

AMERICA LETTERS AS WITNESSES AND AGENTS OF CHANGE. NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN IMMIGRANT EPISTLES

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ABSTRACT. *America Letters as Witnesses and Agents of Change. Norwegian-American Immigrant Epistles.* The letters written by immigrants to their family and friends in the homeland are pieces of a mosaic that provides a wider picture of the personal stories of migration. The analysis of migration has too often focused on statistics, on the mass of people who have emigrated to the New World. However, America letters represent genuine and simple stories of individuals and reflect, in a personal manner, the way immigrants experienced the migration, as well as the way they tried to adapt to a new culture. America letters reveal the enthusiasm, courage and sense of adventure of the immigrants, but also the difficulties, disillusionment, their struggle to belong, even the despair they went through. This paper argues that America letters are witnesses of change, since the immigrants described the challenges of adjustment and acculturation in the letters they sent home, but also agents of change, as they greatly influenced the Norwegian emigration to America. Norway's coast and valleys were teeming in the nineteenth century with accounts of the conditions in the New World as they were described in the letters sent home by the immigrants. These immigrant letters contain the testimonials of those who had chosen to emigrate and were passed on from family to family, parish to parish, village to village, convincing more and more people to leave the homeland for America.

Keywords: *Norwegian emigration to America, Norwegian-American, immigrant letters, America letters, immigrant experience, evolution of mass migration, personal stories of migration*

REZUMAT. *Scrisorile din America – martori și agenți ai schimbării. Epistole ale imigranților norvegiano-americani.* Scrisorile scrise de imigranți către familia și prietenii lor din țara natală sunt piese ale unui mozaic care oferă o imagine mai largă asupra poveștilor personale despre migrație. Analiza migrației s-a concentrat prea des pe statistici, pe masa de oameni care a emigrat în

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Lumea Nouă. Cu toate acestea, scrisorile din America sunt povești individuale simple și autentice care reflectă, într-o manieră personală, felul în care imigranții au trăit migrația, precum și modul în care au încercat să se adapteze la o nouă cultură. Aceste scrisori dezvăluie entuziasmul, curajul imigranților, simțul aventurii, dar și dificultățile, deziluzia, lupta lor de a-și găsi locul, chiar și disperarea prin care au trecut. Această lucrare arată că scrisorile din America sunt martori ai schimbării, deoarece imigranții au descris dificultățile de adaptare la o nouă cultură în scrisorile trimise acasă, dar și agenți ai schimbării, fiindcă au avut o influență importantă asupra emigrării norvegiene spre America. Coasta și văile Norvegiei abundau în secolul al XIX-lea în relatări despre condițiile din Lumea Nouă, așa cum au fost descrise în scrisorile trimise acasă de imigranți. Aceste scrisori conțin mărturiile celor care au ales să emigreze, mărturii care s-au transmis de la o familie la alta, de la o parohie la alta, de la un sat la altul, convingând tot mai mulți oameni să părăsească Norvegia pentru America.

Cuvinte-cheie: *emigrarea norvegiană spre America, norvegiano-american, scrisori ale imigranților, scrisori din America, experiența emigrării, evoluția migrației în masă, povești personale despre migrație*

The nineteenth century witnessed a new discovery of America. It came about, not through the daring of a new Columbus, but as a consequence of letters written by immigrants to the people of the Old World. It was a progressive and widening discovery that played an important role in the migration of millions of Europeans from their home countries to the United States. (Blegen 1955, 3)

Introduction

Theodore C. Blegen opened his book *Land of Their Choice* by referring to a new discovery of America through the letters sent by the immigrants to their relatives and friends in the homeland. Their importance lies in the fact that they are primary sources in the study of migration, providing personal accounts of the phenomenon, but also in the essential role they have played in the evolution of the mass migrations from Europe to the New World.

As scholars have focused for too long on numbers, statistics, generalizations, individual stories were left behind. Theodore C. Blegen well remarked that many writers had focused on the complex international circumstances, forgetting about the individual man (Blegen 1955, 7). The works of William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, published at the end of the Great War, in which they analysed letters

of Polish immigrants and their families, produced a major change, as they shifted the attention from statistics to the personal stories of migration, focusing on life documents and first-person accounts (Borges and Cancian 2016, 281). There is still a need for an analysis of the personal stories of migration, as many of the problems faced by the immigrants on their way to building a sense of place are more or less the same today as they were 100 years ago.

Migration has always been a favourite topic of researchers from various fields because of the implications it has upon both individuals and the society as a whole. As Nils Olav Østrem well observed, “The emigration was not just a row with dramatic chasms, but first and foremost an important social process. Migration is a durable phenomenon with no little impact upon the society, both in our times and throughout history” (Østrem 2006, 17-18).² It is hence natural to try to understand the effects of migration, to carefully examine its multifaceted dimensions and its various perceptions.

This paper draws the attention to the America letters written by Norwegian immigrants to their family in the homeland, stressing their relevance for a broader image of the mass migration to the New World. Personal immigrant experiences are illustrated through a selection of letters of unknown immigrants, while some of the most prolific letter-writers are also mentioned in order to reveal the impact of these letters on the evolution of the emigration. Thus, immigrant letters are analysed as witnesses and agents of change in the process of uprooting and settlement.

Norwegian Emigration to America

If most Norwegians knew nothing about America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this would eventually change as the Norwegian emigration to America officially began in 1825, when fifty-two emigrants left Stavanger for New York on the sloop ‘Restauration’ (Semningsen 1978, 10). The mass migration of Norwegians in America occurred in several waves, with the highest number of emigrants between 1879 and 1893. Until the first decades of the twentieth century, about 800,000 Norwegians left their homeland for the New World. In the history of European migrations to America, the Norwegian emigration was the second largest after the emigration of the Irish, considering the proportion of the populations. Ingrid Semningsen analysed the evolution of the phenomenon, stressing how the migration constantly grew, causing an exodus of population:

² My translation from Norwegian: “Utvandringa var ikkje berre ei rad med dramatiske oppbrot, men først og fremst ein viktig samfunnsprosess. Migrasjon er eit varig fenomen med ikkje liten verknad for samfunnet, både i vår tid og gjennom historia” (Østrem 2006, 17-18).

“The winds of change which had been only a breeze in the beginning of the century had turned into a hurricane. Not only did they breathe new ideas into the heads of those who stayed home, they also caused an exodus” (Semmingsen 1978, 112).

Despite the progress registered in Norway throughout the nineteenth century, in what concerns the socio-economic conditions, the growing population could not be sustained, housing and jobs were scarce, people did not have access to opportunities similar to those they began to hear of from America letters. The desire to emigrate started to spread like wildfire, turning into a real America fever and this term is a strong indicator of the mounting interest of the Norwegians for the New World (Blegen 1931, 71). As changes occurred at all levels, they raised questions regarding the traditional way of life, the traditional values (Mureșan 2020, 52), causing ruptures between the youth and the elderly, between son and father, daughter and mother. The homeland no longer provided sufficient prospects for thousands and thousands who “went across the sea, not because they did not appreciate their homeland, but because they felt that the homeland did not appreciate them and their work, and because the old social bonds could no longer hold them” (Semmingsen 1978, 112).

America Letters as Witnesses of Change

Thousands of letters sent by Norwegians in America to their families and friends in the homeland have been collected by Theodore C. Blegen, Solveig Zempel, Orm Øverland and other historians and researchers (Mureșan 2020, 54). Blegen was among the first scholars who saw the immigrant letter as the ideal source for migration research, for learning more about personal immigrant experiences, about the daily lives of the migrants, the reasons that made them emigrate, the places they chose to settle in, but also about their socio-economic adaptation (Borges and Cancian 2016, 282). In his book *Norwegian Migration to America*, Blegen mentions how information about America began to be transmitted in the letters written by those who had experienced life in the New World. The letters were commonly called America letters and Blegen highlights the fact that they played a significant role in the emigration movement, especially as their informative value was recognized by everyone and particularly since they represented the only source of information before the publication of books or pamphlets (Blegen 1931, 64). Furthermore, these letters helped ordinary people maintain the connection with family and friends, while the information they contained was considered trustworthy and reliable by the prospective emigrants (Krawatzek and Sasse 2018, 1033).

If America was a familiar image for few people in Norway until the 1840s, it became, overnight, a part of everyday life of an increasing number of ordinary people (Skard 1976, 45). Due to emigration, the information about America started to flow and the most important of the new sources were the immigrant letters, which were circulated, even printed. These accounts are remarkable as they are expressions of personal experience, communicating news outside the official channels (Skard 1976, 46-47); they soon became “the source of wisdom about life in the new location” (Elliott, Gerber and Sinke 2006, 2). Since the authorities acknowledged the increasing emigration and started to warn people against it, America letters functioned, as Orm Øverland highlighted, as an “underground literature” which “was effective precisely because it was not distributed through official channels” (Øverland 1996, 20).

The mosaic of immigrant experiences is further on illustrated by a series of America letters written by ordinary people to their relatives and friends in the homeland. When reading these letters, one cannot but perceive the immigrants as human beings, each with his or her name and personality, and see them as women and men who went through change and struggles as they decided to settle thousands of miles away from home. In the land of their choice, “firmness and foibles, joy and sorrow are coupled, in the writing of immigrants, with dreams of what America might mean not only for their own lives but also for those of their children and children’s children” (Blegen 1955, 9).

One such illustrative example are the letters written by Berta Serina Bjøravåg, a single young woman of twenty-three from an island near Stavanger, the main port in the south-west of Norway, who emigrated to Illinois in 1886. She was born in a numerous family, with eleven children, that struggled to survive. Eventually, she and three other siblings settled in America. Around 1891 or 1892, Berta Serina married Knud Kingestad (Tuttle), they had a boy, but she died of consumption at a rather young age (Zempel 1991, 24-25). Her first letter was addressed to her parents and siblings and it described the shock she experienced upon arrival, her feelings of helplessness as she found herself alone in an unfamiliar environment. However, as was the case with many Norwegian immigrants at the time, her faith in God was the one that gave her strength:

There I stood, completely at a loss. There was not a single soul with whom I could speak a word and I didn’t know which way to turn, so I prayed to God, our help in need, that He would save me and help me, and that He did, too, for someone showed me to a house where a Swedish shoemaker lived. I could talk to him, and that was a great relief, but he had arrived so recently that he didn’t know very much about the people I was asking for. (Bjøravåg, Zempel 1991, 28)

The same year, 1886, she sent another letter to her sister Anna, to whom she confided about the many trials faced by immigrants in the New World, whilst also showing her determination to adjust to the American way of life:

As far as my own well-being is concerned, it is going better than I had expected. Naturally there are a few heavy moments now and then, that is true for all of us who have recently come over and no less for me. Yes, dear Anna, there are many trials for a poor greenhorn here in this country. [...] I can only thank God that I have the health to be out working. It didn't look good when I first came over, but you know that it is hardest at first until you really get the hang of things. (Bjøravåg, Zempel 1991, 24-25)

Another Norwegian woman, Babro Ramseth from Tynset, emigrated to Wisconsin at the age of fifty together with her husband and their five children. Barbo wrote letters to her brothers and sisters in which she described her life as a Norwegian mother in America, providing useful details about the close Norwegian-American community she was living in (Zempel 1991, 102-103). In a letter from 1889, to her brother Bersven, she speaks about the longing of the immigrants for their families in the homeland, about the joy they find in the letters from home, but she also shares her fears that they might not meet again:

Dear Bersven and wife and family,
The grace and peace of God be with you. I received your letter some time ago, and thank you heartily for it. It is always a joy for me to get letters from you, so we can hear how everyone is. ... I often feel rather melancholy, as I surely believe that I will never more see you, for this life is so short, it flies like a weaver's shuttle, and runs like a stream of water... (Ramseth, Zempel 1991, 30).

As shown above, these letters imbued with personal perceptions of the immigrant experience dissipate the air of impersonality that too often had influenced the study of migration. Whether they described the opportunities the wanderers had found in the New World, the difficulties of adjusting to a completely new environment, or simply the longing for the homeland, for family and friends, the America letters witnessed the changes the immigrants were going through.

The Impact of America Letters on Emigration

The letters sent by relatives and friends to the homeland functioned also as agents of change, as they were first-hand accounts of the emigration experience, providing reliable answers to the questions of many who now

began to consider the emigration to America as a possible solution to their problems, religious, economic, or social. Little by little, “the letters from across the sea were read with absorbed interest, often passed from one family to another in a widening circle, occasionally made available to newspapers of the neighbourhood, and invariably treasured” (Blegen 1955, 3).

It might seem, though, that these personal letters have little relevance for the history of migration, but, considered as a whole, they represent a folk literature from which a series of writers that became well-known in their time have emerged. These writers in the making wrote for a readership that was potentially American, but that, in an amazing way, eventually became American due to the encouragement they found in those letters (Øverland 1996, 19).

One such writer in the making was Gjert Gregoriussen Hovland, one of the early emigrants. A farmer from Hardanger, Hovland emigrated to America in 1831 and wrote detailed accounts of the conditions in the New World, praising the freedom and opportunities he could find there. He had a significant contribution to the Norwegian emigration, as his letters were copied and sent to other villages, parishes, even printed in newspapers, gaining more and more popularity while enticing people to emigrate (Semningsen 1978, 17). In a letter he sent to his brother in 1835, Hovland reveals his contentment in what regards the decision to leave the fatherland for America, stressing the prospects of building a good life for himself and his family:

We have gained more since our arrival here than I did during all the time I lived in Norway, and I have every prospect of earning a living here for myself and my family – even if my family becomes larger – so long as God gives me good health. (Hovland, Ellison 1922, 71)

His admiration for his new country could be synthesized in a phrase from the same letter: “I do not believe there can be better laws and arrangements for the benefit and happiness of the common man in the whole world” (Hovland, Ellison 1922, 71). Besides praising America, Hovland gave detailed accounts about the pioneer life, so that the Norwegian farmers would know what to expect. Most likely some of the immigrants might have felt disappointment upon their arrival and did not find everything as easy as they had imagined, but, as Theodore C. Blegen put it, “Hovland reflected the optimism of the American frontier, where land and liberty, which he vaunted, were undeniable realities, though the trials, both material and spiritual, which he did not appraise, were also real” (Blegen 1931, 70). However, thanks to his early migration and to the numerous letters in which he advocated for the emigration, Gjert Gregoriussen

Hovland is considered one of the chief promoters of the Norwegian migration to the New World (Anderson 1896, 82).

If Hovland was the first prolific letter writer, a pastor's daughter, Elise Tvede Wærenskjold, who had separated from her husband and had founded a school for girls in Norway (Semmingsen 1978, 29), became the most famous Norwegian-American letter writer. Elise Tvede emigrated to Texas in 1847, together with the man who would become her second husband, Wilhelm Wærenskjold. They settled in Four Mile Prairie settlement and became actively involved in the life of the community. After her husband died during the Civil War, Elise remained the single parent of two children, going through hardships and financial difficulties. Despite the difficulties Wærenskjold had to face, she never ceased to support the Norwegian-American community in Texas, to believe in the benefits of emigration, for which she advocated in the numerous letters she wrote to other immigrants in America, to journals, and to friends in Norway. Due to her prolific exchange of letters, to her articles and brochures, to her avidity in highlighting the benefits of the immigrant life in America, the freedom one could find there, Elise Wærenskjold became the most known Norwegian in Texas. Anderson considers her a notable person in Norwegian American history, as she "was always busy with her pen, and many are the valuable articles written from time to time in the Scandinavian press on both sides of the Atlantic" (Anderson 1896, 383). More recently, Brian Fehler shows that Waerenskjold's letters represent a body of persuasive documents, for which he uses the term 'emigration propagation', a concept which reveals the strategies that persuaded millions of Europeans to begin new lives on the other side of the Atlantic (Fehler 2017, 363).

The two famous letter writers that have been mentioned above have been extremely influential and have contributed to the increase of the emigration to America. It is necessary to highlight the essential role America letters have had in the mass migration from Scandinavia to America. On the one hand, this paramount role is given by the themes they tackled. These immigrant letters represented handbooks for those interested in migrating, as they provided useful information about the conditions found in the New World, but also about the problems the immigrants could face; as expected, upon their arrival in America, the immigrants began at the bottom of the ladder (Blegen 1955, 5), dealing with poverty, hard work, disease, all in a country and culture they were unfamiliar with. Moreover, America letters generated debates in the homelands of the immigrants, as they, naturally, compared the socio-economic conditions in America with those they had left behind. Migration began to appeal more and more to the Europeans, and these letters fuelled ardent discussions in favour, and

against the mirage of the New World. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that these letters enjoyed huge popularity among the family and friends of the migrants, and this popularity eventually expanded to entire villages or regions.

Conclusions

The analysis of the America letters reveals that they are essential in the study of migration due to their focus on individual experiences, as the immigrants “tell their own stories in their own words” (Zempel 1991, xiii). As previously mentioned, the letters are witnesses of change, since the immigrants described the challenges of adjustment and acculturation in the letters they sent home. Nonetheless, they are also agents of change, because they had a great influence upon the Norwegian emigration to America.

These immigrant letters are testimonials of adjustment, abundant in concepts specific to migration, concepts such as belonging, change, insecurity, hope for a better future. Moreover, America letters are relevant for the study of migration because they represented a bridge between the immigrants and the homeland, helping them maintain the relationships with their family and friends (Mureşan 2020, 56). Besides their personal dimension, these immigrant letters reveal the image of America as it was perceived by the Europeans who could not find their secure place in the Old World.

The letters of those who had emigrated, despite their dose of subjectivity, represent primary sources in the analysis of migration, highly necessary for a truthful image of the phenomenon. Migration is, after all, a personal decision and Theodore C. Blegen perfectly summed up the main function of the America letters: “In the letters immigrants wrote home, they told, from its initial chapters, the story of a decision and its consequences. For most of them there was no going home again, and this they knew” (Blegen 1955, 4). Hence, it is important not to forget that there are people beyond statistics and numbers, that the American migration was the story of brave individuals in search of a better life, and the letters they sent home both witnessed and fuelled this tremendous change in their lives.

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