

OLOF PALME--IN MEMORIAM

Can A Prime Minister Fight For Peace? *

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I had the privilege of knowing Olof Palme, not well, but sufficiently to discuss current politics with him and to get an impression of his complex, rich, at times brilliant personality. As a matter of fact, we were "student politicians" together; he was President of the Swedish National Union of Students, and I was Vice President for International Affairs of the Norwegian National Union of Students 1950-51. The summer of 1950 the schism in the student movement had become rather clear, with the meeting of the International Union of Students in Praha featuring students from Eastern Europe and what today is called the Third World shouting in unison Stalin, Stalin; and the students from North America and Western Europe feeling rather alienated, to put it mildly.

The reaction was quick: in December 1950 the Western national unions of students founded their own organization, COSEC (for coordinating secretariat) and the president of that conference in Stockholm was Olof Palme. I was secretary. There is even a photo from one of those sessions, with the two of us together with a beautiful Swedish girl up in front--if my memory is not too wrong I can be seen looking at the girl, and the girl looking at Olof Palme. Such is life.

Later on it turns out that COSEC was supported by CIA as a part of that organization's fight against communism, and it probably reflects negatively both on Olof Palme and myself that we were not quick enough to discover this although one might say that it reflects even more negatively on those who continued working in the service

of the CIA, knowingly or not, as "student politicians" for years and years thereafter. Not to mention on that anomaly, CIA, itself.

I remember Olof Palme later, inviting me to the family apartment at Ostermalm, in Stockholm, close to Karlaplan--a well-to-do family, but not that fantastically opulent as it has been portrayed later. Brilliant, witty, well informed, active--what impressed me most was the tremendous file he had on everything in his room, and most particularly on the third point of view, neither favoring the Soviet, nor the U.S. position, critical of both, attached, very much linked to basic human values. Plague on both your houses.

And I have met him as the right, or maybe left, hand of Tage Erlander, then after he became Prime Minister, for instance at meetings in Germany and in the Netherlands, the latter as late as June 1983. Apart from political discussions there is one little personal anecdote that tells something of Olof Palme. Jogging early morning in Stockholm a foreign TV team wanted to shoot some film of the Prime Minister exercising. So they did, and Palme started getting a little bit tired, and even slightly worried that he was not in his best shape. However, the reason soon became clear: the TV reporters wanted some distance between the car and the jogging Prime Minister and sped up to put some additional yards between the two. Palme wanted to keep close to the camera assuming that this was in their interest---ambitious, hard working, up in front as always!

But all of this is chit-chat. There are two reflections I would like to share with you on this day when this talented man, so dedicated, so much needed is being rightly celebrated with more than one hundred thirty countries in attendance, most of them with their heads of state or heads of government, this day of his funeral in Stockholm.

My first theme is this: why this overwhelming sympathy coming from almost all corners in the world, I think even overwhelming the inhabitants of this wonderful country, the Swedes themselves? What is it that makes people shed tears for a head of government, a politician, even a "controversial" and "sharp tongued" one (to quote some of the frequently found comments upon his assassination, in the press of a country predictably somewhat hostile, the United States)?

I think it can be stated very simply: there was a feeling that in Olof Palme the world had lost something it very badly needs; a statesman who is not only operating on the world arena--they all do that, they have to and even more so as the world system becomes increasingly dense, as states become more and more interdependent. Any statesman wanting to promote the famous "national interest", however it is conceived of, would have to be active on the world arena. What was characteristic of Olof Palme was his action for in terms of "national interest", "world interest" and "human interest". His concern was not only Sweden's position in the world, and the position of the working class in Sweden--the obvious concerns of the leader of a social democratic

party serving as the Prime Minister of his country.

Equally much, some would say even more, on his mind and on his agenda were the concerns for miserable, starving, exploited small people everywhere for those deprived of their freedom in repressive countries, for development in the north-south context, for peace in the east-west context and for the environment. It is unnecessary to list the ways in which Palme devoted himself to these concerns: we all know about them. We also know perfectly well that we do not all agree when it comes to some conclusions--but that becomes so trifling relative to the loss we have suffered.

Of course, all of this would have made Palme an excellent Secretary-General of the United Nations, highly able to take up the tradition carried by his compatriot Dag Hammarskjold of independence of the super-powers, political clout not deriving from being backed by military power but simply due to superior understanding of the true interests of the world system, and ability to act accordingly. Logically this would have been the next step in his career. If it had happened there would have been a perfect compatibility between the man and the job, bringing both moral dedication and brilliance to the UN.

However, what was great about Palme was that these concerns were up in front even if he did not have that particular job as the chief-United Nations' Executive. He provided a live image of a person who combined being a Prime Minister with fighting for peace--and that, I surmise, is the reason why all these expressions of deep affection

deep gratitude are today coming in to the Swedish people, making us fellow Nordics, such as for instance the present Norwegian citizen, emphasize his Nordic belongingness more than ever, hoping that this can make us party to the glory.

Of course, there were two obvious conditions for Olof Palme to obtain this high level of compatibility between the interests of nature, human beings everywhere, his own nation, and the world as a whole.

The first condition is obvious: at some early stage in life he must have liberated himself from many of the provincialisms plaguing us humans. I see a link between his jogging in nature and his concern for environment. I see a corresponding link between his early liberation in ways of thinking, from those prominent in the district he lived and the class into which he was born, to more all-embracing identities. And then, as he started traveling first mentally through enormous amounts of reading and then in person, with ever-widening and broadening of its concerns and identities through the world as a whole. Much of this must have taken a negative form: a reaction to abuse of power, to exploitative structures wherever he saw them--and he saw many of them not in his own home country, but as a student in the United States, hitch-hiking, appalled by the abject poverty in the midst of wealth.

Second, he was of course greatly helped by the fact that Sweden is a non-aligned country. The Swedish government has not signed a contract with the U.S. government asking the U.S. government to bail

them out in case of attack from internal or external enemies in return for Sweden participating in the alliance of nations appointing the U.S. the "leader of the free world". Of course, there are some people in Sweden who might prefer this arrangement, some of them in very powerful positions even if numerically they may be weak. They may argue non-alignment, but leaning to the west, keeping the option of the contract just mentioned being entered into open. And then there are others who are more outspoken, more western in their orientation, legitimizing this precisely the opposite way, by arguing non-alignment. Palme was perhaps no stranger to these two positions, but mainly in favor of non-alignment and acting for non-alignment.

And that gave him the political freedom that corresponded to the psychological freedom just mentioned. Even as a top politician he was free to act according to his conviction, thereby strengthening those convictions. His act in favor of that unfortunate people, so mistreated by a world history, the Vietnamese, will stand as a landmark in history, not because it was so extraordinary to stand up in favor of a little people that had been trampled upon by the Chinese, the Japanese, the French and now by the Americans, but because his act carried conviction, being unexpected from those quarters. The commentary upon his death in the U.S. press shows very clearly that he has not yet been forgiven.

However, it was in the field of block-transcending action that he became best known, symbolized by the title of "Independent Disarma-

ment Commission" he headed, the Palme Commission. I think it suffers from an ideology that became very prominent after the First World War, "disarmamentism" and that Palme might have made the whole approach more credible by turning some of the search-light not only on the super-powers but also on his own country. But leaving such matters aside what remains is much more important. Basic in this connection is a map of the world shared by perhaps most Europeans, but by very few people in the super-powers themselves: a map of the world where both super-powers are seen in a relatively dim light, the struggle between them being one of mutual jealousies, jockeying for power and not a struggle between right and wrong, not even between right and left. Rather, the arms race is seen as a disease of the system, something for which a cure has to be found. And this disease then spreads all over the world body, including the Swedish waters. A Soviet submarine in those waters is seen, of course, as totally against international law, as a Soviet insult meriting strong protests. But when it comes to the underlying causes Palme would be quick to point out that this act can not be isolated to the Soviet-Swedish system alone and lead to an escalation in that relationship; it must be seen as an outcome of the generally bad state of affairs in east-west relations. In short, system thinking, thinking in terms of the world as a whole rather than in terms of narrow national interests!

In doing so Palme may be accused of having underestimated the Soviet threat, and that line of thought will be pursued in the future. I am not in a position to judge in those matters since my own inclination in almost all such cases would be in favor of both-and positions.

What I noticed, however, is that Palme is today being greeted as a spokesman for that other view, and I dare say a more advanced view on world affairs--a view which by being pronounced and held by people in high quarters may become increasingly true.

And that leads me to the second reflection. It is a very short one, and a very sad one: the gruesome asymmetry between what it takes to build a person like Palme, not only as a person, but with that particular status, and how little it takes to eliminate him. A lifetime of endless energy and devotion on the one hand, where his parents, his friends, his classmates, his fellow students, his fellow party members, all of those people in Sweden and abroad have contributed to building Olof Palme through myriads of acts, positive and negative. And then, on the other hand, the fraction of a second needed to cut the life line of this person, so valuable to Sweden, to the Nordic countries, to the world.

Imagine if it were the other way around! Imagine that one could build a person like that in a split second and that it would take sixty years to "eliminate" a person from the face of the earth! Well, in that case we would live in a somewhat better world. Of course, there are flashes of good deeds that connect very quickly just as the misdeeds have a tendency to spread with considerable speed. But that is not what I am talking about: I am talking about the accumulation of experience, insight, clout, all of this that it takes to project an Olof Palme unto the world arena so as to have an impact.

So, today we are grateful. We shall not waste too much time saying the obvious, lamenting what has happened. Rather, let us focus on the example Olof Palme has set for the statesmen of the world. Of course, he came out of the social democratic tradition, both democratic and social in his orientation. Neither a democratic nor a social orientation can stop at the border of a country--Palme was not alone in seeing this, he belonged to that famous triad with which we have been blessed in recent years, the other corners being Willy Brandt and Bruno Kreisky--all three them at times Prime Ministers of their countries. We feel gratitude, and rightly so. But I would like to add to this gratitude, as a non-Swede, a deep vote of thanks to the Swedish voters: they did their job. They voted Palme into power, not only because of what he stood for on the Swedish political arena. If we could have more enlightened electorates like that around the world, particularly in some very powerful countries we would be in a considerably better position!

There are many, many people in the world with similar concerns for nature, human beings everywhere, for societies, for the world as a whole that characterized Olof Palme's faults and deeds. There are not that few people in the world who are statesmen, acting on the world arena as heads of state, heads of government, deputies, foreign ministers, ministers of defense and what not. Very few combine these two qualities. In doing so they challenge the contemporary world order. Olof Palme paid for that combination with his life. Regardless of what we sooner or later may or may not know about the cause of chain leading up to that fatal moment it is very hard to

believe that it is unrelated to this coincidence in one man between his position and his disposition. Along that cause of chain we will probably sooner or later start distributing moral blame, thus giving vent to our feeling of grief, our deep frustrations.

I am not so sure that that will help very much. Rather, I am sure of one thing: let us have not only one more Palme, but two, three---: let one hundred Palmes grow!

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