

A Trunk in the Attic: Tracing the Forgotten Journeys of Swedish Women in America

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ABSTRACT

This presentation examines return migration within the larger framework of Swedish emigration to North America between 1850 and 1930, with a particular focus on women's experiences. While male migration has been relatively well documented, the emigration of Swedish women remain partly underexplored in both academic and public narratives. During the peak period of emigration, nearly 20 percent of Swedish emigrants returned to their home country. Among them were many women who had worked as domestic servants in American households—one of the most common occupations for unmarried, often young, Swedish women who emigrated alone.

The Nordic countries stand out in this historical context, as they saw a significant number of single women choosing to emigrate independently. Yet the reasons behind their decisions to leave, their lived experiences abroad, and their motivations for returning home have not received the scholarly attention they deserve.

Using material from the Swedish Emigrant Institute, we highlight a specific case study: a woman who, after nearly five decades of working as a housemaid in the United States, returned unannounced to Sweden. With her, she brought a trunk that remained unopened in an attic until after her death. This story offers a compelling entry point for discussing themes such as memory, belonging, and women's migration histories. By focusing on this individual narrative, we aim to shed light on broader patterns of return migration and the value of personal archives and collections in recovering marginalized voices in transatlantic migration history.

CV

Alexandra Stiernspetz Nylén serves as Head of the Department of Cultural Heritage and Research at Kulturparken Småland, a regional institution in Sweden dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage through collections, archives, public programs, and academic research. Kulturparken Småland encompasses both the House of Emigrants and the Swedish Emigrant Institute.