

of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome



NEWSLETTER

Spotlight on Scandinavians

The bombing during WWII – an eyewitness account

The following account appears in a letter written in 1944 by a Swedish resident of Rome, Maja Sjöström (see below). Åsa Rausing-Roos, who has translated it for us, explains that in early March 1944 the allied forces bombed Rome, and after the bombardment Maja found her way to Ruth Milles's grave [in the Parte Antica] to see to it. She reported:



The Grote monument (1791) after bombs fell on the Old Cemetery. In the background the small arch through which trams passed was destroyed. The breach was then widened to create today's busy traffic route (see photo below).

“Fortunately it was undamaged despite three huge deep holes on three sides of it. Keats's and his friend Severn's graves had also escaped the destruction despite being very close to the craters, while some thirty of the oldest grave stones – still in the Pyramid Cemetery – had been crushed or toppled and splintered, the contents mixed into the earth of the craters. Hundred-year-old lime trees and laurels had lost their lives. The devastation was distressing in this sanctified ground, where it was unthinkable that anyone would want to upset the peace and the poetry.



I spoke to the two sextons who dig and close the graves. They told me that as they heard the aeroplanes overhead, they had gone to stand in one of the niches of the Aurelian wall, seeking protection from the danger, but as a bomb made it shake, they fled into the Pyramid. Some fifty people had taken refuge there. The bombs fell on all sides all around.

Despite it all, the beautiful camellias are still in bloom, but many calyxes had shed their petals as if out of decorum and sorrow over the evil in people.”

The Swedish sculptor Ruth Milles

Ruth Milles is not well-known today, nor did she achieve fame in her lifetime. “A small flower under the shelter of the great oak which her brother Carl Emil, younger by two years, had become for her”, is how a relative once described her. Her younger brother was the sculptor Carl Milles, the autodidact who became famous for his monumental works of art in both the Old and New Worlds, and a powerful influence on American sculpture while a professor at Cranbrook. Ruth was a promising student at the Stockholm Academy of Art and, when young, created small sculptures such as *Bukettlisa* (Lisa of the bouquet), *Gosse på kryckor* (Boy on crutches) and the relief *Efter väntan vid havsstranden* (After the wait on the seashore).



The pleasures of travel by tram

At the Paris Salon in 1902 she was awarded a *mention honorable* and then participated in a number of exhibitions in Sweden and abroad: St Louis in 1905 (silver medal), Rome in 1911, the Baltic Exhibition in Malmö in 1914, and many more. Her sculptures are still in demand among a few connoisseurs. But why this silence around her? Why do we know nothing of her life?

Ruth's fate was a tragic one. Carl and Ruth spent the late 1890s together in Paris where their life was very hard. Ruth fell ill and had to undergo

an operation, which left her disabled with severe pain for the rest of her life. Carl, who had become a wealthy man, supported her in her later years when she was unable to work.

In 1932, Carl was appointed professor at Cranbrook in Michigan and, afraid that Ruth might feel abandoned in Sweden, suggested that Ruth move to Rome where they had several mutual friends.

One of those friends was the textile artist Maja Sjöström (1868-1961). From her early youth, Maja had known Carl, his wife Olga and his sister Ruth. Maja is today, like Ruth, largely forgotten both in her country of origin, Sweden, and in her second homeland, Italy. But in the early 1900s she was a big name in the world of textile art. When the landmark new Stockholm Town Hall was completed in 1923, her name became known worldwide for the imaginative, colourful



R. Milles, *Bust of a young girl*, terracotta (art market, 2012)

tapestries and fabrics that she had created for it. She then left Sweden for Italy and spent the last 37 years of her life in the Eternal City.

Maja Sjöström left behind a large collection of letters with interesting accounts of life in Rome. She accompanied many of her friends to their final resting-place at the Cemetery, where later she frequently visited their graves and recounted her walks in that romantic place.

On 12 February 1941 she wrote: "Yesterday afternoon at 4.50 Ruth Milles's earthly life ended". Maja was at her bedside and in letters to her sisters she

described how Ruth had suffered a blood clot in her leg while staying at the Pensione Belvedere in Subiaco, and was hastily rushed to Professor Bastianelli's clinic in Rome.

Carl and Olga were in America and, because of the war, were unable to travel to the funeral. Maja helped the Swedish Legation to arrange the ceremony. She told Carl how she had decorated the chapel with almond blossom, ordered a wreath of white lilacs from Carl and Olga, and spread out the other wreaths around the catafalque. Around the urn she had placed wreaths of violets, Parma violets and narcissi, like stars in a wreath. She describes how beautifully the students from the Swedish Institute sang the hymn "I lift my hands" and mentioned all the funeral guests, led by Minister Beck-Friis (the Swedish Envoy in Rome).

Carl did not want the interment to take place until he and Olga could



Ruth Milles in her studio (1908)

attend, but the war still prevented them from travelling. For two years the urn stood in a niche of the chapel; on 6 August 1943 it was finally interred in the Parte Antica (near the grave of John Keats).

Carl Milles bought this burial plot "for all eternity" for Ruth and eventually Olga and himself, and wrote to Maja, "if you have nowhere else to rest after your death, we would be happy for you to rest by our side". In fact, they all died outside Italy and are buried in Sweden; only Ruth lies in the Cemetery.

Contributed by Åsa Rausing-Roos, whose biography of Maja Sjöström was published in 2012 (Carlsson Bokförlag, Stockholm).



Helene Klaveness, a young Norwegian in Rome



Portrait of Helene Klaveness

Many a visitor to the cemetery has stopped by the sculpture of the young, tender, but headless girl, sitting silently and lonely, holding a bouquet of flowers in her hands (Zona 3.1.2.7). It marks the grave of Helene Klaveness who died, aged only 29, in the German hospital on the Capitoline hill on 3 February 1908.

Helene was born on 2 October 1878, the fifth of eight children of shipowner Anton Fredrik Klaveness and his wife Birthe Klaveness, in Sandefjord, south of Oslo, a coastal town that was the headquarters of the family's flourishing shipping business. Although born into wealth, she had her own ambitions and went to Sweden to study physiotherapy at the Kungliga Gymnastiska Central Institutet in Stockholm, the country's oldest institute for teachers of gymnastics and physical education. Norway was in union with Sweden at the time, and many students went to Sweden for professional education.

At the time the Klaveness shipping company was one of the three largest in Norway which was to become one of the most important shipping nations in the world. For the Klaveness family, travel was part of normal life and Helene travelled extensively, in England and

France, and spent a year in the USA. In her spare time she wrote short stories and poetry.

As many did then, she suffered from a lung disease, most likely tuberculosis, and in autumn 1907 she left for Italy to benefit from its better climate. She went to Capri and to Rome where she joined the Scandinavian Society (*Den Skandinaviske Forening i Rom*) of which many Scandinavian artists were members. The best known Norwegian members have been the authors Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Sigrid Undset. Helene lived then at 3 Via delle Carrozze, near the Spanish Steps. Two other Norwegian members in 1907 had the same address; in fact, most Scandinavians lived in this area.



The monument soon after installation

When her family received the alarming news of her illness, her mother Birthe and one of her sisters, Dagny, immediately left for Rome. In Basel they received the sad news that Helene had already died. They

reached Rome for the funeral. In a family album there are photos of the German hospital, of the mother at the graveside, and of the monument erected over it that was commissioned from the Danish sculptor Louis Hasselriis (1844 – 1912), who was then living in Rome. Hasselriis had studied under the Danish sculptor Herman Wilhelm Bissen, and was well known for his monuments. The work that secured him international recognition was a statue of Heinrich Heine that he made for Empress Elisabeth (Sissi) of Austria at the Achilleion Palace on Corfu.

Typical of his portrait monuments are said to be their “poetic attitude”, and the “intimate characteristics” of the person portrayed, and this is true of his sculpture of Helene Klaveness. They might have met at the Scandinavian Society; but family tradition says that Helene’s younger sister, Dagny, sat for the work and the sisters did indeed look very much alike.

The neo-classical monument consists of two parts: the marble sculpture of Helene sitting on a small, Roman seat with side volutes and decorated with garlands, and the headstone of *peperino* stone on a base. The sides of the base carry a relief decoration on each side: the Norwegian coat of arms, and a flag symbol, which is probably the flag of Norway (this was, after all, only three years after Norway gained its independence).

On the headstone, above the sculpture, is incised the Roman symbol of the wolf, Romulus and Remus, and underneath is a quote from one of Helene’s poems: “The earth takes back what it lavishly gave. With its warm hearth, the tear is wiped away.”

The head is now missing, having been stolen in 1995. The photos taken of the sculpture before it was installed are all the more precious.

Contributed by Oddbjørn Sørmoen, art historian in Oslo, who thanks Kjetil Klaveness Melby for the loan of family photos.



Helene's grave: the Undset connection



Sigrid Undset, Nobel Prizewinner, on a Norwegian banknote

Helene Klaveness was buried in February 1908 in the Second Extension to the Cemetery. At that time the chapel (completed in 1898) was still new and burials had only started in this Extension around 1900. It would have taken Louis Hasselriis at least a year to produce the monument for Helene’s grave. It was at the end of that year

(1909) that another young Norwegian woman arrived in Rome, the novelist Sigrid Undset (see *Newsletter* 6).

The heroine of her novel *Jenny* (1911), much of which is set in Rome, is buried in the Protestant Cemetery: “Jenny Winge was buried at the far corner of the cemetery, near the chapel. It was at the very edge of the light green, daisy-covered hillside, where there were still only a few graves. Cypresses had been planted along the perimeter of the lawn, but they were still tiny... Her grave was out in the meadow, set slightly apart from the others... the dark cypress grove stood like a wall behind it.”

When writing her novel, Sigrid Undset must have drawn upon a visit that she had made to the Cemetery. Helene Klaveness had died a year earlier and Hasselriis’ bright white sculpture on her grave would have been conspicuous (see the photo above). It seems that Undset used the setting of Helene’s real-life grave when describing the fictional grave of her fellow-Norwegian.

Nicholas Stanley-Price, with thanks to Bo Lundin for first suggesting the connection.



The restless Swedish painter Gotthard Werner



Gotthard Werner

Gotthard Werner (1837-1903) was born in Linköping in Sweden. His father Heinrich served as a doctor in the Napoleonic wars on both sides – for a short period in the French army after the battle of Jena in 1806 and later in the Swedish army. He married Ida Gradman from Gothenburg and they had four children, two girls and two boys, one of them Gotthard.

Heinrich Werner died in 1849 when Gotthard was only twelve. He went to

school in Linköping but never felt at home in the small provincial town. His mother was a painter and certainly inspired him in his interest in art. In 1857 he went to Paris to study art and to paint. His mother accompanied him and worked for a while in the Sèvres porcelain factory where she decorated porcelain (she eventually died in Sweden in 1870).



G. Werner, *Girl on dromedary*, oil on canvas (art market, 2012)

In Antwerp in 1862, Gotthard converted to the Catholic church. He became a fanatic Catholic and hated everything Swedish. He was never recognized in Sweden as a painter, the themes of his paintings being historical and religious rather than reflecting Swedish Lutheran culture. It seems that he had very few friends and always had financial prob-

lems. One of his few friends was his brother-in-law Leonard Westman and his son Henric, who were wealthy landowners in Linköping. They helped him financially and they supported him when he came back to Sweden in 1875 and settled in Stockholm.

There he participated unsuccessfully in the contest for decorating the newly built National Museum which was won by Carl Larsson. Gotthard Werner submitted a painting of The Västerås Recess (1527), in which King Gustav Vasa broke with the Catholic Church, and another of Gustav III in front of the Colosseum in Rome; but perhaps they were not sufficiently patriotic to win the contest.

Before his return to Sweden in 1875, he had been living in Rome. Moving there in the late 1860s after spending some years in Spain as a painter, he took part in the defence of the papal city against the troops from Piemonte. He served as an ambulance man and was wounded during the battle at Porta Pia on 20 September 1870, the day that the city was taken. He said later that after 1870 Rome went from being the Eternal City to becoming an ordinary European city. He never felt at home in

the political and economic developments in Europe at that time.

After several years back in Sweden, he started travelling again. His movements are uncertain but he spent two years in Egypt in the 1880s. In his letters from there he begged for money and complained about his health. Having failed to get to Constantinople as he wished, he finally returned to Rome where he settled. Other Swedes who visited Rome said that Werner was an excellent guide to the old churches of Rome with their ancient art and mosaics.

He died in abject poverty in Rome in 1903 and, although a converted Catholic, was buried in the Cemetery. Possibly it was his nephew Captain Henric Westman who paid for his grave (Zona 1.8.19). On the simple ledger is inscribed a quotation from Augustine of Hippo: *Inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te* (Our hearts are restless until they rest in you), a fitting epitaph for this artist who found it difficult to settle until finally deciding on Rome.

Contributed by Per Eriksson



Open-air poetry and music performances



Ivan Prado Longhi and Davide Stanzone play music by Handel

It is sometimes in the low evening sun of summer evenings that the Cemetery looks most beautiful. So as to share this experience, we have hosted a few carefully chosen recitals of poetry and music. In late June Douglas Dean and Shelagh Gallivan presented *Will, women, words 1592-94. In search of the man and muses behind Shakespeare's rise to fame*. Written by Mark Irvine and premiered in Oxford, this intriguing entertainment explored, mainly in the Bard's own words, the muses who inspired his compositions. It followed the performance a year ago of *Shakespeare: sonnets of love and death*, a series of readings presented by Voice Professionals Italy.

These two events took place on the forecourt in front of the chapel. But another recent event (*L'amore non muore mai. Sentimento, poesia,*

musica), organised by students of the LUMSA university, was peripatetic and moved among the graves of Keats, Gramsci, Amelia Rosselli and others. At each one actors recited poetry and students from the Accademia di Santa Cecilia played pieces for violin and flute.

These events have proved popular despite being advertised only to a limited public which includes all Friends resident in Italy. If you would like to be informed of future events, write to mail@cemeterystone.it



Photo: N. Stanley-Price

HOW TO BECOME A FRIEND

This Newsletter is made possible by the contributions of the Friends of the Cemetery.

The Friends also help fund the care of the trees in the cemetery and the restoration of tombs. Please can you help us by becoming a Friend? You can find a membership form at:

www.cemeteryrome.it

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