In this article, I present The House of Emigrants in Gothenburg, how we deal with migration history and try to connect the present with the past. Examples of how migrated Swedes were exposed to xenophobia in the USA are mentioned, and how Swedish Americans used their old historical connections to America to achieve a higher position in an ethnical hierarchy. The Americanization of the Swedes during World War I is also presented, as is an example of fruitful comparison between Fords’ English School for Immigrants and Swedish for Immigrants in Sweden. Finally, the latest exhibition, the emigrant ship “The Green Parrot”, is described as an example of connecting migration history to migrants’ experiences of today.

Migration is a very important issue for societies today. A historical perspective on peoples’ movements is crucial for understanding the problems we face all around the world. The House of Emigrants is a migration museum located in Gothenburg, which was by far the greatest emigration port in Sweden. Approximately 1 million Swedes departed from this city between 1850 and 1930, mostly to the USA. The House of Emigrants has exhibitions of the Swedish Emigration to the USA, but also temporary exhibitions of migration history. The services include genealogy service for visitors. The combination of exhibitions and genealogy service attracts many visitors. Some visitors also donate archive material, which otherwise could have been lost. We have many visitors from different schools, who receive a guided tour of our exhibitions and a lecture about the Swedish migrants’ experiences of the past, and how this can be connected to the visitors’ own experiences and to the international world they live in today.

The exhibition of the Swedish emigration to USA has a European perspective, as the emigration of 1.5 million Swedes was a small part of a huge migration of 35 million Europeans to North
America.² It is possible to make fruitful comparisons with other ethnic groups of emigrants, with earlier ones like the Germans and Irish, and with the later emigrants from South and Eastern Europe. One very important fact is that Swedish immigrants in USA could experience xenophobia in the 19th Century. It is very important for visitors to see that also Swedes could and can be targets for racism. Sometimes Swedes were not considered to be white in the USA.³ A testimony of this is an Anglo-American man writing to his parents in St. Paul, Minnesota, from a lumber camp in Lake County in 1901:

9/10th of the men here are roundheads & the most disgusting dirty lousy reprobates that I ever saw... There are probably 15 white men here to 60 Swedes... It is only in the evening that I am forced to associate with these beasts they call Swedes that I get depressed... Walking behind a string of Swedes is something impossible to a person with a delicate nose... It is an odor which could only come from generations of unwashed ancestors & no man can hope to acquire it in one lifetime without the aid of heredity.⁴

Swedes and Scandinavians could also be mocked in different kind of cultural events such as musicals. Yonn Yonson was a fictitious Swedish immigrant in a musical written by Gus Heege around 1890. The character was a caricature of a stupid but strong immigrant with

The House of Emigrants in Gothenburg, Sweden, is located at the previous Customs House, where all the emigrants where shipped out during the great emigration period 1850 to 1930. Photo: Micael Litzell.
a rural background. The play is partly set in a lumberjack camp in northern Minnesota. In the end of the musical Yon Yonson leaves his Scandinavian heritage and becomes part of the American society. The marks of caricature had by then disappeared.

The first Swedish emigrants in USA had a relatively lower status than those who arrived later. Swedish American ethnic leaders, though, used early historical connections between Scandinavia and America to claim belonging on their own behalf. The examples of the viking Leif Erikson who was supposed to have discovered America 500 years before Columbus and the Swedish colony New Sweden in 17th century, were both used in this way. The Swedes were also considered to be more genuinely American, as new immigrant groups arrived from eastern and southern Europe. This facilitated for the former to move upward in an ethnic hierarchy.

The Swedes position in the labour market in USA improved over time. There was a distinct difference between the first and second generation of immigrants, the latter made a clear upward move in the hierarchy. While the first generation of immigrants held lower positions, the children of Swedish immigrants managed to climb to better occupations, such as clerks, supervisors, skilled workers etcetera.

The Swedish American community produced substantial amounts of publications of various kinds. Besides a huge production of books and booklets also a lot of periodical publications were published. In 1910, at the height of the Swedish American cultural sphere, there were 58 weekly magazines and the biggest Swedish American newspapers in Chicago and Minneapolis had an edition of more than 50,000 newspapers weekly. These newspapers not only kept the Swedish American culture together, they also played a crucial role in explaining how the American society functioned to the Swedish immigrants.

The exhibition at the House of Emigrants also describes the process of Americanization of the Swedish immigrants. This process accelerated with the US entry into World War I against Germany. This meant that the immigrants had to show loyalty to their new country, and one way of doing this was to abandon their old European language and speak English.
We find comparisons between Swedish immigrants of the past in USA and immigrants of today in Sweden very fruitful. One example of this is language training for immigrants. Henry Ford had 60 percent immigrants in the workforce at his factory in 1917. For the production system to function properly, it was crucial that communication between the workers and supervisors worked well. Thus, English School for immigrants was established at Ford’s plant. This was not only language training though, the pupils also learned to become a modern efficient worker and consumer. In the exam ceremony pupils went into a large bowl which should be “symboling the American melting pot”. They went in wearing their old European clothes and went out in a new American suit waving an American flag. This is an example of language training embedded in liberal ideology.

A fruitful comparison can be made with language training in Sweden. This country was transformed from being an emigrant country to an immigrant society after World War II. The number of immigrants increased during the 1960s and consequently language training became a critical issue. In 1965 free language training, Swedish for immigrants, was introduced and was organised by the educational organizations. The labour movement had a very strong position in Sweden during the 1960s, and the Workers Educational Association was the most important organisation performing the language training. This language training was consequently also embedded in a specific ideology – but this time a Social Democratic one. Language training can, as we have seen from these two historical examples, be embedded in different ideologies, depending on political context. It’s a fruitful example of comparison between historical Swedish emigration and immigration to Sweden in the last decades. In our exhibition, we make many other comparisons, for example migrants’ communication with their old country then and now, ethnic stores and restaurants for Swedish Americans and for immigrants in Sweden today, work and leisure activities then and now etcetera.

The exhibition at House of Emigrants expanded with opening of the emigrant ship “Green Parrot” in May 2017. The name was used by the inhabitants of Hull in Great Britain for the ships of the Wilson line, which brought the Swedish emigrants the first part of their journey across the North Sea from Gothenburg. After Hull, the
emigrants went by train to Liverpool from where they continued across the Atlantic Ocean to New York. In the new exhibition, the visitors can entry and experience the interior of the ship. Visiting pupils from schools will receive an emigrant identity and participate in puzzle story – searching for personal items inside the ship. Analogue pedagogics are being used, which altogether creates an intense atmosphere of a migrant ship – rich possibilities are given for comparisons with migrants’ experiences today.

The visitors to our exhibitions can also contribute with their own migration experiences through interviews. By performing interviews, we produce new knowledge and many times the persons interviewed also bring us new source material. The House of Emigrants cooperate with Oral History in Sweden – a Swedish network for performing oral history with participants from many universities and museums. During the last decades, many interviews have been made with immigrants by the House of Emigrants, and also by the Swedish Migration Center and the Swedish Emigrants Institute – totally almost 900 interviews. This means a production of new and very valuable knowledge about migrants’ experiences for future research. Through the Oral History projects, The House of Emigrants have also cooperated with various immigrant organizations and communities.

The House of Emigrants also produce exhibitions on migration history for other arenas in Gothenburg and other parts of Sweden. These have been displayed at the Farm Workers museum in Scania, at Kvarnby Folk High School in Malmo, at the University of Gothenburg, and at other places. These exhibitions have had many different topics such as Iranian emigration, Syrian Womens’ stories, immigration to the sugar beet fields in the south of Sweden from the province of Galizia in southern Poland in the beginning of the 20th century etcetera. These exhibitions connect migration history to challenges of peoples’ migration today.

**Summary**

Migration is one of the most important questions in societies all over the world today. The contribution that can be made from migration museums is showing that migration has been part of human experience for all of our history. Consequently, migration is
not some qualitatively new phenomenon, instead it has been crucial for the development of Sweden and other societies for millennia. The House of Emigrants offers connections and comparisons between the great Swedish and European emigration a century ago to America and migrants experiences today. When visitors see that also Swedes can be victims of xenophobia and racism, this creates preconditions for empathy towards refugees. But the positive historical examples of successful integrative practices can also be learned, such as how the Swedish American press played a guiding role for the integration of Swedish Americans into the American society.

New important knowledge can also be produced if we include the visitors into the communication of migration history. Genealogists continuously contribute to their family history, but also new source material for the archives. In oral history projects of various kinds, more than 900 interviews with immigrants in Sweden have been performed the last decades, but much more could and will be done of this kind of projects. Oral history makes writing of history from below possible, it makes it possible to produce significant new knowledge of the history of migrants around the turn of the second millennia.

**Notes**

1. Lars Hansson is director of development at the House of Emigrants in Gothenburg and doctor of history. He has done research on Finnish immigration to Sweden, Swedish emigration to Denmark and Germany and General Motors factory in Sweden. He participated in the founding of the Swedish network "Oral history in Sweden", and has worked with Research circles in two projects. He has also produced a number of exhibitions on migration and labour history.


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