

Mystery in History: The Isdal Woman by Douglas Harrell

On November 29, 1970, a young girl hiking with her father and sister made a gruesome discovery at Isdalen in the mountains outside Bergen, Norway. High above the town in a desolate area known as Ice Valley, tucked among boulders, she stumbled on the corpse of a woman lying on her back, the front of her body burned beyond recognition. Carefully laid out nearby were a bottle of liquor, jewelry, a matchbox, clothes, and other miscellaneous articles. The next day, much to the surprise of local police, a team of National Criminal Investigative Services personnel arrived from Oslo—a clear indication that something big was afoot.

Investigators quickly identified her as Elizabeth Leenhouwfr of Ostend, who had paid her bill in cash, and checked out of the Hotel Hordaheimen the previous Monday. Witnesses recalled her speaking Flemish, and described her as a nervous woman, five-foot-four tall, with brown hair and brown eyes. She had a prominent gap between her front teeth and unusual gold dental work. However, when contacted, Belgian authorities reported that no such person existed. The rumors began flying. Was the woman a real-life version of a Bond girl, and if so, which side was she on?

If she was a spy, she was most likely working for the Russians. The Cold War was in full swing, and Bergen was home to a major naval base and other military facilities. With a thousand-mile coastline, and a northern border 70 miles from the Russian naval base in Murmansk, Norway was a critical NATO ally in the monitoring of Soviet subs as they traversed the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap. Unexplained deaths and disappearances in the vicinity of bases were not uncommon. Further fueling this suspicion was the fact that tests of a new, top-secret NATO anti-ship missile were being conducted at Bergen and other Norwegian naval bases that year.

A police sketch was circulated, and witnesses began coming forward. A waitress at the Hotel Neptun, in Bergen, remembered the woman staying there in early November. She had been impressed by her beauty, and stylish clothes. Her manner was confident, so much so that when the woman caught her staring, she gave the waitress a wink. On another occasion, the waitress had seen her seated next to, but not interacting with, two German naval personnel. Was it possible she was eavesdropping, or worse, receiving classified information?



Police / Bergen State Archives

Police artist sketch of the Isdal Woman, circulated in Norway.

A trove of enigmatic clues came to light when two of her suitcases were discovered in a checkroom at the Bergen railway station. All the labels of her clothes had been removed, hiding their origin and offering no hints as to her identity. The suitcases also contained wigs, makeup, sunglasses, a pair of nonprescription glasses, maps, timetables, and a tube of eczema cream. She had money from several European countries, and had saved a plastic shopping bag from Rome, and one from a shoe store in Stavanger, site of another Norwegian naval base. When contacted, the shopkeeper confirmed that he had sold her the blue rubber boots found near her body. He recalled her being inquisitive and indecisive.

He also recalled she smelled strongly of garlic, a seasoning virtually unknown in Scandinavia at the time. Most intriguing was a sheet of paper covered with short,

coded notations that, when deciphered, were found to be a record of her itinerary.

As investigators traced her movements, a more complete picture of the woman emerged. She was fluent in German and spoke English with a pronounced foreign accent. Her handwriting indicated she had been educated in France. In her travels, she had registered with eight different passports, using a new identity at each hotel. During a stay, she often asked to change rooms, and on several occasions maids reported she had moved furniture to block the door. A few days before she was last seen, a maid at the Hotel Rosencrantz in Bergen accidentally surprised her sitting in her room with a stocky blond man. The woman immediately checked out and moved to the Hotel Hordaheimen, changing her identity and disguising her handwriting.

Continued on next page



Douglas Gaines Harrell is a recovering chemical engineer who has taken up mystery writing as a second career. Hard at work on his first novel, he has taken time out to write several short stories inspired by local history, published in anthologies by Cat & Mouse Press of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. Visit him at www.douglasharrell.com.

Mystery in History, continued

Tantalizingly, the cities and dates of her movements corresponded with the Penguin guided missile tests. She had visited Bergen for a week in March, and had returned to Stavanger on October 29. A fisherman there remembered having seen her on the docks observing navy ships and having an extended conversation with a torpedo boat captain. She next traveled to Bergen, Trondheim, and back to Stavanger, before returning to Bergen, where her body was found.

Once it became clear that international espionage was involved, the investigation was summarily shut down. An autopsy revealed 50 pills of incompletely digested phenobarbital in her stomach, and the presence of soot in her lungs—proof she was still breathing while burning. Authorities concluded she had taken the drugs, and set herself alight shortly before losing consciousness. A verdict of suicide was rendered, and her remains, minus her jaw, were buried in an unmarked grave in February, 1971. The questions of who she was, and what she was doing remained unanswered.

For decades, no new information emerged about the “Isdal Woman” as she came to be known. However, a 2017 BBC article generated new interest, and teams of armchair detectives sprang up in Norway and around the world. Did she kill herself, or was she murdered? Together with reporters from the BBC and Norway’s NRK, the new investigators hoped to find out. As their work progressed, they updated their findings in a BBC podcast, “Death in Ice Valley.”

Science had advanced dramatically in the intervening years, and it was hoped that newly developed tests might reveal clues regarding her identity. Her jaw had not been buried with her, but where was it? A professor of dentistry had saved it, but he had died, and it was presumed lost. Luckily, it was located in the forensic archives of a hospital in Bergen. The Norwegian government prepared a complete DNA profile, and shared it with law enforcement agencies around the world. The results showed she was of European descent. If they discovered anything beyond that, it was not made public. Comparing crime scene DNA with commercial databases has cracked many cold cases, including that of the Golden

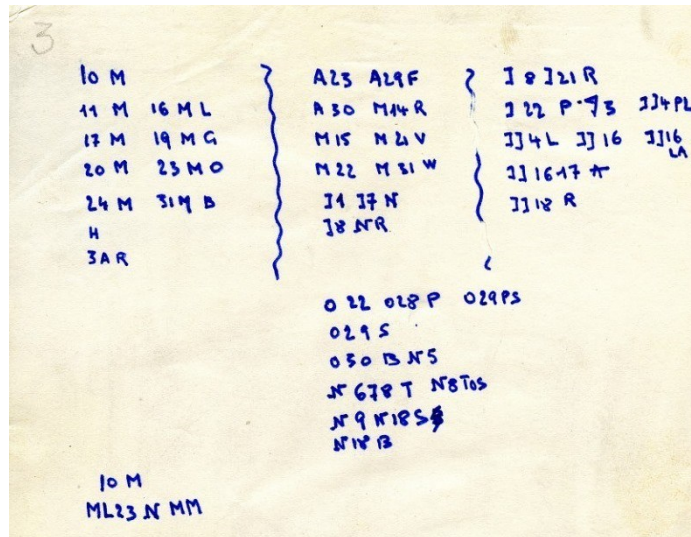


Photo: Øyvind Bye Skille / NRK

Cryptic notes found in a suitcase at the railway station. Notes on the bottom right document her movements in Norway. O22 O28 P O29 PS = Oct. 22-28 in Paris, Oct 29 Paris to Stavanger; O30 B N5 = Oct. 30 to Nov. 5 in Bergen; N678 T N8 TS = Nov. 6-8 Trondheim, then Stavanger; N9 N18 S = Nov. 9-18 Stavanger; N18 B = Nov. 18 Bergen, her last stop.

State Killer, a case dating back to the 1970s. So far, the Norwegian authorities have refused to allow it.

However, the government did permit her teeth to be examined. Stable isotopes of strontium and oxygen exist in different concentrations around the world, and are permanently stored in the teeth of growing children. Their relative levels can pinpoint the source of the food and water a child consumed with amazing accuracy.

This analysis showed that the Isdal Woman had been born near Nuremberg, Germany, around 1930. While still a child, her family had moved west to an area between France and Germany, perhaps Belgium. This squared with her French education, and suggested her family may have fled Nazi Germany in the mid-1930s. Some have speculated she was Jewish

and working for the Israelis, who were known to be gathering intelligence on NATO to further their own weapons developments. International appeals for relatives of missing persons to come forward have not yielded any results. At this point, the investigation has stalled.

As classified archives have been opened, previously undisclosed evidence and interviews have painted a vivid picture of Cold War intrigue worthy of a John le Carré novel. Her different identities, disguises, and movements were the choreographed dance of an accomplished spy morphing like a chameleon as she flitted around Europe gathering intelligence on NATO installations.

The events and motivations around her death are far murkier. She had been calm and deliberate early in November, but agitated during her final days. Was it fear or despair? The removal of her jewelry, and its careful arrangement with her other personal effects, suggests she deliberately killed herself. Given that great effort was expended to obliterate her identity, wouldn't a killer have wanted to remove every trace?

The dramatic life and death of the Isdal Woman has all the makings of a great spy novel. However, unless her DNA can be traced, or new information surfaces, the final pages may never be written.