

Christina Nilsson. A Swedish Story

A 70-years anniversary memory – among other things

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“Christina Nilsson. A Swedish story” – This is written on the cover of the book written by radio announcer Olof Franzen’s book about Christina Nilsson. In this book he tells about the great singer’s strange and exciting life’s events. She was the youngest of seven brothers and sisters, who grew up being extremely poor. Already at nine years old she was known in Varend as “Stina on the slope” the bare foot girl who sang and played violin and was admired for her talent, her beautiful eyes, and her persona. The stories and anecdotes about her childhood together builds a unique portrait of a common, but yet so uncommon, poor child in 1850’s Sweden.

Christina Nilsson was born 20th of August 1843 at the homestead Sjöabol, “Snugge” in Vederlöv’s parish. Her parents were, Jonas Nilsson born 1798, and Stina-Kajsa Mansdotter, who inherited the homestead from her parents. After being told by her sisters and brothers Christina herself has told the story about how she came to this world. “In this little cottage, little Stina was born, however I could have been born on a wagon, or in a hay stack, or somewhere else, because my parents was doing a delivery to Växsjö from Huseby, where my father was working that day. It took speedy driving to come home that evening before I could see my first daylight. My mother never made it to the bed. I was born on the floor and I was told I was screaming terribly.” You could say this was her first performance. She was the seventh child and last in the family. Christina was a “sladdbarn”, (a child born several years after the second to last child) which sometimes no one wished for. It was seven years since the previous childbirth in the family.

Christina said during her late (old) years “My parents homestead was poor, and my mother was never really happy with me, not until I started to make money from opening gates (grindslantar) and for my playing instruments, so I could contribute to pay for the cost of the homestead. My father was always kind. He never gave me a spanking, he was always defending me. He said: “be kind to little Stina, mother, this girl will become something special””. In her olden days, when Stina stayed at Villa Vik, outside of Växsjö, her old songs came back to her, and she often sang them at friends and family gatherings.

In the summer of 1914 – that is 70 years ago- she visited Tulseboda Brunn. Among the guests there were highly educated and successful personalities, culture advocates, which has contributed to the culture of Kyrkhult, and developed its characteristics. During Christina’s visit she performed a concert in the restaurant grand parlor. An inside balcony was built just for this event, which still is there today as a reminder of Christina’s unique concert. One of the songs she sang was one composed by Henrik

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Liljegren "Fjorton år tror jag visst att jag var..." I surely think I was fourteen years old, a little girl, so cheerful and happy. I heard from no suitor, and I thought of no one either." This song Christina brought with her to the world, it was going to be her signature song both during and after her life. It is interesting that she learnt this song during her time in Blekinge. Women from Varend has described how they heard Stina sing this song, which she learnt while being in Sölvesborg, (Blekinge).

According to their story Stina was coming to the Sölvesborg market. She arrived early in the morning, went from house to house, played her violin, and sang her songs. All of a sudden, she heard from an open window, a young woman's beautiful voice singing, she stopped and listened, and she heard for the first time "Fjorton år tror jag visst att jag var..." It was a wonderful experience for Stina. She really needed to include this into her program. Not afraid at all, she stepped into the home and asked the young woman to sing the song a couple of more times for her. She did, and this is how Stina learnt this song. The song became a success at the market, and as a result the revenues were higher than normal. The following evening Stina went back to the young woman and paid her two 12 shillings for giving her the lesson. This story tells us about the method Stina used to learn new songs and music. She was not able to read music sheets and she never looked at the text. Many people were impressed how she could perform songs after just hearing them once. Her musical ability and her beautiful voice were the reasons people listened to her.

The Banker Yngve Ekstrom from Stockholm was visiting Tulseboda Brunn regularly. He wrote an article in the Kyrkhult book "Kyrkhult 1865 – 1965" with the title "Memories of a Christina Nilsson meeting in Tulseboda, Kyrkhult 1914". As a little schoolboy in 1885 he experienced the "Christina Nilsson accident" when she sang for free from a balcony of the Grand Hotel in Stockholm. People were standing packed close together and pushing, then panic developed, which ended in 16 grownup people and two girls were trampled to death. Some were pushed into the water by the quay in Blasieholmen. Quoting a few lines from the introduction of his article: "How many surprising big contradictory memories the three words brings out: Vision delight and cordial social life and memorable co-incidents. *Lovely loveliness*. And then: Dissention and storms, despair and sorrow down to the bottom of the heart, hurricanes over land and sea. *Distressed distress*".

My meeting with at the time the greatest dramatical soprano singer Christina Nilsson, the duchess de Casa Miranda, the summer of 1914 was not the first meeting with this world known lady who's life could show so many contradicting and changing moments, ever since she was born one day in August of 1843 in the little homestead in Sjöabol, in Vederlöv's parish in Småland. With her songs she had enchanted people and countries in the new and the old world. When she in 1872 in London married the French Banker Emile Auguste Rouzeaud the world banking society had opened the doors for her. When she after 5 years after her husbands death was married again in Paris 12th of March 1887 with the Spanish Duke, estate owner Don Angel-Ramon-Maria Vallejo Casa Miranda the aristocrats all over the world were competing to have her as a guest in their parlors.

Christina told people that that both men she been married to were catholic, "but for me to give up on my protestant beliefs would never happen, no never". "My father was religious and from him I have

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kept my belief and trust. I have a bible and a prayer book, which are quite worn out now, I have read them every morning and night during my whole life”.

1914 was not the only time Christina Nilsson was in Kyrkhult. I have a memory of her from my childhood school in Karaboda. It was during the summer holidays 1908. It was established by law that the middle grades every 14 days should come to school to study Christianity (rehearsal). The teacher was Otto Nilsson, a nephew to Christina Nilsson.

At home, my mother and father were planning a two days trip to Långhult, quite far away from Härlunda, where my father's oldest sister Bengta were living with her husband Sven Olsson on a farm. I had been promised to come along on the trip. I was happy because I was able to skip the meeting at school. I was afraid to go to the teacher to ask for permission, but my older sister Emeli convinced me so I did go.

My sister Emeli was a part of the youth choir which was led by cantor Nilsson. Sometimes they held the singing practices in the grand school parlor (room). Once at a coffee break in the hostesses place the cantor told about a beautiful childhood memory: "Already when Tina (his wife) were children, we liked each other, we built castles of air and were fantasizing how we would live when we were grown up. I was a little bit older, so I made the proposals. We were to get married and become mother and father. I would become parish clerk in Tutaryd, and we would be singing every day. The dream became real but my parish clerk job did not end up in Tutaryd, it ended up in Kyrkhult."

Otto Nilsson was a proponent of song and music. He loved and developed this art and taught his congregation in church and in school to sing. He did have somebody to thank for this skill.

(It should be mentioned that the current singer Sylvia Vrethammar belongs to the Nilsson family).

Following up on my story about me going to my teacher. As part of the school there was a very well cared for garden, made by Otto Nilsson. There were two arbors, one hidden and one shaped in a half circle. At the latter I found a company when I came to ask for permission. In the company there was Otto Nilsson with wife Martina (Tina) and the aunt singer Christina Nilsson. The girls Ada and Ina were also there. The Parish Clerk seemed to be happy. He pretended to be hesitant about my request – "but since the trip is going to Småland I will accept it on one condition and that is that you know how to spell correctly both places you will visit. I spelled Långhålt, and then Härlånna. All three were amused and wished me a good trip. (both places were mis spelled).

The day before we started the journey, we inspected the wagon. The result was that it was not conditioned for a long trip, the wheels were leaky from the summer heat. But we were in luck. Johannes, one of our neighbors, sometimes was in the America, and sometimes at home at his homestead in Björkefall. In their barn, on the second level they had a spring wagon, and this was a quite special one, Americans have a special affection for fancy vehicles. My mother was a real good friend of Johannes's Tilda. She was willing to have us use the wagon for our trip. Our white mare, who was the same age as I was, was very quick, so we traveled at a high speed. On the trip we experienced a lot of

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traffic stops. The gates were so close that you could see the next already from the one you just passed. In 1923, when I started to travel by automobile, the gates were still not removed.

The first stop of the trip was Spjutaretorp, where the grandparents once had owned and lived on one of the farms. They were named Ola and Olu Olsson. Right in front of a gate two oxen were lying on the road and chewing the cud. It was not easy to chase them away, but then the farm guard dog came and barked, so the oxen got up and we could pass. The next farm Hărădsmåla was close. It had a much different style of buildings. My father said that a duke family had lived there. We stopped there and gave the horses water. After that we had only about another half hour to drive before we arrived at Långhult.

The trip back happened on the following Sunday. We made a stop in Hărălunda and attended the service in the church. After that we had a half day left for the travel back to Blekinge. The trip back home went faster, because of horses' nature of wanting to go home to their own stable. For me it was a very memorable trip, also because of all the planning before the trip.

It was also this summer Christina Nilsson sang from the steps of the open veranda at the tourist hotel where she stayed. For this concert you did not need any tickets. Everybody was welcome. Among other things it was at this occasion she sang the song by Bellman "Ulla, my Ulla, may I offer you..." (Ulla min Ulla, sag far jag dig bjuda...). Mrs Alma Gauffin from Forneboda had given all the youngest children Swedish Flags to celebrate the singer. We were a few boys that wished she would tell the story of her bear hunt. Through our teacher we knew, that aunt Stina during her season at the opera in Petersburg she accompanied the Russian Tsar on a bear hunt, and that she herself had killed a big "bamse" (bear). She had the bear preserved and put it in entrance hall in her house in London. Between the bear paws the bear held a bowl made of silver, where guests would put their business cards.

It was the Christinas childhood years that were the happiest in her life according to some modest verses she wrote as she was aging. One of those verses she ends like this: "I was never forced to do anything when I was a child. No sorrow and no fights – that was our time. - - - Oh, people believe, that happiness live in the honor. – But I know. All that is just in vain".

Christina Nilsson died at the city hotel in Växsjö, 22nd of November 1921. Since 1023 she is resting at a mausoleum at Tegner church cemetery.

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