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Elisabeth Thorsell

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# The Emigration Survey

– in 1907 the Swedish government wanted to know why people left

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

Around the turn of the century 1800-1900, when the emigration had been going on for more than 50 years, the Swedish authorities started to ponder the question – was this a good or a bad thing for the country? By now a fifth of all Swedes were living in the U.S.

The landowners felt that they were not able to get the labor they needed. The military were worried that too many men of military age was leaving the country and that the army was becoming too weak, etc.

The question was raised in the *riksdag* (parliament), and in true Swedish fashion a government survey was launched in 1907, headed by statistician *Gustav Sundbärg*, who was on the liberal side. He thought that emigration could be decreased by improving the conditions in Sweden for the working classes. In the beginning he also worked with the more right-wing *Nils Wohlin*, who also was a statistician, and later minister for finance (*finansminister*) in the Swedish government. Regarding his views on emigrants he wanted more restrictions. This work with the survey went on for several years and finally resulted in the *Emigrationsutredningen* (Emigration Survey).

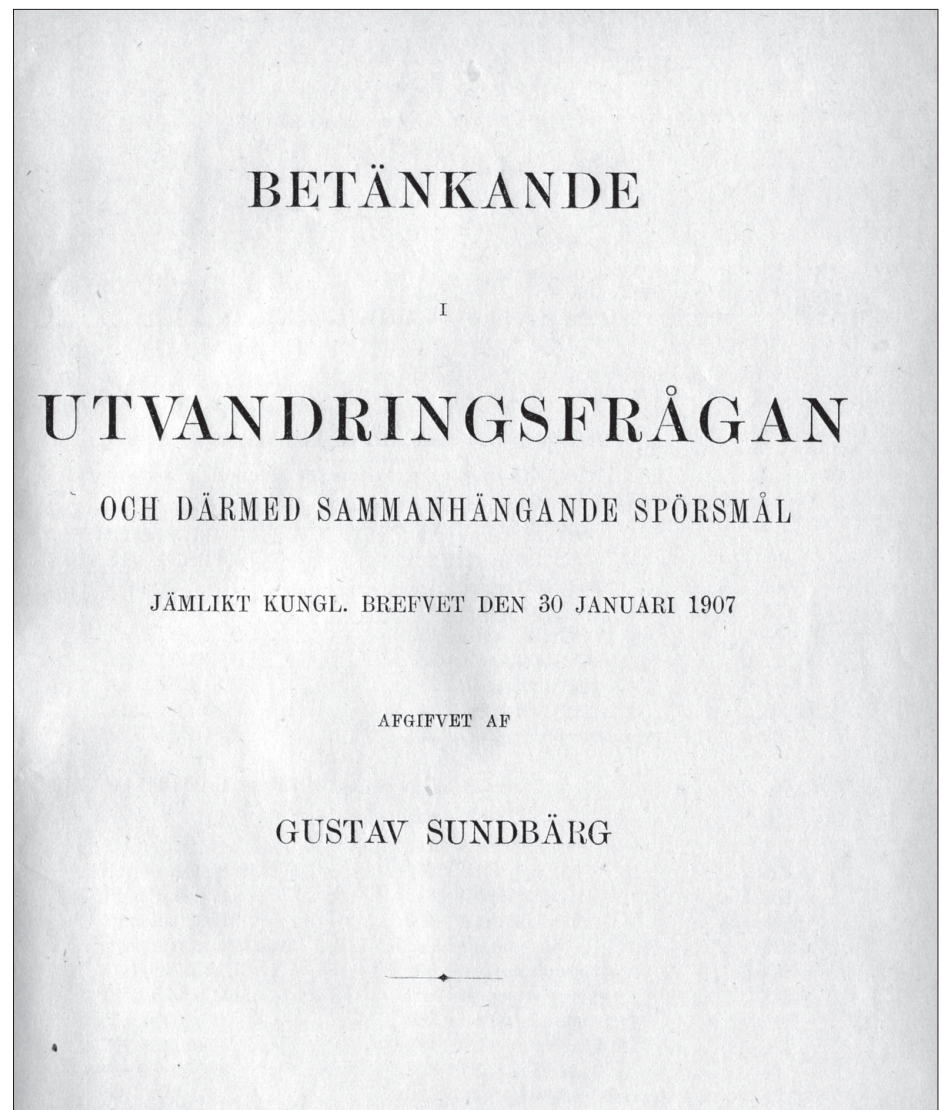
In 1910 Wohlin left the work with the Emigration Survey and instead started to work for the *Nationalföreningen mot emigration* (National Society against emigration).

## The survey goes on

Sundbärg kept on working and found

out that there were many things his survey needed to know more about. He then sent out questionnaires to various government agencies all over the country, and asked about the state of agriculture, labor conditions, wages, and much more. He had people that inquired about the cur-

rent conditions for the emigrants. Were they satisfied with the information from the emigration agents, were the emigrant hotels in different ports acceptable, was the treatment on the ships good, were the prices for tickets reasonable, etc.?



## The conclusion

In 1913 the survey was finished and published in seven thick volumes, consisting of the *betänkande* (report) and then more than 20 appendixes containing detailed information on the status of Sweden around 1910 in many aspects.

In general Sundbärg came to the conclusion that the best way to keep the prospective emigrants in Sweden was to give them more freedom: the general right to vote, better housing, better wages, more possibilities to take part in the society, and making it possible to own land for small farms, etc. One important point was that males that wanted to return to Sweden should not have to do national service, unless they wanted to, as that could be an obstacle to their re-immigration to Sweden.

## The appendixes

The appendixes are written by Gustav Sundbärg, unless another author is mentioned, and they have the following titles:

- 1) Laws about emigrants.
- 2) A review of all statutes and their implementation regarding emigration, with a section on U.S. statutes of immigration.
- 3) A statement on the Mormon recruitment in Sweden.
- 4) Swedish and European statistics on increase in population and mobility.
- 5) Statistics on counties and communities.
- 6) Geographical conditions for trade and industry.
- 7) Testimonies from the emigrants.
- 8) Examinations of certain areas (*bygdeundersökningar*).
- 9) The farming population of Sweden during the period 1751–1900.
- 10) The danger of the obliteration of the class of the farmers, in connection with the changes in the laws of inheritance, the emigration etc., by Nils Wohlin.
- 11) The classes of crofters, dug-out dwellers, and lodgers, by Nils Wohlin.
- 12) On the distribution of land.

- 13) General economic data relating to Sweden.
- 14) The small farm movement (*småbruksrörelsen*) in foreign countries, mainly in the British Isles, Prussia, and the United States, by Gustaf Steffen, Paul Bergholm, and A.K. Eckerbom.
- 15) Methods of industrial work in the workshops and machine works in the U.S.
- 16) The Swedish national character (this was later published as a separate book, which was very popular).
- 17) Excerpts from comments sent in by various organizations and agencies.
- 18) Comments on the question of emigration, from Swedish scientists.
- 19) Comments concerning Swedish industry, trade, and maritime commerce sent in to the survey by chambers of businesses, societies and private businessmen.
- 20) Information concerning the positions of Swedes in foreign countries, as well as statements concerning how to make returning to the homeland more attractive.

Obviously the survey itself and all those appendixes have much information that can be useful knowledge to share in further issues of SAG.

## Appendix 7

This appendix contains personal letters, written by emigrants still living in the U.S. and there are more than 280 of them. There are some problems with the letters, though. They are all in Swedish, and need to be translated, but that is a minor thing. The letter writers are identified only by their initials, province they came from, and what year they left Sweden.

I had hoped that the original letters would still be found in the Swedish *Riksarkivet* in Stockholm, with the full names of the writers. The survey was done because of a decision of the *Riksdag* (parliament), and should have ended up in the *Riksarkivet*, where all documents from authorities like *Riksdagen* should be.

But when I went there and asked for the material from the Emigration Survey, I was disappointed. From the catalog of contents of the Emigration Survey documents I learnt that “according to information from the former chief archivist Holmberg of one of the provincial archives, the main part of the survey materials had got lost because of the actions of Professor N. Wohlin.” So all those original letters are gone, and nobody knows where they ended up.

But in today there are emigration databases to search, and a number of the letter writers have been identified in that way.

## A letter from Älvsborg county

### Letter # 179, written by J.L.G., who immigrated in 1864:

I was born on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1845 in a soldier's cottage in Älvsborg county, and learned first to read at my mother's knee. I was sent to public school at age 10, and during my 3½ months there gained some useful knowledge that has been of some value to me during my lifetime.

Then I was sent out to guard cows and sheep, and do other chores appropriate for my age. At 14 I was apprenticed to a tailor and worked for 1½ years without salary at all, receiving only my food, which sometimes was very simple indeed. Then I got for a year's work a salary of 24 *skillings* per week; during the rest of my time as a tailor I got 1 *krona*<sup>1</sup> each week.

Consequently I could be very diligent and frugal keeping body and soul together.

When I was 19 years old, or in 1864, I borrowed money from an old friend for my passage to America, and after a slow voyage in a sailing ship, we happily arrived in Chicago on June 29<sup>th</sup>. I took a job with a farmer at once, and have continued with such work ever since. The wages for work then were not as high as they are now, but after a while I could pay



for my passage here, and then put some dollars aside every month for future needs. Now I own a farm of 200 acres, have built houses, cleared land, and am free of debt. It is situated 1½ mile from a town with a railway station.

I did not fear National Service (*Värnplikten*) [in Sweden] as the Crown would have clothed and fed me, but I did fear ending up at the workhouse in my old age. We were 10 children in the family, of which two died in infancy. The other eight all lived into adulthood and they had immigrated to this land.

Even though my father was a good worker and a sober man, there were very poor conditions in my childhood home. He was a soldier's son and he served as a soldier for 32 years. After reaching retirement age he received a pension of 12 *kronor* for the first 10 years, and then he got it increased to 24 *kronor* for the rest of his life. My father had three brothers who also served for the Älvsborg regiment and then immigrated to this country and have done well.

I am not the right person to give advice, but let me give some anyway: Give the people the vote, reduce the National Service, decrease the taxes, and take away some useless public offices and then: be more careful with the public money!

People say that is cheaper to live in Sweden than in America, but that will be difficult to prove, as the King of Sweden has ten times the salary of our President. One should also try to get rid of the swollen aristocracy.

At last, let me tell a story. Some years ago I had a neighbor who had a lot of difficulty keeping his cattle, as they broke through all the fences. He tried in every way to keep them within his fences, but to no avail. Then he listened to the advice of a neighbor and gave his cattle more and better grass to graze, and after that he had no more trouble with them. If the Swedish government would listen to this advice, the "Emigration question" would resolve itself.

### Editor's note:

1) The Swedish money system was changed in 1873, from *riksdaler* to the *krona*. Thus Johan's wages were paid in *riksdaler* and *skillings*.

## The letter-writer and his family

From the information in his letter this writer has been identified as the soldier's son *Johan Levin Guld*, born 1 May 1845 in Södra Ving (Älvs.). He left Lida, in Södra Ving, Sweden, on 13 April 1864 for North America.

From the church records for Södra Ving it was found that he lived with his parents and siblings at the soldiers' cottage #590 on the lands of Lida in Södra Ving.

The family consisted of:  
 Soldier *Jonas Guld*, b. 16 Mar. 1805 in Hällstad, (Älvs.)  
 Wife *Annika Andersdotter*, b. 21 Jan. 1808 in Södra Ving.  
 Children, all born in Södra Ving:  
 d. *Maria Stina*, b. 24 Sep. 1830.  
 d. *Eva*, b. 25 Jul. 1832.  
 s. *Svante*, b. 9 Jan. 1835.  
 s. *Johan Gustaf*, b. 27 May 1837, died in Södra Ving in 1839.  
 d. *Johanna*, b. 17 Jan. 1840.  
 d. *Lovisa*, b. 3 Sep. 1842.  
 s. *Johan Levin*, b. 1 May 1845.  
 d. *Mathilda*, b. 23 Aug. 1848, died 29 Feb. 1856 in Södra Ving.  
 d. *Josephina Elisabeth*, b. Jan. 15 1851.  
 s. *Claes August*, b. 19 Aug. 1854.  
 (some of the children used the Guld surname, some used Jonasdatter or Jonasson).

## The family left Sweden

Soldier Jonas Guld, his wife Annika,

and children Josephina Elisabeth and Claes August all left Södra Ving on 19 Aug. 1866.

Daughter Maria Stina, her husband Johannes Eriksson (b. 24 Jun. 1822 in Brunn (Älvs.), their sons Claes Edvard (b. 29 Dec. 1859 in Hällstad (Älvs.) and Frans Alenius (b. 16 June 1862 in Hällstad) left 3 May 1865 from Hällstad.

Daughter Eva left 13 Apr. 1864 with brother Johan Levin from Södra Ving.

Son Svante (recorded as Johansson) left 7 Apr. 1864 from Södra Ving.

Daughter Lovisa left 9 April 1869 with her son Frans Algot Jonasson (b. 12 Apr. 1866) from Södra Ving. They left Göteborg on 16 April 1869 with tickets for New York.

It seems that Svante, Johan Levin, and his sister Eva were the first in the family to immigrate to the U.S. Their reports must have been favorable, as they were followed by their siblings, and even the fairly old parents.

## In the U.S.

Johan Levin Guld was found in the 1900 U.S. census as being a farmer in the township of Goodhue in Goodhue county, Minnesota, and he had changed his surname to *Gull*. He is married to Kristine, born in November 1850 in Sweden. They had 10 children (Delia, Leonard, Enock, Elmer, Richard, Anna, Judith, Ebba, Irene, and Inece).

Personens Namn och Stånd.	ort.	år.	1 1800	från.	år.	till.	år.
<i>Södra Ving</i>							
<i>afsk. Soldat-törp n:o 590.</i>							
<i>Sold. Jonas Guld</i>	<i>Hällstad</i>	<i>1805</i>	<i>16/3</i>			<i>Amerika</i>	<i>1864</i>
<i>Annika Andersdotter</i>	<i>Wing</i>	<i>1808</i>	<i>21/1</i>				
<i>Johanna</i>	<i>Wing</i>	<i>1840</i>	<i>17/1</i>			<i>Hällstad</i>	<i>57</i>
<i>Lovisa</i>	<i>Wing</i>	<i>1842</i>	<i>3/9</i>			<i>n 114-60</i>	
<i>Johan Levin</i>	<i>Wing</i>	<i>1845</i>	<i>1/5</i>			<i>Amerika</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Josephina Elisabeth</i>	<i>Wing</i>	<i>1851</i>	<i>15/1</i>			<i>Amerika</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Claes August</i>	<i>Wing</i>	<i>1854</i>	<i>19/8</i>			<i>Amerika</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Mathilda</i>	<i>Wing</i>	<i>1848</i>	<i>23/8</i>				

Södra Ving AI:7, p.277 (1857-1870). (Picture from ArkivDigital).