

Sophus Petersen's Testament

One early summer morning in 2012 when the hotel manager Thomas Petersen sits down at his desk in the Dorsia's library, his wedding ring happens to tap the saucer of his coffee cup. He doesn't notice the sound at first as his attention is directed towards the hotel's entrance and any potentially early guests. But all is still quiet. Ella Fitzgerald's soft voice hangs over the early morning. A note from *Dream a little dream of me* blends in with the ringing note of the wedding ring. And he is thrown back in time to another early morning.

The year is 1955 and Thomas Petersen is 8 years old. As he woke up in his home on Berzeliigatan and went down to the kitchen for breakfast, there sat Josephine Baker. She smiled in a friendly manner and said *Bonjour!* Thomas greeted her too, served himself some yoghurt and knew that he would remember this morning his whole life. This was not exactly a regular occurrence, even for Thomas Petersen. It was, however, quite logical.

The famous singer was a part of the much wider world which quite often found its way into Petersen's little world at his home on Berzeeliigatan in Gothenburg. Sophus Petersen, Thomas's Danish grandfather, had for a long time run the famous restaurant Lorensberg in the park just next door. His son Bengt, Thomas' father, had just taken over. Stepping into the restaurant was like travelling to another world. A larger, more beautiful, fun and not always entirely *real* world. Lorensberg theatre was just next door. Strindberg's *A Dream Play* with Viktor Sjöström had just been put on by the director Mauritz Stiller. The Schumann Brothers circus troupe came to the Circus in the park every year.

Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman were some of the greats to grace the public stage. One of the favourite pastimes for Thomas and his older brother was to sit very quietly at the front of the dance floor drinking a soda and just looking when the stars performed. Clearly, Thomas Petersen's upbringing wasn't especially ordinary.

The family's flat at Berzeeliigatan 24 was large and bohemian with a maid and other staff to make life easier. The company the parents kept was wide and colourful. Every Saturday there was a party for 20 people. Karl Gerhard performed at the last children's party. The Knäppupp troupe with Povel Ramel were popular. It wasn't unusual for the whole class to be invited to the theatre. In the summers, a van load of furniture went out to Lilla Varholmen and sometimes the Knäppupp gang followed along. They stayed there in some of the island's six houses, set among peach and olive trees from Sophus' old garden store, right next to the sea. Summers full of sailing, eating and singing. A permissive world, fairly free from rules. But not entirely. Some family rules were non-negotiable and had to be followed, *much like a testament, a legacy*. One of them was dinner every evening at six o'clock in the restaurant.

In grandfather Sophus's time, the family entered the restaurant at six and sat at table 93 (the worst one) so that Sophus could have a full view over the guests coming in. If anyone had to wait to be served, he would tap his wedding ring against his plate and mutter in Danish:

- *Where are all my maître d'hôtels?*

After dinner, he would walk from table to table and have a little chat with all the guests. If anyone, usually a lady, seemed to need a little more attention, she would get a flower. And then there was rule number two. This was the one that would affect young Thomas the most, even if he didn't quite understand it at the time. *The guest is king.*



Sophus Petersen made every guest king!
Or a queen.

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Grandfather Sophus made each guest feel like royalty, as if they were the most important person in the world. He turned being a host into an art form. (He practised this most originally with his staff. In the mornings, he would receive the staff and assign jobs while he was still lying in bed...) When the father, Bengt, later launched Gothenburg's first great gourmet restaurant – Sofus, after grandfather - on the corner of Kungssportsavenyn and Engelbrektsgatan, he commissioned a theatre decorator and metalworker to produce the restaurant sign. The result was a strange contraption made of copper, representing – what exactly? A ship? A circus? The creation remains subject to interpretation and now sits on the brick wall of the Dorsia's inner courtyard and orangery.

The interior décor at Sofus was also carefully chosen. The rug in the Avenue room was specially woven in China. The rotisserie was ordered from Girardon in Paris. Special Sophus china was of course brought over from Denmark. Not only did he inherit Sophus's discerning eye, he also integrated the family rules. Dinner was holy. And of course each guest was king, or queen.

Sofus became famous far and wide, just like Lorensberg. Nearly one hundred people worked there. Once, a letter from Nelson Rockefeller's staff arrived to make sure that the delicious Barbecued Spare Ribs were available in sufficiently large quantities when the **Vice President** would soon visit Gothenburg. Yes, Thomas Petersen is thinking about the legacy. It is still early and the Dorsia's restaurant is quiet. Soon however, the turquoise and pink velvet armchairs will be populated by hotel guests eating breakfast, then lunch and dinner guests. No-one will be eating spare ribs, but none of them will leave indifferent.

When young Thomas became a little older and had trained as a chef, he went with his father Bengt on educational culinary trips to France and Belgium. The goal wasn't simply to see beautiful places and eat well. No the point of the trip was to visit the most beautiful and the best hotels and Michelin-starred restaurants, drink the finest wines, so that he could learn to tell ***the difference between what was good, and what was exceptional.***

He discovered two things: fine dining in Europe was a thing of pleasure and fun, completely different from the somewhat tense affair in Sweden. And that art was even more fun.

He spent many of the following years devoted to food, first in famous establishments in England and France, then as chef at Sofus, later as the owner of several successful restaurants in Gothenburg. He refined his inherited knowledge of dining enjoyment at home and constant food and culture trips with his wife Karin. Privately though, he revelled in art, especially plein air painting, particularly by Swedes who went to Paris. He also loved antiques of all kinds. (At the Dorsia, there is a whole room filled with beautiful, mad, funny lamps, ready to be placed in the right spot! And his mother Ulla's make up mirror hangs in the ladies' toilet...)

Maybe just this morning his gaze was resting on one of the paintings on the walls of the library - the Fortune-teller from 1885 by Hugo Birger, an artist under the patronage of the famous Gothenburg patron Fürstenberg. Or the flower pedestal he bought at Stockholm's Auction during one of his many trips there.



Josephine Baker.

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Maybe Thomas Petersen is thinking that the hotel has become a treasure trove from the collections of three generations. (Though he is very careful to preserve a balance between modern and antique styles. He is always asking the architect Johan Hamarin, his old partner in crime, to "yell if it gets too shabby".) Maybe he's thinking about all the guests who have asked how it feels to have realised such a dream as this. This doesn't mean that Dorsia Hotel is some dream fulfilled. Colour, playfulness and the slightly barmy pretence does give the hotel a dreamlike atmosphere, but for Thomas Petersen this is not the fulfilment of some dream. That is simply not how he operates. He is a man who lives in the present, takes opportunities and decisions in the instant and lives according to the motto: nothing is ready until it's ready.

Or as the workmen would say after four years of working with him: "what we don't manage to finish today, we avoid redoing tomorrow." And then one day, the building that the family owned on Trädgårdsgatan was empty. This was no eureka moment. No bolt from the blue. The decision to create a hotel wasn't even a decision, it just sort of happened. At the bottom of it lay all the thinking about the legacy. The holy dinner. Guests as kings.

Don't guests sometimes need to sleep too? Could art be included somehow? Theatre? And was it possible to apply the English garden philosophy he so loved with its sensual shapes and new rooms that simply open up and surprise you, to create something no one else had ever done before? And of course the finest handicrafts! A soft, beautiful world, built with exquisite materials... Otherwise he just wasn't interested.

This uncompromising nature is another of Thomas Petersen's traits, or as he puts it himself:

- If I can't afford a Jaguar, then I'd rather cycle.

Probably, he did as he always does: he closed his eyes to see with a new vision. Ages ago he realised that not everyone can see this way. Not everyone can see that the beauty in a room depends on how a chair is placed in relation to the table. That it's placed askew, **in the right way**. And so maybe as he still had his eyes closed, he could see the **stage**.

An absolutely perfect, beautiful, friendly and pleasurable world you could escape to for a while. Where everything is beautiful both to the palate and the eye. A world that offers an unforgettable, **almost unreal**, experience. Maybe he simply saw the **Dorsia**.

And now, four years later, he sits in the library drinking coffee and looking towards the entrance. A guest arrives and is greeted cordially. Soon Johan the architect arrives. They are going to decide which colour to paint one of the new rooms. They will probably paint the whole room as a trial. That will be fun.

If it doesn't work out, they'll have to do it all over again tomorrow.



Celebrating with Bengt and Lulu Ziegler
could make anybody happy!



Karl-Gerhard was a regular in the restaurant,
as well as in the Petersen family home.