

REVOLVER-HARRY AND KALLE BLOMQVIST...

Kaianders SEMPLER

ABSTRACT: Harry Söderman lived an extraordinary life. Few have accomplished as much as he did. He can be considered as the father of the Swedish Forensic Science Laboratory work that encompasses the whole area except forensic medicine and toxicology. He learnt the subject working with the famous Mr Locard in Lyon and had great influence on the development of European forensic science. However even more interesting are his achievements outside forensic science. He for instance played an important role in the liberation of Norway at the end of World War II. The present paper gives a journalist view of what the general public of today might want to know about the fantastic life of Harry Söderman.

KEY WORDS: Harry Söderman; Sweden; History of forensic sciences.

Z Zagadnień Nauk Sądowych, z. L, 2002, 116–121

Received 6 September 2002; accepted 17 September 2002

It is told that by the end of the Second World War, May 1st 1945, he took the night train from Stockholm to Oslo, walked straight up to the German commandant and declared that continued resistance would be madness. Together with a German motorcycle messenger he then went out to the dreaded German prison camp Grini and personally released the imprisoned Norwegian resistance men.

In Norway he was considered a national hero, and at Furudal north of Rättvik there is a bust in remembrance of him. In his native town Nora, a square is now named after him.

Actually, his name was Harry Söderman, but after he had become a doctor of philosophy by test shooting weapons and comparing the grooves of the bullets, he was generally called Revolver-Harry. He was an ardent democrat and anti-fascist and he meant that the free society could only be sustained by legal security. And legal security in turn needs access to the unambiguous technical production of evidence, for convicting the guilty as well as for acquitting the innocent.

By the end of the 1900th century northern Sweden was to a great extent a lawless land. Harry's father, Pehr Söderman, had been a county sheriff in Delsbo. His work as the guardian of the law seems to have had much in common with the work of the sheriffs in the films of the Wild West. If we can trust his posthumous reputation, Mr. Söderman senior showed quite a few similarities with Wyatt Earp, the legendary sheriff of Dodge City. The

county sheriff was in a perpetual state of feud with the illicit distillers in his region, and both parties always had their guns ready to fire. It is astounding that Mr. Söderman senior survived all the ambushes, assaults and nightly fighting in the forest where they shot savagely at each other with their shot-guns.

However, when young Harry was born in 1902 the family had moved to more civilised areas farther south in the country. Harry started school, but he did not show any great inclination for studies. The only subjects he was interested in were chemistry and physics. The result was that he later entered the chemical vocational training school in Malmö from which he graduated in 1923.

The intention was that Harry should become a chemist in the wood industry. But after he had practised for some months at a wood company he realised that in order to get anywhere in the world of timber, pulp and sulphate lye he had to add to his theoretical knowledge. So he went to Altenburg in Germany and studied wood chemistry in the very midst of the worst years of inflation in the Weimar Republic. After a year he had his exam – and in addition, he had learnt to speak German.

But it wasn't forest chemistry that Harry dreamed about, but criminology, and he devoured everything he could lay his hands on in this subject. But how could he ever become a criminologist? For getting a job within the police, you had to study law, something that was definitely not in his line.

After he had returned home and done his military service in Sweden, he decided to start his career as a chemist by taking a "Wanderjahr" – a year of wandering the world. Perhaps something would turn up in the meantime.

First he stayed for some time in France and then he worked for a couple of months as a fireman on a North Sea tramp steamer. But Harry was a young man with a will of iron and an unusual talent for innovative and unconventional thinking. He wanted to go farther away, he wanted to see the Orient. He went home and turned to the manager of a Swedish bicycle factory with a radical suggestion: "Lend me a bike and I will ride it to Constantinople and in that way I will boost your firm", he said.

The bicycle factory owner was so surprised that he consented, and Harry quickly packed his knapsack. Before he went away he also took the opportunity to arrange with the *Swedish Police Magazine* and another Swedish weekly magazine to send them a travel diary, which would make his travelling funds last longer.

Harry's trip turned out to be longer than he originally planned for. From Constantinople, nowadays Istanbul, he continued eastwards. Through Persia, the Baluchistani desert, India and Burma he went all the way to Thailand and China. Everywhere he was keen on seeing the local police authorities and reporting home.

It isn't quite the regular thing that people should bike to China. At least not in Sweden. Here Harry's exploit wouldn't be repeated until the 1990s. Then a young Swede named Göran Kropp cycled from Sweden to the Himalayas. There he climbed the peak of Mount Everest and then cycled back home again.

Although, Harry never climbed the highest mountain in the world, but he spent one and a half years of his journey in the east. Then he turned back home. But what would become of him now?

In his autobiography "Policeman's Lot" (published posthumously in 1956 in the USA) Harry Söderman tells that he decided to ramble in the Swedish mountains for some days after his return home. He went north and took lodgings at a small boarding house. One day he made a tour up to a mountaintop nearby. The landlady wondered whether he could consider taking some of the other guests at the boarding house up there. The whole thing ended by forming a small expedition consisting of Harry, a clergyman, a lawyer and a Frenchman. After some hours they reached the top of the mountain. There was one of the Swedish Touring Club's cabins for over-night accommodation, and where they had their picnic and stayed the night.

However, the next morning the weather was bad with fog and snow, so the party had to stay in the cabin for several days. They passed the time with card games and conversation while the storm howled round the doors. Then it happened that Harry talked about his secret dream – to study criminal investigation for the famous French criminologist Edmond Locard in Lyon.

"How interesting", said the Frenchman. "Locard is a good friend of mine. If you wish, I could write him a letter of recommendation and ask if he would take you on as a student."

Some weeks later Harry had a letter from Mr. Locard wishing him warm welcome to Lyon as a temporary student.

Harry Söderman, now 24 years old, promptly left for Lyon. The Swedish wood industry missed a competent chemist.

From this we learn to take advantage of the opportunity and the importance of polite conversations with strangers on mountain peaks!

In Lyon Harry learnt modern criminal investigation from the ground up. Locard assumed that the criminal always leaves some traces, something which is now called the Locard principle: "Whenever two bodies touch each other they leave marks!" Mr. Locard claimed.

The marks a forensic technician looks for are such things as hair, textile fibres, fingerprints, nail dirt, bloodstains, sperm, shoe- and wheel traces, dust and gravel, glass splinter, paint flakes, chemical substances. Harry learned all about chemical analyses, identification of fingerprints, investigation on the scene of a crime and many other things.

While in Lyon Harry also took the opportunity to take a doctor's degree at the University of Lyon. His research work naturally concerned criminal investigation. It was about analysis and identification of pistol bullets. He was the first to make a scientific study of the individual markings on fired bullets that originate from the grooves in the barrel and the cartridge case due to the firing pin.

In order to examine pistol bullets quickly, he invented an apparatus he called a Hastoscope. It was a comparison microscope where the bullets investigated could be turned and rotated, either together or individually.

After six years with Mr. Locard in Lyon he thought himself skilled enough and returned to Sweden. Once back home he started a small private bureau in Stockholm where he offered forensic services, and above all, certificates of authenticity of documents. His work progressed more and more successfully, and soon he was appointed docent in criminology at the University of Stockholm.

He got a grant and went to the USA to make contacts and study the forensic progress of the new world.

In 1939 Doctor Harry Söderman became head of the recently formed SKA – The Swedish National Board of Forensic Science – in Stockholm. The purpose of the institution was to give the police means and competence to make accurate analyses and investigations on the scene of a crime, and that was a predecessor to today's SKL – The National Laboratory of Forensic Science in Linköping.

Because the criminal always leaves marks, Harry told his new colleagues and pupils. It is only a question of having methods sophisticated enough to detect them.

Harry Söderman was now considered one of the leading forensic technicians in the world, and lectured both in the USA and at Scotland Yard in London. In New York he took part in the development of a new forensic laboratory. Thanks to his excellent knowledge of languages – he spoke fluent German, French and English – he naturally became a prominent figure in the international police collaboration, and he was one of the founders of Interpol.

During his journeys all over Europe and the USA he collected the latest findings concerning criminal investigation. He summarised it all in "The Handbook of criminal investigation", a thick book of 680 pages, which accounted for forensic methods from antiquity to our own time. Here he discussed matters, such as identification of individuals by fingerprints, the collection of traces on the scene of the crime and photographic documentation, witness psychology, analyses of powder stains, pistol bullets and bullet-holes, analysis of writing and other such things.

In 1939 he looked for a secretary for his voluminous correspondence. A lady named Astrid Lindgren got the job. Nobody knew then that this young lady in course of time would become one of Sweden's most beloved writers of children's books and internationally famous.

Astrid Lindgren wrote in 1946 a book titled "Bill Bergson, Master Detective", the first of what would become a sequence of three exciting books for young people. The books are about the twelve-year-old Kalle Blomkvist – or Bill Bergson, as is his English name – who is dreaming of becoming a detective, and who gets involved in a succession of nasty criminal cases together with his friends.

Astrid Lindgren has afterwards told that it was during the time she was Harry Söderman's secretary that she got inspiration and forensic material for the books. In "Bill Bergson, Master Detective" Bill takes the fingerprints of a sleeping scoundrel according to all the recognised rules. In the following book, "Bill Bergson Lives Dangerously", he carries out an advanced chemical analysis – the Marshian arsenic test – and discovers that a bar of chocolate is poisoned with arsenic. It is all breathtaking, especially for young readers at the age of twelve.

The books were radio serials in the 1950s, and were later also transferred to movies. Thus the forensic laboratory technician and detective Revolver-Harry Söderberg in the guise of Bill Bergson became an idol for all the boys in Sweden. But that was not enough. The police, and particularly the forensic laboratory technicians, have never had such good standing in Sweden as during the time when the Bill Bergson-fever raged.

But it wasn't only in the shape of Bill Bergson that Harry Söderman reached the public. By this time, many popular weekly and monthly magazines readily told about horrible crimes and legal cases. These magazines hired Harry Söderman as a columnist and he told astounding stories in the best Sherlock Holmes-manner from the exciting world of criminal investigation.

Much of the material was from his time with Mr Locard in Lyon. Here was, for instance, the story about the burglar with the strange fingerprints. Nobody could understand how the cunning jewel thief could get through a window on the third floor. Finally it was discovered that a trained monkey had committed the thefts. No wonder the fingerprints were unusual.

Many of the stories published in the Swedish magazines *Kriminaljournalen*, *Lektyr*, *Rekordmagasinet* and other popular press also appear in "Policeman's Lot".

But let us return to the wartime.

In the spring 1942, whilst the war was raging, Harry Söderman had a request from the Norwegian minister for justice in London. In Sweden there were quite a few Norwegians who had fled the Nazi occupation of Norway,

the minister explained. Would it be possible to start a discreet training of Norwegian policemen in Sweden? The idea was that after the war, these men would replace those policemen that had become compromised by working for the Quisling administration.

Certainly, said Harry, and with his usual capacity for unconventional and innovative methods he took care of the matter. A number of "health farms" were opened where the Norwegians were trained with the consent of the Swedish authorities.

In reality it was not the matter of policemen but pure military training, this in flagrant violation of Sweden's formal status as a neutral state. But after Stalingrad the political winds in Sweden had shifted concurrently with the fortunes of war. From the point when neutral Sweden was left with no alternative and was forced to be a puppet of Germany, the Swedish government was more and more keenly sympathetic to the cause of the allies. The fact that Harry Söderman in some inscrutable way managed to find arms for the Norwegian police detachment can be seen as a definite proof of this.

Altogether 17 000 men were trained between 1943 and 1945 at Harry Söderman's "health camps". One of which was in the wood at Gottröra, not far from the present international airport of Stockholm, Arlanda.

January 12th 1945 the first Norwegian police troops were airlifted by the Americans from Luleå to Kirkenes on the Norwegian Arctic Ocean coast. The whole of Finnmark had been burnt and betrayed by the retreating Germans during the autumn of 1944, and Russian troops had occupied the eastern Finnmark up to the Tana River. Harry Söderman's police troops now took over from the Russians, who compliantly pulled away to their side of the border one month later. This was in accordance with the treaty at Jalta between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin.

This and many other things you can read about in "The battle of the Arctic Scandinavia" by Lars Gyllenhaal, *Historiska media* 2001.

One of the Norwegians who was flown up to the north of Norway from Sweden was Thor Heyerdahl, the man who later became world-famous for his voyages with the rafts Kon-Tiki and Ra. Another was the father of my brother-in-law, a young man called Arvid Holte, who had fled Norway two years earlier.

In 1953 Harry Söderman decided to resign as head of the National Forensic Science Institute to dedicate himself totally to his international commitments. He moved to the USA with his family, and as a consultant he participated in the organisation of police organisations in a number of countries.

1956 he was struck by heart infarction during a commission in Tanger. An adventurous life was at an end.