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The great fire in Chicago 1871

A story told by Jan Olof Olsson

Introduction

Jan Olof Olsson (1920-1974), also known as Jolo, was a Swedish journalist and writer. During his lifetime he published many books on historical and geographical themes. One of his earlier books was *Chicago*, published in 1958. In this he mainly tells about the complicated local politics, and sometimes even criminal rulers of the city in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Naturally, he also mentions many Swedish-Americans, but the main theme is the corrupt government in those bad, old days.

However, one day he went to a service in a Swedish-American church, but does not mention the name of it. It seems to have been a Mission Covenant church, situated on a corner lot in the Northwest part of the city. The pastor was named Eng, and the verger was Nordlof.

Mr. Olsson comments on the Sunday hats on the ladies' heads, all covered in flowers and/or fruit decorations. All the men had on their Sunday best suits, and all of them were solemn. Families all brought their children to church. A proud mother told that her son was only seven months old, but had only missed church twice.

Mr. Olsson found a brochure that gave instructions on how the children should behave in church.

Here starts his own text:

I accidentally dropped the brochure. As I bent down to pick it up, I looked forward under the pew and saw the entire church floor to the preacher's pulpit. On the floor, next to each pair of feet, stood high-heeled pumps, sometimes in lacquer, sometimes in suede, sometimes toeless, sometimes without heels – pumps I thought fit for afternoon cocktails. All the ladies had taken their tallest and narrowest shoes, and during the sermon by Eng and his colleagues, had crawled out of their shoe wardrobe's finest items, pushed them under the pew, and sat in their socks.

Afterwards I was invited to coffee in

honor of the church's eldest member who was celebrating his birthday. That was the purpose for my visit to the Swedes in the church. I was introduced on the stairs to some tens of them, and in the flickering sunshine across the avenue we went en masse to the old man's home. He lived in a small, pleasant apartment, a few blocks from the lake and the wide beach road. He was over eighty and had to stay home from the worship service because he had broken his leg a half year earlier. He was spicy and remarkably alert. He blinked often with his left eye towards me and telegraphed with this method "Did I not want a whiskey after the sermon?"

The remarkable thing was his speech. He was born in Chicago in one of the last years of the 1860s, but they had spoken Swedish at home. His language, accents, and expressions remained unchanged since the year his parents immigrated. He said when I greeted him: "Gentle servant". He always called me "my lord" and "dear sir."

With this kindness, he told me – while Eng, Nordlof, and the others drank coffee and the wives in the flower hats sat around the cookies – that he came from Atterbom's¹ parish, Åsbo, outside Mjölby. He said this with a quiet, cultured sense of humor, certain that I knew he was born in Chicago and had never been from there. But on a little bookshelf, which had glass doors and ornaments on the leaves, the books of Atterbom stood next to Wilhelm von Braun's² stories. I was blinded with Sunday's happiness: it could have been one of those cold attics in a manor house with coarse, hard-cut floorboards, today as hundreds of years ago, where an old gentleman sat with his books and through small glass panes overlooking the apple trees of the garden.

But it was an apartment on Chicago's north side with wall-to-wall rugs and a sweet smell of the everlasting American cleaners hanging between furniture and

people, and I opened my eyes and looked into his shiny, cherry-fresh face.

The great fire

When he was three years old, his mother had wrapped blankets around him and carried him away from the big fire. They had lived on the west side where the fire broke out and she had run with him over one of the bridges. She had many times told him about a man who came out of a burning house and jumped in again when he heard the children screaming in a window. But he had not come out with the children but with a bundle of paper collars: so mad and inverted people became during this catastrophe, his mother had said. His father had been in town and tried to save what he could of his tailoring business and almost lost his life for customers' suits and fabrics. He had talked with a wagon owner and asked to rent his wagon to drive all his workshop to safety. But the man demanded \$200 for that: so mad and so evil people became during the fire, his father said. His father and mother had not met for several days in the panic. She had taken her son to the shore, where the men led their families into the mud of the lake to escape the horrific heat from the fire, and she had been in the water with him on her arm, with water up to her waist for hours while the city was spreading firecrackers in front of their eyes.

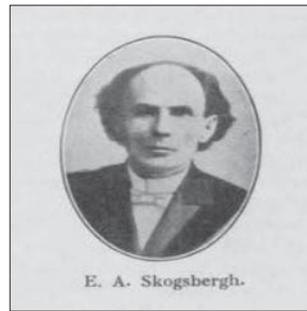
He could not now be sure what he remembered and what his mother told me. But he remembered a block of houses as they hurried past them. It lay with their grey wooden houses in front of their eyes, and they saw worried people in the windows and in the small stores of the ground floors. Suddenly the fire came there with a flash. It had been untouched, far from the flames; then it sparkled into an explosion of flames and flared up while the big fire was still twenty blocks away.

The great thing that happened after the fire, he said, was that everyone after the disaster became very sinful until Moody³ and Skogsbergh⁴ and Sanngren⁵ came. His mother took him to Moody's tabernacle that housed 10,000 people. There was such a rush to Moody's salvation meetings that people threw themselves on the trams in great numbers. The wagons were filled and pushed down the tracks in the street. Sometimes they rolled over, sometimes the horses dropped asleep and lay next to the track, and that was all for the sake of meetings and salvation. Moody preached and cried until his great body shook. Everyone shook and cried in the Tabernacle on Chicago Avenue, and Ira Sankey⁶ sang from "Lammets lov." It was in the late 1870s, and it was a movement in Chicago for God that no one could imagine. People witnessed and cried in the street corners, and even on a tram after the end of the work there were three, four people who started singing in the car and asking others if they had found the way to God. Where there were some Irish Catholics, it could become tense, because they were not nice to these newly saved. They said that they always

had God in their hearts, and sometimes they were a bit drunk by the maize whiskey and hit the questioning person. Then there could be a general melee.

The Swedes did not come to Moody in such big numbers yet. Most of them did not understand what he said. They were too new in the country. Some then sent for August Skogsbergh, who was from Värmland and had preached a lot in Jönköping and Västergötland. From there came many Swedish Chicagoans.

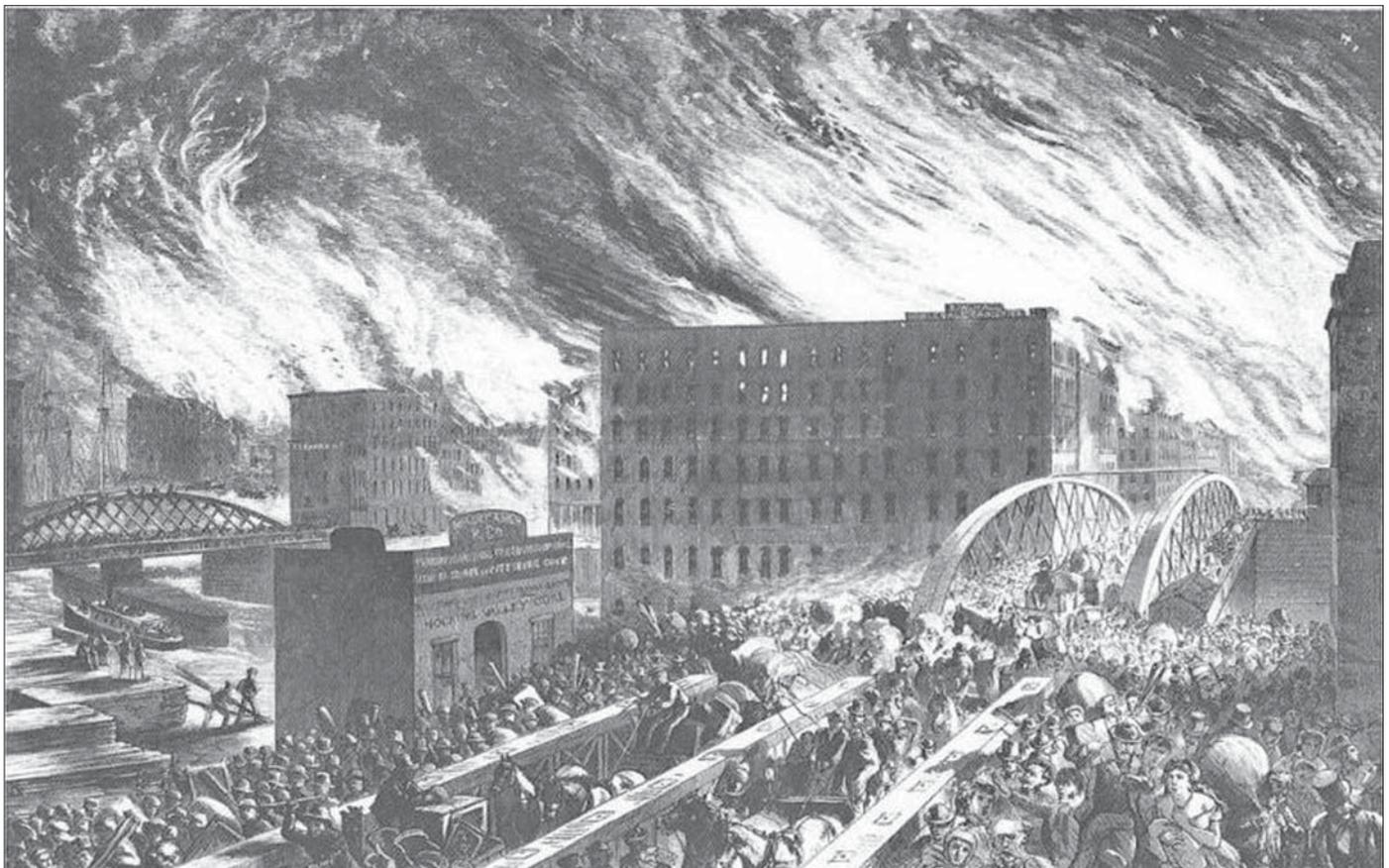
Evidently there was a huge revival in Chicago around 1876, but that is another story.



Endnotes

- 1) *Per Daniel Amadeus Atterbom*, (1790 – 1855) Swedish romantic poet and professor of philosophy.
- 2) *Wilhelm von Braun* (1813 – 1860), Swedish author and poet.
- 3) *Dwight D. Moody* (1837 – 1899), also known as D. L. Moody, was an American evangelist and publisher, connected with the Holiness Movement.
- 4) *Erik August Skogsbergh* (1850 in Glava [Vrml] – 1939) powerful revivalist preacher and pioneer leader of the Swedish Mission Friends which became The Evangelical Covenant Church of America.
- 5) *J. M. Sanngren*, (1837 in Alseda [Smål.] – 1878) pastor in the future Mission Covenant Church.
- 6) *Ira D. Sankey*, (1840 – 1908), American gospel singer and composer, often in company with Moody. Many of his songs and collections of songs were translated into Swedish.

Translation by Elisabeth Thorsell and Chris Olsson.



The Randolph Street Bridge, Chicago.