

Winnipeg's Swedish Matriarch



Gunvor Larsson

As part of Manitoba 150, the *Honour 150* program was formed in 2020 to recognize 150 individual Manitobans for their outstanding contributions to the well-being of their communities. The Swedish Cultural Association of Manitoba is extremely pleased and honoured to announce that our cherished and long-standing member, Gunvor Larsson, is one of the recipients of this prestigious once-in-a-lifetime award.

Gunvor and her husband Karl had quite the adventure moving from Sweden to Canada, and once there, touched hearts of others in many ways.

When Gunvor and Karl Larsson, along with their son Bengt, made the decision in 1958 to uproot from Sweden and move to Canada, it was not easy to leave family behind. In an interview by Laurel Anderson-McCallum, Gunvor stated, "I am here (in Winnipeg) because of my husband. My mom had said to me, 'You must go to Canada with your husband.' We came for a few years, but we stayed."

Gunvor Olsson was born in the beautiful countryside of Östersund, Sweden on Aug 16, 1923. Her parents were both entrepreneurs - owning a barber shop and a beauty parlour - a strength Gunvor would later inherit and bring forth to her new world in Canada. Gunvor married Karl Larsson on April 5, 1947 in Jönköping, Sweden. Karl was an electrical contractor and had an ear for opportunity, so when he heard there was the need for his trade in Winnipeg, the choice was made to move to Canada. Upon arrival in 1958 they knew no one, but as the Swedish population was growing strong in Winnipeg, so was the Larsson's presence within this cultural community.

Gunvor loved to learn but she also loved to teach. Their English schooling in Sweden would continue as both Karl and Gunvor attended evening classes at Kelvin High School to further their English. Later Gunvor would teach Swedish to students throughout Winnipeg; an example of her generous, giving nature.

As Karl's electrical business was thriving, Gunvor also saw an opportunity and opened the *Scandinavian Import Boutique* which was first established on Lilac Street. Here a supply of imported foods, clothing, special Scandinavian housewares and decorations could be bought. In the back of the shop "the coffee pot was always on", as well as delicious homemade breads to make any visitor feel at home. As word spread, their boutique became the Swedish/Winnipeg connection for Swedes visiting or moving to Winnipeg. In particular were many Swedish hockey players and their wives as they were recruited during in the 1970's, such as well know Lars-Erik Sjöberg and his wife Christina.

Gunvor and Karl became active members of Lodge Strindberg #259 at Vasa Lund in 1963, and in time members of the Scandinavian Cultural Centre as well. In 1970 the Folklorama multicultural festival was created as a celebration of Manitoba's centennial. Gunvor saw this as an opportunity to promote Swedish culture, so with her strong will and determination she organized the first Swedish Pavilion at Vasa Lund Park in 1970, which was also when the Scandinavian Pavilion was established at a different location.

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For the past 50 years Gunvor has continued to attend Folklorama. Dressed in her beautifully home sewn national costume, Gunvor volunteers in the Swedish Room at the Scandinavian Pavilion where she proudly speaks Swedish to many of the guests.



Karl and Gunvor Larsson



Sonja Lundström, Gunvor Larsson, Ingrid Tuft

In 1971 Gunvor started teaching the children from Vasa Lund ring dances plus many other Scandinavian folk dances. Soon they were known as the Vasa Children's Dancers and danced at Folklorama in 1971 and many years to follow. It was also at Vasa Lund Hall where Gunvor and Karl formed an adult folk-dance group in 1975 called the Scandinavian Folk Dancers, traveling throughout Canada and the US to perform, also attending workshops to learn new dances. In 1982 the Scandinavian Folk Dancers performed at the opening of the Scandinavian Cultural Centre at its present location on Erin St.

Both Gunvor and Karl were long-standing members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church since 1961, where Gunvor volunteered delivering Meals-on-Wheels for several years and help serve the Fika with the members of the congregation. She has created several cookbooks of tried-and-true Swedish recipes that quickly sell out once printed, as in her latest creation in 2021, *Gunvor's Gems*. Her recipes have been shared across Canada. She was also a writer for the Swedish Press, the International Swedish magazine, for several years.

At the age of 97 years young Gunvor continues to be a proud member of the Swedish Cultural Association of Manitoba as well as Vasa Lodge Strindberg, attending every possible event she can – summer or winter. She is a mentor to the Swedish club where she adds a spiritual presence to the events that are held and shares her wealth of experience and wisdom with everyone she meets. In their honour, the Swedish Cultural Association is proud to dedicate the \$2000.00 donation towards the new elevator at the Scandinavian Centre as tribute to Gunvor and Karl Larsson.

By Nancy Drews, with assistance gratefully provided by Delsie Cousineau

(Permission was granted by Sonja Lundström, Laurel Anderson-McCallum and Mari Clovechok to use information shared from countless conversations held with Gunvor Larsson.)