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Letter from Per Ersson Högman

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Letter from Per Ersson Högman

The following is a letter written in 1850 to *Hudikswalls Weckoblad* by a recruit to the Eric Jansson colony in Bishop Hill who quickly became disgruntled with the enterprise, regretted his decision, and returned to Sweden with little good to say about either the Jansonists or the promised “New Land.” First published in *Hudikswalls Weckoblad* 1851 March 8, 15, and 22.

North America and city of Milwaukee, 21 December 1850

Dear parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, friends, and acquaintances,

Now I wish to let you know about our successful trip from our fatherland across the great sea, to the New World. Fortunately, all are in good health, and life was preserved. There were certainly a few who suffered from seasickness, but as for me, I avoided it except in the Baltic, when we met stormy weather one night that we feared for our lives. Then even I was sick, but never otherwise; but my wife and servant girl became weak and frail as soon as weather blew up, but were otherwise healthy. We left Hudikswall on 22 June and arrived at Helsingör on 3 July, from which we sailed on the 4th, arriving in New York on 19 September. It was a very long trip because we never had good winds, except in the North Sea. For five days, if we ever got favorable wind, we were almost becalmed – but contrary seas almost continuously. It was a Sunday when we were not far from land, and the skipper had to lay out to sea to avoid being lost. We were driven three degrees back out to sea (that is to say 3 x 15 miles), and there was a hard storm the likes of which our skipper had never seen. All sails were shredded, and the aft of the ship was crushed by the seas, and the gangway ripped away; yes it looked like we might find our graves in the ocean, so that nearly every great wave dashed against the ship, and we had to cry: “Lord save us, otherwise we are lost.”

But of the difficulties during the trip, the most difficult was to live

among cunning, evil, and false brothers. I have never seen such ungodly living; but during a very difficult journey and in the time of need, one finds his friends. The reason evil arose was the idiotic contract between Jon Olson of Stenbo and the passengers. It had been written so that we should have water and firewood during our entire trip. But what happened? We got one jug of water a day per man. One day, when we had water delivered, they all complained to me that they could not cook more than once a day; and then they said: “We don’t dare tell this to him, since we are mostly bound to him,” I considered talking to him on their behalf, since I cannot keep quiet about the truth: “Now, Jon [ed. Jonas Olson, “Stenbogubben”) Olson! Do you remember how our contract reads, namely that we should have enough of the above?” Then he answered me: “You’ll have to keep quiet, since you have a beer barrel to go to.” “Well,” I said, “are our brothers satisfied with what you and I have? Let the people get their full ration of that sour and awful water!” Then he answered: “Since I have a great drinking barrel for my people, consisting of 10 persons, so I can inform you of the following water provisions – namely if you work a week for me per man!” “No, I answered; Should they have to buy the water from you for the second time?” Then he answered me: “everything you do, you do for yourself. How then? Don’t ever think that I would ever place myself under your control.” Then all friendship between us ceased.

Then I concluded that these people [the Erik Janssonists] are intent

on gathering both people and money for themselves. God enlightened me by his wonderful light about those people, so that I damned my foot for having gone aboard the *Primus*, and made the decision to separate from them if the Lord gave me the health and time to reach New York.

I have done it. I also got to experience much – as soon as landing in New York. Pastor Hedström told me that the highest purpose of the Americans was to look after our life. I then thought: now I’ll take the railroad, whatever it costs, which I also did along with my wife and my comrades, Unger and Trolin. We came on 10 September to New York. We then drew up a contract for the whole trip to Chicago and immediately paid it. From there we went on the 25th by steamship to Albany, and from there on the 26th by railway to Buffalo. And as soon as we arrived, our things were carried to the pier at the sea. I then showed my ticket showing payment for the entire trip to Chicago. At this, the bookkeeper uttered “We can’t go aboard the paddleboat with anything less than by adding two and a half dollars per man.” “We won’t do that,” our party said. Then I had to follow them, because of their limited means, and because we could not speak English. We thus went aboard a freight boat, pulled by a propeller, and were promised that we could complete the entire trip in five days. After coming aboard, I had the unusual sorrow of there meeting the so-called Olof Stenberg [Olle i Stenbo] and his party. I had just recently fled New York from his father and followers, and they could not go any other way. Sten-

Judikswalls Weckblad.

berg came by canal to Buffalo and of his party, three persons died and a girl was lost. I could never have imagined that I would find such misery into which we fell. After the promise of a 5-day trip, we provisioned for that time; but unfortunately this boat went into all harbors and became so overloaded that it went aground several times. On the 29th we left Buffalo and came into a harbor on the 6th of October, where we stayed three days to avoid bad weather. By then, the Erik Janssonists had been without bread for two days; and in that harbor it was very expensive, so that a pound of bread cost 20 Swedish *skillings*. There I provisioned for my little family.

But Olof Stenberg, in his cheapness, bought no bread, but meal (flour) and salt fish in its place, for these poor people who had placed in Stenberg's hands everything they owned. Those poor people had to be without bread for five days, during which time they had nothing more to eat than salt fish soup, porridge, and some potatoes. After the potatoes were boiled and served, they each got three potatoes and a bit of fish. Such misery and hunger among those people was hard to see and hear. I cannot express or describe the misery, sickness, and death which arose among those people. That the fearful cholera appeared aboard was doubtless a result of their eating salt food without bread, and that they in their thirst had to drink bad water.

Deaths increased so that their prophet himself questioned his faith, and went down into the hold, where he lay on the deck itself. The seamen tried to drive him out, but he didn't obey. There he stayed as the trip continued. His friends who were healthy went up and down, to avoid the disease, but were forced up on deck, so they had to walk, wander and lie on deck, day and night. The hardest to see was when they took

the dead at our feet up on deck, and threw them into the sea. During the last five days we were aboard, 22 died.

We arrived here in Milwaukee on 10 October, and still had a two-day trip remaining to Chicago according to our contract. But we still must thank the Lord that we arrived in a harbor where there were both doctors and medicine available, otherwise we would have died in misery. The poor Erik Janssonist people had prophesied that the Lord would destroy those of their party on the other side of the ocean, who had not accepted their teachings.

Among these Erik Janssonists was a man named (Per) Westberg, who said to me: "Follow along to Bishop Hill." I asked: "What will we do there?" He answered: "We will do the Lord's work in a new Jerusalem which shall be greater than in the time of Christ." The next day he sickened with cholera. Then I asked his son-in-law, Erik Mårtensson, how Westberg was doing. He answered: "He is sick." Then I replied: "But yesterday he prophesied that he would go and work in a new Jerusalem that would be greater than in the time of Christ. Let us understand how unwisely a person can think and speak. Don't you fear that it is against the Lord's will to go that way?" "No," he answered. "But we see well," I said, "that the Lord strikes with his cutting sword against you, and when you arrive in your desired harbor, he will destroy you." Erik Mårtensson replied: "If it is not the Lord's will, may he kill me;" which happened.

By this, we can understand that the Lord will destroy them. They were 158 persons when they left Sweden last spring. When we arrived here in Milwaukee, I was at a loss as to how I would avoid the sickness and get ashore, since it was late in the evening, (11:00); but I took a Norwegian with me who could speak English, and we got a seaman to row

me and my party ashore, where we found lodging. The next day we went back aboard to get our things back to our lodgings. By then Erik Trolin's baby son from Gäcksätter, who had been completely healthy when we left the evening before in our row-boat, died of cholera. That same evening, 10 persons in Stenberg's party died. A rumor spread in the city among the Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes there, that a ship had arrived with Swedes, of which nearly all were sick.

People thus came aboard and got everyone to the hospital, both sick and healthy. The captain and Stenberg were also threatened with legal action by the court, because they had burdened people with such a long voyage. The prophet Stenberg fled the city to Illinois with all the funds of his party. These people would thus have become completely without means, if the citizens of the city had not taken pity on them.

During the first days they were at the hospital, 10 persons a day died, and after 12 days had come to an end and the sickness subsided, there were only 73 persons remaining of the previously-mentioned 158. Thus, everyone can see into what misery we had fallen, what awful and sorrowful life awaited us in this foreign country among unknown people.

To be continued

The writer:

Per Ersson Högman was born at Hög 12 September 1811, and married Brita Månsdotter, born 1 March 1820 at Hög. They left their farm, Åsak nr. 4 on 4 April 1850, to emigrate with the Jonas Olsson party aboard the ship *Primus*.

Translation by John Norton,
Moline, IL.