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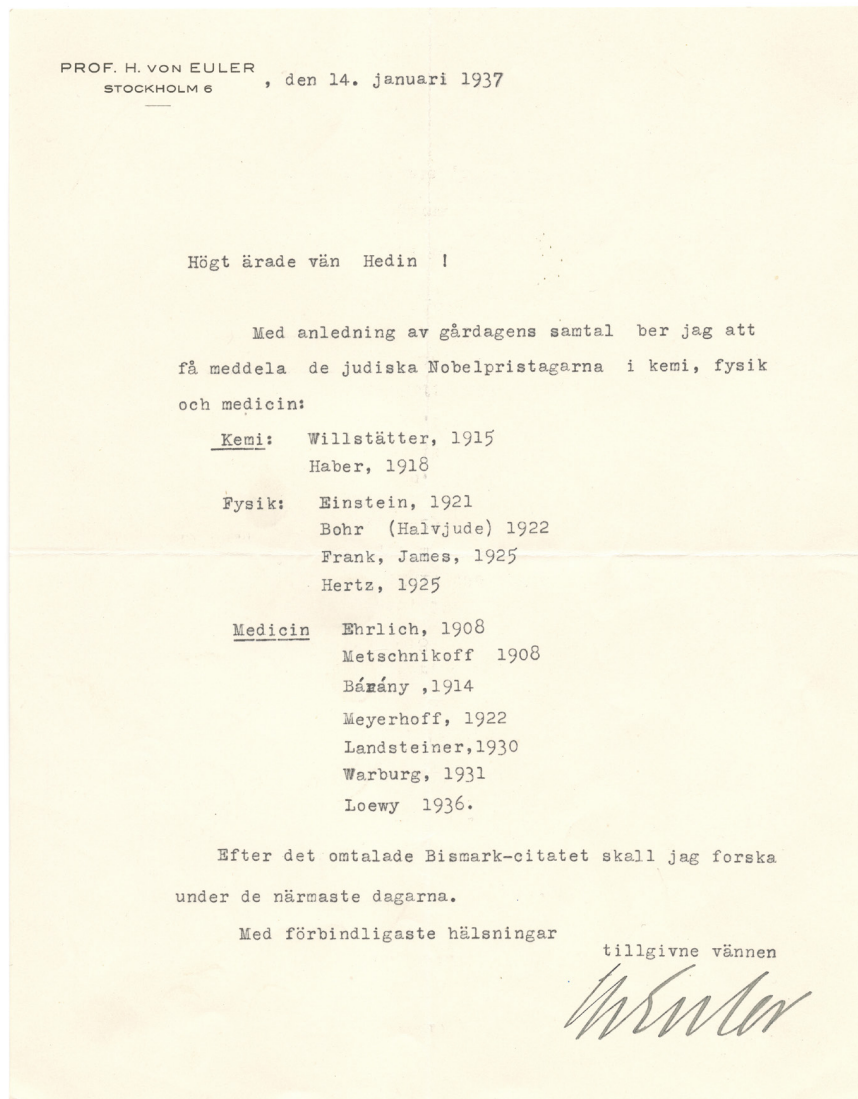
The Nobel Prize and Nazism

Sven Widmalm

Sven Hedin's archive at the Swedish National Archives includes a letter from chemist Hans von Euler-Chelpin with a list of Jewish Nobel laureates in medicine and the natural sciences. The letter is dated 14 January 1937, just over two weeks prior to Hitler's announcement of a law prohibiting Germans from accepting a Nobel Prize. This embargo was motivated by the Norwegian parliament's decision to award the 1936 Nobel Peace Prize to German pacifist and dissident Carl von Ossietzky. At the time, Hedin was working on the manuscript of *Germany and World Peace* (1937) in which he would write about the boycott of the Nobel Prize, as well as the consequences of anti-Semitic policies for German science, in a chapter with which von Euler helped. There was probably a connection between Hedin's and von Euler's interest in Jewish Nobel laureates, their work on *Germany and World Peace*, and the boycott.

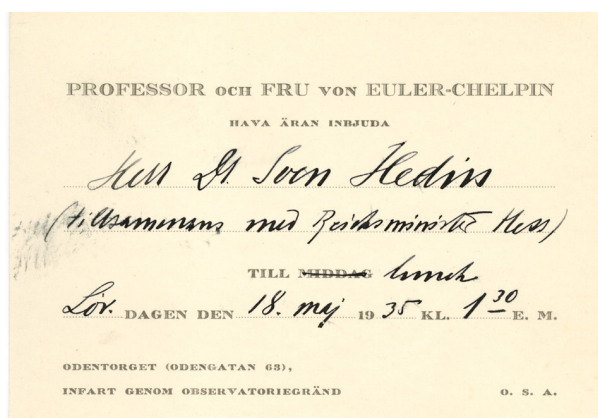
Many Swedish academics had a positive interest in the Third Reich. This does not mean they were "Nazis". On the whole, it is difficult to use this label in a Swedish context; the Swedish Nazi parties had almost no support among the electorate and practically no one in the social elite was openly a National Socialist. To the extent that established academics did enter public debate on developments in Germany, those that sympathised with Hitler's regime often advocated a "neutral" attitude, referencing the too negative image of Germany conveyed by the Swedish press.

Hedin was perhaps the best known prominent researcher outside Germany who publicly supported the Nazi regime. Von Euler kept a lower profile, but throughout almost the entire Nazi period he was active in various organisations, and privately, on behalf of the German regime. He was, for example, chairman of the so-called German colony – a Nazified umbrella organisation



LETTER REGARDING JEWISH NOBEL LAUREATES from Hans von Euler-Chelpin to Sven Hedin, 1937.

for associations for Germans in Stockholm. The boycott became particularly problematic for men of their position and attitude, because they were forced to adopt a critical position in relation to the Nazi regime that they supported in other contexts. This also applied to Fredrik Böök, who also had a mostly positive attitude to Hitler's regime. He wrote a critical article in *Svenska Dagbladet* about the boycott, a text that, according to pacifist writer Mia Leche Löfgren, "smelled of the rose-scented lashes with which he caressed his Nazi friends".



INVITATION to lunch from the von Eulers to Sven Hedin ,1935.

Böök, Hedin and von Euler-Chelpin had central positions in the Nobel system. Böök was a member of the Swedish Academy's Nobel committee; Hedin was a member of both the Swedish Academy and the Academy of Sciences; von Euler, himself a Nobel Laureate (1929), was among the most influential people on the Nobel Committee for Chemistry. The latter two also had contacts among Nazi leaders. Hedin was said to be Hitler's favourite author and had audiences with him in Berlin on a number of occasions. Von Euler had become acquainted with Hermann Göring during World War One and maintained contact with him during the Nazi period, including through his membership of the aeronautical research academy founded by Göring. That von Euler, when Rudolf Hess visited Stockholm in 1935, invited him and Hedin for lunch may perhaps not mean that the Swedes had close contacts with Hitler's deputy, but it does illustrate that they belonged to a group of leading representatives for German-Swedish cooperation that could, when necessary, mobilise contacts at the highest level of the National Socialist Party. Incidentally, Hedin declined a similar offer from von Euler during the Reich Minister for the Interior Wilhelm Frick's visit to Stockholm in November 1937 – he claimed to have received five such invitations and felt that the minister should also meet some new faces.

The press interviewed many leading Swedish researchers when the boycott was announced, and most of them condemned it. A few individuals also expressed negative views about the Norwegian Nobel committee playing "party politics" with the Nobel Prize. No one defended Hitler more than Hedin. In his opinion, the prize to Ossietzky was a pure insult, which unfortunately also had consequences for the innocent Swedes who "for 36 years, when selecting laureates, had demonstrated such objectivity, demands for fairness and a scrupulous impartiality that they had never betrayed the trust



BOTH SVEN HEDIN AND FREDRIK BÖÖK are visible among the members of the Swedish Academy who were caricatured by Ragnvald Blix for *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning* in 1937. The caption reads: “To be loyal to the Germans we should prohibit our own members from accepting the Nobel Prize.”

placed in them”. Hedín’s conclusion was that the awarding of the Peace Prize should be transferred to “Swedish men about whose impartiality and objectivity there can be no doubt, to whichever party they may belong”.

In a few cases, the prohibition on Germans accepting the Nobel Prize was welcomed. In parallel with that decision, Hitler’s founding of a major new prize intended only for Germans caused physicist Carl Wilhelm Oseen to ironically congratulate him on a decision that was entirely in the spirit of Nobel. Herbert Tingsten stated that it would be “irrational to complain about such a logical and clarificatory decision”. After all, the Nobel Prize represented ideals that directly contradicted those of the Nazis. Both Tingsten and philosopher Hans Larsson highlighted the logic in Hitler rejecting the Nobel Prize, because it could hardly be awarded to Jews in Germany any longer.

The Swedish press immediately linked the boycott to the regime’s anti-Semitism. Many Jews had already won the prize, as shown by von Euler’s list. They included Albert Einstein, a certified enemy of the state who also represented a scientific specialism that leading Nazi researchers had designated as being Jewish in nature.

If we look at von Euler’s list, Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr belonged to the leading figures in modern theoretical physics. James Frank and Gustav Hertz had made important experimental contributions to quantum physics. The Nazi and anti-Semitic faction in German physics (which was sometimes

given exactly that name and was sometimes called “Aryan physics”), under the leadership of Nobel Laureates Philipp Lenard and Johannes Stark, believed that the theory of relativity and quantum physics were Jewish inventions without practical benefit or experimental grounding. Instead, they emphasised the value of a specifically German scientific tradition that was pragmatic, experimental and utilitarian (“innovation” in today’s terminology). Stark also believed that the difference was a moral one. These dogmatic theoreticians spread their message through tenacious propaganda and, in every circumstance, promoted their own excellence; the genuinely German physicists, on the other hand, worked unselfishly to create a true image of reality.

Aryan physics was still influential when the boycott was announced (the movement was later disgraced). Philipp Lenard had just published his four-volume work, *Deutsche Physik*, in which he claimed that science is racially conditioned. He was also involved in the newly started Institute for Research of the Jewish Question in Munich, where he represented the natural sciences. In the first volume of the institute’s annual report, *Forschungen zur Judenfrage*, he published an anti-Semitic diatribe that was largely focused on the Nobel Prize. In “promoting the Jewish-internationalist spirit”, wrote Lenard, the prize had caused great damage, not least to the German universities.

One of the Swedish researchers who commented on the boycott mentioned that he and others had received enquiries from Germany regarding Jewish Nobel laureates, and also about the lineage of members of the Nobel committees. A leading newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, wrote that the questions originated from the research institute in Munich and related to an investigation, led by Lenard, on Jewish influence in the sciences. The newspaper commented on this in an editorial and concluded that the boycott was not primarily about Ossietzky, but that it was instead based on anti-Semitism.

There was a great deal of concern about the boycott within the Nobel committees – no one wanted to see the Nobel Prize being obviously politicised. Hans von Euler negotiated indirectly with the regime in Germany via the envoy in Stockholm, Victor, *Prinz zu Wied*, and warned that a boycott would only benefit Germany’s enemies, in that more Nobel prizes would probably be awarded to them and so their influence would increase. He wrote that “other nations and races” would therefore gain from the boycott, thus playing along with the regime’s anti-Semitic politics. Similar contacts were made by the Caroline Medico-Chirurgical Institute, and Böök also made a failed attempt to influence Hitler via Hermann Göring.

But despite this, in 1939 three German scientists were awarded the Nobel Prize: one in medicine and two in chemistry (the latter two were both close colleagues of von Euler). Von Euler did his best to minimise the reaction in Berlin, with no noticeable effect. Joachim von Ribbentrop did suggest that the three should receive their prizes, but only if the money was transferred

to a Swedish National Socialist organisation. This was not a realistic proposal and the result was instead a small diplomatic crisis in which Ribbentrop completely dismissed the idea that the Academy of Sciences and the Caroline Institute were independent organisations that took independent decisions. If only the Swedish government had wished to, it could of course have stopped the prizes to the Germans, according to Ribbentrop.

The institutions awarding the scientific Nobel prizes did not comply with Hitler's dictate. But it is noteworthy that, right after the outbreak of war, they decided to reward three Germans, as von Euler also pointed out. He said that the decision should be regarded as a particularly strong expression of the prizegivers' objectivity and also as proof of the excellence of German science. Hitler should perhaps have understood the value of such a recognition. But he didn't, despite von Euler's attempt to convince the regime that the boycott would damage its intentions, even in terms of racial policy.

A general theme among the Swedes who criticised the boycott of the Nobel Prize on the basis of a mostly positive view of the Hitler regime, was that the prizes were above politics. There was a hope that Hitler could be convinced that such an attitude was also beneficial for Germany because, objectively, German science was further ahead than that of other countries – an argument presented by Hedin in *Germany and World Peace*: “The Nobel prizes are international. They are available to every nation on earth. In the lists of prize-winners Germany takes the first place.” This episode thus gives an unusually clear illustration of how *political* the idea of science's unpolitical character really is.

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This essay is partly based on Sven Widmalm, “Nobelpriset och Tredje riket: Fredrik Böök, Hans von Euler och neutralitetens retorik”, in Gunnel Furuland et al. (eds.), *Spänning och nyfikenhet: Festskrift till Johan Svedjedal* (Möklinta, 2016). Swedish-German links in science and culture during the Nazi period are covered in Maria Björkman, Patrik Lundell & Sven Widmalm (eds.), *De intellektuellas förräderi? Intellektuellt utbyte mellan Sverige och Tredje riket* (Lund, 2016). Quotes are taken from Mia Leche Löfgren, *Hård tid* (Stockholm, 1946), 310; Sven Hedin, “Hedin om Hitlers Nobelbeslut: Låt svenskarna ge fredspriset”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 1 February 1937; Sven Hedin, *Germany and World Peace* (London, 1937), 254; unsigned, “Herbert Tingsten: Irrationellt att beklaga ett så logiskt beslut”, *Stockholms-Tidningen*, 31 January 1937; unsigned, “C. W. Oseen: Beslut i Nobels anda som hälsas med glädje”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 31 January 1937; Philipp Lenard, “Botschaft von Philipp Lenard”, *Forschungen zur Judenfrage* (Hamburg, 1937), 41; letter from Hans von Euler-Chelpin to Victor, *Prinz zu Wied*, 3 May 1937, Auswärtiges Amt, Politisches Archiv, 627 (Berlin).