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Overcoming That Swedish Reserve

Robert J. Nelson*

When my father reached Illinois from Karlshamn in 1897, he was sixteen years old and spoke only a few words of English. In hopes of smoothing young Oskar's path toward Americanization, someone gave him (or perhaps he purchased) a small, red-bound volume entitled *Fullständigaste engelsk-svenska brefställaren för svenska folket i Amerika* (Complete English-Swedish Guide to Letter Writing for Swedish Folk in America).

By the time I arrived on the scene thirty-two years later, the volume was gathering dust in the attic. When I rediscovered it long after my father was dead, it did not show much sign of use. I conclude he faced the mysteries of American social and commercial intercourse without relying a great deal on its help. I think I can see why.

Still, the publishers of the *Brefställaren*, Engberg & Holmberg *Förlag* of Chicago, no doubt knew what they were doing. The guide was printed in the 1880s, the peak decade for Swedish immigration to the United States, when some 300,000 men, women, and children left *det gamla landet* (the old country) for *framtidlandet* (the land of the future). The book probably found a ready market.

And it may have proved valuable to some immigrants. It offered instructions on bookkeeping and how to draw up business documents, along with information on postal rates and the English equivalents of Swedish weights and measures.

Most of the volume, though, was devoted to sample letters for all occasions, printed in both English and Swedish. And from these one gathers that Engberg & Holmberg were determined to replace Swedish reticence with American effusiveness.

"As the letter takes the place of conversation," the book counseled, "it should be natural, that is to say, we should write as we are in the habit of thinking and speaking...."

Ignoring its own advice, the *Brefställaren* proceeded to "Congratulations on birthdays. To a Father," the first sample letter: "Dear Father, I consider it one of the principal duties of my life, to profit by every opportunity of expressing to you my filial veneration...."

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Suggested birthday wishes to a mother (No. 2) were even less restrained: "Believe me, not a day passes, but in the silence of my chamber, I recall with a grateful heart the many proofs of your untiring kindness and solicitude, and pray to God to preserve the valued life of so good, so affectionate a mother; but today, in particular, allow me to express the feelings of my filial love and veneration for you...."

At this point some immigrants may have begun to wonder if more *brännvin* (vodka, schnapps) than printer's ink flowed in the publishers' veins. The sample business correspondence was a little more down to earth:

"No. 11. A man by the name of Sam Hill called upon me to-day, and asked employment...As he tells me that he has been formerly engaged by you...."

Sam Hill seems to have vanished from sight. Perhaps his references all wrote No. 13 letters in reply: "Be on your guard against this Mr. Sam Hill...in the few weeks he spent in my employ, he proved himself a bad subject, wherefore I sent him away." Actually, my father and his peers seldom conducted business by mail. Instead they drove to a neighboring farm or into town, talked matters over laconically, and sealed any deal with a handshake.

Where the *Brefställaren* abandoned any pretense at Swedish reserve, however, was in its suggested love letters:

"No. 16. Charming, lovely Josephine: Even in the still walks of female retirement, the noble and esteemable qualities of the heart and mind cannot remain concealed...Do not consider it a mere expression, when I assure you that your virtuous, amiable conduct has filled my heart...."

If the young lady had her own *Brefställaren*, she could fire back No. 12: "Dear Sir, I honor the man who offers me his hand and his heart, not in the gaudy expression of an indescribable passion, but in the clear and frank language of a simple and feeling soul...."

Had my courting parents exchanged such letters, my maternal grandparents might have written off my father as a Frenchman trying to pass as a Swede and placed my mother on a diet of *limpa* and water (no coffee) to calm her down. Indeed, I can't imagine any of the Swedish immigrants or first-generation Swedish-Americans I knew in my youth indulging in such correspondence. What a suitor wrote to one of my aunts in 1901 after he had left Kansas for Brooklyn more likely reflected the extent to which they were willing to reveal their feelings in letters:

"I wish it would be ice on them [the lakes] soon so I could go out skating. My skates are ready and I also have a pair in readiness for you in case you come here, which I wish you would." And later: "If I can't have the pleasure to see you again it cannot be denied me to think of my friend in Kansas and I don't think it is right of you to stay out in that dreadful country when you know I am waiting for you in gay New York."

His messages may have fallen short of the elegance promoted by the *Brefställaren*, but they had the ring of sincerity. Even those letters strike me as a bit extreme, but my aunt's suitor may have been affected by the pain of parting

and the atmosphere of gay New York. Most of those old Swedes expressed themselves more in the manner of the proverbial *Svenskamerikan* who tells his wife, "I said on our wedding day I loved you. If there's any change I'll let you know."

In their native language, some of the Swedish immigrants were capable of eloquence. Universal education had come to Sweden in 1842, and during the nineteenth century the nation attained one of the highest rates of literacy in Europe. Yet most of the immigrants' letters home to Sweden had, as H. Arnold Barton puts it in his *Letters From the Promised Land: Swedes in America, 1840-1914* (University of Minnesota Press, 1975), a "rough, unvarnished quality." And the writers seldom unburdened themselves of what may have lain deepest in their hearts. Their letters, Barton says, "are often filled with clichés, concerned with mundane matters and local news from the old home parish. Many consist largely of religious platitudes, hearsay information, accounts culled from newspapers, comments on the weather, reports on wages and the prices of commodities, news of family affairs, and greetings to long lists of relatives and friends at home."

With or without the aid of a *brefställaren*—or in spite of it—Swedish immigrants and their children made their way in the United States with less difficulty than what many people of many other nationalities experienced. Historians and social scientists have remarked how readily and rapidly Swedes were assimilated into the culture of their adopted land. Their basic literacy undoubtedly was an advantage when they confronted the challenge of a new language.

And this challenge, I am sure, came less from the pages of a *brefställaren* than from schools, from social and business discourse with others, or from magazines and newspapers. The challenge was met willingly and enthusiastically by many, out of necessity by others. In the Illinois home of my father's half-brother, mostly Swedish was spoken during the early years in America. But when the family's first son started school in the 1890s, the English spoken by the teacher and other students might as well have been Greek. The family immediately established an English-only rule in their home. Their younger children grew up hearing and learning almost no Swedish, as I, too, would do.

(That oldest son overcame his late start in English. He went on to gain a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and pursued a career as a geographer for the U.S. government. Three of his cousins also earned advanced degrees, became college professors, and authored several books.)

Though a teen-ager when he arrived on these shores, my father, too, spent a year or so in grade school in Illinois, surrounded by mostly younger children, absorbing from them as well as from the lessons something of the language and customs of America. Reading became a lifelong passion for him—newspapers, periodicals, and books. Some of what attracted him was escape reading—novels, pulp westerns—but he read American history, too. And always the farm

magazines. So completely did he leave the Swedish language behind (except for his accent) that in later years letters from relatives in Sweden were a challenge for him to decipher, and writing to those relatives in Swedish was almost beyond him. His was a situation not unique among Swedish immigrant families.

The transition from a Swedish- to an English-speaking culture came hard for some immigrants and their families, of course. In religion, in particular, one could see a reluctance to cast aside the familiar language. Even as they were becoming Americanized six days a week, Swedish Lutherans on Sunday liked to sing hymns and hear a sermon in Swedish. This led to divisions in some congregations, with younger members breaking away to form their own English-speaking churches. The late Emory Lindquist, historian and one-time president of Bethany College, told of the congregation in central Kansas that built a church with twin towers. In the stone work of each tower was inscribed the first line of Martin Luther's hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." On one tower the inscription was in Swedish, on the other in English, symbols of divided loyalty.

By the time I began school in the 1930s, my father had been elected to the local school board in Kansas where we then lived, and was therefore responsible, along with the other board members, for seeing that all the children in our diverse rural neighborhood got a good grounding in the reading and writing of English. Being forty-eight years older than I, my father did not live to see me embark on a career in journalism, but I think he would have been pleased and probably not surprised.

Journalism, literature, history, teaching, cinema, politics: the annals of these and other fields where a command of English is vital are speckled with the names of Swedish immigrants and their children, testimony to the fact that, by whatever means, these new Americans achieved a mastery of a new tongue and an understanding of a new society.

The downside, as we say now, is that as English flourished among these immigrants and their descendants, Swedish faded. The Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center newsletter (No. 9, 1995) pointed out that in 1910 almost 1.5 million people in the United States could speak Swedish, but in 1990 the Census Bureau found fewer than 100,000.

Today an American who speaks Swedish is almost as much of a curiosity as my inherited copy of *Fullständigaste engelsk-svenska brefställaren för svenska folket i Amerika*. Alas.