When in Sweden, do as Swedes do: Deconstructing the cultural metaphor of “the Swedish stuga” during a trip to Ramhäll

Introduction

If you're lucky enough to be invited to a Swedish summer house, take the chance! This could be an excellent opportunity to learn more about Swedes and their lives outside of work. Make sure you have a long, hot shower before you go, pack plenty of warm clothes, and go with an open mind.

This is the advise of Sofi Tegsveden Deveaux in her blog, beeswedish.com (Deveaux, 2016).

As a Visby scholarship holder and visiting PhD student I was granted the privilege to become a part of the Department of ALM (Archival science, Library & information science, and Museum & heritage studies) at Uppsala University and participate in daily departmental activities that shape my general understanding of Swedish formal norms, rules, and values. During my first year of studies I took a couple of courses, including a Swedish language course, where we broadly discussed the Swedish cultural mindset, standards, values, and the national dream about the Swedish summer home.

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In 1994 Martin J. Gannon and Rajnandini Pillai introduced the concept of a cultural metaphor and pointed out “the Swedish stuga” as a symbol of Sweden. The preface of the fourth edition to the book “Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys Through 29 Nations” provides the following definition of a cultural metaphor:

[…] activity, phenomenon, or institution with which members of a given culture emotionally and/or cognitively identify. As such, the metaphor represents the underlying values expressive of the culture itself. Culture allows us to fill in the blanks, often unconsciously, when action is required, and cultural metaphors help us to see the values leading to action (Gannon & Pillai 2010, p. 13).

The metaphor of the Swedish stuga does not imply the type of dwelling and back-to-nature lifestyle in countryside solely; it represents a projection of cultural, historical and economic transformations that shapes the framework of the Swedish society. Gannon emphasizes the following characteristics of the stuga that clearly reflect Swedish culture:

The first one is the relationship to nature and traditions; that tends to favour harmony over mastery. The second is the valorisation of a nuclear family and individualism. This is associated with the idea that individual development and well-being are important, probably more important than working life (humane orientation). The third one is the expression of low power distance; the stuga tends to have modest facilities with outdoor toilets and often no running water. (Gannon & Pillai 1994, cited by Romani, Primecz & Bell 2014, p. 22).

Inspired by Gannon’s theoretical approach I attempted to probe into the cultural metaphor of Swedish stuga during the weekend with M.\(^2\) and her family in their summer house in Ramhäll. The travel diary is organized in a chronological order and includes the description of the journey with a stop at Lyans Loppis, an exploration of the abandoned Ramhäll mine, an excursion to the local museum, and reflections about traditional activities in countryside.

**On the way to the summer house: stopping by Lyans Loppis**

Our weekend started on Saturday afternoon from Uppsala Central Station where my friend and I took a public bus to the station in Ramhäll. It was an

\(^2\) To preserve anonymity and confidentiality of the trip participants the initial letters substitute the names.
unseasonably warm and sunny September day. M's father picked us up from the bus stop in Alunda and then we continued our trip by car. Since our route passed through Lyan village we decided to make a short stop at a local flea market, "Lyans loppis".

Loppis, or "boutique of antiques", is the Swedish term for garage or yard sale. According to the description Swedish Freak Blog, loppis are found throughout the country, usually located in people's yards or near a highway (and get a lot of drive-by traffic). They are temporary or sometimes permanent retailers organized by people who are moving or cleaning out their house.

Likewise flea markets, second-hand, and antique shops are very common in Eastern European countries. The main goal of these different shops is to retail items no longer in use and old-fashioned things. Swedish loppis however has a particular atmosphere. Flea markets are organized in public places, where items are relocated and randomly gathered in one place. A Loppis is often located on private grounds (in a barn, garage, or a yard), incorporates the furnishings from one private house, and offers authentic experience of in situ sale. Once a visitor steps over the threshold of the building, s/he enters the dual private - public (private home vs. public shop) space, an intimate world of somebody's house, where the furnishing was relocated from ordinary building to the barn, but still it has a strong connection to the private grounds and former environment.

The world of a loppis is a special attraction and a hidden gem for history and art admirers. The after-purchase feeling in loppis is different from the one in a regular shop or market. It contains a psychological twist: at first, a potential buyer is trapped by the peculiarity of an antiquated item - a happenstance witness of the old times - and after some time s/he can experience a deep remorse for having destructured this dusty harmonic unity.

Lyans Loppis is settled in a typical falu red (deep red colored) barn by the side of the road, so it is clearly observed from the distance. Upon arrival, the owner of the boutique of antiques warmly invited us to his old-fashioned mysterious world. Lyans Loppis contains a vast collection of furniture, jewelry, stationery, and household items from different epochs and time periods from antique to retro. The items are grouped and exhibited in thematic zones: a living room, a kitchen, a barn, etc. (Image 1).
Our intervention to this cluttered space had a low impact on its fragmented unity since we did not buy anything - we did not tear out a piece of the system. We were observing and discussing the origin and functional purpose of different items, trying to discern their silent stories.

The short stop at Lyans Loppis reveals the aesthetics of the Swedish traditional household culture and style, full of well-preserved antiques and pieces of art, the “harmony over mastery” approach to simple things and stuff.

**Back-to-nature pastime at the summer house**

Upon arrival to the summer house we were warmly welcomed by M's mother who is a retired Swedish language teacher. Straight after the entrance, I was kindly invited to pass the reading test in old Swedish by reading from the wall painting which used to hang in a classroom (Image 2).
Unlike the typical modest furnishing of the Swedish stuga, the summer house had all modern conveniences (including running water, heating, and toilet) and was furnished with old-fashioned furniture, exquisite statues, and decorations inherited from M’s grandmother. Probably, some of the items were coeval with the Lyans Loppis assortment.

The house was not located close to the water as it is supposed to be according to the textbooks about the Swedish stuga but it was naturally isolated from the neighborhood by the row of household and recreational buildings: an alcove, a former community laundry, a garage, a barn, and a falu red playhouse. The spatial system of household organization perfectly resembled the core Swedish values: individualism, humane orientation, and independence. The small wooden playhouse painted the traditional reddish brown color was the very spit of a real house with a door and a window. It was the “property” of a child, with special rules and regulations, where M used to spend much time during the summer when she was a child.

The concept of Swedish stuga incorporates the way of spending free time and back-to-nature experience. Visiting a summerhouse is a very popular way of spending weekends or holidays in the countryside of Sweden (as well as in Belarus and Lithuania). Swedes congregate for relaxation to the countryside as a physical and mental getaway from the daily routine. In Belarus however, the cottage season is less relaxing and more labor-intensive. Since Soviet times there has been a tradition to harvest fruit and vegetables on the extensive plots of land. Summer houses (so-called, dachas) were initially intended for agricultural purposes. Nowadays there has been a shift in the perception of dacha from the main source of fruit and vegetables provision to a place for relaxation with friends and family.
The kitchen garden of the summer house has a territory of approximately 25-30 m² and contained a mixture of vegetables, herbs, and flowers. It was a patch, full of different smells, colors, and shapes. Unlike the traditional Eastern European concept of the dacha, the garden area was used mainly for recreational and aesthetics purposes. Born and raised in a house located in the small Belarusian town of Vileyka I used to work in a garden when I was a child. I was excited to challenge myself and to help M’s mother in the kitchen garden. Unintentionally our activities were appointed by "gender" principle: M's father was cutting the wood, her mother was gardening, and we were cutting dried plants on the flower bed. Everybody was busy and happy: one of the main advantages of the light physical labor is the excitement from its immediate result.

Sweden has the space to provide diverse outdoor activities. Hiking is a favorite pastime of Swedes and a long walk on the lakeshore or in the forest is a preferred way to commune with nature. Fishing and picking flowers, berries, or mushrooms are also on the back-to-nature agenda (Gannon & Pillai 2010, p.145). Likewise, picking mushrooms is one of the most popular seasonal leisure activities in Belarus and Lithuania. It unites people of different generations and brings them into the woods. Every family has its own "secret place” in the forest, full of chanterelles or other forest treasures. It is not just mushrooms people find in the forest, but mental repose, delight, socialization, and even competition between family members to hunt the biggest amount of mushrooms.

Besides the back-to-nature agenda, picking berry and mushrooms is an extra source of income for the villagers and retired people during the summer and autumn seasons in Belarus and Lithuania. A network of mushroom and berry collecting centers, both private and state-owned, are operated throughout the country since early June until late September. The collecting centers buy golden chanterelles and blackberries and then export them to the countries of Western Europe and North America.

After gardening we decided to go to the forest to pick some mushrooms for dinner. We got to the nearby forest by car and tried to walk together in order to not get lost. The flora and fauna of the Swedish forest is very similar to the Eastern European one but the landscape is different. There were many rocks and huge stones in the forest, so the walking was not enjoyable. After one hour of wandering, I found only two penny buns (Swe. karl Johanssvamp) while my Swedish friends picked plenty of golden chanterelles.

Our first day ended up with a cozy family dinner and long conversations about cultural diversity, history, and traditions. We found out many similarities between Belarus, Lithuania and Sweden. During the first day in the countryside, I managed to recognize the components of the cultural metaphor of the Swedish stuga, namely love of untrammeled nature and tradition, individualism and age equality as the core principles of the Swedish society. My further exploration of the Swedish stuga metaphor continued during the second day when I learnt the history of Ramhäll.
Ramhäll’s abandoned mine

Our second day started with the exploration of an industrial heritage site – the abandoned Ramhäll iron ore mine, an outstanding example of Swedish industrialization of the 18-20th centuries.

The history of M’s family is closely connected to the mine. Her grandfather was working as a supervisor for more than 20 years up to his retirement. M’s mother was born and raised in the house in the immediate vicinity of the mine and her childhood memories are tightly attached to this place.

According to "Berättelser från Ramhäll" (Eng. “Stories from Ramhäll”), the Ramhäll mine has been known since the 18th century. A geological dissertation published in 1916 stated that the Ramhäll iron ore pit was discovered in 1742 (Ramhälls byagille, 2001). The mining started straight after the pit discovery and continued until the middle of the 1760s. Schmitz Mill established the mining enterprise Hammarinsgruvorna in 1831. Since the middle of the 19th century, the mine was the township forming enterprise. The residential houses, a school, a public laundry and a grocery store were erected to provide basic conveniences for the miners and their families. In 1942, the company Stora Kopparberg bought the mine and continued the infrastructural development: cottages, offices, and a drill-tank were built next to the production center. The operation of Ramhäll’s mines ceased in 1975 when the iron ore production was closed. The mines tunnels were filled with water and the concrete constructions were supposed to be demolished, but scientists insisted on keeping the constructions as a perfect venue for bat breeding (Westberg & Sjöström, 2016). According to M the abandoned area is frequently used for the disaster simulation games.

When we approached the concrete constructions, I smelled the paint and saw lots of recently used spray cans. The interiors of the buildings were perfectly preserved and created a false impression that iron ore production had been recently ceased: control boxes, the wiring system, switches, and the elevator withstood the ravages of time (Image 3).

Image 3: Ramhäll mine’s facilities. Photo: Author.
The views of the site created a paradoxical impression: on the one hand, abandoned concrete constructions looked depressively hopeless and dead, and on the other, these freshly graffitied walls and a concrete tunnel in the air infused hope and new life into the building. The construction looked too modern and well-preserved to having been abandoned for more than 40 years.

An open pit mine tunnel flooded with water was hidden in the bushes in front of the concrete building (Image 4). It was fenced off to protect animals from accidently falling into the hole. There were several more open pit mines in the neighborhood. For safety reasons swimming and diving in the pit and mine lagoons are prohibited. Despite signs and fences explicitly warning swimmers to stay clear of its waters there are people who use the flooded tunnels for diving and swimming.

Image 4: Pit mine lagoon. Photo: Author.

The closure of the mine and the resulting decline in economic activity had a detrimental effect on the local community of Ramhäll. The loss of jobs led to high local unemployment and mass relocation to Uppsala and its neighborhood. The infrastructure originally provided by the company (the grocery shop, cinema, library and cultural center) was shut down. The industrial township Ramhäll was transformed into the area for summer houses. Ramhäll shared the fate of many other industry-dependent townships from all over the world.
Ramhäll local history museum and community center

Triggered by the architectural design and construction of the abandoned mine facilities I was particularly interested in visiting the community center and exploring the local museum representing the glorious history of industrial Ramhäll and its community. Expositions at local museums are often designed by community enthusiasts, not by museum specialists, guided rather by heart and feelings than expertise and knowledge. Therefore the space of local history museums are often cluttered, chaotic and theoretically improper, but vivid and unique.

The museum was located in the former school building dated 1885. The lady from the neighboring house, a local museum keeper – made a guided tour for us. The first hall of the museum was devoted to the industrial heritage of Ramhäll: the exposition demonstrated mining equipment and daily life of the miners. Besides the stands with photos depicting the milestones of Ramhäll’s mining history and community development there was a “glass box” with tools and equipment for mining (Image 5).

The layout of the exhibits in the glass box was chaotic: a lamp, a core, a forging rod, a piece of iron ore, stamps and paper forms were mixed and displayed all together (Image 5). Several items had tags in Swedish (Swe. smidesstång, borrkärna), but the majority were displayed nameless. Therefore, without previous knowledge of mining processes and Swedish language, one could barely understand and identify the content of the display rack. The photos on the exhibition stands were grouped according to several themes: industry, education, leisure. The layout of each exhibition

Image 5: The history of Ramhäll’s community. Photo: Author.
The stand was arranged in chronological order. The narrative of the first hall was focused on the local community of miners and their daily life (on labor, socialization, education, and leisure).

It should be pointed out that the historical timeline of the exhibition from the first hall does not stop at the milestone of 1975 when mining ceased and the tide of life slowed down in Ramhäll. The museum hall depicts the life of the Ramhäll community after the eclipse of its glorious industrial era. For example, a group picture of locals on the bridge constructed in the early 1990s illustrates the recent developments in 1992. The image has a special value for our small group because members of M’s family were there (Image 6).

Our excursion around the museum continued with the visit to the classroom dated to the early 1900s. The auditorium displayed pupils’ desks, a teacher’s table, study materials, colorful pictures of animals and nature, maps, bookshelves, textbooks, copybooks, a blackboard, and an alphabet board. The design of the classroom delicately communicated the educational environment and created “back to school” time machine effect: I had a feeling that I went back to my primary school. Everything was so genuine, colorful and intimate (Image 6). In our primary school we had very similar desks, blackboards, copybooks and sets of numbers and letters, but only Cyrillic letters.
My attention was caught by the colorfully painted alphabet, with the politically incorrect (in terms of our modern norms and regulations) picture for the letter "N" (Image 6). It is hard to imagine this illustration in contemporary Swedish, English, or even Russian alphabets in the classroom but it was common and possible hundred years ago.

After visiting the classroom I had mixed feelings: on the one hand, I experienced the immersion to my childhood and primary school during Perestroika times, on the other hand I realized the huge gap in industrial development and educational environment between Sweden and Belarus: the reconstructed atmosphere of the Swedish classroom of the early 1900s looked so familiar to Belarusian classroom of the early 1990s.

At the end of the tour we walked around the school and popped into the nearby building, a place where the future community center with a library, a crafts room, and a meeting place will be opened in the near future. In spite of the mine shutting down in 1975 ending the industrial epoch of Ramhäll locals still guard and cherish local history and culture.

**Conclusion**

At the end of the day we packed our bags and returned to Uppsala. My short but culturally intensive stay in the Swedish summer house in Ramhäll came to an end. It was a memorable life experience. I managed to explore and recognize the core principles of the Swedish stuga as a cultural metaphor, became a member of M’s family, soaked in the local history of Ramhäll, investigated the degree of Swedish-LithuanianBelarusian cultural
proximity, and physically and socially became immersed in Swedish culture.

The concept of the Swedish *stuga* as a cultural metaphor was traced during my weekend stay in the Ramhäll summer house. The cultural metaphor is, however, only a starting point and subject to change as my personal knowledge and experiences of Sweden increases.

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**FURTHER READING**

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