Hans Rosling was a medical doctor, professor of international health and renowned public educator. He was an adviser to the World Health Organization and UNICEF, and co-founded Médecins sans Frontières in Sweden and the Gapminder Foundation. His TED talks have been viewed more than 35 million times, and he was listed as one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world. Hans died in 2017, having devoted the last years of his life to writing *Factfulness*.

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Foreword
by Agneta Rosling

After more than fifty years of friendship and marriage, three children and eight grandchildren, Hans left me to a severe silence. Through this book his voice can be heard again.

Hans started writing about his life several years ago. He wanted to use his own family experience to tell the story of social development: to point out the similarities between the lives of people from his grandparents' generation, born in Sweden over one hundred years ago, and the lives of people in many countries today, far away from modern-day Sweden both in kilometres and in their living conditions. He wanted to share the stories that had changed or strengthened his vision of what was important in life: of what has to be changed in the world to give us all a sustainable future.

Hans always said that he wasn't being altruistic when he emphasised the need for equality to avoid conflict and war, but selfish. He wanted a world without war for himself, his family and everyone else. Neither was he an optimist, because he never thought the changes he was talking about would be easy to achieve. He called himself a 'possibilist' and always strived to convince his audience that it was possible to make the world a place where

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everyone had a fair chance of living a life on reasonable terms.

Cross-country running was a favourite sport, and Hans always liked to use a map to know where he was and a compass to find the way. This illustrates his way of analysing any situation. You can find the right direction and reach your goal only if you know where you are now and how things are around you. The importance of developing critical thinking habits to understand global development is covered in greater depth in the book Hans wrote with our son Ola Rosling and daughter-in-law Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness*.

This book, *How I Learned to Understand the World*, tells Hans's own story, from childhood through to his adult life and career. It was first published in Swedish the year Hans passed away. In this edition, some of the stories are left out, as we thought these would only be interesting in the Swedish context or because they had already been told in *Factfulness*. I am very pleased that English-language readers will be able to read Hans's memoir in this edited form.

Hans's legacy is maintained and developed by the Gapminder Foundation and, in various ways, by a number of universities both in Sweden and elsewhere. Through the Gapminder Foundation, Ola and Anna are continuing their creative work of promoting a fact-based worldview that is easy to understand. At this time, with the Covid-19 pandemic threatening to increase poverty and hunger in many low-income countries, Hans would have

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been more committed than ever to this work. I am satisfied to know that his voice is still being heard, and that so many people have learned the lessons he was trying to teach and taken his experience to heart.

Hans would have loved to test your knowledge.

The importance of a fact-based understanding of the world is more pressing than ever.

Agneta Rosling
Uppsala, April 2020

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Introduction

On 5 February 2016, I spoke to my doctor on the phone. What he said meant that writing this book became a priority. I had been prepared for bad news, and it was. The diagnosis was pancreatic cancer.

Our talk that Friday afternoon only confirmed what had gradually become obvious to me during the last few days of undergoing medical investigations. The prognosis was bad. I had approximately one year left to live.

I spent most of that evening in tears. I was lucky to have Agneta, my wife, who had been my lovely young girlfriend and then became my partner for life when we got married in 1972. Through the comfort she offered me and the support of our children and friends, I was able to adjust to this new reality. I would not die in the coming month. Terminal illness or not, life would go on. And I would be around to enjoy life during the spring and summer at least.

Cancer made the structure of my daily life unpredictable and my work schedule had to change. Just a few days after learning of my illness, I cancelled all my lecture engagements and also my participation in film and TV projects. It was sad but I had no choice. Besides, I had specific plans, which helped me cope with these dramatic measures. One item on my to-do list moved to the top: complete the book that I had planned to write jointly with

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my son Ola and his wife Anna. We had agreed on the title: *Factfulness*. Over the last eighteen years, the three of us had been working together in public education and founded a not-for-profit venture called Gapminder.

In the autumn of 2015, Anna and Ola had formulated the concept behind the book as well as its title. We had decided to set aside the following year for writing it, in parallel with our work for Gapminder. After my cancer diagnosis I was in even more of a hurry.

I quickly realised that there was enough material for two books. While *Factfulness* is about the reasons why people find development on a global scale so hard to grasp, this book is about me and how I reached that understanding.

In other words, this is a memoir. Unlike *Factfulness*, it is very short on numbers. Instead, I tell stories about meeting people who opened my eyes, and made me step back and think again.

Hans Rosling
Uppsala, January 2017

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From Illiteracy to Academic Excellence

When my father came home from work in the evening, he always smelled of coffee. He worked in the roasting shed at Lindvalls Kaffe in Uppsala. This is how I came to love the scent of coffee long before I began to drink it. I often watched out for Pappa coming home from work, waiting outside as he cycled along the street. He would jump off his bike and hug me and then I'd ask him the same question every time: 'Did you find anything today?'

When the sacks of green coffee beans arrived for roasting, the beans were tipped out onto a conveyor belt and, first of all, screened by a powerful magnet. The idea was to remove any metal objects that might have ended up in the sack during the drying and packing process. Pappa would bring these things home to me and tell me a story about every one of them. These stories were thrilling.

Sometimes he brought a coin. 'Look, this is from Brazil,' he might say. 'Brazil produces more coffee than anywhere else.'

My father would let me sit on his lap, open the world atlas in front of us and begin telling the story: 'It's a large country and very hot. This coin turned up inside a sack from Santos,' he would explain, pointing at the Brazilian

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port city.

He would describe the working men and women, links in the chain that ended with people in Sweden sipping their coffee. Early on, I realised the coffee pickers got the poorest pay.

Or it might be a coin from Guatemala. 'In Guatemala, white Europeans own the coffee plantations. The locals, who were the first to settle in the country, only get the low-paid jobs. Like picking coffee berries.'

I remember especially well the time he brought home a copper coin, a 5-cent piece from British East Africa – now Kenya – with a hole in the middle.

'I think a man would carry his coins by threading a leather strap through the holes and tying the strap around his neck. While he was spreading the coffee beans to dry on the sandy ground before putting them in the sack, perhaps the necklace broke. He picked up as many coins as he could but missed this one. It ended up among the beans and now it belongs to you.'

To this day, I have kept the coins my father gave me in a wooden box. The East African coin led him to explain to me about colonialism. At the age of eight, I learned about the Mau-Mau freedom army and its demand for Kenyan independence.

My father's stories convinced me that, to him, the Latin American and African people who picked, dried and packed coffee were his colleagues. And I have no doubt at all that my powerful longing to understand the world began with Pappa telling me about the coins in the coffee

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sacks and showing me all those countries in the atlas. This longing grew into a lifelong passion and, later, into what I saw as my most important professional calling.

In retrospect, I realise that my father saw the worldwide rebellions against colonialism in a similar light to the European struggle against Nazism. During our long weekend walks in the forest, he would talk in detail about the history of the Second World War.

Politically, my parents were no extremists. Rather the opposite; they were almost boringly ordinary. My father admired everyone who fought for justice and freedom but both of them objected just as much to the far left as to the far right.

I grew up without a religion but with a strong set of values from my parents: ‘Whether people believe in God isn’t important; what counts is how they treat their fellow men.’ And: ‘Some people are church-goers, others take walks in the forest and enjoy nature.’

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Skiing with Dad

We had a small wireless set in a varnished wooden case. It stood on the String shelf above the kitchen table. During supper, we would always listen to the news from Sveriges Radio, the national broadcaster. My parents' views mattered to me as a boy, more than the actual

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news stories. Mamma usually commented on the Swedish news, while Pappa focused on news from abroad and often responded strongly, pausing his meal and sitting bolt upright as he listened, shushing me and Mamma. Afterwards, we would talk for a long time about what we had heard.

Once, I nearly drowned in the open drain running in front of my grandparents' home. It is my earliest memory. I was just four years old and had slipped out of the garden and started to wander between the fence and the drainage channel. The channel brimmed with waste water, a mixture of last night's rainfall and stinking sewage from neighbouring homes.

Something caught my attention down there in the muck. I was curious and climbed into the drain to see better. Then I slipped. The sloping sides offered no handholds. I couldn't breathe. Everything was dark. Panicking, I tried to twist but only sank deeper into the sludge.

My nineteen-year-old aunt, who had come to look for me, spotted my kicking feet and hauled me out. When my Grandma Berta took over and carried me into the kitchen, my relief was huge: to this day I still vividly remember the feeling. Grandma had been heating water on the wood-fired kitchen stove, preparing to do the dishes. Now she poured the warm water into the tin bath instead. She tested the temperature with her elbow while I undressed, then helped me into it and washed me from top to toe with a soft sponge and plenty of soap. Soon I was playing

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happily with the sponge. It was only many years later that I realised quite how close I had been to death.

Even then, in 1952, there was no deep drainage system in the Eriksberg area of Uppsala, where many factory workers, including my paternal grandparents, had their home. At the age of four, I had been sent to stay with my grandparents because my mother had come down with tuberculosis and been admitted to hospital. My father visited my mother every evening after work and could only be with me on Sundays. Grandma, who had brought up seven children of her own, looked after me all week. Her youngest two were nineteen and twenty-three years old, and still living at home when I became Grandma's eighth child.

Both my paternal grandparents had been born and bred in the countryside but had eventually joined the growing urban workforce. My grandfather worked in the same Uppsala brickworks, Uppsala-Ekeby, his entire adult life. He was a kind, hard-working man who loved his wife and showed it. He and his sons had built their wooden two-storey house in the evenings after work and in any other spare moment. It was his pride and joy. Thanks to an in-house mortgage plan run by the brickworks, he had been able to buy a wooded plot at the edge of the city. It became part of a housing area for factory workers.

The tall pines on the site had provided most of the construction material for Grandpa Gustav's house. He spent one summer felling the pines and sawing them into planks using a two-handed timber saw, a period of very

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hard labour that he remembered for the rest of his life.

Grandpa had wanted the house to be as modern as he could possibly afford but, like all working-class housing, the standard of hygiene was poor. The tap above the sink in the corner of the kitchen was the only source of running water. The sink was also where we emptied our chamber pots from the bedroom, including my small potty. The ditches that wound their way along the area's dirt roads were filthy, unhealthy open drains. Grandma kept the house and garden clean and tidy but, in the summers, the stench from the ditches was everywhere. When, later in life, I travelled to many corners of the world, the slum smell of open drains always reminded me of my summers with my grandparents.

My parents, like my grandparents, were also poor. Despite being short of money, they and their families were not seen as deprived. During my childhood and youth, household incomes and health improved steadily throughout Sweden. The health service, part of an expanding welfare state, meant that new medicines were available free of charge. My mother's tuberculosis was cured. Deaths due to infectious diseases declined sharply and accidents replaced infections as the most common cause of death in childhood. Standing pools of water near homes, like the ditch I fell into, could be fatal for my generation of Swedish children.

I was only a teenager when I became fascinated by the challenge of truly understanding how people lead their

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lives. I began to ask my mother's and father's parents detailed questions about their living conditions. Nothing has proved more helpful for my understanding of our modern world than examining the parallels between our world today and the worlds of my relatives in earlier generations.

Grandma Berta told me about how she and Grandpa Gustav, as newlyweds in 1915, had moved into their first home, a rented house in the countryside near Uppsala. It had a wooden floor but only one room and a kitchen. Their simple source of light was a paraffin lamp and Grandma had to fetch water from a nearby well. After twelve years and five childbirths, they could finally move closer to where Gustav worked, but their second home was also very small – a mere twenty-four square metres – and it too only had one room and a kitchen. However, it was supplied with electricity and piped water. Berta gave birth to their sixth child during the three years they lived there. She and Gustav and two of the children slept in the kitchen and the other four shared the single room. Grandma Berta would speak warmly about the huge difference electric light had made to their lives. It affected everything, including how she ran the household and how the children did their homework. Importantly, if someone fell ill during the hours of darkness, the light could be switched on. Her praise of electricity was unstinting.

The family had to use outdoor latrines – holes in the ground – in their first two homes. In 1930, when they moved into the house Grandpa had built, an indoor latrine

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had been dug in the cellar. The new house had four rooms, all wired for electric light. Even by 1952, though, when I was staying with my grandparents, Grandma used the wood-fired stove for cooking and heating water for washing and laundry and so on. That year, they got their first telephone.

Grandpa had also installed a tap in the cellar and placed two large cement sinks next to it. My grandma could stay indoors to wash her large family's clothes and bedlinen by hand, rather than lugging it all to a nearby stream and back. Even so, doing the laundry remained a tough, boring and time-consuming job. Grandma kept an eye on the new labour-saving inventions that industrialisation came up with and one day her dream became real: the 'magic' washing machine.

My father was Berta's second child – actually, her third-born. Her first child was born in hospital but the baby died. Pappa finished his six years of schooling at the age of fourteen. He got a job as a bricklayer's apprentice at the local brickworks – nowadays, it would be classed as child labour, and the older men often mistreated the lads. Still, in those days, young men in growing families made a critical contribution to the household income.

For my father, the very worst thing about his job was neither the poor conditions nor the low wages but the fact that he lost it when he was seventeen. For him, being unemployed was utterly shameful, even though it was a fate he shared with many others during the economic crisis of the 1930s. To be useful, he mended the

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neighbours' shoes.

On the morning of 9 April 1940, the German army invaded Norway and Denmark. My father was called up to fight just a few hours after the news was broadcast. The next day, he was handed a rifle and posted to Landskrona, a harbour town in the straits between Denmark and Sweden. The conscripts were ordered to dig trenches to defend Sweden against the Germans.

My father remained in the army throughout the Second World War and was sent to defend in turn our borders with Denmark, Norway and Finland. He often spoke of how lucky it was that he was never attacked – during his army years, he hadn't even heard a shot fired in anger.

He urged me to be grateful towards all the countries and their soldiers who had shouldered the heavy burden of fighting and defeating the Nazis and their allies. But he disliked the Soviet system. 'We're against both the Nazis and the Communists,' Pappa always said. Even early on, I was included in that 'we'. And he was horrified by the colonising wars started by European countries, some of which had themselves been so recently occupied by the Germans.

Dad dreaded making a fool of himself in front of educated people. He didn't like the buses because he was unsure about how to get a ticket. He wouldn't browse in bookshops because he wasn't clear about how to approach the till or what would happen once he did. When he did grocery delivery jobs for a while, he was sometimes offered something to eat by upper-class folk.

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He always said ‘no, thank you’, aware that he lacked proper table manners.

Shopping in the private-enterprise supermarkets was out of the question for him. He only went to the Co-op, the shops owned and run by working-class people like him. The Young Eagles, the scouts club run by the Social Democratic Party’s youth section, was the only organisation for youngsters run by the party. The working-class movement offered group identity to its members and made my dad and his friends feel safe.

After the war, he held down a few short-term jobs. Then he landed the post as coffee roaster at Lindvalls Kaffe and stayed for almost forty years. In the evenings, he would go down to his carpentry workshop in the cellar. Broken things were mended in my family, not thrown away: when the handle on our first plastic bucket cracked, Pappa made it a new wooden handle.

Pappa, a fit and athletic man, was the best orienteer in Uppsala County. When something interested him he always managed to do it well. He was always ready to join in and his can-do attitude inspired all he undertook. For example, there was the time when my reckless friend Hasse rammed his bicycle into a car and the bike’s front wheel got twisted into an eight-shape. All the local children knew that the bicycle belonged to Hasse’s mother and they also knew what would happen next: ‘Hell’s bells! Hasse will get a hiding tonight.’ Hasse was often beaten at home. Quick as a flash, my dad gathered up the boy and the bike, and took both down into the

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cellar. Pappa set about straightening the front wheel; he pulled it and hammered it until the wheel looked perfect again. He replaced the ripped inner tube and found the right paint to cover the scratches in the lacquer. After an hour and a half, Hasse walked home through our housing estate, pushing a fine-looking bicycle.

My father's family were ordinary working-class people but my mother was born into society's very lowest stratum. It was her mother, Grandma Agnes, who had pulled them out of shaming deprivation and into a respectable life. To outsiders, Agnes might well have seemed like just another old woman in a care home but to us she was a heroine.

When Mum asked her then 88-year-old mother if there was anything she could do to make her happy, Agnes answered: 'Find out who my father was.'

Agnes was born in 1891 in Uppsala County. Her tiny first home was on the outskirts of a village. She always said it was no better than a hovel with a dirt floor. Her mother, who was nineteen years old when she had Agnes, never spoke about her daughter's father.

Years later we learned about a tradition that gave an unmarried woman the chance to identify the father of her child by giving her newborn the same name as one of his legitimate children. In Agnes's case, her mother had worked on a farm where the farmer's wife just some months earlier had given birth to a girl named Agnes. The man himself and maybe the local community would have

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understood.

I was an adult when I asked my grandmother if she had felt deprived during her childhood. Her reply was immediate and definite: ‘No, I didn’t. Not ever. Mum put food on the table every day. We had a roof over our heads, and clean, warm beds to sleep in. We had shoes on our feet and could go to school every day.’

All of my grandparents attended school for four years. How much did they learn? I remember how Grandpa Gustav had to spell the words one by one in order to read a newspaper. Neither of my grandmothers could read me stories, and my paternal grandparents could not read aloud to each other from the newspaper.

My parents were literate enough to read novels for pleasure: the generations went through stages of reading ability, from illiteracy to basic reading skills to competence in their own language and, finally, to coping with foreign languages. My grandparents only reached, at best, a basic reading level. My paternal grandfather even advised me against bookishness: reading harmed the eyes, he insisted. He felt like an outsider when his children and grandchildren ‘buried their noses in books’, and preferred carpentry and talking about matters he understood and liked.

One of my questions for Grandma Agnes was why she had married an alcoholic. Hadn’t her own foster father taught her enough about living with difficult men?

‘I fell in love,’ she replied unsmilingly. She had found the men in the village unkempt and coarse: ‘The farm

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labourers never missed a chance to slap my bottom or touch me in other rude ways,' she said. 'They would call me all sorts of names because of me being born on the wrong side of the blanket. They knew I would never dare tell my foster father.'

Then, one summer, Ville turned up to dig ditches in the parish. Ville's father had been a landless farm labourer but the boy had grown up on the outskirts of Stockholm and served in the army. He helped Agnes carry the milk pails, complimented her hair and always washed at the end of a working day. Ville was not only clean and polite but treated Agnes as a person worthy of respect and not as a bastard child. Such good manners were unheard of in the village. Agnes became pregnant within a month. Ville obeyed the unwritten rule for proper conduct at the time: sex before you marry is acceptable but if you father a child you must marry.

Ville, my maternal grandfather, was an alcoholic who tried to stay sober but lapsed periodically. He was a skilled bricklayer, earned good wages when he wasn't drinking and never beat his wife or his children. Agnes had three children. Her goal in life was to see to it that they had a better life than she had. On two occasions, illness was a serious obstacle to achieving her goal: first, tuberculosis and, later, cancer of the colon. Free universal healthcare came to the rescue. Agnes was cured of tuberculosis and, miraculously, of cancer, too.

Since my mother and her sister were below school age when their mother was in hospital, they were cared for in

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when she had not been allowed even to apply? So at the age of fifteen, my mother started work as a delivery girl for the local grocer's shop.

My family history over the past century has helped me to understand developments in the wider world. There had been famine years and extreme poverty in my grandmother's recent past, awful conditions that were the main reason why so many of my ancestors migrated to Illinois, Minnesota and Oregon in 1846 and later. Grandma Agnes and Britta, my mother, were able to make the move from crippling poverty to quite contented lives thanks to many factors coming together and reinforcing each other.

In the first place, Sweden's economic growth explains how my Grandpa Ville could always find, despite being an intermittent alcoholic, bricklaying work in the construction industry. His wages grew steadily and so he could afford the cost of a sewing machine despite often spending recklessly on booze.

Secondly there were the state-financed social services, which included not only healthcare and schooling but also children's homes and rehabilitation clinics for alcoholics. Grandpa Ville, for one, would have been worse off still without the treatment he received in one of these clinics. While he was there, he wrote love letters to his wife. We still have one of them, so full of love and deeply passionate pleas for forgiveness. It helps explain why Grandma put up with a married life of constant insecurity.

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Thirdly, civil society stepped in at several stages to support and even rescue my marginalised family. Such civic support ranged from the sewing lessons given to Grandma Agnes by the now defunct 'slum sisters' of the Salvation Army, to the cultural education my mother Britta received from undergraduate volunteers at summer camps. I have come to regard my background as shaped by the combined enterprises set up by the private marketplace, civil society and the government. My grandmother's and mother's families were lifted out of destitution. Children of my generation benefited from the protection of the welfare state.

True, economic circumstances changed faster than cultural and social norms. Attitudes to sexuality remained unchanged for an astonishingly long time and the acceptance of sex as an aspect of day-to-day life was utterly taboo. In particular, I'm thinking of access to contraception and also to what we now refer to rather pompously as 'sexual and reproductive health and rights'. Women in my grandmothers' and mother's generations were not supposed to take pleasure in sexual intimacy and were denied the right to plan when to conceive – outcomes of cultural norms that guided political decisions. Having given birth to three children and barely survived TB and cancer, Grandma Agnes decided that she didn't want any more children. Bringing up the three she had was more than enough responsibility. She had heard about a man who would explain how to use condoms. (Informing the public about condoms – let alone making

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them available to the public – was expressly forbidden in Swedish law from 1910 to 1938.)

One day in the mid-1920s, Grandma and some of her women friends heard that, someday soon, this brave man would stand in the main square in Uppsala and talk about condoms. They steeled themselves and risked going along to listen to him. The man – the leader of Sweden's most left-wing party at the time – climbed up on a wooden box and gave a straightforward speech about how couples have the right to make up their own minds about when to have a child together. The police arrested him the moment he produced a condom from his jacket pocket to show the gathered crowd.

A decade or so later, in 1935, my mother was fourteen years old. Her best friend, also fourteen, became pregnant. She lived in a flat on the same landing as Mamma's family, on the second floor of a tenement block. The girl's pregnancy proved what most people had suspected: her father had been abusing her for a long time. Soon, the entire block knew. The father was interrogated by the police and a few days later the local vicar called to talk with the family. He blamed the mother: it was her fault that her husband had been having sex with their daughter – the mother had obviously not been 'available' enough.

This was the reality of life for my mother's generation. She was eighteen years old when she fell in love with my father. Between them, they had no idea about contraception and she became pregnant. She was

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working full time doing grocery deliveries while pursuing her dream of higher education by going to evening classes. In other words, the young couple had very little money and my mother did not want to have a child just then. She searched for a way to have an abortion and heard of a doctor with a private surgery. He was also known to reduce his fee for low-income clients.

Mamma went to see the doctor late one afternoon. She was mortified when he asked her to strip and walk around naked in his surgery. When he asked her for sexual services in return for the abortion, she left. Her only other option was to approach someone at work who was known to perform cheap abortions. This woman turned up in my mother's single-room flat one evening. Her approach to the job was to advance a knitting needle into the womb. During the night that followed, my mother gave birth to a dead foetus and immediately burnt it, as instructed, in her small stove. She was lucky to escape the life-threatening haemorrhages or infections that were very common outcomes of these interventions.

Contraception became more widely available following the information breakthrough that accompanied the launch of the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) under the leadership of Elise Ottesen-Jensen – who became so famous in Sweden that people knew her by the name 'Ottar'. It was mainly in response to agitation by her organisation that the Swedish parliament legalised both information about and distribution of contraceptives in 1938. To this day, RFSU

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has remained Sweden's key condom supplier. My mother and my grandmother never missed any opportunity to praise Ottar for her contribution to these life-changing decisions.

When I was in primary school, my father would sometimes take me to the lectures given at the city's branch of the Workers' Educational Association (ABF). The lecture theatre was a big space that could hold audiences of many hundreds. The lecturers were often explorers who described their experiences in faraway countries, using a modernised version of a magic lantern, a forerunner of the projector, that displayed enlarged black-and-white photographs on a screen. For me, a young boy, these evenings were truly magical. It was thrilling to go with my pappa to events for grown-ups and I was fascinated by the stories from the colonised countries in distant parts of the world.

The talks were very varied and some of the lecturers were especially impressive. Eric Lundqvist was one of them: he was a game warden who went off to the Dutch East Indies in the 1930s to take up a post offered by the colonial administration that ran what is today Indonesia. Lundqvist married a local woman and later became a well-known writer, admired for his understanding of both the area's natural world and its society. Both my parents read his books and liked his public stance as an anti-racist.

The explorer and speaker Sten Bergman, a biologist

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countries belong to the West or not? We were never told. The progress of colonised nations towards independence was something I heard about at home from my father rather than from my teachers at school. Overall, my mental outlook was shaped at home, influenced by my relatives and especially my mother and father, and the radio broadcasts we listened to. School played a very minor role.

Mum was cured of her TB. Sweden's economy, and my father's wages, improved faster than my parents could ever have hoped for. I was only five years old when we moved into a house with a nice garden with plenty of fruit trees. To my parents, the house was a dream come true. They were able to buy it mainly through years of saving, topped up by a loan guaranteed by the state through the growing social housing movement. It was an initiative aimed at stimulating home ownership for the working class. They also had to take on a private bank loan and a generous loan offered by my unmarried uncle, Martin.

The house was new and modern: it had central heating, running hot and cold water, a bathroom with an enameled tub, and a kitchen with an electric cooker, a fridge and a washing machine. The local library was nearby, just down the street. Mum regularly walked with me to borrow books that she would read to me. Other families with children lived in the neighbouring houses and I soon got friendly with some of them.

My father used to like to show me the massive cables

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from the generating station at Bergeforsen and explain how the hydro power was transformed into electric current for our washing machine. One of his favourite enterprises was to go around picking up large pine branches from forest clearings near the city. His employers let him have weekend use of a company car so he could transport the branches home to become fuel for our central heating and water boiler.

My parents' garden was largely devoted to useful plants: they grew potatoes, various vegetables, apples and strawberries. Mum sewed almost all our clothes because buying ready-made was expensive, with one exception: underpants. I remember when imported underwear was first in the shops, and how my mum would chat over the hedge with our neighbours about the pros and cons of foreign undies: what if wearing them was bad for children's health? This early, embryonic sign of global trading in consumer goods – underpants from Portugal – was instantly seen as deeply suspect.

Our saving and skimping meant that, after a few years in our new house, we could go on family holidays. My parents bought a red moped and a blue tandem bicycle, and Mum actually sewed a tent for us. The first time, we toured Uppsala County and were never further than about 100 kilometres from our house. We ended up visiting Grandma Agnes's two unmarried brothers, who lived together on the family farm and welcomed us warmly.

I was allowed to ride bareback on their large horse, led by Petrus, the older brother. When my dad photographed

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me on the horse, it highlighted a clash of cultures. Pappa thought one snap was especially successful: the massive farm horse with the city boy on its back, next to the old farmer in his tall boots.

Me sitting on a horse, with my Great Uncle Petrus

He sent a copy of the photograph to Petrus as a gesture of appreciation for the hospitality we had been shown. It was not well received. Petrus was offended because the photo showed him in his overalls and boots. If he was to be photographed it would only be when he wore his single dark suit. If city folk took photos of him in his working clothes, they presumably intended to make fun of their country-bumpkin relative. My parents eventually settled the conflict but it took them the best

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part of two years. It was a reminder always to respect cultural differences. Petrus was a wise, kind man and that made the lesson all the more effective.

We took the moped on our second holiday and travelled as far as Copenhagen. My brother, Mats, was born in 1960, when I was twelve years old. Three years later, the family invested in a grey VW Beetle and we went on holiday to Norway. Then in 1972, my parents took another big step by buying a piece of land by the sea. My dad built a holiday cottage on the site. He used the money he had inherited from his mother to buy a small boat with an outboard engine and gave it her name – Berta.

Having been a housewife for over a decade, my mother got a part-time job in a library in nearby Old Uppsala. She also went to adult education college every evening to get secondary-school competence in Swedish, English and Social Studies – but she never got the real education she always dreamed of, which would have allowed her to become a teacher or a journalist.

The story of my family was mirrored countrywide by so many others and demonstrated exceptionally fast and positive changes in all aspects of life in Sweden. To get from my grandma's four years of basic schooling to my professorial chair took just three generations. To give an example of an even more dramatic change: four generations ago, my great grandmother was illiterate. As a family, we reflect the different levels of education in today's world.

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It is easy to see the four economical levels in the world exemplified in the context of my family. Improved healthcare allowed people to escape the burden of infectious disease and to lead longer, healthier lives. Rising material welfare meant that it took only a couple of generations to move from shacks with dirt floors to spacious modern houses. Yet none of this would have seemed straightforward to the individuals themselves who, step by step, achieved life-changing personal advances.

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at each other.

‘Let’s snack on something while we try to get a car to stop,’ I said.

‘Hundreds of cars pass by here every minute,’ Agneta pointed out. ‘We have all summer ahead of us. Look over there, a seat in the shade and a nice view into the park. Come on, we should eat the food I packed now. It’s in your bag.’

I don’t mind skipping meals but on the first day of our first joint holiday, she made it very clear that I ought to change my bad habits. We had an enjoyable, romantic picnic in the park. The rest of the day went well, too: we hitchhiked all the way to the south of Sweden and stopped at a charming hostel where we, a couple of nineteen-year-olds, took a family room for the night. It meant that we could be alone together without other backpackers turning up to join us.

Agneta was already in bed when I came out after my shower.

‘Our toothbrushes are in the toiletries bag on the edge of the basin,’ she told me.

I located the gear and started brushing. Odd-tasting toothpaste, I thought, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the love of my life, who was watching me smilingly from the bed. Such a very warm smile. Then she began to giggle and, after a few seconds, burst out laughing. I didn’t get it. It unnerves a romantic youth wearing only a towel when his girlfriend laughs at him. Agneta was still laughing when my field of vision filled with white foam bubbling out

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