



which has long featured in Swedish folklore.

## *My father looked at me*

seriously: "You have to kill the pig before you eat it. That's the tradition," he said. "If you break the spinal cord it won't feel a thing. Go on," he urged as I looked at him with all the hesitancy that a quizzical four-year-old could muster. Is this what Christmas was all about?

But if he said the pig had to die, dispatch the unfortunate beast I must. So I picked up a toothpick and rammed it into the nape of the cute black and white animal, which being made of marzipan felt no pain. Only then was I allowed to eat it. My ancestors had killed real pigs every year and my father insisted that I continue the tradition in some form or another.

In Sweden, the past always hovers over Christmas, a glorious occasion suffused above all with light. It's that radiance which fuels yuletide celebrations in a country where the frosty fingers of winter can grip onto half the year. Light helps banish the memory of centuries dominated by poverty, endless nights and the daily battle for survival, because wound into the innermost fabric of every Swede is the awareness of a grim past far removed from industrial triumphs such as Volvo cars, Saab aircraft and Ikea furniture.

Consider this simple fact: between 1860 and 1910, around one-third of Sweden's population emigrated to the United States. I have walked through the pathetic hilly fields of northern Sweden, where farmers could do no better than stay alive. Nothing could be allowed to go to waste and even the most unpromising foodstuffs were consumed, largely because there was no choice. You salted, pickled, cured and stored underground all you could in the harvesting months and lived off the results in winter. This is the very essence of being Swedish.

And so despite the advent of prosperity, refrigeration and year-round farming, the Christmas food has stayed the same. "If it was good enough for our ancestors, it's good enough for us," is the attitude, and there are no exceptions, however repellent the fare. One particularly foul recipe involves soaking cod in lye (a preservative) and letting it dry out over the summer. When it's time to eat this dish - lutefisk to give it a name - you wash it frequently to remove the poisonous lye, boil what's

left and then tuck into the jellified remnants. The smell is so bad that, when my mother first sniffed it in our Stockholm apartment, she rang my father at work to tell him the sewers were leaking.

What I particularly appreciate about Swedish Christmas is that it shows you can do a great deal with relatively little. Above all, it encourages the skill of improvisation. You can create a perfectly good Swedish Christmas with imagination and just a handful of ingredients: a pig, some herring, a sprig of dill and plenty of potatoes.

The stark simplicity helps Swedes remember that Christmas is a time to give thanks and to celebrate the fact you made it through another 12 months. The season really kicks off on December 13, pretty much the shortest day of the year. This is when Swedes celebrate Sankta Lucia, a festival of light, simultaneously a beautiful occasion and blazing symbol of defiance against the dark.

Sankta Lucia starts before dawn when the eldest daughter of the household dons a long white robe, a red sash and a crown with real lighted candles before serving her parents coffee and special saffron cakes in bed. The custom has gradually mutated and there are now special occasions where long lines of young girls in white enter the room in single file before gathering to sing Christmas songs.

Once Lucia arrives, you can decorate the house and once again the emphasis is on simplicity. Not for tradition-loving Swedes the garish outdoor Santas and a thousand coloured lights of all shapes and sizes. Instead, there are special inverted wooden V-shaped candle holders in the windows; the closer you get to Christmas, the more candles you add at night. If you want to put up electric lights of any kind, they should be white.

The same approach governs the decoration of the Christmas tree, which is first decked with simple straw decorations such as angels, hearts and little baskets, the kind of ageless ornaments you can imagine impoverished subsistence farmers making for their children. Add white lights and several strings of blue-and-yellow flags and you're done. The tree and presents are guarded by the Julbock, a large straw goat

Christmas is celebrated on December 24 and it's usually a long, frustrating day for children, who only get their presents and marzipan pigs after massive bouts of feasting. The table is dominated by a home-cured ham covered in honey glaze, while nearby sit meatballs, pickled pigs' feet and oven-roasted pig ribs. There is every kind of herring imaginable, as well as the sublime *sillsalad*, a herring salad mixed up with vinegar, diced beets, pickled gherkins, apples, potatoes and as much dill as possible. I could eat this every day for a year.

Let's not forget the raw cured salmon, or *gravad lax*, complete with a pungent mustard-dill sauce. At the end of the meal, if you have any space, there is a rice pudding containing a whole almond. Tradition says whoever finds the hidden nut will be married within the year.

This is all washed down with *glögg* (pronounced glerg), a mulled wine that is allowed to stew gently for hours in a huge metal pot filled with cinnamon sticks, cloves, almonds and raisins.

Our family left Sweden for the last time when I was 11, but my mother kept alive the main traditions, and each December 13, wherever I happened to be, I'd bring in the iced pepparkakor for my delighted classmates. Nothing much has changed over the last 25 years, except that now it's my daughter taking the cookies to school each year and suddenly I'm the one icing the names, silently thanking the parents of Sean or Emma and reserving less charitable thoughts as I try to fit Marie-Christine or Louis-Philippe onto a small gingersnap. The boys now get moose, the girls angels.

Our family celebrates Christmas on the 24th. Although many of the Swedish customs still burn brightly, I have made one small change to ensure our Christmas remains calm and tear-free. My daughter does not have to kill her marzipan pig before eating it.

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The author (above) is the Reuters national political correspondent in Ottawa and the article was first published in The Ottawa Citizen in 2004.

