

Sigmund Skard. *Norsk utefront i USA 1940-1945*. Aschehoug. Oslo 1987. Nkr. 139.

Norwegian Americanist Sigmund Skard, writing from vivid personal experience, offers "this little book" as a first step in filling the gap in our picture of World War II Norwegian information and propaganda activities abroad. He focuses on the important role played by what he calls "the Norwegian *utefront*" in strategic cooperation between Norway's London government-in-exile and the U. S. government in North America.

These nations' urgent joint purpose was to give the American people a truthful depiction of the Norwegian war effort; to arouse U. S. citizens ("not least in the 'Norwegian' Midwest") from their entrenched isolationism; and to supply news and encouragement — via print media and short-wave radio — to the German-controlled Norwegian home front. Their collective enterprise was unprecedented, multi-faceted, and, as Skard's slender volume documents, hugely successful.

Skard himself and his psychologist wife Ase Gruda Skard had both been central figures in this adventure. They perilously emigrated with their four children in Spring 1940 after the Nazi occupation, from Trondheim and Stockholm to the Soviet Union and Japan, thence to Washington, D. C., where they made their home for five years together with Ase Skard's father, former Foreign Minister Halvdan Koht. Both Skards afterwards actively published, frequently lectured, and regularly broadcast in Norway's embattled cause; whereas the displaced Koht, officially muzzled by the London government, wrote patriotically, and loyally contributed some unsigned political essays, but gave only infrequent lectures before American academics.

Sigmund and Ase Skard, through incessant poems, articles, and speeches, emphasized that the global war "was basically less a political conflict than a struggle between two diametrically opposed philosophies of life." During their brief Swedish interim Sigmund had published "The Nordic Cultural Tradition," in which he "flayed quite openly the Nazi image of the emotional and Wagnerian 'Nordic' soul, as contrasted with the true traditions of our nations, sober minded and rational." Ase would steadily press her case in U.S. school magazines and in a biting essay on "the Quislings of various nations."

Norwegian fiction writer Sigrid Undset, who kept a cozy Brooklyn, N.Y., apartment through the entire war, similarly wrote and prolifically published sketches, articles, poems, letters, and three books delineating cultural contrasts. She was also, as Skard duly notes, "the first leader of ... a club called 'A Free Norway';" and she once unabashedly declared, "I'm writing propaganda!" Undset's mass-media outlets were diverse (*Nordisk Tidende*, *Decorah-*

*Posten, Kart og Kompass, Normannsforbundet, Lille Norge Avisen, Made-moiselle, New York Herald-Tribune, New York Times*); while her "culture" range was broad: for example, the traditional *julenek*, favorite recipes, Icelandic sagas, Norwegian folktales, literary history. A shortcoming of Skard's narrative method is that he fails even to notice these pieces or their subtle, disarming techniques, but is content, to plot Undset's American years, list titles, and relate anecdotes.

Readers already familiar with Skard's autobiographical *Trans-Atlantica* (1978) and *Solregn* (1980) and with his candid biography *Mennesket Halvdan Koht* (1982) will discover intermittent borrowings here from the former two books about the Norwegian Information Service, the Office of War Information (OWI), and American and Norwegian-American mass media. But *Norsk utefront i USA 1940-1945* woefully lacks an explicit Atlantic political context; and the partisan myth of a brave, blameless, martyred Koht (a legacy shared with Magne Skodvin and Olav Riste) weakens this chronicle.

The disaffected, multi-lingual exiled Storting President C. J. Hambro was likewise fated to pass some wartime years in the United States, where he wrote books and pamphlets, revived *Normannsforbundet*, and gave an estimated 700 ringing speeches in the service of Norway. Hambro's *I Saw It Happen in Norway* (1940) was the first book published in America about the Nazi invasion and occupation. It was widely translated. "He said nothing publicly against the London government," Skard cryptically reports. "But he did not conceal his opinions in private." What private opinions? The author does not deign to tell us.

Skard reveals that it had been Foreign Minister Koht, pausing with the Norwegian King and cabinet at Tromsø, who recognized the necessity for developing a systematic information service, an idea he shortly pursued in London; and an information council and information office were thus organized under Prime Minister Johan Nygaardsvold. Early in May 1940 Koht edited a tactical London government White Paper (published in eleven languages); and he occasionally pleaded Norway's struggle by radio to Europe and America until Trygve Lie succeeded him.

Yet whereas the author at least glancingly noticed in *Mennesket Halvdan Koht* that Koht gave "only about 43 lectures" in the U. S. A. and was "[a] guest lecturer in California in 1943," in the present volume he stints all but Koht's wartime writings. There is no examination here of follow-up American press accounts of the nationwide lectures, by Koht, Hambro, Undset, the Skards, or other notable Norwegian speakers.

*Norsk utefront i USA 1940-1945* is modestly proffered as "a first step." Not the last word. Skard's book is splendidly illustrated (4 pages); and it is

frequently enlivened by pleasant *ekte norsk* anecdote. Of the latter, here are three examples.

Sigrd Undset, whom the author reports as having been "much in demand" as a speaker, might deliver several different talks in a single day. Her speaking-out venues ranged from public schools and women's clubs to the platforms of Madison Square Garden and Carnegie Hall. Still, public lecturing was not her greatest joy. "Her English was far from perfect; and she was little inclined to accommodate herself to the interests of her auditors," Skard recalls. "I once arrived at a place where she had just spoken and asked how her lecture had gone: my informant replied that 'We understood it was about Vikings'."

When Skard's initial American career as a Norwegian specialist in the Library of Congress came to an end in 1943, he obtained the important and well-paid position of Chief Regional Specialist in the U. S. Office of War Information. "Many of the radio people in New York were not altogether secure in their Norsk, nor did they always know the nuances of the contemporary idiom. I'll never forget the morning after Mussolini had been deposed. As usual I got a copy of what our radio had broadcast the day before to Norway. There I saw that the momentous event in Italy was announced to the homeland in these words: 'Vi har den store glede a meddele våre norske lyttere at Italias forhatte diktator har sett seg nødsaget til a avtrede...'"

"The OWI produced Norwegian-language brochures, printed on India-paper; they could be released over Norway by plane. One such pamphlet had been translated from English in New York, though not flawlessly. Where ... the original stated of an American air attack that 'the Japanese planes were taken by surprise while they were warming up at their bases,' the Norwegian text had it that the Japanese 'ble grepet i uoppmerksomhet mens de varmet opp sine baser.' There were other such errors, and my Norwegian supervisor, Bjarne Braatoy, and I agreed that this brochure might sooner call forth laughter than patriotism in the home population. With scarcely any opposition he managed to have the pamphlet scrapped."

In 1945, C. J. Hambro meticulously translated and published numerous of his English-language wartime appeals in Norway. "PA tre-årsdagen," broadcast over CBS radio April 9, 1943, is one of seven inspiring *utefront* texts appended here. It soberly epitomized a civilian population's fate thus: "De virkelige helter i denne krig er de menn og kvinner hjemme som er innviklet i en tragisk og fortvilet kamp og er i overhengende fare for tortur og lemlestelse hvert øyeblikk i døgnet." Lest we forget.