Scandinavia House at 20: Building on a Vision

For more than two decades, the Nordic Center in mid-Manhattan has showcased and shared the rich cultures, enduring heritage and global impact of the Scandinavian countries.

By Max J. Friedman

This Year, Scandinavia House: The Nordic Center in America, the headquarters of the American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF) located at 58 Park Avenue in Manhattan, celebrates its 20th anniversary. Since its opening, it has welcomed more than 2.5 million visitors to a building that is both quietly elegant and modern on the outside, and on the inside is filled to capacity with warmth and vitality.

During the past two decades, it has been home to some 70 art and design exhibitions representing a wonderful cross-section of artistic achievement, more than 1,500 film screenings, more than 800 musical performances, many hundreds of stimulating discussions, symposia and lectures, and over 600 children’s programs.

Scandinavia House on Park Avenue.
Indeed, the programming that has filled Scandinavia House has been far-reaching. It has ranged from informational exhibitions that explored the Arctic region and that introduced the lives of the indigenous Sámi people to symposia sharing innovative approaches to teaching children through play as practiced in the Nordic countries; from museum-quality art exhibitions featuring such topics as Nordic art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to those highlighting the creativity of Nordic designers, photographers and sculptors. Its efforts and experts have also served to explore some of the most serious questions of our time, from climate change to Nordic responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. And the quality of the space has been so well appreciated by its neighbors, says Victoria McGann, Scandinavia House manager, “that many United Nations-related meetings and those of other large organizations from around the nation and the world have been held in the building, more than 400 times in 2019 alone, providing important rental income.”

Scandinavia House also has invited visitors to eat gravlax and Swedish meatballs, prepared under the direction of chef and owner Morten Sohlberg, in its Smörgås Chef restaurant. In its shop on the first floor or through special trunk shows, visitors have been able to purchase everything from inexpensive Swedish Bilar candies in the shape of cars to precious, one-of-a-kind Oiva Toikka handblown birds from Finland. These features have become important draws for ever larger audiences. What’s more, five days a week, visitors see strollers in the lobby and elsewhere as dozens of young children and their caretakers joyfully have come to learn and play at the Heimbold Family Children’s Center.

Honored in 2019 with ASF’s Gold Medal, Norwegian actress and director Liv Ullmann thanked the American-Scandinavian Foundation for all its efforts. “You have given us, since the year 2000 . . . a foundation, a house, a home we can visit and remember and share our heritage and our culture, [and where we can] experience that we all belong together.” Says Edward Gallagher, who became ASF president in 1996 and took on the planning and fundraising for Scandinavia House, “There is a warmth to the place, beginning with the staff who meet with the public. And there is also a sense of scale. We have wonderful large cultural institutions in New York City. However, a smaller institution, like ours, devoted to culture, personalizes the entire experience.”

To create that space required years of effort and imagination. Headquartered for the previous 40 years in a townhouse on East 73rd Street in Manhattan, by the late 1980s it was clear to Lena Biörck Kaplan, then ASF’s president and today still a trustee, that the time had come to move on an idea that had long been percolating at ASF. She observes: “As a trustee, for many years I had thought that the townhouse was wonderful but inadequate for exhibitions and lectures, because there was no single room that could fit more than 30 people at a time. So ASF wasn’t able to optimize the educational and cultural exchange that was at the core of our mission.”

Whenever the idea of moving to larger quarters was raised at trustee meetings, the financial hurdles were considered too significant. “The difference when I became president in 1989 was that I felt fairly confident that we could create something better than what we had,” she adds, “and I was joined by a small core of board members who shared my vision. Once a decision was made to move forward, we began to look for a new location.” The 73rd Street townhouse was sold and ASF took temporary office space nearby. Hoping to limit costs, the initial
The plan was to find a property that could be renovated.

As Lynn Carter, then ASF’s executive vice president and currently senior advisor, notes, “The next few years were spent on building support for the concept, starting the major fundraising needed and broadening awareness of the project. A major impetus was received in 1993 with an anonymous pledge of the first $1 million donation, later revealed to be from Danish shipowner Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller, who had strong ties to the U.S., including running his firm’s shipping operations from New York City during World War II.”

In 1996, Kaplan stepped down as president, and Edward P. Gallagher, then director of the National Academy of Design, was hired as president. And at the end of that year, two adjoining townhouses, with 50 feet fronting Park Avenue between 37th and 38th Streets, which had served as the headquarters for the German Democratic Republic’s Mission to the United Nations, were purchased.

“A search for an architect was then launched,” Carter continues, “with the requirement that the individual or firm have experience building in New York City.” From more than 20 preliminary proposals received, James Stewart Polshek and his firm, Polshek Partnership, were selected to design the new center. This reflected Polshek’s international reputation as well as his long-standing interest in Scandinavian design, following his year as a Fulbright scholar in Denmark in the 1950s. It was then that fundraising began in earnest, for what would become a multimillion-dollar construction project.

And while the building purchase turned out to be a great value at its $5 million price, as Eugene Kokot, a long-serving ASF trustee and current co-chair, recalls, “Unfortunately, it seemed the former owners had taken a great many liberties with the building codes, perhaps taking advantage of their diplomatic immunity. Ultimately it was more cost effective and offered more flexibility for the buildings to be torn down instead of being renovated.”

While still president, Kaplan had begun the fundraising, working with a trustee committee, and had presented preliminary proposals for support to representatives of the five Nordic countries. At the same time, both she and later Gallagher made clear to them that while it would greatly benefit their respective countries to support a new Nordic Center in Manhattan, that center would be an independent entity that produced and presented its own programs. After much negotiation, all five governments as well as the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM) provided financial support: $500,000 each
FOR NORWEGIAN INGER GUNDERSEN GINSBERG, LONG A MAJOR supporter of ASF and a trustee, who specifically contributed toward two of the exhibition galleries (one honoring her parents), the new center offered an important opportunity, she says, “to support one of ASF’s major roles as a presenter of art in its many forms in a high quality, professional space.” Ginsberg explains, “I am Norwegian. I am proud of my country and heritage and have always remained connected to Norway during my years in New York City. This applies to both my professional work and my personal interests and activities.

“My husband and I believed that the creation of a dedicated Scandinavia House was an important step in highlighting and facilitating cultural awareness and exchanges between and among the United States and the five Nordic countries. And fundamentally, we believe in the importance of an organization that serves mutual interests of the Nordic countries and the United States across a range of cultural areas, and that ASF/Scandinavia House occupies a unique position in furthering this objective,” she continues.

“As a result, we view our ongoing annual and special contributions as crucial for ensuring that ASF has the resources to maintain the quantity and quality of its wide-ranging programs showcasing Scandinavian music, film, art, literature and so forth to a broad public of all ages.”

Ultimately some 300 donors from the U.S. and abroad helped finance its construction and operation. “The response to the Campaign for Scandinavia House from supporters around the U.S. and the Nordic countries was truly
phenomenal,” Gallagher says. “In about four years, nearly $18 million was raised, which when added to the proceeds from the sale of the 73rd Street building and a number of early contributions, resulted in a $24 million fund to pay for the construction of Scandinavia House, as well as the beginning of an endowment to support programs and operations. It was a tremendous outpouring of support.”

Careful advance planning was undertaken for developing the operations of Scandinavia House at the same time as design and then construction were taking place. A business plan was developed by Gallagher and the staff, as well as model program schedules and staffing requirements. Today, Stephen McGrath, ASF director of Finance and Administration, marvels at how closely today’s Scandinavia House follows the one imagined nearly 23 years ago.

“Currently,” he notes, “operations of Scandinavia House are supported by revenue generated from admissions, the shop and the café. The revenue generated by short-term rental of spaces to outside groups also is an important source of support. Equally important are the funds generated by contributions and grants in support of programs and the income from a number of funds in our endowment, created by generous gifts from trustees, corporations and friends. And, of course, the funds provided by our members are crucial.”

Groundbreaking took place on May 15, 1999, and plans were drawn up for an eight-story (six floors above ground, two floors below), 28,000-square-foot building. The goal was to complete the building before the end of 2000. And while Gallagher and the staff had imagined much of how the building would be utilized before construction, the Children’s Center, which would eventually become amongst its most popular attractions, was not initially envisioned.

The impetus and support for that came from Monika Heimbold, a relatively new trustee back then, who was born in Sweden, had been trained as a clinical social worker and was working at the time with young children at a therapeutic nursery. When she was shown the plans, she asked Gallagher about possibly devoting some space especially for children. “As a young girl in Stockholm, I always had led a rich, imaginative life,” she says. “I loved stories about bold young girls like Pippi Longstocking and spent hours playacting on small stages with friends in the woods. So I thought it would be great to find a way to share some of those Scandinavian experiences with young children in our new Scandinavia House.”

After some discussion with Polshek, he agreed to design a children’s center on the fourth floor, which had previously been assigned primarily as overflow exhibition space for the gallery below. She says, “I recommended a reading nook filled with Scandinavian children’s books in their native languages and in English, a play area with a BRIO train table, lots of LEGO blocks and a stage where children could act and wear costumes for imaginative play.” Monika and her husband Charles, who would later become U.S. Ambassador to Sweden, provided support for the space. Along with opportunities for imaginative play, during its first ten years, the Center also hosted a series of specially designed installations that incorporated Nordic children’s stories and folktales.

Eleven years later, Monika Heimbold traveled to Sweden to learn more about advances in preschool education that had transformed day-care facilities there from a singular focus on play to one that also incorporated learning. On her return, she expanded the Center’s space, commissioning a reimagined area, adding a sensory room and adjoining tunnel, along with a Scandinavian kitchen and shop, and placing a greater emphasis on younger children, ages 1-5. Beginning in 2011, and continuing in 2016 and 2019, she also initiated a series of symposia,
co-sponsored with the Sarah Lawrence College Child Development Institute, where she had studied and trained. These symposia were presented at Scandinavia House where Scandinavian educators could share the distinctive Nordic model of early childhood education with American educators and early childhood professionals.

Even as much more was to change across Scandinavia House for it to remain up to date and relevant throughout its history, what was created from the outset was immediately recognized as a center that was well prepared to transform an enduring mission and vision into an engaging reality. “We knew that we had created a Nordic Center that was a great locale for cultural programming, as well as a lively place for social interaction,” Gallagher says.

On October 16, 2000, the building was officially inaugurated with members of the royal families of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, the President of Iceland and officials from Finland and the U.S. in attendance, along with a crowd of several thousand onlookers that filled a section of Park Avenue closed for the event.

In his remarks at the opening, His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden called Scandinavia House “a dynamic, creative, interesting world, so far from home and yet so near.” The New York Times labeled it “a gift to the city, a place where visitors cannot only encounter the achievement of five different Northern European cultures . . . but also inhabit them a little . . . simply by stepping through the front door.”

The staff was now confronted by the challenge and the opportunity to create the programs for a waiting public that they had imagined for so long. The numbers reflecting how much has been accomplished to date are impressive. Ask visitors, members and staff and they all have their own memories of favorites.

For Kokot, it was the LEGO architecture exhibition in 2018. “It was an incredible sculpture garden of LEGO creations,” he says. “We had thousands of visitors, many of them groups of school children, with lines stretching along Park Avenue. In many ways, that exhibition brought to the fore everything that ASF and Scandinavia House were trying to accomplish in terms of sharing cultures and recognizing shared cultural interests.”

For Kokot’s co-chair, Daphne Davidson, whose family is of Norwegian background and who had received an ASF fellowship to study Old Norse for a Ph.D. in Denmark, it has been many things. “My parents were members for 50 years, so I remember coming to the townhouse on 73rd Street when I was young. There were no lectures, no concerts, just a nice little place,” she says. “Scandinavia House has totally changed ASF. Having this physical space to showcase everything in which we are involved is extraordinary.”

She brought her daughter to the Children’s Center on Saturdays. And as someone who has been involved with matters related to the Arctic, she lauds the Sámi Stories exhibition from 2014, focusing on the lives, culture and challenges of these indigenous people living in the Arctic Circle region. She also has been impressed by the quality and timeliness of many of the Covid-19-related Zoom presentations that Scandinavia House has mounted since being closed by the pandemic.

For Gallagher, there were so many favorites to choose from as well. “There were the great artists we hosted, like Liv Ullmann who appeared at two extraordinary evenings in 2019 where she talked about her films and career,” he recalls. “And I will never forget the Chopin Sonata performed at an ASF Centennial Concert in 2011 by Leif Ove Andsnes,” an artist described in the press as a pianist of ‘jaw-dropping dexterity and immense musicality.’

“Over the years,” he continues, “we have had so many memorable
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evenings with Nordic and world leaders, including UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland, Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway, President Gudni Jóhannesson of Iceland and, of course, members of the Nordic royal families.”

Here are a few selected highlights from several programmatic areas.

PATRICIA BERMAN IS THEODORA L. AND STANLEY H. FELDBERG
Professor of Art at Wellesley College. She first encountered ASF when she was awarded fellowships in 1984 and 1985 to complete her graduate dissertation on Edvard Munch in Norway. In 1993, she was asked to join the ASF Fellowships and Grants committee and has been serving on it ever since. A decade ago, she became an advisory trustee. And over the years she has curated several groundbreaking exhibitions at Scandinavia House and sees its galleries as a presence in the European and global art world. “In addition,” she notes, “if you are looking for a museum experience that is quiet and meditative and not the least bit overwhelming, this is the place to come.”

For the ASF Centennial Year celebration’s artistic centerpiece, she collaborated with Scandinavia House’s Pari Stave to curate Luminous Modernism: Scandinavian Art Comes to America, which opened in late 2011 and commemorated ASF’s first exhibition in 1912. A highly ambitious effort, it presented works by almost 200 contemporary Scandinavian artists, including Munch, Hammershøi and Carl Larsson. “The first ASF show was a moment in art history that should have not been forgotten,” Berman explains. It foreshadowed the historic groundbreaking Armory show just a few months later. The aim of the Scandinavia House exhibition in 2011-2012 was to highlight a significant chapter in art history and the importance of Scandinavian art as a model for early modern artists in North America. “There were major loans from all the national museums in the five Nordic countries, the equivalent of a major museum exhibition,” Berman says. “It took a year and a half to put the exhibition together and ultimately, helped highlight Scandinavia House for critics.”

The following year she again collaborated with Stave to curate a second exhibition that focused on the influences of Edvard Munch on Andy Warhol. “While not a new idea, we curated it differently than the European shows that came earlier. And so it turned out to be a revelation to New York audiences that in 1984 Warhol had engaged in analyzing Munch’s work,” Berman explains. A third show followed, featuring Munch’s photography. That exhibition has since been presented in Norway and Sweden and elsewhere in the

Top: At the opening and ribbon cutting for the Luminous Modernism: Scandinavian Art Comes to America exhibition in 2011, from left: ASF President Edward Gallagher, Crown Princess Mary of Denmark, King Harald V and Queen Sonja of Norway, King Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia of Sweden and President Tarja Halonen of Finland.

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U.S. These significant efforts have had a positive impact. “As I travel in the Nordic countries, scholars and curators are keen on doing collaborative work with Scandinavia House,” she says.

In her dual roles serving on both the ASF Fellowships and Grants and the Scandinavia House Art and Program advisory committees, Berman continues to think about new areas to explore. “Today, we continue to build new audiences with lectures, symposia and exhibits that might focus on political issues of global urgency like education, gender equality and economic equity,” she says. “We also might want to further examine the immigrant experience in the Nordic countries, as well as urgent questions surrounding ice melt and climate change.”

Karin Hellandsjø has curated five exhibitions at Scandinavia House over the years, beginning in 2005 with Norge: Contemporary Landscapes from the Collection of Her Majesty Queen Sonja of Norway. “Queen Sonja is an active art collector and it was a privilege to present part of her collection of mainly Norwegian art to the American public through the galleries of Scandinavia House,” Hellandsjø says. “It provided a unique chance to get an insight into the contemporary Norwegian art scene from the perspective of a collector. For me it was also exciting to get to know Scandinavia House. They have been good collaborators ever since, always professional and open to new ideas.”

In 2018 another show she curated, Light Lines, celebrated three Norwegian artists who share close ties to the New York community and have influenced each other by employing the power of the individual line. One of the three was Inger Johanne Grytting, who has lived and worked in New York for over 40 years, but whose art, she says, “is still deeply grounded in my early years in Northern Norway, where we learned to do with less and made up for it with creativity.” She continues: “I feel a deep pride in exhibiting at Scandinavia House, knowing the list of distinguished Scandinavian artists who have come here before us.” That list continues to grow.

“When we started out 20 years ago, many Nordic films were not widely shown in New York,” Gallagher says. “We were fortunate in that Danish-born Jytte Jensen, at that time curator of film at the Museum of Modern Art, selected and organized our film programs for the first seven years. Her immense knowledge and network of connections within the Nordic film world made possible an exciting variety of retrospectives, festivals and

*Photo: Laura Feld/ASF*
Icelandic cellist and ASF Fellow Geirþrúður Anna Guðmundsdóttir performs in Victor Borge Hall.

special screenings. She also worked closely with Nordic film leaders, such as Jan Erik Holst, an actor, producer, film critic and one-time head of the Norwegian Film Institute.

Holst recalls those early years. “I WAS A BOARD MEMBER of Scandinavian Films, the umbrella organization of the Nordic Film Institute and its president from 1993-2002,” he says. “I realized then that ASF might be very helpful in the promotion of Scandinavian films. When ASF opened its new and fantastic house in 2000, it was quite obvious we could do a far better promotion of Nordic films with special programs and by presenting historical series, films that focused on particular directors, actors or subjects as well as documentary and children’s films.

“Each year we would also present Oscar contenders from Scandinavia,” he continues. “Not only could these films be seen by the public, they would also reach Academy members and the press. Television series were added to the program at Scandinavia House later, especially Swedish murder mysteries like Beck and Wallander.” Norwegians and Danes had their own similar programs, as had Iceland. As a result, Scandinavia House became an important venue to screen them all. Holst and his colleagues believed the audiences would be there. “After all, we used to say that every fifth American has a relative that was once an immigrant some hundred years ago,” Holst explains.

Over the years, in addition to individual screenings, films were often grouped thematically, with series titles like Northern Exposure, Dogma and Beyond, Scandinavian Beauties, Finnish Documentaries, Baltic Film Festivals and others, many organized by Kyle Reinhart, currently manager of Educational and Cultural Programming.

More than 1,500 films have been screened at Scandinavia House, many preceded by discussions with the directors and other creative staff. In recent years, New York premieres of films such as The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Becoming Astrid and Out Stealing Horses, have taken place there.

If anyone can talk firsthand about 20 years of music performances at Scandinavia House, their diversity, quality and impact, it is Per Tengstrand, a classical pianist who was awarded the Litterus et Artibus medal for achievement in the performing arts by the King of Sweden. He had moved to the U.S. in 1998. “When Scandinavia House was first built, I got in touch with ASF and together with a conductor, Magnus Mårtensson, put together a string orchestra for a packed concert at the new Victor Borge Hall,” he says. And he has been performing at Scandinavia House every year since. “For a few years I did a mix of solo piano concerts and performances with the string orchestra, but I realized the best way to use the hall is for chamber music. So I came up with the idea of a chamber music series which became Music on Park Avenue. It started with a tiny audience but, after a while, the concerts became very popular.”

Tengstrand says he loves the intimate space of the hall because it invites the feeling of the audience being very close to the performer. He always has a pre-concert talk, telling the audience about the music being played and seeking to put it into context to make the “listening experience greater,” he says. “After the concert, I try to share some moments with as many as I can at a reception.” He tells the audience members that “they are the lucky ones because there are very few concert experiences,” he adds, “that can beat the intimacy and chamber music acoustics of Victor Borge Hall. It is the ultimate chamber music hall.”

Gallagher points out that a number of younger artists made their debuts...
at Scandinavia House, groups like the Young Danish String Quartet, who were introduced to New York audiences at Victor Borge Hall 15 years ago. Their concerts received critical raves in the press and led to a major international career.

OPERA, DANCE AND THEATER ALSO HAVE BEEN PRESENTED in Victor Borge Hall, including, since 2011, regular productions and readings by the Scandinavian American Theater Company, an accomplished group of young Nordic actors, directors and playwrights pursuing their careers in New York.

With the lockdowns ordered in New York City in March 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic assaulted the region, Scandinavia House closed its doors on March 15. But in less than two weeks, it had already found new life—and opened its virtual doors online. It started to produce new virtual tours of past gallery shows, adding narration to original exhibition materials and stills for text and images. Children’s Center members and later, anyone interested, could subscribe to an e-newsletter that highlighted ideas for projects to do with their kids and other useful tips. New book talks were presented.

Remote language classes from NYU were offered. Interactive Zoom programs were presented, focusing on the varying pandemic responses among the Scandinavian countries. Other original webcasts dealt with political and societal issues, including policing and police reform and equity, inclusion and immigration in Nordic countries. Nordic cooking lessons were presented with Smörgås Chef’s Morten Sohlberg. New films from Scandinavia were screened online, often with companion interviews with the director or an actor. And much more.

The result has been a substantial increase in views at and subscriptions to Scandinavia House’s YouTube channel, where most of this content is made available. Subscribers are up 50 percent since April, views have more than tripled during the past six months and hours watched are up nearly 200 percent. In addition, about half the visitors to the site last year were from New York. Now, virtual programming has significantly broadened the viewer base nationally and globally.

This virtual programming effort was developed in an emergency, but it is now becoming a regular offering and has generated great responses, providing an opportunity as Scandinavia House and ASF look to the future.

Gallagher notes, “We have learned about the power and potential of the digital world. From now on we will look at everything we do as presenting it live and in person, but also with a virtual reality.” More sophisticated teleconferencing and Live Arena technology is being installed at Scandinavia House so that participants can connect live and in real time from anywhere. “That will let us reach out to people all around the country,” he adds.

Expanding audiences is key. “While we are very community-minded, we also have a national outreach. I really want us to be a center for cultural exchange for the entire U.S., not just the greater New York area,” Gallagher says, “We want increasingly to engage a countrywide membership, broadening our presence everywhere.” Davidson agrees. “Scandinavia has a lot to offer,” she adds. “For instance, Americans can learn a great deal from how these countries are thinking about the Arctic, about economic and social equity and about public education.”

While public-oriented efforts and programs comprise the activities of most of the building, its staff also continues to focus on areas that have existed at ASF since it was founded—especially the grants and fellowship programs.

For more than 100 years the ASF Fellowships and Grants Program has awarded funds to Americans and Scandinavians engaged in study, research or creative arts projects. The first ASF grants were made to promote educational and cultural exchange between the U.S. and the Nordic countries.
**It is an oasis in the middle of all the noise of Manhattan. The intimacy makes it very human and humane.**

Since then, more than 7,500 scholars, researchers, policymakers, artists and professionals have received support for their work in areas as far-ranging as medicine and the sciences, economics and political history, the arts and literature. ASF Fellows are encouraged to showcase their achievements at various cultural events, performances, exhibitions, lectures and symposia. As Sally Yerkovich, director of Educational Exchange & Special Projects, notes, “The reach of ASF’s fellowships and grants programs is greatly enhanced by the fact that many Fellows are able to present their creative and scholarly work at Scandinavia House.”

Also ASF’s internship and training programs facilitate cultural and educational exchange between the United States and the five Nordic countries. Participants gain valuable professional experience and build beneficial relationships, while learning American business techniques to be applied in their home countries. Students and young professionals participate in a wide range of fields from architecture, fashion design and marketing to industrial and computer engineering.

Ultimately, a history of any institution is only a snapshot in time and a reflection of individual or collective memories that may indeed change over time. Yet, those memories can define that institution’s future prospects in some special ways.

Today, Zoe Vayer is a law student at the University of Miami. A New York City native, she practically grew up at Scandinavia House. “I still remember the day that Scandinavia House opened,” she says. “We lived just down the street and could see the building and the crowds at the ribbon cutting from our windows,” she recalls. When she was about six she started to go to the Children’s Center with her younger sister, putting on Viking helmets and playacting skits on its stage. “I also remember Laura (Winterhalter), the manager of the shop, gave us a Scandinavian book about two little trolls that would live in a child’s teeth. It was meant to encourage us to brush. And of course, I can still remember the smell of potato leek soup from the café and the best marshmallow crunch dessert.” She recalls attending the original screenings of *Wallander* in Victor Borge Hall, before it ever appeared on U.S. television. And years later, she worked in the Scandinavia House shop and, later still, was Gallagher’s assistant for a year and a half.

But what really has stayed with her most is her heritage. Her maternal grandfather was Finnish Sámi, who arrived in the U.S. before World War II. Zoe recalls that “he was a quiet stoic type, but proud of where he came from.” The Sámi exhibitions and events that Scandinavia House presented over the past 10 years made a lasting impression on her as well. “His story is my story too, and Scandinavia House has helped keep that story alive.”

Swedish-born Yvonne Ericson is another long-time fan and member. She’s been working there for the past 12 years, greeting visitors at the front desk. “People love coming here,” she says. “And there are a lot of regulars who keep coming back (according to one survey, 30 percent come back every week), attending the film screenings and the concerts.”

**Why do they keep coming back?** “It is an oasis in the middle of all the noise of Manhattan. The intimacy makes it very human and humane,” Ericson adds. “I’ve gotten such pleasure being at the front desk and seeing the kids come in to the Children’s Center and then to see them grow. Normally we close in August for a couple of weeks. But when we reopen, the joy on the faces of the kids is palpable. For them, Scandinavia House is beloved.” Or, as one visitor put it on a recent survey, “Whenever I am there, I am happy.”

“The time has passed quickly,” Gallagher says. “We have come a long distance and have a wonderful future ahead of us.”

A listing follows of program highlights for the past 20 years at Scandinavia House.

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**Max J. Friedman** is a writer and editor who recently contributed to and was guest editor of the *Scandinavian Review*’s Spring/Summer 2020 special issue on “The Nordic Childhood.” He was born in Sweden and emigrated to the U.S. at a young age.