

10 February 1945

The centuries-old building that is now Falun's town hall dominates Stora Torget, the town square. The building sparkles a little extra against its snow-covered surroundings on a cold January day in 2018. Sandra laughs and calls out: "We must have a photo of you in front of the town hall". We are soon going to return home following two days spent searching for traces of or information about the Hälsinggården kibbutz. We have seen parts of a wall, the apple tree in winter, and beautiful birch trees which represent just about everything that has survived of the manor house since it was destroyed by fire in 1971. This is a location in a neighborhood that I have not previously visited but it bears memories of a life prior to my own. It was to this place that my mother, Ruth, came in 1939 aged sixteen. Half a year earlier she and her younger brother had come to Sweden when the government, following the November 1938 pogroms, gave entry visas to some 500 children from Germany – the so-called children's transportation. In the summer of 1939 about sixty of these Jewish youngsters joined forces at Hälsinggården. There they were to be looked after and trained with the intention that, in a few months' time, they would move to Erez Israel (Palestine at this time). Almost half of the youngsters moved on two years later while the other half remained because all the transit routes closed when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. My mother was to stay here until 1946. Some seventy years ago, on 10th February 1945, my prospective parents walked up to the town hall. Unusually they were dressed in their best clothes and, in the black and white wedding photograph, they look youthfully in love and full of hope. They were to marry in a civil ceremony. Was that the easiest way of doing things? Or was it their faith in Zionism without God, religion or religious rituals? Mother was 21 years old. She had met my father at a Zionist conference that had been held at Hälsinggården a few years before. He was employed by a market gardener in Hässelby villastad on the outskirts of Stockholm and he explains that he used to bicycle to Falun to meet my mother. Given the distance, this did not happen very often even though they had oceans of things to talk about. They had, rather, to discuss them by letter. In the summer of 1943 he moved to Hälsinggården and got a job at the local dairy firm in Falun. Officiating at the wedding was the mayor, Gustaf Geete. He was wearing a full-length uniform with a mayoral chain that hung down to his navel.

“Laughable” my mother later wrote to her younger brother Kurt. When my father had produced the brass curtain rings and had placed one of them on my mother’s finger the mayor proclaimed them man and wife and enjoined us to love one another in good times and bad. “One really had to work hard to behave with the sonority that the occasion demanded” wrote my mother. My uncle and aunt were witnesses and, the following day, they organized a modest party for us. Otherwise there were no celebrations. Everything was kept simple. They had hardly any money and everything that they earned went to finance the kibbutz. They were young and uncalculating. In an earlier letter to Kurt, dated 25 December 1944, Mother had casually played down the forthcoming marriage. “Now I can also reveal a private matter. During the next few weeks I shall probably get married (poor Stefan). Formerly one always thought that this was something majorly important, but in the circle of Chaluzim this is not the case for we live as though we were married and all the other stuff is merely a formality.” She goes on to explain how nice it is to have “four walls of one’s own” after all the years of sleeping in a dormitory. Mother was now in charge of the collective in Hälsingstrand School. Several of the members married and when the war ended, there were new possibilities of getting to Palestine under one’s own steam. Some people left the collective for this reason while others had decided to remain in Sweden. But the collective kept on going for a further year and mother enthusiastically maintained her Zionist dream.

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