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Swedish Lapland - As a Hosteler Saw It

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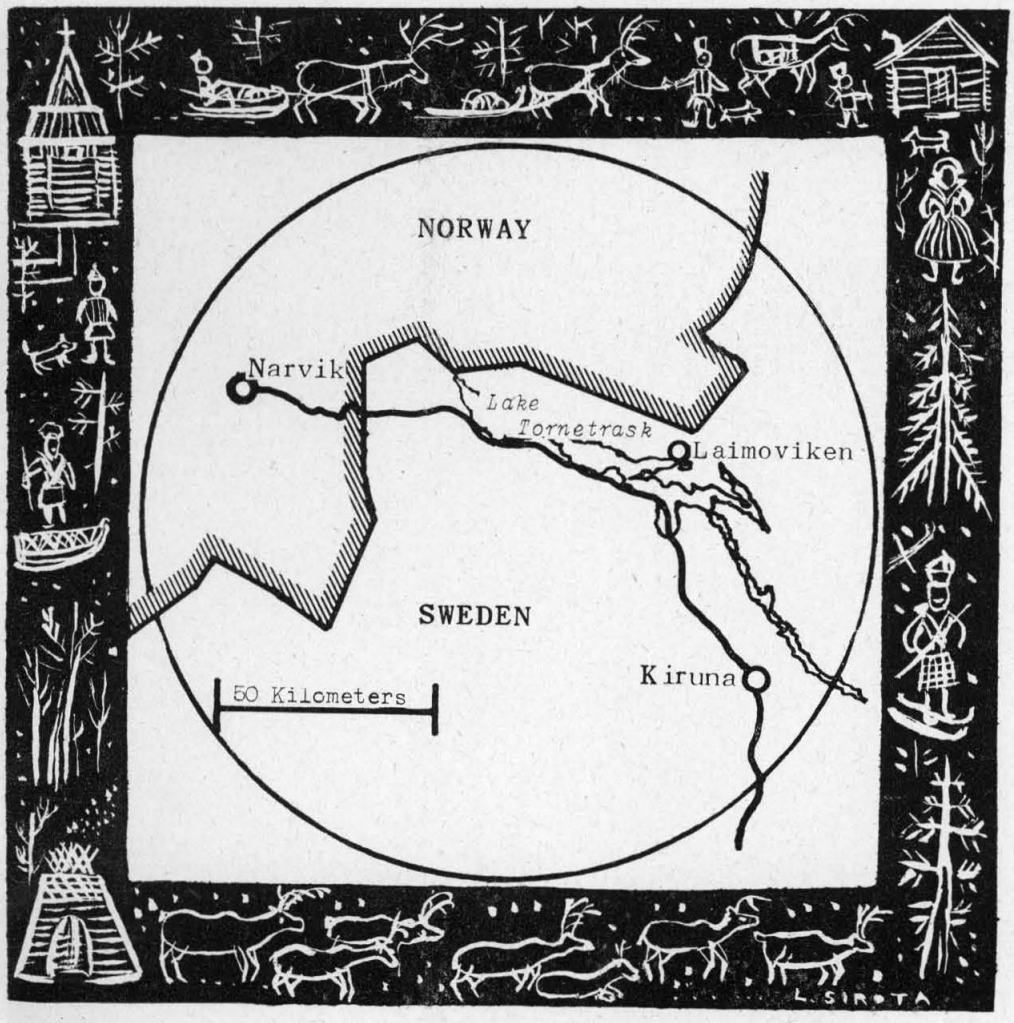

SWEDISH

by Joel M. Halpern

THE train had just left Kiruna, the last stop before Narvik. It was a mid-September morning, the snow had just begun to fall from a bleak, grey sky. From the train one saw nothing but a stretch of barren Arctic tundra. I felt more depressed than at any time since I had left home three months ago. In the past few days I had been completely frustrated in my attempts to visit with the Nomad Lapps, and now that I was leaving the country I had to abandon any hope of doing so.

At last I let my eyes wander from the temporarily barren landscape and across the aisle I noticed two men talking. One of them was a Lapp dressed in the traditional costume with a hat of blue, red and yellow stripes surmounted by a huge red tassel. He wore a jacket of the same material and coloring and around his waist a wide black belt. His companion was a man of medium height with a long, thin and very serious face, dressed in conventional European sport clothing. On the small table between them was a knife in a sheath of carved reindeer bone, and they seemed to be discussing the various artistic qualities of the knife very earnestly.

In a short time my never-easily-restrained curiosity overcame me; I got up and walked over to them. Since my Pidgin Swedish is poor I asked them what I thought was a boorish and rhetorical question, "Do you speak English?" To my amazament the man with the serious face replied with characteristic Swedish modesty, "Yes, a little." I was surprised because, although many Swedes speak excellent English, I was traveling in a remote region and on a slow, antiquated train that stopped at every station and served only the local people. After a few moments of preliminaries, my new acquaintance turned out to be Rector Wallmark, the head of a Lapp High School whom I had previously been in touch with in my efforts to see the Lapps.

He was going to visit several villages in the vicinity of Lake Tornetrask in the hope of persuading some of the children of eligible age to attend the high school at Jokkmok. "Would you like to accompany him?" Of course, but having made no plans for an undertaking of this kind I was completely unprepared. The rector assured me, however, that the Lapps we would visit would provide us with all the necessities, and it required no more convincing. So at a little station called Stenbacken on the shore of Lake Tornetrask, we got off our third class car on that fourth class train and began our journey.

WE WERE met by one of the men who lived in the village of Laimoviken, the first Lapp settlement to which we were going. Our guide was exceedingly short, just a little over five feet, with a weather-beaten face that made him look much older than his forty years. He led us down to his boat by the shore of the lake. After stowing our gear I put on all the clothes I could find since I was told it would be a long and cold trip. This proved to be all too true, and although I had on five layers of clothing, the cold winds chilled me to the bone. The old outboard motor worked pretty well, and a few hours later we arrived.

LAPLAND—*As a Hosteler Saw It*

The "village" turned out to be a group of several cabins and turf huts spread out for some distance along the shore of the lake. What an impressive setting! Lake Tornetrask is surrounded by high mountains (composed largely of granite and quartzite), bare at their summits but with birch and pine trees covering the lower slopes. The leaves were turning to those beautiful shades of orange and yellow which we associate with our mid-latitude autumn. Here in the Arctic the autumn comes and goes quickly, lasting only a few weeks in late August and part of September. It was my good fortune to be there at the peak of this season.

Our intended host, Olaf Turi, was not at home, but his mother and a young girl were, so we were able to make arrangements for food and lodging for the duration of our stay. After a lunch of broiled trout, dried reindeer meat, sweet cake, milk and coffee, we wandered out to look over the village. The house in which we were lodged was of frame construction and painted red just like many other farmhouses in northern Sweden. All Lapps are not so well off, however. Many live in the turf huts called *Kotas* all the year round, while the true nomads live in tents which they move as they follow their reindeer.

LOOKING around Laimoviken, I was to observe the various types of *Kotas* which the Lapps use for a variety of purposes. About fifty yards in front of the house where we were staying was the Turi's summer *Kota*. The outside is of blocks of turf, supported by logs and cross beams on the inside. The interior of their summer home is quite simple but relatively well furnished. They have a wooden floor, a table, a few chairs and benches, and one or two of the ornately carved and colorfully decorated chests typical of the Lapps. This cultural trait of having two houses, one for each major season, has possibly been borrowed from the neighboring Swedish farmers who also have two homes next to one another.

Other *Kotas* which I saw were used for smoking reindeer meat and for storing goods; some of the larger ones are used as barns. In my tour of the settlement there was one *Kota* which was temporarily barred to me. After some discussion I was finally permitted to go inside. All that I saw were several kegs full of salted fish. It seems that the fish represented a large part of the owner's winter supply of food and, consequently, a considerable portion of his world wealth. To ask to see his fish was somewhat analogous to asking one of our friends to show us his bank account.

In the next few days I visited another village, Vuoshojame, located very near the Swedish-Norwegian border. This village is reached only by a narrow, rocky trail over the mountains, by means of which everything the people need must be brought in on the backs of men or horses.

Many of the Lapp herdsmen are exceedingly intelligent people and are anxious to acquire more knowledge. The Lapps have their own newspaper, and several men whom I met were taking correspondence courses in English and German. It seemed curious to find reindeer herdsmen using their spare moments to study English grammar!

In Jokkmok I was able to visit the "Nomad Schools" which the Lapp children attend during the winter months. It was a great surprise for me to find not the one or two turf huts I had expected but a large, modern school building that would do credit even to a prosperous American town. The facilities there are superb. It was strange to see these little Nomads accustoming themselves to running water, toothbrushes, fluorescent lighting, and the thousands of conveniences that go to make up our own modern civilization.

Here the children are taught to read and write Swedish as well as the customary grammar school subjects. They have their own textbooks especially designed to orient the young Lapp children to the outside world. So that their own civilization may be preserved, the boys are taught how to carve from reindeer bone and the girls how to weave bright colored cloth in traditional patterns. Near the school are turf huts and even a miniature reindeer corral which enable the children to maintain close contact with their native culture.

ONE of the most interesting experiences in Lapland was attending a reindeer roundup. Since to a very large degree the Laplander's life revolves about this animal, these affairs are among the most important in their lives. Even school children are given a holiday so that they may attend. The herds of animals are rounded up and driven into a corral usually located near a village. New fawns are earmarked, by cutting the appropriate design in their ears. Many of the bulls are castrated so that they may be made more docile and used to haul sledges.

A certain number of animals are selected for slaughtering to provide a portion of the winter's supply. They are killed quickly and efficiently. They are put on their backs and skinned. The meat is cut up and hung up on racks to dry in the sun. The blood remains in the reindeer's stomach and is drained off into the stomach bladder and dried to be used later in making puddings.

Even the children try to help, mimicking the work of their elders. Little boys and girls try to lasso young calves. Quite often they pick one too big and are dragged about until someone removes the lasso from the reindeer. It was my dubious privilege to sit on several reindeer to keep them down while their antlers were being cut off.

All too soon it came time for me to begin my long journey home. I traveled by seaplane to the nearest rail line and from there three days by train to Oslo, and then to Paris and home by plane.

Drawings by Leonard Sirota

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