2007

Autobiographical Constructions of Danish American Identity between the World Wars

Julie K. Allen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge

Part of the European History Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, and the Regional Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol30/iss2/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Bridge by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Autobiographical Constructions of Danish-American Identity between the World Wars

by Julie K. Allen

One of the most emotionally charged issues related to American immigration, past and present is the question of how quickly and completely immigrants should be expected to assimilate into mainstream American culture. Throughout the nineteenth century, the prevailing attitude in America was that assimilation of immigrants would happen naturally and gradually, but the first decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of nativism and a much more aggressive approach to the Americanization of immigrants. While these trends peaked during World War I, their reverberations continued to impact immigrant groups throughout America throughout the decades preceding World War II. One group that found itself unexpectedly, considering its members' high levels of English mastery and American citizenship, singled out for criticism during this period was Danish-Americans, who responded to the impugning of their loyalty to their adopted homeland by accelerating the pace and fervor of their Americanization throughout the 1920s and 30s.

Nowhere is this attitude more apparent than in Danish-American autobiographical texts from the interwar period. Nativism during and after World War I heightened and focused the self-perception and self-representation of Danish immigrants to the U.S. Several autobiographies by Danish-Americans from this period attempt to explain the phenomenon of the Danish-American and show Danes to be the stuff of which good Americans are made. Each author traces his individual transformation from immigrant to Danish-American, following the pattern established by the Danish-born photojournalist Jacob A. Riis' 1901 autobiography The Making of an American. The final chapter of Riis' book, entitled "The American Made," concludes with Riis' account of seeing the American flag on a ship in a Danish harbor and realizing "that it was my flag; that my children's home was mine, indeed; that I also had become an
American in truth.” Writing at the turn of the century, Riis depicts this change as a natural, almost unconscious evolution, but the interwar autobiographers document a much more deliberate metamorphosis, demonstrating their eagerness to prove Theodore Roosevelt’s alleged comment to Riis, “Your countrymen are among the best Americans.”

Autobiographical constructions of Danish-American identity afforded immigrants the opportunity to explore the dualistic nature of their cultural identity and determine their relationship both to the old country and to their new home, navigating between what John Bodnar and Werner Sollors have identified as “descent—loyalty to an ancestral heritage—and consent—a need to show loyalty to new cultures and political structures.” Danish-American literature, fiction and non-fiction, allowed members of the far-flung immigrant community to express the group’s divided self-consciousness, caught between loyalty to its ancestral heritage and to its chosen future, and suggest means of reconciling both traditions. More specifically, autobiographical texts gave Danish-Americans an opportunity to construct and legitimize their cultural identity within the American socio-political system, a task that became particularly pressing in the 1920s and 30s.

The construction of a peculiarly Danish-American cultural identity is the theme of three autobiographical texts by Danish-Americans from the interwar period: Carl Christian Jensen’s An American Saga (1927), Thomas Miller (T.M.) Nielsen’s How a Dane Became an American (1935), and Karl Jørgensen’s Dansk Amerika (1930). All three texts describe the events of the author’s own life while also attempting to systematize the evolution of the ideal Danish-American, in terms of cultural acclimatization, language usage, religious affiliation, and the choice of marriage partner. Although they share a common purpose, they direct themselves at different audiences. The first two texts, written in English and published by American publishing houses, illustrate and advocate the total integration of Danish immigrants into American culture, while the third text, written in Danish and published in Denmark, serves as an explanation to Danes in the home country of how Danish immigration to America shapes both the immigrant and the country
he has adopted, to the ultimate benefit of both parties. Despite the differences between them, all three texts emphasize that an individual’s desire to become an American outweighs all other considerations, that the process of becoming an American is a matter of will, and that early twentieth-century Danish-Americans possessed this determination in rich measure.

Before turning to the autobiographies themselves, however, it is important to explore the cultural climate in America, particularly as related to the issue of Danish immigration and assimilation. In general terms, efforts by Danish-Americans in the interwar period to use autobiography as a means of documenting their ethnic group’s dedication to American ideals are responding to the overall climate of distrust of foreign-born Americans at the time. Political rhetoric at the highest levels of American government supported the total assimilation of immigrants. In a speech delivered on May 10, 1915, President Woodrow Wilson stated, “America does not consist of national groups. A man who thinks of himself as belonging to a particular national group in America has not yet become an American, and the man who goes among you to trade upon your nationality is no worthy son to live under the stars and stripes.”

Later the same year, on October 12, former President Theodore Roosevelt polemicized, “The foreign-born population of this country must be an Americanized population. [. . .] It must talk the language of native-born fellow citizens, it must possess American citizenship and American ideals. [. . .] It must stand firm by the oath of allegiance in word and deed and show that in every fact it has renounced allegiance to every prince, potentate or foreign government.” Such blanket pronouncements of the inadmissibility of foreign identity in America created an expectation that becoming an American meant renouncing one’s previous identity, as the title of T. M. Nielsen’s autobiography, How a Dane became an American, makes explicit.

However, a more specific catalyst for the pronounced efforts of Danes in particular to market their Americanness may well have been a speech given on July 4, 1918, by Iowa Governor William Lloyd Harding, in which he accused Iowa’s Danish-Americans of gross ingratitude toward America for speaking Danish in their
churches and schools. He then went on to malign the Danish-Americans for their supposed unworthiness for the blessings America had bestowed upon them, stating “Now, think of a man who was brought from the filth of Denmark and placed on a farm for which he was paid perhaps $3 an acre. Ye gods and fishes, what Iowa has done for him he can never repay.” Although the governor later denied his provocative and offensive pronouncements, the tone of his speech was in keeping with his record of antipathy toward foreign-born Americans, an attitude exemplified by his decision to ban the public use, including personal conversations on trains and over the telephone, of all foreign languages in Iowa for the duration of World War I. This policy came under fire from many of his constituents, but aroused the particular ire of Iowa’s admittedly small Danish-American community, which not only tended to live in heavily Danish communities but also nurtured resentment over the repression of Danish in the German-occupied duchy of Slesvig. Governor Harding’s infamous July 4 remarks prompted many angry letters to the editor of the Des Moines Review, including a statement from the Danish-American theologian Peder Sørensen (P. S.) Vig, usually a moderate on the language issue, who argued that Citizenship, true loyalty and the speaking of any certain language do not absolutely go together. If so were the case there could be no American speaking traitors nor many true patriots speaking a foreign tongue. But we all know that there are many of both classes and only too many of the first. Patriotism and loyalty are not matters of the lip, but of the heart, otherwise a parrot might be patriotic, and a stammerer dying for his country a filthy slacker only, according to the logic of fanaticism. Although Danish-Americans took Wilson’s and Roosevelt’s counsel seriously and strove to prove themselves truly Americanized, they differentiated between linguistic ability and political loyalty, as Vig’s letter illustrates.

For Danish-Americans in the early twentieth century, becoming American mandated patriotism and loyalty to America, but not necessarily the renunciation of all connections to Danish culture. J. R.
Christianson summarizes this position as the Scandinavian-American press of the time presented it, namely that the oath taken at the time of naturalization unconditionally transferred political loyalty from the homeland to the United States, but that this oath did not surrender the right to utilize a mother tongue in daily speech or to preserve rapport with the homeland culture through the maintenance of ethnic societies. In other words, civic obligation was one thing and cultural orientation another. In terms of civic obligation, Danes were eager to demonstrate their allegiance to the United States; Vig's impassioned defense of an ideological rather than linguistic basis for patriotism and Americanism is validated, for Danish-Americans, at least, by the statistics for Danish-Americans serving in the U.S. military during World War I. Although Swedish-Americans were generally pro-German, most Danes were fiercely anti-German and ready to fight on the American side. In July 1918, when Governor Harding made his infamous comments, over 30,000 Danish-Americans were serving in the United States Armed Forces. In fact, Danish-Americans' loyalty to their new homeland was so strong that it occasionally baffled their Danish countrymen. J. E. Bøggild, keynote speaker at the 1915 Danish National Celebration in Chicago wondered, "What are the enchanting characteristics of this land that bind all those that have once settled here? For it is the case that America exercises a witchcraft over all those that come under its influence." Governor Harding's attack on Iowa's Danish-Americans was therefore all the more disconcerting for its unexpectedness, given the Danish immigrant community's exemplary track record for rapid and thorough assimilation into American society. Long before World War I-related pressures of nativism and Americanization exerted themselves, Danish-Americans had demonstrated an exceptional willingness to become linguistically and officially a part of American society. The majority of Danish immigrants regarded learning and speaking English, often at the expense of Danish, as essential in making the transition to their new home. The United States Census of Population, which tracks the ability of immigrants to speak English, reported in 1911 that 97 percent of Danish immigrants
spoke English, compared to 53 percent for other ethnic groups. By 1930, 99 percent of Danish-Americans could speak English.\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, by 1930, seventy-five percent of nearly 180,000 Danish-born Americans had been naturalized, the highest percentage of any national group in the United States.\textsuperscript{20}

Scholars have suggested a wide range of factors to account for the Danes' eagerness to become fully American, ranging from a general lack of national pride among Danes in the aftermath of Denmark's humiliating military defeat by Germany in 1864 to the Danish immigrants' single-minded focus on achieving economic success. The most widely accepted explanation for the generally more rapid assimilation of Danish immigrants than other ethnic groups, including their Swedish or Norwegian counterparts, centers on the fact that the settlement practices of Danish immigrants on the whole privileged individual assimilation over cultural conservation. Since Danish immigration to America began in earnest several decades later than from Germany, Sweden, and Norway, there were few Danish outposts on the frontier; instead, Danes often helped stabilize existing settlements. By the time large numbers of Danes were arriving regularly in America toward the end of the nineteenth century, the railroads made travel swift and safe, eliminating the need to travel in groups for safety crossing the plains. As a result, Danes often immigrated as individuals and blended into established communities. The high proportion of single men within Danish immigrant groups resulted in many of them marrying outside the Danish-American community. According to a study conducted in Chicago between 1880 and 1900, 27 percent of Danes married outside their ethnic group, in contrast to 19 percent of Swedes and only 8 percent of Norwegians.\textsuperscript{21}

In \textit{The Danish Americans}, George Nielsen suggests that these immigration patterns resulted in relatively few centralized Danish settlements that could attract later immigrants.\textsuperscript{22} In contrast to Swedes and Norwegians, who congregated in a few states, Danes spread out throughout the northern United States, in a swath stretching from Massachusetts to California. In 1890, when fifty percent of Norwegian immigrants to the United States were located in Minnesota and Wisconsin, the largest Danish settlement at the
same time (in Iowa) contained only 11.7 percent of Danish immigrants. These numbers seem to demonstrate that individual survival took precedence over community building, although Henrik Bredmose Simonsen, in his study of the Danish Lutheran communities in the U.S., argues that many attempts were made to establish Danish colonies that would preserve Danish culture and traditions, as well as providing an infrastructure of support for new immigrants from Denmark.

Another central factor in the dispersal and subsequent assimilation of Danish immigrants was the Danes' lack of a unifying religious organization, such as the Swedish Augustan Synod. Instead, tension between the Grundtvigian and Inner Mission camps within the Danish state church persisted among Danish immigrant groups in America and caused deep divisions within the immigrant community, both in terms of religious practice and attitude toward the preservation of Danish cultural and linguistic identity, which the Grundtvigians promoted, while the Inner Mission adherents focused more on bringing their Christian message to as many of their neighbors, regardless of ethnic background, as possible. Nielsen argues that the viability of Danish-American institutions was tenuous from the beginning due to the small size and loose organization of Danish families and societies, but also because of the prevalence of strife and divisiveness within the Danish-American community. The solution that many Danes chose to this discord within the immigrant group was “dispersal, separation from the Danish community, and a more rewarding fellowship within American institutions.” Whatever their specific individual reasons, the majority of Danish immigrants opted to become part of the society they encountered in America, rather than establishing one of their own, and this tendency intensified as Danish immigration to the U.S. tapered off in the years following World War I and the implementation of strict immigration quotas.

Each of the major waves of Danish immigration to the U.S. has a particular character that reflects the way the immigrants viewed themselves and their relationship to America. Anne Lisbeth Olsen and Niels Peter Stilling classify Danish immigration into five general periods: 1) from 1820 to 1850, individual Danes, primarily men,
scouted out the situation and fanned the desire to emigrate among those back home; 2) from 1850 to 1870, families and groups of Mormons emigrated and settled near each other in western America; 3) from 1870 to 1895, massive emigration by young, single Danes from famine-stricken rural areas seeking work was the norm; 4) from 1895 to 1910, dissatisfied city-dwellers sought independence in America; 5) from 1910 to 1930, emigration by the lower classes was replaced by the "know-how emigration" of specialized laborers.28 After 1930, Danish emigration decreased to a trickle of individuals who did not share a common purpose in setting out for America. The earliest Danish immigrants shared in the thrill of discovering a pristine land, while those who came in the peak years, between 1850 and 1914, struggled to survive in that wilderness and to found communities. Later immigrants came to a largely settled country where they often had Danish connections to help them get started, but also faced the danger of replicating Danish social and ideological divisions within the immigrant communities. By the time Danish immigration subsided, coinciding more or less exactly with the resurgence of nativism in America, Danish-Americans were no longer strangers in their adopted country; for better or worse, they were a part of American society. The challenge they faced now was determining the nature of their identity as Danish-Americans, a question that required conscious negotiation between the demands of the old world and the new.

When large-scale Danish immigration to the United States began in the mid-nineteenth century, Danes enjoyed relatively easy access to American society because of their similarities to the dominant Anglo-Protestant ethnic and religious groups. Like many of the earliest immigrants, most Danes sought religious freedom and economic opportunity in the new world. Nielsen asserts that "in nearly every way, including their values and the desire for economic success, the Danes fit the American system."29 In general, Danes matched the Caucasian, Protestant profile of prosperous Americans, and although they experienced individually the abuse that all "greenhorns" encountered, as a group they merged smoothly into most American communities. In some cases, their Americanization was so ingrained that many Danish immigrants around the turn of
the century referred to themselves as “Danish-born Americans,” almost as if to imply they had always been Americans despite being born in Denmark.

In the absence of readily apparent ethnic or religious differences from their American neighbors, the greatest and often most obvious obstacle to Danish assimilation was language. In light of the controversy surrounding Governor Harding’s foreign language ban on July 4th speech, it is not surprising that the role of language in shaping Danish-American identity was constantly an issue of debate. In making the transition from homesick newcomer to naturalized citizen, Danish-Americans continually struggled to define their linguistic identity. Despite a desire to learn English, many Danes struggled with mastering English pronunciation and felt unable to express their thoughts accurately in the new language. Yet although the Danish language represented a link to the homeland, it did not always provide a bond with other Danish immigrants, since many Danish immigrants spoke regional dialects rather than standard Danish and thus did not share a common vernacular with their countrymen. In fact, speakers of more pronounced dialects of Danish were often ridiculed by other Danes to the point that many Danish communities moved away from the use of Danish entirely to ensure peace. First- and second-generation Danish-Americans also disagreed about the role of Danish, both in private and public settings. The American-born children of Danish immigrants considered themselves first and foremost Americans and were often embarrassed by their parents’ dependence on a foreign tongue and refused to speak it. As the numeric balance of Danish-Americans swung in favor of American-born, the connection to the home country represented by the Danish language became increasingly tenuous. Moreover, although a few Danish-American newspapers survived well into the twentieth century, the diminutive size of the Danish-American community limited its ability to support its own presses, as larger ethnic groups like the Swedes and Norwegians could. Linguistic similarities between written Danish and Norwegian led to some joint publications and organizations, but such cooperative efforts often led to the subsuming of Danish-American identity under the rubric
of Scandinavian-American, a label which first emerged from the commingling of Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians on the American side of the Atlantic. In the evolution of a collective Danish-American identity, therefore, 1930 stands out as a watershed year in terms of both the number and cultural orientation of Danish-Americans. On one hand, quota restrictions put in place during the 1920s, in conjunction with the tightening of the labor market as result of the onset of the Great Depression, caused a dramatic drop in emigration from Denmark: in contrast to the 32,430 Danes who immigrated between 1921 and 1930, only 2,559 Danes immigrated between 1931 and 1940. On the other, 1930 marks the numeric peak of the Danish-American community: in 1930, 179,474 Americans were Danish-born and another 320,410 had one or two Danish parents, totaling 529,142 Danish-Americans. At the same time, however, circulation figures for Danish-American newspapers in 1930 reached a new low of 37,800. Only one out of five first-generation Danes and one out of twelve American-born Danes subscribed to a Danish-American newspaper, which Nielsen interprets to mean that “the language was not being used and the papers intended to provide cohesiveness to the community were not being read.” In other words, although the Danish-American community in 1930 was the largest it would ever be, the interest of Danish-Americans in retaining strong linguistic and social ties as a cohesive immigrant community was in sharp decline, reflecting a strong internal motivation among Danish-Americans to create a cultural identity for themselves as full-fledged Americans within the American cultural and social framework.

Abandoning their emotional attachment to Danish culture and traditions was, however, one thing that the Danish-American community could not and would not do. In interwar America, the retention of Danish customs and traditions had become a socio-psychological issue for many Danish-Americans that was instrumental in their perception of their own cultural identity. The America they so wholeheartedly embraced was in many ways a Danish America, for it was colored by their inherited cultural preconceptions and beliefs, regardless of the language they spoke. Erling Duus captures this attitude in his description of his
grandparents in his 1971 memoir *Danish-American Journey*: "Of course, they learned to speak good English and they lived in an American world that they became somewhat at home in, but the spiritual center of their lives was Danish America." Max Henius, the founder of the annual Rebildfest celebrating July 4th in Denmark, expressed the emotional loyalty Danish-Americans felt towards their cultural home thus:

The love for the land of our birth is not lessened because we have stopped being Danes, in the sense of citizenship. [. . .] But we *will* not and *cannot* destroy the relationship of blood. During our fight for existence and our striving to obtain favorable economic conditions, we keep in our hearts our Danish language and our Danish memories and protect our inherited culture each in his own way and according to his own abilities. As Henius argues, it would have been asking the impossible for Danish-Americans to attempt to erase their memories and their blood ties to Denmark. The traditions they cherished with the heightened fervor of exiles were far more than relics of the past; they were essential ingredients in the evolving cultural identity of Danish-Americans. Despite the fear of hyphenated cultural identities that persisted in America even after the fiercest nativism subsided in the 1920s, Danish-Americans tried to navigate between proving their wholehearted commitment to an American way of life and retaining a sense of their Danishness within that new American identity.

The three autobiographical texts from the interwar period analyzed in the following pages demonstrate precisely this careful negotiation of competing and often conflicting demands posed by each distinct cultural identity. In the texts, three primary areas emerge as essential to the construction of a successful Danish-American identity: the choice of language, religion, and a marriage partner. Written by men whose professional careers had little involvement with literature, none of the texts is a literary masterpiece, but the stories each tells ring true, repeating common themes of poverty and hardship in Denmark, initial obstacles to economic success in America, and the challenging but rewarding process of forging an American identity. More than their
similarities, however, it is the differences between the texts that expose the conscious effort involved in becoming a Danish-American and give these autobiographical texts surplus value as cultural-historical documents.

The most flamboyant of the three autobiographies is Carl Christian Jensen’s *An American Saga*. In keeping with its rather grandiose title, Jensen’s account of his life glorifies the individual and his quest for self in the tradition of the Nordic heroic sagas. Though he dwells at length on his adventures as a peasant and a sailor, Jensen is primarily concerned with presenting for an English-speaking audience his own transformation into an American. To begin this journey, Jensen goes to great lengths to make images of Denmark—sketches of curious individuals like the drunken “peat hag” and the sorrowful junk man amidst a collage of swampy marshes, sand dunes, and raging ocean—accessible to American readers. The novel is extremely introverted, written in rather stiff, literary English mixed with occasional slang in an overly poetic style that at times resembles stream-of-consciousness writing, but is also fanciful and idealistic by turns. Overall, *An American Saga* is a conspicuously non-political portrait of one man’s discovery of himself in America.

Jensen’s writing is crammed with careful detail and excessive metaphors intended, at first, to ease the reader into the foreign environment of his childhood. In the first chapter, the autobiographical narrator describes “the Old Country,” which remains nameless. Instead of building on labels and stereotypes,
Jensen tries to evoke images of places and people that will provide the reader with a mental picture of the country of his birth. He uses a few Danish words such as “Kridt-piben” (the chalk pipe), but he makes only oblique references to the geography of his childhood home. Instead, he begins his tale with an atmosphere: “In a dingy room, over a shop where a man made wooden shoes, I grew aware of myself.”

His own ostensibly blank consciousness represents the reader’s, as he pieces each scrap of information into a larger picture of his childhood.

Jensen demonstrates how he became aware of his cultural identity as a result of the physical surroundings that he so painstakingly portrays. He describes the “narrow cobblestoned street, where the heather farmers passed with their slow-moving teams of oxen and their wagons loaded with sun-dried peat.” He sketches his grandfather, “a man huge of frame and sturdy as an old oak. He was six feet six, with a back broad and sinewy, and with large, hairy fists. He was of a melancholy, brooding temperament, his mind burning like glowing embers that could flare into white heat.”

He mentions his mother and her sisters—“tall, husky, bright-eyed women, very noisy, quick to laugh, and quicker still to show anger.” The narrator introduces an endless parade of colorful characters, succeeded by an array of adventures that would put any dime-novel hero to shame.

Jensen explains his desire to come to America as an instinctive response to a call from the past and the future. In Denmark, he is torn between his love of nature and his love of modern machinery, but he sees in America the possibility for the fulfillment of both desires:

The old Viking spirit drove me over the seas to skim the surface of nature—a warm, romantic rover. The new scientific spirit drew me down into the heart of nature to watch its hidden forces—a cool, realistic adventurer. Both of these, the old and the new, focused my eyes on America, the land of Columbus, Leif Ericson, Indians, and romance, which I read about at sea; and the land of skyscrapers, bridges, air railroads, and realism, which I had seen on my shore leaves.
In the protagonist's starry-eyed dreams, America appears as the land of destiny, and even before he leaves Denmark, Jensen acquires the symbol of his new identity in a tattoo of an American and a Danish flag. In a symbolic gesture appropriate to the saga, the boat that carries him west is the *Hellig Olav*, named for the legendary Norwegian king, and his last sight of his old country is Kronborg Castle, home of Denmark's sleeping defender Holger Danske. Thus, the great heroes of the Nordic past accompany Jensen on his venture into the unknown.

Language is the greatest challenge Jensen faces upon arrival in America. He celebrates his immediate rebirth as an American, but his second childhood is determined by his inability to speak: "But I was a babe, immensely proud of my babble." In his eagerness to learn English, he "hoarded words like a coin-collector, and the language of my second childhood grew," though he admits that "the idiom still refuses to enter my blood." Through the lens of his new language, he discovers the beauty of his old culture; the Danish fairy tales that had bored him in his childhood now "melted in my mouth like liquored candy." He experiences this second childhood with wide-eyed wonder, eagerly taking advantage of the fabled opportunities of American life, learning English and mathematics and finally attending college. He marvels, "In the old country, only nobility and the clergy rose to such heights." In his view, America lives up to its reputation as a land of equal opportunity.

The remainder of the novel humorously chronicles Jensen's efforts to adapt to American life. He sees himself as a representative of the many nationalities that have "melted into a national type" of American. Despite his poverty and dubious reputation as a foreign sailor, he wins the heart of his widowed American landlady's daughter and raises an American family, determined that they should not live in "immigrant fashion." They move further and further west, encountering wonders on every hand. Seen through Jensen's eyes, every hardship is an adventure, every stroke of good luck proof that America is the Promised Land. He encounters scientists and doctors, remarking with amazement, "These great Americans treated me as they would their equal." Despite youthful attempts to find God, he does not find a religion he can embrace.
until he encounters the Doomsday sect in Minnesota, which
welcomes him in and offers him employment peddling the
Doomsday book zealously throughout the Midwest to settlers of all
ethnic backgrounds and languages.

Despite the self-deprecating, slapdash manner in which he
recounts his adventures, Jensen repeatedly emphasizes his earnest
desire to become a true American while still retaining his love for his
Danish heritage. Just before his graduation from Minnesota State
University, Jensen receives his American citizenship, though he has
never seen an American flag and believes the stars on it to be blue.
After Jensen has revealed his ignorance of American history, the
district attorney demands, “Tell me, my boy, what did you learn at
college?” Jensen replies with conviction, “I learned to speak, read,
and write my new tongue. [. . . ] And I learned to love America
above all other nations.”50 This patriotic affirmation of Jensen’s
linguistic assimilation and emotional loyalty suffices and Jensen
takes the oath of allegiance to the United States, becoming an official
American at last. Yet, at the end of Jensen’s book, in contrast to Riis’,
it is not the American flag that makes his heart tremble, it is the
memory of “a Danish beech grove where long ago I caught a
glimpse of Hamlet’s and Holger Danske’s castle; and of a cozy
cottage across the sea where an old couple are raising four
grandchildren; and of an old, old grandfather I have not seen these
many years. They speak of heather, bog, and dune.”51

In a more matter-of-fact style
than Jensen’s swashbuckling
narrative, T. M. Nielsen’s
autobiography, How a Dane Became
an American or the Hits and Misses of
My Life, recounts his rather bruising
journey from Danish peasant to
American pastor. Throughout his
account, the inevitability of his
transformation into an American
underlies the narrative, beginning
with his father’s attempts, while
still in Denmark, “to instill in me
America and American ideals. For forty-two years I have lived beneath a flag which my father taught me to respect long before I ever saw it." Unlike Jensen, T.M. Nielsen makes no claims of glory, for "though the Viking, with his love for adventure, is in my blood. I claim for myself none of his daring virtues. I am neither the Scandinavian demi-god nor the rugged pagan that the Norseman is sometimes featured, and he who approaches this book with such thoughts in mind is doomed to disappointment. I am a very ordinary Danish-American." However, his path to becoming such an ordinary man is paved with abuse, overwork, illness, poverty, determination, and close shaves with American frontier justice, all of which factor in to his views on how America could improve itself and its reception of new Americans.

Nielsen's account is more socially conscious than Jensen's, going beyond the narrative of the author's life experiences to make an explicit contribution to the national dialogue about immigration. Nielsen's hope that, by writing his own story, he will be able to repay a part of the debt he owes America by helping "to straighten some of the things which, to my mind, are basically out of harmony with American life and thought," answers, whether consciously or not, answers Governor Harding's accusation of the Danish-Americans' irredeemable indebtedness to their new country. A foreword written by Bishop Thomas Nicholson underscores Nielsen's reconsideration of the equation of indebtedness between America and its foreign-born population, noting that Nielsen's story "sets forth the debt of our country to these men of other lands. They have received much, but they have also brought no inconsiderable values to our nation." Throughout his text, Nielsen is honest about both the assistance he has received and the mistreatment he has endured as a foreigner in America, and concludes his story with a plea to the reader to treat immigrants more tolerantly.

My heart aches for every foreign-born in this country. The foreigner does not leave his native land to come to America because he thinks Americans are greater people than those of his own nationality. He does not think so at all. He comes to America because he believes America is a better land in which to work out a livelihood, richer in resources, a land
where he is not cramped for room. For that he is willing to
tear his heart-strings, saying farewell to everything at home
that is dear to his heart. For that he braves the storms of the
ocean, enduring the loathsome steerage. For that he merges
himself into a new country, new customs, and a new
language, is called "green horn" and thought of as a ninnie
and a weakling, because at first his English sounds like baby
talk. Let the American poor man go over there, try to make a
living and learn the language at the same time and see what
kind of baby talk he will make.56

Having established his own credentials as a true American, Nielsen
urges his readers to look past the "foreignness" of new immigrants
and give them credit for the courage they demonstrate in attempting
to start a new life in America.

Nielsen's treatment of the language issue is blunt and
evenhanded: the disadvantages every foreigner faces upon reaching
America and attempting to learn English are no different than those
an American would face if the circumstances were reversed. Initial
incompetence in English is no fair cause to discriminate against new
arrivals. For his own part, Nielsen explains that once he began
studying English by reading the Danish Bible alongside the English
Bible, he decided quickly that "I liked English better than I did
Danish."57 He explains this preference partly in terms of aesthetics,
due to the "power and beauty of the language," but also, and more
significantly, because of dialect differences that estranged him from
other Danish speakers he met in America. Growing up in rural
Jutland, he had spoken an obscure dialect of Danish that made him
"a sort of stray sheep and the butt end for jokes" among speakers of
standard Danish in America.58 As a result, the Danish language held
little appeal for him as a connection to other Danes, while mastery of
English offered both economic and social opportunities for
advancement, including an introduction to the American girl who
eventually decided to "cast her lot with the 'Terrible Dane,' no
matter what came."59

As was also true in Jensen's case, many of these opportunities
come to Nielsen through membership in an American church.
Despite little religious training in Denmark, Nielsen finds his most
compelling connection to America through religion, in his case the Methodist Episcopal Church, which provided him with opportunities for higher education, employment, and fellowship that his Danish cultural network could not or did not offer. Although he admits to experiencing some professional discrimination within the church because of his Danish background, Nielsen's assertive approach to shaping his own destiny carries him well into the range of American frontier legends. While serving as the Methodist preacher in a hard-bitten railroad town of Melbourne, Iowa, he alienates local inhabitants by exposing the illegal alcohol trade in what was supposed to be a "dry town" but refuses to be intimidated by the threats he receives; instead, he adopts a Wild West approach to justice: "I secured a revolver. I took it to the church with me, I laid it on the pulpit, told them that I carried it with me all the time, and that if anybody tried in any way to interfere with me in the lawful pursuit of my work, I would shoot him." Although Nielsen eventually backs down from such a precarious position, his approach to the situation demonstrates his internalization of both the American frontier mentality and the moralistic view of life advocated by many American churches at the time, as illustrated at the time of the novel's publication by Prohibition.

In contrast to Jensen and Nielsen's more adventurous tales, Karl Jørgensen's *Dansk Amerika* is a reflective attempt to describe the group experience of Danish-Americans, to themselves as well as to their erstwhile countrymen in Denmark. Where Jensen and Nielsen address English-speaking Americans, Jørgensen writes for a Danish-speaking audience. His goal is not just to tell his own story, but to describe just how Danish America is and to correct misconceptions about America among Danes. What Jensen and Nielsen demonstrate, Jørgensen clarifies. In
the foreword to Jørgensen’s account, C.E. Bardenfleth explains that Jørgensen’s humble undertaking is intended to illustrate how life shapes itself for us, who have gone out into the unknown, shapes itself for us under stars and stripes in that land we have chosen as ours, where each of us has found our purpose, great or small, and where we someday shall enter—may I be permitted to say for most of us—well-earned rest. Bardenfleth claims Jørgensen as “one of our own,” someone who is speaking out from inside Danish America, not to explain it, but to describe it. From Bardenfleth’s perspective, Jørgensen’s primary qualification for representing the Danish-American community seems to be that he has achieved a successful American career in the Southern California Gas Company. For his own part, Jørgensen justifies his comments by the universality of his experiences in America.

In keeping with its informative function, Dansk Amerika has a somewhat drier tone than either An American Saga or How a Dane Became an American, and reveals no pretensions to poetic grandeur. Jørgensen recounts his personal experiences in a conversational way, careful to generalize them for the community of Danish-Americans. His reasons for coming to America are less dramatic than Jensen’s or Nielsen’s—simply a desire to see the world for a few years before settling down—but, as Bøggild had accused in 1915, Jørgensen admits that “America held me captive as it does nearly all immigrants!” Jørgensen confesses that he knew almost nothing of America before his departure except what he had read in letters from an uncle. He advises those considering emigration to mistrust letters from friends in America and to seek out factual information, so that they will be prepared for the commitment they will enter into as Danish-Americans. To this end, Jørgensen gives a detailed account of his voyage across the Atlantic on a partially renovated freighter which was “anything but comfortable.”

The first part of Dansk Amerika deals with Jørgensen’s impressions upon arrival in America. He laughs at his ignorance of cultural differences; in the hotel his first night, he puts his boots outside the door to be cleaned, as is customary in Denmark, much to the
amazement of the hotel staff. He soon finds a room with a Danish family, which he regards as an intermediate station between Denmark and America. He is struck by the fact that the children speak Danish, though they prefer to speak English. He discusses the almost religious nature of Danishness in America, which he sees as a result of the fact that, among Danish-Americans, Denmark quickly becomes the stuff of shining memories and dreams. Nevertheless, he tries to dispel the popular misconception in Denmark that immigrants become Americans “in speech and mentality in a year’s time” and warns the reader that the process of becoming an American is a gradual change that requires effort on the part of the individual. He reports that some Danes lose their Danish and never properly learn English, thereby displaying an embarrassing lack of intelligence.

Language is an issue that Jørgensen deals with at length, for it is, in his opinion, the most important element in the immigrant’s development in the new country. Although he admits that Danes are regarded as among the quickest and best to learn English and speak it almost exclusively, Jørgensen encourages each Danish-American to “be willing and courageous enough to use the vocabulary that he has upon arrival and that he acquires here.” He sees his own ability to use English, however accented, as the key to his economic success. He cautions that Danish-Americans cannot afford to avoid conversations with English-speakers out of fear, nor to continually seek refuge among other Danes, or they will never be able to participate in American cultural, political, and social life. Danish-Americans have important contributions to make, not only to the economy but also to the character of America, which they can only accomplish by incorporating themselves into American society.

To a certain extent, Jørgensen’s autobiography could be used as a handbook for integrating oneself into American life. He moves from the Danish family where he found lodgings at first into an American home to force himself to use English, though it is a times impossible to communicate. Though he contributes to Danish organizations, Jørgensen gradually moves into American circles, first through his work and ultimately by marrying an American woman “of an old American family,” which requires him to speak English, as he had
hoped. Yet he also acknowledges the importance of preserving one's cultural heritage and advises Danish-American parents to teach their children Danish in the home, since they will learn English from friends and in school.

Jørgensen's comments reveal his awareness of the delicate balancing act that Danish-Americans must perform in order to be true to both countries that claim their loyalty. He is critical of the mockery with which immigrants are so often greeted in America, but his purpose in expressing this critique is to prepare Danes who wish to emigrate to accept conditions in America realistically, rather than cherishing illusions that everything is easy in America. He explains that "American society necessarily requires that the heterogeneous crowds that come here be shaped into certain regular forms for the whole to hold together, and the forms are decided by the majority.... For this reason, society demands that immigrants lay aside the ideas they have brought with them, based on national sentiment and culture, and acquire the country's ideas, language, and way of life." Jørgensen readily admits the difficulty of such adaptation and praises Danes for their success in this area, but emphasizes that such national homogenization should not preclude personal opinions nor prevent immigrants from contributing in full measure to America's national development.

Despite their different audiences and agendas, Jørgensen, Nielsen, and Jensen's autobiographies reach similar conclusions that hint at a general consensus among Danish-Americans in the interwar period: the Danish-American is a product of the conscious and deliberate merging of the individual's Danish cultural heritage with the economic and political opportunities that present themselves in America. Each author maps out his individual journeys to this goal, a progression Jensen labels "the inward epic," demonstrating that the path to this new cultural identity is different for everyone, even for three Danish men of the same age and cultural background. All three writers agree that total commitment to American ideals and practices is necessary if immigrants are going to develop a sense of belonging in their new home, but they warn that, in making this commitment, immigrants should build on their Danish heritage, not reject it. They must learn to speak English and show unswerving
political loyalty towards the United States, but they should cherish the Danish language and traditions in their hearts, for it is in the fusion of these two worlds that Danish-American identity is forged. By embracing American life but enriching it with the wealth of their Danish culture, Danish immigrants have become some of the best Americans, earning Theodore Roosevelt's approbation.

Individual self-representations in Danish-American autobiography, particularly during the tense interwar period, showcase the tension between descent and consent, between the immigrant's Danish past and his American future, that lies at the core of the transformation into a Danish-American. Engulfed by American society, Danes assimilated in order to survive, but they made the choice to become Americans consciously and deliberately. Kristian Hvidt cites an anonymous Danish-American, who describes the relationship between his feelings for his old and new countries in terms of family ties:

If I should make a comparison between my feelings for Denmark and America, it would be like the love for a mother and a wife. *Denmark is my mother, America my wife,* and one's first responsibility is to the wife, who is the woman one has chosen for oneself.67

Though they could not forget nor deny their Danish mother, the majority of Danish immigrants chose America as their wife and loved her faithfully. They took her name and learned her language, but they did not lose themselves by doing so; instead, a new cultural identity was born from the marriage of cultures, a people at once Danish and American.

---

1 For a detailed treatment of governmental organizations involved in the drive to Americanize immigrants during this period, see John McClymer, "The Federal Government and the Americanization Movement, 1915-1924)," *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives* 10 (Spring 1978), 22-41

The most comprehensive treatment of Scandinavian immigrant literature is Dorothy Burton Skårdal's *The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience through Literary Sources* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974).


Karl Jørgensen, *Dansk Amerika* (Holbæk, Denmark: Dansk bogsamlingsforlag, 1930).


Christianson, 26.

Peter L. Petersen, "P.S. Vig and the Americanization Issue during World War I." *The Bridge* 2:1 (1979), 57.

Peter L. Petersen, "Language and Loyalty: Governor Harding and Iowa's Danish-Americans During World War I." *Annals of Iowa* XLII (Fall 1974), 406.

Petersen, "Loyalty," 410.

Petersen, "Americanization," 59.

Christianson, 27.


Many Danish-Americans were so successful not only in speaking English but also in thinking like Americans that some proponents of Danish language preservation criticized them sharply. In an article in *De Forenede Staters danske Almanak, Haand- og Aarbog*, 1914 entitled "Moderismaalet" (Mother Tongue), a Danish-American doctor named C.P. Kjærbye chastises his fellow Danish-Americans for using too much English and thereby losing their ability to speak and think like Danes, charging that "we go to Danish meetings and think and act too much according to American habits and spirit." He argues that a foreign language can rarely express one's innermost emotions, that it is impossible to formulate national sentiments and thoughts without one's native tongue, and promises his countrymen: "if we not only think in the Danish language, but as Danes, the language will quickly return." Kjærbye recognized the cultural significance of the Danish-Americans' shift towards thinking like Americans, and his plea for them to
use Danish in their homes and daily lives was impassioned, but poorly
timed, since speaking Danish in America had become a highly questionable
activity after the outbreak of World War I.

19 G. Nielsen, 9-10.
20 G. Nielsen, 10.
21 G. Nielsen, 10-13.
22 G. Nielsen, 11.
23 G. Nielsen, 9.
24 Henrik Bredmose Simonsen, Kampen om danskheden. Tro og nationalitet i de
danske kirkesamfund i Amerika. (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus Universitetsforlag,
1990), 7.
25 Simonsen, 8.
26 G. Nielsen cites an anecdote on this subject from the Danish Times
(February 20, 1931) in which “one Dane observed that when two Greeks get
together they start a restaurant, but when two Danes get together, they start
a fight,” 13.
27 G. Nielsen, 13.
28 Anne Lisbeth Olsen and Niels Peter Stilling, Et nyt liv: den danske
udvandring til Nordamerika i billeder og breve (Strandbergs Forlag, 1985), 12-15.
29 G. Nielsen, 11-12.
30 Max Henius’ 1912 book Den danskfødte Amerikaner (Chicago: Trykningen
besørget gennem Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, København,
1912) introduces this nomenclature.
31 Iver Kjær and Mogens Baumann Larsen, “The Spoken Danish Language in
the U.S. From Interaction to Recollection.” Danish Emigration to the U.S. Ed.
by Birgit Flemming Larsen and Henning Bender. (Aalborg, Denmark: Danes
Worldwide Archives in collaboration with the Danish Society for
Emigration History, 1992), 107.
32 Kendric Charles Babcock, The Scandinavian Element in the United States
33 G. Nielsen, 32.
34 Kristian Hvidt, Danske Veje Vestpå (København: Politikens Forlag, 1976),
271-273.
35 G. Nielsen, 183.
36 G. Nielsen, 200.
37 Henius, 8-9.
38 Jensen, 3.
39 Jensen, 6.
40 Jensen, 8.
41 Jensen, 61.