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John Ingman

Lena Karlsson

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Life in the dugout

An eyewitness account of life in a dugout during the latter 1880s has been found

BY JOHN INGMAN, LENA KARLSSON AND
ELISABETH THORSELL

An older gentleman named John Ingman sent me some time ago a little booklet, called *Familjen Strand och deras jordkula i Målaskog* (The Strand family and their dugout in Målaskog), which was very interesting. John and a friend of his, Lena Karlsson, had produced this booklet to preserve the history of the Strand family and their home, a type of dwelling that disappeared, maybe as early as the later 1800s.

The people that lived there were *Israel Strand*, b. 1821 Nov. 21 in the soldier's cottage Långö in Agunnaryd parish in Sunnerbo *härad* (legal district) of Kronoberg's *län*, and his wife *Ulla Isaksdotter* and their children.

Israel's father was the soldier Göran Löfgren, and his mother was Catharina Carlsdotter. Göran (also recorded with a few other first names, Anders, Johan, etc.) was born in 1791 in Voxtorp, (Jönk.), and died 1861 Jan. 19 in the Agunnaryd poorhouse, where also some of his children lived at the same time. Catharina Carlsdotter was born 1788 in Agunnaryd, and died in 1839 Feb. 8 in a dugout on the lands of Stavhult Södergård, also in Agunnaryd.

This was a family with many problems. In 1825 Nov. 18 Göran was sentenced to a year of hard labor in prison, at the fortress of Kristianstad, for *hemfridsbrott* (unlawful entering of a person's residence). When he came back he had lost his job as a soldier, left the family, and lived on his own ever after. His wife was sentenced to a fine and to be secretly

admonished by the parish clergyman in November 1828 by the Sunnerbo *Häradsrätt* (Legal district). Her crime? She had committed double adultery, a crime which in older times could have lead to execution.

Israel stayed on as a farmhand in Agunnaryd until 1841, when he became an enlisted artillery soldier at the Vendes Artillery Regiment in Kristianstad. He was then given the soldier's name of *Strand*, instead of his Göransson patronymic. He was an artilleryman for 10 years and returned to his home area and settled as a *torpare* (sharecropper) at Västrahult in Ryssby parish (Kron.).

In 1852 Dec. 3 he married Ulrika (*Ulla*) Isaksdotter, born 1826 Oct. 15 in Ryssby, and then they moved almost at once to the farm Kristians-torp, also in Ryssby, where Israel was a farmhand. Their two first children were born there; Peter Johan August, (b. 1854 Aug.17) and Stina Cajsa, (b. 1857 Mar. 26). Then something happened, unclear what, but from 1858 Israel and family are recorded at "the end of the parish" (*socknens slut*) and then as *försvarslösa* (without proper employment), and exactly where they lived is not recorded. During this period son Carl Gustaf is born 1860 Feb. 13. Later in 1860 they moved to a dug-out on the Thorsagård Östergård lands, and in 1862 they moved to their own dugout on Östraby Jeppagård lands, where they lived for many years. The youngest child is born there, son Ola Magni, born 1864 Feb.4.

From now on they did not move anywhere else. Son Peter died of a cold in 1869 Sep.22. Ulla's sister Anna Isaksdotter moved in with the family in 1869. She was ill and died already in 1871. The other children grew up and left home, but Israel and Ulla stayed until they could not cope any longer by themselves and had to move to the parish poorhouse.

This happened in 1904, and then Ulla died in 1912 Feb.22 at age 85, and Israel followed her in 1915 July 17, at age 94.

There were no new people that moved into their dugout, and it became the property of the parish poor board and was sold to someone for 5 *kronor* (about \$1), but nobody lived there any longer and it fell soon into disrepair.

In the 1930 an ethnologist travelled in the area, and noticed a painting of the Strand dugout and started to do some research on it, and finally located Gustaf Kling, who as a child had been a neighbor of the Strands and remembered them well. His memories of the Strand dugout and its inhabitants follows below.

Some local group decided in the 1950s to build a reconstruction of the dug-out, which was finished 1962 with furniture of the appropriate kind. There were organizational problems and the dugout fell into disrepair again. But in 1999 the local inhabitants' society, *Målaskogs Bygdeförening*, rebuilt it again, and it is now open to the public during the summer.

([Link on p. 29](#)).



This is a reconstruction of the Strand dugout.

Gustaf Kling's memories of the Strand dugout

In Ulla's garden

Around the house Ulla has planted all kinds of flowers, lilies and herbs of many kinds. She has lavender, sage, *isop* (hyssop) and *åbrodd* (southernwood), and they all compete to smell the sweetest.

Between the dugout and the lake there is a small vegetable garden, where Ulla mostly grows *bondbönor* (broad beans), and she cooks a delicious bean porridge of them.

A rowan tree stands before the dugout, it gives nice berries, that you

let get a little frost bite before picking them. She dries them and saves them for the winter.

Down by the lake is Israel's rowing boat, that he calls "The Ship".

We see the dugout from outside

The dugout has a hallway (*farstu*). Birch bark, soil and moss covers the roof. As a further protection Israel has also put on some boards.

At the back and along the walls we see windows that reach down to the ground. The glass is green and mounted with lead. The windows at the back are larger than those on other walls.

The chimney is built of rocks, that are above ground.

The dugout only has one room

The only room is both the kitchen and the daily room (*dagligstuga*). To the right is the stove with its cooking pots and the kitchen tools. In the big chimney you can see a door to the baking oven. The cat sleeps in a little space besides the stove.

When looking to the left we see a wooden cupboard where they keep household implements and food. A little wooden barrel, that used to hold snuff, is now the family water supply. It stands right below the window.

They fetched water from the lake.

At the furthest end is a bed made of simple boards; that is where the children sleep.

Under the window at the end of the room you will see a big oaken chest, where they keep their clothes.

We go inside

In the hallway fishing tackle and firewood are kept. There also the “*stopp*” is kept; it is a long pole of wood, and in one end there are some pieces of boards surrounded by rags. There is no *spjäll* (damper) in the stove, so instead the “*stopp*” is put up the chimney from the inside, when there is no fire in the stove.

The door into the room is just 5 feet high, so you have to bow to be able to enter the room. This is rather dark. The ceiling is black from soot. The floor is stamped earth and is also dark. The walls are a little lighter, especially the parts made of wood.

The dugout only has one room

The chest is also used as a bench. In front of it is a small table. The clock of the house hangs on the wall to the right of the chest.

To the right is the bed for the parents; it is nicer than the children’s and has some carvings on the headboard.

On the floor are three stools, one of them has a *ryggstöd* (back support). To the right of the stove there is a box on which Ulla puts her spinning wheel when it is not in use. The wheel of the spinning wheel will then reach the ceiling.

Gustaf Kling tells more

In this dwelling Israel Strand and his wife raised their children and sometimes also had other people living with them.

Nowhere else could you find such a comfortable feeling as in this simple abode.

You could sometimes see Ulla and Israel sit outside, looking over the lake, and talking about old times.

Ulla did not like the train that passed close by her home. She used

to shake her fist at it sometimes. Her children had used the train to leave home.

One day the doctor came for a visit to the dugout. He sits on the chest and is writing a prescription. Then Ulla came over and poured snuff on his writing. The doctor asked what on earth she was doing, and she just said “I am drying it”. (In the old days one used to pour fine sand on ink writings to dry the ink, and she just used snuff instead.)

Another day a clergyman came for a visit and remarked, after seeing the earthen floor, “Well, here you will not have draught on the floor”.

That the old people – Israel and Ulla Strand – loved their simple home, where they had lived for many years and raised their children perhaps I understood best when I witnessed the agony of them when they were taken by force from their dugout and transported to the Ryssby Poor House. Ulla, especially found it difficult to leave her dear place by the forest and the lake.

This was the end of the Gustaf Kling story.

Some other thoughts on the Strand family’s living conditions

Heating and cooking

The most important source of heating was the stove. They were probably allowed to collect firewood from the surrounding forest. The only condition was to not harm valuable trees.

In a crowded dugout the warmth of human bodies was also important. The thick walls gave good insulation, so they kept warm during the nights. During hot summer days they probably felt cool inside. All cooking was done in three-legged pots, or in pots put on three-legged stands.

Water, hygiene and the washing of clothes

They used the water from Lake Tjurken, which was clean and not dangerous to use for cooking or washing. They only had to be careful so they

did not wash themselves or any clothes near the place for fetching water. We do not know if they bathed or swam in the lake, as not many could swim in the old days. In the summer it was easy to keep yourself and your clothes clean. It was more difficult in the winter when the lake froze.

Toilets

It is not certain that they had an outdoors toilet (*dass*). Many people that lived in such simple dwellings had a latrine behind the abode. It was a hole dug under a pole, mounted between two trees, not so comfortable but useful. There was no toilet paper, so you had to use moss or leaves. Inside the dugout they probably had a chamber pot for nightly needs.

Beds and bedding

Gustaf Kling told that there were two beds in the dugout. Ulla and Israel slept in one bed and the children in another. Even if people had to sleep *skavfötters* (some persons in the same bed laid their heads in one end of the bed, and other persons laid their heads in the other end), the sleeping places were probably not enough for all of them, so some had to sleep on the floor. You would then make beds of spruce branches or straw. In the beds you had mattresses filled with straw or fern leaves.

If you had a sheet it was a bottom sheet; upper sheets were most uncommon. Comforters could be filled with sheep’s wool. There were no pajamas, people slept in their underwear. The bedding for those sleeping on the floor was put in the beds by day.

The keeping of clothes

Clothes were always a problem, perhaps you only had what was used every day. If you had some nice clothes they were usually kept in a chest, into which you also put fragrant flowers to keep the clothes smelling nicely.

Light indoors

The custom was to sit in front of the

fireplace and work or read. Kerosene lamps could be bought, but they were expensive as was the kerosene. Readymade candles of wax or candle-grease were also expensive to buy. If Ulla was to use a kerosene lamp or a bought candle for her work at the spinning wheel, then the outlay for light would be more than what she earned for her work.

Another way to get light indoors was to fix splinters of wood on the wall.

It was possible to buy matches. They were made with sulphur that you could light by pulling them along your pants. There was some phosphorus in them and they were poisonous.

Could they read and write?

In 1842 there was a new law instituted that obliged the parishes to start schools. All children had to go to school.

It is not certain that Ulla and Israel had gone to any school in their home parishes. But it is certain that Israel got a good education to become an artilleryman. The artillery regiments were known to give their soldiers good schooling, especially in mathematics.

The Strand children on the other

hand went to school. In 1860 the first school in the Målaskog area was built. It was situated some 400 yards west of the Målaskog railway station, just north of the railroad. This was not so far for the children to go.

Fishing and hunting

Gustaf Klang told that Israel had an *eka* (a skiff) and that there was fishing tackle in the hallway, so one understand that Israel used to fish in the lake. There were many fish in Lake Tjurken and it was important for the household. The children also became good fishermen.

There is nothing that tells if Israel had a gun or took part in any hunting. That he could shoot is certain.

Berry picking

There was an abundance of berries in the forest. They were used both to sell and for their own use. Especially unsweetened lingonberries were easy to keep during the winter.

The rowan tree in front of the dugout gave a good crop of vitamin-rich berries.

Going to church and examination

You had to go to church and take com-

munion at least once a year. Otherwise, we know nothing about the Strand family's religious status.

You also had to go to the household examination once a year. Then you had to show if you were able to read, and know your religion, especially the Ten Commandments.

The children that were to take confirmation lessons were recorded at the examinations. These took place usually at Holborna, the nearest big farm.

Sources:

Familjen Strand och deras jordkula i Målaskog, by Lena Karlsson and John Ingman.

Church records of Agunnaryd:

AI:15, p. 15, 105, 84, 209, 413; AI:6, p. 88, 74; AI:7, p. 90, 74; AI:8, p. 85; AI:9, p. 81; AI:10, p. 87; AI:11, p. 262.

Church records of Ryssby:

AI:13, p. 339; AI:14, p. 624, 617, 29; AI:15, p. 379. CI:7; p. 131.

(All church records from Arkiv Digital (AD Online)).



This map shows the area between Ljungby and Växjö in Kronoberg län. The Strand dugout was close to Målaskog, which is marked with the round dot.