

3-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Stasiewicz, Agnieszka (2006) "News from the Swenson Center: Children of Two Countries," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 26 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol26/iss1/6>

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News from the Swenson Center

Children of two countries:

Ethnic identity in youth literary culture in Swedish America

BY AGNIESZKA STASIEWICZ

Within the large Swedish community in the U.S. there were many who came to America at a very early age with few memories of their homeland. Some, being second or third generation immigrants, had never been to Sweden at all and were more fluent in English than in Swedish. Therefore, many Swedish-American institutions set the ethnic education of children and young people as one of their most important goals. As the literacy rate was very high among Swedish immigrants, literature and newspapers flourished and the written word seemed to be the perfect way to get through to the youth. Between 1840 and 1960 more than 200 denominational Swedish-American periodicals for children were published.

What was the content of these literary publications and how did they refer to Sweden, the U.S., and Swedish-America? Who contributed to the books and periodicals? How wide was their circulation? What values did they promote? What was their influence on children and youth? What was their role in the preservation of the cultural heritage of immigrants? And most importantly, which publications shall I choose for my research? I am examining these and many other questions in my research for a doctoral dissertation about the process of creating youth and children's ethnic identity through literary culture.

When I came to the Swenson Center in Rock Island, I realized that the overwhelming amount of materials gathered there would enable me to narrow my project down significantly. Therefore I decided to focus on the role of the Augustana Book Concern (ABC) in the process. In its day, the Augustana Book Concern was the

most influential Swedish-American publishing house. Although its publishing profile was deeply religious, there were also many works connected with the topic of ethnic identity in a more direct way.

In my dissertation I will examine ABC periodicals and books for children and youth, searching for the elements which helped maintain a "Swedish spirit" in young generations, but also which recognized their "American side." Among the wealth of the Swenson Center's holdings of publications of the Swedish-American press I was forced to choose only a few. Therefore, my focus will be mainly on Swedish-language publications, mostly because of their important role in maintaining Swedish speaking skills among youth and children and because, in general, their content is more diversified.

I will put a special emphasis on these publications which highlight the dual heritage of the children of Swedish immigrants. My focus will be the periodical *Ungdomsvännan*. I have found *Ungdomsvännan* to be one of the most interesting magazines for youth because of its literary sophistication and its concentration on ethnicity. I was very happy to find the whole collection of *Ungdomsvännan* among Swenson Center's duplicates which will enable me to study them in-depth at home. Among the Center's extensive holdings of Swedish-American press I have also found an interesting periodical for younger children called *Barnens Tidning*. Although it was mainly devoted to religious education, it also contains many features that deal with ethnic issues. Moreover, in *Augustana Synodens Protokoll*, I found plenty of information about the number of subscribers, prices, and

other useful data about the periodicals in question as well as others.

The second important factor in children's literary culture is books. On the Swenson Center's library shelves I found not only sources referring to this topic in general, but also a significant amount of stories for children themselves. Most of them, surprisingly, were translated from German or imported from Sweden. Very few were written by Swedish-American authors. One of the latter was Anna Olsson; therefore I decided to put a special emphasis on her works.

Many people have asked why a Polish Ph.D. candidate is doing research on Swedish immigration. My answer is always: "Because it is fascinating!" For a long time I have been interested in Scandinavian and American culture and I wanted to combine these two topics in my dissertation. After spending half a year in Sweden I became certain that the immigration phenomenon and Swedish-America were the very right choices for me.

That is why I am very happy that I was selected for the 2005 Dagmar and Nils William Olsson Fellowship. Thanks to it I was able to spend a month at the Swenson Center studying the impressive holdings of Swedish-American periodicals and literature for youth and children. Moreover, it gave me a unique opportunity to explore both Swedish-American traces in the Quad Cities and American life and culture in general. I have brought home not only an impressive collection of materials for my doctoral dissertation but also warm memories of a beautiful country, people's kindness and friendship, my first baseball game, and chocolate chip cookies.