

By Sven Rosen  
Photo courtesy Swedenborg Foundation

AT EASTER time in 1660, a seven-year-old Swedish boy named Jesper Danielsson fell into a millrace and lay for more than an hour jammed between the mill wheel and the canal bottom. When he was finally rescued he showed no signs of life. His corpse was carried home and placed on a table—where suddenly the boy sat up and started to speak to his astonished rescuers.

Jesper Danielsson, who often referred to the way he was miraculously “resurrected from the dead,” was to

## PROPHET FATHER

## MYSTIC SON

Emanuel Swedenborg achieved worldwide fame — but his lesser-known father was also a visionary, a cleric who talked with angels.

become one of the strangest and most controversial figures of early 18th-Century Sweden. He served as chaplain at the courts of three kings and one ruling queen; literary historians call him one of the greatest hymn writers of the period. In 1702 he was appointed Bishop of Skara, at which time his wife and family were raised to the nobility.\*

From his native farm “Sweden” at Kopparberg, Danielsson took the name

\* Swedenborg himself, as a cleric, was not knighted. The honor intended for him was transferred to his family, a normal procedure.

Swedenborg and one of his sons was Emanuel Swedenborg who, after the family's ennoblement, called himself Swedenborg. The farm name “Sweden” derives from a word meaning “burn-beaten land” and the identity of this name and the English name for Sweden is purely coincidental.

By the time Emanuel Swedenborg was 30 years old he had distinguished himself as a scientist and inventor. He began having visions in midlife (about 1743) and thereafter devoted himself to psychical and spiritual research. Although he himself never preached or founded a religious sect, his followers, Swedenborgians, constitute a consid-

erable society with a regular ecclesiastical organization known as New Jerusalem Church, Church of the New Jerusalem or simply New Church.

Thus the son achieved worldwide fame—but it is not so well known that his father was a visionary mystic as well. Unlike his son, however, Jesper Swedenborg was the prophet of an old teaching, not a new one.

In his *Lefwernes Beskrifning* (“The Story of My Life”), more than 700 pages which Swedenborg wrote for his children and never intended to publish,

## PROPHET FATHER, MYSTIC SON

incidents. All that went against him was sooner or later put to rights in wondrous ways. If he were in want of money, unexpected sources would open. Once when his entire household was in need of bread, a stranger who did not know of their predicament appeared and fed them. Likewise his antagonists, although sometimes triumphant for a time, were later pursued by misfortune. This was a disturbing aspect of the phenomenon but it did not bother Swedenborg. He knew that God was always on his side and in these incidents he saw heavenly justice. With a childish immodesty he likened his ordeals to Job's.

The so-called hymnal affair illustrates his way of thinking. In 1692 Swedenborg was in charge of the compilation of a new national hymnbook. After it was finished, approved and printed, disaster struck. Dogmatic obscurities were discovered in the text and the entire edition was withdrawn. This may have resulted from some personal grudge, for Swedenborg's authoritative behavior and his friendship with the court invited professional envy. The hymnbook was later reprinted in a censored edition and the uncensored one was freighted away by the Swedish foreign missions and dumped in Pennsylvania\* (“to convert the [Indians] and preserve the souls of those Swedish children who are there brought up in the midst of heathens”).

God was not greatly pleased by this plotting, however. In 1702, when the hymnals were in storage in the cathedral of Uppsala, fire struck and laid in ashes

\* The banished hymnbook ended up in America because it was Swedenborg who in 1696-97 appointed the first clerics to work among the Swedish congregations in Delaware. Later, as a bishop, he became the head of the Swedish-American missions.



Emanuel Swedenborg never preached but his followers formed an organization based on his philosophy.

the cathedral, the castle and one-third of the town. Nothing in the cathedral was spared by the fire *except the hymnbooks!* With innocent joy Swedenborg enumerates mundane things consumed by the fire: copper, brass, “even the late Archbishop Svebilus' corpse,\* which lay down in the sanctuary, well protected in a coffin of copper inside a well-blocked-up grave, with a thick and strong tombstone on top of it . . . but my hymnbooks, which lay there unprotected, of sheer paper not even bound, were not singed by the flames.” And the moral point: “Thus God can suffer and preserve in the midst of the fire what evil men cannot endure, but slander, pursue, hate, disclaim, condemn and abolish . . . .”

\* Archbishop Svebilus was one of the gang who wished the hymnbook burned and his brother-in-law, one Dr. Carl Carlsson, seems to have been the worst of the lot.



he relates that throughout his life he felt "protected" and in his visions he often conferred with his guardian angels. These benevolent visitations began in his early school days, apparently a sad and difficult time for him; he seems to have been plagued by bullies and besotted teachers. The first angelic visit is described in Chapter V of his memoirs.

An angel suddenly appeared in Swedberg's study and asked, "What do you read?"

Swedberg told him what books he was studying.

"But do you understand what you read?" the angel asked.

No, Swedberg didn't. "How can I understand when nobody explains it to me?" he said.

"Get these books," the angel replied. There follows an enumeration of books with annotations so that no teacher would be needed.

"Thus he departed after having blessed me and I humbly thanked him," Swedberg wrote.

Even in the history of mysticism such detailed bibliographical information from heaven must be exceptional and religious historians disagree as to whether or not the account was meant literally. (It is interesting that Emanuel Swedenborg's angelic guides revealed similar educational aspirations.) The childishness of Swedberg's narration is striking, an impression also conveyed by his dreams and visions of heaven and hell. They are told in very concrete language and reflect details of everyday life, including, we may suppose, apocalyptic church paintings which may have arrested his eyes during tedious sermons.

"... And our Saviour gript my

hand and led me on the left-hand side westward to the dwellings of the damned. It was an ugly, dreadful, dark and mighty gruesome place; the damned were dancing in a ring . . . flinging their feet up their backs . . . with horrid howls, lowings and bellowings, and with lewd gestures . . . Then I saw . . . a dreadful deep, round hollow. It burned with fire and brimstone, and the blaze flared up the gap more fierce and horrible than any blast furnace smelting ironstone. Despicably, atrociously and horribly, the damned were there tormented. And though with all their strength they toiled to climb the pit, I saw them forever driven back, and by fire-pokers thrust down into the abyss, ejaculating pitiful yells and horrid howls. As they plumped down, the fire sparkled terrifyingly and gave off a huge blaze and puffs of sparks . . ."

Such sturdy expressions of outmoded faith are hard to accept in our time but Swedberg's contemporaries testify that despite his keen intelligence he was unusually naive. His memoirs are filled with unaffected boasts of God's deeds and his own (which he could not always tell apart) but this naive certainty of his beliefs also gave him an aura of authority and power.

Swedberg was an avid collector of nemesis divina cases—coincidences with a moral point believed to unveil divine justice. He seems to have pioneered the genre in Sweden and such stories gained in popularity during the next 100 years, reaching a summit in the botanist Carl Linnaeus' *Nemesis Divina*, posthumously printed in 1848.

According to Swedberg's memoirs, his life contained a succession of these

It seems to have been the fashion in those days to hold that certain books of virtue miraculously did not burn. In February 1685 Swedberg visited a house outside Frankfurt, Germany, where it was claimed that "the late Dr. Johann Arndt's *Paradiesgartlein* was thrown into a burning oven by an ungodly Catholic lieutenant and yet was undamaged when it was swept out of the burning coals one and a half hours later. *Verbum Domini manet in aeternum*: The words of God will remain forever."

The miracle was repeated in Swedberg's own home in 1712. He had exorcised a devil from a doomed woman but this did not save her life. She was sent to the gallows anyway but presumably she died in good spirits and with a healed soul. Subsequently Swedberg met a possessed man and the demon once cast out of the woman now spoke through the madman's mouth: "You robbed me of a steak [i.e., a soul] but I will pay you back . . ." Swedberg writes, "The payment probably was that he gained permission . . . to destroy the bishop's palace with all my property through a violent accidental fire in February 1712. But nothing he gained! God thereafter doubled my fortune and He gave me a much more comfortable house."

The fire started in the library and again both the hymnbook and Arndt's *Paradiesgartlein* were spared. "The hymnbook lay on my table amongst other books and papers, which all were reduced to ashes. The book was only sewed, but not bound. The thread of its back was singed but the pages unharmed."

The fire also seemed to deliver a personal message of comfort. A big copper

pan melted down but a copperplate thin as a knife blade bearing the engraved portrait of Swedberg was recovered undamaged—although so soot-blackened that Swedberg sent it to his son Emanuel Swedenborg asking him to clean it. Before returning the copperplate Swedenborg engraved on it a verse in Latin:

*This unharmed face was found in the midst of the glowing ashes,  
When our home was consumed by the flames while the night progressed.  
Thus, Father, your reputation, your name and the love for you shall live  
Even after your funeral pile, even after the last fire.*

In a letter, as one prophet to another, the son made his interpretation clearer: "You are, Father, like the phoenix. Your shape is reborn through fire and opposition and will proceed unharmed through the flames on your way of destiny."

Swedberg, a man in the public eye, was surrounded by tales and rumors. And of course in those days the difference between a colorful cleric and a wizard was not always perceived. In his memoirs Swedberg bitterly speculates on the origin of nonsense "which is being circulated all over the kingdom, even abroad . . . that I had exorcised [the devil] through a little hole in a windowpane after he had paid a call on me at . . . the palace in the guise of a cavalier to discuss the then-existing affairs of Sweden . . ."

The rumors were not always too far from the truth but Swedberg objected to their corporeality. He himself told similar tales but he of course spoke only of visions and dreams. He was also a man with a strange hold over

→ A "F.P."