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America in My Childhood

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"Moshult was a little part of the world where thoughts of distant places usually did not stretch any farther than to Skruv and Emmaboda," tells the old cantor Ivar Svensson in the Algutsboda book. The exception, of course, was America, which was always in the thoughts of the people of Algutsboda during the time when Vilhelm grew up. America had become a household word, comparable to heaven. The blissful lived there, but could not be seen. Here, as in most other parishes in Småland, America was considered a western offshoot to the home area. This was especially true about Minnesota and Chisago County, "America's Småland," which became the most common destination for the emigrants from Algutsboda and Ljuder parishes. Most people in the area had only a vague idea about the Promised Land or the U.S.A. It was commonly known in which direction it was located and that it was bigger than Sweden, therefore inconceivably big.

As in most other areas in Sweden in the 1800s, the population grew considerably in Algutsboda. The population growth was most prominent among the lower class, which was reflected in the construction of more than two hundred side-cottages *(backstugor)* during the first half of the century. These were the people in the forest around grandmother's Trångadal. In the 1850s, 4,500 people lived in the parish, but the population kept growing and reached 5,391 in 1880. Algutsboda was then not only one of Kronoberg's biggest parishes, but also one of the most densely populated. The growing population contributed to the increasing emigration, which began with the not too destitute, and eventually spread to society's lower classes, the farm workers and small-industry workers. Those living in side-cottages and crofters without contacts in America were usually too poor to emigrate and therefore remained in the area.

The emigration from Algutsboda began early, or about the same time as in neighboring parishes. The first lone emigrant left around 1850 and the earliest group of emigrants, 33 people, left in 1853. After a fairly slow start, emigration took off as the years of famine continued. Axel Henriksson, the area's foremost researcher of folklore, describes the year 1869 as the absolute biggest year in regards to emigration with 93 America certificates. The year 1880 was especially intensive, like everywhere else in Sweden, with about 400 emigrants. The large emigration continued until the First World War, when it was spurred on by, among other things, the closing-down of Modala glass factory. The 1920s was the last of the eight emigration decades. According to the church records, 1,617

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people from Algutsboda left for North America during the entire American emigration epoch (period) ending in 1930. Even if the number of emigrants from Algutsboda was high, it was still lower than the number from the average province in relation to population and considerably lower than the number from the neighboring parishes of Ljuder, Långasjö, and Älmeboda.

Fifty-nine people from about one dozen homes which comprised Molshultamåla village, emigrated during the 80 years of emigration. Almost all of them, or 52 people, went to USA. Moberg's parents also harbored thoughts of America when newly married. In a letter to his mother Johanna, dated in Norway, Michigan, 5 December 1892, Ida's brother Axel Julius Aronsson is neither encouraging nor discouraging leaving Sweden: "but it is difficult to say if they will fare any better here than at home." At the same time, Axel wants to guarantee that Mother Johanna will have a good life if she comes. We don't know if it was this letter or something else that dampened the thoughts of emigrating for the soldier and his wife. It is clear that their intentions were sincere for some time. Vilhelm used to say that he could very well have been born in America. "I understood that my parents had regrets. But it was too late now: they could not emigrate with seven children." Vilhelm Moberg's childhood and adolescent years were consequently woven into the enormous emigration tapestry of Småland. One can easily understand why he felt the emigration subject came to him, choosing its own author.

Vilhelm Moberg has written about the background to the emigrant novels in several places. In the document *The Unknown Swedes* (*Den okända släkten*) he discussed the first results of his research into the building of the novels. The "novel about the emigration novels," which is included in *Berättelser ur min levnad*, is the most personal account. The introduction tells about how the "homebody" was driven to another part of the world by numerous American relatives. "Today, my kinfolk over there number about one hundred. USA is the Kinfolk Land, to me."

We read that America was one of the first words Vilhelm recognized and that photographs of the relatives who had emigrated were always on display in the cottage. The framed picture "Memory from America" occupied the place of honor and showed photographs of his mother's "American siblings." "I saw them on photos—the photos from America were displayed in pretty shell frames on the dresser which was the most prominent place in the cottage. The portraits framed by the colorful shells were father's and mother's pride; they were holy things not to be touched by children's dirty hands." Vilhelm was especially fascinated by the photographs of his cousins. All of them lived in the USA and the photos gave witness of their fashionable clothing. "For a long time I thought that cousins were a kind of high-class, distinguished children, only found in America."

The boy's growing desire to decide his own fate and join the emigrants came from the early impressions of America as Småland's foster parent: "You were born and grew up in Sweden. As an adult, you went to America." In 1916, the dream of America seemed closer to becoming a reality. Uncle Peter Jacob of San Leandro, who had come home for a visit three years earlier, sent a ticket for

America and a letter promising to take care of the eighteen-year-old. The nephew was to attend the same school as his cousins in California. Vilhelm made arrangements to travel with some friends. His father seemed prepared to agree to his son's wish to emigrate, but his mother was implacable: "She would not let me go. America had taken all her siblings from her....Was she also going to lose her only living son to the country from which nobody returned?" Vilhelm was also reminded of his grandmother's words of warning: "Don't go to America, because if you do, your mother will never see you again."

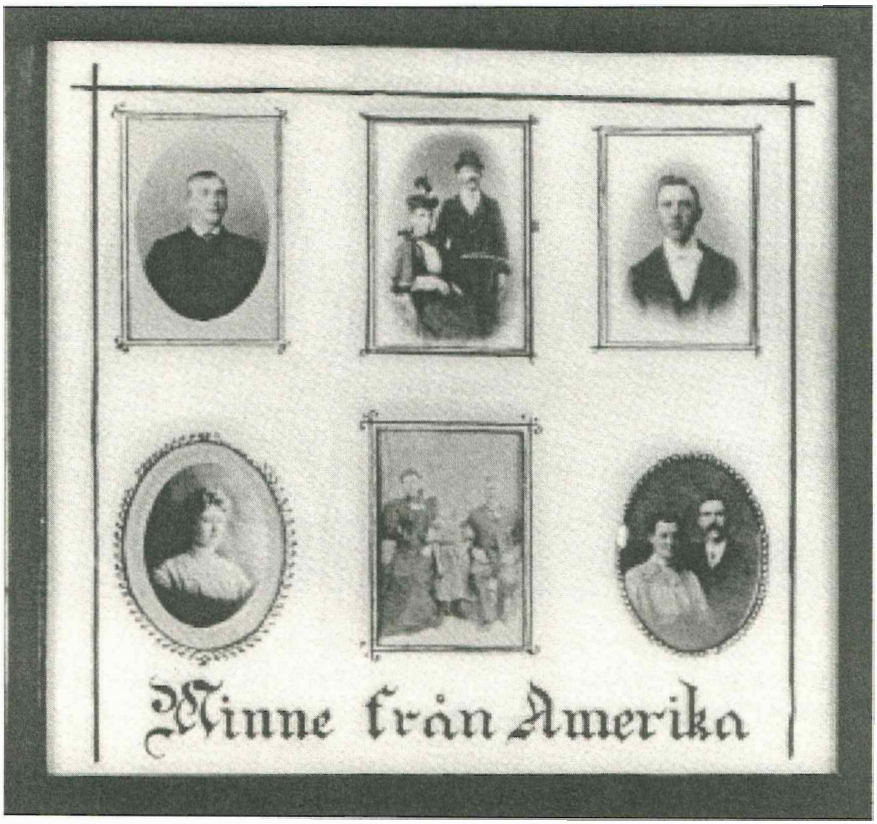

Fig. 1. Memory from America, a photographic collage of Vilhelm's American relatives on his mother Ida's side of the family. Sune Ekstrand photograph.

This resulted in the annoying fact that his friends left while Vilhelm stayed behind, forced to do so by his mother. In return, his father promised him a course at Grimslöv's Folk Academy. Board and room at Grimslöv amounted to

500 crowns, which Kalle Moberg produced by selling a litter of piglets, thereby saving his son for Sweden. He could now embark upon the tricky road through life's own university in earnest. What would have become of Vilhelm if his mother Ida had given in? His impressive physique and his spirit would no doubt have been valued in the U.S. But life as an immigrant would most likely have been too busy for Vilhelm to produce other writings than letters home.

Fig. 2. Vilhelm (on left) and his friends in Algutsboda in 1916, when he was seriously considering America. Two of the boys in the photograph pursued their plans to emigrate. In this case, Vilhelm was not the bravest of the boys.

The America letters were familiar to those who stayed home. They were often read aloud in the home during quiet time in the evening set aside for rest. The rectangular envelopes with the blue stamps showing the president were usually addressed to the mother in the family, who put forth great efforts to reply. Occasionally, the father answered a letter. Vilhelm has told us that all siblings on both his father's and his mother's side emigrated. Like most people, his father and mother also considered America in their youth. A letter from Uncle Axel in Michigan, dated 5 December 1892, discusses the possibilities for mother Johanna, Ida, and her husband "Moberg" to emigrate, but this letter, found in

Vilhelm's possession, did not result in their emigrating. "I could just as well have been born in America."

He writes that his father had three siblings who emigrated, but the church books only tell about his sister, Anna Charlotta, born 1869, who emigrated in 1893. An illegitimate daughter left after her, in 1904. Aunt Lotten's married name was Holtzman and several letters from her are included in Vilhelm's America letters from his relatives. All six of his mother's siblings who emigrated are represented in the large collection of letters, which became the author's first source material for the emigrant novels. In the clerical survey records, they are all listed under the patronymic Aronsson: Aldo Gottfrid, born 1857 and "in America since 1881;" Axel Julius, born 1859, emigrated 1882 with his brother Peter Jacob, born 1861; Anna Carolina, born 1866, emigrated 1885; Vilhelm's namesake Carl Vilhelm, born 1869, emigrated 1887; and finally Frans Ernst, born 1872, emigrated 1890. Last on the page with the heading "125 Moshultamåla" is the only Aronsson sibling who remained in the area, Vilhelm's mother Ida Charlotta, born 1864, noted three times for safety's sake.

The first sibling to emigrate, Aldo Gottfrid, who died at a young age, left for Wisconsin after working for some time on the railroad in Jämtland, where also Axel and Peter Jacob prepared for their emigration. From Wisconsin he crossed into Iron River in the forest and mining area of northern Michigan. Iron River later became the desired destination also for Axel, Peter Jacob, Carl Vilhelm, and Frans. Vilhelm arrived there in 1948 to see his cousins and their children. Uncle Frans, who Americanized his name to Frank Lindqvist, visited his mother together with his son Earl in 1906, while Peter Jacob made a trip to Sweden in 1913. As an old man, Peter J. Aronson began writing down his memories, but they were still incomplete when he died in 1945 at the age of eighty-five. In Vilhelm's America collection is a copy marked "My uncle Peter Jacob Aronsson's memoirs." After varying lengths of time in the Midwest, several of the Aronsson siblings continued as far west as they could, to Seattle and different places in California. Peter Jacob settled in San Leandro and Anna Carolina in San Diego. Axel and Frank in Seattle wrote frequent letters home and their efforts became very useful for their nephew. Like many emigrants, Axel wondered if anything had changed at home. This is evidenced in a letter dated March 17, 1930, "So they drive automobiles in Moshultamåla now. I wonder if they are flying in the countryside, too. Do you have electric lights at home?"

Vilhelm's sister Signe emigrated to Michigan, the family's most common destination in America, in 1926, and Axel confirms in one of his letters to Moshultamåla that she has settled in Escanaba. He adds, "I can't remember your children's names. I have become so (forgetful)... but I do remember your son's name because I see his name in the paper *Svenska Amerikanaren,* William Moberg, I believe that is him." The letter from his uncle in Seattle was an early indication of Vilhelm's fame on the other side of the Atlantic.

Vilhelm had left home long before his thirty-two-year-old sister emigrated in 1926. Her stories would have an impact on the emigrant novels. In *When I Was a Child* (*Soldat med brutet gevär*) his sister is transformed into seventeen-year-old

Dagmar who defies her parents and the system of masters and servants by breaking away from her life as a maid and following her calling to the West. During her three years as a maid, Dagmar had saved up for an outfit for the trip. "She bought a hat, a shining oilcloth purse, a muff to keep her hands in, and a brooch to fasten by her neck, just like Aunt Anna in the photograph. And she bought hair in big bunches and tucked it under her own hair, which stood on end, all in order to appear genteel." And the day came when Dagmar herself lifted her America trunk onto the spring wagon while Aldo Samuel's red mare nervously shook the wagon back and forth.

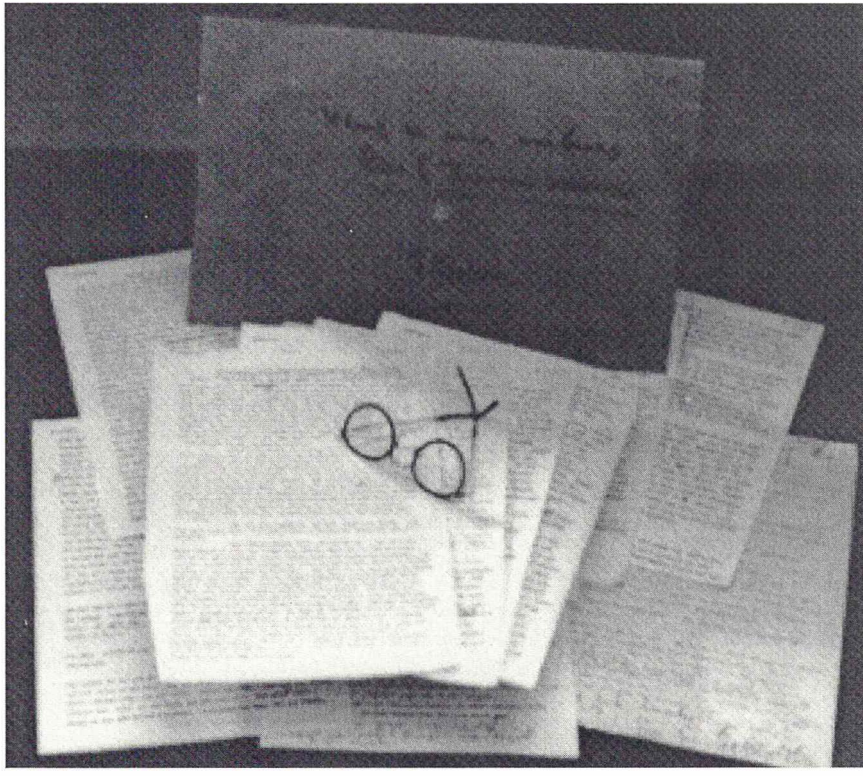

Fig. 3. After carefully studying his uncle Peter J. Aronson's memoirs, Vilhelm placed the manuscript in the big brown envelope now included in the Moberg collection at The House of Emigrants. Sune Ekstrand photograph.

This and several other brilliant descriptions made Moberg's autobiographical novel one of the strongest literary testimonies to the emigration fever in Småland. When the poor mother, the soldier's Hulda, says farewell to her son

Gunnar a few years later, and watches the same red mare pulling the wagon, she thinks back to all the times this mare has taken her lost children to the railroad station.

> "As the soldier's Hulda stood there, she remembered the other times. When the mare left with Albin, she was still a young mare. She stomped impatiently between the shafts, chewed the bit, and rocked the wagon back and forth so the farmhand had all he could do to hold her. That was Albin, and it was many years ago. When she took Ivar and Dagmar she was fully tamed and stood with feet planted on the ground; she had reached a horse's best years. But there was a spark in her eyes, attention in the way her ears reached forward, and pride in the way she held her head high. When Fredrik left, she had a colt running at her side. But when she was harnessed up to the wagon, it was obvious that she had aged; her speed was slower and she sometimes had to be urged on. A few more years had passed since then.
>
> And now Gunnar was leaving in the wagon behind the red mare, and she was old and tired, didn't chew on the bit, didn't stomp back and forth, didn't move her feet at all; she just stood there."