Edgar B. Madsen. *The Shoestring Letters: A Tribute to the Immigrant*

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Reviewed by Inger M. Olsen

Edgar Madsen’s parents, Niels and Signe Madsen, left their home and family in Denmark in 1928 to seek their fortune in the United States. For three decades after their emigration, their only contact with their loved ones back home was through letters, which inspired the name of Edgar B. Madsen’s charming, thought-provoking book, *The Shoestring Letters: A Tribute to the Immigrant.* After being stored in a thatched roof attic for decades, the letters Niels and Signe sent to their loved ones in Jutland came to light when the family cleared out their grandfather’s house; they made their return journey to the US with Madsen’s cousin from Denmark.

Drawing on these precious letters, Madsen’s book narrates his family’s emigration and immigration stories, with relevant historical context and alternating segments taken from the letters about their lives in Denmark and in the US, following the motto, “First they came over; then they overcame” (1). Madsen opens his narrative with a letter written by his father on the Scandinavian-American Line steamship S/S *Hellig Olav*, which carried his family to the US in 1928, and closes it with his father’s adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Steadfast Tin Soldier” in a verse format. In between, he offers delightful, first-hand insights into the reasons his parents chose to emigrate, what they lost by doing so, and what they gained.

Madsen’s uncle Arne mourned his distance from the family home at “Volk Mølle” [Volk Mill], in Jutland. It was a water mill built before the Lutheran Reformation in 1536 by monks when Denmark was still a Catholic country. The mill was a working mill until well into the twentieth century, but there is no trace of it today except a road sign. It was sold out of the family in 1932 and the buildings burned down in 1934. The mill pond is also gone; drainage has taken its toll on what was an essential part of the mill site and an attraction for people who were interested in a leisurely boat ride. The mill pond is the setting for an amusing story Arne liked to tell about two German men who came for a visit in 1926, ostensibly to take a boat ride but
more likely to scout out the area for the future invasion of Denmark. When they met Arne from the mill, they assumed they could speak German with impunity. When Arne answered them in German, they switched to French. However, the boy also answered in that language, whereupon they kept quiet until they were out on the pond. The story is as informative as it is amusing. The people of the mill were well educated, inquisitive and intelligent. Madsen’s own parents travelled and worked abroad, for example, in England to learn the language and in Norway to expand their horizons. This curiosity led to an interest in the US, as it seemed to hold the “best promise for success” (31), especially after the Danish government’s ill-advised attempt to return the country to the gold standard caused a major economic depression.

As with so many Danish immigrant stories, emigration and immigration were a family affair. Signe’s sister Katrine was the first member of the family to leave, in 1920, together with her husband Niels Sloth. Katrine never saw her mother again, but she was eventually joined in Chicago by one of her brothers and three of her sisters, including Madsen’s mother Signe. Marking the centenary of Katrine’s emigration, Madsen’s book also notes that she has more than one hundred descendants living across the US today. Katrine’s son Eric got a special treat when an uncle brought him to Denmark at the age of eight. He stayed for a whole year with bedstemor and bedstefar, went to Danish school and forgot his English language skills. When the year was up, he travelled alone back to the United States. Nice people took care of him on the boat, he said. He later became a nuclear physicist credited with the discovery of the isotope niobum 99.

When they emigrated in 1928, along with their infant son Harry, Signe and Niels Madsen escaped the depressed economic situation in Denmark only to land in the middle of the Great Depression after the US stock market crashed in 1929. Signe had to work but daycare was a problem. Niels cleaned carpets at Chicago’s Shoreland hotel, which was smelly but brought the family an unexpected blessing when Niels was allowed to buy an abandoned steamer trunk for eight dollars, only to discover that it contained lovely clothes for the whole family and bedding as well. Even in hard times, people could be kind. Signe’s sister Katrine was given an expensive piano, music cabinet, and music stand by one of the customers in the café where Signe worked. To
improve their lot in life the family decided to take a job in Alabama doing farm work and carpentry work for a couple of years, but when they returned to Chicago, Niels got a union job as a cement mixer which afforded him a forty-hour work week and a raise.

When World War II started, members of the family joined the armed forces. One went into the army, a second one joined the navy and a third one became a corpsman attached to the Marines. The author’s uncle, a civil engineer, supervised the construction of the LSTs (Landing Ship Tanks) (43). These ships saw service for twenty-plus years from WW II through the Vietnam War (44). The World War II years in Denmark are mentioned as well, both well-known stories like King Christian X’s handling of the German occupation and the rescue of the Danish Jews, and more personal ones, such as the stoic attitude of a relative who needed new tires for his bicycle to be able to get to his weekly cancer treatments. In this situation, the Danish king is contrasted with Al Capone. King Christian could ride a horse unaccompanied through Copenhagen during the German occupation whereas Al Capone had to ride in an armored car. Madsen also mentions the Danish Resistance fighters and their fellow prisoners’ comforting song when they knew their execution was near, as well as the story of an aunt who had moved to Holland where she perished during the Hunger Winter, that is, the attempted revenge by starvation perpetrated by the German occupation force on the Dutch population.

In Denmark, Madsen’s family had embraced their curiosity about the outside world. They were a well-educated lot, both regarding work and extra book learning. As time passed, the members of Madsen’s family in the US took up activities like those they might have joined in Denmark, calisthenics and folk dancing, Danish-style square dancing. Playing for the dancers and being a “caller” became part of their life. A club house was built in Chicago to host athletic events and folk dancing, both of which were well attended. The club house also served as a clearing house for clothes sent to Denmark in 1945, the so-called Care Packages.

Madsen takes his motto for the book and the families’ emigration/immigration from Karen Blixen’s short story, “Babette’s Feast,” whose eponymous protagonist, the French chef Babette, declares, “Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give
me leave to do my utmost!” (Anecdotes of Destiny, 68). Getting a chance to build a new life in the US gave Madsen’s family an opportunity to do their utmost. The book is a charming telling of life in Denmark and the US interspersed with several vignettes which create a full picture of the fate of the family and its life, present and past. The author has created a book which will be a welcome addition to libraries of emigrant/immigrant history on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.