



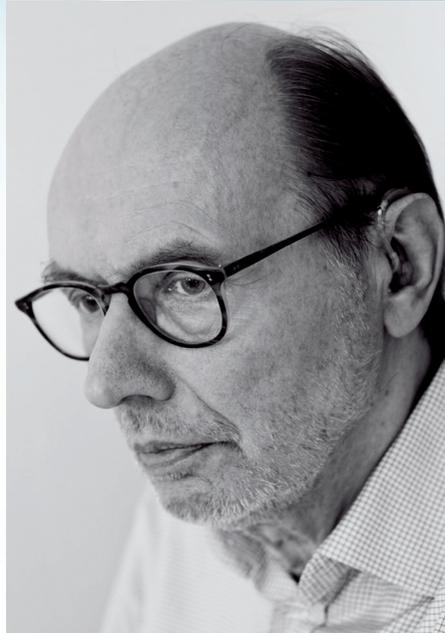
**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**



Bar-Ilan
University

In Memoriam: Per Ahlmark

Manfred Gerstenfeld



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 151

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In Memoriam: Per Ahlmark

Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Per Ahlmark (January 15, 1939-June 8, 2018), a poet and essayist, was former Deputy Prime Minister of Sweden, former President of the Swedish Liberal Party, and founder of the Swedish Committee against anti-Semitism. He was one of the greatest friends of Israel in years when very few European leaders – let alone Scandinavian ones – were willing to identify with the country.

This Swedish politician and writer was a member of the Swedish Parliament from 1967-1978 on behalf of the Liberal's Peoples Party. He led the party from 1975-1978. Ahlmark was the Swedish Minister of Labor and Deputy Prime Minister from 1976 to 1978.

In 2004, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) instituted the Jan Karski Award in memory of this exceptionally brave Polish resistance fighter. The first recipient of this award was Ahlmark. When presenting the award, the Executive Director of the AJC, David Harris, said: “No one I know comes closer to embodying the spirit, the courage, and the commitment of Jan Karski than our honoree today.”

Harris added that Ahlmark had “devoted his life, his every waking moment to the very same values that defined Jan Karski.” He mentioned on that occasion that Ahlmark had visited Israel 70 times. When Israel was assaulted by missile attacks from Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the Gulf

Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld is a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center and a former chairman of the Steering Committee of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He specializes in Israeli-Western European relations, anti-Semitism, and anti-Zionism, and is the author of *The War of a Million Cuts*.

Crisis of 1990-91, Ahlmark flew to the country and stayed for weeks. He said Israel was the only place in the world where he wanted to be.

Ahlmark was also active in the campaign for Soviet Jewry and many other pro-Israeli and pro-Jewish issues. One of his functions was as co-Chair of the NGO UN Watch.

In his 2004 Swedish book – the title of which (*Det ar demokratin dumbom*) translates to “It’s Democracy, Stupid!” – Ahlmark showed that he understood how anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism were linked. He wrote: “Anti-Zionism today has become very similar to anti-Semitism. Anti-Zionists accept the right of other peoples to national feelings and defensible state. But they reject the right of the Jewish people to have its national consciousness expressed in the state of Israel and to make that state secure. Thus, they are not judging Israel with the values used to judge other countries. Such discrimination against Jews is called anti-Semitism.”

I interviewed Ahlmark in 2004 when he came to Israel to attend a conference at Yad Vashem. That interview is published here for the first time.

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Three Socialist forerunners of anti-Israelism

“A few decades ago three Socialist prime ministers initiated the major propaganda campaign which gradually led to the current anti-Israel climate in Europe. These were Olaf Palme of Sweden, Andreas Papandreu of Greece, and Bruno Kreisky of Austria.”

Per Ahlmark, a former Swedish Deputy Prime Minister and former leader of the Liberal Party, explains how the anti-Israel mood in Sweden grew: “In July 1982, the Social Democrat leader Olaf Palme, then in opposition, compared the treatment of the Palestinians in the Lebanese War to that of the Jews in the Holocaust. He put the Israelis side by side with the Nazis. This was the absolute low in relations between Israel and Sweden. A few months later Palme became Prime Minister, as his party won the elections.

“When Palme made his statement, I was in Israel and went to see Shimon Peres. He said angrily: ‘This is idiotic. I’ll bring it up in the Socialist International. Where are our gas chambers, our concentration camps? This is perverse.’ I published in Sweden what he had said.”

From Erlander to Palme

Ahlmark traces the development of his country’s attitudes toward Israel: “Sweden has been ruled by the Social Democrats for most of the past 60 years. In the first decades after the War it was pro-Israel. Tage Erlander, the historic leader of the Social Democrats, admired it. During the Six Day War, he said that he was very scared of what could happen. When

Israel won the war he felt relieved. It took, however, only half a year before people started romanticizing the Palestinians. Since then we have seen in Sweden increasing comparisons between Israelis and Nazis.

“The Yom Kippur War in 1973 brought with it increasing oil prices and fear of shortages. In 1976, Palme’s Social Democrats were defeated. The new government was formed by a coalition of the Conservative, Center and Liberal parties in which I became Deputy Prime Minister. Shortly thereafter the Security Council – of which Sweden was a member – discussed whether Arafat should be invited to the United Nations. My election platform supported Israel and opposed anti-Semitism and terrorism. I was against the invitation of Arafat unless he would denounce terrorism and accept Israel’s right to exist.

“Palme, then leader of the Social Democrat opposition, strongly supported Arafat’s invitation. The Center party didn’t care about Israel or Jewish problems and the Conservatives gave up as well. Only the Liberal party voted against the invitation and thus lost. This happened at a luncheon where our two coalition partners made it clear that they would support the previous government’s position. It was the first time that there was a public break on foreign policy in a Swedish government.”

Covering up Europe's guilt

“A new anti-Israeli peak was reached during the Lebanese War in 1982. It released a number of barely hidden anti-Semitic feelings. Michael Melchior, then Chief Rabbi of Norway, took the initiative for an international hearing in Oslo against anti-Semitism. Its Chairman was Elie Wiesel. The attendants warned that a new anti-Semitism was developing in Europe. There, the Norwegian psychiatrist, Professor Leo Ettinger, an Auschwitz survivor, said that the way the Norwegian media had written about the Lebanese War indicated a wish to cover up for European guilt.

“After Palme compared Israel to the Nazis, we organized a petition signed by many people demanding he apologize for his anti-Semitic remarks. The Prime Minister at the time, Thorbjorn Falldin, didn’t care much about the matter. He was the leader of the Center party, the former Agrarian party, and was not very interested in foreign policy or Israel.

He, however, never made statements resembling Palme's. Our coalition partners tried to be even-handed, a rather foolish attitude considering the nature of the conflict.

“Over the decades the Social Democratic party's attitude toward Israel has become increasingly worse. Many of its parliamentarians claim that Israel is a brutal colonizer. Israel still has friends in the party. These however feel oppressed and are not active on Israeli issues. Palme already blocked the career opportunities of the pro-Israelis.”

Palme: A friend of dictators

“Palme's attitude became worse after he met Arafat in Algiers in 1974. He had not read the PLO program which proclaimed Israel's destruction and said: ‘my feeling is that this man wants peace.’ Nor did Palme comment about the PLO's murder of the Jewish athletes at Munich.

“Sweden's attitude toward Israel would have worsened anyhow, in line with the changed European Union position on the Middle East. Palme, however, anticipated this process very early and aggressively and turned anti-Israelism into part of his political platform. He always praised Arab countries when visiting them. Palme also embraced Castro and was frequently positive toward dictatorships.

“Palme radically changed a number of basic foreign policies of Sweden. He had been a strong critic of the United States in Vietnam, of the Soviets in Czechoslovakia, and of Pinochet in Chile. This created his false image as an adversary of dictatorships. Palme was, however, friendly with several dictators and there were many tyrannies he did not criticize. He told Swedes not to censure the Soviet Union and developed the country's neutral foreign policy. Palme was a very divisive figure in the democratic world.”

Palme's influence still major

When asked how Palme rhymed this with Socialism, Ahlmark replies: “He was a typical opportunist. Many in the party distrusted him as he came from an upper-class family. He thus wanted to appear more Socialist than the real ones.”

Ahlmark mentions that Palme's impact lasts until today. "In 2003, many European Socialists were in favor of the war in Iraq when it started. British Prime Minister Tony Blair is the most prominent one. I am not sure, however, that there is one significant figure in the Swedish Social Democratic party who supports it.

"Goran Persson, the current Swedish Prime Minister and Social Democrat leader, tried to be moderate in his criticism of the United States. He discovered that this is impossible and has thus accepted the wave of anti-Americanism in his party. In the Gulf War in 1991, still a few Social Democrats came out in its favor. The Iraqi conquest of Kuwait was in breach of everything they believed in."

Persson: A more supportive policy

"The Social Democrats were defeated in 1990 again and were in opposition until 1993. The next Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, was a successful Conservative party leader, a reliable anti-Communist with a good knowledge of foreign policy. He had opposed Palme's flirtation with the Communists but didn't understand Jewish issues and never condemned anti-Semitism.

"When Goran Persson became Prime Minister, he told me that he wanted to return to a policy more supportive of Israel. On one of his first official visits, he came to Israel in order to change the atmosphere between the two countries. He started to make positive remarks about Israel and then took the initiative for the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, which convened in January 2000. This was a very positive step. This Conference was successful, and the Stockholm Declaration condemning the trivialization of the Holocaust was an important statement.

"Persson's party didn't follow his lead in a more positive attitude toward Israel. He also to a certain extent destroyed his image when he was President of the EU a year later. When the racist forces expressed their blatant anti-Semitism at the United Nations Anti-Racism Conference in Durban in 2001, Persson did not react. He remained silent when the Muslim states not only trivialized the Holocaust but also inverted it, accusing Jews and Israelis of causing a new one."

The wrong people in key positions

Ahlmark adds: “As far as Swedish-Israeli relations are concerned, often the wrong people are in key positions. This goes far beyond Palme. In 2002, when the biased condemnations of the United Nations Human Rights Commission against Israel reached their extreme, the Swedish ambassador at the UN in Geneva was Johan Molander. At a time when already a third of all the Commission’s resolutions condemned Israel, he asked for more condemnations. Molander was also very active in removing the United States from membership of that Commission.”

Ahlmark sits on the board of UN Watch, a body founded in 1991 by Morris Abrams, a leader of the American Jewish Committee. He had been Reagan’s human rights ambassador and was very upset by the UN’s discrimination against Israel. Once Molander was invited for a lunch with the board of UN Watch, whereafter all participants said that they had never met such an arrogant ambassador from a democratic country.

Persson’s lack of courage

Ahlmark thinks that Persson, if he could, would make positive statements about Israel. “He doesn’t because he leads an anti-Israeli party and lacks courage. He is a broken man who might have resigned already were it not that his expected successor, foreign minister Anna Lindh, was murdered.

“While Sweden has a pro-Israel prime minister in Persson, it had in Anna Lindh probably the most anti-Israeli foreign minister ever. She belonged to the 1968 generation, which tends to be very anti-Israeli. In meetings of EU foreign ministers, she often wanted stronger condemnations of Israel than the already negative consensus.

“While Lindh had a good understanding of the Kosovo problem for instance, she did not comprehend that terrorism is so ugly that all democrats, including the Swedish Social Democrats, should fight against it. She never understood that Israel is fighting for its survival and cannot afford to lose any war. Such a defeat would mean its end.”

Two political murders

Ahlmark points out that Sweden has had to deal with the murder of two politicians in the last 20 years, and that the Swedish police have been incompetent in both cases. “Palme was murdered in February 1986. He had escaped his bodyguards, not wanting them constantly around him. There had not been a political assassination in Sweden since democracy began more than 100 years ago. Thus he didn’t think he was taking a risk.”

Ahlmark says that Sweden is unable to learn from its own experiences. “Anna Lindh had no police protection despite her stance in favor of Sweden joining the Euro monetary zone, on which there was a referendum four days after her murder. The day before the referendum, she would have been one of the main debaters in favor of joining which was the minority position.

“There are Swedes who have shown an ability to learn from what happens elsewhere. Suicide bombings and Al Qaeda’s actions have taught them lessons. Many non-Socialists, however, are still full of illusions, and not only the Social Democrats. The latter have difficulty imagining the cruelties of totalitarian regimes and their leaders. Something similar might have happened without Palme, but the movement of flirtation with totalitarians is identified with him. He jump-started it and became its prominent leader.”

A Socialist archbishop

As for Swedish foreign minister Leila Freyvalds, who came to Israel in order to criticize the Israeli government, Ahlmark remarks that she does not have the same extreme attitudes as her predecessor, Lindh. “Persson wanted a woman in the position. Freyvalds was a fairly good justice minister but has little experience in foreign policy. These disparate reasons made her a good candidate for foreign minister. Swedish prime ministers often want weak cabinet ministers, and in particular for foreign affairs. Then they can decide much of their foreign policy themselves. Freyvalds is a typical fellow traveler. If her EU colleagues would become more understanding toward Israel, she would also do so.

“Another unfortunate situation is that the Archbishop of the Lutheran Church nowadays is very anti-Israeli. K.G. Hammar was very active in the Socialist and Communist movements in 1968. One wonders whether

an Archbishop should really be an activist for Socialist causes, making enemies in many areas. He claims that Israel is to blame for the Middle East crisis and that sanctions should be taken against it.

“There is much opposition against him concerning his anti-Israeli remarks. There are, however, several other bishops who are extremely anti-Israel. One of them, who always makes negative remarks about Israel, praised the Cultural Revolution in China.”

Exaggerating bad news for Israel

“In the media also one finds wrong people in the right places. There is a tendency among many news reporters to exaggerate bad news for Israel and mitigate bad news for the Palestinians. The Middle East desk at the very prestigious national news agency, Teris Telegram Bureau (T.T.), is headed by Hjatir. Twenty or 25 years ago, when he was still a Communist, he was also a denier of the Holocaust. The Swedish Committee against Anti-Semitism in the 1990s asked Hjatir whether he distanced himself from his previous statements. He said: ‘No.’ He does not explicitly claim today that the Holocaust never occurred because that is impossible for someone who works for T.T.

“This person, who is relatively unknown, sits at a place where he has the power to decide what news to distribute. He can delete positive elements for Israel, as well as information on the multiple murders and corruption of the Palestinians. Many local papers take their news from T.T.; thus in a way Hjatir influences what the population reads.

“As far as the media is concerned, in general news journalists are more anti-Israeli than the leading editorial writers. One exception is the largest paper, *Aftonbladet*. This afternoon tabloid now has an anti-Israeli former priest as its editor-in-chief. She makes Israel the scapegoat and is supported in this by other editors.

“*Svenska Dagbladet*, a leading morning paper, leans toward a pro-Palestinian line on its news pages. Its editorial page, however, is balanced. As far as the other major morning paper, *Dagens Nyheter*, is concerned, I am one of its columnists so I shouldn’t comment.”

An excess of Marxist journalists

In Ahlmark's view, the recruitment system of journalists enables Marxist views to permeate society. In Sweden, there are opinion polls of journalists. In 1968, 3% of them were positive toward Communism, similar to the votes the Communist party got in the 1968 election. By 1989, the year the Soviet system collapsed, about 30% of the journalists surveyed had sympathies for Communist or Marxist ideas. Thus a major gap between public opinion and that of the media has been created.

"These people were not removed after the Soviet Union collapsed. They are being promoted normally. Sometimes they moderate their opinions a bit, but they still have sympathies for radical causes. This is the main explanation of why Swedish public opinion has evolved in leftist directions.

"Thus it didn't matter much when in Camp David II, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak made fargoing concessions to cede the West Bank and Gaza and recognize a Palestinian state with a central part of Jerusalem as its capital. Arafat said no and started a war. The conclusion of reasonable people is that Arafat is not only a crook but a terrorist, and the Palestinians are to blame for the bloodshed which has followed in the last few years. Politics and the media however are not rational."

A silent minority

Ahlmark stresses that he considers it his duty to publish information on the major dangers of terrorism to Western civilization. "Even at the paper I write for, many people do not understand the risk terrorism embodies. As I feel at home in Israel, this makes me suspect for many people. It also turns me into a columnist who says things rarely mentioned by others.

"When I write columns in favor of the United States, I am an exception. Afterwards, I am often stopped in the streets, on buses, in the Underground, and people say: 'Thank you for what you wrote today.' These are ordinary people who do not publish, but are glad that somebody writes what they think. There is a sizeable silent minority, which is fairly big, but is not heard in public."

In August 2004, at an International Conference of Yad Vashem, Ahlmark spoke about anti-Semitism, anti-Americanism, and anti-Zionism. He mentioned the European rhetorical claim that Europeans do not go to war but to the negotiating tables. He defined their position as, “We do not exhaust our resources by spending hundreds of billions of euros on weapons and soldiers. The rest of the planet should learn from us how to live together without terrorizing each other.”

Ahlmark went on to say: “As a Swede, I have heard this boasting all my life. We have not been at war for two centuries; it proves that Sweden is sort of a moral superpower. Now this type of bragging has become part of the EU ideology. We are now the moral continent. In a way we are now experiencing the Swedenization of European attitudes to other regions.”

He then criticized Western Europe severely, saying it forgets that without the US army, it would not have been liberated in 1945, and without the Marshall Plan, it would not have taken off economically. He added: “Without the policy of containment under the American umbrella, the Red Army would probably have strangled the dream of freedom in East and Central Europe for maybe another century.”

Israel's democracy: A miracle

Ahlmark adds that he clearly expresses criticisms of Israel. These mainly concern two areas: the usefulness of the settlements and the establishment of a Palestinian state. He wrote the first book in Sweden in favor of a Palestinian state because he considered that Palestinian nationalism had to be satisfied. Ahlmark said that such a state could only come into being if it were democratic and lived in peace with Israel. “Democracies never go to war with each other. It is Israel's tragedy that it is the only democracy in the Middle East. Had there been many Arab democratic states, there would have been no wars.

“Despite my critical remarks on Israel, I'm still regarded as a pro-Israeli fanatic in Sweden. I consider it a miracle that Israelis have built a democracy under constant threat of annihilation. It has never happened in any other country. My criticism of Israel is however considered by many as an alibi; something that in their eyes I say in order to pretend to be balanced.”

At the Yad Vashem Conference, Ahlmark said that he was born in 1939 at the beginning of the Holocaust. He did not meet a Jew until he was 18 years old, which was still possible in Sweden in the 1940s and 1950s. When he came on his first visit to Israel, he started to understand that anti-Semites of different centuries have always aimed to destroy the center of Jewish existence.

In 1983, Ahlmark became the founder of the SKMA, the Swedish Committee against Anti-Semitism. He observes: “This body initiated Holocaust education in schools. In schools attended by many Muslim children, teaching the Holocaust is sometimes very difficult or impossible. The number of Muslims in Sweden is on the rise, and it by far exceeds the Jews among the nine million inhabitants of the country.”

Anti-Semitism: Mainly on the Left

“Anti-Semitic incidents in Sweden are partly caused by Muslims. In that community there are also individuals with sympathies for radical Middle Eastern movements. They are also almost always anti-American. The far right is small, and one could cope with them if they were the only other problem.

“The main challenge in Sweden is on the left side of the political spectrum. The former Communist party received about eleven percent support in the last election. The Social Democrats need their voting support for their minority cabinet. Another party supporting the coalition government is the Green party, which got six percent of the votes.

“The founder of the Green party, Per Gahrton, has been campaigning against Israel for at least 30 years. He was also a supporter of Ahmed Rami’s Radio Islam, a Swedish pro-Nazi radio station. Once one becomes so critical of Israel, one starts to use anti-Semitic language. Different values and norms are applied against Israel than against any other country in the world. This is discriminatory. Saying that all people have the right to have a state and a national feeling except the Jewish people is anti-Semitic. With this definition one sees that among Communists, Greens, and Social Democrats – in particular in the news organizations – one finds leftist anti-Semites and racists.”

Intimidating the Jews

“Violence against Jews is rare. On Israel’s Independence Day, we held a demonstration against anti-Semitism and for Israel. There was a counter-demonstration by Muslims who shouted threats and destroyed our banners. Several hundreds of people marched on our side. Most of them were Holocaust survivors. When they heard what the Muslims were shouting, they had associations of other times and pogroms. There were fewer demonstrators on the other side, but they were violent. The police protection was deficient.

“Nowadays, solidarity meetings for Israel are held in synagogues where there is security. We discuss whether we should hold them in a public square in the center of Stockholm, but then consider we will be disturbed. A shouting match is not the way to celebrate Israel’s independence, but if we have a cordon surrounding the synagogue we don’t reach anyone beyond the Jews.”

Ahlmark says that Swedish Jews are intimidated. “Young Jews do often not want to carry a Star of David or a kippa. Those who speak on television on behalf of Israel ask themselves whether they will be physically attacked, as happens in other European countries. If somebody wears a kippa and goes into the subway in the evening, which is basically a safe place, and finds himself in a carriage with a number of Muslims, he wonders what will they do.

“When Jews were attacked in Gothenborg, the Chairman of the Jewish community made public statements about the sort of fear they instill in Jews. Or even in those who identify with the Jewish community. A process of intimidation has thus crept into democratic Sweden.

“The primary responsibility for this situation lies with Prime Minister Persson. He speaks out against the violence but should do so in a much more energetic way. He should go to pro-Israeli meetings, criticize the police when they do not protect these enough, and say explicitly that he is shocked by what is happening.”

Manipulative media panels

Ahlmark mentions that bias manifests itself in another way as well. He is often asked by television or radio stations to take part in debates about

Israel or the Middle East. “I always inquire first whether anyone on the panel has Nazi sympathies, is a known anti-Semite, or has been an active Communist without publicly distancing himself from it. If so, I do not participate. Often the invitees are three people against me while I am alone. In such situations, they want me as an alibi. I reply then: ‘Either one-one, or two-two,’ otherwise my opponents will get the floor again and again. Actually, I have to refuse most offers.

“Others whom television or radio invite are supporters of Ahmed Rami. Radio Islam has been closed and Rami has been sent to prison a number of times, but the station still exists on the internet. I cannot be with those people in a room because that way I give them legitimization.”

With some nostalgia, Ahlmark thinks back to the days when he was leading his party into the elections of 1976. “Even when I wasn’t asked a question, I raised in meetings Israel’s right to exist in peace without terrorism. We won the elections. Today, theoretically, if I wanted to do so, I would probably be faced with protests and need major police protection.”

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