

6-1-2016

A journey across the Atlantic in 1908

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag>



Part of the [Genealogy Commons](#), and the [Scandinavian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2016) "A journey across the Atlantic in 1908," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 36 : No. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol36/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Swedish American Genealogist by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

A journey across the Atlantic in 1908

A story from the 1907 – 1914 Swedish Emigration Survey

TRANSLATED BY ELISABETH THORSELL
AND CHRISTOPHER OLSSON

I arrived in Gothenburg on the morning of 9 April (1908) and was met at the station by an agent for the Scandinavia America Line from whom I had ordered a ticket. He escorted me to a hotel and said I should come to his office.

On the way to the hotel I asked the agent if there were many who traveled over now. He shook his head and said no, and he said there were a couple of big reasons why people did not travel now. First of all, the bad times, "and now they begin to do so much in this country so that people will not travel."

In the line's office I could pay for my ticket, but could not receive it until we reached Christiania, because I only had a testimony of conduct (*frejdebetyg*) and not a moving-out certificate. The shipping lines are always helpful in cases like that.

To Christiania

In the evening we received train tickets and were escorted by the agent to the train. Upon arrival at Christiania at 7 o'clock in the morning on April 10 there was nobody there to meet us. We found the way therefore to the line's office, and on the road we are overtaken by a valet who should have met us, but had overslept. He took us to *Nielsen's Hotel* on Skippergaden. It was a hotel of about the 7th grade. We got a room where we would stay that day. We were four: my brother, a man from Västerbotten, and a man from Bohuslän. The room was filthy and unpleasant. On the floor in the commode was vomit from someone who had apparently been seasick before the trip started. The maid pretended not to notice anything, but began to set up food for us on the table. Then I showed it to her and asked

her if it was not possible to clean it up and also remove the dirty slop bucket that stood there. She looked at me as if she wanted to say that I had more demands than what they were accustomed to. She cleaned the floor, but we got to keep the slop bucket. Even the tablecloth was poor, in tatters and dirty.

At 10:30 a.m. we were to go to the office and get our tickets. When we entered we were told to stand in line and go in to the doctor. When we came in to him, we had in turn to sit down, and so began the investigation. The doctor said, "Show your hands," and so he looked at the inside of the hands. Then he said, "Open your mouth! say 'A'," as he looked on the inside of the eyelid, and so it was done. When we came back to the office, we were asked to come at 2 o'clock to get our tickets. We did so, and at 4 p.m. we were finally allowed to board. The steamer *Oscar II* had come to Christiania already at 9 o'clock in the morning and was now loading bundles of wood pulp. It

looked like to be the principal load from Christiania.

Finally onboard

When we came onboard, the quartermaster met us, looked at our tickets, and the waiters took our suitcases and guided us down to our cabins. I got my berth in the cabin No. 50. It was for 4 people, but we were only 3 in it.

In Christiania about 200 people boarded the ship, including many Swedes. In addition, many Swedes had boarded before, those who had boarded in Copenhagen. A year ago, they used to send twice as many passengers from Christiania, said the office there.

Exactly at 9 in the evening of 10 April, we left Christiania. There was then a little rain and a light mist.

On April 11, between 8 and 9 a.m. we anchored outside Kristiansand to board passengers there. We got about 100 new passengers. At around noon we left Kristiansand, and so began the actual voyage.



The menu for the journey looked like this:

The 11th. Breakfast: meat and potatoes, bread and butter and coffee. The bread, abundant, like everything else, was always good. It consisted of fresh wheat bread and coarse, soft bread. Loaves reminiscent in appearance of the Swedish "ankarstockar". *Dinner:* soup (some sort of meat soup), bread and butter, meat and potatoes, and a small dry pastry for dessert. At 3 coffee with wheat flour buns. *Supper:* meat and potatoes and bread and butter and tea.

The 12th. The same as the 11th except for dinner when the dessert consisted of apples.

The 13th. The same as the 11th.

The 14th. Breakfast: meat sausages; the remainder being like the 11th. *Dinner:* sweet soup, meat and potatoes, and for dessert apples. *Supper* as the 11th.

The 15th. Breakfast: raw herring and potatoes, butter, bread, and coffee. *Dinner:* cabbage soup, fish stew (potato and fish stewed together) and as well the dry pastry. *Supper:* meat, cabbage and potatoes, tea.

The 16th. The same as the 12th.

The 17th. Breakfast: fishballs and potatoes. *Dinner:* sweet soup, meat and potatoes, and apples. *Supper:* beef stew and potatoes.

The 18th. Breakfast: meat sausages and potatoes as well; for those who so desired, porridge of oatmeal. The milk to it was poor. At dinner we were given the best of the whole trip, consisting of rice pudding with cinnamon and sugar and beer in a glass. After some discussions we were given a fraction of the bad milk instead of beers. Also, fish and potatoes; pastry. *Supper:* fish stew and potato, tea.

The 19th. Breakfast: two eggs and hot oatmeal, served with the bad milk.

Dinner: broth with dumplings, meat, potatoes, and for dessert an orange.

Supper: meat, potatoes, and stewed pickles.

The 20th. Breakfast: meat and potatoes, coffee. *Dinner:* sweet soup, meat and potatoes; pastry. *Supper:* lapskojs [a stew of potatoes and salted meat, bayleaf, a little pepper and butter], tea.

The 21st. Breakfast: potato and beef stew; coffee. *Dinner:* peas, pork and browned cabbage; pastry. *Supper:* potato, meat, and pickles concocted.

mately equal to what you get on the English lines, though it was better served on *Ivernia*, the Cunard Line's old boat, which I traveled with in 1905, despite the fact that they had so many emigrants that they had to set the table completely four times for every meal.

The trip became quite lengthy because the boat is so slow. There was a map in our dining room and in one in the families' dining rooms. It was shown every day how many miles the steamer had passed from noon on one day to noon on the second day.

Here are the figures from our map in English miles:

11—12	april	354 mil.
12—13	,	349 ,
13—14	,	330 ,
14—15	,	330 ,
15—16	,	330 ,

16—17	april	335 mil.
17—18	,	332 ,
18—19	,	342 ,
19—20	,	342 ,
20—21	,	350 ,

In New York Again

Upon our arrival in New York, the Cunard Line's new steamer *Mauretania* left for Liverpool. She has done this journey (as fast) as 579 miles in (24 hours).

In general, there was pronounced dissatisfaction with the Danish boat because it was so slow. We figured out that you can make the journey across England and then on to America in less time this way than by taking the "direct" route.

I spoke with some returning Swedish-Americans of conditions in Sweden and America. One day I said that, within a few years, we will have our own Swedish line that will go directly to New York.

"Not in 1,000 years," said Mr. Swanson from New York. "Why not?" I asked. "They are too slow at home. I think I have seen in the papers a discussion of such a thing, but I do not think it will be more than a lovely thought.

"How happy we Swedish-Americans would be if it were successful.

Some of us found it hard to eat. The food containers were dirty. I gave our waiter 2 kr. That had a good effect. When the coffee was served at 3 p.m. he first had just as many cups as was enough for everyone at our table except for my brother and me. He went after two additional cups, and these got an extra thorough drying. This was repeated often.

The meal times onboard were: breakfast at 8 a.m., dinner at 12, coffee at 3 p.m., and supper at 6 p.m.

On the "tween" deck there were four different dining rooms. In the dining room where families and unmarried women ate, the tables were quite nice. But where we should eat it was dirty. The oilcloths were poor and often poorly dried. The

towel, which the waiter had, was used for almost everything. With them I saw that they both wiped the bench which we were sitting on, the table cloth, and if you made comment about it, also the food vessels. And behind me was a large metal box for refuse. It stood uncovered even during meals. When the meals were finished and tables cleared, we used to sit there to read, write, or play. It was the only place we had to be at. But when they came with the tubs of washing water and poured it out in a corner of the dining room, the smelly splashing water made it at times almost impossible to be down there. The food was almost always the same.

The food on board is approxi-

If Sweden could have, say, three boats of about 15,000 tons each, modern and fast, with only a Swedish crew, so that everyone could travel on this line. Even if the boats went just every three weeks, they would wait and travel with it. How much Sweden needs this line! Aside from that we rarely see the Swedish flag in New York harbor. How much cheaper would things be that are now taken over via England, Hamburg, or Copenhagen! I have traveled for many years for a major U.S. export company which exports, in particular, fruit and cheese to England.

"Once when I took a shipment over to England I was promised by the company to take three weeks for myself to travel to Stockholm and visit. When I got there I was, of course, interested to see how things were done in that business, a business that I understood. I went and looked around. Imagine my surprise when I found my fruit boxes there. I asked where they were purchased. I was told, England or Hamburg. They were considerably overpriced by these intermediaries. I have spoken to several others since then and they have said the same thing."

Views on shipping lines

Among my tablemates on the boat was a tall, stately Swedish former noncommissioned officer of a Guards regiment. He was traveling now for the thirteenth time across the ocean. He had been in Scandinavia and Finland and sold farms in New York State. He had traveled on the *Oscar II* three times before, but always as a 1st or 2nd class passenger. One day when we sat down to table, the captain was on board and went through the dining room. He sees the Swede, goes up to him and greets him, and calls him by name.

According to what the Swede himself said, the captain asked him why the Swedes were beginning to abandon the line. The Swede replied that it was largely due to the Danes openly siding with the Norwegians in 1905 [Ed's note: at the dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway.].

And that, he said, was something we Swedes will not easily forget.

However, many Swedes still travel with the Scandinavia-America Line. I asked one day at the office where they get most of their passengers? The clerk said that Norway came in first place, Sweden in second, and Denmark third. Despite this, they have only Danish waiters. It is impossible for many Swedes to understand what they say. So the advantage they had of a Scandinavian crew that spoke "Scandinavian," was minimal. It works out nearly as well on the English lines because there are now so many Swedish-Americans who travel back and forth that you can always get someone to translate.

Why go on a slow boat?

I asked many, including Mr. Swanson from New York, why he had not traveled with a large, rapid English boat. "Well, you see," he said, "I have my family with me and it is both for me and my family more convenient to travel by this line. When you board you need not switch ships until you have arrived."

The Scandinavia America Line's big trump card is that it runs directly. That was the reason all the Swedes I spoke with went by it. But still, there were many who said that, rather than lying on the ocean for twelve days, they will travel with a faster boat via England.

The boat's office told me that the journey usually takes about eleven days.

To Ellis Island

We received a pilot on board at 11 p.m. and at 1 o'clock at night dropped anchor at Staten Island, the quarantine location. At 5 o'clock in the morning we were told to go up on deck to be examined by the doctor who was just then expected on board. A moment later an old man came on board. We had to stand in line and march past him in double rows. He just looked at us. Many who did not notice him when they passed him asked when the examination would begin.

The exam over, the boat began to move and at 8 o'clock in the morning we were at the dock in Hoboken. There we could leave the boat after being on board for almost twelve days. When our trunks were taken ashore, we were called by the customs officers, who were always kind. At about 11 o'clock we were taken on board a boat to be transported to Ellis Island, the last station.

When we got there, we had to stand on the boat for close to an hour before we were allowed to go ashore. Then we were ordered to take our suitcases and go to the building where the last test would be administered. We stood in line on the stairs and, with hat in hand, marched on. We went down a wide aisle where two men looked in the eyes of every one.

At the end of narrow passages, each numbered 1 through 12, was an interpreter and a man with lots of paper. They only asked me how long I had been in America previously, if my brother would travel with me, and how much money we had. It was not even necessary to show our cash. I was going to stay and see and hear how the others did, but I was not allowed, so we went to the waiting room that said "To New York" to await the ferry for Battery Park.

Down in the waiting room I met several who said that there seemed to be fairly many who seemed to have difficulties getting admitted into the country. It was said that the examination was very strict.

Conditions onboard

Our trip had been favored by good weather. On only one evening was there storm. The cabin we had was pretty good. The iron bedstead consisted of a mattress of an approx. 4" thick cushion. The pillow was similar to the cushions on a Swedish second class railroad carriage. The fabric of both the mattress and the pillow were of coarse, blue fabric, as was the blanket.

On the first night on board, it was so cold that we froze, but we got a blanket the next day. The next night was so hot that it was almost im-

possible to sleep. At about 6 in the morning a boy came with a wet cloth and went over the floor. A little later a woman came who filled our water carafe and dried our wash basin. Then the boy returned and emptied the wash water. It was similar on the Cunard Line, only if I remember right, we also got towels. Here we didn't get any.

Comparison with other shipping lines

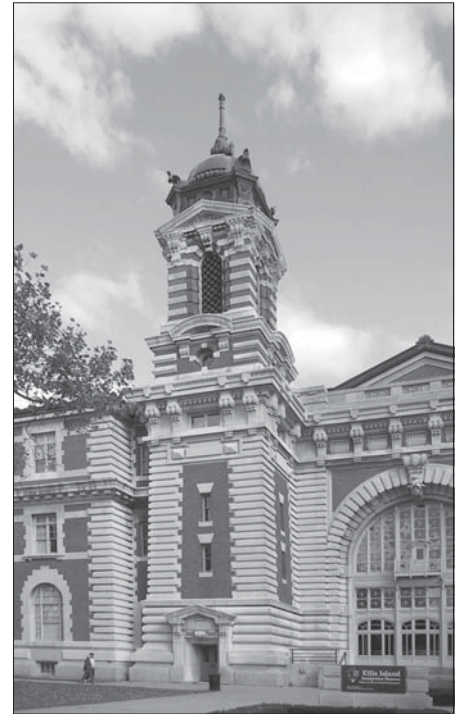
On board the *Oscar II* it appeared that they had better cabins than on the English lines I had traveled before. I saw no large bunks divided by sackcloth like I saw on the *Ivernia*. How it is on the big boats, I do not know, but I would like to travel home on the Cunard Line's new sister ships *Mauretania* or *Lusitania*. The difference in price between a 2nd class cabin for travel between New York and Stockholm on the *Mauretania* vs. *Oscar II* is about 22 dollars. The *Mauretania* costs \$84.60; *Oscar II* costs approx. \$62.50. But I could then do a better comparison. The treatment on the *Oscar II* was like that on other boats. They listened to our wishes, shrugged their shoulders – nothing more. Our view was that Danes were favored. I had a cabin without daylight and when I asked a steward for a change I was told there were no cabins available.

One day I saw a memo that announced that Mr. Mickelsen would speak on "My travels through America and Europe, especially Russia." The man, a Dane, had lived in America for forty-two years. He began by describing his home in Southern California and spoke about what a paradise it was, and how he thought it was a shame that people "at home in Denmark" must have snow and ice and cold when (in California) you could go out to a pasture and pick the most delightful flowers. He lamented that the press and leading figures in the old country spoke so poorly and falsely about America, etc. I went up to him after he stopped and asked if it was easy to get land in California and if it was cheap.

"No," he answered, "it is taken. Land now costs \$200 to \$250 an acre." "That is something for the poor immigrants there" I said. He just tossed his shoulders and smiled. He claimed in his speech that there is enough space for half the European population today. One day I met the man as he was going to his cabin. I asked to follow him and see how he lived. He had a light, nice four-man cabin alone, the best I had seen on the boat. It was just below the stairs to the second class.

[The writer is anonymous, and just known by his signature K. H-n.

[His purpose for travel to America was for his own business, but he was traveling on a emigrant ticket, so he could report on the conditions for the emigrants back to the Emigration Survey (*Emigrationsutredningen*, a Swedish state survey).]



Ellis Island – main entrance.



The Great Hall in Ellis Island's main building, which was, in the old days, filled with immigrants, awaiting their examination.

Ellis Island opened in 1892 as a federal immigration station, a purpose it served for more than 60 years (it closed in 1954). Millions of newly arrived immigrants passed through the station during that time – in fact, it has been estimated that close to 40 percent of all current U.S. citizens can trace at least one of their ancestors to Ellis Island.