

HER STORY:
THE FIRST WOMAN
ON THE BENCH
OF THE EUROPEAN
COURT OF
HUMAN RIGHTS

1971

1980

Helga Pedersen

HELGA PEDERSEN
(1911-1980)



| 24 June 1911

Born near Korsør
Nor, Denmark

| 1936

Master of Laws degree
from the University of
Copenhagen

| 1936

Joined the Ministry of
Justice, serving in several
positions

| 1946-1947

Postgraduate studies at
Columbia University in New
York, with funding from the
American Association of
University Women

| 1947-1948

Judge of the High Court of
Eastern Denmark

| 1948-1956

Judge of the Copenhagen
District Court (excluding
periods as Minister of
Justice)

| 1949-1950

Chair of the National
Council of Danish Women

| 1949-1974

Delegate to the General
Conference of UNESCO,
ultimately serving as Chair
of the Danish delegation

| 1950-1953

Minister of Justice

| 1950

Took part in the United
Nations Commission on the
Status of Women

| 1951

Member of the Danish
Constitutional Commission

| 1951

Appointed Commander
of the Order of the
Dannebrog, becoming
the first woman to receive
that rank

| 1953-1964

Served as a member of
the Danish Parliament,
the Folketinget, acting as
legal spokesperson for her
party

| 1956-1964

Judge of the High Court of
Eastern Denmark

| 1963-1972

Member of the Copyright
Council

| 1964

Judge of the Supreme
Court of Denmark, the
second woman to hold
that office

| 1964-1973

Chair of the Board of
Representatives of the
Danish National Arts
Foundation



Helga Pedersen, 1980



Photograph on loan from the Local History
Archive for Korsør and the Surrounding
Area, Slagelse Archives



Group of judges, 1975



THE FIRST WOMAN ON THE BENCH OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I 1970

Elected to the Conciliation and Good Offices Commission set up by UNESCO under the Convention against Discrimination in Education

I 1971-1980

Judge of the European Court of Human Rights, the first woman to hold that position

I 1972-1980

Chair of the Danish Press Board

I 1974-1980

Chair of the Foundation for Trees and the Environment

I 1975

Published the book *Le Danemark a-t-il sauvé Céline* in Danish and in French

I 1976

Promoted to Commander of the Order of the Dannebrog, 1st Degree

I 1976

Awarded the Gold Medal of the Association of World Peace Through Law

I 27 January 1980

Died near Korsør Nor, Denmark



Helga Pedersen at the podium during an annual meeting in Flensburg in 1956
Photographer unknown / Archive of the Danish Central Library for South Schleswig



A LAWMAKER, A LAW ADMINISTRATOR, A LAW INTERPRETER

|| I was Minister of Justice for three years – what you call the law administrator, though it also meant being a law initiator. And I have been a Justice of the Supreme Court of Denmark since 1964, after having been on three different occasions on the bench of lower courts – as such, you could say that I am an interpreter of the law. ||

Extract from an interview with Judge Helga Pedersen in the journal *Impact of Science on Society* (Vol. XXI, No. 3, July–September 1971)

THE FIRST WOMAN ON THE BENCH OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

HELGA PEDERSEN

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THE FIRST WOMAN JUDGE AT THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

In 1971, following a distinguished judicial career, Helga Pedersen became the first woman judge to serve on the European Court of Human Rights, twelve years after the Court began its work. She remained a judge at the Court until her death in 1980.

During her term of office, she was a member of several judicial formations which adopted landmark Grand Chamber judgments, including:

- | *Golder v. the United Kingdom* (1975)
- | *Engel and Others v. the Netherlands* (1976)
- | *Handyside v. the United Kingdom* (1976)
- | *Ireland v. the United Kingdom* (1978)
- | *Tyrer v. the United Kingdom* (1978)
- | *Marckx v. Belgium* (1979)



She also presided over the Chamber which delivered the landmark judgment in *Winterwerp v. the Netherlands* (1979) on arbitrary detention in psychiatric hospitals, which led to legal reforms whereby patients facing involuntary admission to a psychiatric hospital gained the right to be heard by the court ruling on their detention.

|| THANKS TO HER LONG EXPERIENCE AS A MAGISTRATE, THE WARMTH AND FORCEFULNESS OF HER CHARACTER, HER ATTENTION TO HUMAN REALITIES, HER OUTGOING NATURE AND UNENDING GOOD SENSE, SHE MADE A VITAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORK OF THE COURT. THE COURT IS PROUD TO HAVE HAD HELGA PEDERSEN AS ONE OF ITS MEMBERS, AND WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER HER WITH RESPECT AND EMOTION. ||

Gérard J. Wiarda, former President of the European Court of Human Rights announcing the death of Helga Pedersen.
Excerpt from the book *Hele verden til spillerum: En bog om Helga Pedersen* ("The Whole World as a Playground—A Book about Helga Pedersen"), Gyldendal, p. 139.

HELGA PEDERSEN

MINISTER OF JUSTICE: A DEATH PENALTY ABOLITIONIST



The farm of Helga Pedersen,
where she spent most of her life

On 30 October 1950, Helga Pedersen became Denmark's Minister of Justice in the coalition government led by Prime Minister Erik Eriksen, despite having no party affiliation at the time. A staunch opponent of the death penalty, she had demanded, before accepting the appointment, the right to recommend clemency in any future capital punishment cases. During her time as Minister of Justice, no further death sentences were handed down and none were carried out. As Minister of Justice, she repealed rules under which criminal convictions automatically entailed ancillary penalties involving the loss of civil rights.

|| THAT WAS THE SORT OF PERSON SHE WAS. A PRACTICAL FARMER, WITH HER FEET FIRMLY PLANTED ON THE GROUND. AND AT THE SAME TIME, A CAPABLE MINISTER OF JUSTICE, WHO KNEW HER PROFESSION INSIDE OUT – AND MORE THAN THAT. ||

Professor W.E. v. Eyben, from the book *Hele verden til spillerum: En bog om Helga Pedersen* ("The Whole World as a Playground—A Book about Helga Pedersen"), Gyldendal, p. 36.

HELGA PEDERSEN

A VOICE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Helga Pedersen was deeply involved in furthering legal equality between women and men and promoting women's rights.

While serving as Minister of Justice, she worked to further this equality by reforming administrative practice so that women could be appointed to Orders, rather than merely receiving medals. In 1951, Helga Pedersen became the first woman to be appointed Commander of the Order of the Dannebrog. She was also a member of the Constitutional Commission of 1951. In that capacity, she supported the unconditional right of women to succeed to the throne. The 1953 Constitution ultimately introduced only conditional female succession, giving priority to male heirs.

She also served as Chair of the National Council of Danish Women, participated in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and acted as delegate to the General Conference of UNESCO, becoming Chair of the Danish delegation in 1962. Alongside nine women consultants, she contributed to a report for UNESCO's Director-General on the promotion of women through access to education, science and culture for the period 1967-1976. The report emphasised that complete equality between women and men – in both law and practice – was a prerequisite for development.

|| THIS LITTLE GLIMPSE INTO THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE COURT SEEMS TO ME SO CHARACTERISTIC OF HELGA – AT THE CENTRE OF THE CIRCLE, FESTIVE AND RADIANT, ALWAYS IN HIGH SPIRITS, IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERLOOK OR IGNORE. ||

Mogens Hvidt, from the book *Hele verden til spillerum: En bog om Helga Pedersen* ("The Whole World as a Playground—A Book about Helga Pedersen"), Gyldendal, p. 9.