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Parents listed as unknown. Why?

By ELISABETH THORSELL

1860. Septemb.

Nummer.	Födelsedag.	Dopdag.	Barnets namn.	Mankön.	Ovinnokön.	Föräldrarne.	Modrens ålder.	Hemvist.
140.	2.	3.	Otto Victor Ma <u>urits.</u>	1.		Okände	23.	Soutens gat. 27.
141.	2	7	Hilda Charlotta.		1.	Ja	29.	Seand. gat. 18.
142.	4.	10.	Sofia Walborg.		1.	Ja	24.	H. Bende gat. 39.

This volume of birth records contains all the illegitimate children born in Katarina parish in Stockholm during 1860–1862 (no children listed for 1863), about 140 – 200 each year. (Katarina CIII:10 [1860-1863] Image 180, Arkiv Digital).

It happens often when you trace your family members that you end up with a brick wall.

When the child is finally found in the birth records, the note just says *okänd* [unknown] in the space in the records where the parents' names should be recorded.

The only possible useful information is the age of the mother. In this picture they are respectively 21, 29, and 24 years old. In the next column are some addresses, but they are usually found to be the addresses of the midwife that assisted at the birth of the child, and give no clue to the mother's name or address.

This lack of information was appropriate according to the law of that time.

Infanticide in Sweden

In the early 1600s a law was instated that was based on Mosaic law, and was very harsh on crimes of a sexual nature.

Unwed women who had become pregnant and who wished to avoid the stigma of having an illegitimate child, sometimes took the drastic step of killing the newborn baby.

If she was found out, she was cited at the *Häradsrätt* (legal district court) and most often received a death penalty. She had the possibility of applying to the *Hovrätt* (court of appeals), and lastly to the king himself, to have her sentence commuted being sent to prison.

According to one source (*Stock-*

holmskällan), about ten women were excuted every year during the 1600s, and 1700s.

The new Swedish law of 1734 still stated that a woman who had not told anyone about her pregnancy and had murdered her fully developed child should be beheaded and burnt. If the child was not fully developed and had no signs of manhandling, then the mother was punished by flogging, prison, or forced labor. To try to abort the child was punished by the death penalty.

According to statistics from 1841 to 1950 about 50 to 70 children were murdered each year, with the highest number during the 1870s (78 children).

These figures are for the whole

country. Before 1809 Finland was also included in the statistics. Finland in that year became a Grand Duchy of Russia, as a result of an unlucky war.

King Gustaf III

King Gustaf, born in 1746, became king of Sweden in 1771, succeeding his father King Adolf Fredrik. His mother was Queen Lovisa Ulrika, sister to Fredrik the Great of Prussia.

Gustaf was an intelligent and cultured advocate of the Enlightenment (*Upplysningstiden*). In 1766 he married Sofia Magdalena, daughter of King Frederick V of Denmark. Gustaf succeeded in 1771 to a Swedish throne that had been weak since it was subordinated to the *Riksdag* (Parliament) in 1720. The new king began his reign with futile efforts to mediate between the contending factions of the *Riksdag*. In 1772 he performed a coup d'état (*statskupp*) and assembled the central power in his own hands.

The Infanticide Ordinance

As king, Gustaf had the melancholy duty to sign all death sentences for women who had for some reason murdered their child. He soon wanted to find some method to decrease the number of such death sentences.

In 1778 the Infanticide Ordinance (*Barnamordsplakatet*) was published and sent out to all the courts and the dioceses, which then had to distribute

it to the parishes, where it was supposedly read from the pulpit.

The contents were quite radical. An unwed mother was no longer to be treated harshly by either church or court. She was even allowed to hide her pregnancy and travel to some place where she was unknown, and give birth there.

Another important part of the new law was that nobody was allowed to ask her who the father of the baby was. Before 1778 it had been one of the midwife's duties to try to find out this name. She and the other women present were to ask about this during the worst contractions. If she then named somebody, that was assumed to be correct. Now it was possible for the man to avoid paying child support if she did not name him.

By then the public admonitions that unmarried women had to suffer in their parish church had been changed to admonitions in the sacristy, and thus not seen by the congregation, who were not allowed to shame her. The clergyman was told not to make her name public.

Also, the illegitimate children were now allowed to become apprentices in guilds and crafts, which had been denied them before.

The old epithet *kvinnsperson* (female person) which was used in a derogatory manner, even in court records, was now forbidden as well as other words of that kind. Instead the woman could be called *piga* (maid), housekeeper, or any other title that was not defaming.



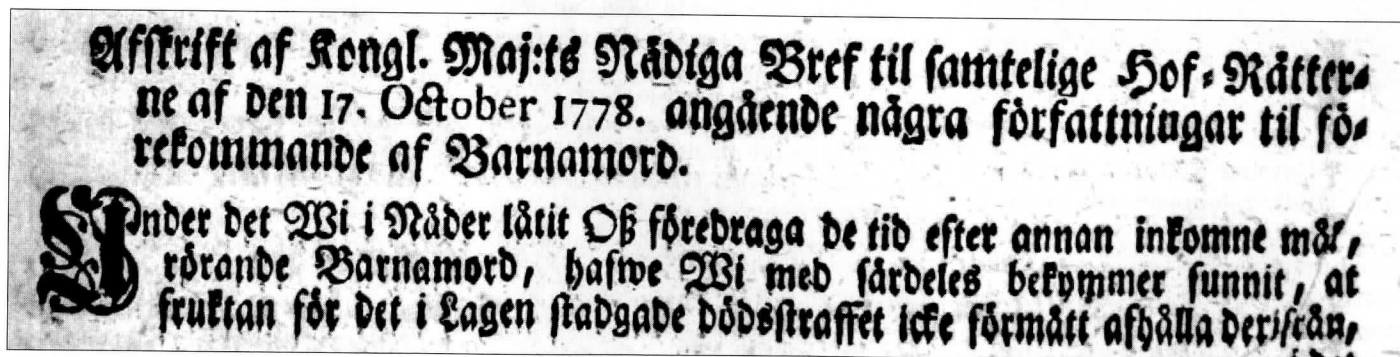
King Gustaf III of Sweden (1746–1792).

The unwed mother was also now given the right to defend herself in writing to the court, and the judge was not to ask questions that could be damaging to her reputation. The minutes of the case and the verdict were not read aloud to the public.

These changes had probably not much impact in the rural areas, where the social control was strict. But many women travelled to the cities where they were *okända*.

All children of *okända* parents did not stay that way forever. If the parents did marry later, they mostly sent in a document to the parish, signed by them and two witnesses, and claimed the child as theirs. These documents can sometimes be seen glued into the church records, so always check the originals.

This ordinance was in force until 1918.



Transcript of His Royal Majesty's Gracious Letter to the Hovrätter (Courts of Appeal) of the 17th October 1778, concerning some statutes to prevent infanticide.

"During that We graciously have had the time after other incoming cases concerning infanticide, presented to Us, We have with particular anxiety found that fear for the, according to the law, death penalty has not made women abstain [from this crime]".

(Picture from Claes Westling, archivist at the regional archives in Vadstena, Sweden)