

Vasterbotten 2014 conference report

Report written by Martin Manasse (Society for Storytelling, UK), June 2014.

The seventh annual Federation for European Storytelling (FEST) conference opened in Skellefte on the evening of 8 June with what is now becoming traditional: all delegates bring some food or drink native to their own country, introduce it and it becomes part of a shared meal. This year it was a picnic near the river. It works rather in the manner of a gigantic potluck supper and the bulk of the food was, inevitably, supplied by our hosts, the excellent and welcoming Swedish team. We lost a sense of time in the evening since, in that region, it does not get dark at night in June so even at midnight it was like mid-evening in most other European countries. A great start to the conference.

The following morning sessions began in earnest and, after an introduction from our Swedish hosts, the opening address was A look at the past to see the future about the roots of Storytelling, the language and image of orality and the context in which stories appear, This was led by the brilliant Mats Rehnman with Coppelie Cocq. Coffee was followed by group discussions on the issues raised and feedback to the reassembled meeting.

Vsterbotten is known as Swedens storytelling region and after lunch we learned how this had come about. It is almost the most northerly Swedish region and is larger than Denmark but with a population of only 250,000. This makes for good contact between the inhabitants and the municipality and, once the interest and value of oral storytelling had been established, the municipality saw its value to the region and became a willing funding partner. Skellefte then adopted the title of Storytelling City, rather than to allow the title to go to the neighbouring city of Ume, this year selected as European Capital of Culture.

Many local organisations are involved and we heard from and discussed Vsterbotten Regional Theatre and Vsterbotten Regional Museum, Skellefte Storytelling Association and Vsterbotten Storytelling Region and Storytelling Festival. There is clearly a wonderfully high level of cooperation between administrators, artists and the local authority and we speculated on the advantage of having a small population in a very large region. The latest campaign is aimed at young people and there may already be some evidence that involvement may encourage them to remain in the region rather than being tempted to move to the larger cities in the south.

After dinner we split into four groups and were taken on a walk around the neighbourhood stopping from time to time for stories from our host team.

Tuesday was an utterly amazing day. Vsterbotten still has a Sami (Swedish Lapp) settlement at Koppsele and we were taken north by bus and then walked across country for the best part of an hour during which our Sami host, Jrgen Stenberg, told us much about his culture and how to recognise the old ruined dwellings from the past. He also introduced us the Joik, a very personal part of the Sami vocal culture, the Joik being a song, often improvised, that can be a person or an activity or an aspect of the landscape i.e. not *about* that thing but *being* that thing. The sound is akin to Native American song.

At the settlement we split into four groups rotating round four workshops: Joik, Shamanism and herbs, Handicraft and Reindeer herding. Our sightings of reindeer were pretty well confined to views from the bus so, sadly, no photo opportunities there. Joik has already been described. The healer (she denied being a Shaman as she said she had not down to earth understanding of nature and its healing herbs. The handicrafts session centred round the building in the traditional way of a new food store high enough off the ground to keep out animals from rats to bears. We were invited to take part, cutting pegs for the roof beams and bringing the birch bark that takes the place of roofing felt. Our herdsman took us through the annual cycle of reindeer herding, the various locations they inhabit from season to season and we learned that the Sami can lose up to 50% of new calves to predators such as bear and wolverine, which puts them into complicated negotiation with the authorities who seek to limit hunting and protect the wolverines who constantly threaten the livelihood of the herders.

We were finally served a fine supper from the various charcoal grills and, not surprisingly, the featured meats were all from differing parts of the reindeer. We stayed on to see the landing of the fishing net from the river, an event staged for us in not quite the right season and thus bringing quite a small yield.

A few more tired or elderly folk, of which I was one, returned to the bus by small boat down the river, which was both wonderfully picturesque and very peaceful.

We stayed overnight in a local hotel, our second of the conference. I suspect that I was by no means the only one to feel that the days experience would be as good for my storytelling as it was for my learning.

Wednesday morning was occupied by the bus journey south to Ume and to our third hotel. We travelled following a major river and stopped by some extensive rapids spanned by what felt like a somewhat precarious wire bridge.

One of our Swedish hosts was the Curator for Story at the Ume County Museum and it was here that we had lunch. After lunch a talk based on the cooperative experience that had led to Vsterbottens recognition as the Storytelling Region was entitled Cooperation within Europe and on a similar theme, we learned also how the Ljungby Storytelling Museum had achieved its UNESCO accreditation. This led to workshops for five groups: Promoting Storytelling in a Digital World, Tellers without Borders (centred on stories for health and therapy but drawing its title from the image of Medecins sans Frontieres), Improvisation and storytelling (techniques, games, etc.), Regional cooperation for building a storytelling culture, and Storytelling to Educate for Life.

I attended the fourth of these. The discussions centred on stratagems to make storytelling more visible throughout Europe and how we might draw on the Vsterbotten experience. After hearing a number of suggestions I proposed an alternative approach: we should not think of what we wanted from our contacts in Europe but concentrate on what they might want from us. If our approach is based on our interest in them, rather than on a supposition that they should be interested in us, we might have better chances

of success. I went on to describe the storytelling newsletters I distribute for the Society for Storytelling and have since offered to the Executive Committee to write a paper describing what I do, as a start to an exploration of whether other countries might do something similar across Europe. Apart from anything else, the newsletters are aimed at arts funders, arts officers, arts councils, educators, librarians, local and regional authorities and the media to remind them each month that storytelling is alive and well and living in their region.

Finally it was time to sum up the conference and hear from the Greek team about plans for 2015, which came first in words and then in dance for all of us. The formal meeting of FEST as an international non-profit company (INPO) would take place the next day for members only so there were some farewells over the final dinner in the hotel followed by more local storytelling and general socialising.

Thursday morning brought the formal meeting and, after detailed discussion, a slight change to the management format designed to meet the conditions for an INPO so that there would be a five year term for the three holders of statutory office, Chair, Secretary and Treasurer, and a maximum three years for the Executive group who actually plan the conferences etc. Following elections, the post holders are:

Officers: Guy Tilkin (Belgium), Abbi Patrix France), Regina Sommer (Germany)

Executive: David Ambrose (Wales), Davide Bardi (Italy), Giorgos Evgenikos (Greece), Maria Granlund (Sweden), Markus Luukkonen (Finland), Jennifer Ramsay (Spain) and one of the officers ex officio.

A priority for the future would be to set up an independent FEST bank account to take over from the temporary account at Alden Biesen arranged by Guy Tilkin. FEST INPO is registered under Belgian law but if this were to be changed the time would be at the end of the five year term when Guy Tilkin retires.

Future: FEST Conference 2015 will be hosted in Greece.

FEST Conference 2016 will be hosted in France.

Bids are now wanted for 2017.

There was a perception that preparing and running a FEST conference was very difficult but I and others spoke of our experiences and it was agreed that I and others should send to the Executive a paper on our experiences to encourage new bidders.

Finally it was time for lunch and departure and those of us with evening travel plans went into Ume, some for general sightseeing or shopping and others (me included) to the sculpture park where we enjoyed a fascinating guided tour.

We are all grateful to the Executive for all their work and especially to the warm and welcoming team from Sweden who entertained, educated and looked after us so well.

I expect that others will report from their workshops in due course and I will add those to this report as and when they become available. I also invite anyone from the conference who reads this to feel free to offer additional information or to tell me what I have forgotten or got wrong.

I take from the conference two main questions:

How to develop greater international cooperation and recognition for oral storytelling and, arising from this, how to develop storytelling in our countries, given that for the most part storytellers are self employed individuals and do not readily form groups or associations for purposes other than to tell stories.