



FROM "ANNA WENNBERG 1889-1988"

By Gösta Wennberg

Part 1

SISTER ELLEN WHO DIED OF TB

[Mom:] You asked me about my sister Ellen who died so young. After my dad was dead we had to leave Österängen and move into town; life was entirely different. I remember being terribly concerned about the money. I used to say to my mom: "Can we really afford having this for dinner?"

Gösta: Did she take offence?

Mom: No she wasn't irritable yet, that came with her menopaus. I was very concerned about how we could make it. Anyway, we moved into town, to a house which was located at Kanalgatan [in Jönköping]. It was a quite unhealthy street as there was an open canal next to it. A family named Elmgren lived there, several of their children had died of TB.



Sister Ellen

I wasn't very sociable as I was very shy. But Ellen was an impulsive kid, always socializing, and she visited this family. Later she became ill and I don't know whether she got the TB there or if she got it the countryside later at summer.

We could live for free in Bankeryd's Vicarage in a cottage. We had such a good time that summer. And the vicar's children had a cousin named... Ekvall. He had TB in the last stage and sat outside in a wheelchair, and they rented a cottage in the neighbourhood. Ellen was there every day and talked to the sick man, at this time nobody knew that TB was infectious (I doubt that!) - I don't know what they believed. She was so fun, nice and really cheered him up.

Later at winter [...] mom moved to Bankeryd since she thought it would be nice to live in the country; Ellen and I went by train to school, she was weak, allways freezing. - One night I woke up because Ellen had a headache and was vomiting, which was the beginning of her decease; it was milliar tubercolosis on her brain from which she later died.

She was a really intelligent kid, who nearly drove the teachers crazy, asked about everything. Afterwords they were so sad that they hadn't been nice to her, had discouraged her.

Gösta: Grandma often told us that Ellen saw an angel on her deathbed.

Mom: Yes, she had a lot of visions, it was a brain disease and she was feverish. Of course she had a

lot of visions. And mom, who wanted to believe but had some problems with it – to her this was evidence for an afterlife.

Gösta: Yes, she was so angry with me... we sat in the living room in the house at Norra Vägen, it could have been 1932 (when I was 12), I was sitting in the sofa and Lydia was sitting in the armchair, and she talked about this. I dismissed it coldly and she was really mad.

Mom: Yes, she couldn't stand that one could have the smallest doubt about anything in the Bible. She was not strong enough, which I understand by now; she needed this [...]

MOTHER LYDIA – HER EARLY LOVE LILLIECREUTZ

(I then ask about my grandmother Lydia Lindman.)



Mother Lydia

Gösta: Did she work as a governess at Yxkullund?

Mom: No, she was a governess at another place called Nyagärde which was owned by the Lilliecreutz family. She was 17 years old so it must have been 1877. The girls that she was teaching were some 14 to 15 years old. She was very musical, played and sang a lot.

When she was there she met another Lilliecreutz whose name was Henrik and who had been a widow for several years, and owned Hånger's village yard. He fell in love with her; I think she was a very delightful person, lively, full of fun. His family did not like this; she was both poor and untitled. So they made her leave them and get another place. [...]

So she couldn't have her Henrik. But she care not only him; from her diaries I have understood that there were many men who fell in love with her. She had what we call sex appeal. She lived in Jönköping, just across the street from where my dad lived, with her mother and siblings. She wasn't in love with him (Salomon); she never forgot this Henrik. But anyway, it wasn't so nice being a governess – this was just what you could do in those days, being a governess in different families, being dependent on others, almost like a servant.

So she got engaged to my dad, and since she was very musical a good friend of my dad paid for her while taking a degree at Uppsala as a church musician, during the time when she was engaged to my dad.¹ This was not very common in those days. The man who was her music teacher fell in love with her. I think she fell in love with him too – but I believed that he had a disease which in those days was incurable - you know what I mean (syphilis of course). I understood this from mom; he couldn't think of getting married.

From her diaries I have understood that she was suffering from depression.

Gösta: Yes, as we do to a very high degree in our family.

Mom: But I didn't know that she had such severe depression, she never talked about it. Probably she didn't understand herself that she had it.

¹ In this detail Anna was wrong. From Lydia's posthumous letters we know that the engagement did not take place until October 1887, that is after Lydia was finished with her training.

Gösta: Like Karin.

Mom: Yes, like Karin. It is interesting to read mom's diaries, about her bad moods and how sad she was and everything. So she married my dad and was married for eight years until he died. When she had been a widow for only a short time Henrik wrote to her and they met – which I think was a very bad thing of him to do. He was much in love with her as she was in him, and he visited her very often. I recall well when he visited us, things were very innocent.² [...]

THE ACCIDENT OF ARVID SERNER 1907

[...] Gösta: Tell me about the accident of Frank Heller's brother.

Mom: I fell in love with your dad during the summer of 1905. In 1906 he wasn't there very much (at Framnäs) but then Frank Heller (Gunnar Serner) visited us and lived upstairs. (His mother was a sister of my grandfather, which made him a cousin of my mom.) He was very hot for girls, I was in love with Helge and didn't care about him at all, but he insisted on kissing me. But he never got to! We had a long slope down to the lake, and one time when the Wennberg's had visited us and Gunnar and I walked together alone, during a beautiful summer evening at 10-11, he was flirty but he didn't get what he wanted.



Cousin Arvid "Uncas" Serner

Then he sat down, held his heart and said that he'd gotten a heart attack. Well, I didn't know what to think, but he didn't fool me anyway. So nothing came out of that flirt. But he was always very hot on girls.

This was in the beginning of the summer. [...] They were out hunting, Sten Wennberg who was about 12-13 years old, Arvid Serner and his brother Harald who was 17. And suddenly – I guess they behaved stupidly, the Serners were no outdoor types or could handle a gun as the Wennbergs – when he pulls the shotgun close to the body, something goes wrong and a gunshot goes off right into his arm. This was on our side of the lake and I remember the two boys coming with him between them – I will never forget it.

I run away, but my sister Greta helped mom. The boys rowed to Framnäs, they had no telephones, I don't know how they got hold of a doctor, but there was a doctor from Gränna many hours later who bandaged him. There was no train going until the evening. They had to carry him down the slope, row him half an hour to the railway station in Stora Hultrum and by the train take him to Jönköping.

They tried to save his arm and later he came to Lund. During all the autumn they picked out shots out of his arm; finally they had to have it amputated. Nevertheless this boy, 17 years old, graduated from high school the following spring, having good grades. He learned how to write with his left hand; the Serner boys were very gifted. [...]³

ABOUT YOUTH AGAIN, ABOUT BOOKS, RELIGION AND SEXUALITY

Gösta: Now I will ask you a question about your childhood. Do you recall the first book that you read?

² Maybe things weren't that innocent after all. In the letters that Lilliecreutz writes to Lydia before their first meeting, he calls her "Mrs Lydia Lindman". In the letters after the meeting he writes "Lydia, my love!"

³ Arvid "Uncas" later on became a high school teacher, PhD, and father of actor Håkan Serner (1933-1984).

Mom: (Here mom tells me, among other things, about the catechism which she didn't understand a bit of.)

Gösta: Where you religious?

Mom: I read the Lord's Prayer and other prayers – but that was just a thing that you should do. I had a very big break when I was 13, the preachings never really made sense to me; I used to lie in bed begging: "Dear God, let them say something that I understand."



And then I thought "Well, I wait until I get older" and I had some comfort in that. [...] When I should be confirmed the religion was nothing for me. And when I should make the promises (for confirmation), I didn't do it. [...] I thought that I would never be able to keep them. [...]

(Mom returned to a religious interest during her menopause when she had a big crisis. With the underused intellectual ability that she had, she read advanced theological works by Nygren, Lönborg, Birgit Lange and others. She and I often sat during the nights at Skeda and discussed all this.)

[...] Gösta: But all this [the religious brooding] left you later, didn't it?

Mom: It left when Helge died. Then I stopped thinking about it. I became indifferent. [...]⁴

Gösta: If we go back – do you recall any books?

Mom: Oh yes. My mother had an uncle [...] and from him we got *Läsning för barn*. We also got H C Andersen's fairy tales. They also had a book called *Vitavall*. [...] That was a book which made a great impression on me. Otherwise we didn't have a lot of books.

Gösta: Did they get into what you read?

Mom: Not at all. Except in Asarum, in the home of my uncle Hjalmar Ek. There I wanted to read Victor Rydberg's *Bibeln's lära om Kristus*, but I wasn't allowed to. [...] This was the year when I was 17. Mom never got into what we read. She used to read aloud for us, she read several books by Charles Dickens aloud. You can imagine it was fun! [...]

Edith told me about girls going on the street. She was our maid (in the home of grandma). "But why do they never have children?" I asked. - "Oh no", said Edith, "on a public highway no seed can grow".

Gösta: How much sexual education did you have, and when did you learn?

Mom: Those things I have known almost all my life, interestingly enough.

Gösta: Wasn't that because you lived in the country?

⁴ During the last years of her life, though, she was a tireless seeker after truth and read a lot of books connected to Christianity.

Mom: We saw animals, bulls and so on.

Gösta: It was never a mystery?

Mom: No. Except how children came out, which was a mystery to me even when I was quite old. (Whispers:) But Björn's mother didn't know when he was to be born – how he was going to come out. Myself, I was never that ignorant, that I knew – but how I was able to know it I do not remember.

ABOUT OBSESSION AND ARSENIC POISONING

Gösta: But you had some quite severe sexual obsessions during your puberty; you told me that when I was younger.

Mom: Yes, I was afraid that I should masturbate, I don't know why, it was a strange obsession. - I had read Selmer [...] who wrote children's books, and in them there was something about it – by this time I hadn't gotten my period yet, I didn't even know what it was. [...]

I went to Dr Sörensen, I told him about how sick I felt, I had a stomach ache, so he pumped it out because he thought that I maybe had a gastric ulcer. I was sick because of all those obsessions. I also got poisoned by wallpapers which gave me those horrible attacks of dizziness.

Gösta: Was this as Rosenlund?

Mom: This was at Rosenlund. I became more and more sick when I lived in those rooms, which had horrible yellow wallpapers. Disgusting pattern, I had read about those things – my sickness could not be just anxiety. So I let a doctor examine me and I was terribly arsenic poisoned. Uncle Gustaf had to tore down all the wallpapers and put up new ones, but it took a long time before I felt well.

Gösta: How old where you?

Mom: I was 17 when I came to Rosenlund, I was 19 when I became ill.

What provoked it was that uncle Gustaf wanted me to have chickens, and something fell in the chicken coop so that one of them broke its bill. I ran down with the chicken to the kitchen and stood with it in my hand, and it was so awful. I fainted, and when I woke up I said: "Have I contracted aunt Elin's disease". (She had epilepsy and mom was, during all her time at Rosenlund, afraid of having this, as one believed, inheritable disease.) Then I got rid of it, but later I told aunt Elisabeth about it, and they took me to a doctor who examined me. So I started to think about this, and nothing more was needed [for me to become very anxious].

Gösta: Tell me about it! I remember "having polio" for seven years (I was afraid every morning from the age of 13-14 to wake up with a stiff neck).[...]

Mom: Did you talk to me about that?

Gösta: Of course I did! I talked to you about everything! [...]