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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.



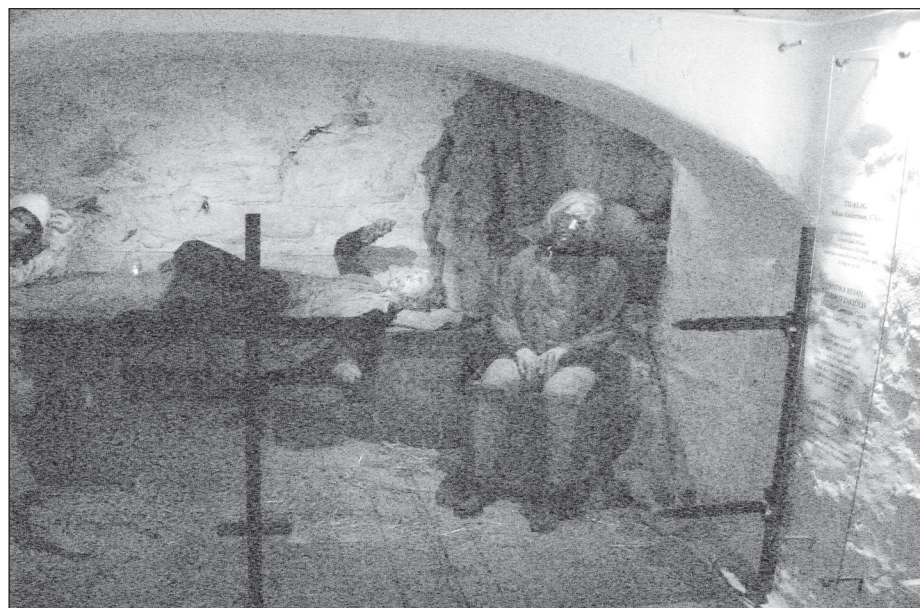
The Gävle Prison Museum. Photo: E. Thorsell.

Prison records

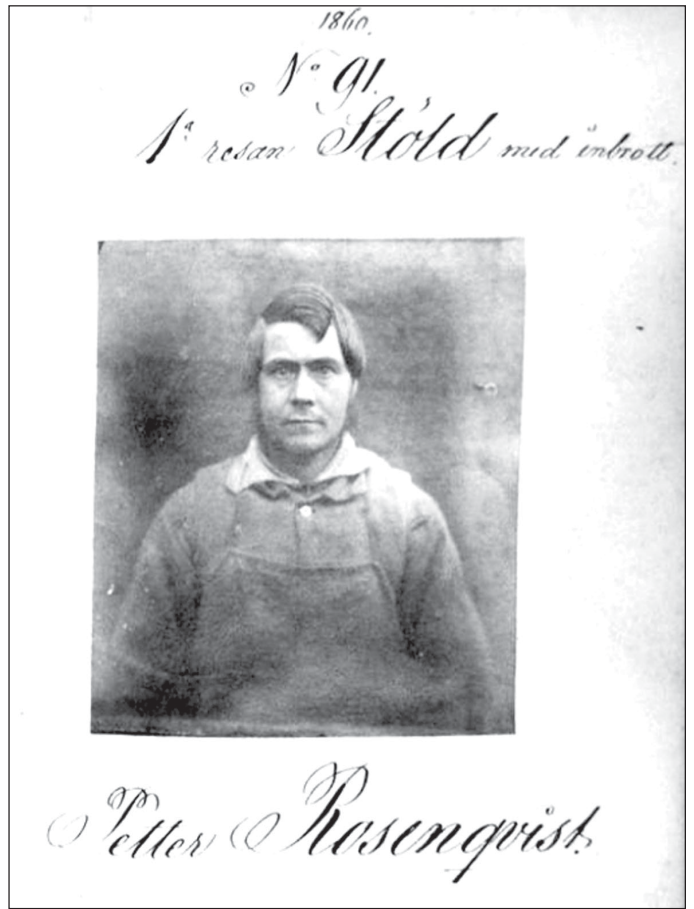
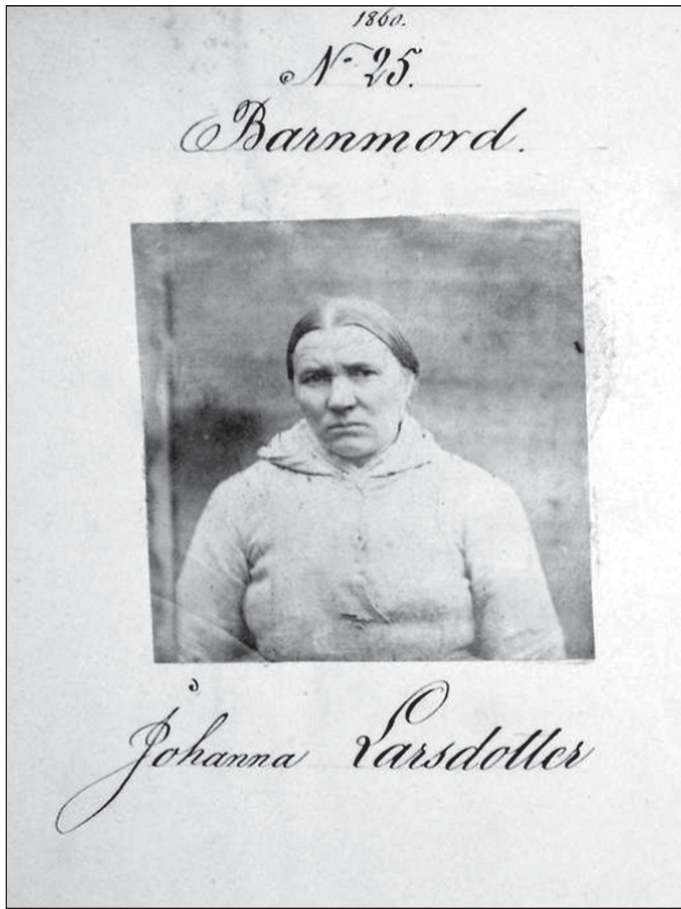
There are several types of prison records, all kept in the regional archives (*landsarkiven*), but many are also digitized on Arkiv Digital or Riksarkivet.

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.



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

