

Ikea founder's deep Nazi ties shock Sweden

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

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The founder of Ikea admitted long ago he foolishly flirted with Nazism in his youth, but a new book is making waves in Sweden with claims his ties to the fascist movement went much deeper than he has acknowledged.

Ingvar Kamprad, the 85-year-old Swedish billionaire who founded and still largely controls furniture giant Ikea, confessed in the 1990s that he had had links to the Nazi youth movement during World War II, when Sweden was neutral, describing it as the "greatest mistake of my life."

He has always described the decision as the "folly of youth," but a book published this week by journalist Elisabeth Aasbrink quotes Kamprad in an interview last year still hailing the Swedish fascist leader Per Engdahl.

"That was perhaps what was most surprising," Aasbrink told AFP. "He has always said he got involved due to teenage confusion, but actually in August last year he was still loyal to this fascist leader."

"He told me: 'He (Engdahl) was a great human being and I will maintain that as long as I live'," she said.

Swedish media have in recent days debated the book's revelations, with an editorial the Dagens Nyheter newspaper ironically stating Thursday: "It was his life's biggest mistake. And yet he keeps repeating it, for the rest of his life."

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Daniel Poohl of the anti-racist magazine Expo said the revelations were serious.

"Everyone has the right to make a mistake and get a second chance, but it is obvious that Kamprad still sees Per Engdahl as a great person," he said in an interview with public broadcaster SVT.

"This was not just about happening in on a meeting by accident," Poohl added.

Neither Kamprad, who lives in Switzerland, nor his spokesman could be reached for comment, but a statement on Ikea's website stressed: "What happened almost 70 years ago is something Ingvar has apologised for numerous times ... and has nothing to do with Ikea's activities."

"Ingvar has dedicated his adult life to Ikea and the democratic values Ikea stands for," it added.

Aasbrink's book "And in Wienerwald the trees remain" tells the story of Otto Ullman, a Jewish boy sent from Austria to Sweden right before the outbreak of World War II and soon becomes friends with Kamprad.

"Ingvar said to me: 'don't misunderstand me, but I fell in love.' And they immediately became very close friends. They were 17 and 18 years old," the author explains.

She says she did not start the project to dig into Kamprad's Nazi past, but had wanted to understand how the Ikea founder could have been such good friends with Otto and at the very same time involved in a movement "with ideas that his friend was suffering the consequences of."

"His parents were murdered in Auschwitz," she pointed out.

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But when she repeatedly asked Kamprad to explain what he was thinking at the time, he had finally said: "I cannot see any contradiction in this."

Kamprad remained friends with Engdahl for years after the war ended, and Aasbrink's book details a wedding invitation the Ikea founder sent the fascist leader in 1950 describing how he was proud to belong to the same circle as him.

Aasbrink also discovered that Kamprad, who has admitted activity in the far-right New Swedish Movement, had previously been a member of the more extreme Swedish Socialist Unity (SSS) party, with the member number 4014.

Sweden's intelligence police Säpo had started a file on him in 1943, when he was 17, titled "Nazi", she said.

"They obviously thought he was Nazi enough to create a file," she said, adding she had been disappointed not to get access to possible file documents from after 1949 to probe how long Kamprad's link to the SSS had lasted.

According to the part of the file she had seen, though, she said Kamprad claimed he "had recruited members ... and doesn't seem to miss an opportunity to serve the party."

Aasbrink says she has received a lot of support, but also a number of angry letters and emails from people upset she was tarnishing a man widely respected for spreading a positive image of Sweden in the world.

"A lot of people think he's a good representative for Sweden," she said, adding: "I have also been criticised because he is an old man, but I didn't interview him in an old people's home. I interviewed him in Ikea's headquarters."