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# POLICE SCIENCE

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## HARRY SODERMAN OF STOCKHOLM: MASTER CRIMINOLOGIST

Cedric Larson

Cedric Larson writes extensively on Swedish and American Swedish subjects and has contributed to this and other publications. He is co-author of *Words that Won the War* which is a study of propaganda in World War I. His earlier article in this Journal dealt with public relations in the New York Police Department. Mr. Larson had the opportunity to meet Harry Soderman during one of his recent visits to this country and through conversations and extensive research has prepared this very interesting sketch on one of the present day leaders in the field of police science.—EDITOR.

The name of Söderman is almost legendary in European police circles, and it is no exaggeration to say that today he is Europe's leading criminologist and authority on police systems. While Söderman's name is familiar in American police circles also, due largely to his writings in police science, his very distinguished career is all too little known. The writer has had the privilege of several interviews with the eminent criminologist in the course of his most recent visit to America, and obtained from him the story of his life, which has been supplemented with extensive readings into his considerable published works.

The career of Dr. Harry Söderman once more illustrates the ancient proverb that truth is stranger than fiction. One might almost suspect that such a biography had been conjured up from the fertile mind of a Conan Doyle or Baron Munchausen.

Dr. Söderman was born August 28, 1902 in Stockholm in a maternity home, although his family did not live in that city. He was one of ten children. His father, Per Söderman, was a *Landsmann*, a kind of sheriff, in Delsbo, Helsingland, in northern Sweden. This area was once regarded as the most "hard-boiled" province in Sweden. Per Söderman was married twice, with seven children by the first marriage and three by the second. Harry was the eldest by the second marriage. Dr. Söderman says with a twinkle in his eye that his interest in criminology dates from the time that his mother was still nursing him, because twice in his infancy enemies of his father unsuccessfully tried to put explosives in the Söderman house to destroy it.

Harry showed unusual promise in school, and his father determined to give him a good technical education and make him a chemist. His elementary schooling was had in northern Sweden, and when he finished elementary school, his father sent him to the Chemical Institute of Malmo where he was graduated with honors in 1920. At the age of 18

he went for special training to Germany, where he studied legal chemistry as well as pulp and paper chemistry at the Technical Institute of Altenburg, from where he was graduated in 1922.

Although his father wanted Harry to have a solid occupation as a chemist in a Swedish paper mill, such a prosaic life held little challenge to this dynamic youth. While in Germany, he became a keen student of criminology, first more as a hobby than anything else. Soon he was studying it seriously and became known as a capable person in this field.

Harry had been an avid reader of travel books in his adolescent years, and always cherished a dream of one day travelling through Asia. He was now able to realize his fond ambition, for after returning to Stockholm, he persuaded the *Swedish Police Journal* to send him on an Asiatic tour from 1924-26. He served as a correspondent for this paper and reported on Asiatic police systems and crime and delinquency in these countries. He spent over two years travelling extensively in Asia, from Turkey through the entire continent to China. He journeyed through Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Baluchistan; and traveled on camel-back through India, Burma, Siam, and French Indo-China. He was not content merely to visit the large centers of population of these countries, but constantly pushed back into the hinterland in his criminological hegira. His dispatches were read with great interest throughout Scandinavia and by criminologists of all the leading capitals of Europe. When he returned, he found himself already famous at the age of 24.

Returning to Europe, he became assistant to Dr. Edmond Locard at the French State Police Laboratory at Lyons from 1926 to 1928. While there he took the degree of Doctor of Science at the University of Lyons, getting that degree with "Très Honorable" mention.

He now embarked in earnest on his life's work in criminology. He was elected a member of the International Academy of Criminal Science in Vienna, in 1929. That same year he was elected assistant editor of *Revue Internale de Criminalistique*, published in Lyons, a post he held for many years. In 1929 he spent several months in France as a special instructor to a mission from Siam under Prince Vongsa Nirajra teaching these Siamese modern scientific police methods.

Returning to Sweden in 1930, he was made chief editor of *Nordisk Criminal Teknisk Tidskrift* (*Nordic Journal for Police Science*) the most noteworthy publication in its field in northern Europe. Besides teaching at the University of Stockholm, he was also appointed by a Royal Swedish charter to become an instructor in police science to the higher officials in the Swedish Royal State Police.

In the years that followed his fame grew by leaps and bounds. He was assigned by the Swedish government in dozens of instances to investigate cases of arson, serious theft cases, and murder, throughout the whole of Scandinavia, when the local police authorities could not cope with them. In a surprising percentage of all these cases, through the use of scientific detection methods, he would track down the perpetrator of the crime.

In 1931 he was named a member of the Royal Parliamentary Technical Committee which investigated the riots at the sawmills in Odalen, Sweden. In 1934 he was made a special investigator into the celebrated Reichstag Arson case which made history. The criminologist reported his findings in this case for a leading Stockholm paper. He was the only person other than the Nazi officials to speak with the suspect, Van der Lubbe, in prison.

Söderman's considerable knowledge of chemistry and science in general were put to excellent use in combatting crime, and he devised many new methods or applications of science in crime-solving, involving ballistics, fingerprints of dead bodies, footprints, burglary investigation, postal theft investigation, dust analysis, espionage, and similar fields.

He came, however, to be best known internationally through his writings. His first book was published in Stockholm in 1927 when he was but 25: *Brottets Värld (The World of Crime)*. The following year another work appeared under his name in the French language and published at Lyons: *L'Expertise des Arms a Feu Courtées*. He published also a large number of technical monographs in learned journals and specialized periodicals.

His fame reached much higher in 1930 upon the appearance of what promised to be a definitive work on police science: *Handbok i Kriminalteknik (Handbook of Police Science)* in which he collaborated with Ernst Fontell, Police Commissioner of Gothenburg. This *Handbook*—totalling 675 pages—was the precursor of his classic *Modern Criminal Investigation*, later to make such a success on both sides of the Atlantic. The 1930 *Handbook* is written in clear, readable Swedish prose, and well illustrated, but was handicapped by the fact that its audience was limited to persons who could read Swedish.

In 1930 Söderman published in French an authoritative volume on fingerprints: *Étude sur les Empreintes Digitales*.

All the above works have been widely quoted in French, German, Spanish, South American, and English works on crime.

In 1933 Söderman obtained a fellowship from the Swedish American Foundation to study American police systems. He spent a whole year in

the New York City Police Department studying their methods, and made a wide circle of friends, among them John J. O'Connell, late Chief Inspector. After a year with the New York Police, Söderman and O'Connell were entrusted with the task of founding the new police laboratory. This consumed about another year. Söderman, meanwhile, had used the time to good advantage to visit police departments of other large American cities, and the offices of the F.B.I. in Washington.

Söderman all this time felt that there was ample room for a good basic work on criminology for police students everywhere, written in English, which would parallel in content his 1930 *Handbook* whose utility had been greatly circumscribed by the fact that it was in Swedish. He talked the matter over with his friend O'Connell, and after many exploratory conversations, the two decided to team up and produce a book under joint authorship, using the unparalleled resources of the New York Police Department and Söderman's wide continental experience as background.

Thus it was that *Modern Criminal Investigation* by Söderman and O'Connell made its initial appearance in 1935 under the imprint of Funk & Wagnalls Company. This volume was destined to make history in the literature of police science. The first edition (which is now a collector's item) had 24 chapters, bibliography and index, and totalled 461 pages. It was well illustrated with photographs and line-drawings and won almost instantaneous acceptance as a standard in its field throughout the police world. Sales of the first printing were so rapid that it was quickly exhausted. Many other printings followed in quick succession. In the next five or six years the book went through three editions and 18 printings. Total sales were never officially divulged by Funk & Wagnalls, but from informal conversations with officials of that firm, the writer estimates that sales in America alone must have totalled close to 75,000.

Besides the English editions, however, the book was translated into a half-dozen different languages, including French, German, Swedish, Spanish, and Japanese. In 1939 a South American edition was published in Buenos Aires, some 3700 copies being printed. It was translated by Germán Salgado of the Buenos Aires Police Department and Dr. Antonio L. Beruti, a judge in the Supreme Court of that city. Although no exact figures are obtainable, a conservative estimate would place foreign language copies of the Söderman-O'Connell book at about 25,000. This would place total sales of the book in the 100,000 bracket, thought to be a record for a work in this field.

A completely revised and rewritten edition, comprising thirty chapters and 576 pages, was published in February, 1952. It was issued as under the joint authorship imprint on the title-page, although O'Connell passed away in 1947, so virtually the entire burden of revision has fallen on Söderman's shoulders.

But to get back to Söderman's career in the thirties—after leaving New York in 1935 he again returned to Sweden and taught at the University of Stockholm. He managed to find time to do some work for the International Police Commission dealing with the issuance and standardization of passports, designed to combat illegal traffic in this field. The year 1937 Söderman spent in Dublin, where he was principal adviser in the reorganization of the Irish State Police.

In 1939 the Swedish Parliament created a kind of Swedish version of the F.B.I. called *Statens Kriminaltekniska Anstalt*, or National Institute of Technical Police. Söderman was named its first director, a post which he has retained to the present time, although he is gone so much he has to have competent understudies to carry on in his absences. Dr. Söderman was given a free hand in setting up the National Institute, which he divided into two units. The first division was the laboratory division and dealt with all kinds of scientific and technical methods for combatting crime. The second division was administrative in character and carries on the multifarious paper work inevitably entailed in efficient criminological investigation.

The National Institute acts as a clearinghouse throughout Scandinavia for fingerprint registrations, criminal records and data of all types, and related functions. Besides this, the Institute has extensive archives of crime records, a "Rogue's Gallery," serves as a central passport institution for the country and handles all relations with foreign police, publishes a police bulletin, and sends out specially trained agents for the examination of scenes of crime at the request of local authorities. It has extensive and modern laboratories which are considered to be among the best in Europe.

The Police School in Stockholm (where Dr. Söderman teaches) is one of the most extensive in the world. The passing of its examinations is compulsory for every rank up to commissary of police (superintendent, English style; captain, American style).

The Swedish state police set-up is rather unusual. This force is chiefly concerned with policing the rural districts and has branch offices in every one of the 25 provinces. The detectives and patrolmen are loaned out from the local forces for a certain time but paid by the government, and

the different state police forces are mainly handled by the chief public prosecutor of the province. The head of the state police is formally an assistant commissioner in the Stockholm police department. The police forces of Sweden number about 7600 men.

During World War II, Söderman was placed by his government in charge of a then very confidential project of organizing Norwegian and Danish police troops raised in Sweden during that conflict. The Norwegian contingent numbered about 15,000 and the Danish 3,000. Their mission was to be ready the day Germany capitulated to rush into their respective countries and preserve law and order. This they accomplished capably, in close cooperation with the Swedish General Staff and the Allied authorities.

Shortly before the ending of World War II Söderman was sent to occupied Oslo on a bold mission. There were at that time about 7,000 political prisoners held by the Gestapo in Norway, and Söderman was busy bargaining on how to get them out and into Sweden in buses, when the war suddenly ended. Söderman in a characteristic decisive fashion, seized the initiative and freed these unfortunate prisoners on his own responsibility and for a time was a sort of police chief in Oslo until the Norwegian authorities could move in and take over. Later the King of Norway decorated him with the Distinguished Service Medal of Norway for this feat. This medal is normally reserved for bravery on the battlefield.

In the post-war years, Söderman has acted as Reporter General to the International Criminal Police Commission, a post which requires travel, correspondence, and writing. This supra-national organization has among its members police organizations from all over the free world, such as Scotland Yard and similar groups. It has as its aim the cooperation of the police systems of the free world in combatting international crime.

Dr. Söderman had an interesting assignment during the year 1951. Since 1946 the Germans in the Allied sections ran their own police under Allied supervision. However, when the Bonn Republic was set up, it became apparent that there was need for the reorganization of the German police by an impartial outside expert. Dr. Söderman was chosen for this tough assignment, and from March to December 1951 spent most of his time and energy at this formidable task.

There was established in Wiesbaden a Federal Office of Crime Investigation (*Bundeskriminalamt*). This office maintains large laboratories, publishes the *Police Bulletin*, keeps a central file of fingerprints and other

crime records, and sends out trained agents to aid the local police if so requested. The Office has limited executive powers. It maintains in the capital, Bonn, a special squad of detectives for the protection of the president, cabinet members, and the diplomatic corps. The Federal Office of Crime Investigation handles all relations with foreign police and is the connecting link with the International Criminal Police Commission. Needless to say, Dr. Söderman is the principal architect in this reorganization of the German police system.

As for his personal life, Dr. Söderman was married in 1935 to Ingrid Beckman. They have two sons: Pehr born in 1936 and Erik born 1946. The Södermans live on an estate 30 miles south of Stockholm. Politically Dr. Söderman has wisely never been active. He is a member of the Swedish "Farmers Party" and was once persuaded to run as a candidate from his district to Parliament, but was not elected, probably to the disgust of the criminal world where they would prefer to see him do anything but chase criminals. In conversation, Söderman loves to refer fondly to his "farm," crops, and animals. In his somewhat rare uncrimino-logical moments, he styles himself a "farmer."

During his distinguished career, Söderman has won a host of honors and conferments by foreign governments, police societies, and learned bodies, too numerous to mention. Söderman never displays any of his awards, even to intimates, or talks about his honors, since he is a man of considerable modesty. He dresses very simply, and one would never surmise just from looking at him casually that he was the foremost criminologist of Europe. Söderman is a prolific writer and indefatigable researcher, and if some ambitious librarian ever made a complete bibliography of his writings there would probably be 150 to 200 titles to list.

Söderman today, at fifty years of age, stands at the apex of his career, one which has been of great benefit to mankind throughout the world. Söderman's great contribution to criminology has been to adapt and extend the discoveries of science, chiefly biology, physics, and chemistry, during the past three decades, to the field of police science. He is no armchair criminologist, either, but to perfect his knowledge of criminal investigation, has visited hundreds if not thousands of scenes of crime of every known type. His skill, patience, tact, industry, and thoroughness have also made him quite popular with all police groups he has worked with. He has personally solved scores of baffling crimes in his lifetime, by the use of scientific methods of criminal investigation, and many cases could be set forth if space permitted.

Söderman is an affable, forthright individual, with a saving sense of

humor and a genial knack of making friends wherever he goes. On one or two occasions when in New York City, he has given entertaining and diverting lectures before such groups as the Mystery Writers of America, Inc., drawing anecdotes and stories from his rich fund of personal experience, which are as breath-taking as any Sherlock Holmes yarn. Like most Swedes of education, he speaks English with ready facility.

In Western civilization in the past few decades there has gradually developed a new science which in America is called criminal investigation or police science. In Europe it is usually termed *police scientifique* or *technique policière*. As for the continental terminology, it is rather difficult to say which of these terms is preferable. The former refers to a given, definite science and the latter to the practical application of that science. Both are important phases in preserving law and order.

It is a sad truth that criminals always seem to take advantage of the latest discoveries within scientific progress in the perpetration of many of their crimes. Therefore society owes a great debt of gratitude to men like Söderman, who seek to utilize the latest advances of science in combatting crime. It is a basic tenet of Söderman's philosophy that the police, fighting as it does an often uneven battle to protect society, has every reason in the world to keep in step with the latest developments of science.

Söderman's niche in the criminological hall of fame is assured, and it is a considerable niche. His career, it is hoped, is far from over, but his fame would be assured on the basis of what he has already done. His name is as familiar in Sweden as that of J. Edgar Hoover in America. His name takes its place with that honored group who have done so much to protect society from the ravages of evil and misguided men who form the criminal fringe of every generation.

It is a tribute to Söderman to say that he is far more than a great Swedish criminologist. He does, in fact, belong to the entire world of free society, for his researches, discoveries, and achievements have been made available to the free world. His eminent name belongs with that honored company of Bertillon, Gross, Galton, Locard, Heindl, Balthazard, Wentworth, Van Ledden, De Rechter, Minovici, Osborn, Mitchell, and many others—all great names in the annals of criminology—and who have left society far safer and stronger because they have lived.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This sketch of the professional career of Harry Soderman is the first of a series of articles that are planned for publication on various leaders in the field of police science. The Editorial Board of this Journal shall select from time to time outstanding men to be the subject of similar sketches.