

# The First Emigrant Database on the Internet: The Danish Emigrant Database

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The expression "to find your roots" comes from the United States. A surfing expedition on the Internet discloses that Americans are among the most enthusiastic people in the world when it comes to tracing their ancestry. This is one of the reasons the Internet, with its many genealogical servers and computerized sources, has become so popular and widespread all over the world. For those many Americans who have their roots in Europe, however, searching more than two or three generations into the past can prove difficult.

## American Material

Before beginning their search, American genealogists must know from what country their forefathers emigrated. That information is more readily available in the United States than in almost any other country whose population is comprised largely of the descendants of immigrants. This is because, from 1820 and until the middle of this century, copies have been kept of the passenger lists of most of the ships that docked in harbors on the east coast of the United States. These lists were made for the ships carrying immigrants by the captains, and they were under oath to provide correct information about every single passenger including name, age, sex, occupation and nationality. Although no one has doubted the accuracy of this information, it has been difficult to check, as there are no lists of names for persons who disembarked in New York between 1846 and 1892<sup>1</sup>. When the investigation of the immigrants was taken over by American officials at Ellis Island after 1892, the information kept, may prove better between 1892 and 1924 (see: <http://www.ellislandrecords.org>).

## Inaccuracies in the American material

With such comprehensive background information available, it is surprising that so many genealogists in the United States have difficulty in finding their ancestors as immigrants - in spite of knowing their names and approximate times of departure from Europe. A suspicion that something might be wrong somewhere was supported by the fact that, when compared to immigration lists, United States censuses from the second half of the 1800s appear to show too many persons of Scandinavian descent compared with the number of immigrants<sup>2</sup>. The nationalities listed in the American passenger lists have never been verified. This is because little of the comparable European documentation—the emigration records—has been preserved and the preserved records are difficult to access.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Tepper: *American Arrival Records* (Baltimore 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Walther D. Kamphoefner: "The Volume and Composition of German-American Return Migration", in R. Vecoli and S. Sinke: *A Century of European Migration* (Urbana 1991), p. 296.

## The German and British Material

The most important emigration records are lists containing the names of approx. 5 million emigrants who sailed from Hamburg from 1850 to 1934. They contain the names of passengers who disembarked from Hamburg on German ships and traveled directly to the United States, as well as the names of those who emigrated only indirectly from Hamburg – in particular, via the Hamburg-Hull-Liverpool route. Unfortunately, the Hamburg material, can be accessed only by use of the original rudimentary, roughly alphabetized lists of names<sup>3</sup>, but recently a database has been established, which so far covers the years 1890 to 1898 (see: [http://www.hamburg.de/fhh/behoerden/staatsarchiv/link\\_to\\_your\\_roots/start.htm](http://www.hamburg.de/fhh/behoerden/staatsarchiv/link_to_your_roots/start.htm)).

A total of 7,2 million persons emigrated from Bremen/Bremerhaven. Complete lists of the names of emigrants who departed from Bremerhaven were compiled from 1832 on, but these were discarded at the turn of the century, while the lists from the 1900s partly were destroyed during a bomb attack in 1944<sup>4</sup>.

Although the exact number is unknown, probably about 20 million people emigrated through Liverpool. It would appear that British passengers were not officially registered until 1890, and no record was kept of foreign passengers until 1923<sup>5</sup>. Many emigrated to the US from Liverpool as this was that passenger ships from Great Britain – as opposed to ships from Germany and Scandinavia – were less “encumbered” by civil servants attempting to enforce price-enhancing minimum requirements as to quality and safety on board. Precisely such requirements led the Scandinavians to record the names of overseas ticket holders from 1868 and onward.

## The Scandinavian material

About 5 million emigrants went from the Scandinavian countries to the U. S. in the period from 1868 to 1940 and approx. 3 millions are now computerized. For an overview, see links at the homepage of the Association of European Migration Institutions: <http://www.aemi.dk/adr.php3>

The different Scandinavian databases:

Denmark: overseas ticket holders 1868–1905: 350,278

The database started at the Internet 1996 and aims to complete the material (1939). URL: <http://www.emiarch.dk/search.php3>

Finland: Passenger records 1892–1949: 307,000; passport records 1896–1912: 108,000; other sources 1918–1950: 25,000.

The database started at the Internet 1999, URL: [http://utu.fi/erill/instmigr/eng/e\\_rekist.htm](http://utu.fi/erill/instmigr/eng/e_rekist.htm)

Norway: overseas ticket holders 1868–1930: 600,000; passenger records 1865–1873: 20,000;

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<sup>3</sup> Staatsarchiv Hamburg, Auswanderungsamt I, Direct lists 1850–1934, Indirect lists 1854–1910.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Tepper; *ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

<sup>5</sup> The Public Record Office, Kew, London – BT 27 – Passenger lists outward 1890–1960. cf. Michael Tepper, *ibid.* p. 129. Charlotte Erickson: *Emigration from Europe 1815–1914* (London 1976), pp. 247–254. Ms. Erickson points out that according to a newspaper article (Morning Chronicle, London, 15 July 1850, pp.5–6) there was a government agent in Liverpool. There is, however, no documentation to show whether this agent was, in fact, a shipping agent who kept passenger lists similar to those in Copenhagen, Hamburg and Bremen.

passport records 1811-1890.

The database started at the Internet 2000.

URL: <http://digitalarkivet.uib.no/cgi-win/wc/webcens.exe?slag=meny&kategori=5&spraak=e>

Sweden: Passenger records 1869-1930: 1.400.000; Gothenburg personal registers 1750-1930: 37,000; sailors 1812-1930: 25,000. The Database at CD-ROM only, information at URL: <http://www.genealogi.se/emigrant.htm#eng>

Iceland: Fragmentary sources, information at URL: <http://nyherji.is/~halfdan/westward/vestur.htm>

### The Danish material

As the reasons to enforce legislation and the sources are comparable in the Scandinavian countries, as well as the computerizing methods, I will describe the Danish material only. Following a number of scandals in which unsuspecting emigrants were conned emigration agents, the parliament passed more stringent regulations on May 1, 1868. According to the new law, the Copenhagen Chief of Police was to approve and monitor all emigration agents in Denmark and authorize all overseas tickets made out in Denmark. This was to be done whether an emigrant would be traveling directly from Copenhagen or indirectly via another European harbor, and whether the emigrant was Danish or not. As an extra measure of control, all the information from each ticket was copied down in ledgers, and thus became the Copenhagen Police Records of Emigrants. A total of 90 thick volumes were compiled, containing the same type of information for every emigrant. In each series, the emigrants are listed year by year in roughly alphabetic order according to the first letter of his or her surname<sup>6</sup>.

### The Danish emigrant database

Although difficult to use in their original form, the uniform nature of the police records made this material a natural choice for electronic data processing. Initial efforts to code the material were made by Kristian Hvidt in the late 1960s when data processing was still in its infancy? Unfortunately, these first efforts did not include personal or place names. Personal names are, however a prerequisite for dealing with genealogical queries and for making a person-to-person comparison with the American passenger lists. In 1990, therefore, I ordered the compiling of a database including all the information provided in the police records for all emigrants from or through Denmark. To date the Danish Emigration Archives has stored data for 350,278 persons who emigrated from May 24, 1868, to December 31, 1905. For each emigrant, 13 items of basic information have been taken from the records: surname, first name, occupation, family status, age, place of birth (from 1899), last known residence (town, county, state), name of the emigration agent, ticket number, ticket registration date, name of the ship (only for direct passage from Copenhagen), destination (town, County, state) and possible cancellation of the ticket. Added to this are 11 sets of codes to assist in making searches.

<sup>6</sup> The Provincial Archives of Sealand, Copenhagen Police Records of Emigrants 1868-1940: no. 21-58 Direct emigrants; 198-248 Indirect emigrants; 59-196 Ship's sailings with passenger lists.

<sup>7</sup> Kristian Hvidt: *Flugten til Amerika* (Arhus 1971) [Flight to America (New York, 1975)], Dansk Data Arkiv -DDA-0670. Dansk oversøisk udvandring 1868-1900 [Danish overseas emigration 1868-1900] (Kristian Hvidt) (Odense 1991).

Finally, for the first time, it is possible to compare information in the Danish records with American passenger lists. And this comparison has led to some interesting discoveries!

### **Sex Change and Rejuvenation on the Atlantic**

Its passenger list shows that the steamer SS Minnesota, weighing 1,950 tons, arrived in New York on July 28, 1869, with 1,369 passengers on board. It had sailed from Liverpool via Queenstown. The passenger list indicates that the ship carried 60 Americans, 416 British citizens and 664 Germans.

The following 3 passengers were listed as Germans as well:

- # 628: Moren Nielsen, age 38, man, laborer, German.
- # 629 Moren Christensen, age 22, man, laborer, German
- # 630: Margrethe Jensen, age 27, woman, spinner, German.

Just 3 weeks previously—on July 8, 1869—the Copenhagen police registered these same 3 persons as passengers for New York via Liverpool traveling on joint ticket C5270. In Copenhagen they were listed as follows:

- Maren Nielsen, age 59, widow, Kraglund, Aalborg County, Denmark.
- Maren Christensen, age 22, daughter, Kraglund, Aalborg County, Denmark
- Margrethe Jensen, age 27, daughter, Kraglund, Aalborg County, Denmark

But how can we be certain that “Moren”, a 38-year-old male German laborer, is identical with “Maren”, a 59-year-old Danish widow? This is only possible if careful attention is paid to the relationship of these 3 persons and the rest of the passengers in both the American passenger list and in the Danish record—only possible because the police records are part of a database. Similar errors can be found in the lists for all 98 ships that arrived in the United States from Liverpool in the second half of 1869, but the SS Minnesota is the worst example.

### **S/S Minnesota: A Comparison**

A comparison of the July 28, 1869, passenger list for the SS Minnesota and the Copenhagen Police Records of Emigrants for July 7, 8 and 9, 1869, shows that passengers with numbers 231 to 796 in the New York list correspond exactly to the holders of tickets nos. C5240 to C5568 in the Copenhagen record. This is true of every single passenger on the SS Minnesota's list starting with:

- # 231: Lars Andersson, age 52, man, laborer, German  
who, in truth, was:  
C5356 Lars Andersson, age 32, farmer, Sweden

and ending with passengers nos. 795–796:

- # 795: Ane Pedersen. age 22, man, laborer, German; # 796: Sofia Knudsen, age 38,  
woman, spinner, German  
who in truth were:  
C5568: Ane Pedersen, age 22, widow, Copenhagen; C5567: Sophie R. Knudsen, age 38,

widow, Copenhagen

What was true for passengers # 231 and # 796 was also true for all the passengers with numbers from 231 to 796. Person to person, group to group comparison shows that 630 of the 664 "German" passengers who arrived in New York on board the SS Minnesota on July 28, 1869, can, beyond any doubt, be identified as Scandinavians: 316 Danes, 292 Swedes, 19 Norwegians and 3 persons from North Slesvig.

### Consistent errors?

Incorrect listing of nationality for more than half of the passengers on board a ship and incorrect listing of sex for 10% of the Nordic passengers would perhaps not be of much significance if such error had occurred only for the passengers on this one ship. Based on passenger lists for the last 6 months of 1869, however, it would appear that such errors were consistently made on all the 98 ships that sailed from Liverpool to New York and Boston. 5,705 "German" passengers had unmistakably Scandinavian names. On the other hand, there appear to have been very few errors of this kind made on the 54 ships that sailed from Hamburg, while 108 ships from Bremen carried almost no Scandinavians.

Such an analysis, on the basis of "Scandinavian" names alone, is, of course, somewhat uncertain. Germans can, after all, have names ending in "sen" –and, more rarely, "son" –and Danes can have German-sounding names. A few "hidden" Danish immigrants on the American lists remain hidden however, until a person-by-person comparison is made. The "Petersen" family from Copenhagen, for example, continued to be listed as "Petersen" on the SS Roland from Hamburg to Hull. but having left Liverpool on the SS Palmyra they became the German family "Patton." Such hidden errors in name and nationality suggest that the problem is even greater than previously assumed.<sup>8</sup>

### Future consequences

If it is true that a large number of Danish immigrants were registered as German, the records should show that a greater number of Danes emigrated to the United States than the number who actually entered the United States. And this is, in fact, the case!

Already in 1867 – the year before the Police Records were begun – 2,149 Danish emigrants to the United States were registered in Hamburg alone. The United States, however, noted only 1,436 Danish arrivals in 1867. At least 713 Danes "disappeared" during the voyage!

The numbers for 1868 cannot be compiled due to gaps in both the Danish and the German records, but for 1869, the first year for which complete documentation is possible, at least 5,426 Danes emigrated to the United States. 4,359 were registered in Copenhagen, while 1,067 were registered only in Hamburg and not in Copenhagen. In 1869, 5,426 Danes left Europe and sailed for the United States, but only 3,823 arrived in that country! More than 1,600 "disappeared" along the way – or rather were incorrectly registered. 316 of them were on board the SS

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<sup>8</sup> As the American authorities made use of passenger lists prepared on board the ships prior to their arrival, the errors were English. Everyone – also British ship captains – made use of passenger tickets and the calling out of names on board in completing and checking the passenger lists. It may well have been difficult then – as it is for genealogists today – to decipher the special "German" style of handwriting common at that time in Scandinavia, but never used in Great Britain.

Minnesota.

### Databases on the Internet

The American passenger lists are not, as previously believed by many American genealogists, a foolproof source of information for those seeking their European roots. And the computerizing made from the lists for "Germans to America" is even worse.<sup>9</sup> It is, therefore, of utmost importance that population historians and genealogists all over the world obtain access to the Scandinavian and Hamburg emigrant lists on-line. At present, they are the only databases that can be used to verify information provided by the American passenger lists. At the same time, the database provides an excellent means of finding "your own roots" - particularly, of course, if you are one of the almost 30 million Americans who consider themselves to be the descendants of Scandinavian emigrants.



Figure 10: Medical inspection of emigrants in Hamburg

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<sup>9</sup> Prof. Dr. Antonius Holtmann - see: <http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/nausa>