The man from Finnskogen

KALNÄSET. A weather-beaten man and his horse. Deep in the forest, they are hauling timber. A beautiful and romantic picture? The story of Henrik Kulblik and the forest Finns is much darker than that. And it’s a Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian tale.

TEXT EVEN ELVENES

Photo ROGER SVALRSÖD/HESTEGUIDEN.COM

NORWAY

The road to Norway was a long one for Henrik Kulblik’s forefathers, who came to Sweden in the sixteenth century, in the reign of King Gustav Vasa, but were forced to move further west.

View of the farm at Kalnäset in Finnskogen in Norway where Henrik Kulblik lives. This place, in the Norwegian province of Hedmark less than ten kilometres from the border with Värmland in Sweden, was where his forefathers came in the early 1600s.

The ten-year-old Finnskog Sjefen has to combine work with training. Heiki Kulblik is keen to put on the working harness and head to the forest with this coldblood whose winnings are close to a million Swedish kronor with races won on Swedish soil this year.

The Kulblik family gathered around Heiki at Kalnäset. At the front are Heiki’s wife Asbjørg and their son Thor Daniel. In the back row are the grandchildren with Heiki’s daughter Thea and Thor Daniel’s fiancée Maria Terese Engell.

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“While he was being broken and trained when young he did a lot, too much”

“The Feldmann Case was about escape routes during the Second World War”

They came from Savo in Eastern Finland. Hunger and poverty drove them to flee. Women, children and men of all ages. Behind them lay an exhausted landscape and numerous graves. Taking the sea route across the Gulf of Bothnia to Sweden, the forest Finns reached Falun and Borlänge, via Rättvik and Orsa before crossing the Norwegian border and arriving in the area known as Finnskogen, which means “Forest of the Finns”.

This is a historic location in the far east of the Norwegian province of Hedmark with beautiful views across the countryside. The combination of ridges with forests and stunning lakes stays with you long after you have stopped gazing at it. Beside me is a strong, sinewy 66-year-old. He has an easy gait and eyes that seem terrifyingly alert but there’s something reassuring about him.

Henrik Kulblik welcomes us to Kalnäset, the farm with 6 000 hectares of forest and about 50 hectares of land for hay production.

“I’ve let my son Thor Daniel take it over. All my time goes into the horses and training, and some forestry in the winter,” Henrik says.
THE ROUTE THE FOREST FINNS TOOK THROUGH SWEDEN has deep and sad undertones. King Gustav Vasa welcomed them, his son Duke Erik – later King Erik XIV – drove them out. From Dalarna further the west.

“They were hunted, children and the elderly, from their homes”, it says in an account written by Grefsen History Club on the forest Finns’ emigration to places including Lilomarka outside Oslo.

Ethnic cleansing, devastation and cruelty. One of the darkest chapters in the history of Sweden, otherwise so cautious, is linked to Dalarna, the forest Finns, and all the blood that was spilt.

The explanation probably lies in slash and burn farming, where large areas were burned before the rye was sown.

“First you clear felled an area and left the timber lying for a year. Then you burned the area and once the ash had cooled enough for a person to walk on it barefoot without burning themselves, you sowed a special type of rye. The first year it wasn’t harvested but grazed. The rye didn’t produce ears until the second year, when it could be threshed. One grain produced about 120 stalks, and the stalk produced about 70 ears,” Kulblik explains, with the help of his wife Asbjørg, nee Rismoen, born in 1954.

KALNÄSET IS AN IMPRESSIVE AND MAGICAL PLACE. It opens itself out like a gift after mile after mile of spruce and pine. The sign beside the road, which goes to the Swedish border eight kilometres to the east reads “Horse clinic”.

It is not Henrik – he doesn’t use the name, instead he calls himself Heiki – who runs the practice. No, here you have to jump a generation to his son Thor Daniel (born in 1980) and his fiancée Maria Terese Engell, who is a vet. They have a little daughter.

“I was a ballet dancer for several years, my father was a trainer and worked at Toppidrettssenteret in Norway,” says Maria Terese, who comes from Oslo.

Toppidrettssenteret is the elite sports centre and the most important facility in Norwegian sport. This is where sports stars in every sport are shaped and trainers and managers are trained.

“Then I have my daughter Thea too,” Kulblik senior emphasises. “She is four years older than Thor Daniel and her partner is the trotting trainer Sverre Hjörneröd and they live in Fredrikstad.”

WHAT ABOUT THE ROUTE TO FINNSKOGEN THOUGH? Kulblik and his family have done quite a lot of research and have the answers.

“We originally come from the Lemoinen family in Rautalampi, north-east of Tampere. There was a huge population increase there, the soil was exhausted and it was necessary to move. My forefathers left there in about 1570,” the trotting amateur says with a great deal of respect in his voice.

“Henrik Steffensen, whose Finnish surname was Mullika, came to Finnskogen in 1625. He cleared the land for the first farm in Grue Finnskog, on the Norwegian side of the border in other words. Kalnäset was farm number two. It took about ten years from clearing the ground until the first house was built and the family probably moved into Kalnäset at the end of the 1690s,” Heiki says.

“At that time, the practice was that the father’s first name became the son’s surname,” his wife Asbjørg points out. Heiki continues:
“The name Kulblik came about from grandfather Conrad, born in 1889. He worked for the customs office and later was a wholesaler and hotel owner in Kongsvinger. He married Anna Kalnäset, she was ten years older than him and ran a hotel and boarding house here on the farm.

“Conrad had horses, trotters and breeding stallions, and was involved in building the trotting track in Kongsvinger. They had a son called Odd Henrik, born in 1919, who took over Kalnest at the age of 42. He was my father and he became deputy chair of the Norwegian Trotting Association and was a trotting enthusiast. I took over and our son Thor Daniel is following in the same footsteps. There are four generations of trotting people in the Kulblik family,” says the sinewy man who himself started his trotting career with warmbloods, but these days his allegiance is to coldbloods.

FATHER AND SON. MOST PEOPLE ARE AWARE of the problems that can arise. Odd and Heiki were no exception.

“Dad wanted us to work. All the time. He was strict and we didn’t get on. After a great childhood with plenty of sport I got injured. My legs gave out, or my heels really. Odd viewed me with irritation. So I forced myself to work. I went off to the forest with the horse to drag timber. The pain was worst in the mornings. I could hardly move. It wore off during the day.”

Odd Kulblik was a determined man, he could be called tough to say the least.

“I asked for wages for the work I did at home on the farm and he said no. So I was forced to move out,” Heiki says.

His salvation was Rotneberget, a neighbouring farm further into Hedmark. In 1976 Heiki got a permanent job and he and Asbjørg stayed there for twelve years.

FROM HARD WORK AND MISERY AND FAMILY TIES – how exactly does Heiki Kulblik make it in as the Norwegian representative in Travonden’s winter issue?

“A little story first. Our nearest town is Svullrya, “svulle” means a [hump in the ice]. In the Second World War two Germans froze to death while on watch. It was minus 52 C. We live in the coldest area in Hedmark. There are 230 households in total, with 305 adults eligible to vote in the municipal election. The municipality is Grue, and is run by the Norwegian Conservative Party, Höyre, and the centre of the municipality is Kirkenær.”

Who did you vote for?

“Felleslista, a non-political party that wanted the best for the local community.”

Most Swedes interested in trotting will probably have seen Henrik Kulblik racing on one Swedish track or another. You get the impression that the man loves being in Sweden. He often turns up in Romme, in Rättvik, Bollnäs, but also in Årjäng, Åmål, Arvika and Färjestad. The stable’s coldbloods are well-built, their coats shine and they usually compete with American sulkies.

“The change came in 1972. Dad arranged a place for me with Sören Nordin. I went to Solvalla with Berit Tweiter Alm and we spent a month at Sören’s stable. He was fantastic at balancing his horses correctly, even with the jerky gait they had in those days. I took in every detail. Sören thought that to find the right balance for the horse, you have to feel the pace in your body. I like dancing and that helped with getting the balance right,” Heiki says.

As we know, he grew up with horses on the farm.
“We’ve always had horses, in the forest and on the trotting track. Dad Odd was keen but he didn’t have much faith in me. He preferred to use the big names like John Torp, Ulf Thoresen, Sverre Skjønberg and Johan Cedell. But that was before Finnskog Jokern came along,” Kulblik points out, continuing:

“Jokern was special from day one, but clever too. While he was being broken in and trained when he was young, he did a lot, too much. His nerves weren’t up to it and Odd wanted to get rid of the horse. I got to try instead, found details that made him into a good trotter and he raced winning more than 300,000 kronor.”

UP HILLS, ON FOREST ROADS, with tough training sessions and hard work. Heiki’s horses have had to earn their feed.

“But it isn’t like that today. Our feeding is more about speed these days. The horses used to be stronger. About 20 years ago the tracks could be heavy going with a demanding surface. I could drive in the centre of the track and still win,” says Heiki smiling. He has won almost 150 races so far.

“Öystein Tjomsland rang one night last autumn. He wanted to know how to use a working harness. His horses were getting chafed. I like those kinds of conversations a lot. Working harnesses are important,” emphasises the man with forest Finn blood in his veins.

NEAR THE ROMME TROTTING TRACK, AT KVISTGÅRDEN, is the home of Eva Skantz and Lars Lindh. Heiki gave the couple the coldblood mare Finnskog Mia when she was young.

“Lasse trained her without much success,” Heiki says.

But why did you give a horse to the Swedes?

“Lasse and I are cousins. His mother Gunhild moved to Sweden early on, got married and settled in Ludvika. We see each other a lot and I visit them often,” Heiki says.

Finnskog Mia did not make the start in Sweden and returned to Norway.

“After a winter of training in the forest she was prepared and started racing. She trotted well but had a problem with one foreleg so I planned to stop using her. A clever chap from Gran in Hadeland said no. He thought I should build on the mare, that it was my duty to take the farm’s bloodline further. Now Finnskog Mia is the original dam of my horses,” Heiki says.

Her offspring have won 1.5 million kronor and the best is Finnskog Sjefen with winnings of 850,000 kronor.

THE STORY OF HEIKI KULBLIK IS a fascinating one. His manner, his smile and his care for his family and others is well known. His work ethic is unquenchable. It’s a rare day that he isn’t working in the forests with his horses in the biting cold.

However, there are some aspects of his life that are less well known. Heiki Kulblik has been in two films, and also had the main role in a 45-minute long programme on Norwegian public television channel NRK. Havlandet was produced in 1984, and The Feldmann Case three years later. He was also supposed to be in a film about Norwegian King Haakon Haakonsen but a lack of snow in Finnskogen meant the recordings were cancelled.

“The production moved to Gol and I stayed at home,” says Heiki.

Were you an extra or an actor?
“I was a production assistant with responsibility for the horses used in the films. I was also a stuntman, dressed as the actors. The cast of Havlandet included Arja Saijonmaa and Sven Wollter, as well as the Norwegian stars Nils Gaup and Bjørn Sundqvist. The action started in Finland in the 1860s. The first recordings were in Finnskogen and then in Kautokeino in Finnmark in the far north of Norway. Nils Gaup was responsible for the reindeer,” says Heiki smiling.

Sami director Nils Gaup is big in Norway, known for Deadline Torp, The Kautokeino Rebellion and not least Pathfinder, which was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign language film in 1987.

“The Feldmann Case was about escape routes during the Second World War, about borders. I was in it as an actor. I played the main character Sverre Anker Ousdal’s chauffeur,” Heiki says.

WITH 66 YEARS UNDER HIS BELT AND GREAT EXPERIENCE of Swedish and Norwegian trotting, the muscular chap from Finnskogen is the right person to talk to about the future of the sport.

“The direction staked out is warmblood horses, shareholders and few active. But I think Sweden can save the coldblood sport. Just look at Jörgen Westholm, who bought four coldbloods at auction last autumn. That was good to see,” says Heiki.

His son Thor Daniel has kept a low profile throughout the interview but says:

“We’ve got a good sport. The problem is that it’s got a bad reputation among our own people.”

“But we’ve got a hobby we can earn money from,” says Heiki Kulblik, brightening up.

The visit to Finnskogen was over, the son walked up to the farm where his daughter was waiting. His wife was going to Eda in Sweden to give a lecture. Asbjørg had already gone to the Finnskogstoppen hotel, where she had been working for the past 15 years.

Heiki stayed seated, he has a nasty cough and is not in good health. On the way home Travronden was offered a guided tour by Thor Daniel, but 66 year-old Heiki had got to the stables before us. He looked his son in the eye.

“I’ll start by bringing in the bedding.”

“Thanks,” said Thor Daniel.

If you want to work, you work, at least in Finnskogen.

Facts

Large areas settled by Finns practising slash and burn agriculture: Sweden: Värmland, Dalarna, Bergslagen, Närke, Gästrikland, Hälsingland, Medelpad and Ångermanland.

Norway: Hedmark, Akershus, Buskerud, Oppland and Østfold.

Henrik Kulblik’s favourites over the years

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<th>Winnings (kr)</th>
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<td>Birken</td>
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Warmblood

Henrik Kulblik has often turned up in Swedish ice trotting. Like his win at Sirsjön in Värmland with Birken.

Active horses today
In training with Henrik Kulblik:

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Reared by Henrik Kulblik, sold and currently racing:

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