



EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
COUR EUROPÉENNE DES DROITS DE L'HOMME

Inauguration of the Helga Pedersen room

Speech by Mattias Guyomar

24 September 2026

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Guests,

On behalf of the European Court of Human Rights, it is a real pleasure to welcome you to the Human Rights Building.

I would like to extend a special welcome to a group of Danish judges visiting our Court; to Denmark's Permanent Representative, Ambassador Jensen; and to Mr Lars Pedersen, a relative of Helga Pedersen's. Thank you all for joining us today.

Let me also express my gratitude to the Judge of the Court elected in respect of Denmark, Anne-Louise Bormann, for your help in preparing today's event.

Last year, we gave the name of Luzius Wildhaber, the first President of the new and permanent European Court of Human Rights, to the guest salon opposite.

Earlier this year, in March, we dedicated the Court's Seminar Room to former Court President and Nobel peace prize laureate, René Cassin.

Today, we honour the memory of Helga Pedersen, the first woman to sit as a judge of the Court.

By giving her name to this room, and also with this excellent bilingual exhibition embedded on its walls.

I wish to thank the publishing house Gyldendal and the Danish Institute for Human Rights for providing us with copyrighted material and other help with our in-house exhibition.

In so many ways, Helga Pedersen was a trail blazer.

Among the very first women to cross the invisible line and break into the world, until then, dominated by men.

On so many counts.

Denmark's first ever female Minister of Justice.

First female commander of Denmark's Order of Dannebrog.

Second-ever female Supreme Court judge.¹

And, crucially for us, the first woman to sit as a judge at the European Court of Human Rights.

How did she get there?

A farmer's daughter.

One of six siblings.

Earned a law degree from the University of Copenhagen in 1936.

As one of the very few women to embark on a law career in that time.

She went on to serve as legal secretary to successive Ministers of Justice during World War II, under wartime occupation.

After the war, she undertook a study visit to Columbia University in New York, sponsored by the American Association of University Women.

On her return to Denmark, at the age of 36, she becomes a District Court judge in Copenhagen.

Then, in 1950, at the age of 39, Minister of Justice.

Elected to Parliament in 1953, she will serve as an MP for more than a decade.

In 1964, she is appointed a judge of the Supreme Court.

And, in the crowning moment of her legal career, in 1971 she is elected a Judge of the European Court.

She will remain a judge of the Court for 9 years.

Until her death in 1980, close to the place in which she was born.

I want to stop here for a moment and take stock.

A judge, a minister, a parliamentarian.

And then, an international judge.

I find it fascinating how Helga Pedersen managed to combine, over the course of her legal career, strands characteristic of all three branches of power:

The executive, the legislative, and the judicial.

How unusual, for anyone, in Europe in the 1950s, to have had such an extraordinary breadth of experience.

Today, it is normal for our Court to count among its judges many academics, former judges, jurists, or diplomats.

Individuals who, through their past careers have experienced different approaches to the law.

And it is this melting pot, based on the diversity of experiences and the diversity of backgrounds, that constitutes the wealth of the Court and its collegial functioning.

Looking at Helga Pedersen's career – she was all of this in one, and so much more.

¹ She became a Supreme Court judge in 1964 as the second woman after Bodil Dybdal, appointed in 1953.

At the Court, she left an indelible mark.

As its judge, she was on the bench of several cases that are now recognised as some of the most significant in the Court's case law, with a lasting impact across Europe.

Tyrer v. the United Kingdom, which led to the abolition of corporal punishment in schools.²

Which also laid the ground for the Court's 'living instrument' doctrine.

The *Golder* judgment, which for the first time described the Rule of Law as part of "the common spiritual heritage" of the Council of Europe.³

Handyside, a 1976 case in which the Court affirmed the principle of subsidiarity – today, one of the pillars of the Convention system.⁴

Finally, in September 1979, in a further 'first' – she was the first woman ever to act as President of the Chamber, in the case of *Winterwerp v. the Netherlands* which led to reform of rules on detention in psychiatric hospitals.⁵

Throughout her career, Helga Pedersen's commitment to advancing equality between women and men weaves like a golden thread.

She chaired the National Council of Danish Women.

Participated in the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

And took part in many UNESCO actions on the theme, including on a commission dealing with discrimination in education.

As Minister, she implemented rules that women could be awarded orders, where previously they had to make do with medals.

As a women's rights advocate, she was as much a voice for equality as an example herself.

And often, that meant being alone.

For the first four years at the European Court, she was the Court's only female judge.

One out of 17, and later 18, judges of the Court.

To give you a perspective: for the first 39 years of its existence, until it became permanent in 1998, the Court had only three women judges.⁶

There is no denying that times have changed since then.

But not enough.

Today, there are 16 women out of the 45 judges sitting at the Court.

In this sense, gender equality – in Strasbourg, as in other international jurisdictions – remains a work in progress.

² *Tyrer v. the United Kingdom*, no. 5856/72, 25 April 1978; *Costello-Roberts v. the United Kingdom*, no. 13134/87, 25 March 1993.

³ *Golder v. the United Kingdom*, 21 February 1975, Series A no. 18

⁴ *Handyside v. the United Kingdom*, 7 December 1976, Series A no. 24

⁵ *Winterwerp v. the Netherlands*, 24 October 1979, Series A no. 33

⁶ Stéphanie Hennette Vauchez, More Women – But Which Women? The Rule and the Politics of Gender Balance at the European Court of Human Rights, *European Journal of International Law*, Volume 26, Issue 1, February 2015, Pages 195–221, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chv004>

As well as being a champion of gender equality, Helga Pedersen was a champion of legal humanism.

Take this example: her deep and principled opposition to death penalty.

She had made it a condition for her appointment as Minister of Justice that she could recommend pardon in any future death penalty cases.

During Helga Pedersen's term as Minister and ever since, no death sentences were handed down, and none ever carried out.⁷

She also abolished the rules by which a criminal offence resulted, as an additional penalty, in the loss of civil rights.

It was a humane reform that was an expression of her belief in the value of resocialisation.

I think it's very proper and fitting that the name of Helga Pedersen should be given to this room that, until today, has been known as the Court's Press Room.

She was, among so many other things, a defender of truth and transparency.

For the last eight years of her life, she chaired the Danish Press Council.

Speaking in 1962, she said:

"Being a judge myself I am very much in favour of having meetings and hearings open and public as often as possible.

I think it gives the best result when the press, when the public, shouldn't just guess what has been discussed."⁸

Many other elements of her legacy endure.

Denmark's constitution of 1953, prepared by the Constitutional Commission of which she was a member, is still in force today.

In recognition of her achievements, in 1976, she was awarded the Gold Medal of the Association of the World Peace Through Law.

By the World Association of Jurists which, nine years prior, honoured René Cassin who will now be, in a manner of speaking, her neighbour across the wall.

She was also chosen as the patron of the Human Rights Moot Court Competition, organised each year by the European Law Students Association.

Of which we had the 14th edition in May this year.

Helga Pedersen herself never actively sought the spotlight.

Unassuming and deeply connected to humanity, she knew how to put others before herself.

⁷ "Helga Pedersen, Denmark's first female Minister of Justice.", Dr Ditlev Tamm, Politiken, 20 September 2023, [Helga Pedersen, Danmarks første kvindelige justitsminister - politikenhistorie.dk](https://politikenhistorie.dk/helga-pedersen-danmarks-første-kvindelige-justitsminister)

⁸ Interview with Helga Pederson, High Court judge and member of the Danish delegation to UNESCO's 12th General Conference. Pederson discusses the work of UNESCO's legal committee, 1962. [12th UNESCO General Conference - Danish Delegation | UNESCO History - UNESCO Multimedia Archives](https://multimedia.unesco.org/en/12th-general-conference-danish-delegation/)

As Professor Tamm, a Danish scholar, has said, she “understood that law is as much about theory and practice as it is about the ability to build bridges between people.”⁹

True to her origins, she remained practical and down-to-earth.

A professional, focused on the tasks at hand.

“Kort og kontant”, a Danish expression which she herself translated as ‘cash and concrete’, and which means – being straight to the point.

As the rights champion Rosa Parks once said: “[e]ach person must live their life as a model for others”.

This is how Helga Pedersen lived hers.

She was an inspiration for all jurists, worldwide.

I sincerely hope that, by naming this room after Helga Pedersen: the jurist, the pioneer, and the humanist – we are giving her memory and illustrious legacy a most deserving home.

Thank you.

⁹ “Helga Pedersen, Denmark’s first female Minister of Justice.”, Dr Ditlev Tamm, Politiken, 20 September 2023, [Helga Pedersen, Danmarks første kvindelige justitsminister - politikenhistorie.dk](https://politikenhistorie.dk/helga-pedersen-danmarks-første-kvindelige-justitsminister)