

Ten Gifts

Part Two

THE SWEDISH RED CROSS WHITE BUS RESCUE OF
15,345 NAZI PRISONERS IN 1945

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The first part of this two-part essay focused on 5 survivors of the White Bus rescue organized and coordinated by Swedish Red Cross leader Count Folke Bernadotte which also led to another 15,000 prisoners being freed in the very last days of the war. The mission's logistics, staff and the lives of the 15,345 people it saved become real through the biography of five who lived to tell their stories.

Part 2 of this history explores other 'gifts' and people rescued by the White Buses. To understand the larger context of this rescue, we explore the controversial topic of Swedish 'neutrality.' This includes people who were often political figures and resistance fighters, a future leader of Norway, an activist in the International Ravensbrück Committee and others. We are indebted to their service and sacrifices and hope these biographies do them justice.



White Bus Convoy En Route to Freedom

Controversy about Swedish 'Neutrality'

"We couldn't believe it," This is what Nelly Langholm (see Gift 3 in Part 1) exclaimed as she began to understand that she was being bused to Sweden and freedom in 1945. "We had to walk to the gates. We saw the buses and there were these Swedish men in grey uniforms with red crosses on their arms. I think they told us. 'Now you will go to Sweden. Now you will be free. Can you imagine?'"^{iv}

Wasn't it remarkable that the neutral nation of Sweden had arranged this rescue directly with Heinrich Himmler, the architect and general in charge of the Nazi concentration and death camps? Alternatively, was Sweden really a 'neutral' nation during the Second World War? If so, how did it maintain this posture considering pressures from both sides in the conflict to join, support and/or endorse their cause? Evidence and historical analysis show that Sweden's high-wire act of trying to maintain a balance resulted in some morally dubious decisions and actions.

The Swedish government and population were rightly concerned about German aggression, especially after the invasions of its neighbors, Poland, Denmark and Norway. Fearing the Soviets more than the Nazis, Finland's decision to join with the Germans in 1941 created even more tension.



As part of the rescue convoys, one of the "White" Buses, DSB 215, now painted red after the war, is on display in Odense at the Danish Railway Museum in Denmark.

The equation to achieve a neutral balance included, on one side, allowing safe passage and safe harbor for Danish Jews, the heroism of Raoul Wallenberg who found ingenious ways to save over 20,000 Jews from Nazi atrocities, and turning a blind eye toward the 44,000 Norwegians who found refuge in this country. Swedes permitted Nazi freight trains safe passage through northern Sweden. In terms of trade, Sweden took a more aggressive pro-Nazi posture: "The Swedish economy was, for a number of years, almost fully integrated into the Nazis' New Order; the country supplied Germany with high-grade iron ore (30 percent of that used by the German armaments industry), as well as ball bearings, foodstuffs, wood, and many other raw materials."^{v [66]} The importance of ball bearings cannot be understated; they provide the reduced friction needed to keep motors, armaments, vehicles, and other equipment on the move. While Sweden did sell ball bearings to both the Nazis and the British, they nonetheless were aiding the Axis powers.^{vi} Allowing German banks and corporations to extend their credit lines resulted in "the delivery of vast quantities of military equipment to the Wehrmacht." There is further documentation that 13 tons of gold looted from Jews and others was stashed in Swedish banks. In addition, some assert that King Gustav V was at least partial to the German and Nazi cause: "Of particular importance to the German war effort, deliveries of Swedish iron ore were to continue unhindered, with the mines protected against Allied sabotage attempts."^{vii}

Why would Sweden allow this? One view is that it was necessary to preserve whatever could be salvaged for neutrality from a vastly superior army and nation bent on destruction of its enemies. This is indeed an understandable perspective. However, "there is no doubt that for several years Sweden put its considerable economic resources at the disposal of the Reich; but its behavior in the latter stages of the war removed much of the stigma of collaboration."^{viii} Much, but never all; maybe understand and forgive but never forget.

Additional support for this view comes from Economics Teaching Fellow at the University of Surrey Eric Golson: "In order to maintain their independence in WWII, neutrals had to make up for their relative military weakness by offering economic concessions to the belligerents. ... For small states in a world at war, however, the defense of neutrality was complex; survival was everything."^{ix}

Acknowledging this history through the lens of time, more than 55 years after the end of World War Two, Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson publicly stated that the “moral and political responsibility for what Swedish officials did – or failed to do – during the war years is something we will always be forced to carry with us.”^x Pretending to adhere to a policy of ‘non-belligerency’ does not mean that Sweden’s actions did not have consequences; they did. Just ask Nelly Langholm who endured hell of the Final Solution under Nazi regime and the joy of finding life after a White Bus ride to “neutral” Sweden.

Against this background of Sweden’s foreign policy, the war continued, atrocities occurred, and people were demonstrating humanitarian values. The following 6 gifts define these actions which put others before self.



White Buses Convoy En Route to Freedom

Gift #6: Dorothea "Mopsa" Sternheim



Born to playwright Cal Sternheim and writer Thea Sternheim on January 10, 1905, Dorothea "Mopsa" Sternheim was known as a child with "the intelligence of a 50-year-old woman."^{xi} Mopsa began her studies at the Dresden Art Academy in 1923 and was drawn into the world of set and costume design where she began an apprenticeship in 1924. Despite her struggles with depression, difficult relationships and even some documented suicide attempts, she found herself playing a significant part for the refugee aid groups in war-torn Paris. Her contribution to the anti-fascist newspapers was significant during her time in France, but her Austrian citizenship (gained upon her marriage to Rudolph von Ripper) and her eventual expatriation from the German Reich made it difficult to stay in France.

Mopsa became increasingly involved with the war and eventually joined a resistance group through the British Special Operations Executive in early 1942. In late 1943, after helping a persecuted Jewish friend flee to England, she was arrested, tortured and all her teeth were knocked out. She was transferred from prisons to concentrations camps and eventually ended up in Ravensbruck in January 1944.

Her ability to speak German allowed her to serve in a supervisory role and assist many sick in the infirmary before her resistance to the SS caused her reassignment to a work detachment, hard-labor-as-punishment. This was her circumstance in the spring of 1945 when the Swedish White Buses came to the camps; she was taken to Sweden and eventually returned to Paris with her mother at the end of the war.



She struggled to find work in post-war Europe, but eventually found herself in costume and set design once again. Only two years later, on September 11, 1954, she was stricken with cancer and died at the age of 49. Her diary entries about Ravensbrück, partly in French, have been preserved, and were published in 2004, and many works of literature have been written about her curious life over the years. A woman racked with the torments of mental illness and scarred by years of difficulties in relationships and employment, she found a way to resist the atrocities of the German Reich. Despite being imprisoned for it, she continued to help fellow prisoners to survive the hell that they all faced. Mopsa lived a difficult life, but her legacy is a gift

of bravery. Bravery to face not only the emotional trials that raged throughout her life, but the physical enemies harming her Jewish friends and fellow prisoners.

Hers was the gift of resilient resistance.

Gift #7: Trien de Haan-Zwagerman



Political action, changing times, women's rights, feminism, equality – these cultural shifts sometimes seem to happen in slow motion, one step at a time, one advocate for the moment. Believing in a cause, being passionate about an issue can lead to change ... and can have severe personal consequences. De Haan-Zwagerman lead a life that enabled social change and almost cost her life. Born in 1891, Trien de Haan grew up in poverty with her five siblings in the small village of Hauwert. Her father worked hard to provide, often barely with the help of what they could grow in the local community garden.

Trien married Bartelee Boele de Haan (1891-1967) on November 15, 1916, a political activist and member of the Social Democratic Workers. They had three daughters, one of whom died from measles at a very young age. She and her husband strongly believed in the ideals of an equalitarian society without class distinction where land, the means of production and distribution are commonly owned and regulated. These are the political and economic theories of socialism in action.

De Haan-Zwagerman's activism did not go unnoticed. She became the first women elected to political party leadership, standing for offices in both local and national elections. Her platform stressed women's equality which was firmly against the male-dominated culture of the times; she worked to change both the legal system and the economic barriers that held women down and back. Her efforts resulted in two new organizations: the NAS Women's Association and

later a center that provided information, advice and medical supplies related to birth control. When these political organizations were banned in July 1940, Trien continued to work illegally, underground, in the shadows, making and distributing false identity cards, government documents while also hiding escapees and hunted colleagues.

Unfortunately, as was so common during that period, her activism was noticed by the authorities; perhaps she was betrayed. She was picked up and imprisoned, sentenced to a term of 15 years. On July 21, 1942, she was sent to Ravensbrück where she remained until the White Bus ride to freedom on April 22, 1945. After her “arrest, Trien experience(d) horrific years in Ravensbrück concentration camp. Mentally broken but not broken, she remain(ed) faithful to her ideals after the liberation and she was politically and socially active until an old age.”^{xii}

After the war, Trien de Haan-Zwagerman tried to continue her advocacy for women, but suffered from ‘concentration camp syndrome,’ a form of post-traumatic stress common among Holocaust survivors: severe anxieties, obsessive brooding, insomnia, nightmares, depressions, psychosomatic illnesses and survivor guilt. One major ongoing commitment remained: her birth-control center’s programs as a concrete form of women’s empowerment.

Trien’s great-nephew Bart Lankester summarized this remarkable women’s life and impact by noting that “until her death in 1986 she maintained her pre-war principles: for real democracy and equal access to wealth and power; against ... political paternalism and all kinds of (state) terror. [She] encouraged all efforts for social equity, ... promoted birth regulation, marital happiness and sexual consciousness. For almost thirty years (1935-1963), she and her husband managed a local care center for birth regulation and contraception.”^{xiii} Sometimes connections in life endure even in death; age 94 when she died, Trien was cremated in Westervelt where some of her political allies also lie. Written while a prisoner in Ravensbrück, her letters and poetry describe the physical, emotional and spiritual challenges facing these women ... yet never lost hope and belief: “What you can't get away from, you must wear bravely.”^{xiv}

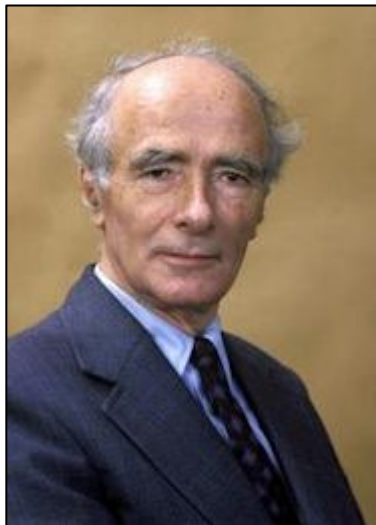
Gift #8: Trygve Bratteli



Sadly, as happens all too often, Trygve's memory faded in those waning years of life. He may have forgotten the details and even the major events of his life, a remarkable life of service, of family, friends and patriotism, but we write this section so the world will remember and celebrate. His life and legacy warrant remembering.

Bratteli might not be mentioned in all the history books, but he was and still is an integral part of liberation of many from the Holocaust through the brave White Buses rescue in Sweden. Born in early 1910 near Oslo, Norway, he was the 4th of 11 children. At the age of 16, he joined a whaling expedition to Antarctica. Trygve had limited education but carried himself with dignity. At some point shortly after returning from the whaling adventure, he unsuccessfully applied for a visa to the United States. He became a roofer for a construction company for a while. His interests in helping others earn meaningful employment and the benefits of a growing economy lead him into politics in his early 20s. Trygve would later become the 26th Prime Minister of Norway.

Trygve Bratteli married Randi Helene Larssen (1924–2002), who became a respected author and journalist. They had three children: two daughters, Tone^{xv} and Marianne, and a son, Ola Bratteli.



Marianne (born 1951) emerged as an important artist of Norwegian modernism. Her themes include family, loss and aspirations. Bratteli's son Ola (1946-2015) became a well-known and respected mathematician. He graduated with distinction from the University of Oslo in 1971 and began his doctorate in May 1974. His studies in Norway were augmented by work at New York University. While holding faculty positions at the University of Oslo and the University of Trondheim, he published over 100 professional articles and received numerous awards for his ground-breaking work on mathematical physics.

In August 1940, Bratteli authored a statement for his party exhorting his country to support, democracy, independence, freedoms of the press and speech. He stressed the impending 'humiliation' of the Norwegian people and the country under Nazi rule. Less than one month later, newspapers were shut down, his political party disbanded and Trygve was looking for work. Construction work spared him for two years in Kristiansund until June 11, 1942 when he was arrested, shipped from prison to concentration camps, ultimately ending up in Sachsenhausen. Many of these camps were for prisoners classified as 'Nacht and Nebel' - night and fog which meant that they were supposed to disappear forever without a trace. Through determination, guile and probably luck, he survived. On April 5, 1945, he was liberated from *Vaihingen an der Enz* concentration camp by the White Buses, one of 16 Norwegians rescued by

the convoy, and was reportedly “near death in a heap of bodies with only his little finger moving.”^{xvi}

His political career began shortly after liberation and continued for decades. His first term as Prime Minister ended when the country decided not to join the European Economic Community, now the European Union. Perhaps because of his experiences in the 2nd World War, Bratteli understood the importance and power of alliances in the emerging world order.

Bratteli’s autobiography entitled *Prisoner in Night and Fog* remains popular reading in Norway. He died in 1984 at age 74, having been in ill health in his last years, possibly exacerbated by his WWII traumas. Trygve Bratteli devoted his life to the pursuits of “peace and freedom, security, the right and the opportunity for human expression and for a dignified life.”^{xvii} When the “fog” had cleared in the light of day, history records his life as a gift to the people of Norway and the world.

Gift #9: Erik Viggo Ringman



Erik Ringman is 2nd from right in front row

How does one say 'Thank You' to those who risk death to save strangers in need? Does history even remember these 308 bus drivers, medical personnel (perhaps as few as 20) and support staff whose collective actions can be called heroic? They are another gift of the White Bus mission, an example of service before self.

The first team included 15 ambulances under the command of the Chief of Transportation Karl Gottfrid Björck.^{xviii} These buses and support vehicles rescued 786 female prisoners from Ravensbrück, the first of what would exceed 15,000 lives, people, souls, parents, children, brothers, sisters ... survivors. On April 24th, Lt. Gösta Hallqvist's mission departed with 706 women, hopefully on their way to safety in Denmark.

Sadly,

- possibly because of the fog of war,
- perhaps because the British wanted to close off Nazi escape routes,
- perhaps because there were Nazis on the buses as guards and escorts,
- perhaps because Nazis were using the Red Cross convoys to escape,
- perhaps because ... well, who knows?

The next day Hallqvist's column was attacked, killing many including a volunteer driver Erik Viggo Ringman; Lt. Hallquist survived a near-fatal head injury.

Was this driver just another casualty of war? Perhaps, but he is also a reminder of heroism in action. A private in the 3rd platoon, (Military ID 359-1-38), Erik Ringman (1918 – 1945) drove a Volvo Spetsnos, a light truck converted for this journey. The convoy leader, Lt. Gösta Hallquist referred to Ringman as his 'best driver.'^{xix}

In the annals of the Second World War, April 25, 1945 is often remembered for three important events. At a global level, it is the day that 46 nations met to start the creation of the United Nations. It was also when American and Soviet forces met at the river Elbe to form a united front against the Nazis. And, most relevant to this history, it was the day that approximately 355 British Royal Air Force bombers and Mustang escorts from the US 8th Army bombed (not as successfully as planned) Hitler's holiday retreat known as Berchtesgaden. It is also the day that other British planes were flying over the safe skies of Germany looking for military targets. Somehow, their flight paths intersected with the escape roads of the White Bus convoy.

Erik Ringman's last trip was on April 25th when these allied planes bombed his convoy. As part of the bombing of Wismar (a large city in northern Germany), travel on the Wismar Road was extremely dangerous. Another group of vehicles was also attacked, killing and injuring dozens. Despite being painted white with red crosses as identifiers, the buses came under attack, killing as many as 45 additional former prisoners and their rescuers. When Åke Svensson returned to Ravensbrück to load the last of 934 prisoners into 20 buses, he "saw two Red Cross vehicles in the ditch, shot to pieces."^{xx} One of these was driven by 27-year-old Private Erik Ringman. His coffin was transported home, fittingly perhaps, that the Volvo Private Ringman drove became a hearse for his remains. At his funeral, a colleague spoke for many about Ringman's legacy and gift: "This [is a] true Scandinavian ceremony, when the Swedish soldier was buried by a Norwegian officiant in a Danish church."

What has yet to be mentioned is the legacy Erik Ringman left with his family and his country. Marie Magnusson, a third-generation descendant of Erik's cousin, is striving to keep his legacy alive. Marie simply wants Erik to "be known" as well as "the others" that were on the

White Buses. Marie mentions Erik as a “caring soul,” someone who was not driving White Buses and trucks for attention or limelight, but someone who simply wanted to make a difference as opposed to being a bystander. While war is characterized by death, persecution and atrocities, this moment of Erik’s heroism shines light on human empathy and pure sacrifice.



*Photograph of Marie Magnusson and her mother Ann-Kristin Magnusson
with Caitlyn P. Traffanstedt and Roger A. Ritvo*

This is how the country mourned Erik; but death is personal and remains in memories of those who knew and loved the deceased. In many families, the stories handed down from one generation to the next become legends, perhaps enhancing events and filling in gaps. Marie Magnusson remembers how the family regarded Erik, his work, his life and sadly his death as the country also mourned at the time. To them, he was “a hard-working man, honest, cared for other people and a good friend. He had a fiancé, but never married. My grandfather was the one who was initially supposed to go with the Red Cross and (I guess they talked to each other) Erik

told my grandfather that it was better if he (Erik) went instead since he did not have any children and my grandfather had two at the time.” ^{xxi}

Service above self is a legacy that both a country and a family hold dear. What a gift!

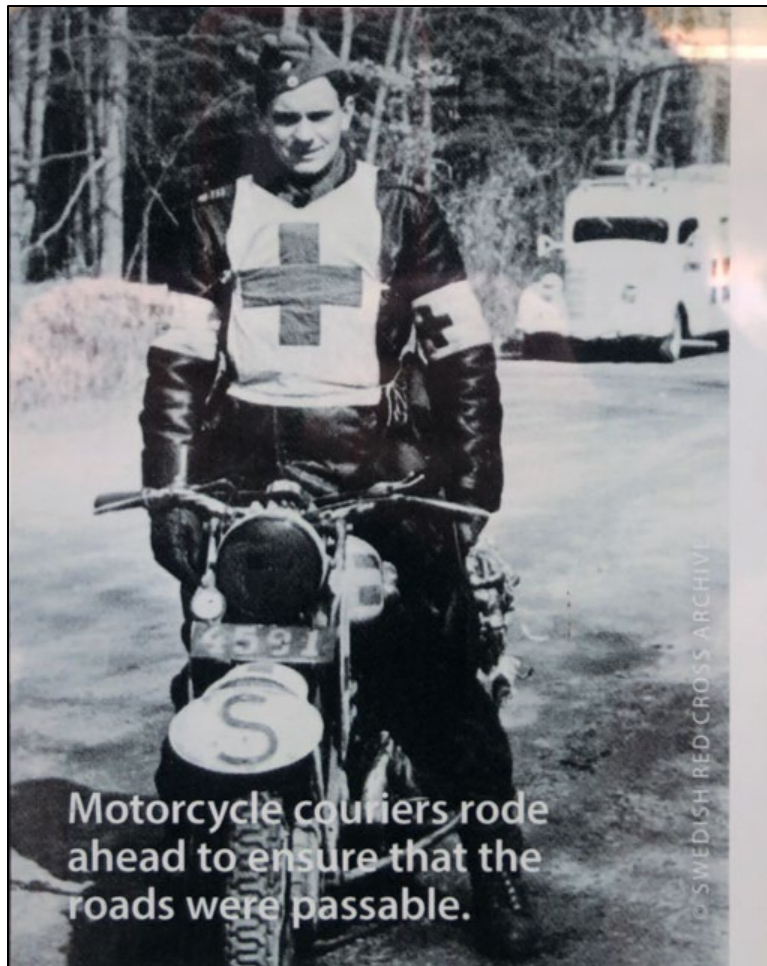


Pictures above show Private Erik Ringman's body returning home in April 1945.^{xxii}

Gift #10: The Unheralded 300

More than 300 volunteers were needed to drive and staff the White Buses into Nazi Germany as the war was closing in on all sides^{xxii}. Since Denmark and Norway were part of the war, Sweden's neutrality and non-belligerent status combined to make this almost utopian dream a reality. Just weeks before the German surrender on May 7, 1945, ordinary soldiers and civilians responded to the call for a secret mission to foray into the unknown. These acts of heroism provide a lasting example of putting others before self. The mission required a major logistical effort to coordinate 36 buses converted to mobile hospital units accompanied by 19 trucks, 14 motorcycles and cars, 7 motorcycles, a tow truck, field kitchen with food, and gasoline.





As a young citizen, Stig Svensson was a volunteer driver on one of the White Red Cross Buses (not the one in the picture). "I'll never forget what I've seen", he said in a 1992 interview.



This same sentiment comes from Sven Frykmann, a White Bus driver with vivid memories of those days, this mission and the people he met and helped. "They were all very grateful and happy. I think all of us who have had the privilege of helping these poor people in Germany have experienced such overwhelming gratitude that it is enough for the rest of our lives."^{xxiii} Driving these distances created its own miniature snapshots of the war. Axel Molin remembers that as a driver "... on our way to Schömberg the activity in the air was very high and we were overflown many times by Allied fighter planes, that did not attack us. Along the *autobahn* there were a lot of damaged cars and severely injured people. In some places where chaos reigned, we simply could not just drive past with our white bus with Red Cross markings, but had to stop and give first aid. In some cases, the damage was enormous."^{xxiv}

Conclusion

Peter Tennant served as a spy for the British Special Operations Executive in Stockholm where he developed relationships with people from all walks of life and of various loyalties during the war. From these on-the-ground perspectives, he concluded that: “the Swedish humanitarian efforts during and after the war did much to remove the dishonor the country had got during its acrobatic exercises in neutrality policy.”^{xxv} At a policy or diplomatic level, some may debate this conclusion; from a humanitarian perspective, more than 15,000 people would say:

‘Thank you for the Gift of Life’



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^{viii}

(Petropoulos, op. cit.)

^{ix}

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^{xi} ([Mopsa Sternheim - zxc.wiki](#))

^{xii} <https://triendehaan.wordpress.com/over-trien/> accessed February 11, 2022

^{xiii} <https://www.antiwarsongs.org/artista.php?id=13973> (accessed February 4, 2022).

^{xiv} <https://triendehaan.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/de-eeuw-van-trien-de-haan.pdf>
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^{xv} His daughter, Tone Bratteli Jamholt, wrote a book, *Two Miles From Europe*.

^{xvi} <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/03/18/archives/norways-new-premier-trygve-martin-bratteli.html>

^{xvii} [Trygve Bratteli - regjeringen.no](#)

^{xviii} [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generalmajor_\(Sweden\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generalmajor_(Sweden))

^{xix} Letter from Hallquist to his beloved Karin, June 15, 1945.

^{xx} Greayer, Agneta and Sonja Sjöstrand. *The Swedish Red Cross rescue action in Germany during the Second World War*. Edited by Martin Wikberg with Translation by Annika and Peter Hodgson
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^{xxiii} https://wikimili.com/en/White_Buses

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