



## **The Diplomat and the Entrepreneur: Olof Aschberg - Converter of Capital, Trader in Trust**

Downloaded from: <https://research.chalmers.se>, 2025-04-29 04:49 UTC

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Marklund, C., Mørkved Hellenes, A. (2023). The Diplomat and the Entrepreneur: Olof Aschberg - Converter of Capital, Trader in Trust. *Diplomatica*, 5(2): 248-262.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/25891774-bja10114>

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

# The Diplomat and the Entrepreneur: Olof Aschberg – Converter of Capital, Trader in Trust

*Carl Marklund* | ORCID: 0000-0002-0832-3993  
Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden  
*carl.marklund@sh.se*

*Andreas Mørkved Hellenes* | ORCID 0000-0002-2492-692X  
Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, Sweden  
*mrkved@chalmers.se*

Received: 22 June 2022 | Accepted: 17 July 2023 |  
Published online: 13 October 2023

## Abstract

Swedish financier, philanthropist, and progressive Olof Aschberg played a dynamic, but “forgotten” role in the contacts between international labor, Western finance, and Soviet power across the world wars. We first suggest Aschberg can be studied as a converter of different forms of capital as well as a trader in trust in between the practices of diplomacy and entrepreneurship. We then outline Aschberg’s wide-ranging activities drawing upon existing secondary literature in lieu of a more systematic study of his life. Third, we concentrate on his interwar solidarity work and anti-fascism based in Paris. We analyze, fourth, his cultural diplomacy and publishing activities out of New York in between the Second World War and the early Cold War. Finally, we argue that Aschberg’s multi-positional and variegated vita illustrates the merit of employing entrepreneurship, in its most broad sense, as an analytical category for investigating the art and practice of citizen diplomacy.

## Keywords

citizen diplomacy – entrepreneurship – internationalism – social capital – trust

## Introduction

Swedish banker, philanthropist, and prominent progressive<sup>1</sup> Olof Aschberg (1877–1960) played a dynamic but understudied, even “forgotten,” role in the contacts between the international labor movement, Western finance, and Soviet power in the first half of the 20th century. Operating across a wide spectrum of functions at a time of high political tension and economic upheavals, Aschberg’s international career spanned from the First World War to the early Cold War. Based successively out of Stockholm, Moscow, Berlin, Paris, New York, and, finally, Stockholm again, his transnational activities ranged from international finance, via social entrepreneurship and international solidarity work to progressive activism – from dealing in hard economic currency to investing in soft social capital.<sup>2</sup>

Establishing a wide array of personal contacts, Aschberg maintained a broad transnational network of academics, artists, businessmen, intellectuals, publishers, and public officials in often unlikely, yet remarkably stable constellations. Largely unknown today, he was famed in his day across Northern Europe as “the red banker.” He earned this sobriquet not only for his financial association with the Soviet Union, but also for his economic support of cultural radicalism and avant garde artistry. Aschberg recognized the economic potential of the working class as well as post-Tsarist Russia but also sympathized with the political aims of the labor movement as well as the Bolsheviks, eventually facilitating contacts between Western capital and the new Soviet regime.

In this article, we first suggest Aschberg can be studied as a converter of capital and as a trader in trust – among many other transnational contemporary actors – in between the practices of diplomacy and entrepreneurship. We then outline Aschberg’s wide-ranging activities in lieu of a more systematic study of his life, drawing upon secondary literature. Third, we concentrate on his interwar solidarity work and anti-fascism based in Paris. We analyze, fourth, his cultural diplomacy and publishing activities out of New York in between the Second World War and the early Cold War. In these instances, Aschberg presented himself as an “agent of internationalism” operating

- 
- 1 For a discussion of transatlantic ideological debate on social reform, at the time defined as progressivism, see Rodgers, D.T. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998); Robinson, E. “Defining Progressive Politics: Municipal Socialism and Anti-Socialism in Contestation, 1889–1939.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 76 (4) (October 2015), 609–31.
  - 2 Marklund, C. “The Icons of ‘the Red Banker’: Olof Aschberg and the Transactions of Social Capital.” *Baltic Worlds* 6 (1) (2018), 53–57.

across a number of institutional structures, social settings and professional capacities along with shifting national allegiances in a number of key sites for internationalism in the first part of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup> Finally, therefore, we argue that Aschberg's multi-positional and variegated vita illustrates the merit of employing "entrepreneurship," in its broadest sense, as an analytical category for interpreting the art and practice of citizen diplomacy.

We will investigate the preconditions for Aschberg's citizen diplomacy<sup>4</sup> in these two settings as a method of transnational humanitarianism and solidarity in the tension-ridden decades from the interwar years to the early Cold War. We thereby aim to contribute to the recent emergence of actor-centered research on world and/or global history. More specifically, we want to expand the scope of research in Scandinavian internationalism in the interwar and early postwar decades from the well-researched landscape of national foreign ministries and international organizations to other, transnational arenas. Certainly, the evidence of Aschberg's doings on these two transnational scenes cannot do justice to the width of his activities in other settings and at other times. Yet, they showcase the shifting preconditions for progressive citizen diplomacy as a method of transnational humanitarianism and solidarity, a field of activity which provided individuals such as Aschberg as well as others not only immense obstacles but also unique opportunities.

### Maecenas or Middle Man?

Previous research on Aschberg per se is surprisingly scarce, considering his role in so many different settings. However, he makes brief appearances in a bewildering set of diverse contexts. Academically, he has mostly interested researchers as an alleged middle man in the transfers of Imperial German funds to Lenin's Bolsheviks during the final stage of the First World War, even though the evidence remains scant.<sup>5</sup> His role in liaising early contacts between

3 Reinisch, J. "Introduction: Agents of Internationalism." *Contemporary European History* 25 (2) (2016), 195–205, esp. 202.

4 In the sense originally explored by Marshall, J. "International Affairs: Citizen Diplomacy." *American Political Science Review* 43 (1) (February 1949), 83–90.

5 Sisson, E. *The German-Bolshevik Conspiracy* (Washington: Committee on Public Information, 1918); see discussion in Kennan, G.F. "The Sisson Documents." *Journal of Modern History* 28 (2) (1956), 130–54; Futrell, M. *Northern Underground: Episodes of Russian Revolutionary Transport and Communications Through Scandinavia and Finland, 1863–1917* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963); Johansson, G., and H. Trond, eds. *Lenin och den nordiska arbetarrörelsen: En samnordisk antologi* (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1970); Lyandres, S. *The Bolsheviks' "German Gold" Revisited: An Inquiry Into the 1917 Accusations* (Pittsburgh: Center for Russian & East European Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1995).

the Bolsheviks and U.S. finance through various financial operations has been frequently noted in passing, but not yet analyzed in depth.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Aschberg has been described as instrumental in making private property – including antiquities, art, jewelry, silverware, and furniture as part of Russia’s cultural heritage – as well as gold bullion confiscated by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War available to the Western (art) markets during the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> In his native Sweden, for example, he is remembered for his donation of an internationally unique collection of Russian icons to the National Museum of Fine Arts in Stockholm in 1933.<sup>8</sup> His function in facilitating commercial contacts between the Soviet Union and Sweden during the 1920s is less well-known, beyond scattered references to his importance as a financial operative of the Soviet state.<sup>9</sup>

- 
- 6 There are earlier, but often unverifiable, news reports on Aschberg’s activities in this context, but one of the first accounts of these connections appears to be found in Solomon, G. *Parmi les maîtres rouges* (Paris: Spès, 1930, German translation in 1930, Swedish in 1930, English in 1935). See also Gankin, O.H., and H.H. Fisher. *The Bolsheviks and the World War: The Origin of the Third International* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1940); Fainsod, M. *International Socialism and the World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1935); Sutton, A.C. *Wall Street and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1974); Pohl, M. *Die Finanzierung der Russengeschäfte zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen: Die Entwicklung der 12 grossen Russlandkonsortien* (Frankfurt am Main: Knapp, 1975); Williams, A.J. *Trading with the Bolsheviks: The Politics of East-West Trade, 1920–39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); most recently, see Rippel, C. “Review of *Wall Street and the Bolshevik Revolution* by Antony C. Sutton.” *Procesos de Mercado: Revista Europea de Economía Política* 34 (1) (2017), 639–60; Spence, R.B. *Wall Street and the Russian Revolution, 1905–1925* (Walterville, OR: Trine Day LLC, 2017); Malik, H. *Bankers and Bolsheviks: International Finance and the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- 7 McMeekin, S. *History’s Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Odom, A., and W.R. Salmond, eds. *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia’s Cultural Heritage, 1918–1938* (Washington, D.C.: Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, 2009).
- 8 Abel, U., and V. Moore. *Icons* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2002); Pitkänen, M. “Olof Aschberg and his icon collection in Stockholm.” In *Northern Byzantine Icons*, eds. M. Usvasalo, P. Salmesvuori, and A. Törmä (Espoo: The Finnish National Committee for Byzantine Studies, 2014), 81–103; Sidén, K. “Den röde bankiren och donationerna av ikoner till Nationalmuseum.” In *Givandets glädje i konstens värld* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2008), 61–71; Kjellin, H. *Ryska ikoner: Olof Aschbergs till Nationalmuseum överlämnade samling* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1933).
- 9 For more specific discussions of Swedish locomotives exchanged for Russian gold, see Carlbäck, H. “Pengar eller politik: Ekonomiska förbindelser mellan Sverige och Sovjet 1917–1924.” *Historisk tidskrift* 105 (1985), 187–233; Carlbäck-Isotalo, H. *Att byta erkännande mot handel: Svensk-ryska förhandlingar 1921–1924* (Uppsala: University, 1997); Heywood, A. *Modernising Lenin’s Russia: Economic Reconstruction, Foreign Trade and the Railways* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); see also discussion in Marklund, C. “A

In these two distinct bodies of literature – on financial operations and art dealing, respectively – it has thus far not been possible to analyze these two aspects of Aschberg's activities in parallel, primarily due to the lack of systematic studies of Aschberg's broader vita. Aschberg's contested role in these two contexts appears detached from his other activities. This has resulted in a theoretically rather critically unreflective position towards "Aschberg the Maecenas" while adopting a highly critical, if empirically uncertain, approach to "Aschberg the middle man."

As a consequence, Aschberg's methods and motives – whether private or public, self-serving or idealistic, or any combinations thereof – have neither been rigorously analyzed, nor have they been systematically compared with other transnational actors and entrepreneurs in the progressive universe of the era.<sup>10</sup> They have typically been either accepted as described by Aschberg himself in his successive and overlapping, but far from exhaustive or reliable autobiographies.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, they have been brushed aside as primarily opportunistic, without much further elaboration or evidence.<sup>12</sup> This polarization has remained remarkably stable over the years as the cultural, economic, political, and social orientation and historical significance of Aschberg's endeavors have not yet been subjected to analysis in their own right.

Nevertheless, Aschberg's wide-ranging activities have recently received some attention in the new wave of research on international solidarity of the labor movement and contacts between Soviet and Western socialism – especially between social democracy and communism.<sup>13</sup> In all these lieux,

---

Swedish Drang Nach Osten? Baltic-Nordic Pendulum Swings and Swedish Conservative Geopolitics." Special Issue: Baltic-Nordic Regionalism. *Ajalooline Ajakiri. Estonian Historical Journal* 53 (3) (2015), 223–46.

- 10 See for example Björkegren, H. *Ryska posten: De ryska revolutionärerna i Norden 1906–1917* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1985); Kan, A.S. *Hemmabolsjevikerna: Den svenska socialdemokratin, ryska bolsjevikerna och mensjevikerna under världskriget och revolutionsåren 1914–1920* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2005).
- 11 Aschberg, O. *En vandrande jude från Glasbruksgatan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1946); Aschberg, O. *Återkomst* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1947); Aschberg, O. *Gästboken* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1955); Aschberg, O. *Gryningen till en ny tid: Ur mina memoarer* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1961).
- 12 See Fainsod, M. *International Socialism and the World War*; Sutton, A.C. *Wall Street and the Bolshevik Revolution*; McMeekin, S. *History's Greatest Heist*.
- 13 For studies of anti-fascist and anti-racist international solidarity work in the interwar era, see Weiss, H., ed. *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); for successive relations between socialism and communism, see e.g., Björlin, L. "Vänstersocialism-kommunism 1916–1924." *Meddelande från Arbetarrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek* 7 (24–25) (1983), 6–12; for

Aschberg called upon his extensive financial as well as social capital in support of a political agenda of anti-fascism, international solidarity and world socialism. Often, he sought to place himself in arenas and milieux where actors and voices aiming to move beyond ideological tension within the broader progressive movement sought reconciliation or – at least – dialogue.

### The Diplomatic Entrepreneur

Aschberg's exchange of economic assets into cultural, political, and social values involved the ability of combining business acumen – or entrepreneurship in Peter Drucker's understanding of the concept – with diplomatic skill, i.e., converting a source into a resource.<sup>14</sup> In 1912, for example, Aschberg established Nya Banken as a "workers' bank" with a view of providing financing for social housing and workers' cooperatives in close cooperation with leading members of the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP), including Hjalmar Lindqvist, the chairman of the main Swedish trade union, Landsorganisationen (LO), and Georg Branting, the son of the chairman of the SAP. Through the bank, Aschberg financed a set of companies owned by the workers, several of which were established in the aftermath of labor conflicts and lockouts.

In this dual role as a pioneer in connecting the cooperative movement and welfare capitalism in Stockholm in the 1910s, Aschberg navigated the tension between traditionally liberal philanthropy and emerging forms of more explicitly *political* social entrepreneurship – akin to today's CSR, but with a distinctively leftist political agenda – which recognized the importance of worker's market value as not only an argument for social reform, but as an instrument of social change in itself, with the city and the housing issue at its core. As such, Aschberg's social entrepreneurship served not only as a "socialist" alternative to conservative and liberal attempts at a pragmatic solution to the "social question" through providing housing and social services through the market. It also contributed to establish a measure of always contentious, yet negotiable sense of social trust between capital and labor which has later

---

Soviet interests and Swedish communism, see Björlin, L. "Röd skandinavism i Komintern: SKP:s kris och splittring 1924." *Arbetarhistoria* 18 (1) (1994), 18–30; Björlin, L. "1940, För svensk arbetarklass eller sovjetisk utrikespolitik? Den kommunistiska rörelsen i Sverige och förbindelserna med Moskva 1920–1970." In *Sovjetunionen och Norden*, eds. S. Jungar and B. Jensen (Helsingfors: FHS, 1997), 201–25.

- 14 Hamilton, K., and R. Langhorne. *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration* (London: Routledge, 1995); Drucker, P.F. *Managing for Results: Economic Tasks and Risk-taking Decisions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).



characterized the corporatist setup of the Swedish welfare state, a connection this far underexplored.<sup>15</sup>

These seemingly idyllic exchanges took place against the backdrop of far more dramatic prospects, not only internationally but domestically too. While the Russian Revolution in 1917 not only changed the ideological and political landscape globally it also reduced the transnational contacts across the Baltic Sea, already compromised by the war, to a minimum. This situation provided Aschberg with a unique opportunity to facilitate contacts between revolutionary Russia and Western capitalism on the one hand and between different strands of the international labor, peace and solidarity movements on the other hand. Aschberg's earliest activism for international solidarity and peace began in conjunction with the International Socialist Commission during the First World War and the Third Zimmerwald Conference, also known as the Stockholm 1917 Peace Conference, launched in the Swedish capital in the spring of 1917.<sup>16</sup> The Stockholm Conference played a key role as a staging point for the international solidarity work, peace activism and anti-racist mobilization which followed during the interwar years.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout his career, Aschberg actively monitored his own "media image" as can be evidenced from the extensive, if obviously curated, archived press clippings in his surviving private archives available at the Swedish Labor Movement's Archive and Library (Arbetarrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek,

- 
- 15 See for example Edling, N. *Det fosterländska hemmet: Egnahemspolitik, småbruk och hemideologi kring sekelskiftet 1900* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 1996); Wisselgren, P. *Samhällets kartläggare: Lorénska stiftelsen, den sociala frågan och samhällsvetenskapens formering 1830–1920* (Eslöv: B. Östlings bokförl. Symposion, 2000); Hedin, M. *Ett liberalt dilemma: Ernst Beckman, Emilia Broomé, G H von Koch och den sociala frågan 1880–1930* (Eslöv: B. Östlings bokförl. Symposion, 2002); Deland, M. *The Social City: Middle-Way Approaches to Housing and Suburban Governmentality in Southern Stockholm 1900–1945* (Stockholm: Institute of Urban History (Stads- och kommunhistoriska institutet, 2001); Sheiban, H. *Den ekonomiska staden: Stadsplanering i Stockholm under senare hälften av 1800-talet* (Lund: Arkiv, 2002).
- 16 Aschberg, O. *Den ryska revolutionen och vad vi skola lära därav: Tal vid demonstrationsmötet i Stockholm söndagen den 10 febr. 1918* (Stockholm: Nutiden, 1918); see also Marklund, C. "Revolution via ombud? Rysslandssynen i fyra Stockholmstidningar revolutionsvåren 1917." *Presshistorisk årsbok* (23) (2006), 45–61.
- 17 E. g., Andræ, C.G. "En hel del att bestyra: Branting och Stockholmskonferensen 1917." *Arbetarhistoria* 12 (47) (1988), 6–8; Grass, M. "Stockholmskonferensen 1917: Den offentliga diskussionen i Social-Demokraten." *Arbetarhistoria* 11 (11) (1987), 13–32; Grass, M. "Fredsfrågan i Stockholm 1917: Ett hot mot de krigförande makterna." *Arbetarhistoria* (12) 47 (1988), 9–14; Björölin, L. "Zimmerwald och ungdomsinternationalen: De socialdemokratiska ungdomsförbunden i Skandinavien och Zimmerwaldrörelsen." *Arbetarhistoria* 12 (47) (1988), 18–25; Grass, M. "'Tio muselmän redogöra för sina nationers slaveri.' Representanter för islamiska folk i Stockholm 1917." *Arbetarhistoria* 25 (97) (2001),



ARAB) in Stockholm. In defending his own public persona, not only against accusations of collaborating with the Soviets, but also from anti-Semitic attacks, he continuously not only sought to engage public opinion across international borders, making use of modern communications technology and media structures in combining citizen diplomacy with transnational civic activism, but he also actively sought to manage his own image, against his adversaries, in cooperation with his numerous affiliates from all walks of life. In this practice of enacting, exchanging, and negotiating value(s) across human experience over time and space at the crossroads of culture, economy and politics, dexterity as well as trust is required, as a form of social capital of itself.

### In the Circle of Nations – Paris

Aschberg first moved (in part) to France in 1926, when he bought the Château du Bois du Rocher in the Bièvre valley, close to Paris. This was to become the first of several properties in and around the French capital, at the center of Aschberg's Parisian activities. They included support to Scandinavian artists. His Maecenas-role, however, extended well beyond that of patron of the arts. Aschberg supported not only Scandinavian artists travelling to Paris in the 1930s, but also social scientists – Gunnar Myrdal was among those soliciting the banker for travel funds. Importantly, Aschberg's solidarity work continued within Paris-based anti-fascist, pro-League of Nations, and internationalist networks like the *Rassemblement universel pour la paix*, the *Cercle des nations*, and the *Mouvement Amsterdam-Pleyel* organized in the aftermath of the 1933 *Congrès européen contre le fascisme et la guerre*.<sup>18</sup>

With the Nazi *Machtergreifung* in Berlin and the waning position of Geneva and the League of Nations, France and especially Paris became a key site for all sorts of leftist internationalism. From communists to social democrats, these groups shared common ground, often in competition and sometimes in cooperation.<sup>19</sup> Not least in its capacity as the main European destination

42–49; Grass, M. "Undertryckta nationer' på besök i Stockholm 1917." *Arkiv 2* (2011), 14–15; see also Marin, F. *Socialpatrioti e socialdemocratici alla conferenza per la pace a Stoccolma 1917* (Trento: Società di studi Trentini di scienze storiche, 1992).

18 Nation, R.C. *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the Origins of Communist Internationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989); Winter, J. *Dreams of Peace and Freedom: Utopian Moments in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

19 Reinisch, J. "Introduction: Agents of Internationalism." *Contemporary European History* 25 (May 2016), 198.

for political refugees from the rest of Europe, the French capital's free anti-fascist associations and publications coalesced into an internationalist forum for debates about the future of Western democracy. Within this landscape of organizations and associations, Aschberg put his fortune at the disposal of various initiatives.

One such broad initiative was the *Rassemblement universel pour la paix* (RUP), created at the *Congrès universel pour la paix* in 1936 by Lord Robert Cecil and French Popular Front minister Pierre Cot. While the Congrès was organized above all to support the League of Nations troubled by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the RUP grew to become a veritable mass movement with the collective adhesion of diverse political currents from British conservatives to communists.<sup>20</sup> In Sweden, the RUP quickly got a foothold in the decade's new social democratic internationalist and pacifist circles, supported by the trade union confederation LO and cooperative union KF.<sup>21</sup>

This was the backdrop to Aschberg's creation, together with the RUP, of a club, the *Cercle des nations*, in 1938. The Cercle included among its members prominent French intellectuals and public figures from *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) leader Léon Jouhaux to the prefect Jean Moulin as well as the Curies; Nobel Prize winner Jean Perrin was its president and Lord Cecil its honorary president. Once more, it was his capacity to convert economic resources – in this case property – into a social/political asset that characterized Aschberg's political interventionism: the Cercle was housed in one of the banker's Parisian properties, an eight-storey *hôtel particulier* on the Rue Casimir-Périer, a stone's throw from the National Assembly. It comprised dining rooms and a bar, and ceilings decorated by Aschberg's friend, the painter Isaac Grünewald.

Meanwhile, his second French grand estate, the *Château de la Brevière* in Compiègne, some 80 km north of Paris and bought in 1936, became a center for receiving political and intellectual refugees from Germany, among them figures like Heinrich Mann, Leon Feuchtwanger, Käthe Kollwitz, and Anna Seghers, as well as Willi Münzenberg.<sup>22</sup> In the diverse interwar fora where

20 Mazuy, R. "Le Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix (1931–1939): Une organisation de masse?" *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 30 (1993), 40–44.

21 Hellenes, A.M. "Pilgrims and Missionaries of Social Peace: Geneva and Pontigny as Sites of Scandinavian Internationalism in Late Interwar Europe." *Nordic Journal of Educational History* 7 (2) (2020), 5–29.

22 Münzenberg played a key role in facilitating the continued activities of left-oriented German refugees out of Paris, see for example Petersson, F. "We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers:" *Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925–1933* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 2013); Braskén, K. *The International Workers'*

Aschberg actively engaged in a kind of *political entrepreneurship* establishing forms of progressive international cooperation between communism and social democracy, tensions between Soviet and Western positions within the international solidarity movement soon emerged.<sup>23</sup> Aschberg's role in these exchanges remains largely unexplored, but beside his politically motivated and ideologically oriented activity, we know something about the humanitarian activities he engaged in together with his wife, Siri Aschberg. Together, they established a nursery for German and Spanish refugee children at the Château de la Brevière during the Spanish Civil War, in coordinated efforts with the Swedish Spain Committee and the French branch of the Union internationale de secours aux enfants.<sup>24</sup>

In his activities as a political and social entrepreneur, Aschberg was also a media entrepreneur in his own right. In France, for example, he took a majority share in one of the largest film production companies of the time, Société Pathé Frères, as well as the publishing house Editions du Carrefour.<sup>25</sup> Aschberg explicitly considered his Pathé holdings as an important factor for peace, international cooperation, social enlightenment and bringing people closer together.<sup>26</sup>

But the Pathé holdings also put Aschberg in a perilous situation. In the chaotic early months of the Second World War, he was denounced as a spy for Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, brought in for questioning by French police, and his passport was confiscated. This was motivated by his contacts with Münzenberg and Münzenberg's wife, Babette Gross. Aschberg himself seems to have viewed the accusations largely as a result of attempts to bring back the Pathé shares on French hands, an interpretation later shared by the Swedish legation.<sup>27</sup> The charges were taken up by the nationalist popular press

---

*Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Green, J. *Willi Münzenberg; Fighter against Fascism and Stalinism* (London: Routledge, 2019).

- 23 Thing, M., and L. Björlin, eds. *Guldet fra Moskva: Finansieringen af de nordiske kommunistpartier 1917–1990* (København: Forum, 2001); more generally, see Blomqvist, H., and L. Ekdahl, eds. *Kommunismen – hot och löfte: Arbetarrörelsen i skuggan av Sovjetunionen 1917–1991* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2003); in addition, see Kan, A.S. *Hemmabolsjeviker*.
- 24 Aschberg, O. *Återkomst*, 94ff; see also Spångberg, A. *I tidens ström* (Stockholm: Bok o. bild, 1966), 97ff. Sköld, J., and I. Söderlind. “Vi måste rädda barnen' Svenska hjälpkommittéer för krigsdrabbade barn i andra länder under 1930- och 1940-talen.” *Historisk Tidskrift* 142 (4) (2022), 533–63.
- 25 O'Brien, C. *Cinema's Conversion to Sound: Technology and Film Style in France and the U.S.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
- 26 Aschberg, O. *Gryningen till en ny tid*, 143.
- 27 Letter from Aschberg to the Minister of the Interior, November 5, 1939; Hennings to Engzell, November 12, 1940, both in OA 036:1.

in France, and Aschberg was eventually incarcerated and in 1940 sent to the concentration camp of Vernet in Ariège, near the Pyrenees, while his Parisian properties were confiscated by the German administration. The major part of his extensive art collections would disappear during the Occupation. It was not until Aschberg “offered” to donate the totality of his Pathé shares to the État français in a personal letter to the Maréchal Pétain<sup>28</sup> that the collaborationist Laval government chose to let him free and return his passport along with a permission for himself and his family to leave France.<sup>29</sup> During the winter of 1941, he departed war-ridden Europe via Lisbon for the United States and New York.

### Associating with the *Free World* – New York

Arriving cash-strapped in New York – having lost most of his assets in Europe, if not those in Sweden – Aschberg immediately got involved in a flurry of activities deeply marked by the recent entry of the United States on the Allied side in the Second World War. The personal and political ties established in Paris during the late interwar years were certainly key for shaping Aschberg’s wartime initiatives in the United States: One of his first engagements was to invest a modest capital in a printing press, for publishing the monthly magazine *Free World* together with Pierre Cot as well as Louis Dolivet (both members of the RUP and the Cercle des nations), in addition to an exile Italian anti-fascist newspaper *Il mondo*.<sup>30</sup> *Free World* was the organ of the Free World Association which included numerous exiled European left-liberal intellectuals and politicians, stateside arguing for a reforming of the Allies – then often known as the United Nations – into a successor to the League of Nations, indicating the continuity and transitory nature of the internationalist engagement of the interwar years and the immediate post-war years as a “mini-Sattelzeit.”<sup>31</sup> While *Free World* continued a successful print run of some fifty-plus issues over a period of six years, in what appears a highly uncharacteristic account in his memoirs, Aschberg depicts his own involvement as marginal and temporary and the overall enterprise as basically failed, even though *Free World* gained

28 Letter from Aschberg to Pétain, October 31, 1940, OA 036:13.

29 Letter from Tixier-Vignancourt to Aschberg, November 4, 1940; Letter from the Vice-présidence du Conseil to Aschberg, November 6, 1940, both in OA 036:13; both reprinted in “Extortion under Laval: Documentary Evidence.” *Free World* (September 1945), 3–8.

30 Letter from Dolivet to Aschberg, October 30, 1941, OA 036:14.

31 Gram-Skjoldager, K., H.A. Ikonomou, and T. Kahlert. “Introduction.” In *Organizing the 20th Century World: International Organizations and the Emergence of International Public*

wide circulation in U.S. liberal and left-leaning circles.<sup>32</sup> Arguably, both Cot and Dolivet maintained close ties with the Soviet Union, as was well-known to U.S. intelligence at the time.<sup>33</sup> Aschberg's attempt at disassociating himself from this imprint is somewhat complicated by the fact that he was later directly involved in the post-war launch of *Världshorisont*, effectively a Swedish edition of *Free World*, replacing the Swedish interwar peace movement's magazine *Mellanfolkligt samarbete*.<sup>34</sup>

Around the time of the launch of *Free World*, in 1941, Aschberg and his wife socialized with Swedish and other Scandinavian wartime expats in the New York area, including artist Carl Milles and businessman Tage Palm, who had been instrumental in the context of strengthening the Swedish presence in America during the 1930s and who still enjoyed close contacts with U.S. arts and industrial circles.<sup>35</sup> For example, Aschberg reached out to Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, both based at Princeton University as Gunnar Myrdal had been commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to write up *An American Dilemma*.<sup>36</sup> Originally, Aschberg contacted Gunnar Myrdal with an idea for biweekly broadcasting radio in Swedish from the United States in September 1941, much along the lines of the Myrdals' own arguments in favor of Swedish courting the United States with a view of post-war reconstruction.<sup>37</sup> This eventually came to pass in collaboration with the American Swedish News Exchange in New York, while Aschberg and his wife became friendly with the Myrdals, who both became involved with the Free World Association.<sup>38</sup>

---

*Administration, 1920s–1960s*, eds. K. Gram-Skjoldager, H.A. Ikonomou, and T. Kahlert (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 1–12.

32 For the audience *Free World* catered to, see Denning, M. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996); Kleinman, M. *A World of Hope, A World of Fear: Henry A. Wallace, Reinhold Niebuhr, and American Liberalism* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2000).

33 On Dolivet and Cot, see Perry, R. *Last of the Cold War Spies: The Life of Michael Straight* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2005).

34 For a discussion of official Sweden's relations to the emerging United Nations, see Götz, N. "From Neutrality to Membership: Sweden and the United Nations, 1941 to 1946." *Contemporary European History* 25 (1) (2016), 75–95. See also the discussion in Fagrell, G. *Mellan många världar* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1975).

35 For the Swedish circle in New York in the early war years, see Kastrup, A. *Med Sverige i Amerika* (Malmö: Corona, 1985), 72ff.

36 Myrdal, G., A.M. Rose, and R. Sterner. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

37 As published in Myrdal, A., and G. Myrdal. *Kontakt med Amerika* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1941).

38 Letter from Myrdal to Aschberg, September 5, 1941, OA 036:9.

According to Aschberg himself, it was the Myrdals who suggested he should pen his memoirs. Indeed, a letter from Gunnar Myrdal confirms that he urged Aschberg “not to forget your idea of writing up an auto-biographical sketch.”<sup>39</sup>

While Aschberg’s involvement in pro-democracy anti-fascist work in New York was compromised by an alleged lack of assets, he also found time to engage himself in issues of Jewish immigration to Latin America, introducing Swedish entrepreneur, eccentric, and self-made peace-broker Axel Wenner-Gren into his plans.<sup>40</sup> This collaboration between two rather unique Swedish citizen diplomats came to nothing. Aschberg nevertheless spends an inordinate amount of effort in his post-war memoirs on how he not only cleared Wenner-Gren from FBI allegations of pro-Nazi contacts but also how he defended the Swedish position to prominent American businessmen, cultural figures and officials.<sup>41</sup> The references are mostly to private conversations and difficult to prove through archival or media records. Nevertheless, they indicate a strong urge on the part of Aschberg to underscore his Swedish – and Scandinavian – loyalties at a time when these were not only in flux but also deeply challenged by the wartime developments in Europe.

### Conclusion

Immediately after the Second World War, Aschberg took up his political entrepreneurship again, but with a new twist. In cooperation with the Free World Association and UNESCO, he used his personal network and skills in promoting the support of anti-racism, decolonization, and international orientation of national social movements, pointing toward the Third World solidarity of the 1960s. There is something revealing about Aschberg’s *modus operandi* as a diplomatic entrepreneur in the deeply social character of his activities. It is not by coincidence that his *guestbook* – originally kept at the Château du Bois du Rocher, now at the Royal Library in Stockholm – became a

39 Letter from Myrdal to Aschberg, February 5, 1941, OA 036:9; see also Aschberg, O. *Återkomst*, 216.

40 For Wenner-Gren, however, these contacts may primarily have served his anthropological research activities in Latin America, for a treatment, see Luciak, I.A. “Vision and Reality: Axel Wenner-Gren, Paul Fejos, and the Origins of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.” *Current Anthropology* 57 Supplement 14 (October 2016), S302–S332.

41 Aschberg, O. *Återkomst*, 209ff.



sort of symbol of his oeuvre as both Maecenas and middle man.<sup>42</sup> The capacity of host – to people and events, associations, and organizations – was altogether central, as was his propensity to give, to extend generosity – whether to escape Vichy custody, to gain voice in the advocacy for an international organization to replace the failed League of Nations, or to regain favor with Swedish social democracy.

Following the war, this “hosting” was expanded to include institutions as well; Aschberg donated his French chateaux to newly created institutions for international friendship and progress. Both the property on Rue Casimir-Périer which had housed the Cercle des nations and the Château de la Brevière were bestowed upon the LO and the SAP in 1951, to accommodate the new Hjalmar Branting Institute, intended to raise awareness of international questions in the Swedish labor movement. While the hôtel in Paris functioned as the urban meeting place, the chateau became a school and study center for Scandinavian and French workers and unionists. It was inaugurated by Gustav Möller and described by Arne Geijer as “the Swedish workers’ movement’s window to the great world”.<sup>43</sup>

The Château de la Brevière quickly became something of an international labor study center, with courses designed for trade unionists organized by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), but also by the Force ouvrière – secessionists from the communist union CGT – as well as the Socialist International. Sometimes Aschberg’s gifts were rejected – presumably out of fear what liabilities and reciprocities could be expected, as indicated by Tage Erlander upon receiving news of Aschberg’s impending donation of a castle in France to the labor movement.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the Château du Bois du Rocher – initially intended to create international goodwill for Sweden in general and strengthen French-Swedish cultural and economic relations – was eventually given to UNESCO in 1956, after having been turned down by the Swedish Export Association, the cooperative movement, and Scandinavian research institutions.

The many roles of Aschberg can be analyzed as a navigation between positions in a space of overlapping transnational internationalisms. This article has sought to highlight the multi-positionality of Aschberg as a key aspect of his activities as an agent of internationalism. Beyond that it is also important to observe that this was a space that Aschberg himself contributed to create,

42 See for example Gerdes, T. “Med Karl Gerhard och Erik Blomberg i Aschbergs gästbok. Ett slott till skänks åt svenska staten.” *AT*, June 18, 1955; “Guess” [pseud.]. “Tysk gömde unik svensk gästbok – skyddade fransmän från nazister.” *AT*, September 8, 1949.

43 “Brantinglotteriet ger ökade fackliga stipendiechanser.” OA 03616.

44 Erlander, T. *Dagböcker, 1945–1949* (Hedemora: Gidlund, 2001), 391, 410, 420.



and notably by converting his assets (property) into sites for encounters, coordination and mobilization, ranging from humanitarian relief work to elite clubs and institutions for popular internationalism in practice.

Through his manifold activities as middle man – who had “never been member of a political party” – as a broker of relations, “a genius in friendship” (according to his close friend Karl Gerhard), Aschberg established scenes for the performance of diplomatic functions although he was never a diplomat in the sense of representing the state. As such, he served as the proverbial citizen diplomat – working mainly with Sweden, but rarely for Sweden in an official capacity.

Was Aschberg a Scandinavian internationalist? Not initially, and not in the sense of other cosmopolitan contemporaries like Sven Backlund or Bjarne Braatøy, representatives (despite their unrepresentativeness) of a specific Scandinavian social democratic vision for world organization and international cooperation. Neither in the sense of his contemporary citizen diplomat and sometime unlikely collaborator Axel Wenner-Gren, who explicitly drew upon an older, conservative interpretation of Nordic neutrality for his peace-making efforts in the run up to the Second World War.

Indirectly, however, Aschberg's activities came to have a Scandinavian bearing – several of the Branting Institute's courses at La Brévière had a strong Nordic dimension and brought together Norwegians, Danes and Swedes.<sup>45</sup> Directly, during his wartime sojourn in New York and through his involvement with Scandinavian exiles on the East Coast, he sought to profile himself as an intermediary between Swedish positions and Scandinavian concerns, against the relief of a post-war world, organized by a revived League of Nations in the shape of the United Nations as a site of internationalism.

The kaleidoscopic career of Aschberg as citizen diplomat runs across the mini-*Sattelzeit* of the world wars, involving a skill set of multifaceted and overlapping diplomacies which demonstrate his dexterity of using convertibility of various forms of capital as a means of access (and escape). Perhaps Aschberg remains an insignificant individual in terms of impact upon world events. But his activities as a citizen diplomat nevertheless appears salient as they exemplify a specific style of internationalist diplomatic entrepreneurship. Here, the very multi-positionality as exemplified by Aschberg, paired with his demonstrable ability and willingness to convert private wealth into transnational platforms and social capital to bring the world closer together, stands out among other and more well-known agents of Scandinavian internationalism.

---

45 Holmberg, G. “La Brévière – svensk arbetarskola i Frankrike.” *Fackföreningsrörelsen* 24 (1958), 521–25.