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My Uncle in America; or, How Danes Love and Hate “Americanness”¹

By Lars Handesten

I once had an uncle in America. He is now dead and gone. Still, he is my closest familial connection to the United States, and that's why I'd like to tell you about him. In Danish we have the idiomatic expression “my rich uncle.” It refers to a person who suddenly appears and takes care of things when you find yourself in dire economic straits. A particular variant of this expression is “my rich uncle from America,” which is even better. The expression dates back to the great waves of emigration, when nearly every Danish family had an uncle in America. In my family we had Uncle Carl, who immigrated to America sometime in 1913 when he was about twenty years old. He was offered American citizenship if he joined the army, so he did and ended up serving in World War I when America entered the war in 1917. He was wounded by a grenade in the trenches and was treated in a hospital near the border between Belgium and France. He was cared for in the hospital by a young Belgian nurse whom he later married. She became Aunt Mathilde. They returned together to the US, where he was now a citizen. Like many other Scandinavians, they first settled in Wisconsin, then later moved to upstate New York.

Uncle Carl came from a poor farming family and was my *farfar's* (paternal grandfather's) brother. I don't know exactly what Uncle Carl dreamed of when he emigrated as a young man or what he expected to find in America, but if you look at literature you can sort of find an answer. Jeppe Aakjær tells of a dreaming peasant boy in his poetic retelling of the old Danish folksong, “Ole Sat on a Stump and Sang.” Uncle Carl may have done similar dreaming when he and his brothers were sent out in their youth to tend the animals in the fields. They would have had plenty of time to dream of emigration like Ole in the song. Johannes V. Jensen is probably the Danish author who has described “the land of opportunity” most positively. In fact, he was one of the only Danish authors of his time who was excited about the US. Most of the others regarded the “barbaric country” with suspicion as a place where the law of the jungle predominated and the rich were

nouveau riche and vulgar. Knut Hamsun is an example of an author who didn't care much for America, but he had gotten to know the country from the bottom up, through heavy and poorly paid manual labor. He laid rails for the railroad.

For his part, Johannes V. Jensen had nice things to say about the country that he visited five times. In an article about New York, he writes:

One week's journey from Europe, God's ruins, lies this ahistorical world, fairly far away but in no way distant. It is to a high degree an unclassical world, but not one that is fundamentally different from our own, just more sprightly. It is ahead of all of us, in more extravagant and happier style, without portentous puzzles in the heart from existence, just life, drive, flight, and appetite, a jumping-over world.²

The United States was a fresh and new country. Jensen liked to call it "the Free States," a rather old-fashioned but promising term that was more descriptive than the acronym "USA." But he was also able to get himself properly worked up about it—especially when he wasn't visiting America, where too many things still rubbed him the wrong way and fit poorly with his dream and grand imaginings. He liked to contrast his imagined "Free States" with old Europe, which seemed to be falling apart because of disharmony between countries and their different languages. For Jensen, America represented the dream of "a unified national body," as he called it,³ a place where the social experiment could begin from scratch. For him, New York City was the center of it all. As he explained, "The city functions as an anthropological laboratory, the birthplace of the new humanity, more than anything else in the world."⁴

This conception of America still exists and has also shaped my own ideas about America. Several years ago, Leonard Cohen articulated this dream in the song, "Democracy":

It's coming to America first,
The cradle of the best and of the worst.
It's here they got the range
And the machinery for change
And it's here they got the spiritual thirst.

It's here the family's broken
And it's here the lonely say
That the heart has got to open
In a fundamental way:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

I don't know if it was this sort of high-flying idea about a new humanity and democracy that enticed Uncle Carl when he emigrated to the United States, but his primary concerns were most likely rather more pragmatic, since his initial task was just to get through the day and find his way, which was hard enough. Jensen was aware of that aspect of the immigrant experience. He had tried making his way in the country the hard way in 1902, when he spent several months in Chicago during the winter. On one hand, he praised the city for its tremendous energy and determination to lift itself up and develop itself. On the other hand, he also saw how people were beaten down by ruthless development. When he saw the city again in 1939, he wrote, "People flee from Chicago. As a city, it is a curse. The wheel thunders here and crushes people. Yet if someone offered me a life in Chicago, I would take it."⁵

Uncle Carl spent some time in Chicago, the "city of the Big Shoulders" as the Swedish American poet Carl Sandburg dubbed it in 1914,⁶ but continued on, like so many other Danes, to Wisconsin. He got a job as a millionaire's chauffeur, while his wife Mathilde worked as the housekeeper. Uncle Carl never got rich himself, and in my family, we had to be content with having an uncle in America. Thus I have unfortunately never been able to boast of my rich uncle in America, and we have never had a rich uncle who could supply the family with riches from another world and save us when we found ourselves down and out.

But Uncle Carl did become prosperous enough that he could afford a car, in about 1960. And that wasn't all. He also had the means to have it transported to Europe, where he and Aunt Mathilde toured around France, Belgium, and Denmark to visit and get reacquainted with their relatives. Aunt Mathilde was what is known as a "noble widow," meaning she must have been married to someone from the nobility before she married my uncle. She must not have inherited any material wealth from that connection with the nobility, since she

accompanied my poverty-stricken, wounded uncle to America, but she put on airs and wrinkled her nose at my grandmother's cooking. That bothered my grandmother. Pickiness was the worst thing she knew. But it didn't bother her enough to prevent her from placing a large photograph of my uncle and aunt on the little mahogany table where the telephone stood. Whether they were poor or posturing, my uncle and aunt from America were given a place of honor in my grandparents' home.

Uncle Carl drove back to Denmark in his car, and he had presents for everyone with him. I was too young to get anything, but my older brother received a pocketknife. It was made of tin and didn't last long. My father got a tie printed with a provocative picture of Marilyn Monroe and her breasts. Of course, it wasn't a tie he could wear—he was a schoolteacher and neither would nor could have had anything to do with such an expression of American popular culture. Uncle Carl was and remained the incarnation of American tastelessness, a tastelessness that Danes love to hate and denigrate. But it is also a tastelessness that we have gradually come to love, a tastelessness that has, with time, gained access and even become an acceptable style. It is kitsch, perhaps. But that kitsch is so exaggerated that it becomes amusing when larger-than-life pop culture icons like Elvis and Michael Jackson indulge in extravagant fantasylands like Elvis's Graceland and Michael Jackson's Neverland.

We laugh at American culture when it goes to extremes, but we are also astonished by the United States, which has the finest universities in the world and a culture industry that produces TV shows we gobble up—a person can hardly sit among a group of academics today without the conversation turning to *Mad Men*, *House of Cards*, *Game of Thrones*, or that type of show. Quite a few of us speak an odd hybrid of Danish and American English. We have adopted the f-word and apply it to everything, just as all women are referred to as “bitches.” Unlike people in the United States, however, we say it happily in all sorts of public contexts, on TV, “or whatever.” It is as if the linguistic distance asserts itself anyhow and makes itself felt. As long as we say it in English, it doesn't feel as offensive to us. There is such pandering to the English language in Denmark that we have begun to use entire phrases and sentences in English when speaking Danish. We

no longer say “*en sag*,” but instead “an issue.” Meetings don’t have a “*dagsorden*,” but an “agenda.” In Ludvig Holberg’s time, French was in fashion, so he wrote the comedy *Jean de France*, in which he pokes fun at a young man who has been studying in Paris. He can no longer properly speak Danish and has changed his name to Jean de France instead of Hans Frandsen. He calls his friends, family, and girlfriend by the French versions of their names. It wouldn’t be difficult at all to translate that comedy into present-day life by just replacing France with the United States and French with English—that would be right on. Then we could, along with Holberg’s character Jeronimus, criticize the foolishness of the youth and complain about all the English words that young people use and older people just don’t understand.

The English language has prevailed in all kinds of areas of Danish life. Today Danes no longer go to an “*udsalg*,” all shops with any self-respect hold “sales” instead. We adopt American culture as well when we celebrate Black Friday and shop like madmen. Halloween has gradually been introduced, too. For many children and young people, it is already a tradition that they don’t even think about, while the old tradition of Fastelavn with costumes and collection cans has gone into steep decline. Shops have also attempted to introduce Valentine’s Day, which could have a beneficial effect on sales. This is happening all over the country, in all areas of life, and “at the end of the day” there isn’t much we can do about it. “That’s life.” Language is just uncontrollable. Those people who have attempted to protect it, well-meaning people from Dansk Sprognævn (Committee for Danish Language) and Modersmålselskabet (the Society for the Mother Tongue) have suffered one embarrassing defeat after another. The struggle against the American English language affecting Danish is a lost cause. “Never mention it!”

I don’t know how Uncle Carl pronounced Danish words when he came to visit. I imagine that traces of his Jutlandic dialect persisted to some degree. But other Danes who have been in the United States for a long time can hardly speak proper Danish anymore. They have become so American that it almost hurts to listen to them. This is often the case with people in the fashion and film industries, people who have simply become so American that they can’t exist in the Danish language. It’s as if it is too small for them. It’s a bit like wearing a T-

shirt that is way too small; an extra-small T-shirt doesn't work at all for people who are so grand and international and accustomed to size XXX.

In some ways, we are more American than the Americans themselves. We think that we know the United States maybe even better than the Americans themselves. We saw Jacob Holdt's book *Amerikanske billeder (American Pictures)* in the 1970s, which shows the social dark side of the country. Here we could see how badly African Americans and Native Americans have been treated, and we could empathize with them. Our ambivalent feelings about "*det amerikanske*" are evident throughout Danish society. We talk about "American conditions" in order to describe a nightmarish cultural and political situation that we don't want to have in Denmark. We have been known to use the phrase "so American" with the precise emphasis that makes it clear that whatever we are talking about is something terrible that is definitely, definitely nothing like us. Danish popular culture contains a fierce antagonism and fear toward Americanism. In Morten Korch's novels, the villains are often American types. They are often shady guys who have returned from the United States having learned everything there is to know about dubious deals. They are people who have abandoned their fatherland. They are people who don't recognize true Danish values, such as homeland, native soil, and true love. This is also part of our view of America—Americans are the dregs of Europe, and their land is the home of the bad guys.

But what do we really know of the country? Mostly New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, along with tourist routes through Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon. First and foremost New York. I was there a few years ago with my wife and fifteen-year-old son. He had asked for this trip when he was confirmed, just like his big brother had done. It was fall break in Denmark, and we waded through the city of New York among a mob of other Danes. Whether we were in line at the Empire State Building or shopping on Broadway, we heard Danish. It is Woody Allen's New York and the European-known parts of the US with which we are familiar. But very few Danes have a concept of the Midwest. We regard the religious fundamentalism of the Bible Belt with irritation and amazement, marveling at people who don't want to learn about Darwin and his ideas about evolution. We

have trouble comprehending that the same land can encompass people who believe literally in the Bible and simultaneously produce the most cutting-edge research in the natural sciences and medicine. How does the country even fit together? It is a mystery.

But Uncle Carl's new culture prevailed in Denmark in the long run. American popular culture has spread and been accepted, even celebrated, almost everywhere. Today there is no one who despises Marilyn Monroe; no one needs to watch her films in secret. Marilyn Monroe is now taken seriously by film studies, and it is no longer embarrassing to be fascinated and amused by *The Seven-Year Itch*.

During the Cold War, in the mid-1960s, Uncle Carl and Aunt Mathilde moved to Tombstone, Arizona, because Mathilde was terrified out of her wits by the threats from the Soviet Union, nuclear bombs, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. She was so afraid of communists that she wanted to hide away somewhere as far remotely as possible, which was how she perceived Tombstone, Arizona. You couldn't get any farther away than that. So they moved right out into the desert where the American military had tested their nuclear bombs—how dumb can anyone be? At home in Denmark, the family shook its collective head at Aunt Mathilde. We felt like the French comic book characters Asterix and Obelix dealing with the Romans. "They're crazy, those Romans," Obelix says. We said, "They're crazy, those Americans." And we still say that.

On the one hand, we are deeply preoccupied with everything American. The Danish media cover every school shooting and the presidential election as if it were about our own president. We follow the first primaries on TV. On Super Tuesday of the primaries for the 2016 election, Danish TV began broadcasting at four o'clock in the morning so that Danes could follow along and not miss a single second of the big drama. On the other hand, we find Americans to be deeply strange and sometimes ridiculous. We don't understand anything about Donald Trump. The Americans could just as well have elected Donald Duck. But we love it when Democrats like Bernie Sanders suggest on TV that the United States should try to be more like Denmark. Our self-congratulatory delight knows no bounds. It's not enough that a pastry has been called after us. Now the Democrats want to introduce "Danish conditions" and import the Danish social-

democratic welfare system. It is not just us reflecting ourselves in the United States when it is reciprocal. It almost brings tears to my eyes and makes me want to break into a patriotic song. In any case, I am reminded of Hans Christian Andersen's words about Denmark:

Engang du herre var i hele Norden,
bød over England, - nu du kaldes svag,
et lille land, og dog så vidt om jorden
end høres danskens sang og mejselslag.

(Once you ruled the entire North,
Commanded England—now you are called weak
A little land, and yet so far around the world
The Danes' song and hammers can be heard.)

That's about how it is today as well. Perhaps not precisely with songs and hammers, but in any case with legends about our welfare state, in which few have too much and fewer too little. But I will resist the lure of these grand passions and come down to earth again. That's how we Danes are, of whom Grundtvig sang: "Ved jorden at blive det passer os bedst, vi er ikke skabte til storhed og blæst" (it suits us best to remain on the ground; we were not shaped for greatness and storms).

Danes must cry uncle with regard to greatness. We don't have America's size; we are not size XXX. We don't have a heroic culture like the United States. Denmark is the place for anti-heroes and small men, which is why we love Chaplin and Woody Allen's films and Peter Farrelly's *Dumb and Dumber*. That's the kind of thing we can relate to. My uncle Carl fits just right into that picture. He never became anything great in America and left no visible traces.

Uncle Carl and Aunt Mathilde died in a retirement home in Tombstone, Arizona. They were not survived by any children, so my family's history in the United States ends there. Or almost. For I stand here and tell Uncle Carl's story, and I am here in the "Free States" to talk about Danish literature and thus in a way about my uncle's cultural background. I am here for professional reasons, but I am also here because the Free States still exert an attraction—as they have done at least since Christian Winther in 1835 allowed his two small protagonists to dream of their "*Flight to America*," to the land where it hails sugarplums and rains and snows lemonade, where you can get an

estate strewn with gold just waiting to be picked up. As it turns out, the two boys never make the journey, but drown their sorrows at the bottom of a bowl of sago soup instead.

I have been to the United States six times and have returned home each time enriched. It has not made me a rich uncle from America in any tangible way, but in a metaphorical sense I am the rich uncle from America. I don't bring home Marilyn Monroe ties or tin pocketknives to my nephews and nieces, but I have an increasingly broad conception of the United States to talk about. I just gave a guest lecture at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and now I stand in New Orleans. I can't claim to have gotten the United States under my skin—that would require more time—but I have nonetheless expanded my horizons, so they stretch farther than Woody Allen and New York. I am here and don't need to drown my sorrows at the bottom of a bowl of sago soup, because I have managed to actually make my way to the "land of plenty," or whatever we would call that in Danish.

Endnotes

¹ This article has been adapted from a speech given in Danish to members of the Danish Academic Network in America (DANA) in New Orleans, Louisiana, in May 2016. It was translated from Danish by Julie Allen.

² Johannes V. Jensen, *Den Ny Verden: Til International Belysning af Nordisk Bondekultur* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1907), 3.

³ Johannes V. Jensen, *Fra Fristaterne* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1939), 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jensen, *Fra Fristaterne*, 123-4.

⁶ Carl Sandburg, "Chicago," *Poetry*, March 1914.