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With Älvdal People Among the Shakers in America[†]

Ewert Åhs

Translated by John E. Norton*

One of the most remarkable events of the great popular religious revival that swept across our parish in the mid-1800s was, doubtless, the large emigration to America. The precursors to that emigration were described recently in the fourth part of our parish history, but because of space limitations we can only cite the following:

Then, a spiritual disease with the character of pure humbug gripped many souls in the Älvdal valley. It was Shakerism, which came from America by way of the previous parish tailor from Mora, Anders Blomberg, born in Myggsjö, Orsa Finnmark. He had previously acted in Mora on behalf of another sect (editor's note: the Erik Janssonists), was committed to an insane asylum in Uppsala, and together with twenty-five followers from Mora emigrated to the (Janssonist) sect's paradise, Bishop Hill in America. When Bishop Hill got into trouble, Blomberg joined the Shakers and became representative of a Shaker colony in Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. To recruit labor for their farms, he went back to Sweden in 1866 and tried unsuccessfully to win proselytes. Finally, in the middle of March 1867, he came to Älvdalen, where he had greater success.

Breaking Up

According to Church emigration archives, no less than forty-eight persons emigrated in 1868, including Tenn Lars Larsson of Näset with his entire family of seven persons. In 1869 and 1871, twenty persons followed, and in the latter year they included master fiddler Gyris Anders Andersson from Klitten with his wife. Among the letters in his estate, generously put at *Skansvaktens*'s disposal by Mrs. Johanna Wik of Klitten, the daughter of Gyris's wife's sister, there were a number, mainly written by Gyris himself, telling of the emigrant's fate and adventures. Here is one to his father-in-law, describing the first part of their trip:

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Göteborg, 8 July 1871

Dear parents, brothers, sisters, friends and relations remaining at home, God's peace be with you now and always! I will briefly in a few lines let you know that the Lord has successfully brought us to this place and we are in good health, and will only tell how quickly the trip has gone to date from Elfdalen 27 June, to Mora 28th, from Mora 29 June, to Falun the 30th, from Falun to Gefle 1 July, from Gefle the 2nd, aboard the steamer *Sten Sture*, delayed outside Öregrund by fog, to Stockholm 4 July, from Stockholm the same day on the steamer *Baltsar Platen*, passing Motala on the 5th and Vänersborg, Trollhättan, and Göteborg the 7th, and now this afternoon we are going aboard the great steamer *Skandinavia* to Scotland, the most direct route for us.

We send collective greetings to all of you, and ask that you share it with even Sar Lars L. S. and my mother M. D. D. and all others. The Lord be with you. Safe journey. When we arrive, I will write more. Anna sends greetings to her parents, so you might not be troubled about me, it is going well for us now that we are accustomed to the sea.

Olof Jonsson left us in Stockholm.

Across the Atlantic

The next letter was sent from the Shaker farm. As a keen observer, Gyris gives us a good description. The entire letter follows.

Pleasant Hill, 1 August 1871

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Elfdalen, We wish that the love and peace of the Lord be forever with and about you, from now to eternity. The distance between us has now become quite large, not less than about 1100 Swedish miles, but we hope that we are through the Spirit still near each other according to our experience, and now I wish to let you know by these few well-meant lines how our trip went here to America, which thank God has gone well. One could almost call it a vacation trip, especially for me, but not quite as expected there at home.

We arrived as mentioned in my last letter in Göteborg 1 July and after the 8th, were aboard one of the Ankar Line's great steamers, *Skandinavia*, which took us across the North Sea. After sailing three days, we landed in a city in Scotland named Lehts [Leith] on the 11th, and after two hours on the railroad we came to the city of Glasgow, arriving at 11:00 a.m., and on the afternoon of the 12th we boarded the great Atlantic steamer *Caledonia*, which was also from the Ankar Line. She took us out onto the great Atlantic Ocean, which is at most a distance of 900 Swedish miles over to New York from Glasgow. We thus left Europe's shores from Scotland and Glasgow. I

should note that the same day we left Scotland we headed for Ireland, where several more passengers boarded from a small steamer, heading for different places in America. Then we came out onto the ocean itself, meeting a headwind that remained with us.

Seasick

But I return to the end of my previous [letter], when that storm was over, and we had sailed a few more days until the 22nd, a heavy fog came up in the afternoon, so thick that we could hardly see from the one end of the ship to the other, and it continued at full speed, and many passengers were on deck, including me, and we knew nothing. Then there appeared an iceberg on our right, just a few fathoms from the ship, and in their hasty shock, both captain and seamen ran around not knowing what to do, since the ship was at full speed. Commands were immediately given to the pilot, who turned the rudder as quickly as possible to the left. At the same time the keel ran over a reef, lifting the ship, scraping and screaming as a result of its high speed. Fortunately, it did not spring a leak, for the hand of the Lord was over us, and it was the first piece of land in America, known as Newfoundland, which you can see on a map of North America, if you have one.

Railroad Trip

After a few more days, a harbor pilot came sailing out who would take us into New York, and on the 27th of this month we arrived there. Later that afternoon we took the railroad, which went over rivers and valleys and through tunnels and across great, fruitful fields.

We sailed through one city after the other, and from one fruitful area to another like a migrating bird, for never before had we seen or traveled at such high speed as now, both day and night. Finally, we came to a city named Cincinnati, and over a great river bridge, hung by thick iron cables hung between two stone towers on each side of the river, and then we went by wagon pulled by two horses through that city and over that great bridge to another city named Covington, since it was only the river that separated both cities; that was on 29 July. The same evening at 8:00 we were again on the railroad to a little city named Nicholasville on the morning of 30 July, and then by wagon with two horses to Pleasant Hill the same day, at which time all brothers and sisters received us with friendliness, and with a warm greeting wished us welcome.

And now I and all of us will simply say in closing that the Lord has brought us safely to this new home and our brothers and sisters give us living witness that they are a people of God with a happy home here, and we witness with our own eyes that it is true, insofar as we have yet seen.

Cheated

It apparently did not take long before the poor immigrants discovered they had been shamefully cheated by Blomberg who, according to a preserved song fragment, had promised them earthly advantages in great measure—"a beggar in his hut shall be rich as a king...."

As early as 10 September, Gyris Anders wrote to a relative who had emigrated earlier, asking about possibilities to buy land and get help to cover travel and other costs. The answer came on 23 September and Gyris and his friends, according to that letter, are given a tongue-lashing for their actions. The letter, signed Göran Persson and sent from Maple Ridge, Minnesota, includes the following: "...I see that you have come to America and Pleasant Hill and are very dissatisfied, which is not strange, for I have many times wondered how a person with any sense and the Bible before them can in any way give support to that religion."

It continues by saying that "land is available for purchase on eight years' credit," that "no stones hinder breaking the soil," and that "there is more than enough forest." There is a detailed description of everything that grows there, of a great river, the "Rom [Rum] River, which empties into the Mississippi at the city of Anoka," of good freshwater springs, and of everything else a farmer needs. However, no economic help is available, and Gyris has to stay where he is.

Censorship

In his next letter, we find a completely different tone than the fresh, optimistic one about the trip itself. The lure of adventure is gone and their eyes have been opened to the difficult situation in which they found themselves. That they are not saying how things are in reality is certainly because all letters were censored, and only those in which the sect and life on the farm were praised were released by Blomberg.

Letters had come from their home at Klitten and Gyris answers in his of 28 October: "Yes, we couldn't read without tears your letters, since you and our childhood home are always in our thoughts and minds" and "...our childhood home, friends and relatives always sway around us." He greets a long list of relatives and friends by name and talks about his work: "...I help make brooms and even kitchen tools sometimes in lead and porcelain and sometimes paint. In other words, everyone has to do much every day, and Anna is in the kitchen now, doing her monthly shift." Here it should be mentioned that all work was done by members of the sect, that the colony consisted of five farms, and that Gyris lived in one named "West lot."

In his letter he also mentions that "...Knif Per Jansson has left here because he didn't like it and went north." As we shall see in the following, most of the

colonists fled, including even Gyrus and his wife. "I am in such poor health..." he writes despondently.

The unfamiliar climate was also a problem, and in a letter of 23 November he writes from the "West Lot and Pleasant Hill" mentioning that "...it would be difficult for us to adjust to this climate and even change old habits, in other words, acting against one's own will." As for the weather, he says "...the temperature itself is very oppressing, so when it is warm one feels very burdened and out of breath." The letter, which because of censorship is kept to generalities, closes as usual with greetings to all those in their home area who are now seen as being so far away and unreachable.

Clear Text

But Gyrus succeeds in smuggling out at least one letter and there he speaks his piece about the reality of the society in which they found themselves. That the letter did not get sent the usual way is shown by a few lines at its close, where he says: "If I were to show the truth in any letter, it would be tossed into the fire and not be sent, thus I am adding these lines out of their sight." The letter, with no place or date, begins as follows: "Be wary of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but who are gaping wolves. You should know them by their fruits, which I have witnessed myself every day since I came here. Thus my friends at home, do not listen to Majt Lars or Blomberg's voice, for they do not act as they speak. Majt Lars writes that he has been raised to the third Heaven, and uses only lies and falsehoods and cunning..."

In several of the letters, the sect's "services" are described, with their strange ring dances. Gyrus writes: "...their so-called meetings are offensive to the conscience, they are in reality wild, unreasonable, and animalistic. Oh, what idiocy..."

The Agitator

The above-mentioned Majt Lars appears to have been a devoted follower of the sect's teachings, according to the preserved letters, and that he in every way tried to encourage people to travel to America. He had already much earlier come into conflict with the powers of justice in his home region. He was from Klitten and emigrated as early as 1864, after having sold all he owned at auction. In 1853 he had been involved in the well-known trials against the Baptists.

He, by his agitation for the Shaker colony, certainly played a much larger role than the frequently-mentioned Säl Per Olsson from Holen, who himself had spent some time in America and later acted as an "apostle" of the sect in his home area. He, as many others, seems to have become the victim of Blomberg's efforts and beautiful promises, but finally completely deserted the sect.

All work in the colony was divided, as mentioned, into shifts, and it is said in one place that they were to live a life of siblings, no one should own anything

privately, but all was communal. Apparently the income earned by men working outside the colony also belonged to the sect, and that such work existed is seen in several letters. For example: "Skogs Olle has again come here today. He had been with Daniel (a brother of Gyris Anders, who with his family had emigrated in 1868) working on the railroad near Lexington a few weeks, but Daniel continued on to a mill further north a few miles from Lexington."

The great difficulties our friends had to deal with even as relates to getting work is witnessed in the same letter: "...Olof says that here in the South it is impossible to earn any money, since they don't value workers highly, because it is so full of Negroes who are willing to take a small daily wage as long as they can live on it."

The Breakout

As soon as an opportunity showed itself, most of the colonists left the farm and tried an independent life, and many landed in Chicago. From the letters it appears that even Gyris and his wife intended, as quickly as possible, to get out, and it was Anna, who with the help of Skogs Olof, [----?], and Sar Olof Larsson from Rot, who with his family of fully eight persons had come to Pleasant Hill as early as 1868, got out after much difficulty. How that happened is described in her letter to her father, Knif Olof Olsson from Klitten. She writes: "Skogs Olof planned to take little Olle with but couldn't, because the Shakers planned to bind and betray him, but they couldn't, then I went along in haste. I was out picking berries during the day and when I came home I found that I could go along. I packed my things after eating supper but I didn't say I was going, because then they would have made noise (complained) and made it impossible, and in the morning we left..."

She finally arrived in Chicago, at the [home of] previously mentioned Tenn Lars from Näset, who had in 1868 come to the Shaker colony with his family of seven. He had already left the colony for Chicago when Gyris Anders and his party arrived and experienced the great Chicago fire in 1871. He came to play a great role as advisor and helper to the poor emigrants, as we shall see from the following. Without his help, Gyris Anders and his dear wife Anna would never have been able to travel back to their dear Älvdalen.

Their great gratitude for his help is seen in several letters, like this (from Anna): "...and now I must tell you that I am much better [and] in a crew with Tenn Margit (a daughter of Tenn Lars) in a sewing shop. There are certainly many there, but no Swedes beyond the both of us, so it is good that I am teamed with her. And I must say that they have been good to me, all of Tenn Lars' people, father, mother and girls and their son-in-law, since I came here from the Shakers, demoralized and not knowing what to do in this foreign land, for one finds their true friends in need and I have not found anyone in America who has been so good to me and all of us as they have been and are..."

Farewell Letter

Now that we've seen how Anna fell into good hands, we shall see how Gyris himself managed the trip from Pleasant Hill. We do this with help of the oral tradition in his family and by letters. It appears that he traveled with his brother Daniel, who with his wife and two daughters came to America in 1868. The trip was made largely on foot and it is said that Gyris, in order not to starve, went in to farmhouses he passed, pointed to his mouth as a sign he was hungry and wanted food and played a tune on his dear fiddle as payment. Once, they were cheated out of money intended for the trip and suffered many difficulties. When the situation seemed most hopeless, Gyris wrote a moving farewell letter to his wife, who he thought he would never again see. That remarkable letter is as follows:

Cincinnati, 19 July 1872

My longed-for wife and dearest friend in the world! The Lord's peace and love upon you! Oh, that He comforted the sorrowing heart! With tears and a despairing spirit I will again write some lines to you, my beloved friend Anna, and let you know our sad circumstances. And it may be the last time I speak and write to you, for I can no longer bear my heartrending sorrow and despair, since I see that I have not only pulled myself down into this greatest of misery I have ever experienced on earth but even pulled you down into the same damnation, you who have always been my most faithful, dearest, and most trustworthy friend in this world. But what shall I do more than simply ask your forgiveness, if I were such to hope. God only knows I have until now held the blessed hope that we should again meet and hold each other's hand, but now it appears that we may not be able to do that, since our situation makes it completely impossible, as I will say on the next page.

We came to the city on 14 August, and, since we didn't have sufficient money for tickets, we were stuck. We had thought when we left Pleasant Hill that we could get some money for a telescope that a Norwegian had given me, or if that didn't work, borrow \$5.00 on a trunk, for Daniel had \$15.00 and I sold both the watches for \$12.00 in the West Lot to two Negroes. But since we got no money in Lexington for either the telescope or by borrowing, these Norwegians said we could travel offering our things as security, since we had many such from Cincinnati to Chicago. One of them, who was a boy just arrived in Lexington, said he could travel on his security and the same boy wrote a note in English that we should present here at the station, so we wouldn't have to say anything. But when we got here, they would no longer give tickets in return for our things. We offered them the money we had, \$15.00, and even Daniel's watch, but to no avail.

What should we now do, with no [command of the English] language to get along with and no Swedish people here. Oh, what misery and despair!

Then we hit upon the thought of writing to T. Larson in Chicago and bow before his heart, asking that he help us out of here with either two tickets or enough money to buy them here, and we thought he'd know the price better than we. We left the letter at the post office here in the city on the 15th, and at the same time left the letter Trapp Olof and I had written in West Lot and even a letter I had gotten from Sweden. And in this letter I send to you, my dearest friend and wife, a letter from Julia, which I took along, thinking we would come directly to you, but such has not been the case. And now we have our things at the station and how long they'll remain there before being thrown out we don't know, and as for ourselves, we've spent the time here in the open, under a tree just outside the city. We've had the same quarters here under this tree four days and nights, and tonight will be the fifth, with our occupation being worried and distraught over our situation.

And now today we have been in town to the Post Office asking for a letter or any answer from Tenn Lars in Chicago, but there is none. And tomorrow we will immediately go from here to see if there is any answer, for we can't stay here any longer and starve, but will be forced to leave, alive or dead, and the latter cannot happen unless we starve to death. If our Father's will be done, we shall see if we will again meet in this life, but if you hear nothing more of us you know and understand that we are no longer on this earth. And we ask T. Larsson and all of you that you see that our things come to Chicago. Collect them, for we plan to send them in some way to you, so that some of our families will get some use of them. Even if they won't send them unpaid, we'll see if we have enough money to pay the freight for them; we don't know how much it will be. Enough for now and perhaps forever, but first and last, to you my heart's dearest friend and wife, I bid you a fond farewell, and God willing it will not be the last time. Gyris.
A. A. S. D. A. S.

And on a pair of smaller papers in the same letter

...never had I imagined that I said farewell to you for the last time, my dear Anna, when I followed O. L. S. and you to the North Family in Pleasant Hill. I would have never believed that it would be the last time I held your hand and said farewell; oh, if I had known it, I would never have let you go, but now it is too late! But it would be my life's greatest joy if I were to meet you once more. We shall see what the Lord does.

Farewell...if it is so that our things come to Chicago, take care of them; you will certainly recognize them. There are two larger trunks and a little one and a sack. We plan to leave here tomorrow and head north, if possible, to Chicago, but it is unsure if we will ever arrive, since it is so far and we

have no way of eating en route. Farewell my dear, beloved friend and wife. It looks like there will be no help for us in Heaven or on earth.

And this letter I write to you, my dearest friend, with the hope you and yours will know our sad situation and our end, in case we never again meet. Nor can we ask [for an] answer from you, since we don't know what lies ahead, for we plan to stay here tonight under this tree, awaiting an answer from you in the morning before we go. And now we are forced to leave the city this 21st day of the month and set out on foot, unsure of our fate and if God gave peace to your heart, that you were not devoured by sorrow and despair, you who are not to blame for this unhappy journey, for you had never wanted to come to America. But I cannot call back that which has been done and cannot help it, but just be content with a heart-rending sorrow, which is eating away my life. Yes! I can do no more for you my beloved friend than place you in God's loving heart. Farewell my only heart and beloved friend. A. A. S.

Reunited

On 8 September, however, we find Gyris in Chicago, joyfully reunited with his wife, and he writes: "...Dearly Beloved at Home in the Valleys of the North, the Peace of the Lord be with You." His unabashed joy can't be missed: "...We succeeded through good people in getting out of the Egyptian slavery, and our hearts are glad that we finally got out of the claws of the Shakers, but America is America..."

In the letter it appears that Anna left the colony on 17 July and both men on 13 August. But the difficulties were not over just because they had gotten out of "the claws of the Shakers." They had to find a place to live and work and it was Tenn Lars who saved the situation.

Gyris writes: "... not just that we deserve it, but we live for today. There are so many peoples from all nations streaming in that there isn't much work here, for both Anna and I have already been so burned by America that our entire goal is to save enough to get back to Sweden."

Anna eared \$3.00 per week in her factory work and Gyris, through Tenn Lars, got work making baskets for fruit farmers. He earned enough for room and board for himself and his wife at Tenn Lars's, and from his wife's earnings, dollar could be added to dollar for the dreamed-of trip home. "Yes, if God meets our desires, we believe we shall see and meet you next summer, if God wills. If I come to Sweden one more time I have no one else to thank than God and Tenn Lars..."

Homesick

Their homeland returns often in their letters, their longing for home, friends and relatives, and their own place. They are prepared to suffer the fall storms on

the Atlantic and in the last preserved letter they say: "...we're going to take our trip home in the fall, since tickets are sold somewhat cheaper than during the summer."

While it might go well for Gyris and his wife, it could be worse for the large families. It could be so difficult that people had to send their children out to beg for food and Gyris Daniel writes: "...Anna and Anders have been out begging some times this winter, and have been out 3 to 4 hours sometimes, and have gotten as much food as they could carry, sometimes almost a clothesbasket full when they come home. So, as far as bread goes, it is at least easier to get here than in Elfdalen."

Back Home in Älvdalen Again!

There is not much more to add. On 31 August 1874 we find Gyris Anders and his wife back in the parish record immigration book, and it is said that, after his return, Gyris went from farm to farm in Klitten with his fiddle and played for joy at being home again. Not many of these emigrants returned to their homes. Some ended their days in the colony in Kentucky, others got themselves a farm of their own, and the youth went out into the workplaces of that mighty land. Gyris kept contact, even after returning home, with his friends out there, but it would take us too far afield to go into that letter exchange. Between Gyris and Tenn Lars, both of whom returned to their home place the same year, a warm friendship arose, cemented by their common experiences and suffering. The Tenn Lars we remember, son of the daughter of Gyris' helper in America, often told how special it was when Gyris came to the village and both the old men talked about their remarkable journey to America.

The very interesting and rich material represented by this letter collection has been given only a summary treatment here. When one reads these letters, written in a foreign land by unhappy and unsuccessful men, one asks "What was it that drove them to leave home and family, farm and community, and set out on that long journey towards a fate about which they knew nothing with certainty?" Was it the need of a richer spiritual life, which they thought they would find in the new land, or was it the thought of avoiding need and hunger that drove them out? Certainly, Blomberg understood in his propaganda how to use the emergency conditions which arose in Älvdalen after the hard years of starvation and need during the 1860s and especially the difficult year of 1867, the last great "bark bread year," since the great migration took place the following year. Perhaps one approaches closest to the truth if one lets both factors become part of their reasoning.