

Alma Nygren Janisch

Traces of a Swedish Immigrant's Life in Portland, OR.

Between 1851 and 1925, 44,533 people left the province of Dalarna, Sweden for North America. Among those emigrants were two of my great-uncles, Karl-Erik and Klas Edward Nygren, as well as their older sister, Alma Elisabeth, whose story this is. A maternal aunt of theirs had left earlier, also from the parish of Stora Tuna, which lost 18% of its population during the great wave of emigration from Sweden.

Alma, born on October 25, 1875, was the daughter of Lisa Aurora Envall and Erik Jansson Nygren and was the eldest of their twelve children. Six of these children died young, three emigrated to America, never to return, and of the three who remained in Sweden one was my paternal grandfather, Johan Emanuel Nygren. Erik Jansson Nygren was most likely a subsistence farmer. When I was a child, the simple two room cottage that had housed his large family was still standing and spoke of the deep poverty and hopelessness that drove so many Swedes to leave for America.

In the 1870's the large iron mills (*Domnarvets järnverk*) that have dominated my hometown ever since were being built, and my two great uncles, who emigrated in 1906 and 1910, must have worked there, as did all the other males in my family still in the 1950's and later. Karl-Erik and Klas Nygren settled in Worcester, MA. where they could use their acquired skills from home and where Swedish was widely spoken, something that must have simplified their early immigrant life.

For their sister Alma, there can only have been two choices, a life much like her mother's dire one or emigration. She chose the latter and in 1896, at age 21, she began the journey that would take her to America, first to Denver, CO. and some ten years later to Portland, OR., where she lived until her death on October 6, 1948.

Alma left Sweden on August 7, 1896 and followed the usual route from there to America: Gothenburg to Hull in England and then on to Liverpool, where she boarded *The Majestic*, a ship holding close to 1,500 passengers. The ship's manifest tells us that she travelled with another young woman from Stora Tuna, Elin (later Ellen) Bagge and that they were planning a "protracted sojourn" with Denver, CO. as their "intended destination". They were both listed as "servants", the occupation of so many young immigrant women born to poverty in Sweden. Apparently the cost of crossing the Atlantic had dropped considerably by the time Alma and Elin left, something that enabled many more young and poor women like them to emigrate. As domestic servants in America, these women were often treated as members of the family who employed them, and they generally enjoyed a level of courtesy that they had never known back home. Young Swedish women found employment easily, and Alma went to work in the home of John and Mary Scheuerkorn. The 1900 Federal Census shows her still there. Elin Bagge became a waitress and rented a room in a boarding house.

By coincidence, in a book dealing with the emigration from Dalarna to America, I found a letter written by Elin Bagge's elder sister, Selma, to her family in Stora Tuna. In it she describes her arrival in New York: "We were taken to an "immigrant hotel" and there we were fed fried meat, potatoes, sandwiches and coffee. You had to pay 35 cents for this whether or not you ate it. Then they called us up one by one and gave us our railroad tickets. Our train was to leave at 8 p.m. A railroad

agent took us to the station, where our trunks were retagged. When we were on the train, the agent showed us our seats. Our car was beautiful. Here the railroad cars are very long with a corridor running through them and red velvet sofas to sit on with room for two on each one. We were able to leave New York at 8 p.m.” This letter no doubt closely describes a step on the same journey that Selma’s sister Elin took four years later with my great-aunt Alma and that of Alma’s maternal aunt, Christina Soderberg, who had gone to Denver in 1882. (Christina later moved on to Los Angeles, where she had a “Hemstitching and Embroidery” business at 3469 Sabina Street.)

Alma and Elin arrived in Denver with one piece of luggage each on August 19, 1896. At this time Swedes made up the fourth largest foreign born group of the city’s inhabitants, and by 1900 there were eight Swedish societies, led by the Skandia Benevolent Association, founded in 1875, and several Swedish churches. This, and the presence of close relatives, may have helped Alma and Elin adjust quickly to their new lives in America. Elin Americanized her name to Ellen and shortly after 1900 married Axel W. Lundh from the southern province of Skåne. He was a school custodian and the couple later had two children.

Alma also met her future husband in Denver. He was an 1891 immigrant from Landkrohn in Bohemia by the name of Franz (Frank) G. Janisch. He and his brother Wilhelm (William) had come together on the ship *The Eider* in 1891, sailing out of Bremen, Germany. The ship’s manifest lists New York as their destination, but once there Frank headed for Denver, CO. and William for Portland, OR. Frank worked as a cook, evidently at a well-known restaurant or hotel, according to his descendants in Portland. In 1904 he applied for a U.S. passport, probably wanting to visit Bohemia (which he did together with two brothers). In this document Frank is described as being 29 years of age, 5’5” tall with a high forehead, large nose, small mouth and round chin.

His complexion is dark, as is his hair, and he has blue eyes. And he is a Catholic, something that, not surprisingly at that time, does not seem to have been welcomed by Alma's family. In fact, Alma's aunt Christina writes in a letter to Sweden years later that her children had been in Portland to visit Alma and her family, and that Frank seemed to be a good and kind man, "in spite of being a Catholic". She also expresses regret over the likelihood that Alma's "very beautiful" daughter will marry into her father's faith! This is, in fact, what happened. In 1927 Alma's daughter married a Catholic immigrant from the Ukraine.

Alma Nygren and Frank Janisch had married in Denver in 1905 after Frank's return from Bohemia. It appears that Frank then headed for Portland, OR. where he joined his brother William and ran the Janisch Brothers Dyeing and Cleaning business in N.E. Portland. In the early 1920's Frank and Alma are listed in the city directory as proprietors of their own business, Gilt Edge Dyeing and Cleaning, and in 1944, a year after Frank's death, Alma is shown as the sole owner. She was at that point 70 years old and, it appears, sold or closed the business. At the end of her life she lived in the home of her daughter in N.E. Portland, where the whole extended family had settled.

Alma and Frank Janisch and their two children (born 1908 and 1918) lived about five blocks from their business which they had established in an old store. Alma is remembered as being extremely frugal, no doubt as a result of her early life of privation in Sweden. She and Frank owned a home but, according to their great nephew, used only part of it. They never owned a car, and Alma shopped where she could use coupons. In the 1930's Frank would spend his Sunday afternoons fishing on the Willamette River with his son-in-law's brother. Christmas was always celebrated in the home of his and Alma's daughter, and Frank is remembered as being very generous at this time, especially to his granddaughter.

In 1917 Alma's younger brother, Klas Nygren, paid a surprise visit to her family in Portland. By that time the siblings hadn't seen each other since 1896, when Alma emigrated and Klas was a boy of nine, so when Klas first saw his sister again, he didn't immediately identify himself but jokingly asked her if she might have a room for rent. Alma told him she didn't, but seeing his smile, she realized who he was, and their reunion was one of joy and much reminiscing. In a letter to his mother and brother Klas writes: "... and on meeting again our tears were tears of joy. And we have talked about so much and Alma has asked me about everything, how things are with you back home. And when we sit together at the dinner table, we keep saying how nice it would be for our Mother to be here with us! What a joy it would be for us all."

A year later the joy of the siblings' reunion turned into grief, when Alma learned that Klas had been killed in WWI and that she was the one in the family who would have to deal with the practical aftermath of his death, such as communicating with the government of France where he died and with the war department in Washington, D.C. In a long letter to their mother and brother in Sweden, written a few months after Klas' death, Alma discusses the decisions she has had to make, such as having Klas buried in France. She also wishes she knew how he had died, whether he was gassed or shot to death. She tells them she has hung a gold star in her front window, as was the custom, to notify passers-by of her family's terrible loss. In her letter Alma makes only a passing mention of her husband and children, but a year or so later the family posed for a photographer, and Alma sent the picture to Sweden, where it is still in an old album that belonged to my paternal grandfather, Alma's younger brother Johan. This picture, and a later one of Alma and Frank with their by then grown daughter, have sharpened the traces of this hardworking immigrant family. I feel

fortunate to have come to know them through genealogical records as well as the recollections of their Portland descendants.

When, in 1919, Alma wrote the letter to Sweden dealing with her brother's death in the horrific battle of Meuse-Argonne in France, she had lived in America for 23 years. Since she was married to a non-Swede English had become her everyday language and had markedly influenced her Swedish. She suggests in her letter that good English was the reason her brother Klas had designated her as the family spokesperson, should he perish in the war. Their brother Karl-Erik, who had lived in Worcester, MA. since 1906, had a Swedish wife, and as the city was home to a great number of Swedes, good English was often not a necessity. In fact, in the early 1900's Worcester had numerous Swedish churches, businesses and lodges, and the largest employer was Norton Ceramics Industries, founded by two men from the Swedish province of Skåne. Alma's brother was, in fact, part of the Swedish work force that dominated Norton.

I don't know if Alma and Karl-Erik ever saw each other again after Alma left Sweden. Crossing the country would have been a costly undertaking for the frugal Alma, and perhaps the memory of her initial rail journey from New York to Denver in 1896 was enough to dissuade her from making that long trip again. The two siblings kept in touch via letters, however, and Alma tells her mother that Karl-Erik would complain about her being slow to write. Karl-Erik outlived Alma by three years, passing away in 1951.

Alma probably arrived in Portland in 1905. She no doubt took the train, both Denver and Portland being at that time rail transportation hubs. Portland's population had grown quickly to over 200,000 residents, and an old picture of the city shows busy downtown streets with horse-drawn carriages and cars competing for space. Four bridges spanned

the Willamette River and the city port was full of activity. One 1910 photograph shows a grocery store in the Janischs' neighborhood, and it is easy to imagine my great-aunt shopping for her family there. In driving around that area I have seen many old buildings that were part of Alma's Portland. I hope she was happy there, so far and so different from the place where she grew up. She mentions in a letter to her mother that mail from Sweden took two months to reach her in Portland, so over the 31 years between Alma's emigration and her mother's death in 1927 communication was not frequent and her memories of Stora Tuna must have faded. Her great-nephew, who knew her and Frank well, told me he couldn't remember her ever talking about Sweden. However, she would bake a Swedish ginger bread cake and passed the recipe on to her daughter, who, in turn, would serve it to her family. And Alma's great-granddaughters remember having a lullaby sung to them in Swedish when they were children.

Frank Janisch died in 1943 at the age of 69, and Alma passed away five years later at 73. They are buried in a Portland Catholic cemetery. Visiting their graves was a very moving experience for me. Here were relatives of mine, whose names I had heard throughout my childhood, and whom I had now gotten to know and had become very fond of such a long time past the end of their hard working and successful immigrant lives. I will always feel immensely indebted to their descendants, who so generously shared memories and facts of those lives that, along with those of so many other people, enriched immigrant Portland in the first half of the 1900's.