

have more female cabinet ministers, heads of boards, deputy ministers, judges, visible media, interviewers and so on. The board rooms of the nation would seem to be the slowest area in opening doors to women. However, women who start their own businesses are doing very well. Yet, the battle of the sexes cannot be laid to rest; attitudes change slowly. Too many women do double duty by taking all the residual responsibility for the home and children, men will not correct that for women, we must do that for ourselves. It simply does not occur to a lot of men to pick up half the responsibility of our common lives."

Regarding the connection between her public functions and private life, Hansen says: "In my life, my work had been of utmost importance. I view my work as an artist may see his or her creation. I have thought about this a lot and for want of a better term, I sometimes call this the artistic approach to life. It has to do with the happiness derived from concentration, absorption in a subject, whether it be technical drawing, practicing a musical instrument, writing a speech.

My last question to our Information Commissioner was what her Danish heritage means to her. She says it has added richness to her life, a dimension that allows her to appreciate other languages and cultures and gives her an edge in entertaining — a reason to serve Danish food to her guests, and a ready-made excuse for making mistakes: "one can always plead ignorance of old or new country ways." On a more serious note, she says the experience of two cultures "lessens one's fear of the unknown."

This piece is a little of Inger Hansen, a Danish-Canadian woman who is a major figure in Canadian affairs and the world's longest serving ombudsman. Her experience of a life based on adventure, curiosity, tolerance and industry is an example to women everywhere.

*Jette Elsebeth Ashlee holds a Master of Letters from Cambridge University in the Social and Political Sciences. She earned her Bachelor of Arts Degree from Simon Fraser University and has attended the University of Copenhagen as a visiting graduate student. Her mother tongue is Danish, and she has conducted fieldwork in the Northwest Territories, Greenland and in Western Canada.*

# Women from SWEA — T.O. Organization Keeps Swedish Women Together

by Valerie Yates

"In a national sense, we're unique!" says Kristin Lyssand-Bloom, President of the Swedish Women's Education Association (SWEA). Swedish women in Toronto have formed Canada's largest and most active Scandinavian women's group. "No other group, Finnish, Danish or Norwegian, is comparable to SWEA," says Lyssand-Bloom. "SWEA fills a big gap," says member Irina Hedman, "all other Swedish organizations serve business interests, and not cultural interests."

The 200-member Toronto organization has enjoyed a great response over the last 5 years, and foresees future expansion across Canada. For now, Swedish women from as far away as Kingston and St. Catharine's lend their efforts to SWEA's activities.

The Association, born in 1982 from the amalgamation of the Swedish Cultural Group, is but one chapter of SWEA International. This umbrella organization, with over 2,500 members and 15 chapters across the world, aims to maintain the Swedishness of new and existing members, promote these customs and traditions to the general public of countries where SWEA operates, and to build a network of Swedish women around the world. An important objective of the organization is to ease the adjustment of its members, particularly newcomers, to their new environment.

SWEA was first started in Los Angeles in 1979, by Agneta Nilsson. Nilsson, who received a medal for her efforts from the Swedish King in 1979, is spoken of fondly by SWEA Board members. She is described by Lyssand-Bloom as an "eager instigator without whom SWEA might never have started."

Under the guidelines and direction of SWEA International, the Toronto chapter of SWEA strives to retain Swedish traditions, both for their members and for Canadian society. The most popular of SWEA's annual activities is the Christ-

mas Fair at Harbourfront. This two-day event has received a great deal of public and media attention. Featured are a Swedish restaurant, numerous market stands, children's Christmas workshops, and traditional entertainment, such as folkdancing and music.

For the past two years, SWEA's Academic Action Committee, in cooperation with York University, has enabled Canadian and Swedish students to participate in an exchange program between York University and Umeå University in Sweden. A set percentage of SWEA Toronto's annual profit as well as various fundraising activities are earmarked for this scholarship fund. In addition, SWEA Toronto initiated the Swedish School, which enables children from 4-13 years old to learn and maintain their mother tongue.

Regular meetings featuring a wide range of interest groups ensure the cohesiveness of the association and encourage closer contacts and personal growth among members and their families. Folk-dancers, who have achieved near-professional status, weavers and cooks provide the focus for popular get-togethers. *SWEA-Bladet*, a monthly newsletter written by members in Swedish, is the organization's prime communication tool.

Reflecting a determination to keep close ties with Sweden, SWEA Toronto hosted a Royal Reception in honour of their Majesties, the King and Queen of Sweden, on the occasion of their state visit to Canada in March, 1988. The Royal Reception, board members agree, marks "a mile-stone" in SWEA's evolution.

While SWEA is a woman's organization, board members state it is not specifically "feminist" or exclusively woman-oriented, though individual members may well be feminists. "SWEA operates from a Swedish perspective through a female point of view, rather than through a feminist perspective." One board mem-

ber explains: "Our common concerns are with traditions and culture and its transmission." Textiles and education are examples of typical female culture and/or responsibility.

SWEA Toronto sprang from a social need. As Ingrid Bryan, Membership Director, puts it: "a need to maintain a few roots." While Swedish women are well integrated into Canadian society, there is a great need "to meet and exchange experiences, and live in your own female culture," says Lyssand-Bloom. "Swedish women need a place where they can get their own history back."

Ingrid Bryan lists three types of members: feminists, or "activist type" members, which represent a minority; home-makers, or "traditional type" members; and a final amorphous group, which may include students and au pair girls.

"It's difficult to keep such different interests together," says Bryan. "Their Swedish background, the wish to maintain traditions, is the only thing that holds us together as a group."

One member of four years spoke of two opposing "factions:" those members who wish to spread knowledge of Swedish culture, and those interested in maintaining social traditions for the sole benefit of SWEA members. Some members of the latter tendency are resentful of the connection with the international arm, which, as they see it, takes money and gives nothing back to the members themselves.

The expected difficulties aside, members agree that SWEA Toronto performs a vital function in the Swedish community. The 200 members enjoy social contact for the duration of their long or short stay abroad, and their varying degree of participation prevents the dilution or stagnation of their mother culture, especially if married to non-Swedes. Their activity also ensures the visibility of the Swedish community in a multicultural society. The organization is particularly important to newcomers to Canada, and to those settled nationals who feel cut off from both their Swedish heritage and the Swedish community. "It's a very valuable organization," says Lena McEvenue, resident in Canada for eight years. "I now have a base of Swedish friends." After living in Canada for 15 years, Eva Cohen acutely felt the need to rediscover her Swedish roots; she derives a great deal of enjoyment and satisfaction from her in-

volve-ment on the Board.

Still a young organization, SWEA Toronto can hope for expansion nationally, and, in the eyes of its membership, evolution and improvement. Growth, however, has its price. As Kjerstin Lindstedt-Dean, *SWEA-Bladet* Coordinator, says: "It's more fun as it gets bigger, but more difficult too." Some members would like to see a greater effort put into making new members, who may be shy and intimidated, feel more at home and part of SWEA.

One board member would like to see greater emphasis placed on helping women who have just come to Canada, women who may have children. These women may need counselling on Canadian family law or citizenship during the process of integration into their new country. Similarly, women who have been away from their mother country for a long time may be out of touch with legal changes in Sweden, concerning taxation, inheritance and property rights. "The need for practical assistance," this board member says, "could be being overlooked."

Despite the varied interests of its membership, SWEA Toronto has in the five years of its operation successfully filled the social needs of its members and established a reputation as an active, professional and respected cultural organization. Its efforts have helped make the Swedish community visible in Toronto, and have added to cultural exchange between Canada and Sweden.

It is a friendly organization, as reflected by its self-described "down-to-earth" Board, one which encourages the sharing of ideas and experiences from both its members and the public.



*Demonstrating lace-making at the Christmas Fair, Harbourfront, T.O.  
Photo: SWEA*

Valerie Yates is a free-lance writer and researcher, specializing in women's issues. Residence in and extensive travel through Scandinavia has prompted an interest in Scandinavian-Canadian topics. She is currently researching Danish settlement patterns in Canada.

**For Further  
Information Please  
write to:**

**Swedish Women's  
Educational Association,  
Toronto Int. (SWEA)  
260 Adelaide Street East  
Box 80  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5A 1N0**