

12-1-2009

## The foster child from Fide

Kerstin Jonmyren

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jonmyren, Kerstin (2009) "The foster child from Fide," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 29 : No. 4 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol29/iss4/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

# *The foster child from Fide parish who emigrated*

## **A tale from Gotland**

BY KERSTIN JONMYREN

One day an elderly woman in Öja parish (on the island Gotland in the Baltic Sea) whom I was familiar with, came up to me and asked me:

“I happen to know that my grandfather made a young servant girl pregnant. That child must have been about the same age as my mother’s twin siblings. Do you know what happened to the child?”

I promised to search in the church records.

As you can see, this story begins with the old familiar story of the vulnerable servant girl and the powerful farm owner.

This farmer’s name was Hans Niklas Hansson and he was born in 1857 in Öja parish. In 1885 he had married Emma Persdotter, born in 1865, the daughter of a neighboring farmer. Two children were born, in 1885 and 1888.

In 1885 a 15-year-old girl was hired as a farm servant, *Eleonora Amanda Catharina Jacobsdotter*, born in Gisle village in Öja, the daughter of a poor stonecutter.

### **Three children in one year**

Of course we cannot know when the farmer seduced his servant girl, but as soon as her pregnancy was discovered, she was forced to leave the farm and her employment. By then she had just reached the age of 18. She gave birth to her son *Carl Niklas Rudolf* in her poor parents’ home on 9 June 1889. Six months later the farmer’s wife gave birth to twins.

In the neighborhood people made a joke about this and said that Nik-

las had got three children within one year. It is also possible that they told him so directly, just to tease him. It is known, too, that his father-in-law had spoken seriously to him, saying that this affair had seriously hurt his daughter, Niklas’s wife.

Still, Niklas did not lose any of his standing in the community by this. He had a reputation as a capable farmer on an exemplary farm, but also with a reputation as a hard and demanding man regarding work, demanding of his children as well as of his servants.

### **Foster child**

Eleonora, who was poor and certainly needed some money for her child and for herself, went to visit a neighbor girl for advice. They had become friends when she was working at the farm. The neighbor girl told her to go to the farmer and demand her rights, and so she did. But there she met both an angry farmer and his angry wife and was sent away. They implied that she had no right to demand anything. They were so upset that later they went to the neighbor girl and reprimanded her.

Soon after giving birth Eleonora had to leave her home in order to provide for herself, to obtain a new placement. She had to hand over her son Rudolf to the parish clerks for them to care for. I have no proof that he was sold to the lowest bidder at a child auction, but that happened now and then at the time to poor people in the area, both children and old people.

In 1900 Rudolf was living as a foster child at Odvalls farm in the

neighbor parish of Fide. At the time his mother was working at a farm in Hemse, another parish in the area. It is an open question how often mother and son could see each other, but it may not have been very often. The local railroad from Hemse did not go as far as to Fide in those days. It stopped at least ten kilometers short. Still I wonder if a poor maid could afford a railroad ticket even for a short distance. She probably had to walk all 20 kilometers if she wanted to see her son.

### **Immigration**

In order to learn what had happened to Rudolf I started asking around. I had found that he had emigrated. He had left Göteborg 28 June 1907 with a ticket for New Haven, CT, but that was all. I went to see a relative of Eleonora’s, an old lady, but she did not know anything about him – nor did other people whom I asked.

So this story could have ended with the words: Rudolf immigrated to America, and after that nobody has received any information on him. But I had been given the task by Signe, the elderly woman who was related to him through her mother, the task to discover what had happened to him, so I had to continue.

I continued by asking a friend of mine for help. He started to search in Ancestry.com, a database on the Internet – and there, after a good deal of searching and a bit of good luck of course, we found a lot of information on Rudolf.

I found that Eleonora’s family must have had some contact with Rudolf, because on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in

1907 he left Sweden and the farm in Öja parish, where he was working as a farm hand, for America. He went to his uncle (his mother's brother) Karl Andersson, born in 1873, who had left in 1898 from a farm in Fide parish, where he had been a farm hand.

## New Haven, Connecticut

Rudolf had immigrated to New Haven, Connecticut, on the East Coast of America. There his uncle Karl lived with his wife Alida, who probably was born in Skåne, together with their two children. Soon thereafter Rudolf was employed as a gunsmith at Winchester, a large, well-known weapons factory. In his new country at first he was known as Rudolph Jacobsen, later on he changed the spelling to Jacobson.

A few years after his immigration he married Clara. She was probably identical with the farmer's daughter Klara Ester Paulina Lif, born in 1888 in Nye parish, Jönköping län, in Sweden, who had emigrated in 1903 from the neighboring parish of Lemnhult. The couple had two children, Ella in 1912 and Walter in 1915.

During both World War I and World War II Rudolph registered for the draft. The registrations which were carried out for a great part of the American male population in connection with the two wars can provide you with interesting information.

During World War I in 1917 Rudolph registered, and there we learn his exact date of birth and his background on Gotland in Sweden. We are also told his address in New Haven, and that he was a married man with children. He had grey eyes, was of medium height, and was slim. He had reported that he suffered from a physical disability and that he had a job of great importance for his country. By that means he avoided the battles on the other side of the Atlantic.

At his registration for World War II in 1942 he was 52 years old, and there we get his address and the

name of his closest family member, obviously his daughter.

## A house of his own

In the census of 1930 we find that Rudolph was the owner of an estate with the assessed value of 2,500 dollars. He and his family were living in the middle of a very Swedish society; all the people surrounding him were registered as born in Sweden. Rudolph passed away in 1958, on November 20, and his wife Clara in 1969, on November 2, both in New Haven.

Regarding their two children, daughter Ella seems to be identical with the Mrs Helge Johnson on Mill Road, New Haven, who was noted as Rudolph's closest relative at the registration in 1942. Son Walter is not noted in any register after the census of 1930, so he may have died as a rather young man.

## The gunsmith for Winchester

The foster child in Fide parish on the Swedish island Gotland became a family man and a property owner on the other side of the Atlantic – and a skilled gunsmith, we may believe.

And we have a story with all the important ingredients about a poor, lonely child who lived a good life in the end, a story with a happy ending.

It is a story about the poor country of Sweden in the past as well, with its great differences between poor people and people who were a bit better off, and its great difference between men and women. It is also a story about how exposed poor children were at the time. But it is also a story about the chances that America actually could offer people who did not own anything back home.

## The mother Eleonora

At last, what became of Eleonora, the young mother? She went on as a servant at different farms for a number of years. At the age of about 40 she bought a house of her own in Alva

parish, where she stayed to her death in 1940. She earned her living by going to different farmers working for them when they needed extra help. She never married, but she gave birth to a daughter when she was in her 30's. She attained the possibility of keeping and caring for her daughter.

She must have had some contact by letters with her son on the other side of the Atlantic, since he was mentioned with his actual address in her probate.

## Sources:

Church records of Öja, Hamra, Hemse, and Alva parishes.

The Swedish censuses of 1890 and 1900.

Family traditions in Öja and Fide parishes.

*On Ancestry.com:*

American male registrations of 1917 and 1941.

American censuses of 1910, 1920, and 1930.

American death certificates.

My thanks to the Gotland researchers Mats Ekedahl and Kjell Swebilius for research assistance.

The author is  
Kerstin Jonmyren, who lives at  
Vintervägen 15  
611 36 Nyköping, Sweden  
Home page: [www.swedgenco.tk](http://www.swedgenco.tk)



*Fide church. Picture from 1885.*