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# My American Cousins

Sten Carlsson\*

The U.S. Census for 1910 shows that 665,000 persons living in the U.S. were born in Sweden and that 750,000 persons, born in the U.S., had one or both parents born in Sweden. If we add to these figures all Swedish Americans in the third generation as well as the Swedes living in Canada, the sum will be about 1,800,000 Swedes and Swedish descendants in North America. Since Sweden, itself, at this time had a population of five and one half million, it can be said that every fourth Swede was to be found in North America. Since nowadays (in 1980) somewhat more than 4 million Americans count themselves as Swedish descendants — many of these are of course of mixed parentage — while the population of Sweden, including immigrants into Sweden, today is somewhat more than 8 million, one can safely say that today more than a third of all Swedes and Americans of Swedish descent are living in North America.

This means, of course, that the modern Swede in Sweden, has a number of relatives — cousins, second cousins — living in North America. The concentration of such kinfolk varies perceptibly both regionally and socially. Swedes with roots in Halland, Småland, Öland, Värmland and Dalsland have in general more American relatives, than those coming from other provinces, and least of all in the area surrounding Lake Mälaren and the upper reaches of Norrland. In addition it can be said that families with a rural origin have stronger ties to America than those who come from the upper strata of society.

If I test these general statements on the conditions pertaining to my own family, I find that the congruity is quite marked. My own family background is quite mixed, both regionally and socially, and the presence of relatives in North America varies greatly because of these background factors.

Because of chronological factors I shall begin with my maternal great grandmother's family, since I find the first American emigrant here. My maternal great grandmother was Regina Steffenburg (1831–1905). Her father was Jacob Steffenburg (1797–1874), a land owner and state surveyor in the parish of Sunborn in southern Dalarna. According to a family tradition, which must be rather recent, he was himself the descendant of an immigrant to Sweden, in that his ancestor came from southern Germany during the 17th century. In reality the original member of the family, named Jacob

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Staffansson, was most certainly of Swedish provenance; the name Steffenburg seems to have been taken by his son in connection with travelling around the European continent as a journeyman or apprentice. Jacob Steffenburg, who ranked a notch above the farmer category socially, belonged to a social milieu, which up to the middle of the 19th century, produced a great many emigrants, but which later showed a low frequency of emigration. In addition to this he lived in a province with an average frequency of emigration. It is therefore quite in order that the number of emigrants has been quite low among his descendants. The family Steffenburg, however, is represented among the earliest emigrants, as many other families of the same social rank. In 1850 Jacob's 17 year-old son, Bernhard (born 1833), went to America. After finishing his school studies in Falun and Gävle, he had become a bookkeeper in a mill in Dådran in the parish of Rättvik in Dalarna. According to a family tradition he was a restless young man, who among other things, had ridden a horse up the main stairs of the royal governor's residence in Falun. But he must also have been a man of courage. I have in my possession a medal presented to him by a fire insurance company (*Allmänna Brandförsäkrings Direction*) for "his zeal as a citizen." He probably received it for some heroic deed in connection with a fire. After his having received a passport in Göteborg 8 June 1850, he subsequently went on board a ship named *New York* and landed 2 Oct. in Boston. After this he disappeared without a trace.<sup>1</sup> He is one of the many emigrants who never wrote home. Among all of my relatives he is the only one who met this type of fate.

So far as I know only two descendants of Jacob Steffenburg went to America, namely his great grandson, Nils Gustaf Steffenburg from Falun (born 1887), who settled in Deerfield, Il and then my maternal uncle, Gösta Steffenburg, to whom I shall return later.

Regina Steffenburg was married to my maternal grandmother's father, Eric Selim Setterlund, a merchant in Falun (1823-1892). He was the son of a clergyman, in Södermanland, but moved as a young man to Dalarna. Both regionally and socially he belonged to the group with low emigration frequency, and one does not find any emigrant among his close relatives. His son, Rudolf (born 1861), became a sailor, and drowned in his youth off Charleston, SC, but he does not constitute an emigrant in the usual terminology.

My maternal grandfather's mother, Benedicta Olsson (1818-1896) was the daughter of a soldier, who was born in the parish of Väsby in the northwestern part of Skåne, but who later moved to Malmö, where he died already in 1824, as a soldier attached to the Kings Own Enlisted Regiment (*Konungens eget värvade regemente*). Both he and his wife, Hanna Rasmusdotter (1790-1873), came from proletarian farm families. Hanna remarried a school master in the parish of Husie (Malm.) outside of Malmö, who later became a blacksmith in the community of Högånäs in northwestern Skåne. In

addition to her daughter, Benedicta, she had only one other child, who reached maturity, a son Jeppa, who is said to have become a grenadier in the city of Linköping and who according to a vague and somewhat confused family tradition spent a part of his life in Australia or some other distant and exotic country.

Benedicta Olsson was married to my maternal grandfather's father, Peter Svensson (1815–1884), who was a master tailor in the village of Tjöröd in Väsby Parish, close to the rapidly expanding mining community of Höganäs. His father had been a sailor and later church custodian in the nearby parish of Jonstorp. Peter Svensson's origin was therefore quite proletarian, but there was a bit of upper class among his ancestors — his maternal grandmother's father had been a cavalry captain and had a German background — and Peter, himself, belonged to what we would term the lower middle class. Quite a few emigrants left the Höganäs area, none, however, of his four siblings or, so far as I can determine, of their descendants. Among his seven sons, however, the youngest of these, Peter Emerentius Svensson (1858–1934), a marine engineer, left for America. His widow and four daughters resided in Fredonia, NY as late as 1937. Whatever happened to them I cannot say.

The oldest of Peter Svensson's sons, Janne (Jean) Swenson (1838–1920), became a master tailor and city official in the city of Varberg. He and his Danish-born wife from Aalborg, had ten children who reached maturity. The two oldest sons emigrated — the younger of them, Otto Charles (1862–1917), only went as far as Copenhagen, where he became a department head at the Brothers Dahl. The oldest son, Emil Swenson (1858–1919), became the most renowned of my many American relatives. He was born in Aalborg in Denmark but grew up in Varberg. After having taken his examinations as an engineer at Chalmers Technical University in Göteborg in 1879, he went to the U.S., where he was employed by the Carnegie Company in Pittsburgh, PA in 1887. He became chief engineer in 1898 and a consulting engineer as well as his own entrepreneur in 1905. In Pittsburgh he constructed the first steel hopper bottom freight car and the first metal bridge which conveyed molten metal across the Monongahela River. Later he constructed the first steel skyscraper in New York, or at least the metal frame for it.<sup>2</sup> He has a prominent place among the many remarkable Swedish engineers who emigrated to America. He had four children, living in Pennsylvania, New York and California. A grandson was living in Cincinnati, OH in 1976. During the 1970s the family had contacts with the cousins in Sweden.

My maternal grandfather, Emil Swenson (1853–1928) was mayor of Varberg, married to Hilma Setterlund (1859–1907). They had three sons and three daughters, who reached maturity. The children adopted the name of their maternal grandmother — Steffenburg. The two youngest emigrated. My maternal uncle, Emil Steffenburg (1897–1966) became bank president of Hambro's Bank in London, while my uncle Gustaf (Gösta) Steffenburg

(1899–1965) during the latter part of the 1920s was a bank clerk in New York City. He married a Swedish American woman, Anna-Lisa Håkansson from Göteborg (1894–1979). The couple returned to Stockholm in 1935 and opened a tobacco shop on Kungsholmen in Stockholm. They are my closest Swedish American relatives. They often spoke of their years in America and doubtless had been greatly impressed by their visit there. They were, however, not very pro-American in their pronouncements.

My father's family comes from Småland, a province which witnessed a lively emigration. Seen from a social point of view, however, there is a vast difference between my paternal grandmother's family, which for generations had belonged to the cadre of Swedish clergymen, and my paternal grandfather's family, which belonged to the farming class. It is also, except for a few instances, that it is on my paternal grandfather's side where I have the majority of my American cousins. My paternal grandmother's mother, Sophia Mathilda Nyman (1836–1908) was the daughter of the well-known evangelistic clergyman, named Pehr Nyman (1794-1856), who ended his days as dean in the parish of Urshult in the county of Kronoberg. He had two sons and two daughters. The oldest son, Pehr Nyman (1839–ca. 1901) went to America in 1858. Neither he nor his younger brother seem to have come up to the expectations which their dynamic father had nurtured concerning his sons, and according to a family tradition some conflicts arose between the father and them. We know for certain that Pehr Nyman, Jr. in the U.S. caused much worry and anxiety for his father's friends because of his inability to blend into the new milieu. Here is an example from a letter written in Chicago 7 May 1860 by the famous emigrant clergyman, Erland Carlsson, originally from Småland to another *smålänning*, the provost in the Cathedral in Göteborg, Peter Wieselgren, which tells the following sad story:

“It makes me sad that I cannot do more for poor Nyman than I have done, but he is impossible. If the Lord is unable to transform his heart, it will be bad for him. He has spent most of his time in Gale(s)burg and the area around there, and I enclose herewith a letter, concerning him, from Pastor Hasselqvist. At the present time Nyman is supposed to be running a small school in a Swedish settlement near Andover. The money which arrived from Sweden I used to buy him some clothes as well as to pay some of his debts. He only received a few dollars in cash. To give him money directly is of no use. Before he receives his inheritance, a guardian should be appointed here, otherwise he will soon spend it all.”<sup>3</sup>

During the 1890s Nyman lived in Moline, IL, where he resided with another immigrant from Urshult, Gustaf Lindahl. Gottfrid Juhlin, a pastor in the Augustana Synod, himself a product of Urshult, and later clergyman in the Diocese of Växjö, met him there.<sup>4</sup> He might also have been a soldier at one time. According to a vague tradition in the family he seems to have visited his sister Mathilda and her children in Småland and made the following statement: “Well, well, so these are Thilda's children.”

Sophia Mathilda Nyman was married to my paternal grandmother's father, Bengt Henric Rosengrén (1825-1882), of an old clergyman family.

He, himself, became vicar of Hemmesjö Parish (Kron.). The couple had ten children reaching maturity. None of them emigrated, neither their descendants. Bengt Henric's brother, however, Frans Rosengrén (1823–1889), sheriff in the hundred of Västbo and later in the hundred of Östbo, had among his descendants a recent emigrant, namely Lena Rogard Tabori (born 1944), married in the U.S. to Marty Fried, a film director. She arrived in the U.S. with her mother, the Swedish actress, Viveca Lindfors (born 1920), who during the years 1943–1949 was married to Folke Rogard (1899–1973), an attorney in Stockholm and a grandson of Frans Rosengrén.

My paternal grandfather's mother was Elin Margareta Johannesdotter (1818–1887), the daughter of a farm owner in Burseryd Parish (Jön.), a parish with very many emigrants, above the average for Småland. None of her siblings departed for the U.S., however, and none of their children, but two children of her sister's daughter, Josefa Petersdotter (1847–1919), married to a crofter (*torpare*) in the parish of Sandvik (Jön.), an annex parish to Burseryd. Her husband went to America and was killed there. The two children, named Möller, emigrated in 1901, but I know nothing of their fates in the U.S.

Elin Margareta Johannesdotter was married to my paternal great grandfather Carl Johan Magnusson (1817–1894), who rented a farm from the Swedish Crown, Övra Lida, sergeant quarters in Burseryd, where he also had been born. His sister, Anna Brita Magnusdotter (1813–1898), was married to a farm owner in Norra Spabo in Burseryd. The couple had eight children. The daughter, Lisa Beata (1851–1930), was married to an August Hanson in the U.S. A son, Johan Heland Spalin (1855–1932), who later became a farm owner in Norra Spabo, became the ancestor of a great many Swedish Americans. His daughter, Hulda (1883–1980), had a son in Los Angeles. A son, August (1892–1963), stayed in the U.S. 1912–1920, before he returned to Norra Spabo. The daughter, Selma (born 1893), resided in the U.S. 1913–1922. The son, Gustaf Emil (born 1896), emigrated 1915 and settled in the state of New York. His brother, Karl Julius (1899–1982), who emigrated 1923, also lived there. Finally it should be mentioned that August Spalin's son, Karl Erik (born 1913), emigrated 1929 and also settled in New York State. Several years ago I happened to be bicycling past Spabo and found there that some dweller or visitor, probably a Swedish American, had in this far and remote village put up street signs with the name "Main Street" and "Times Square." Finally it should be mentioned that Anna Brita Magnusdotter's youngest daughter, Anna Rylander (1858–1912), who was a grade school teacher in Burseryd, lost her husband, a young farm owner, in a railroad accident in the U.S. in 1893.

Carl Johan Magnusson's brother, Lars Magnus Magnusson (1822–1900) became a farm owner in Mellan Lida in Burseryd. He had six children who reached maturity. Three of these emigrated to America. The daughter, Anna Larsdotter (born 1864) was married to a foreman, August Nyberg, in St. Paul, MN, who himself was born in the village of Landeryd in the parish of

Långaryd (Jön.), in the same hundred as Burseryd. I have several times met children and grand children to them, now residing in St. Paul and Eveleth, MN. Anna's brother, August Larson (born 1869), emigrated 1888 and lived first with his sister in St. Paul and then became a farmer in North Dakota, later in Ely, Manitoba, Canada, where he bought a farm and had a good income. Later he settled down in San Diego, CA, where he bought real estate and was involved in the construction of the Augustana Lutheran church. I have visited his German-born wife, Flora Jordan (died 1976), and her children in San Diego. The youngest brother, Josef Larson (1873–1957), emigrated 1892 and came to Jerome, AZ, where he had some mining claim and found both gold and copper, which he sold for a good profit. During the dark days of 1929, this farmer's son from Småland was active in the stock markets on Wall Street in New York and is said to have lost \$100,000 a day for three days, and still had money left. His story in America is one of the more unusual. He has descendants in California.

Several of Lars Magnus Magnusson's grandchildren emigrated. The daughter, Mathilda (1851–1935), married Mårten Strid in Övra Lida, who spent some time in the U.S. They had five children, of which three emigrated—in 1895, 1900 and 1906. Two grandchildren of hers emigrated 1928 and 1929 but returned to Sweden.

Lars Magnus Magnusson's youngest son, Leander Larsson (1876–1960) remained in Sweden and finally became a farm owner in Norra Påbo in Burseryd. Of the nine children who reached maturity, three emigrated. One son, Lars Einar (born 1902), became a painter and decorator in New York City and later in Hope Valley, RI. A son, Gustaf Fridolf (b. 1903), emigrated 1926 and also became a painter in New York City. He was killed in the 1960s when he fell from the scaffolding at a construction site. The daughter, Ruth Agnes Johanna (1908–1974), was murdered in New York City in 1974.

Carl Johan Magnusson's younger brother, Josef Magnusson (1826–1861) became the renter of a farm named Bökelund in the parish of Sandvik. He was drowned in 1861 in an attempt to rescue two brothers-in-law who had gone through the ice on Lake Soten while skating. He left a newborn son, Alfred Sandblom (1861–1892), who emigrated to the U.S., where in 1892 he was killed by being run over by a train.

There remain the fates of Carl Johan Magnusson's own descendants. He had seven children, who reached maturity, of which one emigrated, the oldest son, August (1842–1908). He bought a farm in Stora Holgryte in his home parish of Burseryd, but toward the end of the 1870s he left for America, while his wife, the "America widow" and a small son remained at home. The income he received in America, was from the Småland point of view, fantastic. He returned to Sweden in the beginning of the 1880's, but the American tradition remained in his family. He had seven children, who reached maturity, of which three emigrated. A son, Gottfrid (1891–1925), left for Canada in 1911, where he became a farm worker. He drowned in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1925. A daughter, Selma (1892–1971), also emi-

grated in 1911. She was married in Chicago in 1915 to a man from Östergötland, Eric Emanuel Hultman, who became a factory worker in Whitehall, MI. A married daughter now lives in the vicinity of Detroit. The youngest daughter, Signe (1897–1953), resided in the U.S. 1916–1921 and then returned there. She was married in 1926 in Chicago to a man from Värmland, Carl Tornquist. After his death, she married a Finnish Swede by the name of Arne Lillmars, who resides in Muskegon, MI. A daughter in her first marriage resided at first in Muskegon, but has now moved to Florida.

August Carlsson's oldest son, Algot Carlsson (1876–1954), became a crofter and school custodian in his home parish. Of his five children, one emigrated, namely Walborg (born 1906). She left in 1923 and was married in Chicago in 1926 to a man from Burseryd, Ernest Erickson, who has been a toolmaker in Chicago. The couple now resides in Whitehall, MI. A son lives in St. Germain, WI, while a daughter lives in Lyons, IL. A granddaughter is a student at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL.

Carl Johan Magnusson's oldest daughter, Adelina Carlsdotter (1844–1892), became a farmer's wife on the parental farm of Övra Lida. She had four children, of which the daughter, Elin Johansson (born 1887), emigrated to America, where she was married to a Swedish American by the name of Anders Ström. They are said to have had five children.

A younger daughter of Carl Johan Magnusson, Anna Carlsdotter (1848–1936) was married to a farm renter in the home parish of Burseryd. She had five children. A son, Peter Sandkvist (1878–1915) became a farm owner in Mellan Lida in Burseryd. He departed for America in 1913, while his wife and two small sons remained at home. Two years later he was killed while lumbering near the city of Shelton in the state of Washington. He was carried to his grave by former residents of Burseryd. Anna Carlsdotter's oldest daughter, Charlotta Johansson (1875–1951), was married to a farm owner in Önnabo in Burseryd, who before the marriage had spent several years in the U.S. Their oldest son, Gunnar Engkvist (born 1901), emigrated 1926 and married in 1935 a girl from Burseryd by the name of Astrid Nyman. They have owned a farm in Litchfield, MI, where I have visited them. Their son, Carl, is an engineer, residing in Buffalo, NY.

If I go back to my great great grandfather on my father's side, Magnus Andersson (1777–1840) and his wife, Annika Jacobsdotter (1785–1844), I come to the following summation. The couple had five children, who reached maturity, born between 1813 and 1831. Here as well as in the following material I am not counting children, who died before the age of 15. The number of grandchildren amounted to 22, born between 1837 and 1876. Six of these went to America, one of them returned to Sweden. I know of seventy great grandchildren (the exact number is certainly greater). The years of birth run from 1858 to 1917. Ten of them are born in North America. An additional fourteen have emigrated, of which two have returned. Within this generation, thus, at least a third have become Americans. It is not



possible to arrive at exact figures for the fourth generation. This group includes, however, six new emigrants, of which two have returned. If I stick with my own second cousins on my paternal grandfather's side, I can count to 39. Eight of these are born in the U.S. and two additional second cousins have emigrated. Here I find that a little more than a fourth of them have become Americans.

Within the genealogical framework outlined here I have been able to account for 35 relatives who emigrated to North America, of which 29 remained there (in two cases the individuals returned to Sweden for a short period, and then re-emigrated). The emigration covers more than a century, from 1850 to the 1940s. The destinations of these emigrants have been the usual ones for Swedes — Illinois, Minnesota and Michigan in the Middle West, New York State and Pennsylvania on the East Coast, California and Washington on the West Coast, Manitoba in Canada and then Arizona. In a couple of cases the careers in the economic and technical fields have been brilliant. But one of my relatives disappeared without leaving a trace and another did not succeed in adjusting to life in a new land. Quite a few have succumbed through accidents.

The purpose of this little essay is to give a concrete example of how strong genealogical ties have united North America with a rather ordinary Swedish family.

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<sup>1</sup>"Släkten Steffenburg från Falun," manuscript in the Uppsala Landsarkiv, Uppsala, Sweden; Sten Carlsson, "Genealogi och socialhistoria" in *Släkt och hävd*, 1968, p. 135; Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in U.S. Ports 1820-1850 (except New York)* (Stockholm and St. Paul, MN 1979), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Gösta Bodman, *Chalmers Tekniska institut. Matrikel 1829-1929* (Göteborg 1929), p. 261; Allan Kastrup, *The Swedish Heritage in America* (St. Paul, MN 1975), pp. 554, 573.

<sup>3</sup>Gunnar Westin, *Emigranterna och kyrkan* (Stockholm 1932), p. 94; cf. p. 126.

<sup>4</sup>G. Juhlin, *Per Nyman* (Växjö, 1926), p. 80, note.