

# Being a governess in the early 1920s in Sweden<sup>1</sup>

Ulf Ekblad

Ph.D. in Physics

## Bjersjölagård in Skåne

"So, I went to Bjersjölagård. There [at Bjersjölagård's railway station (Picture 1)] the driver came and met me by car." (The car is seen in Picture 2.) This is how Magdalena de Neergaard (1895–1968) (Picture 6) began her letter to her friend Ninni. Both herself, her relatives and closest friends used the nickname Magda. In the letter, she tells what it was like to be a governess at Bjersjölagård Castle (Picture 3) in the early 1920s.



**Picture 1:** Bjersjölagård's railway station in 1920. It was built in 1910–1911. Photo: postcard, 1920; image source: Leif Nyström's website, <https://leinys.se>.

Bjersjölagård Castle is located 10 km north of Sjöbo in Skåne and just under a kilometre from Bjersjölagård railway station.

Bjersjölagård Castle is said to date back to the 700s. It was originally a strongly fortified castle called *Beritzholm* or *Beritsholm*. The castle was demolished in 1526, after which the new farm was built 1 km southeast of the old castle. The current spelling of Bjersjölagård (with e) is Bjärsjölagård (with ä). Here the spelling with e is used except when referring to modern times.

During the time that Magda was governess at Bjersjölagård Castle, the castle was owned by Count Fredrik Bonde af Björnö (Picture 7); he owned it from 1918.

Since 1958, the Bjersjölagård property has been managed by the Rural Economy Society for the current owner, the Wollmarska Research and Teaching Institution Foundation.

## Governesses

A governess was (and still is, to the extent that they still exists) a female private tutor who taught younger children, mainly girls, in their home. The governess also often lived in the students' homes. In Sweden, domestic

governesses usually came from the middle-class bourgeoisie, but could also be from the nobility. Several famous people were governesses, at least for part of their lives.



**Picture 2:** The car with the driver Blomgren that picked up Magda de Neergaard at the railway station in the autumn of 1921. According to the Regional Archives in Lund, the car is a "The Willys Overland Co, Toledo, Ohio, USA; Weight: 1490 kg; 6-cylinder petrol engine with 45 horsepower". The car was owned by the equestrian master Count Fredrik Bonde, Bjersjölagård, from 1919 to 1925. Purchase price: 16 000 SEK. Photographed outside the north wing of Bjersjölagård Castle in the early 1920s. I found the photograph by chance when I was browsing through a number of photographs online. The driver Blomgren later (from 1928) owned the café at the railway crossing 200 m from the railway station (see Picture 4). Image source: Leif Nyström's genealogy research, <https://www.leinys.se/>.



**Picture 3:** The current Bjärsjölagård Castle was built in 1766. In the north wing, to the left in the photograph, lived the servants. In the south wing, to the right in the photograph, were the guest rooms. Whether Magda lived in one of the guest rooms or if she had a room next to the children in the main building is unknown. Image source: *Svenska gods och gårdar*, Part 6, Malmöhus län, 1944, p. 17. Photo: unknown, circa 1940.

<sup>1</sup> This article is an AI translation (corrected by the author) of an article in Swedish published in DISkutabelt, no 3, 2025.



**Picture 4:** Bjärsjölagård station, the railway crossing and the castle on a section of *the District Economic Map*, Övedskloster, 1910–15, Lantmäteriet.



**Picture 5:** Here is what it might have looked like when a governess taught in the 1880s. The photo shows inventor and professor Alexander Graham Bell's daughters Marian (1880–1962) and Elsie (1878–1964) with their governess around 1885. The name of the governess is unknown. Image source: Wikipedia, Public Domain.



**Picture 6:** Magda de Neergaard (1895–1968). Private photo, circa 1915.

Mary Tudor (1516–1558) (as Mary I, she was reigning Queen of England from 1553 to 1558) was the daughter of King Henry VIII of England, and she had the Countess of Salisbury, Margaret Plantagenêt (1473–1541), as governess. Margaret was persuaded (c. 1491 at the age of 18) to marry Sir Richard Pole (1462–1504) and is thus also known as Margaret Pole. Margaret is now known from several TV series. Mary I was succeeded by her half-sister,

the more well-known Elizabeth I (1533–1603), reigning Queen of England from 1558 to 1603.

In France, the Marquise de Maintenon (1635–1719), called Madame de Maintenon, was governess to some of the children of King Louis XIV of France (1638–1715).

Marie Curie (1867–1934), future Nobel Prize winner in physics and chemistry, was the governess of a Polish family in order to be able to pay for the trip to Paris where she wanted to begin her university studies.

In the English-speaking world of science and technology, one can mention the inventor Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922) who had governesses for his daughters, including Marian (1880–1962) and Elsie (1878–1964) (Figure 5).



**Picture 7:** The cavalry master Count Fredrik Bonde (1879–1963). Photo: circa 1915; Upmark.



**Picture 8:** Countess Märta Bonde (1890–1959), née Björkenstam. Photo: circa 1915; Upmark.

In the fictional world, there are also governesses. The governess in Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1815) is treated as a member of the family, and in Charlotte

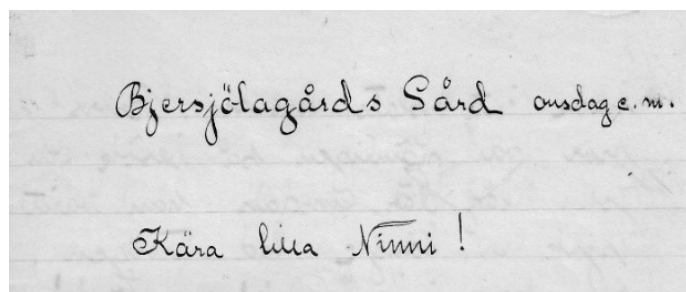
Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jane Eyre is a governess. Anne Brontë's novel *Agnes Grey* (1847) gives a fairly realistic depiction of the life of a governess.

### Governess at Bjersjölagård Castle

At the beginning of autumn 1921, when the car with Magda had stopped outside the castle, "The Count and the Countess came out and received me on the stairs". The count was the cavalry master Fredrik Bonde (1879–1963) (Picture 7). He was born at the manor Kesätter (Kesäter, Kjesäter) in Södermanland. Kjesäter, which during World War II was a reception centre for Norwegian refugees in Sweden, appears in the TV series *Sweden and the War*. (For Magda's activities during the war, see *Danish resistance fighters in the Neergaard family*.) The manor house is known since 1381 and was owned by the Bonde family during the 1700s and 1800s. The countess was Märta Bonde (1890–1959) (Picture 8), née Björkenstam. They had married in 1911 and had two children in 1921: their first-born daughter Gunilla (1912–1977) was nine years old when Magda came to teach her; and their son Erik (Gustaf Karl Fredrik), born 1916-07-01, died 1996. Later, Fredrik and Märta had another son, Björn Carl Fredrik (1928–2002).

In her letter, Gunilla is described by Magda as "very nice and talented". About the son, Magda writes that he is "a little count of 5 years old Busse". Why Magda writes Busse is unknown. Is it her own "nickname" for him? Normally, Bosse is a nickname for Bo, but it does not match his baptismal name. Could it have to do with the fact that Magda thought he was a little "mischievous". Danish and Swedish often have the opposite of each other when it comes to single and double consonants. How Magda pronounced the word "Busse" is unknown.

The sender address in Magda's letter to Ninni she gives as "Bjersjölagårds Gård" and the time only as "Wednesday p.m." unfortunately (Picture 9). However, the fact that Erik was born 1916-07-01 and was five years old when Magda came to Bjersjölagård dates the letter to after the summer of 1921.



**Picture 9:** Introduction of the letter. The castle Bjersjölagård is sometimes called a farm and sometimes a castle; rarely for manor. The three concepts are difficult to define.

Since Busse was five years old in the autumn of 1921, he was probably not going to be taught by Magda, but he was probably allowed to sit and listen to his sister's

lessons. However, there are examples of five-year-old children being able to receive education at home. Fredrik Tersmeden writes in *Lundensare II*: In 1870, when Ivan, the son of Kalmar city's hospital doctor, turned "five years old, he began to receive education at home". His one-year-younger sister, Dagmar ("the language genius from Kalmar"), was considered "too young to participate in the lessons, but in return for a promise to keep completely silent she was still allowed to sit in". Something similar may have been the case with Magda's lessons at Bjersjölagård.

In the letter, Magda writes: "You can believe that this is incomparable. 52 rooms that were all used. 8 maids." She was visibly impressed by the building. She had grown up in much smaller houses, although several of these were to be regarded as farms, but still far from as large as a large manor or a small castle.

Everyday life for Magda began at 8 a.m. "in the early morning when one of the maids comes and rolls up the blinds and wakes [her]." Thereafter "at 9 o'clock Gunilla and I eat a small breakfast. Always magnificently set." The working day is described as follows: "So we begin to read at 9.20. We read so until a quarter before 1 when the count, countess, me and Gunilla have lunch which is like the nicest dinner. Then I play with Gunilla for half an hour. Then the walk. At half past three the count, countess and I drink coffee. Gunilla and Busse drink tea by themselves." At the end of the working day comes "dinner at half past six. Then we drink coffee in the count's writing room. Then the time goes by smoking a cigarette after coffee."

The library was furnished as a schoolroom, which means that the library had a second function in addition to being a library. When it had been given that interior is unknown. Magda writes: "I should probably also tell you a little about the schoolroom. Yes, it is then as perfect as it can be; Large and bright, 6 or 7 windows, along the entire length of one wall a bookcase stretches from floor to ceiling. In the middle of the floor is a square table and 3 wicker chairs. At one wall is my table and in front of it 2 real school desks. Then there is a blackboard, map of Sweden, etc. In the opposite corner is a piano." (Picture 10 and Picture 11.)

Magda's room is described by her as follows: "When I come up to my room in the evenings, there is hot water (to wash myself in) in a jug with a lid and over it a heater. You can believe that I have a lovely room, big and bright. Fine birch furniture, a cabinet with a mirror door, desk with electric foot lamp, chest of drawers and over it an antique mirror, on the chest of drawers a beautiful sewing box with everything needed in it, dressing table with oval mirror, on the dressing table there are two electric candles with shades on, a sofa with a beautiful duvet over it and two pillows. In front of the sofa a very beautiful, round table. Over the entire floor is a soft, thick red carpet. But the best of all is still my big lovely bed. Next to the bed is a

bedside table. On it is also a foot lamp. On this table there is always a bottle of Ramlösa water."



**Picture 10:** The library furnished as a schoolroom. Photo: Oscar Halldin (1873–1948), circa 1920; image source: Upmark.



**Picture 11:** The library as it looked 100 years after Magda had it as a classroom. Photo: Ulf Ekblad, 2021.

Picture 12 shows that it was not that room that Magda had, but it still gives a little hint of what her room looked like. The photograph shows a dressing table with two "electric lights" (lamps) with shades on them, a round table, bedside table/cabinet with a foot-lamp and water bottle and a large bed.

Sometimes visitors came to the castle. Magda wrote, for example, that: "Today there have been 3 gentlemen for lunch, but I got to eat with them anyway". In another place she wrote: "For dinner today we also had a stranger, an engineer". One evening "the count was gone (at Maltesholm) and then I was with the countess" and it was "quite late" in the evening before she got to bed.

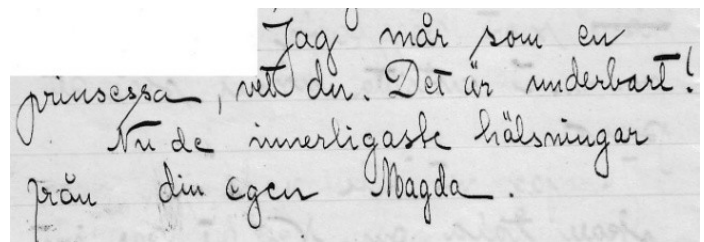
The letter ends (Picture 13) with the words: "I feel like a princess, you know. It's wonderful."

Magda thus worked as a governess at Bjersjölagård Castle from the autumn term of 1921 until the spring term of 1923. When the service ended is a little uncertain, but the Bonde family moved from Bjersjölagård to Glumslöv on 6 September 1923, probably because their son, who

was then seven years old, would start elementary school in the autumn term of 1923.



**Picture 12:** One of the guest rooms in the south wing that gives a small idea of what Magda's room may have looked like (cf. her description in the letter). Photo: Oscar Halldin (1873–1948), circa 1920; image source: Upmark.



**Picture 13:** The conclusion of Magda's letter to Ninni.

Magda thus worked as a governess at Bjersjölagård Castle from the autumn term of 1921 until the spring term of 1923. When the service ended is a little uncertain, but the Bonde family moved from Bjersjölagård to Glumslöv on 6 September 1923, probably because their son, who was then seven years old, would start elementary school in the autumn term of 1923.

### Concluding remarks

The letter shows that Magda was regarded almost as a member of the family. This was probably not unusual, when the governess lived in the family house and was almost with her pupil/pupils around the clock. The governess also functioned almost as a companion to the children's mother (notice that Countess Märta is only five years older than Magda). The governess's educational task was only part of the "employment contract". It was often understood that she would also spend time with the parents, "in her free time". Therefore, she was not "allowed" to have a higher status than her parents, but neither was she allowed to come from an excessively different social environment. As for Magda's employers, these were counts and Magda was of Danish nobility.

In the autumn term of 1923, Magda became a regular teacher at Södra skolan in Landskrona, which she held for the rest of her life. This began a stable existence that was very different from her childhood and adolescence. She was born in Uppsala, Sweden, the daughter of a couple who both worked in the Salvation

Army, and her father was also a preacher in the Evangelical Fatherland Foundation (EFS). For her parents' professional activities, the family moved around Sweden and when Magda had started secondary school, she could not always live at home with her parents. For her vocational training, she then often had to move between different schools and also take a temporary job before she finally got a permanent position.

In October 1924, a few months into her second year of service as a regular teacher in Landskrona, she married assistant master Emfrid Vennerberg (1883–1969) in Landskrona, and 2 1/2 years later Magda gave birth to my mother.

### Who was Ninni? (A late addition)

When I had come this far, I was done with the article, I thought, but then I got the idea that maybe I should try to find out who the letter recipient Ninni was. Was it a relative or someone else? I found two relatives with the name Ninni, but in terms of age, they didn't quite match. A search for various letters and postcards, on the other hand, gave some clues.

In a letter, with missing envelope, to "Dearest little

Ninni!" there is a side note: "A heartfelt greeting to Magda's good friend, from her mother!" and then a postcard addressed to "The teacher, miss Ninnie Christensson" in Landskrona.

From this I conclude that the Ninni with whom Magda corresponds so diligently is her good friend and colleague, the teacher Ninnie Christensson. The fact that Magda often writes Ninni, i.e. without a closing e, should probably not be given much importance.

This Ninnie was probably born 1898-11-16 and thus is three years younger than Magda. Is that why Magda always writes "Little Ninni"? Where she was born seems to be a little unclear; possibly she may have been born in the United States or perhaps in Canada. There is some information that indicates this. At the end of the 1910s and the beginning of the 1920s, however, she lived in Landskrona, where Magda lived and worked for most of her life.

At the end of her life, Ninnie lived in Helsingborg, but when she moved there has not been found, only that it happened in 1971 at the latest. Ninnie died 1992-05-18 in Helsingborg, 93 years old. She remained unmarried.

### Sources

*Buried in Sweden*, Swedish Genealogical Association.

Letter from Magda to Ninni, probably in the autumn of 1921, private collection.

Ehrensverd Cardell, Amelie, *Skåne Castles*, 2023.

Ekblad, Ulf, "Danish resistance men in the Neergaard family", *DISkutabelt*, DIS Syd, No. 2, 2022, pp. 8–11.

*Refugees in Sweden*, National Archives of Sweden, <https://www.arkivverket.no/utforsk-arkivene/andre-verdenskrig/norge-i-eksil/flyktningar-i-sverige>.

1910 Census, National Archives.

Geni, <https://www.geni.com/>.

*Häradsekonomska kartan*, Övedskloster, 1910–15, Lantmäteriet. *The Regional Archives in Lund*.

Leif Nyström's genealogy research, <https://www.leinys.se/>. MyHeritage.

*Svenska gods och gårdar*, Part 6, Malmöhus County, 1944.

*Population of Sweden 1970*, Swedish Genealogical Association.

*The Swedish Book of the Dead 9, 1815–2022*, Swedish Genealogical Association.

*Sweden and the War*, TV series on SVT, Part 4. 2025.

*Sveriges småskolelärarinnor i ord och bild*, II, Stockholm, 1945.

Tersmeden, Fredrik, *Lundensare II – More university fates during four centuries*, Lund University Historical Society (LUHS), 2024, p. 130.

Upmark, Gustaf, *Svenska Slott och Herresäten*, Skåne, IV, 25th booklet, circa 1920.

Wikipedia.

Östholm, Hanna, "School in the shadow: Private education in Stockholm 1735", *Nordic Journal of Educational History*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2020), pp. 61–82.