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"I'm an ordinary faggot"

Scripts of male homosexuality in rural and urban Sweden in the 1940s

by Jens Rydström

Lesbians and gay men in search of their past generally walk up two different historical roads. While lesbians frequently find the richest sources to their history in a "female world of love and ritual," so brilliantly explored by Carrol Smith Rosenberg and others, historians of gay men invariably find themselves trapped in a male world of crime and violence. This has contributed to rather different historiographies, caused not only by the higher visibility of men and the general marginalization of women in society, but also by the different ways gendered mechanisms of social control have regulated male and female sexuality.¹

Court cases are notoriously problematic historical sources. If you want to find out how criminals were treated, or make statistics about how the length of prison sentences has gone down or how the frequency of prosecutions for a certain crime has gone up – then they are excellent and clear sources. But if one wants to reconstruct the lives of gay men based on court records one is immediately confronted with serious problems of interpretation. Court records are impregnated by power, or even an incarnation of power itself, and it is often impossible to know if the prosecuted was lying to avoid a long prison term, or confessing to all his sins to ease his conscience. Moreover, their stories have been filtered through the ears and hands of the court clerk or police officer who wrote them down, and the historian's ability to understand it is restrained by his or her limited knowledge of the historical context in which it was once produced. Still, I will attempt to reconstruct the emotional life of a number of persons who were prosecuted and tried for same-sex sexual acts in mid-twentieth-century Sweden.

¹ Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "The female world of love and ritual: Relations between women in nineteenth-century America," *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 1 (1975):1, 1–29.

In November 1941, a 45-year old schoolteacher stood trial in the small rural district court of Malå, in the North Swedish inland – together with his 13 lovers! He had been apprehended by local police after a row with one of his local young lovers, and he used the night before his arrest to burn all the photographs and letters that were the result of years of bonding both locally and nationally. But unfortunately for him, he had such an extensive network of same-sex lovers that it was rather easy for the police to reconstruct it on basis of all the testimonies they collected. An fortunately for researchers, many of his lovers had kept photographs and letters he had sent them.

According to his own testimony, Martin Faxe* as we can call him,² had developed a habit of having sex with men during a stay in a sanatorium some ten years earlier, and then it had “become a habit”. He fancied young men, between 20 and 25, and he seemed to have had a remarkable persuasive power. In his local village, which had a population of 800, he used to meet young men in the café, and then invite them to help him out with some repair work in his summer cabin. He was an eager nudist, and to arouse their interest he would show them publications like *The Sun Friend*, which was a membership magazine of the Swedish Nudist Association. Then he would insist that they sunbathe naked, and began wrestling with them. He would also take photographs of them. Some of the young men only went there once, others returned and seemed to get something out of the sexual relationship with the older man. When one of them asked him if it was really OK to do what they were doing, the schoolteacher told him that all educated people did things like this, and that it was much better than having sex with a woman. You didn’t risk making someone pregnant and you didn’t risk all kinds of diseases, he said.

The relationships with the local boys were based on sex and friendship. Faxe never talked to them about homosexuality and he didn’t seem to have any deeper emotional bonds to them. But he also created a network of men who were more of his own age and for which he seemed to harbour more complex feelings. He began his network building by publishing a personal ad in a nation-wide weekly magazine. It read: “Male friends are sought by a 35-year-old, unmarried civil servant, with his

² *) indicates that the name is a pseudonym.

own summer cottage and an interest in gardening. Preferably younger friends, who can take over when I leave everything. " Signed: "Foster brother".

As you see, he cunningly included some signals in the text, which could hardly be misunderstood by the initiated. "Unmarried." "Interest in gardening." "Preferably younger friends." "Foster brother." As it turned out he got several answers from men from all over Sweden, who had understood the signals and were interested in more than a platonic friendship. Faxe began corresponding with three or four of them and, inspired by his success, published more ads in other journals. In the end he could muster a nationwide network of almost a dozen men who were older than the local boys and who were self-identified homosexuals.

One of them lived in Landvetter, a suburb of Göteborg. Faxe visited him, had sex, and got to know a circle of gay men who was organized in a strictly gender-dichotomous fashion. Some of them were effeminate and insisted that they couldn't have intimate relations with other effeminate men. Instead, they wanted "real men", whom they often found among the sailors down in the harbour. But there were also male-acting men in the network. They regularly appeared at the parties and were connected to the effeminate men by sexual and emotional bonds. Several of them had worked as waiters aboard the America Liners who then sailed between Gothenburg and New York, and brought back tales and habits from the large and powerful gay subculture in Manhattan.³

Faxe upheld friendly and erotic contacts with his penfriends and went to visit them in different towns, from Boden in the North to Trelleborg in the South. But with one or two of them he seems to have entertained feelings of love and a hope that the relationship would be stable and long lasting. In his correspondence he discusses his homosexual condition and shares gossip and stories about sexual adventures.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that many different forms of sexualities exist side by side, and that the search for a great "paradigm shift" in history obscures the

³ A couple of years earlier, in 1937, many men were brought to court in Gothenburg, and the large court case from that time contains much information about the gay circles in that town.

diversity of sexual practices and discourses.⁴ In her seminal book *Epistemology of the closet* he ruthlessly scorns David Halperin for his naive use of the concept “homosexuality as we now know it”, but in a belated answer to her criticism he brings up the point of historical change. How are we to explain changes in sexual behaviour if we just concede to the idea of a multi-faceted, ever-changing web of sexual encounters? In a defence of his variety of “historicism” he claims that there is in fact difference between the past and the present, and that the deconstruction of identities doesn’t mean that we can’t show how the ways to define same-sex sexuality have changed over time.⁵ I would argue that the horny schoolteacher in the small rural settlement exploited two possible definitions of same-sex desire in order to score as many sexual encounters as possible. With the local youth, he used a “pre-homosexual”, rural discourse, claiming that this was something everybody could do, and with the more adult men in his national network he inscribed himself and them in a modern, urban discourse of homosexuality. Another interesting difference is that of sexual practice. With the local youth he without exception practiced anal penetration, by first letting the younger man penetrate him, and then the other way around, if the young man allowed it. With the adult men who self-identified as homosexuals he had to negotiate sex in another way, and most of the time it resulted in mutual masturbation and oral sex.

My next example shows how urban ideas about male same-sex sexuality were transposed to a small community, also in Northern Sweden. Ture Nordmark* was born in 1919 in a crofter’s cottage some miles outside Långsele, a railway junction with seven hundred inhabitants. It is situated near the town of Sollefteå, which with a population of 3,000 was an important garrison town and inland commercial centre, as well as a centre of the forestry industry in the region.

Ever since his early childhood Ture had suffered from severe stammering, and he was sent to Stockholm for treatment several times, the first time in 1938, when he was only seventeen years old. When the treatment had ended, he didn’t want to go back to Långsele, so he looked for a job in Stockholm, but without success, and he spent the summer strolling around in the city. Outside the Central Station he got to

⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the closet*, New York 1991, pp. 44–47.

⁵ David Halperin, *How to do the history of homosexuality*, Chicago 2002.

know a group of unemployed boys and young men, who told him that they all made a living by prostitution, and they recommended him to do the same. One Sunday morning a man started a conversation with him and proposed that they take the tram to a park on the outskirts of town. When they arrived, he asked if Ture “wanted to help him,” offering him five crowns and a hot meal. Ture agreed, and afterward was taken to a restaurant where they had food. After this experience, Ture went with more men and did the same. Some of them wanted to masturbate him as well, to which he sometimes consented. According to the police report, Ture “eventually began to feel some pleasure in having his sexual drive satisfied in this unnatural way.”⁶

After Ture had returned to Långsele from Stockholm, he spent his Sunday evenings at the railway station, boasting about his exploits in the big city. Rumour soon got around that he was interested in men, and the local boys came to him to learn more about it. He later told the court that everybody was very interested, and they all knew about his experiences in Stockholm, since there was a rumour going around about it in the community.

Soon Ture began to pay young men in the little railway junction to have sex with him. They always engaged in mutual masturbation, just as Ture had done in Stockholm. There was never talk about penetration, either oral or anal. Generally Ture paid them the cost of a cup of coffee and a bun for their trouble. He kept a book “in which he noted the names of all the Långsele boys . . . with whom he had fornicated.” In 1939, Ture wrote a letter to the RFSU, the Swedish Federation for Sex Education, asking for information, and they sent him an article about homosexuality.

In October 1940, Ture had to complete his military training. In the all-male environment of the barracks, Ture soon became known as an eccentric person whose

⁶ HLA, Nordmark case, police report, app. K, Statspolisen, October 25, 1941, 6–7. Since I will use information from Nordmark’s hospital journal, which according to the Swedish Secrecy Act is classified until 2035, I cannot publish details that could lead to identification of him. Therefore, all names are fictitious, and I will not refer to his court case directly, but will call it the Nordmark case. It is kept in Härnösand Provincial Archive (HLA). Nordmark’s forensic psychiatric report from 1942 is kept in the Central Archive for Forensic Psychiatry (RCA) in Stockholm. In the future, these documents can be found through Nordmark’s journal: SAL, SAS, journal no. 87/1943. Fictitious names are marked with an asterisk the first time they appear in the text.

interest in sex with other men was no secret. It was at that time he started to put on makeup every day, he later told the court. He had thought that it 'attracted attention,' and doing so, he had wanted to appear 'elevated in some way.' In Stockholm he had seen 'the homosexual gentlemen' wear makeup, and it had made an impression on him. Before, when he stayed in his parent's home, he had only put on makeup when he had gone to the cinema or to prayer meetings, but from now on he wore it every day. Ture soon began making advances to the other soldiers. He invited them to have "a lovely moment" with him, and if they conceded, he would lead them to a room in the basement where they engaged in mutual masturbation.

Most of the time he paid them a small sum of money, enough for a cup of coffee. The other soldiers made fun of Ture and his talk about "lovely moments". One day, as Ture passed over the yard in front of the barracks, one of the soldiers leaned out of a window and shouted to him, calling him "*pissbög*", or "piss-faggot". He shouted back: "I'm not a piss-faggot; I'm an ordinary faggot." It is impossible to know exactly what Ture and the soldier meant by this expression. The word "*bög*" has been used for a long time as a degrading word for male homosexuals, and obviously the soldier wanted to insult Ture. But in a cheeky way Ture used the word to indicate that he knew very well what kind of *bög* he was, thereby displaying the ignorance of the other soldier.⁷

In *Giving an account of oneself*, Judith Butler discusses subjectivity in a postmodern world. How can we identify a subject and moral responsibility if the discourse precedes the subject? is her overarching question, and her proposed solution is inspired by Levinas and his ideas of passive subjectivity. "For Levinas [...] responsibility emerges as a consequence of being subject to the unwilling address of the other," she writes.⁸ Butler wants to use this insight to talk also about agency. For our image of self is unavoidably a result of the other's request to give an account of

⁷ Ibid., courtroom minutes, October 31, 1941. There are two theories concerning the etymology of the word *bög*. According to one, it is a Swedish form of English *bugger*, French *bougre*. At any rate, Strindberg used the word *buger*, which he borrowed from the French. Another theory, held by Fredrik Silverstolpe, is that it is an ancient slang word used by travellers, vagrants, and other marginalized groups to designate a farmer, and by extension a gullible person. The expression to *sno bög*, "rob a bög," would then have been transposed to mean to rob a homosexual man, and by extension to sell sexual services to him. See Silverstolpe 2000.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Giving an account of oneself*, New York 2005, p. 85.

our self. Thus Ture, by seeking information from the RFSL – who am I – and by answering back to the other soldier’s derogatory remark – I’m an ordinary faggot – places himself in an urban context yet unknown in the small town of Sollefteå. The question of queer subjectivity and the way this is internalised by the hundreds of thousands who prefer the love of their own sex is largely one of external interpellation. In the insult lies the liberation, to put it solemnly.⁹

Lesbian subjectivity is far less known to historical scholars, both, as I mentioned in the beginning, because of the general marginalization of women, and because of the fact that lesbian sexuality in general wasn’t criminalised. Sweden was one of the few countries in Europe that banned same-sex sexuality between women (together with Finland, Austria, a handful of Swiss cantons and Greece), but hardly any women were put to trial. It resulted in a lack of knowledge that became so embarrassing to the Penal Code Commission who prepared the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Sweden that it sent out a questionnaire to a number of persons, asking them what they knew about female homosexuality. The inquiry was sent out to physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists, half of them women. It was also sent out to headmistresses of girls’ schools, who apparently were assumed to be well informed in the matter, and to the author of *Charlie*, a novel with a lesbian theme which had been published in 1932.¹⁰

One answer to the inquiry is particularly revealing about how social control works through the production of knowledge. A female head physician told the story of two probationers she had once taught at the school for nurses. The two young women had had a very close relationship, shared a room, and many times slept in the same bed. They often hugged and kissed, and sometimes they even indulged in sexual acts. But one day one of the probationers “by accident” heard about homosexuality, and they both stopped behaving that way.

My last empirical example is firmly situated in urban space, and is about the growing consciousness of lesbian subjectivity. In 1943, five women, aged between twenty-nine and forty-four, stood trial together in Stockholm. On one evening in April, Mrs. Maria Skacke* called the police and asked them to come to her flat, where

⁹ Cf. Didier Eribon, *Réflexions sur la question gay*, Paris 1999.

¹⁰ Margareta Suber, *Charlie*, Stockholm 1932.

another woman had introduced herself and refused to leave. When the police arrived, Mrs. Skacke had taken refuge with her neighbour and did not dare go home. When the policemen entered her flat, two women lay together on a couch “which gave the constables the impression that they were perverted.” The older of the two women, forty-four-year-old Elisabeth Lundgren,* was drunk and became violent when the police woke her up. She told the police that Mrs. Skacke was afraid that Mrs. Lundgren would come between her and the younger woman. When questioned, Lundgren gave the names of two more women with whom she had had sexual relations, and all five were prosecuted. All except Mrs. Skacke had worked in different restaurants in Stockholm, and some of them had got to know each other when they worked at a munitions factory. The central figure, Elisabeth Lundgren, had had sexual relations with three of the other women, and was currently courting the young woman with whom she was sleeping on the couch, and who in reality had a relationship with Mrs. Skacke. The first question Mrs. Lundgren had to answer at the police station was whether she had given or received any reimbursement for the sexual acts, which she denied. The police report went on to describe the sexual technique employed: “Regarding the method for the ‘sexual intercourse,’ Mrs. [Lundgren] states that she usually satisfied Mrs. [Skacke], partly by touching her clitoris with the tip of her tongue and partly using her fingers. For her own part, Mrs. [Lundgren] has been fully satisfied only by touching Mrs. [Skacke]’s sexual organ.” The police investigation showed considerable interest in the sexual techniques of the women, and established that most of them used their fingers to penetrate their partner’s vagina, but that Lundgren often lay on top of the other woman and “made copulating movements like a man.” According to Mrs. Skacke, Lundgren had also said that Mrs. Skacke “was made to make a man-woman happy.”¹¹

The whole court case gives an impression of a much more concerted quest for knowledge about female homosexuality than any of the preceding cases. It is as if the investigators were aware of the embarrassing lack of knowledge in these matters that the Penal Code Commission had admitted two years earlier. The court ordered a preparatory investigation according to the law on suspended sentence for all of the prosecuted women. In this investigation the emphasis was on whether the women were really homosexual or not, and, if so, how they had become homosexual. Three

¹¹ Stockholm Town Court, 4th div., classified cases, no. 334, 1943, app. 3; the quotations are on 3, 22, 27, and 28.

of them were in their thirties, and they all assured the investigator that they had been seduced by the older and more experienced women, and that what they had done with each other was only a youthful aberration which would not be repeated. In fact, two of them engaged to marry during the trial and declared that they were going to get married and never think about female homosexuality again.

The accounts of the two older women, Lundgren and Skacke, both sounded as though taken directly from Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*. Lundgren had been treated like a boy by her parents, who had wanted a boy instead of a girl, and during all of her childhood and youth she had felt like a boy. Her marriage had been happy to begin with, but after a few years she had begun to feel sexually dissatisfied and had engaged in relations with women.¹² Skacke, on the other hand, told the investigator that she had been born before her parents were married, and that that had affected her whole life. She had always felt unwelcome, and her father had exerted a downright mental torture on her. She had been abused sexually at an early age, and ever since her earliest childhood she had been full of hatred for men. In spite of this, her marriage had been happy during the first years, but then her husband had left her for another woman. She was now suffering from tuberculosis, and for the moment she felt 'as if she walked on the brink of the grave.'¹³ Maria Skacke was, sadly, to be proved right. She died of tuberculosis in September, still waiting for a forensic psychiatric examination, but the four other women were all convicted. Lundgren got six months' hard labour and the three younger women got four months' hard labour each. All sentences were suspended, and only Lundgren was put under surveillance.

This case shows how the authorities eagerly sought more knowledge about female homosexuality once legal developments had created a need. It also shows how the bureaucrats at this time were influenced by their preconceptions of how male homosexuality worked. One of the first questions they asked Lundgren was whether money was involved, and the police investigation concentrated on describing relations between the mannish, "real" homosexuals, and the younger "victims," who were not assumed to be homosexual. In this way the investigators created an image

¹² Ibid., app. 9.

¹³ Ibid., app. 15.

of their relations, which corresponded exactly with what was expected at this time from a lesbian relationship.

The first half of the twentieth century was an intense period of restructuring same-sex sexuality and love in the Western World. In a relatively peripheral area like Sweden, the dissemination of the new category of homosexuality described a centre-periphery movement, with influences from large and lively subcultural centres abroad. Urbanisation helped create new spaces for same-sex emotions in the cities as single men, often living in rented rooms, took to the parks and streets for social and sexual encounters. Swedish sociologist Arne Nilsson has shown how men in Gothenburg who went to the parks for sexual encounters with other men did not just use them for sex, but created a sort of social promenade round between the different urinals. At one particular place, some men would sit outside and play chess while others had sex inside the urinal, and many went to the park to meet friends rather than have sex.¹⁴

For women who loved women, urban space was more problematic, and it is typical that the court case I refer to began as a fight in an apartment. The women in the court records I studied typically met each other at their work places, in schools, or associations like the Salvation Army. And since the categorisation “homosexual” predominantly was associated with men, some women could even engage in homosexual relationships without knowing it! But little by little, women ventured outside home. Beginning in the 1920s, young women demanded access to public space, and since they now earned money they could successfully argue that they, as well as their brothers, deserved to go to cafes, amusement parks, and even dances. The Second World War meant that this development accelerated, when the absence of men created new space for women, in industries and other jobs normally reserved for men. For even in neutral Sweden, the majority of men between 25 and 45 were summoned to military duty along the borders. Some of the women in my example met in an ammunition factory and others when they worked as waitresses.

¹⁴ Arne Nilsson, “Creating Their Own Private and Public: The Male Homosexual Life Space in a Nordic City during High Modernity.” In *Scandinavian Homosexualities: Essays on Gay and Lesbian Studies*, ed. Jan Löfström, 81–116. Binghamton, N.Y., 1998.

It is important, as we study the changing conceptualisations of sexual behaviour and emotional expressions, that we are observant of the many ways in which different historical actors negotiated their sexuality. For as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick stated: there was no great paradigm shift, but a multitude of ways to understand the sexuality of oneself and others. And here we have seen how the idea of a homosexual identity only slowly penetrated into the countryside. We have seen how some men travelling to big cities brought back some habits, as Ture Nordmark, who tried to transplant an urban understanding of same-sex sexuality to the railway junction he came from. Others led a double life, using the modern understanding only when negotiating sexuality with urban homosexuals, and acting out a pre-homosexual script with the locals.