

6-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Thorsell, Elisabeth (2009) "A little boy was killed," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 29 : No. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol29/iss2/15>

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A little boy was found dead – was he killed by his mother?

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

My favorite parish in Sweden is Nordmark in eastern Värmland, partly because we have our summer home there, and partly because some of my roots go deep down there in the the mineral-rich and rocky soil.

I have spent many hours going through the church records, mostly finding something I have not seen before.

One day I noticed in the death records for June 1817 that the pastor had written about a little boy from the village of Grundsjön who had been murdered by his mother.

In the clerical survey I found that his mother was named *Lisa Matsdotter*, born 25 Jan. 1792, a daughter of the mining farmer (*bergsmän*) Mats Matsson and his wife Stina Jansdotter from the nearby village of Sandsjön.

On 25 May 1817 Lisa had married the young *bergsmän* Petter Nilsson from Grundsjön, born 19 March 1788, and moved into his house. This was only a month before the little boy died. Why did he have to die?

The boy was murdered directly after his birth and was never baptized. This suggested that he was not the son of Petter, and that Lisa had married while she was carrying somebody else's child.

Rumors

Lisa had tried to hide her pregnancy, and her fiancé and later husband had not noticed anything, which is a bit surprising. But the women of Grundsjön had sharper eyes, and one of them, a relative of Petter's, had asked Lisa outside the church if she thought she was doing the right thing in marrying Petter in her state. Lisa had denied everything and told this woman to mind her own business.

Petter had heard the rumors, but regarded them just as spite and envy. But the women of the village kept looking at Lisa and noticed changes in her body, and started to talk. Within a few days the rumors reached the ears of the local pastor, Arvid Olsson, and one of his pastoral duties was to uphold the morals in the parish. He contacted the bailiff (*länsman*) Erik Brattström, and both men went to Grundsjön to question Lisa.

Confession

After receiving severe admonitions from the pastor and the bailiff, Lisa finally confessed that by Midsummer she had given birth to a child, which she first had hidden in the forest, and the next day put in a cavity in the floor of the local smithy and then covered with soil, where the little corpse was now found by the bailiff.

Lisa's explanation for her actions was just that she had never told Petter that she was pregnant by another man, out of fear that if he heard this, he would change his mind and not marry her. She would then lose all her future support from this man, whom she "truly loved." Another reason for her confession was that one of the local married women had examined her breasts and found them full of milk, a fact that was hard to deny.

Court records

After her confession Lisa was arrested and taken to the local prison, where she was kept until her trial, which took place in August of 1817. First I could not find any records of her trial, but then realized that as this was about a murder, there would have been called an extraordinary meeting of the *Färnebo häradsrätt*.

This was most often done when there was a serious crime to try, and it was called an "*urtima ting*" [court meeting out of time]. And as it could be supposed that Lisa was sentenced to death, the case was transferred to the Court of Appeal (*hovrätt*), which was the *Svea Hovrätt*. Those records are kept in the *Riksarkivet* (National Archives in Stockholm) which is where I found that Lisa had been sentenced to be beheaded and afterwards burnt, according to the sentence by the local court.

The *Svea Hovrätt* looked at the case and wanted more information, so the case was sent back and more people were heard. The most important was Lisa's boyfriend *Jan Jansson* of Sundsjön, who told that he lived close to Lisa's parents and that he had had intercourse with Lisa many times, until he heard that she had become engaged to Petter. She had never told him that she was pregnant.

Lisa also told more details about what had happened, like that her husband had been in the forest felling trees for charcoal burning while she was giving birth.

Petter was also heard and said that he had been totally unaware of Lisa's condition and that in her he had found his happiness for all times, and that he wanted her to be spared from the death penalty and was eager to resume the marriage, after she had gone through her punishment.

The *Svea Hovrätt* finally decided not to change the verdict of the *häradsrätten*; Lisa was still to be beheaded and burnt.

She was given the option to write to the King for mercy, which she did, and her sentence was changed to eight years in a female prison.

What happened next?

At that time there were only three female prisons (*spinnhus*) in Sweden, one in Stockholm, one in Norrköping and one in Göteborg. The first two have indexes on the internet, and she was not found there. Luckily she was found in Göteborg, where she served her time, and was released in 1826.

Petter had said the he would wait for her, but in 1825 he got a divorce and remarried. When Lisa was out of prison the first thought was that she had gone home to her family in Värmland, and when her father died in 1833 she was mentioned in his estate inventory as a married daughter, but with no indication where she lived. Next I started to look in the

local tax lists (*mantalslängder*) for married Lisas of the right age. Then I thought I should check the prison records again, in case I had missed a clue. There I found a reference to the church records of the Göteborg poor-house (*Fattighusförsamling*). In their marriage records only one marriage was listed for the early 1800s – Lisa's marriage 29 August 1826 to a Johannes Johnson from Starrkärr in Västergötland!

How they met I have no idea, but they must have known each other for some time, as Lisa gave birth on 7 Sept. 1826 in Starrkärr to a daughter Brita Stina, just a week after her marriage.

Lisa and Johannes, who was born

16 Jan. 1783, from then on lived in a dug-out on the Sandhem Södergård lands in Starrkärr.

Little Brita Stina died 27 Dec. 1826, and Lisa's son Emanuel, born 1 Sept. 1829, died 18 Jan. 1843, but by then Lisa was already dead. She died 6 June 1838 of typhoid. Johannes stayed on in his dug-out and died 13 March 1860 of old age.

Lisa and Petter, her unfortunate first husband, had a number of siblings, with many descendants. Petter also had a son Nils in his second marriage with descendants, but the whole story seems to have been forgotten in Nordmark, almost 200 years ago.

October 16th–17th 2009 Swedish Fall Research Conference in Minnesota

The *Swedish Genealogical Society of Minnesota* will host a day and a half Fall Research Conference featuring SwedGenTour2009; Genline Sweden/Genline North America; and Swedish American Genealogist (SAG) participants! Many vendors will have genealogy related items for your review.

SwedGenTour 2009

The SwedGenTour2009 is a group of four renowned Swedish genealogists touring the United States for the sole purpose of helping Swedish-Americans learn more about their heritage. These four individuals participated in previous SwedGenTours and have decided to continue the tradition with the SwedGenTour2009. On all the previous trips, the group has been successful in helping many individuals get started with their research as well as breaking down brick walls. The SwedGenTour 2009, Genline and SAG parti-

cipants will also support the SGSM Fall Research Conference with presentations and demonstrations on how to use the various resources for Swedish genealogical and historical research; on Swedish genealogical online resources; Swedish genealogical CDs; and Swedish emigration.

The SwedGenTour2009, Genline and SAG participants will assist individuals with their personal research. The group will have access to most major Swedish online and CD genealogical resources including resources specific to regional areas such as Kalmar, Jönköping, Halland, Jämtland, and Stockholm. In addition, the group will have access to the Dalsland project (70,000 names from Dalsland including emigrants), index of names for the Swedish American churches, and additional names of emigrants not yet included in the Emibas CD and more.

The SwedGenTour2009 participants will be *Anneli Andersson*, *Anna-Lena Hultman*, *Charlotte Bör-*

jesson, and *Olof Cronberg*.

Genline

The participants from Genline.com, *Jan Eurenus* from Stockholm, Sweden, and *Kathy Meade* of Chicago, are also very experienced genealogists and will help with your Swedish research problems.

Swedish American Genealogist

The participant from the SAG will be *Elisabeth Thorsell* of Järfälla, Sweden. She is presently the editor of the *Swedish American Genealogist*, published by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center in Rock Island, Illinois. Elisabeth has co-authored a number of manuals on Swedish genealogy. She also has extensive experience in doing Swedish research for Americans for 30 years.

For more information, go to
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mnsghsm/9frcinfo.htm>