

MEMORIES OF A SWEDISH CHRISTMAS

BY
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Memories of Christmas in Scandinavia. Yes, these I have, but there are earlier, more deeply set memories, not of Christmases spent in Scandinavia, but of a Scandinavian Christmas--Christmas on a farm in northern Iowa. Because we lived in a German community we were American in thought and speech for eleven months of the year. But December was different. We became residents again, in everything but fact, of Ivetofta Parish, Sweden.

It was not easy on that farm in Iowa to make such a transformation. Lutfisk, herring, lingonberries, and cardamom seed--all must be ordered at least a month in advance from the big city of Ft. Dodge; the dried lutfisk to soak in great tubs of lime water in the cellar, herring to be pickled in vinegar and spices. Biscuits, with glossy egg-topping, were not biscuits without cardamom. What a wonderfully sweet, savory smell: cardamom! Actually they did not remain long in their biscuit state for many were cut in halves

and roasted for hours in long, shallow black pans. Enough *skorpa* for all the morning coffees of the Holidays. From the first week in December a veritable olfactory pandemonium reigned in the kitchen. It was a mixture of Christmas sausage (*fläskkorv*), pickled herring (*inlagd sill*), head cheese (*pressylta*), Swedish brown beans (*bruna bönor*), rye, spiced and yeast bread, twists (*kringlor*), and spice cookies (*pepparkakor*). Yet in the end, the smell of cardamom pervaded all. We young fry loved to be there and willingly took on all the dull tasks of beating eggs, grinding meat, stirring sauces, creaming butter and sugar--just to maintain our rights of domain, scarcely eminent and very hard won.

Christmas Eve festivities really began in our family shortly after noon with the traditional visit to the kitchen where we all would "dip in the kettle" (*doppa i gryta*), with a chunk of dark or coarse white bread, to taste the good juices of the Christmas ham (*Julskinka*). In my memory it seemed to precede directly the decoration of the tree, and that was



(Robert Ryan photo).

done always behind closed doors by my parents and my older sisters.

The front parlor had been closed since the advent of cold weather, but now the great hard-coal stove with its nickel trimming had been polished and set up. Red folding bells, made of honeycomb tissue paper, were hung in windows and doorways. Father cut pine boughs, small ones, to lay before the outside doors. And then on the morning of Christmas Eve the tree was unloaded. No long-needled balsam, this--but a dark green spruce, compact, thick. We had no strings of electric lights; we had something better: short, white twisted candles which were set in holders. After *doppa i gryta*, my parents and my older sisters went into the front parlor and closed the door.

By four o'clock of Christmas Eve all was ready. My older sisters had taken out the cloth curlers from the hair of us young fry, fixed our hair ribbons and tied our sashes around our finest blue wool-poplin dresses. Smorgasbord was ready! The first course, to be sure, was lutfisk and boiled potatoes. (Although we were served mustard sauce with it, a custom in Skane only, the majority of Swedish people use butter and white sauce.) Then we returned to the board to feast our eyes upon delicacies we would not see again until the next Christmas: the decorated Christmas ham (always in the center of the table), breads and cheeses, sausage, head cheese, brown beans, pickled herring and beets, rice pudding (served hot with cinnamon sugar and butter), pepparkakor and almond patties

and finally that most wonderful of all desserts, cheese (*ostkaka*)--a Christmas dessert served mainly in southern Sweden. (Was its taste enhanced by the fact that it took the better part of two days to prepare?)

The climax of my earliest memory of Christmas Eve is the opening of the parlor door. The tree stood in the middle of the room. I saw nothing else for a long while except those flickering, sputtering candles on the tree, a fantastic beauty, a heaven-tree with its silver star at the top leading straight to Heaven--or so I thought. Slowly I realized that there were others in the room. Mother was at the organ; the Swedish song books open, and Father was holding the lamp over the music. The older girls could come in on the choruses; we younger ones just pretended. The hymns were over, and then came the jolly songs which Father loved. We liked them, too, but Mother, I suspect, did not quite approve. Maybe they were songs appropriate only for the dance and clink of the glass. At any rate we always wound up with "Och nu är det Jul igen" (And Now it is Christmas Again), although we didn't understand a word of the song. We marched around the tree, singing less boisterously as the tree once again embraced us.

I was never very sure that Father slept at all that night, for long before the sky lightened, we could hear his slippers flap upon the stairs; he was bringing Mother her coffee. Oh, it was a brooding darkness in which we made ready for the Julotta service! Clammy, icy clothes: it

was easier if one got into them hurriedly; and then there was always the problem of making our white ribbed stockings fit without undulant ridges over those long flannels.

Father in coonskin "pels" and black fur cap stood outside by the sleigh, reins in hand, talking to Hans, the hired man. He had fed the bays an extra ration of oats that morning; Hans was Swedish, too, and knew that all animals must have a feast on Christmas Day. He had made the sleigh ready with straw and blankets. We children were already in, kneeling on the blankets. "Take care you don't put your overshoes against our coats," our older sisters warned. Finally Mother, who had a great brown fur cape, muff, and a velvet hat with plumes, emerged. We were off for Julotta. It was a creaking cold pre-dawn. The moon and stars somehow seemed to be very close. One could almost touch the sky--if one tried. The only sounds to break the whiteness and stillness which lay everywhere were the harness bells--a gentle, light sound--and the squeaking of the snow as the runners slid over it. The whiteness seemed sometimes--if there were no lights in the farm houses--like a never-ending gray mist. Once we passed a house close to the road; the isinglass belly of the hard-coal stove shone red through the window; it looked warm and inviting. We rode in silence the six miles except when Mother said quietly, "In Ivetofta there were flares on every fence post to guide us to church on Christmas morning." This was one custom she had not been

able to perpetuate here in America.

Then the church appeared. The gray mist suddenly vanished. The light from the tall arched windows spilled out over the snow. Father drove the horses into the hitching stall. He turned to us. His eyebrows and mustache were white with frost. The horses' flanks were covered with rime. We moved, stiff-kneed, with Mother to the church door. Father stayed behind to blanket the horses. In every window there were three candles. The tree was much grander than any I had seen, and its candle flames--myriads of them--seemed to be nodding politely but with restraint to each other. Occasionally one would wag and sputter, but generally they only bowed like the communicants, a polite nod, and then raised their heads as if they, too, were waiting--waiting for the child.

I cannot explain how a sight or a sound, scarce thought of for decades, suddenly impinges upon one with startling vividness. But it does. This moment I can hear the organ swell to the anthem, "Var Hälsad Sköna Morgonstund," (*We Greet Thee, Beautiful Morning Hour*) and, less vividly, in the recessional. What happened in between I do not recall. As we moved down the aisle, the world had changed. The primeval darkness which had lain outside the high windows had gone. The eastern sky was gold and red and blue. Christmas morn: the light had come! □