

My Home Town A Personal Account

By Gabriella Åhmansson

The most obvious thing you can say about Uppsala is that it is very old. Old Uppsala, the village north of the town proper has been a political and a religious centre for 2000 years and the settlement itself is prehistoric. The town of Uppsala became the archbishop's seat in 1164 and the official record of township is from 1497.

I came to Uppsala when I was 10 years old. I cannot say that I fell in love with the town at once – it was very different from Gothenburg, the great seaport on the west coast where I spent the first part of my life – but after a couple of years I could think of no better place to grow up in. Or more beautiful. The fact that Uppsala has old roots is something that you feel everyday – buildings like Gustavianum with its impressive copper dome over the old anatomical theatre or the cathedral and the castle which dominate the sky from every direction, continue to impress inhabitants and visitors alike. Town planners have made sure that no high-rise buildings have been allowed to compete with the medieval “skyline” – the only house that actually is high enough to obscure the view was consequently given the name Skandalhuset (The House of Scandal) when it was built a hundred years ago. Today it houses the university administration.



Gustavianum and the twin towers of the Cathedral against “the rose and saffron of a winter sunset” (LMM).

Not that we ever let a lingering sense of reverence for our ancient surroundings hinder us in any way. It simply provided us with an exciting background for our adventures. During the winter we used to go tobogganing on the Royal Mounds at Old Uppsala. We trudged up one of the barrows, whizzed down on the other side, trudged up the next one and so forth. Today visitors are not allowed to climb the mounds since the wear and tear of thousands of feet threatened to flatten the mounds eventually.

During the 1950's and 1960's the sense of history and consequently a wish to preserve our heritage was not very strong even in an old mediaeval town like Uppsala. When I was a child the municipality stored discarded traffic signs in the once so (in)famous Sture Vault up in the oldest part of the castle, where the mad king Erik VIX 1567 attacked and killed two male members of a rival noble family named Sture. In the castle proper where the Governor traditionally lives, one of them used one end of the great hall where Queen Kristina abdicated the throne in 1654 to store hay and fodder for his horses while they used the other end to hang up the gubernatorial washing! This was in the 19th century.

Up to the 1970's, the oldest parts of the castle were boarded up and slowly falling apart. Sometimes curious children would pry one of the boards loose and enter the crumbling ruins on a dare. There was a rumour that somewhere there was a secret tunnel leading south away from the castle hill to the city below, which King Erik might have used after the murders since he was found staggering around the countryside south of town despite the fact that nobody saw him leave the castle. Everyone desperately wanted to find it – it was just like something straight out of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* books. Maybe I am old enough now to confess that I was one of them. I did not go very far, though, because it was really dangerous and spooky in there. And we certainly didn't find any secret passage. Today it is possible to see the oldest inhabited parts of the castle, complete with graffiti on a window sill, probably made by a very young prince who saw an execution from the window in his nursery and drew a picture of it. Happily all the sights mentioned above have now been restored along with the beautiful castle church built by Gustav Vasa's son King Johan III. At some point it had been partitioned off, with two added floors and was used by the university as an archive, if you can believe it.

Up by the Castle there is a bell tower with a very old bell, The Gunilla Bell, cast in 1598 and named after the queen. It tolls at 9 o'clock in the morning and again 9 o'clock at night. It is placed on top of an old battery which still sports a number of canons. The curious thing about the placement of those canons is that they are trained straight at the cathedral. It is said that the king placed them there in order to intimidate the church and the archbishop, hence the name, Styrbiskop which literally means Controlling the Bishop.



The canons of Styrbiskop with the cathedral directly across

There have been botanical gardens connected to the university since 1655, in different sites. One of these gardens was created by Carl von Linnæus and is now called The Linnæus Garden. The old, baroque garden below the castle was given to the university by the king in 1787. I can safely say that we schoolchildren hated that garden, because we were sent there on endless expeditions to look at (boring) plants and trees, always, it seemed, when it was cold and dreary outside. Once we even had to measure the height of the wall surrounding it with a tiny ruler – why I have never

understood. We sincerely sympathized with the French philosopher Descartes, who died in Stockholm of pneumonia only months after having been invited to the court by Queen Kristina. There was a rumour that he spent a few days in Uppsala Castle with her in the middle of winter and that he fell ill after having been taken for a lengthy tour around the castle gardens.



The Botanical gardens with the main building as seen from the castle

It has been calculated that almost 70% of the old city centre was demolished during the 1960's to make way for modern buildings. Granted that many areas were dilapidated and run down and that most of the houses erased were not older than from the 19th century, this insensitive destruction of a medieval town centre still constitutes a near catastrophe on a national level. Finally a private support group consisting of concerned inhabitants was formed to stop the destruction of what remained of the oldest parts of town. They were successful and since then preservation has become a major concern in Uppsala

There are two old churches in Uppsala – the impressive Gothic cathedral which dominates the town and, right by its side, a small unimposing church built of stone and brick, mostly overlooked by tourists who visit the cathedral, the Holy Trinity Church. It is, however, older than the cathedral and the earliest stone parts are from the 13th century. It has an interesting interior and contains some very famous murals made by a well-known mediaeval painter called Albertus Pictor. When I was 10 years old I joined its girls' choir and I sang here until I transferred over to the Cathedral Choir when I was a student. I still think that singing in a choir is one of the most satisfying things a human being can do – being part of something where the whole becomes so much more than one's individual contribution could ever be. Holy Trinity Church is one of my favourite buildings in Uppsala. The university library, Carolina Rediviva, where I spent every weekday for six years writing my dissertation is another of my favourites. I think that the library's Greek motto, which means "the house that strengthens the soul", is very apt.

Although Uppsala is very old, it is very young at the same time. The university, founded in 1477, 15 years before Christopher Columbus "discovered" America, creates a constant influx of young people from all over the country and nowadays all over the world. Since there are at least 25.000 students in residence they are literally everywhere, whole areas consist entirely of student housing. The student clubs, the so called "nations" named after Sweden's provinces and major cities, provide students with homes away from home as well as offering an impressive variety of pubs, ballrooms, restaurants and catering services all run by the students who belong to the nation. The buildings range from quaint to modernistic and can be found all over the city. We have chosen to use Gästrike-Hälsinge Nation for our conference dinner, because even if these nations can sometimes be a little worse for wear and full of different activities at the same time, they have great atmosphere and (generally) great food.



Gästrike-Hälsinge nation on Trädgårdsgatan (Garden street). Gästrikland and Hälsningland are the two counties closest to Uppland and Uppsala when you go north.

Living in Uppsala meant that we were constantly exposed to the academic side of life and for me spending my formative years close to such an old and world famous university was a great motivator. More than anything in the world I wished that I could be part of that life. I wanted to study, I wanted to be one of the thousands of students who celebrated the arrival of spring on Walpurgis Night, I wanted to share their fun and their aspirations. I did not have many role models for such a dream in my immediate family – with one exception no women from my family had a university education or even a high school diploma and there were no academics in my family. But I did have one role model albeit a fictional one – if Anne Shirley could go to university against the odds and get her B.A., so could I!

My school was the Cathedral school. Although the current building on Skolgatan (School street) is fairly recent – it is from the end of the 19th century - there has been a cathedral school in Uppsala ever since the 14th century in different locations. The king Gustav Vasa or Gustav I, who started to build the castle and who incidentally was the reason behind why there is a famous ski race called Vasaloppet every year in Dalecarlia, attended Uppsala Cathedral school. He did not like it very much, however, and he is reputed to have left precipitously. He brandished his knife, pinning his Latin grammar to his desk with it saying: “ I’m leaving – I don’t give a damn about this school!” Please excuse the 16th century profanity.... Strangely enough, the builders of our school thought that this was a suitable subject for an enormous mural, almost the first thing you see when you come into the large entrance hall. Many students certainly envied Gustav getting out of school so easily, especially those of us who took Latin and Greek.

Every spring there is a grand convocation ceremony still conducted in Latin where doctoral students receive their diplomas. For the purpose of this celebration a battery is erected close to the university building and for each and every new doctor there is a salute by cannon. As you can imagine, this ceremony takes quite a while (today there are at least three of these celebrations a year to accommodate the rising number of successful doctoral candidates). I can remember sitting at my desk in school, listening to the endless bombardment coming from the university every spring.

Many people around the world have seen glimpses of Uppsala without being aware of it. Uppsala plays an important part in a feature film by Sweden’s most well-known film director Ingmar Bergman. The title of the film is *Fanny and Alexander* (1984) and it won four Academy Awards and numerous other awards such as the Golden Globe for best foreign film. Ingmar Bergman grew up in Uppsala, on Trädgårdsgatan right across from Gästrike-Hälsinge nation, and used his old home town for most of the outdoor footage.



Ingmar Bergman with Bertil Guwe who plays Alexander. In the background you can see Skytteanum, one of the earliest university buildings, with its vaulted passage.

Upplandsmuséet (The County Museum), for instance, an old mill building right on the river, was featured as the Archbishop's residence, while the old buildings on the cathedral grounds bordering St: Eriks Torg (St. Erik's Square) served as the entrance to the fictional theatre depicted in the movie. The cathedral provides the background for an impressive funeral procession and one of the old bridges across the river connecting the west and east parts can be seen on several occasions.



St: Eriks Torg with the cathedral close to the left.

When I was in school, girls and boys from the three high schools in town used to congregate on one or the other of the bridges across the river, mainly to ogle each other and make plans for the weekends. It is fascinating to know that the practice of using the bridges for informal meetings is a very old custom in Uppsala from mediaeval times and onwards. We certainly had no idea that we were perpetuating something that had been going on for centuries.



To the left the old bridge across the river Fyris

In all essentials Uppsala today is very much what it was 50 years ago when I grew up here. Of course there have been many changes - there are 150.000 inhabitants instead of 70.000 and the city has spread out in all directions. Even so, its heart is the same. And if you ask me, that heart is to be found in the small park between the Cathedral and the Holy Trinity church. I used to sit there under the lilacs in the spring and read and eat ice-cream, while my baby brother slept in his pram. Chances are that I was reading a book by L. M. Montgomery.