

The Sweden they left — the Sweden we visit

By Henry Hanson

Most Americans of Swedish descent know little about the Sweden of their parents or grandparents, and perhaps not much really about the Sweden they visit.

The Sweden which the immigrants left in large numbers (1870-1900) differs greatly from the Sweden of today. This is not particularly unique. The America of 1984 is not the America of 1870. But perhaps the contrast is greater in the case of Sweden than in many western countries, for the industrial revolution with its factories and cities had not significantly affected the Sweden of 1870. Industrialization had not made its impact.

The radical transformation of Swedish society in the last hundred years is also somewhat disguised by the fact that Sweden, while today a "modern" country, is built on ancient foundations and traditions which have been preserved. Sweden is still a monarchy with King Carl XVI Gustaf on the throne of the Svear and Götar. It still has a state (official, national) Church with well-preserved beautiful edifices from the Middle Ages and ancient and medieval Christian "catholic" customs and ceremonial. There are even a few counts and barons, to be found on estates (herrgårdar), in Skåne in particular, and in the higher echelons of government and business. Sweden avoided "revolutions" but its evolution has been revolutionary.

Sweden in 1870 was a rural, agrarian country. Over 75 percent of its 4.2 million people were engaged in agriculture and related activities such as forestry. Today, Sweden is largely industrial and urban, with 80 percent of its 8.3 million inhabitants living in cities and towns, and with less than 6 percent of its people engaged in agriculture in 1970.

Sweden in 1870 was a poor country. True, about 52 percent of farmers were yeoman freeholders (bönder) but many of them had small holdings which barely provided a living, and often only the eldest son would inherit the farm. The tenant farmers and crofters lived in dire poverty, and the growth in population in the 19th century had produced a growing landless agricultural proletariat. Almost 18 percent of the people were considered "paupers." Today, rural and urban poverty has been largely eliminated with slums virtually unknown, and the ordinary Swede en-

joys one of the highest standards of living in the world with a social welfare system which insures security from "womb to tomb."

Sweden in the mid-19th century remained a "feudal" country with a sharply structured class system. Sweden had never experienced the feudalism and serfdom prevalent on the Continent of Europe; but the actual political and economic power rested in the hands of the "better" people, the landed aristocrats, the high civil servants and the small but growing middle class in the cities. Today, Sweden is a strongly egalitarian society politically, socially and economically. The labor movement, with its political arm — the Social Democratic Party, and its economic arm — the trade unions, has transferred power to the everyday Swede. Women enjoy a quality with men hardly surpassed in the world.

Politically the century since 1870 has been the breakthrough of political democracy and parliamentary government. In 1866 the Swedish parliament consisted of the four traditional Estates—clergy, aristocrats, townsmen (burghers) and yeomen (bönder). The yeoman class had been represented in the Swedish parliament from its origin in medieval times, but the advantages of wealth, education and social prestige resulted in the wealthy and aristocratic class virtually dominating the government. Today, Sweden has a unicameral parliament based on universal adult suffrage and proportional representation. Since 1932 the labor party, the Social Democrats, has been in power except for a few months in 1936 and for the period 1976-1982.

The King, while widely admired and respected, no longer plays any role in government. The Constitution of 1809 established a balance between the monarchy and the parliament but vested executive authority in the King personally. Over the years the monarch has gradually, and with good grace, relinquished this responsibility to the prime minister and the cabinet. Since 1973 when a new constitution was adopted the King exerts no political power whatsoever and performs only ceremonial duties, functioning as the official representative of Sweden, the nation's PR man. The king reigns but the people rule.

In 1870 Sweden had rudimentary school systems to teach people to read and write and to indoctrinate them with the basic tenets of Lutheran Christiani-

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ty, but higher education remained until after World War II to a large degree the privilege of the well-to-do. In the post-war era in Sweden, as in the United States, drastic reforms in the educational system have made higher education and training available to all on the basis of ability, not economic status.

In 1870 Sweden was a religious country. The official Church played a prominent role in the life of the rural population, and the rural pastor was a beloved "father figure" albeit often stern. Many churchmen, however, often acted in an authoritative manner; and the higher clergy, the bishops, were often remote from the people. The Protestant dissenters — the Mission Friends, the Baptists, etc., were subject to discrimination and harassment; and Roman Catholics and Jews barely tolerated, being considered something strange, alien and distinctly "unSwedish."

Today the Church exercises very little influence on Swedish society. Less than 10 percent of the Swedes attend church — either The Services (Mässa) of the Church of Sweden or the "meetings" of the minority Protestant dissenters ("free church") — with any degree of regularity; and the pastoral letters of the Bishops are ignored. The institutionalized church has become a mere custodian of certain family-religious traditions, such as Baptism, Confirmation, marriages and funerals. It is a department of the government, with the primary task of maintaining vital statistics. Even the present Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs in the cabinet is not a strong churchman and attends church only when his official duties compel him to do so. The once vigorous free-church movement (non-Lutheran and semi-Lutheran protestants) has ossified and lost its vigor. Sweden is no longer a solidly "Protestant" country. There are well over 100,000 Roman Catholics — vigorous, dynamic and growing, not to mention Orthodox (eastern church) Christians, Jews and recently Moslems and Buddhists.

The failure of the Church in the last decades of the 19th century to appreciate the aspirations of the Swedish working men and women as expressed in the Social Democratic Party and the trade union movement alienated a large

segment of the working class. In addition, the anti-Christian and anti-religious propaganda of many so-called intellectuals, the "intelligenstia," has reduced still further the waning influence of the Church, so that today Sweden is at least a partially de-Christianized country with a large segment of its population hedonist. With the traditional value system eroded, the Swedish people are in a "moral crisis" as they find that the "good life" which they have attained through hard work and cooperation and the welfare state does not fill the void. It might be added that this "crisis" is not unique to Sweden but is widespread throughout Europe be it Catholic or Evangelical, and even in the United States. But it is more acute in modern-day Sweden.

In 1870 Sweden was a homogenous country and remained so largely up until World War II. The Swedes were a Nordic people, and the stereotyped figure of the Swede — tall, blond, blue-eyed — contained a goodly degree of truth. There were to be sure a few thousand Lapps in the far North, and in addition a somewhat large Finnish-speaking population in the Tornio River Valley and in a few other isolated spots in the country. This is changing. The Sweden of today is no longer a monolingual ethnically homogenous society but a multi-lingual society with many ethnic minorities such as Greeks, Turks, Italians and Yugoslavs. It is estimated that today 1,000,000 "Swedes" are immigrants or the children of immigrants. The Finns, not exactly "foreigners" but fellow Nordics despite their unique language, constitute the largest single minority in Sweden, with an estimated 400,000 people in Sweden having Finnish as their mother tongue, and close in number if not percentage to the number of Swedish-speaking Finns in Finland. Two hundred and twenty thousand foreign nationals, that is about 5 percent of the labor force of 4.3 million, are employed in Sweden, frequently doing the "dirty work" and menial jobs which the now well-off Swedes disdain. Fifty different languages are taught in the Swedish schools in addition to Swedish. The fact that the birth rate of the immigrants and their children is much higher than that of the "pure Nordic Swedes" portends drastic demographic changes in the years ahead. Indeed, both in Sweden and in Swedish America an extremely low birth rate is reducing the "Swedish element" in both countries. A form of genocide, self-inflicted?

From the Great Depression of the Thirties until the Sixties Sweden was greatly admired the world around as a country which had coped with its economic problems and provided a secure life and a high standard of living

to practically all its people by finding a compromise between unbridled exploitive, free-enterprise capitalism and the omnipotent socialist state — the famous "middle way." But in recent years it is increasingly chic to regard Sweden as an example of the pitfalls of the overly ambitious "welfare state." Taxes are high and absorb 50 percent of the Gross National Product; the bureaucracy is overwhelming and even arrogant; governmental deficits are astronomical. And the people are not "happy." These problems, while acute in Sweden are not, however, unique to that country, and are more a phenomenon of contemporary society as a whole. For example, our idealistic "war on poverty" did not achieve its goal, our unprecedented deficit spending since 1981 endangers our future and that of our children; while Mr. Reagan strikes responsive chords in the American people with his nostalgia for a bygone time which will never return.

The seriousness of the situation in which contemporary Sweden finds itself should not be minimized. But on the other hand it should be noted that the Swedes have generally sought to cope with the problems of society (1870-1984)

in an intelligent, rational and cooperative manner. Consensual politics and compromise rather than confrontation and violence generally mark Swedish politics. Even such bastions of privilege and tradition as king and aristocrats have accepted the inevitable and accommodated themselves with good grace to a changing world. Industrialists and big businessmen have, in contrast to many countries, accepted "workers" as human beings and not mere "hired hands" to be exploited, as well as in principle the basic goals of the social welfare state. Gustav V (1907-1950), an aristocrat by nature and enjoying considerable power and influence, did not find it impossible to appoint Hjalmar Branting prime minister of the first Socialist cabinet in Sweden in 1920, and later in cooperating with a former carpenter, the Social Democratic Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson, in creating the Swedish "folkhem" (welfare state) and bolstering Sweden's defense capability during World War II.

Modern Sweden has its flaws, and they are serious. But it also has a commendable record in improving the life of all its people.

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