

Chapter 42 : Prince Oscar Bernadotte (1859-1953) – “The Reader Prince”.

July 8, 1859, Prince Oscar II became Crown Prince. His eldest son Gustaf (born 1858) was 2nd in the line. November 15, 1859, his son Prince Oscar Carl August, Duke of Gotland, was born as 3rd in line. The two brothers' lives were initially identical. Because Oscar, unlike Gustaf, was born as an heir prince, he received a salute of 42 shots. Both until Autumn 1869 attended the castle school and then the Beskow school. Oscar had difficulty with spelling, which he blamed on the governor's “phonics method”. Oscar was the livelier of the two and distinguished himself early for wanting his way.¹ 1873-74 he was extra cadet at the Naval Warfare School. During the high school years 1875-79 he was a full cadet but followed a special study plan. He studied navigation and artillery at the Swedish Naval Academy Wallingatan 26 and participated in their gymnastics. The other subjects he read together together with Gustaf at the castle school. On May 21, 1879, he passed the baccalaureate and on November 14, 1879, he passed the naval officer exam.

There are three longer biographies (Jansson 1948; Jövinger 1949; Dahlberg 1953), some short biographies (Almén 1893: ss.326 -330; Mannström 1922; Swahn 1930: ss. 255-272; Lundebeck 1955: ss. 140-144; Elgklou 1978: ss. 136-140; Ohlmarks 1980: ss. 122-123; Sehlstedt 1981: ss. 66-102; Skott 1996: ss. 327-336; Erickson 1999; Sundberg 2004: ss. 237-238; Lindqvist 2010: ss. 76-78; Norlin 2015: ss. 157-162) and a memorial (Bengtson & Cedergren red. 1953). By Oscar's own hand there are a number of sermons, lectures and memorabilia (Bernadotte 1939). Oscar had a private archive with diaries and private letters. These are in the Bernadotte Archives but will not be available until 2035. Since he was in the habit of tearing his incoming letters apart, the information is fragmentary.

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Oscar participated in naval expeditions with the corvettes Balder (1873), Thor (1874), Norrköping (1875-77) & Saga (1878). The commander reported to his mother how he behaved. During his first trip with Balder, it was revealed that Oscar mishandled his hygiene & bit his nails, but that the cadet officers did not dare to reprimand him. When asked by the captain how he liked the seas, he replied that he probably preferred being on land. He had privileges like not having to cut his hut or brush his shoes and he ate with the officers. What surprised them most - Oscar was only 13 years old - was his worldly habits:

The Prince's discretion and conduct is, to say the least, unusual. By telegram, His Majesty knows that Prince Oscar was invited to dinner at His Majesty the King of Portugal. From that dinner, I received from the minister the most flattering review of the Prince's behaviour. Simple, dignified and friendly, always keeping his composure, is a fitting summary. I have of course not informed the Prince about this because I thought it superfluous that He is told of some flattery. The prince manages the German language rather well.²

Afterwards, his father was criticized for these privileges and they were withdrawn. On later expeditions he slept in a hammock together with the other cadets and ate the same food: “In the morning tea, bread and butter, at 12 noon bread, soup and fish, sometimes herring and potatoes, in the evening tea, bread and sometimes porridge. Butter was sometimes lacking.”³

¹ Svedelius 1938: ss. 49-50.

² Bengtsson & Cedergren 1953: s. 62.

³ Jövinger 1949: s. 9.

May 6 to September 16 1876 he was on an extended trip to America with the corvette *Norrköping* where he and the other cadets celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence on July 4 and visited the world's exhibition in Philadelphia.⁴ Oscar attended the inauguration together with his relative Peter II, Emperor of Brazil. At the time, he was handed the sibling's inheritance from Peter's mother to Oscar's grandmother - 15 large coffers with silver items. A few days later, Oscar visited New York. American shotgun journalism was still in its infancy, so Oscar was not interviewed. New York's Swedish-American community, a thousand strong, formed a torchlight train outside the hotel, gave speeches and sang Swedish songs. Oscar thanked them from the balcony. He made a study visit to the military academy West Point and saw Niagara Falls and other places. After his return home, he and his brother Carl were confirmed on December 1 by Archbishop Sundberg & Bishop Bring. It was a simple affair. As their mother was ill, it took place at the castle.

1880-1885 Oscar interspersed a civil education with a military practice: After graduating as a naval officer, he spent a few months in Nice and Paris for language studies. In the summer of 1880 he was on the corvette *Eugénie* and October 1880 to May 1881 he accompanied the steam frigate *Vanadis* on an expedition to the Mediterranean. The trip involved representation, the Italian royal house among others, and for the first time he had his own adjutant. They spent Christmas in Alexandria. Oscar toured the pyramids. Autumn 1881 to Autumn 1882 he and his brother Carl studied at Uppsala University (=attended lectures): Political science for Oscar Alin, History of philosophy for Professor Carl Gustaf Malmström, Swedish History & Literature for Professor Carl Rupert Nyblom, modern Swedish history for senior lecturer Claes Annerstedt & Higher Mathematics and Physics for Professor Herman Daug. The benefit varied. Malmström was not a good lecturer and Oscar was bored by the philosophy. However, Daug's view that mathematics could prove everything - even who had authored a piece of poetry - appealed to him and was afterwards one of his favourite stories. Oscar & Carl followed partly different schedules but had a joint governor Gunnar Wennberg (1817-1901) and two aide-de-camps who took turns: Ernst von Krusenstjerna (1846-1931; the army) & Nils Gustaf Sundström (1846-1931; the navy). Oscar was not a good singer but attended the student choir as a listener. He took singing lessons but was advised by the teacher not to continue with them. (This could be a mix-up with his brother, however.) Additional entertainment was bachelor parties, daily riding tours & skating. In 1883 he was enrolled at the University of Kristiania where he was supervised by the professor of theology Gisle Johnson & professor in political science Yngve Nielsen. Nielsen made home visits: "At 12 o'clock every day I came to the prince's salon and lectured him, and during these lectures the queen was also present. Then it was also decided that after dinner, the days when no guest were invited, I would also lecture him on Norwegian 19th century history, for an hour or so."⁵ In the summer of 1883 he got his first independent command on the Norwegian gunboat *Vidar*. In the autumn the studies continued. They included Norwegian history, geography, constitutional law, economics, "physics of the sea" (=meteorology) and English. Afterwards, he held additional Norwegian military positions. First drilling recruits in Horten, then on ship of the line *Desideria*.

December 5, 1883, to May 9, 1885, he took part in the steamship *Vanadis'* round-the-world trip: Karlskrona-Portugal-Brazil-Chile-Peru-Marquesa Islands-Paumotus Islands-Tahiti-Honolulu-Marshall Islands-Japan-Hong Kong-Philippines-Thailand-Sri Lanka-India-Suez

⁴ Tucker 1876: ss. 52-60; Bengtsson & Cedergren red. 1953: ss. 32-37.

⁵ Hadenius & Nevéus 1960: ss. 243-244. [Yngve Nielsen. Anteckningar, 1883-02-18.]

Canal-Egypt-Gibraltar-Karlskrona-Stockholm. During the trip Oscar kept a diary and published a travelogue.⁶ Additional depictions are available.⁷

As a first-time equatorial, Oscar was soaped, had his hair cut, shaved and coated with glue paint. Because of an eye cataract he was, however, not drowned in a sail with salt water. He had Sundström with him as adjutant, helper & general advisor, represented in the ports and toured the attractions. Since the port visits were up to five weeks, he had plenty of time. One of his occupations was purchasing curios - carpets, bronzes, porcelain, etc. - so-called "gear hunting" (my term). (After returning home, he furnished a fanciful "oriental salon" with the finds that were shown to the public.) There is no information about Oscar's relationship with women this time, but in Tahiti he was kissed. The official position of Oscar during the trip was a roller coaster. At sea - until Calcutta - he was a regular officer. At shore he was Sweden's highest diplomatic representative and the *raison d'être* of the tour. He had difficulty getting used to it. In Thailand, after handing over the Grand Cross of the Order of St. Olof to King Chulalongkorn, he wrote in the diary: "It was quite ridiculous, to one moment be an officer among officers and the next lording it over the boss and deciding on everything." In Calcutta, he was appointed captain and did not have to do guard duty. There his brother Carl joined and they celebrated Christmas and toured together. In Cairo, his brother Eugene also joined.

After returning home Oscar had health problems: Nerve pain due to an abscess in the jaw, lung catarrh & a congenital heart enlargement. The pain and the catarrh were treated by a doctor. In September/October he was in Amsterdam for a treatment of his heart problems by a masseur. After a week, crown princess Victoria arrived accompanied by her lady-in-waiting Ebba Munck of Fulkila (1858-1946). Oscar & Ebba's conflict ridden path to marriage is depicted in the next chapter 43.

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By Christmas 1890, the conflicts surrounding the marriage had been settled. In 1892, Victoria even offered to sponsor one of the children. Oscar & Ebba withdrew from high society, lived the simple life and the newspapers stopped writing about them. 1888-1892 they lived in Karlskrona. Oscar was at first director of the Swedish Cabin boy Corps, including the Falken, Gladan & Snappopp training ships. "When the prince once in his old days told us about his service at the Cabin boys Corps, he emphasized that he never had to beat a Cabin boy more than once, except slapped around a boy because he clearly lied to him in a hearing on bullying, which the prince had reason to suspect existed and which he vigorously fought. Slapping was forbidden then as now, but the others were delighted with this show of princely temperament."⁸

In 1890 he commanded the corvette Freja, with whom he conducted a seven-month cruise in the Mediterranean in the winter of 1890/91. His most vivid memory were from March 1891 outside Gibraltar where the steamship Utopia loaded with American emigrants - mainly Italians & Hungarians - was wrecked in a storm and a number of people drowned.⁹ Freja was his last naval command. In the winter of 1891/92 he was at the commissariat department as harbour commander of the newly built armoured ship Göta. In the autumn of

⁶ prins Oscar m.fl. 1886.

⁷ Natt och Dag m.fl. 1887; prins Carl 1931: ss. 221-338; Jansson 1948: ss. 51-104; Bengtsson & Cedergren red. 1953: ss. 38-60; Dahlberg 1953: ss. 15-28; Erikson 2021.

⁸ Jövinger 1949: s. 11.

⁹ Bernadotte 1939: ss. 191-198.

1892 the family moved back to Stockholm. He was appointed Commander. Then it was staff service. 1896-1897 he Commander the navy optical signal system. On May 14, 1897, he was appointed Rear Admiral of the Coastal Fleet. On November 27, 1903, at the age of 44, he was appointed vice admiral in the navy reserve and left active service.

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Since Oscar the later half of his life made a career in religious organizations, much has been written about his Christian faith. His confirmation seemed to have made little impression on him, but he promised his mother that he would read a passage from the Bible every day, which he did. The long voyages gave him plenty of time for reading and pondering. In 1881 he visited Jerusalem and the Holy Places. In 1885 he visited Massua in what is now Eritrea, where he met the Evangelical Fatherland Foundation missionaries. During his stay in Amsterdam the same year he visited the services of the Norwegian seamen's church where he allegedly came to "salvation certainty". The concept is not entirely clear, but it is about "a childlike faith", an unconditional belief in God's existence and an understanding of his omnipotence, an intellectual conviction based on the Bible rather than an emotional experience of his proximity, an understanding that salvation is by the grace of God and not as a reward for good deeds.¹⁰ As a Reader Oscar was uninterested in theological quibbles and became a protagonist in ecumenical circles. However, later reviews have shown that Oscar's Christian beliefs were militarily over the top harsh in the manner of another era although it was considered praiseworthy that "he stuck to them".

Oscar's religion has been traced to both his aunt Eugenie, his mother Queen Sophie and his Christian teacher Gustaf Beskow. There is also a report that Ebba Munck had something to do with his conversion by being influenced by her stay with Queen Sophie's friend Lady Mary Cairns (1833-1919; b. McNeille) at her residence in Bournemouth and there had "a spiritual breakthrough".¹¹

In 1886, he joined a group of like-minded officers who would gather at home for informal Bible discussions. He also attended Gustaf Beskow's sermons in the Blasieholm Church and his homilies. Oscar's judgement on Beskow was (and it has been interpreted as a self-characteristic):

He may not have had brilliant gifts, but he was, what the psalmist call, "a right hand of God" ... willing to honourably carry out the commands of his Lord and there was gold at the bottom of the character ... Joy and freshness were the basic tenor of Gustaf Beskow's essence and this made its mark on his teaching ... Pastor Beskow gave his disciples what he gave to his audience in his sermons: knowledge of the Bible and love and trust in its truth.¹²

In 1887, Oscar became an honorary member of the League of Friends of the Soldiers that were involved in spreading the word and improving the living conditions of the soldiers - especially curbing alcohol abuse and through the soldier homes giving them a meaningful leisure time.

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¹⁰ Jansson 1948: s. 109 [Källa: prins Oscar.]

¹¹ Jansson 1948: s. 122-123.

¹² Jansson 1948: s. 272.

During his station in Karlskrona, Oscar socialized in the city's religious circles and engaged in their activities. He participated in the formation of Blekinge County's temperance society and in the name of consistency he made a sobriety promise himself. He became a teacher in the Fischerström Sunday school - his first experience as a preacher - and a board member both in the local YMCA and in "the Karlskrona seaman's home". Returning to Stockholm, he from 1892 took part in the Brummer girl's school Sunday school, until 1907 during the summers on Gotland took part in the nearby Fridtorp children home's Sunday school and until 1916 he visited the cell prisoners on Långholmen as a lay preacher. The experience was useful when he was bringing up his own children. As a father, Oscar had a realistic view of what to expect from young people.

As a prince and poster name, Oskar was given local and national board assignments involving a variety of meetings, lectures, administration, inspection and mission trips, personal meetings and representation. As chairman of the meetings, Oscar was quite sympathetic and let those who had the floor finish. Criticism was expressed with humour and in a friendly manner without hurting anybody (unduly). Jövinger emphasizes that he always had his position clear in advance: If a conflict was unavoidable he followed the statutes, the basic principles or the word of God in that order. The mantra was that decisions would never have to be changed.¹³ His influence is otherwise difficult to assess. He was well informed about both policy issues & details. Jansson emphasizes his support for the early inclusion of the Scouting movement in the activities of the YMCA and his ecumenical activities.¹⁴

- 1892-1943, he was chairman of the Swedish YMCA and served on the board of the World Federation in Geneva. He also led the Stockholm division of the YMCA. The appointment of somebody outside the State Church as chairman - Oscar was perceived as a pietist - caused some controversy. Oscar had actually attended the YMCA inaugural meeting in 1888 and there suggested that the congregation was rather old to be called the YMCA and proposed an upper age limit of 35 years but was voted down.
- 1898-1949 he led the annual ecumenical Södertälje meetings. Until 1935, he also, as secretary, managed the organizational, the first time even the protocol. The meetings took place in his home. They were ecumenical conferences in the spirit of the Welsh Keswick Movement. The number of participants was about 700 and there were many lectures. These were published. A selection of Oscar's lectures can be found in "The Forecourts of Eternity".¹⁵
- 1897-1934, he was chairman of the Friends of the Same Mission, and also participated in the missionary work himself - most intensively 1897-1904. There are several depictions of the hardships.¹⁶ Several of those who participated in the mission later emigrated to Canada why Oscar somewhat unexpected became a name there too.¹⁷
- 1897-1911 he was chairman of the Swedish Mongolia Mission. Something of a failure since several of its missionaries were killed.

¹³ Jövinger 1949: s. 19.

¹⁴ Jansson 1948: s. 239.

¹⁵ Bernadotte 1939.

¹⁶ Bernadotte 1939: ss. 199-206; Jansson 1948: ss. 172-190; Jövinger 1949: ss. 23-24; Bengtson & Cedergren red. 1953: ss. 76-79.

¹⁷ Erickson 1999.

- In 1898 he became a board member of the League of Friends of the Soldiers, in 1899 vice chairman and 1918-1948 was its chairman. From 1918 to 1938 he also led the Swedish Soldier League's Stockholm section.
- 1908-1947 he was chairman of the Swedish section of the Evangelical Alliance (SEA) with the corresponding ecumenical agenda as the Södertälje meetings. The organization had been introduced in Sweden in 1853 but died out. Oscar revived it with members he himself selected. Oscar's SEA seems to have died with him. The current organization of the same name is not related. In addition to “networking”, SEA each New Year organized a Public Prayer Week.
- In 1913 he took over “Queen Sophia's shelter for newly released women”.
- From 1919 he served on the board of Gustaf Beskow's Blasieholm church, from 1940 as honorary chairman.

Since Victoria, as Queen, supported the Ecumenical Movement and the Naval Houses, it can be assumed that Oscar as of 1907 was forgiven his marriage. His nephew Gusty followed his example as far as 1907 declaring himself a teetotaler and in 1925 chairing the Ecumenical World Meeting Life and Work in Stockholm. However, Oscar was not fully rehabilitated until after Victoria's death, when he again appeared in the photographs and the weeklies started writing about him and the children. In 1934, his son Folke Bernadotte became the head of Prince Gustaf Adolf's court and the same year on his 75th birthday his brother Gustaf V awarded him the medal “*Illis quorum meruere labores*” with a golden chain for his work with the YMCA movement.

Oscar was in a good financial position. In addition to his admiral's pension, he inherited his aunt Princess Eugenie, Oscar II and Queen Sophie. He and Ebba had a state apartment (Östermalmsgatan 39; a detached house; now demolished) and a medium-sized 20-room summer residence (from 1889 Fridhem on Gotland, from 1907 Malmsjö near Tumba). The space was a must. The family had seven members, an equal number of servants, guests and participants of diverse meeting were often lodged in the home and there were receptions, lectures and “salon meetings” with songs, lectures and homilies for up to 80 people. One advantage for the organizations led by Oscar was that he did not charge for services or expenses and gave large donations. The most famous of these is Fridhem on Gotland to YMCA.

Since Oscar even after his abdication was surrounded with excessive reverence - he had to insist, for example, on being called “The Prince” and not “Your Highness” - it is difficult to afterwards get close to him. In the photographs he appears as serious, but is reported to have played with the children and their friends, laughed at jokes and even made jokes himself. As a speaker Oscar was hardly catchy but he spoke loud and clear, and expressed himself in a succinct and simple manner which was appreciated. One of his few remembered jokes was about an unfamiliar speaker with poor speech techniques. “I've never heard him before, and by the way, I didn't hear him now either.” He was careful not to complicate the message. Missionary work was to both win proselytes and to urge them to pass on the message, “the two arrows on the bow”. Oscar used to say that both things were important but you have to keep them separate, which he did.

In company he had good use for his “prince training”: To make people feel appreciated and at ease by listening carefully to what they had to say, not exploit his rank and remember their names, ailments and interests. His impartiality earned respect. He was never disparaging or overstated who he was. Since it never occurred to anyone to appear comradely, intrusive or

to clash with him, it was easy to keep a royal impartial distance. He seems to have had no particular traumatic relationship with his background. Oscar happily quoted fellow baron Edvard Barnekov's favourite phrase: "If I can serve God by being a baron, I will."

Another way to express oneself about Oscar is that his ambition to stay well with all religious directions at once, over time blurred his religious profile and a general Christian commitment took over. He was transformed into a much appreciated combination Santa Clause, geezer and inventory. Daughter Elsa: "Reaching old age a peculiar almost saintly radiance enveloped him. The harsh wordings of his youth were forgotten." Oscar faith in the bible was such that he 1942, during a serious illness, asked the vicar Alf Norbäck, preacher in the Blasieholm Church, to anoint his forehead with oil according to James 5:14-15. "If any of you are ill, he shall call the elders of the church, and they shall anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. Their prayer in faith will save the sick, and the Lord will make him well. And if he has sinned, he shall be forgiven." Then Oscar for this or other reason recovered. It seems to have been a recurring nerve pain in one half of the face, probably a consequence of the poor dental hygiene during the trip with Vanadis, and for which he was treated by a masseur.¹⁸

It feels a little strange that during Oscar's time the Union dissolved and two world wars were fought without them even being mentioned in his biographies or memories. The only thing I have found in that way is a 1942 statement that "time is evil". His politics are terra incognita, but he seems to have at least resented communists. He was also hostile to the new era's freer view of sexuality, which he interpreted as the spread of sin. In 1924 he petitioned the government to legislate against pornography. Nor was he enamoured of YMCA's Scout activities becoming more important than its missionary role or the generally complacent atmosphere within the free church circles. One would gather for mutual help, comfort & criticism, not to praise one another. The religion of Oscar was a religion of battle. Even literally because he saw no contradiction between being a Christian and waging war.

Oscar was active until the last, but after a fracture of his thigh bone in 1947, he had difficulty moving. He died on October 4, 1953. The youngest daughter Elsa Cedergren gave him a good but somewhat inflated obituary:

That our Father was an unusual man with a strong and outsize character, we children caught on early. But over time we have learned to respect him ... Our Father was only a man, but [Archbishop Nathan] Söderblom's words do still apply:

Saints are those who have been the salt of this world and helped preserve it from decay.

Saints are those who let divine light blaze the path.

Saints are those who in their being, in their life and in their works show the existence of God. Those people shine through time. They light our lives. For their light is the light of God and reflects his power and the glory of Jesus.¹⁹

¹⁸ Bengtson & Cedergren red. 1953: s. 141.

¹⁹ Bengtson & Cedergren red. 1953: ss. 180-184.