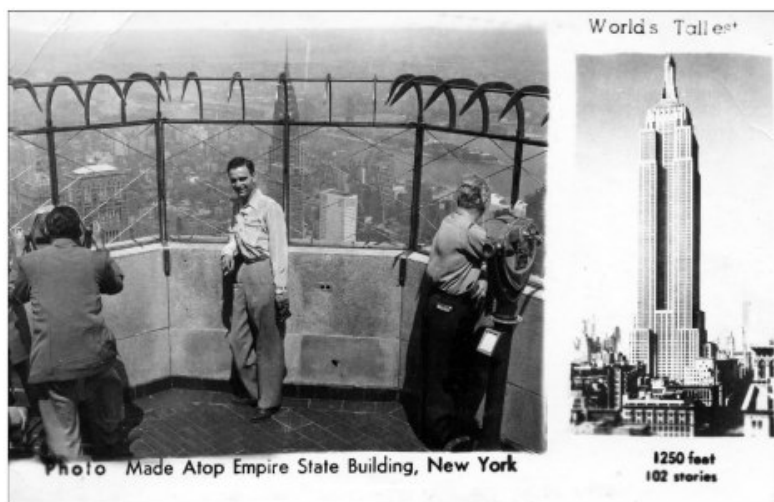


Jerry Nothman: Becoming a Yank - in Sweden

Introduction

Because of his Jewish father who was murdered by the Nazis in 1942, Gerhard Nothmann together with his mother and brother had to leave his native city of Nuremberg and seek asylum in Sweden. There he got in touch with stranded American bomber crews and turned into Jerry Nothman, an American by conviction. The following text is from his autobiography “Lucky Me” in which book Nothman is telling the amazing story of his career from a poor German refugee to a successful U.S. entrepreneur with humor and without glorification.

rijo



Finally: Jerry Nothman on top of the Empire State Building in New York, 1953
(source: private)

U.S. Airmen in Västerås

In 1943, four years after my mother, my brother and me had to flee from Nuremberg to Sweden, Americans entered my life. Västerås, the town where we were living, had a military airfield at its outskirts. When the Americans took the air war to Berlin and to eastern Germany they didn't fly across occupied France and Holland and the western part of Germany if they could avoid it; they would fly across the North Sea, cut across Denmark and the southern tip

of Sweden, and then hit Berlin from the North. That way their exposure to German fighters and German anti-aircraft fire was minimized.

Nevertheless, many of these American planes were shot up. And many of the American pilots, for more than one reason, would land in Sweden. Some were shot up pretty badly. Others - some with twenty to twenty-five missions and others with just one or two missions - were just sick and tired of the war, and so after bombing Germany they would make emergency landings in Sweden.

By that time Sweden had gained enough strength - and the Germans were overextended enough - that the Swedes weren't as afraid of Germany as they had been. By 1943 to 1944, they knew they could give the Germans a good run for their money both in the air and on the ground. Consequently, they didn't imprison the downed American flyers in internment camps. They gathered the aircraft - at one time there were more than one hundred B-17s and B-24s sitting there - at the Västerås military airfield and disarmed them. But the crews were allowed to live in town and in the surrounding areas. They were allowed to wear their uniforms but without insignias. They lived in hotels and in boarding houses and in private homes and worked on their planes every day to keep them or restore them to flying condition. The American government sent them their base pay, their flight pay, and \$7 per day for sustenance, which allowed them to live very well. By comparison, the average Swedish worker didn't even make \$7 a day in those days. So the American airmen weren't poor little soldier boys. They were well off, out of the war, and apart from the fact that they couldn't go home, were very happy to be where they were.



Gerhard (left) with mother Gretel and brother Helmut Nothmann 1941 in Sweden

(source: private)

Each plane was allowed to go up once a month with Swedish fighter escorts. Naturally, they weren't allowed to return to Britain. That would have been a violation of neutrality. However, truth be told if the Allies especially needed one or two of their top pilots back, they sort of left surreptitiously and disappeared.

A Middleman for My Heroes

The entire world looked up to America in those days. The appearance of these young Yanks on the soil of Sweden was really something. For an impressionable young kid like me - and I wasn't the only one - it was a tremendous feeling to sidle up to these young men. In my eyes Americans were ten feet tall. They were role models to be imitated. They were my heroes. These were guys you wanted to get to know and be with.

Like servicemen everywhere, they were looking for booze and blonds. They had money, and they had cigarettes from the Red Cross. So I learned to trade booze for cigarettes. The Swedes make *aquavit*, a potato-based brandy which is very potent. The Swedes are furious drinkers, but booze was rationed. Each adult over the age of twenty-one got a ration book for alcohol. Each male was allowed three bottles a month. A woman was allowed one bottle. Many women didn't drink even that much and I would be their intermediary, trading booze for coffee or cigarettes and taking a "bite," or commission. I had been smoking cigarettes since I was twelve. Of course, that was highly illegal for a kid. If a teacher saw you smoking, even if you were in town away from the school, it was "woe unto you." I got sanctioned more than once.



B-17 bomber
(source: USAF)

Irresistible Idealists from “God’s Own Country”

Some of the American airmen were only six or seven years older than I was. And yet, for all their training and experience in war, they were still naive kids. There was an innocence surrounding those Americans that unfortunately doesn’t exist anymore. They knew a lot about war but they didn’t know too much about life. They were more naive at nineteen, twenty and even twenty-two than I was at thirteen. Most came from farms in the Midwest - Kansas and Iowa. Most had not been fifty miles away from home until they joined the Army Air Corps. (During World War II, the U.S. Air Force as we know it didn’t exist independently. It existed as part of the U.S. Army.) They truly were idealistic. We Europeans were cynical.

The Americans’ naiveté was so refreshing. They represented Norman Rockwell’s America. (Rockwell’s cover illustrations for the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine are still considered the quintessential or most perfect portraits of America during this time.) They were Americans, and Americans were almost universally admired as the guiding light of the powers that stood up to the Nazis.



U.S. bomber crew during World War 2

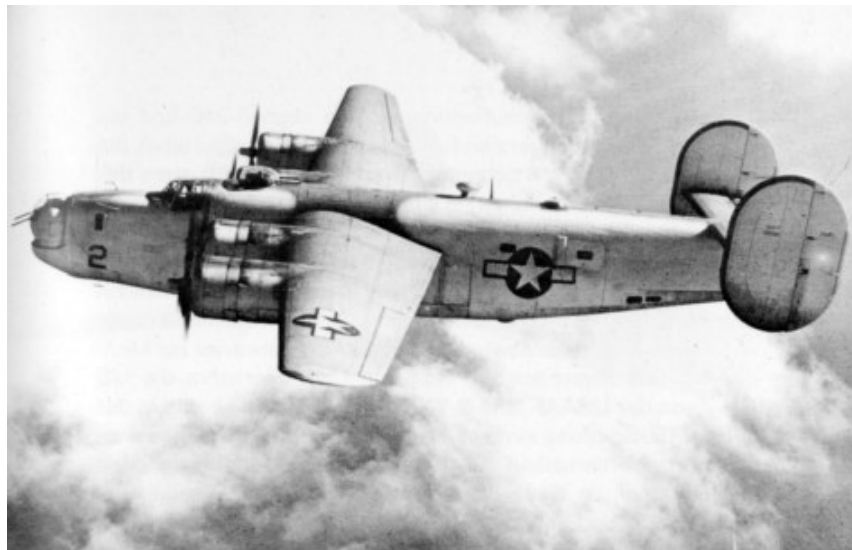
(source: USAF)

The Europeans’ impression of Americans was partially due to the fact that we didn’t have the instant communications that we have today. It took days, even weeks for news to be disseminated. America in many respects was still the mysterious unknown, the new world. At the same time, I would estimate that almost one out four Swedes had a relative in America. This was true of most of Europe. America was the “land of opportunity.” It was the land where it seemed everyone wanted to go. So there was an enormous reservoir of good feelings for America. Thus, the attraction to hang around American airmen was almost irresistible.

I remember that when I was thirteen or fourteen, my brother and I would stay up half the night listening to Armed Forces Network (AFN) radio. In those days on AM you could pick up Swedish radio stations, a couple of strong German stations, but short wave was where you picked up the BBC (the British Broadcasting Corporation), and what became our staple, AFN. AFN played good music, modern music, like that of Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey, and it featured comedians like Jack Benny and Amos and Andy - and all the performers who were popular in those days. For someone like me who was still learning English, these shows were invaluable, not only for learning English but about life in America. A steady diet of Amos and Andy, The Shadow, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, The Weekly Hit Parade and all the other popular radio broadcasts of the time painted a vivid and realistic picture of America and its people.

My First Flight

As I previously mentioned, each of the grounded American planes was allowed to fly once a month. One of my special American friends, Jack Schaffer, helped smuggle me aboard one day. Jack was from Ravenna, near Akron, Ohio, the rubber capitol of the United States. Jack was in his early twenties, a pilot with the rank of Captain. He was one of the guys who had a good reason - a greatly shot up plane over northern Germany - to land in Sweden. In fact, he crash landed. To some extent he took me under his wing.



B-24 „Liberator“
(source: USAF)

For quite some time I had been after him and the other airmen to take me up on one of their once-a-month flights. Finally, after supplying cigarettes and liquor to them for months, one of the guys felt he owed me a favor and so he said, “OK kid, now it’s time you learned to fly.”

They put a pair of fatigues on me so that I looked like everyone else and I accompanied them on the bus to the airfield and climbed aboard with them. I got to ride in the tail gunner's spot. Of course, the guns were removed, but there I was behind this Plexiglas shield looking down at the ground below from an elevation of many thousands of feet. It was exhilarating. That experience probably planted the desire to become a pilot in me, but it would be years and years before I made that desire a reality.

Growing Up

I can't really express how very, very interesting it was to hang around those guys and listen to them. It was educational. I not only picked up the nuances of the English language as spoken by Americans, but I also inadvertently learned a lot about the intricacies of life in the United States.

The airmen would talk about baseball, about going to soda fountains in drug stores, and about girls. They would receive American magazines from the United States and let me read them. I became a voracious reader and would swallow up anything that had to do with America, England, or the war. In these respects my education was years ahead of my schoolmates.

Hanging around those grounded American airmen opened up a whole new world to me, but it all came too fast. I didn't know whether I was a child or whether I was a grown man. Of course I didn't realize it at the time, but I was still a kid, a child with all the built-in apprehensions and fears of childhood.



Gerhard and Helmut Nothmann in the early 1940s
(source: private)

On the Way Out of Sweden: Nick & Tony's

After the following, rather turbulent years, my Swedish chapter closed with another “American” experience when I entered the restaurant trade. Somewhere along the line I had met two fellows, both of whom had spent some time in the U.S.; one as a pastry cook in some New York restaurant and the other in the galley on one of the Swedish America Line ships, the “Gripsholm”, which sailed between Sweden and New York on a regular basis. With transatlantic air travel still in its very infancy, passenger liners were still the preferred method of getting across to the New World.

The two of them had the idea of opening up an American-style restaurant in Stockholm, and did I care to join in their adventure? They knew what it took to prepare an American-style menu; meat cut the American way to produce decent steaks, baked potatoes, hamburgers and the buns to go with them, and of course French fries, and pies for dessert. I would bring to the table a gift of gab, excellent English and a willingness to work long hours as host and chief waiter.

It was all done on a shoestring. We rented what used to be a store, converted the back area into a kitchen, decorated the front with travel posters from the U.S., installed some swinging doors to give it a “saloon” look, and sometime in 1949 Nick & Tony's was born. We had a friend in the jewelry business make some brass name tags in the shape of a N.Y. skyline with names like Harry, Jerry, Tommy, Joe and anything else that sounded American, and those were the names we gave our waiters, no matter where they came from and what their real names were.

Horse Steaks and Jazz

Our cook was an Australian; most of our waiters, if not all, were from different foreign countries. Here they were, “instant Americans,” with yours truly as the greeter, head waiter, bus-boy and anything else that needed to be done. Our specialty was a steak dinner, with baked potato and all the trimmings. People raved about it; it was the best they'd ever tasted. Little did they know they were eating horse meat, which in Sweden and most other European countries was readily available and commonly used in the years immediately following World War II.

My brother Helmut came to work for us to earn some extra money during his time off. We stuck the name tag “Tommy” on him. He met a lady there whom he married (and later divorced), and with whom he had two children, both girls, Annika and Gertrude. Until the day he died, they called him Tommy.

After a few write-ups in the local press we had quite a going concern and counted amongst our regulars even people from the American Embassy, who were tickled pink to get an American meal.

Another friend of ours, an American gal named Stormy (she was the girlfriend of our jewelry friend), was an accomplished pianist and knew quite a few musicians. She arranged jazz jam sessions every Monday night, and we really had the place jumping. Monday night is usually the musicians' night off and we would have some fairly well-known performers sit in for an hour or so.

Flight to a New Life - with obstacles

It was lots of fun and quite exiting, but working at Erik Lundh all day and at Nick & Tony's every night until midnight, and helping to bake hamburger buns two nights a week until the wee hours of the morning did take it's toll, and after a while I found myself in the hospital, first for a varicose veins operation and later for a bleeding stomach ulcer. My hospitalization for the ulcer occurred, just a couple of months before I was scheduled to leave for Australia.

And why Australia? The answer really was quite simple. Somehow I realized that in growing up to be nineteen or twenty, I had made a horrible mess of myself both physically and emotionally. I lived a constant double life, what with being the real me sometimes and someone else at other times, and it was getting extremely nerve wracking, keeping it all straight, to the point where it was starting to affect my health, both mentally and physically. I sensed that the only way out of the mess I had created was to leave Sweden, leave Europe, go somewhere else and start from scratch with a clean slate.

America was my dream destination, but that wasn't in the cards for me. I had no way of getting there legally. On one of my hitchhiking trips I had met a young couple who were traveling together. She was from Holland, he from Indonesia, and during one of our conversations the topic of Australia came up. They told me that the Australian government was actually looking for immigrants on a large scale and was in fact subsidizing people to come there, provided they would commit to work in assigned parts of the country, rather than all gathering just in Sydney or Melbourne. There was an Australia office in The Hague, where you could get all the necessary information and apply. I wrote to The Hague and was told they'd welcome me as an immigrant, but because I was not from a country that had fought on the Allied side of the war, the subsidized travel would not apply to me and I would have to arrange for my own way to get there. I could not travel on one of the subsidized British ships. The re-

quirement for an immigration visa was basically having a certified check for twenty Australian pounds (about \$45.00).

I had become a Swedish citizen in 1948, had registered for the compulsory two-year military service, and knew that on top of everything else I would have to report for service by my twenty-first birthday. I had no desire whatsoever to be in the Swedish army, where I would earn only fifty cents per day. I applied for exemption and was told I would not have to serve, provided I left the country prior to my twenty-first birthday. Here was another incentive to leave. I applied to the Hague, was issued an immigration visa in short order, and had everything in place to get out from under and to start a new life in Australia, unencumbered by make-believe personalities and all the other complexes I had burdened myself with since leaving Germany. All I needed was 3,000 Sw.Kr., (Swedish krona), a little more than a year's salary to pay for the trip! That was one of the incentives for working multiple jobs and winding up flat on my back in the hospital with just weeks to spare before my ship was to sail from Oslo, Norway, in 1950. I almost got the entire amount together and my mother, bless her heart, cashed in some savings bonds and lent me what I lacked.



Jerry Nothman today
(source: private)

If you want to read more: Jerry Nothman's autobiography "Lucky Me" can be ordered on the Internet at <http://www.lulu.com/content/1054462>

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