

Livingstone Inspired Her

# Life Did Not Stop At 73 For This Amazing Woman

*At 73, Gerda Mundt, one of Denmark's foremost women, might have been content to prefer an armchair by the fire and a nap after lunch. Why she decided instead on a trip round the world via Siam and Detroit, is entertainingly narrated in this article, reprinted from the "New World News" and written*

**BY MARY MEEKINGS**

AT first sight she might have stepped out of one of the stories of her countryman, Hans Andersen—a little old lady, with white hair, apple cheeks and sharp blue eyes. But Gerda Mundt is no fairytale character. A veteran fighter in the Danish Parliament, she takes her place with the foremost women of her land. And when you find yourself looking at her face a second time you discover in its lines both strength and humour.

At 73 she has just returned from touring the world—Detroit, Honolulu, Malaya, Siam, Hamburg. "We were all so nervous about her," said a friend, "but the only one who was not was Miss Mundt herself." She was too busy to be nervous—busy amassing new experiences, ideas, friendships. "I did not want to take anyone with me," she explained, "because I thought there might be risks ahead and I did not feel I could undertake the responsibility of another person." And after a morning spent with her in London, following as she plumped for the seat at the top of the bus, or identified for me the lesser-known landmarks of my native city, I began to feel that it would have to be a carefully picked companion whose pace could keep up with hers.

**B**UT why tour the world at 73, an age when most women yearn for and have earned, their own fireside? It was not as if home ties were unimportant to her. She looked after her old father till he died at the age of 92, and brought up her orphaned godchildren from the ages of nine and 14. One of the pleasures of her trip round the globe was the little gifts she picked up for her great-nieces and nephews—with characteristic originality, in spite of spending many months in America, she waited till she reached China to buy her presents, laying in a store of mandarin coats and unusual toys for her family.

She went on her tour when she had retired from Parliament because she wanted to see for herself the conditions in the world, and because she believed that as a woman and a former member of Parliament she could make links between country and country. In a way it was a continuation of her conception of her Parliamentary work.

This conception was an unusual one. To find the key to it you must go back to the years when, as a sick child, she lay in bed and thought more than children usually have time to do, and read and dreamt about the life of Livingstone. And she decided, like so many children who finally do no such thing, to be a missionary when she grew up. But though with her, too, the idea went, it left a hook behind. She still believed that whatever she did with her life, God had a destiny for it which she could find. And slowly she began to feel that the place for her life's work was not so much the distant mission field as the council and Parliament of her own city, Copenhagen. So when in 1909 women could be elected to city councils for the first time, she was put as No. 1 on the list in her own community. For 27 years she served on the council of Copenhagen, and from 1932-45 she represented the Conservative Party in Parliament.

Now for our day and age her way of choosing a career has too strong a flavour of the past—or is it of the future?—to be easily grasped. But to understand this lady it must be grasped, because so many

of her ideas and achievements stem from it. It meant, for one thing, that whatever she did, whether amending the divorce laws or working for homeless children, she did with a certainty and courage that both forestalled her opponents and compelled their respect. It meant, too, that the things for which she fought came before questions of Party or career. She often surprised people by the warmth of her friendship with the women Labour M.P.s, and her willingness to co-operate with all whose ideas were sound. At one election campaign, just before the war, she told the other candidates in her constituency that she was not going to be "personal" or include in her campaign anything slighting to the other Parties. After the election, she and Labour's first woman candidate were asked to hold a discussion over the radio. At Miss Mundt's suggestion they called it: "What we agreed on." This is typical of her attitude. She would say often: "I would not be in political life if I could not co-operate with other Parties over my work for the children."

**I**T was this work for the children that lay closest to her heart. She fought relentlessly for the poor, homeless, delinquent children of Denmark and the reform of hospitals, education and maternity laws that that involved. Her idea of woman's place in public life was a fresh and human one. She felt they were necessary not as either pale or over-aggressive replicas of men, but for the slant they alone could give, the jerk back to hard earth and human values when problems had ascended into the hazy realm of theory and had been all but settled with a wave of the pipe and a stroke of the pen. There is a story that, when a new school was being planned in a factory area, she suggested to the board that a kitchen be installed for the girls to learn cooking, with a room next to it where even the boys could try their hands at darning their socks. The board met this decision with reserve. What would be the parents' reactions? Such a thing had never been done before. They turned the idea down. But she persisted. Finally the rooms were installed and became popular. Before long every other school in the area followed suit.

As a member of the large "population committee" that had to deal with the economic and social effects of the steadily falling birth rate, Miss Mundt could offer the practical experience of her life-long work for child welfare. The country's experts put their heads together and discussed better housing, help for mothers, etc., she agreed with them. But she went farther. She felt strongly that the moral and spiritual foundations of the nation are laid in its homes, and when other members of the committee wanted to use medical and social help to replace, instead of reinforce, moral standards, she took a firm stand. The report was written four times, and more and more of her points were accepted. But with one of her main stipulations for health education—the need to teach the child absolute moral standards rather than techniques to avoid getting into trouble—the committee could not agree.

Now difficulty draws out certain dogged qualities in Miss Mundt. Her persistent tactics remind me sometimes of Babe Didrikson, the

famous golfer, who played until her hands bled and then bandaged them and went on playing. On this occasion Miss Mundt put down her convictions in a special report that was sent in with the majority report. "We have given in to you on nearly all points," said someone, "why not take this report back?" But, as another member put it: "She sat through forty committee meetings, always kept up her spirits, and always stuck to that report."

You will see why the families of Denmark enjoy Miss Mundt and love her for her work for the children. During the war they showed it. She helped organise the Lotte Corps, which corresponds to the British W.V.S., and remained in Parliament, though going was difficult. The Germans tried to force through certain laws, which the Danes refused to pass. Members who opposed them were marked men. One day two Germans came to Miss Mundt's flat at four in the morning, but it happened to be one of the rare occasions when she was spending a night elsewhere. Later she had to go underground for a while. But every home she came to for help or shelter knew her and at once opened its doors to her.

And now we are back again, struggling with an uneasy peace, and Miss Mundt is once more in Denmark, her tour over. Is she just another enterprising woman in public life, with a courageous and colourful career behind her? Or has she something for our precarious future?

I think she has. Because she is unassuming, it is at first hard to pin down. "Write about the big people, not about me," she said. It is easy to miss evaluating such people, because they will not do it for you. They blow no trumpet to startle your attention. You have to watch closely and listen well, and draw your own conclusions.

While I was drawing mine about Miss Mundt, it struck me that somehow she had a different quality from that of our world to-day. Our ersatz world, with its saccharin and spivs, its glamour and gauleiters. We women who can't say "no" to ourselves, and yet hope so wistfully that aggressor nations will. Sometimes the whole set-up seems like a cardboard model, a little thin and shoddy and liable at any moment to totter.

Miss Mundt's world is different. It is real and solid and life-size and as fresh as her complexion. Both her feet are on the ground and she knows where she is going. She has a strength whose source is not a blustering personality, but which comes, in the words of another of her childhood heroes, from "firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right." And that is her gift to the future.