



## From Volunteers to Professionals: The Origin and Development of Public Librarianship in Sweden during the 20th Century

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### **Abstract**

*The Swedish libraries for the general population went through great changes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there were many different kinds of small popular libraries managed by as well the Church of Sweden as municipalities and different kind of popular movements. At the same time the ideas of more developed libraries of the Anglo-American public library model got hold in Sweden. Sweden got state library consultants, a library association and ten years later library education. More and more towns founded modern public libraries out of the former popular libraries. There was later on possible to have greater state grants but that was combined with influence from the library consultants on book selection, arranging premises, hire staff etc. The aims of the public libraries developed with society. Initially it was a question of education the people with books, later it was to reach all social classes in society with what they needed to develop. It has besides also always been a means to treat problems in society. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century most librarians worked part time. Later on more and more librarians, most often female, had as well academic as library school education and worked full time. The salary was however small and they founded a trade union. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a campaign to have library education research based. This succeeded and since the 1990's Sweden has library programs from bachelor to PhD.*

### **Background**

The libraries for the general public were in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century very small and insignificant in Sweden. They were managed by many different organizations and institutions and mainly aimed for as was said “the broader and lower part of the population”. Here I designate these libraries as popular libraries. New ideas were however spread to Sweden at this time

concerning how these kind of libraries should be managed and organized. The ideas came mainly from the US and Britain and they pleaded for a well developed library for the whole population, the so called Anglo-American public library ideas. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century these ideas successively gained ground in Sweden and a system of public libraries grew out of the old popular libraries. The paper is about this and especially about what it meant for the profession of librarians.

### ***From popular to public libraries – agents and structure***

#### Libraries in the early development

In the Church Law from 1686 it was said that the priesi should learn the congregation to read and write. The first parish library was founded in 1799 by the vicar Magnus Hjortsberg in Kjula and Sundby, a congregation close to Lake Mälaren. In the Elementary Education Statute of 1842 with compulsory primary education the priesthood was urged to establish parish libraries and propose suitable books for them. In the late 1860-ies Sweden had more than 1500 parish libraries in the then about 2,500 congregations. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century many parish libraries had been laid down and the rest of them were mostly insignificant with book stocks that were out of date.

In some cities e.g. Göteborg, Helsingborg, Kristianstad and Lidköping municipal libraries were founded from the early 1860-ies managed privately or by the municipality itself .

Liberal workers´ institutes were founded from the 1860-ies and do lecturing societies from the 1880-ies. Often these had libraries that in cities as Stockholm, Malmö and Umeå became rather important.

Heavy drinking of schnapps was very common in Sweden in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To counteract this, reading cottages with small books stocks, journals and non-alcoholic service were established in some cities like Göteborg and Gävle.

What is very special with the origin of and background to the modern public libraries in Sweden are the libraries organized by the popular movements, especially the temperance and labor movement. These movements came to Sweden around the year 1880 and they immediately founded libraries from the early 1900 often as so called study-circle libraries. These libraries were at many places as Stockholm, Malmö and Helsingborg rather impressive. In the late 1930-ies Sweden had more than 5500 study circle libraries.

#### Agents in the early popular/public library question

The primary school teachers and their teachers´ union were very important in the library question from especially the 1890-ies. They often functioned as librarians in the parish and school libraries and the union was devoted to promote libraries in their journal and through work in the local councils and the Parliament (Riksdagen). It was two leading leaders of the teachers union, who submitted a motion for state grants for popular/public libraries in 1902, which gave result through a library decree in 1905. The library question was frequently discussed on Swedish and Nordic school meetings in the decades around the year 1900.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the library question was closely connected to as well social work as the question of lecturing societies and folk high schools. These questions were treated at the Nordic meeting for popular education (Folkbildning) in Uppsala in 1901 and also at Swedish meetings of that kind during the two first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Liberal social reformers were active in this work as Axel Hirsch, who privately on his own means published the journal *Folkbiblioteksbladet* (Popular Library Journal) between the years 1903-1911.

The Stockholm workers' library was a leading popular library in Sweden in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A Finnish observer W. Sippola said about the library in 1906 that "The most important and up-to-date *folkbibliotek* in Stockholm is the workers library. The administration of that library is born out of experiences borrowed from Norway". The librarian Fredrik Nilsson had learned about this during a visit to the Deichman library in Christiania (Oslo).

A new method for pursuing studies began within the Good Templars in Lund in 1902 with Oscar Olsson as the enthusiastic pleader. The point of departure for the new procedure was criticism of the old methods. The previous more school-like courses had led to a lot of problems. Most of the participants had left their courses before they were finished. Olsson found that it was no good putting men and women behind school-desks after a long day of work. They needed something else - something that was important for their lives. What was needed was the joy of knowledge and not school-knowledge. For Olsson books, especially fiction, were central for the study-circles, as the new method for studying was designated. Olsson's idea was that every circle should buy as many books as there were members in it. At the end of every year, the books should be given to the lodge to form a library for all of its members. Olsson thought that the importance for the lodges of good libraries could not be estimated high enough. For him the study-circle was the best, simplest and cheapest means to establish and support up-to-date first-rate libraries all over Sweden. Many municipalities at that time had no popular library.

Important promoter of the Anglo-American public library ideas in Sweden

The Anglo-American public library ideas stand for well developed libraries for all social classes in society with educated staff, good premises, reference and children departments, open stacks etc. These kind of libraries were established in the US and Britain during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the Nordic countries from the early 20<sup>th</sup>. Important in the Anglo-American public library concept is the energy with which the librarians should work to get the library as widely used as possible.

The great promoter of the Anglo-American public library ideas in Sweden was Valfrid Palmgren (from 1911 Palmgren Munch-Petersen). As a young supernumerary library assistant at the Royal Library she took great notice of the backward situation of the popular libraries in Stockholm. She got state money to investigate the public libraries in the US. She went there for some months during the autumn 1907, and she wrote 47 years later about that "I came, I saw and I was defeated". What defeated her were the Anglo-American public library ideas. She was totally captivated by the library spirit. After that she worked hard for the ideas in Sweden for four years. She published her impressions from the journey in 1909 in *Bibliotek och folkuppfostran* (Libraries and the up-bringing of the people) a book that described the

public libraries in the US in zealous fashion. She held three library courses and she founded a youth library in Stockholm. She was also given the task by the ministry of education in 1909 to investigate the situation of *folkbiblioteken* and propose new relations between them and the state. This beautiful young lady's incessant, enthusiastic fight for the public library ideas without compromise and occasionally in conflict with an elderly male popular library establishment during this short period has turned her into a mythical person in the Swedish library history.

The question of popular/public libraries in the Parliament and Government in the twentieth century

For long in Sweden the question of popular libraries was considered to be a private matter or something for the municipality. During the period 1828-1899 several motions were submitted in *Riksdagen* proposing state funding, foremost for the parish libraries. They were all rejected because the question of popular libraries at that time was not considered to be a public matter. This changed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Sweden got the first library decree in 1905 with small yearly state grants, maximum about 8€ (75 Swedish crowns), to local popular libraries. This money could only go to the buying and binding of books and for the printing of catalogues of the libraries book stocks.

Valfrid Palmgrens investigation resulted in a modified library decree in 1912 with a state authority which provided inspection, library courses, a book purchasing catalogue and subsidies to the study-circle libraries of the popular movements. Now a library could get at the most about 43€ (400 Swedish crowns) in yearly state subsidy.

In 1930 Sweden got a new decree with substantial yearly state subsidies to local libraries, at a maximum about 1070€ (10 000 Swedish crowns), and the same yearly sum of money to county libraries. This decree was very important for the conversion of our popular libraries into public libraries and the first that gave subsidies that were large enough to be important for the larger towns. The direct state grants to public libraries were abolished in 1965. After that the Swedish Arts Council have distributed grants to public libraries for different purposes such as general development in poor library municipalities, book-buses, talking books, books for children and ethnic minorities, reading projects, digital projects etc

Sweden got its first library law in 1997. Earlier there were different library decrees since 1905. In Section 2 of the law we can read that "In order to promote interest in reading and literature, information, enlightenment and education and also cultural activities generally, every citizen should have access to a public library. The public libraries shall work to ensure that data-based information is made available to all citizens. Every municipality shall have a public library."

From popular to public libraries

Very important for the further development of the popular and public libraries in Sweden was the founding of the Swedish Library Association in 1915 with its still existing journal *Biblioteksbladet*, (Swedish) Library Journal, in 1916.

The extended grants through the public library decree of 1930 made it possible for the middle sized and greater towns to found modern public libraries with professional librarians, open shelves, departments for children and reading rooms with reference service. The study-circle libraries were integrated into the municipal library systems as branches or, if there was no municipal library in advance, as main libraries.

The modern public library is in most of the local municipalities in Sweden a child of the decades after the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That was a period of fast economic growth that at the same time increased private consumption and the development of the welfare sector.

The local municipality reforms of the early 1950-ies and 70-ies, that decreased the number of local authorities from around 2,500 to 278 in 1974, are very important for the public libraries in this development. Today there are 290 municipalities, more than half of which with less than 20,000 inhabitants. The public libraries went through a period of steady growth between 1950 and 1970. The stock and lending of books multiplied by four during the period, the cost of staff by six and the total costs by seven. Many main libraries and branches got new premises.

Today we have a rather unified public library system in Sweden. We have 290 local municipalities with their main libraries and altogether about 1,000 branches and 92 bookmobiles. They have outreach activities to institutions, places of work, home bound people etc. We have 19 county libraries, three lending centres and a deposit library. On the national level the Swedish Arts Council is active with project grants, courses and other kinds of inspiration to develop the municipal libraries. In that work the county libraries are very important partners.

The development of library service was gradual in Sweden but from the 1970-ies there have been modern public libraries with educated staff in all our local municipalities. Lending of books from the public libraries in Sweden was at its peak in the early 1980-ies with 9.2 loans per inhabitant. In 2008 it was 7.6 of which audiovisual media accounted for 1.3. The greatest decrease has been in fiction for adults. Children's books accounted for around half of all book loans. At the same time every child aged 0-14 years borrowed on average 18.6 children's books. For the country as a whole, every inhabitant made on average 7.3 visits to a municipal library. 5,795 persons were employed in the public library facilities of which 2,955 were trained librarians, together performing a bit less than 5,000 man years. 85 percents of the employees were women.

### ***Library staff and their duties in the popular and public libraries in Sweden during the 20<sup>th</sup> century***

The part time staff in municipal and study circle libraries

In the parish libraries it was normally the primary school teachers, who worked as librarian under supervision of the vicar. In the popular movements it was a selected position to be librarian like those of chairman and secretary of the organization. In the beginning these

librarians had very low or no pay for their work for the library. They handled the daily work at the library but questions of acquisition of books were normally decided by the library board in which they however used to have a voice. If temperance or workers' libraries got means from the local municipality it was often under the condition of inspection by a municipal inspector e.g a grammar school teacher. If the early municipal libraries did not have staff for the daily work that had higher education there could be a grammar school teacher that was the head of the library with the same salary for some few hours work per week as the other staff had for a full week with around 50 hours of work. In the library decree of 1912 it was decided that the libraries had to buy books that were listed in centrally produced book catalogues from the late 1910-s in catalogues elaborated by the library consultants at the ministry of education. In the library decree of 1905 it was said that indecent books were not to be acquired. This was controlled by primary school inspectors, often from the priesthood. From 1912 this was done by the state library consultants and from 1930 also by librarians in county libraries. During the 1920-ies it was realized that books of good cultural value could be weeded out as indecent. It was meant that these books should be of disposal for "mature" readers. In the library decree of 1930 the paragraph on indecent literature was changed to that "The library board should control that literature that could be morally harmful if it was within reach for young and immature readers should not be available for persons considered not to possess necessary maturity." The poison shelf was born! This paragraph was still there in the slightly changed library decree of 1955.

The first courses for part time librarians in municipal and study-circle libraries were organized by the library consultants in 1920. They lasted one or a few weeks and from the 1930-ies they also included a week practice at a county library. The last courses for these librarians were organized by the in 1972 founded library school in Borås, Bibliotekshögskolan, The Swedish School of Library and Information Science (SSLIS). The county libraries besides had own short regular courses for these librarians. This category of librarians disappeared during the late 1970-ies. Through the municipality reform in 1974 all public libraries could hire professional full time staff. Some of the former part time librarians got this kind of position. They were qualified through competence acquired through many years of library work.

The early public libraries and their staff – the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

During the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century some few academically educated persons were hired as librarians for the public libraries in Malmö, Norrköping and Helsingborg the then 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> largest cities in Sweden. In the library decree of 1912 it was said that state money could be paid also for staff and premises. But the level was still too insignificant to be of interest for larger libraries. Library development however continued and the need for professionally trained academic staff grew. This was not the least due to the plans to establish a public library in a new impressive building in Stockholm in 1928. Many staff members were needed. This was the background to the founding of a library school by the state library consultants in 1926. The course lasted some month and required after some years a period of practice and a correspondence course before admission. Most students had from the beginning an academic degree before admission and this became a requirement in 1943. This school existed until 1972 when an independent library school, Bibliotekshögskolan, was founded in Borås with a program of two years and a claim of at least two years academic studies in advance. During the long period from 1926 up until today 75-80% of the students have been female.

The library decree of 1930 had state grants big enough to make it possible for medium-sized towns to hire professional librarians and found libraries in accordance with the Anglo-

American public library ideas. The salaries were however very small and the librarians had to work almost every evening. This brought about the formation of a trade union for librarians at the public libraries in 1938. To get full state grants after 1930 the libraries had to have educated staff and a reference room. This was controlled by the state library consultants. Out of three by the consultants approved applicants to a position as librarian the local library board had to choose one. Public servants could not come out on strike in Sweden until 1966. Before that the librarians had to use other means. When a local library board hired a librarian that was not approved by the consultants the library could be put on blockade as in Skara in 1957. When there could not be agreement about salaries as in Göteborg in the early 1960-ies all staff could give oneself notice.

#### Work differentiation and rationalization in public libraries – the 1950-ies

The situation concerning the staff in the public libraries was in the 1950-ies rather confusing. In the small municipal libraries there was normally a part-time librarian with the title librarian. In the libraries with professional librarians there were only these beside a caretaker. There was no clerk staff in these libraries so the professional librarians had to handle all duties in the library including work at the lenders desk. Besides, most of the professional librarians carried the title library assistant. This lasted until 1971. This situation was very problematic for the professional librarians' trade union. In 1948 the trade union asked the Association of Swedish Cities for an investigation concerning routines and organization of work at the public libraries.

This was in a situation in which there was a shortage of professional librarians. The investigation was carried through in the late 1950-ies and its result was that a division of labor should be carried through between professional and clerical work. From now on the number of clerk staff increased heavily and in the late 1960-ies there was more clerk than professional staff at the public libraries. This has changed in later decades. Now there is more professional staff. This is due to rationalization of clerical work through computerization.

Very important to get more efficient public libraries in Sweden has Bibliotekstjänst, Library Company Limited, founded in 1952 been. They have worked with book selling catalogues with annotations, library furniture, computerized catalogue system etc.

#### Public librarianship in the welfare state – the 1970-ies and '80-ies

The ambitions of the welfare state increased from the 1970's. It was not enough that those who used the public libraries got service. It was a question of democracy that everyone in society could get the necessary knowledge and cultural experiences to take part in the political, social and cultural development. This was the background to a commission, appointed in 1968, which among other questions inquired into how the new cultural policy was to be modelled. One of the central elements in that work was that the cultural policy should promote increased equality in society. The work resulted in the wording of eight goals for the cultural policy in 1974. Among these some were especially important for the public libraries including that the cultural policy should help to protect freedom of speech and to create real conditions necessary for this freedom to be used, to combat the negative effects of commercialism in the cultural sector, to be designed with regard to the experiences and needs of disadvantaged groups, to promote a decentralisation of activities and decision-making functions in the cultural sector and to promote an exchange of experiences and ideas in the cultural sector across national borders.

In 1980 a there was appointed a state commission for public libraries. It published its report in 1984. In that we can read that the public library should fight for the book and the reading, work for free and equal access to information and develop the outreach activities and engage intermediaries. The cultural goals of 1974 and the lines for action from 1984 both led to an extension of different kinds of outreach activities. Many librarians, especially the younger of them that were educated at the Swedish School of Library and Information Science in Borås, were very eager to spread culture and information as widely as possible. This they did in projects already at the library school.

As we have seen one of the goals above was about that the activities of the cultural institutions should “be designed with regard to the experiences and needs of disadvantaged groups”. This could be to ameliorate library service to people on institutions, home-bound people, handicapped people, people who needed talking books but also people who for other reasons did not use the ordinary service of the public libraries so very much. This could be workers, who used the public libraries less than employees, officials and academics. Through local initiatives, and in many municipalities also with the help of state grants, workplace libraries were arranged in a great majority of the Swedish municipalities. Another goal was about decentralization. Sweden got its first book-bus in 1948. The number of them increased heavily during the 1970’s and the 80’s. The librarian during this period became more of a community librarian. The book was still important but it had to be reached out everywhere. Another important feature of public librarianship in Sweden from the 1970-ies on is the great expansion of the children’s departments. From then on children librarians were hired in all municipalities and consultants for these departments were attached to every county library. They were mostly very engaged and had important networks and outreach activities in their local community.

The concept customer began to appear during the 1980’s and the public libraries could more commonly be seen as service institutions that should give what the taxpayer asked for. The users however had normally a picture of what the library should access that lead to that mainly what has traditionally been considered as library media was asked for. During the 1990’s there was a reaction against this and the libraries role as part of the resources of democracy was stressed and the users’ role as citizen got important again.

#### Professionalization of librarianship – the 1990’s

The 1990’s turned out to be a turbulent decade for the Swedish public library not at least through financial crisis in public spending and the massive introduction of computers in the libraries. It was also a decade with high unemployment and great projects within adult education. The concept lifelong learning gained great impact. We saw the following tendencies in the development of the public libraries:

- The crisis in public spending was accompanied by rather substantial cuts in public library service
- The cuts hit especially branches, bookmobiles and work place libraries

- Computerisation exploded concerning as well the internal routines as use of the Internet
- New media grew heavily in importance
- Students in adult education and universities increased their demands for service
- The role of public libraries for democracy was accentuated due to diminished political participation
- Fewer books were lent, especially fiction for adult
- The role as meeting point was emphasised
- Increased cooperation between public, school and university libraries

As written above, the Swedish School of LIS, was founded in Borås in 1972. Its program then can be regarded as a two years' postgraduate diploma. The school had in the beginning no research funds and it recruited well established librarians as lecturers. The idea was that the lecturers should teach best practices. Some of the lecturers were trained researchers but none of them within library and information science. Practice on libraries and study visits were important part of the program. The students also ran projects like libraries at places of work and book talks in schools in the region. In 1977 the SSLIS was integrated into the new established University College of Borås and a process of research connections with universities in Sweden and LIS departments abroad was initiated. In the 1980's there were many discussions about the professional status of librarians. What should be done? As well the Swedish Library Association as the librarians' trade unions worked in behalf of a research based education for librarians. There were some investigations on how library research should be organized in Sweden. A result of this was that a research centre for library research was founded at Göteborg University in cooperation with SSLIS. Very important for the development of this centre was Romulo Enmark, recruited from the department of Ethnology. It started a journal Swedish Library Research. In 1991 Erland Munch Petersen was recruited from the Danish Library School as the first Swedish professor in LIS as temporary staff. Doctoral courses in LIS were initiated in two years later the first doctoral students were recruited. In 1994 Lars Höglund started his work as the first professor in a permanent position. In 1993 the postgraduate diploma exam was changed to mainly magister, from 2007 bachelor and master, exams in LIS. Now the discipline LIS was established on all levels from bachelor to PhD. After 1993 Sweden has got education and research in LIS at four more universities viz. Umeå, Lund, Uppsala and Växjö. Now Sweden has about 10 full professors in LIS and a lot of associate and assistant, and soon 20 doctoral students have completed their PhD.

The librarians have in later years considered themselves more and more as information specialists. Librarianship has however still a strong position in education and research in LIS in Sweden. The public library is important as well for information as for cultural experiences, lifelong learning and as a meeting point. The library is especially important for the children. Of course the library has all kinds of media available as well as artefacts in the physical library as digital documents in the home computer from the virtual library. The good librarian is as well an information specialist as a specialist in dissemination of culture in different media!

### *Analysis*

The Swedish society went through a great transformation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was characterized by industrialisation, urbanisation, social problems and the strivings from a now growing and organized working class to gain influence in society. The old popular libraries

were not adequate any longer. Something new was needed, libraries in which members from all different social classes could meet and through which there was a possibility for everybody to acquire knowledge necessary for the new industries but also for social advancement. These were changes in the societal structure but the actors were also important. In Sweden we are happy to have had an actor, Valfrid Palmgren, who worked for the ideals of library spirit with unsurpassable force and enthusiasm.

The Swedish public library development was about 40 years delayed compared with the US and Britain. What happened there in the 1870's happened in Sweden in the 1910's. Concerning library research Sweden was even more delayed. The Williamsson report in the US came in 1923 with Graduate Library School in Chicago some years later and Sweden got master and PhD program in the early 1990's. How can this be explained? The delay in public library development can be explained by later industrialization and urbanization. Sweden was about a decade later than Norway and Denmark. This can be due to more intensified contacts between especially Norway and the US.

In the 1970's Denmark, Norway and Sweden had well developed public libraries but no university department for research within LIS. This I see as a sign of conservatism in the library sector. It can also be due to the fact the education of librarians took place in independent library schools or regional university colleges without research obligations. This changed in the 1990's when occupations of all kinds wanted to be developed to professions. I think besides that there is a connection between the development of libraries as information centres and the urge to establish librarianship as a "real" profession.

The aims of public libraries are dependent on societal characteristics and political will. In the early days it was a question of educating the people through good books. Later on it was about being an important agent besides the school to create good opportunities for development for everybody. The library was to be a part of the welfare society.

Libraries have always been thought of by politicians as a means to solve economic, political and social problems. That was the case in Boston in the 1850's and it is the case in Sweden today. Libraries can be important for democracy, children's reading ability, lifelong learning etc.

I mean finally that the position of public libraries can be seen as a thermometer of the societal climate in a city or a country. It is not only a question of economy but also of peoples will to develop the libraries in question.