

Lydia Hedberg on America

A folk divided: homeland Swedes and Swedish Americans, 1840-1940 by H. Arnold Barton, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994)

The entertainer Lydia Hedberg ("Bergslagsmor"), who toured Swedish America from 1920 to 1923, singing folk songs and telling dialect stories in her native folk dress, was ever concerned with her audience reaction. She found

"repeated proof that my singing softened their American hearts, whose very fibers must be moved by verses about the poor countryside at home in order that their true Swedish feelings might emerge. That which I sought most often lay deeply buried . . . I came to see that these so boastful Swedish Americans find it difficult to suppress . . . a feeling of shame over the fact that their expectations of America have been disappointed and that they, to stamp out any possible suspicion that they might have done as well in Sweden, must live in an imaginary world based upon boasting over how well they have done in Dollar-Land. "

Their bitterness toward the old homeland, Hedberg was convinced, lay in the fact that it could not give them what they found in America.

Lydia Hedberg found herself progressively more at home with her emigrated countrymen as she progressed from East to West. From Minneapolis she reported a revealing conversation in Swedish with a streetcar conductor:

"Are you from Sweden?" "Yes indeed," was my reply. He looked at me a moment. "Are you also from Sweden?" I then asked. "Sure." "What part?" "I was born here in Minneapolis," he answered, a bit surprised at my question. "So — in Minnesota?" I smiled. "Sure!" He drew out the word in a tone that revealed his surprise that I could imagine that he might not be born in Minnesota . . . And from that conversation it dawned clearly upon me that for the Swedes in Minnesota that state was Sweden.

Again, it was in the East that Hedberg noted in particular a markedly greater tendency among women immigrants to Americanize more rapidly and indiscriminately than their male counterparts. "I was most surprised," she wrote shortly after her arrival, "by the behavior of the Americanized Swedish women. Most of them behaved in a most unpleasant manner, especially the younger ones. Already during their first week [in America] they affect bobbed hair, horn-rimmed glasses, and a mish-mash slang, which makes you astonished at what you hear." She repeatedly commented on the immigrant women's "wild enthusiasm for Dollar-Land." Still, she came to admit, in America, "their personal value is greater, their work lighter, their clothes prettier, their person more appreciated, the men are their slaves, and life is a bit more festive, if you will. No wonder that

they do not wish to go back home again." The men, she claimed, found it harder to adapt to the new land and suffered greater homesickness.

Nonetheless, if the Swedish Americans did not greatly impress in the cultural sphere, opinion was sharply divided over the reasons for this. To Johan Benzendal the case was clear: the Swedish immigrant lost his innate refinement and was ground down to the lowest cultural common denominator by American materialism and banality. Maj Hirdman spoke of a process of "numbing Americanization." Lydia Hedberg said almost the same thing, although with greater sympathy. "It simply cannot be helped," she wrote, "that our emigrated Swedes have lagged behind considerably with respect to culture, which is a matter of time having passed them by. Their intellect has stood still during the dog-years they have had to endure before they could make use of the new language and the customs of the land."

Was there a distinctive Swedish-American type, or indeed a "Swedish America," and if so, what were they? "I ask myself," Benzendal wrote, "how am I to recognize the Swede, as such, in America!" He concluded that the latter possessed no clear characteristics. In America, all the old, traditional nonmaterial values are replaced by monetary values, he maintained. The immigrant becomes "an egotist, or, as the Americans say, an individualist." In this way he comes to be essentially indistinguishable from all others, his "genuine Swedish character dissolved and vanished," and can only really be understood as an American. Under such circumstances, Swedish America was, in Benzendal's view, no more than a joke in bad taste, a cultural no-man's-land. Lydia Hedberg was inclined to agree, to a point. "One thus does not penetrate right away," she wrote, "to those remnants of the Swedish soul and Swedish character that may remain among Swedes who have come here and their descendants. Often one must long search for it."

NOTE: The above text was excerpted and adapted from H. Arnold Barton's *A folk divided*. Johan Benzendal, Lydia Hedberg and Maj Hirdman were Swedes, who visited the United States in the 1920s and wrote about their experiences.

Amerikanska brev by Johan Benzendal, (Uppsala: J.A. Lindblad, 1925)

Reseminnen från U.S.A. by Lydia Hedberg, (Skövde: Isakssonska boktryckeri-aktiebolaget, 1925)

Resa till Amerika by Maj Hirdman, (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1926)