A New Life: Danish Emigration to North America As Described By the Emigrants Themselves in Letters, 1842-1946
moving accounts suggest that some children bounced back after hardships; others evidently did not.


REVIEWED BY SUZANNE SINKE, CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

A New Life, published originally in Danish in 1985 as Et Nyt Liv: Den danske udvandring til Nordamerika i billeder og breve appeared with minor revisions in English in conjunction with the opening of the Danish Immigrant Museum in Elk Horn, Iowa. A New Life is actually an odd mixture of a letter collection and a standard history of an immigrant group. Stilling and Olsen highlight nine basic questions or concerns, to each of which they devote a chapter: why people left, the crossing, first impressions of a new world, agriculture, town life, family life, institutional life (including the press), later impressions of America, and assimilation. Out of a group of approximately four thousand letters, the authors chose passages from one thousand, written by fifty individuals. The letters, in contrast to some collections, are primarily personal ones that have not been published previously. The authors made their selections based on how well the letters address their themes, editing down most selections to include only a paragraph or two on that particular topic. In some cases the same writer appears in another chapter on a different topic, but overall there is not much continuity.

Instead, the text takes the form of a standard immigrant history, punctuated often by quotes from the letters, but absent other supporting information in many cases. Nearly all of the chapters cover all five phases of Danish migration outlined at the beginning of the book: 1820–1850, sailors and pathfinders; 1850–1870, family emigration to Wisconsin, Utah (Mormons), and later the plains; 1870–1895, mass migration, especially to Iowa and Nebraska; and finally 1895–1910, migration to cities. This creates some confusion regarding chronology because the authors do not always make the time periods clear within a given selection. When describing work opportunities, for example, the authors describe the period prior to the 1880s as fairly good, and the 1880s and 1890s as generally poor, rather than referring to more
specific business cycle fluctuations and their effect on employment
(which is what the immigrants write about).

Overall, the work provides a history of Danish immigration to
the U.S. that is lively in terms of the characters and their words. The
c conclusions the authors draw, however, do not always match their
evidence. Describing the typical migrant as “rootless” applies well to
the pathbreakers and sailors. It does not seem as appropriate for the
family migrants or in the context of the later section on Danish churches,
societies, and the press, which includes information on the founding of
a Danish folk high school in Elk Horn, for example. Moreover, the
authors make few comparisons to other groups or to literature on them.

Stilling and Olsen provide useful maps and illustrations, and the
translations read well. In an appendix they outline the age, family
status, and geographic locations of the writers, though they do not indi-
cate whether these were typical among Danish migrants. In all, A
New Life brings a new body of sources to light for an English-speaking
audience. In trying to combine a letter collection and an immigration
history, it is less successful at both than it might have been.

Rachel Calof’s Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains, by Rachel
Bella Calof, translated from the Yiddish by Jacob Calof and Molly Shaw,
edited by J. Sanford Rikoon. Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
1995. xiii, 176 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. $20.00 cloth, $12.95 paper.
REVIEWED BY DONALD M. DOUGLAS, WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Whatever your stereotype of the Jew may be, it is safe to assume that
it does not include a farmer, a homesteader breaking the sod of the
Great Plains of America. Nonetheless, Jews were there and in significant
numbers. One of them was Rachel Bella Calof. Born in the Ukraine
in 1876, she came to Devil’s Lake, North Dakota, to marry a home-
steader she had never met. She had survived a difficult and impover-
ished childhood, only to find herself thrust into the incredible hard-
ships of pioneer life on the northern plains. A twelve-by-fourteen-foot
dirt-floored shack was the first home for Rachel and her husband, Abe,
and she was obliged to share that cramped space with Abe’s mother,
father, and brother through the first few bitter northern plains winters
to conserve an inadequate supply of fuel. She would endure droughts,
crop failures, hail, and tornadoes. In Rachel’s own words, “The most
dependable state of affairs I knew . . . was pregnancy” (73), as she
bore and reared nine children under harsh and primitive conditions.
Although she found herself “very close to the living level of an ani-
mal” (26) on her arrival in Devil’s Lake, she persevered. She and her