

## 'AND YES, THERE WAS A VIKING SHIP RAFT!'

**Minnesotans Travel to Uppsala to Visit Sister City**

by Sarah Johnson

“**T**here is a town in Minnesota with friends taking good care of us...” went the song written by one of the members of the Uppsala Friendship Committee and performed at the *Welcome Skål!* event upon our arrival in Sweden’s fourth largest city. Visiting one of our sister cities to experience Walpurgis, the Nordic celebration of spring, I was fortunate enough to be a part of Minneapolis’s first citizen delegation to Uppsala (our sister city since 2000), a municipality of about 130,000 inhabitants approximately 40 miles north of Stockholm. Sister Cities is an international program started by President Dwight Eisenhower to foster people-to-people diplomacy.

Uppsala is a river city, so one of the cherished traditions during Walpurgis (held annually on April 30) is waiting for the student-created rafts to come floating by. It’s a celebration reminiscent of Minneapolis’s milk carton boat



*Fyrisån, the river that bisects Uppsala. Bottom left: Viking ship raft during Walpurgis.*

rares during Aquatennial (our city’s summer festival). Östra Ågatan, the main boulevard, was packed with college students holding bottles of wine and chanting songs in Swedish, while people on balconies overlooking the river waved the blue and yellow national flag. Police in wet suits were sitting on risers near a small waterfall, ready to help any rafters who got stuck on the rocks. (And yes, there was a Viking ship raft!)

One of the advantages of joining a sister cities trip is that you can often take part in experiences you wouldn’t otherwise have as a regular tourist. In Uppsala, we had the opportunity to learn about the cultural issues facing Sweden from two local officials – Director Hannes Vidmark from the

Department of Ecological Sustainability, and Anders Fridborg, Chief Security Officer and former head of unit coordination for refugee reception. Topics ranged from climate taxes to teaching children from Afghanistan how to ice skate.

On a day trip north of Uppsala, we heard about something very familiar to Minnesotans: iron ore mining. At Österbybruk, skilled blacksmiths would live with their families and work at the Walloon Forge, producing some of the world’s highest-quality iron dating back to the 1600s. We also saw the



*Open mine pit at Dannemora. Photos courtesy: Sarah Johnson*

deep and dark open mine pits at Dannemora, known as the end of the line where they would send prisoners and other undesirables to work. Our tour guide explained that these miners were often known by their facial deformities – one side of their face was perpetually burned due to the need to hold a stick in their mouth for light while deep down in the mine. She painted a gruesome picture of smoke, fire and ever-present danger in a place where the average life expectancy was 35 years.

The sign at their train station (“Uppsala: Välkommen hit, Välkommen hem,” Swedish for “Welcome here, Welcome home”) underscores the friendliness of the people in this area of the world. I can’t wait for them to come and visit us!

