

## **Chapter 47 : Elsa Bernadotte (1893-1996).**

Prince Oscar's daughter Elsa Viktoria Bernadotte, Countess of Wisborg, "Tess" among friends, was born in Stockholm August 3, 1893, at Rosendal Castle and died in Stockholm July 17, 1996. In 1929 she married Karl Axel Hugo Cedergren (1891-1971). The couple had no children. Elsa is the godmother of Princess Christina.

Elsa is only briefly mentioned in the royal biographies (Jaya 1913: s. 101; Swahn 1930: s. 268; Jansson 1948: s. 314; Skott 1996: s. 343) but did in fact make a religious, feminist and political career of her own (Vestkusena 1944-03-03; Who is it in 1956: s. 179; Borgström 1982; Who's Who 1993: s. 209; Ulfsäter-Troell 1996: ss. 441-443; Borgström & Sundberg red. 1993; Dahl 2005). I have divided the narrative into three parts: (1) KMA, YMCA & Scouting. (2) Feminism. (3) The Peace Movement.

Like the sisters, she attended the Brummer girl's school for eight years, was taught handicraft & housework and spent some time abroad with her sister Sophia in Germany, England & Switzerland: 1912/13 in Germany. 1913/14 six months in Swansea, England, with a family of priests. In Geneva (unknown which year) with friends in the family for her French. The parents had school time monitored her reading so that she did not get ideas. However, she seems to have caught up on her reading while abroad. Afterwards, she became involved in various suffrage, peace and Christian organizations.

Elsa had mixed feelings about her upbringing: She had privileges that her peers lacked, but at the same time she was socially isolated and forced to follow the "conventions". She had poor school records, which she later blamed on lack of interest. She was most disappointed that she had not been allowed to attend college. She trained as a volunteer auxiliary in the Red Cross and was an extra student at Sabbatsberg Hospital. 1916-1917 she served on the German-Austrian-Russian Hospital Trains, an experience she later described as both "stimulating and deeply depressing".

In 1913 she joined the Women's Mission Workers (KMA). There is an (uncertain) indication that she was on KMA's board of directors. In 1919, she joined the YMCA, and in 1921 she was the leader of one of the YMCA girls' camps. From 1922 she was a member of the federal board, 1925-1943 as its chairman and after her resignation as honorary chairman. At the same time, she became a member of the YMCA World Council, in 1930 she advanced to the executive committee and 1938-1951 to vice chairman. For the World Council she made long trips to India & China. 1929-1951, she was YMCA's Scout Manager and 1934-1952 she was (alternating with Swedish Girl Scouts (SFS)) chairman of the Swedish Girl Scout Council. In 1951, when she resigned as Scout Director, Princess Sibylla awarded her the Illis quorum medal for civic achievement. In 1966, she became an honorary member of the YMCA - the YMCA's National Board of Directors, in 1993 Councillor at the Central Association - an honorary position because she had by then turned 100. There are some additional details:

In 1924, she attended the YMCA World Council in Washington. At the time, Elsa still had many illusions to lose: "A visit to Arlington war cemetery with fields after fields with the same tombstones, the vast majority of them over young men, was a shock and

turning point for me. From that moment I became involved in the peace movement."<sup>1</sup> She also wanted to try out how ordinary people had it, lived in a boarding house (4 days) and worked in a tannery (9 days) incognito as Elsie Bern. She had to cancel it when her true identity was revealed. Her American travels continued westward to the Pacific, Hawaii, China, Japan, Korea and India. She travelled by train alone incognito, spoke to people and studied the miserable social conditions. She was not back in Sweden until 1925.<sup>2</sup>

On her return, the parents were quite horrified at what the hard school of life had done to their daughter. Elsa summarized her experiences as beliefs without action were worthless & that Christianity was primarily not a doctrine but "a common spirit of love". She was offered the position of YMCA chairman, which she accepted after some hesitation. YMCA became "the vocational training she never received". One of her first assignments was to represent YMCA at the World Ecumenical Congress Life and Work in Stockholm the same year. During the conference, she was struck by how poor the representation of women was. She worked on this issue in various forms throughout her life.

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In 1935, she had such a position that she (within the framework of the YMCA) could create a female equivalent to her father's organization Swedish Evangelical Alliance (SEA) – Christian Women's Cooperation Committee (KKS) - which in 1959 merged with the Swedish Mission Council's Women's Committee into the Swedish Ecumenical Women's Council (SEK). She led these organizations until 1971. In the meantime, she was also active in the Women's Disarmament Committee, the League for a Christian Society, the Fredrika Bremer Association and the International Women's League for Peace and Freedom (IKFF).

Women priests took a long time to get off the ground. The issue had already been raised in 1919 but the decision did not come about until 1958. During that time, SEK also worked with peace work & social issues.<sup>3</sup> At the time of her confirmation, she had been influenced by the Liberal Theological debate of the time, thought to abstain but chickened out. The following episode is usually highlighted (by herself) as typical Elsa: In 1917, she and her father took part in a religious gathering, where the speaker urged the congregation to rise up to join him in condemning a certain liberal theologian. All of them - including the father - rose, but Elsa remained. Christians would not condemn other Christians. Point. Moreover, the person was not there and could defend himself. Elsa claims that her father had the Brummer Sunday School closed in order not to give her a platform to spread her historical-critical vision of the Bible, but that has not been verifiable.<sup>4</sup>

Elsa's relationship with her parents was complicated. Her great role model in life was her father, but he opposed her as a woman, and because she lacked income, he was de facto her guardian until her marriage in 1929. The mother was also upset by her daughter's unwomanly oppositional spirit & determination to fight. It probably caused anxiety. Elsa was, however, supported by her brother Carl, who at critical moments was called in as an expert on what was permissible. The parental conflict also had a theological aspect. Elsa

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<sup>1</sup> Ulfsäter-Troell 1996: s. 441.

<sup>2</sup> Hadjigeorghiou, Ylva. "Elsa Cedergren prins Oscars dotter berättar om sitt omväxlande liv." Svenska Journalen 1980:9, ss. 1-3,34,45.

<sup>3</sup> Dahl 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Dahl 2005: s. 37.

claimed to have experienced God directly, which her parents considered arrogant in the extreme.

Elsa's feminist beliefs were a mixture of old and new. Around 1935, she did not declare herself among those who believed that the woman 'should do everything that the man does', but rather that woman and man each had their own duties, which they perform 'in their particular way'. The conclusion she drew from this reasoning was that, it was not possible to measure or compare the power and influence of women and men. ... the power and strength of the woman lay on a different plane than that of the man, 'namely more in secret' ... 'For as the man has his, the woman has her given task, which she can best fulfil not by imitating the man but by being faithful to herself. ... Because personality [is] the decisive thing, therefore the influence of women [is] so decisive.'<sup>5</sup>

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Hugo Cedergren was introduced to Queen Victoria in 1928. Hard to say what she thought of him. She had difficulty in reconciling herself to Elsa joining Karl Staaf's Liberal Party - the enemy camp - shortly before the marriage. Cedergren was general secretary of the YMCA so probably the couple had met at some congress. It was a marriage of equals in the spirit of the time. They had similar careers and interests.

During the war, Elsa and Hugo inspected the prisoner camps of the warring parties. It appears to have been part of the YMCA prisoner of war assistance. The war radicalized Elsa. In 1943 she joined the Quakers - a both radical ecumenical & radical pacifist movement. In connection with the Berlin crisis of 1948, Swedish church leaders without effect urged both sides to moderation. This was followed up by a large meeting in the Blasieholm Church where Elsa was quoted as saying that "the Swedish Church must acknowledge its failure".<sup>6</sup> The following year she participated in a large peace conference in Paris. This was dominated by U.S.A. & Russia haters and Elsa's proposal for an expanded cultural exchange between countries to improve relations was not liked by anyone.<sup>7</sup> However, it resulted in some smaller meetings between Russian & American Christians in 1952/53. 1942-1950 she represented the Swedish Liberal Party in the Stockholm City Council - promoted by the Swedish Liberal Party's Women's Association. After two terms, she was no longer welcome as a feminist, royal pacifist and "wild card". The Liberal Party came to be dominated by political hawks like Per Ahlmark, Ingemar Mundebo & Herbert Tingsten who were both Republicans & for Swedish atomic weapons.

1959-1961, she chaired the Quakers World Advisory Committee (FWCC). In 1960, she was in America on its behalf, and in 1961 she sat on the organizing committee for its first World Meeting in Nairobi. She was one of the initiators of the Swedish Nuclear Bomb Action Group (AMSA), which in 1959 and 1960 held hundreds of meetings, was supported by 15 thousand members and published the newspaper "Against the Swedish Atomic Bomb". The Swedish Peace and Arbitration Court supported AMSA, gave them office space and elected Elsa & writer Anders Fogelström to the board.<sup>8</sup> She also demonstrated against the Vietnam War, against the neutron bomb and against xenophobia in all forms.

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<sup>5</sup> Dahl 2005: s. 91.

<sup>6</sup> [Om bl a Elsa Cedergren.] Toledo Blade 1948-05-19.

<sup>7</sup> [Om fredskonferensen i Paris.] Wilmington Morning Star 1949-04-23.

<sup>8</sup> Wittner 1997: ss. 216-217.

Her entry into the Quakers in 1943 - when she simultaneously withdrew from the state church - seems to have made her impossible as chairman of the YMCA. Here's how she described her faith in 1982:

### **The Bible**

If we no longer believe in the Bible in the old way, what do we now believe? This question must be put to each one of us, and we have to find an answer. Knowledge of the Bible is very important, but it is unnecessary for us to accept it as infallible or as a legal document; we must think and judge for ourselves, listening to that which speaks to our innermost being.

The Bible is not sacrosanct. It comes from times very different from our own with a different concept of man. It does not contain the absolute literal truth, but it can teach us the truth of life. Dogma is the language of theology. I do not set any limits for my thought in seeking truth in intellectual honesty. But more important than anything else is an anchorage in the divine which is to be found in the depth of every human being; it cannot be formulated in words but must be expressed in life and in relations with our fellow men.

Jesus is the most important person in the Bible, not because the Bible or the churches proclaim it, but because he gave men a new concept of God.

Elsa Cedergren, 1982<sup>9</sup>

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Elsa's legacy is mixed. She looked good, lived in a posh apartment at the posh Östermalm, had a large network, charm, energy, could exploit her royal background, was noticed where she went and was a good speaker. On the other hand, she does not seem to have understood that, as a royal, she was expected to stay out of the day to day politics and fray. In 1950/52, she lost her remaining political, scout and YMCA positions. She left her own organization in 1971 when her husband died. Much later, she was asked if she had never hesitated before all her controversial positions. Elsa admitted that she sometimes felt fear but that this had never prevented her from carrying out whatever it was - it was expected of her.

For obvious reasons, the royal house held Elsa at arm's length, but she was actually invited to some family meetings. She had better relationships with her godchild Princess Christina, who even received her tiara as a wedding present.

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<sup>9</sup> Cedergren 1982.