

Swedish Folk High Schools (*Folkhögskolor*): Past and Present. A Look from the Polish Perspective

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Abstract The article presents an outline of the history of Folk High Schools in Sweden. The analysis includes mainly social and political determinants of their functioning in Poland's northern neighbor. The main trends of the evolution of social functions of these institutions has also been presented in the article encompassing 145 years of their functioning: from the educational center for peasantry (before 1918) – through the educational institution catering for the needs of social movements (1918-1968) to the concept of *skola för alla* (Eng.: School for All). Because of the gaps in international writing in this scope, an emphasis has been put on ideas concerning the origins of Folk High Schools in Sweden as well as on a quantitative analysis of their activities during the last decades. The entire analysis has been presented against the background of Polish interests concerning the Swedish *folkhögskolor* (and *folkbildning*) from the half of the 19th century until the present day.

Keywords History of Swedish Folk High Schools, Non-Formal Education in Sweden, Adult Education vs. Politics, Polish-Swedish Educational Relations.

1. Introduction

Scandinavian solutions in adult education have for decades been presented in other European (and probably not only European) countries as exemplary and worth following. In particular, the two from among numerous forms of educational work developed there since the 1850s – boarding Folk High Schools and the activity of their self-educational groups (study circles) – have always been of great interest to the world and today are considered to be a permanent contribution of that region to the development of the world's educational theory and practice [1,2]. They have also been for decades been treated as effective educational instruments in building the basis for democracy and civic society. [3].

Similar opinions have for years been expressed also by Polish educators. In particular in breakthrough moments, which – let us emphasize it without going into details – Poland experienced quite a few in the last 150 years or so,

there appeared opinions that it is worth referring to the two Swedish educational solutions mentioned above in the subsequent great modernizations programs of Poland.

“For 25 years there has been in Denmark a special type of folk schools, which seem to have a great future, and from there they are beginning to spread to Sweden. They are the so called peasant universities (*p. 170*)” – that is how the chronologically first in Polish language note on that Scandinavian educational innovation – Folk High Schools – starts. It appeared in 1869 in an educational magazine „Szkola”, published in Lvov [4]. It means that the information on establishing the first *folkhögskolor* reached the other side of the Baltic only a year after. For the next information on Swedish Folk High Schools Poles had to wait as long as to the beginning of the 1890s [5]. At the beginning of 20th century it was Stanisław Michalski that passed on the knowledge on Swedish *folkhögskolor* to Polish people. And his remarks and comments voiced over one hundred years ago are considered by the historians dealing with Scandinavian adult education very much to the point even today, as he wrote, for example: “The educational movement in the territory of Sweden has found firm grounds in the peasants who are socially educated and who have for a long time enjoyed political freedoms” or, further on – “different conditions called into existence those study centres. In Denmark it was mainly about awakening the spirit of patriotism after national defeats, and in Sweden it was about broadening the horizon of knowledge and information among the folk masses, called to participate in a broader social life (*p. 399*)” [6].

Both the articles by Zofia Kowalewska and by Stanisław Michalski were important in Poland in so much as even today we can put forward and defend the thesis that the Scandinavian ideas of Folk High Schools were popularized among Polish people at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries thanks to scientific information from Sweden.

The desire to look at the solutions in the area of Folk High Schools applied by the neighbours “from the other side of the Baltic” will accompany Polish educators for the next century, although with changing emphasis and depth, information and analyses on *folkhögskolor* (and the entire Swedish movement of independent education: *folkbildning*) will be

published relatively regularly in the Polish educational community.

They include reports on study visits paid by Poles in Swedish schools in subsequent decades [7-9], articles by Scandinavian authors – e.g. Alfred Petterson [10], Per Himmelstrup [11], Hans Hovenberg [12], Yngve Kasimir [13], Kåre Olsson [14] – published on the Polish side of the Baltic Sea, as well as a few tens of insightful studies of Polish specialists, on various areas of functioning of Folk High Schools in the Kingdom of Sweden. From among the latter ones, the following can serve as good examples:

- articles by Zofia Mierzińska – published just before World War II [15,16];
- papers by Agnieszka Bron-Wojciechowska [17-19] or Lucjan Turowski [20-22] from the times of People's Republic of Poland, that is the period during which Sweden was separated from Poland not only by the Baltic but also by the iron curtain;
- studies by Wit J. Wojtowicz – published for the Polish reader both in Sweden and in Poland at various times [23-25];
- or some sketches by Tomasz Maliszewski from the last decade [26-29].

All of them either directly referred to Swedish Folk High Schools, or were attempts at showing that educational institutions on a broader background (Scandinavian or world).

Regretfully, as a side remark to the main considerations here, one must point out to the fact that even 'at the first glance' it is easy to notice a certain asymmetry in terms of interest in adult education of the neighbouring country in Poland and in Sweden. Whereas on the Polish side we can find quite a few activities showing the willingness to learn about Swedish educational solutions, on the Swedish side the analyses referring to Polish adult education did not appear in the past and still do not appear very often... Let us, however, come back to the main issue. Assessing the Polish scientific (and popular) studies on Swedish Folk High Schools, already at the very preliminary stage of evaluation one must emphasise that they are impressive and significant as for their quantity. As for the quality of the analyses, one must admit that even if some of the attempts, made over the span of over one hundred years, of describing *folkhögskolor* on the Polish side do not stand any more, and the interpretations included there seem quite archaic nowadays, the operation of Folk High Schools in Sweden was closely (and quite regularly) watched.

The purpose of the analyses made in the article is not really referring to the concrete examples of implementation of Swedish solutions in adult education in Polish territory in various periods of 19th-20th century or an attempt at presenting case studies on adaptations of the Swedish Folk High School educational model in recent years, which undoubtedly is an interesting issue worth developing in a separate paper. The main objective of the author is to present a new comprehensive look at the history and present condition of *folkhögskolor* from the perspective of a

researcher from another country – along with an attempt at presenting conclusions and valuation of the presented issues from the point of view of an outsider who, on the one hand, as indicated above, had a rich literature of the subject in his country, and on the other hand – did his own research in Sweden: historical-educational in libraries and archives and field studies – in numerous Swedish Folk High Schools.

2. The Genesis of Swedish Folk High Schools (*Folkhögskolor*)

The discussion on establishing civic schools, independent of the state, started in Sweden before the French Revolution and continued throughout the whole first half of 19th century. Parish folk schools – even the best ones – provided only the basic knowledge on language, mathematics and religion. And that was usually the end of the educational process for the majority of the population. The people living in the rural areas of Sweden were in particularly unfavourable situation, which became especially visible in 1860's when *Riksdag* adopted the legislation democratising social relationships in the country and granting peasants considerable political powers – both at the local and national level. Many peasants, however, were not prepared to participate consciously in decision making processes. Providing for an educational system that would equip them with social competences, in the broad sense of the term, that would let them fully enjoy the civic rights they had just been granted became a necessity [30].

The possible solutions were sought outside the official educational system. The concept of Folk High School that had been put in to practice for some time in the adjacent Denmark seemed to be interesting and adaptable to Swedish conditions.

The earliest known document on "school for life" in Sweden was drawn in 1845, that is only a year after establishing the first Danish *folkehøjskole*. It was then that Frans Adolf von Schéele – the director of one of Swedish schools – asked, in a letter, Christian Flor – the head of the Folk High School in Rødding – about organisational assumptions of his educational establishment [31]. In the autumn of that year "Skånska Correspondenten" also published the first information on the newly opened Folk High School in Denmark [32]. In 1849, another Swedish pedagogue, Jonas H. Ekendal got to know the operation of Grundtvigian *Academy* in Søro and visited Folk High School in Ryslinge. His assessment of the experiment was published in Stockholm in 1852 as a part of the description of his journey to Denmark. He stated there that the use of that interesting educational concept could be useful in Sweden [33].

More and more information on Folk High Schools started to appear in Swedish newspapers and magazines in the second half of 1860's. The opinions on the need to establish Folk High Schools in Sweden differed, however. On 3 November 1866 the Stockholm "Aftonbladet" published a

first page article “Om de danska folkhögskolorna” [34]. A year before, that is on 7 November 1865 the renowned “Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning” published an extremely critical opinion on the traditional official education, where the learning process consisted mainly in memorising the information provided. The paper postulated introduction of a new type of education. The model of Folk High Schools seemed to be an ideal response to those postulates. A very positive opinion about them was expressed by Artur Solhman in 1867. The idea of establishing *folkhögskolor* was also supported by “Nordisk Tidskrift för Politik, Ekonomi och Literatur” in the years 1866-1868 [35].

Let us emphasise, however, that the enthusiasm for Folk High Schools was not as common as it might seem from today’s perspective, because there were also opinions saying that such a type of educational institutions is not needed. Christopher L. Anjou, an extremely influential chief editor of the magazine for elementary (folk) education “Tidning för Folkskolan” was especially critical about the idea of establishing Folk High Schools in Sweden. He was very aggressive in defending the traditional organisation of educational system against “liberal innovations”, which constitute “a moral threat to the young generation”. The fact that the enthusiasts of Folk High Schools draw their concept from criticising the existing *folkskola* was of some significance as well. It must have caused – obviously enough – defensive reactions of conservative citizens of Sweden [36].

Many Swedes, however, supported the new educational concept, strongly opposing the position of the conservative residents of the country. For example, Frederic Ferdinand Carlsson, the minister of education in the government of Luis De Geer was a strong advocate of Folk High Schools. Thus the idea of establishing the first Swedish Folk High School gained a very important ally. At the end of 1860’s he made numerous speeches on that in *Riksdag*. The Nordic National Society was a great propagator of FHS idea as well. It initiated a FHS campaign, especially in Stockholm newspapers and magazines. In the autumn of 1867, co-worker of “Aftonbladet”, dr. Otto Wilhelm Ålund went to Denmark to study in detail the solutions adopted in Danish Folk High Schools. The report on his study visit was published in December issue of “Aftonbladet” and discussed in *Nordiska Nationalföreningen* in December 1867. The decision on active support of initiatives to establish Folk High Schools in Sweden was made then [37]. The objectives that the Rural Party (*Lantmannapartiet*) pursued also played a significant role in establishing first *folkhögskolor* in Sweden. The party clearly indicated the need for further education of peasants, after they have completed *folkskola*, and providing independent civic education for them, which to a great extent resulted from their desire to implement the election postulates of the political supporters of the party, as well as from their willingness to educate party activists [38].

Apart from the educated residents of the country capital actively supporting the projects of establishing Folk High

Schools, also the peasants themselves got involved in the process. The residents of the richest province of Sweden – Scania (*Skåne*) – turned out to have been the most active participants of the process. Probably the co-operation of peasantry and intelligentsia significantly contributed to positive culmination of the efforts aimed at establishing new educational institutions in rural areas of Sweden – Folk High Schools. The idea of civic education was to become a significant element of the future Folk High Schools. It was understood as a process taking place outside school, and even functioning in certain opposition to the official educational system. It seems that the new planned educational solutions were also seen as an opportunity to counteract the progressing degradation of Swedish rural population caused by heaving drinking and overpopulation forcing external emigration, and insufficient general education. *Folkhögskola* was also to provide for education on agriculture, which was to improve farming as the food demand increased.

As indicated above, there were many factors that contributed to establishment of Folk High Schools in Sweden. The then existing educational solutions made further civilisation development of rural areas impossible, and thus hindered economic growth in the whole country. The situation forced taking up actions aimed at removing the significant development barriers and created social readiness to accept new effective educational solutions.

The foundations for establishing *folkhögskolor* were well prepared. The wide discussion by the Swedish society also outlined, relatively clearly, the main directions of their operation in the near future. And the discussions from the 1860s showed that despite the fact that their original idea was based on Grundtvig’s concept, Swedish Folk High Schools very quickly adapted to the specific conditions and needs of their society.

It must also be noted here that in the light of the established research results the beginnings of Swedish Folk High Schools are clearly connected with the new educational ideas from the neighbouring Denmark, despite the fact that later on many Swedish authors marginalized the influence of N.F.S. Grundtvig or Ch.M. Kold and *danske folkehøjskoler* on Swedish schools. That influence, however – especially for the author from the other side of the Baltic – is unquestionable.

3. A Few Remarks on the History of Folk High Schools in Sweden

For the purpose of the studies on the history of Swedish *folkhögskolor* the author suggested dividing it into three periods, based on the analysis of the changing position of Folk High Schools in the Swedish society and the relations between them and the official system of education, as the considerations clearly indicated the direction of changes of the real functions of Folk High Schools in Sweden:

- starting from educating adult representatives of local

- rural communities (till 1918);
- through a model of educating elites – interest groups: political parties, social organizations or religion groups (1919-1968);
- to the concept of Folk High School as a school for all the members of Swedish society – *skola för alla* (till 1968).

3.1. Period I: 1868-1918

The first Folk High Schools had clear links with rural communities, constituting important centres of education and culture for those communities. They also soon started to attain the other goal – preparing many peasant politician and activists. Over the years, those links gradually were becoming looser and schools of geographically wider scope of students started to appear. The percentage of students – residents of rural areas was decreasing when at the beginning of 20th century *folkhögskola* started to be used by political, religious, workers, temperance, etc. movements, which saw Folk High School as an efficient tool for educating their activists. It also confirms the opinion that the concept of Folk High School itself was very flexible and allowed for relatively prompt response to new situations – the new educational needs included.

It seems that skilful use of the links with the world of politics from the very beginning of their operation was one of the most important sources of success of Swedish Folk High Schools. It enabled, for example, effective use of the opportunities to prepare favourable system solutions that stabilised the economic and organisational situation of Swedish *folkhögskolor*. The representatives of the Rural Party (during the first decades) and then social democrats (since the establishment of *Brunnsviks folkögskola*, 1906) or representatives of Swedish rightists (since the establishment of *Sigtuna folkhögskola*, 1917) considerably supported Folk High Schools in their development, contributing to their reaching the status they enjoyed and, consequently – increase of the significance of the whole movement [39,40].

When the first three Folk High Schools started their operation in 1868, the total number of students was 127. In the autumn of 1917 – over 2 000 students began education in over fifty Folk High Schools (it was a significant number – all Swedish grammar school accepted ca 3 000 students to their first grades). Regardless of the changing addressees of Folk High School education, general civic education (*allmän medborgerlig bildning*), an unambiguous distinguishing feature of Swedish Folk High Schools remained the main programmes objective of *folkhögskolor*.

During the first decades of their operation Folk High Schools achieved a unique independent position among other Swedish educational institutions. They did not have too many limitations in planning their own educational activities in terms of content, work methods, selection of teaching staff, becoming one of the important elements that inspired updating of programmes and methods, democratisation of educational relationships, providing equal opportunities for

the residents of cities and rural areas, etc. The period of 1868–1918 saw a clear change in the position of Folk High Schools in relation to the official educational system. *Folkhögskolor* underwent a tangible evolution, from opposition to adopting the role of an educational offer parallel to that of public schools.

3.2. Period II: 1919-1968

After 1918 the *folkhögskolor* movement made a successful attempt at reaching beyond rural areas (*Birkagårdens folkhögskola*, 1916/1918/). The loss of links with the original educational environment was of evolutionary character. At the end of 1940's, the number of non-rural students obtaining education in Swedish Folk High Schools reached that of the students of peasant origin. At the beginning of 1960's Folk High School ultimately lost their rural character. The change of the social function of *folkhögskolor* became very clear over the years. Starting the mid 20th century, also the changes in the programmes, aimed at certain specialisation in long-term courses and at increasing the level of education by introduction of extended general courses and linking some elements of the educational offer with higher education became visible.

During the second period of their operation Folk High School significantly developed their links with the world of politics. In a sense, the situation from the previous historical period was repeated. The important difference, however, consisted in the fact that starting the second decade of 20th century, the Swedish parliament had a significant number of its members who got educated in *folkhögskola* (Table 1). The introduction of so many members of parliament of different political orientations (social democrats were the overwhelming majority, however) in the subsequent elections to *Riksdag* is undisputedly one of the most important achievement in the history of Folk High Schools in Sweden.

Table 1. Graduates of Folk High Schools in Swedish parliament in 1917-1967

ELECTIONS	NUMBER OF MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT		
	Upper House	Lower House	Total
1917	3	13	16
1927	7	32	39
1937	16	42	58
1947	32	21	53
1957	30	37	67
1960	31	46	77
1962	35	49	84
1963	33	52	85
1967	26	48	74

Source: G. Ueberschlag, *La Folkhögskola. Etude de l'évolution historique idéologique et pédagogique des écoles supérieures d'adultes en Suède 1868-1945*, Vol. 2, Université de Lille III, Lille-Paris 1981, p. 721-722.

The process reached its apogee in 1960's, when every fifth member of the parliament was a *folkhögskola* graduate (and in none of the other Scandinavian countries were Folk High Schools so successful in creating political elites [41]). So it

seems obvious that most of the regulations specifying the rules for the operation of Folk High Schools in Sweden took into consideration the expectations of the community, or were at least consulted with that community. The politicians educated in *folkhögskolor* well guaranteed that.

It needs to be emphasised that during the period discussed here, some of the assumptions of *folkhögskolor*, which had been treated in an almost dogmatic way before, were given up. Non-boarding schools appeared (*Marieborgs folkhögskola*, 1935). In that way one of the basic rules of the operation of Folk High Schools was given up.

For the whole period of the other fifty years of their operation, Folk High Schools were treated as a significant element complementing the official educational offer. And their image became very clear as well – not as institutions created as negation of the official educational system but as a programme and organisational offer supporting public education. Each time Swedish educational legislation was amended that parallel character of *folkhögskolor* in relation to state schools was emphasised. During the period of 1919-1968 Folk High Schools managed to preserve their independence and maintain the character of institutions that prepare their students to active civic participation. Such was the opinion of both Swedish politicians and most of the people of Sweden.

3.3. Period III: after 1968

The modernisation of the work of Folk High Schools after 1968 was to a great extent forced by the changes taking place in the official educational system. The completion of the reforms at the level of 9-year *grundskola* and secondary school led to a decline of demand for the traditional offer of *folkhögskolor*. It caused marginalisation of the educational form typical for earlier years of the operation of Folk High Schools. The suppositions of some of the forums voiced at the turn of 1960's and 1970's that Folk High School would become redundant on the completion of the reform of public education [42,43] did not become a reality. Swedish Folk High Schools turned out to be very flexible in looking for new educational niches. Their educational offer was modernised considerably according to the new concept that *folkhögskola* can become an educational institution for all members of the society (*skola för alla*). A variety of short courses (1-14 days) was introduced to the offer of many Folk High Schools and long specialised courses were significantly developed (Table 2), thanks to which their changed educational formula could be useful for hundreds of thousands of the people of Sweden. It was them who became the guarantors of the survival and successful development of Swedish Folk High School, replacing, in a sense, the links with the world of politics observed in the two previous periods.

In the school year 1968/1969 there were 105 Folk High Schools in Sweden. They educated ca 14 000 students. Swedish Folk High Schools had the biggest number of schools and students among the Scandinavian countries at

that time [44]. In 1970's the number of the participants of long courses remained at similar level (e.g. in the school year 1978/1979: 14 171 students, 2 809 of whom participated in specialised courses) [45]. At the beginning of 1980's, there were 121 Folk High Schools, 67 of which belonged to various social movements and educational organisations and 54 were run by regional or local authorities. In the school year 1994/1995 there were 136 institutions (48 of which were run by regional or municipal authorities. There were almost 200 students, who participated in ca 10 000 of various courses. In the school year 1996/1997 their number increased to 147, which was caused mainly by gaining independence by the existing branches of some *folkhögskolor* [46]. The statistical data for the year 1999/2000 are presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Long specialised courses in *folkhögskolor* in the educational year 1999/2000

	course type /educational line/	number of institutions
1.	Media education (photography, journalism, public relations)	59
2.	Arts (painting, sculpture, colour)	58
3.	Artistic crafts (slöjd, fabrics, wood, ceramics)	48
4.	Musical education	46
5.	Leadership training	46
6.	Computer education/IT	40
7.	Ecology/environmental protection	38
8.	Leisure time organisers	34
9.	European/international education	33
10.	Drama/theatre	31
11.	Sport	28
12.	Nature education	27
13.	Writing (literature, creative writing)	25
14.	Tourism	24
15.	Health care	23
16.	Religious education	23
17.	Languages	21
18.	Personal assistants	19
19.	Cultural education	18
20.	Social issues	18

Source: *Folkhögskolor*, [in:] A. Ekman et al (ed.), Årsbok om folkbildning. Forskning och utveckling 2000, Föreningen för folkbildningsforskning, Stockholm 2000, p. 142.

In the school year 2002/2003 as many as 103 Folk High Schools were run by various associations, boards and organisations, and 44 – by local or regional authorities, which started to withdraw gradually from the ownership functions in *folkhögskolor*. New Folk High Schools are still

being established, for example *Hällefors folkhögskola* was opened in the school year 2000/2001. Unfortunately, it also happens that here and there a Folk High School disappears from the Swedish educational space, e.g. *Samernas folkhögskola* in Jokkmokk (in 2001) [47].

Table 3. Courses delivered by Folk High Schools in Sweden in the educational year 1999/2000

TYPE OF EDUCATIONAL OFFER	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	
	TOTAL	WOMEN
Long courses	38 121	24 351
Including: general	15 856	10 205
Specialised	22 265	14 146
Short courses	159 031	90 977
Commissioned courses	19 214	12 335
TOTAL	216 366	127 663

Source: Folkhögskolornas verksamhet, [in:] A. Ekman et al (ed.), Årsbok om folkbildning. Forskning och utveckling 2000, Föreningen för folkbildningsforskning, Stockholm 2000, p. 143.

At the beginning of the new millennium, there are almost 150 Folk High Schools scattered all over Sweden (most of them, however, are located in the south of the country and in Stockholm area). Since the beginning of 1960's all the new schools have been located in cities or in their direct vicinity. Over the decades there has been a clear re-evaluation on that, and the city character of the Folk High School established after 1968 became one of the significant features distinguishing period III from the previous ones. As a consequence of that, starting mid 1970's only slightly over 40% students use the boarding facilities, whose importance has decreased significantly. Women have been the dominant group of students for years now. In the school year 1974/1975 they constituted 51.4% and in 1999/2000 – as much as 63.9% of the total number of students of long courses.

After 1968 *folkhögskolor* opened to new groups of students: the disabled, immigrants, the unemployed, the elderly, etc. They also focused on professional education of the teaching staff, on solutions enabling Folk High School graduates, after adequately long courses in *folkhögskola*, to enter universities and on programmes officially recognised as a form of academic education. In this respect, the concept of Folk High Schools as schools for all (*skola för alla*) adopted at the beginning of 1970's turned out to be socially viable over the past three decades.

It seems that this analysis has clearly indicated that Swedish Folk High Schools have remained an important component of adult education system also in the last period of their operation distinguished here. Despite various challenges that they have had to face from time to time, Folk High Schools have been exercising educational impact on Swedish society.

3.4. Today

It is worth taking a separate part of the considerations for

the analysis of the activities of Swedish Folk High Schools during the last decade, in spite of the author's treating that stage of the history of *folkhögskolor* as belonging to the third of the previously distinguished periods in their history, within the limits of FHS as *skola för alla*.

Recent years clearly show a further quantitative development of the movement of Swedish Folk High Schools (between the school year 1992/1993 and 2011/2012 also the number of the students of Folk High Schools increased by more than 1/5). Let us remind the reader once again that between 1991 and today as many as 21 new schools came into being – five of which were totally new initiatives, and the remaining ones were established in a process of making some school branches independent. The newly established Folk High Schools usually do not have boarding facilities of their own. Only seven of them use the accommodation facilities that they used to have as branches. The name of the youngest Folk High School, that is *Glokala folkhögskolan*, established in Malmö in 2005 [48], has become a certain symbol of the transformation of the Swedish Folk High School movement, as the neologism *glokala* (glocal = global + local) seen in the name of that FHS, clearly shows the approach to building the programme content or forms and methods of work not only in that school but probably in the majority of contemporary Swedish Folk High Schools [49].

Analysing the programme offer of *folkhögskolor* we notice that it is clearly more versatile and that the changes aim at "greater sensitiveness to the needs of the market". Now Swedish Folk High Schools' offer, as a part of long educational courses, both traditional general education classes (at various levels of advancement) and specialized courses covering a few tens of thematic areas. It is, on the one hand, a response of Folk High Schools to the social demand for certain professions (e.g. personal assistant, leisure time animator, environmental protection or health care specialist). On the other hand, however, it is an attempt at maintaining and developing the important role of those schools in supporting personal development of the members of Swedish society – in accordance with *folkhögskola* as a "school for everyone", already mentioned more than once here. All types of specialized courses on culture, art, crafts as well as religion education programmes seem to prove useful.

Let us also add that nowadays a part of the offer of Folk High Schools is sometimes prepared in cooperation with Swedish schools of higher education, which is a visible effect of the amendment of the Swedish "Higher education act" of the mid 1990s, when *Riksdag* "ordered" higher education institutions to intensify cooperation with their social environment¹. The task pointed out to in the act apart from scientific research and teaching students as the third obligation (Swedish *tredje uppgift*) of Swedish universities, resulted in the last decade in a significant increase of the number of initiatives taken up jointly by schools of higher

¹ 1992 års högskolelag, Svensk Författningssamling 1992:1434 (after amendment - SFS 1996:1392), sec.1, § 2.

education and Folk High Schools [50]. Today the catalogues of individual *folkhögskolor* contain tens of courses at academic level prepared in cooperation with this or that university².

When we look at the transformations of the educational offer of contemporary Folk High Schools in Sweden we must emphasise the fact that the changes of programmes are not of a very dramatic character. They rather indicate a steady, carefully thought over and well planned activities of the environments of individual educational institutions, as well as the entire *folkhögskolor* movement in the analysed area. It seems, therefore, that also in the future to come one should not expect any far going re-evaluations in the programme offer of Swedish Folk High Schools and that the changes that will be taking place will not be of a smooth evolutionary character.

And the last thing that the author would like to draw the attention of the readers is namely a considerable development of various forms of international cooperation of Swedish Folk High Schools. Although *folkhögskolor* community had been interested in international issues for at least a few decades it was not only the last several years that saw a significant increase in this area. Already in 1996 the research done by the Centre for Adult Educators (*Vuxenutbildarcentrum*) of the Linköping University showed that 92.5 % of Folk High Schools are involved in international projects (330 educational undertakings), which were implemented in as many as 59 countries [51] – including Central Europe and Poland. The tendencies of the last decade remained unchanged in this respect [52]. It therefore seems to be justified to say the cooperation with international partners developed in many areas and aspects has become one of the most significant distinguishing features of *folkhögskolor*, something that makes them clearly different from all the other adult education institutions in Sweden and their most characteristic feature.

4. Conclusion

Finalising the considerations one should stress once again the regularities observed during the analysis of the directions of operation of Swedish Folk High Schools from their beginnings till today. Apart from the clearly visible for an outside author three distinct stages in their history (connected – as mentioned above – with various educational environments that were active at the given moment of history), it can also be seen that the relations with the world of politics had a very significant impact on functioning of those adult education institutions. If one did not know the relations it would be harder to understand the changes taking place in *folkhögskolor* movement. Those relations can be observed not only at the beginning of the movement, in the

1860s (when politicians guaranteed Folk High Schools financial stability and flexible legal framework) or in the modern times (when the political class, through change of the way of financing and external evaluation of the activity, forced Folk High School to introduce projects “limiting the always existing freedoms of *folkhögskolor*”), but at each stage of their functioning.

And the analysis of the relations between *folkhögskolor* and the official (state) system of education over the entire period discussed in the article has indicated a clear evolution in this respect. The schools born from the negation of public school (Period I), gradually acquiring the character of a parallel and equal educational offer to the Swedish society (Period II), became much closer to the state schools of secondary and higher education and adult education in the last period (Period III). Although it must also be noted that – from time to time – at the moments of bridging the differences between Folk High Schools and public schools, dangerous to the identity of the first ones, attempts were made at renewal of the movement and reminding people of the essence of the folk school idea. It made the schools come back to the tasks that regardless of all the other types of activities taken up over the years have always been their distinguishing feature and made Folk High Schools unique, that is, generally speaking – activities for civic education and democracy. For many years those tasks had been performed by the Swedish Union of Folk High School Teachers (*Svenska Folkhögskolans Lärarförbund*). Unfortunately, in the last decades it seems to have focused on mainly on social security and financial needs of its members, thus losing its position of a “guardian of the ideas” or main animator of the discussion on the principles of the movement. The gap started to be filled in by initiatives taken up by the Folk High School teachers most aware of the idea sources of independent education, and by other activists connected with *folkbildning*. The examples of such re-development movement within Swedish Folk High Schools, such as *Progressiv folkhögskola* from the 1970s [53], *DemokratiAkademin* from the 1990s [54] or *Offensiv Folkbildning* [55] from more recent years clearly prove the thesis put forward above.

It is an undisputable fact that for decades the main task of Swedish Folk High Schools was to prepare the generations of Swedish citizens for life of dignity and value in the society. It seems that this role is not going to change in the years to come, despite some opinions that their mission has come to an end³, because they have that unique ability to flexibly adapt to the new challenges facing the Swedish society. The probably most exciting challenge for an analyst “from the Polish perspective” was observing how skilfully and quickly (let us emphasise that: much faster than public system of education!) *folkhögskolor* were able to perform educational tasks in de-favourised communities (politically, economically, socially or/and educationally). It is really hard for an outsider from Poland to grasp that wide range of

² The traditions of Swedish Folk High Schools in terms of academic education go back to 1977, when the implementation of the programme of educating leisure time leaders/animators (2 year education, 80 credit points)

³ Compare, for example, the opinion of Prof. Gunnar Sundgren [56] (p. 73) and the riposte of Gösta Vestlund in the “Folkhögskolan” [57].

organizational forms, programme content or forms of teaching that have appeared in Swedish Folk High Schools over the period of 145 years of their functioning. Nevertheless, the general picture that emerges from that laborious collecting “the bits and pieces of FHS history” is explicit and unambiguous, there is no doubt – Folk High Schools in Sweden have played a significant role in counteracting marginalisation and social exclusion of both individuals and social groups, and each time when such a danger was noticed in that society.

And one more, final note or question. How can other nations benefit from “looking at” Swedish solutions in the area of independent adult education? And the answer is not as simple as it might seem at first, for it is obvious that nobody can suggest to people connected with Folk High Schools from outside Sweden adopting ready solutions developed in that Scandinavian country. One should hope, however, that learning about the history of *folkhögskolor* can enable “*från andra sidan*” educators to come to more precise answers to the questions how to develop an efficient strategy for similar schools of their own. Because this analysis of Folk High Schools and directions of their activity in Sweden confirms that they can gain and maintain for decades an important position within the structure of national educational solutions. So they are still socially useful, which the author has tried to prove on the example of Sweden. And it should give some hope in the other parts of the globe. Not only in Poland...

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