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Diplomat and Dissident: The Involvement of Chargé H. W. Ellsworth in the Janssonist Emigration

John E. Norton*

During Nils William Olsson's long service in the U.S. diplomatic corps, he made wonderful Scandinavian contacts, both personal and archival, which he later used to develop his magnificent genealogical works on the Swedish immigrants.

A century before, other U.S. diplomats had been directly involved in planting seeds leading to the "great migration." Their efforts helped bring some 80 million Europeans to North America, among them around 1.2 million Swedes. It is thus fitting that this *festschrift* contain something about one of the most remarkable of those diplomatic efforts—the flight of the perfectionist "Erikjansare" dissidents from north central Sweden to the plains of western Illinois, begun in 1846 and continuing into the 1850s. Their departure helped open the floodgates of migration from Sweden, and was planned in consultation with U.S. representatives in Sweden. Those representatives clearly wished to encourage migration of Swedes, sometimes in the national interest (e.g., to help build the American west) and sometimes for more practical reasons of personal gain.

In the late winter and early spring of 1846, U.S. Secretary of State James Buchanan began receiving dispatches from the newly arrived thirty-two-year-old U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Henry Ellsworth in Stockholm.¹ They concerned an unusual series of events leading eventually to the first mass migration ever to leave that country for the United States. His dispatches described migration plans of about 1200 "Eric Janssonist" dissidents, from the provinces of Hälsingland, Gästrikland, Västmanland, and Dalarna, who had already been under pressure for nearly two years from church and state through religious persecution and political repression. Their "dream of America" was formed and realized, in part, by U.S. diplomats.

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¹ The Ellsworth dispatches are housed in the U.S. National Archives, Records of the Department of State. Dispatches from the United States Minister to Sweden and Norway, 1813-1906.

These dispatches show Ellsworth's direct involvement, along with associates like Consul C. D. Arfwedsson, in that first major Swedish emigrant enterprise to North America. They also give a fascinating look into its causes and results. They confirm that the Janssonists' flight from Sweden was not just an isolated, ill-planned, independent effort of religious fanatics, and that its outcome was more far-reaching than just the founding of a new "prairie utopia" called Bishop Hill, in western Illinois.

On 17 February 1846, Chargé d'Affaires Ellsworth wrote the following in dispatch number 8: "It is now feared that the hoped-for exemption of Sweden from the famine that is scourging Northern Europe, will not be realized. Around Stockholm, indeed, and in Southern Sweden, there is at present no great scarcity of provisions, but during the past two weeks sad accounts have reached the government of great distress in the Northern Provinces."

Less than one month later, in dispatch number 10 dated 7 March, Ellsworth wrote: "I regret to state that much sickness is now prevailing in Sweden and indeed to a greater extent than has been known since the cholera, the result of scarcity of food and an extremely open winter...I have received information that a large number of Swedes are intending to emigrate as early as practicable in the spring to the United States. They are inhabitants of the province of Dalecar[1]ia [i.e., Dalarna] and among the most industrious and honest of the Swedish population." They were the Erik Janssonists.

On 5 May 1846, his dispatch number 13 noted that "a Norwegian vessel of about 500 tons admeasurement [probably the brig *Tricolor* of Christiania] has just departed [Stockholm] for the United States for the sole purpose of conveying emigrants, and the question of how many passengers she is entitled to carry was submitted for my decision. [His answer was 2 persons for each 5 tons, or about 200 persons, dictated by the 2 March 1819 Congressional Act Regulating Passenger Ships and Vessels. She carried 22 Janssonists from Dalarna,² including the family of Lindjo Gabriel Larsson of Malung, who is said to have contributed the single largest sum, 24,000 *riksdaler*, to the Janssonist venture]. He continued: "There will be considerable emigration this year from Sweden to the United States, and this fact renders the question of some importance....In the best seasons, however, and under the most favorable circumstances, the Swedes produce little more than sufficient to supply the demand created by the wants of her own citizens—her soil is poor and badly cultivated, and her peasants are too often thriftless and improvident."

² Nils William Olsson and Erik Wikén, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850* (Stockholm, 1995), 45, 231-32.

Ellsworth's dispatch number 14 of 5 June reported: "I have alluded in former dispatches to the large emigration from Sweden to the U.S., which will probably take place during the present year. The arrangements are now completed, and about 1,000 persons will sail this month from Gefle [Gävle] and Stockholm....The emigrants in question may be regarded as a fair specimen of the better class of Swedish peasants, and some are men of considerable property. They are generally hard-working, honest, lovers of order, and will, no doubt, prove a valuable asset to our population. They are dissenters from the Established Church of Sweden, and are in fact driven out by the strong hand of religious tyranny. I understand it is their intention to form a Colony as soon as possible in some of the Western States."

The Janssonists' dream of building a colony "in the western States" had indeed been in planning for some time, and had already been widely reported by provincial newspapers. *Tidning för Falu län och stad* and *Hudikswalls Veckoblad* both reported in November of 1845 that the Janssonists were preparing to emigrate, expecting "...to locate near the Mississippi River, on the plains along the Mississippi and its tributaries. There they hope to find the Promised Land. It is true that these plains are very fertile, especially in the production of wheat, corn, rice, many fruits, flax and hemp. Nature there is very generous and mild. But what is primarily attracting the Janssonists is the complete religious freedom there." They would build their agricultural utopia in a "Promised Land where they would eat figs, wheat bread and pork, since swine are in such *excess* that one needs only shoot, slaughter and eat." No language problems were anticipated, since they would be given the Biblical gift of tongues. The heathens would even build walls and towns for them. All would be as one happy family, with lions and cattle grazing together.

While editorial comment was caustic and doubting, it shows clearly that these northern Swedish farmers had already gained a substantial impression of North America from sources they trusted. One such source was American Presbyterian temperance missionary Robert Baird, whose 1832 immigrant guide, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi, or the Emigrant's and Travelers' Guide to the West*, had doubtless traveled with Baird during his temperance lecture trip to northern Sweden in August of 1840.

Baird's book reported that "there is in the Valley of the Mississippi an immense extent still of the finest land in the world, which may be purchased at the sum of one dollar and a quarter per acre." He was even more specific about Illinois: "The soil of this state is generally very fine, and exceedingly productive....Horses, cattle, hogs, sheep and poultry of every kind, are raised with the greatest ease....No country in the world has greater advantages for

raising livestock. Hogs are raised with little trouble and expense. The fruits of the forest...are fine food for them...The staple productions...are Indian corn, wheat, Irish and sweet potatoes, beef, pork, horses, tobacco and lead...hemp, flax and silkworms succeed well. Apples, peaches, pears, plums, cherries, grapes, gooseberries and currants arrive at great perfection." The similarity between Baird's description and that published in provincial Swedish newspapers is striking and probably not accidental.

On 2 September 1845, *Norrlands Posten* of Gävle reported that Olof and Jonas Olsson, Janssonist "apostles" from Söderala, had sold their substantial farms and were heading for America. On 4 October even the distant *Östgötha correspondenten* reported Olof Olsson's 8 September departure for New York aboard the *Neptunus*, while at the same time answering a critical reader who claimed emigration was "a sickness."

After arriving in New York on 16 December 1845, Olof Olsson, acting as scout for the Janssonist settlement, wrote: "The Communion table is spread for you upon the New Earth. Everything is ready, so that it can be said in truth...when you set foot upon the Blessed Land, 'Come, let us go up to Zion.'" He encouraged them to "Help the poor servants over. Money is of no value in America except to buy land. A good woman or maidservant, or one of our farmhands, is worth far more than money. They quickly work off their debt....This is a land like the Heavenly Kingdom....It is a land for action....A land where worker as well as Regent may eat wheat bread."³

As Janssonist groups prepared to depart, their expectations were high. The state of mind among a party of thirty-six, departing Stockholm in July 1846 aboard the brig *Agder*, was described by Norwegian doctor G. C. Paoli, who accompanied the group. (Paoli later settled in Chicago, where he became a prominent physician.) He wrote: "When I went aboard, the entire party was assembled on deck; an unmistakable joy shone in their looks, since they could hereafter freely, and without comment, practice their religion. This religious fanaticism had numbed all other feelings, to the point where I sought in vain for traces of sorrow in their faces over leaving, perhaps forever, their fatherland, relatives and friends...They were all firmly convinced that they would, upon arrival in New York, be able to speak English....It did no good when I tried to convince them of the unreasonable in such a belief; the Holy Spirit, they said, would give them the power to do this, since Erik Jansson had expressly told

³ The Olof Olsson letter was translated in its entirety by Wesley Westerberg and published in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* XXIII (April 1972).

them that no matter to which land they came, they would immediately be able to speak its language.”⁴

Jansson's published *Farewell speech to the People of Sweden* had, after all, pointed out that: “to be able to do God's work among a people of a foreign tongue, I trust in Him who has given me tongue and voice....I Corinthians 11:10 shows He can give the gift of tongues and the gift of speaking. In Isaiah, Ch. 49 he tells me I can be a light unto the heathens, for which He then gives me the strength to shine for them.”

The failure of that promise was confirmed in late September on the *Agder*, when Dr. Paoli asked a newly-boarded American New York harbor pilot to try to communicate with the Janssonist party in English. It led to the first desertions among the Janssonists, and the first of many negative reports back to Sweden of their problems in the New Land. On 3 March 1847, the newspaper *Helsi* of Söderhamn reported the *Agder's* arrival in New York, along with at least six other ships (*Wilhelmina* and *Solide* out of Gävle; *John Holland* out of LeHavre; and *Charlotte*, *Caroline*, and *Fritz* out of Stockholm) together carrying over 600 Janssonists. On 14 May 1847, *Helsi* also contained a letter written by Brita Gustavson, saying she had left Jansson in New York because she had been unable to speak English as promised.

Swedish ship owner and American Consul C. D. Arfwedsson⁵ in Stockholm (himself an experienced friend of America) reported in July of 1846 that many in the departing Janssonist groups were financially well off and, to his knowledge, planning to settle in Wisconsin. Arfwedsson, as both consul and representative of the Tottie & Arfwedsson trading company, had good reason to encourage continued migration. Swedish iron exporters had suffered a business recession from 1841 to 1843, putting pressure on shippers to find replacement cargoes, like emigrants, who unlike pig iron paid their way in advance! In 1842, calling himself an “impartial countryman,” Arfwedsson had anonymously authored an eight-page immigrant guide addressed “to those who next year plan to leave Sweden and Norway for the United States.”

In July of 1846, Eric Jansson's advance party reached western Illinois, where they found no Zion, but a prairie wilderness. They first bought a small 80-acre farm with cabins and standing crops at Red Oak Grove, and soon increased their holdings to nearly one square mile of prime Illinois prairie. By October,

⁴ The Paoli letter was later published by Theodore Schytte as an appendix to his *Vägledning för emigration*, Stockholm, 1849.

⁵ Olsson and Wikén, *SPAUS*, 153. Arfwedsson served as U.S. Consul in Stockholm from 1838 to 1855, after extensive travels in the United States and Canada, about which he wrote in *The United States and Canada in 1832, 1833 and 1834*.

they had readied two log cabins, four large tents, and a huge canvas-walled church, which collectively housed some 400 immigrants that first winter, augmented by dugouts and sod huts, built in the fashion of Swedish charcoal burners' huts. Suffering lack of food, buildings, and experience, almost half the arriving Janssonists died or deserted that first winter to places like Chicago, Galesburg, and Victoria, planting Illinois' first "Swedetowns." Some late-fall arrivals in New York even remained stranded there through the winter aboard canal boats.

On 23 September 1846, E. Myrén wrote from New York to Crown Bailiff Johan E. Ekblom, a strong friend of the Janssonists, about their first troubles in the new land.

Now all the Readers have gone inland, so that there are only 3 from Helsingland and 2 from Vestmanland remaining in New York.... we signed off from the sect completely, since they were a damned self-serving pack, and we didn't want to follow them into the wilderness, 25 miles from any passable road.... Jon Olsson, when he first came to New York, said that he hadn't paid in more than he'd wanted, and no one had to follow them inland any further than he wished, and when someone said 'give me my money back,' he answered that he had never gotten any money from them. But this didn't last very long for Johan Olsson, because the Swedish Consul [Claudius Edward Habicht] quoted law to him and ordered that 'if you've brought people here you should take them inland, or pay their way back to the homeland,' upon which Jonas had to give in and let as many who wished follow along. But as for us, the Consul has been, and will be, like a father to us. Now, he has recommended me to a place three-days' sail south of New York, on an estate paying 500 Riksdaler until 1 April 1847, during which time I can learn something of their language and get more pay. I forgot to mention that I'll even get food, bed linens and room, the other 3 from Helsingland will also be on the same farm.⁶

One disappointed Janssonist who arrived on the *Charlotte* on 15 September 1846 and followed them only as far as Chicago, was Anders Larsson. There, he began writing a remarkable thirty-four-year series of letters to his friend, Bailiff Johan E. Ekblom, about the sect's American experiences beginning the fall of 1846. In one, dated Chicago, 19 October 1846, he wrote:

It was with joy that we came ashore in the New World after many adventures with the Readers and others. Around 30 left the faith which I

⁶ Albin Widén, *När Svensk-Amerika Grundades* (Borås, Distriktslogen Norra Sverige, Södra Sverige, Vasa Orden av Amerika, 1961), 56-59.

had followed so long, but which had finally become so unlike my expectations that I found it best to leave rather than believe and preach erroneously to such a degree that, for example, if someone became sick they were declared unfit for the Faith and committed to Hell. One day, someone might be damned, then taken back...We were in New York 5 adventuresome days, and everyone who had left the sect were not to be allowed to follow them further, but through Consul [Habicht] and Pastor Hedström, the Prophet Jansson had to allow everyone to go inland, but permitted 10 to remain.... Many went crazy on the voyage, about 10 stayed in New York, and here [in Chicago] there are about 27....Everyone has a decent wage, and any who work should not suffer. I forgot to mention that the price of a stove is from 9 to 13 dollars. A good maid here gets from 2 to 10 dollars a month beside food....Today there was again a critical article in our newspaper. The Readers are claimed to be a frightful bunch, they're called 'worms.'...it looks like this arrogant faith will not be accepted here, since all other religions bow before their God, but these [Janssonists] say they are equal to God, and as soon as they've learned the language, they'll probably begin to preach their usual lessons. It's said they'll soon be murdered....on the 2nd of October we passed Milwaukee, the 3rd we came to Chicago in the State of Illinois, and then we were not permitted to follow the party further, which now had around 27 Swedish miles, or 170 English miles, to their purchased Settlement, which is said to be a Paradise-like Eden in this State of Illinois and Hendrik Conte [Henry County].⁷

By December 1846, Larsson reported the first tragic consequences of the long voyage to America and primitive conditions at Bishop Hill. He wrote: "I can't say much about the Readers, there has been great sickness among them, and a month ago over 100 were dead." In April of 1847 he added that "over 100 have left them and according to rumor, it is said that things are not good within the congregation....300 are supposed to have stayed in New York over the winter, and will soon arrive here since Canal traffic opens the 15th."⁸

In June of 1847, Swedish adventurer Johan Edvard Liljeholm visited Bishop Hill and reported that:

the Janssonists had been here since December, and were now in a most wretched condition, as the voyage across the ocean had brought on sickness, which had taken a number of them, especially older people. Of the 520 who had left their pleasant homes in their native land in good health, attracted by the glowing description of the Promised Land, and believing the false

⁷ Ibid., 27-34.

⁸ Ibid., 75-77.

teachings of Erik Jansson, there remained now no more than 400, of whom a third were sick. During the winter, they had lived in so-called canal boats [decked vessels, 60' from stem to stern, 24' in beam, and 9' above the waterline, drawn on the canal by horses], and in these, they had to endure the winter without any heating, and only gruel and poor bread to eat. Some of the so-called "apostles" and those who had been rich [now all property was held in common] fared better, and lived in houses. Their daily occupation was fasting and prayer. Their sermons were sometimes preached by women and children, and consisted of screaming the same words loudly, over and over, until they got hoarse, when another would take the pulpit, and hymns were sung from Eric Jansson's hymnal. However, the Americans, who did not understand their language, thought them models of piety, and the Bible Society in New York gave them several hundred copies of the Swedish Bible.⁹

On 9 July 1847, Anders Larsson wrote that he had visited Bishop Hill in early June, to find that "the readers have now bought many thousands of acres in an area called Henry County, 30 English miles from the Mississippi, 15 miles from Victoria, with the richest of soils, and paid 2 1/2 to 5 Riksdalers an acre....And it's the most beautiful place anyone could wish....There, they've built around 30 dugouts, quite comfortable for their purpose. They're now beginning to build their new city "Bishop Hill." While I was there, a surveyor laid out the city, to be built in a square, with 18 houses on each side externally, and inside, orchards and fields, plus a large church. All the houses in the city will be built out of unfired brick, plastered and whitewashed on the outside."¹⁰

He also noted that 340 new immigrants had arrived, out of that party of over 400 that had landed the previous December and January in New York.

Those chosen as teachers [apostles] are 12, and all now have gone to school to learn English since last fall, and do nothing else, since it had been prophesied that they would be able to speak in tongues as soon as they had set foot in the New World, and they'll soon be proficient in English. The Prophet himself preached in English for the first time on 7 June, and these apostles will soon be sent out to preach [as they say] before the heathens....Seventy emigrants who left Söderhamn shortly after midsummer last year were...lost at sea [aboard the ill-fated *Betty Catharina*, disappeared off Newfoundland]....Besides these 70, there were probably around 100 who died, while another 180 died [at Bishop Hill], and

⁹ Johan Edvard Lilljeholm, *Pioneering Adventures of Johan Edvard Lilljeholm in America 1846-1850*, trans. Arthur Wald (Rock Island, IL, 1962), 14-15. See also Johan Edvard Liljeholm, *Detta förlovade land, Resa i Amerika 1846-1850*, ed. Olov Isaksson (Stockholm: LTs Förlag 1981), 39-52.

¹⁰ Widén, *När Svensk-Amerika Grundades*, 27-34.

another 150 left the faith....while I was there, another 20 newcomers left, and they expected Pastor Hedström from Victoria to come in to get more....When I left, there were about 600 remaining" [in Bishop Hill].¹¹

But after the first harvest, triumphant colonist Anders Andersson wrote on 30 November 1847: "I take up my pen, moved by Our Father's spirit, when I see how God has blessed us a hundred times more here on the new earth with both spiritual and earthly goodness than we owned in our fatherland.... We have bought properties here which couldn't be exchanged for a fourth of all Sweden. It would not be too much to say that this land flows of milk and honey.... We sent out 9 of the young men who are going to English school to cut wheat, and when they had bound it, they got 1/3 as pay...75 barrels of good wheat in one month's time."¹²

And in April 1848, Johan Edvard Liljeholm returned to Bishop Hill finding that "it was quite different from my last visit there. A new church, and some larger buildings had been erected, all of unfired brick, along with several flourmills and sawmills. All their lands, amounting to around 10,000 acres, were surrounded by a ditch, from which the earth had been piled into a high wall around it. More than 500 acres were under cultivation and planted with wheat, corn, flax, etc."

Letters and reports like these, published in the Swedish press, were either sensationalistic damnations or strong affirmations of the Janssonists and their experience in America. They were, however, sufficient to prompt Chargé d'Affaires Ellsworth to write an explanatory dispatch concerning reports of those first immigrants. His dispatch number 31 of 3 May 1847 reads:

It seems that the Swedish emigrants mentioned in previous dispatches, who sailed last summer, to the number of about one thousand, from Stockholm and Gefle are dissatisfied with the change made, and have written back letters for publication, dissuading others from following their example.

The matter, however, is fully understood here, and the hardships they have experienced must be attributed to themselves alone. They entrusted large sums of money to an agent (Jansen)[sic] who sailed for the United States some months in advance of his principals, and after a misapplication of the funds committed to his care, fled to parts beyond their knowledge.

¹¹ Ibid., 27-34. The letter was translated and published in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* XXIV (July 1973).

¹² Ibid., 21-24. The Andersson letter was also published in the liberal Stockholm newspaper *Aftonbladet* on, 23 May 1848. The letter was also translated and published in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* XXIV (July 1973).

This has of course reduced them to the painful necessity of hiring out their services, for daily support, and this too in a distant land where they had anticipated an immediate removal onto tracts purchased for their little Colony!

To this must be added ignorance both of the language and customs of the people amongst whom they have settled. It is probable therefore that the remainder of the "Jansenists" [sic] as they are called, will defer their Emigration, anticipated during the coming summer, to some more favorable period.

Considering the use made of the facts mentioned, in several of the Swedish papers, and by the disappointed remnant of the "sect" alluded to, the occurrence is to be regarded as unfortunate. I have, however, on all occasions where the matter has been discussed in my presence, pointed out the true origin of the difficulties under which the Emigrants have labored, and that they have been in fault through too much confidence in one of their own nation.

It is to be hoped that Congress has prepared some restrictive regulations providing for better treatment of Emigrants during their passage across the Atlantic, and preventing their immediate addition to the ranks of the more abject poor on their arrival in the United States."

Ellsworth's comments, while hampered by lack of accurate information about Erik Jansson's new Illinois colony and influenced by sensationalistic press reports, show his deep concern that the United States be considered a safe haven for Swedish immigrants and a land of opportunity for all. The Janssonists who remained at home did not, for the most part, "defer their Emigration," but continued to depart for opportunity in the West through the early 1850s.

Ellsworth's Swedish counterpart in New York, Consul Claudius Edward Habicht, continued to watch and help the growing stream of Swedish immigrants. On 16 April 1850 Habicht authored a report to the Swedish Foreign Ministry on U.S. immigration policy, noting that "in Henry County, Illinois there are between 5- and 600 Swedes, some belonging to the so-called 'Jansenisterna,' but from which the majority have now parted, since their 'prophet's falseness and cheating had become evident to them.'¹³ Just a month later Erik Jansson was dead, shot in the Henry County Courthouse on 13 May by a disappointed colonist, John Root. Yet, the Bishop Hill Colony continued, as did the "great migration" from Sweden, observed and sometimes even assisted by Swedish diplomats like Habicht. But that's another story, still untold!

¹³ *Departementssekreterare* Tommy Andersson, a member of Sweden's *Bishop Hill-sällskapet*, recently found this report in Swedish Foreign Ministry Archives. He continues to search for other diplomatic records relating to the Janssonist migration 1846-1850.