

Lina Sandell (1832-1903)
Per Harling
Uppsala, Sweden

Some years ago I made an important journey in my life. It all began with a phone call from a publisher in Sweden. They asked me if I could write a book about Lina Sandell, since Sweden in 2003 would remember her death 100 years earlier. I did not know much about her, but said YES after having checked my calendar.

That was the starting point of my journey. I took a couple of months off in my life, went to the library and read all I could find about Sweden in the 19th century politically, socially, religiously and culturally in order to find out in what kind of environment Lina Sandell grew up. Then I read all I could find about what already had been written about her (quite a few books) and letters that had been written by herself. And then I wrote my book about her and her fourteen hymns in the Swedish Hymnbook.

It became a journey in time to a very special and gifted woman of the 19th century and at the same time a journey to my own church and its development during the same century and a journey to my own modern Swedish history, very much born in the poor and devastated country by that time when so many Swedes immigrated to the USA. Finally it became a journey to my own family, since my mother – born in 1904, one year after the death of Lina Sandell (my mother had her 102 birthday party just a few weeks ago) – grew up in the second generation of the Mission Covenant Church, which in turn was established after a split within Evangeliska Fosterlandstiftelsen, the movement in which Lina Sandell was involved.

I would not say this journey changed my life, but it surely gave me many new perspectives on my life and my faith.

Lina Sandell was born in 1832 in the vicarage of Fröderyd, Småland. Her full name was Carolina Wilhelmina Sandell, a name she inherited from her brother – Carl Wilhelm – that had died the year before she was born. Lina's father Jonas Sandell had just begun his duty as a vicar in the parish of Fröderyd. Lina grew up together with three sisters and one brother.

Lina Sandell happened to be born into a turbulent time of many difficulties and change. The population in Sweden started to grow more and more. The famous bishop of Växjö at that time, Esaias Tegnér, once said as an explanation to the sudden population growth, that it was due to “the peace, the vaccine and the potatoes”. At the same time this growth created problems. More mouths needed more food in an environment where the poverty already was a big problem. The average length of life was 40 years, a figure equivalent to the average length of life in the poorest countries in the world of today!

People moved from the poor areas of the countryside to the cities, where they could find jobs. The cities started to grow like never before.

New liberal political ideas were maintained in the quite conservative country of that time.

New pietistic awakening movements disturbed the Lutheran State Church. Lina Sandell herself was part of this pietistic low church movement, especially when she got involved in “Evangeliska Fosterlandstiftelsen” (National Evangelical Institute), established in 1856.

New inventions revolutionized the way of living. An example: The king Oscar II was the first person to get an electric lamp installed in his working room in 1883. But it took many years before electricity was part of the average life. My mother remembers when she for the first time saw an electric lamp in 1908.

This means that Lina Sandell probably never wrote one word in the light of an electric lamp, but rather to tallow and wax candles.

Alcohol was consumed like never before. It was said that snaps were good for your health! People preferred to drink alcohol rather than water. Many people actually got their salary in snaps! Even priests drank. One of them were Peter Sellergren. After a religious crisis and conversion he became though one of the most wellknown and important keen advocates of temperance. And it was actually with the help of Peter Sellergren that Jonas Sandell – the father of Lina – experienced his spiritual break through and became a true and – and sober – pietist.

Even if “the peace, the vaccine and the potatoes” had given good conditions for a better survival, still many diseases were part of people’s lives and deaths. Cholera, tuberculosis and typhus fever took many, many lives during the 19th century. Lina herself was in periods very sick during her lifetime. Already as a small child she got the diagnosis typhus.

Thus Lina Sandell happened to live during one of the most turbulent and changing times in the history of Sweden. And with her pencil she interpreted and gave words to how faith could help people survive.

The life of Lina Sandell

Lina Sandell was a sick child, which made her stick more to her bed than to play around with her sisters and brother and their neighbour kids. Especially during her tenth and her eleventh year she was in a very bad state. The family thought many times that they would lose her. Maybe it was due to her feeble health that she so early demonstrated her thirst for knowledge. She very early (at the age of four-five) learned how to read and write. And she spent more time among the books in the working room of her father than among the stew-pans in the kitchen of her mother.

The books and her notebook became her closest friends in her unhealthy state of mind. I have often thought that it might even be her bad health that gave us such an important hymn writer as Lina Sandell. Already in her thirteenth year she had filled up her thick notebook with poems and serious reflections on the different aspects of life. They were called like “Reflections on the advantage of suffering” or “The illness and the health of the body”. Much of her focus in her early poetry was on the nature and the creation. When she was confirmed the focus changed. Her confirmation became a strong conversion experience for her and after that she focused more and more on two important themes: the salvation and the life in Jesus Christ and – secondly – the longing for heaven. All through her life these two themes would follow her.

At the age of 21 her first collection of poems was published, followed by one more two years later. The collections had no author’s name though. She did not want to pride herself upon her writing. “Soli deo Gloria”. All glory to God alone. Her poems and her other writings began to be published in different Christian papers anonymously until one editor started to put her initials L.S. underneath her poems. And so it came to be. During her whole life she never put anything else but her initials L.S. beneath her writings. Here I have – as one example – the

first one out of three books of her collected songs. It was published in 1882 and the title says: "Samlade sånger av L.S." (Collected songs by L.S.). I noticed that even in the register in the old song book of the Augustana Synod – Hemlandssånger – Lina Sandell never is mentioned in full name, only by L.S. in the 117 hymn texts by her.

The sisters and the brother of Lina Sandell all got married and moved away from the vicarage in Fröderyd, and she lived alone with her father and mother. She worked more and more as her father's secretary. When Lina was 26 years old her father suddenly died, drowned before her eyes in the waves of lake Vättern, and two years later also her mother died. She was alone not knowing what to do. People at the newly established office of Evangeliska Fosterlandstiftelsen in Stockholm knew about her and her capacity as a writer and in 1861 they offered her an appointment at their office where they wanted her to "work with translations and other literary work". With a trembling heart she said yes and moved to the Swedish capital.

In practice Lina Sandell became Sweden's first successful female head of a publishing house. She would never have called herself the head of it, but rather what other called her: "Stiftelsens lilla piga", which means "The little maid of the Institute".

Her working capacity was almost unbelievable (remember she was a weak person). During her 40 years at the office of "Evangeliska Fosterlandstiftelsen" she wrote more than 2.000 songs (Martin Luther wrote 37, Johan Olof Wallin, the main hymn writer in the Church of Sweden in the beginning of the 19th century, wrote 160 hymns, Anders Frostenson, who died last spring almost 100 years old, the main hymn writer during the last century, wrote 600 hymns). During 37 years she was the editor for a Christian Calendar, *Korsblomman* (show it!), where each calendar contained more than 200 pages. During all years she was the editor of many papers and materials for children. She wrote biographies and spiritual pamphlets, she translated stories and songs from English, German and even Latin texts (she never went to a school, her father had been her teacher). She was the head editor for many hymn- and song collections for grown ups as well as for children. She published her poetry in several collections. And – above all – she wrote thousands of letters to the members of her family and friends. Towards the end of her life she wrote to a good friend: "I am so absent-minded, so tired and so 'out-written'! I am not surprised!

At the age of 35 Lina Sandell got married to the wholesale dealer Oscar Berg, who was seven years younger than her. He had for many years been assiduous in his attentions to her, but she had rejected his love. In letters to some of her friends she reflected on his attentions to her and why she rejected him. And between the lines you may read and understand that she thought that Oscar Berg might become a rival to her first love: Jesus Christ! Her mentor, a good friend from Jönköping, told her in a long letter that he thought that her heart could embrace *both* Jesus and Oscar and finally she said yes to Oscar. Reading the letters around this matter (and about her deep love for Jesus) made me think that if Lina had lived in another country like Italy, France or Spain at the same time, I am almost sure that she had considered to become a nun!

Oscar and Lina never became parents. A scholar found out as late as in the 1980's that Lina actually gave birth to a girl one year after the marriage, but the baby was born dead, and after that they never got any more children. Lina Sandell loved children though. She had a lot of contact with the many children of her sisters and brother and much of her writing was made for the children. Maybe no one else gave the children so many materials to lean on in their

faith journey as Lina Sandell in these times, when children not were seen as fully members of the society (or the church!).

In 1903, 70 ye ars old, having outlived all her sisters and brother, she died. It is said that her last words were some words she had used over and over again in her hymns: “Now I throw all my sorrow on Jesus”.

Now, let’s sing!

The oldest hymn by Lina Sandell in our hymn book is “Tryggare kan ingen vara” (Children of the heav’nly Father). She probably wrote it when she was only seventeen-eighteen years old. By the end of the 1840s and the beginning of the 50s Europe was on a change. Many felt that a new time was coming. In France the February revolution riots in 1848 had spread to other European cities, including Stockholm. Sweden had in 1850 sent troops to help Denmark, which combated a rebellion in Scheswig-Holstein in Germany. The conservative ideas of the king Karl IV was superseded by strong liberal forces, who wanted to completely change the Swedish society. In 1848 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their revolutionary thoughts in *The Communist Manifest*. The industrialism took more and more place in the agricultural Sweden.

In the midst of these revolutionary and turbulent processes of the times a small and sick Lina Sandell sat in her favourite ash-tree in the garden of the vicarage and wrote about the safety of the faithful crowd. Her first text said nothing about children, only about the faithful crowd of Christians through the history. The first verse started: “No one can be safer than the faithful little crowd”. Probably she thought of the martyrs of the Christian story. Later an editor changed her text and put in the image of children. Thus it became a song *for* children. Today it is *the* baptism hymn in Sweden. Almost no baptism can take place without this hymn. That means that it is the most sung hymn of all during a year. In the Church of Sweden about 65.000 baptisms take place every year. If ten people attend every baptism it means that much more than half a million Swedes sing this hymn during a year. It is actually quite astonishing that this hymn has become a baptism hymn, since it does not say anything about baptism. And the Swedish text is full of pictures and metaphors derived from the Biblical story, who almost nobody of the young families knows of anymore in the very secular Sweden. But still it is sung and loved. Let us sing it!

Hymn: Children of the heav’nly Father

The theology of Lina Sandell

What made Lina Sandell write what she wrote? Much of her influence came from her father Jonas Sandell. He was himself very much influenced by the Moravian (Herrnhut) movement from the 18th century in Germany, where the pietistic language was very intimate (sometimes even erotic) and where the theological focus very much was on the shed blood of Jesus, which we sometimes call “blood mysticism”. One of the most used song books in her home probably was “Sions sånger” (The songs of Sion). In its index it very much followed the classical order of grace:

- The voice of God and the call of grace
- The intercessional prayer of Jesus
- The knowledge of the misery of sin
- The graceful voice of the gospel
- Longing for grace
- About the birth of Jesus

- About the suffering of Jesus
- About the blood of Jesus
- About the resurrection of Jesus
- About the ascension of Jesus
- About the true and living faith
- Etc

If you look more carefully at the different themes in the index you will see something interesting, related to the theology of Lina Sandell.

- Under the theme “About the birth of Jesus” there are 3 songs.
- Under the theme “About the suffering of Jesus” there are 32 songs!
- Under the theme of “About the blood of Jesus” there are 4 songs.
- Under the theme of “About the resurrection of Jesus” there is only *one* song!

Thus the main focus is on the suffering of Jesus. If you consider this fact in relationship to the lifelong suffering of Lina Sandell you may see how Lina’s own theology has grown into a trust – in the midst of her own suffering – in the redeeming and suffering Christ. There she finds the hope of her redemption.

Apart of “The songs of Sion” two more important song books were published in Sweden at that time: “The new Songs of Sion” and “Pilgrim Songs”. Even these two books have probably stimulated the writings of Lina Sandell. If “The Songs of Sion” stand for the Moravian heritage “The new Songs of Sion” stand for a more Swedish pietistic heritage. The song book “Pilgrim Songs” on the other hand is much more carried by the anglosachsian heritage (the Wesleyan heritage). The Swedish collections are more focused on the passion theme, while the English song tradition more focus on the joy and the praise themes. In her younger years Lina Sandell was more influenced by the Moravian and the Swedish pietistic movements, while she – growing older – opened herself more and more to the joyful anglo-sachsian heritage.