

Gertrud Grenander Nyberg (1912–2003) in memoriam

When I first met Gertrud Grenander Nyberg in the early 1950's, as an undergraduate attending the seminars of Professor Sigurd Erixon, she was already an authority sitting in the front of the small lecture room in the villa owned by *Nordiska museet* at Lusthusporten. She had gained her licentiate in 1950 with a treatise on the textile industry in Sweden that had arisen out of a commission from the Technical Museum and was summarized in two papers (Grenander Nyberg 1946, 1948). It was not common at that time for an ethnologist to study industrial work, and her thesis did not gain very much credit, but her paper of 1948 was reprinted in 1983.

When she started her career in the early 1930's, her plan was to become a teacher in textiles, but at that time Sweden, like many other countries, was suffering from an economic depression and no work was available for her. So instead she took up studying archaeology (under Professor Sune Lindqvist) and art history (under Professor Gregor Paulsson) at Uppsala University, and later ethnology, an activity sponsored by *Nordiska museet* in Stockholm and led by Professor Sigurd Erixon.

The commission she received from the Technical Museum was one of her first paid jobs, but the fact that she managed to extend it into a scientific investigation shows her great ability in scientific work. One of her sources of inspiration was the American tradition of industrial studies with which she became familiar when she accompanied her husband to Chicago in 1947. He was studying meteorology and later became head of the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute,

SMHI. At the University of Chicago, Gertrud Grenander Nyberg came into contact with the Chicago School of sociology, where anthropologists and sociologists studied the relations between people in industrial companies or local societies. She then brought the new trend to Stockholm and even persuaded Professor

Erixon to take some of the literature she had discovered in Chicago into the regular ethnology courses.

It was also Sigurd Erixon who proposed that she should broaden her studies, i.e. leave textiles for a while. So instead she took up another industrial topic, the study of August Falk's small pork and butchery industry in the south of Stockholm. In this work which she handed over to Stockholm's City Museum, she could really practise this new kind of industrial ethnology which she had brought to Sweden, and it has later been credited as a pioneer work (Högdahl 1996). This also gave her the credentials necessary to be allowed to work for a doctorate, but it was only in 1985 that she obtained the financial support necessary to publish a report on

this work (Grenander Nyberg 1985)!

Meanwhile, she returned to textiles and completed a dissertation in 1974 "On looms in country homes" (Sw. *Lanthemmens vävstolar*, Grenander Nyberg 1974), in which she studied the productions of textiles in country households in Sweden and the tools used for this. The long time that she took to complete her thesis was due not only to looking after her growing family with three daughters, but also to the fact that she had produced 40 minor papers and reviews since



Gertrud Grenander Nyberg at her home, on the occasion of her 90th birthday in July 2002. Photo by Leif Engberg, Pressens Bild.

her licentiate, demonstrating her broad interests in ethnology. After her dissertation she went on publishing several papers every year, now perhaps concentrating more on textiles and textile tools. She had no position, but worked in a freelance capacity.

It was at this time that we renewed our connection, when she contacted me after she had been commissioned to publish the important organic material from the *Wurtensiedlung* Elisenhof in North Friesland. She did this work in collaboration with Mathias Szabó, chief curator at *Nordiska museet*, and Janken Myrdal, at that time a student of economic history specializing in agrarian activities (Szabó, Grenander Nyberg & Myrdal 1985). The old agrarian culture of Sweden had been well documented since Arthur Hazelius founded *Nordiska museet*, and Gertrud Grenander Nyberg was a true heiress of this tradition, but I believe that she added to it her long-standing interest in the details of *how* the tools used in the work functioned.

Her detailed study of the wooden tools and pieces of leather found at Elisenhof has indeed given archaeologists a new and hitherto rather unknown body of material. In particular I have noted the occurrence of a wooden cylindrical churn for butter making, the oldest one known in Northern Europe, and many tools for preparing textiles of various kinds. The loom at Elisenhof was a warp-weighted one, but in another paper (Grenander Nyberg 1984) she published a description of a piece of a shaft loom with treadles from the nearby Viking Age town of Hedeby (Haithabu).

Striking evidence for how the frequency of an item is dependent on the preservation conditions is provided by the abundance of leather sheaths for knives that were found at the site, in contrast to the few actual knives, because of the bad conservation of iron in the marsh. Mostly we find only iron knives in archaeological excavations, but not the sheaths!

When Gertrud Grenander Nyberg took up the study of Elisenhof it also meant that she became a frequent guest in our seminars at the Archaeological Research Laboratory. She was never granted the status of

docent (reader), however, as the faculty at Stockholm University rejected her application on the grounds of age, but she now began to act as a true reader, discussing seminar papers and instructing students in textiles and other organic materials. She did this work solely out of interest, and went on until her very last year. We are all indebted to Gertrud Grenander Nyberg for the knowledge she brought to us.

She reviewed new archaeological finds or treatises on archaeological textile material, and her publication list from 1985 until her 80th birthday in 1992 comprises around 80 papers, of which a good third are reviews of archaeological items or publications.

Not only the greatness of her work but also her sense of humour and quick, often witty remarks and intelligent questions will live for ever in our memory.

Kista, January 2005
Birgit Arrhenius

English language revision by Malcolm Hicks.

References

- Grenander Nyberg, G. 1946. Sömnadsindustrien. En översikt av dess uppkomst och utveckling i Sverige. *Daedalus* 1946, pp. 75–132.
- Grenander Nyberg, G. 1948. Organisation och arbetsfördelning inom den svenska sömnadsindustrin omkring 1900. *Liv och folkkultur*, band 1, pp. 11–128. Reprinted in 1983.
- Grenander Nyberg, G. 1974. *Lanthemmens vävstolar. Studier av äldre redskap för husbehovsvävning*, Nordiska museets handlingar 84. Stockholm.
- Grenander Nyberg, G. 1984. Eine Schaftrolle aus Haithabu als Teil eines Trittwebstuhl mit waagerecht gespannter Kette. *Berichte über die Ausgrabungen in Haithabu*, Band 19, pp. 145–150. Neumünster.
- Grenander Nyberg, G. 1985. *En charkuterifabrik med tradition. En folklivsskildring från 50-talets Stockholm*. Monografier utgivna av Stockholms stad nr 64. Stockholm.
- Högdahl, E. 1996. "Det som inte gjordes mest" Om Sigurd Erixon, Gertrud Grenander Nyberg och forskning i etnologins utkanter. Seminar paper in ethnology, Lund University. Lund.
- Szabó, M., Grenander Nyberg, G. & Myrdal, J. 1985. *Die frühgeschichtlichen Marschensiedlung beim Elisenhof in Eiderstedt*. Band 5. Frankfurt am Main.