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The Swedish Maid: Her Own Story

Elisabeth Thorsell*

My paternal grandmother, Alma Carolina Svensson, was born in 1867 in a mining farmer's (*bergsmän*) family in Nordmark in eastern Värmland, just outside the little town of Filipstad. She had an older brother, Carl Victor, born in 1865, and a younger sister, Nanna, born in 1872.

Alma married a mathematician, Albert Carlsson, who was employed first as a teacher at Lundsberg, one of the few boarding schools in Sweden, and later at the State Board of Pensions. They lived mostly in Stockholm. Nanna, who never married, worked as a housekeeper and also kept a little home in Nordmark, but spent most of her winters with Alma and her family in Stockholm.

The brother, Carl Victor, remained on the family farm and continued with other family business. After inheriting another farm in nearby Färnebo Parish, he moved from Dahlen in Nordmark to Lersjöed in Färnebo around 1912. Carl Victor was married twice. His first wife, Maria Sabina Persson, died in childbirth in 1898 and left him with two little children, Anna (born 1896) and Carl (born 1897). In 1910 he married his housekeeper, Hilma Larsson, by whom he already had two children, Maja and Hilda. Later Einar, Elis, and Hugo were born. Unfortunately, Carl Victor died in a horse-and-buggy accident in 1915, and left his older children orphaned.

His oldest daughter, Anna, was by then almost twenty years old, and she felt it was about time to leave home. Even though the time for making a big decision about emigrating seems to have been less than ideal—it was the middle of World War I—Anna left for America in 1916, one of 671 emigrants from Värmland and 7268 emigrants from the whole of Sweden that year. Anna traveled with her friend, Hilda V. Alfredsson from Nordmark, who was a year older and had a special reason for buying a ticket for McKeesport, Pennsylvania—her fiancé, Gustav, was already there!

Anna soon moved to Hartford, Connecticut, an area where she was going to spend the remainder of her life. Around 1921 she married a fellow Swede, Folke

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A. Heline, who had a small mechanical workshop, and, in a few years, they were able to buy a home on 51 Acadia Street in West Hartford. Their marriage was blessed with a son, Allen, born in 1922, and they seem to have lived a very ordinary life. Folke died in 1972, Allen in 1974, and Anna in 1988. Allen was married and had a wife, a son and two daughters but, unfortunately, contact with them has been broken.

Anna went back to Sweden once, in 1921. When she returned home to Hartford, her younger sister, Hilda, who was born in 1906, accompanied her. Anna often wanted to return to Sweden for a visit, but it never happened again. Her husband Folke did come to Sweden in the 1960s, and my father, his brother, and my brother Erik visited them once or twice in West Hartford. Letters over the ocean evidently were the main contact link.

During her first forty-six years in the United States, Anna wrote regularly to her Aunt Nanna; at least three or four times a year and even more often during the first years. Nanna kept all of Anna's letters, probably more than two hundred in all, as there was obviously a strong attachment between Auntie and her niece. (What has happened to Nanna's letters is not known, but they are probably gone, as the younger generation did not speak Swedish). When Nanna died in 1963, my father, who was a genealogist and did not throw anything away, inherited her little house, with all of its contents. Later everything was passed on to me, so all of Anna's letters are now in my possession. I have started the long process of sorting and transcribing them, and have found them most interesting, as they describe the experiences of an ordinary young girl, with only basic schooling,¹ as she grows to become a Swedish American and adjusts to life in America.

As mentioned above, Anna left Sweden in 1916, and is found in the Göteborg Passenger Lists as having sailed from Göteborg on 5 October with a ticket for McKeesport, Pennsylvania. In her first letter to Nanna, dated 29 October 1916, Anna wrote:

Well, now I have arrived and all went well. We came to New York yesterday; then we went by rail in the night and arrived here at 8 o'clock in the morning. Everything went rather well. If only it had been better on the boat; there the conditions were bad. But that is done now, and I will never go back, unless I can travel second class, and anyhow it will be some time, of course. It is no use to say anything until I find out how I like it here, but I imagine I will find it good. That is what I think now, anyway. I am happy I

¹ This is clearly evident in her original letters, which contain many long, run-on sentences. In the English translations presented herein, basic punctuation marks (periods, commas and semicolons) have been added to enhance readability.

am here now, Auntie, and if I don't like it here I can always go back. It is curious how many regulations there are to get here. At first in Kristiania one has to stand for hours and wait; then we had to see a doctor; then after much toil we got onboard the boat; then we got seasick, which was terrible; then we had to land in Kirkvald; and then we left there and at last we got to New York in the morning. There we had to go to a place where the customs were and then by a ferry to Ellis Ejland [*sic*], where the emigrant office is. There we had to go one by one and without the hat on. Well, that was a funny ceremony, but I did not think they were very careful, not with me. They just looked at me, and then I could leave. But they do make you run around a lot. It is a big house, like the Natural History Museum in Stockholm, and they want you to go upstairs at one end and downstairs in the other, and then they put a tag on you, so you don't get lost. Well, it amused me. It will be very nice to sleep in an ordinary bed; last night we slept sitting straight up [in the railway car].

Anna did not stay long in McKeesport. Already in early November she had gotten a job with an American family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She wrote the following to Nanna on 9 November 1916:

As you see, I am now in Pittsburgh, and have been here for almost two weeks. It is now three weeks since I arrived in America, but I think the time has passed quickly. I like it fine here, as I want to tell you, Little Auntie, and it is a good thing that I do not feel homesickness, as that would not be good for me. I have a place in an English family of two people. I can't talk to them, but I manage very well anyway. I am starting to understand the old lady, so it probably won't take long until I can learn the language. When you don't hear anything else, it is more quickly done. I earn \$5 a week, which is not so much, but you get more when you can talk a little. Yesterday Hilda Axelson from Tängen,² you know, went shopping with me. I bought a new robe or "dress" as they call it here, and boots and some other stuff. Hilda is really kind, you know, as I can't go shopping by myself, because I can't speak English. It is not as in the old country. Today I have been doing nothing since two in the afternoon, and they are not coming home tonight, so I am free this evening. And yesterday I was free from noon until this morning and the whole of Sunday, when the old ladies cook themselves. There is a law in this country that the girls shall have one Sunday or Thursday free every week. There are big houses, real skyscrapers, downtown, but we don't live there, as it is mostly businesses.

² A girl from Nordmark, who emigrated in 1913.

Nordiska Kompaniet³ is just nothing compared to this. I have written to Calle [her brother] to come here. It would be fun if he also came. Please ask him to try; it would be much better for him.

Anna stayed on for a while in Pittsburgh and wrote again on 26 November 1916:

I have now had this place for a month, and it has been a real short month. I have now earned \$20. That, dear little Auntie, is more than 70 *kronor*,⁴ so if you could save a bit, it would be a good thing. There is so much that glitters in your eyes, but I won't buy everything I see. I was going to send you \$5, but I can't send it myself, as then I would have to go to the post office, which I can't do on my own. And in a letter it feels unsafe, but next time you hear from me, then! I will put \$1 in this letter and see if you get it. I am waiting to hear from you at home, but it takes so long. Maybe you did not write until you heard from me that I had arrived, and then it will take another few weeks until I get a letter. Please write to me now and then, so it won't take so long until I get a letter. Don't be sad that I left home. I am very well here and have a nice mistress. I get good food and I do the cooking myself, believe it or not. Cooking the English way is much simpler than the Swedish way; much easier. And I don't have to work much. I almost feel reluctant to take that \$5 every week, but that is the way of this country. The mistress feels she is well off. And they like the Swedish maids; the English are no good. Well, this is all for today. I might be going to Hartford soon.

Anna moved to Hartford, Connecticut, on 9 December 1916. She did not write her aunt again until 17 January 1917:

I've got such a good place here, at one of the dormitories of a boarding school; a bit like at Lundsberg at home, and I don't have to do any heavy work and I have spare time to sew and write. My salary is now \$6 each week, and that is not so bad. You can imagine that there are no boring days here; the students sing and play all day long. The lady who is in charge of this dorm is a Swedish lady, Miss Anni Snygg of Göteborg.

Anna stayed at this place until the end of the term. She then got a new job at a resort, Pine Orchard, which enabled her to spend the summer by the ocean,

³ Nordiska Kompaniet's present building in Stockholm opened in 1915 and, at that time, was considered very grand.

⁴ According to Lars Lagerqvist and Ernst Nathorst-Böös's book *Vad kostade det* (1984), a maid's wages in Sweden in 1915 were 720 *kronor* for a year, including her room and board.

where she took care of two little boys, John and Shepard. There were many other Swedish maids working at this resort and they had a lively social life, as soon as they got off work. On 5 August 1917 Anna wrote:

I have had my first proper letter from Calle now, so I wrote him yesterday. He says you are waiting to hear from me. Well, it has been two or three months since I wrote to you, but nobody has written to me either. Well, that happens when you have been here for some time; you are not as eager to write home as in the beginning. If I am to tell the real truth, several days can pass without a single thought of Sweden. But when I sit down and think of you all at home, then I wish I could go home and see you! Some of my friends here in Pine Orchard are Catholics, but I never think about that. In Sweden they do believe that Catholics are different from other people.

Anna stayed in Pine Orchard until September. In a letter dated 30 August 1917, she had some thoughts on what she wanted to do next:

I plan to go back to Hartford in a while. I have not yet decided. I had a letter today from the lady I had my place with last winter. I might get back to her or maybe not. The Americans pay you more. Thank you dear Auntie for taking care of my bicycle until I come home again.

Anna went back to domestic service in Hartford, Connecticut, and on 24 October 1917 she writes:

I wish I could come and visit with you, and we would have many cozy visits. Yes, I am here in Hartford, have my health and feel good, but I am so lonely. I don't have a special friend, but it is okay, as long as you don't lose your good spirits. Well, I have been here now for a year, so it will pass. I like it here in Hartford; it would be a shame to say anything else. [We] have so much fun. We are some young folks that always go together. And we have some dances every week. You should see how many people come there, all of them Swedes. It is real music too, not accordions, but a real orchestra. Now I can tell you that it starts to be as in Sweden. This week they could not buy as much sugar as they wanted, and it will last for six weeks. You know we have to send supplies to Europe. Is it true that there are hard times in Sweden? It is real starvation, if you are to believe what you hear. I cannot believe it is so bad, as that would be awful. Please Auntie, when you write to me, then tell me the real truth about how it is now. I know that the times are dear, but if there is nothing to buy, I do not know. If that is the case I wish with my whole heart that I had all of you here, as here it will never go as far as to starvation, and I cannot believe that

of Sweden either. Well, when you get this it is Christmas, but maybe you have nothing to enjoy if you do not have any food.

On 18 November 1917 she once again wrote to her Aunt Nanna:

This afternoon I have been to see a girl across town, and then we went to church. It is a big shame that this was the first time I went to church since I came here to Hartford, and I have been here a year now on 9 December. Next Thursday, the last Thursday in November, is a holiday. For the Americans, this holiday is a bigger occasion than Christmas. It is called Thanksgiving. Then they have turkey in every home, which is just as necessary for them that day as it is for us Swedes to have lutfisk at Christmas. Do you know that the only thing I know about, clothes, have gone up in price; almost double since last fall. A dress that I paid \$11 for then, now costs \$20. Isn't that terrible? I get paid more now (\$8 a week now and \$5 then). I am trying to save money, but it is difficult, believe me.

At this time, World War I continued in Europe. On 29 May 1918, approximately five and one-half months before the war ended, Anna wrote:

Isn't this war something frightful. You should be here and read the papers; every day there are listed many names of those that are killed "over there" and always many Swedish names as well. Here there are at least fifty Swedish boys that I am more or less friendly with, that have left. Some of them are very sad, and you cannot wonder at that, [since] they are almost certain never to come back alive, or otherwise with a leg or an arm gone. Several have tried to go back to Sweden, but not succeeded. It does not seem possible. I am really happy that Carl never came here, aren't you? Now it is evening and I have cooked, eaten and washed up. We always have dinner at night in this country, both the gentry (*fint folk*) and workers. We had a steak and potatoes, spinach, bread and butter, preserved plums and cake for desert today, and that was a real simple meal. As you know I have changed my place again; here is only the Mr. and Mrs. in the family, and I do all the work alone, except the laundry. Let's see how long I will stay here, as you have more time off when you are a single maid, so in that way it is rather good. Otherwise I like jobs better where I do not have to cook. I can't cook much, but I will learn if I stay on here. Tomorrow is a holiday in this country (Decoration Day), when all factories are closed and all the stores, and they are a bit festive. I don't know yet what fun I will have; hope something will turn up before tomorrow afternoon. There is a circus in town this week, but I would rather go to the pictures. Maybe there is a dance in one of the parks in Hartford, or something. I am rather tired of all the

dances, because that is what I have been doing the whole winter—gone to dances about three times a week.

In August 1918 Anna changed place again, but now she stayed almost one and one-half years with the same family. They paid her \$45 a month. She left there in October 1919 for another domestic post, but did not stay long. She now changed to factory work and became a tester at a typewriter manufacturer, where she typed a little test on every machine to see that it worked properly. She seems to have stayed there until she went back to Sweden in the summer of 1921. In October 1921 she returned to Hartford, with her sister Hilda, and never visited Sweden again.



Two bathing beauties on the beach in 1924. One of them is probably Anna, the Swedish maid.