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An Oral Tradition From Skåne - Fact or Fiction?

Curt Hauffman*

My father-in-law, Carl Pålsson, residing at Pålstorp near the city of Hässleholm in Kristianstad *län*, has related to me the following oral tradition concerning his ancestors. Carl's paternal grandfather was Pål Michelsson, a farmer, who bought and cultivated Pålstorp. Earlier generations had occupied a *torp*, which was under the jurisdiction of Hovdala, an estate belonging to the Ehrenborg family and situated about five kilometers from Pålstorp. According to tradition every other generation was named Michel Nilsson and every other Nils Michelsson.

The family arrived in Sweden with the person of Nils Michelsen from Ribe in Denmark, during the troubling time of the Snapphanar rebellion. The *snapphanar* were a band of local guerrilla fighters who sought to delay and sabotage Sweden's efforts to bring Skåne under Swedish hegemony after the Peace Treaty of Roskilde in 1658, by which Denmark ceded to Sweden the provinces of Skåne, Blekinge and Halland.

Nils Michelsen's father in Denmark had been a jurist and an official in a judicial court. His brother, Jens Michelsen, had been selected a commissioner in charge of the administration of Norway, which at this time was a part of the Danish Crown, but never assumed the position, because of a quarrel with the Danish King. Still another brother was the commandant of Kronborg Castle at Helsingør and is supposed to have aided his brother Jens to flee across Öresund to Sweden, where he entered the service of the Swedish King. His task was to recruit soldiers for the Swedish army. The king was pleased with these efforts and ennobled him with the name Ehrenborg. In his position he was able to buy up farms from the widows of soldiers killed in battle and thereby created the estate of Hovdala. Finally he sent for his brother Nils to come to Hovdala as the estate steward. Nils discovered a subterranean passage underneath the tower of the castle of Hovdala, which he restored. It was by means of this passage that Nils was able to save his brother Jens, when the *snapphanar* arrived and burned Hovdala to the ground. Jens was a very proud person and Nils had to convince his brother to flee.

At the shore of nearby Lake Finja lay a rowboat, waiting for the escapees. They had planned to row over to the royal castle of Mölleröd, in order to seek

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refuge there, but when they came out into the middle of the lake, they discovered that even Mölleröd was afire. Instead they stepped ashore at a place named Mjölkalånga and from there continued to Finja, and then on to the various country fairs to rouse the Swedes against the *snapphanar*. For these efforts, Nils and his descendants were given the farm of Spragleröd, under the jurisdiction of Hovdala. According to my father-in-law, one of his ancestors feuded with an Ehrenborg and left Spragleröd in anger. The lord of the Hovdala manor attempted to persuade him to return to Spragleröd, but the owner was too proud to accept.

This constitutes the oral tradition which my father-in-law related, later supplemented by his daughter Birgit. When I first heard the story I was quite skeptical. But digging into the family genealogy, has shown some very interesting results. The first person in the family whom I identified was Nils Michelsson, my wife's paternal grand father, going back nine generations, who was born ca. 1611. He did not reside at Spragleröd, but in Elestorp, which also was a part of Hovdala. Later Elestorp was destroyed in a fire, and this may have been the reason the family moved to Spragleröd. Nils Michelsson's grandson, who in harmony with the family tradition, also was named Nils Michelsson, had as his godmother at the time of his baptism, Anna Gjedde, the wife of Jöns Michelsson Ehrenborg, and his son in turn, Michel Nilsson, had as his godmother in 1701 Maria Ehrenborg of Hovdala. While this is not proof that there exists any blood relationship between the two families, it can be viewed as a possibility. But both the first Nils Michelsson as well as his son Michel Nilsson are mentioned in official sources as representatives for Brönnestad Parish at the meeting of the Hundred in 1677, which speaks for the fact that they were highly regarded.

According to Elgenstierna¹ Jens Michelsson, later ennobled Ehrenborg, was born in Nølev in Odder on Jutland in Denmark 1621, the son of Michel Sørensen, a bailiff. From the point of view of age, Jens and Nils could have been brothers. While Jens Michelsen was a Danish citizen he was offered a position as a judge in Norway, which he turned down, however. After his move to Skåne, he became a tax commissioner there in 1670. The Danes, however, sacked his estate Hovdala and burned it to the ground.

Västra Göinge Hembygdsförening (a local historical society), in a printed program,² published a tradition, told by the last occupant of the entailed estate of Hovdala, Casimir Ehrenborg, entitled "Snapphanar and Danes Laying Siege to Hovdala Castle (7 Aug. 1678)," that 'After thirty hours' fighting the *snapphanar* were able to penetrate the northern wing of the castle by means of treachery. When the lord of the manor and his farm supervisor sought to flee to the defense tower, the Danish officer in command met them with his sabre drawn. He was just about to cut down Michelsen, when the latter closed the door behind him.

There happened to be a subterranean passage from the tower which led to a small body of water, named Tröskverksdammen, where they found a hidden rowboat. Michelsen and his farm inspector escaped to the water's edge and from

there they took the boat to Lake Finja. Here they saw Hovdala on fire as well as the neighboring castle of Mölleröd. They then rowed to Mjölkalånga.'

The tower which was built in 1600 still remains intact. Hovdala was owned by the Ehrenborg family from 1665 to 1945, when it was expropriated by the Swedish State.

There does not seem to exist any relationship between the lord of the manor and his inspector, but the parallel stories are quite interesting. Although a relationship with the Ehrenborgs has not been proved, in theory it is not impossible. My father-in-law relates that his father once met an Ehrenborg at a country fair and the following brief exchange took place. My wife's grandfather said to Ehrenborg - "We are related". To which Ehrenborg answered - "Yes, of course we are". Both the Ehrenborgs and my wife's family have resided continually in the area surrounding Hässleholm since the middle of the 17th century. Other branches of her family can be traced in the general area to the beginning of the 16th century.

The above legends and facts concerning the family's origin belong to Sweden. Let us now look at the family's American story.

My father-in-law relates that two or three of his paternal grandfather's brothers emigrated to America. They apparently had a very difficult Atlantic crossing, where contrary winds forced the sailing vessel to swing northward - and in the process the drinking water ran out. The journey continued up the Delaware River. The contact with Sweden soon stopped and it was believed that the emigrants had perished. During my archival research I found only one brother, Jöns Michelsson, who had emigrated to America in 1854 together with his wife and one child, as well as the children of another brother - Maria and Nils, the latter with wife and four children, who left in 1866. Not much grist for the mill and I wondered if it was worth while doing further research, especially since the relatives at the time had given up hope that they had survived.

Then one day a letter arrived from an American genealogist, Kerwin Rosenquist³, which told me that he was a descendant of the emigrated brothers. My wife and I met him in October 1985 and learned a great deal about the emigrants and their descendants. Pål Michelsson's youngest brother, named Sven, was one of the emigrants. He has related to his grandchildren the story of his crossing, which they have passed on thusly: "They sailed from Malmö in the spring of 1852. --- a storm arose and the vessel was blown off its course. It took ten weeks to make the voyage. The families, who had taken their full supply of food, shared with those who had not done so, and serious suffering was avoided." This is a remarkable coincidence with the story my father-in-law related.

Two years later two additional brothers of Pål Michelsson emigrated, namely Jöns (John) and Måns (Mans). Pehr, another brother, did not emigrate, but

four of his children did - Maria (Mary), Nils (Nels), Andreas (Andrew) and Sven (Swan). They all left Sweden 1866 and all took the name of Rosenquist. Kerwin has given me a detailed list of close to 400 Rosenquist descendants in the U.S.

Kerwin has also given me another indication of a possible relationship with the Ehrenborgs. He tells me that he found a letter in America dating to the 1920s, which shows that one of the Rosenquist emigrants visited the owner of Hovdala once and asked for financial aid for his trip, mentioning the relationship.

Additionally I can relate that two brothers of my father-in-law, Malte and Emil, emigrated to Massachusetts in the 1920, and their families still reside there. Emil came back to Sweden for the first time after forty years. He was a large, robust individual, but when he stepped out of the car at the old family homestead he was overcome by weeping, turned to his brother and said: "How well you have preserved the old family farm, Carl."

The last emigrant to come to America from my wife's family was her cousin Anita, who married a physician in the neighborhood of New York.

The descent of our American kinsmen is as follows:

1. Nils Michelsson in Elestorp (1611-1683).
2. Michel Nilsson in Elestorp (1632-1701).
3. Nils Michelsson in Elestorp (1671-1739).
4. Michel Nilsson in Spragleröd (1705-1768).
5. Per Michelsson in Spragleröd (1733-1812).
6. Michel Persson in Spragleröd (1771-1850). His sons were:
 - a. Pehr (1801-1879), who had children - Maria, b.1831; Nils, b.1833; Andreas, b. 1836 and Sven, b. 1843.
 - b. Jöns Rosenquist, b. 1803.
 - c. Måns Rosenquist, b. 1805.
 - d. Sven Rosenquist, b. 1817.
- e. Pål Michelsson in Pålstorp (1820-1879) had a s. Nils Pålsson in Pålstorp (1866-1951), whose sons, Malte and Emil resided in Massachusetts and Carl Pålsson in Pålstorp, whose dau. Carin m. Curt Hauffman. The Hauffmans have three children - Ulf, b. in Danderyd and Nils and Birgitta, b. in the U.S. 1967 and 1968 respectively. A sister of Carl's is Greta Pålsson, whose dau. Anita lives in New Jersey with her family, which includes two children - Paul and Christina

¹Gustaf Elgenstierna, *Den introducerade svenska adelns ättartavlor*, I-IX (Stockholm 1925-1936), II, p. 410.

²*Västra Göinge Hembygdsförenings Årsskrift's* printed program for the performance of a play entitled "Snapphanarna på Hovdala".

³Kerwin Rosenquist's address is 530 South Avenue, Rockford, IL 61109.