# To be a Sailor’s Wife

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# TO THE READER

This book is the result of an unexpected encounter fifteen years ago. I had just graduated and was working on a small documentation project concerning the steamship era on the Åland Islands. My main objective was to interview Åland seamen about their personal experience of work aboard steamships. All of the informants were retired and some of them were old enough to have served in the world's last fleet of commercial windjammers, shipping grain from Australia to England, rounding the notorious Cape Horn *en route*. The interviews were basically life stories and they were presented in the Åland Maritime Museum's annual publication *Sjöhistorisk årsskrift för Åland 1996-1997*. Most of the interviews were conducted in the informants' homes, sometimes with their wives present. On the odd occasion, a wife would offer a few comments, but normally she would linger dutifully in the background, ready to serve coffee and cake when there was a pause in the interviewing and the tape recorder was turned off for a brief moment. But then I met Märta Olofsson. I had been interviewing her husband and was about to leave their house when she put her hand on my arm, looked at me and said something like this:

> It's us you should interview. It was us that were left to cope with everything on our own while he was away for long, long periods. We took care of everything and then, when he came home, we were just supposed to let go and let him take over. He was used to being in command at sea, so he wanted to be in command at home as well.

As she spoke, it became clear to me that she was not just speaking for herself but on behalf of all other seafarers' wives of her generation. Her words were provocative, almost like a challenge, but at the time I did not know how to tackle it. The chance came a few years later when I was given the opportunity to study for a PhD at the University of Hull in the UK. Faced with choosing an area of research, there was no doubt in my mind that my thesis would deal with the Åland seafarer's wife. In the beginning I was quite unsure of what I was looking for. All I knew was that I wanted to give Märta and her sisters a voice. As the project developed, my one-dimensional image of the Åland seafarer's wife was challenged and the more I delved into my informants' life stories, the more complex the picture became. I found that the life of the seafarer's wife

followed a cyclical pattern that was directly related to her husband's work, and that the constant switching between life on her own and life together with her husband created a feeling of leading two parallel lives. I also became aware of the relationship between reconstruction and discourse and on the high symbolic status that is afforded to the seafarer's wife in the creating of an Åland identity. These observations form the basis of this book, which is an edited version of my doctoral thesis, *Women in Maritime Communities: A Socio-Historical Study of Continuity and Change in the Domestic Lives of Seafarers' Wives in the Åland Islands, from 1930 into the New Millennium*.

I owe so much to Märta Olofsson and all the other seafarers' wives who openly and willingly shared their experiences with me. It goes without saying that this book would not exist had it not been for their generosity. In addition, the friendship between the late Dr Basil Greenhill and Captain Justus Harberg was also paramount to my embarking on this project. It was their idea that the old maritime connection between Hull and Åland should be honoured by persuading an Ålander to study maritime history at the University of Hull. This led me down the academic path, and for that I am grateful. As a PhD student I relied heavily on my supervisor Dr David J. Starkey. He gave me advice and support regarding my academic work, always at hand when I was in danger of steering off course or getting out of my depth. I also owe thanks to Dr Amanda Capern, Mrs Anita Pensar and Captain Henrik Karlsson.

My time at the University of Hull was important to me in many ways. I met people there who in their own ways have meant a lot to me. Some I have lost along the way, others are still around. Vicky Williams has remained a dear friend, as has Michaela Barnard, fellow historian and personal shopper. And it was in Hull that I met my husband, Andrew. There are so many things I want to thank him for, not least for moving with me to a small island in the dark and icy North and not complaining about it.

I dedicate this book to Nora Rosenström, my very good friend and the bravest seafarer's wife I know.

# THE WOMAN AND THE SEA

In November 2006 a temporary exhibition called *The Woman and the Sea* opened at the Åland Maritime Museum. It was an exhibition that focused on the female experience of maritime life, both at sea and on land. It was the story of female sailors, officers and passengers as well as seafarers' wives onboard and ashore. It is rather telling that it takes a special temporary exhibition to tell the story of maritime women because somehow they are always an exception. At sea, they are an anomaly, because both the ship and the sea belong to the realm of men. Ashore, they are also perceived as different due to their family structure and independent position. I am not the first, nor the last to observe that maritime women are often neglected in women's history and that the maritime history to a very large extent focuses on men and ships. Research in maritime history has concentrated on economic and structural aspects of the maritime industries, and on the men who worked at sea, on the docks, or as shipowners, shipbuilders, brokers and agents. This is hardly surprising since the maritime industries are extremely male dominated. Traditionally, women have enter maritime history either as exceptional women in a man's world – for example, female pirates and women-in-command – or they have been mentioned incidentally in studies concerning maritime communities and the domestic lives of fishermen or seafarers. In Jeremy Tunstalls sociological study of the Hull fishing community, the women, despite their prominent role in the community investigated, are portrayed mainly as stereotypes; the nagging and demanding wife on the one hand and the worn-out but good-hearted neighbourhood prostitute on the other.[1] In *Living the Fishing*, Paul Thompson dedicated a chapter to 'Women in the fishing', while Trevor Lummis' study of East Anglian fishing communities included a chapter on female waged labour and dealt with the fishermen's wives in a chapter titled 'domestic life'.[2] The women are also rather conspicuous in Anthony P. Cohens anthropological study of Whalsay in the Shetland Islands. The community and collective identity is defined by and expressed through the men on the island and their activities. The women's role in the community appears wholly defined by the fishing industry and its needs.[3] This approach can be contrast with the approach taken by Lynn Abrams, who dubs Shetland a woman's island.[4] In David Cordingly's *Heroines and Harlots*, the tradition of highlighting remarkable women at sea was, to

some extent, continued. He recounted the stories of a young captain's wife, a daughter of a lighthouse keeper and a female pirate, who were all exceptional in their own ways. However, he also paid attention to, and gave illustrative examples of, the numerous women, who experienced maritime life from ashore, from waterfront prostitutes to seamen's and fishermen's wives.[5]

In the 1990s women were starting to become a bit more visible. In both Sally Coles' and Jan Brøgger's anthropological studies of Portuguese coastal communities, women took centre stage. [6] The effect of seafaring on family life was also the focus of two more recent sociological studies. Thomas Heikell investigated the topic from the seafarers' point of view, while Michelle Thomas, Helen Sampson and Minghua Zhao adopted the perspective of the seafarers' wives. In both studies, attention was given to the profound impact that the seafarer's working conditions have on his family ashore and the extent to which his occupation influences his relationship with his partner and children.[7] Round about the same time, articles on maritime women started to appear in historical journals, discussing maritime wives ashore and aboard ship, women's roles in maritime communities, as well as methodological problems in researching maritime women.[8] In 1996, Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling edited a collection of ten essays concerning gender relations in maritime culture. The work included explorations of the lives of female pirates and cross-dressers, women in the American whaling industry, the role of the captain's wife aboard ship, gender in the lives of Afro-American seamen, and history and gender in maritime fiction.[9] Norling's interest in maritime history and women's history was further explored in *Captain Ahab had a Wife*, where she examined gender dynamics in the American whaling industry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By placing the concrete interdependence of maritime men's and women's work within the ideological interdependence of masculine and feminine gender roles, Norling revealed how the reality of maritime life conflicted with contemporary gender ideals.[10] Two further very important contributions to the historiography of maritime women are Ingrid Kaijser's book *Kvinnliga sjömän – finns dom?* (Female seamen – do they exist?) and Lynn Abrams' *Myth and Materiality in a Woman's World*. In Kaijser's book the experiences of female sailors are documented and analysed. Her study is based interviews with both pioneers and active female sailors and the strength of the study is that the author has focused on the gender perspective. The complexity of being both a woman and a sailor, both in terms of onboard life and life ashore, is thoroughly investigated. In

Abram's book she describes how Shetland in the 19th century became a female place where traditional gender roles were questioned. The women made up the majority of the population and they were vital actors in the island's economy. In the absence of men, it was the women who maintained family and society. The created an identity for themselves as liberated and independent long before organized feminism was even thought of. The book also discusses the relationship between myth and historical materiality, and how people imagine their past and use it in creating their identity.[11]

The historiography of Åland's maritime pursuits follows the traditional pattern. While there is a vast literature relating to the economic and structural nature of the Islands' shipping industry, famous shipowners, captains and ships, accounts of life before the mast etc, maritime women are dealt with very superficially in historical publications.[12] In order to find out about women's experiences of maritime life in Åland past and present, one has to turn to alternative sources. The works of Anni Blomqvist, Sally Salminen and Ulla-Lena Lundberg fall into this category, as does Pamela Bourne-Eriksson's travelogues.[13] Kiki Alberius-Forsman's feature columns in the magazine *Finsk Sjöfart*, under the heading *Brev från frun* (Letters from the wife), offer a good insight into life of a modern-day seafarer's wife. A collection of the articles, which were based on her personal experiences and observations of seafaring life from the wife's point of view, was published in 1996.[14] Such publications aside, and a chapter on in Gyrid Högman's book *Den Åländska kvinnans historia* (The history of the Åland woman), there is not much evidence available exploring the experiences of maritime women in Åland and how the island's women have contributed to the maintenance and development of the maritime industries in Åland.[15]

## Åland and the maritime industries

According to Basil Greenhill, it is the sea that has given Åland its current prosperity.[16] Greenhill goes as far as to suggest that the development of the shipping industry in Åland was the Islands' version of an industrial revolution.[17] Much the same sentiment is echoed by Ulla-Lena Lundberg, who writes:

> What happened in Åland was only a part of the developments that took place all over Western Europe. For Åland's part, the ferry traffic and the mass-tourism it generated was equal to the industrialisation and rationalisation that was the motor of the trade and industry in other places.

> Åland has always had a low level of industrialisation and has generated its incomes from the sea.[18]

Historically, Åland's shipping industry has its roots in farming, which was the main occupation until well into the twentieth century. As early as the fourteenth century, farmers from the Islands built small ships to transport surplus produce, fish and firewood to markets along the rim of the northern Baltic. It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that shipping started to develop into an industry of its own, freeing its ties with farming. The main reason for this was the abolition of several mercantilist trade restrictions, both domestically and internationally. In 1867 the Danes abolished the Sound Toll and a year later the Russian tsar lifted all restrictions on maritime trade for non-burghers. Since then Åland vessels have been engaged in world-wide shipping.

Until the first half of the 1870s, shipping was closely interlinked with farming. The vessels were locally built, often by the farmers themselves, who then held shares in the vessel in accordance with their investments. This type of joint ownership declined in the 1880s and 1890s and gave way to a more modern type of shipowning where the vessels were no longer locally built wooden ships but larger second-hand tonnage acquired from abroad. The 1920s saw the transition from sail to engine powered vessels among the Åland fleet, initially in the form of second-hand tonnage, and later, purpose-built vessels ordered for specific trades. With the opening of ferry services between Finland, Åland and Sweden a new form of shipping was introduced, a form that proved to be of great importance to the Islands' economy. Not only did the car-passenger ferries generate good incomes for their Åland owners and create job opportunities both at sea and ashore, but as a result of the ferries, the Islands' tourist industry also boomed.[19]

The development of the shipping industry was mirrored in maritime family life, something that is very visible in the life stories used in this study. The older women were used to lengthy separations, when the ships their husbands sailed in took them all over the world in the pursuit of cargoes. It was not until the end of their careers that they got to experience more regular working turns and routes. In contrast to the younger generations of sailors, for whom the local ferries were an important and common work place, the ferry traffic was of little consequence to them.

## The Sailor's Wife and the Åland Identity

Åland is fundamentally a maritime community, and as such, the sea has a strong symbolic value in the creating of identity. Anthony P. Cohen highlights the importance of symbolism in the construction of community. This is because increased contact with the outside world can, despite numerous social and economic advantages, be a threat to a community's traditional structure and vitality, as external influences gradually wears down the community's structural foundations. The way forward is therefore to replace the structural foundations with symbolic ones.

Åland cannot be regarded as being isolated. On the contrary, Åland could be called a 'cosmopolitan island'.[20] Situated as it is, in the mouth of the Gulf of Bothnia, it has always served as a bridge between Sweden and Finland, and influences from even further away were brought to the Islands by visitors from abroad or by native sailors returning home. Åland served as a trading place for the Vikings, Hanseatic merchants occasionally stopping there on their way to or from Turku and Viborg, while French monks of the Franciscan Order founded a monastery on one of the outer islands. The official mail route from Stockholm to Turku and St Petersburg, established in the eighteenth century, went over Åland, and with the introduction of long-distance seafaring in the nineteenth century, new ideas and influences were brought to the Islands. Since the 1960s, frequent and regular ferry traffic drastically reduced the time and effort in travelling and thus made both mainland Finland and Sweden seem much closer than ever before. To a large extent, it is the island's dependency on shipping that has forced its inhabitants to interact with the outside world to a much larger extent than would have been the case had they engaged solely in agriculture and subsistence fishing.

According to Cohen's theories, Åland's structural boundaries should have suffered a severe weakening from its contact with surrounding communities. That may be true, but as Cohen predicted, symbolic boundaries have taken precedence. These boundaries are evident in a strong sense of local identity and in a clear awareness of traditions and culture. An important symbol for Åland is its special status as an autonomous region, supplying the population with an abundance of symbolic capital, such as the flag and the stamps. Another symbol for the Åland identity is the sea, resting on age-old traditions of the first settlers arriving by some form of sea-going vessel, making a living on the barren skerries by hunting seal and fishing. It is within this context that we find the seafarer's wife.

Prevailing discourses in Åland show that the sea is of strong symbolic value to the Ålanders. At the same time as it is a very concrete and real border to the rest of the world, the sea is simultaneously a link to the same outside world. It is from the sea, the islanders get their income, and it is also a source of mental and physical wellbeing, an element that offers comfort and peace of mind. In 1997, the topic of the annual publication *Åländsk odling* was Åland identity. In the introduction, Professor Bo Lönnqvist writes that the Ålanders perceive the sea as a source of strength in many ways. He further contests that the word sea in itself has a prominent position in the Åland vocabulary, that the word works as a tool in the construction of a specific Åland identity.[21] In the book, fifty individuals, representing different professions and population groups on and outside Åland, were interviewed. With maritime industries employing such a large number of the population, it was not surprising to find a sea captain, a chief engineer and a shipowner among the fifty informants. More noteworthy, however, was the fact that one of the informants was present as a representative of Åland seafarers' wives. She was the only person to be identified through her spouse's profession rather than through her own. The same phenomenon was apparent in a temporary exhibition at the Åland Museum in the summer of 2000, called *Åländska kvinnoporträtt* (Åland women portraits). There were writers, labourers, politicians and doctors among the thirty-nine women presented in the exhibition, as well as two women interviewed in their capacity as seafarers' wives. Again, these two were the only women to be presented in their role as somebody's wife. This phenomenon is evidence of how significant the seafarer's wife is in the gallery of Åland national characters, and that she is perceived to be a worthy representative of the maritime community that Åland is.

The iconic status of the seafarer's wife goes back a long way. In a travel journal from 1871, a visitor noted that Åland women, more than women elsewhere, had to learn to deny themselves a lot:

> She is hardly even fully aware that she owns a friend for life, before he is pulled away from her. Out at sea is his home, there he wrestles with dangers and maybe with death, while she works in the quiet home and hardly has time to think of the one she loves out there, and for whom worry fills her bosom.

Although not all women in Åland were seafarers' wives, the author of the quote above to choose to let the circumstances of the seafarer's wife symbolise those of all Åland's women.

In Åland, it is a given fact that the island's women are more independent that women in other parts of the world and that the reason behind it is that the island's men since time immemorial has worked at sea while the women have taken responsibility for home, family, farm and animals. The seafarer's wife is often presented as a female ideal and there are a lot of stories that strengthens the image of the strong and enduring woman, who despite very harsh conditions manages to create a home for herself, her children and her roving husband. The stories are often based in a time when the seafaring was more closely connected to farming, and when fishing was still the main source of income in the outer archipelago. Fictional works have effectively contributed to strengthen the discourse of resilient maritime women, where heroines like Sally Salminen's Katrina and Anni Blomqvist's Maja are iconized, but the same thing is also obvious in non-fictional writing. When reading Gyrid Högman's history of Åland women, it is the discourse of hard-working, capable women that flows off the pages in the chapter on maritime women. [22] Equally, exhibitions and publications like the ones mentioned previously contribute to the iconization of the seafarer's wife, as does to some extent too my research and presentations based on it. The iconic status of the seafarer's wife is so engrained in the common psyche of the island, that it makes it difficult to accept that in real life not every seafarer's wife can or wants to live up to it.

There are also stories that with comical undertones reveal the independent nature of the seafarer's wife. One such story is the one where the wife forgets her husband in the shop. The story is briefly as follows: The seaman is at home for one of his short and rare visits. The couple goes to the local grocery shop together but when the wife returns home with all the shopping she realizes that something is missing. She has to think for a while until it hits her that her husband is not there. She returns to the store and finds him, lost and confused, among the shelves. The story alters a bit depending on who is telling it. Sometimes the couple has been to the cinema or the theatre, but the point of the story is always the same. The woman is so used to doing everything on her own that she forgets that her husband is with her, and the man is so unfamiliar with life ashore that he is lost without his wife as a chaperone. These stories mainly relate to the time before the 1970s but there is no doubt that the seafarer's wife is still afforded high symbolic status. She is often represented when a cross-section of the Åland population is to be presented. This is an indication of just how important the seafarer's wife is as a symbol of the Åland identity

and what a good representative of the Åland community she is perceived to be.

## About this book

The main aim of this book is thus to first and foremost to widen the scope of maritime history so that it encompasses all people whose lives are affected by the sea. It is designed to give maritime women a chance to make their voices heard and have their stories told. It may sound like a cliché, but it is only by allowing the women to become subjects rather than objects that we can get passed the female stereotypes and begin to reconstruct central dimensions in maritime history that so far has been largely neglected. The term 'maritime women' is, of course, very broad. It includes women working at sea as crew members on all types of vessels, and ashore in sea-related industries, as well as to the mothers, wives and daughters of fishermen, sailors, oil-rig workers and others who depend on the sea for their livelihood. Since the role of the seafarer's wife is the most prominent in Åland, I have chosen to limit my research to her experiences of maritime life.

The book is two-parted. In the first part, I deal with the periodicity and dualism of maritime life. I describe the maritime marriage as a cyclical commuter marriage consisting of four phases that are controlled by the seaman's departures and arrivals. The central question relates to change and continuity, and with that as a baseline I explore issues such as worry, support and communication. What has changed in the life of a seaman's wife? What parts remains the same? The second part of the book focuses on the relationship between the individual and the myth. I am using the concept of the seafarer's wife's supposed independence and the informants' attitudes towards raising children, work and money. By exploring how the informants reconstruct their subjective experiences we can learn more about how life stories are affected by prevailing discourses, both at the time when events were experienced and when they were related.

The research behind this book is based on a collection of oral interviews and written life stories from Åland seafarers' wives. The informants were selected on the basis of three key factors. The main criterion was that the informants had experience of maritime life, more precisely as the life partner of a seaman. Whether they were still living together, widowed or divorced was irrelevant in this case. Another concern was that the women

should have children together with their seafaring partner, since I wanted to study maritime family life. The third factor was age. Since change and continuity in the life experiences of Åland seafarers' wives was a key objective, it was of significance to get as even a distribution of age as possible. To facilitate comparisons, the informants were divided into three groups, representing different generations of women. Generation group one consisted of eighteen women, born between 1912 and 1935. Their husbands were retired and the children had long gone moved out. Generation group two were made up of twenty-eight women, born between 1940 and 1954. Their husbands were still working but they had no children living at home. The twenty-nine women in generation group three were born between 1948 and 1969. Their husbands were active seamen and they had children living at home.

Apart from accounting for their family background, level of education, professional status and their husband's career at sea, the women in the study built their life stories around four basic questions. The first one dealt with the expectations the women had on a future life as a seafarer's wife, and to what extent those expectations were met. In answer to the two consecutive questions the women described their daily lives while the husband was at sea, and then how it changed when he returned. The last question dealt with the impact being married to a sailor had had on the women's opportunities to work and pursue hobbies. It also dealt with the issues of raising a family and of money matters. The subject of seafarer's wife's supposed independence was also raised in the last question.

## Analysing Life Stories

When analysing life story accounts that focus on personal experiences, there is no empirical or quantifiable data available to verify the objective truth of what is being said, since that truth does not exist. But each story, although subjective, does not exist in isolation, separated from the cultural and material reality of society. On the contrary, it is a product of the discourses available to the narrator, both at the point of experiencing and of recollecting. I argue, therefore, that even if each story is unique, the way in which they are remembered and reconstructed is collective. Furthermore, the relationship between the subjective and the objective works both ways, which means that in telling their individual stories, the informants use cultural stereotypes and available discourses as reference points for expressing and making sense of their own experiences.[23] Thus, in order to make a valid contribution to our knowledge of maritime

communities and the women within them, the personal testimonies collected for this work have to be understood as drawing upon, and contributing to, the discourse of maritime women in Åland society.

Since it is I who has collected and interpreted the personal testimonies that form the main source of this thesis, I have to account for my own voice in the material. My methodology and analytical interpretation of the material draw upon ideas of discourse analysis and social constructionism. When looking for change and continuity, I will not be content with noting which aspects of seafaring life altered and which remained the same, but I will also try to account for how these themes are dealt with in the individual stories. In the discussion of the relationship between discourse and reconstruction in the final chapter of the book, I identify the stances that the informants adopted in their presentation of the self and I point to the major discourses that influenced the reconstructions. I further attempt to demonstrate how the women negotiated their position between reality and ideal and what strategies they deployed when past actions and present attitudes were difficult to combine. In doing this, I do not claim to be telling the objective truth of *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, since there is no such truth. What I do claim, however, is that I have used my best judgement to analyse the autobiographical accounts entrusted to me, and present in this thesis is *my* reading of how seafarers' wives in twentieth-century Åland experienced maritime life and how the ideologies and mythologies present in common discourses affected reconstructions of these experiences.

## Notes

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5 D. Cordingly, *Heroines and Harlots: Women at sea in the Great Age of Sail*, London 2002.
[6] S. Cole, *Women of the Praia: Work and lives in a Portuguese coastal community* (Princeton, 1991); J. Brøgger, *Nazaré: Women and men in a prebureaucratic Portuguese fishing village* (Orlando, 1992)

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[9] M. Creighton and L. Norling, *Iron Men and Wooden Women: Gender and seafaring in the Atlantic world 1700-1920* (Baltimore, 1996)

[10] L. Norling, *Captain Ahab had a Wife: New England women and the whalefishery, 1720-1870* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

11 L. Abrams, *Myth and Materiality.*

[12] G. Kåhre, *Den åländska sjöfartens historia* (Mariehamn, 1988); J. Harberg, *Åländsk sjöfart med maskindrivna fartyg* (Mariehamn, 1995); D. Papp, *Åländsk allmogeseglation* (Lund, 1971); G. Sundberg, *Lundqvistrederierna 70 år* (Mariehamn, 1998); H. Svensson, *En obändig ålänning* (Mariehamn, 1998); M. Rosenström, *Fartyget, himlen och havet*, Meddelanden från Folkkultursarkivet no 16 (Helsinki, 1996); J. Örjans, *Boken om Pommern* (Mariehamn, 2002)

13 Se till exempel A. Blomqvist, *Vägen till Stormskäret*, Helsingfors, 1968; S. Salminen, *Katrina*, Södertälje 1976 [1936]; U-L Lundberg, *Leo*, Helsingfors 1989; P. Eriksson, *The Duchess. The life and death of the Herzogin Cecilie*, London 1958.

[14] K. Alberius-Forsman, *Sjöfarare och sjöfruar* (Mariehamn, 1996)

[15] G. Högman, *Den åländska kvinnans historia*, s. 402–436.

[16] B. Greenhill & J. Hackman, *The Grain Races* (London, 1986) p. 25. For more information regarding the decline in the Maritime Provinces of Canada see E. W. Sager & G. E. Panting, *Maritime Capital: The shipping industry in Atlantic Canada 1820-1914* (Montreal, 1990)

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[18] U.-L. Lundberg, *Allt man kan önska sig* (Helsinki, 1995) p. 101

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[20] The author would like to thank Gelina Harlaftis for the idea of cosmopolitan islands.

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# TILL WE MEET AGAIN

## The Duality of Seafaring Life

Based on the life stories I collected it was clear that time played a significant role in the daily lives of the seafarer's wife. The constant adjustment between being alone and together led the women to feel they led two separate lives. This aspect of seafaring life was touched upon in various ways in nearly every life story in this study, and it is also noted by Kaijser, who notes that periodicity and recurring departures results in 'the wife leading one life when the husband is away and one when he is at home and these two lives are very disparate'.[1] In Michelle Thomas study, both the seamen and their wives talked about two lives, two selves and that they existed in two worlds. One wife said: *It's like living two lives. One life obviously with him away and one with him at home.*[2] This exact sentiment was voiced by the Åland seafarer's wives in this study.

The improvements in communications have not affected the feeling of having two separate lives. The issue that seemed to affect the way in which this duality was perceived the most, was the time the seafarer spent at sea and at home. The longer the seafarer was away, the more detached he became from life ashore and the more time there was for the wife to establish her own routines. Nonetheless, even the ferry-folk found that their daily routines changed according to which week it was and they tended to lead their lives on a week on–week off basis. This pattern was illustrated by a comment made by a woman in Generation Three. She said: 'You don't go around constantly thinking that you are a seafarer's wife, but whenever you are planning something you check whether he's off or at work. You lead your life in a week on-week off pattern'.[3]

There was some ambiguity in the discussions surrounding the debate on dual lives. At the same time as it was pointed out that regular mealtimes and set routines became more important when husbands were at home, that the laundry basket filled up quicker and that the house got messier, the informants simultaneously said that they were able to leave most of the housework to their partners – including grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry. From being solely responsible for keeping everything

up and running while the seafarer was away, there was suddenly another person to consider. So, although it was a relief for the wife to have another adult to share the workload with, it was also difficult for her to let go of the feeling that the ultimate responsibility was hers. An informant, whose husband was away for up to six months at a time, summarised her experience in these words:

> He's got two completely different lives, one aboard and one at home, but so have I. One life with him, a man in the house, and another one when I have to take care of everything on my own, and those lives are totally different. Life is much easier when he's at home, but it is difficult not to stick my nose in it, which you have to do when you're alone. He wants to be in charge, naturally, and it's not always easy to give in all the time.[4]

Most women in the study appeared to cope well with seafaring life. Despite minor conflicts and a never-ending series of departures and returns, they appeared to be happy with the lives they were leading and they seemed to cope well with shifting between their two worlds. However, there were women in this study who found themselves disillusioned and very weary of seafaring life. One informant, in particular, presented a reconstruction that was full of discontent. She described her relationship as 'painful and tiring'. As for the concept of dual lives, she stated that she did not know which one of her worlds was the real one and continued by saying: 'maybe my life is only parentheses'. The major reason for her constant identity crisis was 'the never-ending switching from single life to couple life. It's a constant adjustment from one to another and it erases the boundaries for who I am'.[5]

## The Four Seasons of the Cyclical Commuter Marriage

Apart from the duality, I also noted that time was a recurring topic and seafaring life assumed a cyclical character. The same thing is noted by Thomas Heikell in a study of Finnish seamen's life stories. He distinguishes between two phases; time at home and time at sea.[6] Ingrid Kaijser, too, mentions the periodicity as an inescapable part of life for seafarers' wives past and present in her article on Swedish seafarers' wives.[7] Taking Heikell's idea a bit further, I perceive four phases in the cycle of maritime family life. The first phase is the preparation for the seafarer's departure and his actual departure. The preparation is both a physical and mental exercise, which involves the entire seafaring family. are mental as well as practical, and they involve the whole family. The second phase is when the sailor is at sea. It starts with a period of

adjustment, during which the wife and children settled back into the routines that they had devised for day-to-day life while the seafarer was absent. The period of single-parent life was discontinued and the third phase is entered into when the home-based family members begin to get ready for the seafarer's return. This phase of seafaring life is concluded by the seafarer's return and his reception. As soon as the seafarer has returned home, another period of adjustment begins, this time in order to incorporate the seafarer into the family sphere. The circle drew to a close when this, the fourth phase of seafaring life, moved into the first phase and the family commences preparations for the seafarer's next departure.

One can compare the rhythm of seafaring life with the change of seasons. When the summer draws to an end, it is, despite the joys of being on holiday, quite nice to return to work and the routines everyday life entails. Therefore, I like to compare the first phase with autumn. The winter can of course be trying at times but the days go past and all of a sudden there is spring in the air. In spring, everything is easier and you start to look forward to and make plans for the summer. When the summer finally arrives, you can break the mundane routines and just go with the flow. You are carefree and spontaneous, but as the autumn nears, it is nonetheless with a degree of longing you approach it and the existence that in the end is your normal life. As a matter of fact, for many seafarer s' wives, it was the second phase, the one where they were on their own, that they perceived as their normal everyday life.

## Notes

[1] I. Kaijser, 'Sjömannens yrke', in N. Storå & K. Montin (eds), *Sjömannen*, p.41
[2] M. Thomas, *Lost at Sea and Lost at Home,* s. 35–36.
[3] G301-130799
[4] G2029
[5] G2050
[6] Thomas Heikell, *Nog har jag alltid*
[7] I. Kaijser, 'Sjömannens yrke' in N. Storå & K. Montin (eds), *Sjömannen*, pp.38, 41-42

The Captain and his wife

# AUTUMN:
# DEPARTURE

Preparations for the seafarer's impending departure began towards the end of his period ashore. The time spent on preparations depended largely on the length of his current leave and his next period at sea, and it involved not only him but also his wife and children. For ferrymen, who were at sea for no longer than a week or ten days at a time, the preparations were less rigorous than those of a seafarer engaged in longer trade routes. All seamen interviewed by Heikell, for example, felt that the last days or week of their time on leave was lost to them. They were unable to start on a new project and daily life was increasingly revolving the impending departure.[1] Michelle Thomas describes how the seamen in her study concluded all practical tasks and retired emotionally pending the imminent departure.[2] The same strategy was evident among Åland seamen. Whatever the project, it had to be concluded or prepared for a longer break before the seafarer left. The wives, too, had to prepare themselves for being alone with all the responsibilities again. Sharing the physical preparation could facilitate the spouses' mental preparation of the impending separation, as one of the informants of Generation Three said: 'A couple of days before he's due out I start to think that I'll have to sleep alone again, how it is going to be while he is out and what I can do to make time pass quicker'.[3] It was also important for the seafarer and his wife to prepare their children for their father's departure, especially when young children. They needed to be reassured that their father was not leaving them permanently, that he would come back. This could be a complicated task, since small children do not have a rational concept of time. One informant found that one of the most distressing aspects of bringing up children with a seafarer was to explain to children who were too young to understand why their father was 'suddenly completely gone'.[4]

There were twenty women, who in their narratives described the parting as difficult, something they could never get used to. Then again, there were twenty women who claimed that they had, to different degrees, adjusted to these partings, including two women who actually preferred their

respective husbands' absence. Moreover, no less than thirty-five women, almost half of the sample group, declined to comment directly on the issue. The reason for this cannot be uniformly explained. In some women's reconstructions there was generally little room for emotional reflections, and thus no place to address this particular issue. In other accounts, the narrators reconstructed themselves in such likeness to the stereotypical straight-thinking and capable seafarer's wife that separate comments on their abilities to cope with the seafarers' departures would have jeopardised the validity of their construction of the self. It was, in other words, implicit that they dealt with the partings as something inevitable and nothing to fuss about. Finally, the way the question of the seafarer's departure was presented in the questionnaires did not directly encourage women to elaborate on the preparations and actual departure. Instead, the question was aimed more at the women's situation while the seafarer was at sea. These issues fall under the second phase of the seafaring lifecycle, which was characterised by the seafarer's absence.

## Preparing

The oldest women said very little about their preparations of the seafarers' departure, although it was in this generation that one would assume that the need for preparations was the greatest. The men were absent for very long periods, sometimes over a year, and the possibilities of communicating were limited. There must, in other words, have been much for the spouses to arrange prior to the seafarer's departure. The lack of details about the preparations could be explained by the unregulated working conditions. Seafarers were often only employed for a voyage or set of voyages, after which they signed off and went home and waited for a shipowner to call when there was more work available to them. As a result, seafaring life could be 'very abrupt', as one woman wrote. She complained that her husband was often compelled to stay aboard longer than initially agreed and that he could be called back out at very short notice without having had sufficient time at home.[5] The system of employment offered little security, and it is likely that seafarers feared that declining a job once would jeopardise their future chances of getting a job with that particular shipping company. There was a hint of hopelessness in the informant's discussion on the topic, mixed with annoyance and discontent that shipowners should have such power over her family life.

Women of Generations Two and Three were slightly more forthcoming in their discussions on preparations for departure. One informant's account

contained many references to anxiety. In it she mixed descriptions of practical preparations with her own feelings about the forthcoming departure:

> The day you find out that he's going out, one slowly begins to prepare oneself. It immediately feels heavy, I think. The suitcase is taken down, it has to be packed. He ponders what to take, brings it out and I put it in the suitcase. The thoughts run to and fro, how long is he going to be away? How am I going to cope? To be well, hoping everything will work at home. The boiler usually stops just after he has left. It's a lot.[6]

Clearly, bearing the full responsibility for family and home was a heavy burden for this informant. Comments such as 'it immediately feels heavy', 'the thoughts run to and fro' and 'it's a lot' suggested that this woman did not appreciate being left alone. Her husband worked on an oil tanker in world-wide trade, working eight months at sea followed by four months of leave. The long separation and limited communication opportunities might have contributed to the informant's sense of anxiety. Reading only this quote, she perhaps seems more concerned with her own situation than that of her husband, wondering how she would cope and if 'everything will work at home'. But there are also passages in the narrative that expresses concern for her husband's wellbeing. She describes the process by which she and her husband together pack his suitcase. The process was a very tangible way for both parties to come to terms with the pending separation, in which the cooperation in the simple task of packing becomes a symbol of her acceptance of his job obligations and of his desire to include her in his working life. It was also a time for discussing the practicalities of the coming period of separation.

Departure-related stress could also be the cause of conflict. One woman stated that it was almost a ritual for her and her husband to have arguments just before her husband's departure and straight after his return. However, she was also quick to add that the arguments were never very serious and always cleared: 'I was born an optimist. It will be alright, no matter what problems may arise.'[7] The fashion in which the story was constructed placed this informant's story within a discourse that supported the image of the unsentimental, down-to-earth seafarer's wife. In her narrative, the arguments were referred to in a very casual way. They were not to be taken seriously; they were simply a part of the ritual.

Anxiety linked to departure did not only affect the women, but also the men. A study conducted by the Australian Maritime Safety Association in

the late 1990s showed that the transition phases between work and home was the greatest source of stress among seafarers.[8] The seafarers in Heikell's study were also reported to find the time leading up to departure difficult. The seamen felt themselves to be 'somewhere between the home and the ship'.[9] A woman of Generation Two revealed with obvious pain that towards the last years of her husband's seafaring career he would drink heavily for several days prior to his departure. In the narrative of her husband's alcohol abuse, there was an underlying tone of unease and even fear. Having been brought up in a teetotal environment, she claimed that she felt uncomfortable about alcohol. She made further references to her inexperience when she wrote: 'if you're not used to alcohol in your home it is unpleasant and disgusting with drunken people'.[10] In this case, the seafarer left the sea permanently to work ashore. The reason for the career change was said to be that the seafarer had earned all his retirement years at sea, but was too young to retire. Legally, there was nothing stopping him from continuing at sea, but the excessive drinking leading up to departures would suggest that he was a reluctant seafarer. Although seafaring is often regarded as a high-risk profession with regard to alcohol abuse, this was the only story with direct reference to alcoholism. In a couple of other cases the issue was commented upon but only in passing and without direct bearing on the informants or their husbands.[11]

All disagreements and arguments had to be resolved before the seafarer left for work, according to a woman of Generation Three. If not, the problems would grow and eventually become irresolvable. She argued that because she and her husband were constantly forced to tackle their differences, problems were always solved before they could cause any real disruptions to the relationship.[12] A similar stance was taken by a woman of the same age. She wrote that both she and her husband suffered from separation anxiety, which manifested itself in arguments breaking out over petty things. However, the arguments were never left unsolved and the couple never parted in anger. On the contrary, they always 'tried to make their last night together as delightful as possible'.[13] These reconstructions emphasised the narrators' desire to demonstrate that their marriages, despite their obvious deviation from the cultural norm, were very healthy; perhaps even more so than 'normal' land-based marriages.

The human being is a creature of habit and as time went by many seafarers' wives learned to appreciate the time they had to themselves. In many seafaring families, the seafarer's visit was regarded as a break from the norm, and although his presence was appreciated, his departure was also a relief for all parties involved. With the seafarer gone, the rest of the

family could return to their day-to-day routines.[14] There were women who stated that they were now almost looking forward to their husbands' departures, whereas when they were younger, they used to panic at the thought of being on their own.[15] A young woman said that she used to be appalled when she heard older seafarers' wives say that they longed for their husbands to go back to work, but that she later began to better understand their sentiments.[16] Another woman stated:

> My feelings when he leaves are mixed, but since I've always lived like this - and want to live like this – it feels quite good. I know he'll be home again after four weeks, but it sometimes feels like dying a bit each time he leaves.[17]

Despite outspoken reports of a desire to be alone again, it would be hasty to assume from these comments that the women were unhappy in their relationships, for this was rarely the case. The above quotation illustrates the mixed feelings that the partner's departure could evoke. At the same time as the informant felt good about getting some time to herself, she also said that saying goodbye felt 'a bit like dying'. Positively anticipating the seafarers' departures was linked to the habits the women got into during their husbands' absences, for although the presence of the seafarer was in most respects welcomed, it also unsettled the routines that the wife had set up for herself. For these women, when the end of their husbands' stay at home began to draw to an end, they started looking forward to getting back into their routines. Time to oneself was frequently presented as a valued aspect of seafaring life. Many informants agreed that life took on a slower pace when their partners were at sea. There was more time to meet up with girlfriends, go to evening classes, read books and generally just do their own things:

> One positive side with being alone is that you have a certain freedom, which isn't bad. You plan the day as you please and you don't have to serve that much either. The laundry basket doesn't fill up as quickly; dinners are easier, less visitors and parties. It's simply a slower pace.[18]

Very typical among the women who made these kinds of comments was the simultaneous assurance that they meant no harm, that they did indeed like having their husbands at home and that it upset them to bid farewell, as illustrated in comments such as 'it sometimes feels like dying a bit'. It appeared important to them not to present themselves as cold-hearted or selfish. In the words of a woman of Generation Two:

> I sometimes feel that it is nice when he leaves because then I can do what I want. I don't mean to be mean and he says the same thing; that it's going to be nice to leave. Then everything is fine next time he comes home.[19]

Narratives of this kind – that is stories of women who, despite enjoying their husbands' presence, also awaited his departure - were usually constructed by women who seemed to possess a high degree of self-reliance and who appeared well-adjusted to maritime life. There were, however, also women who welcomed their husbands' departure precisely because they preferred to be on their own. One informant felt that it was only when she was alone that she could be at ease with life:

> I have positive expectations when he leaves for work. I believe that that is when I get into my own rhythm and get to do things I can't do when he is at home. I think being alone is my natural state and that is what I'm striving for.[20]

Another similar response came from a woman who said she was happy when her husband came home, but even happier when he left. During the week he was at work she could be herself and the children did not have to worry about making too much noise around the house.[21] Comments like these were very rare in the sample, but to positively anticipate the seafarer's departure was probably more common than the data of this study would suggest. One of the characters in Ulla-Lena Lundberg's novel, a seafarer's wife, said that her reason for looking forward to the week her husband was at work was that it gave her a chance 'to catch her breath'. Before each return, she cleaned the house from top to bottom, prepared the food and 'stood there as some kind of leisure time therapist, whose only task was to make sure it was nice, nice all the time'.[22] This was probably quite a common scenario, at least in the beginning of a relationship when there was still a feeling of insecurity regarding the permanency of the relationship. By being 'the good wife' the women hoped to turn their men into faithful husbands, eager to come home to their awaiting families. However, as time went by, the women tired of playing this game, but they also found that patterns set out in the beginning of a relationship are hard to alter. Therefore, to avoid confronting the problem, some women kept up appearances while their husbands were at home and then used the time they had to themselves to recharge their batteries for the seaman's next return.