

“Honored compatriot!”

An Introduction to Samuel Magnus Hill’s Letters to Selma Lagerlöf

A hundred years ago, Selma Lagerlöf had an admiring reader in the United States named Samuel Magnus Hill. He was a Professor of Swedish literature and served as one of the editors of *Ungdomsvännen* [Youth’s Friend], an illustrated Swedish-American “Magazine for the Home.” Hill labored hard to keep up with life in Sweden. That was no easy task in Wahoo, a small town on the Nebraska prairie, but due to his diligent involvement in the Swedish-American press he was surprisingly well-informed about the ongoing cultural, political and religious changes back home.

Hill had emigrated with his parents and siblings in 1868, after the difficult famine years; he was 17 years old at the time. Intelligent, assiduous and determined, he was eventually able to obtain a university education at the Swedish Augustana College for teachers and ministers in Rock Island, Illinois. After his graduation he taught for a couple of years at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, before serving as a Lutheran missionary for a year among Scandinavian Mormons in Salt Lake City, Utah. Eventually he became a Professor (1884 – 1915) and Acting President (1886 – 1901) of Luther Academy, a small Swedish Junior College in Wahoo, Nebraska. But it was not a life without complications. Toward the end of his academic career Hill writes:

During my first years here [in the United States] I did not suffer from homesickness. On the contrary, I was happy that I had indeed left Sweden. It is both a sad and painful experience, to hate and despise one’s homeland. But I have had that experience. That voluntary exile which thousands of Svea’s [Sweden’s] children choose each year, no doubt has its compelling reasons. Destitution and want is a severe master, even in a homeland one otherwise loves.

I was not homesick for the first fifteen years, but thought that once I had made enough money, I would go back home and settle down. I never imagined that I would live and have the prospect of dying here in America. And I still cannot think that thought yet (1914) even though it apparently will be my lot in life.¹

The year Hill would turn 50 he had decided to take a trip back to his old homeland. (It also turned out to be his only visit to Sweden.) At this point in his life, Hill had been gone for 33 years. Saving money and preparing for the journey took several years. His Professor’s

position was far from well-paid; Hill had eight children to support and finally, to be able to leave, he was forced to sell off most of his library. He left in June 1901 and stayed in Sweden that entire summer. It was far from an ordinary tourist trip, even if he obviously wanted to visit his native area and reconnect with relatives around Västra Ryd in the province of Östergötland. A letter of introduction from the American daily newspaper *The Omaha Bee* made him a “Special Correspondent to the *Bee*,”² and writing newspaper articles was one of his many tasks. On behalf of *Ungdomsvännerna* he had made plans to contact a number of prominent politicians, authors and religious leaders in Sweden. His idea was to turn these meetings and conversations into magazine pieces. Hill was also going to participate in one of the summer courses at Uppsala University, attend a gathering of ministers in Linköping, and participate in the Lutheran World Conference in Lund. There was also yet another mission—namely, to investigate the possibility of finding work in Sweden and re-migrate with his family.

Things did not turn out exactly as Hill had envisioned. “Most of the people I intended to visit, and to whom I had obtained letters of introduction, had left the city [for the summer],”³ and there are no job interviews described in the journal. But he did meet and stay with a number of relatives, and he made several field trips that resulted in articles on Swedish industrial conditions, where the treatment of the workers was of particular interest to him. He did participate in the summer courses at Uppsala University, where he, as a young man, had dreamed of becoming a student, and where he also, just before the turn of the century, had tried to obtain a year-long leave of absence from teaching in order to study. But his application was turned down by the Luther Academy Board of Directors. Hill gave a lecture at Uppsala University on various Swedish-Americans issues, and in doing so, took the opportunity to insert a greeting to Selma Lagerlöf. In his journal, Hill reports:

I sent a greeting to Sweden’s most distinguished woman author, Selma Lagerlöf, saying that she did not have to travel to Egypt in order to study mummies that had been embalmed three and four thousand years ago, but that she ought to make a trip over to the United States to study people in the flesh, Swedes, her own people, who are definitely ‘very much alive.’ She would not be celebrated to death, as we had almost done with [the bishop] Scheele and [the theologian] Waldenström. She could travel around incognito as a school teacher from Sweden, and in that way study us without being celebrated to death or get misleading impressions about conditions here.⁴

It was an appeal Hill came to repeat in his letters to her. Why was Hill so eager to try to talk Selma Lagerlöf into coming to America? The letters are an interesting microcosm that reflects the complicated relationship at the time between the Swedes in Sweden and the Swedes in the

United States. By the year 1900 almost a million Swedes had emigrated and the exodus showed no sign of slowing.⁵ Among Swedish politicians and farmers there was a growing sense of alarm—would emigration drain Sweden’s population to such an extent that it would lead to farm labor shortages? A large government commission was launched to study and analyze the causes behind the exodus.⁶ The findings of the Emigration Inquiry, as it came to be called, were published between 1907 and 1913. It was a widely debated issue. In a series of articles in the early 1930s about Samuel Magnus Hill in the newspaper *Svenska Amerikanaren* [the Swedish American], Gustav N. Svan lists some of them: “Among the ‘movements’ in Sweden that were talked about a great deal at the time, movements with long names, which are now probably mostly forgotten, a few must be mentioned in this context: *Nationalföreningen mot emigrationen* [the National Organization Against Emigration], *Den svenska egnahems-rörelsen* [the Swedish Home Owner Movement] and *Emigrationsutredningen* [the Emigration Inquiry] with its many appendices, annual reports and summaries.”⁷ In Appendix VII to the Emigration Inquiry, published in 1908, Svan discovered a letter with the initials “S. M. H.,” which shows that Hill certainly was aware of and involved in this debate.

In Sweden the emigrants were often perceived as “quitters” who had deserted Sweden. When some of them returned with cash and new ideas, they easily became victims of “Jante’s Law,” the Swedish envy, and were seen as Americans who thought they knew something the native Swedes did not. In America many Swedes still felt primarily Swedish. They were loyal to their Swedish identity. They honored the King, Swedish nature, their Lutheran faith and their childhood memories. Many of them had family and friends left in Sweden. Like all the Swedish-American journalists, teachers and church leaders who sought to preserve what it meant to be Swedish in America, Hill also tried to encourage the things that strengthened the bonds to Sweden and the Swedish identity. There was support from Sweden in this endeavor as well. In Gothenburg, *Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet* [The National Organization for the Preservation of Swedish-ness Abroad] had been founded in 1908.⁸

At the same time Swedish-Americans were tremendously grateful for the opportunities and quality of life their new homeland had offered them. The Swedish-American identity, the one Hill referred to as “the voluntary exile”, was something completely new. It had emerged from the American melting pot where a number of different languages, cultures and life styles had been mixed with each other. There were many new things to describe and explain—everything from nature to daily life. But in this regard the Swedish-Americans suffered from a

feeling of inferiority, of being at a disadvantage, because what the Swedish-American authors and artists portrayed was never really accepted as good enough in Sweden.

It is exactly this point Hill brings up in his lecture in Uppsala. He comments on it in his journal: “I refuted Prof. Adolf Noreens criticism, that there was no Swedish literature among us.”⁹ The simple solution Hill sees to this problem—that in the eyes of the Swedes back home, there were no qualified Swedish authors in the United States capable of depicting Swedish-American life—becomes, in other words, to try to entice Selma Lagerlöf to take on the task. No one would dare criticize such a famous and respected author for a lack of artistic ability. One must add here that in spite of Hill’s description of Selma Lagerlöf as “Sweden’s most distinguished woman author,” he was not without certain reservations. It had to do with politics. Hill never tried to cover up his socialist sympathies. Immediately after his arrival in Sweden he visited, among others, the office of the socialist newspaper *Ny tid* [New Era] in Gothenburg¹⁰, and later in Stockholm he looked up the Social Democrat Hjalmar Branting, who he apparently thought very highly of.¹¹ About Selma Lagerlöf’s novel *Antikrists mirakler* [The miracles of antichrist], which was an attempt to reconcile Christianity with socialism, Hill later wrote rather critically that “it is socialism and religious communism she wants to cut down there.”¹²

One does not get the impression that Hill had contacted Selma Lagerlöf prior to his lecture in Uppsala, and there is no such letter preserved in the Lagerlöf letter archive at *Kungliga biblioteket* [the Royal Library] in Stockholm. There is, however, a letter that he wrote to her a few months after his return home to Wahoo, Nebraska. The letter is dated November 16, 1901. In it, he mentions his greeting from Uppsala and repeats his invitation to her to come to the United States and embark on a lecture tour. In a letter from Selma Lagerlöf, which Hill would later quote in his article about *Gösta Berlings saga* [The Saga of Gösta Berling], it is surprising to hear her say: “Yes, the greeting which you sent me from Uppsala has reached me from many quarters, and I thank you cordially for it.”¹³ In *Ungdomsvännan* Hill writes that this letter was dated “December 26, 1900,” six months prior to Hill’s visit to Uppsala. Hill must have meant 1901, because on February 4, 1902, Hill writes again, thanking Lagerlöf for her letter.

Why are we unable to verify the date? Because the folder in the Hill Archive at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, where the letters from Selma Lagerlöf ought to have been kept, is empty.¹⁴ There are no copies and there is no explanation as to why the letters are missing. Another folder where they might have been kept is missing altogether.¹⁵ As a result, we do not know the extent of Lagerlöf’s correspondence with Hill.

When Hill writes to Lagerlöf in February 1902, he asks her to describe the creation of *Gösta Berlings saga*. Here we have to assume that she—in response to this request—eventually sends Hill her piece “En saga om en saga,” [A Saga about a Saga], because he quotes liberally from it in the presentation he puts together for *Ungdomsvännan* in 1903. Hill must have read or heard somewhere that Lagerlöf was busy with a textbook for the Swedish schools, and apparently interpreted this to mean a grammar book. He had not realized that her subject matter was geography. That is probably why he also presents the idea that the two of them should co-author a Swedish grammar “according to the [American] diagramming method,” where the different parts of speech are separated with lines and arrows. Hill argues—since Lagerlöf already had a publisher—that such a grammar might make “a nice profit,” and as a low-wage academic all additional income was most likely welcome.

Exactly how Lagerlöf responded to this suggestion we do not know, but a collaboration on a grammar never came about. Perhaps she did not respond at all, because a year later, on March 2, 1903, Hill pens another letter to her. The photograph he has asked for has not arrived, he writes, and neither has “the account of how *Gösta Berling* came into being, which you so kindly promised to send.” In order to show how appreciated Lagerlöf was among the Swedish-Americans, Hill reports that *Gösta Berlings saga* and *Jerusalem* are both currently being serialized in the Swedish-American press. And again he returns to the thought that Lagerlöf should come to America so that she could write about “the Swedes in the West.” Hill suggests that a novel like that might perhaps portray the followers of Erik Jansson, who started the religious utopian society Bishop Hill just north of Galesburg, Illinois. “Erik Jansson’s son lives here in town [Wahoo, Nebraska],” Hill writes excitedly, continuing that “trial documents and records from the church, as well as information from relatives still living in Sweden could provide ideas for something splendid, especially by your pen.” Hill argues that this was an important subject: “An account of our countrymen here, sympathetically written, would unite us and considerably strengthen our Swedish identity here.”

Apparently Selma Lagerlöf replies immediately to this letter, because on the Fourth of July 1903 Hill finds a moment to return a few brief lines: “Thank you so much for the portrait and the book.” He now has the material he needs to write his presentation for *Ungdomsvännan*, and he only hurriedly repeats what he had said in his earlier letter, that both “*The Saga of Gösta Berling* and *Jerusalem* are currently being serialized in several Swedish-American newspapers.” Perhaps it is in this missing letter—from which Hill quotes in his presentation—that Lagerlöf claims that she in some ways already has written about how modern America has affected traditional Sweden:

As far as I am concerned, I am in the process of writing a book similar to the one you are suggesting. If you wait until next year, you will see that I have not been to the Middle East to excavate mummies, but simply to study a colony consisting of old-fashioned farmers from [the province of] Dalarna and modern Americans. The setting is not the one you would like to see, but I think that much of what you would like to have conveyed will emerge in the book; because it is with the greatest interest and surprise I saw the growing¹⁶ influence that the Americans had on the Swedes, what we might call the upbringing they had had, and I understand the gratitude you feel for your great, new homeland.

But this will not be a book about America, and who knows if I will ever write such a book.¹⁷

One must assume that Hill sent Selma Lagerlöf a copy of *Ungdomsvännan* when his article, complete with a photograph of the author and her signature, was finally published in October 1903. If she ever responded to Hill we do not know.

Then there is a five year hiatus in the correspondence. But on December 3, 1908, two weeks after Selma Lagerlöf's 50th birthday, Hill sits down in front of his newly acquired Swedish typewriter. After having congratulated the author on "the half-mile marker along the road of life, the fiftieth year," he mentions that the book about Nils Holgersson "now is being published in New York, presumably with your permission," an interesting aside about the problems with lack of regard for international copyright laws at that time. *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa* [*The Wonderful Adventure of Nils*] had been published in Sweden in two volumes in 1906 and 1907. Hill then enthusiastically returns yet again to his old idea that Lagerlöf ought to portray the lives of the Swedish-Americans. Hill believes that a free trip could be obtained, that lectures could be arranged, that Swedish homes everywhere would open their doors, that it would be possible to travel around incognito, that many extraordinary Swedish life stories could be portrayed and that the bonds between Swedes and Swedish-Americans would be strengthened by it. And finally Hill offers to help organize everything.

Unfortunately, we don't know if Selma Lagerlöf answered this letter, but it is interesting to consider what might have happened *if* she had been tempted by Hill's suggestion and had come to America; *if* she had embarked on a series of lectures and met large numbers of Swedish-Americans. Surely she would have experienced "fairy-tale adventures, amazing hardships and similar subject matters, all suitable for novels," as Hill writes. Imagine if she then had used this material and written a novel about emigrants. What socioeconomic group would she have depicted? Rural people—farmers and farm hands—factory workers of the expanding industrial cities, educated people such as students, ministers and lay preachers, or that segment of the Swedish upper class that went to America? Where

would she have put her sympathies? And what would the result have been? Would Vilhelm Moberg, for example, have felt the same need to write his novels? Or would they have been different because hers were not proletarian enough? Would the Swedish-American experience have become a much larger and more interesting genre in Swedish literature if Selma Lagerlöf, at an early stage, would have entered into it?

Why did not Hill's generous offer appeal to Selma Lagerlöf? Exactly how did she decline the invitation? Since her letters are missing, any attempt at an explanation must remain speculation. There are several possible answers. Independence could be one of them: Famous authors always get suggestions from readers telling them what their next book ought to be about, so why listen to a Swedish-American Professor trying to coax her into writing about a subject matter she had not chosen herself? Or it could have been even simpler than that—maybe she was tempted by the thought, considered going, but realized that that she just did not have the time. She was tremendously busy and a trip to America would have taken a lot of time away from her writing. Perhaps Hill had frightened her when he wrote:

“Furthermore, I do not think that it would be difficult at all to travel around incognito for a full year...” *A whole year!* As we know, until 1907, Lagerlöf was hard at work on the two volumes comprising *Nils Holgerssons underbara äventyr*. The financial success of that book made it possible for her to buy back the family estate Mårbacka in 1907, and the question is whether Hill even knew that the Lagerlöf family had lost it and that Selma Lagerlöf now had bought it back. Mårbacka was badly run down and in need of major renovations, and Selma Lagerlöf immediately started dreaming and planning for all the things she wanted to do with her childhood home. Two years later Selma Lagerlöf won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first woman to receive this internationally recognized award. It would have been difficult to find time for a year of travel in America at this busy time in her life.

But it is still rather strange that Selma Lagerlöf did not visit America, since there is, as there are in many good stories, an unknown dimension. Hill probably did not know anything about it, and very few people at the time probably knew a great deal about it either. But due to Torbjörn Sjöqvist's recent research, a previously unexplored sibling relationship has finally been studied carefully. His study is entitled *Kära Syster! Jag tyckes hafva otur i allt. Om Johan Lagerlöf och hans syster Selma* [Dear Sister! It Seems as if Misfortune Is All I Ever Have: About Johan Lagerlöf and His Sister Selma]¹⁸ Among the five Lagerlöf siblings, Johan was the one who had been closest to Selma, and it was he who had repeatedly helped her

economically before she became a successful author. In the late 1880s, Johan was struck with financial difficulties and decided, after going bankrupt, to try to start over in America.

Johan Lagerlöf arrived in Chicago in June 1890. He moved between different cities in the northern part of the Midwest, and late in the summer of 1895 his wife Nanny and son Per (who took the name Percy) joined him. In 1906 the family made a final move to Seattle where Johan, with Selma Lagerlöf's financial assistance, opened and operated a small shop. He repeatedly encountered misfortunes and never became especially successful, and it was Selma Lagerlöf who now regularly supported the family economically. Johan Lagerlöf died in Seattle in 1912. Johan's wife Nanny passed away in the same city in 1926 and both are buried there. Their son Percy Lagerlöf left Seattle after his mother's death. A couple of years later he sent a final message from San Francisco to his half-sister Astrid in Seattle, saying that he "was on his way to South America to look for rubies." Torbjörn Sjöqvist concludes that after that he was gone without a trace, he "who was the legal heir to a third of the inheritance"¹⁹ after Selma Lagerlöf's death in 1940.

As one contemplates this little-known family circumstance, the thought arises that it might be because of her brother's life in Seattle that Selma Lagerlöf did not want to go to America and depict Swedish-Americans in a novel. Reading the family correspondence one discovers that Samuel Magnus Hill was not the first to ask Selma Lagerlöf to come to the United States. Just a couple of years prior to Hill's greeting from his lecture at Uppsala, Johan Lagerlöf's wife Nanny wrote: "Imagine, Selma, if your travels would take you to this huge, amazing land at some point—what do you say?"²⁰ It is obvious that she really wanted Selma Lagerlöf to come. Nanny Lagerlöf also thought that the lives of the Swedes in America, "the many thousands upon thousands who have gone to their graves here,"²¹ as she puts it, ought to be described for the Swedes in Sweden. Johan Lagerlöf, who came from the Swedish upper class and ended up in the American working class, and who never managed to regain his former social standing, was perhaps not as keen on inviting his increasingly successful sister. Why had Selma no desire to visit her favorite brother and his family? It might have had to do with the delicate and hard-to-handle question of class. For many from the Swedish upper class, an emigration to the United States represented a final chance to start over after various kinds of difficulties in Sweden. We now know that Selma Lagerlöf was well aware of her brother's difficult situation.

Samuel Magnus Hill, who came from a very poor family, is said to have kept a folder in which he gathered stories about Swedish aristocrats who had failed in America. Hill remained fascinated by it throughout his entire life. Hill's poem "The Count" serves as an

example of this and the poem ends: “This country has been a place of refuge / for many a driven, poor and laboring son, / and many have escaped scorn and derision and have / traveled full of hope to the land in the west. / But from the royal court and from Sweden’s upper classes / no one except the ruined ones come, / because the barrier of their rank makes things worse: / the ignominy of work, the crime of poverty.”²² For Swedish maids, farm hands, and factory workers, it was undeniable that America had a great deal to offer, while those who came from the upper class and had to start over at the bottom—in a country with a very different set of rules pertaining to class—had a much more difficult time. Johan Lagerlöf’s wife Nanny, who came from the Swedish aristocracy herself, also wrote that “most of the old, so called respectable families often have a rough time.”²³ That Johan Lagerlöf felt socially isolated and lacked friends also becomes evident from the correspondence. The fact that one of Nanny’s brothers in America took his life after failed speculations, underscores this problem.

Torbjörn Sjöqvist raises yet another possible explanation. He writes that Selma Lagerlöf “was always very careful to brush off guesses as to the real individuals might be hiding behind the characters in her novels.” A story with an emigrating man as a key figure would make many readers think of Johan. Maybe she wanted to protect her brother from close scrutiny.”²⁴ There is circumstantial evidence suggesting that alcohol might have been a large part of her brother’s life as well. It is common knowledge that Selma’s and Johan’s father was an alcoholic and locally referred to as “Mår-Bacchus,” a pun on the family estate Mårbacka. Torbjörn Sjöqvist also writes: “Among the bankruptcy documents left in Sweden there are unpaid bills for considerable quantities of fine spirits. As a businessman there were, of course, expectations from business associates...” And Sjöqvist also mentions that Johan, in a letter to his sister, says that he “is proud that his son Per is a teetotaler. He also writes that during his illness he does not tolerate alcohol, but adds that such beverages are cheap [in Seattle].”²⁵ If this is the case, Selma Lagerlöf might not have wanted to have this publicly connected to her at a time when the temperance movement was gaining momentum.

Johan Lagerlöf’s trajectory in America was neither morally uplifting nor an example of the rags-to-riches story, which was so often emphasized by the Swedish-Americans. Hill himself was not especially interested in America as a land of economic opportunity, but saw the United States as a place where a person would be given a chance to start over; he was, in other words, more interested in the moral renewal that America could offer an individual. In his final letter to Selma Lagerlöf he describes what the author might find if she came: “There is one discovery that you will probably make: Sometimes criminals will come among

strangers and start a new life and honor themselves and their people. I personally know of a few such cases, and there must surely be lots of them.” Because of her brother, Selma Lagerlöf might have had a very different view of America, and it might not have been one she wanted to see up close.

Lars Nordström

Beavercreek, September 2010

ENDNOTES

¹ In 1914 Hill typed and edited his journal from his 1901 trip to Sweden. This excerpt comes from the typescript “Sverigeresan.” Hill Archive, Box 1, Folder 3, p. 1 and 2, Swenson Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

² “Sverigeresan,” Hill Archive, Box 1, Folder 3, p. 18.

³ “Sverigeresan,” Hill Archive, Box 1, Folder 3, p. 15.

⁴ “Sverigeresan,” Hill Archive, Box 1, Folder 5, p. 116.

⁵ Lars Ljungmark, *Den stora utvandringen: Svensk emigration till USA 1840 – 1925*, Stockholm, Sveriges Radio, 1965, p. 198.

⁶ This Swedish study was known as “Emigrationsutredningen,” and it published its results from 1907 to 1913.

⁷ Gustav N. Svan, “Samuel i Källstorp” i *Svensk-Amerikanska bilder och minnen, Svenska Amerikanaren*, August 17, 1933.

⁸ This organization is still active in Sweden today, but in 1979 changed its name to Riksföreningen Sverigekontakt.

⁹ “Sverigeresan,” Hill Archive, Box 1, Folder 5, p. 116.

¹⁰ “Sverigeresan,” Hill Archive, Box 1, Folder 5, p. 12.

¹¹ “Sverigeresan,” Hill Archive, Box 1, Folder 5, p. 86. Hill writes: “Den andre i ordningen som jag besökte i detta ärende var redaktör Branting, som äfvenså bemötte mig vänligt och förekommande.” Hill later wrote a piece about Hjalmar Branting in *Ungdomsvännen*.

¹² From the opening of Hill’s article “Selma Lagerlöf” *Ungdomsvännen: Illustrerad Tidskrift för Hemmet*, Årgång VIII, Rock Island, Illinois, Oktober 1903, p. 300.

¹³ Selma Lagerlöf quoted in Hill’s article “Selma Lagerlöf” *Ungdomsvännen*: p. 302.

¹⁴ The logical place would have been in Box 1, Folder 5 or Folder 2.

¹⁵ Folder 1 in Box 1 is missing. Since Folder 2 contains correspondence, it is plausible that the missing Folder 1 also held letters.

¹⁶ The original text in *Ungdomsvännen* says “väckande,” which does not make sense, and it must simply be a typo for “växande.” Hill did not have a clear, legible hand.

¹⁷ Selma Lagerlöf quoted in Hill’s article “Selma Lagerlöf” *Ungdomsvännen: Illustrerad Tidskrift för Hemmet*, Årgång VIII, Rock Island, Illinois, Oktober 1903, p. 302.

¹⁸ Torbjörn Sjöqvist, *Kära Syster! Jag tyckes hafva otur i allt. Om Johan Lagerlöf och hans syster Selma* [Dear Sister! It Seems as if Misfortune Is All I Ever Have. About Johan Lagerlöf and his sister Selma], Sunne, Mårbacka Förlag, 2010. Hereafter referred to as *Dear Sister!*

¹⁹ *Dear Sister!*, p. 139.

²⁰ *Dear Sister!*, p. 89.

²¹ *Dear Sister!*, p. 85.

²² See Hill’s poem in full on www.swedishrootsinoregon.org

²³ *Dear Sister!*, p. 85.

²⁴ *Dear Sister!*, p. 101.

²⁵ Torbjörn Sjöqvist in a letter to Lars Nordström dated September 9, 2009.