

Packages in Hard Times: ‘Amerikapakker’ and Remittances in a Shoebox of Norwegian Letters, 1945-1948 - Konrad M. Lawson

My talk today has two parts.¹ (SLIDE 2) In the first I want to talk about packages—gifts that were sent from the United States to family members in a rural community in Nord-Trøndelag, Norway just after World War II. Then I want to turn to talk about the archive of Norwegian letters which record what these packages meant for the recipients: a shoebox of almost 250 Norwegian letters that my mother and I have brought into the digital realm and made available for researchers, students, and anyone else to browse through and read.

I want to first admit that I came to make this presentation today as part of more a personal, rather than an academic journey. I am a student of history, but I study the politics of treason in World War II and retribution against accused collaborators in various countries liberated from Japanese occupation.² I am therefore more accustomed to reading confessions in a Chinese communist party archive, Korean police journals, or Japanese military documents than the heart warming letters of a Norwegian family.

So, given my background, let me begin my discussion of packages in a post office in Beijing, China just over a decade ago. Picture me impatiently holding a heavy box of books as I waited together with a long line of darkly tanned Chinese laborers. Almost all of them carried the most oddly shaped containers. Some of them were nothing but large shopping bags that had been haphazardly taped together, while others were large cloth sacks stuffed to bursting point.

They are likely migrant workers, I thought, sending all their worldly possessions ahead of them before they returned to their hometowns. I struck up a conversation with one of them ahead of me and asked. No, I was told, he was a migrant worker, but the massive sack he carried was filled with gifts to send to his family in a distant province.³

This brief encounter changed my way of thinking about the nature of remittances in migration. We hear a great deal about the huge flows of money sent from emigrants or, in this Chinese case, domestic migrant laborers, to their families

far away. We hear less, unless my limited reading on this subject betrays me, about cases in which the sending of physical goods across hundreds or thousands of miles also played a central role in the economic relationship between migrants and their originating communities. In the history of Norwegian-American migration, I would like to suggest that the early aftermath of World War II gave rise to such a moment. (2:20)

Five years of occupation created great hardship for the Norwegian people, and in Finnmark up north, complete devastation. In relative terms, the German occupation of Norway came nowhere near the level of violence and destruction experienced in the bloodlands of Poland, the Soviet Union, or even Western Europe, but it would still take years before the Norwegian economy was again on a solid footing.

There were three major sources of aid to wartorn Norway. **(SLIDE 3)** In addition to its important role as a wartime refuge for Norwegian refugees, fleeing resistance members, and Jews, Sweden poured economic aid into Norway, mainly in the form of some 130,000 tons of goods from 1942-45.⁴ **(SLIDE 4)** In the postwar, the US Marshal Plan, constituted the largest amount of economic aid and was crucial in Norwegian postwar reconstruction.⁵ Most famously, however, a whole range of initiatives organized by Norwegian-Americans, especially under the organization American Relief for Norway was central in the relief effort. **(SLIDE 5)** These organized efforts are mentioned in many works on Norwegian American history, from Ingrid Semmingsen's *Norway to America* to Odd Lovoll's *The Promise of America*.⁶ There is no room to consider the many forms of aid here, but one 1947 report estimated over \$30 million in aid from all sources from 1940-1947, including \$6 million in personal money remittances and \$3.8 million from its own fundraising efforts.⁷

Of the various components of aid, the sending of material goods in packages that came to be known as "Amerikapakker" were the most direct and tangible. **(SLIDE 6)** These packages of mostly clothing, shoes, and food were sent by all manner of institutions from churches to charities such as the Red Cross and CARE.⁸ Unfortunately, this may leave us with the impression that the

Amerikapakker were like any other relief effort following disasters in our own times: large shipments of anonymous aid sent by organizations. The letters in our shoebox archive suggests that this does not give us the whole picture: the Amerikapakker of the early postwar period were a combination of large scale packages distributed to distressed persons in communities around Norway, but included the personal aid from immigrants to their own families in need at home - responding individually to requests for specific goods from their relatives in letter exchanges. **(SLIDE 7)** Regardless of their source, the impact of these packages can be seen clearly in one report shown here from a local newspaper, describing the “joyous task” of unpacking these gifts from “great, mighty America.” (3:10)

Our shoebox of letters have a lot to say about these packages.¹⁰ There are some 248 items in the collection, of which 183 are from the 1940s and almost all of these are from the first postwar years. **(SLIDE 8)** Of them 102 letters refer to gifts of some kind and almost all of these are referring to packages sent from the United States. Only one refers to Amerikapakker of the more anonymous kind.¹¹ **(SLIDE 9)** All of the other letters refer to packages sent by their family in South Dakota, which with only one or two exceptions, came from John Holm and Alma C. Wilson.

If their Norwegian-American relatives John and Alma did not have enough motivation to provide aid to their relatives, there were plenty of letters to tell them about the state of affairs in Stjørdal. “We have enough food,” Herborg Holm tells John in September 1946, but there seems to be terrible shortages of fabric, clothing, household goods, shoes, and coffee.¹² **(SLIDE 10)** Herborg tells us about the rationing of shoes in 1946 when one’s annual ration did not cover the cost of a single pair of leather shoes.¹³ Only in letters from very late in 1946 to early 1947 does the Stjørdal family report that goods, though expensive, were becoming more available.¹⁴ **(SLIDE 11)**

John Holm, a blacksmith by trade, sends his family members all manner of items. Almost everyone gets shoes, and some, multiple pairs. John’s brother Ola or Ole, who had returned to Norway from the United States after a short career there as a professional roller skating performer, **(SLIDE 12)** went through several sizes before he got one that fit, after finally sending John a drawing of his foot, labelled,

“the world’s finest.”

What is truly remarkable however, is the sheer variety of items that got sent from South Dakota to the family in import starved Stjørdal: stockings were a favorite, but so were slippers, socks, pens, pencils, knives, axes, raincoats, overalls, galoshes, underwear, suspenders, soap, shaving kits, razors, spools of thread, compass, shoe polish, towels, watches, rolls of fabric and a host of other clothing items. (SLIDE 13) John is thanked for having sent wrenches and on another occasion, a set of tools. In 1946, when larger packages were permitted, Ola asked for a typewriter and a radio, as well as electrical equipment including plugs and switches.¹⁵

The constant flow of packages from South Dakota fed an equally constant flow of letters thanking the giver. (SLIDE 14) They could also cause some tension between family members as they compared their gains with those of others, as this anecdote from Ola Holm shows.¹⁶ Money, of course, was also sent,¹⁷ and as John’s health declined and he finally passed away in 1948, we are plunged into a series of exchanges about the inheritance of his remaining assets in Norway and a last transfer of funds he sent there from the United States. Money matters, however, was a constant, something found in all decades of the collection. The extraordinary flood of packages seen in the early postwar letters in this collection of letters from Norway mirror similar proliferation of package mentions in the early postwar letters of a 1997 published collection entitled, *Brev Hjemmefra* from the Norwegian Institute of Local History.¹⁸

It was difficult for the Norwegian relatives to return the generosity of those years. There were moments when guilt was expressed that they could not afford to pay for the items received, though promises to do so were occasionally made.¹⁹ Of course, return letters did sometimes contain copies of local newspapers or photographs of the family. They were also filled with references to the seasonal events of Norwegian life that surely gave John and other American relatives pangs of nostalgia: The berry picking trips to the forest, the mountain hikes and the festive Christmas celebrations.

The brief examples of the importance of Amerikapakker in the lives of my distant relatives and the communities around Stjørdal in the early postwar period are, in the end, merely suggestive, and anyone studying Norwegian or Norwegian-American economic history will have to dig much deeper.

What I hope my talk today will leave you with, is another reason to consider the value of large collections of these “Norgesbrev,” that is, letters sent from Norway to emigrants. Theodore Blegen, Solveig Zempel, and many others have shown us the wonderfully rich world of “Amerikabrev,” the letters sent by Norwegian immigrants home to Norway.²⁰ Øyvind Gulliksen, Ola Alsvik, Bente Granrud, **(SLIDE 15)** and others have suggested that looking at the other side of the exchange also has much to offer the historian.²¹ Gulliksen has argued the letters can show us how emigration impacted those left behind, as well as serve as a genre of folk literature. Alsvik has suggested they are a key source on the transformation of communities in Norway in their encounter with modernity. Granrud has pointed out their importance for highlighting the everyday lives of women that are so often lost to the historian's perspective. At a more basic level, as Svein Ivar Langhelle puts it, Norgesbrev offer historians “kjøt og blod”—flesh and blood, that can bring our depictions of these communities to life.²² (6:00)

SWITCH TO TALK ABOUT WEBSITES:

-The Norwegian Institute of Local History has assembled a fantastic collection of around 3,200 Norgesbrev from 1840-1960, many of them copies of originals in the care of NAHA. Their online database allows a search by the name of the sender, recipient, and keywords. Anyone who wishes to truly make the most of Norgesbrev as a genre of primary source will want to see the collection at the institute in Oslo.

-Immigration Research History Research Center at the University of Minnesota
- Digitizing Immigrant Letters - leading to an initiative been a number of archives that will allow them to search each others collections in place.

-Siri Lawson, warsailors (morfar), and the transcription/translation of the letters over 6 months (staying close to originals and adding notes) and I spent about 10 days tagging, geolocating, and setting up the archive software online for the

collection.

-Features of the website

-With online accessibility, transcription and translation - these letters become accessible to a far larger audience. Undergraduate students, I would suggest, might find a wealth of possibilities for their primary source assignments in digital collections of this kind. They are also available to scholars who are perhaps studying another ethnic group or part of the world who might wish to compare their own sources with letters they would not normally have occasion to find, or the language ability to read.

-Yesterday, during the roundtable on the future of Norwegian-American studies Debbie Miller suggested that scholars in the field could benefit from an even greater connection with independent scholars, historian enthusiasts, and professionals often marginalized by the academic world. As Siri's warsailors.com, with its many thousands of meticulously compiled ship records, and her long work of transcription and translation of these documents show, there is very large pool of expertise and passionate dedication out there which can provide a deep contribution towards the study of the Norwegian-American experience, and history in general. We all stand to benefit from closer collaboration, especially in the online world.

¹This text is a presentation as read on June 17, 2011 at the Norwegian American Historical Association - Norge conference at Luther College, Decorah, IO. Slides for this presentation should be available along with this download at <http://muninn.net/research/> **Note:** I have not ensured full citation format for this unpublished conference talk. Please contact me if you have trouble locating sources. I have a PDF of the difficult to find 1947 American Relief for Norway report which I'm happy to share. The letters are cited from the Shoebox for Norwegian Letters digital archive Siri Lawson and I created at: <http://huginn.net/shoebox/>

²My background and my connection to the digital archive in the previous note was mentioned by the chair who introduced me, Professor David Mauk.

³This encounter happened at the Qinghua University post office in the late spring of 2000.

⁴*The American Swedish Monthly* v. 39 n. 8 (1945.8), 14.

⁵Sverre Mørkhagen *Farvel Norge*, 549. In turn cites numbers from: Ole Kristian Grimnes *Den todelte verden*, 35-40.

⁶*Promise of America*, 287. *Norway to America*, 163-5.

⁷Andreas Nilsen Rygg *A Survey of American Relief Work For Norway During and After The Second World War*

(1947), 144

⁸ See the 1947 report for details on the various kinds of aid.

⁹ See the slide. From Andreas Nilsen Rygg A Survey of American Relief Work For Norway During and After The Second World War (1947), 132 - Citing Farsunds Avis article from December, 1945.

¹⁰ Again, this digital archive is at <http://huginn.net/shoebox/>

¹¹ #162 Evelyn Holm to John Holm 1947.6.10

¹² #144 Herborg Holm to John Holm 1946.11.29

¹³ #134 Herborg Holm to John Holm 1946.9.5

¹⁴ #148 Ola Holm to John Holm 1947.1.4

¹⁵ #87 Ola Holm to John Holm 1945.7.8 for the request for the radio and typewriter. For the many other items above, see letters such as numbers 233, 158, 153, 151, 146, 141, 144, 142, 137, 136, 128, and many others.

¹⁶ #122 Ola Holm to John Holm 1946.6.17

¹⁷ See for example numbers 152, 166, 174.

¹⁸ edited by Else Braut and Randi Holden Hoff. Full title *Brev Hjemmefra: Brev fra Norge til Utvandrere* (Solum Forlag, 1997).

¹⁹ For example, #128 Ola Holm to John Holm 1946.6.22

²⁰ Some examples: Solveig Zempel. In *Their Own Words: Letters from Norwegian Immigrants*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. Blegen, Theodore C., ed. *Frontier Parsonage: The Letters of Olaus Fredrik Duus. Norwegian Pastor in Wisconsin, 1855-1858*. Northfield, Minn.: NAHA, 1947. Blegen, Theodore C., ed. *Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955. (Also in Norwegian: *Amerikabrev*. Oslo, 1959.)

²¹ Gulliksen, Øyvind T. "Amerikabrev i Telemark," *Telemark Historie*, 8: 7-23 (1987). Gulliksen, Øyvind T. "Letters to Immigrants in the Midwest from the Telemark Region of Norway" *Norwegian-American Studies* 32 (1989): 157-8. Alsvik, Ola: «Brev fra Norge til Amerika - kilder til norsk lokalhistorie?» *Heimen* 3/1994. Granrud, Bente: «Norgesbrev som kilde til kvinnehistorie og hverdagsliv» *Heimen* 2/1999. The Alsvik and Granrud articles are online at http://www.lokalhistorie.no/kilder_litteratur/publ/artikler/heimen94.html and http://www.lokalhistorie.no/kilder_litteratur/publ/artikler/heimen99.html respectively.

²² Cited in Granrud's article.