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Digging Up My Scandinavian Roots

Richard Nyberg*

Many Americans, especially the young ones, can become totally caught up in the excitement of the present, owing partly to the fast pace of this society. We find ourselves constantly on the move, never stopping to look at our heritage, which may tell us why we are the way we are.

As a university student at age 22, I probably fit this description as well as the next person, although my experiences in Sweden during the fall of 1985 gave me new insight into my past and made me pause in my hectic schedule to reflect for a moment. While in Sweden I was fortunate enough to meet several of my relatives who, through their words and lifestyles, showed me my roots. Those exciting experiences will stay with me forever.

I went to Sweden as an exchange student from the University of Michigan to Uppsala University, where I studied Swedish and conducted research on Sweden's press system. I was there for one semester (four months). I left for Sweden with a genuine but very mild interest in meeting relatives and in discovering my ancestry. Perhaps I wanted to meet these people for the benefit of my parents and my Swedish relatives in the United States. I thought it would be fun to meet some of my father's cousins and my second cousins, but my main purpose was academic. And, to be honest, I believed that one needed to be "old" or at least "getting old" to appreciate one's heritage.

Nevertheless, armed with a family history written by a cousin and a few addresses of some of my father's cousins, I set out to find my Swedish relatives. I was ill-prepared to do in-depth research of the Nyberg and Olson families, but I planned to do what I could to get as much information as time and interest allowed. I started things off by mailing letters to the relatives at the addresses I had. Since my proficiency in Swedish was limited at the time, I had some Swedish students on my corridor help me with the first draft. The relatives, most of whom are in their seventies, wrote back to me and said that they would like to meet me before I returned to the United States, but many warned that their health was poor and that a visit might be difficult for them. I read the letters (being pleased with myself for being able to understand them), and filed them in a drawer, hoping for a chance to visit some of them.

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For the most part, my father's relatives come from two areas of Sweden: my grandfather's side from Småland and my grandmother's family from Värmland (my mother's relatives come from Finland, and I was able to visit them, too). I knew more about the relatives in Värmland since a cousin of mine had been in Sweden the summer before and had visited the relatives in that region. I have a second cousin, Håkan, who lives in Kristinehamn, and I tried to meet him and his family, but we never arranged a suitable date. I had hoped to visit with him since he could speak English and he could bring me around to meet the older, less mobile relatives in Värmland.

That never worked out, and I became concerned that I would not be able to meet my Swedish relations. I finally met some during my last two weeks in Sweden. Now that I think about it, perhaps that was the best way to do it, since I could speak Swedish rather fluently (or at least fluently enough to be understood) after three months in Sweden. I decided that I would try to make arrangements to visit my father's cousin in Kalmar. I nervously dialed her number, not knowing if I would be able to understand her and vice versa. Her husband, Gustav, who is hard of hearing, answered the telephone, and I tried desperately to identify myself. I couldn't, so Tyra got on the telephone, and, after a few difficult moments of confusion, I was able to get my message through. "Oh, hello!" she exclaimed in Swedish. "You are welcome to visit us in Kalmar," she said—at least I think that is what she said. We arranged to have me visit them that next weekend. Gustav would be at the railroad station to pick me up. I was amazed at the vitality in Tyra's voice—quite remarkable, I thought, for a lady of 76 years.

So I hopped the train Friday, December 6, for the eight-hour trip from Uppsala south to Kalmar. All kinds of thoughts ran through my mind as I sat in the train. Will they be able to understand me? Are they able to get around? Are they senile? Do they know that I plan to spend the entire weekend? (I couldn't remember what I told her on the telephone.) How would Gustav recognize me at the station? What do I say to these people?

My fears vanished one by one when I arrived in Kalmar, starting with the moment I got off the train. I looked around to see if there was an elderly gentleman looking equally confused. I saw a man walking away from the tracks. He looked back at me, took a double-take, and asked me where I came from. I said, "Uppsala," and he offered me his hand. I had just met my first Swedish relative, and my fascination for my heritage took root.

I asked him how he knew it was me. He said he was not sure, and that he was looking for a shorter, dark-haired student, since my grandfather, who came back to Sweden for a visit in 1939, was short, stocky, and dark-haired. My blond hair and height may have confused him, but he had found me after asking two or three men if their names were Nyberg. The conversation on the way home was difficult at first, but it improved.

We drove up to the house and I saw a smiling, gray-haired lady standing in the doorway. "Welcome," she said, giving me a hug. She reached up and touched my face, smiled, and told me how Swedish I looked, although she expected to see a younger version of my grandfather, Carl A. Nyberg, Sr.

I need to explain some things about my grandfather, since most of my relatives had much to say about this strong, sensitive blacksmith. I mentioned earlier that I had a basic interest in my Swedish heritage, however weak it may have been. My fascination was in finding out more about my grandfather Carl, who died in 1958, five years before I was born. I had heard so many wonderful things about him from my parents and older relatives, and I felt cheated because I never knew him. Traveling to Sweden was one way to find out about his character and background.

Born February 17, 1875, in Vetlanda, Småland, Carl was the son of a carpenter, Anders Jonsson Nyberg. My grandfather grew up near Jönköping, and later in Förlösa, a small suburb of Kalmar, where he was an apprentice in a blacksmith shop. He emigrated to the United States with a buddy in 1903, first arriving in Wisconsin, where he worked for Nash-Rambler. He moved to Brainerd, Minnesota, and then finally to Gladstone in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (my home town) in 1905, where he established himself as a blacksmith. He married Hannah Olson, formerly of Nykroppa, Värmland, in 1908. They had eight children, two of whom died in early childhood. It is not certain why my grandfather came to the United States, but there are rumors that he emigrated to America because of problems with his girlfriend. I guess that wasn't a bad way to get out of a jam. He returned to Sweden for a ten-week visit in 1939. Much of the conversation with Tyra and the other relatives centered around "Uncle Carl" and his 1939 visit.

"Oh, Uncle Carl was so nice," said Tyra, after feeding me an enormous and delicious meal (I did a lot of eating when I visited my Scandinavian relatives). "He was always happy. Everything was good in his mind," said Tyra, looking straight at me through her thick glasses. She told me how active my grandfather was when he visited them, visiting as many relatives and friends as he could.

Tyra and Gustav's house was small, but flawless. The decor was typically "Swedish," or at least it was as I had always envisioned a Swedish home. The furniture, china, and wall decorations reminded me of my aunt's living room. The flavor of the surroundings was familiar, and tasteful to me. The similarities between this house and my grandfather's were striking, and I could already identify some of my family's styles as stemming from the Swedes.

Once the dishes were removed from the table, Tyra and Gustav brought out the pictures and maps. "This is your grandfather in 1939," said Tyra, as she handed me the slightly discolored photograph. She had more than one, so I saw them all. I didn't mind, though, as it made for easy conversation. "This is your grandfather's mother. Her name was Vendla, but everyone called her 'Madame Nyberg' because she was so proud, so stern, and she always loved to wear such fine clothing." My great-grandmother looked like a character out of "Fanny and Alexander." Great-grandfather Anders looked to be in about the same condition, but Tyra explained that he was a friendly and pleasant man.

They showed me pictures of the relatives today, and I was amazed at how many there were, many of whom lived in and around Kalmar. My family at home knew little about Uno's (grandfather's brother's) children, among them Tyra, so I tried to learn the many names and faces while sitting at that table. As

the youngest of my generation, I do not recall meeting any of the Swedish relatives who visited the United States. This made it difficult, since I had problems placing faces and names in the family tree.

Gustav carefully spread out their old map of the United States, and I immediately saw my home town underlined and circled; apparently they knew of their American relatives, although they had only seen a few, the last being my Aunt Inez, who visited them in 1967. They told me of their dream to travel to the United States to see how my grandfather had lived, and to meet those with whom they had kept in contact over the years. In detail they described their trip, finally asking for comments or suggestions. I told them what I could, but it really did not matter, since they somehow knew such a voyage was out of the question, owing to their health. They said they were too old, but I told them, "No way." They had hoped for such an opportunity for years, and then they made excuses for not going. I have some American relatives who are interested in traveling to Sweden, but they also make excuses. I wish I could be more convincing.

That Friday night after the pictures, maps, dreams, and tea, Gustav and I took a five-minute walk and visited another of my father's cousins, Svea, an incredibly energetic woman of 72 years. Of course we ate more, and she brought out the letters and the pictures of grandfather and her father Uno. She described her health problems as a child and how nice my grandfather was to her for many years. They exchanged letters, and Svea let me read one. Grandfather, a lay preacher in the Swedish Mission Covenant Church in Gladstone, was a caring man who showed compassion toward Svea. She in turn had an obvious soft spot in her heart for him, and her words describing him were warm, sincere, and very respectful. She nearly broke into tears, and that display of emotion, if I may use a colloquial expression, "blew me away." I was gaining an incredible amount of respect for a man I never met.

Svea gave me some pictures to take with me, and also a wooden Swedish flag, which she had made herself. She tearfully said goodbye, wishing me good luck and giving me strict instructions to greet my Aunt Esther (to whom she writes occasionally) and also my father, Carl, Jr. That evening was unforgettable, but I was to experience much more before the weekend was over.

Gustav and I returned home that night (Tyra had gone to help the Salvation Army with an event), and we stayed up past midnight talking about the family. After discussing what was to happen the next day, I went to bed. I will never forget the remark this spunky, 76-year-old woman said to me as I turned in for the night: "Sleep well, and dream about me." What a lady.

I spent the next day with Tyra's sister Britta and her family. Britta lives in Förlösa, just outside of Kalmar, where my grandfather grew up. I saw everything I needed to see that day, starting with the foundation of my great-grandfather's house. We looked around the area some, and Britta showed me a tree in which my grandfather once played. We drove past her old home where grandfather stayed when he was in Sweden; we saw the local school house, the blacksmith shop where my grandfather was an apprentice, and an old church that my great-grandfather, the carpenter, had helped to build. We also visited another of my father's cousins, Anton and his wife, Ragnhild. I took a picture of Ragnhild

weaving with an old loom, a method use by past generations.

That whole day I tried to be attentive, carrying my notebook and pen everywhere we went. I was able to capture some interesting comments, jotting them down in a strange combination of Swedish and English. At one point we were driving down, "the old Stockholm road" and Britta said, "This is exactly how it was in 1902, 1939, and today." I was seeing Sweden as my grandfather did, and nostalgic feelings welled up inside me. Perhaps that is strange for a 22-year-old American, but I was overcome with fascination and interest for my heritage.

I ate dinner with Britta, her adopted daughter, Britt-Louise, her son-in-law, Kjell-Ove, and their 12-year-old son, Daniel. We talked and ate a lot, and I began to feel like I fit in well with my Swedish relatives, even though I had known some of them for just a few hours. After dinner I went with Britta to a chapel service at a local Swedish State Lutheran church. (Apparently Britta caught wind of my interests in church and religious affairs). Armed with gifts and pictures, I returned to Kalmar with Kjell-Ove. Again, the goodbyes were difficult, especially for Britta, but I had learned and experienced much from the events of that Saturday. The memories are real and wonderful in every respect.

I left Kalmar Sunday following a church service in Kalmar's cathedral with Tyra and another fine meal. Tyra and Gustav gave me pictures, a Swedish Bible, and a glass candle holder. Early Sunday morning I visited a 61-year-old second cousin, Ingegård, who also lives in Kalmar. I spoke with some relatives on the telephone, too. I made sure I had all the addresses of my relatives in Kalmar, and I also learned of second cousins living in the Stockholm area, two of whom I visited during my last week in Sweden. The weekend in Kalmar was very special to me, as I was overwhelmed with love and concern. It was fantastic.

But what has that experience meant to me? First of all, it was significant in that it served to bring my American and Swedish families a little closer together, since I was a type of liaison linking cousins in both lands. We exchanged addresses and promises to meet again some day. Secondly, I knew my efforts to meet our relatives would please my father and Aunt Esther and, to a lesser extent, the other family members. They were happy that my time in Sweden was enjoyable for me. Thirdly, I wanted to test my Swedish before returning to the United States. I think I passed, since I spoke Swedish the entire time without many difficulties. Fourthly, I made connections with other relatives whom I had never heard of before. This helped to create a better understanding of our Swedish family heritage. And finally, I learned about my grandfather, whose devotional guide I read daily.

Being the youngest in my generation, I missed the chance to know my grandparents. I have always been intrigued by this man, his life, and his background. I saw and spoke with people who respected him for who he was. I walked where he once walked and I saw the land and buildings he knew as a boy. I never learned from my grandfather when he was alive, but his past has taught me a great deal. For this knowledge I am grateful.

Now I also know that one does not have to be 50 years old or older to appreciate finding one's roots. Digging up my genealogical background was one of the most exciting and rewarding experiences of my four months in Sweden. I cherish those memories.