

The faith and actions of Greta Andrén, missionary to the Jews of Vienna, 1938-41

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.126017>

ABSTRACT • In this microhistorical study of the Swedish Mission to the Jews (Svenska Israelsmissionen) in Vienna, I explore the everyday life and work of the deaconess Greta Andrén (1909–71) during the time of the Nazi occupation of Austria. Andrén's actions are presented and related to the parts of her faith that are revealed in the sources. From this I distil a triad of meaningful categories, namely her work, the children she worked with, and God. These resulted in her sustaining an ongoing state of over-exertion during her wartime refugee work.

Introduction

In this article, I will present some findings regarding a Swedish missionary to the Jews of Vienna, the deaconess Greta Andrén (1909–71), and her everyday life and work during the Nazi occupation of Austria. According to Ulf Carmesund, who quotes a description of Andrén by herself, 'Sister Greta', as she was also known, had felt the calling to become a deaconess already at the age of twelve. She hailed from the coastal town of Marstrand, and after studying modern languages and Hebrew at Gothenburg College she entered Bräckö Deaconess Institute, where she also received training as a nurse. She writes that it was during her daily encounters with Jews at Ersta hospital in Stockholm that she began to think of the Jewish people as possible objects of missionary activity. Praying for guidance, she visited the director of the Swedish Mission to the Jews (Svenska Israelsmissionen, SIM), Birger Pernow, who himself had been praying for God to send a deaconess to his organization for some time.

Hearing this, Andrén took it as a sign. She arrived in Vienna late in 1934. She was 25 years old (Carmesund 2010: 117).

Andrén was a core member of SIM, and instrumental in founding its successor organization, the Swedish Theological Institute, in Jerusalem, where she served as matron until her retirement and death in 1971. In Vienna, she took upon herself an enormous workload, and was clearly in an influential position despite her formal subservience to the priests. She was among the last associates of SIM to leave Nazi-occupied territories in 1941, at which point the missionaries were forced out of the Third Reich.

The purpose of my research is to investigate how the sources describe the relationship between Andrén's faith and her actions. In this micro-historical article, I hope to answer the three following questions:

1. What were Greta Andrén's everyday tasks in Vienna?
2. What meaning did she find in these tasks?

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3. How did she connect her everyday work to her faith?

In answering these questions, I have chosen to work with the correspondence between the station in Vienna and SIM's headquarters in Stockholm, as well as the texts of the missionaries in the organization's journal, *Missionstidning för Israel* (Missionary Journal for Israel, MFI). In these documents I hope to uncover enough clues to piece together André's everyday world and see how she operated within it. They contain descriptions of her activities as well as both the reasons for her actions that she chose to present to the public and the thoughts and demands she made known to her superiors.

I employ a micro-historical perspective when conducting my research. This is because the topic of my research is an everyday world, and someone's activity within it. Special attention is given to the meaning she found in that everyday world, and thus a micro-historical method is especially suitable, since thereby the meaning of a particular case can be identified in the light of its own internal logic (Levi 1991: 106). Reducing the scale of research allows the scholar to access what is not noticeable on the macro-level. Thus social contradictions, especially the different sources of values and normative systems, can be brought to light, and over-simplified explanations can be avoided. The system that was present in the context of a particular case can be connected to the actions of the subject of that case. The negotiating of such normative systems by the subject, and the conflicts they bring about, lie at the centre of micro-historical research (Levi 1991: 95–8). In the present study, the reduction of scale allows for the discovery and analysis of contradictory behaviour, such as a philanthropic agenda towards the Jews, with anti-Judaic sentiment dispersed across the missionary movement.

SIM in Vienna

SIM had originally seen the light of day as the Missionary Journal for Israel in 1874. A year later it had gathered enough funds to establish a fully fledged missionary society. SIM initially funded missionaries from other countries, until the establishment of a home for Jewish Christian proselytes in Stockholm in 1881. Travels were undertaken until the First World War made them impossible, at one point reaching as far as Persia (Pernow 1945: 7–11, 14–17).

In 1920, the missionary Johannes Ginsburg arrived in Vienna to explore the option of founding a station, with the aim of reaching the Jewish population of that city. Ginsburg, himself a Jewish convert to Christianity, concluded that the 200,000 Jews of Vienna would be the ideal target for missionary activity, since they were well established in society, and since the rest of the world's Jewry paid special attention to the ideas that emanated from the city, not least with regards to Zionism. Ginsburg had not originally intended to go to Vienna, but rather to Romania, and the somewhat unclear circumstances regarding his arrival in the Austrian capital were seen as divine providence (Gunner 1996: 78–95). SIM established a station at Seegasse 16 in 1922. It would remain open until 1941, being the last of all missionary societies to leave National Socialist Austria.

After an initial raid on the station, SIM enjoyed a good relationship with the Nazi authorities, as their short-term goals coincided: the migration of as many Jews as possible. The missionary director Birger Pernow and the station's leader Pastor Göte Hedenquist managed to negotiate an exemption on behalf of SIM from the ban on association implemented shortly after the Anschluss (Edvardsson 1976: 88–90). Hedenquist met with Adolf Eichmann to confirm

SIM's responsibility to help the Jewish Christians of Protestant denominations to emigrate, and a representative for the mission was placed in Eichmann's Central Office for Jewish Emigration (Koblik 1988: 91). SIM had to walk a tight-rope, helping Jews while not becoming an enemy in the eyes of the National Socialists. Success made the organization one of the most important sources of information to the Church of Sweden and possibly all of Sweden regarding the persecution of the Jews (Koblik 1988: 93; Frohnert 2008: 234; Lindberg 1972: 46; Pammer 2017: 101). From 1938, SIM was the only mission to the Jews in the German Reich (Frohnert 2008: 229).

After the Anschluss in March 1938, so-called 'spontaneous Aryanization' broke out. This entailed a pogrom-like plundering of Jewish homes and stores to such an extent that the new authorities feared it would hamper their plans for Vienna. Jews were made visible by mandatory signs, such as Hebrew lettering on shops, schools dismissed Jewish pupils, and Jews were banned from several white-collar professions. The culmination of this process was the Kristallnacht, and the process itself was to a large extent a strategy on the part of the worker and lower-middle classes, with the ultimate goal of expelling the Jews from the economy (Botz 2016: 188–93). Vienna faced housing problems, and shortly after the Kristallnacht, the public and the new authorities together mobilized to force Jews out of their homes. At the end of 1938, 44,000 Jewish homes had been taken over, with 26,000 more awaiting the same fate (*ibid.*, pp. 193, 195). The despair engulfing the Jews drove many of them to suicide. According to Stephen Koblik (1988: 93), the SIM staff predicted that all of Europe's Jews would be exterminated, whether the National Socialists allowed their emigration or not.

SIM and the Jewish People

The suffering of the Jews as a result of their denying the Messiah was seen as just by many actors in the milieu of Swedish revival Christianity, to which SIM belonged, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. SIM's first director was August Lindström, who had also founded the MFI. He was a co-worker of the influential clergyman G. E. Beskow, who had put a mission to the Jews on the agenda by writing about his travels in Egypt and Palestine. Moving in the same circles were also Peter Fjellstedt, who supported such a mission, and Johann Christian Moritz, who actively tried to convert Jews. Apocalyptic and millenarian thoughts were common in the revival movement, and were especially espoused by Moritz. Beskow believed that the Jewish people would return to their homeland when they accepted Jesus Christ as their Messiah. Until then, they were subject to the Lord's vengeance (Edvardsson 1976: 11–14; Hammarström 2014: 128; Gustafsson 1984: 37–42). A common motif in this milieu was the Wandering Jew. Another was the Pharisaic Talmud Jew, and yet another the Godless Reform Jew, who spread nihilism and anti-Christianity about him. These were contrasted with the true Israelite, who would turn to Jesus Christ and become part of God's salvation plan. Overcoming the Talmud, the inoculation against Christianity, was seen as the key to achieving this. Such anti-Judaic thinking was common in the MFI in its first decade of existence, and remained in the Low Church awakening that SIM sprang out of well into the twentieth century (Besserman 1991: 53–4, 56, 58–9; Hammarström 2014: 130–1, 135).

SIM's missionary director, Birger Pernow, saw the persecution of Jews under National Socialism as God's plan to make them abandon worldly hope and turn to otherworldly hope. Such a view was

shared with others and maintained during persecution (Besserman 1991: 74–5; Frohnert 2008: 230). This can all be seen in the light of the common trope of Jews as signs of the divine plan, which figured heavily in Swedish apocalyptic thought. Jews were often thought to either be tools or agents of the Antichrist, or a lost people reclaiming its status as the foremost subject of history – a status they had lost to Christians after rejecting Christ – the result being that Zionism, antisemitic persecution and the conversion of Jews to Christianity all could be interpreted as signs of the imminence of the Second Coming (Gunner 1996: 78–95).

Greta Andrén within SIM

Sister Greta's position within SIM was one of high regard and influence. There are several examples of her superiors asking for her input. In 1938, Göte Hedenquist wrote to Sweden, where Andrén was on vacation at that moment, attaching an application for immigration to be given to her, since she knew the refugee girl in question (Hedenquist to Pernow 1938-10-6. E6a:8). Later that year a group of children were to go to Sweden by train. They were accompanied by two older girls, these being chosen on the recommendation of Andrén. For one of the children, Andrén had succeeded in attaining a special invitation to Sweden, despite the child's status as formally 'Mosaic' (Hedenquist to Pernow 1939-12-17. E6a:8).

In many cases, Andrén's judgement is used in the sources as an argument by her superiors. When one family in Sweden has complaints about the girl they took in, Hedenquist writes to director Pernow that the girl had been part of the Andrén's circle for a long time and is a good Christian, 'although



'Sister Greta' at the beginning of her life and work in Vienna, 1935. Photographer unknown. Church of Sweden's Archive, Uppsala.

a bit unused to work'* (Hedenquist to Pernow 1939-02-14. E6a:8). The implication seems to be that if the girl was approved by Sister Greta, this should be enough for the family. About another girl, the missionary pastor, Göte Kronwall, writes that Andrén 'appreciates her very much' (Kronwall to SIM 1939-07-07. E6a:9). When a man in Sweden is looking for a Viennese housekeeper, Kronwall recommends a girl from the youth group whom Sister Greta 'appreciates much' (Kronwall to SIM 1939-08-25. E6a:9). When difficulties arise in securing a girl's entry to Sweden, Andrén's having 'recommended her especially warmly' (Hedenquist to SIM 1939-10-16. E6a:9) is used as an argument for allowing her immigration to the country.

* My translation from Swedish. In the following, all translations into English are mine.

It is clear from the sources that Andrén had a vital leadership role in the missionary work. When Pastor Hedenquist was on vacation in 1939, they read as if Andrén had become the informal head of the station. Until that point, few of the letters in the archive are written by her, and suddenly there are several. The tone in these letters can be demanding at times, speaking from a position of authority. She strongly expresses her opinions regarding new staff, and seems to think they are either not suited for the tasks ahead or would only be in the way, as they would not stay long enough to properly learn the routines of the station (Hedenquist to Pernow 1939-07-27. E6a:8; Hedenquist to Pernow, undated. E6a:8; Unknown to Pernow 1940-06-04. E6a:9).

The actions of Greta Andrén

As desperate Jews started flocking to the mission in ever greater numbers, the workload of the staff increased. During 1938, the number of daily visitors would sometimes rise to a hundred (Hedenquist to Pernow 1938-03-14. E6a:10; Svenska Israelsmissionens årsberättelse för 1938: 204). At the hub of this work was Greta Andrén. On top of giving spiritual aid as well as health services, given her training as a nurse, she was in charge of the children's group, the girls' club and the women's group. To these belonged about 30, 35 and 70–80 members, respectively, throughout 1940. Andrén seems to have been the only deaconess to give spiritual aid, both to converts and to non-converts (Svenska Israelsmissionens årsberättelse för 1940: 208). In early 1939, Pastor Seth Asklund writes about the situation:

And this is the second thing that strikes one when one arrives, how brilliantly happily our workers bear an often inhuman

workload, bearing it not only without grumbling but with gratitude that they might serve. ... Every morning both the dressing room and youth home, even the church hall, are transformed to registry and office, where typing machines tap and telephones ring, where paper stacks grow and letters come and go, and where the number of those seeking help and advice can be counted towards the hundreds. (Asklund 1939: 45)

Asklund would come to write again of the hard work conducted at the station (Asklund 1940: 12).

According to a letter from Göte Hedenquist to Birger Pernow (1939-02-14. E6a:8), Andrén was scheduled for a month's vacation in 1939 between 24 April and 25 May, but whether this took place or not is unknown and even doubtful. The following year, the five-month stay of Deaconess Ingrid Wermcrantz enabled both Andrén and her fellow deaconess Anna-Lena Peterson to take a month's vacation (Pernow 1940: 232). Both had previously indicated that they were not interested in any vacation at all if they couldn't travel to Sweden (Unknown to Pernow 1940-06-04. E6a:9); however, after stating that no one in the staff expected any vacation (Ivarsson to Pernow 1940-05-03. E6a:10) Pastor Johannes Ivarsson did express to director Pernow a wish that both deaconesses should take a month-long vacation, and that Andrén was to have it first, since she needed it the most (Ivarsson to Pernow 1940-05-27. E6a:9). According to Ivarsson, 'Greta's work is completely invaluable and not comparable to Anna-Lena's' (Ivarsson to Pernow 1940-05-03. E6a:10).

All this work finally resulted in Andrén's exhaustion and what we today would call burn-out in 1940. On 4 December, Pernow writes and asks about her health, as Ingrid

Wermcrantz has told him that Sister Greta 'has been sick' (Pernow to Ivarsson 1940-12-04. E6a:10). Ten days later he writes again stating that he has heard that she *is* sick. In the letter, Pernow asks Ivarsson to 'hold her leash for a bit ... so that she does not over-exert herself so again' (Pernow to Ivarsson 1940-12-14. E6a:10). I interpret this as Andrén having had one bout of over-exertion during the late autumn and another in December 1940. Pernow expresses a wish that she be sent to the resort town of Semmering for a few weeks' paid rest (*ibid.*). A few days after Christmas, Pernow indicates that Andrén is regaining her strength, but he reiterates his wish regarding her vacation, calling it 'particularly important' (Pernow to Ivarsson 1940-12-28. E6a:11). Ivarsson writes back at the beginning of the new year that Andrén is very tired and still somewhat out of balance (Ivarsson to Pernow 1941-01-02. E6a:11). By mid-February she was allegedly recovered (Ivarsson to Pernow 1941-02-12. E6a:11). This letter did not reach Pernow in time before he wrote and asked that Andrén 'as far as possible spares her health and powers' (Pernow to Ivarsson 1941-02-15. E6a:11). Roughly six months later, in July 1941, the missionary station was closed by the National Socialists as the goal of completely exterminating the Jewish people meant that SIM's presence in the city was no longer warranted.

Children as sources of inspiration

In reading the source material, it is clear that Andrén drew great strength from her protégés, the children of the missionary station. It should also be mentioned that the letters in the correspondence not written by her but that mention her in some way are almost always about children. When Sister Greta herself writes, there are two types of people

present in her letters: sources of inspiration, and poor, anxious people in dire need of help. Children and youngsters belong almost exclusively to the former category. However, one notable example exists, namely a young soldier on leave from the front in 1940. Through a woman who regularly visited the station, he happened to come, dressed in uniform, to a meeting with the children's group that Greta Andrén presided over. The theme of that meeting was finding safety in following Jesus. The soldier participated actively, and wanted to write down some songs to take with him back to the front. Andrén left the room for a short while, and when she came back, she found the soldier crying. 'It was moving to see the joy with which he participated in the children's games, and one felt that he himself for a few moments was a child again. Perhaps the little ones got to show him some of the children's heaven and God's love' (Andrén 1940: 320).

In a letter to MFI written in February 1938, Pastor Hedenquist and Sister Greta tell the readers about the last Christmas before the Anschluss. In the part written by Andrén, children and youngsters are central, as is the gratitude displayed by the Jews she encountered. She feels small and humble in front of the hungry children, and she teaches them that the Christmas gift we should give to Jesus is only that he be allowed to live in our hearts, even if we live in poverty-stricken apartments (Hedenquist and Andrén 1938: 45). She mentions one boy in particular:

As I was serving the sausages and came with the second pair, I said jokingly to him: 'You couldn't handle more.' But he anxiously stretched out both hands towards me and looked anxiously from me to the mother and from the mother to the sausages, and as I put them on his tray, he shone as if he had been given everything

his heart desired! (Hedenquist and Andrén 1938: 43)

Another example of the inspiration provided by children may be presented. In the summer of 1938, as the youth group went on a trip to SIM's home in Weidling outside Vienna, one girl in particular helped Sister Greta, who would write in December that year: 'Often she gave me new courage when the burden threatened to become too heavy' (Andrén 1938: 305). At an outdoors meeting, Andrén tells her readers, another girl spoke about not letting Christianity be just a theory but a practice, saying: 'Let us live out Christ exactly where we stand, so that at least those who persecute us can see that Christ lives!' (pp. 305–6), to the amazement and encouragement of Andrén.

Yet another example would be a girl of eight who Sister Greta followed to the train. The girl's father was dead, and her mother, being Jewish, was not allowed to enter the train station, so that non-Jews did not have to see her. Through the window to the train, Greta Andrén asked the little girl if she was afraid to go all the way to Sweden alone. The girl replied: 'Oh no, I am not afraid. Because I do not travel alone. Because God is with me.' Andrén finishes retelling this anecdote by quoting Matthew 18:3: 'Unless you be converted, and become as little children ...' (Andrén 1940: 320). Likewise, mentioning worries among those assembled at Seegasse for the coming winter of 1940, Andrén mused that often the children had to teach the adults gathered at the missionary station 'holy carefreeness' (p. 322).

Sister Greta's relationship with the children in her care was not a one-way street; she intervenes on their behalf in some of the sources. In one case she asks if nothing can be done for a girl who is of Jewish faith, but whom she is teaching according to Pastor

Kronwall's plan (Andrén to Hedenquist 1939-07-27. E6a:9). When some boys write home to Vienna to complain about their situation, Sister Greta understands that they might exaggerate the severity of their condition in order to be sent back to Vienna, and thus have a chance at getting back to their parents, but nonetheless asks that someone in Sweden should verify the complaints (Andrén to SIM 1939-08-01. E6a:9). For one trio of girls, she tries to intervene several times in order to have a new transit clause removed from their files so that they can enter Sweden without having to move on to a third country (Andrén to SIM 1939-08-23. E6a:9; Andrén to SIM 1939-08-14. E6a:9). When a mother and daughter can only be reunited in England by paying a large entry fee, Andrén asks that someone from SIM escort the girl, which would mean circumventing the fee (Andrén to SIM 1939-08-15. E6a:9).

However, this relationship, while granting her strength and perhaps even bordering on possessiveness, left Sister Greta vulnerable as well. One of the three girls mentioned above, for whom she tried to acquire an exception to the rules on transmigration, developed paranoid delusions after arriving in Sweden and was institutionalized. Göte Hedenquist writes to Birger Pernow (1940-01-28. E6a:9) that 'Sister Greta has cried for several days. [The girl] was one of the best here.' The girl in question would recover completely about ten months later (Pernow to Ivarsson 1940-01-28. E6a:9), but taken together with the previously mentioned levels of stress throughout 1940 and into 1941, it is clear that this incident was a harsh blow to Andrén's well-being.

Concluding discussion

The results of this study show that Greta Andrén was an extremely devoted worker. She

presented to the readers of the *Missionary Journal for Israel* a connection of this work to her Christian faith, especially with regards to her work with children. Though she provided healthcare and spiritual aid, it is noteworthy how great an influence her work with the children and youngsters of SIM had on her. This is expressed both in her unpublished letters and in her texts in MFI. I would argue that she did not simply use the children as easy pedagogical models for the audience in Sweden, or to showcase the importance of SIM's work to donors who expected results, but rather felt their suffering deeply. She clearly put a lot of effort into circumventing restrictions on the aid given to refugees, and was not afraid to use her position to protect what was precious to her, especially the protégés she seemed to find in the children. When such a protégé was institutionalized, she cried for days. The case of the visiting young soldier shows that Andrén was willing to extend the category 'child' to grown-ups, in line with the thought that becoming like children is central to the practice of Christianity. She does not seem to have extended this category to the soldier from a position of authority, but rather, she was humbled by the sight and viewed it as a rich blessing.

That children were teachers does not seem to have been empty talk to woo the readers of MFI, but something experienced in her everyday life. At the same time, the children she helped were mentioned as being 'good', or well behaved. What of children who were not so well behaved? As she ultimately had a great deal of influence over which children were given a place in the refugee quotas, an influence underscored by the priests mentioning her work as valued above that of her fellow deaconess, the children close to her could be suspected to have an easier access to spots in the quotas. While I have not shown here that Andrén was prone to favouritism,

it is not out of the question that this took place. She singled out certain children as sources of inspiration that could be presented to an audience, but I would argue that the inspiration they provided her was real, and seen as signs from God.

This constant influx of inspiration from the children enabled Sister Greta to work at levels described as 'inhuman' by others at the station. She did this to such a degree that she suffered from exhaustion and burn-out, yet chose to remain all the time until the station was forcibly shut down.

I would like to ascribe to the everyday world of Andrén the three categories of meaning of 'child', 'work' and 'God'. Andrén's everyday faith was the signs she saw around her, especially in the children. The meaning of faith was to be a child before God. I interpret the source material as pointing to a view on Andrén's part of her own life as led by working among the living signs of the Lord, especially in the form of children. Through her everyday actions, the signs, the meaning of the signs and the constant discovery of new signs all gave meaning to the actions she was compelled to perform. This compulsion, whether rooted in psychology or divinity, drove her to work beyond the point of exhaustion, but as far as I can tell she found that this was a price worth paying for continuing to live in a world filled to the brim with meaning. As I read the sources, the actors of her world were children, with adults as static persons, but adults could become actors if they were willing to enter the category of 'child'.

By employing a micro-historical perspective, I have been able to avoid ascribing to the faith and actions of Greta Andrén the macro-political considerations that might otherwise have been brought forward as explanations. Instead, her everyday life has been allowed to present itself based on its own context, revealing a way for her to continuously find

meaning in her tasks. Andrén found signs of God in the children of SIM, which compelled her to work, but the work she performed constantly revealed new signs. Living in this circle, she herself stood in a continuous relationship with her own capacity to become like a child, and thus grow ever closer to God. ■

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