

“Fanny and Alexander” and Contemporary Swedish Antisemitism

by Norman Berdichevsky (February 2015)



Although 1983 may not seem that long ago by the calendar, the Swedish film “Fanny and Alexander” represents what might be termed Pre-Modern History in European attitudes towards Israel and the Jews. This is all the more apparent in the case of Sweden – a country traditionally known for its enlightenment, high educational standards, and tolerance during the last two centuries that has fallen since into the trash bin of “political correctness.” The country has distanced itself not only from the sentiments of Scandinavian tolerance, Western civilization, Judeo-Christian tradition, respect for women and the fundamental rights of free speech and expression but openly panders today to Islamist isolationist resistance to integration within Swedish society and refuses to call a spade a spade with regard to antisemitism.

Nevertheless, the country has been regarded for so long by so many on the American Left as the model of a classic Scandinavian social-democracy that nothing appears to have tarnished its image in spite of the many warning calls that have been sounded (see Lars Hedegaard – [“Jyllands-Posten”](#) (August 16, 2014), Denmark’s largest circulation newspaper in which the famous Muhammad cartoons first appeared).

The author, Morten Uhrskov Jensen, outlined the steady precipitous drop in the quality of education in Swedish primary schools and rise in crime over the last decade, warning that “Sweden will have to pay a very high price for its experiment with permitting excessive immigration from dysfunctional states.” In December 2010, the Jewish human rights organization, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, issued a travel advisory concerning Sweden, advising Jews to exercise “extreme caution” when visiting the southern parts of the country due to an increase in verbal and physical harassment of Jewish citizens in the city of Malmö.

“Malmö sickness,” named after Sweden’s third largest city, has become a term to represent determined efforts to make Jews feel uncomfortable and invisible and afraid to identify in any public way with their faith or in support of Israel. It is instructive to look at the

historical record to adequately appreciate how the country has exploited the Jewish community when needed. They were originally encouraged to stimulate the Swedish economy, and were invited to settle. All they needed was a capital of 2 000 riksdalers to obtain a letter of protection (skyddsbrev), a practice copied from the *schutzjude* required in many of the German duchies. The Swedish parliament actively discussed in committee whether Jews should wear a distinguishing mark when walking in the street – perhaps a distinctive red or yellow hatband. In any case these measures would only apply to the wealthy. Poor Jews were subject to deportation. A large number of restrictions were placed on Jews, including residence outside the large cities of Stockholm, Göteborg, Norrköping and Landskrona. Jews could not reside or own property in the countryside, a restriction only removed in 1854. By 1870 Jews received equality on paper with citizens' rights apart from a prohibition against them serving as cabinet ministers (statsråd). Incredibly, this remained on the books until 1951.

The reluctance of the authorities to deal with the Muslim immigrant population who are largely the perpetrators of antisemitic acts has reached new lows in the past few years. In 1950, Malmö had a Jewish population of 4000. For the past decade there has been a steady migration leaving behind no more than 550 Jews as members in the organized Jewish community and about a thousand more perhaps who are unaffiliated and invisible.

It is therefore all the more ironic to say the least that Ingmar Bergman, the most well-known Swedish cultural figure since the end of World War II produced and directed "Fanny and Alexander," which can arguably be called one of the most enduring and memorable philosemitic films of modern times. The film also highlights how many women and children, like Jews, were regarded as social outcasts without elementary rights in the Sweden of 1907-09, the years in which the scene is set at the start of Fanny and Alexander.

Bergman was Sweden's most accomplished writer and producer working in film, television, and the theatre. His work includes over sixty films and documentaries, most of which he also wrote as well as having directed 170 plays. In 1934, at the age of 16, Bergman was sent to Germany to spend a summer vacation with family friends. While there, he attended a Nazi Party rally in Weimar where he saw Hitler. He honestly described this initial encounter writing that *"For many years, I was on Hitler's side, delighted by his success and saddened by his defeats...Hitler was unbelievably charismatic. He electrified the crowd... The Nazism I had seen seemed fun and youthful"* (from his autobiography, "The Magic Lantern").

This experience must have haunted him and lingered in his mind for a long time along with his memories of the strict upbringing of his dour authoritarian father, a fundamentalist Lutheran minister. "Fanny and Alexander" is a reaction to that upbringing and his youthful folly

(repeated mindlessly today a large number of Swedish young people) in being swayed by the emotional appeal of the Nazis. It was Bergman's love and infatuation with women and children, the world of the theatre, and the importance of imagination and fantasy that create an alternative reality and the appeal of all the senses in which to luxuriate. It also impelled him to interject a central Jewish character in the film.

Fanny and Alexander in its cinematic version showed worldwide with subtitles is 188 minutes long but a much longer 512 minute version was produced for Swedish television and shown in five episodes. Swedish speaking critics who have seen both versions believe that the longer version clears up several "holes" in the plot and deepens the character portrayal.

The film is set in a large provincial Swedish town (modeled on Uppsala where Bergman grew up) in the early twentieth century (1907-09). Alexander and Fanny Ekdahl are adolescent siblings who lead an idyllic life with their very wealthy extended family. Their home is the lap of luxury which the camera recreates when it lingers on the opulent furniture, beautiful paintings and sculptures, oriental carpets, and exquisite crystal and china. The entire family is artistically inclined and own the town's main theatre.

It is managed by the matriarch, an "earth-mother," the children's paternal grandmother, Helena Ekdahl. She is life-wise and forgiving of all the failures, and foibles of her children and their unrealized ambitions and weaknesses (including the philandering ways of her younger son, Gustav Adolf). He maintains a carefree open liaison with one of the family maids, Maj, whom everyone in the family adores, even Gustav Adolf's wife, Alma. Helena can hardly object because she too has violated the commandment against adultery with the knowledge and even agreement of her deceased husband. Her lover is a Jew, Isak Jacobi, whom the children adore because he is a marvelous story teller.

Between the siblings, Alexander in particular has inherited the family's love of storytelling. The children's father, Oscar, is the theater's director and main actor who is married to Emilie, a much younger woman and his untimely death recasts him in the role of Hamlet's father – as a ghost whose forebodings are apparent to Alexander. The young boy senses that the hasty remarriage of his mother to Edvard Vergerus, the town's austere Bishop is doomed.

Her decision is not based on economic necessity but her perceived need to provide what she believes will be a more disciplined and needed upbringing for her children particularly the immature Alexander. She feels that her heretofore idyllic existence lacks an "inner meaning" and she makes the mistake of placing tentative confidence in the Bishop and his view of life and death where there is no room for art, beauty, imagination, and material well-being.

In fact he is a total fraud, as the longer version details more specifically, having had to resort to "the Jew" to borrow money and cover his extensive debts and that he is a hypocrite and a philanderer as well. He has been previously married and had two children, all of whom perished under his "care," and Alexander becomes convinced that he was directly involved. His murdered children call out to him in the very room with barred windows where he and Fanny are imprisoned.

Emilie quickly learns that Edvard is a fanatic whose ideology is a relentless religion without compassion. His actions are clearly evil, but he carries them out with clear faith in his own righteousness as do all fanatics and more than a few antisemites. He even believes his way is one of genuine concern for Alexander. "The love I feel for you and your mother and sister is not blind and sloppy," he explains, "It is strong and harsh." The Bishop is not simply a bad man, but rather a complicated person who can only see things from his deepest convictions. He has chosen his position and will hold fast to it at the cost of driving him apart from others.

His home is a sparse retreat, a hermit from the world, living a life of self-imposed modesty and frugality. The servants are ugly old frustrated women. The windows are barred and meals are the simplest without taste. He will stop at nothing to prove the superiority of his views causing him to inflict severe punishment on Alexander and forcing Emilie to disown her family. The children are kept prisoners and are only rescued thanks to the ingenuity and intervention of "Uncle Isak." The Bishop is an inveterate antisemite and yet his own greed and prejudice are the very weapons Isak uses to trick him into surrendering the children.

In order to appreciate the character of "Uncle Isak," a central figure in Fanny and Alexander, it is crucial to recall that a Jewish moneylender was the most stereotypical negative role employed by antisemitic propaganda everywhere. Bergman use such a startling character change by portraying Isak not just as a money lender but an art and antique dealer, master puppet-maker and story-teller who is in love with the family's matriarch thus contradicting all the conventional expectations about Jewish characters as grasping, greedy individuals concerned only with business. Like the Ekdahls, he belongs to the world of the theater, art, and imagination. Isak is a cabalist – devotee of the most mystical trend in Judaism. He also has a mysterious nephew, Ismael Retzinsky (played by a woman) who explains that fantasy and eroticism can become true and used to make life exciting and beautiful.

In Emilie's confession to her mother Helena at the summer home she says "*...but I thirsted for (religious) truth and felt I'd been living a lie.*" Not only is Emilie forced to leave the theater, but she completely stays away from it and all of her friends; leaving behind her creativity. Nevertheless, she is quickly brought to her senses by the Bishop's brutal mistreatment of her

children.

All the characters are rich and multi-faceted, not just Isak who play different roles through the course of their lives.. *Fanny and Alexander* ends with a quote from Johan August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*: "Everything can happen. Everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On a flimsy framework of reality, the imagination spins, weaving new patterns."

Alexander (perhaps recalling Bergman's own youth) questions the existence of God several times throughout the movie, wishing He would strike down Edvard and kill him so that the family would be liberated from the imposition of an inhumane lifestyle. The celebration near the end is almost completely pink, red and white with flowers and foliage everywhere, radiating the happiness of the family's reunification.

Fast forward to the Sweden of today. Is the current Swedish antisemitism a new factor related to a critical view of Zionism and the policies of the state of Israel? The evidence points to the contrary that traditional centuries' old antisemitic views echoing the Bishop have reasserted themselves and that Israel and Zionism are nothing more than simple covers. According to a 2005 U.S. State Department Report on Global Antisemitism, Sweden figured then in third place after Germany and Austria. In January 13, 2009, Molotov cocktails were thrown inside and outside the funeral chapel at the old Jewish cemetery in Malmö, It was the third time the chapel has been attacked in a few weeks. What has this to do with Israel?

In 2010, *The Jewish Daily Forward* reported on the current state of Jews in Sweden. Henrik Bachner, a Swedish writer and professor of history at the University of Lund, reported that members of the Swedish Parliament were present at anti-Israel rallies where the Israeli flag was burned while the flags of Hamas and Hezbollah were waved, but the greater part of the rhetoric was blatantly antisemitic—not just anti-Israel.

In a report to the *London Daily Telegraph*, 86 year old and Holocaust survivor Judith Popinski, explained that she is no longer invited to schools to tell her story of surviving the Holocaust even with the approval of the municipality. These schools have a large Muslim presence and no longer ask Holocaust survivors to tell their stories, because Muslim students treat them with open disrespect and walk out of the class.

In 2009, Malmö hosted a first-round Davis cup tennis match between Israel and Sweden. Due to "reasons of security," no spectators were allowed to enter the stadium and watch the match. Prior to the game, numerous Swedish politicians had called for it to be cancelled due to their pro-Palestinian views and the aftermath of the Gaza War. A plan to move the match from Malmö

to Stockholm failed due to logistical issues and a lack of time and the decision was made to ban all spectators because of security concerns after the city's recreational committee dominated by The Swedish Social Democratic Party and the Left Party won a vote 5-4 after a long debate. The recreational committee said it could not guarantee security for the fans to witness an Israeli team that included top ranked woman Shahar Peer. The Malmö decision came after Peer was denied a visa to play in the Dubai Tennis Championships thus placing "progressive" Sweden in the same camp as Dubai.

In the end, Israel defeated and eliminated the Swedish team by a 3-2 score. Can any sports figure from any other country claim to have been subject to such discrimination and discourtesy (since the murder of the 1972 Olympic athletes in Munich)? More than 6,000 pro-Palestinian protesters, including many ethnic Swedes disgraced themselves and their country making it the largest political demonstration over a sports event in Swedish history. Malmö was banned from hosting any further Davis Cup matches in the aftermath of the riots. The city was also fined \$25,000 by the International Tennis Federation.

In March 2012, Malmö's mayor Ilmar Reepalu again came under criticism from the Jewish community when he told a Swedish magazine that the "anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim" party [Swedish Democrats] had "infiltrated" the city's Jewish community in order to turn it against Muslims but later had to retract this statement and said that he had no basis for his remarks and that he "shouldn't have put it that way."

His remarks make anyone familiar with the history of anti-Semitism in Scandinavia cringe and testify to how low Sweden has sunk. Contrast them with the unbelievable heroism and undaunted courage of Raoul Wallenberg (January 17th was the 70th anniversary of his disappearance), who risked his life many times and managed to save thousands of Hungarian Jews from annihilation due to his authority as a Swedish diplomatic envoy in Budapest. He has been granted honorary citizenship by the United States, Israel, Canada and Hungary. The lesser known Torgyny Segerstedt, was the crusading anti-Nazi editor of *GHT, Göteborgs Handels och Sjöfartstidning* (Gothenburg Trading and Shipping Paper) who voiced fearless public criticism of Nazi antisemitism and mocked Hitler until his death in March, 1945. He refused to bow to pressure from all sides to imprison him and shut down his newspaper. Segerstedt, like Wallenberg, was honored by a Swedish postage stamp with his image.

Ingmar Bergman made Fanny and Alexander in order to make amends for the antiquated and reactionary views of the generation of his parents and grandparents as a final reckoning with the past. He could not imagine that scenes of modern contemporary Sweden would rival the 1907 world view of Bishop Edvard Vergerus. In a scene near the very end of the film, the Bishop's

ghost appears to Alexander and deals him a blow at the back of the head to remind him (just like the ghost of his Hamlet-like father) that “you can never escape me.” No, as Bergman has demonstrated, we can never totally escape or erase our past. Unfortunately, it applies as well to antisemitism in Sweden under the cover of political correctness.

Norman Berdichevsky is the author of [Modern Hebrew: The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language](#).

To comment on this article, please click [here](#).

To help New English Review continue to publish interesting and informative articles such as this one, please click [here](#).

If you enjoyed this article and want to read more by Norman Berdichevsky, click [here](#).

Norman Berdichevsky contributes regularly to The Iconoclast, our Community Blog. Click [here](#) to see all his contributions on which comments are welcome.