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# Swedish Genealogical Societies 1883–1983

Håkan Skogsjö\*

(The Swedish Genealogical Society (*Genealogiska Föreningen*) celebrates its fiftieth anniversary this year. The Editor of *SAG* has asked Håkan Skogsjö of Göteborg, Sweden, to tell our readers something in general about Swedish genealogical organizations during the past 100 years, as well as to tell us specifically about the Genealogical Society itself.)

It was at the Eden Hotel in Stockholm on Monday evening, Nov. 27, 1933 that the Genealogical Society of Sweden (*Genealogiska Föreningen*) came into being. No one present that night, including Lennart Zielfelt, the man behind the idea, and who was to lead the organization for the next quarter of a century, could possibly have foreseen how important this step was for the development of genealogical research in Sweden.

The Genealogical Society was, however, not the first of its kind in Sweden. Lennart Zielfelt writes about this in his review of the society's first 25 years (published in the society's journal, *Släkt och Hävd*, 1958, pp. 133–144), that there were "two rivals competing for the public's genealogical interests". These organizations were the old and patriarchal *Personhistoriska Samfundet* (The Society for the Study of Personal History), founded already in 1876 and the more questionable organization entitled *Skandinaviska Släkt Studie Samfundet* (The Scandinavian Society for the Study of Genealogy). Both of these organizations viewed the newly started society "with misgivings", as Zielfelt puts it.

## From Collecting Autographs to Family History

The fifty year-old history of the Genealogical Society is doubtless an important event for genealogists to celebrate during 1983. There is, however, another thing which should be noted in this year of jubilee — it is the fact that it is exactly 100 years ago this year since the first Swedish organization was formed for the expressed purpose of advancing genealogical research. It

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was in 1883 that *Svenska Autografsällskapet* (The Swedish Society for the Study and Collection of Autographs), later reorganized as *Personhistoriska Samfundet* was founded, at the behest of an archivist at Sweden's National Archives (*Riksarkivet*). He was Otto von Feilitzen (1820–1889), who decided to expand the activities of *Svenska Autografsällskapet* so as to include also the fields of genealogy and heraldry. This expanded theme was expressed in the society's new by-laws adopted April 13, 1883, where it expressly stated that "the purpose of the society shall be to activate and occupy the mind with the knowledge of autographs, genealogy and heraldry and to preserve from destruction or neglect, objects, manuscripts and drawings which have a bearing on this type of historical research."

When this expansion of the society's activities took place *Svenska Autografsällskapet* had been in existence for seven years. It had been organized March 25, 1876 in the so called Bonde Palace in Stockholm, and the convenor was none other than Baron Carl Jedvard Bonde (1813–1895), Chief Chamberlain to His Majesty, King Oscar II. He was also elected as the first chairman of the newly formed group. The remainder of those present were, like Bonde, members of Sweden's high aristocracy with a sprinkling of archivists and librarians. As is evident from its name, the society focused mainly on the collection and study of autographs and according to its by-laws, the ambition of the society was "to save from destruction all older and more recent manuscripts, records and correspondence which can be of interest to the historian and the collector alike."

In February of 1879 the society published its first issue of *Svenska Autografsällskapets tidskrift* (The Journal of the Swedish Society for the Study of Autographs). It was a small and unpretentious publication, which was issued sporadically from time to time. The society also published a series of *Studies*.

When the society expanded its activities it also began to attract more members. In 1885 its membership was still quite small, about 40, but by 1893 it had reached a total of 120. The activity of the society and the contents of the periodical also shifted more and more toward family and personal history. Thus in 1898 it was decided to change the name of the periodical to *Personhistorisk tidskrift* (The Journal of Personal History), but it was not until 1905 that the process of changeover was complete and the new name of *Personhistoriska Samfundet* was adopted.

*Personhistoriska Samfundet* is today the oldest still functioning organization in Sweden with genealogy as its program. But as the name suggests, genealogy is not its sole area of activity. *Personhistoria* or personal history, sometimes called family history, is usually thought of as a combination of genealogy and biography. Thus the program of the society has more and more tended to become dominated by biography. The reason for this development is that genealogy has been taken over by other organizations. *Personhistorisk tidskrift* publishes four numbers each year (usually printed as two or three issues). The last issue in each annual volume usually contains

an extensive review section of genealogical, biographical and topographical works, which is of inestimable value. The present secretary of the society is Dr. Göran Nilzén, who also functions as the editor of the journal. The chairman of the society is the editor-in-chief of *Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon* (The Swedish National Biography), Dr. Birgitta Lager-Kromnow.

### Racist Ramblings

In 1920 *Skandinaviska Släkt Studie Samfundet* (SSSS) was formed. One of the founders was Capt. Gustaf Leopoldsson von Horn (1868–1940). The purpose of the society was to further the study of genetics in Scandinavia and to conduct genealogical research within Scandinavian families. Several studies were published, but with a clear Nazi bias. Among the publications was the large collective work entitled *Genealogia Gothica*, in which certain sub-standard articles came under attack, and rightly so, by such respected scholars as Dr. Bengt Hildebrand, the eminent author of *Handbok i släkt- och personforskning* (Guide to Genealogical Research). The author of some of these shoddy articles was not the chief editor of the work itself, Erik C: son Swartz (1887–1963), but probably the most eccentric person in the annals of Swedish genealogical research, namely Adalbert Fredriksson, who also called himself Knas d’Ofson, Knas Svenolber Fredrik Of Son and Marquis de Son! This weird person, obviously mentally disturbed, whose real name was Sven Olber Olsson (1882–1944), was the author of a number of curious studies which strongly point to his being a Nazi sympathizer. *Skandinaviska Släkt Studie Samfundet*, a society, whose contributions to Swedish genealogical research we easily can forget, is supposed to have carried on until 1951, when its membership was around 100. Its publication activities seem to have ceased in 1946.

### The Birth of the Swedish Genealogical Society

Early in the 1930’s one could read in one of Sweden’s largest newspapers, *Svenska Dagbladet*, a letter from a reader who was doing research on Swedish urban families (*borgerliga släkter*). The writer of the letter was probably Arvid Berghman (1897–1961), a noted genealogist and heraldic expert. Another letter to the editor, this signed L.Z. suggested that the collecting of information on Sweden’s urban families should be carried out under the aegis of a society. The writer of the letter was Lennart Zielfelt (1895–1976), to whom goes the credit for having taken the initiative to found the society (as mentioned earlier), which then was given the name *Genealogiska Föreningen*. In 1943 it went national when it added a sub-title, *Riksförening för släktforskning* (National Society for Genealogical Research).

The Genealogical Society has meant a great deal for Swedish genealogical research. Its activities are many, including the important field of publications. During the years 1934–1949 it published fifty issues of *Medlemsblad för Genealogiska Föreningen* (Newsletter for the Genealogical Society). In

1950 this newsletter was replaced by a journal which was named *Släkt och Hävd* (Family and History), which at first came out with three issues a year, but which lately has been expanded to four issues annually.

A series of genealogical studies has also seen the light of day, including the very important *Svensk släktforskarförteckning 1978*, which charts the genealogical research areas of more than 600 Swedish genealogists. In addition the Genealogical Society has also published an impressive list of family histories.

One of the earliest goals of the society was, as the letters to the editors of *Svenska Dagbladet* indicate, the collecting of all current genealogical material. This has been done and today the society can boast of a large genealogical library, a large index of family names to be found in printed family histories of all types, a number of family histories in manuscript, an imposing archives of press clippings from two major Swedish newspapers, *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*, as well as much other genealogical material. All of these aids are to be found in the offices of the society located in the old National Archives on Riddarholmen in the central part of Stockholm. At the present time the chairman of the society is Lieut. Col. Erik Thorell (1917– ).

### Conflict Gave Birth to Strife

Today the Genealogical Society has the position of being Sweden's foremost genealogical society. This was not always so. During the middle of the 1940's things began heating up. Lennart Zielfelt tells about it in *Släkt och Hävd* 1958, p. 136, where he says that "it was a disagreeable conflict" accompanied by "sharp expressions of opinion" directed against the society and parts of its board. The result of this conflict was that Christopher von Warnstedt (1918– ) together with a few others established in February, 1946 *Föreningen för släktforskning* (Society for Genealogical Research) and began publishing a journal, *Genealogisk Tidskrift* (Genealogical Journal) the same year. In the beginning the editorship was handled by von Warnstedt, but after a schism in the board of the society, the editorship was taken over by Elsa Dalström-Söderberg. The journal appeared for the last time in 1961. It should also be noted that *Föreningen för Släktforskning* also published a series of genealogical studies named *Svenska antavlor i listform* (Swedish Ancestral Tables), which, however, ceased after a second issue.

### *Släkthistorisk Tidskrift*

In 1949 *Släkthistorisk Tidskrift* (Genealogical Journal) appeared. Rune G:son Kjellander (1920– ) was its editor and publisher. In the first issue the editor stressed the fact that "his journal was independent and did not constitute a forum for contentious board members." Thus he said, "all dangers of public debate are eliminated." The editor went on to say that

*Släkthistorisk Tidskrift* wished to “work for the common good, spurred on by idealism and love of the fatherland”. These words demonstrate what was happening in the genealogical society world in Sweden in the late 1940’s. There must have been a few problems within the ranks of Swedish genealogical researchers, probably due in large part to Christopher von Warnstedt’s passionate engagement in the genealogical questions of the day.

In the first issue of *Släkthistorisk Tidskrift* there is a *Svensk Släktforskarförteckning 1948–1949* (a list of Swedish genealogical researchers for 1948–1949). This list contains no less than 237 names. This list is, however, not the first of its kind in Sweden, for already in 1946 *Föreningen för Släktforskning* had published a stencilled list, which was said to be the first in Sweden. This was edited by Carl-Gösta Windell, a genealogist and book-dealer in Stockholm.

Despite the statement of Mr. Kjellander in his first issue of *Släkthistorisk Tidskrift* that his journal would remain free of entanglement with genealogical societies and not become the forum for any given organization, already in issue No. 1 for 1950 one can read on the inside of the front cover that his journal now “was the official organ of Sweden’s Genealogical and Heraldic Society.” It has not been possible to gather any supplementary information regarding this group. The journal ceased publication already in 1951.

### United Youth

*Genealogisk Ungdom* (Genealogical Youth) was founded in Mölndal, a suburb of Göteborg, on Feb. 5, 1977. A total of seven younger genealogists were present, among them Per-Olof Widing (1950– ), who was elected chairman, Tor Erland Salberger (1952– ), who became treasurer and I, the author (1958– ), who was elected secretary.

Genealogical Youth, as the name implies, seeks to enlist younger genealogists, but older persons are always welcome (at a higher fee). The primary purpose of the society is to publish genealogical items. A journal, *Släkthistoriskt Forum* (Genealogical Forum) is published quarterly. It is edited by Peter Olausson (1956– ) and contains in addition to articles on genealogy, also book reviews and discussions. A series of studies, *Svenska Antavlor* (Swedish Ancestral Tables), is edited by Bo Lindwall (1953– ), where members of the group have the opportunity of publishing the results of their genealogical research. In addition to its quarterly, the society also publishes a newsletter, *GU-Nytt* (Genealogical Youth Newsletter), which deals with the business affairs of the society.

Lately computers have entered almost all areas of human endeavor, a phenomenon we all have noted. Even genealogists have to keep up with the times in order to see how best we can use computers in our research. A group of enthusiasts was organized in Linköping in the fall of 1979 in order to study the possibilities of this new medium. In April of 1980 the group reorganized and formed a society with the name *Föreningen för datorhjälp i släkt-*

*forskningen* — *DIS* (The Society for Computer Service in Genealogical Research — *DIS*). The chairman of this society is Lars Blomberg. A mimeographed newsletter *Släkt-Forskar-Nytt* (Newsletter for Genealogists) is edited by Per-Olov Bergman.

### Regional and Local Groups

In addition to the societies mentioned so far, all of them operating country-wide, there are also a number of regional and local groups doing genealogical research. There are at the present time eight regional groups affiliated with the Genealogical Society. The oldest of these is *Skånes Genealogiska Förening* (Genealogical Society for the Province of Skåne), founded in 1937. The next oldest is *Västra Sveriges Genealogiska Förening* (Genealogical Society for Western Sweden), founded in 1946. The other six have all been organized within the past five years. *Skånes Genealogiska Förening* has since 1978 published a separate journal entitled *Skåne Genealogen* (The Skåne Genealogist), which comes out twice a year. In 1950 a regional group was formed in the city of Norrköping, *Östergötlands Genealogiska Förening* (Genealogical Society for the Province of Östergötland), but it ceased operations already in 1952. The chairman for this group was the knowledgeable Dr. Hjalmar Lundgren (1880–1953).

Other regional groupings, which have existed outside the national Genealogical Society, have also had their day, even though their existence has been ephemeral. *Genealogiska Föreningen i Skellefteå* (The Genealogical Society of Skellefteå) was formed in 1937 and had as its secretary and forceful leader a wholesale merchant by the name of Svante Lundell (1894–1971). Its activities ceased, however, after a few years. In *Genealogisk Tidskrift* for 1947 we learn of the formation in 1945 of *Jämtlands Läns Släktforskarförening* (The Genealogical Society for the County of Jämtland). This group held its annual meeting at the provincial archives in Östersund May 15, 1947. The year before it had had a membership of 62 persons and the group published three mimeographed newsletters. *Dalslands Släktforskarförening* (The Genealogical Society for the Province of Dalsland) was formed July 4, 1954. Its chairman was Anders Gustav Börddh (1895–1968), an author, and the secretary was none other than the well-known genealogist from Dalsland, Olof Ljung (1924– ). All of these three groups, however, have ceased to exist. Recently new groups have been founded both in Jämtland and Skellefteå.

### A National Federation?

In 1981 I published an article in *Genealogisk Ungdoms Tidskrift* (Journal for Genealogical Youth), in which I presented a survey of all Swedish genealogical societies. This list contained no less than 22 local and regional groupings which were active during the spring of 1981 (those affiliated with

the national Genealogical Society were not included). Of those 22 societies a total of sixteen were formed in 1977 or later, giving us some idea of the rapid development in this area during the most recent years. The flowering of interest in genealogical research has directly influenced the growth of genealogical societies and clubs.

More than a year ago the question arose concerning the possibility of organizing a national union or federation of all these groups. This question has been brought up within the boards of directors of various and sundry groups. Representatives of the societies in south Sweden met in Alvesta in Småland in May of 1982 and in October of the same year representatives of groups from central Sweden met in Eskilstuna in Södermanland. A meeting of groups in north Sweden is planned in the near future.

Personally I am in favor of the idea of a national association since I firmly believe that this would give strength and purpose to all Swedish genealogical societies. If these were organized for a united purpose, that of furthering genealogical research, the national unit would be strong enough to withstand political pressures and powerful local interest groups. As a collective group this national federation could also cooperate more fully in the organization and implementing of national tasks, which would not be possible for the regional groups working separately.

### Literature

In addition to the works cited in this article I have also made use of these sources:

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