

David Gedin: Understanding a Private Archive: The Early Twentieth Century Professionalization of Scandinavian Literary Agents, Based on the Archive of Lena I. Gedin.

Thank you for the invitation, and of course a special thanks to Corinne for this lovely opportunity to see and listen to you all.

~~As is almost always the case, my abstract doesn't exactly mirror my paper...! To quote: "How can a coherent picture be constructed from an archive marked by evident gaps?" Etc. One reason for this shortcoming is that I do not have a particular theory to use to address the problems of the gaps and the uneven representation of the literary agents in the Scandinavia during the period I discuss. But I regard this as more of a practical problem where I try as best as I can to create a picture and a narrative of the material I have got access to, while being as transparent about the shortcomings as possible.~~

~~(What I do have is a theoretical foundation for my interpretations of the material at hand. But that, of course, is something else.)~~

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To have access to a private archive, like the one from Lena I. Gedin, is, of course, a tremendous advantage and a privilege, especially when it comes to literary agents who have left few traces behind: "seen but not heard," as in Binky Urban's declaration, quoted by Laura.

But it is not without complications.

You have to impose some order on a pile of randomly collected papers, decipher sloppy signatures, and detect when undated letters were written.

Yet it is an exciting experience to read through letters that may not have been read since they first were written, and not by anyone other than the sender and recipient.

Further, a public archive is *public*, and the difference between engaging with material that many people have handled in a public setting and reading something that is uniquely yours in your own home creates an intimacy that — though this is a very un-scientific feeling — none the less, impacts your attitude and approach to the material.

I think this facilitates my goal of the research: to let the material change your way of understanding and then interpret it so that it fits in your view. That is, a sort of compromise between the material and the perception. Hopefully, the result will be something new, but still comprehensible within the framework of established facts.

What helps is that, in a private archive — at least mostly — the papers have not been sorted according to the principles of an institutional archive. There may be archives that keep everything as it was (I do not know), but there is a risk that newspaper clippings, photographs, small notes, and scraps of paper are sorted out. Objects that often represent the gaps in a tidier archive. And seeing what might have been excluded informs us about what is regarded as valuable and indicates the hierarchies in the cultural world.

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For example, compare the official archive of Erika Mann's letters Lena I. Gedin's. The former are indeed very neat but consist only of Erika Mann's copies. This means, for instance, that you do not know when she wrote on hotel stationery or — more interesting — when and for how long she used the traditional letter paper with black borders after her father's death. They also lack her handwritten signature and corrections. Handwritten regards to the Gedin-family emphasize a closeness, but even when the changes mostly are less significant, they say something about her way of writing and definitely give the messages a more personal touch.

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The excluded attached notes and papers are also either part of the letter or, as in this case, say something about the context in which it was received, as well as providing complementary information. In one letter, for example, Lena I. Gedin's pencil notes inform us where the mentioned article was published.

But last, and by no means least, the valuation of the letters — the hierarchy among the writers, which excludes the less “important” ones in the exchange — transforms the dialogue into a monologue. Only one voice gets heard, though the nature of all writing, but especially letters, is a social exchange. In the Literaturarchiv in München, unlike in Lena I. Gedin's private archive, Erika Mann's voice echoes in a void.

This is something Karin and I experienced when we published Schering's letters to Strindberg. The latter, published in an authorized edition with footnotes changed dramatically in meaning when combined with Schering's, even though the footnotes referred to or quoted Schering's letters. For example, the fact that Strindberg ignored information about changes in the translation—that is, he accepted them — and Schering's desperate pleas for economic help changes our view of both Strindberg's character and his way of working, as well as of the German edition.

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The fact that Lena I. Gedin came to handle all of the Mann family's literary rights in Scandinavia and developed not only a close relationship with Erika Mann but also, and even more so, with Katia Mann, is something her private archive reveals.

I thought I could tell you this story as an illustration of Scandinavian literary agents' strategies — but perhaps most of all, Lena I. Gedin's. For

while there are similarities to the other agents, there are also differences. One problem when it comes to providing a general view of what it was like to be a Scandinavian literary agent at the time is that there were only three of them: one in Denmark, two in Sweden.

Last year in Aix, I mentioned the story of how Lena I. Gedin moved from Stockholm to Berlin, married Georg Israel, and, as a businessperson, started an international literary agency from scratch when their children were 2 and 3 years old. She took advantage of Georg Israel's many contacts — mainly Jewish, socialists, and/or communists — in cultural Berlin. He had befriended writers like Lion Feuchtwanger, Philip Roth, and, not least, Hermann Kesten. Through Kesten, who had a job at Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, she gained an important contact in Fritz Landshoff, partner and CEO at the publishing house. They were thrilled by the idea of selling their authors to the Nordic countries, not only for the income but also for idealistic reasons.

Lena I. Gedin had a bit of a rough start; the market for Georg's favorites —mostly Jewish, socialist, and German proletarian novelists — was not that big in Scandinavia.

But after the family fled in 1938 and settled in Sweden, she worked hard to build a respected professional position in her new country. Unlike her colleagues, she was not satisfied with being a sub-agent to the great British and American firms but also wanted to become a main agent for prestigious authors. And even though she had to start anew after the immigration, she had the advantage of a vast network that the Nazis had scattered across the world.

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It was on recommendation from Fritz Landshoff, Klaus Mann wrote to her in August 1947. By that time, Lena I. Gedin had managed to build a strong position as an agent in Scandinavia, not least by being more or less the only one who still did business with the US and UK during the war.

Klaus Mann began by asking if she would be able to sell his two latest books to the Nordic countries. One was *André Gide and the Crisis of Modern Thought*, and the other was his autobiography, *The Turning Point (Der Wendepunkt: Ein Lebensbericht)*. The first was especially timely because of the rumor that André Gide, a close friend, was going to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

This was probably the reason why Klaus Mann also announced a plan to visit Sweden: he wanted to attend the celebrations. But to make some money, the idea was to give lectures, and he asked Lena I. Gedin if she could arrange some.

The Mann family was, of course, the cultural nobility of the time, with Thomas as the exalted head. Lena I. Gedin had tried to do business with them already in Germany, but all of Thomas Mann's books had been negotiated and sold, leaving no room for a new agent. She had tried to sell Heinrich Mann's *Die große Sache*, but without success. She had more luck with Erika Mann's children's book *Stoffel fliegt übers Meer*, but everything ended with the war.

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This was a new opportunity. As far as I know, not that her motivation was a cynical calculation to reach Thomas Mann, but as Bourdieusians, we know that a good player has the strategies incorporated into their thinking and feels comfortable "at home" in a position where they use them.

Lena I. Gedin wrote that she would, of course, be happy to take care of his books ~~and added that she had tried earlier to secure a contract for his novel *Der Vulkan* (1939), but in vain.~~ However, the chances of arranging lectures for that autumn were slim at such a late date.

Klaus Mann replied:

~~Ad Point Two (lectures):~~ Have you REALLY tried HONESTLY? I want to emphasize once more that I am quite an experienced old lecturer—in fact, I am not a bad one!—that I have the most thrilling things to say, and that I am not expensive. It's just that I should like to visit Stockholm and Copenhagen, and that I think lectures are always the nicest pretext for such a trip.

Lena I. Gedin managed not only to sell *The Turning Point* in the following weeks but, after using all her contacts, succeeds to arrange a some lectures.

~~Considering his lack of funds, she also secured an invitation for him to use a spare room in one of her acquaintances' homes. But that did not fly!~~

~~Klaus Mann answered~~

~~I think I should prefer to stay in a hotel in Stockholm as well—although, of course, I appreciate [the...] hospital offer. But you know how it is: I'll have to work and shall need privacy... Is the Grand Hotel [i.e. the most luxury hotel in Stockholm] much more expensive than the others? It's such a lovely place.~~

~~She booked him a room...!~~

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The next drama unfolds a week later. Klaus Mann has arrived in Copenhagen, and a telegram reached Lena I. Gedin on the morning of the 11:th of November:

*will you please be an angel and mail me some cigarettes situation
here catastrophic thanks klaus mann +*

She took care of it! Four hours later:

*BERLINGSE BOUGHT MERGENARTICLE THREEHUNDRED
CROWNS ASKED THEM PAY YOU AND ARRANGE CIGARETTES
BOOKGEDIN*

In a letter following the telegram, she wrote: “Regarding cigarettes, I understand your ‘Verzeiflung’ [förvivlan/despair].” And she told him that she had not only mailed cigarettes (which was forbidden and would probably be confiscated by the customs) but also called the editor of the newspaper to ensure that Klaus Mann would get his cigarettes one way or another.

Klaus Mann, in his forties, was charming and personal, and Lena I. Gedin was obviously affected, but she was also keen to emphasize her professional efficiency. For this was the formula for success: competence, reliability, and friendship. Not least the last; for these literary agents, personal relationships were everything. At a time when contracts were made one book at a time, loyalty were decisive elements of the work.

The visit to Stockholm was clearly a success. They went shopping together, a lunch was arranged with his new publisher and other members of Sweden’s cultural community, her two sons showed him Uppsala and its university, and, of course, he was invited to Linnégatan, Lena I. Gedin’s and her husband’s combined home and workplace. The initial contact had grown into a cooperative friendship!

A few days after his departure, a letter arrived:

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Chère Madame et Amie,

Just a word to let you know that I arrived in good old Amsterdam [...] — and, what is more important, another word to thank you for all your efficient kindness and helpfulness. “Grâce à vous” my stay in Stockholm was both enjoyable and prosperous. You have given me “a hell of a good time”. You, and your pedagogically minded husband, and your nice, intelligent boys -- you have been very good to me. MERCI MILLE FOIS. [...]

Give my best to Georg (yes, he has won another bet: I am smoking a cigarette while writing this!) and say Hello for me to the two bright young men of Uppsala.

Cordially, yours,
Klaus.

What followed was an intense correspondence over the next 16 months. Lena I. Gedin tried to sell his articles and books to the Scandinavian countries, though not with much success. But she also used the contact when another agent poached Thomas Mann’s rights in Finland — the only country left where she could do business with his books. Could Klaus help her?

Klaus Mann reported from his parents’ home in California that he had spoken to his mother Katia, who handled the affairs, and she said she had no knowledge of Lena I. Gedin or that she had previously sold Thomas Mann’s books in Finland.

Your name was quite unknown to them until I mentioned it. Now, since I told my parents what a fine person you are, they are sorry, of course, that they didn’t let you handle Dr. Faustus. It’s too late now, however, to do anything about it: the contract has been signed, ~~Laszlo has sent his check, etc.~~ But my parents would like to do business with you in the future.

Without necessarily planning it, this was, of course, the contact Lena I. Gedin had hoped for and the beginning of a profitable and enjoyable friendship for both parties.

The relationship was further secured by the forthcoming tragedy when Klaus Mann committed suicide in May 1949 in Cannes. The Gedin family, also in the south of France, had had dinner with him only three weeks earlier and were among the last friends to see him. So, Thomas and Katia came to Stockholm to talk to the family, to see if there were any special clues as to why he did it. The shared grief connected the families even closer.

From then on, Lena I. Gedin took care of all of the Mann family's business in Scandinavia. This did not mean she could relax and reap the gold and prestige from the business — far from it!

To begin with, Thomas Mann's most famous books were in the past, and a fairly long time had passed since his Nobel Prize. His new articles and books did not sell themselves! Katia Mann, who handled the business (as the wife normally did in prominent authors' marriages), did not easily accept this.

Besides, Lena I. Gedin also needed to take care of the other members of the family: Klaus's and Erika's books, and later Golo's and Monika's. And when Michael had a career as a musician, she arranged concerts for him in Sweden.

Then, Thomas Mann died suddenly in 1955. From that point on, Lena I. Gedin's work involved monitoring new editions and persuading publishers to reprint old books — neither of which was an easy task.

Every autumn, she and her husband made the trip to Switzerland, where the family resided, to have lunch first with Thomas and Katia and sometimes Erika, and after 1955, with Katia, Erika, and any of the other children present.

Katia's initially suspicious attitude toward Lena I. Gedin's capacity as an agent lessened over the years. While the latter kept a sharp eye on current editions as well as opportunities for new ones, Katia's letters became less about business and more about her and her family's life.

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Two tough businesswomen whos mutually respect for each other grow as the years passed and, in Katia's case, new tragedies occurred: Erika died in 1969, Michael in 1978. A letter from Lena I. Gedin in 1973 illustrates these two characters through its mix of controlled grief and matter-of-factness:

Liebe, Vereherte Frau Doktor,

Vielen Dank für Ihre lieben Zeilen.

Mein lieber Mann und Lebenskamerad ist ganz plötzlich am 9. Mai gestorben. Was das für ich bedeutet brauch ich Ihnen nicht zu sagen.

Ich versuche alles weiter laufen zu lassen und werde am 10. ds. in Zürich sein im Baur au Lac. Aber zusammen mit meiner Schwester.

Ich freue mich sehr Sie dann wieder zu sehen.

Alles Gute und herzlichste Grösse

Von uns allen.

Ihr sehr ergebene

Lena I. Gedin"

Dear Mrs Mann,

Thank you very much for your kind note.

My dear husband and life partner passed away quite suddenly on May 9th. I need not tell you what this means for me.

I am trying to keep everything running as usual and will be in Zürich on the 10th of this month at the Baur au Lac — though accompanied by my sister.

I look forward very much seeing you again.

All the best and warmest regards

From all of us.

Yours very sincerely,
Lena I. Gedin

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The last letter to “Liebe Freunde Gedin” from Katia Mann is dated July 14, 1975, when she thanks them for the greetings on Thomas Mann’s hundredth birthday. Five years later, she died, and Anita Naef, the family’s assistant for decades, attached a letter to the formal thank-you card:

Liebe Frau Gedin –

dieser Karte wollte ich noch etwas beifügen, da ich Sie nun doch auch schon längere Zeit kenne.

Seit Weihnachten wurde Frau Mann langsam immer dünner und schwächer und sie wollte nicht mehr leben; so ist sie am 25. April sanft eingeschlafen.

Wahrscheinlich wird Professor Golo Mann das Haus übernehmen und so können Sie bei Ihrer nächsten Reise nach Zürich hier anrufen – die Nummer bleibt dieselbe.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

Ihre
Anita Naef

Dear Mrs. Gedin,

I wanted to add a few words to this card, as I have known you for quite some time now.

Since Christmas, Frau Mann had been growing steadily thinner and weaker and no longer wished to live; she passed away peacefully on April 25th.

Professor Golo Mann will likely be taking over the house, so you can call here on your next trip to Zurich – the number remains the same.

With kind regards,

Yours,
Anita Naef

Whether Lena I. Gedin visited that autumn is unknown, but the following spring, she also died in her sleep at the age of 82, with a pile of books to read and possibly offer to publishers on her nightstand.