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Letters from Emigrants in the Archive of Bröderna Larsson & Co.

Per Clemensson*

In the years since the last publication of a report on the work of the Emigrants from Göteborg (*Göteborgs-Emigranten*), excerpts have begun to be made from letters in the archive of Bröderna Larsson (the Larsson Brothers) & Co., a large emigration agency that had a very active office in Göteborg. Our purpose to date has been to address a couple of questions: Were any people from Göteborg among the writers of these letters? and do any of the letters contain an account of leaving Göteborg, being in England, or of the transit to America?

My curiosity about the letters was awakened when, by chance, I found a letter with the following contents:¹

18 April 1885

Respected Mr. August Larsson:

After I read in the *Svenska posten* [newspaper] that one can travel by way of Malmö to America without a certificate [*flyttningsbevis*] from the parish, I want to be bold enough to ask you if I can take the route from Malmö and then to America without a certificate.

Now I shall tell you, Mr. Agent, about my conditions. I am a married man and have such an awful woman that I can't continue living with her any longer. It is quite impossible for me and I'm thinking of going to America to get away from her. It is impossible for me to get a certificate from the parish, for I have been there and tried, but I get nothing out for she sticks her nose into it. Mr. Agent, please help me over, it would be very kind; and please let me know what the prices are.

What does it cost from Malmö to Nevvork [New York]; ditto from Nyverk [New York] to Sekago [Chicago]; ditto from Sekago [Chicago] to Michigan and Sjemnat äfven (?). Please give me information about the least costly route, while there are many young men due to be called up into the army who are thinking of travelling this spring. So now there is another

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¹ Note: The translator of this letter provided the following caveats: "Paragraphing and some punctuation added; spelling and other oddities not reproduced directly in the English."

thing. I have a ticket from America that is made out for the White Star Line and is valid from Göteborg to Michigan in America, but you can't go that way without a certificate from the parish and that I can't get from the pastor. The agent for the White Star Line is Mr. C. W. Hallström. So that way is shut for me. Now I would like to ask if it is possible for me to exchange this ticket and travel from Malmö on this ticket.

Dear kind Mr. Agent help me if it is possible so that I can travel that way on the ticket, even if I should rightly pay a little if only it worked. Mr. Larsson, if you cannot help me on your line, please be so kind and give me information if there is another agent in Malmö who can help me with the ticket. But be kind, Mr. Larsson. If it is possible to help me, I will pay and God will help him who helps me. Please do this Mr. Agent if you are kind.

I must now end my careless lines and ask to be excused if I have been so bold and give me information and reply by the first return post would be very kind of you so that I may know how this goes, but kind Mr. Agent, help me and I would be really happy and so write when I may travel, yes kind Mr. Agent be kind and fulfill my wish that would be really kind Is the request of

[Name suppressed]

A postage stamp is enclosed.

If the Agent writes [back] as soon as he gets this letter he would be kind.

The writer, whose name is suppressed here, had married for the second time in 1883 and, despite his efforts, remained in Sweden with his family. It is clear that without telling his wife he had made inquiries about emigration, for he gave his mother's address as the place where letters should be sent to him.

Imagine if many letters had such contents or were so specific! For then it would be possible to perceive emigrants' motives for travelling, their circumstances, the financing of their travel, events during the journey, and so on. Or perhaps letters like this could be found to refer to emigrants named in our database. The Göteborg Emigrants' register of letters gives, for each, the writer's name and address and, in summary form, the contents of the letter.

Mabel Hood and Dan Erneling have compiled the register. Their principal job has been to ambitiously and actively make excerpts from letters. They have so far covered letters from 1879 to about 1905. The Larsson Brothers archive was donated in 1956 to the County Archive by the owner—a farmer, Johan Gustafsson, of Björkvik, Sundholmen—on condition that it would be closed for research until 1970. It was designated C23.

The archive had been discovered in 1954 by Olof Thörn, fil.lic., in conjunction with research into material for a dissertation about emigration; he thus became the first person who could study emigration from the inside. In 1959 he published an article in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* (now *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*). The archive subsequently became the principal source for Berit Brattne's doctoral thesis, "Bröderna Larsson. En studie i svensk emigrantagentverksamhet under 1880-talet" (Uppsala, 1973). Information given here is derived mainly from Brattne.

Thörn found the documents at the Prästäckre farm in Berghem Parish that had been owned by a relative of the Larsson brothers. The archive, packed in a number of boxes, had been put into one of the farm buildings there in 1919. In 1924 one of Samuel Larsson's brothers had expressed a wish that the archive should be burned, but it never was. In time the boxes got used for other purposes and the previous orderly arrangement of the archive was destroyed. The documents were spread out over the floor and destroyed, in part, through dirt and damp. Some that have survived are still illegible.

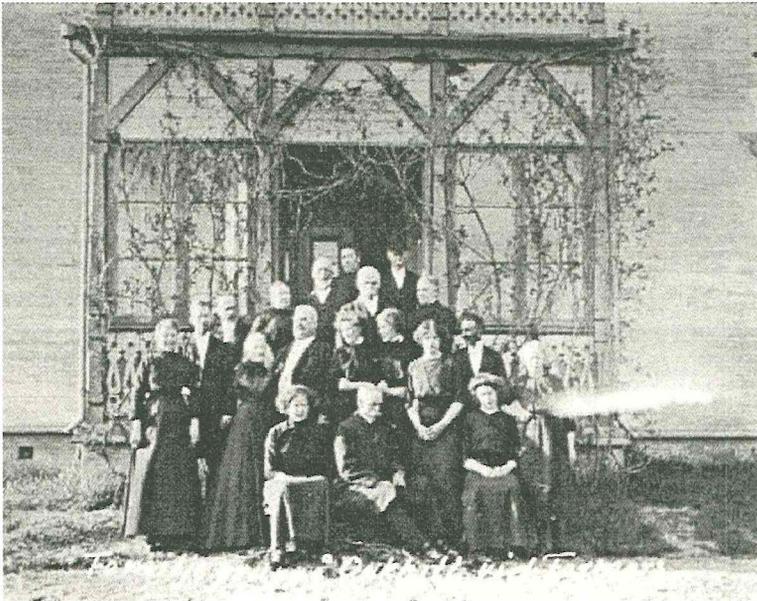
The archive has been put into order and listed by Josef Edström in the County Archive. This work was made possible by a grant from The Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. The archive has also been microfilmed. Despite its earlier insecure storage the archive is very well preserved and, as the only surviving archive of an emigrant agency, it is unique. It derives from the time between 1873 and 1933. It comprises remains of the emigrant agency partnership's activity until about 1910; later it is of a private character.

The archive comprises the following series:

- A. Copy books 1876-1922 (about 48,000 pages) with alphabetical indexes of the addresses.
- B. Folders: lists of agents, lists of representatives, post books and the like 1880-1906.
- C.I. Correspondence between the Larssons 1880-1910.
- C.II. Letters from emigrants 1879-1910 (109 volumes; about 250 letters per volume; sorted by year and the initial letters of the writers' names).
- C.III. Letters from Swedish companies and private persons 1876-1910.
- C.IV. Letters from foreign companies and private persons 1880-1910.
- C.V. Telegrams 1881-1910.
- D. Documents arranged by subject, among them ticket stubs, emigration contracts, statistical information, documents concerning trade in butter, tobacco, snuff and coal, and organization.

- E. Books of account 1873-1933: main ledger, journals, cash books, memorials, registers of bills of exchange, remittances of monies by emigrants.
- F. Printed items, advertisements, and so on.

The five Larsson brothers were born in the parish of Berghem, district of Mark, Sjuhäradsbygden, and the province of Älvsborg. They were the sons of Lars Thomasson, a smallholder, and his wife, Brita Andreasdotter. When the father died at the age of forty in 1858, Brita was left to raise and support her sons—Johannes (b. 1845), Elias (b. 1846), Andreas (b. 1849), August (b. 1851) and Samuel (b. 1853).



The Larsson family at Berghem

Johannes took over the family smallholding and expanded it into a viable farm, thanks to his brothers' economic support. They, however, emigrated to America.

Elias left first. Despite having a meager education, he was hired by a colonial-goods company in London in 1864, for which he undertook a number of journeys. In New York he came into contact with an emigrant Swede, a

banker named Bo Christian Roos af Hjelmsäter. In 1873 Elias returned to Göteborg, where he registered a partnership called Roos, Larsson & Company.

This partnership shared office premises with the agent for a British shipping line, Guion Line, and through this contact, by 1876, Elias became the principal agent in Sweden for Guion Line. In 1878 the partnership was renamed Bröderna Larsson & Co., with the registered purpose of carrying on a trading and agency business. Elias's three brothers were later employed after they returned to Sweden.

Bröderna Larsson & Co. eventually had offices in Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö. In addition to representing the Guion Line, it also represented a number of other shipping lines, including Anchor Line, Beaver Line, American Line, Inman Line, White Star Line and the Dominion Line. Individually, the brothers were sometimes part of the partnership; all were engaged in the emigrant activity as well as the business activity. Besides his emigrant agency activity, Elias dealt with the import-export business, the discounting of bills of exchange, mining operations, and property dealing in Stockholm, where he lived after 1880.

The firm was divided in 1881. Elias F. Larsson maintained his business in Stockholm, August Larsson took up residence in Malmö, and Sam Larsson took charge of the Göteborg office. The Malmö office closed in 1892, when August Larsson moved to Göteborg. In 1907 Elias F. Larsson withdrew from the activity as emigrant agent; he died in 1931. Samuel Larsson died in 1936; Andrew in 1927; August had died in 1919.

The majority of the emigrants' letters contain questions about times, prices, travel routes, maps, safety at sea and so on. The archive contains a number of letters between agents and representatives about commission and other agreements. Many letters give reasons for emigration; some writers ask whether it is possible to travel without formal permission from the authorities. Many letters are about financial questions, how travel can be paid for, about free tickets and so on. Some writers ask about working conditions and whether there are chances of employment. Some letters express complaints about food and comfort, or about delays in England and New York.

Only a few letters contain accounts of the journey. Such data as exist are mainly given in connection with complaints. Letters from Göteborg are rare, and none have been found that describe embarkation in Göteborg. Less rare accounts include some of time spent in England and arrival in New York. It is hoped that, through registration, the letters will be more accessible for researchers.