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She defied her time

By Karen Margrethe Schelin

Reality always tops imagination. This is certainly true in the case of Inga Arvad, the Danish journalist and beauty queen, who at the tender age of 21 interviewed Hitler – he called her “a perfect Nordic beauty” – and later became world famous for her love affair with a young, American ensign with a bright white smile.

His name was John F. Kennedy.

As a term of endearment the 23-year old Jack called his Danish girlfriend 'Inga-Binga'.

Arvad herself remarked after her first meeting with the man who later became President of the United States, that he had “charm that could make birds fly out of the trees”. Their love affair made the FBI fly, too.

Inga Arvad had an eye for great men, and great men were to be her destiny. The story about the Danish journalist, whose interview with Hitler was printed in this newspaper (Berlingske Tidende) November 30 1935, has been told bit by bit over the years. Many journalists and film documentarians have tried to piece Arvad's life together and tell her full story. No one has succeeded before, because Inga Arvad's family did not want to contribute to the project. However, Ann Mariager has succeeded, and for the first time a writer has met with Arvad's family, read through her letters, her dairies and her memoir sketchings. In addition to her talks with Inga Arvad's family and friends, her book is based on an extensive research in Denmark and Europe as well as the United States, including reading the 1200 documents on Inga Arvad in the FBI archives in Washington.

The author has persistently followed in the footsteps of the Danish journalist and adventurer who, right up to her death in 1973, lived an extraordinary life and whose fabulous story now can be read in the book “Inga Arvad – the scandalous Scandinavian”, published by Gyldendal and out in book stores today.

It is a thought-provoking and fascinating portrait that the writer draws of Inga Arvad's life and destiny. The story of Inga Arvad is also the tale of a woman, who defies her time and insists on following her ambitions to become a journalist. Her career is jumpstarted in 1931 when 17-year old Inga becomes Miss Denmark.

Inga Arvad's upbringing had given her an international outlook and she moved effortlessly on the international stage. She was squeezed by her single mother who paced her daughter forward and followed her all over the world. Almost all the way into the conjugal bed with the string of men Inga Arvad married – for reasons that not always had to do with great big love.

The beauty queen title paved Inga's way into the film industry and a career in film appears to open. Inga does, for a brief while, become a movie star in Denmark. But she turned her back to film. She wanted to become a journalist.

Following a shipwrecked marriage to an Egyptian that she married at the age of 17 and lived with in Paris and Cairo, Inga decides to try her luck in journalism. She takes off for Berlin on her own, and thanks to her drive and her beautiful looks manages to get through to Hitler, Goebbels and to Goering's lavish wedding. She reports cheerfully on the wedding to Danish media. Actually, she is the first to break the news on Göring's upcoming wedding with a German actress.

However, her time as a journalist in the 1930s Nazi Germany will prove to have fateful consequences for Inga Arvad. Her past catches up with her when she arrives in the USA a few years later, following an expedition voyage with her new husband, film director Paul Fejos, and the outbreak of World War II.

But Inga still wants to become a journalist. With the help from her connection to the Swedish

Electrolux-billionaire, Axel Wenner-Gren, she manages to get into the prestigious journalism school at Columbia University in New York. Wenner-Gren is sponsoring her husband's exotic expeditions.

At the school she is considered a somewhat stranger and her obvious talent as an interviewer and feature writer is not very appreciated. But she continues purposefully and upon graduation the Danish journalist manages to land a job at the conservative Washington Times-Herald (later to be bought by Washington Post). And while World War II is raging, Pearl Harbor is being bombed by the Japanese and the US enters the war in Europe, Inga is busy writing her daily column "Did you happen to see?" Profiles of new, fascinating faces in Washington.

One day her boss suggests a new person for Inga to profile.

"Get an interview with the young Kennedy for your column", she says.

She gets it. And on November 27 1941, Inga introduces her readers for Jack Kennedy in "Did you happen to see?" In her column she writes that "Jack hates only one topic – himself. He is the best listener I have come across between Haparanda and Yokohama. Elder men like to hear his views, which are sound and astonishingly objective for so young a man".

Det får hun. Og således kan Inga Arvad 27. november 1941 introducere sine læsere for Jack Kennedy i »Har De tilfældigvis set?« I klummen skriver hun blandt andet: »Jack hader kun et emne – ham selv. Han er den bedste lytter, jeg er løbet ind i mellem Haparanda og Yokohama. Ældre, erfarne mænd kan lide at høre hans synspunkter, som er kloge og forbløffende objektive for så ung en mand.«

Those are the last lines of Ingas profile of young Kennedy.

And even slightly older women like to listen to Jack. Inga does, for sure. She has just turned 28 when she meets the 23 year old navy ensign with the brilliant smile, and soon the two of them start a passionate but secret affair. Inga is still married to her film director, though he has been away for years because of film projects. Fejos himself finds a young pianist whom he later marries. So it's not maybe it isn't coincidental at all that beautiful Inga with an extraordinary appetite on life falls into the arms of Jack. Jacki, by the way, is the brother of one of Inga's newspaper colleagues, Kathleen Kennedy.

Inga Arvad eventually pays a high price for her love affair with John F. Kennedy. His father is against their alliance, and rumors begin to circulate that Inga is a spy for the Nazis. She is working for a newspaper that really isn't President Roosevelt's cup of tea. When an old news item out of Berlin surfaces, in which she is called Hitler's publicity chief in Denmark, FBI embarks on a zealous surveillance of Inga Arvad. From the FBI archives Ann Mariager can report on the numerous telephone conversations between Inga and Jack, and even their sexual encounters were recorded.

The FBI tackles Inga so roughly that she is marked for life. The Federal Bureau has no proof and they never succeed in proving that she in any way should be a spy. At one point she considers suing the journalist who started the rumors, but she decides not to. As Inga writes in her notes later in life:

"I interviewed Hitler. At the time it was a journalistic achievement much envied and much appreciated by the newspaper I worked for. For years it lay dormant. It wasn't a problem. Actually I was praised for it, occasionally. Then suddenly, during a war hysteria coupled with a reporter-colleague's jealousy, what had been a halo fell down and became a noose".

Inga Arvad was without a doubt rather naive when she at the age of 21 threw herself into reporting from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. But she wasn't the only one being naïve at the time. She is to pay a high price for her youthful daring. And hence is the story of Inga Arvad's life and destiny thought provoking on several levels. The story of her life is also a portrait of a resilient woman who was before her age and had an incredible ability to live in the moment and get the best out of it.

It is the tale of a smart and beautiful woman, born in a time of unrest between traditional, female values and a modern women's ideal. Inga Arvad's ambitions gave her an international outlook, but she was also pushed forward by a mother that she distances herself to too late. As with a lot of other things, she learns to live in spite of the limitations of the time.

Inga Arvad was a woman who loved to be close to adventure, power and influence. She was also a restless soul and, as Ann Mariager writes, the beautiful rolling stone longed to find a place called love.

She does not get the love of her life. But she eventually settles down in a marriage with the war veteran and former Western actor Tim McCoy, 22 years her senior. They have two sons, and as Terry, the younger says in the book: "My mother never let the wake rock her boat"