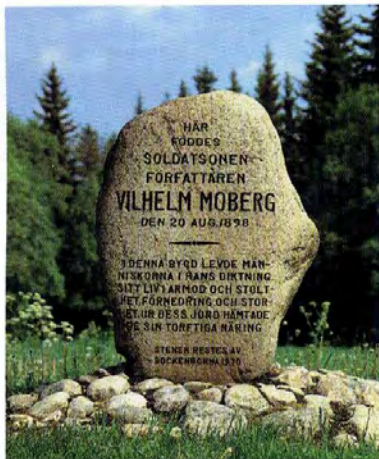


VILHELM MOBERG & ME:  
**OUR**  
 Emigrant Tales



TOP: The Emigrants statue, by Axel Olsson, at the water's edge in Karlshamn, Sweden, shows Vilhelm Moberg's well-known characters Karl Oskar and Kristina.

ABOVE: The Moberg Stone in Moshultamåla.

FACING PAGE: Roland Thorstensson, far left, with his mother and his father on the day he emigrated from Sweden to the United States.

In my office I have a framed photograph of the Moberg Stone in Moshultamåla. It hangs on the wall in front of my computer, so I always see it when I am writing. I got this fine picture from Sven Adolffsson when he and his brother visited Minnesota a couple of years ago. If I look at the photo long and intensely, I see not only the stone and its surroundings of proud firs and thickly foliaged hardwood trees, but also the man whose name occupies a space on the stone, as well as many of the characters he has created in his books. Under Vilhelm Moberg's name, the villagers who erected the stone have written: "In this district the people in his fiction lived their lives in poverty and pride, humiliation and greatness. From its soil they got their meager subsistence."

Among by ancestors are many people who also lived "in poverty and pride, humiliation and greatness." I often think about these people and how Vilhelm Moberg has helped me to understand them better.

BY ROLAND THORSTENSSON

## Setting Sail

In fall 1964, I walked around Karlshamn, dreaming about a voyage across the Atlantic. I was a senior in high school and had just applied for a scholarship from the Sweden-America Foundation to study in America. For more than two years, I walked past the Karl Oskar and Kristina statue on my way to school. I thought I understood what the sculptor had wanted to imply with Karl Oskar looking out toward the sea, and Kristina with her head turned toward her home in Ljuder parish. In those days, I understood Karl Oskar better than I understood Kristina. I wanted to get away. I wanted out. Sure, I had a good home in Tröjemåla on the Småland side of the border between Småland and Blekinge, but I did not want to follow in my father's footsteps and become a farmer. I often climbed high up in a tree and gazed far, far away. I often hid from work to bury myself in books, including Moberg's *The Emigrants*. There was a good part of Robert Nilsson in me, I think. But my father was no Aron from Nybacken. He did not box my ear when I went on strike. He and my mother always let me satisfy my hunger for reading.

I was fortunate. The Sweden-America Foundation agreed to send me across the Atlantic. I got my scholarship and was going to study at the University of Washington in Seattle. The journey there was long and not without hardship. I went by ship to New York—just like the first emigrants—and got violently seasick. But I got there at last. If I may paraphrase the last lines from *The Emigrants*, my first real sea voyage ended like this: "On August 6, 1965, M/S *Kungsholm* made port in New York after a voyage of more than a week from the place of embarkation. Precarious, insecure, and unstable were my first steps on American soil."

My "place of embarkation" was not Karlshamn, but Göteborg. A few years ago I found some photos from the day of departure. There is one photo that is of particular interest. It is of me and my parents, and somehow it reminds me of the emigrant monument in Karlshamn. My father looks proud as he stands on the deck of



*Kungsholm*, and like Karl Oskar he gazes toward the sea. When he was young, he had planned to emigrate to America—his uncle, two brothers, and many other people from our home area were there—but in the end he stayed to farm his parents' land. Now I, his son, was going to realize his dream. My mother, just like Kristina, looks more doubtful. Was she going to lose her only son to America?

I have often wondered why I sailed to America. Why didn't I fly? Probably it was my father who decided that. He was the one who helped me purchase luggage: a normal-sized suitcase, a huge one, and a proper trunk—a veritable America trunk. Was it my baggage that decided my means of transport?

**"On August 6, 1965, M/S *Kungsholm* made port in New York after a voyage of more than a week from the place of embarkation. Precarious, insecure, and unstable were my first steps on American soil."**

## An American Way of Life

I do not remember when I read my first Moberg novel; maybe I was not yet a teenager. It was probably *The Emigrants* that I read first. We did not have a large library at the farm in Tröjemåla, but the emigrant novels were in the bookshelf together with Sven Edvin Salje and some lesser known writers.

Moberg's novels helped me create a more varied picture of America than the one I had as a child. Then America had been just a fairytale country. My father's two brothers, Albin and Kalle, lived there, and I could say proudly that I had four American cousins. Every Christmas we received a package from the Swansons in Chicago—or "Svanssons in Schikago," as we said—with julkaka and Christmas candy, chewing gum, odd pieces of jewelry for my mother and my sisters, and, often, equally odd pieces of clothing for

father and me. Once I got a shirt with all the American states on it. It must have been the Christmas of '53, for I was still in Tröjemåla school. In the middle of the winter, I ran around in the schoolyard in this summer shirt, without a jacket, because I wanted all of my classmates to see that I had received Christmas presents from America.

In the summer of 1954 Albin came home to Tröjemåla with his wife, Ellen, who was from Norrland. They brought their huge American car, a white Chrysler that was almost as wide as the gravel roads in Småland. Albin had not been home since he emigrated in 1920. "Now I will really let them see how well off we are in America," he might have thought when he drove around Småland in his fairytale car.

Those of us who had not been to America were quite convinced that the country in the west was, indeed, a promised land. And so, finally, I came to America. I spent my first six years there at the University of Washington in Seattle, where I was supposed to study American history, but early on, I met the teachers in the Scandinavian department. One of them, Walter Johnson, had grown up in Taylor's Falls in Minnesota. He had a special liking for Småland people, and he persuaded me to major in Scandinavian studies. And thus, in 1968, I became a teaching assistant and started my doctoral studies in Scandinavian languages and literature.

There I was on the west coast of America studying Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Selma Lagerlöf and—Vilhelm Moberg. I must admit that initially I found other writers more stimulating than Moberg. I had left the forests and stony fields of Småland behind me, had even swallowed my gutteral r's hoping to conceal my farming background. How insecure and foolish I was when I came to America. How can anyone not want to be a Smålander? I ask now. But at the time, Småland represented the provincial world that I wanted to escape, and Moberg belonged to the Old World.

I was more interested in the crazy, modern world—and it was not far away. I had come to the United States a young Socialist, and a very naive one, I might add. I wanted to live in the present and be part of creating a new world. But in the long run, Professor Johnson was stronger than I, or perhaps it was Moberg himself who seduced



Vilhelm Moberg holds a translated copy of his novel *Rid i natt*. Moberg was very proud when the Third Reich banned his writings following the book's publication. **FACING PAGE:** A still photo from the 1972 Swedish movie *The Emigrants*.

**Vilhelm Moberg meets me [at the bus stop] and people on the bus say, "Isn't that Vilhelm Moberg? Sure it is. Then we must wave."**

me. He took me back in time and homeward, if only in the world of my imagination initially. At first, I wrote some essays about Moberg's emigrant novels, and when I finally had to choose a subject for my doctoral thesis, I took Professor Johnson's advice and wrote about Moberg as a dramatist. "No one has written about this in English," he said. "You will do it!"

"Oh well," I said, and then I started writing.

## The Moberg Diaries

In 1971 my family and I moved east to Minnesota: the state that is usually called "the most Swedish of them all." Destiny had brought us there in the form of a position for me as teacher of Scandinavian studies at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. We now lived in the state Moberg had made famous. (Not only was 1998 the hundredth anniversary of Moberg's birth, it also was exactly 50 years earlier that he took his first steps on American soil in Minnesota.)

Moberg was not unknown at Gustavus Adolphus. He was, however, not totally appreciated. My predecessor there, Emeroy Johnson, was a retired minister who had grown up in the area that Moberg's emigrants brought under cultivation. Johnson thought that the language of the emigrant books was too coarse—especially Ulrika's and Jonas Petter's. And, in his opinion, there was too much tragedy in the books. "We Swedish Americans are not like that," he said. "We do not speak like that."

Gustavus Adolphus regularly confers honorary doctorates on deserving people. During my first year at the college, I was asked to write to Moberg and invite him to accept this honor. I was fully aware of the fact that Moberg was no friend of such bestowals of honor, so I was not surprised when he said no. He sent me a terse letter which has, unfortunately, disappeared.

A year later, in the spring of 1972, I received a more positive letter from Moberg. I had written to him to request an interview sometime that summer, as I was going to be at the Royal Library in Stockholm reading the manuscripts of his plays that had not been published in book form.

"Sure, we could have a chat," he wrote. "Contact me when you get to Stockholm."

I did, and on August 8, 1972, I, a naive young man of 26, was on a bus on my way to Söderäng—Moberg's home. I spent a whole afternoon at Söderäng, and when I returned to Stockholm, I wrote down my thoughts about the experience in a notebook. The following are excerpts from those notes.



*August 8, 1972, Söderäng*

*Vilhelm Moberg meets me [at the bus stop] and people on the bus say, "Isn't that Vilhelm Moberg? Sure it is. Then we must wave."*

*Moberg is very polite, but seems to be a bit hard of hearing. Despite the many wrinkles in his face and his walrus eyebrows, he looks younger than he really is. He also moves like a considerably younger person.*

*We walk up to the homestead, Söderäng, situated about a hundred yards from the main road between Norrtälje and Grisslehamn. Moberg talks incessantly. It is actually a bit hard to get some questions in.*

*In the living room, which is wallpapered with books, Moberg shows me the books he is most proud of: translations of the emigrant novels to around 20 languages.*

*Then we have food out on a sun-drenched veranda. The conversation at the table gives me a much better picture of Moberg as a person than as a writer, if one may separate the two. As a table partner, he is more interested in talking than*

listening. Often, as I am exchanging opinions with [Moberg's daughter] Eva, who is home to visit, I am curtly interrupted by a question or a statement.

The views of Americans [regarding] the Vietnam war took up a lot of our conversation. Vilhelm does not understand how "the most peace-loving people can conduct such a war. Why isn't the Nixon regime overthrown?"

Moberg makes his daughter, Eva, a little angry by reminding her about an old high school memory from the fifties, when she first went to school in Michigan and then in Carmel, California. It started by Eva's implying that she had felt rather like a misfit in the U.S.A. during this time. It was partially due to herself and her obstinate teenage years, partially to the America of the fifties, which, in her opinion, was narrow-minded and naïve. "How can you go back to Sweden, that little country, when you are so well off in America?" her classmates asked her. She also was upset about the way world history was presented to Americans at the time. "It was America for all it was worth. No other country existed."

At two o'clock it was time for "interrogation," as V.M. called it. And with this, the two of us walked off to the writing cabin, an old smithy long since renovated and changed into a smithy of another kind.

"The smithy" is not just a writing cabin. It is a veritable museum. The walls are decorated with Moberg's proudest memorabilia: pictures of his parents and grandparents, portraits of himself by his son, who is an artist. And the object of which Moberg is most proud: a photocopy of the ban on his writings that was announced in the Third Reich after the publication of *Ride This Night* (*Rid i natt*).

After the "interrogation," we walk back and are met by Mrs. Moberg. She points out that her husband has not learned to read timetables. In other words, we must hurry to the bus stop to be on time for the last bus to Norrtälje. The writer asks if any "leeches" (i.e. reporters) have called while we have been away. He says that he does not accept their merciless sucking nowadays, which makes me feel both proud and honored. Moberg says to his wife that this interrogation has been less trying than most.

And then we walk down to the bus stop. Moberg and I shake hands. As I get on the bus, some of the passengers lean against the window. "Wasn't that Vilhelm Moberg?" one says. "It certainly was. He lives here, you know." Without looking around, but very much aware of being stared at, I sit down somewhere in the far back of the bus.

When I reread those words this past summer—some 26 years after I wrote them—I actually did not remember much of our conversation. It struck me that I recognized Moberg better than I recognized myself. Was it really I who had written this? Had I really been to Söderäng?

## The Unknown Relatives

I read the collection of articles Moberg wrote about his unknown relatives in America when I lived in Seattle. During my first year at Gustavus, I learned that I, too, had unknown relatives in America, that it was not only my father's relatives who lived there. It turned out that I had several relatives in Minnesota, and one even attended Gustavus Adolphus College when I started teaching there. My mother had mentioned the name Magni LeVander a couple of times before I moved to America. He was her maternal uncle who had emigrated in the 1890s. At the time that was all I knew. Now I know a lot more about this remarkable man.

In Sweden his name had been Petter Magni Pettersson, and he had grown up in Elmehult in Urshult parish. His mother's name was Martha Pettersdotter. She was deaf and dumb, and believed to be "feeble-minded." Pettersson's father was the clergyman in Urshult: Nils Peter Löfvander.

Moberg could have written novels about Martha and her children for their lives contained fascinating circumstances and tragic relationships. And like Moberg's fictional characters, this family experienced firsthand the peculiar power of blood ties, the bridges between cultures, and the opportunities of a new life in the Promised Land.

Martha Pettersdotter spent the greater part of her life in a mental asylum. She gave birth to two children out of wedlock, Petter Magni and Anna, my maternal grandmother. Although (or perhaps because) Petter Magni's father was the clerical leader of the parish he chose not to help her. Nor did he acknowledge his son.

Petter Magni, however, had a strong, fervent dream. He wanted to be a preacher of God, just like the father who had forsaken him.

They say that he had a preaching stone at the edge of the woods by his aunt's home in Elmehult. (He was living with his aunt, as his mother was incapable of caring for him.) There he would give his sermons, sometimes alone, sometimes with some acquaintance as audience. In 1893 his aunt gave him the money to buy a ticket to America. That she had managed to scrape together enough money is a miracle.

Petter Magni became one of many in the large stream of emigrants from Kronoberg County to Minnesota. At first he worked for another immigrant parishioner in Norseland, barely two miles from Gustavus Adolphus College, but he seems to have been poorly prepared for manual labor. He wrote home to his aunt that he "fared ill" and would prefer to go about spiritual matters. He finally accomplished his goal: Martha Pettersdotter's son became a minister. I do not know when he changed his name to Magni LeVander, but the fact that he chose his father's last name—despite his father's unwillingness to acknowledge him—is both strange and interesting.

Magni LeVander became a respected man of the cloth in several Swedish American parishes in the Midwest. All of his sons attended Gustavus Adolphus College, and several of his grandchildren as well.

Theodor, Magni's oldest son, became a professor of rhetoric at Augustana College in Illinois. The youngest brother, Bernhard, became a lawyer. The middle brother, Harold, is, I believe, the most well known of the three. He was governor of Minnesota from 1967 to 1971, and was the ceremonial speaker at Minnesota Day in Växjö in 1968. I have heard that he mentioned in his speech that his family came from around the area. But he chose not to go into detail—maybe he thought it too risky to tell all; perhaps he was afraid of what the newspapers in Minnesota would write about "the governor's background." Several of the governor's Swedish relatives had traveled to Växjö to listen to him. They rarely traveled that far, but now, humble and silent, they sat there, probably waiting for the Governor to include them in some way. But this did not happen.

Bernhard LeVander, Petter Magni's only living son, has always respected his blood ties. He realizes that so-called ordinary people also know what pride is, and that humiliation can be an incentive to greatness.



Bernhard LeVander, center, embraces his Swedish cousins during their visit to Minnesota. The woman at left is Roland Thorstensson's mother; the other woman is his aunt.

## A Lasting Influence

At Gustavus Adolphus College, I and my colleague Roger McKnight have taught courses on Moberg since the 1970s. Not many students register for our Moberg course every time we offer it—they need to speak Swedish well to handle the course literature. But in the nearly 25 years since we began offering these courses, it has added up to quite a few. Not everyone is equally appreciative of the writer, but he leaves no one untouched.

Moberg also is becoming better known in the Swedish areas of Minnesota. For a long time, there were just a few people who knew

**And like Moberg's fictional characters, this family experienced firsthand the peculiar power of blood ties, the bridges between cultures, and the opportunities of a new life in the Promised Land.**

his name and had read his books. "Vilhelm Moberg Slept Here," reads a sign in a park in Chisago City, but I do not think many knew who this "Moberg" was.

This is beginning to change. Today, the Lake Chisago area has begun to use the Moberg connection to promote itself. And rightly so. Through his emigrant novels, Moberg has made this area known, not just in Sweden, but in many other countries as well.

Moberg really has taken me both away and home. Without him, my time on earth would have had much less content. Thank you, Vilhelm. **S&A**

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