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The identity of Swedish-speaking Finns and its construction

Family letters as a source material

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Language, class and identity

The 'national awakening' or the construction of the ethnic identity of Swedish-speaking Finns is a process that began, strictly speaking, in the end of the nineteenth century (since 1860's), as a kind of response to the Fennoman movement of Finnish-speaking Finns. The word 'finlandssvensk' came into common usage since 1910's and 1920's, which has often been mentioned as an indication of an established group identity. The public side, 'macro level', of this process is rather well known. Through private letters it is, however, possible to find information about its more personal aspects, the 'micro level'. How did Swedish-speaking Finns feel about their situation in a country that was becoming more and more Finnish-speaking? How did they construct their identities as Swedish-speaking Finns, individually and as family members, and what channels did they find for their activity?

I have studied one family, the Hultmans. They were an educated middle class family who were also very committed to their home district, Western Uusimaa (Västra Nyland). How did their self-images and ethnic identities take shape from 1880's until 1930's? How did they define themselves and others? This article is concerned with letters as a source material primarily from the point of view of my own study and the material I use in it: what questions can be asked from the Hultman family letters, and what answers may they give?

Swedish-speaking Finns have been and still are a very heterogeneous group, both geographically and socially, which means a heterogeneity of identities, too. Like in most nationalist movements (at least in the nineteenth century), the educated class had a key role, even when

they claimed to be speaking for the common people. This is a justification for studying the social group that has, in spite of its small size, produced a lot of source material, like letters. However, the educated upper or upper middle class is the group of 'stereotypical Swedish-speaking Finns' in the eyes of other Finns. Therefore, the researcher has to pay attention to a danger of reproducing the old stereotypical image, finding always similar aspects in their culture also on a personal and family level.

The Hultman family and their archive

A central figure in my study is Oskar Hultman (1862-1928). He was a son of a wealthy merchant from a small Swedish-speaking coastal town, Tammisaari (Ekenäs). He became a researcher of Nordic languages, since 1909 a professor of Swedish language and literature in the University of Helsinki. Thus, he was also taking a rather active part of the more public process of the construction of the identity of Swedish-speaking Finns. Oskar Hultman married twice. His first wife Mili Strömberg, daughter of an official family, died at childbirth in 1894. The child also died. The second marriage took place after a long lonely period, in 1910. The new wife, Emmy Stenbäck, had been working for example as a teacher and a drawer in Finnish National Museum. Their marriage remained childless.

The letters of different family members open different angles to the Hultman family life - things did not always seem similar to everybody. Some of them, notably Oskar Hultman, produced more material than others. It is, however, important to pay attention to what e.g. his wives wrote, in order to find information about the gender-related aspects of identities. The letters also tell about the social contacts of the family members. By the letters received from various people it would be possible to reconstruct most of the social networks the Hultmans were involved in. Language and social class defined social interaction; contacts were normally limited into Swedish-speaking members of one's own class.

The large Hultman family archive includes material produced by three generations from early nineteenth century to 1930's: letters, diaries, account books, scientific and other notes and photographs. The members of the family retained their correspondence and other documents, and Oskar Hultman organized them with the help of his second wife Emmy. The family archive became a symbol of family community and a way of maintaining it, like family archives often were for the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. For Oskar Hultman, it was also an essential part of his own identity-construction. It linked him with the community of his family and ancestors, into his family history. Emmy Hultman seems to have felt that her husband's family archive was in a way also hers, and she donated it in her will to the library of Åbo Akademi (in Turku), which collects archive material about the history of Swedish-speaking Finns. Because the family archive was such an integral part of the self-image of the family, the researcher always has to remember that 'unpleasant' material may have been left out. It is important to pay attention also to the silences.

Native language and native place

Oskar Hultman's work as a philologist links him with the more public history of Swedish-speaking Finns and the history of Swedish and Nordic philology. The Swedish language itself, its meaning for the identities of Oskar Hultman and his family members, is from my point of view a more interesting but also more difficult matter. Language was at the core of being a Swedish-speaking Finn, but how can the meaning of language to an individual or a family be studied? It might be possible to pay attention to the way these people used Swedish language, but because I am Finnish-speaking, I would not be capable of a very vivid analysis. The Hultmans did not write explicitly about the meaning of Swedish language for themselves, because it was such an obvious part of their lives. They were living in an almost completely Swedish-speaking coastal town, and Swedish was the only language they knew and had contact with. Unlike some other members of Finnish educated class, they had not much need for pondering on why they spoke the language they did. Swedish language was around all the time, it infiltrated the lives of the Hultmans. It defined the way people communicated and even with whom they communicated. Language became visible also in situations of conflict, e.g. when one met people who could or would not speak Swedish.

Identification with a place, native country or native place, is another important aspect of an ethnic identity. For at least some Swedish-speaking Finns, including the Hultmans, Finland in its entirety remained slightly distant. Instead, they found the basis of their identities closer. The Swedish-speaking coastal area of Finland, since 1920 called Svensk-Finland, became their 'small native country'. The Hultmans were local patriots of Tammisaari/Ekenäs: they were committed to their home town and the surrounding Swedish-speaking Western Uusimaa/Västra Nyland, its coast and archipelago. Sea and coast became parts of the 'Swedish' mental landscape, and to a person identified with them, like Mili Strömberg, spending time in interior Finland felt bleak. She wrote to her bridegroom Oskar 10.6.1889:

Man blir helt vemodig då man ser denna fula trakt och jemför den med Ekenästraktens härliga natur. Stackars människor som bor här! Jag tror att hvarken Du eller jag kund länge uthärda här, det kännes så instängdt och tryckt då man ej ser en vattenyta framför sig; man skulle bli sjuk här af bara längtan ut. Skären! Se det är ändå något härligt!

The Hultmans were members of small-town bourgeoisie. When they were away from their home town, they missed their small-town idyll. The heart of native place and home town was, of course, home. Home and family were at the core of the construction of identities. Networks of family and relatives have been important for upper and middle class culture; for Swedish-speaking Finns maybe even more important than usually, because in their small circle families have in many ways been linked with each other. Contacts were maintained e.g. by writing letters. Especially correspondence with the closest family members was lively. When a person was away from home, he/she was expected to write home regularly. Missing home and idealizing the peaceful life at home with the loved ones were also expected.

Eller sitta vi hemma hos oss, min älskade och jag; det är i det lilla kabinettet - vid matt belysning från ampeln i taket - pianotoner från salongen-- (Oskar Hultman's letter to Mili Strömberg 16.10.1886)

An educated Swedish-speaking home was a safe idyll in a country that was threatening to become more and more Finnish-speaking.

Local patriotism stimulated Oskar and Emmy Hultman into active research of local history. In 1910, they became chairman and secretary in *Ekenäs-samfundet i Helsingfors*, a society for increasing knowledge of their home town and its history. They published many studies and articles on local history, both together and separately. In her letters to her mother, Emmy Hultman described the summer house life of the couple as both peaceful and full of work. In this kind of Swedish-speaking idyll, husband and wife were working together, as companions, to study their common native places and their history.

Away from home

Letters were written especially when one was away from home and travelling. Thus, it is possible to trace the 'personal geography' of the members of the Hultman family. For them, Finland seems to have consisted mainly of the narrow Southern and South-Western coastal area. They hardly ever visited other parts of Finland - even when Mili wrote about the bleakness of interior Finland, she was in Perniö, quite close to the seaside. Their Finland seems to have been quite small. Instead, their world outside it was wide. Sweden was close to them, for Oskar Hultman almost a second native country where he spent long periods. Especially Germany and Italy became familiar to Oskar and Mili on their long 'belated wedding trip' in 1891. Later Oskar Hultman travelled a lot in Europe, both alone and with Emmy. Even Northern Africa and Asia Minor were visited. The Hultmans were both small-town local patriots and cosmopolitans. However, most of Finland remained unknown to him.

How are different countries described in the letters? It seems that especially in remote countries the 'common people' are described as very exotic, but that there was not much contact with them. Contacts remained mostly within one's own social class. When the Hultmans describe in their letters the people they have met, like other tourists, their nationality is mentioned, but it does not define a person as much as his/her social class: wealth and especially the degree of his/her education and cultivation. In all countries, the Hultmans were very much members of the educated class, even more than they were Swedish-speaking Finns. Abroad, their ethnic identity seems often to have meant a Scandinavian orientation and contacts with Nordic travellers.

Conflicting sources

The Hultman family archive is not the only source of information about the Hultmans. And sometimes different sources conflict each

other in interesting ways. This happened, when after Oskar Hultman's death a short biography (*minnesteckning*) was published to honour him (Pipping 1932). A serious biography to honour a professor did, surprisingly, cause a scandal in the Hultman family circle. In the dispute that followed, the basic theme was the happiness of a marriage, the relationship of spouses in a Swedish-speaking educated family. The ideas of womanliness and of a good wife from two different periods got into conflict with each other.

The letters Oskar and Mili Hultman wrote to each other since 1886 give an impression of a romantic engagement and a love marriage. The opinion of Rolf Pipping, the writer of Oskar Hultman's biography, was however that Oskar's and Mili's marriage was a sad mistake. Mili was a vain, calculating and empty-headed product of the nineteenth-century education of women, and her family pressured unwilling Oskar into marriage. The reader gets an impression that Mili's death was actually a positive event in Oskar's life. Only a new marriage with Emmy brought him happiness.

The biography is in a strange conflict with the obviously loving letters. Why? People who had known Oskar and Mili seem to have been asking the same question. Mili's family demanded investigation and correction. Soon it was found out that Rolf Pipping had relied on material given to him by Emmy Hultman, sometimes distorted and sometimes even totally false. After this, Pipping was ordered to write a detailed correction (Pipping 1934) - in which he wrote that Oskar's and Mili's marriage had obviously been a happy one.

According to the original biography, Mili was not able to give support to her husband in the right way, if at all. Also Mili's correspondence with Oskar gives an impression that her support to Oskar was emotional rather than intellectual; she was a woman brought up to be a wife and a housewife. Emmy's support, instead, was described in the biography as a companionship that was both emotional and intellectual; this kind of more modern, companionate marriage seems to have been the writer's ideal. For Pipping, it seems to have been easy to see an 'old-fashioned' wife like Mili as totally useless and even bad. But when Emmy's dishonesty in the biographical process came up, the picture was turned upside down - the modern wife Emmy became the villain and scapegoat instead.

Discreet and correct intimacy

According to a pamphlet Emmy published for her self-defence (Hultman 1936), the mistakes and misunderstandings in Oskar Hultman's biography had been brought about by excessive discretion - neither Emmy nor Rolf Pipping had been asking each other the right questions. This really seems to have been a part of the problem. Discretion was probably even more essential in the social relations among the Swedish-speaking educated class in Finland than it was among Finnish-speakers, because in their small group it was important not to offend each other. In Emmy Hultman's case, this had failed.

There was much discretion inside the family, too. The tone of the

Hultman family letters - like Oskar Hultman's diaries, too - is rather correct. They are usually not very emotional, and there are no embarrassing intimate confessions made. The Hultmans are usually more concerned with the outward reality than their inner emotions; at least, emotions are not on the surface. Love letters, too, follow the conventions of nineteenth-century letter-writing, although they are the most emotional of the letters. The Hultmans are telling news about themselves and other people in a style that sometimes is causerie-like. There is not much serious pondering on religion or questions of world-view, or on one's identity as a Swedish-speaking Finn, either.

The Finnish-speaking nationalists, Fennomans, were often very seriously idealistic - according to Juha Siltala, the belief in working for good and victorious goals gave them a sense of being a part of something great and important. The Hultmans had no such pathos. Instead, it seems as if an awareness of the precarious position of one's language and ethnic group had taught them to take some distance both from themselves and others. They do not seem to have been very religious, either. They hardly even mention God, except in phrases that lack deeper religious meaning. The Hultmans belonged to a rather secular and liberal group of Finnish educated class, which was primarily Swedish-speaking and had its roots in trade and commerce - many leading Fennoman families, instead, came from the clergy.

The world-views, opinions and attitudes of the letter-writers are not explicit; the Hultmans expected that the person reading the letter would understand them anyway, and usually even share them. These 'hidden' structures of thought have to be searched for under the surface of the text. Sometimes they are rather obvious, although they are expressed indirectly. Often they take the form of irony; e.g., it is not hard to notice what was Oskar Hultman's opinion about Finnish-speaking uncultured 'gentlemen' (*finnherrar*), whose number seemed to be increasing all the time.

When letters are considered to be a source material that can give information about human emotions and intimate experiences, the correspondence of the Hultmans does not, at the first glance, seem very rewarding. It does become more interesting, when you start looking for emotions under the surface, or if you pay attention precisely to the correct, civilized tone of the letters. Emotions were often hiding behind a correct facade. Sometimes the facade was cracking, notably during the dispute caused by Oskar Hultman's biography. This kind of correctness and civilization - in the sense Norbert Elias uses the concept - might be a part of the culture of the Swedish-speaking educated class in Finland more than that of Finnish-speakers. Educated Swedish-speaking Finns had to distinguish themselves not just from common people but also from the Finnish-speaking educated class. For the Hultmans, this seems to have included distance from both one's own emotions and from other people. When the Hultmans got emotional or sentimental, the sentiment was often one of nostalgia: they longed for a safe home or small-town idyll, which often seemed to exist only in the past.

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