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# Ingeborg Holm changed the world. An early whistleblower

**Abstract** The play *Ingeborg Holm*, which later became a silent movie – considered to be Sweden’s first social drama on the screen – was written by Nils Krok in Helsingborg 1906. It caused a fierce discussion in Swedish media at the time. *Ingeborg Holm* was a play and a film that questioned some of the ground values in Sweden at the turn of the century. Nils Krok was in that perspective what we might call an early whistleblower. *Ingeborg Holm* is usually not a part of Helsingborg’s reproduced grand history.

What matters and what counts when it comes to the history of a town like Helsingborg? What and who on the other hand, is never seen or accounted for? Who has made those choices and why? The stories we produce and reproduce about the past matters. A master narrative is often created in which certain perspectives and people are placed at the fore front, while others are forgotten or left out on purpose. What is remembered, forgotten or hidden? To choose is a political standpoint.

**Keywords** use of history, master narrative, empowerment, gender, women

All of us sitting on poor relief boards, voting yes and no  
 on issues relating to other people's fortunes and misfortunes,  
 ought to read *Ingeborg Holm*  
 (Ebba Pauli, *Helsingborgs-Posten* 1913).

*Ingeborg Holm: A Play in Four Acts* (Krok 2008/1906) was written in Helsingborg in 1906, whose main character, Ingeborg Holm, also came to play a role in terms of reforming Swedish legislation. The play was written by Nils Krok (1865–1928) during the week of Easter in 1906 and was about poor relief in Sweden. Krok found contemporary poor relief to be both debilitating and managed in an old-fashioned manner. Poor relief still followed the 1871 poor relief regulation. It was based on the so-called right of the head of the household (the master), which meant unconditional discretion for poor relief boards across the country. Nils Krok argued that it needed to be reformed. Women with children were expected to live on allowances so small that children were forced into begging, people were forced into poorhouses to survive and children were separated from their parents. Nils Krok reflected upon the social utility of this. Would not benefits that kept families together, constitute a better option? The objective of Nils Krok's play was to bring about change and Ingeborg Holm was to be the character who would change the world. However, a woman like Ingeborg Holm was and still is an unusual hero in the official history, or master narrative, of Helsingborg.

A master narrative is a metanarrative presenting an accepted version of what things look like in a location and why this location is said to be the way it is (cf. Brown and Au 2014). In Helsingborg's master narrative, there has not been any room for or interest in theatre or women like Ingeborg Holm. Helsingborg's master narrative is a history about men and the bourgeois middle class. The focus has been on development, business acumen and grandeur. The people who have been put in the spotlight include shipping magnates, industrial tycoons, entrepreneurs and consuls. There is almost an infinite number of events, places and people capable of representing the collective memory of Helsingborg. However, challenging the image of the city's master narrative and representing more than just a peripheral story is hard. Hence, Ingeborg Holm is not part of the master narrative of Helsingborg. She belongs to the large number of rejected or forgotten people in history.

The play was a social drama about a woman, Ingeborg Holm, who has just lost her husband in a lung disease. Left behind is Ingeborg Holm: a widow with a house, a newly opened grocery store with large loans and five

small children, while at the same time being too sick to get a job. Ingeborg Holm was forced to ask the poor relief board for support in order to keep her house and put food on the table. Around the year 1900, women with up to five children were offered 20 kronor per month for food, shelter, clothing and fuel. Ingeborg Holm realized that this assistance would force her to send her children to beg. But there was another option, which the board believed was the best for everyone involved, which was moving into the poorhouse while boarding out her children. Ingeborg did not see any other way out. She moved in and the children were given new homes. At the poorhouse, Ingeborg got sick with grief from missing her children who lived too far away for her to visit them. That is why Ingeborg in the play asked to leave the poorhouse. The board took a vote on her future. Lund, bookkeeper at the poorhouse, said no and emphasized that in addition to Ingeborg Holm not having any skills or anywhere to live, she was well-behaved and a good worker at the poorhouse and that they needed people who could wash the dishes, scrub the floor and look after those who were ill. Maids were hard to get, he pointed out. Furthermore, she would also have difficulties repaying her debt to the poor relief system.

Nils Krok wanted the theatre audience to be affected by the play. The target audience for the play was the Helsingborg bourgeoisie. The ones living in the city able to decide upon and enforce changes, as well as having the means and being able to go and see a play. Visiting the theatre was a cultural event for the upper middle class.

*Ingeborg Holm* premiered in Helsingborg on 5 November 1906. It was also staged in Gothenburg in 1907 by Victor Sjöström (1879–1960). Author Ebba Pauli (1873–1941) was there and saw the play. She agreed with the play's criticism of the poor relief system.

From the play (Krok 2008/1906, 102):

OLSSON: ---Through my work, our poor relief has become real poor relief. No abundance! Our frugality has reduced the poor tax year after year. Isn't that great!

Ebba Pauli also served as secretary of the Swedish Poor Relief Association (*Svenska Fattigvårdsförbundet*), which aimed to change the Swedish poor relief system as it was seen as patriarchal in nature. She reviewed the play *Ingeborg Holm* in the *Swedish Poor Relief Association Magazine* (*Svenska Fattigvårdsförbundets Tidskrift*) (Pauli 1907). Ebba Pauli called upon

members of poor relief boards around the country to go and see the play. She was critical of the poor relief system being so enthusiastic about saving money, as well as of the fact that children were separated from their mothers and placed in foster homes far away. She also found the mixture of people who were poor, ill, elderly and addicts to be problematic.

From the play (Krok 2008/1906, 61):

BERG: --- The poor house is the large garbage dump for all the misery in society. Insane people, delirious people, people off the street, both men and women, feeble poor creatures who've worked their whole lives, poor young women who've been deceived, they all gather here and, I assert, corrupt each other. And now you want to bring in a woman, who's done nothing wrong and is still in her youth. You want to board out her children and deprive her of her right, her right as a mother, to she herself govern and raise them. Who is to ensure that she doesn't get her spirit broken by the punishment you want to administer on her?

Despite Ebba Pauli's arguments, the play did not turn into the means for change envisaged by Nils Krok. The play triggered empathy and reflection but no real change. Perhaps this is why Nils Krok re-worked his play into a film script. Film represented a powerful new medium with great potential at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1913, Victor Sjöström, who is now seen as one of Sweden's leading filmmakers, was tasked with filming just about anything with famous actress Hilda Borgström (1871–1953), as she had a large number of unused days left in her contract. Victor Sjöström chose to produce *Ingeborg Holm*. As a matter of fact, he had participated in staging the play at the theatre.

The film premiered in Gothenburg in 1913. It was a scandalous success. After the screening in Stockholm, the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* wrote that several viewers left the cinema due to the unfair allegations raised against the poor relief authorities. The writer claimed that the scenes looked more like a cynical exercise of power and prisons from a century ago than a contemporary poor relief facility. Poor relief inspector Georg Nordfelt criticized the film in a letter to the editor titled "Unwholesome cinematic art" (Nordfelt 1913). He found the film to be unwholesome and objectionable as it depicted conditions in the poor relief system as belonging to a semi-barbaric country and not to Sweden in 1913. Many people criticized the film for being highly excessive. Nils Krok replied that this was not a matter of sinister fiction but

a realistic account. Critics were also concerned with how the outside world would look upon Sweden after a film such as *Ingeborg Holm*.

The debate Nils Krok wanted, and which his play about Ingeborg Holm was a part of, yielded results. In 1918, Sweden got new reformed poor relief legislation. Nils Krok and Ingeborg Holm, together with Victor Sjöström, Hilda Borgström, Ebba Pauli and the film medium, changed Swedish law. *Ingeborg Holm* was the first film to trigger a political debate in Sweden (Hedling 1999, 50). It also received some attention in other European countries and in the United States.

In fact, Nils Krok may be seen as an early whistleblower. Nils Krok was part of both the establishment and the poor relief board he criticized. Through the newspaper articles written in relation to the film, one can get a sense of the difficulties involved in criticizing something you are a part of yourself. In the newspaper *Helsingborgs-Posten*, bookkeeper Munkberg from Helsingborg in 1913 accused Nils Krok of lying and fabricating. Nils Krok did not engage in any discussions, simply maintaining that he did not make things up and that if experts like Ebba Pauli found the events to be realistic and credible, then that must be good enough. Munkberg was a member of the poor relief board together with Krok and participated in the decisions made by the board. He also served as a trustee at the poorhouse. The play's bookkeeper Lund, who also serves as a trustee at the poorhouse, probably refers to bookkeeper Munkberg. Perhaps the charges and harsh criticism levied by bookkeeper Munkberg indicate that he felt singled out as a bookkeeper and trustee.

From the play (Krok 2008/1906, 110 f.):

VICKMAN: So, on top of everything, you forcefully keep poor mothers, unwed women and widows, who once saw themselves as having to move here, at the facility. You won't release them until they have paid the last sliver of their debt. And when can it be paid! Poor young women! They yearn for freedom, which is found on the other side of the tall fence.

LUND: Pardon doctor, if I may make a remark! Surely, you're not saying that we should release unwed mothers. In that case, they will return every two years with a new child. We must keep them until they become so old that we have nothing to fear in that respect.

Munkberg was persistent in his claims that what was portrayed in the film never occurred at the Helsingborg poorhouse. He also claimed that no one had been forced into the poorhouse and argued that everyone was free to leave whenever they wanted to. However, the cases in the poor relief board minutes show the opposite. There was no right to appeal a decision. Nor was it feasible to leave the facility on one's own accord. Many women spent their whole working life at the poorhouse without being able to leave. The play about Ingeborg Holm was based on abuses repeated time and time again in the poor relief board minutes.

From the play (Krok 2008/1906, 108):

OLSSON: You could say whatever you want, but poor relief works well. It works well, you see. They enjoy a good existence, each and every one who comes here.

VICKMAN: No, unfortunately.

OLSSON: What are you saying?! Is there anyone missing good food and being tended to? Mind your own business as the facility doctor and don't blame others!

VICKMAN: I do not seek to blame any one person but the system itself.

OLSSON: Our system is a damn good system, as it's cheap.

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VICKMAN: I said that my remarks concern the system. Why should Mrs. Holm be admitted to the facility?

OLSSON: You can't expect me to be able to account for this after so many years. I suppose she was poor and wanted to live here. We don't force anyone.

VICKMAN: Shouldn't she have been given enough assistance in terms of money and being allowed to remain outside the facility, so that she herself would have been able to raise her children?

In 1918, the discussion had reached a point where a change in the legislation comes into effect. According to the new legislation, those applying for assistance had the right to appeal decisions and the previous *meager* relief was now to be *fair* relief. Poorhouses were to be differentiated and older inhabitants were to be moved to retirement homes.

This could be the end of the story about Ingeborg Holm and perhaps that might have been sufficient. The courage to make one's voice heard can make a difference. By means of theatre and film, people were able to bring about change. Ingeborg Holm had implications, not only in Helsingborg but in Sweden as a whole as well as the rest of the world. The film is still screened and discussed today, and it is available on Youtube. However, in the master narrative of Helsingborg, it does not hold a place.

If Ingeborg Holm in fact represented a realistic portrayal of the poor relief system in Helsingborg, it should be possible to find out who Ingeborg Holm really was. When looking over the board minutes, I directed my searchlight towards the widows. There were many unfortunate circumstances, difficult situations and sad events surrounding the widows applying for assistance. But no one fit in with the play. I found no widow from a lower middle-class background with five children to be boarded out. It is possible that Nils Krok felt obliged to change the details about his main character in order to offer a better fit for the middle-class audience at the theatre; to create the possibility to identify and emphasize with the main character, but also to create a feeling that this could happen to anyone. Thus, I started over, from April 1906 and backward, and read about *all* women applying for assistance from the board.

In the fall of 1905, a middle-aged woman stands in front of the poor relief board. Her name is Maria Persson and she is presented as "Admitted unwed Maria Persson" (HBG sa 1905, 4). Maria Persson wishes to leave the facility and claims to be able to contribute with 10 kronor a month for the raising of her children. As it were, Maria Persson has given birth to five children out of wedlock, three of which still were boarded out by the poor relief system.

The board takes a vote concerning her life. Seven votes against six decide that mother of five Maria Persson should remain at the facility. There is no right to appeal. "The woman shall presently and until further notice remain within the facility" (HBG sa 1905, 4). The reason was that Maria Persson would never be able to pay off her burdensome debt, which increased each year she used the poor relief system. The longer she was forced to stay, the larger the debt. It was more profitable for the city if Maria Persson remained at the poorhouse and worked off her debt. Furthermore, good maids were difficult to come by.

In the case of Maria Persson, elementary school teacher Krok and building contractor Andersson dissented against the decision in writing. This was the only time Krok publicly stated his dissatisfaction. Is it possible that Maria Persson is Nils Krok's Ingeborg Holm? She also had five children and the

procedure and discussions are similar. But Maria Persson was not a widow, she had not lived a seemingly orderly life and she had five children out of wedlock. She did not own a grocery store and was instead referred to as an unwed maid.

Nils Krok offered harsh criticism of the poor relief system, both in play and film, which took away the rights of poor people. He criticized a system that separated children from their parents and removed people's ability to act. Creating a debate on the basis of Maria Persson would probably have been difficult. From this perspective, the widow Holm represented a more suitable choice.

Maria Persson is admitted into the poorhouse already in 1893. This is the same year that Nils Krok takes his seat on the poor relief board. Maria Persson is 23 years old, in an advanced stage of pregnancy and has a small child to take care of. Perhaps she was unable or not well enough to work due to her pregnancy. In addition, it would probably have been difficult or even impossible for her to keep or get a job having one child and about to give birth to a second. She applied for assistance in front of the poor relief board. That very same day, she moved into the poorhouse and her three-year-old son Carl Emil was boarded out. Maria Persson also had a previous son, Edvard. He was six years old and was already boarded out when Maria moved to the facility.

Two weeks later, Maria Persson gave birth to her daughter Anna Sofia. Maria Persson and Anna Sofia lived together in the poorhouse for almost a year before the daughter was boarded out. Two years later, in 1895, Maria Persson gave birth to a son (Edvin) in the poorhouse. In 1900, she had another son, Axel Ferdinand. According to the poor relief board, Maria Persson had led an immoral life outside the poorhouse, which would be prevented as she was admitted. However, this did not lead to the expected results. Maria Persson lost contact with her children. They lived too far away, in spite of the fact that the poor relief board stated that children should be boarded out in the surrounding area.

Anna Sofia ended up with the Jönssons in Allerum together with another foster daughter. The couple did not have any children of their own. Edvard lived in Kvistofta with the Berggrens and another foster son. They did not have any children of their own either. When Edvard completed his church confirmation in 1902, he was seen as an adult and the assistance from the poor relief system ended. However, Edvard remained with his foster family and was recorded as the young man Edvard Berggren. He had taken the

surname of his foster family. Did Maria Persson ever find out what happened to her children? Did she ever meet them again? It is rare that anyone shows any interest in women like Maria Persson or tells their story. In a master narrative, single mothers are rarely afforded a prominent place. Nor are their children.

Maria Persson remained locked up for 18 years without having committed any crime, without having been convicted and without the right to appeal. For 18 years, she worked six days a week for the city while still creating an insurmountable debt that meant that she was unable to leave her prison. She applied to the board to leave a number of times. On 1 May 1905, she stood in front of the board and asked to move out: “the request by unwed Maria Persson to leave the facility was tabled until next meeting” (HBG sa 1905). However, at the next meeting, the board was quiet, and at the next, and the next. It was not until October that Maria was informed that she would not be allowed to leave the poorhouse. In fact, Maria Persson had to wait until 1911 before she was allowed to leave the facility. She was then 51 years old. Her children had all been confirmed and were seen as adults. The poor relief system no longer paid out any assistance to the foster families for taking care of them.

In 1941, Maria Persson is admitted to a retirement home, 81 years old. The retirement home was located in the same building as the old poorhouse where she had spent 18 years of her life. In the register, she is now referred to as *Miss* rather than the stigmatized term *unwed*. The very next year, in 1942, Maria’s daughter Anna Sofia also moved into the retirement home. Anna Sofia was only 49 years old. In practice, many old age homes still operated as poorhouses. They therefore spent Maria’s last year in life as well as Anna Sofia’s first year in life together, at the same institution. Did they know that they lived there at the same time? Did they know that they were mother and daughter? Did Anna Sofia know that she had lived there as a newborn? Maria Persson died of heart failure in the winter of 1943, 83 years old. Anna Sofia stayed at the home until she passed away in 1976.

By extension, the lives of Maria Persson, Anna Sofia and the other children, and their experiences when encountering Swedish poor relief, resulted in changes in the Swedish legislation. But who could have known? Most likely least of all Maria Persson herself. Widows, single mothers and children are rarely part of the master narrative of a location. However, if the Helsingborg master narrative requires success and significance, then Ingeborg Holm and Maria Persson definitely ought to be a part of it.

Stories, such as the one about Ingeborg Holm and Maria Persson, enable us to reflect upon whose voices are heard, which processes and perspectives are presented or re-presented in a city's master narrative. Which roles are assigned to people in our own use of history and why? What do we remember, what is forgotten or hidden? Choosing which stories, events and people to present is a political standpoint. But so is choosing which ones not to present.

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