

Summary of Paul Fanlund article *A century ago, a pandemic devastated my ancestors*

Julius Fanlund departed for America in 1914 at age 21 from a train station in Vilshult, a tiny hamlet in southern Sweden. *“My brother Ernst drove me here with his horse and there were tears in his eyes when we knew we were never going to be meeting again,”*

My grandfather was off to a new life in America, to the farmlands of northern Illinois, with soil and climate conditions like those in Sweden. He went into farming, married and raised three children. My father was the oldest.

Julius died in 1985 at age 92. His brother, Ernst, six years younger, lived only four years after their parting. He died on Nov. 7, 1918, a victim of the Spanish flu pandemic that rocked the planet a century ago. Ernst was 19. Three days before his death, his sister, Frida Matilda Olsdotter, 21, had died. Two days later, another sister, Selma Natalia Olsdotter, also died. She was 24.

My great-grandparents, Ola Olof Persson and Anna Maria Jönsdotter, lost three of their six young adult children within five days. Can you imagine? I knew little of this family history growing up because my grandfather never talked about his loss.

The Spanish flu started in January 1918 and lasted for nearly three years, infecting about 500 million people worldwide, one-fourth of the earth’s population. Estimates of deaths vary widely, perhaps 50 million or more, making it among the deadliest in world history. While most influenza outbreaks disproportionately kill the very young and very old, this one was different, with a high mortality rate among young adults, as evidenced by the ages of my great aunts and great uncle.

The pandemic struck Sweden harder than most countries. It arrived there in June 1918 and afflicted at least one-third of the country’s 5.8 million people, killing an estimated 34,500 in its first year.

In July of 1973 Julius returned to his homeland for a family reunion after an absence of 59 years, reuniting with his two surviving siblings, whom he last saw as young girls. A local newspaper reported on the reunion. *“The Slagesnäspojk had lovely reunion with his sisters,”* proclaimed the headline. The reference was to Slagesnäs, where my great-grandparents had bought a farm in 1908. “Pojk” is Swedish local slang for “boy.” (Correct Swedish is Pojke)

