RESEARCH PUBLICATION

CHAPTER 7

# Transitions, Transformations and Contact Zones: Sibling Migration to Minnesota, 1881–1891

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**Abstract:** With a biographical focus on three siblings, Halvor, Torbjørg (Thea), and Nils Rønning, and their migration from Bø in Telemark, Norway, to the United States in the 1880s, this chapter explores how the siblings' possibilities, attitudes, and practices changed through living in the Norwegian-American, Lutheran Hauge Synod's contact zones. The Rønnings' life stories illustrate the gendered experiences of transition, its potential, and the agonies of the migratory experience. For the Rønning brothers, the Norwegian-American Lutheran Hauge Synod contact zones represented opportunities for education, further academic study, and careers. Torbjørg Rønning, on the other hand, found employment as a domestic servant. Even so, working for Halvor Rønning in his Hauge Synod parish in Solør, Minnesota, the Norwegian-American congregational life with its gendered structure of a feminine, egalitarian, and publicly active sphere, proved to be a fertile contact zone for a young, pious immigrant woman.

While the aim of this chapter is to explore how life in a contact zone might change young, religious immigrants' attitudes and practices, the role of a Norwegian minister – August Weenaas – is also investigated. With his transatlantic, theological career, Weenaas represents a personalized contact zone that changed Norwegian life paths.

**Keywords:** sibling migration, Hauge Synod, Norwegian-American, Lutheran mission, contact zones

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## Introduction

On board the White Star Line's *Oceanic*, on her way from San Francisco to Shanghai on a November night in 1891, twenty-six-year-old Torbjørg (Thea) Rønning (1865–1898) was writing to her younger brother Nils Rønning (1870–1962). Traveling first class on her way to China as one of the earliest missionaries from *the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran China Mission Society of America*, Torbjørg reminded Nils of their childhood in Telemark:

> The stars look so close, I feel as if I could reach out and touch them. Remember Nils, Mama used to tell us that on a clear night in Telemark she could hear the stars sing. Listen, now I think I know what she means.[1]

By making an emotional link between her decision to leave for China and the memory of their mother and childhood in Norway, Torbjørg was beginning to create a new world for herself. While she and Nils had shared the experience of migrating to the US four years earlier, Torbjørg was now moving without him. On her way from the US to China, she wanted her brother to know that this continued migration was right and necessary for her. Torbjørg expressed joy at having started the transformation from Norwegian migrant to Norwegian-American missionary.

Torbjørg and Nils' elder brother Halvor Rønning (1862–1950), who was also on board the *Oceanic*, had been the first of the three siblings to migrate to the US. He, and later Torbjørg and Nils, settled in Minnesota in the 1880s as part of a Norwegian-American Lutheran, low-church Hauge network[2]: Halvor in 1883 and his two siblings in 1887.

Among the earliest immigrants from Norway to the US were followers of the pietistic lay preacher and leader Hans Nielsen Hauge. As several historians have pointed out, the first organized church among Norwegian immigrants in the US was based on inspiration from Hauge. This church, the Hauge Synod, had a strong connection to Norwegian lay Christianity.[3] By the late nineteenth century, the Haugean followers had become a minority among the Norwegian-Americans. However, Hauge and his teachings continued to play a central role in Norwegian-American religious life, and

1 Topping 2013: 24
2 Gulliksen 1998: 182–183
3 Gulliksen 1998: 182–183; Nichol 1993: 152

historian Odd Lovoll characterizes Hans Nielsen Hauge as the "religious icon of Norwegian-American Lutheranism."[4]

Church historian Vidar L. Haanes points to the Hauge movement, also known as "the society of friends", as a means of social change, mobility, and migration in early nineteenth century Norway. "The social relations were lifted out of the traditional, steadfast class society, and were reorganized and linked to the society of friends. The Haugeans' training in social mobility is an important prerequisite for emigration."[5] As will be seen later, the idea of social mobility within a pious, Lutheran context was central to the Rønning siblings' migration experiences.

Based on published autobiographies, memoirs and biographical material, this chapter will focus on different phases of migratory transition and settlement through biographical examples of the three Rønning siblings.[6] As shown by historian Kari G. Hempel, the connections between the Norwegian congregations in the US and Norway constitute a main element in the perception of a transnational Norwegian society in the US.[7] Even so, as historian John Gjerde reminds us, this immigration culture was a unique culture – a hybrid of Norwegian and American culture. Migrants developed "complementary identities," to use Gjerde's term. Allegiances to the American nation and to cultural traditions carried across the sea could coexist.[8]

This unique, hybrid culture can be seen as consisting of *contact zones*, the Norwegian-Lutheran congregations of the Hauge Synod being one of them. The concept of "contact zones" has been defined both as spaces where people of different backgrounds met and interacted and as "imagined contact zones" between, for example, European Christians and missionaries

4 Lovoll 1999: 252; see also Larsen 1949: 39–48

5 Haanes 2021: 211

6 Gracia Grindal's biography, *Thea Rønning. Young Woman on a Mission*, from 2012, is a key source to the life of Torbjørg Rønning. Grindal's study is based on published mission and congregational sources like *Kinamissionæren,* the journal of *the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran China Mission Society of America*; and *Budbæreren*, the Hauge Synod's paper. See Grindal 2012: 55. These journals are published mission and church journals that must be read as a "front stage", public version of the mission's or congregation's reports. See Aase 2022: 41; and Skeie 2004: 89–100. Olav Golf's study from 1994, *Red Wing Seminarium. Et haugiansk skoletiltak i Amerika. Forhistorie og pionertid frem til 1885,* is a central source to the history of the Red Wing Seminary. An additional central source to this chapter is August Weenaas' memoir, *Livserindringer fra Norge og Amerika,* published in 1935. Nils Rønning's *The Boy from Telemark,* published in 1933, is yet a memoir that is a source to the history of the Rønnings. Both Rønning and Weenaas published their memoirs more than 40 years after the events had taken place; a long timespan which must be taken into consideration when utilizing this material as historical sources.

7 See Hempel 2011

8 Gjerde 1997: 8, 240

living abroad who maintained the notion of one common community and thus exchanged ideas.[9] In addition, there were "personalized contact zones": individuals who transcended boundaries and integrated different backgrounds and attitudes. These were "cultural brokers" who created contact and connections between cultures and people, and acted as agents of cultural translation.[10] The transatlantic Haugean migrants operated in "contact zones" as spaces where newly arrived Norwegian migrants settled and met first and second generation Norwegian-Americans, in addition to other American citizens, immigrants from outside the Scandinavian countries and, at times, Native Americans.

Historian Thoralf Klein argues that "the contact zone cannot be studied in isolation; it must be analyzed in its connections with global communication flows."[11] There existed extended communication networks between the Lutheran/Haugean migrants and Norway, consisting of personal letters, published newspapers, books, and mission pamphlets. In addition, people were moving back and forth between Norway (and the Scandinavian countries) and North America, partaking in cultural translations and global communication streams.[12] The aim of this chapter is to explore how life in a contact zone might change young immigrants' attitudes and practices. In what ways were the Rønnings transformed through living and interacting in Norwegian-American contact zones? How did religious agents influence the siblings' transitions and transformations as migrants in the US?

A total of 700,000 Norwegians emigrated (mainly to North America) in the years between 1865 and 1915.[13] During this mass migration from Norway, the highest number of people emigrated between 1879 and 1893; among them Halvor, Torbjørg, and Nils Rønning.[14] Another relatively large number of Norwegian men and women that became part of the nineteenth century's migration movement were Western missionaries, leaving their homes in Europe or the US for missions in African and Asian countries.[15] There were energic, strong, and spiritual links between the

9 Becker 2015: 10, 11
10 Becker 2015: 10; see also Habermas 2019.
11 Klein 2015: 237
12 See Løvlie 2022: 75–93 and Ulvund 2022: 51–74
13 A dramatic number for a country with a population of 2.2 million in 1900. Semmingsen 1975: 95. See also Østrem 2014.
14 Semmingsen 1975: 118. From 1880, around ¼ of all migrants returned to Norway after an average of 7–8 years in North America.
15 Karen Hansen has shown how both Norwegian migrants to North America and Norwegian missionaries in Madagascar, South Africa, and China were part of Western colonialism. Hansen 2013: 2

Norwegian-American communities and the missionaries.[16] Halvor and Torbjørg represent both these migration movements, as they were both part of the Norwegian-American community and thereafter became missionaries.

Following their immigration to the US, both Halvor and Torbjørg became missionaries for the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran China Mission Society of America. They were both assigned to the British China Inland Mission and stationed in Fancheng, in the Hubei province in the south of China.[17] In 1907, after seventeen years in China, Halvor became a widower and again he chose migration. This time he moved with his seven children to Canada. Here he founded a Norwegian frontier congregation in Alberta and he and his children became Canadian citizens.[18] In Fancheng, Torbjørg married a Swedish missionary, Carl Landahl. She died suddenly from meningitis at the age of 33 in Taipingdianzhen, not far from Fancheng, in 1898.[19]

Nils, on the other hand, settled permanently in Minnesota. Here he became a well-known writer and publisher of Lutheran, Norwegian-American literature.[20] The life stories of Halvor, Torbjørg, and Nils were in different ways exceptional. Even so, by exploring what makes their stories of migration extraordinary, the aspiration is to find aspects that were influential for many migrants of the late nineteenth century.

The first part of this chapter will look at which factors made migration possible for the three siblings. This part will introduce the key broker of cultural contact in this story, the Norwegian minister August Weenaas (1835–1924). Important here is Weenaas' capacity for cultural interaction within various contexts, including Norwegian-American congregations and social hierarchies in Norway. The second part investigates the Hauge Synod's school and college, the Red Wing Seminary, established in 1879, as a contact zone, while the third part of the chapter looks at the period Halvor and Torbjørg lived and worked in Solør, Minnesota, with the Solør congregation as a contact zone with gendered implications.

16 See Okkenhaug 2015: 9–30.
17 The China Inland Mission was a Protestant mission organization established by Hudson Taylor in 1865.
18 Topping 2013: xx
19 Topping 2013: 84–85
20 Gulliksen 1992: 165–203

## Why did the Rønnings choose to leave Norway?

Historian Donna Gabaccia argues that we need to understand where the immigrant came from in order to understand their life in a new country.[21] Social class, regional background and religious belonging are thus important categories for analysis. What might be detected in the Rønning siblings background that might help explain their choice to emigrate?

Historians debate the reasons for the Norwegian mass migration. The prominent migration historian Ingrid Semmingsen writes that no one has managed to disclose the secret force behind the mass emigration from Norway to North America. Maybe the secret is found in the strange country they left for, she asks.[22] Even so, available farmland and considerably higher wages for both men and women were two important factors that motivated Norwegians to leave for the US.[23] Conditions in the US also made it easier to establish a small business or trade. Female migrants – the large majority being domestic servants both in Norway and in the US – also had better working conditions and salaries in the new country.[24]

Farming and business did not tempt the Rønning siblings. In 1933 – more than 40 years after he left Norway – Nils published his memoirs. Here he emphasized social mobility and a more equal standing between people as his motivations for emigration. Nils wrote that "while in Norway one could not as a rule rise from a lower to a higher station in life, in America the sky was the limit."[25] Looking back, the 63-year-old Nils created a personal narrative where he as a young boy knew that he did not want to become a farmer, but instead dreamt of studying. While memory must have shaped his view of growing up in Norway more than forty years before, we know that education was highly valued in the Rønning family. The parents, Nils (1821–1901) and Kjersti Buskerønning (1829–1895), had sent their gifted older son Halvor to a county school (*amtsskole*) established by the state to provide higher education for farm children. In 1879 Halvor enrolled

21 Gabaccia 1995: 25

22 Semmingsen 1975: 119; Niemi 1998: 26

23 In 1862, when the Homestead Act was passed – promising 650 *mål* (160 acres) of free land, with only the addition of a small fee for measuring the land – the largest newspaper in Norway, *Morgenbladet*, refused to believe that this was true. 650 *mål* represented a very large farm in Norway and the possibility of owning so much land drew many young men from the Norwegian countryside to the US. Semmingsen, 1975: 123

24 On Scandinavian female immigrants and domestic workers, see Lovoll 2011: 59; Bergland & Lahlum 2011: 5; Lintelman 1989, 2009.

25 Rønning 1933: 4

at Skien's Teacher's School, as teaching was one of few career-openings for a farmer's son.[26]

During this time Halvor underwent a personal religious experience, becoming a "true believer" as was expected among the lay church movement.[27] Halvor felt he had been called by God to become a missionary. To realize this dream, it was desirable to attend the Norwegian Mission School in Stavanger: the only institution that educated missionaries at the time.[28] But since Halvor was not able to find the means to study in Stavanger, he had to abandon his mission call.[29]

Historian Jarle Simensen argues that in nineteenth-century Norway, men who became missionaries belonged to groups in society that already were mobile. Often it did not make much of a difference if you migrated to the US or became a missionary in China or Africa.[30] Halvor Rønning, who first tried to attain a career as a missionary but ended up emigrating, was typical of the spirit among young people in transit. This is underlined by the fact that he became one of the first three missionaries from the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran China Mission Society of America.[31] This mobility and ties between migration and mission also characterized female migrants.[32] Torbjørg, now known as "Thea" after four years in the US, followed her calling to become a missionary and left for China with her brother in 1891. A decisive inspiration for the Rønning siblings' religious vocations is found in their family background, and their father Nils Buskerønning played an especially prominent role as a facilitator of crucial contacts with the transatlantic Hauge church communities.

## Minister August Weenaas: Facilitator and "contact zone"

By the early 1880s Nils Buskerønning had been "born again" and become a "true Christian" according to the Hauge tradition.[33] As mentioned earlier, many Hauge-followers emigrated to the US to escape the social and

26 Grindal 2012: 22. Grindal quotes from the article "H. N. Rønnings Biografi", *Kinamissionæren*, 2, 1892, 85.
27 Grindal 2012: 22. On the lay church movement, see Gilje 1996: 18–19.
28 Jørgensen 1992: 84, 86–87
29 Grindal 2012: 22–23
30 See Simensen 1985.
31 Topping 2013: xx
32 One of Norway's most famous missionaries to China, Marie Monsen (1878–1962), for example, had two sisters and one brother who emigrated to the US. Skeie 2015: 33
33 Grindal 2012: 22

religious limitations of Norwegian society.[34] But Buskerønning had no plans to become a migrant himself. The family farm was large enough to feed his children and they lived in relative comfort. Buskerønning also had additional income from building and inspecting roads.[35] The building of a new road led him to Tinn, a village more than 100 kilometers north of Bø in Telemark, where he got to know the local vicar, August Weenaas.[36] This encounter would have life-changing implications for three of the farmer's children.

August Weenaas, an ordained minister in the Norwegian State Church, had a career that crossed national borders and made him an influential figure in Norwegian-American church and academic life. He worked as a minister in Norway, and from 1868 to 1876 and from 1882 to 1885, among Norwegian emigrants in the US. In 1868 he started teaching at the Swedish-Norwegian Augustana-synod's ministry seminary in Illinois. A year later, in 1869, he became the first president of the Augsburg Seminary, where he also taught theology. The Augsburg Seminary, from 1872 located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was the first independent Norwegian seminary for ministers in the US.[37] Back in Norway in 1879, Weenaas worked as a minister in Bø, Vesterålen, and later in Tinn, Telemark.[38] In his second and last period in the US, from 1882 to 1885, Weenaas became the rector of the Hauge Synod of the Lutheran Church's Red Wing Seminary in Minnesota, where he also taught theology.[39] His prominent position in two of the most important institutions of higher learning among Norwegian Americans made him an influential player, not only in the Norwegian-American settlements but also as a recruitment agent for young, Norwegian men suitable for a minister's position in Norwegian immigrant churches in the US.

The Norwegian State Church had no authority outside the borders of the nation state, but the church's ministers were invited to serve in Norwegian-American churches.[40] At the time there were three main Lutheran strands among the Norwegian-American settlers. The Hauge Synod was one of these three, the other two being the Norwegian Synod

34 Haanes 2021: 211–229
35 Grindal 2012: 24
36 Golf 1994: 195; Rønning 1933: 4; Grindal 2012: 23
37 Weenaas, who was president of Augsburg Seminary until 1876, recruited Georg Sverdrup and Sven Oftedal from Norway to teach at the seminary. Both Oftedal and Sverdrup were influential agents in Norwegian-American networks. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augsburg_University. Visited 9.29.2023.
38 Weenaas 1935
39 See Weenaas 1935.
40 Nichol 1993: 151–165

and the United Church.[41] Weenaas felt it was his mission to work for a union of the Norwegian-American church synods. Despite his love for the lay movement, Weenaas has been characterized as both authoritarian and high church, and he met opposition among the Norwegian-American communities.[42] After a falling out with the leadership at the minister seminary, he returned to Norway, where he continued as a minister in the State Church. Weenaas and his new family – his first wife and two children had died in the US – eventually settled in Tinn for a period.[43]

Even though August Weenaas was a controversial figure among Norwegian-American Lutherans, he still had followers among the Hauge Synod.[44] The Red Wing board had approached him several times offering him the position of teacher and new head of the theology seminar, but he had rejected the offers. He had been deeply disappointed by the strife among Norwegian-Lutheran congregations. In the end it was his hope and passion for creating a united Norwegian-Lutheran church in the US that finally made him accept the position as head of Red Wing Seminary in 1881.[45] Red Wing was a contact zone for Norwegians in the US that in different ways played a life-changing role for all three of the Rønning siblings. What characterized this contact zone?

The Red Wing Seminary had been established in 1879, in the town of Red Wing on the Mississippi River in southern Minnesota.[46] The main motivation behind the seminary was to educate ministers for the Hauge Synod's congregations. The synod had kept the ideal of lay preachers that characterized the lay-church movement in Norway in the first part of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s, however, the American Haugeans saw the need for formally trained ministers. While the main language of instruction at the Red Wing Seminary was English, Norwegian was also taught. The congregations wanted ministers who not only spoke Norwegian, but also knew the religious culture of the old country. Thus, a Red Wing student should ideally have grown up in Norway, have a religious calling and feel

41 Gulliksen 1998: 181–193, see also Løvlie 2020: 147–165 and Meier 2020: 89–115.
42 Golf 1994: 223
43 Roseland 1890: 847
44 Golf 1994: 169
45 Weenaas wrote in his memoirs that it was especially the work to unite the three different strands of Lutheranism among Norwegian-Americans that inspired him to leave for America a second time. Weenaas 1935; Golf 1994: 166, 171
46 Golf 1994: 233

so strongly about his emigrated countrymen's souls and salvation that he was willing to leave Norway himself.

Nils Buskerønning's meeting with Weenaas took place not long before the minister moved back to the US in 1882. Buskerønning wanted to discuss the possibility of further education for his son Halvor with the minister.[47] Weenaas told the farmer that not only was there a great lack of ministers among Norwegian immigrants in America, but in that country even poor young men could receive theological training.[48] Buskerønning was deeply moved by these new prospects for his gifted son. This direct contact with Weenaas constituted a personal contact zone which led to a profound change in the farmer's mindset. For Halvor Rønning, looking back on this meeting, it was of the utmost importance to emphasize the almost religious nature of the encounter. Halvor writes that his father was so overcome by emotions during the conversation with the minister that "a new light dawned" on him, what earlier had been impossible "now appeared to be a possibility."[49] Seldom in the history of Bø had a farmer's son studied theology and become a minister. But Halvor was now invited by Weenaas to become a student at the Red Wing Seminary.[50] According to Halvor Rønning, his father's passion for learning and religion was instrumental in his own decision to pursue a religious career in the US. Even so, the facilitator of the transatlantic migration was August Weenaas. He was able to detect potential candidates for ministers in Norwegian-American congregations among intellectually gifted young men in rural Norway, who were prevented from studying because of social and financial restrictions in a deeply class-divided Norway.

The meeting between the "cultural broker" Weenaas and the farmer Buskerønning eventually led to the migration of two more of the Rønning siblings. In 1887, four years after Halvor left, Torbjørg and Nils joined their brother in Minnesota. During his years as a student at Red Wing, Halvor had invested many hours writing numerous letters to his family. Historians have pointed out that "immigrant letters that appeared to be personal in

47 Scherer n.d.
48 Golf 1994: 196
49 Golf 1994: 196
50 Grindal 2012: 23. Halvor was to return only once to Bø, in 1900, while fleeing the Boxer Uprising in China. Thus, Nils Buskerønning lived to see the fruits of his love for education; not only had his son studied theology and become a minister in Minnesota, he had also been the first missionary together with his sister Torbjørg to be sent out by the Norwegian (Hauge Synod) and they had both become educational mission pioneers in China. See Topping 2013.

nature were informally shared within communities".[51] This was also true for Norwegian migrant letters in the nineteenth century. Even strangers from the neighboring villages would come and hear news from "over there",[52] thus making the Norwegian "America letters" part of the global communication flow of the time.[53]

When the Rønnings received letters from Halvor in Minnesota, neighbors and others came visiting. Nils would read from the letters, often the same letter to different audiences. In his memoirs, Nils wrote, "After a while I knew the letters by heart. He (Halvor) painted the opportunities in glowing colors, and many a person went away from my readings with new hope in his heart and a new light in his eyes."[54] Having internalized the uplifting news from his older brother, Nils, at the age of seventeen, was looking for a way to continue his education. In the summer of 1887, he emigrated to the US. Torbjørg, five years older than Nils, chose to join her brother.

Torbjørg, in a similar manner to Halvor, also experienced a calling to become a missionary. According to her autobiography, Torbjørg had "found peace" with God in the spring of 1887. This religious "awakening," when she felt she was truly converted, was accompanied by a calling to become a missionary. But for some unknown reason Torbjørg did not realize her vocation.[55] Instead, a short time after her calling, she decided to emigrate. While her reasons for leaving Norway are not known, it is tempting to see a connection between her suppression of a mission call and the decision to emigrate.

## Contact zone: The Hauge Synod's Red Wing Seminary

After his move to Minnesota, Halvor Rønning learned English quickly and enjoyed life as a student. Fellow students and teachers at Red Wing played a crucial role in his adaption to the new life. Not least important in this process was the relationship to Weenaas, whom Halvor described as a father figure. Another teacher was described as "a friend and brother".[56] Thus, the four years at Red Wing Seminary not only seem to have been a Norwegian home away from home for Halvor. He described these

51 Elliot et al. 2006: 43
52 Øverland 2011: 215–232
53 Klein 2015: 237
54 Rønning 1933: 5
55 See Grindal 2012.
56 Golf 1994: 196

formative years as "paradise on earth".[57] Emigrating to the US had led him to a religious community where he was able to live a perfect Christian life with likeminded "brothers". Even so, there was a practical aspect to his new life. Halvor could rely on valuable experience from "the old country", as his teacher's training and farming skills proved to be of great value among Norwegian-Americans. He taught Norwegian to first-term students and in parochial schools during vacations. In addition, he worked on Norwegian-American farms during harvest season, thus earning much needed money for sustaining life as a student.[58]

Halvor's positive presentation of student life must have inspired Nils, who enrolled in a school a short time after arriving in the US. Nils later followed in his brother's footsteps and became a student at the Red Wing Seminary. But he did not want a career as a Lutheran minister. Instead, Nils earned a degree at the University of Minnesota and became a writer and editor for a Norwegian-American audience.[59] He lived in Minneapolis until his death in 1962.

In his memoirs, Nils portrayed himself as an "average emigrant". But Nils Rønning was not typical of the many young, single men who left Norway in the late nineteenth century; the large majority of these would have been looking for employment and not education.[60] Even so, in his memoirs Nils portrayed himself as unique in the way he narrated his national and regional background, described nostalgically in national romantic terms: "The immigrant came from a land of romance, legends, song, melody, and art. His blood was pure, his limbs lithe, he had the will to work. A passion for freedom and a training in the exercise of it was part of his heritage."[61] But writing as a man in his early 60s, he also expressed deep, positive emotions for his new country. While Nils told his readers that the desire to live in freedom is what linked his old and new life, he went on to describe how his feelings for the US had been awakened already as a boy in Telemark, when he had read a biography of Abraham Lincoln: "Then and there the heart of the little white-haired, barefooted Norwegian boy went out to the great heart of Abraham Lincoln, and I was baptized with the spirit of America."[62] As a grown man, Nils thus created a personal link between his

57 On self-representation in mission literature, see Mikaelsson 2011: 87–100.
58 Golf 1994: 196
59 Gulliksen 1992: 65–203
60 Rønning 1933
61 Rønning 1933:8
62 Rønning 1933: 2

boyhood in Norway and his new homeland where he was to live for 75 years.[63] Even so, the time at the Red Wing Seminary and its introduction to American academic life in a Norwegian-American context must have been decisive in Nils Rønning's life, opening the way to a university degree and a successful life as a writer and publisher.

For Torbjørg, the Red Wing Seminary was a life changer indirectly through her elder brother's education there that led to her migration. This contact zone, however, also had a decisive direct influence on Torbjørg's life after she had left the US, through her marriage to a friend of Halvor's, Carl Landahl, who knew Halvor from their student days at Red Wing and who joined the Rønnings as a missionary in Huang, China.

## Transition: Torbjørg becomes Thea

For Torbjørg, the Red Wing Seminary, which did not become co-educational until 1914, facilitated – through her brother's network of friends – a suitable marriage partner. Thus, Torbjørg, at the age of 31, fulfilled the expectation of becoming a married woman. For Halvor and Nils Rønning, on the other hand, the Red Wing Seminary meant an opportunity for higher learning. This is an example of how a migrant's opportunities were gendered. As historian Catherine Dewhirst argues, "migration ruptures many things, but gender expectations were not easily abandoned. There was a higher chance for young men to succeed in America (as it had been in the old country) than for young women who migrated."[64]

Gender roles were not necessarily the same in the US as in Norway. In her study of Norwegian-American women, historian Lori Ann Lahlum shows how some gender roles for women remained as they had been in Norway, while others changed. As Lahlum puts it, "generally, broader employment opportunities existed in the United States, and they became available sooner than in Norway."[65] Norwegian-American women could, for example, teach in the Norwegian parochial schools operated by Lutheran congregations, which was not possible in Norway.[66] With two brothers pursuing higher education, Torbjørg Rønning might have seen a position as a teacher in a Norwegian-American school as a suitable occupation.

63 Gulliksen 1992: 165–203. During all these years Nils Rønning made his first and only visit to Norway in 1899.
64 Dewhirst 2010: 359–361
65 Lahlum 2011: 80
66 Lahlum 2011: 80

According to her own autobiography, written for mission supporters and published in *Kinamissionæren* in 1892, she had enjoyed her years of schooling in Norway that ended with her confirmation at the age of fifteen. Even so, she did not continue her education.[67] Instead, in a similar manner to most of the single, female migrants from Scandinavia, Torbjørg worked as a maid in American households.[68]

Immediately after arriving in Minnesota, Torbjørg and Nils found employment as domestic servants at the house of the leader of the Norwegian-American church of the Hauge Synod, Østen Hansson and his wife Anne. The Hauge church community was a contact zone where Norwegians with years of experience of life in the US assisted new immigrants in the transitional phase of settling in new circumstances. Here the Rønning siblings were exposed to a new social order different from the deeply hierarchical social conditions in Norway. The minister Østen Hansson and his wife did practical chores on their farm, which was not common among Norwegian State Church ministers.[69] Nils and Torbjørg not only familiarized themselves with American culture, but they also began learning English. Soon after, Nils started his American education, while Torbjørg continued to work as a domestic servant. She now moved on to work in an American, English-speaking household in Faribault in southern Minnesota, 80 kilometers south of Minneapolis.

The first months after their arrival were difficult for Torbjørg, and she wrote several letters to her parents complaining about the hard life. Even so, when her mother asked her to come home in the winter of 1888, Torbjørg did not see returning to Norway as an option. She told her mother that:

> Nothing will come of that for I am not at all homesick as I am writing and we are doing very well here, so I have no wish to return to poor Norway. I am very glad that I have come here, we are proud that we have become used to the climate and everything gets better with time … in America almost every day is like Christmas in Bø. Here is abundance in everything if one will work. I have USD 2.50, much more than I would earn in Bø, but I cannot earn more until I can speak English properly, although I understand a great deal now.[70]

67 Grindal 2012: 26
68 On European immigrant women and domestic service, see Gabaccia 1995: 47. On Scandinavian immigrant women and domestic service, see Lintelman 1989: 9–23.
69 Grindal 2012: 31
70 Grindal 2012: 33

Torbjørg typically contrasts life in "poor Norway" with the many opportunities for improved material life offered in the US. She uses emotions to describe her new life and expresses pride in her ability to master the extreme climate of Minnesota. She is satisfied with her living conditions, but impatient with her ability to learn English. Even so, there is more to this letter. "Immigrant letters," Gerber argues, "are not principally about documenting the world, but instead about reconfiguring a personal relationship rendered vulnerable by long-distance, long-term separation."[71] From this perspective, twenty-two-year-old Torbjørg, by writing about better wages and successful adjustment to a new life as an excuse for not being willing to accommodate her mother, was attempting to liberate herself from the mother. Even so, there are also feelings of dislocation in Torbjørg's letters.

As a domestic servant working for the well-to-do Spencer family in Faribault, Torbjørg encountered a hitherto unknown wealthy and material lifestyle.[72] In her eyes, the life of the Spencer family was characterized by unholy activities and hollow values. These women, she reported, wore silk dresses every day and "everything about them was vain."[73] Vanity, alcohol, and material excesses indicated a sinful life that should be shunned, and Torbjørg expressed her dislike by using Biblical references.[74]

While being repelled by American materialism and consumption, the fact that Torbjørg changed her name to the English sounding "Thea" implies that this period of transition was moving her more and more towards American culture. Leaving her known, old life behind, she was transforming the foreign into a new identity that remained pious and Lutheran, but now in a new, Norwegian-American context.

## Contact zone: The Solør Church and Ladies' Aid Society in Faribault

It was in the Hauge Synod's Solør Church in Faribault, where Halvor was now a minister, that Torbjørg as Thea found her new spiritual home and workplace. This contact zone represented a different view of women's position within congregational life than the Norwegian State Church's gender regime. Since Halvor was not married, Thea took on some of the roles of a

71 Gerber 2006: 43
72 Grindal 2012: 33
73 Grindal 2012: 33
74 Grindal 2012: 33

minister's wife. In a similar manner to congregations in Norway, women in the Solør Church had established a Ladies' Aid Society. Even so, there was a marked difference between the Norwegian-American women's organizations and the Norwegian organizations. In the words of Lahlum:

> The Ladies' Aid in the United States became much more egalitarian and engendered broader participation than in Norway. In addition, through the Ladies' Aid, Norwegian American women quickly assumed an important financial role within the church (unlike Norway), which affected the power relationship between women and men within the congregation, and they took on public roles when they served dinners and hosted bazaars.[75]

Lahlum argues that the Norwegian Lutheran Church and the Ladies' Aid functioned as gendered realms – one masculine and one feminine. Ideals on masculine and feminine spaces influenced women's participation in community events and activities. These same ideals, however, also created opportunities for women to extend their influence in the public sphere – especially through the Ladies' Aid – and shape other social activities in Norwegian-American communities.[76] Since Halvor Rønning was not married, the parsonage was without the head of the feminine realm. The minister's sister could, however, act as a substitute for the minister's wife at public meetings. Thea took on this role and hosted Ladies' Aid meetings together with her brother. By hosting dinners and bazaars, Thea took on a public role. The Ladies' Aid made it possible for women to do good works and contribute financially to the church and to foreign missions. Even so, as shown by Lahlum, "women's participation almost exclusively took place within the context of domesticity: sewing, knitting, and serving church dinners."[77] Norwegian deaconess Ingeborg Sponland, who came to Minnesota in 1891 to head the Norwegian-American deaconess institution in Minneapolis, experienced the conservative patriarchal structures of Norwegian-American congregational life. In Sponland's autobiography, she relates her own experiences of patriarchal structures in a Norwegian-American congregation and writes that there were "men in the church who strongly opposed women's activity in the church in any form except to serve suppers and keep the church clean. Spiritual work was to be done

75 Lahlum 2011: 80
76 Lahlum 2011: 95
77 Lahlum 2011: 97–98

only by the pastor."[78] Such limited opportunities for women to carry out spiritual work and serve in more official capacities might have been the reason that Torbjørg – regardless of her prominent role in the congregation – was not satisfied with life in the US. A visit to the Hauge Synod churches in June 1890 made Torbjørg's dream of a missionary career reappear.

## A new period of transition: The first missionaries from the Hauge Synod to China

Due to impulses from the Hauge Synod contact zone and its ties to global Protestant networks, Halvor and Thea were not to settle permanently in the US but to continue their life in transition. What initiated this move was their presence at the 45th annual meeting of the Hauge Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Here two men from Norway held an appeal for mission work in China. Both were on their way to China as missionaries and the older of the two, Ole S. Næstegård (1861–1937) had already spent some time in China as an independent missionary. Now they were on tour hoping to engage supporters among Norwegian-American congregations.[79]

Næstegård had published several letters in *Lutheraneren,* the Norwegian-American church journal, and some ministers in the Hauge Synod were positive to supporting a mission in China. While the older members of the synod hesitated, several young people decided to go ahead and establish *the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran China Mission Society of America.*[80] At the organization's first meeting in August the same year, in Goodhue County, Minnesota, Halvor and Thea were present. They both felt that this was a godsent possibility to finally realize their missionary callings. The Solør congregation was full of enthusiasm about the prospect of taking part in the global Protestant effort to introduce Christianity to China. Thus, their "beloved minister would be the first missionary from the Hauge Synod to China."[81]

When Halvor finally decided to realize his call as a missionary, Thea had a chance to follow her vocation. Just as important as the backing of her brother was the strong support from members of the Hauge Synod Ladies' Aid, who saw Thea as their Christian envoy in China. These women were not only supportive with prayers; they also came to play a crucial role

78 Sponland 1938: 44
79 Grindal 2012: 49–51; Okkenhaug 2015: 12–13
80 Grindal 2012: 52
81 Grindal 2012: 62

in financing the Rønnings' mission work in China. This leaves us with the question: Did the Norwegian-American congregational life, with its egalitarian women's organizations, provide the support that Thea needed to make the choice to follow her call and leave for China? Support that she apparently had not found in the much more hierarchical church life in Norway.

Thea's role as a missionary propelled her out of the private sphere and made her a public figure among the Norwegian-Americans. Now it was not only Halvor, but also Thea who was asked to speak publicly at the large, annual Hauge Synod meeting in the summer of 1891.[82] Normally, women were not allowed to speak to a mixed audience in church.[83] In the early days of the Hauge movement in Norway, Hans Nilsen Hauge encouraged women to be active also as leaders and preachers, but this liberal practice had soon been abandoned and by the late nineteenth century it was not common for women to preach in the Lutheran churches.[84] Even so, at the most important gathering of the Hauge Synod in the US, Thea Rønning experienced how becoming a missionary changed gender expectations and allowed her to serve in an official capacity. However, in fall the same year, Halvor and Thea went on a tour to gather financial and spiritual support among Hauge Synod congregations in Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota.[85] From these meetings it was reported that Thea was too moved to speak and that Halvor would speak for her. "These scenes," according to biographer Gracia Grindal, "would be repeated wherever they went…with songs, speeches and offerings for the mission in China, with Thea unable to speak for tears."[86] Thus, the mission supporters were reassured that Thea Rønning showed appropriate female religious feelings and behavior in public.

## Conclusion

A biographical focus on the Rønning siblings' history of transatlantic migration sheds light on the gendered experiences of transition, its potential, and the agonies of the migratory experience. For the Rønning

82 Grindal 2012: 59. The Hauge Synod agreed on sharing the support for the Rønnings with the China Mission Society.
83 Grindal 2012: 59
84 For a critical examination of Hauge and the role of women as preachers, see Seland 2021.
85 Grindal 2012: 61
86 Grindal 2012: 62

brothers, the Norwegian-American Hauge Lutheran contact zones represented opportunities for education, further academic study, and careers. For Halvor and Nils, Norwegian-American educational institutions like the Red Wing Seminary – a vibrant contact zone where young men were trained in theology – were crucial in transforming the new and foreign into "home" and in creating a sense of belonging. Encounters and relations nourished at Red Wing made the transition into American life a positive experience. Torbjørg/Thea Rønning, on the other hand, like many female Scandinavian migrants, found employment as a domestic servant. Even so, working for her brother, the Norwegian-American congregational life with its gendered structure of a feminine, egalitarian, and publicly active sphere, proved to be a fertile contact zone for a young, deeply religious immigrant woman.

The Rønnings and their possibilities, attitudes, and practices changed through living in the Norwegian-American Hauge contact zones. Would Torbjørg/Thea Rønning have become a missionary if she had not emigrated and shared a spiritual and working life with the women in the Hauge Synod Ladies' Aid? From the 1880s women from Scandinavian countries became missionaries, and a rural background would not necessarily have prevented Torbjørg/Thea from being accepted by a Norwegian missionary organization. Even so, her four years of working in the US, learning a new language, and living in a different culture must have prepared Torbjørg/Thea better for life in China than if she had never left Norway.

Halvor Rønning did not have the means to attend the Norwegian Mission Society's School in Stavanger. For him migrating opened the way to a realization of his old dream of becoming a missionary. Nils Rønning obtained a university degree and worked as a writer and publisher for most of his adult life. His books and other writings were published in both English and Norwegian. Nils thus reached a large Norwegian-American audience and he eventually became an influential mover in the Scandinavian Lutheran American contact zone himself.

The migratory experience in different and gendered ways expanded the social, religious, and working lives of all three of the Rønning siblings. This social mobility was facilitated within the context of Norwegian-American religious life, and initiated and enabled by a Norwegian minister, August Weenaas. With his transatlantic theological career, driven by his vision of a united Norwegian Lutheranism in the US, Weenaas represented a personalized contact zone that changed Norwegian life paths.

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