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Recommended Citation

Lindell, Lisa, "Finding Sissa (and much more)" (2009). *Hilton M. Briggs Library Faculty Publications*. Paper 22.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/library_pubs/22

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Finding Sissa (and much more)

– A journey into the past

BY LISA LINDELL

In 1997, my article “Searching for Sissa” appeared in the *Swedish American Genealogist*.¹ Over a decade later, I am still engaged in and fascinated by the pursuit of family history. Although I know little Swedish beyond a few basic terms and am certainly a genealogy amateur, a breakthrough in the Sissa search and recent discoveries on a related line have rekindled my excitement in tracing my Swedish roots. In my research, I have relied upon the indispensable work of family members, record keepers, and genealogists, and have greatly benefited from the wealth of information and original records now accessible online.

“Searching for Sissa” was the story of researching my great-great-grandmother (the mother of my father’s maternal grandmother). Swedish-born Sissa was a Kansas immigrant who died in 1887 at the age of forty-one.² Surviving her were her husband Nels (whom she had married in Illinois) and ten children. The youngest was two-week-old Phillop, who, sadly, died a week after Sissa; and the oldest was my great-grandmother Jennie, who at seventeen was obliged to take on a mother’s role.

Sissa’s background

Sissa’s ancestry and even her maiden name were unknown to our family and presented a challenge to trace. In our search, we consulted obituaries (including one initially sending us on a false trail), family letters and diaries, church and census records from Illinois and Kansas, and, finally, the Bräkne-Hoby, and Gammalstorp parish records in the county (*län*) of Blekinge in southern Sweden.

There we found a Sissa Jönsdotter born in Fogdakärr, Bräkne-Hoby, on the exact date as our Kansas Sissa. This Sissa Jönsdotter moved to Gammalstorp parish in 1860 and left there for America in 1869, shortly after my great-great-grandfather Nils Jönsson emigrated from the same parish.³ (Unlike with Sissa, Nils’s immediate ancestry and path from Sweden to America were, happily, straightforward to track.)

The right Sissa!

In my 1997 article, I could not state with certainty that the Sissa Jönsdotter we had found in the Swedish records was my great-great-grandmother. Since that time, however, I have discovered parish records which wholly convince me that we do indeed have the right Sissa.

In two household examination rolls (*husförhörslängder*) from Gammalstorp parish in the 1860s, the Sissa we had traced from Bräkne-Hoby and my great-great-grandfather Nils

are listed on the same page in the village of Agerum.⁴ Their close proximity explains how they would have known each other prior to Nils’s immigration to America in 1868 and the couple’s marriage upon Sissa’s arrival in 1869.

Even before I became certain of her identity, I had begun searching the Bräkne-Hoby records to find Sissa Jönsdotter’s ancestry. I was able to follow her father’s line back one generation and her mother’s line back two generations. But then I came up against a seemingly insurmountable barrier, caused by the loss of critical church records in nineteenth century fires in the parishes of Jämshög (*Blekinge län*) and Näsrum (*Kristianstad län*) where Sissa’s parents were from. I had almost given up tracing the line further when I serendipitously happened upon <http://www.jamshog.net/>, a website devoted to the local history of Jämshög and Kyrkhult parishes. Scarcely daring to hope, I wrote to

18	40	Anna Johansson	31	14	Fastlandet	v.	Näsrum	62
		Dane Olsson	32	24	Agerum			27/10
		Nils Jönsson	41	10	N: 43	v.	p. 220	1868
19	41	Jöns Jönsson	36	25	Sjövisberg			
20	42	Annika Peters	43	1	Näsrum	v.	Näsrum	13- 1863
21	43	Per Nilsson						
22	44	Dr Lars Johansson	44	14	Blekinge	v.	721	64
23	45	Bengt Peters	37	15	Agerum		p. 278	64
24	46	Elsa Nilsson	48	21	Agerum	v.	p. 82	64
25	47	Håkan Johansson						
		Sissa Jönsson	46	12	Hoby	v.	p. 28	65

The Gammalstorp clerical survey (*Husförhörslängd*), AI:18, [1861-1866] page 379, showing Nils Jönsson and his future wife Sissa working at Agerum #42.

the site manager with my dilemma and got an immediate reply, "I can help you!" followed in a few days with about thirty new family names, some of them going back to the 1600s. My source for this welcome new information, genealogist *Maj-Britt Sundin*, has spent over twenty-five years compiling the family lines of Jämshög and Kyrkhult parishioners. What satisfaction to finally be able to complete the search for Sissa and fully place her within our family history.⁵

Another track

In the meantime, the difficulties with Sissa led to other unexpected results. While stalled on Sissa's line, I became absorbed in tracing a related Swedish line, that of my great-grandfather Peter Lundin (the husband of Sissa's daughter Jennie. His Swedish name: Per Svensson), which led to intriguing discoveries and broadened my historical knowledge.

Like Sissa, Peter emigrated from Sweden, a young adult, and died an untimely death. After arriving in America in 1886 from Våghult in Kyrkhult parish, Blekinge, Peter settled in Gypsum, Kansas, and found employment with the Missouri Pacific Railroad. He married Jennie in 1895, and the couple moved to Colorado, where Peter continued railroad work. In 1904, while working as a section foreman near Colorado Springs, Peter was fatally injured in a fall from a building. He died at the age of forty-four,⁶ leaving Jennie with three young children and another child on the way.

Jennie, who was once again shouldering weighty family responsibility, moved back to Kansas and successfully raised her children on a farm near Assaria in Saline County.

Peter's background

As I began work on Peter's family, research already done by family members proved invaluable. My uncle had traced one line of Peter's ancestry back five generations, and both he and my father have preserved many family papers and pho-

tographs. My father's font of stories and memories from treasured times spent visiting his grandmother Jennie and the family at the Kansas farm were also of great interest. In 1997, my father had a headstone placed on Peter's previously unmarked grave in Colorado Springs to honor his grandfather's memory and to benefit future generations interested in family history.

Following Peter's lineage back to Sweden, we learned that Peter's mother Elna Ingemansdotter had died when Peter was just five years old and that Peter's father subsequently married Elna's sister Inga.⁷

Unexpected roots

In pursuing the ancestry of the two sisters, I have been excited to learn more about my family's religious and cultural heritage. A sense of personal connection with events and movements of the past brings history fascinatingly alive. Our research soon uncovered a seventeenth century German connection.

Peter's third great-grandfather Lorentz Christian Schöning was born in Germany (likely in Brandenburg) in 1681. Unfortunately, information about his ancestry is yet unknown. After immigrating to Sweden, Schön-



Peter and Jennie Lundin ca 1900. (Lisa Lindell collection).

ing resided in Malmö in Malmöhus län (now part of Skåne län), and, in 1712, came to Jämshög. There, he served as *klockare* for forty-five years. The *klockare* (literally "one who tolls the bells") was the parish clerk or sexton. Schöning's duties included teaching the children and youth of the congregation. Upon his



Jämshög church, photo from about 1900. Picture from "Kulturmiljöbilder," at http://www.kms.raa.se/cocoon/bild/public_search.html

death in 1761 at the age of eighty, Schöning was buried in the main aisle of the Jämshög church. Jöran Johan Öller, in his account of Jämshög parish published in 1800, commended Schöning's exemplary instruction, beautiful handwriting, and thoroughness and honesty in his job.⁸

Online sources

The ready online accessibility of primary sources and email communication has been of tremendous help in my research. Through this means, I was able to establish with certainty the ancestry of Lorentz Schöning's wife Anna Catharina Corvin, my sixth great-grandmother. I was especially fortunate to receive the generous assistance of Blekinge genealogist (and sixth cousin) *Hans Rosenlund*, who shared with me the estate inventory of Anna Catharina's sister Maja, identifying Anna Catharina as the full sister of Maja and daughter of Wilhelm Corvin. Anna Catharina was the daughter and granddaughter of parish pastors (*kyrkoherdar*) from Ronneby, Blekinge. Her father Wilhelm Corvin was ordained in 1692 and her grandfather Hans Willumsen Corvin in 1654. Brief biographies of both of these men are included in the *Lunds Stifts herdaminne*, a multi-volume work providing historical information about the pastors of Lund diocese.

Many men of the cloth

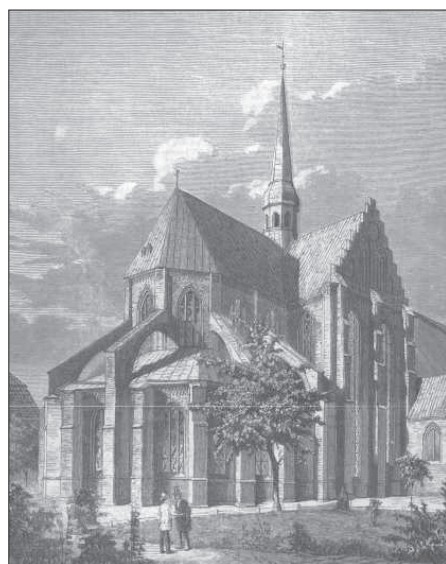
I discovered that many other men in the Corvin line entered the ministry as well. Notable among these was Hans Hansen Raffn (the maternal grandfather of Hans Willumsen Corvin), who served as parish pastor and dean of St. Petri in Malmö in what is now the southern tip of Sweden. I learned that Raffn (sometimes known by his Latin name Johannes Johannis Corvinus) was popular with his parishioners and was also a translator of literature and hymns. In 1625, Raffn died of the plague and was buried at the altar of St. Petri church in the same tomb as Claus Mortensen, a predecessor at

St. Petri and producer of the first Danish hymnal (*Malmö-salmebogen*), published in 1528.⁹

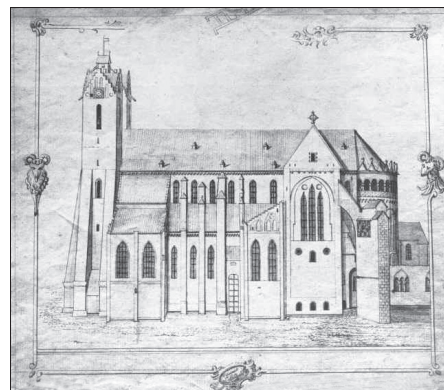
They were Danes!

This Danish reference brought to light a part of Scandinavian history of which I had been previously unaware. In going back in time, I found that my Swedish ancestors and their fellow citizens had unexpectedly turned Danish. Southernmost Sweden belonged to Denmark until the Treaty of Roskilde in 1658. Thus, my seventeenth-century progenitors changed nationalities, even though they remained in the same location.

In researching these new Danish ancestors, I came upon Baltzer Jacobsen (my twelfth great-grandfather and the paternal great-great-grandfather of Hans Willumsen Corvin). Jacobsen served as archdeacon in Lund from 1562 until his death in 1585, when he was buried in the Lund Cathedral (*Lunds domkyrka*). Born around 1522 in Malmö, Jacobsen grew up as the Protestant Reformation swept across northern Europe. Malmö, in fact, was one of the first Scandinavian cities to embrace Protestantism in the 1520s and played a leading role in the evangelical movement. Malmö's alliance with the Hanseatic League



The Malmö Sankt Petri church. Illustration from 1867 in Ny Illustrerad Tidning.



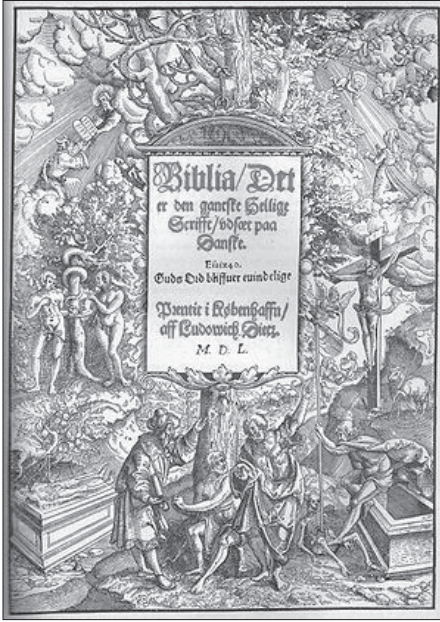
Drawing of Lund Cathedral by S. Abildgard from 1753. Source: http://www.kms.raa.se/cocoon/bild/public_search.html

closely connected it to the towns of northern Germany, bringing in ships bearing not only trade goods but also the Protestant faith. Local reform leader and hymn writer Claus Mortensen was the first Lutheran pastor in Malmö.¹⁰

While tracking Baltzer Jacobsen, I learned that he attended Wittenberg University in Wittenberg, Germany, in the 1540s. Here, professor Martin Luther had ignited the Reformation with the posting of his 95 theses in 1517 and his doctrine of justification by grace through faith. A roster of the Danish students attending the university during the time of the Reformation shows that Jacobsen matriculated in July 1543. During Jacobsen's years at Wittenberg, Luther was still active, serving as the dean of the theology faculty until his death in 1546. I find it amazing that a direct ancestor of mine lived in such close proximity to Luther, no doubt influenced and inspired by this revolutionary figure and giant of the faith.¹¹

Bible translators

Also meaningful to learn and to savor was the fact that two of Jacobsen's relatives, both early converts to Lutheranism, were instrumental in the first translations of the Bible into Danish. Jacobsen's brother-in-law Christiern Petersen was first to produce a full translation. This Bible, completed before 1543 and reworked and published by a royal Bible commission in 1550, was declared by



The first page of the Danish Bible from 1550.

King Christian III as the official Bible of Denmark. In 1524, Jacobsen's probable uncle Hans Mikkelsen (Mickelsen) had been the first to translate the New Testament into Danish.¹²

As I persevere in tracing my family's roots, I feel blessed to have discovered such remarkable stories and ancestors. My genealogical quest has been a richly rewarding experience. In addition to the historical learning opportunities, I love the puzzle component. Carefully fitting together the clues and discovering a new ancestor or lead is always exciting and a powerful enticement to persist.

Notes

1. "Searching for Sissa," *Swedish American Genealogist* 17.1 (March 1997), pp. 23-28.
2. Sissa died 24 July 1887 near Salemsborg, Saline County, Kansas.
3. Sissa Jönsdotter was born 12 January 1846. She left Gammelstorp parish on 20 April 1869 to come to America. Nels left Gammelstorp parish 29 May 1868.
4. Gammelstorp parish (Blek.) Household Examination Rolls Vol. AI:18 [1861-1866], p. 379; vol. AI:1:20 [1866-1871], p. 442.

5. Sissa's father Jöns Pettersson was born 6 May 1804 in Jämshög parish and died 1 June 1855 in Fogdakärr, Bräkne-Hoby parish. Sissa's mother Berta Carlsdotter was born in Näsrum parish on 2 November 1801 and died 6 June 1855 in Fogdakärr, Bräkne-Hoby; no cause of death is listed for either of them. I am indebted to Maj-Britt Sundin for her help in supplying the names of further generations of Sissa's ancestry. (Sundin, "Re: Seeking help in tracing ancestors from Jämshög," email message to author, 26 April 2009).
6. Per Svensson (Peter Lundin) was born 22 July 1860 in Våghult, Jämshög parish. He left Kyrkhult parish 9 March 1886 to come to America. He married Jennie Johnson 12 October 1895 in Salina, Saline County, Kansas. Peter died 15 December 1904 in Colorado Springs, El Paso County, Colorado.
7. Elna Ingemansdotter was born 12 March 1834 and died 26 November 1865 in Jämshög parish. She married Sven Svensson on 4 November 1859 in Våghult, Jämshög. Inga Ingemansdotter was born 7 August 1822 and died 24 November 1884 in Jämshög parish. She married Sven Svensson on 26 October 1866 in Våghult, Jämshög.
8. Jöran Johan Öller, *Beskrivning öfwer Jemshögs sochn i Blekinge* (Wexjö: A. Thetzells enka, 1800), pp. 316, 320, 323, 349.
9. The family was known variously as Corvin, Corvinus, Rafn, Ravn, Rauffin, and Raffn, all meaning raven or crow. Helpful sources in tracing this family line were A.U. Isberg, *Bidrag till Malmö stads historia* (Malmö: Författarens förlag, 1895), pp. 68-75; Gunnar Carlquist, *Lunds Stifts herdaminne* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerups förlag, 1943-), series 2, vol. 2, pp. 32-35 and vol. 13A, pp. 329, 352; C.F. Bricka, ed., *Dansk biografisk lexikon* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1887-1905), vol. 13, p. 539.
Genealogy web sites, including Jens Jensen Yde's Slækt at <http://www.starch.dk/private/niels/yde6.asp>
Bengt Jönsson's Hemsida at <http://hem.passagen.se/nbbj/>
Hans Rosenlund's Släktdatabas - Genealogy Files at <http://hans.alltidhult.se/tng/> were of great value. I am grateful to Hans Rosenlund for providing the proof needed to connect my family to the Corvin/Raffn line. (Rosenlund "Re:

Corvin," email message to author, 14 July 2008).

10. Geoffrey Rudolph Elton, *The New Cambridge Modern History: The Reformation, 1520-1559* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 146; Ole Peter Grell, "Scandinavia" in *The Early Reformation in Europe*, edited by Andrew Pettegree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 107.

Sources providing information about Baltzer Jacobsen include Holger Frederik Rørdam, "De Danskes Studeringer i Vittenberg i Reformationstiden" in *Ny kirkehistoriske Samlinger* vol. 1 (1857-59), p. 467; Rørdam, *Historiske Kildeskrifter og Bearbejdelser af Dansk Historie især fra det 16. Aarhundrede*. Monumenta historiae Daniacæ (Copenhagen, 1887), vol. 2, pp. 283-284; Johan Corylander, *Berättelse om Lunds Domkyrka på Allernådigste Befallning* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerups Förlag, 1884), pp. 128-129, 181; Richard Bonnevier, "Re: Burials in Lunds domkyrka," email message to author, 20 February 2009.

11. Wittenberg University was established in 1502. Martin Luther (1483-1546) began teaching there in 1508.
12. Christiern Pedersen was the husband of Baltzer Jacobsen's half-sister Else. Hans Mikkelsen is believed to have been a brother of Baltzer Jacobsen's father Jacob. Both Hans and Jacob were mayors of Malmö in the early sixteenth century.

For information on the Danish Bible translations, see Lillemor Santesson, "Nordic Language History and Religion/Ecclesiastical History III: Luther's Reformation" in *The Nordic Languages: An International Handbook of the History of the North Germanic Languages*, edited by Oskar Bandle, Kurt Braunmüller, Lennart Elmevik, Gun Widmark (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002-2005), vol. 1, pp. 414-418; James Townley, *Illustrations of Biblical Literature, Exhibiting the History and Fate of the Sacred Writings* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856), vol. 2, pp. 33-38.

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