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## **Sensitive sources and emphatetic reading**

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This paper discusses letter-writing in a reform school context. I focus on the letters composed by girls in a reform school "Vuorela", from which opens a unique path to a history of juvenile institutions - but also to the lives and reasoning of young women themselves, and the opportunities available to them as they progressed to adulthood in the reformatory environment. In the reformatory also letter-writing served the goal of moulding the girls into an acceptable female adulthood. Expectations concerning female behaviour and procedures through which the institution aimed at re-structuring the girls' identities along acceptable guidelines are present in the ways the girls expressed themselves.

In this paper special emphasis is laid on ethical issues concerning the use of such sensitive and intimate sources as personal letters. How to treat gently enough this kind of material? How to do justice to the people, whose lives I am using in my research? The paper is based on my PhD work-in-progress, which discusses the historical construction of gender-specific conceptions of delinquency on one hand in the public debate and on the other hand in the Finnish reform school practices at the first half of the 20th century.

### **The Reform School "Vuorela" and it's inmates**

Founded 1893 and located in Nummela, Vuorela served as a first and until 1940's also the only state reformatory for girls in Finland. The institution was founded as a result of reforms in criminal policy: young lawbreakers under 15 years of age were to be sentenced to new reformatories, whose methods were based on education instead of punishment, at least in principle.

Vuorela was designated only for girls (7-15 years old), most of them convicted for crimes in the court of justice. In addition to them, a

certain number of girls whose placing was requested by their parents, guardians or most commonly by municipal authorities, due to their disorderly behaviour, were admitted as well. Until the 1920's the number of convicted girls exceeded the number of those accepted by petition. However, the proportion of these girls was increasing. By the 1930's the majority of inmates in all Finnish reformatories were sentenced to reformatories on the basis of child welfare, and no longer due to criminal legislation. Finland has followed the "Scandinavian model" of treating delinquent children, emphasizing the child welfare system instead of youth custody. The very role of reformatory schools has been to specialize in the treatment of troublemaking youth by using the methods of social work and education as well as isolation and discipline to some extent. (See e.g. Siltanen 1990; Pösö 1993)

Girls that were sentenced to the reformatory by court conviction and by petition didn't differ much from each other. Majority of the girls were convicted for stealing or petty larceny. Of the total number of 184 girls sentenced to Vuorela by court conviction between 1894-1919 only 24 had been convicted for something else than crimes against property (e.g. arson, homicide or sexual offence). In the applications of girls assigned to the reformatory by petition, the single most commonly noted factor was also petty larceny. The background and family circumstances of these girls seem quite similar too: poverty; negligence of school; loitering out on the streets; untruthfulness, slandering and other behaviour, which was described as disturbing by teachers or neighbours; and finally parents and their incompetence to raise their children according to the standards set by authorities. The aforementioned reasons are mentioned in applications written by local authorities, reports of the crime proceedings and verdicts.

Most of the girls sentenced to Vuorela had already encountered several other procedures - many of them had, for example, been placed to foster homes, but the placement hadn't been successful. Most of the girls taken into Vuorela were 13-15 years old, some of them even younger than 10 years of age, and they were kept in the reformatory until they were young women, 18-20 years of age. In the reformatory they got their primary school -education and attended the confirmation school. The older girls attended also various practical courses aimed to facilitate their capability to support themselves in the future. Usually this education included handicraft (weaving etc.), housework or livestock rearing. Like in many other similar institutions, the role for which girls were mainly prepared was one of a domestic servant or housewife. Before leaving the institution most of the girls were sent "on parolee" as domestic servants in respectable families. A small minority of the most "successful" girls with best grades continued their studies in some other schools (for example in rural homemaking schools or folk high schools). When the time came for leaving the institution, the girls either returned to their homes and relatives or were positioned to jobs arranged by the reformatory - again mainly as maids. This has been quite a typical life-course for girls in various child care institutions of that era. Girls who ended up in reformatories and orphanages came from lower classes and were brought up to be servants. Both class and gender restricted their lives. (See e.g. Bjurman 1995; Alexander 1998; Söderlind 1999.)

## Letter-writing in a reform school

When exploring such delicate topics as delinquency, the researcher faces many ethical questions, which are no less complicated in historical research than they are in research concerning young people of today; in fact quite the contrary. To some extent the historian has an even more powerful position as an interpreter: the people whose history he/she is writing, are not present to tell their own stories, which sets new responsibilities upon the historian's shoulders. The central ethical question in my study relates to the "disorderly", "delinquent" or "wayward" girls themselves. How could I make them visible in my research and at the same time do justice to them? How could I avoid neither labelling the once so strictly labelled "delinquent" girls nor reducing them merely to passive objects of policies? I wouldn't like to be the last one in the long chain of judges estimating them, nor would I like to make them just "victims of unfortunate circumstances". Is there any other role vacant for the girls themselves in the studies written about the repressive mechanism they faced?

My sources constitute of archive material collected by the reformatory personnel. I have beautifully hand written letters, files and reports about the inmates written by the reformatory personnel, as well as verdicts, statements and reports composed by girls' previous teachers, municipal authorities or police authorities etc. All of these are sources in which the girls themselves - objects of all proceedings - have very little to say. The risk that the girls themselves are superseded since most of the sources are composed by authorities is always close in a study like mine. Fortunately, alongside with the documents composed by officials I also have some material composed by the inmates. During their sentence in the reformatory the inmates' correspondence was under a careful censorship. All letters that girls received or wrote were carefully read and censors could refuse to pass letters that might upset or undermine the inmates' reform. The personnel in Vuorela also copied extracts of those letters in order to observe the inmates' development in the institution. These copies have been retained: there are five notebooks filled with closely hand written extracts, some of the letters copied in their full extent, plus the personnel's comments about hundreds of intimate letters in the archive. Thanks to this censorship, considered today as harsh, I have some material that provides a narrow, but interesting entrance to the girls' own reasoning.

As recent studies on the history of letter-writing have proven, letters have not been as intimate and spontaneous form of communication as we might assume. Like any other communication it is restricted by cultural guidelines, i.e. practices that restrain and channel the individual writing into commonly shared forms. (See e.g. Chartier, Boureau & Dauphin, 1997; Barton & Hall 1999). Letters written under such exceptional circumstances as in a reformatory environment have been composed under multiple limitations, but also expectations. In letters to their families the girls may have for example disguised their sentiments or activities as they wrote down what they thought the officials wanted to hear or tried to protect their privacy and independence. These letters open a path to a history of

expectations, orders and instructions rather than one of urges and desires (Compare: Alexander 1998.)

Nevertheless, the inmates' efforts to portray and explain themselves provide important clues about the otherwise often implicit or hidden practices and goals of the reformatory education. In their letters the girls for example describe their life in the reformatory, but also those homes and people they have left behind when entering Vuorela. Letters are filled with nostalgic memories, homesickness and questions concerning family members. Along with everyday news and future plans the girls discuss the incidents that had led to their sentence. They try to reason what has happened and at the same time they often - consciously or not - try to convince the receiver (if not the censor above all) of their willingness and efforts to reformation. In their letters the girls present illuminating narratives of themselves as offenders: fallen, penitent or incorrigible etc. The traditional question of what is true and what is false, is not necessarily the most relevant one. Sometimes the "fictional" autobiographical narrative presented by a reformatory inmate may be even more interesting and revealing than the "factual" events behind the narrative.

As an example I enclose extracts of letters written by a Swedish-speaking girl, born in 1902 and sentenced to Vuorela in 1913. Both letters have been sent to her parents. Abridgments have been made by the reformatory personnel and marked with "----".

3.11.1916.

Älskade Egna! ----

---- Jag har väntat tre år att få se Eder. Jag väntar nog fast tre år till. Men efter tre år så får mamma ett paket.

Mamma får mig hem.

Och när jag kommer hem, så får mamma vila, från allt arbete, jag sköter nog om allt som behövs. Jag sköter om korna och lagar mat och gör allt vad mamma behöver.

Mamma gjorde så mycket arbete när jag var hemma.

Mamma gjorde för mig också många gånger. Mamma!

Sedan så gör jag allt för Mamma! - Jag har så många gånger tänkt: om jag skulle vara hemma, så nog skulle jag kunna vara snäll och flitig!

Jag mår nog bra. Hälsa alla från mig.

Eder lilla [namn]

(Translation in English)

The above mentioned homesickness and efforts to reinforce the affinity between the child and her parents - especially mother - are clearly visible in the first letter. Like Roger Chartier (1997, 18-19) has stated, many family letters take as their main topic the path that binds the correspondents. Over the long run, family correspondences create a sediment, a basis of memory. The existence of letters criss-crossing between family members is a prime means of safeguarding links that distance places in jeopardy.

On the other hand, the letter reveals also something about the expectations that the reform school had for example on children's relationship to their parents. A good girl respected her parents and regret her wrongdoings. In her letter the young inmate is desperately describing herself as "*snäll*", worth her parent's love and

remembering. The idyllic future home, shared with mother and father that she is describing in her letter, had probably more to do with her memories of the past and her homesickness, than the "real" alternatives that were open for her. (Compare: Johannisson 2001) When portraying the future she is also manifesting her willingness to reform. The same could be said about the following letter as well. In this letter the same girl describes her religious manners. When doing so, she is responding to the Christian education in the reformatory and following certain patterns of religious discourse, favoured in the reformatory. She is convincing the multiple readers of the letter of her penitence and ability to reform.

25.12.1916

Käraste föräldrar!

Tack, tusen tack för brevet, som jag fick. Det var trevligt att få höra lite hemifrån. ---- Vet Mamma att jag har ämnat vara snäll hela nästa året, som nu kommer. Jag skall försöka om jag kan vara det. ---- Vet Mamma att jag kan ej somna om kvällarna när jag går till vila, om jag inte ber till Gud förrän jag somnar. Först läser jag min aftonbön, sedan ber jag Gud att han skall bevara Eder där hemma. Jag tackar honom för dagens arbete och hans beskydd, som han om dagen har givit mig och alla andra med. Många kvällar har jag försökt att såva, när jag ej har bedt om aftonen, bara läst aftonbönen, men har ej kunnat sova. Jag såver då så oroligt; jag måste bedja fast midt i natten, när jag vaknar.

En natt så sov jag så dåligt att jag vaknade många gånger den natten. Så bad jag tre skilda gånger till Jesus. Varje gång, när jag hade slutat bedja, så somnade jag igen. När jag vaknade så bad jag igen. Så att jag bad tre gånger den natten. Om morgonen när jag vaknade, så hade jag så bra att vara; om dagen så kunde jag vara snäll emot mina kamrater. Den dagen gick så bra till enda.

Alla morgnar, då jag vaknar litet förr än vanligt, så tackar jag för nattens vila. - Mamma och Pappa skall alltid bedja, när Ni kommer om kvällarna hem från Ert arbete. När Ni går till vila om kvällarna, så skall Ni inte glömma att bedja till den goda Guden, som vi har.

Skriven snart svar till Eder lilla eget barn [namn]

(Translation in English)

### **Sensitive topic - intimate sources**

The topic of my research is in general a rather sensitive one and arouses strong emotions - but the same goes for my sources as well. Especially the letters composed by reformatory girls constitute a fascinating, but also demanding and even dangerous body of sources. How to treat sensitively enough this very personal material that was once composed for private purposes, then observed, censored and criticised in the reformatory - and now it is finally analysed and made public for new purposes in my own study? How to do justice to the people I am using in my study?

The claim for sensibility entails the aspect of justice. Do I even have the right to make this kind of sensitive material public? Did these people ask for stepping into publicity? We like to think that we are



doing a favour when coming forward with problematic and "unfair" issues, and speaking for people who otherwise would keep - or be kept - silent in our society. For example the Microhistorical school set as one of its purposes rewriting history from the grass roots perspective, from the point of view of those who had vanished in the traditional canon of history. Criminals, prostitutes, witches etc. have been made "subjects" of their history. But are we really doing them a favour when making ourselves their voluntary representatives?

As one possible answer to my questions - most of which still remain unanswered - would be serious reasoning over my own purposes as a researcher, my own moral values, sympathies as well as antipathies and my relationship to the girls in the focal point of my study. Furthermore, the historical research should be understood as being necessarily a narrative composed by the historian from his/her point of departure, this being the case even if the researcher makes all the possible efforts not to take sides or promote any ideological goals. Like Liz Stanley has pointed out, also a researcher writes in a cultural context. When creating the interpretation, he/she chooses among many other possibilities. The choice is influenced by e.g. the narrator's age, class, gender, race and other social and cultural factors. (Stanley 1992; Saresma 2000)

On the other hand, I should be aware of the possible reactions my study may evoke. The sources I am using are open for multiple reactions ranging from amusement aroused by the oldish and naive expressions used by the girls to silent sympathy. Since the past reformatory education doesn't always meet our modern standards for child welfare, the stories of reformatory girls evoke anger and moral disapproval as well. But what kind of sentiments do I wish to evoke? Do I wish to tell horror-stories or what is it that I want to say with my work? Even as a historian the researcher is always a political actor: doing a research on something means constructing the object of research, and the way the research is presented is not inconsequential either.

This is another reason why empathetic reading of sources and sensibility in reporting about them is needed. However, understanding why and how something happened is not the same as accepting it uncritically. Empathetic reading and efforts to make the foreign past understandable don't imply approval of the treatment that "wayward" girls encountered - nor does it imply blind admiration and positive attitude towards "whatever the girls did". Empathy could be created also by placing girls and their actions as well as the reformatory education into its historical context and by this way trying to make it understandable. (Blom 1992. See also: Zemon-Davies 1983 and 1997; Ambjörnson, Ringby & Åkerman. 1997; Leskelä-Kärki 2001)

As another possible answer I can state that I remain within the limits of letters as texts. Like it has been pointed out in biographical and autobiographical studies, it is impossible to reach the foreign past and peoples comprehension as it "really" was. (Stanley 1992; Zemon-Davies 1997; Coslett, Lury & Summerfield 2000) Though the flesh-and-blood girls have captured my fascination, I can't reach their actual thoughts or feelings felt at the moment they wrote their letters. What I can reach instead, is the cultivation process they faced in the institution and the marks it left to the way they expressed themselves

in their letters. Therefore, on the basis of this material, I am able to say something for example about the instructions concerning letter-writing in the institution and the way that letter-writing served the goal of moulding the girls into an acceptable female adolescence. Expectations on female behaviour or even procedures through which the institution aimed at re-structuring the girls' identities along acceptable guidelines are present in these letters and it is this very process that I am also most interested about. The girls' "true meanings" escape my reach, but the mutual discourse they construct in their letters can be reached. Finally I have to say that somehow I feel quite "relieved" to be able leave the girls' "inner thoughts" and "true meanings" for them selves and out of my study.

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## Appendix: Translations in English

3.11.1916.

To all my dearest ones at home ---

---- I have waited for three years to see you. I will wait three more years but after three years Mother will have a package. Mother will receive me back home.

And when I come back Mother will get a chance to rest from all her work, I will certainly take care of everything that is necessary. I will take care of cows, cooking and anything else that Mother needs. Mother worked so hard when I was at home. Mother did so much for my benefit as well. Mother! After [I have come back] I will do everything there is to do for You Mother! - I have thought for so many times that if I only were at home surely I would be able to be kind and diligent!

I am all right and send my greetings to all

Your little [name] ]

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25.12.1916

My dearest parents!

Thank you so much for the letter I received. It was so nice to hear something from home. ---- Do You know, Mother, that I have decided to behave well the whole New Year, which is to begin now. I'll try if I can manage it.

---- Do You know, Mother, that I can't fall asleep in the night when I go to bed, if I haven't said my prayers first. First I read my evening prayer, then I ask God that He would take care of you all back there at home. I thank Him for the day's work and His protection, which He has granted me and all the others as well. Many times I have tried to fall asleep without praying after evening prayer, I have just read my evening prayer, but I haven't been able to sleep. I sleep so restlessly; I have to pray even in the middle of the night, if I wake up.

One night I woke up many times during the night. I had to pray for Jesus three separate times. Every time I finished my prayer, I fell asleep again. When I woke up, I started again, and by that way I prayed three times altogether. In the morning, when I woke up, I was in such a good state of mind; during the day I was very kind towards all my mates. The whole day got well on until the night.



Every morning, when I wake up a bit earlier than usually,  
I do thank God for the rest. - Mother and Father should  
also pray, when You come back home from Your work.  
When You go to sleep in the evening, You shouldn't  
forget to pray the kind God we have.  
Write soon an answer to Your own little child [name] ]  
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