

OUT OF POVERTY: THE AHRENBURG SIBLINGS, 1860–1920

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how three illegitimate children of a poor maidservant built their lives in Finland at the end of the long nineteenth century. The eldest followed in her mother's footsteps by becoming a maidservant with an illegitimate child of her own, but the two younger ones cut loose from the traditional setting of the family, both geographically and socio-economically. They joined the middle class, which was then emerging and taking shape at the turn of the century. This article shows how the rise of the younger Ahrenberg siblings was made possible by the new social structures in Finnish society: increasing educational openings for common people; economic liberalization; and the emergence of new career opportunities within the expanding field of public sector social work. The article also analyzes the impact these changes had on the self-understanding of the siblings. Moreover, the article sheds light on the means of mutual assistance by which the Ahrenberg siblings helped each other seize the new opportunities and fight the insecurity of Finnish society at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

INTRODUCTION

The article discusses the Ahrenberg family from Kisko parish, Southern Finland. The family members include Edla Ahrenberg (1846–1924), a crofter's daughter, and her three illegitimate children, Olga Maria (1868–1915), Mauritz Johan (1874–1916), and Elin Alina (1883–1923). Elin Ahrenberg changed her name to Aarrevaara in 1907. Here, her original family name, Ahrenberg, is used throughout the article, with the exception of the references.

The article's point of departure is the downfall of Edla Ahrenberg: as a young maidservant, she committed a crime and was sentenced to imprisonment. Within a short period of time, this maidservant of good reputation became a poor and a shunned vagrant—a breakdown of her social status among the landless people of Kisko parish. The term *landless people* refers here to the group of non-land-owning rural people who were living outside the traditional system of four estates (nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, freeholder peasantry). The group consisted of tenant farmers, rural wage earners, and casual laborers who were usually hired at farms during the busy summertime but left unemployed in the winter.

The article analyzes the ways in which the three children of Edla Ahrenberg built their lives. The eldest, Olga Ahrenberg, followed in her mother's footsteps by becoming a maidservant and having an illegitimate son. She lived her life in Kisko and the neighboring parishes. The middle child, Mauritz Ahrenberg, volunteered for the Finnish Guard, and after serving as a regular for a couple of years, he started a family and a business of his own as a rural tradesman in Western Finland. The youngest, Elin Ahrenberg, attended Kisko elementary school, achieving excellent grades, and eventually became a municipal poorhouse directress. Her longest post, nine years, was in Lempäälä parish, Southwestern Finland. The article seeks to answer the following question: why and how were the two younger children able to cut loose from the socio-economic status of the family and make their way to the threshold of the emerging middle class?

Methodologically, the article is a biographical case study. The case-study method has been chosen because it is the best way to access individual lives in depth. At the same time, the research subjects are approached as “bookmarks of their time” (Florin 2014). This means that the Ahrenberg family members will be bound to the world they lived in. They are analyzed in relation to the values, practices, and ways of life that were commonly favored in their own society. In other words, the role of that particular society in enabling the particular kind of lives becomes visible (Schaser 2008; Caine 2010; Possing 2012).

In this article, the term *socio-economic status* refers to conditions that “determined the access to economic resources, thereby reflecting group-specific differences in the standard of living in terms of nutrition, housing, and vulnerability to economic hardship” (Dröbe and Lundh 2010, 348). The term *middle class*, in turn, refers here to the new social middle group of Finnish society, emerging outside the four estates towards the end of the nineteenth century. The group consisted of artisans, farmers, lower officials, and civil servants, and the petit bourgeois of the cities,

all more or less in pursuit of upward social mobility (Rinne and Jauhiainen 1988, 14, 19–20; Häggman 1994, 23–26; Haapala 1995, 97–122). In addition, there were ambitious individuals emerging from the lower social orders—the landless people—who got a foot in the door of the new middle class, thus creating the “rags to (relative) riches” stories of their time. As a case study, the younger Ahrenberg siblings can be regarded as an example of such a story.

The new middle groups both benefited from the legislative, economic, and cultural changes in society, and accelerated that change by their own actions. In Finland, one of the key factors behind the emergence of the middle groups was education, which was becoming increasingly available to common people after the Primary School Act of 1866. Twenty years after the passing of the Act, 79 percent of the rural municipalities had one or more primary schools, and in 1903, there was only one municipality totally lacking a primary school (Statistics 1908, 96).

By educating themselves and their offspring, and by creating a cultural ethos of their own, the members of the new middle groups aimed to set themselves apart from the uneducated masses as well as from the traditional elite, which was regarded as old-fashioned and decadent (see Marja Vuorinen’s article in this volume). With education came a more profound realization of the individual’s opportunity to rise to greater things and affect the course of his or her life. Socio-economic status was no longer seen as a quality strictly bound to inherited economic, social, and cultural capital, but as an attribute dependent on individual action and decision-making (Markkola 2003, 135; Nieminen 2003, 262–65; Dribe and Svensson 2008, 126). This way of thinking gradually eroded the foundations of the *ancien régime* based on the idea of inherited socio-economic standing within (or outside) the traditional system of the four estates. In a broader sense, the endeavor of the middle groups was part of the process in which the old way of dividing people into four estates was replaced by a class division as a means of social distinction (Häggman 1994, 23–26; Haapala 1995, 97–122).

It should be noted, however, that as ideologically important as the elementary schools were, the change in society brought about by education was by no means sudden or dramatic. This was because in the early 1900s the Finnish school system was still far from comprehensive. The network of schools did not reach all school-aged children, and, in terms of total coverage of education, Finland was behind other Northern and Western European countries. According to the 1910 census, half of the adult population was still illiterate (Haapala 1995, 39).

Furthermore, the emerging middle class was not homogenous. For the young folk moving up from the lower orders, elementary school or occupational training could open the door to the *lower*-middle class. On the other hand, the path to the *upper*-middle class remained barred for them for decades, partly because secondary schooling, leading to upper-middle class professions, was considered too expensive. As late as 1910, only 7 percent of the age group entered secondary education (Haapala 1995, 39). Thus, although the expanding primary education may have increased the opportunities for social mobility for the lower social orders, all in all, the growing importance of education in society helped the better-off social groups to gain and secure the more privileged positions within the middle class (Maas and van Leeuwen 2002, 191).

The article seeks to open a new perspective on the modernization of Finnish society around 1900 by discussing the interplay between societal change and individual lives. On the one hand, there are the major structural changes that made Mauritz and Elin Ahrenberg's social ascent possible *in theory*: first, the increase in educational opportunities for the common people (Alapuro 1994; Häggman 1994; Haapala 1995; Markkola 2003; Nieminen 2003; Rahikainen 2003); second, industrialization and economic liberalization (Ahvenainen, Pihkala, and Rasila 1982; Kekkonen 1987; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Konttinen 1993; Haapala 1995; Pihkala 2001); and third, the emergence of new career opportunities for women within the expanding field of public sector social work (Vattula 1981; Rinne and Jauhiainen 1988; Anttonen 1994; Satka 1994; Henriksson 1998; Rahikainen and Räisänen 2001; Henriksson and Wrede 2004; Annola 2013). These changes and their impact in society have been widely discussed elsewhere.

On the other hand, less attention has been paid to the subtler mechanisms by which the common people were able to actually seize the new opportunities *in practice*. In this article, the focus is on these mechanisms, the ways in which people of humble background managed to weave their lives into the fabric of the new society. The article also aims to discuss how the widening range of opportunities influenced the self-understanding of common people. Discussing the Ahrenberg siblings' fight for a better future also sheds light on their common enemy. It is obvious they were trying to escape poverty. But as poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon, it is justified to ask what kind of poverty the Ahrenberg family was experiencing and what it meant for them to be poor. It is also worth pondering how the available source material reflects not only social ascent but also poverty.

The source material for this article consists of official documents and records kept by both secular and ecclesiastical authorities: communion books, poll tax registers, court records, and military records. Contemporary newspapers and periodicals are also used where applicable. The picture of the Ahrenberg family is enhanced by analyzing private documents such as letters, school reports, and work references. The letters include material written by Elin Ahrenberg at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as two letters from Liisa Aarrevaara, the granddaughter of Mauritz Ahrenberg. These letters were written in 1992 and 2008 in response to inquiries sent by Professor Mikko Mäntysaari¹ and the present author.

THE DOWNFALL OF EDLA AHRENBURG

Edla Ahrenberg was born in Kisko parish in July 1846, the youngest daughter of a crofter, Carl Ahrenberg, and his wife, Maria Helena Salin (Kisko Birth and Baptism Records 1796–1852). The family was farming a tenant farm called Haukia, belonging to Finnari farm in Jyly village. After the demise of the parents within a short period of time, 1865 to 1866, Edla Ahrenberg moved to the neighboring Pohja parish to work as a maidservant in the household of a civil engineer, Karl Johan Broberg (Kisko Death and Burial Records 1839–1900; Kisko Moving Records 1839–1869).

Edla Ahrenberg trod a path typical for young rural women in Finland as well as in Northwestern Europe in general: country girls and boys—and especially those coming from the lower social orders—were supposed to work as maidservants or farmhands for a couple of years before marriage (Steedman 2004; Rahikainen 2006, 28–29, 35; Dribe and Lundh 2010, 352–53). At twenty-one, Edla Ahrenberg was somewhat old to be leaving home for the first time, which may have been because she took care of her ailing parents.

Things did not work out for Edla Ahrenberg in Pohja: in August 1868, she was summoned to Pohja-Tenhola district court and prosecuted for theft and for disturbing the peace of the Sabbath. During the two hearings in court, Edla Ahrenberg willingly confessed to having stolen woolen yarn from the nearby Antskog textile factory several times during the previous year. She had also stolen two banknotes of

1 Professor Mikko Mäntysaari approached Liisa Aarrevaara in order to write an article on Elin Ahrenberg (Aarrevaara) as a pioneer in the field of Finnish social work. The article was published in 1992 (see Mäntysaari 1992). Professor Mäntysaari was kind enough to place the material he had collected for his research at the disposal of the present author. The collection includes copies of the letters Elin Ahrenberg wrote to her employer Johannes Lohilampi at the beginning of the twentieth century. The original letters are stored in the Johannes Lohilampi Archive, Sammatti, Finland.

one hundred Finnish *markka* (marks) from the suitcase of her employer's guest the previous summer (Court Record 1868). Moreover, as the court record reveals, four silver teaspoons were also involved:

Edla Johanna Ahrenberg explained that she had followed [her employer and his guests] to the said picnic as a maidservant; that Engineer Broberg had a cellar in which the service for the picnic had been stored; that upon leaving for the picnic, four silver teaspoons had been forgotten in the basement; that Edla Johanna Ahrenberg, a day after the picnic, or Monday morning, had taken the said teaspoons and hidden them in a sock found in Broberg's attic.²

It came out in the first hearing that Edla Ahrenberg had tried to get rid of one of the stolen banknotes by asking her elder sister Kristina Malmberg to purchase ten ells of shirt fabric with it, but the local shopkeeper had grown suspicious of a humble woman possessing such a large sum of money. The police soon traced the banknote to Edla Ahrenberg herself (Court Record 1868).

The district court found Edla Ahrenberg guilty and sentenced her to a fine of 672 marks, 60 pennies. As there was absolutely no way Edla Ahrenberg could have paid the fine, the pecuniary penalty was replaced with corporal punishment, which in her case meant birching. Because the court could not ignore the fact that Ahrenberg was heavily pregnant, the birching was to be executed only after the birth of the child. In the meantime, Ahrenberg was to be held in Uusimaa County Prison in Helsinki, where she had already been detained between the two hearings. In addition, Edla Ahrenberg was subjected to an ecclesiastical punishment: she was to repent her sins and beg for absolution in front of a pastor and two witnesses. In the fall of 1868, Edla Ahrenberg was sent off to Uusimaa County Prison (Court Record 1868).

Why did Edla Ahrenberg's career as a maidservant turn into a series of thefts? The court record gives no indication of her personal motives, but it is possible that her choices had to do with the Finnish Famine of 1866–68. Although Pohja and Kisko were not among the worst-hit regions, living conditions were poor there as well. For example, in April 1868, the local newspaper *Sanomia Turusta* reported on hunger and disease in Kisko, and it is clearly visible in the parish register that typhoid especially was carrying people off in Pohja (*Sanomia Turusta* 1868; Pohja Death and Burial Records 1849–1900).

² All translations are by the author.

It may be that not even a position in an engineer's household was enough to ease the insecurity the young maidservant must have been experiencing amidst the news of the misery. The situation became even gloomier during the spring and summer of 1868, as Edla Ahrenberg must have realized that she was expecting a child. As the pregnancy became more visible week by week, it was quite obvious that she was sooner or later going to lose her job at the Broberg house.

The first thefts in the winter of 1868 may have happened on the spur of the moment, but as the offences became more frequent in the summer, one cannot help thinking that Edla Ahrenberg was desperately trying to ensure her survival by stealing. She was especially keen on stealing or purchasing material for knitting and needlework. Her "specialization" was probably due to the fact that she was living close to a textile factory, but it may also imply that she was actually planning a new life as a knitter or seamstress. There is some support for this speculation in the account of Liisa Aarrevaara, according to whom her great-grandmother, Edla Ahrenberg, earned her living as a dressmaker (Aarrevaara 1992; 2008). Although no official document has been found of Edla Ahrenberg's career as a dressmaker, it is possible that she was indeed adept at needlework and intended to make a living out of it.

Edla Ahrenberg's daughter Olga was born in Uusimaa County Prison in December 1868, and soon thereafter Ahrenberg was granted absolution by the prison chaplain for her fornication. On being released from prison, Edla Ahrenberg returned to her home parish, Kisko, where another absolution was granted in March 1869—this time for theft and disturbing the peace of the Sabbath (Viapori Birth and Baptism Records 1815–1891; Kisko Criminal Records 1826–1889). Whether the birching was actually executed at some point during the process is not known.

As the official records provide no details, it is not easy to find out how exactly Edla Ahrenberg organized her life after returning to her home parish in 1869. In poll tax registers, as well as in the communion books, she appears in connection with Jyly village, but on a separate list of people with no fixed abode (Kisko Poll Tax Registers 1870–1910; Kisko Communion Books 1863–1899). It should be noted that her new status does not refer to her criminal past but rather to her difficulties in finding employment (Pukero 2009, 22).

Although Edla Ahrenberg had atoned for her crime in the eyes of both the secular and ecclesiastical authorities, there was no way of going back to normal. It is likely that no one wanted to hire a servant with a criminal past. In the late 1800s, servants applying for a new post were obliged to present a small printed booklet with grades for health, honesty, sobriety, diligence, chastity, and so on, given by

previous employers (Vuorela 1977, 659). While it is not known whether in Edla Ahrenberg's case the booklet was checked, she was nevertheless unable to find a position as a domestic servant.

The account of Edla Ahrenberg's great-granddaughter, Liisa Aarrevaara, gives an impression of Edla being shunned by her relatives in Kisko (Aarrevaara 1992). However, according to the parish registers, it seems fair to assume that Edla Ahrenberg was actually living at her old home, Haukia tenant farm (see also Miettinen 2012, 268–70). After the death of Carl Ahrenberg, the croft was taken care of by Edla Ahrenberg's elder sister Henrika and her husband, Gustaf Lindfors. Living at Haukia, in close contact with her sister's family, Edla Ahrenberg could probably manage somehow by carrying out temporary tasks and odd jobs available in her immediate surroundings in Jyly village. It is not hard to imagine Edla Ahrenberg putting her alleged needlework skills to use at this point in her life (see also Markkola 1989, 50–51; Markkola 1994, 113).

The parish registers even imply that there was a closeness between the two sisters: when Mauritz, the second illegitimate child of Edla Ahrenberg, was born in December 1874, Henrika and Gustaf Lindfors were registered as his godparents (Kisko Birth and Baptism Records 1853–1886). Henrika Lindfors was no stranger to a stained reputation: she had herself given birth to an illegitimate son in Karjalohja parish seventeen years earlier. As Henrika had married afterwards and ended up as a respectable crofter's wife, life had turned out just fine for her and her son. Henrika's son was actually entrusted with the Haukia tenant farm after the death of Henrika's husband in 1887 (Karjalohja Birth and Baptism Records 1839–1886; Kisko Marriage Records 1683–1874; Kisko Communion Books 1880–1889). It should be noted that there was a tradition of godchild–godparent relationships inside the Ahrenberg family: Kristina Malmberg (née Ahrenberg) and her husband were marked as the godparents of Henrika Ahrenberg's son (Karjalohja Birth and Baptism Records 1839–1886). Edla Ahrenberg and her son were included as a part of this tradition.

Judging from the parish registers, Edla Ahrenberg was not totally ostracized by the rest of the community. This observation is substantiated by the work of Tiina Miettinen (2012), who has analyzed the lives of unmarried women in Häme Province. Miettinen suggests that from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries in Häme, women with illegitimate children may have been separated from their families in the communion books but not in real life. They were not driven away from their homes but, in fact, helped by their families (Miettinen 2012). In the case of

Edla Ahrenberg, the supposed intrafamilial aid was informal in nature. According to the Poor Relief Act of 1879, parents were obliged to support children under fifteen, and children were supposed to take care of parents unable to work. The municipal poor relief would be forthcoming only if these lineal methods of help failed. However, siblings like Henrika Lindfors and Edla Ahrenberg were under no obligation to support each other.

On the other hand, it is impossible to know if Edla Ahrenberg was nevertheless despised *within* the context of informal intrafamilial aid—or whether the attitude of her sister’s family towards her changed over time. In 1883, Edla Ahrenberg had a third illegitimate child. The daughter, Elin Ahrenberg, was christened at Kisko parsonage, with one of the parsonage maidservants and a crofter’s wife as her godmothers. No immediate family was involved that time (Kisko Birth and Baptism Records 1853–1886).

In 1884, Edla Ahrenberg’s eldest child, Olga, came of age and left Jyly village in order to work as a maidservant at Liuhto farm, Kurkela village, which was to be the first in her long series of positions in domestic service. Olga Ahrenberg led a fairly independent life, changing her surname to Lehtinen in the years 1903 to 1906 (Kisko Communion Books 1880–1889; Ahrenberg 1890–1915). It is unknown whether she actually maintained a connection with her mother and her siblings. However, there is no recollection of her among the living members of Mauritz Ahrenberg’s family—for example, in her first letter, Liisa Aarrevaara did not even mention Olga among the children of Edla Ahrenberg, and in her second letter, Liisa Aarrevaara indicated that from the point of Mauritz’s family, Olga simply “disappeared without a trace” (Aarrevaara 1992, 2008).

It may well be that Olga Ahrenberg deliberately tried to avoid Jyly village, and thus alienated herself from the rest of the family. Her childhood had probably been harder than her siblings’—after all, she had been born in a prison and forced to live her first years in the village while the sentence of Edla Ahrenberg was still fresh in living memory. Nevertheless, the records of Kisko, Perniö, and Halikko parishes reveal that Olga Ahrenberg by no means “disappeared” in adulthood but trod, rather paradoxically, a path similar to that of her mother. Olga, too, remained unmarried and became the mother of an illegitimate child as her son Aarne was born in Halikko in 1901. On the other hand, unlike her mother, Olga Ahrenberg was able to get service positions in spite of the child *and* the fact that she suffered from a speech defect, a stutter (Ahrenberg 1890–1915; Kisko Communion Books 1880–1889).

On the whole, illegitimacy was not uncommon in rural Southern Finland. According to Pirjo Markkola, every third maidservant gave birth to an illegitimate child in nineteenth-century rural Häme. Kisko was located on the boundary between the two other southern provinces (Turku and Pori, and Uusimaa), and in both of these the overall illegitimacy rate was high, especially among the landless population (Nieminen 1951, 289–90; Markkola 1994, 60–61). In that sense, the Ahrenberg women, Edla, Olga, and Henrika, were not unusual. The lives of Olga Ahrenberg and her aunt, Henrika Ahrenberg, further suggest that women with illegitimate children could have a relatively satisfactory future if they were able to go on working or contract a marriage—whereas a crime was not easily forgotten by the employers.

With Olga gone, Edla Ahrenberg still had to support her two younger children, Mauritz and Elin. The official records suggest that she could not perform her duty. According to the 1880–1905 poll tax registers, Edla Ahrenberg was not directly supported by municipal poor relief but was exempted from paying the poll tax because of her poverty (on female-headed households' overrepresentation among poverty-related tax-exempted households, see Miikka Voutilainen's article). However, the communion book of 1880–1889 shows that the tax relief was not enough: in 1887, Edla Ahrenberg had to send Mauritz, who was now in his early teens, as a foster child to Uusikylä farm, Kavasto village. In the 1910 poll tax record, Edla Ahrenberg is finally mentioned as a person receiving municipal poor relief (Kisko Poll Tax Registers 1880–1910; Kisko Communion Books 1880–1889).

MAURITZ AHRENBURG AND THE WORLD OF SELF-MADE MEN

In February 1893, eighteen-year-old Mauritz Ahrenberg volunteered for military service in the Finnish Guard (*Suomen Kaarti*) (Ahrenberg 1892; Recruitment Records).³ By volunteering, Mauritz Ahrenberg entered the army rather exceptionally, three years before the age of conscription, choosing a three-year term of service in the Finnish elite troops (Ekman 2006, 378–80; Talvitie 2012). Mauritz's choice was the first step away from the traditional setting of the Ahrenberg family and a likely future as a farmhand in Kisko region. This way he was also deviating from the customary way the youth of the lower social orders led their lives before marriage, as described above.

3 The military records concerning Mauritz Ahrenberg's career in the Finnish Guard were kindly brought to the attention of the author by two researchers who specialize in military history, Kari J. Talvitie and Tuomas Hoppu.

Mauritz Ahrenberg was qualified as a marksman in the Finnish Guard, and apparently did well, because six months later he was one of the four men in his company selected to be trained as non-commissioned officers. In 1894, Ahrenberg passed the examination required of the trainees, after which he was first entitled to the military rank of junior sergeant. In February 1896, Mauritz Ahrenberg was transferred to Kruunupyö Company, Western Finland, as a junior platoon officer, and in November 1896, he resigned. The transfer and his resignation probably had to do with the fact that Mauritz Ahrenberg was married to Helga Mäkelä in 1897. The bride was a farmer's daughter from Vimpeli parish, located close to Kruunupyö. Eventually Mauritz and Helga Ahrenberg settled in the nearby Veteli parish and started a family there (Finnish Guard Records 1893–1896; Kruunupyö Reserve Company Records 1896; Ahrenberg 1907–1916; Aarrevaara 1992, 2008).

The Guard records shed light on two things of special interest. First, when Mauritz Ahrenberg was listed as a volunteer, he was also listed as a *shoemaker* by profession. Given that he was only eighteen years old, it is probable that he was not really an independent craftsman but a youth who happened to have acquired some skills in shoemaking. When Ahrenberg was being raised as a foster child in Kavasto village between the years 1887 and 1889, there was, for example, a shoemaker on the nearby Wiiari farm, so it would have been relatively easy for the young Mauritz to learn something about shoemaking (Kisko Birth and Baptism Records 1887–1900). In Veteli, the title of shoemaker offered him an alternate occupational niche (Veteli Birth and Baptism Records 1897). By presenting himself as a shoemaker, Mauritz Ahrenberg once again rejected the idea of adopting the identity of a farm-hand or a vagrant. He was building a new kind of self-understanding as a self-employed person.

Second, what is interesting in Mauritz Ahrenberg's military career is that, in addition to military skills, the training included basic academic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic (Talvitie 2012). As superficial literacy (reading) was required of all young people wishing to complete the compulsory confirmation school, Mauritz Ahrenberg could read tolerably even before he volunteered for the military. However, it is safe to assume that the all-round training he received in the Finnish Guard offered him a key to social advancement. When the second child of Mauritz Ahrenberg was born in Veteli in 1899, the father was listed as a *tradesman* by profession (Veteli Birth and Baptism Records 1899). It appears that Mauritz had started a business of his own. The first business attempt in Veteli was not entirely successful, however. For example, in April 1905, Ahrenberg appeared as a debtor

on a protest list published by a financial newspaper. He was to pay a 200-marks bill to a hat factory in Tampere (*Kauppa-lehti* 1905; on indebted merchants, see Riina Turunen's and Maare Paloheimo's articles in this volume).

The path of Mauritz Ahrenberg from a penniless foster child to an entrepreneur was eased by legislative reforms. His opportunities were enhanced by economic liberalization, started in 1859 with the passing of the Freedom of Land Trade Act, continued in the 1860s with the abolition of the Guild System and Hired Labor Act, and completed in 1879 with the passing of three new acts: the Freedom of Movement Act, the Freedom of Profession Act, and the above-mentioned Poor Relief Act. The reforms obliged all adult citizens capable of work to support themselves, but also granted them freedom to make their living where and how they wanted. Because of the reforms, in the 1890s, Mauritz Ahrenberg was free to ply the trade of a shoemaker, or to start a business of his own as a rural tradesman. Had he been born a generation earlier, all this would have been much more difficult, if not downright impossible, for him.

In 1907, Mauritz Ahrenberg and his family moved from Veteli to the neighboring parish of Lappajärvi and started a new business in Itäkylä village, relatively close to the birthplace of his wife in Vimpeli parish. Mauritz Ahrenberg sold dress fabrics and clothing at a “moderately low price” (Ahrenberg 1907–1916; *Ilkka* 1907a). He became one of the heralds of the modern time: along with economic liberalization, industrialization, and the increase in retail trade, factory-made fabrics and clothing soon triumphed over home-made products. It is somewhat ironic that Mauritz Ahrenberg's business in fact threatened the livelihood of vagrant women, many of whom supported themselves by working as village seamstresses, as Edla Ahrenberg may have done (Markkola 1989, 48–52).

Judging by the contemporary newspapers, the time in Lappajärvi seems to have been relatively prosperous for Ahrenberg and his growing family. Quite quickly, Mauritz Ahrenberg became a relatively prominent figure in his new community. For instance, in 1907, he was voted onto the Lappajärvi Assessment Board (*Ilkka* 1907b). This was a position of trust—the function of the assessment board was to set tax rates individually for each parishioner.

The way Mauritz Ahrenberg settled into the clannish Western Finland community may have had something to do with the fact that he was married to a local girl. Helga Mäkelä's father, Juho Mäkelä, was a freeholder peasant with a relatively large property. He had been honored with the title of parish supervisor in the parish of Vimpeli (Norrena 1997, 29). For Mauritz Ahrenberg, Helga Mäkelä was a good

match, a passport into a new local network (see also Dribe and Svensson 2008, 128–29, 140; Dribe and Lundh 2010, 374). One could also ask whether Mauritz Ahrenberg's status as a worldly wise and enlightened newcomer in the community contributed to his position (see also Long 2005; Stewart 2006; Dribe and Svensson 2008; Dribe and Lundh 2010).

Mauritz Ahrenberg became one of the founders of Itäkylä Youth Association, established in 1909 (*Vaasa* 1909; Purola 2013, 63–64; Kivipelto 1983, 698). These youth associations, which sprang up throughout Finland at the turn of the century, were part of the process by which the traditional society of estates was slowly replaced by civic society. Whereas the society of estates was based on privilege and the concept of subservience, civic society was based on the notion of liberty and sovereignty of an individual. The new idea of sovereignty was manifest in the way people expressed themselves through the expanding press, their activity in political parties, and the growing number of associations, such as the youth associations. The core ideology was one of encountering each other as fellow citizens, free of the divisions imposed by the old system of four estates (Alapuro, Liikanen, Smeds, and Stenius 1989). And it was precisely people like Mauritz Ahrenberg—people born outside the system of estates but aspiring to a superior social status—who were keenly engaged in the emerging civic activity. For Mauritz Ahrenberg, the Itäkylä Youth Association offered an arena in which he was able to further strengthen his understanding of himself as an independent actor.

Mauritz Ahrenberg was apparently so well-off that it became possible for him to support his mother, as was his duty according to the law. Edla Ahrenberg left Kisko in order to live in her son's household in Veteli, accompanied by the eighteen-year-old Elin Ahrenberg (Aarrevaara 1992). The latter had completed both Kisko elementary school and confirmation school, and was now looking for a job as a girls' craft teacher in an elementary school. Luckily for her, such posts came open several times in Veteli parish in the years between 1901 and 1906 (Ahrenberg 1897; Ahrenberg 1902–1906; Kisko Communion Books 1890–1899). Thus, with the exception of Olga, the Ahrenberg family was briefly reunited. When Mauritz and his family moved to Lappajärvi in 1907, Edla Ahrenberg probably followed her son, but Elin parted company with them in order to work as a housekeeper in Sammatti parish, Southern Finland.

In the 1910s, Mauritz Ahrenberg's fortunes changed for the worse; he was afflicted by the Finnish national disease of the time, pulmonary tuberculosis. Growing rapidly weaker, Ahrenberg had to sell his business and buy a small patch

of land to ensure the survival of his family (*Ilkka* 1910; Aarrevaara 2008). It is not known whether Mauritz Ahrenberg had significant insurance or savings, but in any case his sickness radically undermined the financial standing of the family.

It seems that even the old mother, Edla Ahrenberg, once again had to face a precarious existence as Mauritz was dramatically failing to support her. Because she was officially still a resident of Kisko parish, she was sent back to Kisko, to be supported by the municipal poor relief there (Kisko Poll Tax Registers 1910). The extreme measures suggest that it was believed that Mauritz Ahrenberg was dying—in August 1911, Elin Ahrenberg wrote to her friend that Mauritz was so weak he could not speak properly, so that any day could be his last (Aarrevaara 1911).

Quite surprisingly, Mauritz Ahrenberg rallied from the first bout of illness, and in the years 1910 to 1916, he still had time to see three more children born into the family, and three of his sons pass away (Ahrenberg 1907–1916). At this point the roles of Mauritz Ahrenberg and his younger sister Elin reversed. Elin Ahrenberg had become a poorhouse directress, and in 1911, she was able to take Edla Ahrenberg to live with her at Vesanto poorhouse. In addition to organizing the care of the mother on a more pleasant and respectable basis, Elin Ahrenberg helped her brother's family by sending them money (Aarrevaara 1914). In April 1916, Mauritz Ahrenberg passed away at the age of forty-one, leaving his wife with four children, the youngest of whom was only seven months old (Aarrevaara 1916).

ELIN AHRENBURG AND THE WIDENING HORIZONS

If military service was the passport to a better life for Mauritz Ahrenberg, the elementary school served to advance Elin Ahrenberg, the youngest of the siblings. In addition to two ambulatory schools, there was a proper elementary school available in Kisko, established as early as in the 1870s (Kvist 2000, 194).

Attending elementary school was not self-evident in nineteenth-century Finland. School education was mostly available to those children whose labor was not crucial to the survival of the family, that is, the offspring of the traditional elite and wealthy farmers. Schools were still rare, especially in the rural areas, and most parents considered education an unnecessary folly that prevented the children from learning real work (Markkola 1989, 39–57; Markkola 2003, 135). It is worth pondering how it became possible for Elin Ahrenberg, the daughter of a poor vagrant, to attend the school and become a prime example of the new society built on education.

First, school attendance did not necessarily become an economic burden for Elin Ahrenberg. A group of enlightened Kisko parishioners was actively trying

to ensure that as many children as possible could go to school regardless of their background. At the instigation of these people, the poorest pupils were given small grants at the annual school Christmas party. The grants were funded by private donations and the income from municipal taxation on spirits. Moreover, the upper floor of the school building was turned into a small hostel in order to accommodate the children whose homes were in the remote countryside (*Aura* 1890; *Aura* 1896; *Kvist* 2000, 194–96). For example, Haukia tenant farm was some ten kilometers away from the school.

Second, it appears that Elin Ahrenberg's mother did not object to her attending elementary school. Rather, elementary school may have seemed a relatively reasonable choice—especially as Elin Ahrenberg was a good pupil, receiving exceptionally high marks for reading in parish catechetical meetings and top grades at elementary school (*Kisko Communion Books* 1890–1899; *Ahrenberg* 1897). Edla Ahrenberg's positive attitude toward her daughter's education resembles a phenomenon common in the towns: because there was less suitable work available for children in an urban environment than in the rural communities, city children were able to attend school more regularly than their rural counterparts (*Haapala* 1995, 38–40; *Rahikainen* 2003, 162–66).

After completing elementary school in 1897 and coming of age in 1898, Elin Ahrenberg had an excellent school report with which to start her career but inadequate means to continue her studies at secondary school. Clearly unlike her mother and sister, she would not spend her youth in domestic service. Elin Ahrenberg's options were infinitely superior to those of her mother and sister, but nevertheless limited. This combination brought her both the freedom and the pain of making her own way in a changing society.

It is possible to follow Elin Ahrenberg's search by analyzing a letter she sent to the Helsinki Deaconess Institution in 1903 (*Ahrenberg* 1903) and two letters she addressed to the Chief Inspector of Poor Relief between the years 1906 and 1910 (*Huoltaja* 1923a; *Records of Received Letters*). More information is provided by the application Elin Ahrenberg submitted to the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1921, attaching all school reports and references (*Ahrenberg* 1897–1921). These documents evince four interesting points.

First, the documents show that Elin Ahrenberg tried to build her future by seeking forms of further education that did not require large financial investments. In 1902 and 1903, she studied at Elias Lönnrot Housekeeping School in Sammatti parish. The aim of the school was to teach young women of humble background

how to take care of the daily women's work on a farm by the standards of the rising middle groups, and, in the process, to elevate the simple country girls to patriotic citizens (Uniooni Naisasialiitto 1893, 14, 52; Ollila 1993, 56–65; Kallio 2002, 278–79). What became crucial for the attendance of poor girls like Elin Ahrenberg was the opportunity to apply for a free place by presenting evidence of impecuniousness. Elin Ahrenberg was granted a free place by reason of her limited economic means (Student Register 1902–1903).

In 1904, Elin Ahrenberg supplemented her education by taking independently a girls' craft teacher examination at Raahe Teachers' College. Apparently she did not take any classes but relied on the craft skills she had learned at elementary school or at home. The examiner, Sigrid Axelson, the drawing and craft teacher at the Teachers' College, gave Elin Ahrenberg a certificate that authorized her to work as a craft teacher at elementary schools (Ahrenberg 1904). Thus, at twenty-one, Elin Ahrenberg was qualified to work as a housekeeper and as a girls' craft teacher.

Second, the documents reveal that even though Elin Ahrenberg's posts as a substitute craft teacher in Veteli and as a housekeeper at Lohilampi farm in Sammatti must have eased the financial situation of the family, she was not happy with either of them. These jobs could not fulfill her expectations, because what she wanted from an occupation was not just salary, but a deeper sense of *vocation*. In her 1903 letter to the Helsinki Deaconess Institution, Elin Ahrenberg clearly articulates her urge to offer her life in the service of suffering fellow men, either as a missionary worker or a deaconess (Ahrenberg 1903).

Third, it is obvious that Elin Ahrenberg understood that there were still invisible divisions in society, which were hard to overcome. In her letter to the Deaconess Institution, she pointed out in an almost apologetic tone that she had not been able to educate herself "properly" because of her poor origins. The same undercurrent is present in the question Elin Ahrenberg addressed to the Chief Inspector of Poor Relief in 1910: she wanted to know if there was any hope at all of her becoming a poorhouse directress if she had not attended secondary school (Ahrenberg 1903; *Huoltaja* 1923a; Records of Received Letters). It seems that Elin Ahrenberg was anguished by the fact that the options open to her were restricted by her lack of secondary education.

On the other hand, Elin Ahrenberg must have known that secondary education was far beyond her reach. In nineteenth-century Finland, secondary schools were available for the daughters of more privileged families: for example, almost 75 percent of the students at girls' secondary schools were the daughters of civil

servants and the bourgeoisie (Ketonen 1977, 78–79; Salminen 1995, 22). Thus it seems more likely that Elin Ahrenberg was less intent upon a better education than on voicing her uncertainty about what was required of a deaconess or a poorhouse directress. The ultimate purpose of the letters was to ascertain how far it was possible to leap from the world of crofters, cottagers, and rural servants into which she had been born.

Fourth, the noble thought of a vocation can be seen as a token of a new phase in the development of Elin Ahrenberg's self-understanding: she no longer saw herself as a person to be helped by others, but as *a helper*, an independent actor. What is especially interesting is the way Elin Ahrenberg approached the director of the Deaconess Institution and the highest official of poor relief in Finland. Although both addressees were considered to be decidedly senior officials, the letters of Elin Ahrenberg cannot be regarded as humble petitions but rather as matter-of-fact inquiries. This implies that Elin Ahrenberg was indeed not a subject but a citizen. She knew there was more than one possible future open to her, and she was not afraid of finding out more about these alternatives.

THE LONELY HEAD OF THE FAMILY

Because she considered the strict religious control of the Deaconess Institution odd, Elin Ahrenberg did not become a deaconess (Ahrenberg 1903). Instead, she chose to become a poorhouse directress. Both deaconesses and poorhouse directresses worked with the poor and the shunned, but whereas the deaconesses were bound to follow an implicit Christian calling (Markkola 2002; Kauppinen-Perttula 2004), the ideological framework of a poorhouse directress was less clearly defined. Moreover, poorhouse directresses were better paid: in 1894, for example, the annual salary for a deaconess was 160 marks, but poorhouse directresses, working in the rural areas, were normally paid between 240 and 500 marks a year (Suomen Naisyhdistys 1894, 183, 188). Thus in choosing the world of municipal poorhouses over the Deaconess Institution, Elin Ahrenberg opted for a wider ideological *Lebensraum* as well as for a better-paid job.

To the chief inspector and other state officials of poor relief, poorhouses were not only shelters for those poor who were not capable of work and who had no relatives to support them, but the poorhouses were also correctional institutions, intended for people who were constantly trying to resort to poor relief in spite of their ability to work. The "idle" able-bodied poor were to be locked up in a

poorhouse in order to learn to follow the principle of the new legislation: all people were required to work for a living.

Thus, managing a poorhouse was not an everyman's job. According to the chief inspector, the educational goal of a poorhouse was best achieved if the director was an educated, unmarried woman—possibly even a member of the old intelligentsia within the traditional system of the four estates, or at least a recruit from the upper part of the emerging middle class—sharing the state officials' perception of decent citizenship. In practice, women seeking to become poorhouse directresses were to have basic education (elementary school) as well as experience in nursing, mental nursing, childcare, housekeeping, and bookkeeping (Helsingius 1892, 2–4; Annola 2011, 81). In the nineteenth century, these forms of education were mostly available to women of the upper social groups.

However, as the women of the upper social groups did not find the hard, rural, relatively low-paying job appealing, the position of poorhouse directress began to be filled by women of lower social standing and rural background. Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, this process was fuelled by the fact that an increasing number of women of humble background were able to meet the qualifications, thanks to the expansion of elementary schools and the establishment of new kinds of practical schools, such as the Elias Lönnrot Housekeeping School in Sammatti. Over time, the qualifications of a poorhouse directress became separated from the applicant's social background and were to an increasing extent bound to education, that is, certificates and practical training in a poorhouse (Annola 2013, 199–202). It was this development that opened the directress position to Elin Ahrenberg and women like her.

Moreover, there were still traces of the mental image of the occupation as the *vocation of the educated*, with which the state officials had tried to recruit the women of the upper social groups at the turn of the century. Hence, employment as a poorhouse directress could serve as a stepping stone to a new kind of self-understanding for women of modest origins. For Elin Ahrenberg, standing at the threshold of the new middle class, an occupation that combined many-sided down-to-earth work with an elevated vocational ethos was a perfect professional solution.

Elin Ahrenberg's road to a poorhouse directress was rocky, however. In response to her letter of 1906, she was informed by the chief inspector that she lacked a general overview of the field of poorhouses, as well as the required nursing skills. Elin Ahrenberg took this as a temporary shortcoming, which she unhesitatingly rectified the same summer by practicing at Jalasjärvi poorhouse and at Lübeck

hospital in Kokkola (*Huoltaja* 1923a; Ahrenberg 1897–1921). According to Liisa Aarrevaara, these studies were financed by Mauritz Ahrenberg (Aarrevaara 1992). It should also be noted that Mauritz was supporting their mother, Edla Ahrenberg, at that time, which gave Elin the opportunity to study and work elsewhere in Finland.

It was only after another letter to the chief inspector in 1910 that Elin Ahrenberg finally managed to get her first appointment as a poorhouse directress in Rautalampi parish. Considering the deteriorating health of Mauritz Ahrenberg, Elin's appointment came at just the right time for the family. As poorhouse directresses were usually given private rooms within the institution, Elin Ahrenberg would be able to take care of her mother alongside her daily work. It is probable that she had been lacking this kind of opportunity when working as a housekeeper in Sammatti.

The appointment in Rautalampi marked the starting point of a long and meandering career, during which Elin Ahrenberg moved several times. She changed her post every year, which, in fact, resembles the way rural servants renewed their contracts of service every fall. In 1910, Elin Ahrenberg served at Rautalampi poorhouse; in 1911, she moved to Vesanto; in 1912, to Saarijärvi; and in 1913, to Leppävirta, all of which were located in Central or Eastern Finland. In 1914, she finally managed to find a place she was happy with: Lempäälä poorhouse in Southwestern Finland (Ahrenberg 1897–1921; Annola 2011, 151–52).

A considerable amount of money was needed to cover the moving expenses. The first move from Sammatti to Rautalampi seems to have been especially problematic for Elin Ahrenberg. Because she could no longer rely on her sick brother, she had to borrow money from her employer, Johannes Lohilampi, the owner of the largest farm in Sammatti. Johannes Lohilampi was eager to help his departing housekeeper to start a new career, especially as some parishioners were circulating rumors about him having a relationship with her (Aarrevaara 1911). After Elin Ahrenberg's removal to Rautalampi, the socio-economically mismatched friends engaged in a correspondence lasting for many years. Eventually Johannes Lohilampi relinquished his claim to any interest (Aarrevaara 1916).

It seems that Elin Ahrenberg was always searching for a better place—better located, better paid—despite the fact that every move must have been a small shock for the sickly and aging Edla Ahrenberg, who was now living (and moving) with her daughter. In November 1912, Elin Ahrenberg wrote to Johannes Lohilampi:

As I have my old mother to take care of, I am not that willing to move in wintertime, but the better salary is tempting me. They would pay me 100 marks more there [in Saarijärvi]. [. . .] We'll see, I still haven't decided what I'm going to do in case they promise me a wage increase here [in Vesanto]. The main thing is, though, that I am beginning to get a good name, something to be a little bit proud of. (Aarrevaara 1912)

The letter reveals that, besides the well being of Edla Ahrenberg, two other things had become very important to Elin Ahrenberg: her reputation as a poorhouse directress, and the question of salary. These two aspects were intertwined in the numerous wage negotiations in which Elin Ahrenberg engaged during her long career. Rather cool-headedly, Elin Ahrenberg took to threatening the local decision-makers with leaving if they would not give her a raise in salary. In some cases, the local authorities were so afraid of losing a good poorhouse directress that they agreed to Ahrenberg's terms. This happened, for instance, in Lempäälä, where in 1918 the local board of poor relief agreed to raise Ahrenberg's salary against the wishes of the municipal council (Mäntysaari 1992, 15–16; Annola 2011, 152–53).

Elin Ahrenberg's fight did not stay local. By 1917, she had become both a model directress in the eyes of state officials, and the chairwoman of the newly established professional association for actors within the field of municipal poor relief, *Suomen Köyhäinhoitovirkailijain Yhdistys*. Under the leadership of Elin Ahrenberg, the association was fighting for pensions and better salaries for *all* poorhouse directresses. To these determined women, being a poorhouse directress was not just an altruistic vocation, or an extension of every woman's motherly nature, but hard work for which sufficient remuneration was needed (Annola 2011, 153–54, 224–34).

The fight was fuelled with fear. Like many of her colleagues, Elin Ahrenberg was afraid of being left alone and penniless in her old age, or in case of sickness. There was no pension system, and the salary of a poorhouse directress was so low that it was considered very difficult to put money by for retirement. Thus the most dreadful prospect for an aging directress, or a directress with poor health, was to be forced to live as an inmate in the same poorhouse she had previously been in charge of (Annola 2011, 226–27).

Elin Ahrenberg's health had never been very strong: she suffered from nervousness and a heart condition. As early as in 1911, she was strongly advised by three different physicians to give up her stressful work as a poorhouse directress (Aarrevaara 1911). Elin Ahrenberg refused to follow the doctors' orders but resorted

to medication and went on working as usual. The decision cost Ahrenberg her life; she died in November 1923, at forty years of age (*Huoltaja* 1923a).

Elin Ahrenberg's reluctance to give up working was in all likelihood partially a result of her ambitious attitude towards her career, but it was also a decision dictated by necessity. The fact that the entire family needed the money Elin Ahrenberg earned as a poorhouse directress made it impossible for her to quit. With the deaths of Olga in 1915 and Mauritz in 1916, her role became even more crucial. She was now the undisputed head of the family, and everyone else looked to her for support. Should she fall ill and lose her ability to work, there would be no one to support her. She had to go on.

In her new role, Elin Ahrenberg also felt obliged to help the late Mauritz's sons, Reino and Väinö, who had come of age. As Mauritz's family now owned only a small patch of land, Reino and Väinö Ahrenberg had to leave Lappajärvi and build their futures on education. Reino Ahrenberg attended Tuomarniemi School in Ähtäri, Western Finland, in order to become a forester. According to Liisa Aarrevaara, Elin Ahrenberg let Reino spend his holidays in Lempäälä, and it is also probable that she was financing his studies. Reino Ahrenberg graduated in 1920. Väinö Ahrenberg, in his turn, lived in Elin Ahrenberg's household when studying in the nearby city of Tampere (Aarrevaara 1992).

Several hundred people from near and far attended Elin Ahrenberg's funeral in December 1923, expressing their condolences to the aged mother, who was now burying her last child. The closest relatives, however, were not present nor do they appear, as would have been customary, in the death announcement, according to which Elin Ahrenberg was deeply missed by her mother, colleagues, friends, and the inmates of her poorhouse (*Huoltaja* 1923b; *Huoltaja* 1923c). Mauritz's widow, Helga Ahrenberg, also refused to take the homeless Edla Ahrenberg back to Lappajärvi to live in her household. Edla Ahrenberg died two months later in January 1924 (Aarrevaara 1992; Mäntysaari 1992, 16).

Through the deaths of Elin Ahrenberg and her mother, three viewpoints open on the lives of the Ahrenberg family at the end of the 1910s and at the beginning of the 1920s, illustrating the change in socio-economic standing and the relations between the two branches of the family over the years.

First, it seems that Mauritz had been the connecting link between the two parts of the Ahrenberg family, and after his death, the family ties started to loosen to the point where Elin and her mother were actually rather distant to Mauritz's surviving family. This assumption is corroborated by Liisa Aarrevaara, according

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to whom Elin Ahrenberg was “not that much connected to her brother’s family” (Aarrevaara 1992). It may be that Elin Ahrenberg had helped Mauritz’s sons gain a foothold in society because she had wanted to pay back the debt of gratitude she owed her late brother. Thus, the help was a matter of obligation rather than true closeness between the family members.

Second, it can be argued that Elin Ahrenberg compensated for the loose family ties by dedicating her life to the network of poorhouse directresses and their professional association. When the wills of Elin and Edla Ahrenberg were opened, it emerged that special arrangements had been made: both daughter and mother had bequeathed their entire estates to the association (Mäntysaari 1992, 16; Annola 2011, 153). The Ahrenbergs’ bequest was allocated very precisely: it was to be used for the establishment of a rest home for weary poor-relief workers. Thus, it seems that Elin Ahrenberg had not wanted to support the association in general, but to take concrete action to help her colleagues cope with their stressful work. In so doing, she had bluntly ignored her surviving relatives in favor of the occupational network, which did not please the offspring of Mauritz Ahrenberg (Aarrevaara 1992, 2008).

Third, the wills indicate that Elin Ahrenberg and her mother had not been living a hand-to-mouth existence during their last years but adopted values typical of the new middle groups, according to which austerity was a virtue. Both women had been able to save money. They had not simply been putting aside modest sums but taking advantage of the modern insurance companies and savings banks. Elin Ahrenberg had a life insurance worth 2,000 marks at Suomi Insurance Company, and, more astonishingly, the old mother had total savings of 6,801 marks in the local savings bank. The new standard of living is also apparent in the estate inventory deed made after the death of Elin Ahrenberg, as items typical of the lifestyle of the new middle groups appear on the list of possessions: plants, vases for cut flowers, books, linen, a coffee service, cutlery, fruit knives, silver sugar tongs—and nine silver spoons (Aarrevaara 1924).

CONCLUSIONS

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Finnish society was changing. The old system of the four estates was gradually being replaced by class divisions as a means of social distinction. The place of an individual in society was no longer defined by privilege and the concept of subservience, but by the idea of sovereignty, manifest in civic action. At the heart of the change were the new middle groups, the emerging Finnish middle class. It was basically recruited from among artisans,

farmers, lower officials, and civil servants, and the petit bourgeois of the cities, in other words, from the relatively new occupational groups that had developed outside the traditional estate society.

However, in a changing society, opportunities for social advancement could also open up for the members of lower social groups. Among the upwardly mobile were Mauritz and Elin Ahrenberg. As landless, non-propertied people, they were born outside the traditional system of the four estates. However, by taking advantage of legislative reforms as well as new forms of education, the Ahrenberg siblings were able to abandon the traditional life-cycle of a rural servant and integrate into the new middle groups.

Mauritz Ahrenberg's key to success was the all-round training he received in the Finnish Guard, as well as legislative reforms that made it possible for a literate and numerate soldier to start a business of his own. For Elin Ahrenberg, the pre-conditions for social advancement were created by the progress of public education and care institutions at the end of the nineteenth century. Elementary schools were established, and new forms of post-elementary-school education were introduced, many of which were specially designed for youth of more modest origins. New career opportunities opened up in the institutions of the expanding public sector—in schools, hospitals, and institutions of poor relief—for women in particular. New paths and new spaces emerged in society. For a poor but astute young woman like Elin Ahrenberg, treading these paths and occupying these spaces could mean improvement of her socio-economic status. Thus, the means for social advancement were different for Mauritz and Elin Ahrenberg, depending on their gender.

The social mobility of Mauritz and Elin Ahrenberg contrasts with the relatively stagnant life of their elder sister, Olga Ahrenberg, who worked as a maidservant for twenty-six years or more in Kisko or neighboring parishes. In a way, she was successful, too, because she was able to find employment in spite of her speech defect and the birth of an illegitimate child. Judging from the parish registers, it seems that her life as a maidservant and as a mother was less turbulent than her mother's had been. However, having been born fifteen years earlier than her younger sister and suffering from a stutter, Olga Ahrenberg did not have equal opportunities for social advancement. It remains unclear whether or not she was content with her lot in life.

The life of the Ahrenberg family illustrates the change in society, but also highlights another characteristic of Finland at the turn of the century: the insecurity that could not be relieved by the non-existent or extremely primitive social security system. For Edla Ahrenberg, struggling with an unwanted pregnancy in the year of

the 1868 famine, stealing may have appeared the only way to survive. Some forty years later, the terminally ill Mauritz Ahrenberg could do nothing but sell his business, thus weakening the economic prospects of his surviving family. In the 1920s, Elin Ahrenberg was treading a fine line between her weak heart and her role as the major breadwinner of the extended family. Because there was no pension system, she just had to keep on working.

What clearly emerges from the case of the Ahrenberg family is the importance of grassroots-level aid in terms of both survival and advancement. Although there are recollections of Edla Ahrenberg being shunned by her relatives, it seems that she was not totally excluded from the community. Partial as the acceptance may have been, Edla Ahrenberg and her children always had a place they could call home. A relatively stable residential situation made it possible, for instance, for Elin Ahrenberg to attend elementary school in Kisko, which had a tremendous impact on the course of her life.

As for Edla Ahrenberg's own family, the mother and her two younger children formed a close triangle within which aid was forthcoming whenever needed. Mauritz Ahrenberg supported his younger sister financially when she was studying, Elin Ahrenberg aided her brother and his family after he lost his ability to work, and both siblings took care of their old mother in turn. In addition to the intrafamilial help, Elin Ahrenberg especially was probably aided by local philanthropists in Kisko and through the stipend fund of the Elias Lönnrot Housekeeping School. She also borrowed money from her former employer. The mutual aid within the family as well as the supportive measures engaged in by external actors together formed a buffer zone. This reserve made it possible for the Ahrenbergs to seize the new opportunities of social advancement brought about by the change in society and to fight financial insecurity by compensating the shortcomings of the primitive public sector social security.

In light of the source material, poverty was most obviously omnipresent in the life of Edla Ahrenberg, who was exempted from paying the poll tax because of her financial situation. Her younger children were better off but did not altogether escape poverty: for Mauritz and Elin Ahrenberg, poverty may not have been a tangible part of everyday life as in the case of their mother and many others among the landless people, but it still affected their mindset. For instance, Elin Ahrenberg was always haggling for a better salary, but also making deprecatory remarks about her background and education, which, according to her, was inadequate because of her poor origins. To Elin Ahrenberg, her humble background was simultaneously

a motivating and an inhibiting factor. She was realistic enough to understand that even though society was changing, there were still barriers that were hard, if not impossible, for someone like her to cross.

On the other hand, what is revolutionary in the way the Ahrenberg siblings faced poverty, is their unwillingness to adopt an apathetic, fatalistic attitude typical of many poor people. For Mauritz and Elin Ahrenberg, poverty was not something God had intended for them. Rather, it was a condition that could and should be overcome by making plans for the future and actualizing them in the best possible way. This new way of thinking was one of the key elements behind the fall of the old system of four estates. Concrete actions such as legislative reforms were needed in order to make room for the new society—but it also took people with an adventurous mindset to actually see the widening horizon, and courage to take the first steps towards it, and to make the revolutionary seem perfectly ordinary.

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