

IN CONVERSATION WITH DICK RING

By Hans Teke

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THE YEARS IN SWEDEN

Hans: As the only one today who has met Lydia you must have some thoughts about her and of course about your mother Kerstin. What do you recall about those ladies?

Dick: I am looking at a photo taken 73 years ago, which shows the three of us at a place in Karlshamn, I believe. Lydia looks very serious, my mother less so and I seemed quite cheerful in that faded photo. At age six life was good and I would be totally unaware of any possible adult challenges.



Mother Kerstin

I have no other recollections of Lydia but of course many ones of Kerstin. She was quite beautiful with a very pleasant speaking voice, sang well and had an infectious laugh, as I recall from those early days in Canada and initially after returning to Sweden. We (Kerstin, Ted, Sylvia and I) had moved there in 1935 after my father Reginald had lost his job during the depression. Sister Louise remained here and the two of them went through some very bad times until my father managed to gain employment again.

By contrast I think the four of us fared well in Sweden as we were helped by my eldest aunt Anna and husband Helge to a great extent; also in my case by aunt Karin who was a teacher including mine and with whom I lived for a couple of years.

Recall that my mother's outlook changed a lot and quite understandably as she was chronically ill (had a rheumatic heart) was separated from her husband and eldest daughter and often unable to look after the three of us.



Aunt Anna and Helge "Mobban"

Hans: How would you compare Kerstin's two sisters Anna and Karin; what do you recall?

Dick: Anna and husband Helge were presented with quite the challenges when the four of us arrived in Värnamo because at around that time they also took on Chris and Else from the U.S. Their mother Greta, my aunt, had died while giving birth to the twins and things had not worked out well with their stepmother which created a need to move to Sweden.

So in addition to raising her own children Gösta, Stina and Brita, there were five children and Kerstin needing to be looked after. And we all were and very well, I recall. Anna, the matriarch of the family, could be very strict and authoritative but had a soft side to her nature. I recall her helping me with schoolwork at times. But best to behave. She was less than pleased when a friend and I visited the attic in his house and somehow managed to start a fire. That resulted in

a visit to her attic for a spanking and in being referred to for some time as “the little arsonist” by Helge, who relied heavily on Anna to keep order with all of us as he worked hard as a land surveyor. His office was an addition to the large stucco house we lived in. I found it very nostalgic to visit that house in 2000 during a Rotary Friendship visit. The owner, an avid art collector, had rare paintings displayed on the walls, some of which Helge used to display his various hunting rifles on.

Karin in those days seemed a bit more easygoing perhaps helped by not being responsible for six additional people. She did however take me on for two years (1941-42) as we shared her very nice but smallish apartment in Ljungby. I recall her as being fascinated by English things such as the BBC, the very difficult London Times crossword (she solved most), how the war was going... A keen cross country skier and loved to spend those summers at Koster (a group of islands near the Norwegian border), where she took me twice. Great times for a young boy!



Aunt Karin

She was a teacher and a good one. As one of her pupils I recall her as being strict but with a sense of humor. She instilled in me a wish to learn more; certainly a mark of a good teacher, I suggest. In 1977 Margaret and I visited her, still at her beloved Koster during that summer.

SISTER SYLVIA

Hans: Gösta wrote that even during your early days in Värnamo, Sylvia showed signs of anxiety. Anna recalled that she kept repeating "Are you mad at me, Auntie Anna?" Do you recall?



Sylvia in her teens

Dick: No, my recollection was that she was quite extroverted, a pretty girl who seemed happy to me, her brother, who was five years younger. Later I did recall symptoms which were indicative, on reflection, of someone not at peace with the world. Even later, this was diagnosed as schizophrenia, a chronic condition which Sylva had to cope with for the rest of her life. She did work in Sweden and in Canada for a while, was married briefly once... was in and out of mental institutions for several years but stayed on her own mostly, had a couple of friends who visited her.

She seemed quite happy in her own world; characteristically it was the rest of the world that was out of step. The three of us, Louise, Ted and I, visited and helped a bit. It was challenging as she was apt to give the first person she met any money she had. In her later years she lived in subsidized apartment which conveniently was very close to where I worked. She kept busy with papers, writing letters and deciding how best to solve the problems of the world. She had some good ideas too, albeit more suitable for a less imperfect world!

As to her physical condition, it was not very good the last years, understandably since she was a chain smoker and became quite heavy. So when she died in 1994 it was not really unexpected.

Too us it seemed very sad that a young vibrant girl was afflicted with this dreaded disease for most of her life. I sensed that she was quite accepting of it.... if she could only get me to



Dick, Sylvia, Ted and Louise Ring, 1950

smarten up! On reflection, much of what she thought I should change was very insightful. But her little brother knew better of course... he thought.

Hans: Do you think that she and Louise were very close?

Dick: Not after the physical separation. Louise was an extremely caring person, and very much devoted to her family, to her daughters and son and grandchildren; did a lot of babysitting, quite involved in the family, and tremendously well loved. (She only died a couple of years ago.) But with a full life of her own there really wasn't very much contact with Louise and Sylvia in later life, which I think was quite understandable.

KERSTIN'S LAST YEARS

Hans: You came back to Canada in 1946, three years before your mother died. How do you recall those years as to Kerstin's quality of life?

Dick: They were difficult for her. Initially the three of us shared a very small flat in central Toronto (coincidentally very close to where Ted's widow Helen, daughter Vanessa and family live in a large house) and it was not the ideal place to come to after pleasant accommodations in Sweden. Living quarters were very hard to find just after the war so my dad did well to get us started. We did manage within a year to find a better apartment. I recall thinking when my father met us coming off the boat in Baltimore. "Who is this man?" I wonder if my mother did not in some ways share that feeling.

Throughout her remaining life she was ill, often in pain and taking digitalis for her heart condition. While it was not totally unexpected her death came suddenly (she died at home an early morning) and on reflection perhaps it was a blessing as her last years were not very happy ones. I moved out on my own after a year and went on to work for a year before going to university.

My overall feeling is that my mother had a very difficult life with early periods of happiness, but the separation from husband and Louise changed everything for the worse as did the decline of her health. Her life, I feel, was for too long an unhappy one. My father of course had a very hard time too. He lived to be 84 years, the last ones spent at Louise's home and still travelling at every opportunity.

ON BROTHER TED, ANXIETY AND FAMILY

Hans: What can you tell me about your brother Ted?



Brother Ted, 1954

Dick: Ted was among many other talents a very fine photographer who worked at times with a couple of well-known artists in Canada. He was very interested in nature, was a fine teacher at the Toronto Island Public School. I have met some of his pupils through his daughter Jennifer and they thought very highly of him as a teacher. It seemed Ted was ahead of his time in environmental concerns and teaching his pupils about nature.

He was very supportive of me on several occasions and we all were very saddened by his far too early death in 1973. He was separated from his wife Helen, who did a marvelous job of raising Vanessa, Kerstin, Jennifer and James through her own hard work and effort.

Hans: I know that Ted had his “ups and downs”. And it seems that there is something one could call “the Lindman anxiety”, which has manifested itself with several family members. You included?

Dick: Yes, I would include myself. It was interesting to read about Lydia and other in the family, who seemed to have to deal with severe anxiety beyond the level of what most people appear to have. But then do we really know? In any case I find that there are mechanisms for dealing with my concerns so perhaps I will not blame Lydia for passing on those unwelcome genes.

Hans: I have understood that the website about the family has meant quite a deal to you, during the year it has existed. Do you want to tell me about how it has affected you?

Dick: I guess that when my dear niece Jennifer started digging in to the family tree, persevering of all sorts of basic questions about dates and times and persons involved and so on, I realized that I wasn't really knowledgeable about my own family, and it made me start to dig into all kinds of sources. And that grew into a very strong interest at the moment. And certainly being part of fine-tuning your translations (of Gösta's stories for example) has been very interesting. It has helped me to maintain my diminishing Swedish and it has given tremendous insights into so many people that I knew.

ON LIFE AND VOLUNTEER WORK

Hans: What might be some changes in today's Dick as compared to the early-days one?

Dick: Margaret notices that I am getting weirder day by day but then we did not know each other way back so... For most of my working life (as a manager, sales and research in publishing), I concentrated on the quite usual things; making more money, getting a bigger house or car; not really very satisfactory because you never get there...wherever there is.

Today, being retired, more satisfaction is gained from family, volunteer work and trying to do my bit in helping out. My outlook changed substantially after spending about 18 months in

Guatemala between 1999 and 2005. I helped a friend there a bit and more in Canada raising money and supplies; she had formed a group some 15 years ago called Poco a Poco (little by little). As good a name imaginable as all progress in all (hopefully) developing countries happens that way.

Guatemala is very beautiful, very poor, very corrupt and government does not really care about the 90 % plus who are poor. Even if it did, few pay taxes so no money to speak of. Also very violent: 6000 murders in 2006 (Canada with more than twice the population had some 1000). My friend Jill helps with supplies, micro credit loans, teaching midwifery, first aid; the list goes on.

Locally, I do visiting to care facilities and driving people to various places, mostly for medical appointments. It remains a truth that you get a lot out of helping out a bit. Someone very wise, likely a woman, once said "It is a big mistake to do nothing because you can only do a little. Do what you can!" Margaret volunteers at a local hospice, which is much more challenging than what I do. Get to know someone; next time he or she may be gone.

ON MUSIC AND QUOTATIONS

Hans: My great grandmother Anna recalled that you were very good at whistling opera selections when you thought that nobody was listening. What kind of music do you most often listen to?

Dick: An early memory of Skeda (the family estate in Sweden) was of my cousin Gösta correcting my efforts of whistling a movement from the Haydn Trumpet Concerto. Sticks with me whenever I hear that theme! Mostly classical, I used to facilitate music experiencing groups at different places. Also jazz. I think that we are very fortunate to have sources such as YouTube. I have music on constantly, and we're very lucky, because in Toronto we have access to a variety, and a few good, jazz stations. So it's definitely my number one interest in the arts. I



think Aldous Huxley said it best "Next to silence, music expresses the inexpressible best".

Hans: You like to quote. Do you have some favorites?

Dick: I have always liked one from Anatole France: "It is in the art of deceiving ourselves that we show our greatest talent". I will spare you a bunch, but end with a famous part of a poem by William Wordsworth (from "Ode: Intimations of immortality") "What though the vision that was once so bright, be now forever gone from sight, though nothing will bring back the hour, of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower, we will grieve not but rather find, strength in what remains behind".

I was reminded this beautiful morning on the tennis court that my backhand is now forever gone from sight but gained strength from being lucky enough to still hack around in a game I started in Ljungby, Sweden at age 10, as we used worn out Tretorn balls during the war years. And in that many other worthwhile aspects of life remain behind.

Dick Ring, August 15, 2009