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Another letter from the Emigration Survey

A man from Jämtland tells his story in 1907

BY LARS ADOLF LÖFQVIST

TRANSLATION: ELISABETH THORSELL AND CHRIS OLSSON

I was born in Hammerdal, Jämtland County, 23 June 1865. My years as a child passed by without my remembering any remarkable happenings, except that when my mother came home one time during the winter of 1868 after having gone to try to get some food for us, she found myself and my sister sitting on a piece of black and hard “barkbread” that we had dunked in a bowl of water. I remember as if it were yesterday how my mother wept, and we children joined her and wept heartily, but did not know what we were weeping about. But mother certainly knew. At that time there were no railroads in Jämtland, and if the harvest failed, as often happened, you had to cart foodstuffs either from Sollefteå or from Sundsvall. The big forests in Jämtland were only just beginning to be logged, so there was no money to earn there for an ordinary workman. My father was a shoemaker, so he got some work, but in very few of the farms was he paid in cash, and foodstuffs were also scarce, so both farmer and laborer starved. Time passed until I was 11, when my parents moved to a sharecropper’s place (a *torp*) some kilometers from the

church village. This *torp* was badly maintained, with crops accordingly. I will never forget my first summer there. I often complained about my empty stomach, and I was fearing the *skogsrå*¹, the bears, and the wolves, etc., where I walked when I herded the animals. There was not much in my knapsack, and most of the days I did not dare to sit down and check it. The next summer was better, and so on until I was 15 years of age, when I should go to catechism school with the local pastor. That there never was enough food I remember clearly, especially as a big part of the crop was to go to a former inhabitant as his retirement, called *födoråd*. I never went to the ordinary school, but got some education in the catechism school, where I was the most raggedy clad of all the 70 other confirmands.

Almost an adult

Now when I became a grown man and started secretly to use tobacco, and when the herding of the cattle during summer was done, I worked the harvest, which was heavy work but much more pleasant. During the winter I drove lumber during the daytime, and in the evenings I sawed firewood. When spring came, the lovely spring of Norrland with light nights and birdsong, I laced my knapsack and went to float timbers, at first in smaller brooks with calm waters, but later in more dangerous waterways where my life was in jeopardy many times. But you got 2 *kronor* 50 *öre*² a day, working 12 to 14 hours each day, and not everybody got as much then. I still shiver at the

memory of how I once lost my footing on land, when I was working to untangle some lumber that had assembled to a “knot.” The mass of lumber went downstream and I was forced to come too. Huge logs were thrown high in the air, shattered like rails against the rocks, and broken like matchsticks. Nobody, who has not seen a pile of tangled logs (*bråte*) go downstream, can imagine the giant power that is freed. The water above the log pile is dammed to a height of 10 to 12 feet, sometimes as far as a mile upriver, and when the pile of logs starts to move, there is nothing to stop it. I did get back on land, against all odds, unhurt, some way down the river, but I did get a really cold bath. Such things loggers are used to and do not catch a cold at all. When floating timbers was done, I returned home to break stubblefields and rocks, dig ditches, and other chores until it was time to cut hay. It was heavy work to cultivate this stone-ridden, swampy soil, where you carted away 30-40 horse loads of larger and smaller rocks from each acre. But the heaviest of all was that there was no possibility of ever being able to purchase the *torp*, of being on my own. It belonged to the Royal Forest Commission (*Domänverket*), and had been chosen as the dwelling for the forest ranger (*kronojägare*), the position my father had. As salary for this he had the use of the *torp* and a small sum of money. The *torp* required hard work to care for it, the small plots of forest were part of the crown forest, the soil rich in rocks and water, and also exposed to frost. I do not recall that during



The Hammerdal church.



Some flottare working with timber floating in Norrland.

the period of my life from ages 11 to 28, when I left home, a single year went by during which the potato vines were not frozen down in the soil, and few other years when the barley and rye crops were more or less undamaged by the frost. If one had not had the income from the timber logging and floating timber to fill in the gaps in the farming accounts, I don't know what would have happened, as however hard my father and I worked with the fields, sometimes with one or two men extra, we still had to buy at least 8 barrels of grain every year. We did have some little income from the cows by selling butter, but this source of income was a poor one, some 75 *kronor* per year. I would have wanted to stay at the *torp* for my entire life fighting difficulties and poverty, if I just could have acquired it as my own. But as this was not possible, I realized that I had to try something else. I was then married and 28 years old.

Leaving home

It was with a heavy heart that I left my parents' home, where I had lived as a child and grown to be a young man and an adult, where I had worked and hoped, where everything was known and dear to me, where every rock and bush had a memory, a tale to tell; it was like a part of

myself was torn away. But I was young and strong, and looking forward with confidence. I settled in the city of Östersund and started to work, at first as a carpenter, but as there were few new houses built at that time, I had to abandon that work, and instead start shoemaking, of which I had some knowledge. This profession gave me a meager living for 11 years. Many shoemakers in that city during this period had started larger or smaller workshops, but in 2 or 3 years time many went bankrupt. I never had to do that, but we had to give up many pleasures



Everyday dresses for Jämtland people in the 1800s.

and commodities in order to survive.

During the 12 years that I lived in Östersund, I had the pleasure most winters of visiting my parents' home and spending some weeks or months there as an extra forest ranger, helping my father with the control of the lumber that was sold from his area. The salary for this job was 60 *kronor* per month. That was not quite enough to feed and keep a family of five, and the cost of travelling. During all these journeys, as well as at other occasions, I was always on the lookout for a home of my own, but I never found anything satisfactory. To buy land from the Crown was impossible; they did sell some *torp*, but then always to the current inhabitant. To buy land from the lumber companies was even more impossible, and to ask one of the few farmers that had not yet sold their land was of no use, as it was too costly to detach a *torp* from the original farm. If I had had 3,000 to 4,000 *kronor* it might have been possible, but as I hardly had 300-400 at my disposal, it was quite different.

During this time several national questions: the questions of the right to vote (*rösträttsfrågan*), small homes (*egnahem*), national service (*värnplik*), and the customs duties (*tullfrågorna*) were discussed in the parliament (*riksdagen*). The two first ones were always accompanied by lofty promises, deferred to the distant future, while the two latter ones were decided almost at once. This was bitter for the general public, as one could see that the parliament was not interested, unless it was from necessity, to give the less well-to-do part of the population any compensation for the taxes they still had to pay.

Promises were not kept

The taxes, both the direct ones and the indirect ones, were increased every year, promises were given that no one meant to keep, and then at the same time, an appeal was published in the Swedish newspapers: "What can be the cause of the great emigration from Sweden?" This appeal I felt was a slap in the face



Storgatan 55 in Östersund, built in 1885, and one of the addresses where the Löfqvists lived during their time in the city.

for someone in my situation. Never will someone be able to convince me that this question was put to find the causes, as I do not believe that someone could be that naïve.

Instead, this question was posed to try to find out if the working people might have understood the treachery that had been done to them. I wrote a couple of lines in answer and sent it to a newspaper, but got an answer in the paper that it was not possible to publish this. In the meantime both the English and the American governments distributed pamphlets through their agents in which they praised in many ways the great country in the West, where there was no military or customs duties to endure, where every man has his right to vote, where there is free land for settlers, and good opportunities to find a job and earn money. Under such conditions it seemed strange to me that Sweden still has as many inhabitants as it has.

During 1903 and 1904 I had not been able to earn enough to feed my family, so I decided in the spring of 1904 to go to that faraway and so

highly praised country in the West. That this decision was preceded by inner fighting, much more painful than I can describe, I will remember as long as I live. But I'd rather leave than live on speculations and promises that I saw I could never fulfill, or live on charity, which I could and would not do.

The journey to America

On the 17th of May 1904 I started my journey, the hardest journey I have ever done or will ever do. Many emigrants joined us during the trip, some showed some make-believe happy faces, but everywhere I could trace some sadness, especially among the older ones.

The journey went without any problems and on June 6 I found myself in the huge waiting room of the Windsor railway station in Montreal. Here I was, a stranger in a strange country, with 8 dollars in my pocket, without a friend, and without knowing a single word of the language spoken. After several fruitless efforts I finally met a Swede who

helped me find food and lodging, and also promised to help me find work, if he could. This was then very difficult as some 5,000-6,000 individuals were out of work in the city. After a week of visiting every part of the city I finally managed to find work at a railway car shop as a carpenter for 18 cents/hour. Food and lodging was 3 dollars/week or 12 dollars/month.

On a promise of higher wages if I could go further west, I started the journey to Winnipeg two months later. Here I now got 26½ cents/hour, and after having been there five months I had enough to send for my family, two adults and two children. I settled in a small progressive town, where I bought some land and built a house and a barn. We now own the farm and two cows, everything without any debts.

Conditions in Canada

I have during my time here been able to survey all the land between William and Winnipeg. Most is open for settling. The land here is mostly forest and is available under the condition of it being mining land, and you only have to pay 50 cents to register 160 acres. There is not much farming here as the land is not very good. It needs to be fertilized after 2 or 3 years, otherwise the soil is so good that I have never seen anything better in Jämtland. About 200 miles to the west is a belt of clay soil, some 30 to 60 miles in width, from Minnesota to Hudson Bay. This land is the best that I know exists, as it is 2 to 8 feet deep with black soil on a bottom of thick clay. This land is mostly forest, and the lumber that you cut down pays for the cost of settling. This land is owned by the government for 80 dollars per acre and is available only to new settlers, to be paid in four payments of 20 dollars each year. Further west in Manitoba every other quarter section is government land and every other is railway land. Government land costs 10 dollars to settle, and the railway companies ask 15 dollar per acre. It might seem unnecessary for

me to tell about these conditions, but it explains why Swedes travel here, especially family fathers that know how and want to farm.

Future for Sweden?

How the conditions are in Southern Sweden I do not know, except for what I have heard and learned from newspapers, but concerning Norrland it will never be able to compete with Canada. I have seen some sanguine newspaperman throw out the idea of how to make an America in Norrland and thus convince many returning immigrants to settle there. This is quite impossible. I can believe that a few who can't stand the climate here or just did not like it, might, if the conditions were good and tickets were free or at a very reduced price, return to the homeland, but the majority are, and will be, lost to Sweden, after they have learned the language and conditions here. Also, I have seen in the Swedish newspapers

an idea of prohibiting emigration for men who have not done their national service. This would probably increase instead of decrease the loss of young men, as then they in some measure feel that they have lost their freedom, and what is then more natural than that they try in any way to get this back. And to circumvent such a law would be fairly easy for an intelligent man, with the result that only the stupid ones would be left.

I would like to see the commission of a survey that could find an effective way of restraining the emigration from Sweden and I am certain that there are such measures to be found in Sweden, which would, not totally, but in many ways decrease the emigration. Thus it would be necessary to act so that, the class of the people that now leave the country would understand that not only some larger or smaller corporation, but the whole realm of Sweden wants

to keep them in the country, as well as act quickly in the question of the unemployed, because when the grass grows, the cow dies. [Ed:s note: this is an old Swedish maxim: *Medan gräset gror, dör kon.*]

Footnotes

- 1) The *Skogsrå* was a mythical woman who roamed the forests and caused mischief. She was supposedly very beautiful, but had a hollow back, which made it easy to identify her, if she happened to turn around. It was dangerous to raise her anger or irritate her, but she could also do good deeds, like wake up a charcoal burner when his charring-pile (*kolmila*) caught fire.
- 2) Roughly 50 cents.

Some information on the Löfqvist family

Lars Adolf Löfqvist, the author of the above letter, was born 23 June 1865 at Prästbordet in Hammerdal in Jämtland. His parents were Lars Löfqvist, born 30 Oct. 1835 in nearby Brunflo, and his wife Ingeborg Antonsdotter, born 16 July 1835 at Frösön, also in Jämtland. Lars had been a rifleman, and now was a sharecropper. In 1866 they moved to another cottage in Bye and in 1877 to Ede, both places also in Hammerdal. At Ede Lars started to work as a forest ranger, and the family stayed there until 1896, when Lars and Ingeborg moved to Brunflo parish, not followed after that.

Son Lars Adolf left home when he married in 1892 June 21 to Anna Märta Kjellström, born 8 July 1866 in Borgvattnet, Jämtland. They lived for a short period with Lars's parents, and moved around 1894 to Brunflo. On 2 July 1896 they moved to Östersund, where they stayed until 29 December 1903, when they moved to Odinslund in Brunflo, from where Lars left for North America 17 May 1904. Anna Märta and their three

daughters left from the same place on 1 December 1904.

There had been more children in the family. All children born to Lars Adolf and Anna Märta were:

- d. *Emma Laura Teresia*, b. 8 Jul. 1892 in Hammerdal.
- d. *Anna Evelina Fausta*, b. 20 Sep. 1894 in Hammerdal.
- s. *Viktor Erland Laurentius*, b. 24 Oct. 1896 in Östersund, d. there 30 Apr. 1897.
- s. *Petrus Laurentius Florentin*, b. 14 Jan. 1899 in Östersund, d. there 19 Jul. 1899.
- d. *Ingeborg Klara Kristina*, b. 8 June 1900 in Östersund.

In the *Emibas* database Lars Adolf is recorded as having left Sweden at the same time as his family, but in reality he went first to be able to find a place where they could settle.

He chose Fort William, Ontario, for his new home, and there another daughter was born, Lily Dagmar Viola, b. 24 June 1907, who died 24 June 1909 in Fort William.

Fort William is now a part of Thunder Bay, and local friend *Elinor Barr*

tells me "By a strange coincidence the Lofquists were friends of my grandparents! There were two Swedish communities side by side, Finmark on the Canadian Pacific Railway and Ellis on the Canadian National Railway, about 30 miles west of Thunder Bay. Lars Lofquist was credited with being the first settler in Ellis having filed on a Dawson Road Lot, 26 April 1910. I should tell you that this homestead land was so poor you couldn't survive by farming alone. Lars operated a general store and post office and served as justice of the peace. My grandparents arrived in Finmark 9 May 1912, filed on homestead lots and started a sawmill using logs cut from the properties."

Lars Adolf Lofquist died in 1946 and his wife Anna Martha died in 1954.

Elinor writes further "My family's experience in Finmark seemed to mirror that of others, that is lots of hard work, deprivation, and early deaths."

Elisabeth Thorsell