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Better Than a Dream

Ingrid Liedman with Ina Samuelson

“I’m dreaming! This can’t be true!” But it was! The event that brought this new fact into being has added a new dimension to our lives, which we had not thought possible.

This dream began many years ago. My mother was born in Sweden in 1917. She was an only child of a milkmaid who moved from farm to farm every half year or so, always searching for a better position. She never knew her father. When mother was three years old, she lost her mother, my grandmother, from a bleeding ulcer. Thus mother went to live with her long-widowed grandmother, who had lost her husband years earlier and now was living in very precarious financial conditions.

Two years later, a distant relation and a childless couple heard about the little five year-old and made arrangements for her to live with a relative in the United States. Accompanied by another relative, going to be with her husband in America, my mother left Sweden 13 Nov. 1923 to begin a new life in this country.

Mother settled down with her relative in Boone, IA. She remembers how frightened she was before arriving there, but the love and care bestowed on her by these people nurtured her to become a happy studious girl. She was graduated from high school as number three in her class, earned money to put herself through a nurses training program at the Swedish Hospital in Minneapolis and then married a young man after many years of courtship.

One day 16 years and two children later our lives changed in a drastic way. This change came about in the form of a letter from an aunt in Sweden, about whom mother knew nothing. Part of the letter stated: “I do not know where you are and if you will get this letter. If you do, please write to me. I can read English. I am your mother’s sister.” A real blood relation? Tears of joy were shed in the hope of finding a real family.

Three years later father insisted that my mother, my sister and I go to Sweden. During our month there we met three of my mother’s aunts, one uncle and many cousins. Mother learned that the vision of Sweden, which she had thought of as day-dreams or scenes from movies were indeed true. She had really helped her grandmother bake the Swedish flat bread and placed it on the pole in the pantry. She found the hill she remembered having skied on, as well as the man, who as a boy, had brought her a water lily floating in a lake.

Since that time my parents have been to Sweden many times, but in their limited vacation time, have just been able to visit the family. In 1987, however, it was mother’s 70th birthday and for the occasion she was given a present of two months in Europe, of which one month was to be spent in Sweden. By means of correspondence and research my parents hoped to locate the family and somehow learn the history of her lost mother. We saw her off and noted the sparkle in her eyes. What happiness!

Mother's chief goal in Sweden this time was to learn more about her mother and the area from which she came. In order to do this, she hoped to follow in her mother's footsteps, using church records, which are very thorough in Sweden. Every time people move into a parish they have to register and every time they leave a parish they must check with the parish clergyman and declare their destination.

Mother had a general idea of the area where her mother had lived and so she and father began the hunt. As the days passed, helpful people guided her through lovely areas in Sweden, rolling hills, through forests and through a landscape dotted with small red cottages. She studied parish records until she found a place where her mother had arrived alone and had left with an infant daughter - Aina, my mother. This was indeed a thrill for her to find herself officially acknowledged. But she had no idea what was waiting for her.

She followed her infant footsteps from place to place, thus tracing the first three years of her life. She examined tombstones in the cemeteries, looking for familiar names. And then one day in Munktorp Parish in Västmanland she discovered an entry in a parish register, informing her of the fact that her mother and she had arrived, and had then departed but also with an infant son. An infant son? Was this possible? Could mother have had a brother, about whom no one had ever spoken? A check and a double check proved the entry correct. Many emotions surged through her as she contemplated curiosity, anxiety, as well as fear of rejection.

The clergyman of Munktorp was almost as excited as my parents. After having checked the accuracy of the recorded page, the minister said: "I know this man! He is our church custodian and lives right across the street. I'll phone him."

Mother eagerly listened as the pastor said: "Hello, Harald! This is your pastor. I want you to come over to the church. There is someone here I want you to meet ... your American sister!"

This call brought quick results. The 67 year-old man came on the run and brought with him two pictures. One was the picture of his mother, the identical copy of the one mother had at home in her childhood treasure box. The second picture was that of my mother, on which my uncle had written "Your sister Aina, to America." It was true. They were siblings.

After the initial meeting, the nervous smiles, the curious stares, and the energetic photographing by my father, the following story emerged. After my grandmother, the milkmaid, died, my uncle, who was less than a year old, was given to his father. But his father was not ready for a child, so, as was commonly done, he placed an ad in a newspaper asking that whoever would raise the child for the lowest monthly payment could have him. Thus a large rural family raised Harald until he became of age. But he never enjoyed advanced schooling or accumulated much money.

In addition to caring for the church and the school grounds he had learned carpentry and helped friends with their farming. Living alone in an apartment he had all the comforts of home, including television and a large library of books. He had never married. His family consisted of two pictures.

What an incredible meeting! Who would dream that a woman, 70 years old, would be unaware in this modern world of the existence of someone as close as a brother! Also, how astounding that he should be living across the street from where the discovery took place. It was a boon that mother still remembered her Swedish so that both of them could share feelings and memories of their lives.

What would happen now? Brother and sister must meet again, be together and to learn to know each other. Harald spoke of taking an English course at night school and coming to Minneapolis to spend time with his sister. A phone call on his birthday was a thrill. He immediately recognized the voice of his sister with whom he had not spoken to for six months.

My impression is that we will have to allow brother and sister to work out their future. My optimism says that the relationship will be happy and meaningful. On the other hand there is fear that it will be a disappointment. Reality may be a little of both. Already we feel that special tie that only blood relatives can have, the tie of unconditional acceptance just because they were born into a family. I have high hopes that things will work out. After all, he is my only *real* Swedish uncle!

A British Seaman's Discharge for a Swedish Sailor

Kermit Westerberg»

A certificate of discharge for a Swedish sailor, issued by the Superintendent of the Merchant Marine Office of the United Kingdom, has surfaced in the archives of Northwestern University Library in Evanston, IL. The document in question was issued for J.B. Lundgren, an able-bodied seaman, born in Sweden 1857, who was discharged from the vessel *Star of Bengal*, registered in the port of Belfast, on 4 June 1883. Lundgren had signed on board the vessel in London 11 Sept. 1882 and was discharged at the same place almost ten months later.¹

The discharge paper identified Lundgren as having the highest character marks for ability and conduct, being given the grade - *very good* in both categories.

It has not been possible to identify J.B. Lundgren further nor to establish how the document found its way to the archives in Evanston. Perhaps a reader of *SAG* can shed further light on the identity of this Swedish sailor.

*Kermit Westerberg is the archivist-librarian and acting director of the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center in Rock Island, IL.

¹Thanks to the generosity of Kevin Leonard, assistant archivist at Northwestern University Library, the document has been donated to the Swenson Center in Rock Island.