

EN MINNESBOK COMPILED BY BERTIL HAGMAN

Note: *En Minnesbok* was compiled by Bertil Hagman following the death of Jussi Björling. One of our most dedicated Jussiphiles, Gail Campain, has provided translation of the entire book. Individual author introductions are by Harald Henrysson.

Six sections of *En Minnesbok* are found on our website at <http://www.jussibjorlingsociety.org/enminnesbok.html>.

The remainder of *En Minnesbok* also appeared in earlier editions of the *JBS-USA Journal*. We are pleased now to provide these last five sections.

Some Light-Hearted Memories

by Eric Wennerholm

Eric Wennerholm, born in 1903, was a Swedish lawyer and author. From 1930, he provided legal counsel to the famed explorer Sven Hedin, as he would much later do for Jussi Björling. In his later years, Wennerholm wrote several biographies of Swedish actors and persons famous in other fields of culture, with whom he was personally acquainted, among them Sven Hedin. In 1958, Wennerholm became head of the foundation which the cinema and theater tycoon Anders Sandrew had founded in order to support actors. Wennerholm died in 1984.

My first particularly distinct memory of Jussi Björling away from the stage is a charming and light-hearted one. The place was, nevertheless, a theatre and the date, 7th September 1934, when Jussi was only twenty-three years old, and a certain young lady called Anna-Lisa Berg, that year's Lucia¹, even younger. The Theatre Museum and Höstsol² had arranged a charity soirée at Drottningholm's Theatre at which the spirit of Gustav III was certainly present and the style of a long-gone era was recalled to new and enchanting life.

Everything has its history, but the Drottningholm Court Theatre has two. The first, more intensive, period of activity oc-

curred during the last fifteen years of Gustav III's life when Drottningholm was not only a centre for musical and theatrical life in Sweden, but also for the pleasures of the Court and, not least of all, for the comfort and enjoyment of the King himself.

The second period, the beginning of which this soirée inaugurated, commenced in the 1930s, when performances once more began to be presented in the newly-renovated theatre which, prior to its refurbishment, had been languishing like a degraded *Sleeping Beauty* for 130 long years, in use as a grain warehouse.

The palace park was bedecked in all the magnificence of its autumn colour, and I remember from a photo session before the performance how the ladies and gentlemen of the ballet, dressed in their rococo costumes, tripped lightly down to a pond and there allowed their reflections to mingle with those of the proudly gliding white swans.

We were assigned crowded and rather cold dressing-rooms in which the hand-basins were tiny but authentic.

Perhaps the reader will enjoy hearing something of the evening's programme. A French trifle, was gracefully presented by Inga Tidblad³ and Alf Henrikson.⁴ With demonic *bravura* and displaying the century's best-looking pair of hose-clad legs,



Eric Wennerholm

the general manager of the Royal Opera, the great John Forsell himself, performed.

And then came the young star, Jussi Björling, who only a few years earlier had made his debut as Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*. On this evening he sang an aria from this same opera, giving it something of the youthful air of a folk-song. The audience's attentiveness, which can wander a little at such festivities, was sharpened, and the performance was received with a more spontaneous enthusiasm than the general tone of the evening otherwise demonstrated. Jussi smiled contentedly. This young man, who never became anything but that, could appear calm, securely self-assured about the quality of his art, with his two feet planted firmly on the ground. It could seem as though he received all the tributes as a matter of course. But in truth, before a performance he was as keen and nervous as a thoroughbred horse, and he was infinitely grateful if he met with success. He had more need of appreciation and kindness than one would imagine.

The entertainment included a so-called *tableau vivant* which presented a scene based on Pehr Hilleström's painting of the Gustavian court at Drottningholm in the year 1777, and which was made up of young high society ladies and gentlemen. We were

dressed in the clothes of the period and looked decorative but had not been given any set lines. Our part in the proceedings consisted of sitting or standing around, occasionally saying “Oh me!” or “Oh my!” and applauding, a little distractedly, Anders de Wahl as Count Fersen and Gabriel Alw as the King. Tore Teje⁵ stepped out of the “picture frame” to perform an intense scene from Racine’s *Phèdre*. At that, we forgot ourselves again and applauded in a spirit of vigorous democracy. After the *tableau vivant* had been disbanded, all the performers took their places in the theatre’s seats. In accordance with the customs of the times, each place was carefully assigned, right from that for the *lantmarskalk*⁶ down to those for His Majesty’s manservants and barbers. Jussi sat with the ladies of the court. In King Gustav III’s box sat our present King, Gustav VI Adolf, along with many princes and princesses.

After the performance, the performers, still fitted out in Gustavian costume, joined the elegant ladies and gentlemen for a supper in the luncheon room where Gustav III⁷ used to partake of his morning meal. The new crystal chandelier glittered and Prince Wilhelm raised his champagne-filled glass for a toast.

Something of the light-heartedness of those bygone times, but also their formalised elegance, took hold of the guests. Conversation assumed a courtly refinement, and here and there, in theatre boxes and hidden corners, intimate rendezvous were made. We waltzed. Feelings were played upon, completely honourably, but also with wholly natural involvement. The enchantment of the style and milieu drew forth for a brief time a gallantry which is otherwise hardly a distinguishing characteristic of our time’s more straight-to-the-point manner of expression. Even Jussi’s confident *dalmål*⁸ acquired a slightly aristocratic touch. Costumed thus, we from the 1930s felt ourselves completely taken over by the aristocratic style of a past era.

These then were the background and

the milieu, the accessories and the atmosphere—perhaps somewhat long-windedly related, but it is so pleasant to be able to relate such things long-windedly—for the little intermezzo involving Jussi, that year’s Lucia and myself.

Our Lucia was beautiful, young and joyful, and she could dance, perhaps a little more warm-bloodedly than a lady of the Gustavian court would have allowed herself to do; but can we really say what a lady of the Gustavian court allowed? Lucia and I danced together—once, twice, many times, and Lucia seemed pleased. From time to time Jussi came over and asked Lucia to dance, and I remember that I thought his interruptions were rather unnecessary.

And so finally the clock chimed the hour for modern times to break in on the fantasy. The bus for the performers was to leave from the steamer’s jetty. Victoriously I offered Anna-Lisa my arm and she accompanied me through the park. But when we were taking our places on the bus, suddenly—how it happened I don’t know—there was Jussi sitting in my place next to her. Moreover he was smiling. The journey home proceeded, however, with the advantage alternating between Jussi and me.

At Fridhemsplan the bus stopped. Jussi took Anna-Lisa’s arm, and without a word they strolled off, amicably waving me goodbye. In a melancholy mood I went the whole way home on foot, humming to myself: “La donna è mobile qual piuma al vento...”

The following day, there they were—in the newspaper, featured together. I could see that I’d lost the advantage!⁹

When you look through an old guest book you find, as “Koftan”, the editor-in-chief of “Upsala Nya Tidning” put it, that “life consists of sacrifice with now and then something nice”. You come across names of friends whom you unfortunately will never see again, people who once brightened and warmed your life, but who have now gone from our lovely earth. Jussi’s solid and characteristic signature is glimpsed from time to time; one reads the names of the other

guests and the occasion immediately comes to life again.

It is certainly not always so much fun enjoying oneself! Creating pleasure can be a little more trying than it is refreshing. A party ought to have an atmosphere which separates it from everyday experience and I recall that we had such a one at Djurgårdsbrunns Wårdshus [a restaurant on Djurgården], a party with spirit, attended by artists, actors and other good folk. Jussi didn’t sing—a singer ought to be excused from that at a party—but he gave several speeches of thanks. There was dancing. There were actually two people dancing as I recall—Herman Zetterberg and Vilhelm Moberg. This was in a year noted for judicial corruption so the general feeling between the two men was, let us say, a little reserved.¹⁰ Late, very late, in the night the musicians came to me and asked, somewhat dejectedly, if they could stop playing.

“As long as anyone wants to dance, you should play on,” was my reply.

“Yes, but there’s only one couple left on the dance-floor, and it’s two men.”

Rather curious, I went out to investigate and found the then Minister of Justice and the polemicist Moberg clasping each other in a wild polka. The music continued.

Big parties were not, however, Jussi’s cup of tea. After a time he would whisper to me: “This is starting to get boring. Let’s go back to Yvonne’s and your place and play the piano and sing.”

One light and mild early summer night he sat down at our old out-of-tune piano and sang Scottish folk-songs; he sang and sang before the open window and seemed to enjoy being away from the limelight and not having to be the great Jussi Björling. At such a moment, in the company of a few real friends, Jussi was completely free and open, a playful child. That was what he meant by enjoying himself.

The following day—it was a Sunday morning—my wife suddenly realised that we might have disturbed the lovely little lady next-door and rang her to apologise.

"Disturbed me?" she said, "Not at all. I sat for hours by my window and just enjoyed it. It was like being at church."

There have been lots of festivities mentioned here, so that one can understand the farmer who reads the newspapers and asks himself whether folk in the capital do anything but go to parties. But of course they do, and, in particular, Jussi Björling did.

One can say, without exaggeration, that he really did nothing other than work. His whole life revolved around his engagements. One can even go so far as to say that his life, in some ways, appeared to be marked by a certain poverty in that it contained little in the way of intellectual or physical pursuits. We have seen photographs of him pulling in a pike, and certainly he did so on occasion; but to a large extent he just breathed music, existed in tones, explored through phrases, thought in roles. He was a conscientious artist and a perfectionist, our happy singer!

As his lawyer I also got to see Jussi in another role—let us call it the role of a member of society. When contracts were being drawn up he always took careful notice of everything connected to the artistic side of things. When we came to the fee he would merely give a nod of satisfaction and check that it was the highest that was paid. The merit in a contract did not depend on the fee! One time some business friends had advised him to go and live in Switzerland for tax purposes. I commented: "And so become an expatriate Swede." "No," he replied, "expatriate Swede, that's a dreadful idea. I

don't want to be an expatriate Swede. I want to be completely Swedish. I couldn't give a damn about Switzerland!" ■

¹The celebration of St Lucia's day on the 13th December is an important part of midwinter festivities in Sweden. All over the country, local communities select a girl to be Lucia, "The Queen of the Light". In the 1920s a Swedish newspaper introduced an annual competition to choose Stockholm's Lucia.

²A charitable foundation providing accommodation and support for needy stage artists in their retirement.

³A well-known actress of the time.

⁴This is an error on the writer's part. It was Anders Henrikson, an actor at the Royal Dramatic Theatre who partnered Inga Tidblad. Alf Henrikson was a journalist and writer whose work for the stage included the libretto for Hilding Rosenberg's opera *Resa till Amerika* [Journey to America].

⁵Anders de Wahl, Gabriel Alw and Tora Teje—famous actors and actress of the period.

⁶During the period when Sweden had a diet of the four estates (up until 1866) the *lantmarskalk* was the president of the estate of the nobility.

⁷King of Sweden 1950-1973

⁸The Swedish dialect spoken in Dalarna.

⁹The conclusion to this anecdote is rather confusing in the original, since the writer is unclear about precisely what he read in the newspaper regarding Jussi and Anna-Lisa. He had possibly confused his dates and was implying that the announcement of their engagement appeared the day after the soirée at the Drottningholm Court Theatre. This did not actually occur until some months later. Alternatively, a well-informed newspaper columnist may have hinted at their relationship.

¹⁰The year referred to as being "noted for judicial corruption" was probably 1952 or 1953 at which time Herman Zetterberg was Minister of Justice. In his political writings, the famous novelist Vilhelm Moberg (author of a series of four books which is regarded as the greatest fictional portrayal of Swedish immigrants to the USA), participated in debates on various social issues including topical legal cases. Moberg was highly critical of Zetterberg's decisions as Minister of Justice.

The Voice of Velvet

by Sven Salén



Sven Salén

Sven Salén, born in 1890, had a brief commercial education. With an early interest in the sea, he bought his first ship in 1915. The Salén shipping company, which he founded and of which he was CEO 1923-62, was for a period one of the leading lines in the world with a large fleet of reefers, tankers and dry cargo vessels. Salén was interested in sports, especially skiing and sailing, and as a helmsman, he took a bronze medal in the 1936 Berlin Olympics and finished fourth in 1952 in Helsinki. He was also an amateur composer and very active in supporting the Swedish lyric tradition. Sven Salén died in 1969.

Jussi Björling—during the last few decades that name has flown out on wings of song over the whole world; an ambassador of vocal music from the little country far up in the north on the Arctic Circle; a singer who could sing with Italianate passion but also with a northerner's control. This must have been a spoilt individual, a true prima donna. What was he really like?

The scene is Carnegie Hall. Jussi is giving a benefit concert for the Swedish Seamen's Hotel in Brooklyn. There is a full house—full out in the auditorium and full

Website Alert

Raymond Björling, a Swedish opera singer, and grandson of tenor Jussi Björling, spoke at the concluding panel of the Schiller Institute conference in Berlin on February 26, 2012. His topic was "Four Generations in a Family of Musicians." One may watch it or read the text at:

http://www.schillerinstitute.org/conf-iclc/2012/berlin/eiv_v38n17/cmusic_creativity.html#rb