

Asa Simma Tells Stockholm - Transcription

Things that Saami people and Swedish have in common, I certainly agree with that, is “Kalles Kaviar”.

‘Beause I have memories from my childhood of this “Kalles Kaviar” tube on the table, and the match-box salstikant(?) with the naked child walking as innocent as Kalle himself from the kaviar-tube. It brings back a memory: I was told a little story when I was child about how my forefathers worshipped the gods and the spirits, and I was told that one way to show respect was to give offerings that should be made of something shiny, like silver or something. So, when I was about seven years old, I thought I should continue that tradition and show some respect to the spirits that are helping us around by giving something silvery to them. When I was a little child I didn’t have that much money, so I started to gather these “Kalles Kaviar” tubes, actually, because there was this little silver on the top. So I had a little bag full of empty “Kalles Kaviars” and I carried them up on a hill, in my little village. I respectfully left them there so that the spirits that protected me would be around me. So I guess I’m pretty happy about “Kalles Kaviar”. And another thing that came into my mind: my grandfather and my parents were nomadic when they were growing up. They kept on moving with the tents and the reindeers and they didn’t settle down. They kept moving from place to place and since we were Swedish citizens we also had the benefits of the Swedes like pensions, or children’s allowance and things like that. But there were no post offices up in the mountains. So there was always this man that took charge of all the Saami post-money that came in and took care of it. He would then would give it to the Saami families when they came back in the autumn. In my family, the story was told that for many, many years, when my grandfather went to this Swedish man to ask for the money that had been sent from the Swedish government, he said: “No, there’s a hunger in Sweden, so nobody is getting any benefits.” This continued for many years and of course, my grandfather, for whom this wasn’t anything strange because he was used to see that sometimes nature takes the reindeers and you get poorer. Other years, there would be more reindeers and you would get richer. So he trusted the man. And after many, many years, this Swedish man got a bad conscience because he had taken the money. He had taken all the benefits and built himself a beautiful house. So he came to my grandfather with this bad conscience and offered the money back. He said: ‘I’ve been stealing all the money that has been sent to you, and I want to give it back.’ And my grandfather said: ‘I don’t want that money. If you have taken it, you keep it.’ And I’m very happy about this story, because I think my grandfather made a strong decision not to take the money that once was taken from him. That, I would like to carry with me: that tradition.

He said that stones and trees cannot talk anymore. I don’t believe in that. I have heard them speak. Because, in the way I was brought up with the reindeer herding and living off of nature, you never knew what could happen, anything could happen. One day, you were a rich person, and one day you were very poor. So I feel like the richness, when poverty is being talked about, as was mentioned here. Poverty. What is poverty ? What is it really ? I remember one poem by a Saami author that said: ‘I’m rich. I’m very rich. Because I have dreams and I have inspiration.’ So it is a question of what we really want in this life and of what makes us happy. Of course money is something we need. We don’t need more than is necessary. I only need the things I need and I don’t need more. What would I do with twenty-five plates, when I only need and use five of them ? What shall we do with a hundred pairs of shoes, when I only use one pair ? So for me, I think that when we talk about richness, it means to be able to use what you have fully. That is to be rich.

So when I heard about this thing, about the Swedish national anthem and the Saami national anthem, I just have to remind you that my people live in four countries. We live in Sweden, in Finland, in

Norway and in Russia. So it's irrelevant to compare it with the Swedish national anthem, I think. And then, when I am among my people, if I mean Norway, Finland and Russia, I feel that we come from the same people - in spite the fact that somebody may be speaking Finish, Norwegian, Swedish or Russian. There's a bond, and the bond is the experience, it is much stronger than history. The experience of being, of being a human, of surviving. That is the bond.

I feel like the gift of coming from another culture and still being part of the majority society gives me the ability to participate in both cultures fully. I can be here in this city of Stockholm and still be like I was Swedish. But when I go back to my country, I feel like something falls off from me. And I enter some kind of being that for me is very natural. I feel at home in the mountains and I also feel at home in the city.

I stayed with my people until I was sixteen. Then I had to move to a city, Kiruna, because I was going to the gymnasium. It's very usual, for the children up there, that when you're sixteen you move away from your parents and create your first home while you study. Even though I went to Denmark where I got my education, I always kept returning. And I feel very very strongly that home, my home, the feeling of home, the feeling of where I belong to, is inside me and with me, wherever I am. Wherever I am on this earth, it's with me.

Many Swedes get disappointed when I tell them that I am not a Swede and then they say to me: 'Well, you live in Sweden, you speak Swedish, you are going to Swedish schools...' But I don't feel like a Swede, I feel like a Saami. And I am a Saami wherever I am in the world and it has nothing to do with my passport or what school I went to. It has to do with something stronger. My people have another story of how we came to this world. The Swedes seem to believe that it was through Adam and Eve that we became humans. We, the Saami people, believe that we are the children of the sun. That's how we call ourselves. That's another name. And that earth was created as a gift to the sun. So there is a god, a creator, that made the earth and gave it as a present to the sun. And the sun is our ancestor, our great-grandfather. And the funny thing is that my mother's last name before she got married, was "Sun". So her family has come from the creation. That, I think, is really fun.

When I live in Stockholm, I only speak Saami with my children. I feel it is very important for them to learn all the details of our culture, because that's a richness to carry. It makes you feel at home, wherever. And when you feel at home, it's a point of security, It's a point of trust and it's a point of being able to act and do things and to manifest things. I think trust is such an important thing. And I believe that even for the Swedes, trust is important. I also feel that as a Saami, growing up in the insecurity of nature, you never know what is going to happen. You never know. You have to go, even if it's thirty-six degrees below zero, you have move, you have to go out even if the cold is burning your skin and you come home with frost burns.

In that situation you have to feel trust, and you have to feel that there is a reason why you do this. And you can't get bored. You just have to do it.

I left Kiruna. I didn't like Kiruna and I still have a hangup about Kiruna. Because for me, at that time, in the end of the seventies, when I was growing up...I feel like I have been living in two different eras. One where Saaminess should be sort of 'not-to-talk-about-it', you know. I heard these stories about my grandmother, when she went to Kiruna for the first time. She was wearing her traditional costume. She was going to the hospital and she needed to sleep in a hotel-room. They didn't let her in to the hotel because she was wearing the traditional Saami clothes. They said: 'You cannot stay here.' So I lived in that time where you had to hide your Saaminess. You couldn't speak Saami. I also fully participated in a time of uprising, where we started to speak Saami. We wore our costume no matter

what people said.

But at the time for me in Kiruna at the school Saaminess still wasn't accepted. So I tried to hide it. I didn't want people to know that I was Saami. I have memories of myself, in the evening, putting tape around my slit eyes so they would look a bit more like Swedish eyes. That's a time I don't really want to remember.

Then after Kiruna I moved to Norway, to North-Norway. To work with a Saami theatre-group. And I loved it. It was a time where Saaminess, Saami culture, was about to be recognized by the outsiders. It was a very important time for me. Because I lived and worked with people who were very active, both politically and culturally. I learned a lot of things from these people and it was an important part of my life. Without that, I don't think I could have that to lived my culture physically. To move to another country, to live in another country. Because that bond, that understanding of the bound was born there in Norway, with the Saami artists and culture workers; it gave me a safe and stable ground to stand on.

Then I went to Denmark, where I took my actors education. And after Denmark, I moved back North, where I had a theatre-group that I worked with for ten years. But for me, going back to Lapland was not only because of my culture. In one way it's not always that I feel at home with my own people. But I have a very strong bond to nature there. It's nature that asks me to come back. It's not the people. Not all the people. Maybe just a few.

But, what me really brought me back to Lapland, was my parents. My parents divorced when I was seventeen. My mother found another man who was much younger and she left my father. It was very hard for my father. Actually the way I was brought up was like being brought up in a divorced family because my father was gone very often for long periods up in the mountains. And because of us being forced to go to school. During my generation, the Saami people built houses up there. Some of the women and children lived in these houses. The kids went to school with the school-bus every day. My father was gone very often. So I have these memories of being afraid of my father when he came back from the mountains of where he had been for a long period. Not afraid but shy. Sort of: 'Who is this stranger?' When my mother and father divorced, my father was very wounded. I think that in the village I come from, my parents were the first ones to divorce. So it was a historical thing. My father was very depressed. It was difficult for him, because in Saami families men do certain things and women do other things. Girls are brought up to learn certain things and boys are brought up to learn other things. It's a sort of responsibility that is given to you at a very young age. So when my mother left, my father had to learn all the things that the women do. Sowing, shoes, preparing skins and all the things that have to do with the tradition a woman carries. I stayed up there as long as my parents lived. And when they died, I left. I didn't need to be there anymore. I moved, I left and I went to Finland.

The Saami family is very extended. It's huge. My cousins or my mother's cousins become my aunts and my uncles. And my aunts and uncles become grandmothers and grandfathers for my children. The Saami family is very extended and very dear. When you meet a Saami person that you never have met, the first thing he starts to ask is: 'What family do you come from? Who are your relatives?' It's very important to find out if this person is your relative. 'It might happen. And often, it happens, because we start to dig back generations and we say: 'Yeah, yes. I had a great-grandmother, that was a cousin to your great-grandmother. So we must be related.' Family is big.

But still I feel like for me, as an individual, that I have found my family. My family contains people

that are very close to me: my dearest friends and a few individuals from my physical family. Aunts, uncles, cousins...I don't want to be tied down to that inherited family. I need the family that I have found through my work, through my love. Those are my family. That's my true family. Them I have chosen into my life. They are all over. They are all over this world. They are in Stockholm, they are in Finland, they are in, name it, Norway, America, Canada, Japan...

These are people that have meant something to me. That have touched me. That have awoken things in me. That have showed me new ways on my path as a human being, as an artist. New values, new things, new emotions, inspiration. Those people are very dear to me.

This was told to me as I was a young child, when my mother was expecting me: she didn't want to give birth to me. So she had decided to get an abortion. At that time, in the sixties, it wasn't an easy thing to get an abortion. So when she finally went to the doctor for the abortion, she was told that the pregnancy had gone too far. That it was too late to perform an abortion and she had to give birth to this child, which was me. And this always sort of followed me. I don't know if it has to do with the fact that she had thought of getting an abortion, but it has followed me for very long and it still does. The feeling that I'm not welcome.

It can suddenly happen to me when I'm with people, even when I'm with friends, I suddenly get this emotional shower. That: 'No, I shouldn't be here. I should go away.'

But nowadays, I've learned to deal with it. In a way that I don't get wet from that emotional shower.

I married very young. I married when I was twenty years old. I had my first child when I was twenty-six, which actually is very common for Saami girls. They marry and get children young. So it was nothing strange. I married a man from another culture, with another language. Of course, I was brought up to marry a Saami man. I was brought up to become a reindeerherd wife. That was given to me when I was small. That was a part of my upbringing.

But I left my society and went to Denmark where I completed my education and met my first husband.

I was married for seventeen years with him and had two children with him. He's a North-American Indian from Canada.

And for me, being married to him and meeting all his people and living in his society is in a philosophical way very related to the Saami culture. Lots of things are common, lots of ways of seeing signs, reading signs, reading nature are very related. I actually was educated about my culture, while being there with the Indians. Somehow, I started to understand my culture much more. All the common things, that for me were very natural in the Saami culture I didn't think of why we did that and from where it had come and what was the history of this or that action. When I lived with the Indians, I sort of came closer to my own culture. I've seen that sometimes it is necessary to be very far away to be able to come closer to something.

I think I was very angry as a child. But then, somehow, one of my weaknesses as a human was that I hid that anger. I should scream, I should shout. But, somehow, I don't do it. Maybe I don't dare to do it.

I have this very strong memory of this rage just coming up as a child, I think I was about ten years old. There were many knives in my home because of our dealing with reindeers and meat and I took this big knife...I just took it and then started to hit a table. I remember my mother and father trying to hold me back and pull my hands away. I just had to do it. I had to do it.

And still today, when I go to my father's house, I can see the marks on the table and I remember that moment. It was tough in many ways and tough individually. This rage and disappointment are part of our lives and of our humaneness. My God! I get disappointed even today. Even though I understand

why I get disappointed. I still get hurt from the disappointment. When I was brought up, Saami people were not respected. Our language and traditions were made fun of. So for me it doubled the disappointment I had to carry. When I was brought up, our traditional singing was not heard, our Yoiks were not heard because that was a time of oppression. Everything Saami was 'blaaah'. It didn't sound like anything. It sounded like something boring and monotonous. My mother taught me the songs in secrecy and she told me not to tell anybody I was learning these songs, because it would put me into trouble. And then, while I was brought up the sort of Saami culture 'Renaissance' was just starting in the seventies. When I was nine years old, a Saami artist, who had meant very much for me, heard that I was singing the traditional songs. So he took me on a tour, when I was nine years old, among them to inspire the Saami people not to forget the songs. We were many children and lots of old people. We traveled together one summer. For me it's of big importance, because I learned so much about the singing tradition. Not only how to do it, but the whole philosophy behind it. I think the fact is when we look at the western way of conceiving a piece of music; somebody sits down and composes music, writes it down, then puts his little signature on it: 'This is mine! I did it!' But we did the Yoik tradition and the most beautiful thing in our singing tradition is that it is totally the opposite. It is what inspires us, that is the composer. If I see the beauty of a mountain, that creates the song inside me, and I make a song of that strong feeling I have for the mountain, for the stone, for a person, for a animal, for whatever, then that is the composer, not me. I am just a tool that's letting this melody come out, to be born. This melody is born through me.

You learn to know things because you want to know about them. So maybe that is the reason the people don't know about the Saami people in this country. Because they don't want to know anything about the Saami people. There is something I really dislike about museums. That has to do with this issue and this fact that somehow things are caught and they are locked in. They are conserved and they should remain like that. I feel very much that a is part of the attitude of I don't say all, but many Swedes. And maybe if you go back ten, twenty years, it was stronger, at that time even more so wanting to keep the Saami people wild. Somehow I think that it compensates the Swedes own desire for wilderness because I think every individual has that love for the unknown, the uncertain, something that is very tickling, inspiring about things we don't know, that we can't really grab and grasp. I feel that Swedes have an attitude about the Saami. When you say the word Saami I have heard that many Swedes think about somebody with a colourful costume standing on top of a mountain with a reindeer and singing these strange songs. That's like the stereotype-ideal of the Saami and it has nothing to do with reality. And maybe reality hurts, maybe it really hurts the Swedes to know that actually Saami people also drive Volvo-cars. We also have TVs, we have micro-waves, we have sowing-machines, we have washing-machines and all the things every Swede has. Maybe that reality sort of breaks away a romantic idea that the Swede wants to have. A little colourful singing Saami with the reindeer on top of a mountain is not anybody dangerous.

I have lived and worked both in Norway and in Finland. It is quite different there. The attitudes of the Norwegians and the Fins towards the Saamis are very different than the Swede's. I have wondered many times: 'What is it? How come?' When I was living in Finland, the Fins loved the fact that I was a Saami and they said: 'We are related, we are related! We have something in common!' And I couldn't pinpoint what that commonness was, because I couldn't really see the commonness. They wanted to have it that way and I feel the same thing with the Norwegians. Then when I go back in history, neither Norway nor Finland have been free for very long,. They have been ruled by other countries. Well, Sweden hasn't. Sweden has been a very powerful nation. Sweden is a big brother of these Nordic countries, like Denmark, you know. They have been a ruling culture. So I feel that the

sympathy for our smaller culture and oppressed culture is not as strong in Sweden as it is in Finland or Norway.

I don't pull it aside. I speak my language with my children. When I pick them up from school, we speak my language and people say: 'What kind of language are you speaking?' So then I explain. Such clumsy questions might come, which are related to this romantic point of view with the reindeers. It's important to remember that the reindeer herders in Saami culture are a minority. Only six percent of the Saami people are reindeer herders and still the stereotype-picture is that we are all reindeer-herders. Actually, reindeer-herding is very recent, just five- or six-hundred years old. Our history as hunters and fishermen is much older than as reindeer-herders.

One of the most beautiful things that my first child said to me was when he was about four years old; it was dark and we were in the same bed. He wanted to get up and he started to climb out of bed. His feet were hanging from the bed, not touching the floor and he says to me: 'Mother, the darkness is eating my feet.' And that's one way to see it, you know. Why not, you know. For me that showed his mind, his point of view, his opinion of himself, in the great darkness.

I was very close to my brother who is two years older than I am. I did a lot of things with him and I remember when we were in Norway. At some point, we moved to Norway for summertime because that's where we stay with the reindeers. We live in Sweden in the wintertime. In Norway, we stay in the mountains. There's no electricity, no running water, no toilets. So we live in Saami tents. Up there we didn't have too many luxurious things, such as milk that was a rarity for instance. We don't milk the reindeers in the summertime, because they have calves. The milk has to be given to the calves and in the older days the Saami people used to borrow goat herds from the Norwegian farmers, so that they could milk the goats and get milk. But we didn't do that anymore when I was small, so we used to bring lots of boxes of powdered-milk, mix it with water and you had instant milk. I remember that my brother and I used to play a lot in a river, just jumping over the stones to get to the other side. And one day we had a really good idea: we were talking about how lovely it would be if there would be milk in the river instead of water and how happy the Saami people would be, because everybody was saying: 'Oh, we don't have milk, we don't have milk.' So we went home and took all the powdered-milk that my family had. We went upstream and mixed it into the stream. Everything, ten big packages! And then we ran down because we absolutely thought that now the whole river was going to turn into milk. We ran down a few hundred meters and of course all the milk was mixed with the thousands and thousands of liters of water that were constantly running there. Our parents were not that happy when we came home because we had used up all the milk.

The place where my parents built the house in the beginning of nineteen-sixties was on an island. When we went to school, the school-bus couldn't come and pick us up there in the morning, so we had to go with a boat every morning to the bus. It was sometimes very tough in the springtime when the ice was starting to melt and in the autumn before the ice was strong enough. We went through the water many times. I especially remember in the spring, when our mother used to come and get us, she skied over the thin spring ice, because somehow you get lighter when you are on skis. And then she would take us on her back, we were three kids. She would take one to the island, ski back, then get the second child back to the island and then the third child. This she did every morning and evening. So it was complicated to get to the bus, and it was a tough thing. What I did when I reached the age of nine/ten was to write a letter to the Swedish king, who was a prince at that time and I wrote: 'I'm a poor little Saami girl and on a little island and I have this problem: I can't get to school. Would you please give me a bridge?' And he gave me a bridge. We were in Norway and the bridge was built dur-

ing the summertime. When we came back from Norway, before school started, suddenly there was this bridge and I somehow know, when I think about it today, that this bridge is also something symbolic for me. This is the bridge that I walked from my home to the other side of the water; it was the bridge that opened the road for me to walk away from my culture, but also to return to what is my true home.