

# The Longing that Becomes Song

By Joen Lagerberg

One of the most agreeable privileges accorded the head of an embassy is that of being able to bask in the reflected glory of the ambassadors of Swedish culture, “an official duty” in his sphere of activity. Our country’s operatic life has many such ambassadors, more than any other Western country. But the best of them all was certainly Jussi!

Jussi’s first engagement abroad took place when I was the ambassador in Prague, and his first guest appearances at the Czech capital’s *Narodní Divadlo*, the National Theatre, were as Gounod’s Faust and Alfredo in *La Traviata*.

It was a grateful assignment for a great Swedish singer to perform in Prague, as music there was given a position of great importance. There was almost the feeling of living in the midst of a permanent festival. Both the Concert Hall in Prague, *Obecní Dum*, and *Narodní Divadlo* were centres of Czechoslovak culture. As in Italy in Stendhal’s time, virtually all the boxes were leased by well-known families, and evening concerts and opera performances had the feeling of a club, thereby creating a positive atmosphere for the artists. Sweden enjoyed remarkable goodwill in Czechoslovakia: had not Smetana, the Czechs’ greatest composer, worked and created in Gothenburg; had not Gothenburg’s theatre orchestra over many years recruited Czech

musicians; and had not their most important and extremely popular conductor, Václav Talich, recently brought Stockholm’s Concert Association Orchestra to a standard on a par with Europe’s best?

Jussi’s arrival was trumpeted in the Prague newspapers in superlatives; or, to cite Jussi’s own book *Med Bagaget i Strupen* [My Throat is My Portmanteau]: “The advance publicity had been somewhat clamorous.”

He came, he sang, he conquered!

Even then, in March 1936, his vocal artistry was such that one was moved to the depths of one’s soul, whilst one’s breast swelled with pride when tumultuous applause and ovations greeted him at the end of each act.

I have not, unfortunately, kept note of the name of his Czech soprano co-star. However, I think I am probably not wrong if I say that both Violetta and Marguerite were sung by Horaková, a singer as engaging as she was accomplished, who later became Talich’s second wife.

The reviews were splendid. The newspaper *Venkov* spoke of “an easily-taken and freely ringing high C.” No reservations, all bouquets. One thing is certain: Prague opened the door for Jussi Björling to other theatres and other conquests on the Continent. Dresden and Vienna, among others, were also “captured” around this time.

In May 1936, two months later,

Jussi performed again in Czechoslovakia, this time as Radamès in *Aida* in Prague, followed by an appearance in Brno, where he sang Rodolfo in *La Bohème*. In 1937 he delighted us again in Prague where the National Theatre acclaimed his Radamès.

Jussi was a true *connaissance à faire*. Boyishly natural, he was an affable dinner guest who created a convivial atmosphere about him in which the conversation could flow and a good time could be had by all. When his victories had been won, we—Jussi, the always equally charming Anna-Lisa, my wife and I—went “out on the town”, making a culinary tour of the various Slav restaurants offering gastronomic specialities. We partook of an excellent shashlik with a Yugoslavian white wine at a modest Yugoslavian restaurant, and a meal at a Bulgarian establishment was accompanied by a Bulgarian wine which proved to have an unexpected explosive kick. The general atmosphere, however, did not become explosive, thank goodness; rather, it was uninhibited.

During the war (in April 1943, in fact), when I was the ambassador in Rome, Jussi gave four performances as Manrico in *Il Trovatore* in Florence. The situation in Italy at that time was such that travel involved the risk of being caught up in bombing raids. Consequently, and to my great disappointment, I was unable to be present to witness Jussi’s triumphs in the city on the Arno. But contact with him was maintained, and I was able to experience in rich measure that Jussi was not only a vocal genius, but a genius of friendship also.

From his triumphant guest appearances I have kept one clipping

from an Italian newspaper (*La Nazione* in Florence) which reads in part: "His extraordinarily controlled voice, so rich in nuance and flexibility, his great musicality, his convincing involvement in a role and his well-balanced dramatic interpretation—all these place him in the front rank of operatic artists."

May I be permitted a general reflection in connection with the unfortunately all too brief reminiscences I have been able to give above (I have never, by the way, kept a diary). Is it not so that the artist—the true artist—is, in the majority of cases, something of an "escapist"? He is out of place in the everyday world, but this very escapism provides his fellow human beings with a wonderful insight into what an unrestrained life-force means! There is one exception—and I am still speaking in generalities: the singer. He is both of and not of our world. He can—like Jussi—stand with his two feet on God's earth and, as an

extra gift, he is the possessor of a singing voice, that most wonderful of all instruments which—when it reaches perfection—helps one, as the smile of a child in its cradle and Mozart's music do, to believe in other worlds. Jussi Björling's timbre and artistry were such that he made one think of the deep longing, of which Levertin spoke in his poem "Folket i Nifelhem": "the buried longing"—in the Swedish heart—"that becomes song".

*Joel Lagerberg (1888-1975) had comprehensive cultural interests and was a good pianist. He entered diplomatic service in 1912 and was stationed in Helsinki, Paris, Berne, Rome, Paris and Washington before he became envoy in Prague 1935-37, then Warsaw 1937-39, Madrid 1941-2, Rome 1942-46 and The Hague 1946-53. After his diplomatic service, he became First Master of Ceremonies 1953-70 and was also on the Royal Opera Board 1953-61.*

Hostess Maija Budow presided over a spectacular smörgåsbord at a spring party for 25 friends, part of a two-day celebration of Bertil Bengtsson's "Evening with Jussi Björling" program in Georgetown (April 2003).



## Among Swedes in the U.S.A.

By Lennart Nylander

“**A**nd one more thing! I'll be back next year and I want to give a concert then for the benefit of Swedish sailors. It'll be in Carnegie Hall and I promise to fill every last seat in that big hall. We'll have a really great time. Speak to my agent about the details.”

These were Jussi's farewell words to me—I was Consul-General in New York at the time—before he returned to Stockholm in 1947 after acclaimed performances at the Metropolitan Opera and concert tours around the United States. There was nothing to be done other than obey, and we did that more than willingly. That farewell proposal initiated an annual series of benefit concerts at Carnegie Hall involving the participation of Jussi and other Swedish singers. The concerts were usually organised by the Swedish Seamen's Welfare Fund, an organisation which had been formed in the summer of 1947 and which on several occasions worked together with—and shared its income with—the then very active Swedish-American charity association, United Swedish Charities, whose mission was to provide financial support in New York for Swedish children's and old people's homes, hospitals etc.

The achievements of our great Swedish singers after the Second World War in New York and, for that matter, all over the country, cannot be too highly praised. Sweden was