

Fighting a world of hate

Iranian-born Mina Dennert is leading a movement that challenges racial hatred in her home country, with a message for the entire world

BY SARAH BRITZ
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She woke up with her hair cut off and her body covered in Nazi symbols. She was 14 years old. In the white, rich and apparently peaceful area of Kullavik, south of Gothenburg, Sweden, Mina Dennert had become a girl who posed a threat to the white race.

"Not being Swedish had never even occurred to me," Dennert admitted, 26 years later, as she reflected on how you go about taking back control of your own life after such a devastating event. The social climate back then and its consequences, which resulted in the humiliation and rejection of that particular teenage girl in the suburb of Kullavik, meant that Dennert almost ceased to exist.

Today, at least, there's an answer. Dennert is the founder of #jagärhär, the Swedish movement known in the UK as #iamhere. The aim of the #jagärhär movement is for nobody to be exposed to hate speech or threats, and for nobody to have to face hatred alone.

All of this seems immediately relevant in light of President Donald Trump's disparaging statement on European immigration, likening immigrants to terrorists and calling it "very negative" to historically white European countries.

But let's take another look where it all started, back in the early 1990s. There was a recession both in Sweden and throughout the Balkans. Sweden accepts 84,000 refugees. Over a 12-month period, 117 refugee camps are attacked. In 1991, an election year, a new political trend is on the rise. An anti-immigrant group, composed of young, uneducated men, which argues in favor of reduced immigration, grew in size. As it did so, it brought together an increasing number of younger people – the section of the electorate that has traditionally had a more open-minded attitude. During this time, Sweden's

population as a whole became more negative in its attitude toward immigrants. Opinions continue to shift, despite the fact that fewer refugees were arriving and fewer permanent residence permits were being granted.

Ian Wachtmeister and Bert Karlsson travelled around the country, stacking beer crates on top of each other to symbolize what they claimed immigration is costing society. This attitude affected practically all of the parliamentary parties, whose policies become more restrictive, and the political rhetoric changed from being welcoming to discussing

the ways in which refugees and immigrants are a burden on Swedish society. The New Democracy party entered Parliament.

During the same period, a network named White Aryan Resistance embarked upon a violent hate campaign against immigrants, Jews and homosexuals, by making threats and carrying out acts of violence accompanied by white power music. They had no ambitions for parliamentary influence. Their sympathizers – right-wing extremist skinheads in bomber jackets and boots – were visible on Sweden's streets.



PHOTO BY MARIO PRHAT OCH AORTA

The Keep Sweden Swedish, or BSS party dissolves in the late 1980s. In 1988, the Swedish Democrat party is created, and its members include former members of BSS. The party retains the BSS slogan "Keep Sweden Swedish" until the late 1990s. The party seeks parliamentary influence and wins its first mandates in municipal councils in 1991.

In the meantime, Mina Dennert was growing up in the white and relatively affluent suburb of Kullavik, south of Gothenburg. She is an adopted child, born in Iran and brought to Sweden as a 1-year-old.

Iranian-born Mina Dennert was adopted as a 1-year-old and grew up in Sweden. Having never considered herself as being different, her world was turned upside down when she was attacked by Neo-Nazis when she was 14. Now, as the founder of the #jagärhär (#iamhere) organization, she is leading a movement that is challenging racial hatred and gaining in popularity all over Europe.

In 1989, she was 14. It is at this time that she became closely acquainted with the effects of radicalization on her group of friends: suddenly she found herself in a situation where her very existence is questioned. "I have a very clear memory of the first time I heard of 'Keep Sweden Swedish,'" she says. "It was the last Saturday of the summer holidays. A guy walked past, looked at me and just said it out loud. My whole world crashed down around me. I just didn't understand. Wasn't I Swedish? I'm as Swedish as they come!"

Dennert was a girl who loved black pudding, ate jam on everything, who knew the official flowers of all the Swedish provinces, was a nerd about her country's history and who wanted to preserve its traditions. "If I wasn't Swedish, what was I?" Everything changed that summer.

"The guys who used to hang out by the youth center with their mopeds suddenly became neo-Nazis," Dennert said. "And everyone went along with them." Her boyfriend dumped her and denied that they'd ever been together. A love letter that she wrote to him was photocopied and spread all over the school – covered in swastikas and neo-Nazi propaganda.

"I just wanted to run home and hide," Dennert says. "I was sitting there at the bus stop one day with a friend when a man came up with his gang. It felt like there were several hundred men, but we just stayed there. We had nowhere to go, and so me and my friend decided to go over to Billdal, the next suburb over." Dennert said laughing. "Go over to Billdal! That's where the people who were against the neo-Nazis lived. They met up at the bus station and fought each other on the weekends."

Dennert laughs often, even when she is telling the worst parts of her story. "It's only now, looking back, that I see all the stuff I put up with, how bad it was and how significant it's been in my life," she said. "One of my best friends was black, too. It was pretty much just him and me. And he couldn't cope. He died a few years back, after many years of drug abuse. Even though he did it to himself, it was the racial hatred that drove him to it."

In the 1990s, a string of violent crimes and murders were committed that had neo-Nazi and extreme right-wing overtones. Eleven people were shot in Stockholm between 1991 and 1992 and the victims had what was described as being a "non-Swedish appearance." The most extensive police investigation in Sweden since the murder of Olof Palme, the Swedish Prime Minister assassinated in Stockholm in 1986. After some time, the man known as "The Laser Man" was caught and sentenced to life for one murder, 10 attempted murders and nine bank robberies.

Within a few years, West Sweden was shaken by two additional murders, of which neo-Nazis are found guilty: John Hron was tortured to death in Kode and sculptor Per Skogsberg was beaten to death in Gothenburg. John, a 14-year-old, was killed because he refused to praise Nazism and Per was murdered because of his sexual orientation.

In just one year, #jagärhär has gone from being a small group on the Internet to being a well-established association that holds talks, workshops, forms opinions and is involved in dialogue with the government, the mainstream media and social media giants alike. Dennert is currently the only employee. The association has received praise and

financial support and has been mentioned as a good example in the Swedish Government's action plan, "In defense of free speech," which presents measures to combat threats and hatred directed at journalists, elected representatives and artists.

#jagärhär will be launching its forthcoming book, "Courage" ("Mod") at the Gothenburg Book Fair.

Almost 76,000 people are members of the organization's Swedish Facebook group. The movement is also spreading beyond Sweden's boundaries: The German group has nearly 40,000. Its members take action online in threads where hate, fake news and racism thrive. They do this not by entering into the controversy, but by standing up for reasoned dialogue or simply by demonstrating their presence.

"I've always felt 'racified,'" Dennert says. "What does that mean? Different people have different interpretations, but for me it means being subject to, or in the danger zone for experiencing, racism – either physically or mentally." The #jagärhär movement started on May 16, 2016, when Dennert saw that a Facebook friend was sharing racist material. She followed the thread and found herself on racist and anti-immigrant pages. She started to ask questions in the comments in response to what was being posted, asking "Is this likely?" and "Is it true?"

"It wasn't Internet hate, but it was clear that they had a world view based on one insane claim after another," she says. It was then that she had an idea: to do a kind of patrol online. "A bit like a kind of Neighborhood Watch," Dennert says. "I asked a few friends what they thought of the idea. The strategy is simple. We tag things so that it's easy to find each other and we like each other's comments, so that what we say gets placed at the top of the thread. We show that we're there, so that other people feel able to speak out."

We start talking about why #jagärhär is important. "There's a power in daring to speak out," Dennert says. "You become stronger when you see that you aren't alone. Being the victim of hate means that you're filled with shame. It's embarrassing to be different; to be a victim. They say, 'You're stupid, you're disgusting,' and then it's all about you, and not about the fact that they're neo-Nazis, for example."

Dennert has no need to discuss things with right-wing extremists but said that it's important that it's not only victims who are expected to protest and try to change things: it's the responsibility of the whole majority of society. "We should make room for those who aren't allowed a voice," she said, with an intense look on her face.

She laughed again and twisted her hair into a knot on the top of her head. After a little while, the knot unraveled itself and her hair fell down again.

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