterli/Fischbacher was employed at the Publishing Company for Foreign Works in the Soviet Union, VEGAAR, after its German initials (Verlagsgenossenschaft ausländischer Arbeiter in der UdSSR).<sup>25</sup> In early 1937, Wilhelm Dannemann and Eleonore Vetterli-Lipper obtained visas to the Soviet Union from the Soviet Embassy in Paris, under the names of Konrad and Eleonore Vetterli. Upon arrival from Paris, they were accommodated under the names Viktor and Ruth Zander at the famous Moscow Hotel Lux where revolutionaries from all over the world stayed as guests of the Soviet Union. Ruth Zander got a job at the Soviet Publishing House for Foreign Literature. Her aunt’s husband, Bernhard Mayer, occasionally went to Russia to buy furs. “I was pleasantly surprised on one of these trips to meet my niece Elinor Lipper and her husband in Moscow. We hadn’t heard from her for years before,” he later wrote.<sup>26</sup>

In Moscow, Ruth Zander became acquainted with a Swiss exile, Berta Zimmermann, who worked at the International Department of the Comintern, OMS. Zimmermann was married to the well-known Swiss communist Fritz Platten, an old friend of Lenin. The association with Zimmermann, in the midst of Stalin’s great purges, proved fateful for Ruth Zander. In the beginning of June 1937, Zimmermann was arrested, and later her husband Platten. Unbeknownst to Ruth Zander at the time, Zimmermann and her husband were eventually both executed. On suspicion of „counter-revolutionary activity”, 26 July 1937, after only two months in the Soviet Union, Ruth and Viktor Zander was both arrested.<sup>27</sup> Ruth Zander was first brought to Lubyanka Prison, and then transferred to Butyrka Prison where she spent several months in a mass cell. She received on 14 October 1938 a five years sentence for “counter-revolutionary activities” and was sent to a transit camp in Vladivostok, whereupon she arrived in Magadan prison camp in June 1939. Although her sentence had been for five years, she spent seven and a half years in Magadan, as she described in her later book. The Soviet government pursued a policy of not releasing political prisoners during the War. In 1946 Ruth Zander became pregnant in the camp. She was transferred 18 December 1946 to Aktyubinsk prison camp in Kazakhstan, giving birth 27 January 1947 to a daughter, Eugenia. Mother and daughter were in September 1947 transferred to a camp in Brest-Litovsk in White Russia, close to the Polish border, awaiting repatriation to Germany, as the Soviet authorities considered Ruth Zander a German citizen.<sup>28</sup>

The first information the Swiss authorities received about this woman with Swiss citizenship and an infant daughter came from a resident of Erlangen in Germany, Ingeburg Rzymann, who in November 1947 sent a letter to the Swiss Consulate in Munich. She wrote that her niece had spent time in a Siberian prison camp where she had encountered a Swiss citizen, Ruth Zander, who had told her that she had been imprisoned with her husband, a correspondent for Swiss newspapers, and that he had probably passed away. Now this Ruth Zander was being

22 On the activities of such couriers, see, for example, Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett and Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981); R.S. Rose and Gordon D. Scott, *Johnny: A Spy's Life* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010).

23 RGASPI: 495 205 3364. File on Wilhelm Dannemann, alias Viktor Zander. Interrogation 27 July 1940.

24 RGASPI: 495 205 3364. Files on Wilhelm and Erna Dannemann. The Dannemanns both had cover names. Wilhelm Dannemann was called not only Viktor Zander, but also Erwin Reichmann from Austria, Ejnar Sigurd Harry Lundin from Switzerland [Sweden?] and Konrad Vetterli from Switzerland. Erna Dannemann was called Erna Hiller, Karen Emilie Sofia Willadsen from Denmark, Anna Freiberg from Luxembourg, Therese Ring from Austria and Hanna Lina Weber from Switzerland.

25 RGASPI: 495 274 162. File on Konrad Vetterli.

26 Mayer, *Interessante Zeitgenossen*, p. 221. Mayer wrote this in 1944 or 1945, and added, “and since then have not received any news from her.”

27 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 60. Notiz, Betr. Bericht von Frau Eleonore Vetterli-Lipper über ihre Erlebnisse in der UdSSR. Besuch am 20.1.49. Same file, 59. Notiz über die Unterredung mit Frau Eleonore Vetterli-Lipper über ihre Erlebnisse in der UdSSR, 10 March 1949.

28 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 9. Personenschäden, 4 November 1957.

held in a transit camp in Brest in White Russia on her way to Germany and not to Switzerland although she was a Swiss citizen.<sup>29</sup> The Swiss authorities investigated the matter and found no record anywhere of a Swiss woman called Ruth Zander, let alone of a male journalist by the name of Zander.<sup>30</sup> But the very same month, in November 1947, Eleonore Vetterli-Lipper was able to send a message from the Brest prison camp to the Swiss Embassy in Warsaw. The message, with some personal information, was sewn into a jacket brought to the Embassy by an Austrian woman who was being repatriated. Another former camp inmate, who was Polish, confirmed her story and gave the Embassy staff the Zürich address of her paternal aunt, Auguste Mayer-Lipper. The two messengers told the Embassy staff that the Swiss woman carried with her a baby, whose father was allegedly a Russian paramedic. They added that the father was most likely a Tartar, judging from the baby's appearance.<sup>31</sup>

The Swiss authorities investigated the matter anew and found out that indeed a Swiss citizen by the name of Eleonore Vetterli-Lipper existed. They interviewed her aunt in Zürich, Auguste Mayer-Lipper, who had recently received a postcard from her niece after having heard nothing from her for many years. The aunt, who had spent the war years in the United States, said that she had heard nothing from or about her niece's husband, Konrad Vetterli. The official who spoke with Auguste Mayer-Lipper wrote in his report that he had thought it advisable not to tell her that Vetterli now lived in Zürich and that he had obtained a divorce

from his registered wife, her niece, in August 1944, re-marrying in 1947.<sup>32</sup> The Swiss Embassies in Warsaw and Moscow contacted Polish and Soviet authorities with information about Eleonore Vetterli-Lipper and a request that she be released.<sup>33</sup> Mother and daughter were transferred 22 April 1948 from Brest-Litovsk to a transit camp for returning prisoners in Pirna in Saxony. In May 1948, a Swiss official in Berlin was able to speak to Eleonore at the camp.<sup>34</sup> Finally, in June 1948, the Swiss authorities put mother and daughter into an aeroplane from Berlin via Frankfurt to Bern, where they caught a train to Zürich. Eleonore's aunt, Auguste Mayer-Lipper, was at the train station 15 June 1948 to greet them.<sup>35</sup> Eleonore's mother, Lilli Lipper-Obermayer, had however died in the United States in 1944.<sup>36</sup>

## Testifying about Soviet Prison Camps

Some of Eleonore Lipper's life after this is on public record. In early 1950, Elinor Lipper, as she now chose to spell her name, published in German her account of eleven years in Soviet prisons and labour camps.<sup>37</sup> It sold very well.<sup>38</sup> It was serialised in the organ of the Swiss social democrats, *Basler Arbeiter-Zeitung*, in the spring and summer of 1950.<sup>39</sup> The same year the book came out in an English translation in the United Kingdom. It was generally well-received, and Lipper for a while played a role on the Cold War cultural front.<sup>40</sup> In a Swiss police report from 1950 it was noted

29 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 74. Ingeburg Rzymann an Schweiz. Generalkonsulat München, 12 November 1947. Same file, 53. Schweizerisches Generalkonsulat München an das Eidgenössische Politische Departement, 17 November 1947.

30 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 73. Notiz, Herrn Dr. Fässler, 27 November 1947.

31 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 72. Legation de Suisse en Pologne an die Abteilung für Politische Angelegenheiten des Eidgenössischen Politischen Departements, 29 November 1947.

32 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 71, Notiz, Herrn Dr. Fässler, 6 December 1947. Konrad Vetterli's second wife was Susanne Roth Veronika Dinger, born in 1909, and they had a son in 1947, Iwan.

33 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 69. Legation de Suisse en URSS au Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Moscow, 6 January 1948. Same file, 41. Legation de Suisse en Pologne an die Abteilung für Politische Angelegenheiten des Eidgenössischen Politischen Departementes, Warsaw, 1 April 1948.

34 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 64. Schweizerische Heimschaffungsdelegation an das Eidgenössische Politische Departement, Politische Angelegenheiten, 7 May 1948.

35 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 24, Notiz [Notice], 15 June 1948. Same file, 9, Personenschäden, 4 November 1957.

36 RGASPI: 495 205 3364, file on Elinor Lipper-Vetterli, alias Ruth Zander. Huber, *Stalins Schatten in die Schweiz*, p. 540.

37 Erlebnisse in russischen Konzentrationslagern, *Berner Tagblatt*, 9 March 1950, p. 1 (cutting in the file on Ruth Zander in the Swiss Federal Archives). Ich war ein Sowjet-Häftling, *Welt am Sonntag*, 8 October 1950, p. 10 (cutting in the file on Kommunistische Bewegungen in the Swiss Federal Archive).

38 Lars Schultze, Einführung, Elinor Lipper, *Elf Jahre Meines Lebens* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 2007), p. iii.

39 Elf Jahre in sowjetrussischen Gefängnissen und Lagern, *Arbeiter Zeitung* 4 March to 10 June 1950. The Swiss Police kept a record and diligently cut out each instalment and added to the file: Swiss Federal Archives. Kommunistische Bewegungen, 879 8, 1-79.

40 Scholarly reviews in English were for example published of the German original edition by Margaret Dewar, *International Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (October, 1950), pp. 569-570; of the U.S. edition by George W. Simpson, *International Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Summer, 1951), pp. 242-244; and by William A. Nolan, *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (October, 1951), p. 190; and by N.S. Timasheff, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 276 (July, 1951), p. 177. See also Henry L. Roberts, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (October, 1951), pp. 162-163; W. H. Chamberlin,



Elinor Lipper in 1950, when her book on the Soviet labour camps had been published.

with satisfaction that “With her present journalistic activities Mrs. Vetterli makes a praiseworthy contribution to the fight against communism.”<sup>41</sup> In particular, Lipper’s readers seized upon her story about the 1944 visit to Magadan by U.S. Vice President Henry Wallace, accompanied by the controversial orientalist Dr. Owen Lattimore and other U.S. dignitaries. On that occasion, the Soviet secret service staged an elaborate show, as Lipper described in detail, although second-hand, since she was as most other camp inmates kept away. The show had the desired impact: The naive Americans had no idea that they were in the midst of labour camps, where political prisoners were daily being brutally treated, overworked, starved and sometimes killed.

In June 1950, Elinor Lipper was invited to give a speech at a Congress for Cultural Freedom, organised in Berlin, and largely financed by the U.S. Military Government in Germany. On the flight from Paris to Berlin Lipper appeared to another passenger, composer Nicolas Nabokov, who was also attending the Congress, as “a frail, diaphanous, extraordinarily sad and beautiful-looking woman”.<sup>42</sup> The Cold War was at its most intense: The day before the Congress opened, the Korean War had started with the invasion by communist forces of South Korea. Many distinguished intellectuals attended the Berlin Congress, including U.S. philosopher Sidney Hook, Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler, English philosopher Alfred J. Ayer, Italian writer Ignazio Silone and German economist Wilhelm Röpke. On the return flight from Berlin, Nabokov sat next to Elinor Lipper and talked to her in Russian which she spoke fluently. She told Nabokov that she had not enjoyed the conference; she was wary of being manipulated. They saw each other occasionally during the summer in Paris, but by the autumn, she had become engaged to a Jewish doctor in Switzerland by the name of Just Robert Català, born 28 October 1912 in Célestat in Alsace and living in Lugnez. They married 3 March 1951.<sup>43</sup> Lipper’s husband was a

specialist in tropical diseases, with an assignment in Tananarive in Madagascar.<sup>44</sup>

In late 1950, Elinor Lipper gave testimony in a public trial in Paris. The French leftwing writer David Rousset—who had attended the Berlin Congress—had sued the editors of the communist weekly *Les lettres françaises* for defamation: They had claimed that he had falsified evidence about Soviet labour camps. Lipper was the very first of Rousset’s witnesses to be called to the stand, Friday 8 December 1951, “a thin, pale, black-clad woman in her late thirties. Struggling to overcome acute stage fright, she tried to recount her experience of Kolyma camps”. Even if the lawyers for the communists loudly exclaimed that her “private misadventures” were irrelevant to the case, she managed to insert a few telling statements in her testimony.<sup>45</sup> Other witnesses called by Rousset included German writer Margarete Buber-Neumann, who had languished in a Soviet labour camp for years and then, after the 1939 non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler, had been handed over to Nazi Germany where she was immediately imprisoned; and Spanish communist leader Valentín González who had fought in the Spanish Civil War, fled to Russia and been put into a labour camp.<sup>46</sup> The decision of the French Court was announced in January 1951. Rousset won his case. In a public declaration, Professor Sidney Hook and other prominent intellectuals called the judgement “nothing less than a full-dress indictment of the entire system of slave labor” in the Soviet Union.<sup>47</sup>

In May 1951, Elinor Lipper testified again about the Soviet prison camps, with other former inmates, to an international tribunal, organised by David Rousset at Brussel’s Egmont Palace. After four days of hearings, the tribunal concluded that concentration camps indeed existed in the Soviet Union, but that they were unlike the Nazi extermination camps in some ways, most importantly in that their goal was not to annihilate the inmates on the basis of their race, but rather to extract labour from them.<sup>48</sup>

*Human Events* (28 March 1951), p. 8; Warren B. Walsh, *The Nation* (30 June 1951), pp. 616–617; Martin Ebon, *The Saturday Review* (26 May 1951), p. 12.

41 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Ruth Zander, 57. Bericht von Insp. H. Fatzer, 27 October 1950. Author’s translation from German.

42 Giroud, *Nicolas Nabokov*, p. 231.

43 Harvard University, Houghton Library: bMS Fr 375 (198). Boris Souvarine papers. A printed invitation to a reception on the occasion of the wedding of Just Robert Català and Elinor Lipper 3 March 1951.

44 Swiss Federal Archives: File on Kommunistische Bewegungen, 879, 14. An den Nachrichtendienst der Kantonspolizei (Hirzel), 19 February 1951. Cf. Giroud, *Nicolas Nabokov*, p. 234.

45 Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 42. Ex-Inmate Relates Russ[ian] Camp Horror, *The Stars and Stripes*, 10 December 1950, p. 2.

46 Cf. Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Als Gefangene bei Stalin und Hitler. Eine Welt im Dunkel* (München: Verlag der Zwölf, 1949) and Valentín González, *Vida y muerte en la U.R.S.S.*, with the cooperation of Julián Gorkin (Buenos Aires: Bell, 1951). English editions are, respectively, *Under Two Dictators* (London: V. Gollancz, 1949) and *Life and Death in the Soviet Union* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1952).

47 Herbert Lottman, *The Left Bank: Writers, Artists and Politics from the Popular Front to the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 274.

48 Susan Lisa Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 126.



The most famous chapter in Lipper’s book is about a 1944 visit by U.S. Vice President Henry A. Wallace to her labour camp in Magadan, Siberia. Totally oblivious to the dire conditions in the camp, Wallace chatted friendly with Ivan Nikishov, the cruel and corrupt camp director. When Wallace met Lipper in 1950, he expressed regret for his gullibility.

## Lipper’s Public and Private Sides

In the spring of 1950, immediately after the publication of the original German edition of Elinor Lipper’s book, the German-Austrian poet Albert Ehrenstein, now residing in New York, wrote about it to the Swiss writer and Nobel Laureate Hermann Hesse: “It is the best book about the Soviet Union that I have come across; I have known the author well since 1932 and she is a serious person.” While living in the 1930s in Switzerland, Ehrenstein had been a friend of Bernhard Mayer and Auguste Mayer-Lipper, Elinor Lipper’s aunt. Ehrenstein told Hesse that he had contacted Viking Press in New

York about a U.S. edition, but that he was afraid it might be too disturbing and sincere for American readers.<sup>49</sup> A week later, Ehrenstein was however dead. In early 1951, the U.S. edition of Lipper’s book was brought out by rightwing publisher Henry Regnery in Chicago. “*Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps* was reviewed widely and, without exception, favorably,” Regnery wrote in his memoirs. “The review in the *Nation* spoke of the book’s vividness and humanity, and, like almost every other, mentioned the report of the Wallace-Lattimore visit to Kolyma.” The book was condensed in the June 1951 issue of the *Reader’s Digest*, and the United States Information Agency distributed more than 300,000 copies in sixteen languages, including even Icelandic.<sup>50</sup>

49 Albert Ehrenstein, *Werke, I, Briefe* (München: Boer, 1989), p. 453. Letter from Albert Ehrenstein to Hermann Hesse, 30 March 1950. Apparently, this was Ehrenstein’s last letter. Author’s translation from German.

50 Extracts from Lipper’s book serialised in Icelandic daily *Timinn* 1–10 August 1951 and in *Visir* 21 July–21 August 1953 were most likely facilitated by



Regnery invited Lipper on a lecture tour to the United States.<sup>51</sup> But two problems emerged, as Lipper explained to him: She had recently married and did not want to travel without her husband, and she had not received a visa to the United States, even if she had already in November 1950 applied for it. Her husband, Just Robert Català, was invited with her, and the secretariat of one of the trip organisers, the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, wrote to the U.S. Attorney General asking him to give clearance to her application for a visa which he duly did.<sup>52</sup> In the autumn of 1951 Elinor Lipper went with her husband to the United States where some of her lectures were sponsored by the Iron Curtain Refugee Campaign of the International Rescue Committee.<sup>53</sup> “She was a trim, bright, and attractive woman, and with her sincerity, conviction, and ability to rise to any occasion was a great success, whether she spoke before the executive

board of the AFL-CIO, to an American legion auxiliary, or at a New York press conference,” her publisher, Henry Regnery, wrote.<sup>54</sup> The *Denver Post* shot a photograph of her with former Polish Prime Minister Stanislaw Mikolajczyk 20 November 1951 at Stapleton Airfield in Denver on their way to San Francisco where both of them were to speak.<sup>55</sup>

Some of Elinor Lipper’s life is however not on public record. When the Swiss authorities first heard of Lipper, her story was that she had been arrested at the same time as her husband and that he had most likely perished in the Soviet prison camps. The authorities were bemused at this, since her registered husband, Konrad Vetterli, as already mentioned, lived in Zürich and had obtained a divorce on the ground that he had not seen his wife for seven years. They were given to understand that Vetterli had spent some years in the United States, not that he had been to the Soviet

Union and back.<sup>56</sup> The Swiss authorities did not realise that when Elinor Lipper spoke about her husband she must have been referring to Wilhelm Dannemann, also known as Viktor Zander. He did indeed perish in the camps, probably around 1940. His former wife, Erna Dannemann-Wiegand, who had been secretary to leading German communists, was summoned to Moscow and arrested in late 1937, sentenced to 15 years in labour camps and sent to Kolyma.<sup>57</sup> In December 1939, the Soviet authorities intended to hand her, as many other German communist prisoners, over to Nazi Germany, but the ship taking Erna and other prisoners from Magadan to Vladivostok wrecked upon an iceberg, and she drowned.<sup>58</sup>

In December 1950, the Swiss authorities received notification from British intelligence that probably Elinor Lipper was a Soviet agent and that her real name was Erna Hiller, the wife of Wilhelm Dannemann.<sup>59</sup> The Swiss authorities investigated the matter and came to the conclusion that Elinor Lipper was who she said she was, her identity being confirmed in an interview by her paternal aunt.<sup>60</sup> The case was not pursued any further, but the sources of British intelligence, whoever

they were, certainly were right on some points: Under the code name Ruth Zander, Elinor Lipper had indeed lived with Wilhelm Dannemann in Moscow and probably elsewhere. But typically, in her book on her time in Soviet prison camps, she only once mentions her marriage, and in a footnote: “The author’s release was due to the active intervention of the Swiss authorities, because she had become a Swiss national by marriage in 1935.”<sup>61</sup>

## Lipper’s Impact

Soon after Elinor Lipper’s book came out in the United States, the popular science writer Martin Gardner commented on her account of Henry A. Wallace in Siberia:

“When Lipper’s chapter on the Wallace visit ran in the *New York Post* (June 11, 1951), Wallace sent the *Post* an incredible letter which it published on June 20. “It was not until long afterward,” said Wallace, “that I knew that slave labor camps existed. The testimony of those who have escaped from the camps indicates that

the United States Information Agency.

51 Tamiment Library, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: American Committee for Cultural Freedom Archive. Henry Regnery to Elinor Lipper, 6 March 1951.

52 Tamiment Library, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives: American Committee for Cultural Freedom Archive. Elinor Català to Henry Regnery, 14 March 1951; Elinor Català to Sidney Hook 6 April 1951; Pearl Kluger to the Attorney General 23 April 1951. Robert Català is found on a passenger list arriving on an aeroplane from London to New York 1 November 1951. He is registered at the same address as Eleonore Català-Lipper earlier, 62 W 45th St. U.S. National Archives, Washington DC. New York, Passenger Lists, 1820–1957, BOAC, BA 509/302 [database online, www.ancestry.co.uk].

53 Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archives, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, IUPI, University Library: Indianapolis Foundation Records. Grant Requests, 1924–1986. Box 66, Folder 53, Elinor Lipper. Mostly letters and documents about Lipper’s luncheon talk in Indianapolis 7 November 1951. Mr. Català was included in the seating arrangement at the luncheon. There are also some documents in the file about a dinner in Lipper’s honour at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel 31 October 1951.

54 Henry Regnery, *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1979), p. 106. See also, Soviet Refugee in U.S. to Help Others Escape, *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 October 1951. According to this, Lipper’s first appearance in the U.S. was at a press conference in New York 15 October 1951; her first talk in the U.S. was in Miami 18 October 1951 at a meeting of the Women’s Auxiliary of the American Legion. See also, Betty Walker, Career for Freedom, *Chicago Sun-Times* 9 November 1951.

55 Photographer Dean Conger, <http://www.gettyimages.com/photos/stanislaw-mikolajczyk>

56 Swiss Federal Archives: Kommunistische Bewegungen, 879, 13. An den Leiter der Nachrichtendienstes, 28 December 1950.

57 RGASPI: 495 205 3364. File on Erna Dannemann.

58 Lipper, *Eleven Years*, p. 94. Lipper calls the woman Erna D, and she was obviously Erna Dannemann. Some of the prisoners on the freighter, *Indigirka*, were rescued by a Japanese ship and handed over to the Soviet authorities in Vladivostok, and one of those survivors told Lipper about the fate of Erna Dannemann. In Hermann Weber and Andreas Herbst, *Deutsche Kommunisten. Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945* (Berlin, Karl Dietz Verlag, 2004), p. 144, 1940 is given as the year of Erna Dannemann’s death, but according to the file in the Soviet Archive RGASPI it was 1939 and also according to Lipper (December).

59 Swiss Federal Archives: Kommunistische Bewegungen, 879, 10. Akten-Notiz, 11 December 1950.

60 Swiss Federal Archives: Kommunistische Bewegungen, 879, 13. An den Leiter der Nachrichtendienstes, 28 December 1950.

61 Elinor Lipper, *Eleven Years*, p. 276n.



Communist Russia treats political dissidents in much the same way as czarist Russia but on the whole less humanely.” This prompted me to make a comment which the *Post* ran on June 24. I listed six excellent books in English about the labor camps, all published before 1943, and pointed out that under the czars the number of prisoners never exceeded 50,000. Only a small fraction of this number were political prisoners. That a man of Wallace’s stature could have written a book about Russia without bothering to read anything critical of Stalinism, is now hard to believe, yet such was the temper of the times.<sup>62</sup>

Gardner was, as mentioned earlier, certainly not Lipper’s only reader to note this extraordinary incident involving the gullible U.S. Vice President.

Another person feeling the impact of Elinor Lipper was a young ex-communist from New York, Marvin Liebman, who was working as a publicist. When asked in 1951 to help organise Lipper’s lecture tour, he initially refused, since there were no slave camps in the Soviet Union and Lipper was therefore “obviously a fraud”. Subsequently, a meeting was arranged between Lipper and him at the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan where she was staying. Lipper told Liebman her story which overwhelmed him: “I felt totally betrayed. What was worse, because I had believed in the Soviet Union, I felt personally responsible for what had happened to her,” he wrote in his memoirs. Liebman helped organise the rally in San Francisco where Lipper spoke. It was attended by the mayor and many dignitaries. “Lipper impressed the crowd with her moving and powerful story.” Lipper then went with Liebman to Los Angeles where she addressed some meetings and also attended a private gathering at actress Bette Davis’ Malibu home. “The Hollywood guests sat on the floor and listened to this woman talk about the horror of her life. Yet, almost to a person, they disbelieved her.” When Lipper and Liebman returned from their tour of the West Coast, in January 1952, Lipper wanted to see Vice President Henry Wallace. Liebman called Wallace, and he invited them to his farm in South Salem. Lipper told him what had actually happened that day in Siberia when he visited the slave camp. Wallace repeated what he had in essence previously said publicly: “I didn’t know, I didn’t

know—please believe me—I didn’t know.” Liebman later commented: “I saw in him the sense of betrayal that was entangling many of us who had worked with the communists.”<sup>63</sup>

In a book about orientalist Owen Lattimore who in 1944 accompanied Vice President Wallace to Siberia, historian Robert P. Newman also briefly discussed Lipper’s account of Wallace’s visit, but from a different perspective. Newman pointed out that a special section on Lattimore was found in the U.S. edition of Lipper’s book, and not in the German original edition, with quotations from an article which Lattimore published after he returned to the United States and a few scathing remarks about it. Newman asserted that “Lipper told friends that the attack on Lattimore was inserted in the Regnery edition without her knowledge.” His source was Lattimore himself who told Newman the following story about a conversation with German ex-communist Ruth Fischer:

“ In the 1970s Lattimore lived in Paris, where he got to know Ruth Fischer, a former Communist of stature and an early anti-Stalinist. Lattimore told me about a conversation with Fischer: ‘One day we were talking about the different kinds of ex-Communists—the reasonable ones, the sectarian ones, the pathological ones, and I mentioned Lipper. ‘That’s strange,’ said Ruth, ‘I know Lipper and I’ll find out for you. She’s an honest woman.’ In due course she told me—but did not show me the letter—that Lipper had written her that this derogatory passage had been inserted by the American publishers, without consulting her.’<sup>64</sup>

However, since Ruth Fischer died in 1961, it was difficult for Owen Lattimore to have any conversations with her in the 1970s.

Newman’s account is also implausible for other reasons. In the first English edition of Lipper’s book, published in London in 1950 by the World Affairs Book Club and translated by professional translators Richard and Clara Winston, the section on Lattimore was included. It was therefore not really inserted into the U.S. edition, brought out in 1951.<sup>65</sup> It is however true that in 1955–1961, Ruth Fischer lived in Paris, having

turned from a strong anti-communist into something of a communist sympathiser. In her papers, no letters are found to or from Elinor Lipper. A few letters from Ruth Fischer to Owen Lattimore exist however, from 1958–1960. There, Elinor Lipper is nowhere mentioned.<sup>66</sup> It is possible, although unlikely, as Newman himself acknowledged in his account, that Henry Regnery inserted the section on Lattimore into the U.S. edition without consulting the author. But even if true, nothing would follow from this about whether Lipper agreed or disagreed with the strictures against Lattimore in the book. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that she disagreed with it, because after the book’s publication she accepted Regnery’s invitation to go on a lecture tour to the United States and during that trip she nowhere expressed any reservation about, or disagreement with, this section of the book. In the original German edition, Lipper certainly did not mince words about Wallace.<sup>67</sup> However, it is also quite likely that she did not want to become involved in the heated debate in the United States at the time about possible communist agents in government agencies.

## In Madagascar and Switzerland

Many years after the publication of Elinor Lipper’s book, Professor Sidney Hook wrote to her publisher, Henry Regnery: “That Lipper book was and is very important. I remember how uncomfortable Einstein was when I sent him a copy of the German edition.”<sup>68</sup> Lipper’s book has inspired at least two literary works, a recent poem, “Petition,” by Andrea Cohen and the earlier novel *Insurrection in Poshansk* by Austrian writer Robert Neumann.<sup>69</sup> But after the 1951–1952 U.S. tour, Lipper went with her husband to Madagascar and disappeared from public life.<sup>70</sup> Later, she returned to Switzerland and became a writer, a translator and literary interpreter. She wrote,

for example, with Soulard Robert, the *Geschichte der Maschine* (History of Machines) in 1963, and *Das Grosse Hundebuch* (The Big Book on Dogs) in two volumes, in 1974. She contributed an introduction to a German edition of Salvador de Madariaga’s historical novel, *Ein Tropfen Zeit* (Drop of Time), in 1962.<sup>71</sup> She also wrote the foreword to the second German edition of Ignazio Silone’s novel *Fontamara* where her strong opposition to both fascism and communism was made clear: According to her, Silone was Italy’s conscience.<sup>72</sup> Characteristically, Lipper did not mention that she had, as a young girl, been acquainted with Silone. This was when she was in the mid-1930s living with her aunt in Ascona. Silone, a refugee from Fascist Italy, was arranging for the first German edition of *Fontamara* and frequently visited her aunt’s husband, Bernhard Mayer. But as he admitted twenty years later in a letter to Arthur Koestler, he also visited Mayer’s house “to see a young student, a fierce Stalinist by the name of Elinor Lipper”.<sup>73</sup>

In Switzerland, Elinor Lipper mainly worked as a translator. For instance, she translated some books from French in a series on the grand European dynasties, including *Die Tudors und die Stuarts* by Guy Lechlech and *Die Medici* by Albert Jourcin in 1969, and *Die Hohenzollern* by Louis Mermaz in 1970. She translated many more books from French, such as *Der Konfuzianismus* by Albert Cavin 1973 and *Das Glaskunst* by Jean-Charles Gateau in 1974. Her daughter, Genia Català, also worked as a translator. She and her mother collaborated on a translation from English to French of the book *Regard sur la liturgie et la modernité* (Looking at the Liturgy: A Critical View of Its Contemporary Form) by Aidan Nichols in 1998.

Elinor Lipper-Català passed away 9 October 2008 in Tessin in Switzerland, survived by her daughter Genia (Eugenia) and four grandchildren, Larissa, Philippe, Cynthia and Sylvain.<sup>74</sup> 🐾

66 Houghton Library, Harvard University: Ruth Fischer Archive, bMS Germ 204 (1580).

67 Lipper, *Elf Jahre*, pp. 101–103.

68 Edward S. Shapiro, ed. *Letters of Sidney Hook: Democracy, Communism and the Cold War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 313. *Sidney Hook, Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the 20th Century* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1987), p. 478.

69 Andrea Cohen, *Petition*, Poetry (February 2011), <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/241124>; Robert Neumann, *Die Puppen von Poshansk* (München: Desch, 1952); Robert Neumann, *Insurrection in Poshansk* (London: Hutchinson, 1952); Günther Stocker, *Zwischen Grauen und Groteske. Robert Neumanns Gulag-Roman Die Puppen von Poshansk und die Kultur des Kalten Krieges*, *ILCEA*, 16 (2012), <http://ilcea.revues.org/1454>

70 Giroud, *Nikolas Nabokov*, p. 234. Also Swiss Federal Archives: Kommunistische Bewegungen, 14, where it says that Català resided in Tananarive in Madagascar.

71 Elinor Lipper, Einführung, Salvador de Madariaga, *Ein Tropfen Zeit* (München: Alfred Scherz, 1974), pp. VII–XI.

72 Elinor Lipper, Einführung, Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1971), pp. 7–13.

73 Edinburgh University Library, Centre for Research Collections: Arthur Koestler Archive, Ms 2380/2. Ignazio Silone to Arthur Koestler, 30 September 1955 (in French). Silone also contributed a somewhat non-committal blurb on the cover of the 1950 original German edition of Lipper’s book.

74 Avis de décès, *Tribune de Genève*, 13 October 2008, [http://www.hommages.ch/Defunt/39186/Elinor\\_Catala\\_Lipper](http://www.hommages.ch/Defunt/39186/Elinor_Catala_Lipper)

62 Martin Gardner, *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener* (New York: Quill, 1983), pp. 153–4.

63 Liebman, *Coming Out Conservative*, p. 87–88.

64 Robert P. Newman, *Owen Lattimore and the “Loss” of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 323 and 614.

65 The two editions, by World Affairs Club, London 1950, and by Henry Regnery, Chicago 1951, are however identical, the same translation by Richard and Clara Winston, and with U.S. spelling. In 1951, a reprint was brought out by Hollis & Carter, London.



# A SURPRISE ENCOUNTER

## The Jewess who became an Icelander and the Nazi who became a Communist

*At the 60th birthday party of Iceland's leading communist in May 1958, the Jewish wife of one of his friends, Henny Goldstein-Ottosson, a refugee from Germany, recognised, to her dismay, Dr. Bruno Kress, a German Nazi residing in Iceland before the War. Now he had become a respected scholar in East Germany, the director of the Nordic Institute at Greifswald University. Mrs. Goldstein-Ottosson complained to her husband's friends who nevertheless remained, for political purposes, friendly with the old Nazi. But she did not know that Dr. Kress—member no. 3,401,317 of the Nazi Party—had been involved with the Ahnenerbe, the research institute of Heinrich Himmler's SS. Moreover, while Mrs. Goldstein-Ottosson did know that her first husband, and her brother and his family had perished in the Holocaust, she had no idea that her brother, Siegbert Rosenthal—Auschwitz prisoner no. 107933—had been the victim of one of Ahnenerbe's grisliest experiments, the 'skeleton collection'. Shortly after the death of Mrs. Goldstein-Ottosson in August 1986, the University of Iceland gave Dr. Kress an honorary doctoral degree.*

The Monday after Whitsunday is by tradition a holiday in Iceland, enabling people to enjoy a long weekend. Monday 26 May 1958 was such a holiday, and it so happened that it fell on the sixtieth birthday of a well-known political figure, Brynjolfur Bjarnason, the former leader of Iceland's Communist Party which had operated between 1930 and 1938, then merging with leftwing socialists into the Icelandic Socialist Party. Brynjolfur Bjarnason became Minister of Education in the first government in which the pro-Soviet Socialists participated, in 1944–7. Now his friends were all gathered, on a cool and pleasant spring evening, at a ski resort about 30 minutes drive from the capital, Reykjavik, celebrating his birthday. Amongst the guests were an old soulmate, Hendrik Ottosson, a news reporter at the Icelandic Broadcasting Corporation, and his wife, Henny Goldstein-Ottosson. She was a Jewess from Germany who had fled from the Nazis in the mid-1930s, with her mother and a son from a previous marriage. Suddenly, at the party, she gave a start. She saw somebody she recognised from pre-war Reykjavik, a German Nazi then living in Iceland: Dr. Bruno Kress, a philologist who had resided in Reykjavik, married an Icelandic woman and been a leading member of the Icelandic section of the German Nazi Party, the NSDAP. What was he doing at the birthday party of an Icelandic Socialist leader? She became very upset and complained to the organisers of the festivities. The incident was however played down, and not mentioned publicly. Neither Henny Goldstein-Ottosson nor the birthday party organisers, nor indeed Dr. Kress himself, fully realised the extraordinary stories which were hidden behind this surprise encounter.<sup>75</sup>

## The Jewish Dressmaker

Johanna 'Henny' Lippmann was born in Berlin 28 March 1905, the daughter of a Jewish merchant, Leo Lippmann, and his wife, Minna, born Glass. They both came from that part of the German Empire which later became Polish territory, Minna from Czersk, Leo from Pinne in Posen. Henny's mother, Minna, had been married before, to Markus Rosenthal, from the same village, Czersk. They had divorced in 1899, having been married for six years. They had two sons: Harry,

born 1895 in Rastenburg in East Prussia, and Siegbert Meinhardt, born 1899 in Berlin. Minna had then married Leo in 1902. Henny's father and two half-brothers all fought in the Great War. Leo was a Russian prisoner-of-war, returned from captivity in early 1919, in broken health, and died in the summer of 1919. Henny's older half-brother, Harry, received the Iron Cross twice in the war, both of the first and second order. Henny trained as a dressmaker, but she was only twenty-one years old when she married a much older fellow Jew: Robert Goldstein, born 3 May 1893. They had one son, Peter, born in Berlin 7 November 1927. He was only a few months old when his parents, Robert and Henny Goldstein, went to Medellín in Colombia where they helped Robert's brother to manage the Hotel Europa. They only stayed there, however, for two years before they divorced, after which they resettled in Germany.

In Berlin, Henny soon got a job as a dressmaker at a leading fashion house. But after the Nazi takeover in January 1933, she decided to leave as soon as possible. She saw an advertisement from an Icelandic sewing firm which needed a dressmaker. She applied and got the job. In the autumn of 1934 she went to Iceland. She was a great success at the firm, and in July 1935 she signed a new contract for three years, and received a permit from the authorities to stay for the same period. Her son and her mother joined her in Iceland at the same time.<sup>76</sup>

In 1938, when her contract ran out, Henny Goldstein had become a popular dressmaker in Reykjavik, acquiring a group of loyal customers. She now wanted to work independently, but when her employer, Helga Sigurdsson, realised this, she denounced her to the authorities, as her stay and work permits were about to run out. Needless to say, in 1938, the countries in the world could be divided into those who wanted their Jews to leave, and those who did not want to accept any Jews. But Henny had a good friend, the journalist Hendrik Ottosson, a strong opponent of Hitler's Nazi regime and therefore helpful to German refugees. A few days before Henny Goldstein was to leave the country with her son and mother, Hendrik Ottosson married her. Henny thus immediately acquired Icelandic citizenship, as was the law then, and could stay in the country with her family. Indeed, the friendship between Henny and Hendrik turned into a caring marriage. While Henny had now



Henny Goldstein in Berlin with her two brothers. Harry (left) survived the Holocaust by escaping to Iceland. Siegbert perished in the Natzweiler camp. From the family archive.

gained the right to stay, her former employer brought a case against her for breach of contract: Henny had promised, in her 1935 contract, not to establish a rival sewing firm in Reykjavik. The case went all the way up to the Supreme Court which allowed Henny to continue working as an independent dressmaker, but fined her for breach of contract.<sup>77</sup>

While Henny Goldstein departed for Iceland in the autumn of 1934, her two half-brothers stayed in Berlin. Harry Rosenthal was a managing director of a large shoe company, Salamander, with more than a hundred affiliates in Germany. He had been an avid soccer player in his youth: he had sat on the Berlin Sports Board and been an Olympic judge in the 1928 Amsterdam Games. But after the Nazi takeover in 1933, he had to leave the Sports Board, and the Salamander board of directors was given to understand that he was an

undesirable executive. The persecution of Jews intensified, and after Gestapo had repeatedly called Harry in for interrogations, he decided to leave. In the autumn of 1938, he bought a return ticket to Iceland, telling the authorities that he was going on a brief visit to his sister there, so he got a temporary passport to leave and enter Germany. Twice married formerly in Germany, Harry Rosenthal left behind his Berlin apartment, his car, his summerhouse, and his second wife, only bringing with him some clothes, his designated 10 Marks and a gold watch and a Leica camera. Upon arrival in Iceland, he showed the immigration authorities his temporary passport and the return ticket, and was allowed to enter. He went straight to his sister's place. His mother noticed immediately that he was a changed man: he spoke almost in a whisper, looking furtively around all the time, making a start at the slightest noise: Jews in

<sup>75</sup> I am indebted to many people who helped me with the research for this paper. The family of Henny Goldstein-Ottosson gave me access to several documents from her personal files. Professor Gerd Simon, Tübingen University, and Professor Thor Whitehead, University of Iceland, have guided me to the relevant documents from the *Ahnenerbe* and the Nazi Party (NSDAP) archives, presently at the German Federal Archives, *Bundesarchiv*, which they have studied because of their different projects. Historian Snorri Bergsson made available to me documents from the National Archive of Iceland which he had copied in connection with his research on foreigners in Iceland in the 1920s and 1930s. Professor Gerd Simon and Dr. Hans-Joachim Lang made various suggestions to improve this paper.

<sup>76</sup> Henny Ottosson, *Morgunblaðið* 14 September 1986 (obituary by her granddaughters); Henny Goldstein-Ottosson personal files, especially Erbscheinsverhandlung [Certificate of Inheritance], signed by Henny Goldstein-Ottosson in the Reykjavik Embassy of the German Federal Republic 20 March 1957, with all the relevant details on her family.

<sup>77</sup> *Haestarettardomar* [Supreme Court Judgements], Vol. 10, 1939 (Reykjavik: Haestirettur, 1940), pp. 365–75.

Germany had for five years been treated as second-rate people, *Untermenschen*, and it only meant trouble if they tried to assert themselves.

In Reykjavik, Harry Rosenthal sold his gold watch and the Leica camera and used the money to rent a small plot outside the city where he grew vegetables to sell. Thus, he supported himself for the first year. He lived with his sister, mother, brother-in-law and nephew in a small rented apartment in the city centre. After a few months in Iceland, Harry was joined by his girlfriend from Germany, Hildegard Heller, sixteen years younger and actually not Jewish. They had met and fallen in love when she was working for Salamander as a designer of window exhibitions. While the Icelandic authorities did not issue Harry Rosenthal a stay or work permit, they tolerated him for a while. When they finally decided to send him out of the country, Henny's husband, Hendrik Ottosson, went to the Icelandic Minister of Justice and threatened to make it a big issue publicly. The Minister relented, and Harry got a permit to stay and work. Meanwhile his second wife had died. Harry moved with Hildegard who became his third wife to Akureyri, a small town in the North of Iceland, where they lived in relative comfort for the rest of their lives. There, Harry worked first as a tailor, and then as a manager for a men's clothes store. He and his wife became Icelandic citizens and took Icelandic names. Harry — Hoskuldur Markusson in Icelandic — died in 1968, and his wife Hildegard — Hildigerdur in Icelandic — in 1993. They had no children.<sup>78</sup>

When Iceland was occupied by the British on 10 May 1940, Henny's husband, Hendrik Ottosson, as a known opponent of Nazi Germany, became an assistant to the British force, helping them to locate Nazis and their sympathisers in Iceland. Through his job, he became acquainted with a few British soldiers of the Jewish faith. He brought some of them home to his mother-in-law, Minna Lippmann, who much enjoyed talking to them. Having been born and brought up in Poland, she spoke fluent Polish, and used that language with some of the soldiers. She also could understand those soldiers who spoke *Yiddish*, a variation of Medieval German with a lot of Hebrew words and expressions. In the autumn of 1940, Hendrik Ottosson

and his family even helped organise the first Jewish religious ceremony in Iceland ever held. It was *Yom kippur*. Amongst those present were Minna Lippmann, her son Harry, her daughter-in-law Hildegard and her brother-in-law Hendrik Ottosson. This was probably the first non-Christian religious ceremony in Iceland in 940 years, since the Icelanders adopted Christianity in the year 1000. After the ceremony, the first Jewish congregation was formed. In small, isolated Iceland, there had never before been a sufficient number of Jews to form such a congregation.<sup>79</sup>

## Victims of the Holocaust

Henny's other brother, Siegbert Meinhardt Rosenthal, did not escape from Germany. He and his wife, Erna, born Bärwald, had long tried to have a child. The reason they did not leave in late 1938 when the persecution of Jews intensified after the infamous *Kristallnacht*, was that Erna was finally pregnant. They had a son, Denny, 19 July 1939. In early 1943 Siegbert and Erna were impoverished, staying in a small apartment at Auguststraße 51 in the centre of Berlin and working as cleaners at the Jewish Association, *Die Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland*. Through the International Red Cross, they regularly exchanged short messages with Henny and Hendrik in Iceland who worried greatly about them.<sup>80</sup> Finally, Hendrik succeeded in getting the Swedish Foreign Service involved. It promised to try to get them out of Germany.

When the Swedish Embassy in Berlin however enquired about the Rosenthals in April 1943, they had disappeared.<sup>81</sup> A month earlier, 12 March, they had been sent on Train No. 36 to Auschwitz, the SS camp in Upper Silesia. The train had arrived in Auschwitz the next day, 13 March. It had been full of Jews from Berlin, who received the same treatment as other newcomers to the prison camp: Immediately ordered out of the train, they had to form two files, one for the men, another for women and children. Nazi doctors selected those who were allowed to live for a while, as slave labourers, and the others who were sent to the gas chambers. Siegbert was in the first group from Train No. 36, with 217 other men and 147 women. This was the last time he saw his

wife and his little son. Siegbert worked as a slave labourer in the Buna factory inside the camp, operated by I.G. Farben, making synthetic rubber. Usually the slave labourers, all with shaved heads, in black and white striped uniforms, and with a number tattooed on their left arm, only lasted for a few months. Siegfried's tattoo number was 107933.

One bright day in June, however, Siegbert Rosenthal was ordered, with about 200 other prisoners, both male and female, to appear in front of Block No. 28 in the camp. All the prisoners had to undress. Two men in SS uniforms inspected them closely, and selected 115 of them, most of them Jews, for further inspections. The unfortunate Auschwitz inmates did not know that they were about to be victims of one of the Third Reich's grisliest enterprises, the so-called skeleton collection. The leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, had in 1935 established an institute to explore the ancient heritage of the 'Aryans', as the Nazis conceived of themselves. The institute was called *Abnenerbe*, or the Heritage of our Forefathers. It supported scholars investigating the history, language and literature of Germandom, as well

as sending scientific expeditions to several places, even to Tibet. Its executive director, Wolfram Sievers, was a stalwart Nazi.<sup>82</sup> In the War, the *Abnenerbe* helped loot cultural treasures from countries occupied by the Nazis, and it also conducted medical experiments on Jews

and other prisoner-camp inmates, mercilessly testing human reactions to high altitude and low temperature.

The Nazi doctors involved with *Abnenerbe* were also interested in identifying more clearly the physical attributes of Jews. One of them, Professor August Hirt from the University of Strasbourg in what had

been the French province of Alsace, and was now the German province of Elsass, thought he needed more skeletons of Jews for study; the *Abnenerbe* complied. The Jews selected in Auschwitz were to provide the skeletons. After the 115 prisoners had been selected, they were sent to special blocks in Auschwitz, the women to Block No. 10, and the men to Blocks No. 21 and 28. The SS officers, anthropologists Bruno Beger and Hans Fleischhacker, did some more measurements on the prisoners. As there was an outbreak of typhus in the camp, the prisoners were put into quarantine for a few weeks. By then their number had been reduced to 86.

On 30 July 1943, Siegbert Rosenthal and his fellow Auschwitz inmates were ordered into a train which took them to the notorious Natzweiler camp in

the Alsace. There, they arrived on 2 August. After some measurements and checks, made by Professor Hirt, the women were killed, on 11 and 13 August, in a small gas chamber which had been specially installed in the camp. The men had to wait a little longer, the reason



Henny Goldstein's sister-in-law, Erna Rosenthal, Siegbert's wife, with their son in Berlin 11 November 1939. Mother and son both perished in Auschwitz. From the family archive.

78 Olympiudomarinn a Akureyri [The Olympic Judge Who Lives in Akureyri, interview], *Dagur* 19 February 1964; Forstjóri í fraegasta skofyrirtaeki Thyskalandis fludi og settist ad a Islandi [Director of Germany's Best-Known Shoe Company Fleed and Went to Iceland, interview], *Visir* 27 April 1964; Hoskuldur Markusson, *Dagur* 10 July 1968 [obituary of Harry Rosenthal [Hoskuldur Markusson] by 'E.D']; Hjonamining, *Morgunbladid* 10 November 1993 [In Memory of a Couple, joint obituaries of Harry and Hildegard Rosenthal, by Harry's nieces, the daughters of Henny Goldstein-Ottosson, and other people]. Also, interview by Hannes H. Gissurarson with Hlin Gudjonsdottir (Henny Goldstein-Ottosson's daughter-in-law) and Magnea Henny Petursdottir (Henny's granddaughter) 27 October 2010.

79 Vilhjalmur Orn Vilhjalmsson, Iceland, the Jews, and Anti-Semitism, *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3-4 (Fall 2004), pp. 131-156.

80 Henny Goldstein-Ottosson personal files: Correspondence 1939-1942 between Siegbert and Erna Rosenthal, and Henny and Hendrik Ottosson.

81 Henny Goldstein-Ottosson personal files: Two letters from Otto Johansson, Swedish Embassy, Reykjavik, to Hendrik Ottosson, Reykjavik 24 March 1943 and 6 April 1943.

82 Heather Pringle, *The Master Plan. Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006); Michael H. Kater, *Das 'Abnenerbe' der SS 1935-1945. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturpolitik des Dritten Reiches* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1997); Thor Whitehead, *Islandsaevintyri Himmlers 1935-1937 [Himmler's Icelandic Adventure, 1935-7]* (Reykjavik: Vaka-Helgafell, 1998).

being that Professor Hirt wanted to test on them the effects of a drug designed to make people infertile. Upon arrival, he had injected the drug in their testicles, causing much pain. He then waited for about a week.

The men, including Siegbert Rosenthal, were killed on 17 and 19 August in the gas chamber. Afterwards, the 86 bodies were transported to the Anatomical Institute of the University of Strasbourg. There, a medical assistant cut off one testicle from several of the dead men, for Professor Hirt's research purposes. But another medical assistant at the Institute, Henri Henrypierre, thought that something was wrong with this recent supply of bodies, some of them still being warm, and all of them with tattoos on the left arm. Secretly, he wrote down the tattoo numbers.

The bodies were kept in the basement, but as the War was turning against the Nazis, soon they had to abandon all ideas of using them for any *Ahnenerbe* research. In 1944, the French army arrived at the Anatomical Institute

and found the bodies, some of them whole, others in parts. When some of the *Ahnenerbe* documents were captured, it became clear what the 'skeleton collection' was about, and in 1948 the *Ahnenerbe* director, Wolfram Sievers, was hanged for this and other war crimes in Landsberg. More than fifty years later, the German writer and scholar Dr. Hans-Joachim Lang succeeded in identifying the 86 victims from Natzweiler camp,

using the notes on the tattooed number taken in 1943 by Henri Henrypierre, the medical assistant at the Anatomical Institute of the University of Strasbourg, and other documents.<sup>83</sup>



Henny Goldstein's brother, Siegbert Rosenthal, became an item in the macabre 'skeleton collection' which the SS institute *Ahnenerbe* organised. From the family archive.

Henny's former husband, and the father of her child, Robert Goldstein, also perished in the Holocaust. He had escaped to France soon after the Nazi takeover. But in 1940, the German army occupied the north of France, while the pliant Vichy government nominally was in charge of the south. In all of France, however, Jews were forced to register at the police, and they were by law deprived of civil rights. After careful planning by the SS and the French police, on 16–17 July 1942, non-French Jews in the occupied zone were rounded up by the police in what became known as the Vel d'Hiv action. Most of them were sent to a concentration camp at Drancy under horrible conditions where they were kept for a while before being deported to Auschwitz. Robert Goldstein was one of those Jews: He went

on Train No. 25 from Drancy to Auschwitz 28 August 1942 and was not heard of thereafter.<sup>84</sup>

Neither the Natzweiler nor the Drancy stories were of course known in any detail to Henny and Hendrik Ottosson in Iceland. They only received the information, after the war, that neither Robert Goldstein nor the three Rosenthals had survived, having all been deported to Auschwitz. They kept the presumed fate

of the Rosenthals secret from Henny's mother, Minna Lippmann, who kept asking whether there were any news about her son, Siegbert, and her grandson Denny. Minna Lippmann died at the age of 78 in 1947 without knowing the terrible truth about her descendants.<sup>85</sup> When Henny Goldstein-Ottosson in the spring of 1958 met the German Professor whom she remembered from pre-war Reykjavik as a militant Nazi, she only knew a little more than Minna about what happened to her own family; and she certainly did not know but a part of Bruno Kress' story.

## The Nazi Scholar

Bruno Hugo Kress was born in Selz (Seltz in French), a small village in Alsace, then the German province Elsass, 11 February 1907, the son of Karl Kress, a railway worker, and his wife Emma, born Friedrichs. He was the second youngest of their six children. Bruno Kress was brought up in Metz in Lorraine, then the German province Lothringen. In 1919, after the German defeat in the Great War, Alsace and Lorraine were transferred to the French, and the Kress family moved to Berlin.<sup>86</sup> Bruno Kress attended grammar school in Berlin and then studied philology at the Berlin University, the *Friedrich Wilhelms-Universität* (later Humboldt University) where his teacher was Professor Gustav Neckel, an ardent nationalist.<sup>87</sup> In 1932 when Kress was 25 years old, he got the opportunity to go to Iceland in a student exchange programme which had been established in the 1920s. He arrived in Iceland in the autumn of 1932 and rented a room in the stately house of a distinguished Icelandic family, the Thoroddsens, who lived by the pond in Reykjavik's centre. Studying Icelandic at the University, Kress also gave private lessons in German and Swedish. One year after the Nazi takeover in Germany, Kress, at a meeting in Reykjavik on 1 March 1934 joined the foreign section of the German Nazi Party, with a handful of other German citizens residing in Reykjavik. He was party member no. 3.401.317. At least one of his brothers was also a member of the Nazi Party, and also of the SA, the *Sturmabteilungen*.

In the summer of 1934, the new German Reich under the leadership of Adolf Hitler sent a Consul-General to Iceland, Dr. Günther Timmermann. While

Timmermann was a member of the Nazi Party, he was attached to the German Foreign Service and moreover a passionate ornithologist, who later published a book about bird life in Iceland and married an Icelandic woman. When the first leader of the local cell of the Nazi Party had to leave the country in the autumn of 1934, Dr. Timmermann took over his duties. But Kress who was by then a *Propagandawart* for the Nazi Party, or propaganda chief, found the new Consul-General lacking in enthusiasm for the new order. In January 1935 he sent a complaint about Dr. Timmermann to the Berlin headquarters of the Nazi Party. He listed seven items:

1. The Icelandic party cell had not held a welcoming ceremony when the German research vessel *Meteor* came to Iceland in October 1934.
2. The party cell had not held a Christmas celebration in 1934.
3. The Winter-Help association had not started operating until January 1935.
4. The party cell had not celebrated in any way the liberation of the Saar District.
5. The members of the Icelandic cell were not capable of participating energetically in party life.
6. The cell leader, Dr. Timmermann, preferred a quiet and comfortable life to fighting for the cause.
7. The cell leader had insulted Kress by remarks about his friendship with an Icelandic family (the Thoroddsens, where he stayed).<sup>88</sup>

The last item undoubtedly referred to Bruno Kress' relationship with one of the Thoroddsen daughters in the house where he stayed in Reykjavik — a plain thirty years old cooking instructor at a Reykjavik primary school.

Amongst the Icelanders who took private German lessons by Bruno Kress in the winter of 1934–5, were three students at the Reykjavik Grammar School, all of them attracted to Nazism, for them a vibrant and exciting creed at the time. "Kress sometimes gave us magazines with speeches by Hitler on various occasions," one of them, Geir Thorsteinsson, later recalled. "I still remember that in some speech there was inserted in parentheses, 'Applause.' Then, later, there was inserted, 'More Applause.' Finally, it said, 'Wild Applause.'"

85 Interview by Hannes H. Gissurarson with Hlin Gudjonsdottir and Magnea Henny Petursdottir 27 October 2010.

86 Bruno Kress, *Morgunbladið* 13 November 1997 (obituary).

87 Klaus von See and Julia Zernack, *Germanistik und Politik in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus. Zwei Fallstudien: Hermann Schneider und Gustav Neckel* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2004).

88 German Federal Archives [Bundesarchiv]: NSDAP, Personal Akten Bruno Kress. Hamman, Parteigericht, Auslandsorganisation, Beschluß 9. Oktober 1936 (Abschrift); Gauschatzmeister Leonhardt to Reichsschatzmeister Schwarz, Berlin 19. Dezember 1936; [Reichsschatzmeister Schwarz?] to Gauschatzmeister Leonhardt, München 18. Januar 1937; In Namen des Führers, 20. Juli 1938 (Abschrift); Gauschatzmeister Nolte to Reichsschatzmeister Schwarz, Berlin 16. August 1938; Reichsschatzmeister Schwarz to Gauschatzmeister Leonhardt, München 12. September 1938.

83 Hans-Joachim Lang, *Die Namen der Nummern* (Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe, 2004).

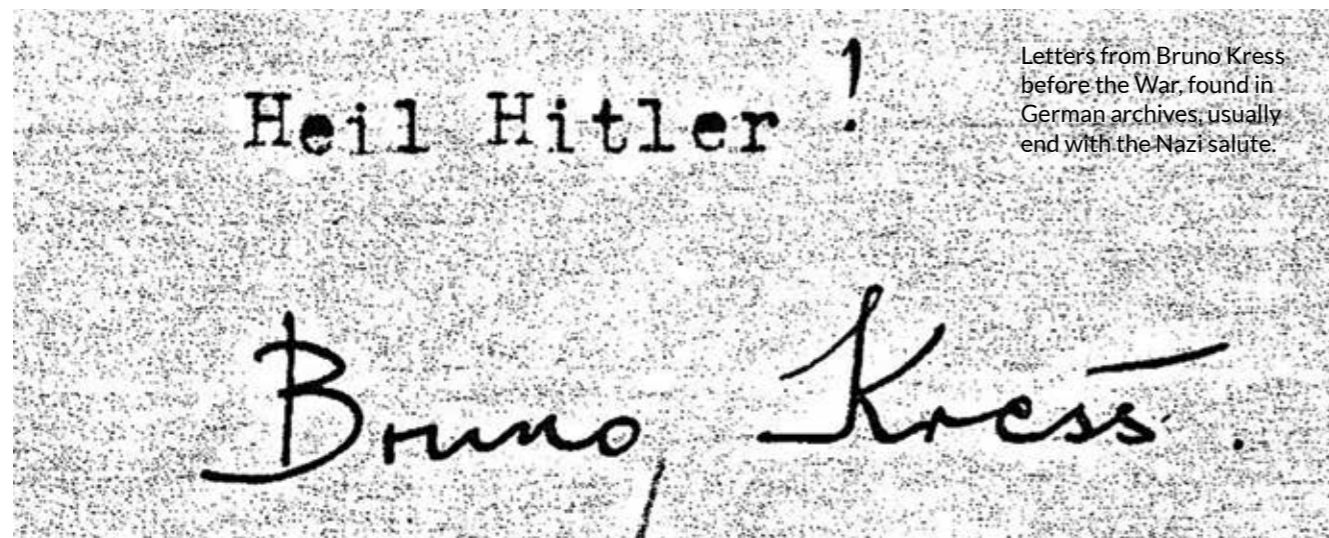
84 Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, *Le Mémorial de la déportation des juifs de France* (Paris: 1978).

Thorsteinsson trained as an engineer in Norway where he joined the Technical Assistance Groups, *Technische Nothilfe*, which fought alongside the SS on the Eastern Front in the Second World War.<sup>89</sup> A Jewish refugee in Iceland, Hans Mann, later said that Kress was very rude to him and the other Jews who came from Germany, while some of the other German Nazis in Reykjavik, including the Consul-General, treated them with courtesy. “Kress behaved just as if he was still in Germany,” Mann said. “He was an evil man.”<sup>90</sup>

In the summer of 1935, Bruno Kress returned to Berlin to defend his thesis in philology which he did on 25 October. The Consul-General whom he had denounced to the Nazi headquarters, Dr. Timmermann, was however furious with him and saw to it personally in the autumn of 1935 that Kress did not get a temporary lectureship in German, financed by the *Reich*, at the University of Iceland.<sup>91</sup> Dr. Timmermann also

it directly to Berlin instead of trying to resolve it in Iceland. Their findings could only be appealed to a higher party court by the leader of the foreign section of the Nazi party. But having just graduated, Kress was now out of the Party and without a job. He supported himself for the next few years by teaching German, both privately and at the Reykjavik Grammar School, and by working part-time at the office of a small Icelandic company. In the autumn of 1936, he married Kristin Thoroddsen which made for an excellent entry into Icelandic society.

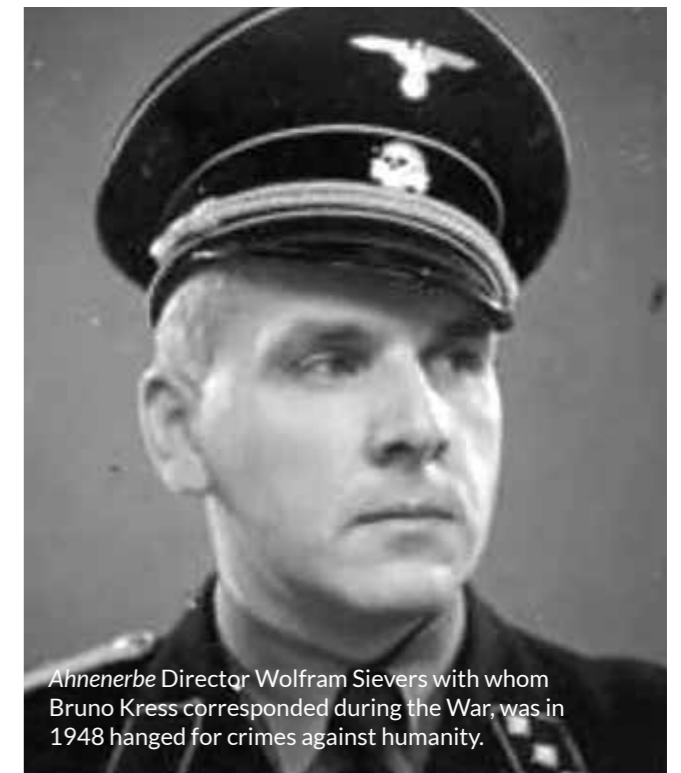
Kress continued his fight against the German Consul-General in Reykjavik. So intense was this fight, indeed, that Dr. Timmermann was in no doubt when someone threw a stone through his window one evening, that the perpetrator was Bruno Kress.<sup>92</sup> But finally Kress succeeded in having the findings of the lower party court overturned, with the assis-



himself reported Kress to the Nazi Party in Berlin, for breach of discipline. The words of the Consul-General carried more weight in Berlin than those of the recent university graduate. In March 1936, Kress was deprived of his Nazi Party membership for breach of discipline. Kress appealed this decision to a special party court which sent people up to Iceland to interview Timmermann, Kress and a few trusted members of the Party. They found, in November 1936, that Kress had been right in some of the items he complained about, but that he had been wrong in referring

tance of the leader of the foreign section of the Nazi Party. The higher party court decided in April 1938 to reinstate Bruno Kress as a member of the Nazi Party. Soon after this, an officer in *Ahnenerbe* came to Iceland on a brief visit. He met with Bruno Kress who described to him a research project which might interest *Ahnenerbe*. It was to write in German an Icelandic grammar. Kress knew that *Ahnenerbe*, under the influence of the SS leader Heinrich Himmler, was quite interested in Icelandic culture, regarding the Icelanders — descending from Norse vikings,

settling the island in the 9th and 10th Centuries, with negligible immigration for a millennium — as a ‘pure’ Nordic race. The idea was well received in the *Ahnenerbe* headquarters in Berlin, and it was decided to give a grant of 100 Reichsmarks monthly to Bruno Kress for a year. The first payment arrived in May 1939.<sup>93</sup> At about the same time, Kress’ old nemesis, Dr. Günther Timmermann, returned to Germany in disgrace, and an ardent Nazi and SS-officer, Prof. Dr. Werner Gerlach, took his place as the German Consul-General in Reykjavik.<sup>94</sup> Dr. Gerlach immediately set about restoring order in the Nazi Party cell in Reykjavik. Bruno Kress was present at the first meeting of the restored cell in June 1939, and he was one of only three Germans who did not miss a single meeting of the cell until the British occupied Iceland on 10 May 1940 and imprisoned all the German Nazis in Reykjavik which they knew about, including Bruno Kress.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, in September 1939, Bruno and Kristin Kress had a daughter, Helga.



Ahnenerbe Director Wolfram Sievers with whom Bruno Kress corresponded during the War, was in 1948 hanged for crimes against humanity.

## The Nazi Becomes a Communist

The British brought Dr. Bruno Kress and the other German prisoners-of-war that they apprehended in Iceland to the Isle of Man. For the next four years, Kress lived in relative comfort at the Camp L in Ramsay where he wrote letters, not only to his wife in Iceland, but also, somewhat surprisingly, to *Ahnenerbe* in Germany. In July 1942 he wrote to Wolfram Sievers, the *Ahnenerbe* director, that he needed a typewriter with special Icelandic letters in order to complete the Icelandic grammar that he had received the grant to write. Sievers sensibly replied that it would not be a good idea to send such a typewriter to him, as it would be unlikely to make it through.<sup>96</sup> This was a year before Sievers authorised the killings of the 86 Jews, including Henny Goldstein-Ottosson’s brother, Siegbert Rosenthal, for the *Ahnenerbe* skeleton collection. It should be emphasised, though, that there is no evidence of Kress knowing or approving of the excesses

of the *Ahnenerbe*, even if he had to know of the persecution of Jews in Germany and apparently did not object to it. In the autumn of 1944, Kress was released with some other German prisoners-of-war in a prisoners’ exchange with Germany, organised by the International Red Cross and taking place in Gothenburg in Sweden. Some other prisoners-of-war on the Isle of Man chose, however, not to participate in this programme, probably because they were opposed to the Nazi régime. From Sweden Kress went to Germany.

Kress was heard from next when he was, immediately after the war, teaching at schools in the Soviet occupation zone, in Mecklenburg, the North German district on the Baltic Sea. He lived for a while in the village Rambeel, east of Lübeck. In the autumn of 1947, his Icelandic wife, Kristin Kress, went to Mecklenburg to bring him home, having received all the necessary permits after a lot of bureaucratic hassle.<sup>97</sup> But Kress did not want to return to Iceland. He got legally divorced from his Icelandic wife in 1950, and

89 Vissum aldrei hvað biddi okkar [We never knew what would happen next, interview with Geir Thorsteinsson, published posthumously], *Morgunblaðið* 15 January 2006; Asgeir Gudmundsson, *Berlinarblús*, 2nd edition [*Berlin Blues*, an account of Icelanders in the service of Nazi Germany during World War II] (Reykjavik: Skrudda, 2009), pp. 150–156.

90 Interview by Snorri G. Bergsson with Hans Mann, 24 March 1994.

91 Icelandic National Archives: University of Iceland files, BA 2:34. This file contains various letters between Bruno Kress, the University of Iceland and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

92 Interview by Snorri G. Bergsson with Thora Timmermann December 1994.

93 German Federal Archives: NSDP. Personal Akten Bruno Kress. Schweizer to Ahnenerbe, Detmold 18. November 1938; Schweizer to Ahnenerbe, Detmold 12. Januar 1939; Schweizer to Kress, 6. Februar 1939; Sievers to Kress, Berlin 1. März 1939; Kress to Sievers, Reykjavik 13. März 1939; Kress to Sievers, Reykjavik 12. Juni 1939; Kress to Ahnenerbe, Reykjavik, 7. August 1939. German Federal Archives: Ahnenerbe. Ahnenerbe to Oberfinanzpräsident Berlin, [1939?]; Wüst to Himmler, Berlin, März 1939.

94 Perhaps Dr. Gerlach plays a minor role in world literature. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s play, *Les Séquestrés d’Altona* (1959), some of the main characters belong to the “von Gerlach” family. One of them is called Werner von Gerlach. While in May 1940 the German Consul-General had been imprisoned by the British forces occupying Iceland, in the autumn of 1941 he was released in a prisoners’ exchange. He worked as the cultural attaché of the German Embassy in Paris in 1943–1944. Sartre was living in Paris at the time, and most likely knew of him.

95 Icelandic National Archives: Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs files, DK German Embassy. Table of Attendance of Nazi Party and Labour Front Groups.

96 German Federal Archives: NSDP. Personal Akten Bruno Kress. Bruno Kress to Ahnenerbe, 17 July 1942, and Wolfram Sievers to Bruno Kress, 19 August 1942.

97 Icelandic National Archives: Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs files, DK 24.B.1. Kristin Thoroddsen was sister of prominent Independence Party member Gunnar Thoroddsen, then Mayor of Reykjavik.

immediately thereafter he married a German woman, Margarete Peetske, who had one son, Wolfhard Machmüller, born in 1939. By then, the Soviet occupation zone had been turned into the German Democratic Republic, the DDR. For the next few years, Kress taught at various schools in Mecklenburg, eventually becoming a schoolmaster in Redewisch, a town close to the border between the DDR and the German Federal Republic, or West Germany. Bruno Kress had two daughters, Elke and Anke, with his second wife. From his new home in East Germany, Kress could follow the 1948 court case against the former director of *Abnenerbe*, Wolfram Sievers, with whom he had corresponded from the Isle of Man, and his execution.

In 1956, Bruno Kress' big opportunity came. Then, Greifswald University celebrated its 500th birthday. It was decided to strengthen its Nordic studies, and Kress was hired to teach Icelandic. At the University a Nordic Institute had been founded already in 1918. Not operating during the war, it was restarted in 1954 with Dr. Ruth Dzulko as director. She refused, however, to spy on her colleagues for the East German security force, the *Stasi*, and fled to West Germany. In 1956, a respected philologist, Dr. Hans-Friedrich Rosenfeld, was appointed director of the Nordic Institute. He lacked interest, however, in politics so the central committee of the communist party in Mecklenburg (which was now called Rostock District) decided to replace him with Kress. In a January 1957 report to the central committee of the party, Kress wrote: "Professor Rosenfeld had no understanding of the new tasks and objectives of the Institute. He did not want to extend the functions of the Institute from the purely philological, and to direct an Institute with a political agenda, as if there were any institutes without a political agenda."<sup>98</sup> Rosenfeld went soon thereafter to West Germany. For the next few years, Kress collaborated closely with the chairman of the Rostock District central committee, Karl Mewis, on 'extending the functions' of the Nordic Institute. An Assistant Professor in Swedish who was not deemed politically reliable was fired, for example, and three new Assistant Professors were hired in the Nordic languages.

One of Kress' tasks was to develop a relationship with the Icelandic Socialists (as the communists now called themselves).<sup>99</sup> In the early Spring of 1958, he received the two editors of the Socialist Party daily, *Thjodviljinn*, in Greifswald. In a newspaper report afterwards, the Icelandic guests commented favourably about Kress who 'spoke flawless Icelandic'.<sup>100</sup> Soon after their visit, Kress went with another specialist in Nordic studies, Walter Baetke, Professor at Leipzig University, on a mission to Iceland. It was during that visit that he was invited to the sixtieth birthday of veteran Socialist Brynjolfur Bjarnason and had the encounter with Henny Goldstein-Ottosson, the Jewess that he allegedly had, as a Nazi in Reykjavik twenty years earlier, treated contemptuously. Henny Goldstein-Ottosson was, understandably, dismayed at seeing him there. But she would have become much more upset if she had known, both that Kress had worked for *Abnenerbe* and that her own brother had been killed by *Abnenerbe* in the most gruesome way—even if, as should be stressed again—Kress had nothing to do with that or with other *Abnenerbe* misdeeds.

## A Nest of Spies

When Bruno Kress and Walter Baetke returned to East Germany after their Icelandic trip, Baetke wrote a report on their behalf to the University authorities which was forwarded to the Central Committee of the East German Communist Party. He said that Kress and he had discussed international affairs with their Icelandic friends. They had warned them about militarism in West Germany and informed them of the great progress made in the DDR. "It serves our purposes to cooperate closely with the Icelandic Socialist Party. At present, Iceland is the weakest link in the NATO-chain."<sup>101</sup> The Icelandic Socialists completely ignored the lonely protest voice of Henny Goldstein-Ottosson. Einar Olgeirsson, the chairman of the Party, visited Greifswald in the summer of 1958 and had discussions with Kress. The affair at the birthday party seemed almost forgotten when suddenly in the autumn of 1959 a German newspaper for the German-speaking minority in the south of Denmark, *Der Nordschleswiger*, published an article by Karl Meister-Walldorf about the Nordic Institute, titled 'A Comintern School for Scandinavia.' According to the author, the East Germans were

hypocritical in criticizing the West Germans for allowing former Nazis to occupy important positions in their country. The East Germans themselves had appointed a former Nazi, Dr. Bruno Kress, as the director of the Nordic Institute at Greifswald University which trained communist agents and cadres who were to work in the Nordic countries. Dr. Kress had visited Iceland in the Spring of 1958 where he had, the article continued, given a speech at a closed meeting of the Icelandic communists. There he had been recognised by a Jewess who had fled Germany before the war. She had pointed him out as one of the German Nazis who had tried to make life difficult for her and other Jewish refugees in Reykjavik before the war.<sup>102</sup>

When Bruno Kress saw this article, he immediately wrote to Einar Olgeirsson:

“The small kernel of truth in this defamatory article is probably that I attended Brynjolfur's birthday party in the Ski hut in Hveradalir. I did not make a speech there and did not notice anything out of the ordinary. The Icelanders ought to know all about my past. Like all the other Germans in Reykjavik (except Schopka), I joined the foreign section of the Nazi Party. In 1935, I was thrown out of the party on the initiative of Consul Timmermann who was then still in Iceland. I could not become a Lecturer at the University of Iceland. Nazi Germany did not allow that. ... I never did anything to any German immigrants, nor would I ever do so.

Kress asked Einar Olgeirsson to write to the communist leaders in Greifswald and clarify the situation.<sup>103</sup> So Einar did a few days later. He explained to the East German communists that at Brynjolfur Bjarnason's birthday party, the wife of one of the comrades had been present. She was of the Jewish faith and had fled from Nazi-Germany before the war. She was, Einar Olgeirsson said, hostile towards most Germans and had become very upset when she saw Kress there. Einar Olgeirsson added that when Kress had lived in Iceland before the war, he had not been regarded as a Nazi. Indeed, because of Nazi opposition, he had not received a lectureship in German at the University of Iceland for which he had applied.<sup>104</sup>

Bruno Kress was director of the Nordic Institute at Greifswald from 1957 to 1965. Many Icelandic communists came to Greifswald in this period to attend the 'Baltic Week' which the East German communists organised from 1958 for Scandinavian sympathisers, a week-long conference. Bruno Kress sat on its executive committee. In 1960, the Icelandic Socialist Party held a seminar for its cadres in connection with the Baltic Week of that year. Kress gave a paper there on 'The Development of Socialism and the German Issue, especially the fight against West-German Militarism'. The same year, 1960, Brynjolfur Bjarnason visited Greifswald and gave a lecture on 'The History of the Icelandic Labour Movement'. The encounter at his birthday party between Kress and Henny Goldstein-Ottosson in 1958 was only referred to once in an Icelandic newspaper, by the social-democratic *Althydubladid* in 1961, probably with the 1959 article in *Dem Nordschleswiger* as the source. The newspaper said that in the prewar years, Kress had been known as one of the "most militant Nazis in Iceland." It also expressed surprise that the Icelandic Socialist Party offered him as an instructor at one of its seminars.<sup>105</sup>

The Nordic Institute was, in the 1960s and 1970s, reputed to be a nest of spies and agents for East Germany, directing their attention at the Nordic countries. Many of its staff and students had ties with Stasi, such as Heinz Becker, a Stasi officer, Olaf Schlaak (code name Eberhard), Franz Stepanek (code name Jochen), Klaus Witte (code name Gunnar), Kurt Vieweg (code name Nordland), Gabriele Sokoll (code name Berndt) and Wolfgang Fritsch (code name Oxford).<sup>106</sup> In 1961, on Bruno Kress' initiative, Arni Bjornsson, an Icelander, was hired for two years as a Lecturer in Icelandic at Greifswald University. He only spent one year however in Greifswald, moving in early 1963 to the somewhat livelier environment of West Berlin where he lectured in Icelandic at the Free University. During his time in West Berlin, he was approached by an Icelander working for Stasi, Gudmundur Agustsson, and asked whether he would provide information about his colleagues and students. Arni Bjornsson refused to do so, but did

98 Alexander Muschik, Im Dienst der 'Arbeiter- und Bauernmacht [In the Service of a Workers' and Farmers' Republic], *Nordeuropaforum*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2004), pp. 27–42.

99 As noted in the beginning of this paper, the Icelandic communists merged with leftwing socialists in 1938, forming the Socialist Party which was however dominated by its communist wing.

100 Magnus Torfi Olafsson, *Islensk fraedi i Austur-Thyskalandi [Icelandic Studies in East Germany]*, *Thjodviljinn* 30 May 1958.

101 Valur Ingimundarson, *Sigrar ungs lydveldis, Lidsmenn Moskvu* by Arni Snaevarr and Valur Ingimundarson [Victories of a New Republic. Followers of Moscow] (Reykjavik: Almenna bokafelagid, 1992), p. 240.

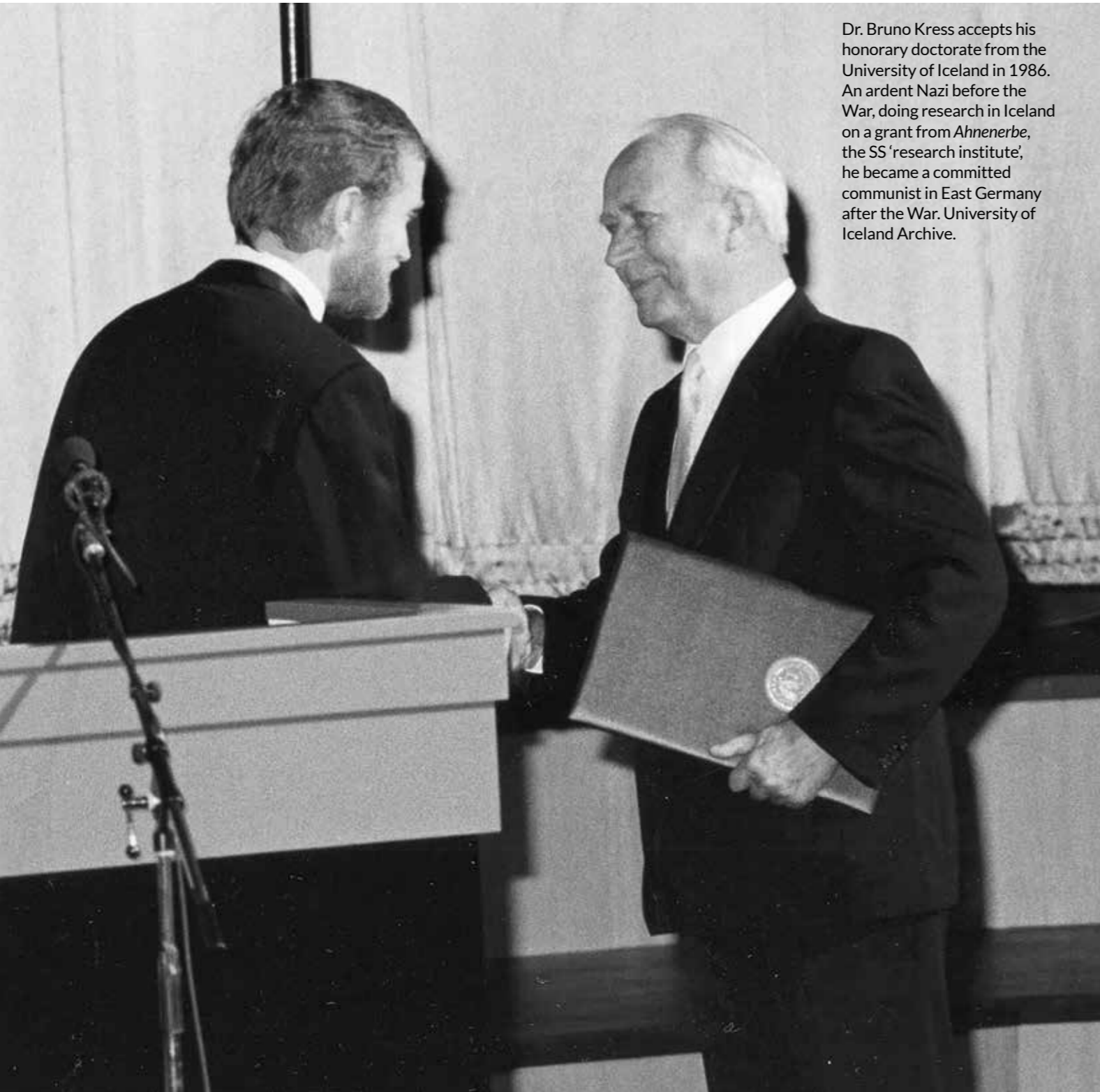
102 Karl Meister-Walldorf, Eine Kominternschule für Skandinavien, *Der Nordschleswiger*, Vol. 14, 5 September 1959.

103 National Library of Iceland: Einar Olgeirsson Archive. Bruno Kress to Einar Olgeirsson, Greifswald, 15 September 1959.

104 National Library of Iceland: Einar Olgeirsson Archive. Einar Olgeirsson, draft of a letter to the communist authorities in Greifswald; Bruno Kress to Einar Olgeirsson, Greifswald, 13 October 1959. Kress confirms in his 13 October letter that Einar Olgeirsson's letter to the communist authorities was sent 2 October.

105 Thyskur nasisti laerifadir islenskra komma [A German Nazi Indoctrinating Icelandic Commies], *Althydubladid*, 21 June 1961.

106 Mette Herborg and Per Michaelsen, *Stasi og Danmark* (Copenhagen: Holkenfeldt, 1996).



Dr. Bruno Kress accepts his honorary doctorate from the University of Iceland in 1986. An ardent Nazi before the War, doing research in Iceland on a grant from *Ahnenerbe*, the SS 'research institute', he became a committed communist in East Germany after the War. University of Iceland Archive.

not make this strange incident public until after the fall of East Germany.<sup>107</sup> Reputedly, once Kress was asked by an Icelandic acquaintance where his former students mostly found work. 'At the post office,' he swiftly responded. Indeed, East Germany had one of the most extensive surveillance and repression systems the world has seen. People understanding

Icelandic, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian could easily find employment in such a state. 90,000 Stasi agents as well as 175,000 special informers were keeping the watch on a nation of only 16 millions (more than four millions having escaped to the West). In Nazi Germany only 40,000 Gestapo agents had been looking after a nation of 80 millions.<sup>108</sup>

107 Islenskur namsmadur njosnadi fyrir Stasi [Icelandic Student Agent for Stasi], *Morgunbladid* 7 February 1995.

108 Ehrhart Neubert, *Politische Verbrechen in der DDR, Das Schwarzbuch der Kommunismus. Unterdrückung, Verbrechen und Terror*, ed. Stéphane Courtois (München: Piper, 1998), pp. 847 and 857.

## An Honorary Doctorate in Iceland

Bruno Kress retired from the directorship of the Nordic Institute in 1965 and from his Professorship in 1972. He devoted his later years to completing his Icelandic grammar — once supported by the *Ahnenerbe* — and to translating the works of the Icelandic Nobel Laureate Halldor Kiljan Laxness into German. In 1977, he was asked by an Icelandic newspaper why he was translating Laxness into his mother tongue. 'It is because of his humanitarianism, because of his sympathy with the powerless and downtrodden,' Kress replied.<sup>109</sup> His Nazi past was almost never mentioned in Iceland, with the exception of two books about Iceland in the Second World War by prominent Icelandic historian Professor Thor Whitehead who also broke the silence on the treatment of Jewish refugees in Iceland during the 1930s.<sup>110</sup> The Icelanders rewarded Kress' interest in their history, language and literature by bestowing honours upon him. In 1978 Kress was made Knight of the Icelandic Order of the Falcon, and in the autumn of 1986, on the 75th anniversary of the University of Iceland, Kress received an honorary doctorship at the Faculty of the Humanities.

One month earlier, 24 August 1986, Henny Goldstein-Ottosson had died, so there was no one to protest, as in 1958. Henny had continued her normal life in Iceland after the surprising 1958 encounter with Kress. She had worked from her home as a dressmaker since 1952, and later was employed at the office of the Icelandic Broadcasting Corporation. Her husband, Hendrik Ottosson, had died in 1966. Her son from her first marriage to Robert Goldstein, Peter, had gained Icelandic citizenship and become a telegraphist. He married an Icelandic lady, Hlin Gudjonsdottir, and they had five daughters. Peter and his family were in some contact with relatives in the United States, England and Israel, and one of the daughters lived in Israel for two years.<sup>111</sup> Peter Goldstein died in 1993, fifty-one years after his father Robert was killed by the Nazis.

Bruno Kress died at his home in Greifswald 15 October 1997. Soon after his death, the opponents of Nazism increased by one. In a little book published by the Greifswald Mayor's Office about notable people resting in an old graveyard in the city, one of Kress' colleagues at Greifswald University, Dr. Hans Reddemann, Professor of Medicine, informed the readers that Kress had fled to Iceland in the 1930s from the Gestapo.<sup>112</sup> This interesting piece of information even found its way to the German edition of Wikipedia.<sup>113</sup> 🐕

109 Tilfinning en ekki stjornmalastefna [Emotion, not Ideology], *Timinn*, 26 May 1977.

110 Thor Whitehead, *Ofridur i adsigi [War Approaching]* (Reykjavik: Almenna bokafelagid, 1980) and *Strid fyrir strondum [War Off the Coast]* (Reykjavik: Almenna bokafelagid, 1985).

111 Interview by Hannes H. Gissurarson with Hlin Gudjonsdottir and Magnea Henny Petursdottir 27 October 2010.

112 In an email of 17 October 2010, I asked Dr. Reddemann where he received the information that Kress had fled to Iceland from the Gestapo. He gave an evasive answer in an email 30 October 2010. He only said: 'In our book about the Greifswald graveyard we have mostly used secondary literature: the archives of Greifswald University, Google, Wikipedia and so on.' Then he provided me with the address of one of Kress' daughters. Hans Reddemann, Bruno Kress, *Der alte Friedhof*. (Greifswald: Der Oberbürgermeister, 2004), p. 48. Since the source of the German Wikipedia entry was quoted as being his article, the circle had indeed been closed!

113 Bruno Kress. German Wikipedia entry, [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruno\\_Kress](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruno_Kress), accessed 17 October 2010. This piece of information has now been removed.





# The Apologist HALLDOR K. LAXNESS

## A Twentieth Century Intellectual

*Halldor K. Laxness was Iceland's foremost writer in the 20th century, and her only Nobel Laureate in Literature. Having tried unsuccessfully in the 1920s to become a Hollywood scriptwriter, he returned to Iceland a fervent opponent of capitalism. He visited the Soviet Union twice in the 1930s, describing it in glowing terms, denying the existence of the Ukrainian famine and fully believing in the guilt of Bukharin, whose trial he attended. His staunch support of Stalinism continued after the war when he was active in the so-called peace movement, backed by Moscow. But after he received the Nobel Prize in 1955, he slowly moved away from Stalinism, and his break with it came in his 1963 memoir of the interwar years, A Poet's Time, where he gave a completely different account of his two trips to the Soviet Union in the 1930s from that of his two earlier travelogues and where he for the first time publicly told the story of how an innocent girl was arrested in his presence. Laxness seems, in his egoism, arrogance, indifference to individual sufferings and fascination with the use of power to impose an idea on a whole society to be a typical 20th century leftwing intellectual.*

The Twentieth Century was the best of times; and it was the worst of times. It saw marvelous innovations, astounding achievements, advances in trade and technology benefiting hundred of millions, perhaps billions, of people. But it also visited upon mankind two World Wars, the terrorist regimes of Lenin and Stalin, Hitler and Mao, repression, mass murder, even genocide. Those who believe in liberty under the law, cooperation without commands, mutually beneficial trade, and the spontaneous order of the free market, have little difficulty in discerning the roots of this evil: what the past century witnessed were the perhaps unintended consequences of socialism, of the belief in commands to affect human behaviour, of the inevitable abuse of absolute power. It was the transformation of the invisible hand into the clenched fist. But an often-discussed question, troubling conservative and liberal intellectuals is this: Why have so many people of ideas, teachers, journalists, poets and writers, been vehemently opposed to capitalism? Why has what seems like a majority of them lent their support to totalitarianism, mostly in its Marxist form, but some of them even to National Socialism? Perhaps some light can be thrown on this question by describing the life and works of the most influential Icelandic intellectual of the 20th century, Halldor Kiljan Laxness, the 1955 Nobel Laureate in Literature. Not only did his life (1902-1998) largely coincide with the century, but Laxness also participated in and wrote about some of the most important ideas and events of modern times. He was a typical twentieth century intellectual in many respects. His was an interesting journey.

## “What are the Masses but Clay in the Hands of Superior Minds?”

Halldor Kiljan Laxness changed his name, as many radical intellectuals do: An author appears more distinguished as Knut Hamsun than as Mr. Petersen; Jacques Thibault is a less impressive name than Anatole France. By a name change, one also removes oneself from one's origins, as may seem natural if one wants to make the world over. Laxness was born as Halldor Gudjonsson (the surname simply meaning son of Gudjon), in Reykjavik in the spring of 1902, the son of a manual worker who had escaped poverty by diligence and foresight and who bought the farm Laxnes in

Mosfell valley, close to Reykjavik, in 1905. There Laxness was brought up, mostly by his mother and grandmother, whom he remembers fondly in various writings, until he went to Reykjavik to attend school in 1915. He was a child prodigy who read vociferously, played the piano and painted. But after three and a half years in Reykjavik, he dropped out of school. He had an irresistible urge to write and a burning ambition: only sixteen years old, he wrote a romantic novel about a rural love affair. Immediately after finishing it and sending it to the printers, he went, with a little financial help from his mother who had then recently become a widow, to Copenhagen. There he wanted to become a famous author, and immersed himself in the works of the best-known Scandinavian writers of the time, Knut Hamsun and August Strindberg. He wrote some short stories in Danish, and incredibly, one of the largest Copenhagen dailies published them in the autumn of 1919 and spring of 1920.

Despite this promising beginning, the young writer could not support himself by his writings, so he returned to his mother's farm in Iceland in 1920. A close friend of his late father who had emigrated to Canada, but left behind some money in a savings account, allowed him to take a given sum out of the account to finance a visit to him in Canada. With this money, the young Halldor Gudjonsson went in the autumn of 1921 to Denmark and then on to Germany and Austria where life was very cheap for foreigners, because of inflation. He was briefly engaged to a young girl from a big farm near his childhood home, but when she brought it to an end, he decided to go to America. In the spring of 1922, the young Halldor Gudjonsson was refused entry at Ellis Island because he was almost penniless, and his father's friend declined, in a telegramme from Canada, any responsibility for him: He had discovered that the young man had, with the help of his mother, emptied the savings account, not being satisfied with the sum which his benefactor had allocated to him.<sup>114</sup>

Upon returning to Europe in the summer of 1922, Halldor Gudjonsson was 'down and out' in Copenhagen and the Danish countryside for a few months. He had a short affair with a young Icelandic girl at this time, resulting in a girl born out of wedlock, without him knowing, in Iceland in the spring of 1923. Suddenly, however, in the autumn of 1922, Halldor Gudjonsson was offered a place in a monastery in Luxembourg, Clervaux, by a prominent Danish Catholic writer, Johannes Jørgensen, to whom the young Iclander had written about his interest in

the Catholic faith. There he went at the end of 1922, and was baptised as a Catholic in January 1923, taking the name Halldor Kiljan Laxness: Kiljan was an Irish saint who was a missionary in Bohemia, and Laxness is simply the possessive declension of the farm where he was brought up. In the monastery, Laxness worked on another novel, on a farmer's son who hardens as a result of the misery he both experiences and sees around him. Laxness returned with the novel to Iceland in the spring of 1924 and aroused much curiosity in tiny Reykjavik as a young Catholic. While he said that he intended to enter the Benedictine Order, he tried his best, and sometimes succeeded in, seducing young Icelandic ladies, including Solveig Straumland, the wife of an acquaintance. His new novel was not well-received, and deservedly so.

Laxness was however seen by many as the most promising writer of his generation, and a group of well-to-do people offered him financial assistance to go to Sicily to write a new novel. Laxness was a sensitive, nervous and vulnerable young man at that time, but also quite arrogant, with elevated ideas about himself. He wrote to his confidante, Rev. Jon Sveinsson, an Icelandic Jesuit and author of popular children's stories:

“Indeed, I have very little inclination to behave according to the wishes and taste of the general public: I feel that the vocation of the writer is much too important for that. The writer is the prophet of our times; he is the man who has a duty to speak to the masses in God's name, rather than a joker in a variety show, seeking applause. I cannot resist the thought that it amounts to moral promiscuity, or worse, to try to write in such a way that the masses would approve; but if the writer cannot make the audience listen to him, with or without prior consent, then he has only himself to blame and should choose another job.

He added:

“What are the masses but clay in the hands of superior minds? They are nothing but raw material, at the most the tools to initiate events of world importance. They have never been anything else, and never will be, and that is their holy task, to be used in the wars of great moral ideas, and they should behave accordingly.<sup>115</sup>

Laxness spent most of the year 1925 in Taormina in Sicily, then a popular haunt of homosexuals, as he later recalled. After a brief spell in the monastery in Luxembourg, Clervaux, where he had been baptised, in the spring of 1926 he returned to Iceland with the manuscript of a new novel.

The new novel, with the strange name *The Great Weaver from Kashmir*, came out in the spring of 1927, aroused much controversy, but was acclaimed by the younger generation. A leading conservative critic, Kristjan Albertsson, began his review with famous words: At last! At last! Laxness' novel is seen by many as the beginning of modern Icelandic literature. It is the long, wordy, sometimes eloquent, and almost burlesque story of a young Icelandic man of affluence, who travels around post-war Europe and samples its carnal pleasures, only to turn his back on the world and enter a monastery. But at the very time when Laxness was sending this novel to the printers, he was changing his views. While a Catholic, he had translated polemics against communism into Iceland (on communist repression in Poland), but now he became politically radical, perhaps under the influence of some of his friends who frequented a literary salon in Reykjavik maintained by Erlendur Gudmundsson, who was deeply interested in the arts, and who became a strange mixture of close friend, errand boy and father figure to Laxness. In a series of articles about his travels in the poor regions of the east and north of Iceland, Laxness said, half-seriously, that those opposing cultural reform deserved a bullet in the neck, in a prison basement.<sup>116</sup>

Despite his newfound radicalism, Laxness wanted to go west, and to try his luck in the Los Angeles film industry. He did not succeed. Nobody was interested in handing artistic control of such a vast enterprise as a film over to this young, arrogant and ambitious Iclander. He later claimed that the reason for his failure was that a prominent film executive, Paul Bern, had committed suicide. But this happened in 1931, and Laxness returned to Iceland in late 1929. Before Laxness left for America in 1927, he had become engaged to an Icelandic girl, the daughter of a conservative professor of law and former government minister. They wrote tender love letters to each other during Laxness' years in America, but what he did not tell his fiancée was that in Los Angeles he lived for quite a while with an Icelandic girl who worked there as a nurse and who supported him financially. The nurse, Valgerdur Einarsdóttir, took it very hard when he subsequently returned to Iceland, leaving her behind.

114 Facts and details about the early life of Laxness (1902-1932) are, unless otherwise quoted, derived from Hannes H. Gissurarson, *Halldor* (Reykjavik: Almenna bokafelagid, 2003).

115 National Library of Iceland: Jon Sveinsson Archive. Letter from Laxness to Jon Sveinsson, Taormina 23 July 1925. Translations from the original Icelandic are all made by me.

116 Halldor K. Laxness, *Raflysing sveitanna* [Electricity for the Countryside], *Althydubladid* 8 March 1927.



Halldor K. Laxness wrote two travelogues from the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In a 1963 book he admitted that he had not told the truth about what he saw and heard.

In California, Laxness wrote a passionate article about the Sacco and Vanzetti case for an Icelandic socialist daily after having read *Boston*, the novel by Upton Sinclair about the case. As a result, he met Sinclair who befriended him (although he did not mention Laxness in his autobiography) and helped him find a editor helping him with the translation of *The Great Weaver of Kashmir*. It was a young girl of Sinclair's acquaintance, Helen Crane, the niece of the author Stephen Crane, but the relationship turned sour when Laxness did not pay the girl. Then and indeed all his life he behaved as if he believed that others should work for him without any recompensation. Laxness sent the manuscript of the English translation of *The Great Weaver of Kashmir* to several publishers, but they all turned it down.<sup>117</sup>

In America, Laxness also worked on a collection of essays on the social question, *The Book of the People*. There he expounded a highly scientific view of society: children should be brought up in nurseries, not by their parents; centralised economic planning had to replace the play of the blind market forces; religion was nothing but the opium of the people; there was no real scarcity; crime, prostitution and poverty could all be eradicated; man was perfectible.<sup>118</sup> In a newspaper article, talking of Icelandic missionaries in China, Laxness said, perhaps in the heat of the moment, that it was strange that no law provided for the hanging of such evil people.<sup>119</sup> In the summer of 1929, officials from the U.S. Immigration Service visited Laxness, because they had been sent, by an enraged Icelandic-American, a translation of his article in the Icelandic newspaper on the perversion of American justice in the Sacco and Vanzetti case. They took his passport with them, but handed it over to him in the autumn, after they had abandoned their enquiries. He promptly sent a telegramme to his mother who paid for his trip back to Iceland.

### “When Reindeers Run with Wolves, They Have to Howl”

When Halldor Kiljan Laxness at the end of 1929 returned to Iceland, he was a committed socialist, embittered by his experience in America, but more mature as a writer, and with a tougher hide. Since

America had, in his opinion, rejected him, he rejected America, as an ideal, with her capitalism, consumer culture, and democracy. In Iceland, he married his fiancée, Ingibjorg Einarsdottir, and started writing a novel about a working girl's adventures and affairs in a fishing village, *Salka Valka*, which came out in 1931 and 1932.<sup>120</sup> It has some similarities to the works of the American social critics Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. The most influential man in Icelandic politics at the time, agrarian radical Jonas Jonsson, Minister of Education, who incidentally briefly appears, thinly disguised, in *Salka Valka*, liked the book and managed to get Laxness a generous government pension. But Laxness was moving rapidly to the left. A communist party, affiliated with Comintern, the international communist movement, had been founded in Iceland in the autumn of 1930. Laxness wanted to see for himself what was happening in the Soviet Union. He contacted Icelandic friends in Moscow as early as 1931, angling for an invitation to the Soviet Union. In the summer of 1932, he met Willi Münzenberg, the famous propaganda chief of the international communist movement, in Berlin, and Münzenberg managed to get him an invitation.<sup>121</sup>

Laxness went to Russia at the end of September 1932 and spent two months there. On a train ride in the Ukraine, he witnessed the dire poverty in the countryside where the collectivisation of agriculture imposed by Stalin was bringing about famine. Sharing a hotel room in Moscow during the 7th of November festivities with a well-known German communist, Hermann Duncker, he could not avoid listening to one of Duncker's visitors, a former inmate in a Siberian camp, whisper tales to his host about the appalling conditions there. Nevertheless, upon returning to Iceland, he wrote a short travel book about the Soviet Union, uttering not a word of criticism, but applauding the transformation of a whole society on scientific principles that he said he had just been witnessing.<sup>122</sup> When the conservative daily *Morgunbladid* published news about the Ukrainian famine of 1932–1933, Laxness wrote an article in the organ of the Icelandic Friends of the Soviet Union, vehemently contesting those news: “I travelled all over the Ukraine in the so-called

117 It finally came out in 2008, Halldor K. Laxness, *The Great Weaver from Kashmir* (Brooklyn, Archipelago Books, 2008).

118 Halldor K. Laxness, *Althydubokin* (Reykjavik: Jafnadarmannafelag Islands, 1929).

119 Halldor K. Laxness, Atakanlegt [Pathetic], *Heimskringla* 23 January 1929.

120 Halldor K. Laxness, *Salka Valka* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1936).

121 Facts and details about the mid-period in the life of Laxness (1932–1952) are, unless otherwise quoted, derived from Hannes H. Gissurarson, *Kiljan* (Reykjavik: Bokafelagid, 2004).

122 Halldor K. Laxness, *I austurvegi* (Reykjavik: Sovetvinafelag Islands, 1932).



Laxness usually was elegantly dressed. But when he had to speak at a 1 of May meeting of the communists in Reykjavik in 1936, to the chagrin of his wife he found some old and worn clothes to wear, as a proper proletarian author.

‘famine’ of 1932. This was a wonderful famine. Everywhere, things were flourishing.” In his support, he also quoted the now-notorious English-American reporter Will Durant.<sup>123</sup>

In the next three years, Laxness worked on what many consider to be his greatest work, *Independent People*, about a farmer who settles in an inhospitable mountain region in Iceland because he wants to be independent, but failing miserably; both his wives die, and by his stubbornness he drives away his step-daughter whom he loves, and other members of his household.<sup>124</sup> For Laxness, this was not only a critique of the romanticisation of rural life in Iceland, but also a response to a novel with a similar theme (but ending happily) by Knut Hamsun, *Growth of the Soil*.<sup>125</sup>

Laxness liked to write his novels abroad, in sunnier regions. He wrote part of *Independent people* in Barcelona in the autumn of 1933, and another part in Rome and Positano in the winter of 1934-5. In Italy, he used the opportunity to try and further a translation of *Salka Valka*, as he explained to his friend, Erlendur Gudmundsson:

“An Italian acquaintance of mine, a man of influence and of course a fascist, introduced me to the Mondadori people at their office in Rome, and they at least appeared to be interested in the book; here one only meets fascists and makes no fuss about it; when reindeers run with wolves, they have to howl.<sup>126</sup>

Laxness also tried to bring out his work in Germany although she was now under Nazi rule. In October 1936, for example, he paid the Danish Embassy in Berlin a visit, bringing with him a letter from his publisher in Denmark who firmly rejected all claims that Laxness was a communist; the publisher stated that Laxness had asserted to him that this was simply fictitious and malicious gossip.<sup>127</sup> The German Nazis knew however perfectly well, through their Icelandic contacts, that Laxness was a vocal supporter of the Icelandic Communist Party and his works were not published in Nazi Germany.

In August 1931, a son had been born to Laxness and his wife. Laxness had not wanted the child, but his wife refused to undergo an abortion. Laxness preferred his wife to travel with him, so she frequently,

for months, left the child in the care of her parents. To his son, Laxness was a friendly, but distant father. He did not show much interest in the upbringing of his illegitimate oldest daughter whereas he fully acknowledged her and his mother often looked after her. Laxness expanded his energies on causes which he considered worthier. He participated fully in the election campaign of the Icelandic Communist Party in the summer of 1937. For example, he spoke in the time allocated to the party by the Public Broadcasting Service; and he wrote a series of newspaper articles encouraging people to vote for the Communists. At the time, he was waiting for an answer to letters that he had written to the Soviet Union asking for an invitation to go there. The invitation finally came in the late autumn of 1937.

Laxness went to the Soviet Union through Stockholm and Helsinki in early December 1937. He attended an election rally which Stalin held in the Bolshoi theatre on 11 December 1937, the night before elections to the Supreme Soviet. He later admiringly wrote that Stalin was of a greater-than-medium height and well proportioned, while in fact the Soviet dictator was short, ugly and with a pock-marked face.<sup>128</sup> Laxness also composed a poem in traditional Icelandic form about a farm in the east which had been neglected, and which gained a new master who made everything flourish; this was Stalin. At the end of December, Laxness was invited to a writers’ congress in Tbilisi in Georgia where he met Russian writer and journalist Ilya Ehrenburg for the first, but not the last, time. There he attended a dinner given by Lavrentiy Beria, then general secretary of the Communist Party in Caucasus, but just about to be promoted to Stalin’s chief henchman. After the dinner, Laxness and the other members of his delegation walked back to their hotel. On the way, they encountered *besprizorni*, homeless children, sleeping by the street. One of the delegates said to the Soviet guide that there were *besprizorni* on the street. The guide sternly said that there were no *besprizorni* there. The man pointed to the children. The guide replied that in a decree of the Communist Party it was stated that the *besprizorni* problem had been solved in the Soviet Union and there accordingly were no *besprizorni*. Laxness shrugged his shoulders.<sup>129</sup>

At the writers’ congress in Tbilisi, Laxness also met a Kazakh folk singer and poet by the name of Dzhabayev. His poems were translated into Russian and German for his benefit, and Laxness became so moved by their purity and authenticity that he rendered them into Icelandic, for example this: “In Stalin, the dreams of the people of beauty and joy become true; Stalin, our beloved friend, you have no equal; you are the poet of the earth; Stalin, you are the singer of the folk song; Stalin, you are the mighty father of Dzhabayev.”

On the way from the Caucasus, Laxness spent a few days at Sinop, a luxurious resort by the Black Sea. He was working on a new book, on a poor Icelandic poet in a half-hearted and hopeless fight against his adverse conditions, *World Light* (sharing the title with a short story by Ernest Hemingway which Laxness translated some years previously).<sup>130</sup> In early 1938, Laxness went to Ukraine where he was shown, amongst other things, a collective in the village of Brovari, close to Kiev. Then he went to Moscow where at the beginning of March he was issued a ticket to attend one of the most remarkable spectacles of the 20th century, the trials of Nikolai Bukharin and many other, real or imaginary, opponents of Stalin. Day after day he listened to the testimony of Bukharin and the others accused.

In a book that Laxness wrote about his 1937–1938 stay in the Soviet Union, *Russian Adventure*, he described Bukharin clinically, without any pity:

“A small, stooped, bald bookworm, with the bearings of a schoolteacher, somewhat Mephistophelian in the sharpness of his features, a pointed nose, clipped ears, crescentic eyebrows, a Napoleonic beard, with his theories as an extension of his gnawing teeth; this is how he appeared to me.<sup>131</sup>

The Moscow trials ended at four o’clock in the morning of Sunday 13th March 1938: 18 of the 21 accused were sentenced to death, and almost immediately shot, by a bullet in the neck, in the Lubyanka Prison basement. This very same Sunday, Laxness was invited to dinner to a young woman that he had come to know in Moscow. Her name was Vera Hertzsch, a German communist from Leipzig who had emigrated to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and married a Polish Jew who lived there. She divorced her husband and became engaged to an

123 Halldór K. Laxness, *Russland ur lofti* [Russia from the Air], *Sovetvinurinn*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (September 1934), pp. 4–5.

124 Halldór K. Laxness, *Independent People* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1945).

125 Knut Hamsun, *Markens Grøde* (Kristiania [Oslo]: Gyldendal, 1917); *Growth of the Soil* (New York: Knopf, 1920).

126 National Library of Iceland: Erlendur Gudmundsson Archive. Letter from Laxness to Erlendur Gudmundsson, Positano, 29 December 1934.

127 Rigsarkivet [Danish National Archives]: Udenrigsministeriets Arkiv [Archive of Foreign Ministry], Berlin/81.A.91. Letter from Steen Hasselbalch to Ambassador Herluf Zahle, København, 15 October 1936. From Dr. Vilhjálmur Orn Vilhjálmsson.

128 Halldór K. Laxness, *Gerska aefintyrid* [Russian Adventure] (Reykjavik: Heimskringla, 1938), pp. 103–104. In a later edition Laxness changed the words to “of medium-height”.

129 Halldór Laxness, *Skaldatimi* [A Poet’s Time] (Reykjavik: Helgafell, 1963), p. 138.

130 Halldór K. Laxness, *World Light* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

131 Halldór K. Laxness, *Gerska aefintyrid* (1938), pp. 79–80.



Vera Hertzsch, a German communist residing in Moscow, was arrested with her daughter (whose father was Icelandic) in the spring of 1938 when Halldor Laxness, staying in Moscow, was having dinner with them. Laxness only revealed this twenty-five years later. Mother and daughter both perished in Stalin's labour camps. Photo: Private collection of Benjamin Eiriksson.

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Icelander, Benjamin Eiriksson, a student at a Party School in Moscow. Shortly after Eiriksson's departure for Iceland, she had given birth to their daughter who was now becoming one years old. Hertzsch and Laxness had a lot to discuss, although they avoided politics, and the evening passed pleasantly.

It was approaching midnight and Laxness was about to leave, when there was a soft knock on the door. A man in the unmistakable black overcoat of the security police, the NKVD, stood in the door. He asked to see Laxness' papers and went with them to the nearest police station. When he returned, he handed Laxness back his papers, but told Vera that she should come with him. During his absence, she had packed her things. She told Laxness not to worry about the little girl who slept in her cot: "The Soviet Union takes good care of children." When Laxness left, the police car waited outside for Vera, with the engine running.<sup>132</sup> Some days later, Laxness signed a contract with a Russian publishing house for the translation and publication of his book, *Independent People*, in Russian, and received a hefty advance, albeit only in non-convertible rubles. Laxness returned to Iceland, stopping over in Copenhagen where he spoke at a meeting of Icelandic students and described his experience in the Soviet Union in glowing terms.

## Defending Stalin, but Knowing of his Misdeeds

In Iceland, Halldor Kiljan Laxness continued to propagate communism with undiminished vigour. He did not tell anyone except the father of Vera Hertzsch's child, Benjamin Eiriksson, about her arrest. Publicly and privately, he defended the Moscow trials. His travelogue, *Russian Adventure*, was never translated into English. But it is a lively work and had much influence in Iceland, and some in Denmark where it appeared in a translation. It has a masterly opening. Finally, Laxness said, he could write a best-seller, become a feted author in all capitalist countries of the West, move to a mansion, drive around in a Rolls Royce, and give lectures at respected universities, — if only he would attack the Soviet Union, express disappointment with the great experiment conducted there, follow in the footsteps

of effeminate aesthetes (as Laxness put it) like André Gide who had not been able to stand the robustness of a new world in the making.

Among the topics discussed in *Russian Adventure* were the Moscow trials, Soviet agriculture, and Russian art and literature. Laxness expressed a sense of wonder and gratitude at being present at the creation of a New World and a New Man and waxed lyrically about a people living together in unity without any masters or slaves. Soon after the trip, in the autumn of 1938, Laxness ran into his old benefactor, Willi Münzenberg, in the foyer of the Paris Opera. They pretended not to recognise each other. Münzenberg had by then left the international communist movement and was being vilified in the communist press. He was killed under mysterious circumstances in a wood in France near the Swiss border in the spring of 1940, probably by Stalin's henchmen.<sup>133</sup>

Laxness remained in the thrall of Stalin. When the Soviet dictator made the August 1939 non-aggression pact with Hitler which brought about the Second World War, Laxness applauded it in an article in the Icelandic communist newspaper.<sup>134</sup> Less than three weeks after the outbreak of war, Stalin attacked Poland from the east, Hitler having invaded from the west. Again, Laxness applauded:

“Three weeks after the signing of the non-aggression pact, Bolshevism stands on the banks of the Weichsel River; fifteen millions who lived under a medieval feudal regime, notorious for the poorest farmers in the West, have now, quietly and without much bloodshed, jumped into the Soviet country of workers and farmers. I see the capitalist press writing that Bolsheviks all over the world are outraged because of this. I do not fully understand that way of thinking. I do not understand why any Bolshevik should object in any way to fifteen million people being silently annexed to Bolshevism.

Laxness added that now National Socialism had been reduced to a docile and harmless dog.<sup>135</sup> A few days later, in October 1939, Laxness published an article in the communist newspaper, pointing out to the Icelandic government that hostile comments in the press about the Soviet Union, a friendly power, were “hazardous,

<sup>132</sup> Laxness, *Skaldatími*, pp. 306–3011.

<sup>133</sup> Sean McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow's Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West, 1917–1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>134</sup> Halldor K. Laxness, *I stríðsbyrjun* [As War Begins], *Thjóðviljinn* 9 September 1939.

<sup>135</sup> Halldor K. Laxness, *Afanginn til Veiksel* [The Road to Veiksel], *Thjóðviljinn* 27 September 1939.

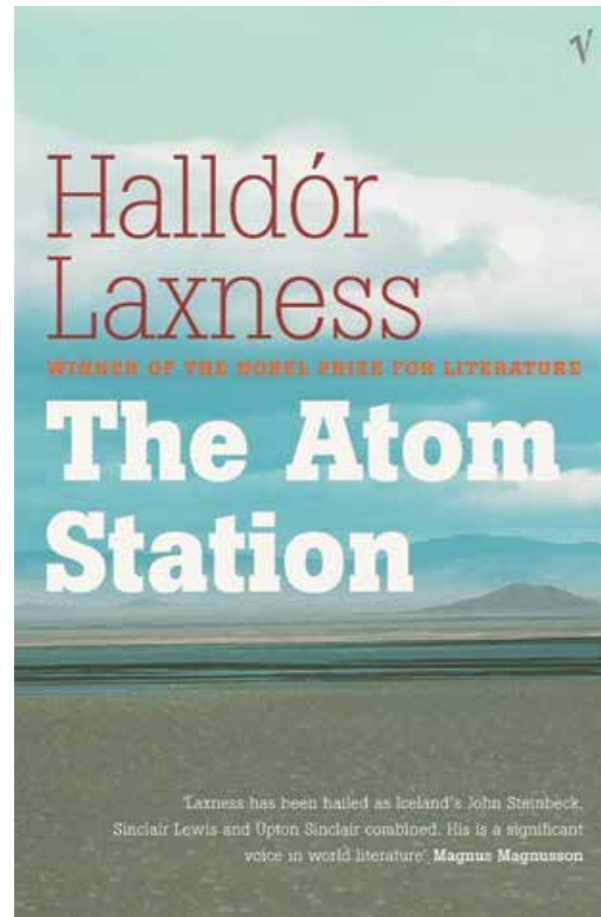
to say the least”.<sup>136</sup> Needless to say, Laxness also fully supported the attack by the Red Army on Finland at the end of November 1939.

Laxness’ fierce defence of Stalin’s policies did little to improve his standing with many Icelanders, especially his former benefactor, Jonas Jonsson, who had by now become a staunch anti-communist. Laxness’ annual government grant was greatly reduced in 1940, leading him in protest to reject it altogether. His wife also left him in 1940 for another man, so he lost the free accommodation he had been enjoying for almost a decade at his parents-in-law. Laxness subsequently wrote to Moscow and asked for, and received, another advance on the Russian edition of *Independent People*.<sup>137</sup> But his old friend, Erlendur Gudmundsson, and a rich admirer, Ragnar Jonsson, supported him financially over the next three difficult years. His next book, *The Clock of Iceland*, a historical novel, strongly nationalistic, was a huge success, and sold quite well so that in 1945, Laxness could move into a big and modern house, almost a mansion, in the valley where he had been brought up, thirty minutes’ drive from Reykjavik.<sup>138</sup> The same year he married Audur Sveinsdottir, a girl from modest circumstances whom he had been seeing for years, even during his first marriage. She was 18 years younger than he, and utterly devoted to him. They had two daughters together.

Laxness continued using his sharp tongue for the benefit of the communist cause. In 1941, for example,

he fiercely denounced Jan Valtin, the German former communist whose real name was Richard Krebs. His account of his subversive activities in the service of Komintern, *Out of the Night*, had been published in Iceland.<sup>139</sup> In early 1946, in the election campaign before the municipal elections in Reykjavik, Laxness also attacked Arthur Koestler who had written perceptive books about the Moscow trials and Stalinist terror: Koestler was not offering a critique of the Soviet Union, Laxness asserted, but vilifying it, “and this is caused by some kind of hatred which must remain the private problem — or perhaps the symptom of a disease — of the man who is possessed by it”.<sup>140</sup> At the same time as Laxness defended Stalin and the Soviet Union, he took lessons in Russian from a Baltic refugee, Teodoras Bieliackinas from Lithuania, originally from St. Petersburg, who told him all about the communist oppression of the Baltic nations.<sup>141</sup>

Laxness’ first trip to Europe after the war was to Czechoslovakia in 1946. In 1948 he published a controversial novel, *The Atom Station*, with direct reference to negotiations between the Icelandic and U.S. governments about Iceland’s security.<sup>142</sup> Laxness was of course very hostile to any cooperation with the Americans. Nobody noticed at the time that the plot of the book resembles that of a Czech novel, *Anna proletarka*, written by the communist author Ivan Olbracht in the 1920s, except that in *The Atom Station* Icelandic politicians sell out to



136 Halldor K. Laxness, Haettuleg bladamenska a ofridartimum [Dangerous Journalism in Wartime], *Thjodviljinn* 3 October 1939.

137 Halldor Gudmundsson, *Halldor Laxness* (Reykjavik: Mal og menning, 2004), p. 446. Letter from Laxness to Mikhail Apletin, in the Soviet archive RGALI. Apletin was director of the foreign affairs section of the Soviet Writers’ Union.

138 Halldor K. Laxness, *Iceland's Bell* (New York: Vintage International, 2003).

139 Halldor K. Laxness, Vondur felagsskapur [Bad Company], *Nytt dagblad* 31 August 1941.

140 Halldor K. Laxness, Baejarstjornarkosningar og stridsaesar [Municipal Elections and War Propaganda], *Thjodviljinn* 25 January 1946.

141 Halldor K. Laxness, Nokkur ord um Teodoras Bieliackinas [A Few Words about Teodoras Bieliackinas], *Thjodviljinn* 25 February 1947.

142 Halldor K. Laxness, *The Atom Station* (London: Methuen, 1961).

the Americans, whereas in *Anna proletarka* the social democrats in Prague betray the communists.<sup>143</sup> In the next few decades, Laxness was an indefatigable traveller. In 1949, he returned to the Soviet Union where he met the American singer and communist Paul Robeson, and had dinner with him. Later, Robeson confided in his son that he was perfectly aware of the Stalinist repression to which some of his Soviet friends had fallen victims, especially Jews.<sup>144</sup> What he saw, Laxness must also have seen. In this trip, Laxness became a friend of John Watkins, a linguist at the Canadian Embassy who returned to Moscow as Ambassador in 1954. Watkins read Icelandic and translated short stories by Laxness into English. He was unmasked as a KGB ‘agent of influence’ in 1964, after the defection of a KGB officer to the West, and shortly afterwards died of a heart attack. Watkins was a homosexual who had been lured into a compromising situation in Moscow by the KGB.<sup>145</sup>

But much of Laxness’ time in 1948 and 1949 was taken up by his quarrel with the Icelandic tax authorities. His book, *Independent People*, in an excellent English translation, had been the choice of the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1946, and sold hundreds of thousands of copies in the US. Laxness received about 100,000 dollars in royalties, paid his income tax and his agents in the U.S., but did not declare any of the remaining income in Iceland, as was the law. Finally, he settled the case and paid a hefty sum, by Icelandic standards, in tax. The Icelandic authorities, possibly politically motivated against this eloquent champion of Stalinism, had gone to great lengths to acquire the information about Laxness’ tax problems from the US.<sup>146</sup> In 1948, Laxness’ Swedish translator, Anna Z. Osterman, wrote a piece in the conservative daily *Morgunbladid*, bitterly complaining that Laxness had cheated her out of her payment for the translation into Swedish of *Independent People*.<sup>147</sup> Laxness did not reply. But he responded in no uncertain terms to other criticisms in *Morgunbladid*, calling the editor, a man of known integrity, a thief and a scoundrel who could not even compose a letter.

Laxness was always elegantly dressed, and when abroad liked to stay at the best hotels. In the autumn of 1948 he was visited in his room at the d’Angleterre in Copenhagen, the most famous and most expensive hotel in the Nordic countries, by Zdeněk Nemecek, the Czechoslovak Ambassador to Denmark. Nemecek had been his guest in Iceland in the summer of 1947 and written a book about their travels to the north and east of the country.<sup>148</sup> Nemecek was in tears when he told Laxness that he would have to resign his post for political reasons and emigrate to America where he would have to begin a new life, penniless.<sup>149</sup> There had been a communist coup earlier in the year in Czechoslovakia. Another of Laxness’ friends, Dr. Emil Walter, the Czechoslovak Ambassador to Norway and Iceland, also resigned his post in protest against the communist dictatorship. Walter had translated some of Laxness’ works into Czech. When Laxness met him a few years later, he commented to his wife that this intelligent, but slightly vain cosmopolitan person now appeared destitute and forlorn.<sup>150</sup>

Laxness remained a faithful friend of the Soviet Union. In 1950, he became the President of the Society for Promoting Cultural Relations between Iceland and the Soviet Union, whose budget was secretly provided by the Soviet authorities. He contributed an article in the first issue of the Society’s magazine, where he said that the best illustration of the need for this Society was the unfair attacks by Icelandic biologists on the theories of Trofim Lysenko.<sup>151</sup> Laxness’ loyalty to the cause did not go unnoticed in Moscow. According to documents available after the demise of the Soviet Union, the foreign section of the Soviet Communist Party frequently invited Laxness to the Soviet Union, usually with the Writers’ Union as the official host. Laxness went there in the autumn of 1953, and spent some time at a resort on the Black Sea; he went there again in 1955 to be at the Moscow premiere of his play *Lullaby Sold*, which was about the commercialisation and destruction of natural talent. Shortly afterwards, German playwright Bertolt Brecht saw the play and

143 Laxness probably read Olbracht’s book in a German translation, *Anna, das Mädchen vom Lande* (Berlin: Universum Bucherei, 1929).

144 Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), pp. 352–354.

145 Robert Ford, *Our Man in Moscow* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), pp. 146–147.

146 There is however no evidence that Laxness was ‘blacklisted’ in any meaningful sense in the U.S., as is often maintained. It seems that this belief rests on a misinterpretation of the inquiries in 1947–1948 about Laxness’ financial affairs and tax payments made by Icelandic and U.S. authorities, including the FBI, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

147 Anna Z. Osterman, Fyrirspurn til ‘tavariti’ Halldors K. Laxness [A Question for ‘Tavarich’ Halldor K. Laxness], *Morgunbladid* 9 June 1948.

148 Zdeněk Nemecek, *Islandske dopisy* (Praha: 1948).

149 Edda Andresdottir, *A Gljufrasteini* [In Gljufrasteinn, Laxness’ house] (Reykjavik: Vaka, 1984), p. 70.

150 Halldor Gudmundsson, *Halldor Laxness* (2004), p. 592. Letter from Laxness to his wife, Saltsjöbaden, 12 April 1955.

151 Halldor K. Laxness, Inngangssord [Introductory Remarks], *MIR*, Vol. 1, No 1 (1950), pp. 3–5.



A part of the audience at the trial of Bukharin and other old communists in Moscow in the spring of 1938. Laxness can be seen turned towards an interpreter to the right. Photo: Getty Images.

was disappointed: He found it old-fashioned. Laxness and Brecht only met once, in East Berlin in 1955. While they were quite similar personalities in many ways, it was not a meeting of minds. Laxness found Brecht interesting, but strange.<sup>152</sup>

## Moving Away from Stalinism

After the World Peace Movement was launched in 1949 with the blessings and active assistance of the Kremlin, Laxness participated in many of its meetings, gave speeches and wrote articles in support of nuclear disarmament. His services were recognised by a special literary prize which the World Peace Council gave him in Vienna in 1953. He also received the Martin Andersen Nexø Prize in the summer of 1955, given by Danish communists in honour of Stalinist loyalist Andersen Nexø. But the most significant prize Laxness ever received was of course the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1955. He had been a candidate for many years, with a rather small, but very vocal group of supporters and admirers in Sweden. The communist

Artur Lundkvist was one of his most active advocates, and so was his Swedish translator, Peter Hallberg, Professor of Literature at Gothenburg University, who had taught for several years in Iceland, and married an Icelandic girl (a friend of Laxness' second wife). From the correspondence of the members of the Swedish Academy which awards the Prize, it emerges that many were reluctant to give the Prize to such an ardent communist, or at least a fellow-traveller. Dag Hammarskjöld, the General Secretary of the United Nations, who was a member of the academy, was amongst those least in favour of Laxness.<sup>153</sup> From the opposite direction, there was some pressure from the Soviet Union in 1955 to award the prize to Mikhail Sholokov.

Within the Academy, there had for while been a strong desire to award the Prize to an Icelandic author, not least in recognition of the great literary tradition of Iceland. Indeed, the Nobel Prize committee, a small group within the Academy, proposed in the autumn that the Prize be divided between Laxness and another renowned Icelandic author, Gunnar

Gunnarsson. Non-communist circles in Iceland would have welcomed that, as Gunnarsson was a staunch anti-communist. But Gunnarsson was not very well-known in Sweden, and this proposal was rejected by the 18 members of the Academy. Some literary experts, including Hallberg and Professor Jon Helgason, Laxness' close personal friend, also made it clear to members of the Academy that in their opinion, Gunnarsson was not as outstanding an author in the Icelandic language as Laxness.<sup>154</sup> In the end, the choice was between Laxness and Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez (who received the Nobel Prize a year later, in 1956). Laxness had a strong group of supporters in the academy, and his opponents gave up: in the final vote, he received ten of the 18 votes.<sup>155</sup>

When the decision of the Swedish Academy was made public on 27 October 1955, Laxness' old admirer and friend, Kristjan Albertsson, wrote in the

conservative newspaper *Morgunblaðid*, that while all Icelanders would congratulate him on the Nobel Prize, many of them would also reserve the right to disagree with him in politics. So offended was Laxness by this remark that he did not speak to Albertsson for years. When Laxness received the Prize in Stockholm 10 December 1955, the Swedish newspapers wrote that he had bowed the deepest of all recipients in front of the king. But his speech on this occasion was very well-written, without any reference to his political opinions, and warmly applauding the literary heritage of Iceland. Laxness returned in triumph to his own country. After this, he was the undisputed leader of Icelandic culture. Gradually, he began to retreat from his socialist positions. Perhaps it was not so much the Nobel Prize which brought this about, as the revelations of Stalin's misdeeds in the famous secret speech that Nikita Khrushchev, the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, gave in February 1956. Laxness felt betrayed by the Soviets. He had spent two decades denying what Khrushchev affirmed in his speech. Not only had he defended the Moscow trials, but, to take one example, fiercely contested the authenticity of Lenin's so-called final testament where he had expressed doubts about Stalin's qualifications for leadership.

A novel which Laxness had published already in 1952, *The Happy Warriors*, may indirectly express some of his rising doubts about the Soviet regime.<sup>156</sup> It was about an 11th century Icelandic poet who worshipped the heroic tradition and deeply admired the Norwegian missionary-king, Olav, but upon witnessing the personal failings of the king, lost the will to serve him. It had a quixotic theme, like many of Laxness' novels: the idea for which the main character leaves his family and estate, turns out to be an illusion. In a sense, *The Happy Warriors* is also a parody of the Icelandic sagas, to which Laxness had an ambivalent attitude. Admiring their brief, brisk and objective style, he intensely disliked the cult of violence which some had discerned in them.

Laxness next novel, *The Fish Can Sing*, 1957, was almost non-political, about a young boy growing up in Reykjavik in early 20th century, obviously drawing much on his own life.<sup>157</sup> Soon after its publication, Laxness embarked on a tour around the world. He was the guest of the Chinese government in Canton

154 Stiftsbiblioteket i Linköping [Regional Library of Linköping]. Elias Wessén archive. Letter from Jon Helgason to Wessén, Copenhagen, 14 October 1955, and from Sigurdur Nordal to Wessén, Copenhagen, 29 October 1955.

155 Archive of the Swedish Academy (by special permission), Protocol Book. Cf. Kungliga biblioteket [Royal Swedish Library], Manuscripts Division, letter from Anders Österling to Dag Hammarskjöld 9 November 1955, where Laxness was said to have received eleven votes. Without good reason, Österling counted one absent member as voting for Laxness.

156 Halldor K. Laxness, *The Happy Warriors* (London: Methuen, 1958).

157 Halldor K. Laxness, *The Fish Can Sing* (London: Methuen, 1966).

152 Gudmundsson, *Halldor Laxness*, p. 597.

153 Kungliga biblioteket [Royal Swedish Library], Manuscripts Division, Sten Selander archive. Letters from Dag Hammarskjöld to Selander 11 and 23 March and 12 May 1955.



Under Stalin, Kazakh folk singer Dzhambul Dzhabayev was paraded as a great proletarian poet, but in fact his 'poems' were composed by party hacks. Laxness was fooled and translated his alleged works. Photo: Rian-Novosti.

and Peking (Guangzhou and Beijing) in December 1957, and later wrote that the communist government might be too dogmatic in its propaganda, but that it seemed to have the consent of its subjects and also that it had succeeded in feeding the whole Chinese nation, not a mean feat. Ironically, soon afterwards, China experienced its greatest famine in history, with 35–45 million dead, because of Mao's folly in launching the 'Great Leap Forwards'.<sup>158</sup> Apparently unknown to Laxness, also, was that while he toured the country, an 'anti-rightist' campaign was being conducted against all those who had dared to criticise the government in the previous months. Laxness also went to India, lunched with Prime Minister Nehru and was impressed by him and other Indian leaders, eloquent and well-educated as they were. He attended a dinner given by Alva Myrdal, the Swedish Ambassador to India and the wife of Gunnar Myrdal where they discussed ways of conquering poverty in India. It did not seem to occur to them that in India perhaps government was the problem rather than the solution.

However, Laxness' next novel, *Paradise Reclaimed*, was directed against the dream of a paradise on earth, and in a subtle way it marked his disillusionment with the Soviet regime.<sup>159</sup> On the surface, it is the story of an Icelandic farmer who became a Mormon, and left his family to settle down in Utah. His family followed him, enduring numerous hardships on the way. At the end of the story, the farmer returned to Iceland, telling people that it was important to seek and find paradise, but even more important to look after one's farm. The end echoes Voltaire's *Candide*, of course, but the novel is based on the true story of an Icelandic farmer who wrote a self-biography.

Laxness visited the Soviet Union, however, in 1960 and again in 1962. His definite and open break with communism, or rather communism in its Stalinist form, came in 1963 when he published a memoir of the interwar years, *A Poet's Time*.<sup>160</sup> There he gave a totally different account of the Soviet Union from that in his two travelogues of the 1930s. He also wrote interesting sketches of some of the writers and intellectuals he had met, such as Upton Sinclair, Willi Münzenberg, Emil Ludwig, Stefan Zweig, Bertolt Brecht, and Martin Andersen Nexø. The book was well-received by the Icelandic right who applauded Laxness for having finally spoken out against Stalinism. There was

a stony silence on the radical left, and privately many of Laxness' former comrades-in-arms expressed their dismay at his revelations. Laxness' Soviet friends did not however seem to mind his criticism much, as it was directed against Stalin rather than socialism, and he was invited back in 1965. His main concern then was to receive royalties for his many novels published in the Soviet Union.

Laxness was invited to give a lecture in Tel Aviv in Israel in the autumn of 1963. After the lecture, he was approached by an Israeli lady who told him that a Baltic refugee living in Iceland had killed some of her relatives during the German occupation of the Baltics. Laxness refused to have anything to do with the matter, even if his lecture had been on 'The Origins of Humanitarianism'.<sup>161</sup> Later in his life Laxness published two minor non-political novels. Disillusioned with communism, he became a sceptic, dabbling in Taoism, although he never fully turned his back on his friends in the Icelandic socialist movement. In 1969, he received the Danish Sonning Prize, which had been given the year before to Arthur Koestler whom Laxness had attacked as at least half-mad in 1946. To Laxness' surprise and anger, radical students at Copenhagen University exhorted him to decline the prize alleging that the original donor had been a slumlord. The students even staged protests outside the main University Building during the prize ceremony. Laxness, the former radical, bitterly complained about the protest. After he reached seventy, in 1972, he lived a quiet life, slowly losing his memory while retaining his physical vigour. In the mid-1980s, his friends began to notice his mental deterioration which did not stop him however in signing over to his wife all his property, including his copyrights, in the early 1990s. Laxness died in February 1998, having been confined to a hospital for many years.

## Why Did Laxness Not Tell the truth?

Halldor Kiljan Laxness shared many personal traits with the most famous intellectuals of the 20th century, like Bertolt Brecht, and Jean-Paul Sartre (whom he met at writers' congresses and actually detested). There was the same colossal egoism; everything, including his family and friends, had to serve his artistic ambition, enable him

158 Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

159 Halldor K. Laxness, *Paradise Reclaimed* (London: Methuen, 1962).

160 Halldor Laxness [Now Laxness had dropped his 'Kiljan'], *Skaldatimi* (1963). It has not been translated into English.

161 This seems to have been the 'Mikson case'. It is described in *Estonia 1940–1945. Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity* (Tallinn: 2006).



to devote himself utterly to what he felt worth while. When he was working in his house, usually from nine o'clock in the morning until about two in the afternoon, there had to be total silence; his two little daughters had to keep quiet. When the family was on a cruise, Laxness usually had a cabin for himself, and his wife and daughters were located at the other end of the ship. There was a long line of people who thought that Laxness owed them money which he did not pay back, such as Helen Crane and Anna Osterman. Laxness' relationship with his main German translator, Ernst Harthern, also ended in a bitter quarrel about translator's fees. Laxness did not speak to another Icelandic writer, Olafur Johann Sigurdsson, for years when Sigurdsson preferred to work on a new novel of his own instead of reading the proofs of a book by Laxness.

There was the same occasional theatrics, the self-created martyrdom. Laxness had for example promised the Icelandic Broadcasting Service, when a talk by him was to be directly transmitted from Moscow to Reykjavik on 7 November 1932, that he would not mention politics; he broke that promise. Laxness also staged his breaking with the social democrats in 1935. He had promised to read a certain short story at the 1st of May festivities of the social democrats; instead he read a new short story, indirectly attacking the social democrats for their unwillingness to form a popular front with the communists; consequently, the chairman of the meeting stopped his reading, and he went in protest, but triumphantly, to the communist meeting held at the same time.

There was the same double standard in personal life. One instance was on Labour's Day, 1st May 1936. Laxness was a bit of a dandy, always well-groomed and elegantly dressed, however precarious his financial situation was. At the last minute, before he was to attend the communist meeting this day, he took out of the closet some torn and dirty clothes and put them on, not listening to the protests of his wife who thought this behaviour fraudulent. When Laxness had become affluent in the post-war years, he always stayed at the best hotels, lived in a big house, usually with one maid, and liked as much to drive big American cars as he disliked paying taxes. At the same time he waxed eloquently about the need of personal sacrifices for common purposes.

Personal idiosyncracies do not prove anything except that those who purport to tell us how to live our lives sensibly, do not always excel in living their own lives well or decently. Laxness was the most influential Icelandic intellectual of the 20th century, even if he

belonged to a party which was rarely in government and he, fortunately, did not see his ideas implemented. Why did Laxness not tell the truth about the Soviet Union until very late? And why are intellectuals like him typically so hostile towards capitalism? When Laxness looked back, in *A Poet's Time*, he offered several explanations for the discrepancies between his account there and in the two travelogues from the Soviet Union in the 1930s. One was that if one told the truth, one would be strengthening the enemies of the Soviet Union, of which Hitler and Mussolini were the most dangerous. But this is hardly a good explanation, for two independent reasons. First, there were of course alternatives to supporting either Hitler or Stalin. In the second place, from August 1939 when Hitler made the non-aggression pact with Stalin to June 1941 when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, Laxness did not behave as if Hitler was the mortal enemy. On the contrary, he saw no difference then between "full-fed" powers like the United Kingdom and France and "hungry" ones, such as Germany and Italy.

Another explanation was that he hoped, with others, that the difficulties were only temporary; that the Soviet Union would eventually flourish. But if Laxness turned against capitalism because of the homeless in the San Francisco parks, as he eloquently said in *The Book of the People*, why did he not similarly turn against communism because of the *besprizorni* whom he saw on the streets of Tbilisi? At home, Laxness was a social critic with a sharp eye and an even sharper pen. Why did he leave all his critical acumen behind, when he visited the Soviet Union?

Laxness' third explanation was that he was deceived by the Soviet authorities. Indeed, he was, like so many other visitors to the Soviet Union. For example, in 1932 he went to the Red Triangle factory in Leningrad. Arvo Tuominen, a Finnish ex-communist, described in his memoirs how he and others showed credulous visitors around that factory: it was all staged.<sup>162</sup> In 1938, Laxness visited a collective in the Brovari village near Kiev. It was a showplace. There is an account of a planned visit by former French Premier Édouard Herriot to Brovari in the summer of 1933: the villagers were rushed into decent clothes; plenty of food and new furniture were sent from Kiev; but when the visit was cancelled, the hapless villagers had to return all the goods.<sup>163</sup> Perhaps the most embarrassing deception, for Laxness as a professional writer, was that of Dzhabambul Dzhabayev. As Dmitri Shostakovich writes in his memoirs, Dzhabambul was no poet. A party hack in

Kazakhstan had written a poem which Stalin happened to like. Information was requested on the author. There was a crisis meeting until somebody remembered an old Kazakh folk singer. All the subsequent 'translations' of his poems were in fact produced by Soviet literary figures. It was a gross forgery.<sup>164</sup> Laxness was taken in, however, and other Icelandic socialists composed poems about Dzhabambul.

Laxness was deceived. But, as he admits himself in *A Poet's Time*, this was not least because he wanted to be deceived. He did not look at any evidence for anything he did not want to believe. One example is glaring. He stayed at the same luxury resort by the Black Sea, Sinop, as did Andre Gide two years before. But as Gide describes, he went over the brook dividing the main resort building from the neighbourhood, and there he saw poor people huddled together in huts.<sup>165</sup> Laxness obviously did not venture far out from the stately rooms of the resort building where he sat and wrote moving passages about poor people in Icelandic fishing villages. Laxness did not see because he did not look.

The excuse cannot be used that there was no information available on the repression in the communist countries. From the very beginning, Western newspapers and magazines wrote about it. It was precisely in response to reports in *Morgunblaðid* on the famine in the Ukraine that Laxness wrote one of his pieces, hotly denying the famine. In the 1930s and 1940s, there were many articles in the Icelandic press on both the famine and the terror, and a few books. It is clear from *A Poet's time* that Laxness was well aware of the conditions in the Soviet Union even if he was deceived on various details. He listened to horror stories from Siberia in the hotel room which he shared with Duncker in 1932; he saw the *besprizorni* on the streets of Tbilisi in 1937; he witnessed the arrest of Vera Hertzsch in 1938. Laxness also knew from his teacher of Russian, Teodoras Bieliackinas, about life under Soviet rule. He listened to Zdeněk Němeček in his room at the d'Angleterre in the autumn of 1948, and so on. There were also numerous reports in the Icelandic press on the mass executions after the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, and the repressions in the following years.

Laxness chose, as did many other intellectuals, simply to ignore all this. They knew better. Their real argument was that omelettes could not be made

without breaking some eggs. A careful reading of Laxness polemics against Gide in *Russian Adventure* reveals that Laxness did not really take issue with Gide's descriptions of facts about the Soviet Union: his argument was, rather, that Gide did not have sufficient resolution to accept them as necessary costs, that he was just an effeminate aesthete, as Laxness suggested. It was only when Laxness realised that no omelette had been made that he turned against Stalinism.

## A Man of System

Halldor Kiljan Laxness' best epic works, *Independent People*, *World Light*, and *The Clock of Iceland*, are classics of Icelandic literature. It does little to detract from their brilliance that the main plots are all similar: they are all about a 'love triangle' consisting of a man, a woman and an idea for which the man sacrifices the woman, whereas the idea eventually turns out to be an illusion. Laxness' readers do not hold against him either that he borrowed extensively from other authors, often without acknowledging it: *Independent People* is to some extent based on the novel *The Growth of the Soil* by Hamsun; large parts of *World Light* are taken from the diaries of the minor Icelandic poet on which the main character is based; whole passages in *The Clock of Iceland* are translated from Danish descriptions of court life in the 17th century, while others are taken, only lightly edited, from various sources.<sup>166</sup> As mentioned previously, the plot of *The Atom Station* is similar to that of a Czech novel. Two of Laxness' short stories, "Temudchin returns home" and "Corda Atlantica", are also directly derived from other works, the first from a life of Genghis Khan by the English communist writer Ralph Fox,<sup>167</sup> the second from a newspaper interview in 1950. The same can be said about many of his other short stories and plays. Nevertheless, Laxness displayed an ability to create wonderful works of fiction from this raw material. He was a true craftsman, tireless in collecting anecdotes, characters and stories, and skilful in their use.

The explanations which Laxness offered in *A Poet's Time* are excuses, not real reasons. What is underlying is a deep hostility towards capitalism. But why does a vast majority of intellectuals reject capitalism? Many of the explanations offered by economists and other scholars seem to fit Laxness quite well. Joseph Schumpeter surmised that intellectuals were alienated; they had the ability to articulate their views of how society should be

162 Arvo Tuominen, *Kremls klockor* (Stockholm: Tidens Förlag, 1958), p. 251.

163 Semen Pidhainy (ed.), *The Black Deeds of the Kremlin: A White Book*, Vol. 2 (Toronto: Globe Press, 1955), pp. 93–94.

164 Solomon Volkov, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 161–162 and 171.

165 André Gide, *Back from the U.S.S.R.* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1937), p. 56.

166 This is extensively documented in my three volumes on Laxness (2003–2005). The last one is *Laxness* (Reykjavik: Bokafélagid, 2005).

167 Ralph Fox, *Genghis Khan* (London: John Lane, 1936).

governed, but neither the power nor the responsibility to govern it.<sup>168</sup> Laxness was in many ways alienated from his society. In his communist days he never displayed the sense of responsibility which one would expect from men in power. Ludwig von Mises explained the intellectuals' hostility towards capitalism by the fact that they expected to do better in a socialist society.<sup>169</sup> Certainly, Laxness was convinced, in the 1930s and 1940s at least, that socialism would win in the epic struggle with capitalism. He also noted that intellectuals like him commanded much more respect in the Soviet Union than in Western democracies, most notably the United States. Bertrand de Jouvenel pointed out the fact that intellectuals do not want slavishly to supply what is demanded in the marketplace. They do not want to follow the customers; they like to conceive of themselves as having a calling and obeying it.<sup>170</sup> This was certainly the case with Laxness. Again and again, in his letters as a young man, he wrote contemptuously about writing for the masses, letting them determine your output.

It is Friedrich Hayek's explanation, however, which best fits Laxness. Briefly, it is that intellectuals like to conceive of the world as created by intelligence, not developed almost at random. It is only intelligible to

them if it is planned. They are unable to recognise order without someone consciously establishing it. Society has to embody an idea.<sup>171</sup> Laxness was very much such a man of system. He repeatedly contrasted the contradictory and chaotic nature of market forces to the harmony established under socialism. Lacking all first-hand experience of business, he wanted to organise the whole of society on the basis of the monastery in which he lived in Luxembourg, although with a special exemption for himself to leave at will, of course.

The story of his life fills the observer with a profound scepticism about intellectuals as social and political leaders. In responding to the hostility towards capitalism, its defenders must however not lapse into anti-intellectualism, or irrationalism. Ideas have to be met with ideas, arguments with counter-arguments. What conservatives and classical liberals have to do, in a nutshell, is to make the invisible hand visible, explain and articulate the voluntary cooperation which can, under the right set of rules, take place in society. The intellectuals are the best of men, and they are the worst of men. They are the best of men under freedom when they enrich our lives with interesting, even captivating ideas and stories. They are the worst of men with power which corrupts themselves and destroys others. 🐕

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168 Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), Ch. 13.


169 Ludwig von Mises, *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1956).

170 Bertrand de Jouvenel, The Treatment of Capitalism by Continental Intellectuals, Friedrich A. Hayek (ed.), *Capitalism and the Historians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 93–123.

171 Friedrich A. Hayek, The Intellectuals and Socialism, *University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 16 (Spring 1949), pp. 417–433.



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