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## **EARLY SWEDISH INFORMATION ABOUT THE NAZIS' MASS MURDER OF THE JEWS<sup>1</sup>**

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EVERY state tries to keep information secret that, if revealed, could harm it or reduce the advantage it receives from having exclusive access to such information. In totalitarian states the blocking of information is a working principle. The totalitarian system and the free exchange of information are fundamentally contradictory. The actions of totalitarian states are of a criminal nature; therefore, such states try to prevent information about their activities from becoming public knowledge. In such systems information is blocked off both externally, from other countries, and internally, from their own societies. Various means can be employed to achieve this end, such as censoring the press and correspondence, making citizens' contact with foreigners difficult or impossible, and sealing the borders—all of these enforced by a police endowed with extraordinary power and a cruel penal system. That is why a substantial part of the study of Nazi Germany is preoccupied with the problem of information, of what the world knew and didn't know. Researchers have sought to examine to what extent knowledge informed not only official structures but also individuals and societies. These enquiries have not led to common conclusions. It appears that the meaning of 'being informed' is flexible. In many cases, perhaps even in general, people knew exactly as much as they wanted: only some facts were recognized and internalized; others were rejected. Knowledge depended on the questions asked and on sensitivity towards key issues.

In Hitler's Germany the blocking of information increased gradually. During the first years of the totalitarian regime the world was relatively well informed about what was going on under the rule of Hitler and the Gestapo. In fact, before 1939 the Nazis were unable to introduce an information barrier. They persecuted people for describing the facts and for propaganda that they claimed to be slanderous, but they themselves acted in a fairly open manner, even boldly, and they publicized their actions. Only matters concerning decision-making by the Third Reich were hidden from the world (although certain materials indicate that some shrewd observers could precisely predict Hitler's successive moves on the basis of their knowledge of Nazi ideology and its execution). At that time it was also hard to hide knowledge of goings-on in Germany. Until the war started, all countries maintained diplomatic agencies there. There was also a network of consular offices, and among the foreign press correspondents were outstanding journalists. If they failed to know, it was because they did not ask questions in the face of reality. Another factor impeding an early blocking out of information was the permeability of the borders. Exiles were an important source of information about the Third Reich. In addition, the inherited German state apparatus worked according to old legalistic habits, and it absorbed the Nazi philosophy of state slowly and not without resistance.

The principal change came with the outbreak of the Second World War. Diplomatic and consular agencies and journalists from the Allied countries disappeared from Germany, although the many neutral agencies remained in place. More importantly, the representatives of foreign countries were prohibited from remaining in the territory of conquered Poland, which was where the Nazis first applied on a large scale their plans for the genetic reorganization of the lands they had conquered. It was here that the Nazis intensified their persecution of the Jewish population they found under their control. From the summer of 1941 they began to implement their genocidal programmes, which had been planned as part of their invasion of the Soviet Union.

A fair amount of research has been devoted to the question of when and how the outside world came to know about this genocide. In Sweden there has been considerable public and private debate on this question centred on a document from August 1942, known as the Vendel Report, which contains a description of the situation in Germany and in German-occupied Poland.

Karl Yngve Vendel, a 4s-year-old officer of the Swedish consular corps, was transferred in January 1940 from Holland and appointed as consul in Stettin. The consulate was only partly intended to take

care of Swedes in the area and deal with trade relations, for, as Vendel wrote several years later, 'There were hardly any strictly consular matters.'<sup>2</sup> Vendel's principal assignment was to gather intelligence. Sweden feared German aggression, a justified fear, for only several months later Germany was to attack Denmark and Norway and conquer them easily.

Vendel's tasks and methods were fairly simple: he watched ports and roads to see if the Germans were regrouping their military force in away that endangered Sweden. Such work was a standard part of consular work. Vendel's activity was effective, as was acknowledged years later in Swedish specialist publications.<sup>3</sup> The consul had been informed in time of the preparations for the attack against Norway in the spring of 1940, and, a year later, about the invasion of the USSR. (That this information was not used is a completely different matter.) Vendel asked many different questions, and was extremely well informed. In addition, although the German police probably were aware of the nature of his activity, he made many acquaintances and friends in Nazi official circles, as well as outside them. The Vendel Report is the result of one of these friendships.

On 9 August 1942 Vendel went to visit some German friends at their estate in east Prussia. He stayed there until 13 or 14 August, and then he returned, not to Stettin but to the embassy in Berlin. There he wrote a report of what he had seen and heard during his trip. The top-secret report, dated 20 August, consists of seven large pages. Two days after its writing it was sent to Stockholm. The councillor of the legation, Erik von Post, provided a covering letter:

I respectfully send this *pro memoria*, in which Vendel summarizes his impressions from his conversations with various people met by him primarily during his trip to eastern Germany undertaken with the permission of Richert.<sup>4</sup> Enclosed in this memorandum is the description, which is based on the conversation [with a person] close to the former minister of agriculture, Mr Darre, about the conflict between Himmler and Darre. This conflict was the primary cause of the latter's fall. I stress that the version depicted there corresponds exactly to the information acquired by the embassy earlier from the circles of the SS (compare Richert's letter to Söderblom of 8 July). Vendel relates also what he learned about the conditions in the General Government; about statements by Ribbentrop; about the situation on large estates in the east, etc.

Yours, ERIK VON POST<sup>5</sup>

The first two pages are indeed devoted to 'dirty politics' among the Nazi dignitaries. But Vendel did not stop there. As the narration progresses, the report deals with more and more important matters. Vendel writes:

The above record gives a frightening picture of the relations within the government of the Reich; it confirms the past year's fear among wide military circles, also shared in the industrial ones: that the leadership of Great Germany is slipping more and more into the hands of Mr Himmler and his horrific organization, the SS.

He continues: It is well known that Mr Himmler has publicly stated that the new policy of settlement in the east is ruled by *new* principles; the old German settlement policy based on imposing German customs on the indigenous population has failed. In accordance with the new methods of settlement, cultivation of the land would be entrusted only to the German race. In other words, through Himmler's settlement project the theory of the master race and its slaves would be implemented. In this respect, Mr Himmler serves as a tool for Hitler. I bring to your attention the speech by Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop that I referred you to about a year ago. Answering the question about German cruelties in Poland, and whether such conduct could be excused, Ribbentrop said that it was impossible to evaluate Hitler's projects at this time. Only in fifty years would the first fruits of his actions appear, and in some hundred years there would not be any Polish problem at all! *Ausrotten* (uproot) and *vernichten*

(annihilate): these two words belonging to the National Socialist terminology are used particularly of ten, and put into practice with ruthlessness and brutality that is unheard of. Mr Himmler's activity on Polish territories provides us with the most terrifying examples of his settlement methods.

The conditions in the General Government are much worse than in any other occupied territory. The most obvious question one must constantly ask oneself is on what and how the population manages to live, especially in the towns. On the one hand, the rations received by Poles (640 calories a day, i.e. one-fourth the needs of an adult) are so small that, with the passage of time, people would have to die of hunger. But on the other hand, symptoms of mass malnutrition cannot be seen, although from time to time one sees hungry people, especially children. Apparently, the majority of the population can still procure the food necessary to live. It is possible partially because everybody participates in secret trade, and partially because of the selling of all goods and things to get food. As in Germany after the last war, there are in Poland clear symptoms of inflation. There is extreme poverty on one side, and on the other there are war profiteers with large funds. Clerks with fixed incomes must take bribes in order to survive. According to the person to whom I spoke, and who studied the conditions in the General Government for several months, the opinion 'Die Juden haben alles' is of ten heard.<sup>6</sup> If we consider the immense poverty in the Jewish quarters of different towns, we have to say that this statement applies only to a handful of the Jews who are still well off. As a matter of fact, the statement should say, 'Durch die Juden kann man alle haben, die Juden beschaffen alles.'<sup>7</sup> Owing to the old connections with producers and farmers who are accustomed to doing business with the Jews, there still are possibilities for acquiring otherwise unobtainable goods.

There was an attempt to put the entire distribution of produce in the General Government under control and to organize a system of coupons to provide for the needs of the population at a minimum level, but despite many efforts this project completely failed. Lack of transportation makes distributing even the stored stocks difficult, not to say impossible.

Supplying the cities, particularly Warsaw, with fats, milk, and eggs is carried out exclusively by illegal trade. Prices have risen excessively. For example, the person to whom I spoke presented me with data from spring 1942 in Kraków:

Bread, 1 kilogram: 16-19 zlotys  
One egg: 1.10 zlotys  
Butter, 1 kilogram: 50 zlotys  
Milk, 1 litre: 4 zlotys  
Pork, 1 kilogram: 50 zlotys  
Coffee, 1 kilogram: 625 zlotys  
Sugar, 1 kilogram: 55 zlotys (before the war: 1 zloty)

The exchange rate has not changed for the Germans: 1 German mark equals 2 zlotys. As for salaries, for example, in Kraków and Warsaw a German office clerk earns 1,500-2,000 zlotys monthly, and a typist 800-1,000 zlotys. The salaries of Poles are completely different. A typist gets only 120-400 zlotys. To provide his food needs, a Pole has at his disposal mainly the 'black market'. The prices are determined by bread: for example, in Kraków it costs 16-18 zlotys. These data portray how terrible the situation of the Polish population is, especially in towns. To overcome the scarcity of food, a system of bonuses has been introduced, by which the Germans try to encourage the farmers to produce more, and to deliver their produce to purchasing centres. Whether this can generate improvements the person to whom I spoke was unable to say.

This account of the situation of the Polish population in the General Government is equally objective and frightening, even if limited to only one aspect of the economic situation, the food supply. Vendel does not mention murder, violence, terror, or robbery; nor is the Polish resistance discussed, either civil or military. The account is by someone who is sympathetic to the Poles but has not had real contact with them, and therefore perceives the reality as though through glass, without actual contact.

He does not describe how the Poles live; he cannot imagine it. He only expresses his amazement at how they can be subjected to the organized hunger and survive at all. We can see that he takes at face value the information about attempts to take precautions against hunger. It is possible that whoever served as the author's source of information wanted to appear to him as a decent person. Let us also note as important for our purposes the use of such terms as 'inflation', a word which at that time was not at all current among the Poles, and the comparison between the situation in Poland and the situation in post-First World War Germany, which would hardly have been likely to cross the mind of a Pole.

The account that Vendel had passed on is true and honest. It speaks well for the German who portrayed the situation to him. This German undoubtedly opposed Nazism. Moreover, in the conflict between the Nazis and the Poles he took the side of the persecuted and hunger-plagued Poles. Still, the information is hardly a revelation: Polish organized resistance had accurate data (even more accurate than Vendel's) and had been sending it through its network to the government in exile of the republic of Poland in London. In other words, the part of the report quoted above is an important source for the history of Germany; however, it was not a discovery that could have inspired international discussion at the time. Such discussion could have been evoked by the following paragraph:

The treatment of the Jews, as described by the person to whom I spoke, is of the kind that is impossible to express in writing. That is why I limit myself to a few brief pieces of information. The treatment differs in different locations, depending on the number of Jews. In some cities there are Jewish quarters; in others there are ghettos surrounded by high walls, which Jews can trespass only at the risk of being shot; finally, in some others Jews enjoy some freedom of movement. Nevertheless, the aim is the extinction of them all. The number of Jews murdered in Lublin is estimated at 40,000. The Jews over fifty years of age and children under ten are especially subjected to extermination. The rest are left alive in order to fill the gap in the workforce; they will be exterminated as soon as they are no longer useful. Their property is confiscated; it mostly falls into the hands of SS men. In the cities all Jews are gathered; they are officially informed that it is for the purpose of 'delousing'. At the entrance they have to leave their clothes, which are immediately sent to a 'central warehouse textile materials'. Delousing is in practice gassing, after which all are packed into previously prepared mass graves. The source from whom I received all the information about the conditions in the General Government is such that there can be no shadow of a doubt that his description is true.

This account was one of the first revelations of the scale of the Nazi genocide to be sent to the West. It was sent three months before the arrival in the West of Jan Koziński-Karski, the courier of the Polish resistance, and also pre-dated the dispatches of Gerhart Riegner from Geneva. The account was truthful, yet it was incomplete. For example, the source knew about burying the corpses of people who had been gassed as in Belzec, but not about burning them, as in Treblinka or Auschwitz. But even more important than the information about murdering the Jews is the statement, which Vendel did not doubt, that the murder of Jews did not have the casual character of ordinary war cruelties but that its goal was to kill all Jews who fell in to German hands.

Let us note Vendel's emotional attitude towards the information he transmitted. In the last sentence of the paragraph quoted above he states that the person who gave the account deserved complete trust and was undoubtedly competent. Vendel does not mention the name in his report, as that would have been too dangerous. But he would not have refused to reveal his source if his superiors had asked. Besides, the head of the Berlin post, Ambassador Arvid Richert, knew whom Vendel visited in eastern Prussia, and why. In other words, Vendel demanded that his report be treated seriously in this principal point.

We can summarize the rest of Vendel's report. It contains information of a more 'routine' character, if such a word can apply to news concerning the Third Reich. In it we read about the expulsion of Poles from the 'former Polish Corridor' and the resettlement there of Germans from Bessarabia, and

about conscription into the Wehrmacht of the Poles who declared themselves ethnic Germans and their deployment to the front.<sup>8</sup> This last fact cooled the readiness of Poles to sign the *Volksliste*: 'The Poles prefer to bear their national sign "P", a bond that in the present time ties all Polish elements more strongly than ever, rather than allow themselves to be naturalized.' Then we read this: 'During my week-long stay in the region of the Mazurian lakes in eastern Prussia, where in the very same neighbourhood as the headquarters there are the quarters of the foreign minister and his staff, I again had the opportunity to meet the people who have intimate contacts with the headquarters.' We do not know who these were, but they certainly could not have been unimportant from the point of view of intelligence, since Vendel repeated Ribbentrop's outpourings about the planned Japanese attack against Vladivostok, the future location of Hitler's headquarters, the prospects and premises of the German summer offensive, and the condition of supplies in Germany, including oil and rubber. Then details follow about the situation in agriculture, the living conditions of forced labourers (i.e. the Poles and the Soviet prisoners of war), the supplying of German cities, etc. The last page presents Vendel's observations made in Sopot and Gdynia. He noticed the testing of new raiding ships capable of transporting tanks and trucks. We know that for Vendel's superiors this was important information because Sweden still feared aggression. In the summer of 1942 Germany was at the height of its success, and it could afford to attack vulnerable Sweden, which was surrounded by German armies, stationed also in Finland.

In the last paragraph of his report Vendel describes his meeting with an industrialist (recall that Vendel mentions contacts in both military and industrial circles) from the Ruhr, who informed him of the mood there. The industrialist was anti-Nazi. He assured Vendel emphatically, although not necessarily in full accord with the truth, that 'in the entire Ruhr region there is no one who believes in German victory'.

Vendel's report was brought to light by Steven Koblik, an American scholar of Swedish history and the author of a study of the attitude of Sweden towards the Jewish problem in the years 1933-45.<sup>9</sup> The Vendel document had been in the hands of historians before, especially those who worked during the 1970s on the huge project 'Sweden during the Second World War', but they did not pay attention to it. Incidentally, Vendel himself, even before it was brought to light, had described his report in his article mentioned earlier, accurately evaluating the hierarchy of facts and events; he emphasized the paragraph about the Holocaust, and quoted the whole of it.

Koblik's monograph excited much discussion in Sweden, but generally not in the public forum. Vendel's had been one of the first reports not of Nazi cruelties and crimes (such details had been available even earlier) but of the Holocaust, which was in progress not far from Sweden. It should have sounded the alarm, as everybody would agree now. But it did not. Vendel's report was understood in Stockholm, and it was made known to the leaders in the ministry and to the prime minister, whose signatures appear on one copy of it. Nevertheless, it remained hidden from the world. In the discussion started by Koblik the focal point was the responsibility of respected, humanitarian Swedish politicians and diplomats for their silence in the face of the crime, or even more for the way they hid it. This was not the first such discussion in Sweden. Others like it had surfaced from time to time ever since the end of the war. And they had cited not only Vendel's report but also the 1942 conversation between Kurt Gerstein and Swedish attaché von Otter.<sup>10</sup>

Investigating the document, Koblik asked the question: Why, in spite of their high-flown phrases, did Swedish leadership, aware of the Nazi crime of genocide, conceal Vendel's report as well as other reliable testimonies? His answer, well balanced and based on almost every possible consideration, including Sweden's strategic situation, is devastating from an ethical point of view. However, he did not ask such questions as how the report came into existence, who spoke with Vendel, and why they gave him their information.

These questions are intriguing. Who were the people with whom Vendel spoke, and why would they talk to a representative of a foreign country? Did they only pour out their emotions, or did they have

some aim, and if so, what? Where in eastern Prussia, close to Hitler's headquarters, did this conversation take place, and why there and not in Berlin or Stettin? Did the people realize that Vendel was in Germany on a confidential mission? Did they talk to him despite their awareness that he would write a report, or was it rather precisely because they knew that he would pass on their information?

Some conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the report itself, especially if we compare it with the earlier ones he wrote. It appears that Vendel was friendly with a Prussian junker (a big landowner), who possessed a large property in eastern Prussia. That was why agriculture and the connections in the ministry of agriculture come up so often in his reports. Vendel spent that particular week with the man's family somewhere near Hitler's quarters in Rastenburg. Certainly, the junker families of eastern Prussia were not lacking in outstanding personalities, and the names of more than one individual among them who opposed Nazism spring to mind.

I set out to learn whom Vendel visited that week and to whom he talked. My search followed two paths. First I tried to find Vendel or his descendants. Regrettably, I learned that Vendel himself had died in 1980 at the age of 85. In the registry of the inheritance court I discovered that he left no direct descendants, and his more distant relatives could probably not tell me much. Thus the first path reached a dead end.

So I turned, as a second possibility, to the archives of the foreign ministry in Stockholm. The archivist, Sven Johansson, granted me help far beyond my limited expectations. Not only did he tell me everything he knew about the report and its author, but he also found out that the name of the estate visited by Vendel was (until the end of the war) Gross Steinort. Its owner was Count Heinrich von Lehndorff, a reserve lieutenant, at that time in the Heeresgruppe Mitte. This information is reliable and concrete: Johansson found an official letter from 1951 in which Vendel openly wrote about 'the tragic fate of my contact in the German headquarters, Count Lehndorff'.

Lehndorff and Gross Steinort played well-known roles in the history of the war. Heinrich von Lehndorff was one of the leading figures in the anti-Nazi conspiracy known as the Generals' Plot. It was also from here, from Gross Steinort, that Count Claus von Stauffenberg was delegated to perform the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944. Moreover, Lehndorff was instrumental in the last contact between Stauffenberg and the leader of the conspiracy, General Henning von Tresckow. In Gross Steinort Lehndorff passed on to Stauffenberg the words of Tresckow that 'the assassination must be carried out no matter what. The attempt must be undertaken even if it fails. Now the point is not so much the practical goal as in showing the world that the German resistance has the courage to risk the life [of its people]. Compared to this, everything else is less important.'

The available literature expresses high regard for Lehndorff, but it did not introduce anything new in to my investigation. Fabian von Schlabrendorff, one of the few participants in the assassination conspiracy who survived and whose memoirs constitute the canon of knowledge about the organization and its people, apparently met Lehndorff late, only after August 1942.<sup>11</sup> There may also be other reasons why Lehndorff remained in the shade. It seems he was especially trusted by Tresckow and acted out a double conspiracy: first, because he lived near Hitler's headquarters and his estate had been considered the base for the assassination all along, and secondly, because he had contacts with the outside world—that is, contacts with Vendel.

Vendel mentioned Lehndorff as his contact in the headquarters. This description is naturally given in the language of intelligence, with a certain rationale behind it. However, investigating Vendel's reports more closely may yield the opposite conclusion: that, in fact, it was the conspirators who tried, through Vendel, to establish contacts abroad and overcome the information barrier. Very few Germans maintained contacts with the outside world in 1942, and that was why even isolated citizens of foreign countries, or the rare official representatives of these countries, would have been especially valued.

Whether it was Lehndorff who found Vendel or vice versa is unclear, but it is not very important: they needed each other. The reports indicate that for a certain time Lehndorff tested Vendel, probing

whether he could be trusted and to what extent. At first he told him things that were attractive from an intelligence standpoint and risky for anyone who revealed them, but that still fell within the framework of glorified gossip. In the case of Vendel's possible indiscretion or disloyalty (which undoubtedly was Lehndorff's concern), such items would not have caused the unmasking of the conspiracy.

Another question arises. Why did Lehndorff, who had frequent meetings with the Swedish consul in Stettin, not divulge his knowledge during one of them, and why did Vendel have to go all the way to the Rastenburg area? The neighbourhood of Hitler's field quarters and command post was heavily guarded. Access was difficult, and the area was under special police protection. It would have been practically impossible for Vendel to go there by train or in his own car. He was probably delivered in the car of one of the generals, a vehicle that would not have aroused the inquisitiveness of the police. If such steps were undertaken, it was probably not just for theatrical effect. Then why?

Everything seems to indicate that during this week-long stay close to Hitler's 'Wolfs Lair', Vendel met not only Lehndorff. Erik von Post alludes to this in his covering letter. But the names of those whom Vendel met were buried with him, and all we have left is deduction. Nevertheless, an attempt can be made to establish their names. Sven Johansson holds that the people from both military and civilian circles who were involved in the plot and visited Gross Steinort should be considered: the host's father-in-law, Colonel von Mellenthin; Fabian von Schlabrendorff; General Henning von Tresckow; diplomat Hasso von Etdorf; and General Hans Oster.

Are these the individuals Vendel met, and did the information he received come from them? We can rule out Schlabrendorff. If he had given Vendel the information about the Holocaust, or if he had known that such information was given, he would undoubtedly have written about it in his book, especially as he was sensitive to the issue of the murder of Jews. For different reasons, we should also exclude General Oster, who was a deputy of Admiral Canaris, the head of military intelligence. He had his own channels for sending information to the West; they were at a higher level and therefore probably more efficient. Was it then one of the remaining ones?

The information that Vendel passed on to Stockholm undoubtedly came from a *German* source. This is clear not only because Vendel himself said so, but also because both Polish and Jewish tragedies were portrayed through the eyes of an outside observer. In all of Vendel's reports I have found no trace of a Polish or Jewish contact. If he had information from Polish or Jewish sources, he would probably have considered it too partial and only credible to a limited extent. He would not have characterized Polish or Jewish sources as trustworthy in every respect.

Vendel had a lot of confidence in his host, but probably not enough for him to write about Lehndorff that 'the source from which I received all the information about the conditions in the General Government is such that there cannot be a shadow of a doubt that his description is true'. Besides, Lehndorff did not have to drag him to Gross Steinort. He had contacted Vendel earlier and they had meetings in both Stettin and Berlin.

Until new data should undermine my hypothesis, I think that the mysterious person for whom Vendel undertook his adventurous and risky trip to the Rastenburg area, the trip that required approval from the head of the Swedish diplomatic agency, was the first officer in the staff of the Heeresgruppe Mitte: General Henning von Tresckow.

According to the opinion of both his contemporaries and historians of today, Tresckow was the spiritual father of the conspiracy. He was an outstanding general, one of the best in the German army, which abounded with extraordinarily talented officers. This factor, together with Tresckow's personal charm and persuasive skills, made generals who were even higher ranked than he in the army hierarchy willingly admit his intellectual and organizational leadership.

Tresckow was Lehndorff's superior, both in the army and in the conspiracy. It is impossible to believe that Lehndorff, his most trusted and loyal collaborator, would maintain risky contacts with Vendel without Tresckow's knowledge and approval. Therefore, Tresckow was almost certainly involved in passing on the information about the Holocaust.

Why do I think it was he who talked to Vendel? First of all, because Vendel's report is so sophisticated in its presentation. Everything indicates that the report follows the structure of the information he received in Gross Steinort. The source did not want to estrange the recipients with the harsh and off-putting facts. The world was not yet prepared for the bare truth of the Holocaust. Recall the reserve that greeted Jan Karski, a courier from Warsaw and a witness to the Holocaust, when he told the leaders of the anti-Nazi coalition what he had seen and heard.

Whoever spoke to Vendel understood this. Most likely for this reason, the communication starts with gossip. What could attract a diplomatic reader more than gossip! Posterity might disregard it as banal, but contemporaries never would! After the gossip comes the statement that Himmler has more and more power. He had probably always had tremendous power, but this statement prepares the listener for further information. Until now the world could tolerate Nazism, suggests the speaker, but it is now becoming ever more dangerous. While neutrality has its justifications, from this point on it is impossible. Then follow the details about hunger in the General Government, almost obvious and consistent with what had already been known in Stockholm; none the less, this information was formulated very cautiously: no hungry people could be seen on the streets, the German authorities were trying their best. Only after this is the crucial fact revealed, the one for which the trip of the Swedish consul and the meeting had been arranged: the information about the Holocaust. Vendel's document displays, in fact, a high-quality art of dialectics and great understanding of the reluctance to accept such horrifying news.

One further argument supports the Tresckow hypothesis: a surprising number of stock-exchange terms are employed in the report's descriptions of the economic conditions. Such terms were hardly applicable to the situation in the General Government. And for some years after the end of the First World War Henning von Tresckow had been a stockbroker in Berlin.

The whole course of the report testifies to a sense of logic and a good knowledge of the faulty human psyche. Tresckow's contemporaries agreed that unlike other German high officers, preoccupied only with military matters, he was a man of broad horizons. It has been claimed that his way of thinking more resembled a philosopher's than a simple staff officer's. He was made aware of the murder of the Jews even earlier: in the autumn of 1941 he had been a witness when the specially dispatched SS men murdered the Jews of the German-captured town Borysov in Belarus. Breaking the rules of conspiracy, Tresckow then led a protest, almost a mutiny, of the staff officers in the group of the Heeresgruppe Mitte.

Whatever the judgement of history will be regarding the problem of identifying who spoke to Vendel - or who gathered these materials, for these did not have to be the same individuals-the more important task seems to be to find out the purpose for which they did it. Certainly, the information would not have been relayed just so that Swedish intelligence would know. That would not have justified dragging Vendel to Gross Steinort and having him meet the leaders of the conspiracy. The aim was different-it was dearly to alert the world.

I will not attempt to present the attitude of the conspirators towards the Jewish question. The materials indicate that there were diverse opinions within this circle. There had to be differences between Dietrich Bonhöffer and Karl Goerdeler, not to mention the generals. Most of the conspirators came from aristocratic families embodying the caste system. It is thus more to their credit that they felt obliged to alarm the world in defence of people who seemed alien to them.

Let us turn now to the fate of the report. The covering letter by Erik von Post was already unpromising. It treated Vendel with contempt, mentioning him without his title and first name, which



violated etiquette generally accepted in Sweden. Maybe this lapse expressed a then frequent disrespect for the consular staff on the part of even lower-ranking diplomats, but it seems that the purpose was different. Expressing disrespect for the author probably served the purpose of diminishing the importance of the report. When listing the problems addressed in the document, Post skipped over its most essential content, the data about the extermination of the Jews. It was a clear hint to Stockholm not to get involved in that problem. Obviously, various hypotheses can be put forward, but it seems doubtful that Post would have omitted this crucial part by oversight. There are no grounds for accusing Erik von Post or Arvid Richert of being Nazis, but there are even fewer grounds for regarding them as anti-Nazis. More cautiously, we can conclude that they were both convinced that remaining on good terms with the Third Reich was in the best interests of Sweden, and they acted accordingly. They prevented, or tried to prevent, anything that would loosen Sweden's dependence on Germany and avoided engendering discontent in Berlin. They refused to act even in such obvious cases as possible intervention in defence of the Swedish industrialists in Warsaw whom the Gestapo had arrested and sentenced to death.<sup>12</sup> It is no wonder that in November 1942 (three months after Vendel wrote his report), when the foreign ministry asked Richert, in regard to some incidental information from an embassy report, if it was true that the Germans deported the Jews from Polish towns, Richert answered: 'The truthfulness of this information cannot be determined; therefore, it needs to be treated with maximum reservation.' About reports of the evacuation of the Warsaw ghetto, he added: 'I do not have access to -any credible information about this.' In his next letter he thanked the ministry for not having made such details known to Rabbi Ehrenpreis of Stockholm, and he demanded that 'information about the treatment of the Jews, etc., whose source is the embassy, should not reach people on the outside'.<sup>13</sup> What more did he need? Yet already by the spring of 1942 the most credible witnesses, the Swedes Sven Norrman, Sigge Haggberg, and Carl Wilhelm Herslow, had told him about deportations. .

In spite of Post's efforts, Vendel's report excited interest in the Swedish foreign ministry, albeit not at once. After two weeks, on 8 September 1942, the director of the political department, Staffan Söderblom, had copies of the report sent to the offices in Helsinki, Rome, and Copenhagen; to the general staff; and to the deputy governor of Stockholm. Söderblom's copy was signed by several people to whom the report was presented. Among others, the signatures of Deputy Foreign Minister Eric Boheman and Prime Minister Per Albin Hanson can be deciphered on his copy of Post's covering letter. However, those men did not receive their own copies. It is therefore unclear whether they actually read the report or were only informed about its content, most likely in a manner determined by the covering letter. (I suggest this not without reason. Söderblom was a man of low calibre who owed his career to family connections: his father, an archbishop, was head of the Church in Sweden. At the time of Hitler's victories Söderblom ingratiated himself with the Germans, and later he did the same towards the Soviets. The failure to demand the release of Swedish citizen Raoul Wallenberg, who had been kidnapped by the Soviets in Budapest, has been attributed at least in part to Söderblom's lack of character.) As a result, the information from the German anti-Nazi officer was sunk so effectively that even the publication in the 1960s of Vendel's essay did not arouse interest.

Steven Koblik thoroughly analyses all the factors that contributed to Sweden's undertaking its particular course of action.<sup>14</sup> There was a fear of provoking Germany. Sweden was not able to fight a war against Germany, certainly not for the purpose of saving the Jews. The politicians and diplomats we have mentioned were not antisemites, but they had to think of the interests of their own country.

On the one hand, on the threshold of the war, Swedish authorities had issued a series of instructions directed against German (and also Polish) Jews seeking help, but later they displayed exemplary behaviour, saving the Jews from Denmark who faced extermination. The Swedish public willingly recalls the truly heroic efforts of Raoul Wallenberg, who towards the end of the war rescued Jews in Hungary, and the mission of Folke Bernadotte, who in the war's last weeks saved thousands of concentration camp prisoners of many nationalities. In the end Koblik condemns the behaviour of

Swedish authorities. At the same time he finds circumstantial excuses, asking what Sweden could have done.

Sweden could have done one thing that Koblik did not consider. It could have used its channel to pass Vendel's information on to the West, to the countries of the anti-Nazi alliance. Such action was not unheard of in diplomatic practice. But it was not done. Moreover, the report was not made known to the director of the information bureau in the Swedish foreign ministry, Sven Grafström, who was anti-Nazi. He had proved in the past that he would not refuse to take unconventional steps if they were necessary.

Instead, a copy of the report was made for the deputy governor of Stockholm, Hellgren, who after the war was accused of having abused his power by collaborating with the German police authorities. It seems that he also disregarded Vendel's report. There is in addition the possibility that a report originating from Stockholm denounced the German anti-Nazis, but was suppressed, possibly by Admiral Canaris or one of his collaborators.

After all the years that have passed, a reading of Vendel's report evokes mostly sadness. Nothing can now help save the people who were murdered, even if there had been a substantial chance that the Nazi death machine could have been stopped then. Such was the aim of the leaders of the German officers who conferred with Vendel in Gross Steinort in August of 1942. Their anxiety and sincerity impressed Vendel, but their united efforts were in vain. Two years later Lehndorff was to die, murdered by the Nazis, and Tresckow would commit suicide when their assassination plot failed. Many of their comrades, the élite of the nation, would share the fate assigned earlier to the Jews.

Examining the materials to write this study, I felt, with clarity very rare in my forty years' experience as a historian, how greatness and loftiness exist side by side with ignominy, mediocrity, and pettiness. On one side there is Tresckow, on the other Söderblom; Lehndorff and Richert can likewise be opposed. And the one only briefly mentioned here, but nevertheless hard to forget, a member of the conspiracy, the great Dietrich Bonhöffer, presents a striking contrast to the petty archbishop of Uppsala, Eidem, who, even when absolutely no doubt remained about the goals and actions of the Nazis, refused to sign a letter to the Hungarian bishops in defence of the murdered Jews. Also at fault was the Jewish congregation in Stockholm, worried about an influx of Jews from Poland and eager to prevent this 'danger'. It is painful to study documents that show how sacrifice and generosity can be annihilated by small-mindedness. But let us do what we can and should do: pay respect and bow our heads to those who, at a time when the wolves roamed freely, upheld the honour of humanity.

*Translation from Polish by Gwido Zlatkes*

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The first draft of this chapter was published in *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, 164/4 (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Karl Yngve Vendel, legatory councillor emeritus, 'Var Sverige hotat under andra världskriget?', *Effektivt Försvar: Fritt Militärt Forum*, 5 (1965), 386.

<sup>3</sup> Editorial. 'Undensk personalpolitik'. *Effektivt Försvar: Fritt Militärt Forum*. 6 (1965), 441.

<sup>4</sup> Arvid Richert was the Swedish ambassador in Berlin.

<sup>5</sup> Riksarkivet Stockholm, HP 324-84

<sup>6</sup> 'The Jews have everything.'

<sup>7</sup> 'Through the Jews you can get everything, the Jews can obtain everything.'

<sup>8</sup> In the territories incorporated into Germany in 1939 the Poles were forced to declare their German nationality by signing the so-called Volksliste.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Koblik, *The Stones Cry Out* (New York, 1987); pub. in Swedish as *Om vi teg, skulle stenarna ropa* (Stockholm, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> After receiving some unspecified signals, Kurt Gerstein, a chemist, joined the SS in order to uncover the crime. He obtained direct evidence of genocide. He tried to alert the world, but in vain. The papal nuncio in Berlin, Archbishop Orsenigo, simply showed him the door when he tried to relate what was going on in extermination camps. On 22 Aug. 1942, two days after the date of Vendel's report, Gerstein met the attaché of the Swedish embassy, Otter, in the train from Warsaw to Berlin. He not only presented him with a detailed account but also showed documents proving the crime. It has been claimed that Otter made a report of this but somehow it got lost. Scholars and archivists doubt whether such a report was presented at all. See Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret* (London, 1980)

<sup>11</sup> Above all, see the memoir documentary book by a participant in the conspiracy: Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *Offiziere gegen Hitler*, ed. Gero von Gaevernitz (Zurich, 1946). Also see Peter Hoffman. *Widerstand. Staatsstreich, Attentat. Der Kampf der Opposition gegen Hitler* (Munich, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Richert and Post are treated extensively in the diary of Sven Grafström, *Anteckningar* (Stockholm, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> For more on this, see Ivarsson Martin, 'Att kunna men inte vilja' (1989), manuscript in the possession of the author.

<sup>14</sup> Koblik. *The Stones Cry Out*.