

## VILHELM MOBERG AND THE IMMIGRANT CHURCH

John E. Norton

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Vilhelm Moberg, recognized as Sweden's "author of the century" for his immigrant classics, can be said to have begun his historic novels about the great migration to North America while still a young man. He was driven first by curiosity about why so many relatives, (nine aunts and uncles), had left Småland, seeking their "dream of America." As a young man in 1916, he even considered joining them, but stayed home at the urging of his mother, who had seen too many relatives leave for the "promised land." But, 32 years later, in 1948, he and his family finally set out for America on an immigrant visa, determined to tell the grand story of that great migration, and do it in a way that "de-heroised" the story of those pioneers. He also made it clear that he "was not writing Swedish-America's history, but a novel."<sup>1</sup>

He had begun his research in the 1930's by reviewing family letters, church books and shipping records, then finally headed for Minnesota with his family in 1948, after a year's preparatory work. His first immigrant interviews, often held in local taverns, proved less than fruitful, though he faithfully recorded them. He made his first research breakthrough at the Minnesota State Historical Society, where he found daybooks kept from 1854 to 1898 by immigrant Baptist farmer Andrew Peterson from Västergötland, filled with everyday history, and written in everyday language.

Moberg, like many immigrants, was not happy during his early years in the Midwest. Its summer heat, humidity and small-town life in Minnesota, Wisconsin and

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<sup>1</sup> *Berättelser ur min levnad* (Stockholm 1968), p. 301. Also translated and appearing in edited form in *The Swedish American Historical Quarterly*, vol.52(4) 2001, pp. 187-221.

Illinois were oppressive, and its winters, frightening. In the late fall of 1950, he was saved from an Illinois snowstorm near Bishop Hill, Illinois by a National Guard truck, a story he wove into his third immigrant novel *Nybyggarna*, transforming the truck into an ox slaughtered during a blizzard to save the life of Karl Oskar's son. His Midwestern experiences caused him to finally flee to California, where he lived and wrote from 1949 to 1955.

By 1949, his first book, *Utvandrarna* was published in Sweden. It caused distress and anger within "official Sweden," because of its often-negative portrayal of both Church and State, and its earthy populism, expressed often in vulgar terms. That anger coalesced into a national action against him and his novel, led largely by conservatives. It spilled quickly over into Swedish-America, cooling the once-warm reception he had earlier been given, especially among Swedish-American clergy. "The Free Host of Fighters for Light" sought to "raise a storm of protest against Swedish smut literature in general, and *Utvandrarna* in particular." Circular letters reached American-Swedish newspapers like *Nordstjernen* in New York, then other institutions, congregations, and organizations in the United States. But, the average Swede loved the novel, and the protest action only fueled public interest. Its success was assured, in part by the controversy.

Even before its translation into English, a Swedish-American professor in Pennsylvania, A.J. Uppvall, wrote a protest letter about *Utvandrarna* to Moberg, published in *Dagens Nyheter* on 30 December 1950, stating: "Well the gentleman came home from the United States, tired and angry. That's wonderful. We congratulate you heartily. The undersigned has himself helped, by describing you as the leader of smut

literature in the United States. What you should have had, before you scraped the stinking stuff off yourself, was tar and *feathers* in liberal proportions. Here, we await impatiently the English translation of your miserable opus *Utvandrarna*. According to a recently-received message, you'll soon be called to legal task for your dirty work.”

One Swedish Conservative M.P., estate owner Axel Mannerskantz, and his wife read the book, then threw it into their Varnanäs castle furnace, while singing the Swedish National Anthem. Moberg's response was typical: “I was very proud: Can a Swedish author be burned in a finer place than a castle with traditions from Sweden's time of great power?” Despite a bull with 4,000 signatures from Church and Parliament, *Utvandrarna* was translated and published in America. Upon U.S. publication in 1954 of his second novel, *Invandrarna (Unto a Good Land)*, his fame was assured on both sides of the Atlantic, while debate about the works continued.

What was it that caused those storms of official protest, yet enthusiastic public acceptance on both sides of the Atlantic? Was it really a question of gutter language, Moberg's open agnosticism and contempt for Church and State, his artistic weaving of fact and fiction, or were there other causes?

Some criticized the novels for their loose handling of history. He first resurrected a defunct pietistic movement in Småland, “Åkianism”<sup>2</sup> from its 18<sup>th</sup> century grave, giving it to a small family group who accompanied Karl Oskar and Kristina across the Atlantic. He did this to dramatize Sweden's very real persecution of religious dissenters during that period, while illustrating the pietism that was a strong element in the early migration,

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<sup>2</sup> See Emil Herlenius' *Åkianismens historia*, (Halmstad, Sweden, 1902) and Paul Elmen, “Religious motifs in The Emigrants,” published in *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly*, vol. 24(3), July 1973, p, 143. Sect founder Åke Svensson and seven of his followers were sent to the Danviken Insane Asylum for their deviant beliefs in December 1785, and three died there 1786-88, including Åke himself. This broke the movement.

and indeed at the heart of the development of our Augustana Synod. Yet he gave the “Åkians” of Småland characteristics and experiences borrowed directly from the later Erik Janssonist emigrants from northern Sweden, including their documented belief that they would be given the biblical gift of tongues to understand English as they set foot in New York.

Moberg identified most of the early immigrants to Chisago Lake, Minnesota as coming with Karl Oskar’s party from Moberg’s native Småland, in the mid-1850s. Yet, the first group migration to that area was actually several years earlier, made up of pietistic “Hedbergians” or “Luther readers” who came from Hälsingland to Andover and Moline, Illinois in 1850, under the leadership of Joris Pelle Andersson from Hassela. They then headed up the Mississippi in 1851 at the invitation of pioneering Minnesota settler and Erik Janssonist, Erik Ulrik Nordberg.<sup>3</sup>

Others reacted to Moberg’s treatment of the State Church clergy and the Swedish State itself. He picked names with negative connotations for Swedish clergy, like the brandy-selling, intolerant Brusander (“noisy”). He also let an immigrant farmer tell a vulgar shipboard story of a notorious womanizing pastor from Ljuder parish, Drysell, who died in an embarrassing state, corrected only by the servant girl whom he had abused for many years.<sup>4</sup>

As Moberg began his second novel, *Invandrarna (Unto a Good Land)*, he continued his attacks on Swedish clergy, making a bishop of Växjö an equally shameless

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<sup>3</sup> Norelius, Erik, *The Pioneer Swedish Settlements and Swedish Lutheran Churches in America 1845-1860*, (Rock Island, IL 1984), pp. 253-258. Norelius was himself a member of that emigrant group, and a builder of the church in Minnesota.

<sup>4</sup> Moberg, Vilhelm, *Romanen om utvandrarna. Utvandrarna, Invandrarna, Nybyggarna, Sista brevet till Sverige*, (Stockholm, Sweden 1962), p.170.

womanizer, whose notorious activities were widely known, but unreported, by his parish pastors.<sup>5</sup>

But, as he began to describe Swedish-American clergy, his view began to shift. He named an immigrant Lutheran clergyman “Erland Törner” (“thorny”), inspired by pioneering Augustana pastor Erland Carlsson, founder of the three earliest Lutheran congregations in the Chisago Lake area. Yet, he gave the name Petrus Olausson (a patronimic inversion of the name Olaus Petri, Sweden’s 16<sup>th</sup> century church reformer) to a devout layman and fictional former Erik Janssonist settler from Alfta, Hälsingland.<sup>6</sup> Petrus was brought by Moberg to Chisago Lake from Illinois, with news of the building of first Lutheran church in Andover, formed to protect immigrants from the many “false prophets” they had found in America. Moberg also let Petrus become involved with pastor Törner in building the first Lutheran congregation at Chisago Lake, a direct reflection of its real founders, Rev. Erland Carlson and farmer Per Berg from Hög in Hälsingland, who had accompanied Joris Pelle from Moline in 1851.

Moberg spoke warmly, and often, of Swedish Lutheran pastor Tufve Hasselquist, who emigrated in 1852 from Skåne to accept a call from a pioneer Lutheran congregation in Galesburg, Illinois.<sup>7</sup> His feeling for Hasselquist carried over into all three subsequent novels. This was perhaps motivated more by Moberg’s admiration for Hasselquist’s editorship of *Hemlandet*, Hasselquist’s journalistic stand against slavery and support of Lincoln, and an early childrens’ ABC book, than for his pioneering ministries to the Augustana Synod.

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 360.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, pp. 402-403.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, pp. 474-479.

He also endowed those early Swedish-American pastors with humanity, a deep sense of humility, and communality with their parishioners. On Erland Törner's first missionary trip from Illinois to Minnesota, he afflicted the circuit-riding pastor with mosquito attacks and dirty, badly torn clothing, mended by Karl Oskar's wife Kristina.<sup>8</sup> He let Törner organize the first congregation in a barn in the St. Croix River Valley, on 24 May 1854. Moberg gave him parishioners like former Janssonist Petrus Olausson, with whom he worked closely, but not without dissention. For, as they built their new church in the summer of 1855, they debated costs, 10 possible locations, and struggled with factions advocating three different exterior colors, red, green or white. The whites won.

Moberg redeemed the abused former village harlot, Ulrika I Västergöhl, by marrying her to an American Baptist pastor, Henry O. Jackson, in the first Baptist wedding in Stillwater. He died prematurely. He finally let her express feelings for her old Ljuder congregation in Småland by anonymously presenting them a very expensive jeweled silver bridal crown, for use by future generations of young women, given what she had been denied in Sweden... respectability and a husband.<sup>9</sup>

Vilhelm Moberg let Kristina die early, worn out by childbearing and a hard, yet trusting, faithful life. It was after her first taste of the newly-ripened Astrakan apples she had nursed to maturity from Swedish seeds sent by her parents to the new land. And he finally brought Karl Oskar, a man unreconciled to God, like Moberg himself, to the end of life in December 1890. He had Karl Oskar and Kristina buried at Glader Cemetary, on the bluffs above Chisago Lake.

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 427, 434-435, 447-448, 591

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, pp 736-732.

Karl Oskar's death was announced to relatives in Sweden in an epilogue to "The Last Letter Home" by an immigrant stranger who wrote: "Your brother Nelson's family, who are your close blood relatives, send their heartiest greetings to you. It is an unknown stranger in North America who writes these lines. I extend my hand in friendship, and wish you all well. Over my old homeland, I finally ask the Lord's blessing and eternal peace."

Today, many readers of the Moberg novels, and those who have seen the wildly-popular Swedish musical "Kristina from Duvemåla," still come to Glader cemetery with flowers to place on Karl Oskar's and Kristina's graves. But, they are not there. They exist only in the memories of thousands of people on both sides of the Atlantic, born out of the wonderful imagination of an unrepentant agnostic who, after completing his novels, wrote, "When the day finally comes that I can no longer write, I only hope the door to the room of the inaccessible will also be closed to me. Of that day and time, neither the nonexistent God in Heaven, nor his angels, know anything."<sup>10</sup> Moberg drowned in 1973.

#### FOR MORE READING.

Moberg's novels themselves make enjoyable reading or re-reading. He thoughtfully provided an extensive list of references on Swedish migration to America, published as an appendix to the collected novels. English-language works include George M. Stephenson's *The Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration*. (Minneapolis 1932), Theodore Blegen's *Building of Minnesota* (Minnesota Historical Society. 1938) and *Norwegian Migration to America*. (Northfield 1940) and A.E. Strand's *A History of The Swedish Americans of Minnesota*. I-III. (Chicago 1910.)

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<sup>10</sup> *Berättelser ur min levnad* (Stockholm, 1968), p. 337