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A Swedish Shoemaker Makes a New life in America

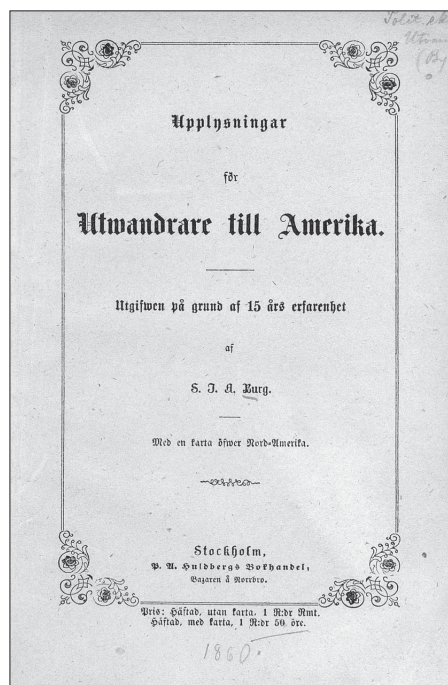
By MARGARETA LAGERMAN

TRANSLATION BY CHRIS OLSSON AND
ELISABETH THORSELL

This is the story of a man who left for America in the mid-1840s to create a new life. Many at this time left Sweden for various reasons: religious, crop failures, etc. Our man, however, it appears on closer inspection, was trying to escape an unhappy marriage, something that we must leave open to our imagination.

Sven Johan Agrell had a better opportunity than many of his compatriots to succeed with this effort. He had a solid craft and vocational training behind him, something that ought to have allowed him to easily find a source of income in the new country.

But who was this Agrell and can we find traces of him in the different sources?



The pamphlet *Upplysningar för Utvandrare till Amerika*, by S.J.A. Burg. Stockholm 1860. Copy from Kungliga Biblioteket, Stockholm, Sweden.

My interest in Agrell was first sparked by a booklet I found at an antiquarian fair in Stockholm a few years ago: "*Information for Emigrants to America*" written by S.J.A. Burg.¹ It was very small in format, printed on very thin, fine paper, in Gothic typestyle, and written in old Swedish. The printing year was 1860 (written with pencil) and it covered 100 pages. My curiosity was awakened to look more closely at what the booklet had as content, and of course, to possibly find out something about its author. A copy could easily be obtained from the Royal Library (*Kungliga Biblioteket*).

The author was undoubtedly Swedish, but somebody named S.J.A. Burg could not be traced in the Swedish church books. Two source references from America expert Elisabeth Thorsell opened the door for further investigation.

"#1004-1006. Mrs. L. Agrell was Lovisa Gustava Lilja, b. in Enköping 25 Aug. 1813, ... Her husband, Sven Johan Agrell, b. in Kromsta, Litslena parish (Upps.) 27 Dec. 1809, ... had disappeared from Sweden in 1844 or 1845, and is identical to the well-known land agent S.J. A(grell) Burg, the propagandist for Waldens Ridge, TN, and the author of the work *Upplysningar för utvandrare till Amerika* (Information for Emigrants to America), published in Stockholm 1860. She was ostensibly on her way to America to look for her husband and was accompanied by her dau. Lovisa Wilhelmina, b. in Stockholm 3 May 1835, as well as her foster sister, Sophia Emilia Lilja from the General Orphanage (Allmänna Barnhuset) in Stockholm, b. there 13 Jan. 1825. Mrs. Agrell failed in her mission and was back in Stockholm again the following year. She d. in Stockholm 16 April 1859. All three women had received passports in Stockholm 13 Sept. 1845."²

After determining that the author S.A.

Burg is identified as a Swedish man by the name Sven Johan Agrell, we can go to the church archives. We take it here in chronological order. Sven Johan was born 27 Dec. 1809 in Kromsta in Litslena parish, (Upps.).³ The parents were farrier Jöns Johan Agrell and his wife Maria Elisabeth Holmström. We find information about the Agrell family in Litslena clerical survey,⁴ and see that the mother died in 1811 and that the father re-married. There were six children in the family.

In January 1817, the family moved to Uppsala.⁵ The family now consists of five children and parents. Sven Johan moved to Stockholm. In the church books for Klara parish, it was noted that the journeyman shoemaker Sven Johan Agrell moved into the parish in February 1833.⁶ Under the column "*Frejd*" (reputation) he was noted as "honest." He is further "unmarried." However, no note in the moving-out record for Klara has been found.

We will search for information about Lovisa Gustava Lilja.⁷ During a timespan of 1833 onwards, we look in the Banns and Marriage book for Lovisa's hometown, Enköping. We know from the above that the couple will have a baby girl in May 1835. On 24 August 1833, the banns were published for the first time for the journeyman shoemaker Sven Johan Agrell and the maiden Lovisa Gustafva Lilja and the two are married in Enköping on 3 November 1833.⁸ He is 24 years old, she is 20. The actual wedding ceremony took place in Stockholm. One can imagine a big wedding dinner with parents, in-laws, and many siblings who participate in the celebrations for the young couple.

Life in Stockholm

The next clue leads to Stockholm. In November 1833, the newlyweds moved into St. Jakob's⁹ parish to the Spectern block. In the remarks line, the listing is "honest."

They move in December 1834 to the parish of Adolf Fredrik,¹⁰ specifically to the Moraset 36 block. Sven Johan (we do not know which name he is using) is now said to be a “master shoemaker” after moving to Stockholm. He had been trained in Enköping for the past few years, with good reports from his father-in-law, Lars Petter Liljas’s, workshop, when he was a shoemaker in the city.¹¹ With him in Stockholm during the first years of the shoemaking life was the shoemaker apprentice Carl Eric Hellblom, born in 1816.

The couple moved again in December 1835 to St. Jakob’s¹² parish. The family has now received a new little member, a daughter, Lovisa Wilhelmina, born 3 May 1835 in Adolf Fredrik.¹³

In June 1837, the household moved again. In the moving out record for St. Jakob’s parish the destination is listed as “undecided” (*obestämd*).¹⁴ As in many cases in the different records, Sven Johan is noted as “honest.” In the meantime, the family moved to Hedvig Eleonora parish on 8 November 1837.¹⁵

From there we lose where the family moved next. What we do know, according to the information above, is that the wife Lovisa Gustava and her daughter, as well as the foster sister, travelled to North America at the end of 1845 to search for the missing husband. He is said to have disappeared sometime in 1844 or 1845. During this time, the couple may have moved within or from Stockholm altogether. They may all have returned to Lovisa’s hometown, or just she and her daughter had returned there. This is a clue to turn to Enköping records.

Life in Enköping

In the clerical survey for Enköping for the years 1838-1842 we find the family together.¹⁶ The master shoemaker Sven Johan Agrell is the owner of house #2 in the *Östra kvarteret* in the city, where he lives and certainly has his workshop there. They are said to have arrived there in 1840 from Stockholm. According to the clerical survey, the family has a son, Carl Axel, (b. 6 Sep 1840, d. 10 Sep 1840).¹⁷ Then they have a little girl, Axelina Adelaide, (b. 21 April 1843, d. 24 Apr. 1843).¹⁸

It’s sometime during the next two years Sven Johan leaves his wife and child, apparently in Enköping.

Lovisa went to America

As mentioned above, Lovisa was heading to America hoping to find her husband. One can see that she really wanted to reunite with her husband. Economic reasons for finding him may not have existed because she could afford to make this trip, taking with her two additional travelers. However, the attempt fails. Unfortunately, she loses her little daughter, Lovisa Wilhelmina, only 10 years old, in America.

We discover that Lovisa’s next step was moving from Enköping into St. Jakob’s parish on 24 April 1847, to Regeringsgatan 54.¹⁹ Her reputation is reported as “well”. The remark states: “The man Agrell, *Skomakare*, has left his wife.” In February 1852 she moved to Klara parish.²⁰ At the end of 1855, Lovisa moved to Hedvig Eleonora parish, to Grev Turegatan 21.²¹ She has a letter of divorce from her husband Sven Johan Agrell from the Uppsala diocese, dated 27 March 1851. On 16 April 1859 “shoemaker S.J. Agrell’s widow dies.”²² This note, however, is wrong because we find Sven Johan in good health in Tennessee in North America at this time.

Editor’s note: Divorced people were in those days recorded as being widow or widower, as there was not enough space on the mandatory statistical forms that the clergy had to fill out.

Sven Johan in America

The time of Sven Johan Agrell’s first trip to America has not been found in any emigrant or passenger lists. Perhaps he travelled on a merchant ship or the like for this first overseas trip. The traces of him that we can find are primarily in his “*Information for Emigrants to America*,” where he himself says he has fifteen years of experience traveling around North America. However, there are two recorded journeys from Sweden. Through different sources, we can also see the purposes of both these trips.

The first documented trip to Sweden is found in the second source from Elisabeth Thorsell, “*The Swedish Heritage in America*” written by Allan Kastrup²³ in 1975. Here is that story in the book:

“In the 1850 Census there were a handful of Swedes at Nashville, Tennessee, including S.J.A Berg or Burg, who called himself doctor; his mother-in-law, Maria Peterson, and a shoemaker named Carl Fredrik Edman. The year before, a cam-

paign promoting the settlement at Walden Ridge near Chattanooga had been launched in Stockholm by Berg and other Swedish agents, and similar efforts were made in the 1860s with greater success. A pamphlet entitled “A New California,” published in 1849, extolled the climate and the fertility of the land in southeastern Tennessee, while Illinois and Michigan were denigrated. The brochure received an enthusiastic notice in Aftonbladet, which called Walden Ridge a real little paradise.”

As far as surname and professional title are concerned, we find that Sven Johan now uses a different “alias.” We find a record for J.A. Agrell, journeyman goldsmith, who received a passport in Göteborg 16 Aug. 1849 in the database *Emi-Pass*.^{24,25}

According to Allan Kastrup (see above), a campaign was started in 1849 to attract Swedes to settle in Walden Ridge near Chattanooga, where in 1850 Agrell/Burg is listed in the 1850 U.S. Census.

In *Aftonbladet* for 24 May 1849²⁶, under the heading “Mixed Topics” we find a review of a small book, “A New California for Swedes....Transl. from the 2nd original edition. Stockholm 1849.” The reviewer calls, as we see above, Walden Ridge “a real little paradise.”

In the spring of 1849, in *Aftonbladet*, there was a notice: “An Invitation. Join a company, planning our departure this coming spring to California and there forming a colony, so are invited from the country of residence to several members, preferably farmers. Further information about the plan as well as the travel expenses, etc. is announced by the Society Commissioner, L. Marcus, Skärgårdsgatan No. 15, Stockholm.”

California plans

As we see above, Burg and others are behind this enterprise. They have created a company and established “Proposed Rules for the Establishment of a Colony in the State of California and the United North American States.”²⁷ L. Marcus is listed as responsible. No exact date is specified but the proposal was published in 1849, as seen by a pencil note on a document in the Royal Library. In total, the proposal contains 21 sections. The last paragraph provides information about the cost of the trip, etc. In Section 2 it says that on arrival, Califor-

nia intends to divide the “available workforce.” A distinction must be made between “agriculture, trade, handicrafts, and gold panning.” This latter, about the possibility of searching for gold, is reflected in the passenger list to the United States in August 1849, where we find “J.A. Agrell, journeyman goldsmith.”

Failure?

According to Allan Kastrup, we can learn that the venture this time did not succeed.

Allan Kastrup tells above that a second attempt was made in the late 1850s. An in-depth account of this project is found in Burg’s pamphlet “*Information for Emigrants to America*.” The purpose of the booklet is clearly stated at the end of the story. Burg says that he has formed a company where shareholders can buy shares, and get without cost access to land, settle down, and create a safe and secure haven in the “promised land.” In the collection of “Acts of the State of Tennessee”²⁸ from 1856, all of the particulars about the founding of this company are included. It claims that at least seven people in addition to himself are part of the company. The actual “*Information for Emigrants to America*” is printed in Stockholm and is aimed primarily at countrymen in the native country, but also to those who did not do so well in America from the outset but were looking for better opportunities to make a living.

Back to Sweden

The visit to Dr. Burg’s native country can be determined to be in the summer of 1858. The reason one can surmise this may have been negotiations with the publisher about the printing of the pamphlet.

Back to America

On May 25, 1858, John Burg leaves from Hamburg with the *S/S Transit* via Liverpool to New York.²⁹ He has now given himself the title “doctor.” During his return to America, Burg writes a long attachment to his pamphlet. In this is found further details regarding the conditions for emigration and residence in America. The letter is dated Liverpool 6 June 1858.

Through the pamphlet “*Information for Emigrants to America*” we get a large part of his time in America “served up on a platter.” He has, according to his own account, spent fifteen years in North America and has accumulated experiences and

information about all the regions he has visited: Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Texas, California, and Oregon.

He reports on geographical conditions, climate, vegetation, natural resources such as wildlife, etc., cultivation opportunities, possibilities to find work on the whole. He even tells about the population, about how to become a citizen, and much more that might be useful to the immigrant.

One is already struck when reading “*Information for Emigrants to America*” with how easy the pen flows throughout the story. But one can also note, let’s say, a certain manner in the presentation. At the same time as Burg urgently calls for careful consideration before the decision to emigrate, without deterring the reader, he emphasizes all the positive things that can happen for the bold to take the great step over the Atlantic and seek a, hopefully, happier existence in the Promised Land “over there.”

Dr Burgs later life

In the United States federal census of November 1850,³⁰ we find J.A. Burg resident in Coffee County, Tennessee, living with his wife Hannah, age 29, born in Sweden.

In June 1860 he lives in Sequatchie, Tennessee, post office Walden Ridge. His occupation is mentioned as “shoemaker.” In a separate note, drawn up 20 July 1860, we see under the column for the profession: “Physician.” Below we find Burg’s additional information, a son, Franc, 8 years. However, wife Hannah is not mentioned here. Her eventual fate does not appear. On 13 Sep. 1860 Burg marries Amanda M. Foust, 30 years old³² from Sullivan, TN.

Information about Burg’s further existence in later years in America has not been researched by the author, except that he, one guesses, continues his project of taking

care of immigrants from Sweden. The possibility is fascinating enough that all the big databases, filled with digitized information, now offer us an opportunity to follow a person’s life. One wonders what Burg himself would have said about this revelations of his life.

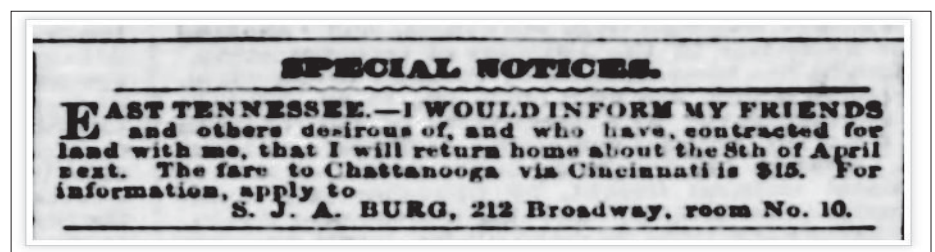
To speculate about the person Agrell / Burg can actually be something permitted in this context. He was obviously seeking freedom, adventure, and hoping to create a more “gilt-edged” existence. That he then renamed himself and also changed the information about his occupation can or should not be used against him. In the midst of all this information, we also find a testimony about him, which we can take as a good and nice posthumous comment about our master shoemaker from Litslena, namely, as cited above: “well-known country agent S.J.A. Agrell/Burg, The Propagandist of Walden’s Ridge, TN, and the author of the work, *Information for Emigrants to America*, published in Stockholm in 1860.” Sven Johan Agrell seems to have achieved the goal of his dreams. He creates a certain legacy by being a broker for his land-hungry compatriots. And he has gained stature in the eyes of the outside world.

S.J.A. Agrell / Burg dies in 1870.³³

Endnotes:

- 1) Burg, S.J.A., *Upplysningar för Utvandrare till Amerika. Utgifwen på grund af 15 års erfarenhet af S.J.A. Burg. Med en karta öfwer Nord-Amerika*. Stockholm, P.A.Huldbergs Bokhandel, Bazar- en å Norrbro, printed 1860 (Stockholm).
- 2) *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in the United States 1820-1850* p.228, (SPAUS) by Nils William Olsson and Erik Wiken (1995).
- 3) Litslena (C) C:3 1796-1846 Image 44 / Page 40.
- 4) Litslena (C) AI:10 1808-1815 Image 143 / Page 137.

A newspaper find



The New York Daily Herald 25 March 1855. Submitted by Barbara Rasmussen.

- 5) Litslena (C) AI:11 1815-1821 Image 157 / Page 151.
- 6) Klara (A, AB) BI:5 1830-1836 Image 940 / Page 175.
- 7) Enköping (C) AI:12 1831-1838 Image 220 / Page 18.
- 8) Enköping (C) EI:1 1774-1860 Image 37 / Page 33.
- 9) Jakob och Johannes (A, AB) BIa:4 1833-1839 Image 430 / Page 21.
- 10) Adolf Fredrik (A, AB) BIa:3 1830-1837 Image 267 / Page 261.
- 11) Enköping (C) AI:12 1831-1838 Image 1470 / Page 143.
- 12) Jakob och Johannes (A, AB) BIa:4 1833-1839 Image 1430 / Page 71.
- 13) Adolf Fredrik (A, AB) CIa:7 1830-1859 Image 98 / Page 183.
- 14) Jakob och Johannes (A, AB) BIa:5 1835-1839 Image 106.
- 15) Hedvig Eleonora (A, AB) BIa:7 1835-1838 Image 150 / Page 146.
- 16) Enköping (C) AI:13 1838-1842 Image 91 / Page 74.
- 17) Enköping (C) AI:14 1843-1851 Image 103 / Page 81.
- 18) Enköping (C) C:6 1840-1861 Image 83 / Page 195.
- 19) Jakob och Johannes (A, AB) BIa:5 1840-1850 Image 3680.
- 20) Klara (A, AB) BI:8 1849-1852 Image 2320 / Page 227.
- 21) Hedvig Eleonora (A, AB) BIa:12 1855-1858 Image 6.
- 22) Hedvig Eleonora (A, AB) FI:10 1853-1868 Image 208 / Page 408.
- 23) Kastrup, Allan, *The Swedish heritage in America; the Swedish element in America and American-Swedish relations in their historical perspective*, Swedish Council of America, (1975/, pp. 212-213.
- 24) *Database of passports from Sweden. Emipass, database on CD Emigranten Populär 2006.*
- 25) *SPAUS except New York*, by Nils William Olsson (1979), p. 98 mentions this man. He is not listed in SPAUS (1995).
- 26) *Aftonbladet*. 24 May 1849. Nr 119.
- 27) *Förslag till Reglemente för upprättandet af en Coloni i Staten Kalifornien och de Förenade Nord-Amerikanska Staterna.*
- 28) *Acts of the State of Tennessee, passed at the first session of the Thirty-First General Assembly, for the years 1855-56. Published by authority, Nashville: Printed by G.C.Torbett and Company 1856.* Digital copy from the Tennessee State Library.
- 29) Ancestry.com *Hamburg passenger lists 1850-1934. "John Burg."*
- 30) Ancestry.com *1850 U.S. Federal Census*. Coffee County, Tennessee.
- 31) Ancestry.com *1860 U.S. Federal Census*. Sequatchie County, Tennessee.
- 32) FamilySearch.org, Tennessee Marriages.
- 33) *Find a grave*. U.S.A.

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*Male costumes from Sorunda (Södm.), and female costumes from Östervallskog (Vrml.).
Pictures from Svenska Allmogedrakter by Gerda Cederblom (1921).*