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The Värmlands Nation Dinner, May 6, 2000

Preface: During my first time in Uppsala on the Minnesota – Uppsala exchange in 2000, my husband Ben had to return to the U.S. to be with his mother in her final days. Being alone, and knowing that Ben was not able to be part of what we would have done together had he been able to stay, I started writing a series of journal entries describing my experiences as I learned about Uppsala and Swedish culture. I sent the journals as email messages to him and other friends and family in the U.S. who were likely worried about how I was doing on my own. Now, looking back on what I wrote in the spring of 2000, I see my wide-eyed enthusiastic joy as, through experiences, I learned more about Swedish life and culture, sometimes getting wrong the details and their meaning. Below, I reproduce, a journal entry I wrote about the Värmlands Nation spring dinner on May 6, 2000, with a few recent corrections from Professor Frändberg.

Åke Frändberg, a member of the Uppsala law faculty whose daughter, Louise, had lived with us in Minneapolis for six months a couple of years ago, had invited me to attend the May 6 spring formal dinner at the “nation” at which he is the Inspector, the chief officer of the organization. There are thirteen nations (student social organizations) at Uppsala University, one for each region of Sweden. All but one of the nations has a building, including a small library, that typically offers a café in the afternoons, pubs in the evenings and dances and special parties on the weekends. Nations also have choirs, bands, religious groups, and the like. The building of the Värmlands nation is right next to the law school building in which my office is located. The Nation’s building was designed by Ragnar Östberg, the architect who designed the Stockholm City

Hall, and so the Värmlands building appears in tourist guides and maps. The Värmlands Nation also owns a dormitory and an apartment building elsewhere in town and administers a scholarship program. Each student at the University must belong to one of the nations. Indeed, you may not sit for a course exam without showing evidence of membership. Historically, students were automatically assigned to the nation representing their homeland area in Sweden (Värmlands is in the west of Sweden, partly bordering Norway), but these days, for all but one of the nations, students are allowed to elect membership in the nation of their choice. Värmlands has about 2,000 members.

Early in the day on Saturday, I had seen a group of young men and women dressed in suits and dresses, some with the chest sashes and ribbons characteristic of the Värmlands Nation (black with a gold stripe on either side) marching back to the Nation in formation, carrying a flag. Åke explained to me later that they had been returning from decorating the Nation's grave at the city's graveyard. (The graveyard is a few blocks away from the nation, just across the street from our apartment. We have seen graves there that go back at least to the 18th century and there may be older ones there as well. Most Nations have a grave and a monument for student members of the Nation who died while students here.)

At about 5:15 p.m., I walked along the cobblestone sidewalks the few blocks from our apartment to the Nation in a floor-length black velvet dress and patent leather shoes, somewhat self-consciously, amidst the folks on their bicycles and others walking babies, enjoying the warm and brightly sunny afternoon. Upon arrival at the Nation at the appointed meeting time, Åke came down the wide staircase to greet me. My immediate assessment of the expression on his face was that he was relieved that I was properly dressed, perhaps having been fearful that an American wouldn't know quite how to dress for such an occasion. He looked quite spectacular himself, wearing white tie and tails, including a jacket collar in embroidered velvet, a colorful Värmlands Nations ribbon sash across his chest and a round metal medallion on a chain hanging from his neck indicating his status as Inspector. He escorted me upstairs to the reception where champagne was being served in flutes. There was music from piano and oboe. The group included a large number of current students and some alumni, about sixty people altogether. All of the other men were also wearing white tie and tails, most with sashes and other ribbons and medallions and decorations; a few also wore their black-brimmed white velvet student caps (including both current students and those who had

been students long ago). The women were dressed in floor-length formal dresses, except for a student and an elderly woman dressed in embroidered folk costumes. Many of the women also wore chest sashes or smaller medals with the Värmlands ribbon on their gowns. At the reception, Åke explained that his wife had been ill and would be unable to attend. He introduced me to a number of those present, both student officers of the Nation and alumni, including a reporter from the local newspaper attending in her role of alumna, who had interviewed Barry and Patty Feld (with whom she had become friends and visited in the U.S.) and Andy Schoettle, University of Minnesota Law School faculty members, in the early days of the exchange program between the two schools.

There was a seating chart for dinner posted by the entrance door to the dining room, but I didn't notice it until later in the evening. When the doors opened for dinner, Åke rushed to find me within the reception to escort me, elegantly by the elbow, to enter because, since he was the Inspector, the others could not enter until he had done so first. The dining room had two long tables situated diagonally across the attractive room. It had several large windows, chandeliers, and on all of the walls were formal painted portraits of former Inspectors of the Nation. The tables had white table cloths, fresh flowers, lighted candles and at each place was a little booklet of the evening's program and menu. As dinner service began, I realized that, in the absence of Åke's wife, Viveca, I, as the female guest of the Inspector would be the very first person served with each course.

The first course was a chilled avocado soup with sour cream and caviar, served with a long narrow piece of toast. (Caviar is much more common in Sweden than the U.S. Each grocery store has a large caviar section. One popular kind comes in a squeeze tube, decorated with the face of a smiling child. I realize that this is difficult for Americans to believe, but the Swedish children like it spread on sandwiches as an American child would use peanut butter. It was pretty clear that the caviar in the soup was not the same kind that comes in the squeeze tube.) There was some kind of alcohol served with each course. For the soup course, there was beer and schnapps. The appetizer was cold fresh pasta, with salmon and mussel, flavored with fresh orange and lemon. A white wine was served with the appetizer. The main course was chicken breast with a balsamic sauce, sliced potato cakes with goat cheese and spring vegetables, all served French style (with waiters offering the different courses from a serving platter), with a red wine. The dessert was described on the menu

as an ice cream sandwich but that doesn't do justice to its delicacy. There were two splendid cookies, vanilla ice cream, whipped cream and fresh strawberries, served with a dessert wine, followed by chocolate truffles (dark and white) served with cognac or "punch." What is called punch here is not the fruit juice-mixed drink you might expect under that name in the U.S., but rather a very strong after-dinner liqueur. Later, coffee was served and with this, some ashtrays were distributed and a few people lighted cigarettes or cigars.

I have described the menu as if the dinner was served uninterrupted, but actually there was a long program of other events that were interspersed with the dinner. The events were of three kinds, songs sung by the attendees, musical interludes, and speeches. A young man with a large dinner bell would, at various times, stand, ring the bell and announce a specific drinking song to be sung by the assembled group. These songs were contained in little hard-bound black books, specific to that Nation, that the students and alumni had received when they joined. One's name was embossed in gold on the cover of one's song book. As far as I could tell, they all knew all of the songs but some had brought their books along to be passed around as autograph books, for friends to write greetings on the pages of their favorite songs. In one case, they sang from distributed typed photocopied sheets, new words to an old tune, the words written by an elderly woman in the group, that Åke said were quite good and clever. After each drinking song was sung it was appropriate to toast with whatever alcohol was being served with the current dinner course. There was one drinking song that was repeatedly sung during the evening after each speech, most of the song being sung by the group and one line sung only by the person who had just finished speaking. As the night progressed, the songs became more complicated and animated. Some involved pounding on the table or stomping one's feet under the dinner table at particular moments in the song. One song included a whole series of hand gestures identified with specific words in the song. There were a number of special songs to celebrate the arrival of the "punch" after dinner. These included linking elbows, swaying back and forth and repeatedly sitting down on one's chair and then standing up while arms remained linked at the elbows. In another song, as it mentioned the various areas of study at the University, the people who were on that faculty were to stand. One of the traditional songs that ends such an evening involves standing on one's chair. I will have to admit that it is the first time in my life that I have stood on a chair in a floor-length

gown but I somehow managed both the ascent and descent without disaster. While I couldn't participate in the singing, as each of these more complicated songs came up, Åke advised me of the expected movements and I did my best to join in.

The performance music and speeches were each announced by a young woman in a red satin gown standing from her place at the table, going to the side of the room and pounding three times hard on the floor with a large heavy wooden staff topped by a metal insignia. After the ceremonial pounding, she would formally introduce the speaker or music. There were two musical interludes. First the pianist and oboe player who had played at the reception played two pieces of classical music. Later in the evening, a guitar player and fiddle player performed several folk songs. The speeches were largely formal at the beginning of the evening and got generally more irreverent as the evening progressed. The speeches were all in Swedish, of course. Åke provided me with summaries at the end of each. First, there was a welcoming speech from the young woman who was the student leader of the organization, obviously well spoken. An elderly couple announced a financial gift to the Nation. Another woman presented to the Nation a bronze model of a statue of a young girl, about 18 inches high, that was a miniature replica of a large public statue that had been donated by her late brother, a famous Swedish journalist based in Hollywood, to his hometown in the Värmlands region. There were lots of laughs as she tried to figure out how to turn the statue, under its opaque cloth cover, so that when she removed the cover it wouldn't be pointing its backside to the audience. There was a short talk by a noted Värmlands poet who was an honored guest of the Nation for the evening. He told a story about a Värmlands radio reporter trying to record a radio interview of an ordinary Värmlands person. The reporter asks the interviewee how he spends his days and the interviewee begins to explain the events of the day—making his coffee, feeding his animals, and then mentions drinking, at which point the reporter turns off the recorder and explains that they don't want talk of that sort on the radio. The reporter helpfully suggests that at that point in the day perhaps the interviewee might have read a book. The recording begins again and the interviewee picks up the idea, continuing to relay the events of his normal day, describing when he would be drinking in the course of the day as “reading a book.” Finally he comes to a point in his account of the day, and the punch line, when the interviewee says that he went to visit a friend who “makes his own books.” (Moonshining is apparently legendary in Värm-

lands.) I will have to ask Ben because I think we have heard this tale before, perhaps in some totally unrelated context. The story of the radio reporter was told dramatically by the poet, to great laughter and giggles. Later in the evening he recited some poetry. There were a number of other speeches by students. One was a traditional speech to the glories of spring, that included some recorded bird sounds, but was told quite humorously about how you were supposed to enjoy spring but it had some less delightful features such as experiencing seasonal allergies and discovering that your spring wardrobe that had been packed away had become entirely unsuitable for reuse. Another student speech was directed mostly to Åke, humorously attributing the triumphs and problems of the Nation over the past five years in some way to the fact that at a similar occasion five years ago Åke had popped out of cake as part of a stunt. (You would have to know Åke and his polite, quiet-spoken formality to understand how generous he must have been to have done such a thing so completely unlike him.) Åke himself gave the last speech of the evening, including a few words in English at the outset introducing me to the group and welcoming me to the event.

In between the songs and the music and the speeches there was time to enjoy the meal and conversation with others at the table. I spoke mostly to Åke and to two students across the table from me, both of whom had spent some time in the U.S. and both of whom had taken a year off from their studies to take a modestly-paid position at the Nation to gain valuable management experience. The young man, a law student interested in a career in business, managed the Nation's current financial transactions. The young woman, a student in personnel administration, was in charge of the food service and personnel. She was responsible for the daily café and pub, the weekly dances and the special events such as that evening. She explained that the gourmet dinner was entirely cooked and served by the staff of students who had trained each other, from year to year, in how to do all of the tasks.

The events I've described lasted from 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. At that point, a big band, also students of the Nation, started playing in the formal ballroom on the lower level and the dinner attendees migrated there and to its adjacent bar. Åke invited me to dance and we did dance one slow number and one swing dance, but I think he figured out pretty soon that formal dancing was not my strength. We went upstairs for a while to a somewhat quieter parlor (because the band was really loud) and chatted. Although it was probably ill-advised on my part in light of the

alcohol I'd consumed during the evening, we talked about fairly serious European economic, cultural, and political issues and Sweden's role in the new Europe. Although Åke encouraged me to stay for the later events of the evening (more dancing, the dining room now turned into a café with small tables with lighted candles for more quiet conversation, some kind of snack at 1 or 2 a.m.), I begged off about midnight and headed for home, pretty exhausted since I'd risen that morning at 5 a.m., about twenty minutes after the very early Swedish spring sunrise.