Dateline: Rävvetievve

Losing Lapland

By Robert Lewis

They have existed for at least 6,000 years, migrating from the Urals in what is now the Soviet Union, across the top of Scandinavia. To the outside world they are known as Laplanders, a nomadic people with European features who tend reindeer herds and dance in colorful costumes against the burnt-orange backdrop of the midnight sun. But in the mountainous reaches of Sweden and Norway—at this time of year, icy glacial rivers cascade into verdant Alpine valleys high above the Arctic Circle—the people see themselves as an endangered minority. They are fighting to preserve their language, culture and land against encroaching southern commercial appetites—and they are losing. "It's a small man fighting a big man," concludes Swedish anthropologist Hans Andersson, an expert on Lapp culture.

Certain parallels with Canada's original northern peoples begin with the Lapp rejection of the very word as pejorative. Instead, in Sweden, they call themselves *samer* (pronounced SAW-myrr). Originally they were hunters and fishermen. At the turn of the 16th century they started domesticating the reindeer. About 100 years later, when Gustaf II Adolf joined the Holy Roman Empire, *samer* were used as slave labor to transport silver on reindeer from the mountains to the coast. Those who refused were keelhauled between two holes cut in the ice. Later, when Norway broke from Sweden, the new border prevented the *samer* from freely roaming the top of the world with their herds. More than 100 years ago, instead, they were given rights to limited tracts of land.

In Sweden and Norway the *samer* are still waiting for legal recognition of that claim. While cases wind slowly through the courts, the tribesmen fight a losing battle against development. Giant hydroelectric projects flood salmon runs and the riverbanks, where the reindeer once grazed in winter. Often insensitive administrations in the south give with one hand but take with the other. One department slaps a bounty on wolves while the tourist lobby works to save the wolves for camera-toting hikers in the hills. Conservationists move to save the forests but another branch boosts clear-cutting for the pulp and paper industry, wiping out the older trees whose lichens provide reindeer with emergency fodder when the snow is deep in winter.

Johan Kulmunen, an elder of the Rävvetievve community 950 km north of Stockholm, was ready with his list of gripes when Sweden's Prime Minister Thorbjörn Fälldin arrived by helicopter with Pierre Trudeau last month. Kulmunen is an experienced herdsman who, with his dogs and a few calls from a mountaintop, can round up 1,000 reindeer in a couple of days, seemingly from nowhere. The meat fetches $8 per pound, while skins and antlers are hot tourist items in the south at $100 and $20.

Of the estimated 50,000 *samer* in Scandinavia, 15,000 live in Sweden and only 20 per cent live off the reindeer. As a voice speaking against further assimilation, elder Kulmunen pleads with Fälldin, as they sit huddled on a rock near an earthen hut, to stop timber cutting in the dense, fast-growing forests on the mountains nearby. As they speak, a reindeer herd moves like ants in a sugar bowl across a glacier far above. Fälldin nods sympathetically between puffs on his pipe, then vows: "We won't go in there."

Erling Söderström, a journalist with Lapp ancestors from Luleå on the Gulf of Bothnia, is skeptical. "Of course," he says sarcastically, "when central governments are being criticized they are concerned. We are *so* grateful they are concerned." The *samer* evidently are less organized than Canadian natives, but Söderström reports they are becoming more assertive and "there has been some talk that we should cut down the power lines. There's a great feeling here of being betrayed."

The alienation is shared throughout Norrbotten, a province that has the fewest people per square mile in Sweden, but the highest unemployment. There is a sense that northerners get precious little in return for exporting their hydroelectricity, iron ore and timber to southern markets. The frustration was reflected in the past election: Norrbotten residents gave the Communists their highest percentage of regional votes.

Söderström favors the creation of a transborder territory of Nordkalotten, a kind of sovereignty-association with the south wherein northern Scandinavians—not just *samer*—would set their own priorities for a change. As for the *samer*, a peaceful minority within the Arctic majority, Hans Andersson uses language that could have been borrowed from politicians in Quebec City or Inuit leaders in Inuvik. "The *samer* were one of the world's first small people," he asserts. "They had an independent nation, but they were shut out of their traditional areas and had to move. The *samer* nation should be allowed to have its land here." Adds elder Kulmunen: "Freedom is better."

Lapp family: small man fighting a big man

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