

STIEG LARSSON

A profile by Christopher MacLehose

Stieg Larsson died on Kristallnacht in 2004, aged 50. He had done everything that any one man could possibly have done to expose and document and turn back the resurgence of Neo-Fascism in his native Sweden. He worked day and night, sometimes in fear of his life, with a small group of political activists who founded a magazine called *Expo*. The work and the magazine go on. When he died there was a memorial service for him at which many friends were astonished to discover the scale of his achievements, the range of his friendships, of his journeys, the sheer force that had been exerted by this modest, quiet man in the fields of political and humanitarian endeavour across Europe. His magazine, which received a great many mocking and abusive messages at his dying, did not make a special issue to celebrate his life and work. Its continuing life was and is his deafening and sufficient legacy. A very sophisticated political strategist had died, but a younger and equally committed team to whom he had been a mentor took his place in the front line.

Larsson culled his allies from many walks of life. He sought out and made a friend of Mona Sahlin, the leader now of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, at a time when she was being savaged in the media. He called her out of the blue to offer her advice and he became for her what she calls "a living schoolbook ... my university." Her concerns -- housing, immigrants, xenophobia, class, honour killings, gender -- were concerns of his.

He found his way to Kurdo Baksi, the Kurdish radical leader in Stockholm, when Baksi organised a one-hour strike of all immigrant workers in the city. "The Queen and the King were not happy," he says, "about my plan for a one-day strike. So I compromised!" Larsson and Baksi worked together for ten years, for a time publishing their separate magazines under one banner.

Almost all the notable storytellers of Sweden come from the north of the country: Mikael Niemi, P.-O. Enquist, Henning Mankell, Torgny Lindgen among them. Stieg Larsson was born 400 miles north of Stockholm and grew up there in Umeå. Telling stories remains a habit in these sparse communities. (Note, the internet vouchsafes, that driving in Norrland can be dangerous, especially in winter. Moose impacts pose a significant danger.)

Even as a boy Stieg Larsson was a tireless writer -- a very early illustrated text on constellations he had been observing he signed "Dante Larsson." The drumming of his typewriter was such that he had to be moved into a basement room in the apartment building his family lived in, and when that did not quell the restlessness of the neighbours he had to move to a room in another building altogether.

He finished school and did his national service. His combat training in the army he put to use in the course of journeys in Africa during which he saw civil war in Eritrea, where he is said to have taught women soldiers how to use hand-grenades. Somewhere in Africa he caught malaria and when he returned to a job in the post office it gave him the possibility,

when he needed it, to plead exhaustion and to stay at home reading. He edited the Trotskyite magazine; he took a fervent interest in the war in Vietnam; he wrote, designed and mimeographed 30 S.F. fanzines in his twenties; he was an artist and a photographer besides being employed for 20 years as a graphic designer at the T.T. news agency in Stockholm. He befriended Maurice Bishop, the exiled premier of Grenada; he was for 30 years the Scandinavian correspondent of the British anti-Fascist magazine *Searchlight*; he lectured at Scotland Yard on the cross-European neo-Fascist networks and the way they used the internet.

But Stieg Larsson will be remembered most of all as a man of exceptional moral conviction. He used up his life fighting racial and religious intolerance. He was alert, as perhaps no one in this field had been before, to the pan-European dimension of the problem. He learned the whole extent of the Austrian and German and Dutch and Russian and French and British right wings and the ways in which they worked and communicated. He was the author of books on honour killings, on the Extreme Right in Sweden, with Anna-Lena Lodenius; on the so-called Swedish Democratic Party (which is nothing of the sort and not to be mistaken for the social democrats) with Mikael Ekman.

In the years after the war it is clear that the Swedish police were more effective in following the traces of the extremists on the left than they were in watching the emergence of the far right. The extreme right, by now disguised in suits and ties, began to blossom in the '80s, and in the '90s to become extremely dangerous. Four immigrants were murdered in the late '90s, two policemen were killed during a bank robbery, a car bombing all but claimed the lives of a journalist and his young son; a trade union leader was shot dead after exposing a Neo-Nazi colleague.

For as long as they were working closely together, sometimes writing articles under each other's by-lines, Larsson and Baksi were under no illusions about the risks they ran. Baksi says, "One time they shot in my home." Both were threatened and for a long while Larsson had to take precautions going to and from his office, had to alter all his routines and to take precautions too for Eva Gabriellson, his life-long partner. Their photographs and address were posted on the internet. An anarchist, who was similarly targeted by the extreme right, was murdered under the noses of a police surveillance team. Friends of Larsson say that he was always unafraid, but the strain of those years, especially in the late '90s, must have been severe. In one of the worst times, terror tactics were used against *Expo's* printers, windows were smashed and their employees threatened. Prompted by Baksi, all four of Sweden's main daily newspapers joined forces with *Expo* and Baksi's *SvartWitt* (Black/White) magazine and printed their articles -- naming and publishing photographs of 61 men and one woman alleged to be associated with extreme right wing organisations.

Larsson worked on and on. At the press agency by day, at *Expo* by night, until there came a time when he was free to take voluntary redundancy from T.T. He put all that he could of his payment into *Expo* and worked harder there than ever and by night began writing the crime novels that would be one part of his bequest to Sweden and the literary world. By this time Larsson had read so voraciously especially among the English-language

crime writers, had so often reviewed their work for a summer or winter round-up for the agency -- mass graves, as they were known -- that his mastery of the form came as no surprise to those friends who were sent the texts of all three novels, sometimes chapter by chapter.

John-Henri Holmberg, a publisher, says that in all the time he knew Larsson he never forgot a single detail even of a conversation, that this gift, along with his persistence, was the cornerstone of his brilliant work at *Expo*: the patient building of cases, the ability to outwit the enemy, to defeat all comers with facts and reason. He never lost his temper in debate, and in interviews was invariably calm, smiling and with a twinkle in his eye. Only making speeches in schools or at trade union meetings did the passionate, charismatic and absolutely authoritative Larsson emerge. He and his colleagues answered myriad calls for advice and help in schools plagued by young Nazis. He and Jonas Sundberg, a long-time associate, developed programmes which were planted in schools -- with a high degree of success -- to help and encourage the victims of harassment. What the whole *Expo* team did in ten years was to build a library which is the product of meticulous research -- of files, of books and journals and DVDs, White Power music, of recordings of speeches and photographs, all documenting the activities of the extreme right in Sweden, both individuals and companies. This magisterial work was put together over years, not least by the patient burrowing on the internet of Larsson and his colleagues. It is a work which *Expo* has been willing to share with any organisation which has needed their research to further the aims they share with *Expo*. Larsson himself spent days and nights exploring the net, burrowing in blogs and chatrooms and homepages, also answering all the letters, responding to all the questions he could find, maybe four or five hours at a stretch, often his feet on the desk, a cup of coffee at hand, one of his every-day ration of 60 or so cigarettes beside him.

His work goes on, as patiently as ever. In Salem, south of Stockholm, in early December there is a march of Neo-Nazis and right-wing groups, to the spot on which a young man died in 2000, murdered by anarchists. This year the left wing makes speeches and marches -- 700 of them, including Danish and German contingents -- for three hours and then are persuaded off the streets in mid-afternoon by a massive police presence, although some of them bent on violence have vanished into the woods. Much delayed by a protective ring of police, 900 Neo-Nazis then march from the railway station to their place of speech-making. The speeches are cretinous -- and recorded by *Expo*, the trundling hundreds observed by them, surprising participants noted. The whole exercise is carried out over ten damp and freezing hours, the would-be assailants picked off by the police, applauded by heavily-mittened infants at the roadside, and driven a long way off under heavy guard in buses. A small addition to the library that is now being copied by the Royal Library of Sweden as an invaluable public record.

On 9.xi.04, Larsson was going to be taking a public meeting with Kurdo Baksi to mark as they did every year the day that was Kristallnacht. On the day before, unusually, he rang to say that from the Nazi homepages he could tell that there would be a substantial turnout and wondered if it would be wise to warn the police. Baksi did not think so. On the morning of the meeting Baksi rang to check what time they would find each other and

was told that Larsson had without warning been taken ill and was gone to a hospital. Baksi took the meeting alone: "There were 60 Nazis and 40 normals, not a problem," and then he went to the hospital and Stieg was not alive any more. "Smiling in his jacket and tie. Handsome, but no cigarette," he said. "He was the brain of these questions in Sweden ... He made a good plan for himself, except to die."

* Stieg Larsson's "Millennium Trilogy" is published in Sweden by Norstedts. The first volume, called in English THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO, will be published in the U.K. in January 2008 by the MacLehose Press, an imprint of Quercus, and in the U.S. in September 2008 by Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House, Inc.