

Ragnar Sohlman and the Will of Alfred Nobel



The will of Alfred Nobel came as a complete surprise; he had discussed it with no one before his death. It was hand written on a sheet of paper, with notes scribbled in the margin, and had never been reviewed by a lawyer, since Nobel distrusted lawyers. Probating the will and setting up the Nobel Prizes consumed the life of Ragnar Sohlman for more than three years. In the end he was successful, and the Nobel Foundation and the Nobel Prizes owe their existence to the persistence and vision of this resourceful young man.

Ragnar Sohlman, a young chemical engineer working for Nobel in San Remo, was Alfred Nobel's most trusted friend. He and Rudolf Lilljequist, another of Nobel's engineers, were made the executors of his will. They in turn engaged Carl Lindhagen, an influential and very capable attorney and politician in Stockholm. Together they faced several problems:

- (1) There was no Nobel Foundation, so the money had been left to no one, to nothing;
- (2) The will was imprecise, and it was not determined even in what country the will should be probated;
- (3) Some of the family, who were left only a small fraction of the estate, contested the will;
- (4) The press and others criticized the will, calling it unpatriotic since it did not single out Swedes for the prizes. They also argued that it should not be used to make a few individuals wealthy, and voiced other objections;
- (5) The assets of the estate were not liquid, and in fact were in risky ventures;
- (6) The institutions chosen to award the prizes weren't willing to accept the responsibility.

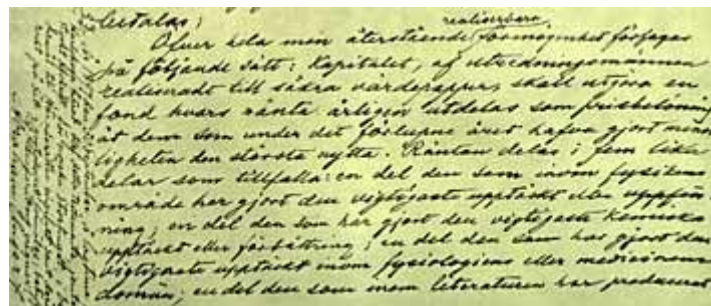
The first job, then, was to set up the Nobel Foundation. This was done in Sweden, where the will was eventually probated. Although Nobel had been living in France, the Paris court declared itself incompetent in this case because Nobel had moved his domicile to Sweden. He had moved his horses to Bjoerborn, near Bofors, where he was setting up a

residence, and the court declared that where a man's horses are, there is his residence! It also helped that the will was written in Swedish, and that Nobel had appointed Swedish executors. Regarding the third point, some of the family (Alfred's nephew Emanuel, who wanted to consolidate control of the family oil industry in Russia, and was wealthier than Alfred) immediately supported Alfred's desire to set up the prizes. When the rest of the family were granted additional money, they finally gave up their suit. On the fourth point, it is interesting to note that the prominent socialist, Hjalmar Branting, who criticized the Prizes for making individuals rich, later won the Nobel Prize himself. With respect to the fifth point, Sohlman had to convert the assets of the estate to bonds and get them out of France before the French government could tax them. He literally put all the bonds in trunks and carried them across Paris in a carriage with a loaded pistol in his lap! Finally, the awarding institutions were convinced to accept the responsibility of awarding the prizes. This was accomplished, first of all, by making detailed regulations for the awards which would protect the institutions from criticism, and second, by giving a substantial portion of the funds to the institutions to set up research institutes.

During this same period (1898), Sohlman was drafted into the Swedish army. He served as an officer and was able to get use of a telephone (a rarity in those days) by purchasing a phone line for the Officers' Club and leaving it there when he left!

The will was written and dated 27 November 1895, in Paris. Nobel died 10 December 1896, in San Remo, and the will was probated on 9 November 1897, in Stockholm. The statutes of the Nobel Foundation were established by Royal Ordinance on 29 June 1900, three and one-half years after Alfred Nobel died. The first Nobel Prizes were awarded on the 10th of December, 1901, the fifth anniversary of Nobel's death. Ragnar Sohlman served as the Executive Director of the Nobel Foundation for the period 1929-1946.

The will itself establishes five prizes (a sixth prize, called the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics, was subsequently established by the Bank of Sweden). The will was hand written, on a yellow pad, with notes scrawled in the margin:



In part, it states: “The whole of my remaining realizable estate shall be dealt with in the following way: the capital, invested in safe securities by my executors, shall constitute a fund, the interest on which shall be annually distributed in the form of prizes to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind. The said interest shall be divided into five equal parts, which shall be apportioned as follows: one part to the person who shall have made the most important discovery or

invention within the field of physics; one part to the person who shall have made the most important chemical discovery or improvement; one part to the person who shall have made the most important discovery within the domain of physiology or medicine; one part to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction; and one part to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses. The prizes for physics and chemistry shall be awarded by the Swedish Academy of Sciences; that for physiology or medical works by the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm; that for literature by the Academy in Stockholm, and that for champions of peace by a committee of five persons to be elected by the Norwegian Storting. It is my express wish that in awarding the prizes no consideration be given to the nationality of the candidates, but that the most worthy shall receive the prize, whether he be Scandinavian or not." That's all that the will says. All the rules that now apply to the awarding of the Nobel Prizes have been established on the one hand to reflect the wishes of Nobel, and on the other to protect the awarding institutions from criticism. Legally, the rules are established by a Code of Statutes published in 1900 and signed by King Oscar of Sweden. According to the rules, for example, no posthumous awards are allowed, no self-nominations are permitted, no protests can be lodged, and the records remain sealed for 50 years. How well have the rules been followed? That will be one of the subjects to be discussed in the rest of the course.