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# The Örberga Poorhouse – A Woman’s Work

By GERDA TELL

TRANSLATED BY ANN LITTLE

The Old Peoples Home (*Fattigstugan*) in Örberga, Östergötland, has long since been demolished, but I have many memories from there, which I will try to relate here.

In the New Year period of 1899, my mother, walking with heavy and tired footsteps, was on her way to see the chairman of our Parish Council, who had sent for her. She had been offered the position of matron at Örberga “poorhouse,” as it was called in those days.

My father, worn down by pain, and suffering quite badly with his nerves, was unable to support his family singlehandedly. He was employed as a *stallförman* and coachman at Arneberga gård (manor farm). Mother helped in the fields at harvest time, and had to take the children along with her; she worked so very hard.

On the day in question, my mother felt very down, something she would often tell us children about. I was not yet born then, but she was carrying a little one next to her heart, who would be born in May of that year. It is not surprising then that her walk was heavy and her mind troubled at the thought of having to care for a lot of feeble old people.

Mr. Hägerström, the local minister, and his wife thought that Mother was well suited to work with the old, and had told her so on many previous occasions.

And so, Mother took the job; she felt that she had no other option, as she would often say to us. She was strong and healthy, and had a good temperament. I cannot recall Mother being ill for more than one day when we were young.

We lived in a large, oblong shaped room, with an iron stove and paneling on the walls. In my memory it all seems so dark, but there were “points of light.” Mother was lucky with flowers and the potted plants in the windows, and we had beautiful curtains.

There was one window facing north, and another facing south, but no electric lights at that time; only kerosene lamps, which did not light up such a large room very well.

## The Old People

Everybody, young and old, would enter the house through a wooden veranda. Opposite the front door was the kitchen, where there lived three old men; they had an open fireplace, where they would put their tripod legged coffeepots when they made their coffee. There was also a large baking oven in the kitchen, with

enough room for 16 loaves to be baked at the same time. Mother would bake for the old people as well as for us.

It was not always easy to keep check on their small individual bags of flour, and some of the people seemed to suspect “foul play,” but mostly they trusted “Mor Stava” (mother Stava) as they used to call her.

To the right of the front door, a long passage led to our one room. To the left was *stora stugan*; the main room. There lived eight old women and their beds were put close together along the walls. If you went in when they were making coffee, you would see the top of their stove covered with coffeepots. They had to do their own housekeeping. Communal meals, paid for by the parish, did not exist in those days. – Oh no, the few ‘pennies’ they received in parish re-



Örberga church. May 2004.

lief was not even enough for one square meal a month. One month they received 1.65 *kronor* and the next 1.50 *kronor*, and then, as payment in kind, a small amount of flour and a few potatoes, once every three months.

Above the *stora stugan* (the main room) lay a *järnspiselrum* (iron stove room). There lived two mothers with their five children. They were not too well off either, poor things, but they seemed content nevertheless.

What joy there was at Christmas time amongst both young and old when the coachman arrived from Naddö (a manor in the parish), with "provisions" from Mrs. von Heidenstam, who always remembered us children. There would be baskets packed with nice things; sweets for the children and sugar, coffee, and rice for the old people, as well as for our family.

In the summertime, we children were allowed to pick lots of fruit at Naddö. Such kindness is never forgotten.

On Christmas Eve, Mrs. Margareta Ohlsson at Ullevi Västergård sent a delivery of coffee, sugar, and bags of rice, as well as the finest bread.

Mother would cook rice porridge for everybody in the home on Christmas Eve, and coffee on Christmas Day.

Supplies came from Arneberga gård too; a large tub of milk, which Mother would share out between the old people. This meant that they did not have to touch their own scant money to buy milk for a long while (milk cost 8 öre per liter in those days). A lot of other things arrived from Arneberga, however, we children did not "get a look in"; Mother would carry everything indoors for the old people; they took priority, which was only right. Mother knew where her responsibility lay.

## Ways of earning money

A lot of the old people earned extra money by lacemaking and knitting socks (there was even an old man who made lace). The women who



The Karl Otto Pettersson family in 1903: son Karl Erhard in the back, then Gustava with baby Gerda, Karl August, Hilda, and Karl Otto. In front son Enock.

knitted for *bondkåramororna* – the farmers' wives – preferred to be paid "in kind," and the farmers wives would give them pieces of pork, loaves of bread, and new potatoes, if it was that time of the year.

There were some people who received help from their children – even from America – and then, their lined old faces would light up in joy.

## What we ate

How well I remember Thursdays' yellow pea soup, when the old people would bring their pieces of pork to Mother, tied around with bits of thread for the purpose of identification; there was even red-colored thread. Not very hygienic perhaps, but nobody worried about such things in those days. Everything tasted good. Mother was a marvelous cook and could make a tasty meal out of very little.

On Saturdays, we always had mashed rutabagas, and on Tuesdays, we had soup.

Mother always shared with others of what she had. Her motto was; "a

closed fist can receive nothing." True words. However, when I was very young, before I started school, Mother did not have much to share. I remember well how we would often eat *vattgröt* (porridge made from rye flour) for our evening meal, with milk or syrup-water; bread and pickled herring and raw onion. It tasted wonderful when you were hungry. Perhaps it lacked something in the way of vitamins, but we were healthy, nevertheless.

As time went by, we would sometimes have meatballs on Sundays, and for dessert soup made from dried fruit. Mother would halve the meatballs for us children, and share them out between us. What a feast!

We could eat as many potatoes as we could manage; we grew our potatoes on land belonging to Mr. Dahlgren, the tenant of the Komminister gård in Örberga. He was always very kind to Mother, who kept a pig in Mr. Dahlgren's pigsty. We did not have any outbuildings, only a cellar which was built after I began school.

## The pig

In early spring, Mother would make her way to August Karlsson, the owner of Säby Södergård. She would bring a sack along for the pig she was buying, and then carry it home on her back.

One year, Mother did not have enough money for a pig, and we were all very sad. But then one day, twenty *kronor* arrived in the post from one of my brothers, who was living in the town of Enköping, where he was training to be a gardener.

We felt really happy, as the amount was exactly the price of a pig; they were quite cheap in those days.

Mother shared everything with the old people in the house, making sure that they got more than just the "cooking-smells."

## Modern times are coming

In 1916, "the year of the light" arrived in Örberga old village. That was thanks to our Prince Eugen, who brought electricity to his newly built manor of Örgården, and to Örberga village.

By then, the "poorhouse" had seen a few changes too; our home had been made much brighter. Our one, long room, had been made into two rooms; one large and one small. Also, there was now a doorway into the kitchen and a *kakelugn* (tiled oven), in the large room.

There were two old men living in the kitchen at that time; later there would be only one. (After 1930 there were no old people in the kitchen.)

The room in which the old women lived had become so much brighter as well, with light colored ceiling and beautiful wallpaper on the walls. The children were all grown up by then, and had left home; all except me.

There were still bedridden people in the home; people who had been lying in bed for years, and Mother had to look after them. But now she had better pay; 100 *kronor* a year, instead of 50 *kronor* a year, as in the past.

## Other income

Mother also had other sources of income; she did not get any money for looking after the mail and newspapers for the villagers, but she would be paid by different means.

Also, she would hand over peoples' mail to the postman when he was on his way back from the Nässja round in the afternoon.

The telephone exchange was put in our house on 23rd November, 1905, after the big fire in Örberga. It did not pay much, but the pay increased with the years as did the number of subscribers. I think that each subscriber paid 20 *kronor* a year, before 1936, when the telephone exchange became automated. By then, Mother had run the telephone exchange for 31 years, coupled with all her other duties.

Mother also had the responsibility of heating the village school and the parish council room. It was generally us children who did the cleaning; Mother saw to the dusting and heating. I can picture her in my mind still carrying the heavy boxes of coal for the fires in winter.

## The bellringer

Another of my Mother's duties was, for many years, to ring the Örberga church bell every weekday at 6 o'clock in the morning and at 6 o'clock in the evening, from the 1st of April to the 1st of October. For this she was paid 5 *kronor* at the end of the six months. I know she had a pile of stones in a corner of the church porch during the summer. When she pulled at the thick bell rope hanging from the roof space, she would kick away a stone with each peal of the bell, so as not to lose count.

Mother was quite strict with us children, but fair, and we all loved her very much.

I remember her saying to me once, when I was a bit older, "there are probably many who are jealous of me." But now, in hindsight, it doesn't seem much to be jealous of, the way Mother had to work so hard for paltry wages.

## Other duties

The parish stables were situated on the west side of the churchwall. There, in a stall, were black coffins for the poor, stacked one on top of the other. Mother would collect a coffin from there when a person died. She would make the deceased look so nice; put flowers in their hands, if it was summertime; otherwise she would use a bit of greenery from her potted plants. Some of those who died had no next of kin; then Mother would always walk with them to the graveside.

Many schoolchildren would bring their little troubles to "Moster Stava" (Auntie Stava) as they would call her. Sometimes they had damaged their clothes, and sometimes they had "damaged" themselves.

She would also go to people's houses to lay out their dead. How she found the time and strength to cope with everything is a mystery. Mother always put her trust in a "higher power," and was content with her lot.

Also, Mother was remarkably fit and healthy. Now, in the year 1920, her wages had been increased to 150 *kronor* a year, so things were a lot better than they used to be.

The memories come and they go; how well I remember the day I came home from school to discover that Mother had found 90 *kronor* in a pile of dirty shirts she was sorting through, after an old man that had recently died. She immediately took the money to the "parish room," where a meeting was taking place that day. She received no reward but; "a clean conscience is worth more than money."

When Dalsgård, the new Old People's Home stood ready in 1931, there was only one "old age pensioner" left to move from Örberga.

Mother fell asleep on the 6th of September, 1946. Her memory lives on in us her children for as long as we ourselves are alive.

[**Editor's note:** This article is a translation from a newspaper in the Linköping area, probably the *Östgöta Correspondenten* in the late 1940s. The translator, Ann Little, is a great-grandchild of "Mor Stava" and lives in Cornwall, England. Her e-mail is Annantelan@aol.com]