"The establishing at the earliest possible date of a general international organization, based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all peace-loving states and open to membership by all such states, large and small". It must be a tribunal to which every nation can submit its grievances and with the decisions of which even the greatest world-powers will comply. However far distant the goal may appear, upon this task all our political education must be centered.

Swedish Folk Schools

The People's Own Workshops for Democracy

By Per G. Stensland

ORIGINATING in the rank and file of the common people, the Swedish Folk Schools were created more than seventy years ago as instruments for popular education outside the regular public school system. To-day the Folk Schools of Sweden, like those of Denmark, Norway and Finland, are well-established institutions for modern adult education, workshops for Scandinavian democracy.

The decade of the 1860's saw the introduction of new laws for local self-government in Sweden and the reformation of the national parliament along modern representation lines as a two-chamber Riksdag. These developments brought into the open the question of intelligent and widespread participation in political life by those citizens who previously had had no opportunity, either nationally or locally, of making their voices heard in political decisions. Then as now, some form of adult education was indispensable for such participation.

Although the country had had a system of compulsory elementary education since 1842, it had become clear that this regular public school system was not enough. Adult citizens had to have a chance to acquire for themselves knowledge about their own social and political problems. It happened that about this time a Swedish liberal newspaperman named August Sohlman was studying the Danish folk schools, which had grown out of the ideas of the great Bishop Grundtvig. Sohlman initiated discussion of "citizen schools" in a series of newspaper articles, published during the 1860's.

Some twenty years earlier, the first Danish folk schools had been organized by men like Kristen Kold and J. C. LaCour, followers of Grundtvig. These schools were born in a time of great political and economic crisis for Denmark when the country was threatened and later attacked by Germany, and when its economic position was seriously weakened. The answer to the threat to national life came from the Danish people themselves. On the basis of the political and cultural ideas of Grundtvig and his disciples, they created their folk schools. The Danes came to the schools, sang their own hymns, learned the Danish language, history, civics and literature to strengthen their souls, and studied agriculture and science to make rich their farms.

Sohlman had heard about these schools, and he knew of the plans of cultural leaders like Christopher Bruun and Bjornsterne Bjornson for creating similar schools in Norway. Sohlman's enthusiasm for the project was imparted to a group of young intellectuals and progressive farmers, and, in 1868, through their efforts, the first Swedish Folk Schools were founded. There were three of them: two in Skaane in Southern Sweden, Hvilanx and Oennestad, and one in

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Middle Sweden, Lunnevad. The new schools first of all sought support from farmers' organizations. Strong opposition was met from reactionary groups, sometimes from the State church, but gradually the resistance broke down, and new schools grew up in other parts of the country. From the eighties on they were often combined with vocational "Farmers' Institutes." Education was given, not for degrees or credits, but for the sole purpose of spreading culture and knowledge to the common man. That is still the main function of the Folk Schools.

Farmers' schools in the beginning, the Swedish Folk Schools gradually turned to the service of other groups in society. In 1906, the first of the labor schools was created at Brunnsvik, in Southern Dalecarlia. Two years later, a special school was founded by and for temperance people, at Wendelsberg, outside Gothenburg. In 1917, a group of young Christian Liberals founded their Christian-Humanistic Folk School at Sigtuna, the old capital of Sweden. After the first World War still other "special" schools came: Birkagaarden, the first city Folk School, in Stockholm; Viskadalen, the first West Coast labor school, outside Gothenburg; Sjoevik in Dalecaria, the Folk School for the Baptists; and as the youngest "special Folk School," Lillsved, for those chiefly interested in sports, outside Stockholm.

In 1912, 81 per cent of the students were from farms, while in 1942 this group represented only 56 per cent of the total enrolment. The proportion of labor students went up from 10 per cent in 1912 to 22 per cent in 1942. In the latter year, 45 per cent of the fathers of the students were farmers, 6 per cent farm laborers, 20 per cent belonged to industry and handicraft vocations, and 9 per cent to commercial ones. Slightly less than 9 per cent were in the so-called "free professions." This division indicates that students at the folk schools represent a fairly good cross-section of the Swedish population.

To-day there are 59 Folk Schools, scattered all over Sweden. More than 6,000 students annually attend their courses. There is no record of the number of prominent political leaders, officials in the popular movements, national and local representatives in councils and committees who are "old Folk School students," but it must be very large. Of even greater importance, however, is the influence that the Folk Schools have had over the social and cultural life in Swedish communities.

Curriculum

Like similar institutions in Denmark, Norway and Finland, the Folk Schools of Sweden started as private endeavours, supported and controlled by private groups or movements. Unlike those in the neighbouring countries, however, the Swedish schools have ended up as publicly supported and sponsored educational institutions. The freedom of the schools has been largely unimpaired, although they have operated under legislative enactment since 1919. Like other adult education agencies, the Folk Schools now represent a combination of public and private control.

However, public control has not resulted in the development of a standardized, impersonal character in the schools. The State supervisor is an advisor rather than a controller, and the regulations in the law respecting classes, subjects, teachers, and boards leave the principal and teachers a large measure of freedom. The School Board always includes not only public representatives, but spokesmen of popular movements and other citizen groups in the community. Though the State gives the most important scholarships to students, in all cases there are a number of community scholarships.

There can be danger in too much freedom, though, and this may be especially true for schools born in times of romanticism and idealistic liberalism. Gradually the Swedish schools have moved away from the romantic idealism

of Grundtvig's day. Sooner and to a greater extent than the Danish, Norwegian or Finnish, the Swedish Folk Schools became conscious of modern, social and economic problems. They were first to take up relations with labor and city people, and they finally broke their connections with the Farmers' Institutes and stepped forward as schools for all adult citizens. Social, political and economic studies became an important part of the curriculum, and there were other signs of modernization, notably the teachers' academic training. The Swedish variation of Grundtvig's citizen schools have lost none of the original spirit, however, nor departed from the purpose of preparing for democracy with less formalism, less routine methods, less impersonality than is possible through the regular public education institutions.

Being non-credit institutions, the Folk Schools do not give their students any grades. Their aim is to "give the older youth and adults general and civic education," to use the words of the 1919 law. "Considerable stress should be laid on fostering individual thinking and moral strength, and the students should be enabled to know their community, their country, its history, and its present social conditions, its spiritual and material resources." The main goal, in other words, is not to disseminate a certain measurable standardized education, but to give a basis for intelligent understanding of the world around us and for alert citizenship.

Quite logically, the curriculum of the Folk Schools is marked by freedom of choice. The State instructions require classes in Swedish language, history, literature, civics, geography, mathematics, science, singing and sports. Inside this rather broad scheme, each school and each teacher may choose the courses they prefer. In most schools the socio-civic courses range from pertinent parts of political science to community problems, from general sociology to the specific Swedish population problems, from social law and institutions to everyday economics, from leadership training to social philosophies.

The main courses at a Folk School usually are between five and six months, in wintertime, three and four months, in summertime. Two levels are instituted: the first year course, to which students are admitted who have finished elementary school (6-7 years); and the second, to which students are admitted who have passed the first year course or have "similar education," for example have graduated from public Junior High School. The age limit for girls is 16, for boys 17; there is no upper age limit. In most schools the average age in the first year course is about 20, and in the second year around 22. The summer courses are open to girls only, but the winter courses are co-educational in most schools.

The number of classes in the various subjects may be indicated by a list of average class hours per week in a first year course, as of the terms during 1942-43. Swedish language (5); Humanities (history, literature, socio-civics) (11); Geography (2); Mathematics (5); Science (6); Singing (2); Sports (4); Bookkeeping, drawing (4); Study circles, talks (3).

Most of the Folk Schools have classes in English language (3-5 hours a week), some of them have additional "practica; subjects": handicraft and home economics for the girls, slojd for the boys, etc. The second year course offers some variation by giving more humanities, less "practical subjects."

Teaching methods in the Folk Schools are characterized by their flexibility. Grundtvig himself protested with his schools against the "Latin School," which he called "the black school," with its soul-poisoning formalism and legalism. On the whole the Folk Schools in Scandinavia have been crusaders against formalism and legalism in pedagogy. First that war was waged under the motto of "the living world," and spoken, often improvised lectures and talks became the characteristicum of adult education in the Folk Schools. The almost religious

belief in inspiration as the sole guarantee for good teaching has been questioned in recent years. There is now a definite tendency to combine "the living word" with modern teaching devices: radio, film, phonograph; and to have textbooks of less formal character than those used in the regular elementary and secondary schools. The modern Swedish Folk School tries to strike a happy medium between the vague, inspirational Grundtvigian school and the present formal secondary school.

The result is a vocational and social education center many times of the same type as the settlement, the community center, or the informal adult school of America. The students usually live at the school, and have their meals in the big dining hall. Sometimes both dormitories and the dining halls are cooperatively organized. The teachers ordinarily live near the school, and the nearby village or town tends to be thought of as "outside territory."

Free study circles are often organized at the school, as a means of achieving the purpose of making students alert to their responsibilities in their home communities. Participation in drama groups is invariably one of the features of the school. Hiking groups and skiing parties, track sports, and basketball tournaments frequently appear on the schedule of extracurricular activities.

To a teacher, one of the social traits of the Folk School becomes particularly significant, the personal contact with the students. Informal gatherings, discussions, community singing, private conferences, all take place in his home. Sometimes it has been said that a Folk School teacher has no private life!

Naturally the Folk Schools have become homes for the folk songs, old and modern. Grundtvig, himself a great hymn composer and poet, started a tradition which by no means is regarded as outmoded in modern Folk Schools. As the "singing schools" from the beginning had given community singing a prominent place in their daily life, people outside Folk Schools began to get interested in songs of the people and the art of singing together. Through adult education groups and popular movements the community singing swept the country in the thirties, and brought back to the people its own songs, long forgotten, sometimes sneered at and regarded as too little sophisticated. Very often classes start with a song, and there is a custom of making the social evenings great events in community singing.

An Enlightened Citizenry

All over Sweden, the Folk Schools have become meeting places for many types of annual conventions, and general conferences, discussions and community meetings are held in their halls. The teachers are called upon as lecturers, study group leaders, and organizers of leadership training courses.

In line with this community tradition, the Folk Schools of Sweden in recent years have also become homes for people from troubled Scandinavia, and centers for relief and refugee work. To say that the Scandinavian countries and Europe have been "the greater community" to the Folk Schools is not false idealism It was in the halls of one of the northern schools that hundreds and hundreds of Finnish refugee children were housed when they first reached Sweden during the winter war 1939-40. The school, where I had the privilege to be a teacher for three years, received German refugees as students as early as 1938-39. Its principal left the work at the school for a place in the Swedish volunteer army during the winter war 1939-40. Its teachers worked day and night for Norwegian refugees when the first waves reached Sweden after April, 1940. Among the last students I had were five Norwegian youngsters, and my parting memory from the school was a rousing speech delivered from the balcony of the school by a refugee Norwegian professor of literature.

Those are not unique features for one or two Folk Schools in Sweden. They are natural signs of a will to work—regardless of boundaries—for enlightened citizenry, free thinking, tolerance and a balanced judgment, against ignorance, mass-thinking, prejudices, and distortions of the human mind.