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My Grandfather: Soren Lorentz Lassen

by Karen Lassen

Fifty-five years after my grandfather's death in 1934, my two brothers and I gathered at his gravesite in Sault Ste. Marie near the Great Lakes. For the first time, Soren Lassen was being honored by a family that he never knew. Although he had died long ago, his gravestone had only recently been put in place. I pulled the scissors I had brought out of my purse and carefully cut back the crabgrass that was already creeping across the new stone. Stepping back, I read it aloud:

Svend Lawrence
(Soren Lassen)
1864-1934

Without speaking, my brothers and I walked over to the forest at the edge of the cemetery and picked yellow and white wildflowers as well as some pale blue forget-me-nots that we laid around the edge of the grave stone.

Suddenly, I laughed, breaking the silence. "Let's sing!" We held hands and sang some old Danish songs we had learned as children, *Der bor en bager paa Nørregade...* (There lives a baker on North Street) and *Nu er det jul igen...* (Now it is Christmas again). Slowly, but without hesitation, we began to dance around our grandfather's grave. The singing and dancing became loud, even raucous, as we released pent-up emotions about finally learning our paternal grandfather's story and finding him after so many years.

While I was growing up, Dad said very little about his father, my grandfather. I knew my grandparents divorced when Dad was four and his two younger siblings were three and one. Two years later, my grandmother remarried a widower with two children. They had two more children, making this a large family of seven children and two adults. This was Dad's family as far as I was concerned. It seems odd to me now that I never asked Dad to tell me about his biological father; even more odd that Dad never talked about him. It was almost as if my grandfather never existed.

As is often the case with a family secret, it gets exposed due to an unexpected event. That event happened during Christmas 1979. My

brothers and I had gathered at my parents' home in Santa Barbara, California to celebrate the holidays. It was December 23, *lillejuleaften*, the day before Christmas Eve. I remember that day clearly. Dad went to fetch the morning mail and brought it inside, laying it in a pile on the dining room table. My brothers and I were sitting at the table, chatting with each other and finishing our morning coffee. I briefly glanced at the stack of mail, wondering if there were letters from our relatives in Denmark.

Among the usual Christmas cards, magazines, and odds and ends was a small package wrapped in brown paper and thick twine. Its smallness and the rugged twine drew my attention. Dad picked up the package, looked at the return address, and said it was from his sister in Copenhagen. I watched with interest as Dad carefully cut the twine and removed the brown paper. There he found a small, weathered-looking, black leather book with worn corners and a metal latch. When he opened the cover, his face went ashen. I thought he was about to faint so I jumped up, but he put out his hand to stop me. Then he sat down and looked at the three of us for the longest time. Finally, he said in a whisper, "This is my real father, Soren Lassen's diary. I did not know it existed."

Dad sat motionless holding the diary in his hands, seeming lost in space, his watery pale blue eyes looking somewhere I could not see. Was it grief, longing, anger? More than joy. I did not want to interrupt the moment, so I said nothing. Then Dad got up as if in a daze, left the room, and walked back to his den, closing the door behind him.

My brothers and I looked at each other, puzzled. What was going on here? Where had this diary been all these years, and why did it emerge now? Who was Soren Lassen and where had he been living all the years since his divorce?

Hours later, Dad found the three of us in the kitchen. He handed me the diary. I held the small, fragile book in my hands and carefully opened it. The pages were brittle and yellowed with age, the handwriting elegant like writing I had seen on the Bill of Rights, full of flourishes and curlicues. As I looked at it, I could almost hear the scratchy sound of a fountain pen as my grandfather wrote his daily entries.

I tried to read the first page, but it was impossible, the script being old-fashioned Danish. I can read modern Danish but not this. I

was disappointed, because reading a handwritten document feels so personal and intimate. The size, shape, and slant of every word and the syntax conveys so much information about the writer.

Dad decided to translate the diary and type it up for us. He spent the next few days back in his den, writing. This must have been a very emotional time for him, being suddenly so intensely involved with his father. He must have pondered each entry, trying to piece together a coherent picture of his father's life as well as dealing with his own feelings.

The diary was written between November 1899 and March 1900 in eastern Canada. The first part tells the story of a man who lived on the edge of poverty. My grandfather worked as a day laborer on a railroad crew, laying track. He spent his nights in uninsulated wooden railroad huts with no heat. He slept in his clothes and shivered against the icy winds that seeped through the thin walls during the bitterly cold winter. He hoped that in time he could accumulate enough money to return to his wife and children in Denmark.

After he found out that his wife had divorced him, my grandfather sent his diary to his sister in Denmark, who kept it hidden for almost sixty years in her dresser under a stack of underwear. When she was very old, she gave it to Dad's younger sister, who then sent it to Dad in 1979.

In the diary, my grandfather describes himself as an intelligent, capable man who grew up in an upper-middle-class Danish family. He acknowledged that despite his aptitudes and abilities, he had no drive to achieve anything, could not concentrate or apply himself. He said that he was easily distracted and only was able to complete something when he was under pressure, after which he would collapse or go out on the town.

I thought about his description of himself—intelligent, able, but unmotivated, unable to focus, easily distracted. This sounded like he was either depressed or had some sort of attention deficit disorder that made it hard for him to concentrate and follow through on tasks. I do not think anyone at that time paid much attention to depression or psychological problems. You probably were supposed to ignore your problems and get on with life's demands and obligations. I felt compassion for my grandfather. As I continued reading, I wondered why my grandparents divorced. It seemed odd that a family with three young children would end in divorce. Divorce was very uncommon at

the turn of the century. I could not imagine what sort of incident could bring about such an upheaval.

Part of the answer to my questions was found on the last page of the diary. It was a personal letter from my grandfather to his three children.

My dear children,

March 9, 1900

At some point in the future when you read this letter, I hope you will get a better sense of me, your father, who perhaps by then will be dead in a foreign country far away from you. You will undoubtedly hear from others that I was an irresponsible man and a poor father, and that I was inclined to excesses. In short, that I was a man who did not belong in civilized society.

At the time I married your mother, a considerable demand was made on me financially, a demand I could not satisfy. I was my father's son, and he let me know that he had high expectations for me. I felt trapped in a struggle between my powerful and demanding father and myself, a struggle I eventually lost. I got involved in situations that I did not know enough about and was not able to handle. I made some bad decisions. I believed far too much in my fellow man, even when things didn't look right.

Finally, I realized that I was ruined. I could not sleep or eat when I realized this catastrophe. I neglected my family, not because I didn't care. The thought that I someday had to give up and leave you was unbearable, and I left you without really knowing what I was doing. For a whole year, I lived as a hermit in London, martyred by my conscience. The biggest blow to me was that your mother, who loved me and whom I love more every day, has divorced me.

The purpose of this letter is to show you my fate so that it can serve as a lesson for you in your future. As long as I live, I, your father, will think of you with love and deep interest. Even if you do not respect me, you may still be able to love me, because after all I am your father. Farewell my dear children. I sincerely hope that the happiness that I did not attain will be yours.

*Lovingly, your father,
Soren Lorentz Lassen*

I was stunned after I read this letter. Why did my grandfather say that he never expected to see his three children again? That seemed unbearable. And why did he think his children would not respect him? And what was it that led to his ruin?

Dad was reluctant at first to talk, but with encouragement from my brothers and me, the story emerged. My grandfather was the oldest of six children—three boys and three girls. Being the first son, he was the family heir, the one who would carry on the honor and reputation of the family. He was handsome and charming and had lots of friends. He was everybody's favorite. He was also, according to Dad, a social butterfly and bon vivant. Dad remembered hearing a story about my grandfather drinking champagne out of the shoe of a famous Danish actress at the Royal Danish Theater in Copenhagen.

My grandfather attended the University of Copenhagen and earned a law degree, after which he joined his father's law firm. At twenty-five he married Maria Hald and they had four children. Their oldest child died from diphtheria when he was seven, leaving the family with three young children under the age of five.

The stress of work and family led my grandfather to make a very bad decision that changed his life forever. He illegally took a large chunk of his client's money and invested it in a speculative scheme that went bankrupt. He lost all the money.

In Denmark at that time, debtors' prison was the punishment for a white-collar crime such as this. Soren's father, my great-grandfather, who was a partner in a prominent law firm and part of established society, could not tolerate the shame, which would tarnish the family reputation if this crime became public knowledge. He quietly paid off all his son's debts, which entailed considerable personal sacrifice, and told Soren that his actions made him beyond redemption. Then he banished Soren from the family and from Denmark.

Soren's father told him he was to leave Denmark and ostensibly visit his brother in England, from where he was supposed to just disappear. The old patriarch said he would take care of Soren's wife and children, but he never wanted to see or hear from his son again. Soren reluctantly did as he was told and stayed in England briefly, before taking a freighter to Canada.

I was appalled that my great-grandfather could actually banish his son and take away his wife and children. I do not think he could legally do that; but maybe this was not a legal maneuver but rather a family edict issued by a powerful family patriarch, not something easily ignored. It is hard to believe that anyone would follow such an edict today, at least in any Western country.

I puzzled over my great-grandfather's decision to never see or hear from his son again. Why would he take such extreme action? Could there be more to the story than met the eye? Maybe the financial disaster that led to my grandfather's banishment was just the tip of the iceberg, the last straw in a long list of transgressions. Maybe my great-grandfather had reached the limit of what he could tolerate from his son. Still, banishment seemed too harsh a response.

On the other hand, my grandfather did not seem to put up much of a fight. He did have a choice, after all. He could have taken responsibility for his crime and accepted the consequence of going to prison. He could have stood up to his father and refused to abandon his wife and children. He could have shown remorse for what he had done as well as a desire to make amends. But he took none of these actions.

After his mother remarried, Dad and his two siblings moved in with their new step-family. But the melding of the two families was difficult. Dad began to act out and cause trouble. He argued with his stepfather and was often angry and sullen. After two years, his stepfather had enough and sent Dad away to live with a relative who was a Lutheran minister in a neighboring town. Another banishment! Dad was eight years old by then. He told me he slept in the attic of the minister's house and cried himself to sleep every night. He probably thought he was the cause of the breakup of his family.

In 1921, Dad was twenty-five years old and had moved to London, where he worked as a chemical engineer. He would often spend his weekends visiting his uncle and aunt at their country home, Holders Hill House, outside London. This was the same uncle that my grandfather stayed with after he left Denmark. When my Dad visited his uncle, his father's name was never mentioned.

One day, however, on a visit to Holders Hill House, Dad's uncle took him by the arm and led him outside into the garden. He had something important and private he wanted to tell him. He spoke quietly and told Dad that his father, Soren, was in town on some sort of business and wanted to see his son. It seems like Dad's uncle knew this news would stir up lots of mixed feelings and he wanted to give Dad a chance to digest it and compose himself. Dad said nothing for a long time. When he finally spoke, he said he was surprised to hear that his father was still alive and in contact with a family member.

Another long pause. Then Dad said he would be willing to meet with his father. That was all.

When they met, Dad said he encountered an interesting, distinguished-looking elderly gentleman for whom he felt “no filial attachments whatsoever.” My grandfather appeared moderately affluent and in good health. He wore a well-tailored suit and spats on his shoes, as was the custom in those days. Dad showed me a picture of my grandfather. I could see the strong resemblance. Both were tall, handsome, strong-featured men.

When they met a second time, my grandfather took Dad to an expensive restaurant near Trafalgar Square and gave him a collapsible silk top hat that upper-class men wore to the opera. Dad thought the gift was frivolous and wasteful, although he kept the hat for the rest of his life. Over lunch, my grandfather said he was in London hoping to sell shares in one of his gold mines near Ontario. He pulled a golf-ball-sized gold nugget from his pocket and placed it on the table. Dad smiled but said nothing.

My grandfather never talked about anything of a more personal nature, such as where he lived in Canada, whether he had remarried, or anything about his past troubles. Dad, not wanting to open an old wound, never asked. A few weeks later, Dad and his uncle accompanied my grandfather to Victoria Station where he boarded the train to Southampton and then presumably a freighter back to Canada.

After that brief visit in London, Dad never saw his father again nor did he attempt to stay in contact. Based on a rumor his sister told him a few years after the London visit, Dad thought his father may have committed suicide due to the failure of his gold mines. As the rumor went, my grandfather was depressed, and on the freighter taking him back to Canada from England he jumped overboard. I was skeptical of this story. It seemed out of character for my grandfather. He was more likely to reinvent himself than take his own life, I thought.

This could have been the end of the unhappy story of my grandfather as far as anyone in my immediate family knew. Aside from the diary and a few rumors, we had no more real information and neither did any of our relatives in Denmark. It seemed like everyone preferred to let the story fade away and be forgotten.

That is, until my brother Peter, who is a real sleuth, got curious about the places in Canada my grandfather mentioned in his diary.

He lived there at least from 1899 through 1921. There must be records of his travels to and from Canada as well as records showing his gold mines. If he remarried, surely it was recorded somewhere.

Peter traveled to Toronto and Ottawa, looking through immigration records, old ship manifests, and passenger logs. There, he found our grandfather's name on multiple entries and exits from Canada. The records showed that he went back and forth to England and Europe many times, presumably to sell his mining shares. Peter also found that our grandfather legally changed his name from Soren Lassen to Svend Lawrence, probably in an attempt to distance himself from his ignominious past.

On one of his trips to Toronto, Peter found tax and property forms that showed our grandfather had owned a house for a time in Toronto and paid school and property tax. This surprised Peter because school taxes were only collected from people who had children. But there was no record anywhere of a marriage or children. Peter thought our grandfather may have become involved with a local Indian woman and had children with her, and this would be the reason for paying school tax. There were many Ojibwe Indians living in the gold mining areas near Toronto and the Great Lakes, and it was not uncommon for single white men to form long-term liaisons with Indian women. Peter liked the idea of having Danish Ojibwe relatives living in Canada so he kept up his sleuthing.

A few years later, Peter found a record that showed our grandfather had lived the last years of his life in a home for indigent people near Sault Ste. Marie in the vicinity of the Great Lakes, where he died in 1934 at the age of seventy. The home had subsequently burned down so there was nothing left to see. Near the home was a community cemetery where poor people were buried. Peter checked the old records and found that our grandfather had been buried in a grave in this cemetery, marked by a small cement square. The old records included a chart that showed the exact spot where Soren had been laid to rest.

Peter commissioned a stone cutter in Sault Ste. Marie to cut a gravestone for our grandfather. After the new stone was put in place, Peter invited my other brother and me to fly with him to Sault Ste. Marie to visit our grandfather's grave. We were all excited about this trip because it felt like tying up loose ends in a family saga. We wanted to see the grave to have a sense of completion with our grandfather.



At the gravesite, I kept thinking that if our grandfather could see us right now, he would be pleased that we, three of his seven grandchildren, had found a way to be happy in our lives even though happiness had eluded him. We talked on and on, trying to put into words the many thoughts and feelings we had about him. Now we knew about his appealing and not-so-appealing sides. He probably was fun to spend time with and as children we would have loved him. But he also seemed to be a bit of a con man and wheeler-dealer, a speculative schemer, never taking responsibility for his mistakes, selling shares in his dubious gold mines. He probably was a dreamer who was not able to do the hard work of bringing his dreams into reality.

Yet, when all was said and done, we chose to accept him, flaws and all. He was after all part of us and part of our heritage, and none among us is without flaws. We were glad to have found him and to have brought him back into our family where he belonged.

If anyone were watching us on that day by my grandfather's grave, it might have looked like we were re-enacting an old pagan ritual. And in a way, we were. It was a ritual of redemption, healing, and reconnection, as primitive or modern as human connections.

