

Filling the gaps in a dark family history

For the last 14 years, Maria Bouroncle, a native Swede, has been living in Washington, DC. Like many of us, she has been intrigued by genealogy and tracing her family tree. But her research drew her back across the Atlantic after she got wind of a disturbing event in her family's past which lay hidden for several generations.

I visit Maria Bouroncle in her home. Stacks of old photographs mound her dining room table, and after work she pores over them. They take her back in time revealing older relatives, buildings, festivities and day-to-day life in a small Swedish village. The only people missing are three small children — two young boys and a baby girl. Their portraits disappeared and their fates vanished. Until now.

For the last few years Maria balanced her work at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, DC with filling gaps to this mystery. "It's almost an obsession," she says. "In each and every document that I've read, I've hoped to find an explanation as to why such unfortunate events took place."

Ingeborg, Maria's great aunt and the mother of the three children, captures her attention. She remembers visiting her at a nursing home in her childhood. But only recently did it dawn on her that Ingeborg once married and lived on a big farm in western Sweden with her husband and three children.

On the morning of March 22, 1929, Ingeborg intended to launder the family clothes while her husband Artur and his brother set out to collect firewood from the nearby forest. Before leaving, Artur helped his wife set up the copper wash basin. On his way, he realized he forgot his watch and returned home. There, something terribly odd struck him. The curtains were drawn. Stepping into the kitchen, he saw Ingeborg, head in hands. To his horror, three small, lifeless bodies draped over the basin's edge. "Ingeborg, what have you done!?" he burst out. Cold silence answered.

County authorities responded to the call taking Ingeborg into custody at the small municipality of Vänersborg where she underwent mental examination. When asked to recall the events, she only responded, "I took the eldest first." Doctors attributed the tragedy to schizophrenia. However, Ingeborg disagreed. "No, I am the only one responsible, and I am prepared to take the punishment." The clinicians institutionalized her in Restad Hospital.

In her home village, the traumatized ran from farm to farm seeking solace among them and demanding an explanation. As answers failed to surface, people repressed their thoughts. And Artur buried the gravestone and his children's names along with it. "They were erased from history. Perhaps that was the only way people could continue their lives," says Maria.

Initially, Maria contacted older relatives back home in Sweden. She then began combing through public archives, interrogation protocols and medical records. Over the past

two years, Maria identified and visited the places where Ingeborg tried to make further

sense to the story. "Washington, DC is a big city where people live semi-anonymously. It contrasts significantly with coming to a small village in Västergötland, Western Sweden. People approach me and ask, "Are you the one who's related to Ingeborg?" The story has now given rise to a manuscript titled *Let the Children Come to Me*, reflecting the inscription on the epitaph.

When Ingeborg left the hospital, she moved in with her sister, Maria's grandmother, and family. Her then peaceful life included needlework and handicrafts, bike rides and bus tours with the local village sewing community. But, in her final years, she returned to the institution. "Perhaps the memories caught up with her. Perhaps it's why she would often scream for help at the nursing home. We'll never know."

With all her research, Maria has learned much about her own family history. "Deep fear of mental illness gripped my family, making it a sensitive topic that everyone avoided. Hopefully now we have been liberated." Maria also hopes that the children's headstone, still buried in a graveyard in Västergötland, will someday surface. No matter how their lives ended, the marker at least acknowledges their existence and dignifies their lives.

*By Kerstin Weman Thornell
Translated from Swedish by Juliette Balabanian*



From her home in Washington, DC, Maria Bouroncle has traced her family history. In her upcoming book, she wants to acknowledge the three children forced to leave life before their time. Photo Kerstin Weman Thornell

Right: A young Ingeborg; Far right: A wealthy farmer, Artur moved his bride to a big farm in Vesene in Västergötland.



Easter Monday, 1929, Västergötland, Sweden. Three small white coffins lay before the altar in Vesene Church. Meanwhile, authorities held a young mother in custody. (Newspaper clipping left). Both Artur and Ingeborg invited family and friends to the funeral ceremony, but only Artur could attend.



Photographs from Bouroncle's private collection