

The Hugo Wiberg and Frieda de Groot Story
as told by
Sven Wickberg
Son of
Colonels Frieda de Groot and Erik Wickberg

In March of 1998 we were on the point of leaving our summer house in Dala-Järna (Sweden) when the telephone rang:

Sven Wickberg speaking.

Hallo! My name is Christer Wickberg, but I don't think we are related. Someone on the Net has asked me to find a Sven Wickberg who's mother was Frieda and who knows Hugo Wiberg.

Well, my mother died at my birth, but her name was Frieda. And I remember speaking to a Hugo Wiberg on the telephone many years ago. Sounds a bit like me. How did you find me?

I just bought the telephone directory on CD-ROM. There are only two Sven Wickbergs, one in Västerhaninge, the other in Dala-Järna. No one answered at Västerhaninge, so I tried Dala-Järna.

Well, we are the same, I am your man and the buck stops here. What's the issue?

May I give this lady your address?

Sure, go ahead!

The American lady turned out to be Mary Long a daughter of this Hugo Wiberg. My mother Frieda, whom I never knew since she died when I was eight days old, seems to have been a good friend of Hugo's and had written him a number of very personal letters. Would I like to have them? I said: Yes, I'd be delighted. But why do you take all this trouble?

Mary told me that she considered that Frieda's son should have those letters. Mary also told me that she was the (unofficial) historian of her family and had gathered lots of material on her parents and grandparents. Incidentally these people had all known my parents and grandparents, and she seemed to have quite a lot of interesting detail on this that I had not heard of before. Since we both are modern people, with computers, e-mail and the lot, a quick and hectic correspondence started. What a lot of interesting historic material we had been gathering! What to do with all this? Book publishing is not a very rewarding business for the ordinary person. But why not try the World Wide Web? Since our parents and grandparents on both sides had been Salvation Army (SA) officers it turned out that much of our material would also be interesting topics in SA history. So when I now, a bit reluctantly, release some of these pieces, I hope it might add some interesting puzzle bits for quite a number of people "out there" and perhaps something "between the lines" of official history.

The Frieda story

From when I was a very little boy I remember a picture of a lady sitting among roses on a balcony. I knew that this was "Mamma Frieda," my "first" mother - the one that gave life to me. But since I had another mother, Margarete, I didn't care much for that photo. Later in life I came to know that mother Frieda had died when I was born. "Giving birth to a child is a dangerous business and some mothers die." That was just a fact that didn't move me very much. I was born in 1930. Perhaps the doctors were not then as skilled as they are today, and of course now they also have better medications and instruments. Only much later in life, when I was nearly 50, I began to wonder. Why did Frieda die? It seemed to have come quite suddenly and unexpectedly. What happened? I asked Erik, my Dad, but he refused to talk about it. It was too painful at the time, and he didn't want to warm the painful memories up. "When I am gone you will have my papers and my diaries," he said.

Just a few weeks later I received a letter from some old cousin-in-law of my father's. It told me that an older relative had died. Among his papers they had found a letter from Dad to "Uncle Chris and Tante Lien." These were the grandparents of Frieda, and to them Dad had written in detail and related the

circumstances around my birth and Frieda's death. So I got to know, after all -- and from Dad himself! -- what I wanted to know!

It was a very sad story. Everything had started so well. Frieda's father was on journey from London to Switzerland and passed through Berlin to see Erik and Frieda. He came just in time to accompany them to the maternity hospital of her choice. Everything went well, and the next day he held me in his arms before he left. Erik and Frieda planned to bring me home in a couple of days.

Then suddenly Frieda got a high fever. The doctors first said it was temporary and would soon pass over. But it didn't. In the night they called father to the hospital and told him that since Frieda could not retain food or drink they would move her to the biggest and best hospital in Berlin. So they did, but in the new hospital the doctors gave no hope. To the horror of my father she just withered away, lost consciousness, and passed out. Everything was over in a couple of hours.

What was the cause? The doctors did not know. Since Frieda had lived in Java for some time, she might have contracted malaria or some other tropical fever that had remained latent in her system. Some years previously she had had a spell of tuberculosis. Perhaps some remaining weakness contributed to the cause of her death. Only a few years later such things as sulfa drugs or intravenous nourishment might have saved her. We will never know.

Father was very tacit, not only on the death of Frieda, but also on most other details of their love story, their marriage and their life together. I suppose it all had to do with his urgent wish not to revive the past. All of Frieda's family were gone. Her mother Leonarda had died in 1924, long before I was born. Her father Johannes lived in Switzerland and had died in 1947. I never met him. Frieda's two brothers, Chris and Leo, also lived far away and died without my ever having met them.

So my questions remained and grew. Frieda de Groot, my mother -- who was she? What was her life like? In these last few years I have found one piece after the other of this puzzle. I decided to try to put them together. This is the Frieda story.

How Hugo met Frieda

The Salvation Army (SA) sends its officers all round the world. So in the first decade of 1900 two officers' families met in Japan: de Groot from the Netherlands and Wiberg from Sweden. Hugo was a son of Sven and Lotten Wiberg - the same Sven that nearly scared me to death 44 years later. In 1914, when Hugo was 15, his father was transferred to Japan as Principle of the Japanese Training College.

Frieda was the only daughter of Johannes and Leonarda de Groot, Dutch officers who also had served in Java and were sent to Japan in January of 1916. She was the same age as Hugo - 17 at the time. Frieda had two brothers and Hugo three, so Frieda was the only girl in the company of six boys. But Frieda and Hugo soon became very close friends. You might have thought that in due time they would make a nice couple. But they never got to that. How was that?

Hugo's daughter Mary writes: Frieda's and Dad's parents spent quite a bit of time in each other's company as witnessed by the many photographs taken of the two families together. Frieda and Dad were teenagers at this time and seemed to take an immediate liking to each other.



**Families de Groot and Wiberg
out for a family walk in Japan
Frieda in the middle, Hugo far right**

Mary continues: I get the impression from things said in other family letters that Frieda at this period in her life was considered rather ‘wild.’ She did seem to take a particular delight in teasing Dad, and I think this was because Dad was shy and self-deprecating and she was trying to bring him out of himself.

As is usual in Army circles, it only took a few years before the parents got new marching orders. In April, 1920, Johannes de Groot was sent to Switzerland as Territorial Commander. A month earlier Lt. Colonel Sven Wiberg was transferred back to Sweden where Hugo was drafted for the compulsory military service in the Swedish Armed Forces. From this time on (1921-25) Frieda and Hugo corresponded regularly. Hugo saved many of Frieda’s letters, which his daughter Mary later handed over to me (keeping copies for herself). What we know comes largely from these letters.

In 1922 Frieda became a SA officer herself, but after a short period seemed to have overworked herself and was sent for a couple of months “to the mountains” for recuperation.

Mary continues: While recuperating, Frieda wrote to Hugo. Although Frieda liked to tease, she was very serious in her endeavors to win Hugo over to Christ. The greatest portion of her letters were written trying to convince Hugo of Christ’s love for him, and trying valiantly to overcome Dad’s feelings of inadequacy and self doubt. After Frieda’s return from the sanitorium, she was not well enough to resume her Corps duties so she was given an appointment to Salvation Army Headquarters in Switzerland as her father’s secretary. She had to spend a great deal of time in bed rest. But she was also called upon at this time to use up most of her reserves of energy to care for her mother in her last months on earth. Frieda’s mother, Leonarda, had found signs of beginning cancer already before they left Japan. She died in 1924.

Mary continues: Frieda felt a great burden of responsibility during her mother’s illness and after her death, not only for her father (who was broken hearted after Leonarda’s death, and could barely function in his grief) but for her brothers as well. Her mother had especially given Frieda the responsibility of Leo, her youngest brother, who had not been saved. Frieda took her responsibility very seriously and not only converted Leo, but also cared for her father and his job responsibilities -- to the detriment of her health. All during this time Frieda was

writing to Dad. I think it helped her to express her pain and anguish on paper. I also think she liked Dad a lot. Although the word 'love' was never spoken either in Frieda's letters or in the one letter I have that Dad wrote to Frieda, Dad seemed to be quite serious in his courtship of Frieda because Frieda mentions in her letters that he sent her candy, flowers, jewelry (even a rosary in one case), and many American magazines and comics for her and her brothers Leo and Chris. I think the social conventions of the day prevented them from speaking of love unless there was a formal understanding between them and their parents. So I think they poured out their hearts by speaking of the soul. I sincerely think that if they had been living closer they would have gotten married.

Sven continues: In 1925 Hugo entered Training College in New York City and there met Mary Josephine Loeffler. In her old age she told her daughter Mary in a recorded interview that she fell in love with Hugo at first sight. But the rumour was that he was engaged to Frieda de Groot, so she didn't expect more of it. How do such rumours come about? Frieda was away in Switzerland. Hugo came in from California. And, as we know, the correspondence between the two had not been very hot. Rumours have their own ways. But the next year, when they both [Hugo and Mary] were serving as sergeants at the Training College, some of the Cadets found out that he had a picture of Mary Loeffler in his watch.

This is where the many questions and "I wonders" come into the story. Did Hugo feel any allegiance to Frieda? After all, he seemed to be courting her rather seriously. Just what was their relationship? When did he fall in love with Mary Loeffler? How and when was he planning to tell Frieda? If Frieda hadn't come to America, what then?

The last personal letter that we have from Frieda to Hugo (Oct 9, 1926) was to tell him that she and her father were coming to America:*

The General has given us nearly 2 months furlough to go and see the boys (Frieda's brothers Chris and Leo), before we farewell from Switzerland and go to the end of the world (turned out to be South Africa) from where we will not be able to hop over so easily.

Frieda was trying to make arrangements for a meeting and wondered if they could find the time and opportunity to do so. It might not have been that easy because Frieda's brothers lived in Boston, Hugo lived in New York City, and his retired parents lived in Bergenfield, New Jersey. Did Frieda and Hugo ever meet? Did Frieda find out about Mary Loeffler? Was there at that time anything to "find out"? Perhaps Hugo even proposed to Frieda but was turned down? We do not know.*

However, Hugo never forgot Frieda. Later in his life he spoke a few words with Frieda's son Sven on the telephone when passing through Stockholm. He also sent him this nice picture of Frieda and her mother Leonarda.



Leonarda and Frieda de Groot

How Frieda met Erik

Frieda and Hugo began a correspondence that lasted from 1920 to 1926. (At least those are the ones that still remain.) Most of the material in this chapter comes from Frieda's letters to Hugo, who in 1920 was in Stockholm doing military service. Later he moved to America and regained his American citizenship. The first letter Frieda writes to Hugo tells him that she will be entering Training College on September 1, 1921. Three months after Frieda enters Training, she is ordered to the mountains for five weeks to rest and tells Hugo she plans to go back to Training College after the new year. "The Lord has given me a weak body" she says. She also mentions that the Swiss Training College is getting a new Training College Principal in February (1922). His name is Colonel David Wickberg, from Sweden, who is presently Divisional Commander in Stockholm. She asks Hugo to tell her all about this officer. In the only preserved letter from Hugo to Frieda, he responds:

We know them very little. We have so recently come home [to Sweden], and they were stationed in Germany when we were here last. Both the Colonel and Mrs. Wickberg are considered very intelligent people, and the Colonel is one of Sweden's most promising officers. Their two boys are handsome and bright kids. The oldest [Erik] took prizes in school most every year and looks very learned with his glasses. This is what I can say of them, as they are very shy.

Frieda soon learned for herself how "shy" Erik was. After ending her training, she was appointed to a French corps in the Jura area. From her letter to Hugo on August 15, 1922, we learn that Hugo had just been to Switzerland to see her, drowning her with small presents (two watch bracelets, three boxes of chocolate, a knife and a huge bottle of Eau de Cologne). She thanks him saying "I immensely like to get things. It is one of my weaknesses and especially when they are given in the way you give, but still...it is not done you know."

Frieda loved Corps work, but again her body did not cooperate and she became worn out. As a result Frieda was transferred in 1923 to the Youth Department at Headquarters in Bern to do secretarial work. Not only was she still rather delicate herself, but her mother also was not well. So Frieda lived with her family and helped with the household chores in addition to her secretarial duties.

At this time both of the Wickberg "smart boys" had also found work at Headquarters. The very strict Bernese authorities did not allow aliens to have paying jobs, but at the same time they would not allow the boys to go "idling." Tott was 17 and Eric was 19 and both of them were required to go to school. Tott went to a business school, but Erik showed his examination papers from the junior high school in Stockholm. That did not impress the Bernese who required him to pass a knowledge test. To Erik's great surprise (and delight) he passed.

Because The Salvation Army had caused this problem in the first place, they found jobs for the boys at Headquarters. Thus Frieda saw them every day, but she complains to Hugo that neither of the boys would talk to her. But the two alien families de Groot and Wickberg visited each other quite frequently, and Frieda soon got shy Erik to talk by asking him to teach her Swedish. Later she tells Hugo that she took lessons from Erik. Actually she must have been a good

student because she writes to Hugo (in December, 1924) thanking him for two very long letters in Swedish, for which there were only two words she had to look up in the dictionary!

Erik writes about their relationship at this time in his book *Inkallad* (God's Conscript): "It seemed so strange to me that such a nice girl could be a Salvation Army Officer." At the time neither Erik nor Tott had anything to do with the religious work of the Army, and their only contact with it came through their parents. One day, probably after work hours, Erik walked Frieda to the tram and as usual he was arguing about the oddness of The Salvation Army and was teasing Frieda about The Army's funny "rules and regulations." But Frieda, ever the evangelist, bluntly asked him this crucial question: "Where do you stand to the challenge of Jesus Christ?"

Actually Erik had for quite some time felt very uneasy about this. He had been going to a French Reformed Church in order to improve his French, but he soon realized that the preaching seemed to talk to him personally. Somewhere deep inside he felt an urge to join the Christian fellowship and take up some kind of religious work. He tried for guidance by opening his Bible at random. He had landed on the words of Jesus in Mathew 12:30: "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters." (Luke 11:23, New King James)

It seemed such an odd word, so he had closed the book, then opened it again, at random. But he once more landed on the same verse. Frieda's straight question now hit him squarely. He suddenly felt an overwhelming need to settle this question. He did not dare to be the one that was against Jesus and scattered. So he locked himself up in the bathroom – the only place where he knew he could be alone for a while – and prayed.

Afterwards he knew his fate: God wanted him to become a Salvation Army officer. It was the last thing on earth he wanted. Erik hated the idea and could not understand what God wanted from him in The Army. He must have told himself that this was quite out of the question. Erik – who no doubt made comparisons with his very "promising" father David – told himself that he had no qualifications whatsoever, i.e., he could not sing, could not play an instrument,

and could not preach. What could there be in The Salvation Army for him? But the conviction remained.

He became a Salvation Army Soldier of the Berne 2 Corps in June of 1924 and applied for Candidateship. Since his father David was Principal of the Training College in Berne, neither he nor Erik wanted him to go there, so he applied to the International Training College (ITC) in London hoping it would be too late for the next session, and also hoping he would not be accepted. After all, he had no experience of Salvation Army Corps work. Much later he learned that the ITC session was full, but that the Chief of Staff, Commissioner Higgins (who personally dealt with all applications from officers' children), had decided that if Wickberg's son wanted to come, room must be made for him. This happened in June of 1924 and in August of the same year Erik, at the age of 20, left for London. From now on he would be under orders. For all he knew he might never return to Switzerland and surely it would be a long time before he saw his parents or Frieda again.



**Erik Wickberg
and
Frieda de Groot**

This picture of Erik and Frieda, marked 1924, might suggest that the young couple were out dating. But that is not the case. They were together with a whole group: Frieda and her two brothers, Erik and his brother, and one or two others. They were probably playing around with Erik's camera. We have a large series of pictures of different compositions. Nevertheless, in these last months of togetherness, the relationship between Frieda and Erik bloomed. Although the word "love" was never spoken, Erik – who most surely was in love with Frieda – did not seem to be able to verbalize his feelings (probably he did

not even understand them). The relationship was kept on a strictly spiritual plane. Frieda induced him to keep a diary (which now is in my keeping) and she taught him all the new and strange elements of being a Christian, a Soldier, and a Candidate for Officership. She encouraged him in every respect.

On this last day the families met for coffee. Frieda had become almost a daughter in the house of the Wickberg's (they had two sons only) and Erik's parents obviously liked her very much. But Frieda was five years older than Erik, and it probably never occurred to them that she might one day be Erik's bride. Nor did Erik allow himself to think like that.

Frieda did not come to the railway station to say good-bye, but her brother drove her as near as it was possible to come, and Erik and Frieda said a brief farewell. This was the end of their time together. Or was it?

Frieda and the Rivals

Frieda seems to have been "everybody's friend," but Hugo and Erik were the two boys that were closest to her. Did they become rivals?

Hugo was very shy and did not seem able to tell Frieda he loved her. But at times he drowned her in small presents, perhaps hoping that they would speak for him. Frieda is very touched and thanks him, but does not take the cue. She writes to him as to a dear brother, who is a bit lazy in writing back.

In 1922 Hugo visits Frieda and her family in Berne. Frieda has become a Salvation Army officer, and according to SA rules could marry only another SA officer. Perhaps Hugo came to the conclusion that Frieda was lost for him. He sent her a beautiful rosary. Frieda's mother Leonarda says that Hugo probably regards Frieda as a sort of nun.

Erik seems to have been the same sort as Hugo. He was also very shy and wouldn't even speak to her, but Frieda broke his silence by asking him to teach her Swedish. From the fall of 1923 they met for lessons once a week. They became more and more close, especially after Erik's conversion and decision to become a SA officer. Of course this made tongues wag, and many people seemed

to think that is was because he wanted to marry Frieda that Erik had taken this step. Erik is very annoyed by this gossip, but nevertheless carries out his plan to enter Training. They never talk of love. He leaves Berne for London in August, 1924.

How did this affect Hugo? It seemed he had given Frieda up. But some time in the Spring of 1924 he confides to Frieda that he also has felt the call to service as a SA officer. Frieda is delighted, but warns him that he must be sure of his purpose. Only if it is a genuine call and he wants to serve as an evangelist will it hold. Hugo, who now lives in the USA, resumes writing to Frieda. He sends her thick letters – even in Swedish, which she now can read! – and more presents. He asks Frieda how old Erik is. Frieda is surprised that Hugo doesn't know, since the two boys have met several times. Perhaps Hugo did know. It was his way of reminding Frieda that Erik, 20, is only a youngster, whilst Hugo and Frieda are 25 already. Frieda, in her letters to Hugo, speaks of her concern for his spiritual growth. No words of love are ever mentioned in Frieda's letters.

Erik finishes training and is sent to Hamilton, Scotland, and later (October, 1925) to Berlin, Germany. During this time he corresponds with Frieda. Many years later Erik gave me (his oldest son Sven) the impression that Hugo, at the same time, was courting Frieda rather heavily, and that Frieda had in some way or other let this fact be known to Erik. But Erik wouldn't let himself be rushed. He had to make quite sure – to himself, to Frieda, and to the gossips - that his decision to become a SA officer was not dependant on Frieda, but on the strong conviction of a call from God.

Hugo enters Training College in New York City in 1925, but after January of 1925 there is a sudden drop in the frequency of Hugo's letters. Frieda is annoyed. She says: "You know Hugo, it really hurts me that you should stop writing so suddenly." After that Hugo seems to write occasional letters, but not as before. Was he losing interest, ill, just busy, or had he met someone else? We do not know. On October 9, 1926, Frieda, very excited, tells him that she and her Dad have been given two month's leave to visit her brothers in Boston. Frieda hopes it will be possible to stop and visit Hugo of their way. What happen then? As has been said we do not know. Perhaps this was the time when Hugo proposed and was brushed off? Or perhaps he told Frieda that he had

started on another relationship? Maybe they did not meet at all,* and Frieda was so sorry that she did not write to Hugo any more?

At any rate Frieda was now alone and must have at times felt rather lonely. Her brothers were also in America. Her father, whom she had taken care of since her mother died in 1924, remarried in 1926 and was sent as Territorial Commander to South Africa. Erik was in Berlin. And she herself was transferred to England as Assistant at Social Services.

Erik later told me that he corresponded diligently with Frieda during this period. But not one word of love was written. In one of his manuscripts Erik tells that Frieda had turned down proposals from at least two others during this period. Once she stopped answering his letters, but he persuaded her to resume the correspondence. And the time passed by. Frieda was five years older than Erik. What did she think of this? We only know that when Erik made up his mind and proposed in a letter to Frieda in 1928, she sent the telegram: "Delighted" (although, as she smilingly told him later, he didn't really deserve it). And to this he could only agree.

*Mary's note: They did meet and it was at that time that Dad and Frieda in all probability resolved their relationship. If Dad had not told Frieda about his relationship with Mom before Frieda's visit, he probably did so when he and Frieda went together to Boston to visit her two brothers (Chris and Leo).

Dad, however, never forgot Frieda. After Mom and Dad retired, Dad did try to contact Frieda's son, Sven Wickberg, when he and Mom visited Sweden. Dad wanted to give Sven a picture of his mother, but when he called him they only talked on the phone for a few minutes. Dad saved their letters, however, and many years later I was fortunate enough to find Sven Wickberg via the internet, told him about the letters, sent him the original letters, and we have been corresponding ever since. I visited him and his wife Ije in Sweden in 1999 (I think) and we have been corresponding ever since. Somehow I think Frieda and Hugo are very happy that we found each other.

I did keep a copy of the letters, however, and they are in the 1920 - 1926 letters section of this web site. I have extracted only the Frieda and Hugo story from Sven's web site: <http://www.abc.se/~m1384/html/sw2.html>