

## “Tell Ye Your Children...”

### The Twisted Swedish Road to Holocaust Recognition

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ABSTRACT: From a historical perspective, this article analyzes the dramatic political process in the 1990s when modern Sweden left its traditional dissociation from historical orientations by entering into a European context in which the Second World War and the Holocaust were crucial historical landmarks. The political campaign Living History must be understood in terms of recent processes of both nationalization and Europeanization of history. As a conclusion, three problems of the politics of history are discussed: a competing European historical focus on communist crimes against humanity, a simplistic and reductionist political use of Holocaust history, and a difficult but necessary discussion of the potential lessons of history in general, and of Holocaust history in particular.

RÉSUMÉ : D'un point de vue historique, cet article analyse le processus politique dramatique des années 1990, par lequel la Suède moderne a laissé derrière elle la dissociation traditionnelle de ses orientations historiques en entrant dans un contexte européen dans lequel la Seconde Guerre mondiale et l'Holocauste étaient des points de repère historiques cruciaux. La campagne politique de l'Histoire vivante [*Living History*] doit être comprise en termes de processus récents tant de nationalisation que d'eupéanisation de l'histoire. Trois problèmes de la politique historique sont discutés en conclusion : un accent historique européen concurrent vis-à-vis des crimes contre l'humanité communistes; une utilisation politique simpliste et réductionniste de l'histoire de l'Holocauste; et une discussion difficile, mais nécessaire des enseignements potentiels de l'histoire en général, et de l'histoire de l'Holocauste en particulier.

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## Changing Destinations

**W**hen the present author was a secondary school student in Trelleborg in southern Sweden in the years around 1970, the goal of the annual school journey was uncontested. My school class always travelled over the strait to Denmark to enjoy ourselves at Tivoli, an amusement park in central Copenhagen where life always was at its best, at least for a teenager. Thirty years later, from approximately the same Swedish geographical position, my children undertook the same secondary school journey. Where did they go? Certainly not to Tivoli, but to a more distant place outside the Nordic countries, and furthermore totally unimaginable as a destination for a school journey in the 1970s: the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, the foremost symbol of the Holocaust.

This article, with a political focus that situates it in the expansive scholarly field of the politics of history, analyzes this journey that Sweden and Swedes have made from the early 1970s to the millennium years. The Swedish road stretches from a rather carefree, forward-looking orientation towards the good in life to a serious occupation with history in general, and with the most painful aspects of modern European history in particular: world wars, large-scale repression, and genocides. It goes without saying that Swedes have had company with other Europeans in this change of perspective from what has been called a progressive to a tragic narrative (Alexander). However, it is also obvious that Swedes in important respects have travelled their own course towards not only an unknown, but also previously uninteresting and irrelevant historical continent.

It will be argued that Sweden entered the Second World War in 1997, which is a very convenient year to enter into a world war since no Swede ran the risk of being killed or hurt more than half a century after the end of armed hostilities. Besides, at the end of the century it was much less problematic to unequivocally side with the winning Nazi opponents than it was in the war years, when traditional cultural and institutional bonds and an economic dependence rendered a full Swedish dissociation from Germany much more difficult.

The observation of Sweden's late entry into the war may seem humorous, but behind it rests the more serious idea that there was a need and an interest for Sweden to be part of an increasingly important history and historically-based European community. Obviously, this was a strongly felt need because it conflicted with a profound Swedish conviction that Sweden was a nation distinctly situated outside the European conflict zone, the world wars, and the atrocities committed in their shadow. A Swedish historian has described this turning away from Europe and war, and turning to modernity, neutrality, and peace, as a "state of mind," a specific Swedish self-understanding and way of life (Johansson 170). Sometimes,

it had seemed that Sweden, as an archetype of the modern state and society, had wanted to stand outside history itself, unambiguously turning its face towards the future. But, as will be demonstrated, this situation radically changed in the 1990s.

## The European Silence

Although neutral, non-belligerent Sweden had a particular position in Europe as one of few bystander states in the Second World War, its postwar attitude to the Holocaust did not differ much from a general European one. The general interpretation was that, as a small state, Sweden had luckily, but also through realistic and skillful political adjustments to the warring parties in general and the Nazis in particular, managed to avoid being dragged into the war. Thus, Swedes had responsibility for neither the military operations nor the tragic destiny of the European Jews. The Swedish notion corresponded well to Raul Hilberg's famous definition of a bystander as someone "not 'involved,' not willing to hurt the victims and not wishing to be hurt by the perpetrators" (xi).

The Nuremberg trials, the terrible photos taken by war correspondents when the camps were liberated, the miserable remnants of European Jewry, and the creation of the State of Israel helped to remind people of the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany and to keep memory alive. After the first postwar years, however, silence about and avoidance to the Jewish tragedy spread all over Europe. Silence is hard to analyze, it has been argued, since it per definition is not. However, one can grasp it when it no longer exists, which definitely is the case today (Levin 195). It is also true that a few recent scholarly analyses have questioned the interpretation, emphasizing that traumatized Holocaust survivors were not as silent as previously maintained (Cesarani and Sundquist; Heuman). Nevertheless, the dominant Holocaust responses during the first postwar decades were silence, disinterest, and indifference. To be sure, the response changed from one country to another, due to both the war experiences, the strength of antisemitic<sup>1</sup> ideas, and postwar developments. Furthermore, there was a difference in kind and not in degree between Eastern and Western Europe. In the Communist east, there was an absolute silence, since Jews were not allowed to compete with Communists as the foremost heroic victims of Nazi rule. Besides, open discussion about the Holocaust could have disturbed the social equilibrium in several regions within the Soviet sphere, where wartime collaboration with the Nazis had been frequent (Karlsson 2013). In Western Europe, where silence was not proclaimed by a ruling party, the Nazi genocide could be and was paid attention to by individuals and collectives, mostly Jewish ones. However, silence was predominant not only in Communist countries. Everywhere, antisemitism returned and gained new prominence when Jews came back from the camps and reclaimed houses, apartments, and other possessions that had been taken over by their non-Jewish

neighbours during the war (Lagrou 251-61). Furthermore, Holocaust history was often hard to bring into line with the antisemitic stereotype of Jews as active agents of their own self-interest and the misfortune of others (Karlsson 2003).

What Henry Rousso with reference to the French postwar experience has denominated as “the Vichy syndrome” (1-11), a widespread disinclination to discussing cooperation and other kinds of siding with the Nazis, was certainly not restricted to France. In the interest of postwar unity, governments in countries occupied by the Nazis chose to downplay collaboration with the occupiers in persecuting Jews. A comfortable “truth” was that Nazism and the perpetration of genocide were unequivocally German phenomena. Postwar nationalism gave precedence to “national” suffering and martyrdom over Jewish victimhood. Hannah Arendt wisely noted the limits of universal rights when she argued that the Enlightenment notion of human dignity applied to citizens but not to “alien”, stateless peoples (Arendt 1979, 301-2). Jewish history was seen as different from and worth less than the history of the titular populations in Europe. Thus, in Poland, Auschwitz was considered a memorial landscape of Polish, not Jewish suffering (Huener 79-107). As Tony Kushner has demonstrated, the Holocaust did not even fit into the ideological blueprint of the Western liberal democracies, where universal and individual values were considered fundamental, and not the particularistic, ethnic dimension of Holocaust history (205-69). In what would become West Germany, the idea of 1945 as *Stunde Null* indicated a similar inclination to repress and forget the Holocaust. The genocide perpetrators were certainly Germans, but the crucial point was that they were Nazis, who were conclusively defeated in 1945. In the West German case, it should, however, be underlined that this consoling and convenient attitude soon changed into an active politics of denazification and reconciliation, including reparations to the new state of Israel (Markovits and Noveck 401-26).

## Early Swedish Responses

During the first postwar decades, the history of the tragedy that fell upon the European Jews did not resonate much in official Swedish speeches and texts. In the war years, Sweden received thousands of Jews from neighbouring Norway and Denmark. Several thousand Holocaust survivors came to Sweden for rehabilitation after being liberated from the camps in the final phase of the war, approximately 6,000-7,000 in the “white buses” rescue mission organized by the Swedish Red Cross (Åmark 553). Many of them remained in Sweden, but the absolute majority remained silent about their experiences for a long time. Even fewer Swedes belonged to the perpetrators, a group with a more instrumental interest to keep silent about the crimes in which they had taken part. This means that the absolute majority of the Swedes belonged to the bystanders, not only of the Holocaust, but of the entire world conflict.

A few examples of the Swedish silence may suffice. In *Svensk Uppslagsbok*, a national Swedish encyclopedia produced just after the war, the Nazi genocide left very few marks. Obviously, there was no distinct entry, because at that time there was no Swedish terminology to separate the Nazi genocide of European Jewry from other atrocities of the war years. The extensive entry on the Second World War contained one—but only one—sentence on the Holocaust:

Den grymma, omänskliga brutalitet som präglade den tyska ockupationspolitiken, framträdde klarast och skarpest i de otroliga tvångsåtgärder, som genomfördes mot de ockuperade ländernas judar och som kulminerade i en formlig utrotningskampanj gentemot dem och Tysklands egna judar. ("Världskrigen," *Svensk Uppslagsbok* 31, 1067)

[The cruel, unhuman brutality that characterized the German occupation policy and that stood out most clearly and distinctly in the incredible forced measures taken against the Jews in the occupied countries and that culminated in a veritable extermination campaign against them and Germany's own Jews.]<sup>2</sup>

In the entry on antisemitism, another minor text dealt with "den största skändlighet historien känner" [the largest infamy that history knows] ("Antisemitism," *Svensk Uppslagsbok* 1, 1207). Likewise, in postwar Swedish history textbooks, German brutality was certainly noted, but it was not mentioned that Jewish suffering had a particular genocidal character. Other political and military aspects of the Second World War were allowed much more extensive space. In the university textbook, a translated version of the American historians Palmer and Colton's *A History of the Modern World*, read by all Swedish history students and future history teachers during at least three decades, German repression and death camps are briefly mentioned, with east European Jews contesting with Poles, Russians, Czechs, and other "inferior" peoples as victims (336). Also among professional historians interest in the Holocaust was non-existent. In the 1970s, more than twenty PhD theses in history were written at Stockholm University within the framework of the large research project "Sweden during the Second World War." Overall, the Holocaust was absent, which clearly indicates that the genocide was situated outside the realm of Swedish history.

It should, however, be underlined that the Swedish silence of the first postwar decades was far from absolute and total. Of great importance for resisting or opposing the silence were the contributions of journalists, scholars, writers, and artists of Jewish origin, some of them with personal experiences of the Holocaust.

In the late 1980s, the American historian Steven Koblik was the first scholar who indicated a Swedish connection to Holocaust history.<sup>3</sup> He argues that the information in media during the ongoing war was both scarce and hidden away from the front pages (21-28). A banal explanation is that at that time the Holocaust

was not the “Holocaust,” but “only” one of many atrocities unfolding under conditions of war. Another explanation could be that the Swedish media put self-censorship into practice at the same time as the Swedish Foreign Ministry gradually became increasingly active in suppressing open information about Nazi brutality against Jews, mainly as a response to complaints from Germany (Leth 173-85). However, other scholars have maintained that Swedish newspaper readers were quite well informed, if not in full detail, about how the mass killings of Jews on the European continent proceeded. From 1942, it has been argued, Swedish newspapers regularly conveyed and commented on information and reports from the Allied press:

Senhösten 1943 kan rimligt sett knappast någon svensk ha varit tveksam om vad som faktiskt höll på att ske i Europa. Uppgifterna var alltför många, rapporterna alltför detaljerade för att några tvivel skulle föreligga.  
(Svanberg and Tydén 41)

[In late fall of 1943, no Swede can obviously have been in doubt about what actually was going on in Europe. The information was too manifold, the reports too detailed to cause any doubts.]

Quite another thing is to evaluate how wartime Swedes reacted to the news of the genocide. The best brief answer is probably that there was no unanimous opinion of how the information should be judged. Probably, many Swedes living outside the European warzone found the horrendous reports from Nazi killing fields difficult to give full credence. Photos were met with ambivalence: on the one hand, they never lie, on the other hand, they must have been arranged or only presented one side of the conflict (Zelizer 142-50). Besides, Swedish society was not free from what a historian has called an antisemitic background noise, which enabled Swedes to express antisemitic attitudes, while at the same time distinctly distancing themselves from antisemitic ideas (Kvist Geverts 37).

## **The Swedish Discovery of the Holocaust**

The date Sweden entered the Second World War—12 June 1941—was not preceded by any declarations of war, but by a debate among the party leaders in the Swedish Parliament, *Riksdagen*. In his talk, the Social Democratic Prime Minister Göran Persson surprised his audience by explaining that this was not the right time for traditional political discussion. It was necessary to face a more uncommon but nevertheless serious problem: Swedes’ awareness and knowledge of the Holocaust. Persson was upset by a study carried out by a scholarly centre at Stockholm University demonstrating that far from all Swedish youngsters from the age of 12 to 20 were convinced that the Holocaust really had taken place. In

response, the Prime Minister, born in 1949 in a generation with no personal connections to the genocide, declared his intention to initiate a government-sponsored campaign to inform Swedish teenagers not only about Holocaust history per se, but also about the lessons of this history, for the sake of democracy, tolerance, and human rights:

Förtiteln måste vara en ständigt ringande varningsklocka om vad som kan hända om vi inte håller debatten om demokrati och människovärde vid liv.  
(Bruchfeld and Levine 1998, 82)

[The Holocaust must be a permanently ringing warning clock of what might happen if we do not keep the debate on democracy and human value alive.]

As a result a project, *Levande historia* [Living History], was organized, and a booklet with the title "... om detta må ni berätta..." was written by two Holocaust historians, published on 27 January 1998, and distributed for free to all Swedish households. Translations into many minority languages were carried out. The title of the English version is the same as the title of this article. Teacher training courses were set up, a national scholarly centre for the study of the Holocaust and other genocides was created at Uppsala University, and an international so-called task force for cooperation on Holocaust education, remembrance, and research was organized at the Swedish Prime Minister's initiative.

A few years later, Persson could reap the fruits of these internationally-acclaimed initiatives when political leaders of the world on four consecutive years, starting in the millennium year 2000, came to Stockholm to attend conferences devoted to Holocaust-related issues. In a powerful Stockholm declaration, the utmost importance of the genocide topic was laid down in its first paragraph:

The Holocaust (Shoah) fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilization. The unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning. After half a century, it remains an event close enough in time that survivors can still bear witness of the horrors that engulfed the Jewish people. The terrible suffering of the many millions of other victims of the Nazis has left an indelible scar across Europe as well.  
(Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum 3)

No doubt, Living History became a tremendous foreign policy success for Sweden. In 2003, the campaign was reorganized and institutionalized into a Swedish civil authority, Living History Forum, with the same main task to strengthen democracy, tolerance, and human rights by means of Holocaust history.

It goes without saying that the Swedish Prime Minister's growing campaign initiative basically cannot be explained by teenagers' lack of conviction that the Holocaust had occurred or maybe rather by their disinclination to giving a politically-correct answer. As demonstrated, the initiative was a political expression of a will to abandon the time-honoured Swedish bystander role as regards Europe, the Second World War, and in particular the Holocaust. But why did it happen, and why in 1997? Three main explanations can be distinguished, but before we delve into them it should be underlined that there were some forebodings or ends of silence, mainly connected to events and processes outside Sweden. Already the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, dominating the media for several months, gave rise to a certain Holocaust interest, and the screening of the American television miniseries "Holocaust" in 1979 excited a new interest in Swedish mass media (Zander 277-80). Furthermore, the translator of the series gave the Holocaust a Swedish term, *Förintelsen*, which means "destruction" or "annihilation." The Swedish word is furthermore spelled with an initial capital, which no other historical concepts are, probably to stress its unique or unprecedented character. The downside is obviously that the Holocaust risks losing its historical dimensions.

The NBC television series obviously played an extremely important role in helping people all over the Western world identify with the victims of the Nazi atrocities, with persecuted or discriminated-against minorities, and with the choices people had to make during the war and genocide years. In March 1979, following the screening of *Förintelsen*, the evening paper *Aftonbladet* dedicated many articles to the Holocaust in general, and to "Swedish" aspects of the genocide in particular. Swedes who were involved as rescuers, antisemitic propagandists, or scholars engaged in race theories were introduced, and the staunch refusal of Swedish authorities to receive Jewish refugees was criticized, as were later-day Swedish neo-Nazi, denialist ideas of "Jewish lies." The journalist Göran Rosenberg, later honoured for his book *A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz* (2012) on his father's Holocaust story or rather the abyss between this tragic experience and the son's optimistic Swedish life, reported from a journey in March 1979 to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where parts of Rosenberg's family were destroyed. Another topic was the emergence in the 1970s of various organized tracts, neo-Nazi and others, denying that the Holocaust had ever occurred (Lipstadt 103-21; M. Karlsson).

In scholarly discourse, important works such as Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men* (1992) and Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996) also served to raise the general level of Holocaust awareness and interest and to start discussions about scholarly questions on the genocidal processes and structures involved as well as traditionally non-scholarly questions on guilt, complicity, and collaboration. To



the same kind of trigger belonged the German *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s, with its main question whether the Nazi regime and misdeeds should be explained from a unique German *Sonderweg* of unbalanced modernization or rather as a reaction on the partly coeval Communist terror in the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, the Living History campaign that started in 1997 signified a radically new Swedish attitude towards Holocaust history, and moreover it acted outside the realm of the traditional Swedish mediators of history: school, university, and museum. As regards school history teaching, the situation may be best described as a paradox: while politicians opted for a campaign of information about Holocaust history, history as an independent subject in the Swedish school at the same time seemed bound for disappearance from the politically-controlled curriculum.

However, the paradoxical situation certainly concerned school history teaching and not the political campaign, because Living History can be described as part of a general renaissance of the historical dimension in Sweden—which did not include school history. The history return can be attributed to several larger developments in society and the world. Among them was the disappearance of Soviet Communism, which soon paved the way for the return of “historical” conflicts, in particular in the Balkan region. The Soviet disintegration in the regions neighbouring Sweden had occurred in the sign of advanced uses of history, in particular of claims of historical rights. The vacuum created by the disappearance of the bipolar world left room for historical scenarios. It was easier to catch sight of the Holocaust as the “evil of our time” when the evil on the other side of the Cold War wall was gone. The European integration process, into which Sweden entered in 1995, and the advent of multicultural society both incited us to asking historical questions about who “we” and “they” are, what “we” have in common with “the others,” and what differentiates us. The decline of the welfare state made us ask other historical questions, such as who are to blame and bear responsibility. Continuous violence in the Middle East reminded us of the power of history, not least of Holocaust history.

Consequently, in the 1990s, historical debates started to haunt Swedish politicians, unused to responding to historical accusations and sore points. The most urgent one concerned Sweden’s wartime relations to Nazi Germany. If the works of the professional historians on Sweden during the Second World War had left few traces in the public debate, the journalist Maria-Pia Boëthius’ book *Heder och samvete* (1991) [Honour and Conscience] had a paradigmatic effect, triggering off a vociferous moral debate on Sweden’s attitudes and politics towards Hitler’s Germany. With a strongly populist argumentation, Boëthius made a major assault on the old small-state realist notion, accusing not only the Swedish politicians but all those men in power for cowardly having given way to all German wishes and demands, with the sole purpose to avoid being dragged into the war at any cost.

Other historical problems that reached the public level were more directly related to Holocaust history. The discovery of Nazi gold in the Swedish central bank, bought from Germany that in its turn had stolen it from occupied countries and possibly robbed it from unlucky Jewish Holocaust victims, aroused public interest. When it was suggested that Swedes had built their postwar welfare on Jewish assets, the moral dimension became embarrassing. At least as troublesome was the sudden surge of moral emotion over the disclosure of coercive, involuntary sterilizations of tens of thousands of allegedly mentally or socioeconomically inferior Swedish women going on for four decades, starting from the 1930s, for the purpose of the improvement of the human race. In 1997, the Swedish government, obviously risking an accusation of adhering to Nazi policies, promised to launch an investigation into the policy of forced sterilization and to explore a possible economic compensation. The same year, a commission was set up by the government to investigate the problem of Nazi-stolen Jewish gold in Swedish banks.

Many aspects of these histories were known and had been published before, but in the 1990s there seems to have been a preparedness among many intellectual and well-educated Swedes to use them in a critical and moral historical discourse. Singled out as the main guilty part of these histories was the Social Democratic party and state that established its long-term dominating position in Sweden in the early 1930s. It is true that Sweden was governed by a coalition government during the war, but the Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson was a Social Democrat. In part, it is reasonable to explain the late successor Göran Persson's decision to initiate the Living History campaign as an active and vigorous response that Sweden was prepared to deal with and learn from these painful historical experiences.

However, the most important explanation of the Swedish Holocaust engagement is related to Europe. As mentioned, Sweden entered into the European Union on 1 January 1995. So far, economic and gradually also political integration had been at the forefront of the integration process. In the 1990s, questions of cultural integration started to attract attention in Brussels and Strasbourg. To strengthen European identity, inner cohesion, and shared responsibility, the cultural dimension could be useful. Should Europeans choose to speak a *lingua franca*? Should they develop a common historical consciousness? Was there any chance of developing such a common "European" view of history, relating interpretations of the past to concerns of the present and to expectations for the future on a continent where the British constantly had fought the French who had fought the Germans who had fought the Poles who had fought the Russians who had fought the Swedes who had fought the Danes...?

In the 1990s, the idea was established in several political contexts and fora that the Holocaust could be this truly European history, serving several purposes. One was that it could legitimize a fight against racism, antisemitism, and

xenophobia by using the genocide as a negative example of uncontrolled racism. The EU could stand out as a guarantee against the perpetration of new Holocaust-like atrocities, and those denying or trivializing the Holocaust could be situated outside the realm of European history. The latter idea indicates another useful aspect of the European Holocaust engagement. The Nazi genocide could provide the EU with a founding history, demonstrating that the integration was based on an idealistic ambition to create a tolerant and peaceful Europe, and not to pragmatically coordinate coal and steel production. Consequently, by launching the Living History campaign, Göran Persson demonstrated considerable political skill by situating Sweden, a former bystander nation as regards both the Holocaust and Europe, in the forefront of this cultural integration (Karlsson 2010, 38–55; Karlsson 2012, 427–40).

## The Holocaust – A Swedish History

When historical phenomena such as the Holocaust enter into any national grand narrative, they become “nationalized,” which means that they certainly change this grand narrative but simultaneously are changed by the same narrative. In scholarly discourse, much has been written about the Americanization of the Holocaust, when American values, in particular those of the Hollywood film industry, take possession of the Holocaust narrative (Rosenfeld 119-50; Flanzbaum). Obviously, the Swedish Holocaust narrative also got its particular national features.

In the first edition of *...tell ye your children...* from 1997, the Swedish involvement in the Holocaust was restricted to two aspects. The major one, caught under the headline “Sweden resists” and underlined by a photo, concerns the diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and his bureaucratic operations to rescue Jews in Budapest in 1944 (Bruchfeld and Levine 1998, 69). This text relates well to the traditional national grand narrative told everywhere in Europe since the end of the war: the narrative of partisan Resistance to Nazism. The other sentence is a quote from a representative of a Swedish civil authority, moreover the brother of the above-mentioned war-time Prime Minister, who already before the war admitted that Sweden had not been very generous in its reception of Jewish refugees (Bruchfeld and Levine 1998, 75).

In the new edition of the booklet from 2009, the Swedish participation in the Holocaust history covers twenty full pages. Raoul Wallenberg’s good deeds are still in focus, but the main difference is that a series of negative and critical dimensions involving Sweden have been added: the development of an institute of racial biology and the passing of laws in accordance to ideas of eugenics; the attraction of Nazi ideas on many Swedes, often related to the fear of Communism; the unwillingness to let Jewish refugees immigrate to Sweden; the continuation of “business as usual” with Nazi Germany in the war era; and the participation of young Swedes in the Waffen-SS (Bruchfeld and Levine 2009, 51-70).

In Sweden, several large studies with a genealogical perspective have been carried out recently with the purpose of analyzing interpretations, representations, and uses of Holocaust history in posterity, in Sweden and in Europe (Karlsson and Zander 2003; 2004; 2006). Nevertheless, the inventory above corresponds well to the topics of the veritable explosion of Holocaust-related research carried out by Swedish historians during the last two decades. In one way, compared to traditional Swedish history scholarship, a revolution has taken place. In another way, all has in fact remained the same since Swedish historians with few exceptions only deal with Swedish history, normally in the Swedish language. The result has been a strong focus on Sweden and the Holocaust and a scholarship in which Raoul Wallenberg is still the absolute focus. However, he has also met competition from histories in which the darker sides of Sweden's engagement in the Holocaust have been demonstrated.

## Competitions, Trivializations, Lessons

Since the late 1990s, Holocaust themes have been conspicuous in Sweden, not only in scholarly life but also in the political and cultural spheres and in mass media. 2012 was dedicated as a Raoul Wallenberg remembrance year, with several official manifestations of his heroic deeds both nationally and internationally. On 27 January, the day of the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp, ceremonies are organized all over Sweden. In schools, Holocaust history is a prominent topic, and not only when students go to Auschwitz. Living History Forum constitutes a national centre with plentiful resources for educational and remembrance activities.

Three problems connected to this frequent use of Holocaust history in Sweden and elsewhere should finally be noted. The first concerns competition with Communist history and terror, a sensitive topic touched upon already in the German *Historikerstreit*. On 1 May 2004, the EU admitted eight former Communist states into the integrated Europe. Several of them, primarily engaged in the reconstruction of their national histories, were reluctant to take an active part in Holocaust history discourse. With their experiences of collaboration with the Nazis in the war era and long-term exposure to Communist terror, they have opted for widening or changing the perspectives of the European "evil of our time," which many leftist politicians with no personal experiences of real Communism in the western parts of Europe oppose. The seemingly over-bridging option to address the crimes of totalitarian regimes, including both the Holocaust and Communist terror, is not passable for many on the Western side due to the ideological connotations of the totalitarianism concept. A "Swedish" version of this dilemma appeared in 2006, when a non-socialist government added "Communist crimes against humanity" to the Holocaust as the point of departure for the work of Living History Forum. The venture caused a strong reaction among

leftist scholars, of whom almost 500 protested in a collective appeal in the biggest Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (Karlsson 2011, 210-12).

The second problem is related to the fact that the popularity and usefulness of the Holocaust as a point of reference when discussing present-day problems simultaneously may result in its trivialization. Today, the Holocaust can be used as an object of comparison for all those who will address and draw public attention to almost any alleged wrong or injustice. The Holocaust can be “sold” for various political, cultural, or commercial purposes (Cole). Fighters for minority rights can get ammunition for their sake by relating to a “similar” Holocaust history, as can activists against abortion. Sometimes the political analogies and metaphors are deeply problematic, as in the proposal to equalize the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians with the Holocaust. It goes without saying that such analogies are extremely simplistic, focusing exclusively on superficial similarities while avoiding discussing differences. In its most simple form, the comparative, metaphoric formula is: X is like the Holocaust. Needless to say, this use of history does not correspond to the idea that the Holocaust constitutes a unique or unprecedented historical phenomenon. Nevertheless, historical formulas of this kind are generously given space in mass media, which often is exactly what the practitioners of this political use of history want to achieve. A relevant question is: Where should the border line between use and misuse or abuse of Holocaust history be drawn (Karlsson 2007, 27-45)?

The question leads over to a third problem: In the hegemonic political Holocaust discourse, in Europe or in Sweden, there is a strong rhetorical focus on the lessons of the Nazi genocide. “Never again!” is the most heard political answer to the question what we can learn from Holocaust history. The answer is hardly convincing. Despite the fact that we know a lot about Holocaust history and we also are well acquainted with Balkan history, a European genocide still was perpetrated in Bosnian Srebrenica in July 1995. This is a crucial problem not only for political and military peace-keepers but also for professional historians, who seldom believe that there are instrumental lessons to be learned from history. Many historians do not believe in historical lessons whatsoever. As a crime against humanity, Holocaust history surely is a useful starting-point for a qualified discussion on this important matter. However, political formulas are seldom the best answer, but neither are scholarly historical products intended to talk for themselves. History must be used and learned from by posterity, but with knowledge and responsibility (Karlsson 2015, 29-34).

In the same vein, it must be asked what difference an information campaign such as the one pursued by Swedish Living History Forum can make. A critical answer would be that it is unreasonable or even dangerous to reduce serious societal problems of democracy, tolerance, and human rights to lack of historical information among teenagers, while a more positive answer would be that relevant knowledge of the most painful and debated borderline events in history provides

young people with a historical consciousness that connects their interpretations of the past with a readiness to take action today and to take responsibility for the future. If we rely on the latter answer, Auschwitz-Birkenau is surely a better destination for school journeys than Tivoli.

#### NOTES

1. In this article, the words antisemitism and antisemitic are spelled as single words, without a hyphen, in order to emphasize that the term means “hatred against the Jews” rather than being against speakers of Semitic languages.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
3. It is an interesting fact that the historians who first systematically dealt with the Holocaust and Sweden, not only Steven Koblik but also Paul Levine, were of North American descent. The situation was the same in France, where Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus pioneered writing about France and the Holocaust.

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