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How youngsters became adults in Old Sweden

By Ingela Martenius

In most societies the transition from childhood to adulthood is celebrated with some sort of ceremony and festivity, often preceded by or consisting of some form of training and/or test. Today this role has been taken by leaving high school with attendant celebrations, but in the old agrarian society the confirmation was considered as the rite of passage for adulthood.

From child to adult

The confirmation was of course really a church rite, a confirmation of the baptism. Since the Swedish church – like the Catholic church and the majority of Protestant churches – practices child baptism, it is important that the baptism is confirmed when the child is old enough to comprehend its meaning. Confirmation can therefore not take place until the child is "adult," which we in Sweden traditionally think occurs at the age of 15.

Before modern readers start protesting, you should consider the fact that we today generally think that coming of age is at 18 – but it is in actual fact a process that starts at just precisely 15 and is not concluded until 10 years later. At 15 you are legally responsible for any criminal acts committed, you are allowed to drive a moped, have sex, and watch NC-17-rated movies. All of them remnants of "the old Sweden"!

So confirmation took place *earliest* at the age of 15, but it could also be postponed if the parish vicar thought that the confirmand-to-be was not mature enough or did not have the requisite knowledge. In some parishes there were special ledgers listing the year's confirmands, and in case of missing birth records these ledgers may be used to indicate at least a probable year of birth since it is certain that the confirmand always was *at least* 15 years old at confirmation. Before confirmation the child was not counted as a person in his/her own right, but was always referred to in relation to his or her father; for example, a death record would read "farmer Nils Andersson of Norgården's son Peter, 13 years old" ("*åbon Nils Anderssons i Norgården son Peter, 13 år*").

Requisite knowledge

Before 1986 the Swedish church required you to be confirmed to be allowed to participate in Holy Communion. The Church Law of 1686 demanded that a parishioner, before attending his/her first communion, was examined as to knowledge of Christianity (as interpreted by the State Church of course), which led to public hearings. During the latter part of the 18th century this grew into a special church service which was given a firm ritual in the church manual of 1811; however, only in the 1917 manual is the ritual termed "confirmation."

Confirmation started with "reading for the vicar" ("*läsa för prästen*"). Today many misinterpret this as meaning that this was when the rural population learned to read. In fact the ability to read from a book was, together with a basic understanding of Christianity, a prerequisite for being allowed to attend the confirmation lessons.

All children learned to read sometime between the age of seven and ten. In some parishes the sacristan (*klockaren*) taught the children, sometimes reading was taught at

A typical confirmand from Bohuslän (Kville) about 1910. The girl is dressed completely in black, but is evidently still using a white shift under her dress since it shows at her throat and wrists. She is also holding her nice new – black – gloves in her right hand.
(Photo: Anna-Carin Betzén Collection).

Confirmation at Rättvik's Church (Dala.) at the end of the 1970's. In several parishes around Lake Siljan the tradition remained that girls should wear national dress to their confirmation while the boys started wearing suits at the end of the 19th century. In connection with the revival of the national dress in the 1970's boys began wearing national dress again. (Photo: Maria Björkroth).

home, and in some parishes there actually was a special schoolmaster. These schoolmasters were not seldom discharged soldiers, since their training included a thorough instruction in the arts of writing and arithmetic (soldiers were supposed to be able to read already). Sometimes it would happen that a farmer's son who had been given the chance of studying for the clergy did not quite make it – or he ran out of money – and instead ended up a schoolmaster.

Proper schools for the rural population, with separate schoolhouses, were established from the middle of the 18th century all over Sweden. The Basic School Reform (*Folkskolereformen*) of 1842 did not bring about any significant changes; it must also be emphasized that while the new law required the parishes to arrange schools, it did not require the children to attend them. But already before 1842 there were some 1,800 schools in about half of Sweden's 2,512 parishes (1999); ten years later nothing much had changed. The great change was instead that in the new basic school (*folkskolan*) the children also had compulsory lessons in *writing*.

So what did the confirmation lessons comprise? Well, there was reading of various texts in the Bible, but above all learning by heart Luther's Small Catechism – mostly the Ten Commandments, the Confession, and the Lord's Prayer – including the difficult explanations. You were however not expected to know *all* of the explanations by heart: in the church records there are sometimes notes that someone knows "all of the explanations" ("*kan hela Svebilii förklaring utantill*"), which was so remarkable that it had to be recorded.

Confirmation and First Communion

The confirmation lessons ended with the much-feared examination in church before the entire congregation. This examination was thus really the first household examination, because once you were confirmed you were examined together with all the (confirmed) people living at your farm once a year by the vicar, on exactly the same subjects as at confirmation.

Today in Sweden we think of confirmation as an examination – which today often takes the form of a seminar – immediately followed by communion. However, in the old days the examination, often referred to as "standing on [*sic*] the aisle" ("*stå på gången*") since the confirmands answered the questions lined up in the aisle, took place on the Saturday, and the communion followed the next day, Sunday. According to Swedish-Americans belonging to the American Lutheran Church, they still adhere to this old tradition.

Confirmation Gifts

It is often rumoured that today many confirmands are confirmed only for the presents. These presents are also a souvenir from the time when confirmation meant stepping into the adult world. The confirmands would often receive quite expensive gifts that completed the change in clothing marking their new status: for the girls it could be a pin or a clasp in silver or perhaps a silk scarf, for the boys cufflinks in silver or (from the middle of the 19th century) perhaps even a watch!

The gifts were of course mainly from the parents, or perhaps an older sibling – but not least the godparents were now expected to make a contribution. There are letters and other records preserved where godparents complain that they now live in "abject poverty" from giving the expensive gifts expected from one of higher social status.

Adult life

How did life change after confirmation? Well, for the majority nothing much changed for a couple of years. Indeed they were responsible for their crimes, could hold a job, and poll tax had to be paid, but the notion we have today that this meant that most of the rural youths had to leave home to fend for themselves is a fact

Confirmation at Ljung's church (Bohuslän) concludes a confirmation camp, summer of 1970. All the girls wear white, "grown-up" dresses in the latest (very short) fashion; the boys wear ties but no jackets due to the unusually warm summer. Photo: Ingela Martenius.

that has to be taken with a – large – pinch of salt. Some children did have to leave their poverty-stricken homes before they were 15; they worked for food and lodging and, if they were lucky enough to have a kindhearted mistress, some second-hand clothing. In church records they are entered as "*gossen*" (the boy) or "*flickan*" (the girl). When the 15-year-olds had been confirmed they were free to go to work "for real" (and be noted as "*dräng*" [male farmhand] or "*piga*" [female farmhand]) and they had to be given wages according to law.

Some 15-year-olds did indeed go into service as soon as they were confirmed. But if the parents had the least opportunity of keeping them at home for another year or two, they did so. In most places the majority did not leave home until they were 17-19 years old, which is to say much the same age as when you finish high school today.

Clothes

The transition to adult status was marked by clothes. Before they were confirmed children wore children's clothing. From when they could walk until they were about 5 – 7 years this meant a smock-frock (*kolt*), a sort of "dress" that went down to the middle of the calf, differently cut for boys and girls and often made from yellow (simplest colour to dye) wool or linsey-woolsey and worn over a linen shift/shirt. On top of the smock-frock an apron was worn, a bib apron for boys and a waist apron for girls. The children were of course wearing a cap at all times: made from "wedges" for boys and made from two sidepieces and a central piece from forehead to neck for girls.

Around the age of 5 – 7 years, varying from parish to parish, the children were dressed in simpler versions of adult clothing. It was only now they managed to dress themselves, a requirement for the "upgrade" – there was no time to dress two or three children in every family! "No obvious holes, and (passably) clean" was the sum of ambition for the children's clothes until they were confirmed; very little time or effort was spent on clothes the children would wear out or grow out of. It was common practice to turn worn-out adult clothing into children's clothes as well as could be managed.

Confirmation meant that you now had the right to wear fully adult clothing. What this entailed exactly varied, but there were some general rules. So, for example, girls living in areas where adult women used *bind-*

A woman wearing a bindmössa*, costume from Inlands Norra härad, Bohuslän. From* Svenska Allmogedräkter *by Gerda Cederblom 1921.*

mössa (which is to say *not* in, for example, Skåne) always had their first *bindmössa* (a silk cap or bonnet, usually embroidered) at their confirmation. It is unfortunately nowadays a common misconception that unmarried females did not wear *bindmössa* – indeed they did. Some parishes had very strict rules, but generally speaking light colours were worn by young girls (light blue was, for example, popular for confirmands) and darker colours, even black, were used by older, married women.

In the towns children also wore smock-frocks during their first years. Before confirmation the boys then wore short trousers (above the knee) and the girls' skirts reached just below the knee. Afterwards the boys wore long trousers and the girls' skirts became floor-length and they were allowed to put their hair up. In urban middle class society there was however a tendency to try to preserve girls as "innocent children" for as long as possible, and so it was not unusual that girls, particularly if they still attended school, wore shorter skirts for everyday use with their hair put up as simply as possible, for example, by just winding the "little girl plaits" around the head.

At first everyone in the rural population was of course confirmed in national dress – that was after all the clothes available, and they were worn with pride since they showed that you were no longer a child. The clothes were proper clothes for attending church, but not the most expensive ones. Indeed, this was the *start* of collecting clothes: farmhands, both male and female, were partly paid in fabrics and other articles of clothing, and the cash part of their wages could be used for buying the more luxurious items, such as, for example, silk scarves.

When the national dresses started disappearing towards the middle of the 19th century they were replaced at confirmation by heavy woollen suits with long trousers for the boys and fashionable dresses for the girls (though of course very modest versions, with long sleeves and made high to the neck). Since urban middle-class adult women wore black – or at least dark – clothing for church, the confirmands' dresses were in the beginning black. However, towards the end of the 19th century urban middle-class society did not regard black as a suitable colour for young girls – it made them too grown-up – so, in the cities (not in Göteborg though!) they started to dress girls in white for confirmation. This practice spread to smaller market towns and in the end also to rural parishes. The change from black to white sometimes had odd consequences: so, for example, *two* dresses could be necessary – one in white for the actual confirmation and one in black for the communion the next day. The most conservative province proved, not unexpectedly, to be Bohuslän; the Schartauan clergy and/or congregations made sure that the girls in some parishes wore black well into the 1950's! However, the vicar in one parish in Bohuslän thought the parish girls should wear black, but when he tutored private confirmands who had their lessons during the summer and lived at the vicarage these girls were allowed to be confirmed in white – the colour was thus partly also a question of social class.

Using your Swedish national dress for confirmation today

The confirmand should of course be dressed like the other confirmands. It is of course very nice if they all wish to wear national dress! If there are no specific local customs the confirmands should dress in completely adult versions, suitable for attending a church service. Where a "*bindmössa*" is part of the dress the girls must wear them, preferably – if there are no specific traditions to the contrary – in a light colour; light blue used to be a very popular colour for a confirmand's bonnet.

Family, relatives, and friends dress as for a normal church service, perhaps with a particularly nice scarf or a brand-new shirt, but not as for a major holiday.

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