

Postcard from Gothenburg, 1918

My Swedish great-great grandmother Hilma Carlson and her three daughters, Elin, Issi and Thorborg, wrote to one another obsessively, recounting the ups and downs of their lives from the 1880s until the early 1950s. Though many of the letters were destroyed, those that remain still amount to millions of words, and copies fill five large ring binders in my cousin Erik's flat in Stockholm. The letters are the basis of a [Swedish book](#) published in 2017, but I've been working on a version for English readers, piecing together the personal stories – divorce, infidelity, struggles with money – as well as following the wider narrative of a changing nation.

With the onset of Covid-19, I stopped. The pandemic seemed to make everything I'd been doing seem utterly trivial: in the midst of such a storm, what did these old stories matter? I became obsessed with the news. Long before the lockdown, I had the radio on all the time, consumed every scrap of information I could find on social media. Then I reached saturation point. I turned off the radio, put away my phone and went back to my papers – because there is always something to learn from looking back.

We've been here before.

Between 1918 and 1919, a strain of bird flu swept across the world, infecting around one third of the global population and killing at least [50 million](#) – more people, by any reckoning, than all the military and civilian casualties of the First World War put together.

No one can be sure exactly where it began. There was a bad flu going around in China in the winter of 1917-18, but the pandemic flu was first officially diagnosed in America, in a [military camp in Kansas](#), in March 1918. The movement of troops to Europe caused the illness to spread, but because of military censorship nothing was reported until the virus reached neutral Spain. When the King of Spain fell ill at the end of May, European newspapers jumped on the story and the illness became known as 'the Spanish flu'.

It took a good few months to reach Sweden, where my grandmother Sigbrit and her family lived in Gothenburg, a port city on the west coast. But on the 6th of July 1918, the steamship

Torsten docked there, bringing passengers from London and with them, an invisible viral freight.

As the sickness began to take hold, the Swedish doctors' association argued for extending school holidays and for legislation that forced infected workers to stay at home. There were also proposals to introduce fines for sneezing, laughing, and coughing in public, as well as for the branding of infected [individuals](#). To begin with the Swedish Medical Board didn't take the threat particularly seriously: they classified it as a 'mild' illness.

By mid-July the flu reached Stockholm and began to spread among conscripts in the 70 army garrison cities across the country. Since 1914, Sweden had mobilised to defend its borders and all men between the ages of 20 and 42 were required to do 340 days of [military service](#). The over-crowded barracks were a major source of infection. On 4th of August, my great-great-grandmother Hilma, writing to her eldest daughter from the seaside resort of Särö, noted that the 'Spanish sickness' had arrived in town. 'I sense a dark cloud is rising and I tremble at what it may bring,' she wrote.

The first person to succumb to the flu in Hilma's circle was the kitchen help in her son Folke's household. Soon Folke himself was ill, then his children's nursemaid. The most commonly reported symptoms were a high temperature and a cough, also extreme fatigue, muscle aches, sometimes vomiting. Hilma wrote to tell her eldest daughter that Folke was running a temperature of 40 degrees and the children's nursemaid lay 'senseless'. Two more servants became unwell. During this first wave of the epidemic the death rate was relatively low. Some towns tried to isolate, but only for six weeks. In autumn, the second wave came and this time the disease was brutal.

In October 1918, Hilma's grandson Inge wrote from Gothenburg that 'the ravages of the Spanish flu are worse than ever. On Sunday there were 72 burials.' He recounted a story he'd heard about a man knocking on a door in the working-class district of Majorna. A child answered. 'Can I speak to your mother?' the visitor asked. 'No,' said the boy. Inside, the man found the father, mother and one of the children, lying dead on the floor, and the three surviving children huddled in a corner of the room.

Stories like this highlight the desperate poverty in which many families lived. Though Sweden wasn't fighting in WW1, shipping blockades led to severe food shortages. Bread, sugar and potatoes were rationed, and coffee, the lifeblood of any Swedish household, was unobtainable. In May 1917 there had been riots, with women marching on Stockholm to demand food. The country teetered briefly on the brink of civil war. Now the virus was exposing these divisions even more sharply. A phrase that's often trotted out these days is that 'the virus doesn't discriminate', but the reality in Sweden at that time was that many working-class people were malnourished and living in over-crowded conditions.

When Folke became ill he was taken into isolation in Gothenburg's Epidemic Hospital, but many towns didn't even have a hospital. In [Östersund](#), one of the worst-hit towns, the bank director, Carl Lignell took it upon himself to withdraw funds 'without authorisation from Stockholm' and to requisition a school for use as a hospital, and set up a task force to help the town's citizens. As with the house in Majorna, Lignell's taskforce sometimes found people lying on the floor because they were too poor to afford beds.

In Gothenburg, Folke recovered from the 'Spanish sickness' and lived to a fine old age. The letters say nothing about the fate his servants, only that Folke's wife had to find replacements for those that fell ill. The [Central Statistics Bureau](#) estimated that 34,000 Swedes died between July 1918 and July 1919, and that death toll reached 37,000 before the pandemic was over.

The legacy of this catastrophe was that it emboldened those who had been calling for social and economic reform, and opened people's eyes to the deprivation that existed among working people. Politically, it strengthened support for the Social Democrats, whose leader Per Albin Hansson proposed, in 1928, that Sweden should be 'the people's home' (*folkhemmet*), a place of equality and mutual respect where people looked after one another – an idea that became an important touchstone in the years ahead, when Sweden developed a high-quality welfare system that, for a time at least, made the nation one of the most prosperous and egalitarian societies in the world.

In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit argues that disasters are an opportunity to remake our reality. The crisis we're experiencing right now has exposed the fragility of the UK's welfare, health and social care systems and shown us how close to the breadline so many

people are. When we come out of it, let's see if we can use the spirit of emergency to change things for the better and make this country a home for all.

[Vicky Grut](#)'s short story collection *Live Show, Drink Included* (Holland Park Press, 2018) was shortlisted for the 2019 Edge Hill University Prize.

Sources

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