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John Root Once More

Erik Wikén*

In the ongoing discussion concerning the identity of John Root, who 13 May 1850 shot and killed Erik Jansson, the sect leader, in Henry Co. Court House in Cambridge, IL, I do not believe that an important letter written by Anders Larsson¹ of Chicago, which has a direct bearing on the event, has been duly noted. The letter was dated Chicago 1 Aug. 1850 and published in the newspaper *Aftonbladet* in Stockholm 2 Nov. 1850.² The translated version follows:

“I now wish to tell you the final bit of the life story of the prophet, as he called himself — the bishop of Bishop Hill. But in order for you to have a full grasp of the story, I must tell you the reasons for his sad end. During the fall of 1848 a number of Swedish gentlemen left Chicago for Bishop Hill, and it is probable that most of them were only going to stay a short while. It was during this time, when all (according to the dictate of the prophet) were to be married; and some of these gentlemen did not wish to brook God’s demand (as it was called). Among them was a man named Root from Stockholm. He married Jan Andersson’s daughter Lotta³ from Domta in Österunda. About a month later Root realized that he could not remain in Bishop Hill, and fruitlessly tried to convince his wife of all the deception, which lay as a foundation for their views. But he failed in his attempt; she was too heavily involved with them. Since that time Root has in a way been separated from the Erik Janssonists; partly because he has worked for an American, who has had contract jobs at Bishop Hill; partly because he has resided in the neighborhood, meaning finally to convince his wife to abandon the group. When this did not happen Root began taking legal action in order to get his wife and 4½ month old child away from there. He therefore took the county officers, i.e. the county’s men of authority, to Bishop Hill, in order to exercise his legal rights. Both his wife and his child were released in Root’s custody without any opposition. Root left immediately with his family and an American while the county officers took another route. But when Root came about three miles from the place, i.e. Bishop Hill, he was suddenly surrounded by a large crowd from Bishop Hill, all carrying weapons. These took Root’s wife and child by force. Root immediately had the county

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officers issue orders of arrest for the leaders of the gang, who also were arrested and in complete agreement with these officers, he travelled back to Bishop Hill, with no other companions than two loaded pistols, saying openly that anyone who dared stop him would get the first bullet. Everything, however, went along peacefully, since they all thought that he was to fetch his wife for a court appearance as a witness. But Root did not go there, but took another road to Rock Island.

When it was discovered that Root was not in court (his presence was not required inasmuch as he had an attorney) some of the Erik Janssonists swore an oath that Root had disturbed the peace in Bishop Hill during their divine service, whereupon an order of arrest was issued for Root. But when they arrived in Rock Island to carry out the order and the Americans learned of their motive, they were happy to be able to return without a challenge. But Root decided after a few days to take his family to a safe place and decided to place her with her sister and brother-in-law in Chicago, namely Per Ersson⁴ from Grinda in Torstuna, whereupon he arrived here with his wife and child 15 March. The wife was rather taciturn in the beginning, but finally seemed to be satisfied with the situation. This did not last long, however because at 7 o'clock in the evening of 18 March both the wife and the child were missing. Jan Jansson⁵, formerly residing in Wänsjö and nowadays living here in the city (and as you know, he is a brother of Erik Jansson) came running to us and told us what had happened. Root, who then was staying with us, immediately sensed something was wrong and said that no one else but the Erik Janssonists had been there and taken them. All inquiries were in vain. In the morning of the following day, we were informed that four of the Erik Janssonists had been in the city, namely Jon Olsson⁶ from Ina, Blombergson⁷, Petter Jansson from Sista and a servant named Lars, whom Jon Olsson had brought with him from Sweden. There were suspicious statements made as well as a private discussion, which Jan Jansson had had with Lotta a few hours before her disappearance, caused strong suspicions that Jan Jansson, himself was involved. He was arrested immediately and during the trial confessed that the persons mentioned before had taken the missing persons, saying that he had been a tool in their hands. The judge then told him: "You have already confessed so much, that if the situation does not change from the course it has taken, you can expect a jail term of from two to 14 years." But after 14 days' incarceration Jan Jansson was again a free man. Root again had arrest orders issued for the robbers, and travelled himself to deposit them with the county officers in Henry County. It was sad to see him now, since he was most disconsolate

over the loss of his wife and child, which he believed he would never again see alive. He knew all too well the conditions in Bishop Hill, since he had in the beginning been recruited to the upper echelon and thus had full insight into many things concerning the group. Many, though they did not know Root personally, were much interested in the case and expressed strong sympathies for him. At his departure he had two pistols with him and said: "These will from now on be the judge between Erik Jansson and myself." I and others tried to reason with him concerning the wrong approach to this question; but he answered me that it was virtually impossible for him to secure justice, since Erik Jansson had said that even if it would cost him \$10,000, Root was not to have either wife nor child alive. Since Root, as I have just mentioned, well knew the conditions in Bishop Hill and the methods used there, he fully believed Jansson's statement. We tried to tell him the results of such action, but he answered that nothing remained for him to live for, since Erik Jansson had robbed him of everything of earthly pleasure. When Root, therefore, came to Henry County, about 100 Americans were in his company, in addition to the county officers. They all departed for Bishop Hill to take Erik Jansson and the four miscreants, who had been to Chicago, but no one was to be found in Bishop Hill and all search was in vain. The search went on for a couple of days and the officers had much trouble in preventing the posse from trying to destroy the place, since they were so angry. No Swede was among them, however. In the meanwhile Erik Jansson had travelled to St. Louis and the surrounding area, where he stayed for about six weeks, without anyone knowing where he was. The other four had escaped to California and individual letters from Swedes, who this spring had been to California, related that these individuals had not even dared to stop en route in Independence, about 500 miles from here. During his absence in St. Louis Erik Jansson had an article in the newspapers in St. Louis, in which he falsely and untruthfully stated that Root in the company of seventy Americans had burned down almost all of the houses in Bishop Hill, where Erik Jansson was the highest authority in a Swedish settlement and where he out of the goodness of his heart had housed seventy widows and 150 orphans, whose parents had died of cholera, etc., etc. This article gave the results he desired — so that he again was able to dupe the people in St. Louis to loan him some cash and goods to the value of more than \$2,000. The article also influenced the governor of Illinois, to whom Erik Jansson also had written. He had complained about the county officers, who had not been willing to protect him or his followers and that the law did not protect them. The governor gave the county officers a reprimand for

not being alert to the situation. But these did not take the reprimand lightly, but collected enough affidavits concerning the truth of what had happened and of the orders for the arrest of Erik Jansson.

As an aside it should be mentioned that Erik Jansson, in order to create good will for himself, at this time, signed an agreement to buy shares in the amount of \$50,000 for the construction of a steam railway.

On 11 May he returned home to Bishop Hill. Everyone warned him that he should be careful of Root, since everybody knew that Root at the very first opportunity would shoot him. Root had during this time practiced target shooting. On Sunday Erik Jansson preached nevertheless, saying that no bullet could harm him, and on Monday 13 May he travelled to the court house. Root met him in the court house, where he consulted with his five attorneys, and asked Jansson, if he could have his wife and child back. Erik Jansson then answered him by saying that a sow was good enough for a wife for Root. Root then immediately fired a pistol shot through Erik Jansson's heart. He also fired another shot, but it only went through the clothes and fell to the floor. Erik Jansson fell to the floor from the first shot and died within three minutes. After this deed, Root voluntarily handed over both of his pistols to the county officers and said: "Now I have completed my task; do what you want with me and what your duties command." The court house was almost full of people. When Root later was tried and asked if he had committed murder, he denied the charge. Supposedly he felt that his deed was not murder, but rather a good act, which had liberated the world of a monstrosity. Jakob Jakobsson⁹ from Söderala and Nils Hedin¹⁰ from Hede were present and carried off the lifeless body to Bishop Hill. Two days later we read the news in the local newspapers and in the same week I received no less than five letters about the event from the country; I have also talked to several persons who were present on the occasion. Every day for two weeks there is scarcely a newspaper which has not had an article concerning this event, and all were agreed that they would not use the term murder but use the expression Root's action or deed, etc. Some newspapers even had some silly articles, as an example speaking of Erik Jansson's resurrection and assumption to Heaven, etc. The event is unfortunate from only one aspect, in that Root got ahead of justice, since the bell of revenge had soon tolled for the last time for Erik Jansson, who then in a more disgraceful manner could have spent the remainder of his days reviewing his past.

There seems to be total chaos in Bishop Hill, since their economic position is beyond help and the only hope is for the officers of the group¹¹, now in Sweden, that they will be able to bring back

sufficient funds so that the creditors can be paid off part of what is owed them and arrangements can be made to satisfy the rest of the claims. They are therefore returning at a good time, or as we used to say in the old country — “in the nick of time.” There is also a great need of leaders. During this vacancy (if I may use that term) Fiskra-Anders¹² and Brodd-Jonas¹³ together with Miss Jansson supposedly are sharing the spiritual and secular supplies. Their physician, a young German, is supposed to have drafted a new constitution for Bishop Hill, which all will be asked to sign. I have spoken to a Swede, who has read this constitution. Miss Jansson (a clever, devious and arrogant Sigbritt)¹⁴ is said to have had a hand in the authorship, and the purpose of the constitution is, as speedily as possible, to place Erik Jansson’s 11 or 12 year-old son on the throne, supposedly under the guidance of the stepmother (if I can use that expression), since Erik Jansson is not supposed to have been legally married to this Miss Pollock, but only preached that God had united them and that no assistance was needed from any worldly authority. There are many comical stories concerning this union but what truthful persons, who have resided a long time in Bishop Hill, have to relate is as follows: two days after the death of his former wife from cholera, Erik Jansson preached that he had received a commandment and witness that he should marry immediately, in part because his bodily needs craved it and in part because he had to produce a mother for Israel. The woman who had received the commandment to take the place of the dead woman was therefore to appear the same evening in his sleeping quarters. This sermon produced results, but instead of *one*, *three* came, all of them having received the commandment, and all were willing to join him in bed. Erik Jansson is supposed to have declared that none of them had received the *right* commandment. The choice was therefore moved up to the following evening, when *two*, who had received the commandment appeared, and according to the sources the stronger of the two assumed her role in bed. The following day Erik Jansson informed his congregation in his sermon that God had selected a mother, and she was the right one, since she had been present at his former wife’s death, when her divine spirit apparently flew into Miss Pollock or Miss Gabriellson (her former husband was named Gabriellson¹⁵, the rich man’s son from Malung).

How things are going to go for Root is not decided. His case will not come until next court session. Since he is poor and is not well known, he cannot expect much sympathy; but nevertheless some of the most able attorneys have volunteered their services and it is said that four have been accepted. \$500 have already been collected. Root is held in the prison in Toulon, Stark County, since they did not dare

to place him in the court house in Cambridge or in Rock Island. Generally the sympathy is for Root and it is believed that not even in Henry County nor Knox County would it be possible to name a jury which would not vote freedom for Root. Even so, the governor in every state has the power to pardon, if it is sought, and even if Root himself does not care the least, people are in full action. I forgot to mention that while Erik Jansson had fled to St. Louis, he is supposed to have tried to declare Root's marriage to Lotta illegal, but this plan failed; he then attempted to get a divorce for them, but this also failed.

There are rumors from the country that no means are spared to win complete exoneration for Root.

I have now, as briefly as possible, sought to give you a truthful account of the last fate of Erik Jansson. I suppose that the newspapers long ago have kept you informed, but in case you had not known the correct reasons, then this story may be new to you and for other friends. I have to add, however, that in Sweden bounties are paid for the killing of lesser wild beasts. So far as I am concerned I don't wish to be the judge in this affair but I can truthfully say and I am secure in my statement, that had not the respected pastor Hedström¹⁶ in Victoria with his restless activity on behalf of religion; his serious and compassionate sermons and advice appealed to the people, Americans as well as Swedes, that they should not take justice in their own hands, the group in Bishop Hill would certainly have been totally destroyed long ago. This man could see that time was running out and he told me last winter that the bell of the avenger would soon sound for the last time.

Since I wrote this account I have been informed through the newspapers and also from letters received that Root a long time ago was out on bail, but if the case has been resolved or not I do not know. The newspapers also tell of the cholera epidemic which has hit Bishop Hill. Their physician was one of the first victims as was Brodd-Jonas and others.

Chicago 1 August 1850

Anders Larsson

This will attest to the fact that this copy is, after necessary corrections, completely in accord with and its meaning fully in agreement with the original letter which we have examined.

Joh. Er. Ekblom
Sheriff

N.A. Brundin
Assistant Pastor in Torstuna

Of value is Anders Larsson's statement that Root came from Stockholm. The same information is to be found in a slightly later letter by a member of the Bishop Hill colony, Erik Ersson from Nora, who in writing a letter home to Sweden 9 Nov. 1850 says:

"He (Eric Jansson) was shot to death . . . by a Swede *from Stockholm* named Root."¹⁷

Even Sven Werner, in a letter written home dated Andover 14 Nov. 1850¹⁸ calls him "a Swede *from Stockholm* by the name of Ruth."

To this can be added Johan Hällsén's account (though given quite a bit later to Philip Stoneberg, but Hällsén had lived in Bishop Hill since 1847¹⁹):

"Root was a Swedish native, the son of rich parents in *Stockholm*."²⁰

Concerning Root's age there is a source of primary value, namely the entry in the Seventh U.S. Census for 1850, which for Stark Co., IL²¹ has the following entry:

"Jail John Root committed 1850 26 M Student Sweden charged [with] murder," in other words Root was probably born 1824 and was therefore of the same age as Charlotta Lovisa Jansdotter,²² whom he married.

John Root died in Chicago 1 March 1856.²³

Despite intensive research it has not been possible up to this moment to find John Root in Swedish source materials.²⁴

Notes

¹Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850* (Stockholm & Chicago 1967) (*SPANY*), pp. 92-93, n. 69.

²The letter was probably addressed to Ekblom, the sheriff, who vouches for its authenticity. The original is not among the other America letters to Ekblom in The Anna Lindevall Collection (Uppsala Landsarkiv).

³Charlotta Lovisa Jansdotter, see *SPANY*, p. 95, n. 83.

⁴*SPANY*, p. 97, n. 89.

⁵*SPANY*, p. 97, n. 91.

⁶*SPANY*, p. 87, n. 37.

⁷*SPANY*, p. 71, n. 35.

⁸*SPANY*, p. 97, n. 92. He was also a brother of Erik Jansson.

⁹*SPANY*, pp. 122-123, n. 42.

¹⁰*SPANY*, p. 105, n. 47.

¹¹This refers to Olof Jansson's from Söderala and Olof Jonsson Stenberg's travel to Sweden 1849-1850. Olof Jansson returned to New York 29 June 1850. On the other hand Anders Larsson was incorrectly informed of Stenberg's return. He arrived in New York 17 Sept. 1850. - Erik Wikén, "New Light on The Erik Janssonists' Emigration 1845-1854" in *The Swedish American Historical Quarterly* Vol. 35, 1984, pp. 233-235.

¹²Anders Olsson Berglund, see *SPANY*, p. 137, n. 55.

¹³Erik Wikén, "Brodd-Jonas and Brodd-Märta: Two Bishop Hill Colonists Identified" in *Swedish American Genealogist* Vol. X, 1990, pp. 188-190.

¹⁴An allusion to Sigbrit Willums of The Netherlands who in the 16th century came to Norway with her dau. Dyveke. The latter became King Christian II's mistress, but after her death the mother became the king's adviser. In 1517 she was placed in charge of the Danish customs, trade and the Royal Mint. Her arrogance was so great that the king's closest advisers left him for fear of her wrath. When Christian II left Denmark she went with him. -*Nordisk Familjebok*, 2nd ed. Vol. 25, pp. 414-415.

¹⁵Lindjo Lars Gabrielson, see *SPANY*, p. 71, n. 36.

¹⁶Jonas Hedström, see *SPANY*, p. 13, n. 36.

¹⁷Lilly Setterdahl (Trans.), "Emigrant Letters by Bishop Hill Colonists from Nora Parish" in *Western Illinois Regional Studies* Vol. I, No. 2, Fall 1978, p. 133.

¹⁸Erik Wikén, "A Marriage Certificate from the Bethel Ship in New York" in *Swedish American Genealogist*, Vol. IX, 1989, p. 169.

¹⁹*SPANY*, p. 133, n. 18.

²⁰The Philip Stoneberg Collection, Augustana College in *The Bishop Hill Colony Papers and Post Colony Papers 1843-1903*, microfilm in The Swedish Emigrant Institute, Växjö, roll No. 12.

²¹*The Seventh Federal U.S. Census*, 1850, Illinois, Stark County.

²²See n. 3 above.

²³*Hemlandet, det Gamla och det Nya* (Galesburg & Chicago) 15 March 1856.

²⁴Accepting the above references to Root's coming from Stockholm and his age in 1850 — 26 years — I cannot accept Börje Östberg's thesis identifying Root with the absconded clergyman Carl Johan Reutermark from the Västerås Diocese, born 31 Jan. 1807 and therefore 43 years old in 1850. See Börje Östberg, "Who Was John Root?" in *Swedish American Genealogist* Vol. VIII, pp. 73-79.

In order to spare other researchers useless work I would like to relate that the young student named Joh. Roth, who appeared at the police headquarters in Göteborg 4 April 1848, is another person although it is tempting to link him to Root. This Johan Roth was b. in Edsberg Parish (Öre.) 25 June 1830, s. of Nils Gabriel Roth, inspector, and Anna Lisa Enhörning. In Knista Parish (Öre.), where the family had moved, Roth received an exit permit to Brazil 30 March 1848. On 3 May 1848 he enrolled in the Göteborg Hiring Hall (*Göteborgs Sjömanshus*) as a seaman on board a vessel destined for Brazil. He returned to Sweden, became a Swedish sea captain and perished in the Baltic 29 Dec. 1879.

A Swedish Bible Inscription

The following inscription is to be found in a large family Bible, part of the collection of such Bibles at the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis.

No. ASI-40 consists of *The Holy Scriptures (Den Heliga Skriften)*, published by A.L. Norman in Stockholm 1863. It has the following inscription on the flyleaf:

"Olof Sohlberg, born in Sörviken (Brunflo Parish, Jämtland) 13 March 1823, the son of Olof Sohlberg, farmer, born in Vålbacken (Lockne Parish, Jämtland) 1784 and Lisbeth Pehrsson, born in Sörviken 1792. He was married to Ingrid, born in Öd (Marieby Parish, Jämtland) 24 March 1828, the daughter of Olof Pehrsson, a crofter, born in Öd 31 Oct. 1799, and Lisa Stina Svensdotter, b. in Överbyn (Marieby Parish) 10 Dec. 1804. They had the following children:

Elisabeth, born 13 Aug. 1855; Olof¹, born 6 July 1859 and Pehr Magnus, born 19 June 1865."

¹Olof Sohlberg, Jr., arr. in the U.S. with his family 1879 and after studies at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN, entered the Medical School of the University of Minnesota, where he earned an M.D. degree in 1884. He established a successful medical practice in St. Paul, MN. In 1886 he married Helvina A. Wold. - A. E. Strand, *A History of the Swedish-Americans of Minnesota*. I-III (Chicago 1910). III, pp. 911-912.