

# The Missing Skull – Professor Lundborg and the mismeasure of grandma

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**What is science? Or, more pertinently, what is good science? This question is central for all practitioners of science and one of the most important to convey to our students. For those of us working in interdisciplinary settings – my own department covers everything from humanities to political and natural science – the question becomes even more complicated when traditions from different disciplines collide. For me personally, whenever I think too highly of my own research and risk deviating into bad scientific practices, I think of my paternal grandmother, Elsa. Although long dead, she brings me back into the fold of good science – or so I hope – by urging me to take another turn at critically evaluating how I perform research and to keep my arrogance in check.**

## Skull collections and collecting

On 27th January 1945, Auschwitz was liberated. The 70th anniversary of the liberation released a round of journalistic ‘discoveries’ of the anatomical collections deposited in various Swedish institutions. During the past 40 years, such journalistic feats occur about once every decade; each time introducing a new generation to historical facts about bad research practices that flourished not long ago; each time triggering discussions about how Swedish scientists promoted eugenics – sterilizing individuals of so-called ‘inferior’ hereditary quality – and contributed to the development of craniometry – the measurement of skulls to determine an individual’s ‘race’ – and racial biology.<sup>2</sup>

Swedish 19th century scientists Gustaf and Anders Retzius, ‘fathers of Swedish anatomical science’, were prime movers of skull collecting and craniometry. Hence, the journalistic target this time was their skull collection at the Karolinska Institute – Sweden’s leading medical research institute at which the Retziuses were active, and whose professors select the medical Nobel Prize laureates. The Retziuses, father and son, were held in such high esteem at the Karolinska Institute that a major building and a campus through-road were named after them when the institute moved to its present location in 1945.

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<sup>2</sup> While I use the term ‘inferior’ throughout, I recognize that the term is problematic and it does not reflect my own standpoint. However, the term was used widely by the proponents of racial biology, ‘racial hygiene’, and eugenics and is used here to reflect the arguments of that particular debate. For wider a discussion see: Broberg G, Roll-Hansen N, eds. *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland*. East Lansing, MI: State University of Michigan Press; 2005.

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Skull collecting throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, was, to no small degree, motivated by an agenda to ‘objectively measure’ differences between humans – to classify humans as individuals of higher or lower worth.<sup>3</sup> The skull collections were expected to provide evidence to motivate existing social structures and prove the superiority of the ‘Nordic-Germanic race’.<sup>4</sup> Still, probably because of the thrill of exoticism, and the hope to show their inferiority, the skull collectors aggregated as many skulls of supposed ‘inferior’ races as possible. Indigenous burial grounds and sacred places in Oceania, Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Northern Scandinavia were looted, sometimes by scientists, but also by ‘adventurers’ who, in part, financed their travels by selling stolen skulls to anatomical collectors and those developing anatomical collections.<sup>5</sup>

In Sweden, there was particular interest in the Sami and Tornedalian indigenous communities of the North, but most of the skulls in the Swedish collections were of Swedish ‘majority race’.<sup>6</sup> According to Swedish 19th century legislation, convicted villains, persons who committed suicide, and the inmates of mental institutions and workhouses at death did not own their own bodies, which, therefore, were used for dissections at medical training institutes. After dissection, the skulls of these individuals often ended up in collections as examples of humans with so-called ‘inferior’ qualities. Exact statistics are difficult to come by, and the recent ‘rediscovery’ of skull collections has demonstrated the paucity of good documentation in the past.<sup>7</sup> However, among Swedish skulls that were not from archaeological digs, the overwhelming number of

<sup>3</sup> Ljungström O. *Oscariansk antropologi: Etnografi, förhistoria och rasforskning under sent 1800-tal*. Stockholm, Sweden: Gidlunds; 2004. Svanberg F. *Människosamlarna – Anatomiska museer och rasvetenskap i Sverige ca 1850–1950*. Stockholm, Sweden: The Swedish History Museum; 2014. Kyllingstad JR. *Measuring the Master Race: Physical Anthropology in Norway, 1890–1945*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers; 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Although the individual researchers may not have seen themselves as being racist, only collectors and systemizers of measurements, there was in the 19th and early 20th centuries a widespread notion of the superiority of the Nordic-Germanic race. Particularly in North America and North West Europe, in which the inhabitants considered themselves of mainly Germanic origin. The skull collections and craniometry transformed these notions of race into a scientific concept. For example, see: Kyllingstad JR. *Measuring the Master Race: Physical Anthropology in Norway, 1890–1945*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers; 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Svanberg F. *Människosamlarna – Anatomiska museer och rasvetenskap i Sverige ca 1850–1950*. Stockholm, Sweden: The Swedish History Museum; 2014.

<sup>6</sup> The Swedish majority, belonging to the ‘Nordic Race’ was considered ‘superior’ to the minority ‘races’, Finns (‘Eastern-Baltic’), Sami (‘Lapps’), Romani (‘Gypsies’), and Jews.

<sup>7</sup> The research questions asked during the collection period, with strong emphasis on skull indices, were such that limited documentation was systematized for each sample. For non-European samples, the documentation could consist of only country of origin and date of arrival at the institute. Svanberg F. *Människosamlarna – Anatomiska museer och rasvetenskap i Sverige ca 1850–1950*. Stockholm, Sweden: The Swedish History Museum; 2014.

specimens in collections likely came from individuals that, for one reason or another, were regarded as socially or racially 'inferior'. In this respect, with so few so-called 'superior' examples, one wonders how the skull measurements were expected to provide any relevant comparisons. However, we must consider that statistical methods in the 19th century were neither as well developed, nor afforded as much importance as they are today, and since the primary outcome of the investigation (the superiority of the wealthy white male) was already a given at that time, protagonists of craniometry were probably less concerned with any deficit in statistical significance.

If the story ended there, the collections themselves may not have triggered so much debate in the wake of the Auschwitz liberation anniversary. However, in 1922 the Swedish Parliament decided to finance the State Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala.<sup>8</sup> Officially, the initiative came from a social democratic member of parliament, but the motion was signed by parliamentarians from the whole political spectrum. Unofficially, Professor Dr. Herman Lundborg, an internationally acclaimed leading racial biologist, probably wrote the motion – and was rewarded by becoming the institute's first Director.<sup>8</sup> Lundborg argued for the sterilization of supposedly 'genetically inferior' individuals, moreover, his correspondence revealed that he was a Nazi sympathizer.<sup>9</sup>

### Grandmother Elsa

Grandmother Elsa was one of the early female students at Uppsala University. Not the very first, but early enough for female students to still be an anomaly at the university. During Elsa's time in Uppsala, Herman Lundborg was in the ascendance as a world-leading racial biologist. Students at the University were easily accessible study material, and Lundborg took advantage of this situation by measuring Elsa up and down, and back and forth, before declaring her to be the 'finest example of the pure Nordic Race'.<sup>10</sup> When Elsa later recalled these times to her grandson, she told me how Lundborg used her as a demonstration example during lectures so that her fellow students, notably all male, should really 'imbibe the beauty of a female of the pure Nordic Race', and how she was photographed, both clad and nude, for the archives of the State Institute for Racial Biology.

Elsa died when I was nine, and at the time, I did not fully grasp the implications of her story. But aged 11 or 12, I found Lundborg's popular science pamphlet of the racial characters of the Swedish population on the family bookshelf.<sup>11</sup> When I showed it to my father, he, to my distinct displeasure, was convinced that the female nude used to represent the 'Nordic Race' was, in fact, Grandmother Elsa (Fig. 1).

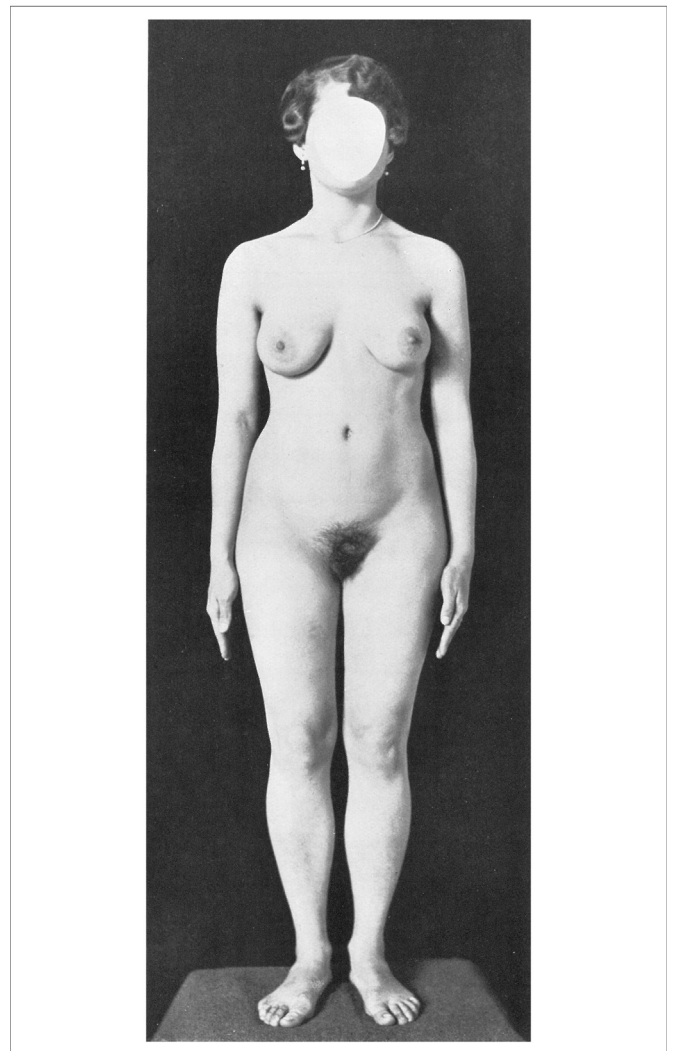
In my early teens, contemplating my grandmother publicly displayed in the nude was of great embarrassment!

<sup>8</sup> Broberg G. *Ugglan 4: Statlig rasforskning. En historik över Rasbiologiska institutet*. Lund, Sweden: Lund Univ. Fac. Humanities & Theol.; 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Hagerman M. *Käraste Herman: rasbiologen Herman Lundborgs gåta*. Stockholm, Sweden: Norstedts; 2015.

<sup>10</sup> These are Elsa's words when she recollected her student life to me. Later, my father confirmed that she had told him the same when the persecutions of Jews started in Germany in the 1930s.

<sup>11</sup> Lundborg H. *Svensk raskunskap*. Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell; 1927.



**Fig. 1.** 'Granny in the nude'? A plate that, according to the Swedish State Institute for Racial Biology, depicts a typical female representative of the 'Nordic Race', possibly the author's grandmother. From Lundborg H. *Svensk raskunskap*. Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell; 1927.

Today, however, I primarily see a dreadful irony in Elsa's contacts with Lundborg. The reason: one would think that the good Professor, a self-affirmed proto-Nazi, should have realized that Elsa was not so Nordic. In fact, this so-called 'finest example of the pure Nordic Race', Elsa Jacobowsky, was 100% Jewess!<sup>12</sup> Obviously, to Lundborg, Elsa's cranial index and general posture were more important than her name and ancestry when he assigned her to one of his predefined racial groups.

We could end here: with a laugh at how former generations of scientists could perform bad science, and with the rather obvious conclusion that racial biology simply was *Bad Science*; a faulted methodological approach where, from the onset, practitioners assumed a particular ideological position and then used doubtful methods to *prove* a theses – as opposed to *testing* a hypothesis. However, the question remains – how do I, as a practicing scientist,

<sup>12</sup> Her family originated from what is now the corner of Poland, Lithuania, and Kaliningrad. Koritzinsky H. *Slektsregister over familjene Lapidus-Nissalowitz-Schwartzman i Norge-Sverige-Danmark*. Stockholm, Sweden: Privately Published; 1946.

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