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YUN INTERVIEW  
SVERKER ASTROM  
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Selection of Hammarskjold as S-G . . . . .	1
Suez Crisis . . . . .	2,3
Swedish UN Forces . . . . .	2,3,4
Congo Operation . . . . .	5,7
Lebanon . . . . .	5,6
Withdrawal of UNEF in 1967 . . . . .	8,9
Jarring as Special Representative . . . . .	10,11
Jacsonson's Candidacy . . . . .	11,12
Swedish Role at the UN . . . . .	13,14



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JK: Mr. Astrom, just for the record I would like to ask you when you first met Dag Hammarskjold and what was your position here in Sweden at that time.

Astrom: I met him at the end of the forties when he became Secretary General of the Ministry. I worked very closely with him. I was in a way his Chef de Cabinet for about a year or two. I worked with him for four years. Then in 1954 I was transferred to London and it was during that year that he was appointed Secretary-General of the United Nations.

JK: Was it anticipated that Hammarskjold would be selected?

Astrom: On the contrary, it came as a complete surprise both to him and to everybody else. That is a long story how all this happened. It is still, I suppose, a bit unclear who really took the initiative in the Security Council. Some say it was the French. Anyway, one of the members of the Security Council must have known about him when they took the decision. He proved acceptable to everybody and was elected. But it was an absolute and utter surprise for himself. And what is perhaps more interesting in this context is that he had been entirely absorbed by European affairs at that time. Not only had he never worked in the United Nations or for the United Nations but he was always a big skeptic of the United Nations. He had an enormous readiness to learn rather quickly and a facility

for quick adaptation. I think after about 24 hours he became both an expert on the United Nations and an enthusiast for the ideas of the United Nations.

JK: Then you were the Director of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Astrom: Yes, from 1956 to 1964 I was head of the Political Department and our attitudes and policy within the United Nations being such an important part of our total foreign policy I was involved in UN affairs all through these years. I met Hammarskjöld once or twice a year in New York. I would also see him at times in Sweden because he used to come here in the summer.

JK: As the Director of the Political Department were you involved in decisions or discussions around the Suez crisis and the sending of the Swedish troops for the UNEF?

Astrom: Yes, of course. That was the first time that this concept of peace-keeping operations came up. That was a very big and important decision for Sweden whether we should take part in that or not. It was a very difficult position because Sweden had said for 150 years that it would never again send any Swedish soldiers abroad. Even if these Swedish soldiers were recruited on a voluntary basis, this was, nevertheless, a very great important decision of historical significance for us. At that time it was even opposed by the military. They didn't want

Swedish soldiers to go abroad and it was opposed by some cautious political leaders in Parliament. But in the end it was decided by the Foreign Minister that it was the right thing for Sweden to do. I think that part of the motivation for his decision was that Hammarskjöld was the initiator of the idea, to some extent together with Pearson of Canada, and not only that Hammarskjöld wanted us to participate. That became for Erlander, the then Swedish Prime Minister, a very important argument.

JK: The decisions had to be made very quickly because they were in the midst of the crisis.

Astrom: Yes. There was the political decision and then there were the preparations to get the people ready. I think that was done at exemplary speed. One has to remember that at that time we had had no experience of this kind. Now, of course, we have beefed up the whole system of preparations. So, there probably now is a higher degree of training and preparedness for taking part in UN operations than in any other country.

JK: Peace-keeping operations and the troops involved in that have a rather unique function in that generally they are not supposed to use force. So, it seems that that would require a unique kind of preparation.

Astrom: That's right and there are a certain number of young people in Sweden trained on this basis. Precisely as you say there are special demands on these people, how to act

in the particular type of situations that are those of a peace-keeping operation which is not to fight but to maintain peace and armistices, etc. And as you say they particularly must try to define under what circumstances weapons can and cannot be used.

JK: Did that present any problems in the beginning when the first troops went over?

Astrom: Not then but it did create problems during the Congo crisis when indeed UN troops in the Congo operation, both Swedish and other, were required to use force on some number of occasions. Of course, we were very much concerned about this because in some instances force was used by the UN troops including the Swedish contingent on a fairly large scale.

JK: As I understand in the beginning they were not carrying weapons. But then they were open to attack.

Astrom: I imagine they had some sort of small weapons for defense. That they must have had all through.

JK: At one point in the Congo operation the Katanga secession presented problems for the UN and Dag Hammarskjöld went to Elizabethville with Swedish UN troops in an effort to get Tshombe to approve the landing of these forces.

Astrom: Yes, that is right. I don't remember the details but, that is so, yes.

JK: Were you involved in the decisions that were made regarding the Congo operation?

Astrom: Well, yes, after all I was head of the political department. To the extent that Sweden had to do with these things I was involved in all of those discussions.

JK: Did Sweden support the Congo operation?

Astrom: Yes, we never threatened to withdraw or refused to take part but we were concerned about the turn that the operation took, in particular about the use of force that occurred. We were concerned but, we never took a different stand from that of Hammarskjold. We did do it in the Lebanese crisis in 1958.

JK: What was the issue there?

Astrom: The issue there was that the Swedish delegation to the United Nations had taken the initiative of a particular peace-keeping operation in June, 1958 after the United Arab Republic, that is Syria and Egypt, seemed to have crossed the border with bands of people which threatened the integrity of Lebanon. Then a peace-keeping operation was decided upon by the Security Council at the initiative of the Swedish delegation. That initiative, again, was prompted a bit by Hammarskjold. So far, so good, then came the 14th of July when the Iraqi coup took place. Thereupon American troops landed in Lebanon and British troops in Jordan. Then the Swedish government took the position that the UN operation should not be operative at the same time and parallel with a US

operation. We went so far as to instruct our Ambassador to the United Nations, Gunnar Jarring, to present a proposal that the UN operation be adjourned, suspended as long as US troops were there. Then after the US withdrawal they could be resumed.

JK: What was the reasoning for that?

Astrom: The reasoning was simply a question of principle, that the UN should not be mixed up with the US. So, either one or the other. The Swedish government had nothing against the Lebanese government asking for US help but the Lebanese government could not, we argued, at the same time ask for UN help. It must be one or the other. That idea was violently opposed by Hammarskjold. His whole plan was that we would let the UN operation continue while we negotiated with the US their withdrawal. So that the UN operation would be very low key as long as the US was there. But then gradually, as the US would withdraw, the UN operation would resume its full impact. That was his reasoning. There was a big quarrel with Hammarskjold on this issue. We maintained there should be no mix up between the two and we presented to the Security Council over Hammarskjold's strong opposition a draft resolution on the temporary suspension of the operation. That was defeated by the Security Council with only two votes in favor, Sweden and the Soviet Union. Then, of course, everything went Hammarskjold's

way. The UN operation was retained. The US operation was diminished and finally the US troops were withdrawn and the UN operation fully resumed.

JK: When did this take place?

Astrom: Summer of '58, June through August, 1958.

JK: Then later on in the Congo operation which took place a couple of years after that I understand that Lumumba originally went to the US to ask for help and the US referred him to the UN.

Astrom: Those details I don't remember.

JK: You were Ambassador to the UN beginning in 1964. Was Sweden on the Security Council during the time that you were Ambassador?

Astrom: We were not in the Council during my time.

JK: During that time the United Nations Emergency Force was still in operation in the Middle East. In 1967 the Egyptians asked the UNEF to leave. Were you involved in the discussions on that issue?

Astrom: Yes, very much so. The whole situation became more tense particularly in the month of May, 1967. Nasser took a threatening attitude toward Israel. Finally he asked for the withdrawal of the UN forces from the Sinai. That was a historical moment. A UN operation is by definition on the territory of a country with the consent of that country. And U Thant felt that if they asked for withdrawal, "I cannot help but to obey." There was a lot

of controversy as to whether he was actually correct. At least he should have gone to Cairo, called the Security Council, should have tried some kind of delaying action. He knew that if the UN left and the Egyptian forces occupied the coast of the Tiran Strait there would be war. It was more or less evident. So, there are two schools of thought here. One, U Thant acted correctly because he couldn't do anything but that. The UN operation was really voluntary. Or two, whether he should have at least tried by some means to delay the situation to allow time for some peaceful solution. This was a matter for historians and very important.

JK: But it was not brought to the General Assembly.

Astrom: Not only that but it was not brought to the Security Council. That is a matter of controversy, why that didn't happen.

JK: There were Swedish forces in Egypt.

Astrom: Yes, we were part of the UN operation at the time. There was a Swedish contingent which had to withdraw at that time.

JK: If they had stayed, if U Thant had decided not to withdraw them, what would have happened to those Swedish forces? Would they have been caught in the middle?

Astrom: They would certainly have acted according to the wishes of the Secretary-General.

JK: That could have involved combat.

Astrom: Hardly. One reason why U Thant took the decision was that some national contingents, including I think the Indian one, had declared that the moment the Egyptian government asks for UN withdrawal they would withdraw whatever the Secretary-General does.

JK: So, an individual country has the freedom to withdraw.

Astrom: They can do what they want. They are not bound. We could have said that also but we didn't. I think that as always we were at the disposal of the Secretary-General. Anyway, he took the decision to withdraw.

JK: That's interesting that there were these different approaches by the nations who had contributed forces. There is still some controversy as to whether that situation could have been avoided.

Astrom: Absolutely. In a way it is a crucial period of history because had that been handled differently, possibly better by U Thant, perhaps the whole history of peace-keeping operations might have been changed, and the history of the Middle East.

JK: Gunnar Jarring was then asked to be a special representative of the Secretary-General to the Middle East.

Astrom: After the Security Council Resolution 242.

JK: Were you involved at all in discussions with Gunnar Jarring?

Astrom: Yes, I saw him almost every day.

JK: Did you discuss with him any of his ideas on how to resolve the issues?

Astrom: He is a rather taciturn and secret person. So I don't suppose he would discuss in any great detail what his plans were. But as friends we discussed it a great deal in general terms.

JK: Then he came out with his memorandum which was apparently used later on in the Camp David negotiations.

Astrom: There was a major problem with that because the Israeli government at the time objected to his proposals.

JK: Do you have any idea why they objected to it?

Astrom: Well, they wanted to have security and to keep the occupied land.

JK: So, the issue at that point was to keep the occupied territory.

Astrom: At least not to relinquish it unless they got some very reliable guarantees.

JK: We mentioned earlier that your stay at the UN ended shortly before the election of the next Secretary-General. However, from your position as a Swede would you have any comments to make on the candidacy of Jacobson?

Astrom: He is an outstanding man. He would have made an outstanding Secretary-General. That may be one reason why he was not elected.

JK: The Soviets objected to his candidacy.

Astrom: The Soviets were against it as were some other countries. One reason was perhaps that the United States was in favor. Don't forget that at that time there was the Cold War and whatever one superpower advocated was automatically opposed by the other. That was always the case.

JK: The US had come out strongly in favor of him?

Astrom: Well, it became clear that they favored Jacobson so that naturally made the Russians suspicious. I had nothing to do with the affair and I only know what I read afterwards.

JK: Did there seem to be any objection to him because he was Jewish?

Astrom: That escapes my judgement but it may be that some Arabs had expressed that concern. One can also say that if they did express that concern the Russians were somehow likely to listen to this because at that time the Russians didn't want to do anything against the wishes of the Arabs. But whether that was true or not escapes me.

JK: Shortly before that time had Jacobson published a book about some of Finland's policies?

Astrom: Yes, at that time he had published one or two books particularly about the "Winter War" of '39-'40 which is the best history of the "Winter War" that exists. So, he is an outstanding historian.

JK: Had he made any statements about Soviet-Finnish relations?

Astrom: No, he had never said anything that in itself could be considered hostile. He was not a communist. He was not particularly friendly to the Soviets. But as an employee of the foreign ministry and head of the political department I think he had never been anything but correct in relation to the Soviet Union.

JK: So, there would not be any objection to him as far as that was concerned.

Astrom: I don't think so.

JK: More so the fact that he would have been a strong leader.

Astrom: That probably was it.

JK: The Soviets didn't want someone who might be independent.

Astrom: Precisely, they didn't want anyone who would be as independent as Hammarskjold had been.

JK: Are there any comments you'd like to add from your experience at the UN?

Astrom: I think that in light of the present situation that the Cold War is over we need to realize again and again that the whole security system of the United Nations with the Security Council playing an important role was paralyzed at that time. All through the years that I was there. All through the years that the Viet Nam war took place. They never thought about bringing that issue before the United Nations and the Security Council. The whole

situation has been changed dramatically and maybe the UN can now play its role according to the Charter.

JK: How were important issues generally dealt with then?

Astrom: Through the General Assembly. What Sweden did during those years was to try, when the Security Council was paralyzed, to concentrate on work in the General Assembly on "survival issues", space, food, women's situation, population, the deep sea, and the Antarctic. As you know, in 1968, Sweden took the initiative on what became the the 1972 conference in Stockholm. It was the first global get-together on the environment. We took the initiative in '68 and worked for the concept and preparation of this conference during the two years '70-'72. In '70, when I left, Maurice Strong took over as Secretary General of this world effort to organize this enormously important UN conference.

JK: Well, thank you so much for your help.

INDEX OF NAMES

Erlander, Prime Minister	3
Hammar skjold, Dag	1-7, 12
Jacobson, Max	11, 12
Jarring, Gunnar	1, 6, 9, 10
Nasser, Gamal Abdel	7
Pearson, Lester	3
U Thant	8, 9



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