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# Sankta Lucia, med ljus i hår...

BY NILS R. CASPERSSON

The church lights or the hall lights dim. Soft singing in Swedish begins:

*“Sankta Lucia, Sankta Lucia, Se, på vår tröskel står, vitklädd med ljus i hår, Sankta Lucia, Sankta Lucia”* (Look, at our threshold stands, White-clad with light in her hair).

The reverent Lucia Procession proceeds to the front of the nave—a young girl/woman, Sankta Lucia, leads, representing her community and village, wearing a long white robe with a red sash and a candle wreath (now mostly electric!) in her hair. She carries a lighted candle, sometimes a silver tray set, sometimes her hands in prayer. The candle wreath may have provided necessary light for the original Lucia who carried food and clothing to the poor.

Following Lucia are other girls singing in white robes, usually with green or silver sashes, and carrying candles (also electric). They are the Lucia handmaidens (*tärnor*). Starboys (*stjärngossar*) follow sometimes, with long pointed hats decorated with gold stars, and with some of them carrying staffs with lighted stars (yes, electric!). Younger children follow dressed as *tomtar*—some may be bakers or gingerbread men, others are very junior Lucia *tärnor*.

The Lucia choir may then sing traditional Swedish songs and melodies, recite prayers and stories, or perform on musical instruments that apply only to the coming Yuletide season, beginning in early December with the first of the four Sundays of Advent,

anticipating the arrival of Christmas.

The Sankta Lucia festival has become a celebration of light with many different sources of Scandinavian and Northern European folklore and mythology. Most point to the Winter Solstice, the evening of longest hours of darkness with the day's shortest sunlight, originally December 13. The holiday took hold during Sweden's Catholic period, somewhere between 1000–1500 AD, and is still honored today with parades and family celebrations on December 13. The winter solstice, though, is on December 21 now. (There was a change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar for Sweden (and the United States and United Kingdom) in the mid-18th century, which essentially pushed the calendar forward to account for leap days.)

It is clear that there was a young woman from Syracuse, Italy, early in the 4th century, named Lucia who was martyred for her faith and recognized as one of the most notable female saints of the early Christian Church. According to the old Julian calendar, December 13, the date traditionally given for St. Lucia's martyrdom, was also the longest night of the year. St. Lucia—whose name comes from the Latin word for light—became a symbol of light, and her feast day merged naturally with preexisting winter solstice traditions.

The pre-Christian holiday of Yule, or *jól*, in the Northern European-Germanic-Old Norse, also in the 4th century, was the most important holiday in Scandinavia and Northern Europe. Originally, an observance of the winter solstice and the rebirth of the sun, it brought about many practices



Rochester, New York, Sankta Lucia choir 2019. *Front row, left to right:* Carolina Romand, Aydriana Romand, Adelaide Arnold, Elin Astrid Ozimek, Marilyn Terpening. *Middle row, left to right:* Margaret Liljedahl, Grace Olivo, Liv Caspersson, Tristan Caspersson, Karen Reichert. *Back row:* Alaina Reichert as Lucia. Photo by Vicki Caspersson.



Lucia from Skansen, near Stockholm, 1899

that remain in Advent and Christmas celebrations today. The Yule season was a time for feasting, drinking, gift-giving, and gatherings, but also the season of awareness and fear of the forces of the dark.

The celebration of Lucia as we know it in Sweden did not begin until 1764, when the first recorded Lucia dressed in white made the rounds at a manor in Västergötland province. The now famous

Lucia celebrations at the Skansen open air museum in Gamla Stan, Stockholm, were first held in 1893. From there, the custom of Lucia processions began to spread to schools and local organizations. Not until the 20th century did Lucia celebrations fully take root, greatly aided by the modern mass media. Ulf Martenssen, editor/publisher of *Nordstjernen*, explained, “Sankta Lucia was very much a family affair. Children participated actively, and at times, Father Christmas visited unexpectedly after the Recession and dinners were finished!”

Swedish (former Klippan Vasa Lodge #4) and Norwegian (Scandinavian Heritage Society, District 3, #433) communities in the Rochester, New York area have celebrated the Sankta Lucia Festival since the 1930s. The 50th sustaining anniversary of the Rochester Lucia was celebrated in 2008. Several different venues have hosted the festival, including the Rochester Redman Club; Forty and Eight Club; Fairport United Methodist Church, Fairport, New York; the Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word, Rochester, New York; and the Lake Avenue Baptist Church, Rochester, New York. Area girls from the Rochester area who have portrayed Lucia include Alaina Reichert, 2019; Adrianna Reichert,

2018; Grace Olivo, 2017; Liv Caspersson, 2016; Margaret Liljedahl, Melanie Antes, 2008; Cori Terpening/Rainbeaux, Karen Reichert, 1964; Gulvie Ericksson, 1963; Aydriana Romand, Carolina Romand, and Karin Campe.

The Fairport Swedish Group and the Sons of Norway/Scandinavian Heritage Society collaborated several times for grand evenings of lutefisk dinner and Lucia, attracting larger audiences similar to celebrations still found in native Scandinavia. Audience members are always encouraged to participate in the next year’s events, especially the children. Marilyn Terpening, Lucia music conductor, for more than 15 years, noted, “We always want younger children and high school students to participate. Learning a bit of the Swedish language isn’t difficult and at the end of the dances, everyone is laughing!!”

Following the equally reverent Lucia Recessional, audience and family members are encouraged by the choir to participate in a variety of Swedish folk dances and the very long line weaving dance, followed by a smorgasbord of home-baked holiday cookies, saffron buns, ginger *pepperkrakor*, cakes, coffee, and more.

Swedish traditions like the Sankta Lucia event help maintain a reverence for the past. This acknowledgment of the Winter Solstice proves how observant and aware that our ancestors were and how significant and important that community and family are. It is that reverence that makes us look forward to the arrival of each Christmas/Jultide season. ▼

*Note: The 2020 Rochester Sankta Lucia celebration was cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions.*

Nils R. Caspersson is a retired New York State teacher with a background in folk arts studies, particularly Swedish/Scandinavian. He also writes for *Nordstjernen*, a Swedish-American newsmagazine from New York City. Photo courtesy of the author.



1848 Swedish magazine Lucia illustration.

### Barbie’s Gingersnaps, A modern *pepperkrakor*

- 3/4 c. shortening
- 1 c. sugar
- 1/4 c. light molasses
- 1 egg
- 2 c. flour
- 2 t. soda
- 1/4 t. salt
- 3/4–1 t. each, cinnamon, cloves, ginger

Combine and place medium-sized rounds on cookie sheet. Bake in 350° oven until modestly firm. Lightly sprinkle with sugar while still hot. Serve with coffee.

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