

The Sharpest Pen.

Torgny Segerstedt 1876-1945

Torgny Segerstedt, 1876-1945, was active in religious research and journalism. He was a hard-hitting liberal writer, with his main platform in the daily Gothenburg newspaper Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning (GHT), where he was editor-in-chief from 1917 to his death.

After Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, GHT became the leading Swedish newspaper dedicated to the struggle against Nazism, drawing attention to Segerstedt in Sweden as well as internationally. On the domestic Swedish political scene he became the primary opponent to the policies of concessions to Nazi Germany that came to be a sign of the Swedish coalition government.

Source: The Swedish National Encyclopedia.

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Originally, Torgny Segerstedt was supposed to become a minister in the Church of Sweden. That was what his father wanted.

Subsequently, he was groomed to do research in the history of religions at the Uppsala university, Sweden's oldest. That was what Nathan Söderblom had decided. Nathan Söderblom was a professor of the history of religions, later to become archbishop of Sweden.

Neither of these career lines materialized. One is tempted to add, "praise the Lord". Not that Segerstedt lacked qualifications for either of these professions. He would no doubt have turned out to be an excellent parish minister – if that had been the end of it. His confirmation teacher saw beyond that and imagined a clear path for Segerstedt to become a bishop. And there is no need for guesswork about his potential for an academic career. Segerstedt did, indeed, accomplish such a career. He became a university lecturer, and a professor, although at the Lund University, in southern Sweden.

But it was not in academia that he was to gain his most outstanding recognition. It was in journalism, and, some would maintain, in the field of ethics. As editor-in-chief of GHT, he

turned the newspaper into the headquarters of the spiritual rebels who, in the thirties and forties, took up a merciless battle against Hitler and his stormtroopers. Segerstedt was the undisputed commander-in-chief of these rebels, one of the few anti-Nazi voices from Sweden, and a voice that was outstanding in clarity and distinction. His reach went beyond the Swedish borders, into the neighbouring countries of Denmark and Norway, as well as to the Allies, England, France and the US. In those countries, at this time, the name of Sweden was hardly associated with courage, strength and frankness. When the glorious Swedish nation and its foreign policies were discussed in those countries, it was with a rather different tone. One can also easily imagine that the same discussion would have carried considerably less weight if Segerstedt's voice had been raised from a local parish minister's office or from a modest research desk rather than from the editorial platform of a daily newspaper such as GHT.

A wellknown opponent wrote in his obituary of Segerstedt that he had used his pen to undermine Sweden's reputation abroad. Another wellknown, less aggressive writer pointed out that, in all likelihood, it was the other way round. "The great respect and appreciation" that Segerstedt generated abroad were likely to reduce the damage to Sweden's reputation that the official policies of concessions to Germany would have caused.

But during his life there was no general agreement on this conclusion. On the contrary, there was a broad diversity of opinion on Segerstedt's positions. He was admired, no doubt, in some quarters, but he was also heartily disliked in others. He was a person who gave rise to strong opinions, pro and con. He was a center of debate. He was at the center of strong winds. And it started long before his time in Gothenburg.

In 1917, when he came to Gothenburg and GHT, he had more than a decade in academia behind him. And there had never been a dull moment around him. He had managed to create – and survive – at least a few storms of near-hurricane force. The common denomination of these storms was that he was not orthodox enough.

He was a theologian, of course, as his old friends felt he had always been, at least since his high school years in Karlstad, the province capital of Värmland, in western Sweden. (That was where he was born, in 1876, and where he grew up.) "The theologian" was exactly the nickname his high school mates had attached to him. In 1894 it became more than a nickname when he registered at the Lund university, in southern Sweden, as a student of theology and philosophy.

Nine years later he submitted his dissertation for a Ph. D. at the Uppsala university. The title of his thesis was *"On the Origin of Polytheism."* The idea was that his thesis would make him a first lecturer in the history of religions at Uppsala, under the only Swedish professor in the subject, Nathan Söderblom.

That was Nathan Söderblom's intention. But it never came to be. The conservative experts at the Uppsala University Faculty of Theology did not approve his thesis as a satisfactory

platform for a lectureship. In their view the author was not orthodox enough. Between the lines in his dissertation they had found heretical messages. He was not seen as a loyal member of the pure evangelical State Church of Sweden, so they chose to reject him. That was the start of “the first Segerstedt battle”, which was really a hard fight about academic freedom, a fight, in fact, between church and university.

Instead of a lectureship at Uppsala University, Segerstedt was appointed lecturer at the Lund university, where, in 1912, he was appointed professor of the history and philosophy of religion. This was too much for the orthodox to swallow. A new battle was unavoidable, “the second Segerstedt battle”. This conflict ended with Segerstedt’s appointment to a chair, but in Stockholm.

Four years later, he was invited to move to Gothenburg, where new struggles lay in store, “the third Segerstedt battle”. And that battle was Segerstedt’s major fight – the fight against German barbarism.

He was a pioneer in that fight. The same year as the Fuehrer assumed power, in 1933, Segerstedt, in his capacity as editor-in-chief of GHT, declared war on him.

In his “Today” column of February 3 he stated his simple thesis: “Mr. Hitler is an insult.”

Many people thought he should not have written that, among them Mr. Hitler himself. The “Reichsminister” Hermann Goering immediately sent a protest to GHT – a protest which was immediately, on February 8, published in the newspaper.

Goering declared, “as a true friend of Sweden”, that Segerstedt’s dirty statements (“schmutzige Äusserungen”) about the German chancellor endangered the friendly and cordial relationship between his own people and the Swedish people. He now wanted to know “before he took further action” whether the editorial leadership of GHT would “intervene against such statements”.

Segerstedt answered the same day, in an editorial.

He stated that, after reading Goering’s cable, he and the newspaper had first experienced serious doubt. They found it difficult to decide “whether they had been exposed to a hoax or whether the document was, indeed, to be seen as an authentic message.”

It turned out that, indeed, the document was what it seemed to be:

“Inquiries with the Telegraph Office have confirmed that there is no doubt as to its authentic origin. Inquiries in Berlin have given the same result. “

Segerstedt expressed his genuine surprise at this result.

“We have, indeed, never nurtured any exaggerated ideas about the intelligence and judgment of the present German government, but the mindset expressed in this cable falls far short of what even we had believed that any of its members would be capable of.”

He then assured Mr. Goering that “the overwhelming majority” of the Swedish people could do very well without friendship with him and the movement he represented, “a true challenge to dignity and good sense.”

He also commented on the tone that the Reichsminister had used. “It is no doubt the tone that comes naturally to him, that of a drill sergeant yelling in a military backyard. Cultivated people do not talk like that.”

The article ended with a wish and yet an assurance.

“The friendly feelings of the Swedish people toward the great German people can probably endure even the clouds that now cover the unfortunate country. We hope that it may not call for too great sacrifices to make it rise from its present humiliation. Nor should anyone accuse the German people of the curious behavior with which its temporary leaders amuse the world. We do not take these gentlemen seriously. The fact that they exercise government power in Germany, however, is a circumstance we regard with the utmost concern.”

That is the style of a cultivated person and a brilliant writer. That was also the way he would go on to talking about the German criminals and about official Sweden when its government took positions supporting Germany. He used the whole range of irony, indignation, sharpness, involvement, jokes and pathos.

In 1936, when the Swedish – but not the English – universities decided to participate in the celebration of the 550th anniversary of the University of Heidelberg, they were applauded by Segerstedt.

He was pleased to announce that the Swedish universities had not taken the restrictive position of their British sister institutions. “What they had made a point of was something as insignificant as the fact that the present government of Germany had disposed of the very foundation of all scientific research, the unconditional search for truth.”

Segerstedt reported that, at Heidelberg itself, “44 teachers have been removed, some because they were of Jewish origin, some because they had soiled themselves with liberal views.” Such things could not be tolerated by those “swarthy men, who passionately defend the purity of the blond Nordic race.” The same cleansing then took place at other German institutions of higher education. “The spirit has then turned very good. Servility and obscurity are back in place.” “When English academics refuse to honor these leaders, they act in the spirit of vanity that intellectuals have always displayed. It is this spirit that has

brought the Western world such bad fortunes as freedom of thought and speech, and which has fought such powers of life and progress as torture and violence.”

“It is,” he concluded, “with great satisfaction that we note that our Swedish universities are not as narrow-minded as their British colleagues.”

Satisfaction was also what he and all other “reasonable” Swedish citizens felt when they were informed, in January 1940, that their government had decided to reduce “the nuisance that is labeled freedom of the press.” If a writer repeatedly “comes close to the truth”, this will of course generate offence. “Under the present conditions, the truth is not respectable. Nobody would dream of presenting the truth totally in the nude. And it would not help to dress her up in too many clothes. The only discreet way is to look elsewhere and go on as if nothing had happened.”

A “Today” column in August the same year brought up the issue of Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegian major who had become a symbol of treason. The Quisling name had, linguistically, branched out into both nouns and verbs. There were, according to Segerstedt, big and small quislings, and their business was quisling. He characterized the development as a rather interesting linguistic phenomenon and as a feature of the history of ideas quite illustrative of the time that had seen its creation. “So Vidkun Quisling has not lived in vain.”¹

On August 24, 1944, Segerstedt expressed his sympathy for Mr. Hitler, “the great statesman and military leader”, who had not met an equal opponent. Instead he had had to accept lower-level people like Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin, a drunkard, a gangster and a gruesome bolshevist. Still, to comfort the Austrian vice corporal, they had proven to be, if not worthy of him, at least not totally incapable. The Russians had at least made some progress, and the British and Americans had not given up completely. The extraordinary military genius appeared to have taken a short nap, just like Homer, added Segerstedt.

That is what it could sound like when he used mockery as a weapon to attack the German bandit chief. And that was a frequent approach – but he could also attack head on. Then the great military genius was degraded into a screamer yelling at the crowds. He and his adherents were “a bunch of criminals”, pure psychos with their power derived from mortuaries and a doctrine that could not be characterized as anything but the worst gibberish.

But whichever style he adopted, subtle mockery or head-on attack, Segerstedts writing was always based on the same unshakable conviction, that Mr. Hitler was an insult. He saw it, however, as a fortunately passing insult. Even in that respect Segerstedt was quite certain.

¹ A famous cartoon features Vidkun Quisling being stopped by the guards when walking up the steps to the German Foreign Office, when he was stopped by a guard. Mr. Quisling was affronted, saying, “But I am Quisling”, to which the guard responded: “All right, and what is your name.”

“Spring always returns” is a quote from the time when the five–year-long winter was at its darkest. Sooner or later the vice corporal would have to give up.

Segerstedt himself would not live to experience that moment. In December 1944 he was struck by an illness from which he would not recover. He died on Easter Eve the following year, one month before his newspaper was able to announce Germany’s capitulation.

Segerstedt’s life was a constant battle, a battle against dogmatism and oppression, for “the freedom to think and to openly defend one’s thoughts.” The theologian in him could have expressed it as the one thing absolutely necessary. As he declared , “This freedom transcends everything. Man can dispense with anything, but not this.”

This fight would later be picked up by another bold journalist who shared his name, his daughter Ingrid. She had made herself a name not only in journalism but also in politics – for many years she represented the Gothenburg members of the Liberal party in the Swedish parliament. She was also heavily involved in peace and refugee causes, as president of the Swedish UN Association and in the International Women’s Association. She was an indefatigable fighter for right and humanity, and as such she also had her fair share of bullying drill sergeants to deal with.

We are reminded of this fight by the monument that the City of Gothenburg erected in Segerstedt’s memory on the 10th anniversary of his death. The monument stands in front of the main building of the University of Gothenburg, with a quotation from of Segerstedt’s own writing:

“Free birds plough their way through space. Many of them may not reach their distant goal. No matter. They die free.”

Text: Anders Franck

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