

Eric Bylander

Three Semesters

Memories of My Time as an Exchange Student
and Visiting Professor in Minnesota

Introduction

Born, raised, educated and working in Uppsala, it could be said I haven't gotten very far in the world. To which I might respond with a great sense of local pride, "*Where are you going, you're already in Uppsala?!*" Nevertheless, the answer to this hypothetical question has repeatedly been: "To Minnesota!"

The first time was when I was one of ten exchange students from Uppsala who spent the fall semester of 1997 at the University of Minnesota (UMN) Law School in Minneapolis. The student exchange program was then barely 15 years old.

My second and third semesters there were as a visiting professor in the fall of 2015 and the spring of 2019 – 33 and 37 years after the faculty exchange began. During both semesters, I was in Minneapolis with my family: my wife Christine and three, then four children, respectively.

Incidentally, "Three Semesters" is not only the length of time I have spent at UMN Law School, but also the title of a 1943 Swedish novel by the author and lawyer Fritiof Nilsson, known as Piraten, "the Pirate" (1895–1972). Although it is set in "the other place" in Swedish Academia, Lund, it has clear merits as a portrayal of a young student who comes to a university town with the aim of obtaining a law degree.

I have yet to reach a fourth semester, but in early 2020 – just prior to the onset of the pandemic – I returned for a single week to follow up on my previous visits with a book exhibition (which is discussed in *Bonded by Books* by Bruno Debaenst and Ryan Greenwood elsewhere in

this volume). Since then, I have been involved in efforts to highlight the uniquely enduring exchange of both students and faculty between UMN Law School and the Faculty of Law at Uppsala University. My next visit is planned for September 2025, when this book is scheduled to be released.

Recalling my Minnesota experiences has given me great personal pleasure. That pleasure is not derived from their being published – even though the intention of writing something for publication prompted my return. It is my hope that the observations and memories I convey in the following may also be of value to others. I am not so conceited as to imagine that they are of general interest because they are mine. On the other hand, I imagine that they may be catalysts for the reawakening of other people's memories, as well as constituting some of the many images of that multifaceted exchange. For my part, it took no more than the mention of a person, a place, a restaurant or something else to stir up a great deal of sediment in the stream of time. This has partly complicated the selection of aspects to touch upon. However, as Voltaire accurately noted, the secret of being a bore is to tell everything. That's not the kind of person I aspire to be.

Before returning home to Uppsala a few days before Christmas 1997, I wrote somewhat wistfully in a letter that I was facing “a break from a stage in life, if such a relatively short period deserves such a characterisation.” In retrospect, this characterisation has proven to be well-justified. I am not alone in viewing my semester as an Uppsala student in Minnesota as a time that was not only full of experiences, but also highly formative. Although perhaps not quite as formative, my two subsequent semesters were also eventful and rewarding.

Returns

I generally appreciate when life, in different ways, reconnects to places, people or events I have experienced in the past. Not least for this reason, I was delighted to receive the news that I would be the faculty member from Uppsala selected to participate in the ongoing exchange program during the fall semester of 2015.

During my first stay in Minnesota, my mood had been relatively sombre. The reasons had nothing to do with Minnesota, which was certainly a perfect place to be in order to make life as bright as possible. Yet against this backdrop, with memories of my first visit, it was particularly wel-



The Law School building.

come to have the opportunity to return under happier circumstances after nearly 18 years, moreover, accompanied by my family.

In its own special way, even the university computer welcomed me back to the UMN Law School. After 18 years, I could *still* activate my old username! Perhaps more memory-evoking, though less remarkable, was the fact that the mighty Mississippi – which makes Uppsala's River Fyris look like a mere stream – still flowed between the law school and my temporary home. I recognized the law school, even though it had expanded in 2001. The impression of permanence was reinforced by the fact that some of my former professors were still on the faculty.

Places to Live

When I first arrived in Minneapolis in early August of 1997, I had only been able to arrange temporary accommodation. However, that turned out to be an excellent starting point: Wales House, a lodging house mainly for UMN guests, located in Dinkytown, which is a pleasant, small-town community within the city, close to the campus. It was in this homely environment that I made my first acquaintances during my stay. They became the foundation for socially enriching friendships, even outside the Law School circles. At the time, this international uni-

versity homestead had been operating in a former fraternity house for three years. Unfortunately, it closed in 2019. I hope similar establishments emerge because they fulfil an important function. In another life, I would love to host something like this, perhaps in Uppsala.

Unfortunately, my student finances at the time did not allow me to stay at Wales House for more than a few days, but the friendly owners eased my concerns and helped me to find the landlady I ended up living with. When my parents came to visit a couple of months later, Wales House was the obvious choice for their accommodation. In this veritable home away from home, we threw a party and invited some of my new friends from around the world to enjoy my mother's Swedish home cooking, which was much appreciated.

In both 1997 and 2015, I lived near the city border between the twin cities Minneapolis and St. Paul. I stayed with the owner of what I came to call "the house of 15 cats" for the rest of the fall semester in 1997. Technically, there were 16 cats when I moved in, but one of them, Johan Sebastian, climbed over the fence and was unfortunately hit by a car. My landlady did a remarkable job keeping the nice house neat and tidy, but it seems to have been almost a full-time occupation.

I rode a bike I bought at Dinkytown Bike & Skate to and from law school, which was quite a distance. This vehicle served me well, but it was still a long way to go home for lunch and then return to law school. When I returned home late in the evening, true to my natural circadian rhythm (which was not always appreciated by my landlady), I had often eaten both lunch and dinner at a restaurant. This diet was hardly healthy for my body or finances, but I often shared meals in good company, which *was* good for the soul. During more intense study periods, these were the only times I left my study space at law school. I must have gained quite a bit of weight that semester. Only three months passed between the portrait photos on my two surviving student ID cards. In the photo from the beginning of the semester, my features are quite sharp, and I look older than my 24 years. In the photo taken three months later, my features have softened, and with my round, peachy cheeks, I look more like a teenager.

Among the clearly positive changes in Minneapolis between 1997 and 2015 were the introduction of a modern light rail network and a well-developed system of rental bikes and cycle paths. If I am correctly informed, Minneapolis is considered one of the most bicycle-friendly cities in the United States. In Uppsala, the bicycle has long been the preferred means



Rental bike.



Twin Cities Light rail.

of transportation. The return of a tram network after 75 years is a subject of debate in a city that is large by Swedish standards, but not American ones. In the fall of 2015, I travelled by light rail and rental bike between the law school and the accommodations that the law school arranged for me and my family: University Village Apartments near Stadium Village. However, mainly for our many excursions – more on that below – I bought my first car, an unimaginative Volvo (which the family, for some obscure reason, gave the nickname *Clementine*).

Three years after our last stay in Minneapolis, in the spring of 2019, my family and I were provided with two floors in a beautiful house in Uptown, close to the picturesque Bde Maka Ska Lake, which had been officially renamed from Lake Calhoun in 2018. The house belongs to Gilles Guyot, a visiting professor at the UMN Law School. Before and after us, visiting professors from Uppsala have enjoyed the benefit of his spending most of his springs in his native France. This time, we acquired an American car, a Chrysler large enough for our family, which had grown since



Christine shovelling snow.

our last visit. Unfortunately, the car (which ended up being named *Silvia*) was too large for the garage. My already strong wife became even stronger from repeatedly digging the car out of the snow.

Studying and Teaching, but Also Much More

As I refresh my memories of my semesters in Minnesota, I am struck by how much time I spent there – or on side trips to other places in the United States – doing things other than studying or teaching. The visiting student's emails home and the visiting professor's social media updates are so full of such things that I feel a little guilty.

The Swedish term “semester” means “vacation”. To an extent, my semesters (*terminer* in Swedish) in Minnesota can indeed be described as vacations. However, at times, I certainly worked hard during all three of them. It's just that the everyday activities and places you spend time on are not as noteworthy as the more unusual ones. Only once, as a student in 1997, did I visit the vibrant city of New York, when I was on my way to Minneapolis. Only once, as a visiting professor in 2015, did my family and I visit Chicago; a city with a long history of attracting Swedes. And only once, at the end of my time as a visiting professor in 2019, did my family and I take a ten-day road trip to Yellowstone National Park and back.

On our long journey to Yellowstone, one of our day trips took us from Sioux Falls to Rapid City, located at opposite ends of South Dakota. The distance is roughly 347 miles (558 km), which is equal to the distance between the Swedish cities Stockholm and Helsingborg. Unkind or spoiled reviewers mention the South Dakota Tractor Museum in Kimball as the only attraction along the entire route. This is incorrect, but the museum is recommended nonetheless. In the interests of transparency, it should be noted that this recommendation comes from the grandchild of a Swedish managing director of a tractor sales company!

In Cody, Wyoming, we experienced an authentic American stampede rodeo. The family members enjoyed this attraction to varying degrees, with comments ranging from “it's more fun to throw gravel in the yard” to “we should go here every night”. On our way home, we travelled from Cody to Billings on the Beartooth Highway, which has been aptly described as “the most beautiful drive in America”.

When it comes to the areas closer to Minneapolis, I note tourist visits to all of Minnesota's larger towns and many smaller ones. It's one of life's



Pipestone.

truisms that, what can be done at any time often doesn't get done at all. During our first stay, in 2015, my family and I were told by native Minnesotans, "You've seen more of Minnesota in a few months than we've seen in a lifetime!"

If I had to choose just one place to visit in Minnesota, it would be Pipestone National Monument in the southwestern part of the state, where the stone for the peace pipe has been quarried for centuries. We thought we were bound to be disappointed when we returned in the spring of 2019, because our contemplative family trip there in the fall of 2015 had been one of the most memorable things we did. Yet the place still held the same special aura of undiminished fascination.

If I were similarly asked to choose one of the many hotels we have stayed at during our family trips,



Redwing hotel organ.

the answer would be: The St. James Hotel, a station hotel built in 1875 in Red Wing. Among its attractions is the unusual feature of a hotel organ. For a train enthusiast like me – and my son, my father and, for that matter, my grandfather – it was an added bonus that long freight trains still passed slowly by, right outside the windows.

But before I lose myself in restaurant memories and recommendations, I will step out of my self-appointed role as tour guide. It is enough that this position is already occasionally taken on by me in relation to exchange students and visiting professors from Uppsala.

Studying as an Exchange Student

My time as an exchange student took place during the last six months of my law studies at Uppsala University. This meant that, apart from my thesis – itself accounting for an entire semester and on which I had already worked quite a bit – I didn't need to take many courses to complete my law degree. "Studying should not take up too much time away from all the other fun and exciting things that studying abroad has to offer," I said at the time.

And I still stand by that.

At UMN Law School, I therefore chose to take only three courses totalling 8 credits, which is about half a normal workload. However, I still studied full-time because of the work on my thesis.

My thesis dealt with the rather specific topic of legal protection for official symbols, focusing particularly on Swedish municipal coats of arms. The UMN Law School Library's exceptional quality – particularly its impressive Scandinavian collection – is exemplified by the fact that I only had to request a legal text via post or telefax from Sweden on two occasions. Today, at least one of those texts is available online, but at that time, Swedish legal literature was rarely available in any form other than paper.

At the start of the semester, I wrote to my parents with great enthusiasm: "I haven't heard of a single bad teacher here at law school." Nor do I recall hearing about any such teachers in subsequent years. All three of my courses were taught by brilliant teachers.

Introduction to American Law, a 2-credits course, was (and still is) compulsory for all foreign students. It was led by the very pleasant and inspiring Professor Meredith McQuaid. She was then Assistant Dean and responsible for, among other things, visiting students from Uppsala. The

knowledge I gained from her proved useful 18 and 22 years later, when I taught at the UMN Law School myself. When she retired in 2023, she was Associate Vice President and Dean of International Programs at UMN. I was delighted to see Professor McQuaid again as a guest of honour at the American Swedish Institute when we celebrated the aforementioned book exhibition at the Law School in 2020.

My second course, *Criminal Procedure*, (worth 3 credits), began “with a truly virtuous teacher,” I wrote in a letter sent sometime near the start of the course, continuing: “He knows the subject inside out and is very entertaining to listen to.” The person I was describing was Professor Barry C. Feld, who, incidentally, has been a visiting professor in the Uppsala – Minnesota exchange program four times, the third time being in the spring before I first came to UMN Law School in 1997. On several occasions, he referred to conditions in Sweden with obvious approval of the Swedish criminal procedure system at the time.

Back then, I already suffered from morning fatigue, which I usually mention as an important reason for working in academia, with its flexibility in terms of when the working day begins. Professor Feld clearly took advantage of this flexibility in a different way than I do. In one of my letters to home, I stated that “his only fault is that his lectures start at nine in the morning!” Although I thought his teaching was worth getting up early for, I unfortunately overslept time and time again. In another letter from the beginning of November, I exclaimed: “Three morning sessions a week must surely qualify as torture – at least in my case!”

This brings us, rather aptly to the third course, *International Human Rights*, (3 credits). I had been told in advance that it was considered “perhaps the most outstanding course at this Law School and one of the best in the world in this field.” The course indeed proved to be of a very high standard. As a legal scholar, I later benefited greatly from the knowledge base I acquired there.

Our first class was not led by the course instructor, Professor David Weissbrodt (1944–2021). The reason for this, we were told, was, impressively, that he “had not yet returned from Geneva, where he is carrying out an important assignment for the United Nations.” One of the assistant teachers, the former mayor of Minneapolis, Donald M. Fraser (1924–2019), welcomed us instead. The following year, he was a visiting professor in Uppsala as part of our exchange program. After this experience, he became the driving force behind the sister city relationship between Uppsala and Minneapolis in 2000.



UMN text books etc.

Even during the more demanding periods of my studies, I noted: “It actually feels good to work hard because even a holiday-like existence, such as I had during the first half of the semester, can become tiresome.” However, this did not stop me from complaining in a letter – around the time I transitioned to a more intensive focus on my studies – about how the course literature was used: “This marathon reading of thick books with unnecessarily long legal cases feels quite soul-destroying when you have come this far in your education and are used to a more scientifically oriented approach, where books serve

as reference material.” Now that I have grown up and become a professor, I might dismiss such a comment from my younger self with a few words about laziness and spoilt behaviour, and with the admonition that you must learn to crawl before you can walk. Perspective invariably comes with hindsight, but that is perhaps not particularly helpful or reassuring at the time!

At Uppsala University, the first three years of the four-and-a-half-year legal studies program had, and still have, a major exam at the end of the exam period. I noted: “It’s strange to have three exams a week apart. It’s like earlier stages of education, where you feel like a computer diskette. You’re just trying to erase as much as possible to make room for the next batch of material!”

Here, too, my older self certainly has some objections.

The only exam that made me genuinely anxious was the Criminal Procedure exam. And with good reason. For one thing, I was unfamiliar with the process of writing an outline. I concluded: “It’s very difficult to know how much depth to go into. Should I memorise names and dates of certain cases, or is a general understanding of certain principles enough? Tricky!”

A few days before the exam, an American student, who was coming to Uppsala in the spring, informed me that Criminal Procedure was consid-

ered one of the most difficult courses offered there. This rumour turned out to be true, but I was not discouraged by the relatively poor reward for my hard work, and I now teach and write about this subject.

Teaching as a Visiting Professor

During both of my semesters as a visiting professor at the UMN Law School, I have taught the same course, which I was entrusted with designing myself. Entitled *Supreme Courts in Comparative Perspectives*, it is an upper-level 2-credits course related to my scholarly interests. It covers the differing roles and powers of supreme courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, the European Court of Justice, and other supreme courts of more limited jurisdiction. In fall 2015, I taught the course on my own. In spring 2019, I worked with Professor Neha Jain on the course, and it was a great partnership. That semester, I was also the course director for my advanced civil litigation course at Uppsala University, which was delivered via distance learning. At the time, I could not have known that this experience of distance teaching would prove useful when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out a year later.

The prospects for teaching the course to American law students were somewhat discouraging when I read the following in one of the texts I had selected for the course, *The Influence of Comparative Procedure in the United States* (Langbein, 1995):

American jurists are disinclined to interest themselves in foreign example for the same reason that scientists at American medical schools are disinclined to investigate the merits of medicine as it is practiced among the witch doctors of the Amazonian rain forest. They operate on the assumption that the foreigners have nothing to teach.

Things went better than expected. But it was undeniable that only a few students could be persuaded to take the course. However, this also had its advantages. Teaching only a few students at a time brought to mind the famous tutorial system at Oxbridge, where the main teaching method is regular, very small group sessions. Because there were not many students, we were able to establish close contact. Further, the American students who dared to expose themselves to the Swedish witch doctor's arts were globally minded and intrigued. Our discussions were fruitful, and I dare say that they were not only so for me.



Interior of Minnesota Supreme Court.

The limited number of students also facilitated the implementation of my idea to visit the Minnesota Supreme Court in St. Paul as part of the course. In November 2015, I accompanied the students on a visit to the court and had the privilege of meeting and talking to Justice David Stras, the court's youngest judge ever and a former professor at the UMN Law School. In 2018, he was appointed Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, where he continues to serve.

In March 2019, the students and I attended an oral hearing in a murder trial at the Minnesota Supreme Court. Afterwards, we had the honour of meeting one of the justices hearing the case, Associate Justice Natalie E. Hudson (UMN Law School '82). Some few years later, in 2023, she became the Chief Justice of the Court. Things have gone well for "our" justices.

Other and Further Meetings with Judges and Courts

Halfway through my semester as a visiting professor in fall 2015, I experienced a couple of quite special occasions. Less than four months before he passed away, I had the opportunity of listening to and exchanging a few words with one of the world's most interesting judges at the time. On the night of October 20, the widely known United States Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia (1936–2016) gave that year's Stein Lecture to an audience of 2,700 people at Northrop Memorial Auditorium in the heart of the UMN. There he made a case for his controversial originalist legal philosophy for interpreting the Constitution. It was truly fascinating to hear his thoughts, which he conveyed in a way that captured even the sceptics in the audience. He then engaged in a Q&A session with Profes-

sor Robert A. Stein, who had established the lecture series (and who is also my co-editor of this book).

Professor Stein has an impressive network of contacts and has been able to attract Supreme Court justices and other legal luminaries to UMN, both before and since. Earlier in that semester, I had tentatively asked him if I could visit the Supreme Court of the United States in Washington, D.C. “Let me call and check with an acquaintance,” he replied. Just a few days later, I received an invitation from Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1933–2020) – the legendary United States Supreme Court Justice and the previous year’s Stein Lecture holder – to attend a session at the court. And so, a few weeks later, sitting in the prime audience seats, I was able to follow three cases concerning two of the most incomprehensible features of American legal and social life: the death penalty and the jury.

Returning to October 20, when Justice Scalia had filled Northrop in the evening; earlier that day I had the opportunity to join a much smaller group of about 20 faculty members at UMN Law School who got to meet and speak with him. This meeting is only documented in my heart, my mind, and on a small piece of paper, as the instructions were: “This meeting will follow the U.S. Supreme Court rules of decorum: No laptops, purses, backpacks, bags, cell phones, cameras or recording devices will be allowed in the room.”

When Justice Scalia heard that I was from Sweden, he remarked that Justice Ginsburg – his personal friend, colleague, and legal adversary – allegedly speaks Swedish, though he was unable to judge whether this was true. (It was.) I seized the opportunity to mention my recent visit to their workplace in Washington, D.C. and satisfy my curiosity about why the justices ask the attorneys so many questions, which seems unusual from a Swedish court perspective. He explained that it is the Justices’ way of communicating with each other rather than with the counsel, because the subsequent deliberations are extremely intense.



US Supreme Court and my hotel bike.



Legal interpreter sign.

Another remarkable experience with the American judicial system occurred during my subsequent and most recent time as a visiting professor, in the spring semester of 2019. It did not involve any direct contact with a judge, although it came close. Around Easter, I found myself called to serve in Hennepin County District Court in Minneapolis.

My ability to speak and understand English is sufficient for me to understand how inadequate it is. It was therefore with my heart in my throat that I accepted the challenge of being hired by Minnesota's largest criminal court as a Swedish legal interpreter. The court had had

great difficulty finding someone and was grateful that I allowed myself to be persuaded to take on the role. Swedes in Minnesota today rarely seem to find themselves in trouble with the law, and if they do, they clearly do not feel they need an interpreter.

Shortly before the jury selection was to begin, the prosecutor announced that the charges had been dropped due to lack of evidence. However, the assistance I had been able to provide to the defendant and his defence counsel for a few hours seemed to be appreciated. In any case, it was an educational experience and, at least so far, unique in my life.

A Few Concluding Words About Swedes and Sweden in Minnesota

I have been so captivated by Minnesota that I have repeatedly left my beloved Uppsala for extended periods of time. One of the things that has captivated me the most is the clear influence of generations of Swedes on the state.

This influence is most evident in various Minnesota institutions. These include Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter (started in 1862 by Swed-



The American Swedish Institute.

ish immigrants in Minnesota), which used to invite Swedish exchange students from the UMN Law School. When another Swedish exchange student and I were there in the fall semester of 1997, I noted that despite the many Swedish names on buildings and the fact that the school symbol of three crowns is visible almost everywhere, “it’s very American for Sweden, but very Swedish for America.”

Another such institution is “our place over there”, as my family and I affectionately call the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis (founded in 1929). Sometimes my family and I needed a venue to entertain guests elsewhere than in our somewhat cramped temporary home in 2015. My family and I were then happy to invite our new friends of various nationalities to this Swedish cultural centre with its historic mansion.

It was also there that I was reunited with my old landlady and friends from my time as an exchange student. I had already come to appreciate the institute, but in 1997 it was undeniably rather run down. When we returned in 2015, however, it had been both expanded and refurbished; it now houses one of the best cafés in Minnesota: *Fika*.

I have experienced fascinating Swedish traditions in an American setting at the institute, both as a student – at events such as the *Punschklub-*



The “Swedish” wooden doll.

ben's kräftskiva (crayfish party) and pea soup dinners – and later with my family. At the beginning of our stay in the spring semester of 2019, we went Christmas tree plundering at the institute, which included a violin and accordion-accompanied tree-throwing procession.

The Swedish- and Norwegian-American folk singer Ross Sutter played, sang, and led the singing games, enthusiastically supported by the Bylander family. He seemed to appreciate our feedback on more recent Swedish Christmas traditions. He showed us “the dancing old man on the plank” – a wooden jig doll on a rod, reportedly being “a Swedish tradition” that neither I nor my family have ever encountered in

Sweden. I concluded: “Perhaps it dates back to the 19th century, perhaps it comes from another country. Here, it is Swedish.”

The soil for a Swedish-American university exchange has proven to be particularly fertile in Minnesota, not least because the exchange builds on and develops the state’s Swedish heritage.

For my part, I will be returning.