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Elisabeth Thorsell

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A first look at Swedish prison records

By Elisabeth Thorsell

It is very probable that we all assume that the ancestors were all honest, hard-working and godfearing people. However, we do not know much about them as individuals, we do not know if they were tall or short, or the color of their eyes, or what they looked like?

Then we may find that somebody had done something he/she should not have done, and then spent some time in prison, and now we will find all kinds of details in the prison records.

The preserved prison records can start as early as in the 1740s. During my own research I have found a man who robbed the post in 1745, and ended up in Örebro county prison (Länsfängelse). There are details about when he was imprisoned and when he was released, and that he got food every day.

How to find a culprit

When you follow your people in the clerical surveys, always check the column, usually on the righthand page, called *Frejd* or *Uppförande*. If there is a note there, it is usually something not too good: like "run away" or in "Malmö prison," or "*dömd vid Hanekinds häradsrätt* (sentenced at the Hanekind legal district). Hopefully you will get a date and can check the legal records (*dombok*), and find out what happened.

During the court proceedings the "culprit" often told in their own words about places of work and other happenings. He often told if he had comrades that had helped with robbery, for instance.

Before the middle 1800s the prisons were often placed in disused castles and other government buildings, and the inmates had to live in big, but dark, rooms with little light and little heating. The inmates had to live together and hopefully keep the peace and not fight with each other. Female prisoners lived in the same room with the males.

New ideas

During the early 1800s new ideas regarding prisoners and prisons were discussed in many countries. It was thought that prison should not only be a punishment, it should also reform the inmates and make honest people of them. In Sweden King Oscar I had long been an advocate for prison reforms. From the U.S. came the idea of the *Philadelphia System*, which is a form of prison management based on the principle of keeping prisoners in solitary confinement. When first introduced in the early 19th century, the objective of such a prison or "penitentiary" was that of penance by the prisoners through silent reflection upon their crimes and behavior, as much as that of prison security.

In 1844 the *Riksdag* decided that each län (county) should have a prison of that type, with individual cells for each prisoner. The inmates lived alone in each little cell, where they should also work with some kind of craft. But the isolation from others often broke down their psyche and some even became insane.

These types of prisons have now been replaced with modern institutions. The old ones have sometimes become hotels or even been torn down. The one in Gävle closed in 1986, and is now an interesting museum.

Here you can visit prison cells from different years, see how the prisoners lived, and also the clothing they had. Some also climbed the walls and escaped.



The Gävle Prison Museum. Photo: E. Thorsell.

Prison records

There are several types of prison records, all kept in the regional archives (*lands-arkiven*), but many are also digitized on Arkiv Digital or Riksarkivet.

Prison rolls (Fångrullor)

These were written shortly after the prisoner came to the prison. They recorded his name, date of birth, and a short description of his looks, especially marks on his body, when and where sentenced and how long he had to stay in the prison. It was also recorded if he committed some crime during his time in prison. This information would help to find him again if he escaped.



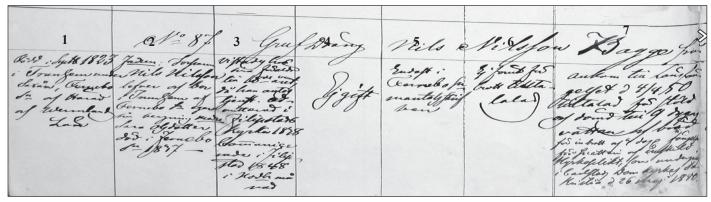
A reconstructed dungeon in the Gävle Prison Museum, Sweden. Photo: E. Thorsell.

Prison church records

The prisons had a clergyman attached to the instutition, and they kept a kind of very detailed records, called church records.

In this record there are many details as seen below.

The prisoner's occupation was given as a "grufdräng" (working in a mine). His fullname is given as Nils Nilsson Bagge.



(Fångvårdsanstalten i Karlstad (S) DIIIda:1 (1840-1851) Image 8 / Page 1 [Arkiv Digital]).

1) Where born? In September 1823 in Trumhem in Saxån, Fernebo parish in Fernebo Härad and Wermland County.

2) The father *torpare* Nils Nilsson still alive and living at Trumhem in Fernebo parish, and supports himself. Mother Sara Olsdotter died in 1837.3) Lived with his parents until age 18, when he became a farmhand (he is above listed as a miner). Took first communion in Filipstad church in 1838, took communion in Filipstad in month of November.

4) Not married.

5) He has only been registered in Fernebo parish for Tax purposes (Mantalsskrivning).

6) He has never been accused before of any crime.

7) He came to the County prison on 4 April 1850 accused of stealing and sentenced to 9 days om water and bread and 3 days in jail for burglary and pilfering to undergo secret church admonition (*kyrkoplikt*), which took place in Karlstad Cathedral on 26 May 1850.

Lefnadsomständigheter före ankomsten.						
Födelseår, månad och dag, samt ställe, uppgifoet till Ig, Socken, Stad, Härad och Län.	och vilkor, samt on as	Uppfostran, förra yrke, el- ler näringsfång samt tiden och stället för första och sista Nattvardsgången.	ter lefva, uppgift a deras	Den Församling, der fången jemlikt Kongl. förordn. den 20 Juli 1861 bör mantals- skrifvas.	Om, när och af hvad an- ledning tillförene häktad, för brott tilltalad, frikänd, bestraffad eller benådad.	När och af hvad orsa, personen till fångvårds anstallen ankommit, samt beslutet derom.
	Ale Lan forme. for all the todat. ton Salernalled : Skelagand ; ton Jan af as 1861. Modern : Parmon, & kohande 20; & kohande 20; enke, i fatter ometandig hote	Sanattulgen: Ekshnind vid 15 an, 1876. Justa de : Eks-	Crift. Historyckon.	Lorra Bardan. Eksternad	Ej fornt.	And Yo 88. Anthe gal for barne tout 2 6 min straff arbete.

(Fångvårdsanstalten i Karlstad (S) DIIIda:15 (1888-1891) Image 26 / Page 1 [ArkivDigital]).

For this document the heading is "Conditions of living".

Column 1 gives the birth date for the piga Ingeborg Larsdotter, who was born 18 June 1861 in Ekshärad.

Column 2 tells that her parents were the tenant farmer Lars Jönsson and his wife Ingegerd Karlsdotter. The father died in Ekshärad at the beginning of 1861. The mother lives in Hamra in Ekshärad, a widow in poor circumstances.

Column 3 Ingeborg has gone to school, grew up at home, is a servant girl, went to her first communion in Ekshärad, at age 15 in 1876, and last time there in 1888.

Columns 4-6 says that she is unmarried, lives in Ekshärad, and never has been to court before.

Column 7 tells that she came to the prison 18 Oct.1888, accused of infanticide. Sentenced to 41/2 years of hard labor.

The next page (not shown) here says that she was sent on 6 November 1888 to the Centralfängelset in Göteborg. From there she was transferred to *Göteborg's Kronospinnhus* (the female prison) (Göteborgs kronospinnhus (O) DIIIaa:8 (1885-1889) Image 850).

See what happened to her next on the following page.

Larsdotter Ingeborg No

Göteborgs kronospinnhus (O) DIIIaa:8 (1885-1889) Image 850. (ArkivDigital).

In the records of the Kronospinnhus¹ there was more information about Ingeborg.

She is recorded as being 1.4 meters tall, ordinary body, blue eyes, brown hair, straight nose, and an oval face.

She had been sentenced according to the Penal Code (Strafflagen), Chapter 14, Section 22, to 4 years and 6 months for infanticide by the Älvdals Lower Tingslag's H[ärads]R[ätt] on 22 October 1888.

Next is a list of what she had when she came to the prison, and what she had when she was released: Cash: 13 kronor and 84 öre, 2 skirts, 1 linen vest, 1 dress (worth 3 kronor), 1 sweater, 4 neckkerchiefs, 2 shawls, 2 handkerchiefs, 2 pairs of stockings, 1 pair of boots, 1 collar, 1 pair of drawers, 1 pair of mittens, 1 pocketwatch, 1 apron, and some other small items.

She had also earned a small amount during the years, which she had put in a savings bank account of 55 kronor.

Ingeborg was mentioned as in good health and a good worker, and was released on 30 April 1893 and sent to her home parish.

There she lived for while with her mother at Hamra, and later took jobs at various places as a piga. She never married and died 1947 Jan. 3 at Norra and Mellanskog in Ekshärad (Swedish Death Index 7).

Editor's note:

Next, click on the button marked Image, and

you will see this:

1) A Kronospinnhus was a female prison, where the inmates had to work with spinning various kinds of yarn. In the old days there were three of them, Stockholm, Norrköping and Göteborg.

The released hard-labor prisoners database

The Swedish Prison Board (Fångvårdstyrelsen) archives has scanned the release papers from 1876 to 1939, and made them avialable on the Riksarkivet web site. Most of the men in the database had got a sentence longer than 1 year. There are very few women in the database. It is in Swedish, but on the search page it is possible to switch to search in English (link to other languages). See link on p. 26.

Persson Ståhl, Sven August

Name	Persson Ståhl, Sven August		
Occupation	Arbetskarl		
Birth date	1844-06-10		
Birth place	Linköping		
Birth county	Östergötlands län		
Place of residence	Sjögestad Östergötlands län		
Release place	Sjögestad Östergötlands län		
No in prison roll	5849		
No in portrait roll	1143		
Prison	Långholmens centralfängelse		
Judicial authority	Linköpings Rådstufvurätt		
Date when the punishment was sentenced	1883-04-16		
Length of sentence	4 år		
The punishment started	1883-04-18		
Release date	1887-02-26		
Punishment	För det han eftergjort och utpra		
Previous punishments	Ostraffad		
Funds when released	55 kronor 40 öre		
Hair color	Ljusbrunt		
Beard	Ljusbrunt		
Eye	Blå		
Nose	Rak		
Mouth	Ordinär		
Skin	Ljus		
Height	5,5 fot		
Physique	Ordinär		

No 3078. Bestivilning, round artistickarlen Sum august Person Stahl um den 76 dennes trigijoes fren Gentralfangelset à Langhalmen. N. 5849 i stammallan sand N. 1143 i porträtte Födelseir, maand och dag: 1844 Roveri 10? Fodetwent till (toreauting, harned (stud) ach tan: hirthofing cestary doisanting asterictands h Sound kurkuskritningsort; Ale Undergar un bestraquing fardet hear offergiet och erter ange Utslaget, of hvilken myndighet och när det af kunnets; Copings Nedelufamatte Straffet sand tiden, die det barjade: Har. 1883 d. 18/4 - afainet actraffed, ingran vid frightingen: Stocestads for, Ostergatlands law obstationticant vid trigitainen; 55 Recentor 400 Fångens fotografi. Har Shine Gan Niles Mar H_{2} Baid The prisoner made coun-1887 terfeit money (ET note).

Swedish American Genealogist 2018:3

1860 Nº 25. Barnmord. Nº 91. 1º resan Hold med intrott. Johanna Parsdoller Petter Rosingvist

All pictures from Malmö länsfängelse (M) DIIIi:1 (1859-1861) (ArkivDigital).

Nº 342 1860 Nº 237 1º resar Hold mid inbrott. 1: resan Stold Chan, Fredrik Willhulm Saulsen! Sun Ohlsson. (Dansk.)

Swedish American Genealogist 2018:3