

## Chapter 50: Folke Bernadotte (III) (1939-1948) - "In the Service of Humanity".

Folke's careers 1939-1948 is described as: (1) The war years 1939-1943. (2) The Red Cross years 1943-1945 including the "white buses". (3) The post-war years 1945-1948. (4) The Palestine Mediation. Folke's international missions have been highly publicized but are here depicted in proportion to the time he spent on them.

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September 1, 1939, Germany attacked Poland and November 30, the Soviet Union attacked Finland - the so-called Winter War. Folke had just ended his involvement in the New York exhibition when he received a request to contribute to the Swedish volunteer corps:

"Then came the telegram. I remember as if it were yesterday, the moment I broke the yellow Western Union envelope and read its contents. It was a call from some leading Swedes that I should stay in America. It was hoped that I would organize a volunteer corps there, mainly of Americans of Scandinavian descent, who could be deployed to help Finland in its difficult situation. The hopes on the part of the Swedish initiators were apparently quite high - in addition to recruiting this corps, it was desired that I, among leading American industrialists and businessmen, would raise an amount of twenty million dollars to finance both the corps' stay in Finland and certain other expenses in connection with the Finnish Volunteer Corps."

The Swedish government was in favour of the initiative, but US law prohibited such "private armies". ... "With my clients in Sweden, I agreed that I [instead] would try to raise money for the purchase of aircrafts, which the Finnish army lacked. I would also try to engage experienced pilots, who were willing to volunteer for the Finnish Air Force. ... But although the sympathy for Finland was extremely great, I met a compact resistance when it came to getting companies or individuals to provide financial assistance for the intended action." Folke tried to cooperate with ex-president Hoover's fundraising effort "The Finnish relief fund" but Hoover declined because his fundraising was for humanitarian aid, not armaments.<sup>1</sup>

It has not been possible to verify the details of the story. It is true, however, that during the Winter War Finland bought 44 fighter jets of type Brewster F2A-1 (B-239) but that these did not arrive until the fighting was over. Folke was interviewed about the purchase by two journalists from the communist newspaper Daily Worker who pretended to be volunteer pilots and the article was published as "Nephew of King of Sweden Agent of Mannerheim" but I have not been able to locate it.

Better documented is Folke & his wife's fundraising for a field hospital. Folke toured the Scandinavian diaspora. Wife & friend Bror von Blixen-Finecke worked his millionaire acquaintances. The result was meagre - 85 thousand dollars. Hoover's fundraising was not successful either. Folke explained afterwards that America had enough of its own problems. An alternative explanation was that many Finnish-Americans were in America because they had fled the defeat of the Finnish Civil War and that they saw the Soviet Union as a liberator. Folke's fundraising was enough for six trucks (=80 beds), 30 unpaid volunteers (five doctors, 15 nurses, a radio expert, six drivers, baggage train) and food & equipment for six months. The operational responsibility for the ambulance force rested with the Canadian organization

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<sup>1</sup> Bernadotte 1948: ss. 18-27.

“The Danish Relief Fund”. The leader of the ambulance force was the surgeon Dwight Fishwick (1907-1956). As the Winter War ended on March 13, the ambulances were redirected to Norway - where the fighting lasted until June 8 - and then to England.

On January 24, 1940, the so-called Prince Bertil delegation arrived to buy military equipment & supplies for Sweden. The attempt was not very successful though. Folke expected to at least be consulted but sat in his hotel for three days without anyone contacting him. He and all the other Finnish activists were apparently in disfavour. He felt humiliated but also felt that the delegation was incompetent that did not understand the value of his personal contacts. His wife later presented it as Folke preparing a purchasing service which was never used.

On March 12, Folke & his wife took “The Clipper” to Paris. The children were for unknown reasons left with their parents-in-law. The family was not reunited until the following year. At the end of the month, Folke & Estelle continued to Sweden. Folke met the family and re-established contact with his organizations. On April 9, Germany attacked Denmark & Norway and all reserve officers were called up to their regiments. Folke was immediately given an assignment as head of the detention detail. This handled foreign troops that for various reasons had ended up in Sweden. There were already a number of Poles. Due to the defeat in Norway, several thousand Norwegians and Englishmen were temporarily interned in June and until the end of the war about 12,000 combatants - including Russians & Americans.<sup>2</sup> After the war the internment detail also handled the extradition of Baltic soldiers to the Soviet Union, but by then Folke was no longer in command.

At the end of 1940, Folke became head of the defence staff's entertainment detail. Under his command this grew to 1275 touring field artists (= two million spectators), an unknown number of field cinemas (=six million spectators) and the distribution of radios & board games. In 1940 the view on the business was:

The Defence Staff's entertainment detail has also carried out extensive activities, which, however, have been the subject of some criticism, directed at the lack of dignity and seriousness of certain programs, at the performance of the ballet, at the screenings of old films, etc. Me thinks this criticism to severe. The detail seems to have consistently sought to offer, without lowering its standards of quality and good taste, such entertainment and distractions as the conscripts isolated from their homeland are accustomed to from their civilian circumstances. The field theatre has had a varied repertoire and hired many prominent artists - both the Royal Theatre and the City Theatre in Gothenburg have participated as well as several well-known revue and film artists. In addition to the extensive theatre tours, the entertainment detail has organized so-called entertainment patrols, which have been able to reach even very small units. ... The film industry, on the other hand, has not deemed itself able to make the latest production available for these free performances. Criticism has been levelled for them providing films, which proved unsuccessful already during the performance in front of a civilian audience.<sup>3</sup>

Folke continued according to the same concept. His most concrete effort was to: (1) Make the field artist part cost-effective (=everything would fit in a car). (2) Censor German-critical elements. The latter seems to have had to do with Folke sitting on the Swedish Information Board (SIS), which was responsible for, among other things, keeping public opinion neutral,

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<sup>2</sup> Smeds 2009.

<sup>3</sup> SOU 1941: s. 17,28.

even if not German-friendly. One intervention of his became very well known. He claimed that Karl Gerhard's satire "All the old fine brands of high bouquet" was an insult to Princess Sibylla. It contained a verse about the conquest of Germany formulated as Hitler collecting the wine & spirits of different countries.<sup>4</sup> He probably thought it was easier to invoke Sibylla than reasons of state. Normally he did not engage in any prior censorship. When it came to the budget, he wanted to be informed about small things but not concerning the repertoire. If his subordinates became too anxious about details, he narrowed his eyes at them and said "that is incomprehensible to a layman".

Other commitments were the exhibition "People & Defence" 1940 (to stimulate the defence loan), the field Christmas gifts and the continued involvement in the swimming promotion, the rifle association, the scouts & the voluntary defence work (CFF). Given Folke's need for action the years 1941/42 seem unusually uneventful, however.

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In the spring of 1943, the position of vice chairman of the Swedish Red Cross (SRK) would become vacant. Folke's names came up in the discussions and he was recommended both by Major General Carl August Ehrensvärd on SRK's board (who knew him from the General Staff) and by the chairman of Asea Sigfrid Edström (who knew him from the New York exhibition and other assignments). Retiring Deputy Chairman & Commissioner-General (=Government Representative) General Axel Hultkrantz (1870-1955) sought out Folke to probe his interest and he "did not completely reject the idea". At SRK's annual meeting in June 1943, he was unanimously elected vice chairman with effect from September 1. SRK's chairman for 40 years was Folke's uncle Prince Carl. Folke's job description is unclear, but the uncle's right hand & "hereditary prince" seems an appropriate description. In Folke's memoirs "Instead of weapons"<sup>5</sup>, one gets the impression that he from the very beginning influenced policy. Judging by Hultkrantz's history<sup>6</sup>, this was not the case. Folke was chief of staff under Prince Carl's command.

His first assignment was to carry out an exchange of wounded prisoners of war between England & Germany. The International Committee of the Red Cross (IRC; based in Geneva) had in 1942 made an attempt to exchange them across the English Channel, but it had faltered on prestige and technicalities. In the autumn of 1943, the IRC made another attempt. Now with Sweden as transit country and Folke in command. The exchange took place in Gothenburg on October 17-21. Folke stayed in the background but appeared at a press conference where he presented the organizational machinery: 4159 allies against 831 Germans. Crown Princess Louise toured the ships and congratulated the British. Folke & Princess Sibylla did the same with the Germans. In order not to disturb the festive atmosphere, those prisoners with mental illnesses were exchanged at night. A similar prisoner exchange was made the following year: 2636 allies against 2136 Germans and 583 civilians from each side. Folke in this errand visited London, Geneva & Berlin. He also conducted a number of fruitless negotiations to inspect the Russian prison camps, and at the end of 1944 he visited the Allies for discussions on the need for help after the end of the war. Folke was also chairman of the Red Cross Week's working committee which on May 6-14, 1944, collected funds for SRK's post-war aid & recruited members. In fact, this week - possibly

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<sup>4</sup> Gerhard 1957: ss. 257-260.

<sup>5</sup> Bernadotte 1948a.

<sup>6</sup> Hultkrantz 1945: ss. 178-198.

with Folke as a draw - 180 thousand new members were added, which in one swoop made SRK one of the country's largest popular movements with 518 thousand members.

Since Princess Sibylla's father, Duke Carl-Eduard, was President of the German RC 1933-1945, it is at least theoretically possible that he had something to do with the prisoner exchange, but there is no information. Secretary General and de facto President 1935-1945 was the physician Ernst Robert Grawitz (1899-1945) who was actively involved in the death camps. Further down the organization, however, there were still non-Nazi functionaries, such as Walter Hartmann (1892-1970) who from 1938-1945 was head of the German RK's international department and DRK's representative in the IRC. However, Carl-Eduard was contacted at the end of the war by Foreign Minister Ribbentrop to he too negotiate with the IRC.

On February 2 (?) 1945, the Swedish government decided that SRK would try to repatriate the Danish & Norwegian camp prisoners. Folke afterwards claimed to have had a part in the decision - and it is possible - but he was by no means the first with the idea. On the other hand, he was the one who translated it into action. The operation itself - "The White Buses" as the latter came to be called - took place from February 16 to May 4, 1945. Folke negotiated four times with SS chief Heinrich Himmler to release the maximum number of prisoners. The end result of the operation was that 15 thousand people, of which just over half Scandinavians and a small number of Jews were rescued.<sup>7</sup> As these were spread all over southern Germany, they were first transported to a concentration camp - Neuengamme outside Hamburg - and from there to Sweden.

There were many who afterwards wanted to take credit for the operation. A lot of books were published. Since the Swedish documents were classified until 1995, the operation was first described by the participants themselves (Arnoldsson 1945; Bernadotte 1945; Frykman 1945; Rundberg & Meyer 1945; Svensson 1945; Wedell Andersson red. 1945; Kersten 1947; Refslund Thomsen 1948; Ditleff 1955; Schellenberg 1956; Holm 1984; Molin 1989; Christie 1992; Hallquist 1995; Molin 1997; Folke 1999). Over time, a number of archive-based descriptions were also published (Trevor-Roper 1947; Kersten 1956; UD 1956; Yahil 1967; Yahil 1969: ss. 313-319; Fleming 1978; Karlsson 1980; Kobelik 1987: ss. 123-142; Ilan 1989: ss. 25-48; Schwarz 1992; Haavas 1995; Lundberg 1997: ss. 11-110; Bjurling 1998; Lindquist 1998; Ottosen 1998; Einhorn 1999; Wikberg 2000; Persson 2002a; Persson 2002b; Doerries 2003: ss. 165-202 ; Lomfors 2005; Sode-Madsen 2005; Sisman 2010: ss. 216-222).

Despite the number of references (34!), It is difficult to describe Folke's contribution. The fact that the operation was successful has been interpreted as proof of his skill as a negotiator, but can just as well be interpreted as the circle around Himmler being anxious for the operation to take place. Folke (i.e. the Swedish government) was not primarily interested in saving Jews, but in repatriating Danes & Norwegians, i.e. Nordic Aryans. None of the people Folke dealt with: Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, SS chief Heinrich Himmler, RHSA (security police) chief Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller, foreign intelligence chief Walter Schellenberg or the local camp commanders made any serious attempt to stop the operation. Schellenberg even encouraged it. There was something of a Köpenickad over it. Folke initially met Ribbentrop, who spoke continuously for over an hour to avoid being informed about Folke's intentions and thus having to tell Hitler about them. He then met with

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<sup>7</sup> Wikberg 2000.

Schellenberg, who gave good advice on how to conduct the negotiations. Afterwards, Kaltenbrunner & Müller came with constructive criticism of how the operation should be carried out.

Folke was later criticized for his close collaboration with Schellenberg. He even wrote a certificate to the war criminal trial about his good character and intentions, which made his wife and others wonder what he was thinking. The choice was between Folke having Nazi sympathies or being naive. It is possible that Folke misjudged Schellenberg - his behaviour would have been exemplary from Folke's point of view - but it is easier to see it as a barter. Without Schellenberg, there would have been no prisoner exchange. In return, Schellenberg wanted Folke to convey peace offerings to the Allies and help him survive. Which Folke did.

The most detailed description of the negotiations ends in the conclusion that Folke - naive or not - handled the task well:

Bernadotte's wife, Estelle, and many with her, have considered Folke Bernadotte to be “naive”. I have my doubts about this. What his critics perceive as naivety, not to mention a hypocritical arrogant belief in having been assigned a “divine mission”, I would instead characterize as idealism, and a belief in being on earth to do good deeds. Estelle Bernadotte has also mentioned Folke's negotiation strategy: “When he [Folke] was given a task, he studied it to find a first possible opening. When this worked (as it often did) he was already looking for the next step and so on. It's so easy to look back on a man's successes and see it all in the light of the end result but forget the importance of each step as it unfolded.”<sup>(1)</sup>

Bernadotte's actions during the 1945 negotiations with the Nazi German leaders do not indicate naivety but rather cold-bloodedness and skilful salami tactics. In February, he demanded only small German concessions, concerning the return of Swedish women to Sweden - which would mean a direct relief of the Germans' burden to feed them - and a reunification of the Norwegian and Danish prisoners into a still German camp. But at the same time he also made sure that Swedish military, albeit red-cross-camouflaged, vehicles were given the opportunity to enter German territory and operate on German roads. These small concessions were then used as wedges into the German resistance. In the end, this was completely split and led to the total German concessions in the final stages of the war.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup> E. Bernadotte, Answers to questions of Dr. Amitzur Ilan, Dec. 1983, copy in Barbro Jerring's private archive, p. 7 (“naive, yes”), p. 13 (negotiation strategy).

Folke's deputy chief Major Sven Frykman gets the last word: “The Count was never satisfied when he had got something which he had asked from the Germans. He always wanted more. He was fearless in taking personal risks and set us all an example. He had a strong will and showed it. Like the good horseman he was, he went straight to the point. That was what he expected of us, too.”<sup>9</sup> The criticism that remains is that Folke took too much of the credit and that Neuengame became so full that SRK was forced to move several thousand non-Scandinavian prisoners to surrounding camps, possibly getting some of them killed. In 1945, however, this criticism was counted as nothing and Folke was during the year awarded with three honorary doctorates in Uppsala, Copenhagen & Oslo and with the Grand Cross of the

<sup>8</sup> Person 2002a: ss. 134,490-491.

<sup>9</sup> Hewins 1950: s. 163.

Order of the North Star and its counterparts in Denmark, Norway, Finland, England, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania & Hungary. He also received medals of merit from SRK & the scout movement. Folke had mixed feelings about all this old & new bling-bling and during a dinner with the kids he put on everything - a total of 38 Orders & medals - and his wife her jewels. In the middle of the dinner, the doorbell rang and they thought that now they had disgraced themselves in their circle of acquaintances, but it was a false alarm.

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On November 23, 1945, Folke was elected chairman of SRK and took office on January 1, 1946. Prince Carl had meanwhile had the statutes rewritten so that the board was no longer recruited by the board itself but through a combination of permanent and elected mandates. However, that change did not take effect until January 1, 1951. Folke therefore had time to fill a number of places with his own people. His duties initially consisted of continuing the relief effort, disbanding the war organization and maintaining contact with the occupying forces, the International Committee of the Red Cross (IRC) and the Red Cross Federation:

The Red Cross had been commissioned by the government to lead and control the distribution and distribution of food, clothing and medicine, etc. to Poland, to the starving population of the Netherlands, to France and to French prisoners in Germany; equipment and certain foodstuffs for orphanages in Czechoslovakia as well as to Austria; all this is mainly paid for by state funds. At the same time, the Red Cross with its own funds provided certain relief shipments to Finland, to the civilian population of northern Norway and to French children.<sup>10</sup>

Until now, Folke had no experience of leading conferences, but studied the technique of the other RK leaders intensively and even compiled a compendium. However, he only got to demonstrate his skills once at the Red Cross conference in Stockholm in 1948.

The last year, Folke's SRK operations consisted of emergency aid to the Germans and fruitless negotiations with the Russians on a prisoner exchange and relief efforts in the eastern zone. The German aid provoked a lot of aggression. There was also a debate that the authorities through SRK hindered other organizations in their relief work. Some wanted, in the same way as with the children of Finland, to let the German "ruin children" spend time in Sweden where they might even absorb some democratic values. That had happened after the First World War. Why not now too? The conflict became known as "home vs. soup". SRK, i.e. "soup", won.

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The depictions of Folke's last mission as mediator in the Palestinian conflict contains little new about his person. He was appointed on May 21, 1948, and killed on September 17. In between, he managed to mediate, if not a peace, then at least a ceasefire. The official investigation of the Israelis<sup>11</sup> was about the murder itself, not his person. Folke's collaborator Ralph Bunche received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for completing the mission.

Folke's time in Israel - four months - was first described by himself (Bernadotte 1948: ss. 276-281; Bernadotte 1950), then on the basis of archives & memories (Kugelmas

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<sup>10</sup> Hulcrantz 1945: s. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Bernadotte – Investigation into assassination. (1949.) <archives.gov.il/en> (2018-01-01).

1952: ss. 110-117; IPS 1968; Nadel 1970; Sachar 1972: ss. 544-558; Mann 1975: ss. 216-237; Dayan 1976: ss. 95-103; Persson 1979; Stanger 1988; Barros 1989: s. 205; Heed 1989: ss. 155-169; Ilan 1989; Schwarz 1992; Urqhart 1993: ss. 153-185; Marton 1995; Bachner 1999; ss. 47-85; Burén 2012). A recurring theme in the descriptions is that Folke, through his ignorance of the local conditions, the forced pace - his mandate was only six months - and his personal risk-taking must in some way have been responsible for his death. The events unfolded in the following manner:

On June 9, the parties approved the ceasefire. The next stage was a peace agreement. The first peace proposal - a union between two independent states - was rejected by the parties at the end of August. The second - more Israel-friendly - proposal was completed on September 16. A breakaway group from the Jewish Stern League perceived the negotiations as Folke & Bunche following British lead and trying to prevent the formation of a Jewish state. From that point of view, it was better to kill them, which succeeded with Folke. Bunche was busy with other things and escaped.

The Israeli government subsequently claimed that Folke had rejected an offer of an armed escort. According to Bunche, this was a misconception. Folke accepted an armed escort when it was offered but had rejected the police's demands for constant bodyguard protection because these were not always available. According to Bunche, the fact that he did not have an armed escort at the time of his death must have been due to the Israeli police misjudging the risk. This interpretation was rejected by the Israeli government & also by Folke's Chief of Staff Åge Lundström.<sup>12</sup>

Since the murder of Folke was not the 1<sup>st</sup> but the 13<sup>th</sup> attack on UN personnel (5 dead & 7 wounded)<sup>13</sup>, one must agree with the Israelis that Folke's lack of interest in protecting himself requires an explanation. He had, for example, declined a safety vest because it was too awkward and no one around him was armed. When his chief of staff Åge Larsson protested the day before his death, Folke replied that he wanted to expose himself to the same risks as his observers. If he dodged danger, it was a defeat for the UN.<sup>14</sup> There is also the following incidents:

There were times when the United Nations flag flying over their retinue of cars didn't impress snipers lying in the dunes alongside the roads. Several times they were fired upon and once their own driver slumped over, dead. Bunche, the former football player and slider to third base, flipped himself over the seat barrier, and almost lying on the dead body he steered the car to an embankment as he reached forward and pulled the emergency brake.

Bernadotte was transfixed with astonishment as Bunche got out, and plucking the U.N. flag from its scabbard he waved it over his head and shouted in Hebrew and an Arabic tongue: "Who dares to fire on peacemakers?" Then Bunche walked up the road to the cars following behind. He was unarmed and in full view. The count shouted a warning but Bunche paid him no heed. The thickset man walked up the road in the blazing sunshine, smiling and continuing to call out in several languages.

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<sup>12</sup> Bernadotte 1950: s. 286-287; Burén 2012: s. 160,188-189,198.

<sup>13</sup> Lie 1969: ss. 162-165.

<sup>14</sup> Bernadotte 1950: s2. 286-287.

There were several men dead in the cars behind and several wounded. Some of the nervous staff members wanted to drive off hastily, but Bunche helped attend to the wounded-then, with his arm about one of the wounded men, drove back to Jerusalem.

His only comment to Bernadotte, when they drew up in front of their headquarters, was: "Seems to me the U.N. should get more publicity around here. Maybe we're doing a bad job."<sup>15</sup>

The incident has not been verifiable but says at least something about Bunche's reputation. He and Folke both seem to have taken pride in demonstrating their derring-do. Gustaf V gets the last word:

18/9-1948. The king returned. I went in to him before the cabinet meeting. He seemed severely weakened and had severe cough attacks. When I offered my condolences on Folke B's death, he stated with some emphasis that B should never exposed himself to such dangers. "He was careless. It was not right of him to do so."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kugelmass 1952: s. 113.

<sup>16</sup> Undén 2002: s. 255.