

Israeli activist Sigrid Undset

By Sigrun Slapgard, 07/10/11

Sigrid Undset was in the forefront for the establishment of Israel, a newly discovered correspondence shows.

"The most important task now is to save the Jews who are still alive in Europe," wrote Sigrid Undset to Professor Joseph Klausner in 1943. "A more important task is to create a homeland for all the homeless Jews," she continued in an unknown letter found in Israel.

The man who wrote to Sigrid Undset, was the influential and well-known uncle of Amos Oz. Joseph Klausner will be known to many as "Uncle Joseph" from Amos Oz' autobiographical and bestselling novel *A tale of love and darkness*. Undset had met the renowned professor and author at a conference organized by the Emergency Committee for the Rescue of European Jewry in the United States. Joseph Klausner was central to the international efforts for Jewish cause and would later come to compete with Chaim Weizman to become the first president of Israel. Joseph Klausner was famous and controversial for his rewriting of the story of Jesus of Nazareth, and Sigrid Undset had at this time more or less put off writing novels, and consecrated herself entirely to the fight against Nazism and to save Jews in Europe.

Secret activist

The letter appeared after I had held a lecture about Sigrid Undset in Jerusalem, talking about her relief work for the Jews during the war. My assertion that the Nobel Prize-winning author was in the forefront of both open and secret efforts in the campaign to save Jews, awakened interest in Israel. Much of the material I had found in the United States, had been marked "No publicity" and "Strictly confidential." The day after my lecture in Jerusalem, one of the listeners appeared with a copy of a letter, written by Sigrid Undset in 1943 to the prominent Joseph Klausner. I could immediately recognize the wording of the sentences from many of her speeches in her time as a war refugee in the United States, often with an English spoken with a strong Norwegian accent:

"I shall hope that we, who see anti-Semitism as a despicable phenomenon, shameful and poisonous, now will be hating it even more because of the horrible crimes perpetrated against the European Jewry," Sigrid Undset wrote. She used her sledgehammer of words against anti-Semitism in the United States. Now she hoped that the experience of Nazism once and for all had revealed the shameful hatred against the Jews.

Fighting against Nazism

At this point in 1943, Sigrid Undset believed that there still could be an ally of action in the US and Great Britain that would save and set free all prisoners concentration camp during the Nazi regime. As a world-known refugee in the United States she spent much time on her commitment to save the Jews. In speeches and letters she tried to influence both public opinion and government leaders such as Roosevelt and Churchill. The fact that she also had close contacts with leading intellectuals in what was then Palestine, has until now been unknown. Her letter to Professor Klausner shows that Sigrid Undset was an early advocate for establishing the state of Israel and a homeland "for all the homeless Jews and the Jews who can not or will not adapt to secular governance. This need will be stronger after this war is over."

Sigrid Undset wrote that she feared the racial hatred that could come in the wake of the Second World War. She warned against the feelings of guilt she thought Germany and its allies would come to struggle with, and that therefore it was imperative to have a full-fledged Jewish state. "The Jewish people have a right to defend itself in the future and become an independent nation, with all the institutions and functions that are needed in a state," wrote Undset, and assured of both Norwegian and allied support. The last part of the letter seems to have formulations that she has borrowed from aid organizations she actively supported, and she gives strongworded support for 'Eretz Israel'. Sigrid Undset was a board member of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, and the letter shows how heavily involved she was. She was also engaged in other organizations which fought against Nazism. Ever since Undset stood up for the Ossietzky-case in 1935 and also as head of the Writers' Association shortly afterwards, she used much time to write articles and give lectures against Hitler's ideas.

Chastise their own

After Sigrid Undset lost the eldest son's during the German invasion of Norway, and she herself was forced to flee in April 1940, she looked upon herself as a pure propaganda soldier. She was willing to go far in their struggle against Nazism and antisemitism. Undset was often aware of that her own Catholic community was passive and took wrong stance to what happened in Germany. In the American press she challenged this attitude, and in particular criticized the Catholic priest Coughlin in Detroit, called him a scoundrel and accused him of experimenting with the hatred against Jews. And as her letter to Professor Klausner shows: Sigrid Undset was a strong supporter of Zionist organizations and the plan to create the state of Israel in Palestine. Again, she went far in her zeal to support Zionism and had herself to tolerate criticism for supporting and excusing Jewish terrorism. Sigrid Undset also sent a personal appeal to Prime Minister Churchill to abolish the death sentence of two Jewish assassins, and she thought the two might have acted in despair when they took the life of the British envoy in an assassination in Cairo. (The source here is Odd Karsten Tveit.)

Then, after the war, when Sigrid Undset realized that she had lost her great battle and that the destiny of the Jews was even worse than she had feared, she was grim and spiteful against Germany. She was somewhat unfair in her hatred of the Germans. But perhaps this after all was a human factor, she had been suffering too much of a loss herself in her life and struggle for humanity.