



Sweden

by Jan Magnusson

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A member of the European Union since 1995, Sweden is a Nordic country with a population of 9 million, a figure that has slowly increased in the last decade because of steady immigration. A liberal and democratic kingdom, Sweden has a reputation for sexual openness, yet it maintains a law that punishes buyers of sex from prostitutes.

During the last decade, the history of gay men and lesbians in Sweden has been fairly well documented. A few dissertations dealing with the subject and several volumes of history have been produced. The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Sweden's largest gay and lesbian organization, RFSL (The Swedish Federation for Lesbian and Gay Rights), in the year 2000 also brought history to the fore.

The Medieval Period

One of the first references to same-sex love in Sweden is found in the *Revelations* of Heliga Birgitta (St. Brigid). She accuses King Magnus Eriksson (ruled 1332-1363) of unnatural intercourse with a nobleman, Bengt Algotsson. Birgitta indicts the king for "loving men more than God or your own soul or your own spouse."

The provincial laws during the medieval period punished bestiality but not same-sex sexual acts, which were, however, considered offenses against the will of God.

The Early Modern Period

Queen Christina (1626-1689; reigned 1632-1654) is the best known queer woman of the early modern period. She reportedly had an intimate affair with her lady-in-waiting Ebba Sparre (1626-1662), who was called "La Belle Comtesse" by the queen. The manly appearance of Queen Christina was partly a result of her status as ruling monarch. Decorum required that she rule with a firm hand. However, the cross-dressing of Greta Garbo (1905-1990) in the Hollywood film *Queen Christina* (1933) captures the popular (and scholarly) view of the queen.

Although there was no ban on same-sex sexual acts in Swedish law, some 20 men were nevertheless tried for sodomy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. No cases of same-sex sexual acts between women are known from this time.

In the preparations of a new penal code in 1609, same-sex sexual acts are mentioned, but they were never officially included in the code. It has been suggested that this reticence was in part a conscious "politics of silence" in order not to stir people's imagination and give them ideas of sexual possibilities, an instance of homosexuality as the sin not to be spoken of by Christians.

A number of cross-dressing women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been documented. For



Top: Sweden and neighboring countries in 2004.

Center: A portrait of Queen Christina by Sébastien Bourdon.

Above: King Gustav III.

example, Karin du Rietz (b. 1766) fled her home dressed as a man and became a guardsman at the Royal Court. Many of the cross-dressing women joined the Army as soldiers, including Anna Jöransdotter, Ulrika Stålhammar, and Lisbetha Olofsdotter.

The most prominent queer man of the eighteenth century was King Gustav III (1746-1792; ruled 1772-1792). The king's sexual habits were the subject of numerous rumors. In begetting an heir with the Queen, he was reportedly assisted by his crown equerry, Adolph Fredric Munck (1749-1831). Gustav III had many male favorites at the court, including Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt. The king's sexual inclination towards his own sex is not in doubt. His reign is remembered as a golden age of Swedish cultural achievements.

The Nineteenth Century

The Penal Code of 1864 broke the long silence on same-sex sexuality in Swedish legislation. Of the three "sodomitical sins" (bestiality, same-sex sexual acts, and "unnatural" fornication between man and woman), only bestiality had been continuously and explicitly outlawed since the medieval period. But in 1864, Chapter 18, section 10 of the Penal Code prescribed up to two years imprisonment at hard labor for these offenses. The law was gender neutral; hence, it applied to men and women alike.

Among the important Swedish cultural figures of the period who engaged in same-sex sexual relationships were the poet Erik Sjöberg Vitalis (1794-1828), the historian Wilhelm Erik Svedelius (1816-1889), the philosopher Pontus Wikner (1837-1888), and the author Viktor Rydberg (1828-1895). Selma Lagerlöf (1858-1940), the Nobel Prize winning novelist, lived a lesbian life; her love stories are heterosexual, but frequently illuminate the conflicts and ambivalences of love in a way that suggests her experience as a lesbian.

The Earlier Twentieth Century

During the twentieth century sexuality rose in social significance. Sexuality was also medicalized during the last decades of the nineteenth century, a process that continued until the 1930s, as the influence of Sigmund Freud and psychiatry became paramount. Moreover, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the sexual became the centerpiece of modernity, so that few other fields were subject to so many social regulations. The government appointed numerous commissions on sexuality, dealing mostly with sexual hygiene and procreation. These commissions produced more reports than any other commissions in the 1930s.

In 1932, Vilhelm Lundstedt (1882-1955) put forward a private member's motion to the Riksdag (the Swedish parliament) to decriminalize homosexual acts. In response, committees were appointed, research conducted, and debate engaged.

In the 1930s, reformers emphasized the need to protect homosexuals from bands of young men who blackmailed them. During the 1940s, however, the emphasis was on the need to protect young men from being seduced into homosexuality.

In 1944, same-sex sexual acts were decriminalized, but they were not given moral sanction. The age of consent was set at 18 for men, with a specified set of rules for those between 15 and 21, while the age of consent for women was set at 15. The popular press discussed male prostitution, overestimating its frequency and contributing to a moral panic.

The homosexual, created as the "other" and the opposite of the heterosexual, was depicted as a moral threat to society in the 1950s. As elsewhere in the western world, when the cold war was at its frostiest, the homosexual became a public enemy and a threat to the security of the nation.

These attitudes may be seen in two scandals that haunted Sweden in the 1950s, the Haijby and Kejne

"affairs." Kurt Haijby was a young man who had become acquainted with King Gustav V and thereafter received large amounts of money from the court to keep quiet about his liaison.

In May 1950, the Kejne affair broke in the press. A clergyman, Karl-Erik Kejne (1913-1960), accused members of the government and state officials of being part of a homosexual Freemasonry that protected its members from legal prosecution. King Gustaf V was supposedly involved.

These allegations led to a violent debate concerning corrupt legal practices. The government appointed a citizen's committee, but the result of the inquiry was meager. One minister, Nils Quensel (1894-1971), left the government. More significantly, however, the scandals were devastating to the homosexual cause in the mind of the average citizen.

RFSL

A new organization was founded in 1950. RFSL (The Swedish Federation for Lesbian and Gay Rights), was initially a section of Denmark's "The League of 1948" (Forbundet av 1948). The organization provided a place where homosexual men and women could come together and discuss their interests.

One of the founders of RFSL was an engineer from Lysekil, a small town in western Sweden, Allan Hellman (1904-1982). He was characterized as "the bravest man in Sweden" for his willingness to be open and straightforward. Another important figure in RFSL was Eric Thorsell (1899-1980), who gave speeches about homosexuality as early as the 1930s and 1940s. An iron mill worker from Surahammar, he had studied one semester (1931-1932) at Magnus Hirschfeld's institute in Berlin. His experience was useful to RFSL.

To become a member of RFSL, one had to be recommended by other members. Like the homophile groups in the United States at the time, emphasis was on discretion, anonymity, and the need for the homosexual to adjust to society.

The New Activism

This kind of approach changed when the activist generation of 1968 came to dominate the scene. During the 1970s openness became the theme. The first liberation march was held in Örebro in 1971. It was followed by many similar marches in other cities.

In 1977 the first large march was held in Stockholm, but not until the EuroPride march of 1998 did the commemoration of Stonewall 1969 become a popular event. Nowadays this annual celebration draws a steadily increasing crowd.

Few persons dared to step out of the shadows of anonymity during the 1960s. One was the author Bengt Martin (b. 1933). When he and his cohabiter talked about life as a male couple in a televised debate in 1968, they got many letters from lonely gay men and lesbians. In 1971 information from RFSL on the subject of homosexuality was disseminated at a school of education, beginning a practice of educating students about the lives of gay men and lesbians.

In 1972 Sweden adopted the first sex-change law in the world. In 1978 the legal age of consent was equalized for both men and women and for both homosexual and heterosexual activities. It was set at 15 years.

In 1979, after a successful sit-in at the Socialstyrelsen (The National Board of Health and Welfare), homosexuality and bisexuality were removed from the list of mental diseases.

The Progress Toward Equality

During the 1970s, activists were busy in the fight to eliminate laws that had been adopted to protect the population from homosexuals; during the 1980s, the struggle was to create laws that would protect gay men and lesbians. In 1987 the first law was adopted that protected gay men and lesbians from being discriminated against in businesses, at the workplace, and other accommodations. Other laws soon followed.

A shift in public opinion gradually took place and sentiment came to favor glbtq equality. The first step towards gay and lesbian marriage was taken in 1987, when the Law on Cohabitation passed the Riksdag. It was followed by the Law of Partnership in 1995. This law has been celebrated as a major step in establishing equality for same-sex couples with heterosexual married couples.

Some gay activists reacted against it and called it a "second class citizen's law," largely because the partnership did not confer the right to adopt children. Undoubtedly, however, it made homosexual couples visible in society to a much larger degree than previously, when couples simply lived together without any official recognition, often without even mentioning their union to their relatives. After Law of Partnership came into effect, relatives frequently participated in partnership ceremonies.

A law against discrimination at workplaces and an ombudsman to investigate charges of discrimination were initiated in 1999. The Ombudsman against Discrimination on grounds of Sexual Orientation (HomO) is appointed by the government and charged with combating homophobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in all areas of Swedish society. Hans Ytterberg (b. 1956) became the first HomO. He has both experience as a judge and a long record of leadership within RFSL.

Work to improve the social position of gay men and lesbians continues. In 2003 the long awaited possibility to adopt children and to become foster parents became a reality. Two women or two men living together can now both be parents of their common children. The non-biological mother or father adopts her or his partner's children, and the same rights are accorded as for heterosexual custody. In 2003, a ban on inciting violence against homosexuals as a group was adopted.

AIDS

The first recorded case of AIDS in Sweden was documented in 1982. The new disease brought much alarm, and an epidemic was feared. AIDS temporarily created a backlash against the glbtq community.

To prevent spread of the disease, much effort was directed towards organizations dealing with homosexual men. These efforts included a strengthening of RFSL and a creation of an HIV-secretariat working within RFSL. HIV education, especially the need for contraceptives, permeated all of society.

As an unexpected result Sweden adopted some of the world's harshest laws against spreading infectious disease. Those convicted under these laws may be kept in custody for an indefinite time.

In 1987 gay saunas were banned, at the instigation of the Minister of Social Affairs, Gertrud Sigurdson (Bastuklubbslagen). A place where men could have casual sex with strangers was seen as threatening and possibly contributing to the spread of HIV.

Political agitation led to the repeal of this law in 2003. The harsh laws against spreading infectious diseases remain on the books, however. Such laws follow the Swedish welfare state's legal tradition of regularizing social affairs that affect the whole of society.

The Church of Sweden

In 2000, the Church of Sweden separated from the State. An attempt is underway to make it possible for gay and lesbian couples to marry in church. A meeting of bishops in 2003 created a commission to produce a

report on how to deal with partnership ceremonies within the church.

Some church officials still regard homosexuality as a sin. An exhibition called "Ecce homo," which featured depictions of Christ in glbtq-environments, produced by Elisabeth Ohlson (b. 1961), caused much alarm in 1998. The indefatigable work of EKHO (The Ecumenical Groups of Christian Homosexuals and Bisexuals) has, however, yielded some fruit.

Marriage Equality

On April 1, 2009, the Swedish Parliament approved legislation permitting same-sex marriage, making Sweden the seventh country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. On May 1, 2009, gender-neutral marriage licenses will be issued.

The legislation, passed with the support of six of the seven parties in Parliament and by a 261 to 22 vote, does not compel churches to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies, though it is believed that many churches will choose to wed gay and lesbian couples.

Conclusion

A long political struggle to make glbtq people visible in society has now made it possible for two women or two men to bind themselves together in marriage and adopt their common children. Bisexual men and women can live freely and with a fairly good degree of understanding from the common citizen.

Transgendered persons are popular in show business and at gay bars, but still have to fight a great deal of prejudice. On the whole, however, the position of glbtq persons in Sweden has changed immensely for the better in the last forty years.

The Nordic countries have a long tradition of coordination of laws. Their progressive attitudes toward sexual variance has been influential on the European Union as a whole.

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