The Drunken Brawl: Market Riots in Eskilstuna 1937 and the Fight for the Right to get Drunk

By Stefan Nyzell

In the autumn of 1937 the traditional autumn market was held in the industrial city of Eskilstuna. A fun fair with carousels, amusement stalls, dance halls and tent shows was the main attraction for the visitors, many of which came into town for the entertainment from the surrounding countryside. This year the city authorities were very clear that they would not tolerate the excessive drunkenness that usually followed as part of the popular amusements during the three markets days. During the days before the market the police stated in the local newspapers that it would act firmly indeed to reduce the amount drunkenness among the visitors in the market area. The decisive actions of the police during the first day of the market made it abundantly clear for all that it was not empty words. The city jail, located in the police station in the cellar of the city hall and thus in the very heart of power as it was from this building the city was ruled, began to fill up with market visitors, taken up by the police with charges such as public drunkenness, disorderly conduct or violent resistance. The seven cells in the city jail was filled with twelve arrestees after the first days of amusements, this to some extent worrying the city authorities that this would indeed be even worse than the years before when it came to public drunkenness. This would not be tolerated a spokesman from the police told the gathered reporters from the three local newspapers.¹

The second day of the market the fun fair opened up at 10 am. During the course of the day the crowds of visitors increased steadily, and by 8 pm the police estimated that some 5000 market visitors had gathered at the fun fair to partake in the amusements. The police had a busy time of it, refusing overly drunk people to enter the gates of the fun fair and arresting those inside the fun fair found in that state for public drunkenness. At 10 pm the police were notified by some of the visitors of a fight near one of the carousels. When the policemen arrived at the site they found a violently struggling, obviously drunken, young man being held fast by a member of the fun fair staff, the latter having been struck in the head bleeding down the right side of his face. Gathered all around the two struggling men were a crowd of shouting onlookers, happily cheering as the drunken young man tried with all his might to break free from the other man’s hold. The six arriving policemen hastily made their way through the gathering and without any loss of time relieved the man from the fun fair staff, arrested the young man, put handcuffs on the latter, and started as a group moving towards the fun fair entrance where a waiting police car stood ready and waiting to

¹ Folket, 2/10 1937; Eskilstuna-Kuriren, 2/10 1937; Sörmlandsposten, 2/10 1937.
take any arrestees from the fun fair for the ten minutes’ drive to the police station at the city hall. As the group of policemen with the still struggling young man started to move, the fun fair worker following them towards the entrance told the head constable that the drunkard had refused to leave the carousel, preferring to linger on its comfortable seat, and had had to be forcibly moved from it, answering this with violence as he was made to leave it.²

During the course of the day up until that moment some ten people already had got arrested at the site of the fun fair on charges disorderly conduct or public drunkenness. The way that the young man taken by the police at the carousel was in all appearance in that way no exceptional from any other fun fair visitors arrested earlier in the evening, but the immediate answer from the gathered crowd witnessing the arrest was very much different. With angry shouts the crowd surged forward in an earnest attempt to free the young man from the clutches of the police with the use of violent force. The police in turn answered this with drawing of their sabres, forcing the crowd back, and moving towards the fun fair entrance with the angry and violent crowd – getting larger by the minute – all around them. All the same the policemen finally succeeded in getting the arrested young man to the waiting police vehicle, and although the crowd gathered around the car in questing, evidently with the intent of overturning it, the car hastily gathered speed and could leave the scene followed by the angry shouts of the crowd.³

It was far from over. When the arrested young man had been taken from the site of the fun fair by the police car it might very well have ended, but it did not. Instead the fury of the gathered crowd at the entrance of the fun fair was directed at the remaining policemen who soon found themselves hard pressed. As more policemen arrived by foot and by car, and the violent crowd grew as more and more people joined the throng, what started as a drunken brawl and an arrest by the police, one among several others during the same evening, in a very short time turned into large-scale violent confrontations between crowd and police. It is eminently clear that the crowd at this juncture turned its efforts towards getting even with the police, studiously singling out hated policemen known for their brutality and taking out all their fury on those. As the police answered with repressive force and arrested several more among the loud and violent gatherings the anger from the crowd – at this point of time several hundred at the least – only seemed to become even more intensified. As the policemen realised they were far outnumbered and spread too thin, and thus becoming vulnerable for the violent aggression from the angry crowds, they started to pull back moving towards the city square with the city hall, and the police station, at its southern side. They were closely followed by the crowd and shortly before 11 pm between 2000 and 3000 people were gathered on the city square, aggressively jeering and loudly shouting for the release of all in the jail arrested for drunkenness. At the square the crowd immediately made

² Landsfogden i Södermanlands län, Handlingar i stadsåklagarens mål 1937, Rapport angående oroligheter i Eskilstuna lördagen den 2 oktober 1937, DIII:3.
³ Landsfogden i Södermanlands län, Handlingar i stadsåklagarens mål 1937, Rapport angående oroligheter i Eskilstuna lördagen den 2 oktober 1937, DIII:3
at determined attempt to storm the police station and to free the arrestees. This was met up with policemen with drawn sabres at the very door of the police station, in the end by force pushing the attacking crowd back to the square proper.  

It was then less than an hour since the police had arrested the young drunken man at the carousel. During that time the head of the police had called in what policemen and extra policemen was at disposal in the city, gathering them in the police station and sending out groups of experienced policemen among the crowd on the square with the instruction that these should try reason with the people gathered there and to calm down the situation. To some extent this seemed to work for a while, but at the same time there were fast spreading rumours circulating among the crowd in the square about the excessive use of violence the police was said to have used at the fun fair and on the square. When one of the policemen on the square got too far from his colleagues and the crowd started to push and show him back and forth between themselves, pushing of his helmet and jeering at his apparent helplessness, several policemen led by the head of police himself tried to make a way through the closed ranks of people and come to the policeman’s aid. Somewhere in the crowd someone started singing the International, and this was taken up by many other voices around the square. The policemen trying to reach the place where the singled out policeman was held by the gathered crowd surrounding him had a really hard time making their way through the throng of people. Indeed they got quickly got more or less dispersed from each other, leaving them in the risk of being as exposed to the wrath of the crowd as the policeman they were trying to reach. The head of the police, more or less reaching the crowd surrounding the policeman in question started trying to talk those gathered there into releasing him. Instead this led to a surge of people moving towards the head of the police, who pushed by the people now surrounding himself fell to the ground. There exposed to the whim of the crowd he got pushed, kicked and had his glasses broken, before other policemen could reach him and by the force of their drawn sabres push the crowd back. Rescued from the crowd the head of the police immediately ordered all policemen, including those up until now held in reserve, to move out on the square to disperse the people gathered there. Shortly after this some forty policemen with drawn sabres line up on the south side of the square and by a given command attack the crowd dispersing it into the surrounding streets. Then the police start moving through these streets making arrests and dispersing any groups of people showing any sign of trying to gather into larger crowds.

In the inter war years Eskilstuna was one of Sweden’s leading industrial cities. In 1937 the city had some 36 800 inhabitants. Industrialization and urbanization had made the city grow rapidly in the late 19th century, from some 5 000 in the 1870s, 10 000 in the 1890s, and

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4 Landsfogden i Södermanlands län, Handlingar i stadsåklagarens mål 1937, Rapport angående oroligheter i Eskilstuna lördagen den 2 oktober 1937, DIII:3.
5 Landsfogden i Södermanlands län, Handlingar i stadsåklagarens mål 1937, Rapport angående oroligheter i Eskilstuna lördagen den 2 oktober 1937, DIII:3.
27,800 in the 1910s. The city had a history as a place of manufacturing dating back to the seventeenth century with a deeply rooted artisan culture distinctly marked by what the upper and middle class authorities in the city never failed to label as disorderliness in their frequent outburst of general indignation. Up until the late nineteenth century apprentices and journeymen had regularly made the streets of the city rowdy and noisy, to the equally reoccurring wrath of the city authorities, and where the drinking alcohol and taking a dram with ones fellow artisans took an as integral part in the culture as making it an almost holy act. While the city authorities had long worked to discipline this disorderly culture and to correct its many faults, the artisans themselves had with an almost equally determined frequency defended their way of life. It had been far from uncommon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that angry crowds of artisans had gathered, demanded the release of, or attacked and by violent force freed, arrested members of their community, in those reoccurring instances when they collectively felt that the city authorities simply had gone too far in its disciplinarian repression of the artisan way of life.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, though, industrialization presumably had made this rough and ready artisan culture into something of the distant past. In Eskilstuna, as in so many other industrial areas in Sweden, the social democratic working class movement – both its political as its trade union aspects – had gained much influence among the working class population in the later decades of the nineteenth century. The Social Democratic Party (SAP) had gained an increasing amount of political power in Eskilstuna in the late 19th and early 20th. Indeed the party had come to dominate the proceedings of City Council in even before the equal suffrage reforms in the late 1910s, and in the following decades it became the undisputed political authority in Eskilstuna. This was a development taking place in many of the industrialized regions of Sweden – not least in the larger industrial cities. Closely interconnected with this increasing social, cultural and political influence of the social democratic working class movement within Swedish society was a distinct cultural shift among the working population, from the rough and disorderly artisan culture in the mid nineteenth century to an orderly and respectful working class culture in the mid twentieth century. Then, with the social democrats firmly in power in Sweden at the national level in the early 1930s, this culture of orderliness came to be constructed as an integral part of the modern political culture of Sweden – articulated in actual politics such as the vision of the Swedish society as a people’s home (that is a welfare state society built on

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the notion of consensus rather than conflict between its classes). An instrument in the social democratic ambitious construction of the modern welfare state was social engineering – articulated in the visions of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal. An important aspect of this cultural construction of modern welfare Sweden was what can be seen as a disciplinary project aimed at those among the population that did not freely acknowledge the ideals of orderly culture. 

It is from this perspective the outspoken ambition from the authorities in Eskilstuna to act firmly against drunkenness during the traditional autumn market, at least in part, can be understood. In the social democratic ruled orderly construed city there were from the perspective of the rulers not really any place for the articulation of a more popular aspect of working class culture – a less orderly culture in which the traditional autumn market was seen as a clearly defined time and space for a culturally accepted amount of rowdiness, noisiness and drunkenness. Thus the demands of the disciplinary project as an aspect of the construction of the dominant societal culture of orderliness were sometimes met with fierce contentious resistance from those less orderly who not were prepared to simply adjust themselves to the dominant norms of society. This in turn can be seen as an important part of the explanation to the series of events during the second day of the autumn market in Eskilstuna 1937; beginning with the arrest of a drunken young male worker, leading up to violent contentious riots in the autumn night, and ending with a trial where the authorities have a hard time explaining how a large gathering of decent young workers could act in such a way as to violently attack the police station and singing the International as they were fighting with the police.


\[11\] Nyzell, 2009, p 38-47.
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