

## **Sigrid Undset and the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe**

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I've been wondering why I haven't heard of Sigrid Undset before stepping into her home museum in Lillehammer. Having read extensively about the Holocaust, I should have come across a Norwegian author who raised her voice for the sake of the Jewish people in time it needed support more than ever. My guess is that she hasn't received the acclaim she certainly deserves because she has been associated with a group apparently many Jews want to forget: the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, also known as the Bergson Group. The controversy surrounding this group is still alive and well. Here's a news item from June 23, 2008:

### **130 Israeli Leaders Urge Yad Vashem to Recognize Bergson Group**

JERUSALEM- One hundred and thirty Israeli political and cultural leaders --including former Supreme Court justices, cabinet ministers, and cultural figures-- have signed a petition to Yad Vashem, Israel's central Holocaust institution and museum, urging it to add to its exhibits material about the Holocaust rescue activists known as the Bergson Group.

The petition was organized by the Washington,D.C.-based David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

The Bergson Group was a maverick political action committee in the United States in the 1940s that used rallies and newspaper ads to pressure the Roosevelt administration to rescue Jews from Hitler. Its efforts played a key role in facilitating the rescue of more than 200,000 Jews during 1944-1945.

<http://www.wymaninstitute.org/press/2008-6-23.php>

Typing 'Sigrid Undset Yad Vashem' in several Internet searching engines, I found no direct links.

The controversy concerned the tactics of fighting the Nazi extermination machine. While the American Jewish establishment during II World War thought that quiet engagement was the best way to proceed, the Emergency Committee did everything it could to raise public awareness to the systematic murdering of Jews that went on in Europe and urged everybody to do something about it. I dare to suggest that quiet engagement hardly ever works, and nowadays it's quite clear that the Emergency Committee was right in its approach.

Here a note relating to Undset's activities:

The Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset (1882-1949), winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1928, was an ardent anti-Nazi and fled Norway to escape the German occupation in 1940. During her five year stay in the U.S., she served as co-chair of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, and spoke at the July 1943 Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe.



Undset (L) in 1943 at the inaugural meeting of the committee's Women's Division, together with Mrs. Abraham H. Kavovitz, who presided at the meeting.

(<http://wymaninstitute.org/special/bergsonexhibit/leadership5.php>)

At that time she had spoken in several occasions. In July 1943 she participated in a conference at hotel Commodore, New York. (New York Times, July 26, 1943. p.19)

**Sigrid Undset, author, after denouncing anti-Semitism, said:**

**"It is the right of the Jewish nation to get the opportunity to defend itself in the future from a national stronghold, as an independent nation, in possession of all the organs of a national life of its own," she added.**

**The conference adopted resolutions regarding ways to rescue the Jews of Europe and post-war aid based on previous findings by its various panels.**

My impression is the while supporting the committee and taking part in its public events, Sigrid Undset did not take part in its daily activities. The reason for this was not the fact that the activities of the committee were shrouded with controversy – she was not a woman to shy away from controversy – but because she had had another urgent call: to fight for her own country.