

1 Modernity

Moderne

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THE SUN WAS shining on a cool clear summer day in early July. I was standing close to a large wooden building, painted dark red with white trimmings. In front of me an elderly man stood towering above me, not unlike an English country gent, at least two heads taller than me. His gaze was firmly placed about half a meter to my right and appeared focussed on the far horizon, whilst he was announcing, with a voice dry as tinder: *Der Herr Ems wünscht bei uns zu mieten?* (Mr. Ems wishes to rent one of our cabins?). It took me a moment or two to realize that he actually was addressing me, before I could attempt an affirmative nod.

This was my first encounter with Sweden. I had arrived in Stockholm in the summer of 1962, and made haste to contact an acquaintance from our village back home in Austria. He had worked as gardener at a small estate on Stockholm's western fringe, *Riddersviks Gård* in *Hässelby Villastad*, and took me there to find out, whether I could get lodging and work at the Manor.

I didn't get a job, but they let me rent a small labourer's cabin, without water or electricity. It was really just a small room with a kitchenette attached to it. It must have been at least a hundred years old and was located on the edge of a potato field, with a small path that led to the main buildings of the estate. However, I did find work nearby eventually, having secured a gardening job in a newly built neighbourhood in *Skälby*.

Even if my first Swedish experience was with the Sweden of yore, in the form of a gentleman's eccentric way of addressing me, I would soon understand that this was the exception rather than the rule. My life during that summer centred on the western outskirts of Stockholm. This was where suburbanization had begun just a few years earlier.

From my cabin it was only a 20 minutes' walk to the T-station (metro station) *Hässelby Strand*, the terminus of the (then) only metro-line in Stockholm. This station had been established only four years earlier and still looked shinningly new to me. There was nowhere like it in Graz, the major town that I had left behind me to come to Sweden.

Since I was working just north of *Hässelby Villastad*, I had no business in the town of Stockholm itself. On Saturdays, I would take the metro eight stations to *Åkeshov*, where I would have a sauna and a swim in a brand new swimming hall. In evenings, when I felt like it, I would take it three stops to *Vällingby*, to go to the movies.

On route, my wondering eyes would rest on a manifold of fairly new buildings along the way, each more interesting than the last. After the low apartment buildings in *Hässelby Gård*, via the intriguing centre of *Vällingby* – with its (now world-famous) concept of combining a garden city with modern temples of culture, leisure and commerce – I passed a wall of a building in *Räcksta*, that looked like a skyscraper to my provincial eyes – the headquarters of *Vattenfall* – and saw the many villa quarters located in between and thereon. All were embedded in a lush carpet of vegetation, with green lawns crowned by feathered pine trees, as if unconcerned with the newly arisen building frenzy of the Swedes. I was lucky to have arrived just in time for Sweden's post-war *Gründerzeit!*

On Saturday evenings, I would sneak past the fence of *Hässelby Strandbad*, where there was dancing and merry-making till midnight. No waltzes, polkas and marches were being played there! Rather, big band music in syncopated rhythm. One song in particular tickled my fancy, and from it I learned my first Swedish words:

*På Västerbron i den himmelska ron
en spårvagn går ensam och tom ...*

I soon started to gather more words, eager to learn the language by applying the Schliemann method, reading texts in Swedish aloud and memorizing them. My favourite text was an article in an abstruse little journal, called *Häpna*, which appealed to my interest in science fiction.

Eventually, I was able to read the main newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, which gave me a broader perspective on Swedish "Modernism". The debate articles in that paper fascinated me. Here I learned advanced views on society that I had hitherto never seen in newsprint. For instance, a first

for me was the liberal view on how to treat criminals. Instead of the usual ideas of revenge and prevention through punishment or the simple act of locking someone up, there was a view of teaching the deviants the right way through re-education in prison!

I often get the question what made me come to Sweden as a youngster, immediately after having graduated from high school. The answer to this query is easy; youth is adventurous by instinct and driven to travelling and gaining new experiences. It is far more intriguing for me to explain why I came back after that first summer visit and eventually stayed in the country.

We are all hostage to our upbringing. My first formative years were spent in a small village in South-Eastern Austria. There I experienced a fulfilling childhood in a close-knit conservative society characterized by self-sufficiency, rarely touched by outside influences. But, at the early age of nine, I was brusquely uprooted and replanted to Graz, the capital of Styria (one of Austria's Länder).

In those days, the Austrian State believed in the merit of identifying, and making special efforts to educate, its most intelligent youth, irrespective of family background. All elementary-school teachers were asked to single out, among their fourth-grade pupils, the most gifted and send them to Graz for entrance tests to a boarding school, which enlisted some 90 pupils for an eight years elite high-school education. I happened to be one of those admitted to the class of 1954. This thanks to *Frau Pieber*, my first teacher, who had prepared me for the tests with special tutoring.

The education we received there was not only utterly comprehensive, encompassing both humanities and natural sciences, but also strived to imbue us with a modern, liberal attitude to life and society. This was deliberate, to counter the lingering "evil spirits" of the totalitarian regime that had broken down less than a decade earlier.

After having thus been won over to the merits of (for old Austria) modern concepts, such as liberty and equal opportunity for all, I had, when leaving school, to experience the real Austrian society of the early sixties. Suffice it to say

that I felt a pronounced cleft between ideals and reality that became increasingly difficult to accept for an impatient and uncompromising youngster.

Sweden to the rescue! Experiencing a new country for the first time lets you concentrate, if you are a young idealist, on the positive aspects of this other society. This is especially true if it shows all signs of vigorous and righteous progress. One easily neglects the negative that is also present and is rounding up the overall picture.

Of course, the perceived accord between my ideal society and what I experienced in Sweden was not the only reason why I stayed. Falling in love with a woman certainly played the main role. But had Swedish society been like Austria of the early sixties, I doubt whether I would have put down roots in this country as my new homeland.

As I grew older and more knowledgeable about society, I had to revise my first impressions. In addition, Swedish society itself changed over the years. What at the outset seemed to me a country of liberty, equal opportunity for all and progressive humanistic ideals, eventually turned out to be a country where socialist inspired statism gradually took charge and brought society into relative decay. It took a great financial crisis in the early 'nineties to bring a stop to this sad development and reintroduce vigour and progressiveness in society.

I also got a more comprehensive grasp of the many faceted town of Stockholm, once I had moved there for good and taken up residence in various parts of the city. A decisive moment came when I saw, for the first time, in early 1964, an enormous void expanding throughout the town centre. This deep wound in the city landscape took almost a decade to heal and its scars are still felt, by myself and Stockholmers alike, to this very day. Thus, with increasing insights and age, my interest in modern buildings decreased and I have become more and more fond of the Stockholm of yore, or what remains of it.

Some parts of the city are still uniquely well preserved, such as *Gamla Stan* and *Riddarholmen*, and a delight to revisit. There is also a treasure-trove of architecture from the early

parts of last century, which has a uniquely Scandinavian flair. Let me just mention *Stadshuset* (Town Hall), *Högalids Kyrka* (Högalid Church) and *Stadsbiblioteket* (Main City Library).

Still, my taste for modernity remains firmly entrenched at least concerning the living quarters I prefer to reside in. Ever since leaving the century old cabin in *Hässelby Villastad*, and after staying a short time in an equally old small flat on *Söder* (without central heating or hot water) together with my wife, I have taken care to always find lodgings in recently built quarters.

This brought us first to *Fagersjö*, then back to *Söder* (*Drakenberg* area), and thereafter to *Huddinge* (*Myrstuguberget*, a site designed by Ralph Erskine). Today I am living in *Hammarby Sjöstad*, an area bubbling with vitality and so new that it is still awaiting its completion. *Sjöstaden* has a certain flair, reminding me of the perceived modernist Sweden of yore which I experienced and loved so many years ago, even if my new quarters more rightly deserve the term *Post-modernism*.

I am an old man now, but I realize that my inner core still appears to linger in the early sixties, when I fled to modernity and never looked back.