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When Anna Traveled to America: An Example of Findings in Ellis Island's Database

Elisabeth Thorsell*

McKeesport 20 Oct. 1916

Dear Aunt!

Well, I have reached my destination and everything went well. We arrived in New York yesterday, then traveled by night-train from there and arrived here at 8 a.m. today.

Everything went fairly well, if only conditions onboard the ship had been a little better. It was miserable, but it is over now and I am not going back unless I can travel 2nd class, and it will still be a long time. Yes, of course, I should not say anything for sure until I find out how I like it here. I think I will like it; that is how I feel now anyway.

We have come to very nice people, so that is good. Gustav and Gunnar at Tången also live here. They are laborers but live very nicely, their own little house with 9 or 10 rooms and the very best furniture, so I am sure there's a big difference here and in Sweden.

I don't know if I will stay here in Keesport or Pittsburg, I will see. I may apply for work. Today we traveled many miles by car when Hilda and I, Gustav and Gunnar went to Pittsburg. Here, I get to ride in cars until I am satisfied. This place is similar to Stockholm except it looks like a city full of homes, not as crowded as in Stockholm.

How are you now, I hope you are well, and don't worry about me, dear Aunt. Greet Aunt Anna from me. I am listening to music as I am writing. The Mrs. in the house is a very good piano player, and she sings too. They have one son who studies at the technical college and one daughter goes to elementary school.

I am glad to be here now. You know, Aunt, that if I don't like it I can always go back.

It is amazing how many regulations one has to follow when traveling here. First in Kristiania, we had to wait in line for hours, then we had to see a doctor, then finally after much trouble we could board the ship. Then I was seasick, and that was terrible, then we had to go to Kirkvald, we left there, and finally arrived

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in New York one morning. There we had to go to a place for a customs check, from there on a ferry to an island, Ellis Island, where the immigrant office is. There we had to walk one by one and without hats. Yes, it was a funny ceremony, but I didn't think it was very thorough, not as far as I was concerned anyway. They just looked at me and let me go. But they were rather hard on us. It is a big building, about the size of the National Museum in St[ockholm] and here we had to run around on the top floor, then down to another part of the building. They outfitted us with address labels so we wouldn't get lost. Well, I thought that was a funny thing.

Well, farewell for now. Make sure you stay healthy and don't be upset with me that I left. I will write soon again. It will be nice to sleep in a real bed tonight, last night we slept sitting up. Gustav and Hilda send their love, Gunnar too.

Address: Jenny Lind St. McKeesport, PA, U.S.A.

Twenty-year-old Anna Svensson wrote this letter from Färnebo in Värmland to her Aunt Nanna Svensson in Nordmark the day she arrived in the U.S.A. Anna lost her mother when she was four years old and her father remarried. In 1915, her father, the ironworker Carl Victor Svensson, died from complications from an accident with a runaway horse. Anna had no longer anything that directly tied her to Sweden, except maybe her dear aunt Nanna. She wrote several hundred letters to Nanna, which are preserved.

The New Database

In the 5/00 issue of *Släkthistoriskt Forum*, I wrote an article about Ellis Island, the institution that received immigrants in New York from 1892 and on, where I mentioned the plans for a large database containing information about all of these immigrants.

The database was made available to the eagerly waiting general public on 17 April this year and then immediately broke down—the interest was much greater than anyone had predicted. It was reported that 50 million (!) attempts were made to access the database during the first 24 hours, and every tenth attempt was successful.

More servers were immediately installed and at this time there are about 25 servers online, making it easier to access the database, even if it still can be a problem. The best thing to do may be to get up early in the morning when America is still asleep and go to <www.ellislandrecords.org>.

Cousin Anna, who wrote the letter to her dear aunt, seemed to be a good example of what one can expect find in the database.

By typing in this address, one reaches Ellis Island's home page, which is rather dark and not very informative.

Further down on the page is a "continue" button, but this sometimes only produces a "server error;" sometimes it opens the first search page. In the middle

of this page you will find “find a passenger,” where you enter first name and the surname of the person you are looking for, then hit “search archives.”

If everything works, you will get a list of the first 25 matches. You are also able to narrow your search by using the buttons in the left-hand column and enter data such as sex, age, nationality, etc. This is the “edit” button.

In Anna’s case, the possible matches were reduced from 141 to 7 when I entered the year of emigration, 1916. Unfortunately, she was not included in these selections, which created a new problem. When I switched to search for Anna Svensson, emigrated from Kristiania, I was more successful and she showed up in the list of matches. The list appears with the exact spelling used in the search, but also with suggestions for other variations.

The next step was to click on her name at which time I was asked to register in order to continue. As I already had registered, all I had to do was type in my username and password, which I selected when I first visited the database.

I now had the basic information about her (see figure 1), the eleven different points available in the database. However, I was surprised to find that the destination was not included, which is rather impractical. “Fernateo” is listed as her place of residence, which is presumed to be a mistake in the transcription of Färnebo.

In the left-hand column are links regarding the ship and the more exciting “ship manifest,” which opens a list of all passengers on her journey.

Ship Manifest

Anna is found on line 5 and her travel companion Hilda on the next line in the ship manifest. Above this list is a small button, “view original manifest.” Opening this page gives you a scanned photo of the original manifest, rather small in size. But with a click on the magnifying glass below the picture you discover more information. The manifest comprises one page. The pages are not always in order so it is necessary to move a little ahead or back to find what one is looking for, but it is well worth the trouble.

Questions on the List

For this particular year, 1916, twenty-nine questions are answered, including the following: their destination; who paid for the ticket; address and relationship of the person they said they were going to; how much money they carried with them; hair and eye color; if they had been in the USA before and, if so, when; if they were polygamists or anarchists (!); health condition; height; year of birth; literacy; etc.

Unfortunately, the link to the original manifest cannot always be found, in which case the information about the immigrant will be very limited. The amount of information also varies considerably between different time periods. In the 1920s, for example, typed, easy-to-read manifests were produced with information about closest relative or friend in the homeland (see figure 2) as well as the address, while the information from the 1890s usually is more brief.

Another Try

In 1920, Anna married Folke Heline from Sweden and in 1921 she made her only journey back to Sweden to visit. When she returned, she brought her younger half-sister Hilda, fifteen years old.

Now it would be interesting to see if we could find Anna and Hilda in the manifests for 1921.

After a few attempts, we actually found Anna, but with the spelling "Helin," but Hilda was not to be found. I was lucky to be able to open the original manifest, and noticed Hilda was registered together with Anna. The problem was that the spelling "Svenson" was not accepted as a form of "Svensson," and Hilda, of course, was listed under "Svenson."

A Big Advantage

Despite certain problems with the database search, this new prospect, free of charge, is a big advantage for all who seek their ancestors. However, one must remember that the database covers only a limited time period, 1892-1924, and that the biggest emigration took place in the 1880s.

A Few Numbers

The database includes information about approximately 22 million individuals. About 40 percent of the United States' present population are estimated to have some ties to an emigrant who came through Ellis Island. About 1,200 volunteers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints spent the last seven years transcribing and registering the ship manifests from microfilm, and have donated about 5 million working hours to the project. The database went online 17 April and had about 26 million visitors during the first 54 hours, which makes 27,000 hits per second (not verified), and these are just the lucky ones who got through (as they say on the radio). (Source: Dick Eastman Online newsletter 2001 2/5, 24/5).

A Few More Tips

Stephen Morse is a free-lancer knowledgeable in computer science, who has created a special, simplified search tool for the database: [<http://sites.netscape.net/stephenmorse/ellis.html>](http://sites.netscape.net/stephenmorse/ellis.html)

I have not yet had the opportunity to try it, but it would certainly be worth checking out. A so-called faq-page (frequently asked questions) is included on the site, which contains some good information about the possibilities and limitations of the database.

Users who notice errors in the database may send an e-mail to dberrors@ellisland.org. In the subject box, type in either *Manifest error*, *Spelling error*, *Ship image error* or *Other database error*. The sender will not receive a reply, and the question should naturally be in English.

▶ Passenger Record
 ▶ Original Ship Manifest
 ▶ Ship
 ▶ View Annotations
 ▶ Create an Annotation
 ▶ Back to Search Results

PASSENGER RECORD

Here is the record for the passenger. Click the links on the left to see more information about this passenger.

[ADD TO YOUR ELLIS ISLAND FILE](#)
[VIEW ORIGINAL SHIP MANIFEST](#)
[VIEW SHIP](#)



Name:	Svensson, Anna
Ethnicity:	Sweden, Scandinavia
Place of Residence:	Fernateo, Sweden
Date of Arrival:	October 19, 1916
Age on Arrival:	20y
Gender:	F
Marital Status:	S
Ship of Travel:	United States
Port of Departure:	Kristiania, Akershus, Norway

Fig. 1. This is the basic data about Anna that can be printed out. To the left are the buttons “Original Ship Manifest” and “Ship.” Viewing or creating an annotation requires membership in the Ellis Island Foundation.

* Last permanent residence.		The name and complete address of nearest relative or friend in country whence alien came.	Final destination. (If bonded for permanent residence.)	
Country.	City or town.		State.	City or town.
U.S.A.	N.Y. New York	Father: Aug. Anderson, Kullen, Mjölby.	N.Y.	New York
do	Akron, Ohio	Mother: Sofia Anderson, Karlstro: Sköldinge	Ohio	<i>Local Ohio</i>
Sweden	Åkåping	Mother: Tekla Anderson, Storgatan 44, Åkåping	Mo.	Kansas City
U.S.A.	Chicago	Mother: Karolina Bjurström, Nora	Ill.	Chicago
Sweden	Solna	Brother: Karl Arvidson, Stjärngatan 5, Stockholm	Mass.	Cambridge
do	Uddevalla	Mother: Laura Olson, Stenungsund	Ill.	Chicago
do	Malvarby, St. Åby	Mother: Lovisa Creek, Malvarby, St. Åby	Nebr.	Lincoln
U.S.A.	Boston, Mass.	Mother: Josefina Börjeson; Kvibergs, Göteborg	Mass.	Boston

Fig. 2. Typed manifest from the 1920s.