

Chapter 52 : “Elisabeth Tarras-Wahlberg”

The wedding had shown that the press organization was not up to it. Mårtensson employed Elisabeth Tarras-Wahlberg (1950-; b. von Engelhardt) who for a long time became the face of the court. She was a refugee child from Estonia. Not much for mingling, but with good grades, she first studied two years on a scholarship at Mount Holyoke College, Mass, a women only university. A planned Swedish interpreter's career never materialized (she spoke good English, French and German, worse Latin and Spanish) but she took a bachelor's degree in political science, an introductory course in law and had stray jobs. In 1972 she worked for Jan Mårtensson at the Environmental Conference and in 1973 as Information and Press Secretary at the Swedish Institute. She was also the editor of *Aktuellt om Sverige*. From 1976 she advanced in the court hierarchy (1976 press assistant, 1979 press secretary, 1988 press chief, 1995 information manager, 2004-2008 Marshal of the court) until she because of unclear causes requested resignation.

Her work for the court consisted initially of press contacts and the publication of yearbooks. The advancement January 1979 to press secretary was surrounded by conflict, as it seems because of her sex. She did not part in the state visit to West Germany in March 1979 on the grounds that she was not qualified enough to service the 400 journalists. There was also the argument that the rest of the world would not respect a woman as court official. When Mårtensson left shortly after, he seems to have invested his prestige in her taking over his duties as press spokesman of the court, which succeeded.

For the journalists, she was something of a riddle: “If you ask her directly if she is a monarchist, you get the answer 'no comments'. From Jan Mårtensson, she has learned the importance of using the expression 'off the record', to speak between four eyes.”¹ Possibly the expression “off the record” is ill chosen. At the Foreign Office's press agency, a distinction was at this time made between “off the record” (information that may not be published) and “not for attribution” (information that may be published but without naming a source). These conversations with journalists, politicians and others seem to have been so frank that she was reassigned. Probably unfair because whenever necessary, she suffered from amnesia. There were rumours that she blacklisted unpleasant newspapers, but this she denied. However, she kept a record of bad articles - “The Junk File.” She later described it as doghouse for articles, journalists, and newspapers that rubbed her the wrong way. According to Walther Sommerlath, *Svensk Damtidning* and *Hänt i Veckan* were there from the beginning. She kept a diary but intended to burn it before she died.

- Some things could certainly make the headlines if the diary got into the wrong hands, but I would not call it scandals. I write detailed notes about what I have experienced every day, both at home and at work, but it is not something I intend to publish. When something happens that could be interpreted as a scandal, I have usually not written it down. But perhaps it would still be best to destroy them. Much of what I have written in the heat of the moment feels silly.²

- I have decided not to write an autobiography. If you have something important to history, you have to be 100 percent honest and sincere. I have been involved in so many contexts and experienced so much and participated in so many conversations that were of such a nature that they for many different reasons they should not be put

¹ *Svensk Damtidning*, 1977:30.

² Per Öqvist. Hon klarar av pressen i Silvias skugga. *Expressen*, 1994-07-03.

on paper. Besides, I think that memoirs are pretentious. But I like to write. I can imagine myself reflecting on the media industry.³

The posting 1995 as CIO came in connection with a reorganization to a modern press and information department: This prepared the King's speeches, state visits and other visits, responded to invitations and letters, placed television cameras etc. In addition, it was at the service of the media and the public. In this position, she became known as "the living denial machine". According to Crown Princess Victoria, her most important task was to be "bitter almond" whatever that implies. Perhaps to speak frankly. She herself felt that she was in a vulnerable position and anxious not to expose herself to the journalists or to "boil over at the wrong moment". She was easier to attack than CG. His relationship with her was formal and vice versa. He didn't interfere too much.

There is something fascinating about Elisabeth Tarras-Wahlberg. It is possible to count the number of people who actually like her on the fingers of one hand and she is often described as a sulky old foggy with a wretched relationship to the press. Sure, she may be an arrogant snob, but my good she's well dressed! The daring buttoned jacket, a patterned silk handkerchief and the elegant scarf make every Anglophile shudder with pleasure. ... Much of the reason lies in her image. A pant suit never looks as good as when worn by a haughty aristocrat. ... In a world where we are constantly looking for which sweater fits which pair of jeans Elisabeth Tarras-Wahlberg is one step ahead of us. She lifts it to another dimension and matches her personality with the style of clothing. For is there anything that matches the pinstripe as well as a corresponding personality?⁴

CG is quoted in the media but often feels misunderstood. Tarras-Wahlberg long time conveyed his denials, clarifications and evasions and thus had a political role. I distinguish five variants:

1. A denial. The criticism was an over-interpretation of what the king had said and lacked any basis. That was usually enough to silence the opposition.
2. It was the King's personal opinion. When CG used this subterfuge, it always spread a certain amount of confusion because many people believed that CG had no private life or even private role, but was always in office as a head of state and that he therefore, making any statement at all violated the Torekov compromise. It was more common for Silvia to use this cop-out because the compromise did not apply to her.
3. The king can not be reached for a comment. This usually happened when CG had stumbled into a politically booby-trapped area and whatever he said he would be attacked.
4. The king had nothing to add. This was interpreted to mean that he actually meant what he said but the statement in question was difficult to criticize because CG liked to express himself in such general terms that one came across as an idiot if one tried to analyse what he meant.
5. An emotional reaction of the type: A total lack of understanding that someone with such noble and selfless motives as the king could be subjected to such perfidious and malicious attacks. (Often mediated by some acquaintance.) As a rule, this caused the opposition to fold because he or she could expect a storm of criticism and a lot of personal discomfort.

³ Cecilia Hagen. Cecilia Hagen möter Elisabeth Tarras-Wahlberg. Expressen, 2004-10-31.

⁴ Stilförebild - Elisabeth Tarras-Wahlberg. En gentlemen bekännelser, 2008-10-07.

Compared to other informants, she sounds more straightforward because she would rather attack than slip away. Her mandate to speak on behalf of CG seems unlimited - she has never denied any of her own statements. If you follow her over time, you notice that she often reinterprets or beautifies. One reason not to participate in debates is probably that it would then be revealed. As a spin doctor, one would expect that she was also a political adviser. That is not the case. CG and Silvia have been uniquely ill-prepared for their interviews. Before internet that didn't matter. Nowadays, the information waltzes around forever. CG and Silvia feel embarrassing.

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Under Tarras-Wahlbergs tenure the Royal Court's information unit and the media would meet twice a year over beer and a sandwich at the castle, court stables or other place to exchange information. Tarras informed about the schedule. The media representatives mingled and felt special but...

“Journalists almost always got some good quotes from ETW that made them feel satisfied. However, after they hung up, they often felt that she somehow had taken advantage of them. That's how she worked.” - “Among journalists in the country's editorial offices there was a kind of love of hate for Elisabeth. Many appreciated that she almost always answered the phone and that she rarely became angry about the most infantile questions about Daniel and Victoria or the royal couple. Others were a little afraid of her.” She used to call the editors when things got wrong in the articles. “She was called a tough broad in luxury packaging, a high-heeled armoured car, posh girl personified, the king's little maid and Madame Terror.”⁵

At the Tuesday-sessions of the Court, she was rapporteur:

- I tell of all the interview requests at the planning meetings we have every Tuesday morning. The king and the queen are present. I am not filtering anything, I am acting in that role as a neutral official.

But Elisabeth Tarras-Wahlberg also has experience and is a great judge of character. She knows how the various journalists and newspapers work.

- It is not that I blackball anybody. But I know which journalists I can trust and which I cannot. So if the King, in such a presentation, asks questions about the journalist concerned, I give my sincere judgment. And it can be hard.⁶

Tarras-Wahlberg interpreted the increasing popularity of the royal house as an “educational effect”. Come the mid-1980s, enough journalists had followed CG's state and county visits to understand that he & Silvia worked hard and for the good of the country. Less nonsense was printed. Then in 2004 came Brunei (see chapter 38), showing she was out of touch.

⁵ Andreas Utterström. Daniel & Victoria. 2007.

⁶ Ingvar Hedlund & Sofia Johansson. Hovet inifrån 1. Expressen, 2001-12-25.