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News from the Swenson Center

The 2013 Olsson scholar and his experiences at the Swenson Center

BY JURI REBKOVITZ

After having finished my degree in Scandinavian Studies and American Cultural History, I decided to work on a PhD thesis that would allow me to combine the knowledge gained during my studies with another subject that has always been interesting to me: migration. While immigration to America is a topic that has been dealt with in an extensive amount of literature, there is a clear lack of works with a comparative approach. Therefore, I chose to write about the interaction between the largest immigrant groups in 19th century Wisconsin and Minnesota, two states known up to this day for their German and Scandinavian heritage respectively. My study with the working title “German and Scandinavian Immigration to Minnesota and Wisconsin during the Second Half of the 19th Century – Contacts, Conflicts, and Cooperation” aims at drawing a detailed picture of the relationship between these two immigrant groups by giving an in-depth illustration of their mutual perception, stereotyping, and behavior patterns. At the same time, backgrounds, extents, and consequences of occurring conflicts and cooperations in three different thematic fields – politics, religion, and social and cultural relations – will be examined.

In order to bring my PhD dissertation to a successful end with satisfying results, extensive research in several archives is necessary. Looking through various collections online, I found the Swenson Center to own many potentially useful primary sources, thus I was glad to receive the *Dagmar and Nils William Olsson Visiting Scholar Award*. During the five weeks spent in Rock Island, I analyzed Swedish-American news-

papers from Minnesota and Wisconsin as well as several personal papers written in the relevant time period, hoping to find Swedish immigrants’ views on Germans and comments on contemporary matters, events, and characters. In the end, I collected much more interesting material than expected.

Looking at politics, notably Carl Schurz (“*den utmärkte statsmannen*”) was a popular character also among Swedes. Although a majority of the German immigrant population was affiliated with the Democratic Party, this connection is referred to on only one occasion (“*tyskens parti*”). Furthermore, Swedish newspapers would not hesitate to give recommendations to vote for a German Republican candidate. While a candidate’s German ethnic background is usually mentioned, it is in most cases not used as a crucial argument against him.

In the field of religion, close social and theological ties between German and Scandinavian Lutherans existed. Swedish newspapers regularly covered events in German Lutheran life and church leaders like Erik Norelius at times seem to have played a significant role for Germans. In the face of the widespread anti-Catholicism during the treated period of time, it is not surprising to find strong anti-Catholic opinions also among the Swedes, but it is peculiar that whenever a connection between the Catholic faith and one particular nationality is made, it is always with the Irish and not with German Catholics.

As for the third area of interest, German culture and language had a high reputation among many of the Swedes. German-American singing societies are seen as something worth imitating and one newspaper sug-

gests readers with good German skills to see a German theater performance. Particularly older sources mention joint celebrations, for example on the 4th of July. In the rare cases in which explicit criticism of Germans can be found, they are accused of a distinct cultural chauvinism that goes hand-in-hand with constant complaints about American society. The stereotype of the merry, beer-drinking German prevails in Swedish sources, too. Last but not least, one newspaper considers it necessary to justify itself for the among Germans apparently popular stereotype of the “*dumme Schweden*” (*stupid Swedes*).

In conclusion, my stay at the Swenson Center was very fruitful and I was able to make some important contributions to my PhD thesis. I was also fortunate to be at Augustana College for the “Indians and Immigrants: Entangled Histories” conference, hence I would finally like to thank the entire Swenson Center staff not only for their excellent help during my research stay, but also for organizing and inviting me to that interesting event.

