**Nikolina**—Hjalmar Peterson (1917)
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Essay by David Kaminsky (guest post)*

**Nikolina (English)**
*Translation by David Kaminsky*

To be in love, it is an awful pain
a one who’s tried it will not disagree
I were so awful stuck on Nikolina
And Nikolina just as stuck on me

Well, for her hand, I asked her daddy’s blessing
But his response was a surprise indeed
I’ve not before or since been seen egressing
From someone’s doorstep with such awful speed

So I went home and wrote to Nikolina
To see if she would be so awful kind
And meet me on the slope next Saturday e’en
amongst the oaks when first the moon does shine

A dark and hooded figure there did meet me
The moon shone in the sky of blue above
‘Twas Nikolina’s daddy come to greet me
And wielding quite the awe-inspiring club

I got so scared I shook down to my knees, then
Took to my feet in fear of his attack
But as I snuck and crept between the trees, then
The old man let that club dance on my back

So I went home and wrote to Nikolina:
“Of my whole life I must adieu now take.
If you can’t remedy my heartsick pain
I’ll go and drown me in the nearest lake.”

But Nikolina cured my bitter sickness
She said “Dear Olle, sure, don’t be unwise.
He who abbreviates his life’s a chicken,
Best calm yourself until the geezer dies.”

And now I wait along with Nikolina
For the old coot to finally kick the can
So we can dedicate that club to lean
against the grave, in memory of that man

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**Nikolina (Swedish)**
*As performed by Hjalmar Peterson*

Att vara kär, då ä en ryslig pina
Den som försökt då säger inte nej
Ja’ va så rysligt kär i Nikolina
Och Nikolina lika kär i mej

Om hennes hand, ja’ bad hos hennes pappa
Men fick ett svar som ja’ ej väntat på
Ja’ aldrig kommit utför någon trappa
Så rysligt hastigt som ja’ gjorde då

Så gick ja’ hem å skrev te Nikolina
Om hon vill vara så rysligt snåll
Å möta mig när månen börjar skina
I ekebacken nästa lördagkväll

Där mötte mej en mörk figur i kappa
Å månen sken på himmelen den blå
Den mötande var Nikolinas pappa
Beväpnad med en rätt försvarlig påk

Ja’ blev så rädd ja’ darrade i knäna
Å tog te bena både rädd å skygg
Men som ja’ smög där fram emellan träna
Lät gubben påken dansa på min rygg

Så gick ja’ hem och skrev te Nikolina:
“Nu ä dä mä mitt hela liv adjö
Om du ej bota kan min kärlekspina
Går ja’ å dränker mig i närmsta sjö”

Men Nikolina botade min sjuka
Hon sade “kära Olle, tänk dig för
Den som sitt liv förkortar ä en kruka,
Du kan väl lugna dig tess gubben dör”

Å nu så väntar ja’ å Nikolina
Att gubben han ska kola vippet av
Å till ett minne efter honom sättes
Den gamla påken uppå gubbens grav
Hjalmar Peterson [jalmar petefɔːn], also known by his stage name “Olle i Skratthult” (Olle in Laughterville) was Swedish America’s most prominent vaudevillian. He emigrated from Värmland, Sweden, at the age of twenty in 1906 and eventually settled in Minneapolis, where he lived until his death in 1960. At the height of his career, from around 1916 through the early 1930s, he and his performing troupe traveled an annual circuit to packed audiences from Seattle to Chicago to Jamestown, New York and places between.

Peterson’s biggest hit, “Nikolina,” sold more than 100,000 copies over the course of three separate recordings, an accomplishment nearly unheard of for a foreign-language artist at the time. Although the song’s anonymous Swedish author probably did not mean it originally as an immigrant allegory, its themes certainly allowed it to be heard that way by the Swedish American audiences who made it a hit. To understand why “Olle i Skratthult” struck such a chord with those audiences, and why Nikolina more than any other song in his repertoire resonated with them, it will help to have some sense of the relevant cultural context.

Major immigration from Sweden to the US began in the 1840s and extended, over the course of several waves, into the 1920s. At first it was mostly poor rural families escaping a rigid class hierarchy that kept them impoverished and oppressed, moving to the upper Midwest to start new farms. This wave increased dramatically in the late 1860s, as the combined effect of the 1862 Homestead Act (designed to parcel out Native American lands to white farmers) and several years of dramatic crop failure in Sweden.

Eventually, and particularly with advances in shipping technology that made the sea voyage easier and cheaper, more and more of the Swedish immigrant population started to skew younger and unattached. These newer immigrants, still largely from the Swedish underclasses, tended to gravitate toward the cities. Ultimately one in five Swedes emigrated to North America, most of them concentrated in the upper Midwest. By 1910, Chicago had more Swedish speakers than any city in the world other than Stockholm.

Many of these people lived in cities without local family attachments and sought community in newly established Swedish American heritage organizations. The symbols of Swedish heritage celebrated by these organizations (e.g., Saint Lucia’s Day and Midsummer; the Vikings and the conqueror king Gustavus Adolphus) were largely adopted from the recent surge of national romanticism among elite social strata in Sweden. The contemporary music and dance practices of the rural poor, being centered around foreign factory-produced accordions, had meanwhile
been rejected by the Swedish elite for being too modern, too international, and too industrial to serve as symbols of authentic Swedish culture. The musical practice that flourished within the Swedish American heritage organizations of the early twentieth century therefore instead became an amateur choral tradition borrowed largely from Swedish university student societies.

This elite version of Swedish heritage went hand in hand with the increasing social mobility of American Swedes, who had gone from being “bad” immigrants (contrasted against earlier British and German waves) to “good” immigrants (contrasted against more recent waves from Eastern Europe). At the same time, however, it also represented a severing from their own cultural history as mostly poor peasants, exchanged for celebration of a monarchy that had oppressed them and the musical tradition of a university that never would have accepted them. This split between the lived cultural history of most Swedish immigrants and the version of Swedishness produced by elite national romanticism manifested the dilemma of an upward mobility that seemed contingent on abandonment of that lived history.

In the mid-1910s, the outbreak of war in Europe intensified this dilemma by instigating significant anti-immigrant sentiment in—and a near-total stop on immigration to—the United States. The preservation of the Swedish language in the US, long a concern for Swedish Americans as the primary carrier of their culture, came under increased threat from both these factors. (Several states banned church services in Swedish during this period, for instance.) The armistice eased immigration restrictions somewhat, but this was only a temporary reprieve, as a series of congressional acts over the course of the 1920s effectively ended mass immigration to the United States. Thus was the severing of American Swedes from their rural Swedish roots made even more real.

This anxious period was, significantly, the precise moment during which Hjalmar Peterson’s performing troupe found its greatest success. His touring production was entirely in Swedish, in defiance of any pressures to abandon the language. Such was Peterson’s skill as a physical comedian, however, that he was popular even with non-Swedish-speaking crowds. He apparently had the ability to get an entire theater laughing just by walking out on stage dressed in his signature costume—a cap with a flower in it, straw wig, long scarf, and blackened tooth—and looking around. This ability to keep the language, but also transcend language and make connections to cultural outsiders, must have done a great deal to ease identity-based anxieties for his Swedish American audiences. Even more significant, perhaps, was the way his act navigated tensions between upward mobility and connection to peasant roots.

At first glance, Olle i Skratthult seems like he could be the stock country bumpkin character from any white ethnic vaudeville act in the US, and he certainly fits that niche. At the same time, nearly all of Peterson’s song and sketch material came directly from Swedish sources, some of which he had already been using when he first emigrated in 1906, and some of which he gathered while on a performing tour of Sweden a few years later. His Olle i Skratthult persona, down to the precise details of costuming, is drawn entirely from a Swedish popular tradition known as bondkomik or “peasant comedy.”

In Sweden, peasant comedy held a rare position of relevance across social classes. It was primarily popular among the rural poor, but it had also been deemed authentically Swedish by
the urban elite guardians of Swedish heritage. This seal of approval came in 1893 when the famous peasant comedian Jödde i Göljaryd was hired as a featured performer at Skansen, Stockholm’s brand new outdoor museum of Swedish folklife. The exceptionally wide appeal of peasant comedy may be attributed in part to the standard presentation of a self-effacing country bumpkin caricature that validated class stratification while nevertheless proving sympathetic and clever, often outwitting his alleged social betters.

Olle i Skratthult was clearly inspired at least in part by Jödde i Göljaryd, and in fact Peterson appropriated material from that earlier performer (a common practice in peasant comedy). Peterson’s act appealed to a sense of immigrant nostalgia that depended on a strong connection to Sweden, so his use of sketches and songs that actually originated in the old country was key. At the same time, Peterson distinguished himself in two subtle ways to intensify his resonance with Swedish Americans. First, while Göljaryd is a real town that would have signified for most of Sweden as a kind of generic Hicksville, Skratthult never actually existed in either Sweden or the United States. This allowed Olle to occupy a fantastical past-space that resolved the immigrant dilemma by virtue of its indeterminacy, situated in neither country or both. Secondly, Peterson’s rural dialect was perfectly indistinguishable from that of any Värmland Swede, except for a mysteriously American heavy L that he peppered into his performances seemingly at random. (The song “Nikolina” has six such moments: aLdrig, snäLL, kväLL, himmeLen, OLLe, tiLL, whereas all other occurrences of the letter L happen with perfect Swedish pronunciation.) The effect was a subtle but certainly intentional marker of native Swedishness yet somehow tinged American.

Nor was Skratthult a place of Vikings, conqueror kings, al fresco midsummer smorgasbords, or any of the other trappings of elite Swedish heritage production. The sound of that place was not choral singing, but the accordion-centric music of Hjalmar Peterson’s backing band. When his company came to town, the event began as a concert and theatrical production, but ended in a participatory social dance. Attendees, dancing polkas and schottisches to the same band that backed Olle’s songs, became Skratthultians for the night in their own right.

The song “Nikolina” does considerable work to emphasize this connection to late nineteenth century Swedish peasant culture, and to work through anxieties about its value. Musically, the song has the feel of a hambo, a form that occupied a peculiar position in relation to the elite guardians of Swedish heritage at the time. (I am here discussing the 1929 recording; the earliest recording, from around 1917, does not have a hambo feel likely because it was made with studio musicians instead of Peterson’s regular backing band.) The hambo was part of that accordion repertoire that also included forms like waltz, schottische, polka, and mazurka, which on the whole had been rejected by those guardians partly for being too generically European. Alone amongst those forms, however, hambo actually was uniquely Swedish, being an accordion-friendly modernization of the traditional polska. Given that polska was generally understood by the national romantics to be the most authentic form of Swedish folk music, the hambo as its modern manifestation thus nestled into a space somewhere between impoverished contemporary peasant culture and hallowed Swedish heritage—much like the peasant comedy tradition writ large.
And yet “Nikolina” is not quite a hambo either. Any audience member who knew how would likely feel the song’s pull to dance a hambo, while also on some level recognizing the difficulty of doing so. A traditional hambo is made up of sections containing four balanced phrases of two 3/4 measures each. The second, third, and fourth line of each verse of Nikolina match this structure perfectly. The first line, however, consists of a 3/4 measure followed by a 2/4 measure and then a 4/4 measure—three extra beats organized with decidedly lopsided emphasis. The effect for any hambo dancer would be a feeling of confused inhibition in the first line of each verse, followed by free movement in the next three. Anxious inhibition, followed directly by release, is thus embedded and repeated in the very metrical structure of the song.

The lyrical style, meanwhile, manages to establish itself as simultaneously rooted in peasant life and respectably sophisticated. Peterson performs in an exaggerated rural dialect calibrated to match his equally exaggerated country bumpkin attire, yet his words also reveal an erudite vocabulary applied to clever turns of phrase packaged in strict iambic pentameter. Lyrically, Nikolina is in what Swedes call a “literary song” rather than a folk song tradition.

The theme in US immigrant song of the parental generation representing the old world and the children’s generation the new is perhaps most famously exemplified in “My Yiddishe Momme,” written in the early 1920s and made famous by Sophie Tucker in 1928. In that song, where the narrator waxes nostalgic about missing her poor immigrant mother, the underlying drama is about upward mobility demanding a severing of cultural roots. The Swedish American audience might hear similar themes in Nikolina, only reconfigured by virtue of there being three characters rather than two. Where “My Yiddishe Momme” offers a clean distinction between the mother’s rich old-world poverty and the child’s impoverished new-world success, the relationship to upward mobility in Nikolina is decidedly more complex.

In this song, Olle interacts with two characters of higher social standing than his. For the Swedish American audience, Nikolina’s father might stand for the old-world elite whose violent oppression the peasant’s back must bear, and whose family and society are closed to him. Nikolina herself would then, as a possible entry into that family after all, represent the new world potential for social mobility—like joining a choir that never would have accepted you in the old country. (The understanding that Swedish American men could climb the ladder by marrying Swedish American women was also well-established by the late nineteenth century, when the former often worked as manual laborers and the latter as prized live-in maids for wealthy families who imparted their class status upon them.) The anxiety about what that social mobility might mean is manifest in our not knowing Nikolina’s real loyalties for the first six verses, to the point that Olle must actually threaten suicide to find out.

Whereas both songs are charged with ambivalence about social mobility, however, “My Yiddishe Momme” maintains an air of tragedy while “Nikolina” plays its melodrama for comedy and offers a happy ending. Nikolina’s success hinges on its humor, both for the general reason that good comedy sells, and specifically because it provides an acceptable avenue for the necessary work of engaging with the trauma of migration. (Swedish American audiences did not tend to appreciate straightforward tragedy, likely considering it wallowing and in bad form.) The challenge the song faces, then, is how to wring some optimistic sensibility out of the upwardly mobile immigrant’s inescapable dilemma of cultural loss.
Nikolina’s happy ending is manifested not by any logical solution to that dilemma, but by projecting it onto metaphorical characters and then solving the problem for those characters in a way that has no bearing on any immigrant’s lived reality. The “real” story of emigration would be the one any listener familiar with romantic cliché would expect following the third verse, namely that Nikolina and Olle meet up on the slope and then run off together to elope. The song’s central twist (among many) is a rewriting of history so that they never left, instead resolving to find their better life by simply waiting out their oppressor.

The song offers the catharsis of an imagined alternate history, in which a better life might have been found without having to pay the steep costs of migration. And the emotional thrust of that catharsis is carried by the music itself, with the metrical anxiety of the first line of each verse resolving into the free hambo movements of the following three. In this way Nikolina encapsulates the visceral sense of Skratthult, that place which allows you to be at home in Sweden no matter where else you find yourself in the world—a feeling that, in that moment of impending cultural loss, would have meant a great deal to a Swedish American audience.

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