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Going Home

A young boy's experiences onboard an Atlantic liner

BY LENNART PEARSON



In the late fall of 1946, when I was in the eighth grade, my mother decided to take me with her to Sweden to visit her aging father. The war was over and the Swedish-American Line was once again carrying passengers across the Atlantic, so she put her name on a long waiting list for tickets. After some months, she was told that space would be available on the S.S. *Gripsholm*, sailing Friday, December 6th, and arriving in Göteborg (Gothenburg) ten days later – just in time for Christmas.

My recollections of packing are hazy. I recall my mother putting things rather ingeniously into a wardrobe trunk of the type that would have been standard equipment for transatlantic travelers a decade earlier. We also had a steamer trunk, a couple of suitcases, and a 16mm movie camera that my father had bought in 1941.

Leaving New York

The S.S. *Gripsholm*, which to my eyes was simply enormous, was docked at Pier 97, at the west end of 57th Street on the Hudson River. The pier itself was a long drafty shed in which several thousand people were all trying to figure out what to do next. There was baggage everywhere. Movable picket fences separated passengers according to whether they were traveling First Class (blue tags), Cabin Class (green tags), or Tourist Class (red tags). Trunks and suitcases were to be checked in by last name, under large letters strung on overhead cables the length

of the entire pier – twenty-six letters repeated in blue, green, and red. It was a scene of noisy confusion. Outside, taxicab drivers were blowing their horns, porters with hand trucks were hustling those who had just arrived, and hot dog vendors were hawking their indigestibles. Inside the shed, policemen helped newcomers make sense of the signs as people shouted across barricades in various languages. Parents were tugging at cranky children, teenagers were eyeing other teenagers, officials were stamping anything handed them, travel agents were selling tickets, and wispy old ladies in hats and gloves were protecting their handbags from purse snatchers and pickpockets. Just beyond the commotion, through the open walls of the shed, I could see the portholes of the gleaming white ocean liner and gangplanks leading into the ship.

A number of people from church had come down to the dock to see us off, including the pastor who considered it his Christian duty to say farewell to members of his flock but who also enjoyed the excitement of such departures. We were all properly dressed for the occasion. I even had a hat with a brim which I wore under protest since I always hated hats (and still do). We were not the only passengers from church. There was Nanny Paulson, a redoubtable woman in her sixties, and a good friend of my mother. Although she had never married, she had a surprisingly good instinct for things that were of interest to a boy just about to turn

twelve. Nanny was a professional cook. She had provided Scandinavian cuisine for some of the finest families in New York such as the Vanderbilts and Hattie Carnegie, the fashion queen. Coming to the United States for the first time in 1910, Nanny had returned almost every summer to Sweden to see her relatives. This was to be her twenty-eighth trip; she would cross the Atlantic thirty-four times in all before she retired. She had an imperious way about her, and perhaps her instincts about human nature had been too much shaped by the hard hand of experience. She knew well, for instance, that much could be accomplished by a well placed “tip.” Not everyone appreciated Nanny as much as I did, but certainly, everyone who knew her also respected her.

Two other passengers that turned up on deck were religious celebrities, Gustaf Landmer and Einar Ekberg. Landmer was an evangelist and Ekberg was a gospel singer. Whether they traveled together regularly as a Swedish version of Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey, the nineteenth-century American evangelists, or whether they found themselves together on this particular sailing purely by coincidence, I do not know. On board ship, however, they did team up to hold religious services in Swedish on several evenings in one of the lounges. Ekberg sang and Landmer preached to a generally receptive audience.

Once on board, we all posed for pictures on the upper deck and

engaged in the customary bon voyage rites of hugs and goodbyes.

The ship sails

At 12:30 p.m., thirty minutes before the ship was due to sail, the ship's horn signaled visitors to disembark. It was an unforgettable sound, ear-shatteringly magnificent as it echoed back across the Hudson River from the New Jersey shore. With a pang of sadness I said good-bye to my father, not realizing that the moment was far harder for him than it was for me. A few moments later, I could see him and the pastor emerge on the observation platform at the end of the pier, waving. In those days it was customary to throw rolls of narrow streamers from the ship to those on shore, the thin strip of paper being the last link broken as the ship was slowly nudged from the dock by the attending tugs. The ship began to move very, very slowly backing out into the Hudson River. The figures on the pier grew smaller and smaller until they were no longer identifiable. As the tugs withdrew and the ship's own screws began to turn, a faint vibration indicated that the ship was moving under its own power. Then the pier slipped behind us, and the bow of the ship pointed east out toward the Atlantic.

I was fascinated! The harbor was alive with barges, ferries, garbage scows, tugboats, oil tankers, freighters, and everywhere, sea gulls. The sun was bright and the air chilly, and I was reluctant to leave the upper deck. Fortunately, all meals on board were served in two sittings, and we had been assigned to the second sitting. That meant I could remain on the upper deck until almost 2:30, by which time the *Gripsholm* had already passed the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island and was well out beyond the Narrows into Lower New York Harbor. I had heard a great deal about seasickness from my mother who knew herself to be a poor sailor so I expected the ship to begin tossing just as soon as it left port. When we sat down to eat lunch, however, the only thing I felt was the faint pul-

sation of the ship's engines. The water was calm and beautiful, and through the windows of the dining room, we could see the shoreline of Long Island perhaps four or five miles off the port side.

Delicious food!

The table steward began to bring out the various luncheon courses, including Scandinavian delicacies that were familiar to me from home: an assortment of cheeses, pickled herring, and lingonberries. Scandinavian cuisine – Swedish, Norwegian, Danish cooking – is unique, in the same way that there is something special about Chinese, French, and Greek cuisine. Not everyone is fond of smoked eel, cheese made from goat's milk, head cheese, or *lutfisk* (boiled stockfish previously soaked in lye), but almost everyone can find something to savor at a *smörgåsbord* table, especially when it is followed by coffee and Danish cookies or a slice of raspberry *tårta* (cake) covered with real whipped cream.

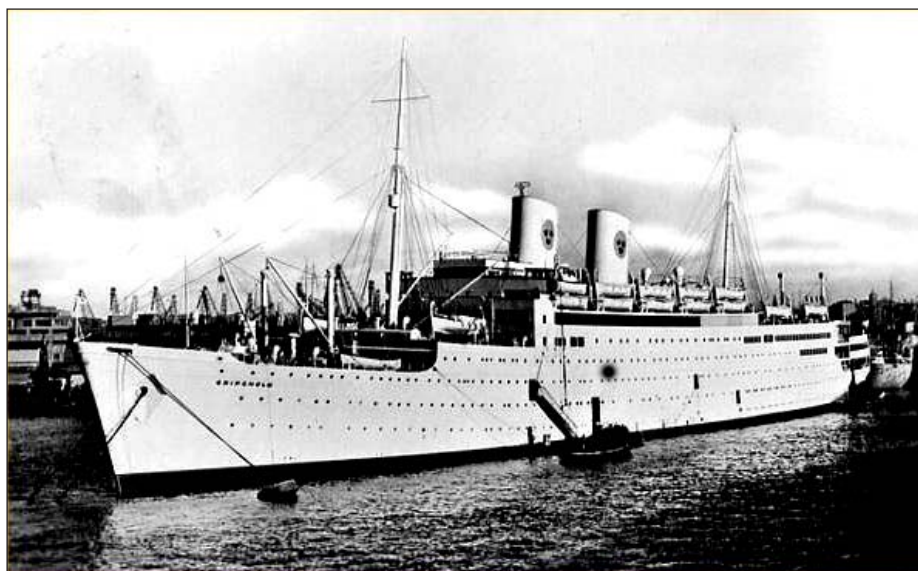
Nothing that was served up during the ten days of this crossing was too exotic to be sampled, and the greater the variety, the better I liked it. Some portly German people seated at a nearby table commented very favorably on the food, and one grandmotherly traveler pointed out to me that the words for “herring tidbits”

in Swedish (*gaffelbitar*) and in German (*gaffelbissen*), were really quite similar. My mother confirmed that the Swedish language was closely related to German, but was not able to come up with a Swedish cognate for *rollmops*. Clearly, there was more to be learned about Germany than I had picked up during the war years, when all Germans without exception had been regarded as “the Enemy.”

Later in the afternoon there was a lifeboat drill. We were each assigned to a particular lifeboat, which meant that when the alarm sounded, everyone gathered at designated points on one of the upper decks. In our group there were perhaps twenty people. I was puzzled by the fact that I could see no lifeboat from where we were standing. It was explained that the lifeboat was immediately above us, and that in an emergency it would be lowered by the crew for access through an open window. This was not reassuring. I had read all about the *Titanic*, and I could almost hear a ghostly band playing in the background, “Nearer My God To Thee.”

Our temporary home

Our particular cabin was on D-deck, which was about at the waterline since I could hear water sloshing on the other side of a porthole that had been tightly closed with an inner metal cover. There were two decks



M/S Gripsholm in 1952.

even lower, E- and F-decks, and while I suppose it was an advantage not to be quite that far down, the stairways and corridors were equally narrow all though this part of the ship. The cabin was tiny, with barely enough room to turn around. It made me want to spend as many waking hours as possible elsewhere, which is precisely what I did. Since it was easy to slip under or past various ropes and barriers without being noticed, I soon discovered that the more desirable parts of the ship were for Cabin Class and First Class passengers. Still, even in 1946, the essentially egalitarian spirit of the Swedes was such that markers of class seemed to be only halfheartedly observed. At any rate, my own conscience was no more than minimally troubled as I roamed about the ship quite freely on my own.

Shipboard events

On the second day out, as the ship was approaching Newfoundland, I noticed an unusual number of fishing trawlers in the area. The sea was very calm, and by afternoon, as fog closed in, the ship began to sound its foghorn at one minute intervals. It was a bit spooky, and I could only hope that those on the bridge knew what they were doing and that the ship's radar was in good working order.

In one of the hallways, a map was posted showing the progress of the trip, and each morning we could see how much of the distance had been covered in the previous twenty-four hours, usually somewhere between 250 and 350 miles. Beside the map was a posting of world news as it had been received in the ship's radio room during the night, along with a listing of shipboard events scheduled for the day.

On Sunday morning, for example, anyone who wished to attend Divine Service in the first class lounge was welcome to do so. The service of worship was conducted by the ship's captain, who read the "Order for Morning Prayer" of the Church of Sweden, the hymns being accompa-

nied on a portable organ. Sunday dinner was especially nice. It was a buffet table with all kinds of delicacies, followed by Baked Alaska for dessert, which was for me another first. On the menu, there was a daily instruction about the six-hour time adjustment that we needed to make as the ship traveled east. Each day, we were to advance our clocks a modest twenty or thirty minutes so that we would arrive on local time.

Once out on the high Atlantic, the days settled into a routine of sorts. Many of the passengers would rent a deck chair and a blanket after breakfast and spend the morning taking in the sea air and snoozing in the sunshine up on deck. Those who felt more energetic played shuffleboard or, in one of the enclosed areas of the deck, ping-pong. I recall playing games with some of the children on board, but nothing more particular than that. Below deck, in a caged hold not being used for baggage or freight, the crew had laid out some tarpaulins to provide an indoor area where children could tumble about – a kind of playpen about thirty feet square. The space was dirty and unappealing, and the tarps smelled of mildew. Since the ship was nearly two city blocks long, it was a bit of a walk from the cabin to the rear deck. One had to go through a long, narrow corridor past some doors to the engine room that also happened to be near some ventilators from the kitchen. It was very noisy, and the odor for about a hundred feet seemed to be a mixture of machine grease and tomato soup. I found that the best way to avoid being nauseated was to hold my breath while passing through that immediate area.

Seasickness

Some passengers, including my mother, suffered from seasickness, a malady that originates in a discrepancy between what one senses and what the eye can see. The brain has to interpret two types of motion: *side-to-side* (rolling) and *up-and-down* (pitching). The *rolling* of the ship

makes it hard to keep one's balance, and in heavy seas, it is possible to be thrown from wall to wall in a corridor, or even clear across a room. The *pitching* of the ship as it plows forward through the waves creates a feeling of compression as the floor pushes up against the soles of one's feet followed by decompression as it suddenly drops away, producing a sense of light-headedness and a loss of gravity, especially disconcerting when going up or down stairs. Since the eye perceives an enclosed space as stable, these discrepancies can produce dizziness and nausea, a discomfort further aggravated by the incessant creaking of the walls and floors. In daylight, I found it helpful to be up on deck or to stay near a window or porthole where I could see the bow or the stern of the ship dipping up and down against the horizon.

By the middle of the week, the sea was rougher, and certain deck areas had to be roped off. For several days, my mother stayed pretty much in the cabin while I was personally more comfortable upstairs. Food was less appealing than it had been, but I missed no meals and felt rather independent having the table to myself. When the dishes on the table began to slide around because of the rolling and pitching of the ship, the table steward would pour some water on the tablecloth to hold the dishes in place. If it got really bad, the edges of the table could be pulled up about an inch so as to keep things from falling off entirely. When that became necessary, not many passengers showed up to eat.

Boring evenings

Evenings were rather boring, except perhaps for the lounge lizards, who took advantage of the tax-free opportunities of the mid-Atlantic to drink like Vikings. On several evenings, music was provided by a rather sorry band. When the band was occupied elsewhere, presumably playing in the upper class lounges, a noisy barker presided over a kind of horse-racing game, in which small model horses

advanced across the floor of the lounge according to the roll of the dice. This provided players with opportunities to bet on their favorite horse. One is continually amazed at the ingenuity of human beings when it comes to indulging their vices.

The fixtures on board were rather old-fashioned. Bathroom doors had little turn locks with red or green indicators on the outside that said, *Ledig* ("Available") or *Upptaget* ("Occupied"). The device is common in Scandinavia, and one wonders why something so simple and so helpful has never been widely marketed in this country. Instead of a shower, it was possible to arrange with the bath steward for a hot tub-bath if one didn't mind sitting in seawater and feeling sticky afterwards, though presumably clean.

Tour of the ship

Nanny Paulson never suffered from seasickness, and she was a good companion while my mother was being miserable down below. Nanny had arranged a ship's tour for several of her friends and she invited me to go along. It was fascinating. We saw the whole ship, including the bridge with all the controls, and I even got to meet the ship's captain and first mate. Our guide took us up to the radio room where the wireless was crackling and the teletype machines were clattering away.

Outside, on top of the radio room, cages had been specially built for some rare silver-blue foxes and for some thoroughbred mink that were also on the way to Sweden. They were fed canned chicken and cereal during the voyage and apparently did not suffer much from seasickness.

We went through some of the crew's quarters that seemed incredibly cramped and uncomfortable even by comparison with our tiny cabin. We climbed down metal ladders until we were in the engine room where the heat and the noise were very intense. It was hard to imagine anyone working under such conditions, but of course someone had to attend to the machinery. I was

awed by the size of the propeller shafts, and by the sense of power in the ship's engines, but I was also glad to get out of there.

All through the voyage, a few seagulls had accompanied the ship, swooping and diving whenever the ship's waste, which included a considerable amount of food, was dumped overboard. Toward the end of the week, I noticed that the number of seagulls had greatly increased, and then on Friday morning the word went out that land was in sight.

Land in sight!

Sure enough, on the starboard side of the ship, I could see the rocky coast of northern Scotland. Seasickness supposedly ceases as soon as one can see land, so my mother was temporarily back among the living, but only temporarily because the North Sea in December is known for its roughness. By Sunday, however, land was again visible. This time it was on the port side of the ship and it was the coast of Norway. That night we attended the traditional "Captain's Dinner." It was the last evening meal on board ship, complete with whistles and funny hats. Since it was nearly Christmas, the table was spread with an incredibly lavish *smörgåsbord*. The centerpiece was a roast suckling pig complete with a red apple in its mouth. One could go back repeatedly, as indeed I did, and

when everyone had eaten their fill, the table could have fed as many all over again. Even now, all these years later, I cannot remember a more impressive meal.

The Swedish archipelago

On Monday morning, I was up early. The Swedish equivalent of New York's Ambrose lightship was *Vinga fyr*, a very old lighthouse that marks the entrance to the archipelago of Göteborg. Once past *Vinga fyr*, the ship took on its harbor pilot and continued to sail slowly up the well-marked channel toward the city. There were many small, rocky islands with little red cottages, and here and there we could see people waving at the ship. At midmorning, we entered the river (*Göta älv*) on which Göteborg is situated. On the left were the shipyards of a thriving shipbuilding industry (*Götaverken*). I could see huge cranes and gantries, vessels in dry-dock for repair, ships at various stages of construction, as well as the usual tug and barge traffic found in a major seaport. The signs and advertising billboards, however, were all in Swedish.

Göteborg harbor

Presently I spotted the pier up ahead where the *Gripsholm* would dock. It was festively decorated with bunting



Vinga lighthouse outside Göteborg.

and banners, and on top of the pier, at about fifty foot intervals, were Swedish flags – a yellow cross on a blue field – waving in a brisk wind. Below were hundreds and hundreds of people waving and waiting for all 1,350 of us to disembark.

While the ship was secured by noon, it would be another several hours before we could get off because First Class and Cabin Class passengers were the first to disembark. From the upper deck I watched the booms hoisting the baggage and mailsacks out of the holds of the ship. Somewhere in the giant nets swinging through the air from the ship to the shed were our trunks. A cabin steward helped us get our small suitcases upstairs to a hallway where a wide door would fold back to allow the gangplank to be emplaced. After a detour through one of the lounges where various officials checked our papers and our passports, the moment finally arrived. We passed down the gangplank and I was in Sweden!

Unlike New York, where the pier was perpendicular to traffic, the Swedish-American Line pier in Göteborg was parallel to the street. In other respects, the interior of the shed seemed much the same though better organized. To find our baggage, we looked in the proper area under a large “P,” and there it was. When we had assembled everything, we collared a customs inspector who asked a few questions and then slapped an official looking stamp on each piece.

Nanny Paulson was also in our area, and I distinctly remember that when she found a customs inspector to check her bags, he took a long, squinting look at her, and then said, “Oh my, are *you* back again?” To exit the shed, we found a porter who wheeled our things past a checkpoint where another inspector applied a crayon to the sticker affixed earlier. Nanny was carrying an extra suitcase, as it turned out, on behalf of the crew member who had taken us on the grand tour of the ship. The bag had a sticker just like all the others but was full of American cigarettes

being smuggled into Sweden. As soon as she was clear of the checkpoint, the seaman relieved her of the bag. With an exchange of winks, he thanked her and disappeared into the crowd. It was the payoff for the tour!

Friends meet us

To my surprise, two friends of my mother met us on the other side of the barricade, Martha Johansson and Signe Johnson, who had returned to Sweden several months earlier. Martha was an attractive redhead, probably in her forties, who wore her hair in braids pulled up on her head somewhat like a garland. Signe was short and plumpish, probably in her sixties. Both had worked in the United States for wealthy families, and they now shared an apartment in Göteborg. Since it was mid-afternoon, they invited us to have supper with them and to stay the night. Out on the broad cobblestoned street, it surprised me to find that the blue streetcars of Göteborg consisted of two connected coaches, powered by pantograph, and that they could turn corners just as easily as the single streetcars did back in New York. It was very cold and starting to snow. The daylight was turning to darkness, and a warm apartment was welcome. The apartment house, in an older part of town, had a certain faded elegance, and looked much the way I imagined older houses might look in Paris or in Prague. The apartment itself had high-ceilinged rooms with ornate moldings, and was nicely furnished. One unusual feature was a quarter-round tile fixture in one corner of the living room that went from the floor to the ceiling and extended about two feet out into the room. It was a kind of central heating unit – called a *kakelugn* – for the various apartments that provided radiant and continuous heat. It was not something familiar from my previous experience, but it worked very well. I was to make many such discoveries during the next few months.

In the morning, we had a few things to do before we could head for the train station like changing money. I went with my mother to a Swedish bank, where she changed some dollars into crowns. I was much impressed by the number of times a rubber stamp had to be applied to a piece of paper before the transaction was considered complete.

On the train home

Eventually, we got to the central railroad station where a whole new world invited scrutiny. Freight cars were unusually short and stubby. Passenger trains had signs on each individual coach indicating its eventual destination. There were no steam locomotives; everything was electrified. Our first destination was the town of Markaryd, and then, the tiny community of Hannabad, where my mother had grown up and where her family still lived. The passenger coaches had compartments that opened on a narrow corridor along which the conductor could come by to collect the tickets. We had the compartment to ourselves, with seats facing opposite each other and a folding table in between. My mother wrote some postcards for mailing back to the States while I rode backwards observing the changing landscape and noting the names of stations where the train stopped: Kungsbacka, Varberg, Falkenberg, and then, Halmstad, where we had to change trains.

I speak Swedish!

I have two vivid recollections of the layover at Halmstad. First, I remember buying a bar of chocolate at the kiosk and thinking to myself that it seemed grainy compared to American chocolate. Second, I remember, at my mother’s urging, going up to a railroad official who was changing signs on the platform and asking him in *Swedish* when the next train would be leaving for Markaryd. I do not know whether I was more surprised to hear myself actually saying something in Swedish or getting an answer that confirmed I had really

been understood. The part of Sweden that is south of Göteborg at one time belonged to Denmark, which accounts for the fact that southern Swedish is marked by a distinctly "Southern drawl." So, in the broad accent of the province, the man looked straight at me and said, "Ahrr-ton och fyrtio-fyra (18.44)," or, 6:44 p.m. My mother was much amused by the exchange. By lavish praise, she convinced me to think it really was worth the effort to try to speak Swedish after all, I was going to be there nearly a year. She was not wrong.

When the train arrived in Markaryd, we were met at the station by my Uncle Andrew and my cousin, Allan, who was about my age. The four-mile ride by taxi out to Hannabad was memorable. It was totally dark, and there was about a foot of snow on the ground. Once the village of Markaryd was behind us, I could only see what was illuminated by the headlights of the car. The unpaved, snow-covered road was barely visible, though the driver seemed to know exactly where every turn was supposed to be. We rode uphill and downhill, over little bridges, and through a deep, deep forest with enormous evergreen trees whose



snow-laden branches seemed to sweep the ground in greeting. It was incredibly beautiful and I knew that somewhere at the end of the forest, a welcome was awaiting us.

I was not disappointed. The woods eventually opened out into the hamlet of Hannabad where I could now see a few lights here and there, and then the car stopped. We were at my Uncle Andrew's house. Aunt Gerda, a slightly younger version of my mother, welcomed us and introduced us to her two little girls, my cousins, and to *Morfar* (= "mother's

father"), my grandfather. Reunion was heady stuff. The tears flowed freely, and everyone was talking at the same time.

I could tell my mother was very, very happy.

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The Bridge Conference in Karlstad in September 2006

In late September, Wednesday 27th to Sunday October 1st there will be an interesting conference being held in Karlstad, Sweden, the capital of the County and Province of Värmland. The conference is organized by the Kinship Center in cooperation with the Swedish Council of America, who wants to broaden its contacts with modern Sweden.

The conference language will be English.

There will be several social events but also a number of workshops, 24 in all are planned. Their topics range from genealogy through folk costumes and wood carving to Swedish food, and life in modern Sweden.

On Friday there will be a number of excursions, ten in all. Their des-

tinations vary from the Nobel Museum in Karlskoga to Mårbacka, home of famous author Selma Lagerlöf to the Viking Ship *Glad of Gillberga* to the gourmet inn at Grythyttan. Two excursions also go to Dalsland, to The House of Straw, the Aqueduct at Håverud and many other interesting places.

The conference is open to anyone, who is interested in meeting with Swedes, active in preserving and showing local history, as many of the participants will be active in local historical societies (*hembygdsföreningar*).

The conference fee is \$400. The costs include the conference, all meals from Wednesday dinner through Saturday banquet, enter-

tainments and transportation during the conference. Lodging is extra and available in various price ranges. On the web site it says that the conference fee should be paid by 1 June, but it will still be possible to register during the summer be.

Documentation of the conference will be sent to the participants within one month after the conference.

You can find more details at www.swedishcouncil.org/conference.htm

or at www.emigrantregistret.s.se/conf-en.htm

Välkomna! You will see your SAG editor there!