THE 1985 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE
A NORWEGIAN LOBBYIST FOR IPPNW: MD DAGMAR KARIN SØRBØE

By Ivar Libæk, April 2014

This text deals with how it was possible that the 5-year old organisation International Physicians to Prevent Nuclear War (IPPNW) became Peace Prize Laureate in 1985 during an ice-cold period of the Cold War.¹

Tuesday November 14th 2000 I had a three hour long conversation with the Norwegian medical doctor Dagmar Karin Sørbøe (born 1945).² She told in detail how she lobbied members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee (Gidske Andersson, Gunnar Stålsett, Egil Årvik) and the Committee’s Secretary and Director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, Professor Jakob Sverdrup. Dr. Sørbøe brought a lot of documents to strengthen her story.

A few days later I got copies of these documents with Sørbøe’s personal handwritten remarks and explanations.³ These important sources make it possible to reconstruct the remarkable decision-making process before the 1985 Peace Prize Laureate was chosen. This is very special, because the written sources in the Norwegian Nobel Institute’s Archives are only available to the public after 50 years.

The Beginning

The summer 1982 Dr. Sørbøe participated during IPPNW’s second World Congress in England.⁴ According to her this was the first real congress in the organisation, and more than 400 physicians from various countries participated.⁵ Sørbøe was deeply moved by IPPNW’s ideas presented at the meeting; she participated in the discussions and showed the others that she was willing to do what she could for the organisation.

In the debates she underlined that the Soviet participants were equal members, and she became spokesman for a flat structure and democratic rules, but the young organisation needed prestige. Therefore she underlined that as a Norwegian she would try to get IPPNW the Nobel Peace Prize. Because of this initiative and because she spoke many languages and was internationally oriented, Sørbøe was elected Vice-President with responsibility for Europe and Canada.

Letter of Nomination and Campaign

Back in Norway Sørbøe read the statutes for the Nobel Peace Prize. She wrote a document she called “Possible Draft of Nobel Prize Nominating Letter”.⁶ Then she contacted Professor of Philosophy, Knut Erik Tranøy, at the University of Oslo. As a university professor he had the right to nominate individuals or institutions for the Nobel Peace Prize.⁷ He signed Sørbøe’s

¹ Remember that Norway together with USA and other Western countries made a boycott of the Olympic Summer Games in Moscow, 1980, the same year that IPPNW was founded.
² The interview was held in my office at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo.
³ These documents are now Nobeliana’s archives. They are not available without the consent of Dr. Sørbøe.
⁴ The other Norwegian on the Congress was Professor Einar Kringlen.
⁵ Read about the history of IPPNW on this website.
⁶ Copy of this document in Nobeliana’s archives. Sørbøe discussed the content with people abroad, but her text is in fact the Letter of Nomination sent to the Norwegian Nobel Committee.
⁷ See this website for all persons who have the right to nominate.
Nominating Letter, and she brought the document in person to the Secretary of the Nobel Committee, Director Sverdrup at the Norwegian Nobel Institute.\footnote{Copy of Tranøy’s nomination of January 1st 1983 in Nobelian’s archives.}

And this was an important stage in the decision-making process. Sørbøe found it extremely important to establish close relations to the people who made the decision (the members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee) and the bureaucracy (the Secretary of the Committee/Director of the Institute). The latter gets all the nominations and sets up the so-called short list of candidates before presenting it to the committee members.

In the interview November 14\textsuperscript{th} 2000 Sørbøe told that she continually contacted Director Sverdrup. She also kept control in the great campaign that now took place both in East and West. Most of the nominations for IPPNW were sent to her private address in Oslo. Therefore she could personally bring them to Sverdrup “to keep the case warm”.

Sørbøe also told that she contacted members of the committee. Committee member Gidske Anderson was impressed, and after the decision was made in 1985 she wanted to write a book about Sørbøe’s work. Unfortunately she died before she had realised the project.

The Announcement October 1985

IPPNW was an unknown organisation to most people before 1985. Therefore Sørbøe found it important that it became a Peace Prize Laureate. This fact she told Sverdrup and the members of the Nobel Committee. It would also be of value to use the award to inform people about IPPNW and the fight against nuclear weapons.

The announcement for the Nobel Peace Prize is made in mid-October, and the name of the laureate is kept secret to the last minute. But Sørbøe wanted to be informed beforehand if IPPNW was to be chosen, and she was successful. Director Sverdrup put his words to her in such a way that she understood that IPPNW would become the winner, even if he did not tell her directly.\footnote{Sørbøe’s words to me.} This gave her time to work on politicians and media so that the award was received positively. She realised of course that a Peace Prize to IPPNW could be heavily criticised because Soviet doctors participated.

Sørbøe visited Egil Sundar, Chief Editor of Norway’s leading conservative newspaper \textit{Aftenposten} in his office. In turn he contacted Prime Minister Kåre Willoch (Conservative), and his newspaper and the Prime Minister spoke in favour of IPPNW after the announcement.\footnote{Aftenposten, October 12th 1985: “Willoch: En fortjent oppmuntring” (Willoch: A deserved Encouragement) Carl I. Hagen, leader of Fremskrittspartiet (The Progressive Party) was the only Norwegian party leader who spoke negatively of the 1985 decision.} So did also the newspaper \textit{Dagbladet} and NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting) which had interviewed Sørbøe before the announcement.

Sørbøe also kept her colleagues abroad informed. When the Peace Prize for 1985 was announced in Oslo, IPPNW held a conference in Geneva, Switzerland, where the two leaders Jevgenij Tsjasov from the Soviet Union and Bernhard Lown from USA participated. Sørbøe informed both of them in order to make them fit to meet the international press. Therefore the two heart surgeons were not surprised when Gunnar Stålsett, member of the Nobel Committee and at that time leader of World Council of Churches seated in Geneva, came to IPPNW’s conference to tell the happy news.
Conclusion

The lobbying for IPPNW was a success, and Dagmar Karin Sørbøe’s role was decisive. The written sources that I have had access to makes it clear that IPPNW never would have been Peace Prize Laureate without her efforts.

But perhaps somebody will rewrite this story in 2035? Then the Norwegian Nobel Institute opens its archives because 50 years have passed, and who knows what they hide?