

Men of the Iron Mountain

MARTIN MAYER

THE STORY of the Nimba iron mines of Liberia, the largest new private investment on the African continent, goes back more than two centuries and north about four thousand miles. The mines belong to an organization called LAMCO, the initials standing for Liberian American Minerals Company; but between the "A" and the "M" there is an invisible "S" that stands for "Swedish." The basic investment and most of the management and technical staff of LAMCO are drawn from the Grängesberg Company of Sweden, and Grängesberg grew grand on the iron deposits of Kiruna, 125 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

Iron, appropriately, is a great magnet: men will be drawn wherever it is found. Kiruna and Yekepa, the assemblage of huts nearest the iron mountain of Nimba, are alike in their unsuitability for habitation by that portion of the species which has adapted to modern European society, and also in their combination of the most extreme remoteness and wretched climate with many of the amenities that produce reasonable comfort. There is nothing of much interest to a tourist in either place, but for reasons that are pretty obscure even to me I have spent a few days in both—in Kiruna in 1954, at Nimba a few months ago.

Waiting to Go South

Kiruna in 1954 may have been the most prosperous working-class town anywhere outside the United States. Wage rates ran fifty per cent and more above those for skilled labor in southern Sweden. The Grängesberg Company, which owned the mine in partnership with the Swedish government, had provided not only modern apartment buildings with gaily painted terraces but also decent little stucco homes on separate plots of land; miners were encouraged to buy their houses for something less than the true cost of construction through an almost painless check-off from wages. Among the other perquisites were an allowance

of about \$150 to pay the family's fare south during vacation and what may well be the only outdoor swimming pool north of the Arctic Circle. (Swedes will swim in weather that makes an Englishman light the grate.)

Sweden has been an ironmaking center since before the Christian Era, and the deposits in Kiirunavaara, as the Lapps called their iron mountain, have been known at least since the early eighteenth century. But until the invention of the Thomas converter in 1878, Lapland iron (like the iron of Lorraine) was virtually useless because its high phosphorus content made the end product brittle. Once the converter rendered high-phosphorus iron as good as any other, a railroad was pushed through to Lapland by British capital. Intensive mining, however, did not begin there until 1903, and Kiruna is entirely the product of this century.

So is the rest of northern Sweden, and the evidences throughout of Swedish social intelligence were most impressive. In a town like Lyksele, until a few decades ago no more than a clearing in the grim swamp forest, the culture of metropolitan Stockholm, complete to garden apartments, sugared spinach, and concert hall, had been expensively and successfully transplanted. But in Kiruna the terrain and the climate had defeated planning. For all the organizing and building that had gone into it, Kiruna was unkempt, a now muddy, now dusty hillside frontier town. A few scruffy trees rose from the brown or, briefly, sickly green tundra; there were no gardens or lawns except those tended by the company or the municipality itself. In 1954 there was still quasi prohibition in Sweden, and one did not see drunks on the streets of other Swedish towns, but here the bars were filled with young men drinking themselves insensible with the sodden and lonely determination of the northerner.

It is possible to like this country. Up in the hills on the railway line

that takes the ore to ice-free Narvik there is a pleasant red-brick hotel with birch furniture and roaring fires that caters to spring and fall skiers. Dag Hammarskjöld, a director of Grängesberg, used to like to wander the bare hills near Kiruna in summer, avoiding the occasional Lapps in his quest for solitude. But for most people the dark, cold, wet winters are not redeemed by the brown, mosquito-infested summers. (Lapps are nomads because the reindeer, their source of food, clothing, and shelter, can't stand mosquitoes.)

Nobody pretended that Kiruna was a happy town. The director of social services spoke about the drinking, juvenile delinquency, the total absence of civic spirit. "The problem is," he said finally, "that nobody thinks of Kiruna as home. People who have been here thirty years will tell you that as soon as they have some money put away they're going back to Malmö or Linköping. Why, there are people who were *born* here who will say they're just filling in the time until they go south."

'A World of Iron Ore'

And some of them have indeed gone south. Late last year, I played golf (a game as strange to Swedes as it is to Africans) on a course hacked out of the rain forest below Nimba, and my partner was a man who had been born in Kiruna. He was in Africa because he liked working for Grängesberg; and Grängesberg itself, somewhat involuntarily, has gone south.

It is typical of Swedish mixed enterprise that every ten years the government had the right to buy out Grängesberg's half of the Lapland mines, and in 1955 the Riksdag voted to exercise the option. It is also typical of Sweden that the arrangement gave Grängesberg the right to insist that the government pay in cash. In 1957, therefore, when the transfer of title occurred, the Swedish government paid over \$195 million to the company.

Meanwhile, in the early 1950's a group of Americans and Canadians, whose connections were good enough to make up for their lack of funds and mining experience, had formed a partnership with the Liberian government to exploit the mineral resources of up to five hundred square

miles of Liberian land—any five hundred square miles. They raised some \$8,000 in England and sent geologists poking about Mount Putu in southeastern Liberia, where a Point Four team had previously spotted iron ore. Their money ran out about the time Grängesberg learned that the Riksdag was going to buy out Kiruna, and the Swedes, limiting their liabilities and negotiating from strength, took over the syndicate.

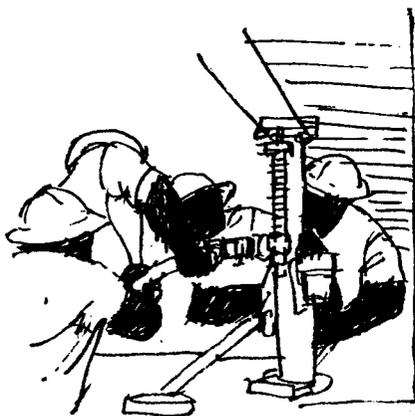
After drilling under the supervision of Ph.D.s from the University of Stockholm, toward the end of 1955 Grängesberg found that the iron at Putu was a thin layer, not worth mining. "The Swedish syndicate was now faced with a difficult decision," Erland Waldenström, Grängesberg's president, later told a meeting of the Swedish Ironmasters' Association. "Should it throw its hand in? There was already a group of competent people and a good deal of experience in Liberia, and valuable experience of the local conditions had been gained. . . . We decided to have another try."

On the basis of a strong hunch and some old reports, a survey team hacked their way through the bush to the Nimba hills in the remotest part of Liberia, which is saying a good deal. They arrived at the top on December 23, 1955, and on Christmas Eve they radioed out a report of "a world of iron ore."

Grängesberg's published material speaks of known reserves of two hundred million tons of hematite of at least sixty-five per cent iron content (iron is worth extracting in proportions of twenty-five per cent). Waldenström says he believes the hills will yield substantially more than two hundred million tons of rich ore, "plus another big layer of forty per cent—at least two thousand million tons." LAMCO is now removing the best stuff and shipping it out at a rate of twenty-seven thousand tons a day.

THE BEST WAY to reach Nimba from Monrovia is by a two-engine Piper which flies just under the clouds (very bumpily during the six months of the rainy season). For the first hundred miles or so the country is low and fairly flat—green bush sparsely dotted with packed

beige earth and the random straw roofs of African villages; then round hills announce the approach of mountains. These run handsomely up to eight thousand feet on the Guinea side of the border. On the Liberian side, the mountains, green to their crest, shade off to a ridge about four thousand feet high. As the plane cuts through a gap in the first hills and banks toward the airport, you can see just below the top



of the ridge, in what was a saddle before one of the humps was shipped as ore, the gigantic Krupp crusher.

The mine itself is a miracle of organization, making no concession to the fact that in Africa men with shovels come cheap. The ridge is being cut away in shelves, each about forty-two feet high. An electric rotary drill punches holes in the shelf, and a light charge of an easily handled explosive loosens the ore. Electric and diesel "steam shovels" chew into the rubble at a rate of six cubic yards a bite and drop the ore into huge thirty-two-ton Westinghouse dump trucks with gleaming stainless-steel floors. The trucks drive to the crusher, their time of arrival controlled at a bridge by means of a traffic light operated from a central control room which observes their approach on television. The stuff comes out of different parts of the mountain in various forms ranging from blue stone to red dirt, so deliveries have to be timed if uniform cargoes of ore are to be shipped.

At the crusher, a gamma-ray scanner measures the contents of the bins and controls traffic lights that tell the driver when to dump. Covered belt conveyors carry the ore two

miles, over a drop of 1,770 feet, to storage bins in the valley; the belts are braked by wheels connected to electric generators that supply much of the power for the operation. There are six storage bins, each with a capacity of two thousand tons. Five times a day, a sixty-car freight train pulls in beneath the bins, and the ore is automatically loaded in ten gulps, each gulp noisily filling six cars with almost exactly ninety tons of ore in fifteen seconds elapsed time. The railroad line, carrying more tonnage than any other in Africa, runs 170 miles almost dead straight to the town of Buchanan, which LAMCO has made into a port capable of handling sixty-thousand-ton freighters by the direct-action expedient of sinking four million tons of stone in the Atlantic to act as a breakwater.

No Flirting Room

No human community can be totally planned, but Grängesberg has done its best here. The population already runs over ten thousand. Most of the African workers are still housed in wooden buildings near the airfield, but the permanent community is growing rapidly in the valley just below the mine. Stratification is by job—hourly employees (all African) live in one set of areas, salaried employees (or "staff," now about 650—of whom 350 are Swedish and 150 African) in another set. Within the staff category, housing is assigned by rank, so that all division heads live atop a rise in Area F, known as Snobby Hill. There is a story no one will confirm that Grängesberg wanted to mix the staff housing but that the Liberian government objected: with Liberians on all staff levels, housing by hierarchy at least gives a guarantee against segregation by race.

There are no garden apartments in Nimba. The individual houses were designed in Sweden quite specifically for African use. The walls are a precast white concrete block. In the lower-middle-class areas, small windows are set high under the overhanging roofs; direct sun never enters. On Snobby Hill, the concrete panels alternate attractively with floor-to-ceiling louvered windows, each householder deciding for himself on the proportion and place-

ment of wood and glass louvers. Everything is modular, with a ten-foot square as the basic unit; all houses are about twenty feet wide, with a length varying by the salary of the occupant. Nobody is expected (or permitted) to buy these houses: they are supplied free of charge by the company.

The usual amenities have been constructed—movie theatre with associated club rooms, library, bank, nine-hole golf course (a hook on any of the first four sends the ball across the border into Guinea), tennis courts (the coach of the Swedish Davis Cup team came down for two weeks to instruct local players), a fifty-by-twenty-meter swimming pool, and a row of buildings for private stores, including a two-module shop for the Arab trader who dominates the retail business here as everywhere in Liberia.

Near this "community center" is a commissary serving a magnificent smorgasbord (LAMCO imports ninety thousand pounds of meat a month to feed the Nimba staff); on Snobby Hill is a true officers' club, complete with bar and Japanese lanterns on a terrace from which can be seen the moving lights on the mine as the second shift labors until ten at night. Staff children attend an international school, where for six grades the language is English though most students and most teachers are Swedish; each child receives six hours a week of teaching in his own language (including Spanish, Italian, and German). All roads are paved, and most Europeans own cars—a Volkswagen for lesser ranks, a Volvo for management—purchased at wholesale prices through the company.

As always in such cantonments, the problem for Europeans is what to do with the wives, underemployed because houseboys at \$10 a week clean up and do the laundry. There is no place to show off one's clothes or to shop or even to flirt. There isn't even any television. Wife-swapping, the libido's answer to the absolute lack of privacy in such places, does *not* square with Swedish morality, which relates sexual freedom before marriage to fidelity once the trap is sprung. Athletics, arts-and-crafts clubs, card clubs, and such help a little, but not much; the activities most likely to absorb the

ladies' interests are purely social, like an elaborate masquerade ball at the officers' club that took place one Saturday night when I was there and drew about two hundred people, including a dozen Liberians.

"But really," said a Swedish engineer, "it's not so different from Kiruna. Both are company towns, both are *very* isolated. People who have nothing to think about except themselves get very gloomy here, just as they do in Kiruna. There are floodlit ski runs in Kiruna like the floodlit tennis courts here. But you don't have the long nights—people work better in the long nights."

An Unco-operative Culture

More interesting is what a place like Nimba may mean to the Africans. One habit of mind sees it automatically as Swedish imperialism (backed by a notorious American company, Bethlehem Steel, which put up a quarter of the money). In Africa itself, it is not easy to be patient with this attitude. By the end of this year, LAMCO will have put \$300 million into Liberia. The "infrastructure"—the port, railroad, housing, sanitary facilities, hospitals, schools—cost the company close to \$100 million, more than half a year's gross national product in Liberia. Both the railroad and the port can be immensely valuable for the development of Liberia's deserted



bush. And the government's share of LAMCO's profits will add at least ten per cent to the tax revenues of the Tubman family fief.

But it's not just a question of statistics. To say that the West African tribesman is only a generation from the Stone Age does not, somehow, convey the reality. One must wander the place a little to begin to understand the extent or the significance of the tribal African's radical incompetence in dealing with the

societal or physical artifacts of the twentieth century. (Let me concede that the Stone Age may have been morally better, or, as Levi-Straus argues, humanly more satisfying than our own, but it happens to be gone, at least for the time being.) All the European airlines are now running more and more flights to Africa, not to show good will but to transport the increasing number of skilled and even semi-skilled European workers needed to industrialize Africa. Old hands in Nigeria and Ghana say that for all the decolonialization there are more white men in West Africa today than ever before.

The Africans will learn to cope, of course. Even businessmen who are losing money admit that the African skilled worker, when he can be found, is every bit as good as the European; and Africans are hard workers, though their waste of energy is appalling. Nimba can show tribal Liberians whose self-taught command of Swedish exceeds their bosses' grasp of English. But the culture does not co-operate, and its resistance is heightened by the nonsense of "negritude" promulgated by French-educated African politicians to becloud the gap between them and their constituents. (A Nigerian cabinet minister once mocked this line by asking if a tiger talked about his tigritude.) And efforts to create that range of skills that are the foundation of a complex society are discouraged by the wretched notion, the worst heritage of colonialism, that the man who calls the turn is the one who shuffles the papers behind a government desk.

Highly mechanized and isolated operations like LAMCO bring a larger world to the African bush. They are pretty hard on everybody, but so is almost everything else about Africa. For the majority of LAMCO's laborers (who simply show up and apply for jobs; no recruiting has been necessary), the machinery, the organization, the ferocious concentration on scheduling are all incomprehensible and rather frightening. Their fear comes out in a superstition about a "small man" on the mountain who pulls people into its depth and devours them. Europeans, though not much liking the ritual murder cults that survive in the

surrounding bush, play along with this one for its utility: "If a boy is giving you trouble," says a shop foreman, "just say you'll tell the small man."

The workers don't like the concrete houses, distrust the electricity, and adjust only with great difficulty to running water and toilets. In their huts in the bush they burned a mixture of twigs and manure to make a smoke that renders the straw roofs waterproof; the same smoke has quite an effect in a painted living room. Their domestic arrangements are as messy as those of the pioneers who littered the American prairie: living on an underoccupied continent creates habits that take a long time to erase, as Mrs. Lyndon Johnson is now discovering. Moreover, the LAMCO houses are much too small for African families. "In the bush," said one of the managers, "the African builds a hut for himself, and then four separate smaller huts for his four wives and fourteen children. Here they all crowd into two rooms."

A few workers cherish the school, and show up with huge broods of extended family, seeking entrance. More commonly, boys are taken out of school at the age of ten or so and sent off to a residential "bush school," apparently an introduction to magic, that effectively destroys any literacy previously acquired. Fewer than two hundred of LAMCO's 2,900 largely illiterate African employees take advantage of the free night schools, and, despite the immediate reward, there was no great competition for the seventy-five places in the vocational and technical school that was the Swedish government's gift to Liberia when the mine opened.

IN FEBRUARY, 1965, the African workers at Yekepa went on strike, seizing the two-story Administration Building, the shops, the sawmill, the warehouse, the commissaries. The houseboys and waiters left their jobs. "They came down the road waving cutlasses and clubs," the principal of the international school told me, "but nobody was harmed; they just wanted to close the school." At the end of the two days that the African mob controlled Yekepa, everyone went peacefully back to work when the government sent up the tough

cookies who had been Liberia's contribution to the United Nations' peacekeeping force in the Congo. Hoping to learn what their grievances were, LAMCO helped the Africans set up a trade union (the days of Cecil Rhodes are *really* gone). Now there are orderly channels through which the men can demand, say, a fish shop like those at the Firestone plantations.

On wages of \$10 to \$12 a week plus housing, the African at Nimba has barely moved into a cash economy. What the women plant and gather in the bush is crucial to the household. LAMCO feels that the wages are low and would particularly like to increase the differentials between unskilled and skilled workers. (LAMCO's total bill for wages is something less than \$2 million in an operation with about \$40 million in gross sales.) On the company's planning charts, wages for skilled Africans go to \$125 a week for a few jobs, but to date the Liberian government has not allowed the scale to rise much over \$50, except for office workers. "We are guests in this country," says LAMCO's American general manager, Richard Lowe, who was sent to Stockholm originally (from India) to make the Nimba "feasibility study" for Grängesberg. With fifty per cent of the gross profits going directly to the government, the Liberian authorities have no reason to want wage rates at Nimba to go so high that they would strip skilled workers from the rest of the country. What the Liberians do want, insistently, is a larger share of staff jobs for themselves; every year they get a little more than Grängesberg really feels it safe to give.

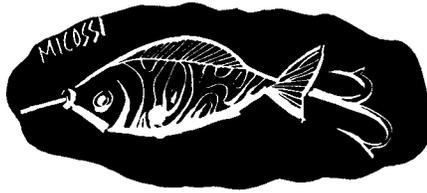
For the Europeans, the money is much better (mechanics start at \$550 a month plus housing), but the experience is much less valuable. Most European workers in West Africa,



not just at Nimba, seem to find the job hot, lonely, uncomfortable, and seriously impeded by the incapacity of the local people with whom they work. Nothing is more disturbing in Africa than to be told by the solid European Socialist worker that now he understands about the American South. ("You know about all this; you have it on your doorstep.") The attitude is most upsetting to the diplomats and businessmen, the university professors and foundation men, who spend their time with the educated group in the cities. "With what we've built," Lowe said uncomfortably, "a lot of our people forget that this isn't their country." Sometimes it is an easy thing to forget.

IN A SENSE, I suppose, all such places are the same, and can be taken as a microcosm of almost any macrocosm you like. In a relatively prosperous market economy with reasonable mobility, the people who profit from the enterprise are forced to feel a first obligation to the comfort and felicity of their producers. In an impoverished community, a totalitarian society, or an economic system that has eliminated unemployment through the centralized direction of labor, producers can simply be plunked down, by accident or design, wherever they are needed. Both procedures are operative at a Yekepa, or maybe even at a Kiruna. But the question of why any of us are where we are, or doing what we are doing, is a lot more complicated than any of the various societal mythologies like to admit.

The Swedes are civilized about these matters, probably more civilized than anybody else. And, though Swedish doctors will not allow Europeans to remain in Liberia more than two years without a substantial break (the company will pay round-trip transportation home for a three-month vacation in the middle of a three-year contract, for the whole family), climate is apparently not a major problem. Yekepa is two thousand feet up, which makes it about ten degrees less devastating than Monrovia, and the miners themselves are working at four thousand feet. "Sometimes," one of them said wistfully, "up there, it's like a nice summer's day in Sweden."



Dreamers

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

“How does a livelihood start? With a family, a wife and children. Why doesn’t a bachelor earn enough? He doesn’t have a family. Even if he works, he scarcely earns enough to support himself. Rich men have wives and children. Without a wife, a man is half a person. I don’t know how many times I’ve wanted to go into business, but when I get up and look around the house, it’s as if my hands were paralyzed. . . .”

Reb Ezekiel, a short, stocky man with a partly gray beard, was speaking. Behind gold-rimmed glasses, his eyes were soft and moist. He wore a gaberdine with tails, a silk hat, and polished boots.

It wasn’t that Reb Ezekiel was a bachelor. He was married for the third time, but she was a bad wife, and such a wife is like having none at all.

“It’s like this,” he said. “When I come home from evening prayers and want to sit down with a book, she wants to go to bed. I can’t go to sleep at nine; I toss and turn all night. At four in the morning she’s up to tend her fish, with a lot of noise, waking me when she lights the gas. While she and her daughter fumble with the tanks where the fish are, she curses continually. Then they go off without even leaving me a warm drink. At night they’re frozen and grouchy and go right to bed. Is this a home? What am I there for except to make a benediction over the wine on the Sabbath? She’d like me to care for the fish too. No! This is no home!”

“Well, why not divorce her?” people would say.

“She doesn’t want a divorce. Besides, how would I support myself? I’d have to be able to earn a living.”

“Then what can be done?”

“Now you know why I’m so miserable.”

He used to visit our house, drink tea, and have a bit of food. He taught me to play chess, and liked to invent things. His pockets were filled with strings, springs, little discs, spindles, wire fragments, and other items used for his inventions. Having studied books on the subject, he already knew how to make ink and salves. Everything fascinated him—why summer was hot and winter cold, why ice formed from water and later dissolved, why the ancient Egyptians were conversant with a magic unknown to moderns, and what countries lay beyond America, China, and the Mountains of Darkness. How could such a man, who was always looking into books, fool around with fish? How could he be expected to stand in Yanash’s bazaar among the boors and simpletons, selling carp or pike to housewives?

If he had a household to call his own, it might have been different.

OTHERS in similar situations visited us also, with their real or fancied tragedies. One who came often was Mattes, whom I remembered from Leoncin. The son-in-law of Hirshl the Dairyman, he used to visit the court of the Radzymin Rabbi. Short and thick-set, with

large hands and feet and an amiable naïve face, he, like my father, had devoted his life to being a good Jew. He was always talking about rabbis and saints; it took him three hours to say the morning prayer. He had no time to work. His father-in-law, Hirshl, had tried vainly to make a merchant of him. After the morning prayer, Mattes would eat a piece of bread with onion and sit down to study. There was so much to study that he could not understand how anyone could devote himself to anything else. So many prayers, Hasidic books, so many degrees of piety to be reached. . . . And one had to be constantly on guard against all the devils and goblins that tried to drag one down. How was it possible to take the time to work in a store or care for cattle or worry about the dairy and such matters?

Hirshl wanted his daughter to divorce Mattes, but Leah, who had a couple of children, wouldn’t hear of it. She had remained in Leoncin with her father, while Mattes wandered about Warsaw.

Suddenly he announced that he had become a Uman Hasid. For years he had searched for a true saint, and now he had found Uman Hasidism, and Reb Nachman was the greatest Rabbi of all. No Hasidic book, he said, could match Rabbi Nachman’s collected wisdom, his tales and prayers, so full of the mysteries of the cabala. Mattes threw himself entirely into Uman Hasidism. Coming to see us, without any introduction he would begin to dance, snapping his fingers and quoting his saint: “There is no gloom! Until the coming of the Messiah, my flame will smolder. . . .”

All Mattes longed for was to go to Uman in the Ukraine and spend his time studying in the house of worship that stood over the Rabbi’s grave. As a *Kohen* (of priestly descent), Mattes was not permitted to enter a cemetery, but the graves of saints, he knew, did not defile. Nevertheless, Mattes needed train fare. He also wanted to take Leah and the children, but his father-in-law would not permit it. What would they live on, out there in Russia—Mattes’ dance steps on the Rabbi’s grave?

Both Ezekiel and Mattes were