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Becoming American—according to the
Jorgensens
by Torben Tvorup Christensen

Introduction
For those who have waited a long time for this article about integration among Danish-American immigrants I can only say that I am sorry. Lack of time has kept me away from my Danish-English dictionary and thus prevented me from writing a more public friendly version of my Masters Thesis. Knowing how difficult it would be to convert more than a hundred pages into a few readable lines—I guess—is the real reason why I have not undertaken this task before now. Another reason is simply that I each time I began thinking about doing something I was being overwhelmed by a strong desire to return to the Danish Immigrant Archive at Dana College—the place where I did most of my research—and to the fantastic crowd of volunteers that work there. Distance can truly be a curse when it prevents one from visiting friends and places of great personal value.

Having said this I will only add that this small article can never replace the original manuscript but is merely a small fraction of it. For a more complete and detailed letter analysis and conclusion please read my thesis "I Danmark er jeg født—hvør har jeg hjemme?". Jim Iversen, president of the Board of Directors of the Danish American Heritage Society has a copy of the thesis and another is soon to be found at the Danish Immigrant Archive at Dana College, Blair, Nebraska. I do hope though that this article gives the reader an idea about the complexities of integration.

Great Danes?
It is a normally accepted statement that Danish immigrants who came to the United States rapidly assimilated into the dominating Anglo American society. This statement has flourished at least since the publication of Kristian Hvidt’s doctoral dissertation “Flugten til
Amerika" or "Flight to America" in 1971 and possibly even before that time.

Kristian Hvidt mentions it briefly though it is a subject that lies beyond the contents of his dissertation. Despite this fact and by the using American Census Reports he concludes that Danish immigrants compared to other immigrant groups generally chose to settle among Americans or non-Danish immigrants and therefore more rapidly got accustomed to American living. This was not the case for most immigrants of other nationalities. They instead tended to cluster residentially with those with whom they were most familiar or with whom they were associated by ties of kinship and other networks of association.

Kristian Hvidt uses several methods to verify his statements. I shall not bother you with all the details but merely suggest that the general impression by and large has been—and still is—that Danish immigrants, contrary to other ethnic groups, geographically were more scattered and thereby more easily were assimilated compared with those nationalities that stuck together for a variety of social, religious and cultural reasons.

Since the publication of Hvidt's dissertation the world has seen a number of interesting and qualitative works, which all in one way or another have dealt with the issues concerning Danish immigration and the aspects of integration and assimilation. It would require more space than is left for this article to mention them all. But I would like to recommend a single one which I believe is quite interesting. It is the book *A New Life* by Niels Peter Stilling and Anne Lisbeth Olsen. In this study the authors use Danish immigrant letters as their main source and aim at describing the migration processes by focusing on various issues from the decisions to emigrate on to dealing with the question about assimilation.

Compared with other ethnic groups we do not now much about Danish immigrants and their experiences when it comes to the matters of integration and assimilation other than what has been said in a few books. Is most studies focus has mainly been on Danes as members of certain groups and not that much on the individuals behind the history.
I have tried to rectify this by involving the immigrants themselves and using their letters in my work. I have done so because I consider integration, like the decision to emigrate, as an individual process which varies from person to person. This has also given me the opportunity to ask the question: Is it all together possible to conclude anything about integration and assimilation within an ethnic group based upon their geographical scattering? In my world this sounds very naive and almost too easy. One could instead claim that such a process solely depends on the immigrants' personal will to be transformed and has nothing to do with whom you live together with—be they compatriots or people of other nationalities.

I would also like to add that for me it seems a bit overwhelming when Kristian Hvidt and others apply a concept like assimilation onto immigrants when the term normally is regarded as a stage at which the immigrant has lost contact with his or hers original group and become one with the dominating culture.

**From Contact to Assimilation**

How should we then define concepts such as integration and assimilation? In search of material that could provide me with answers relating to the aspects of integration and assimilation I have come across the works of Migration Historian Elliott R. Barkan. Among his works there is one article in particular that has captured my interest. It is called “Race, Religion, and Nationality in American Society: A Model of Ethnicity – From Contact to Assimilation.” In it Barkan criticizes the fact that “many writers have defined assimilation quite differently. There has been only marginal consistency; indeed, there has actually been a muddling of meanings and not uncommonly a seemingly careless substitution of one term for another.... As a consequence, a consensus on meaning and terminologies has been lacking.” The big question for Barkan is how to define fundamental processes such as integration and assimilation and just what are the stages that could lead to integration and assimilation.

Barkan therefore suggest the following definitions:

Assimilation most accurately represents the point at which individual members of ethnic groups have shed the cultural,
linguistic, behavioral, and identificational, or structural, activities that have set them apart from others. These individuals’ political and cultural norms, cultural and social activities, language usage, residential locations, friends, spouses, identities, and loyalties have by and large become indistinguishable—or insignificantly different from—those aspects of the general society and core culture.² On the other hand we have integration, which Barkan believes is an important concept because it entails more that the initial efforts to adjust an acculturate. Acculturation meaning the absorption of the cultural practices, norms and values of the host (or dominant) society. For many integration could be the final stage, but it does not represent as complete as possible change as does assimilation, which marks a full blending or incorporation. Integration is taking place when an ethnic group person becomes bilingual or monolingual English; moves beyond the boundaries of his or her ethnic community and begins to associate on a regular basis with members of the larger society, or other ethnic groups; participates in external organizations, such as labor unions, public service groups, fraternal associations and so on; is involved in the general political processes; and, depending on age, goes through some phase of educational system usually the public schools.³ The person who has begun to integrate has therefore gained some acceptance from the larger society, has become what Barkan calls bicultural. That implies that the individual’s ethnic identification persists, attachments to and participation within the ethnic group may remain and some primary relationships, including marriage, may still involve one’s traditional community.

The model that Barkan uses to describe the processes, which immigrants go through, is called “From Contact to Assimilation”. It consists of the following six stages:

Stage 1, CONTACT, refers to newcomers, for example new immigrants. Their focus is overwhelmingly toward their native homelands and cultures and in most instances, the frames of reference and cultural and social norms remain there, and even for
those who might not wish to preserve their bonds to that homeland they yet strive to hold on to the roots in their traditional society and culture. The use of native language is predominant and individuals at this point may not have even fully developed an explicit group consciousness or sense of identity beyond that associated with their region of origin. Only few interact with outsiders except, possibly, in work situations. Citizenship is not yet an option.

By stage 2, ACCULTURATION, if they had not already existed, ethnic group identities and communities emerge, with an array of different organizations and usually native language publications. At the individual level, there also begins to be some exposure to the larger society and culture. As a result even more components of the dominant culture and language are likely to be adopted by the immigrants.

By and large, immigrants with the same background at this stage preferably live rather clustered, use their native language, participate in local community associations—secular and religious ones—and rely upon their ethnic and kin networks.

Some second generation members are present and may seek more interaction with the larger society and elements of integration might therefore begin to appear. Barkan points out that second generation can refer to the children of immigrants and immigrants who arrived before their teenage years.

There may even be some cases of intermarriage at this point. Some first generation immigrants at this stage seek citizenship while others are usually inclined to postpone applying unless there are particular economic, political, or personal motives. The focus of most immigrants remains predominantly toward the homeland.

With stage 3, ADAPTATION, substantial acculturation (with greater use of English) takes place. The focus of the group—be it family or community—is less toward the homeland and more toward the dominant American society and culture.

Some both second and now also third generation individuals take more direct steps to separate themselves from their family or ethnic group. Others may not go that far but do experience some integration through more extensive associations with no group
members, such as in schools, unions, sports teams, and dating. As a result there is more intermarriage.

Finally, significantly more, foreign-born persons acquire citizenship. Among those who reach stage 4, ACCOMODATION, there is a smaller amount of foreign-born persons. Third and fourth generations are far more visible – either in the sense of time since arrival or since sustained contact with the dominant society. There is meager attention to affairs in the homeland (or it’s merely ceremonial), little use of the native language, and limited participation in ethnic community affairs.

There is by now considerable occupational, social class, educational, and geographical mobility as well as more intermarriage.

Finally, at this stage, we find more integrated individuals having, perhaps, an “academic” or nostalgic interest or curiosity about their ethnic past.

By the time members of an ethnic group have reached stage 5, INTEGRATION, a considerable degree of incorporation in the general society has been attained, although some cultural, identificational, symbolic and behavioral characteristics remain and, quite likely, particular language expressions, traditional foods, and some festival celebrations that are episodic or infrequent.

By and large, most persons at this stage identify with the core society, expressing only marginal or symbolic interest in the affairs of the homeland or their original community.

At the last stage, ASSIMILATION, a formalistic or limited group memory persists among some persons, but descendants of the original ethnic group have by this phase, largely blended or melded into the larger society culturally, socially, institutionally, and identificationally. Although persons may retain knowledge of their ancestry, they no longer see themselves as ethnic group members. People at this last stage are no longer regarded or perceived as distinctive by members of the dominant or general society.

The Jorgensen family

In the light of the allegation that Danish immigrants rapidly assimilated, I have examined how the members of a common Danish
emigrant family experienced the transformations processes. If have done so by the help of their letters to the family back home in Denmark and by the application of Elliott R. Barkan’s stage model.

Using letters as a source there are of course certain matters that need to be considered. The authors of A New Life mention the fact it is only a small percentage of all immigrant letters that have been preserved up until today and perhaps only those that were best written had an interesting content or a dramatic story. The authors continue: "Taking this into account, as well as the fact that we don’t know how many emigrants never wrote home, there is little to be gained by a discussion of whether or not the letter writers are typical. Emigration was, after all, an individual phenomenon with emigrants sharing some common points of intersection."

The letters I chose to work with were written by Hans Julius Nielsen (1877-ca. 1964) to family and friends in Denmark. The letters are now preserved at The Danish Emigration Archives in Aalborg, Denmark. At the Danish Immigrant Archive at Dana College, Blair, Nebraska, I found a collection which consisted of a total amount of approximately 5,000 letters that were written in the period 1892 to 1992 by the Jorgensen Family: a family consisting of Hans Jorgensen (1881 - 1966), Rosa Jorgensen (1880 - 1965), and their four daughters, Edna (1905 - 1985), Ruth (1907 - 1981), Lilly (1912 - ?) and Agnes (1915 - ?). In this article I have chosen to refer only to the Jorgensen Family.

In 1910 the parents with their two eldest daughters emigrated to America, where the two youngest
were born. After having lived some time at various places they ended up in California, where the parents lived until they died.

It is no coincidence that I chose this family. I was inspired by the fact that they came to America at a time when the era of mass migration was coming to an end and shortly before the American entrance into World War I which stimulated a variety of Americanization programs. The letters are also distinguished by telling a continuous story. They do so because of the large number and the long time span in which they were written. That means that we are able to follow the family at close quarters right from the beginning.

When the family came to the United States in 1910, Hans Jorgensen was probably the one most eager to create a good life for the family. And he knew he had to do something so that the transformation process would be as painless as possible. Previous to the transatlantic journey he took English lessons and continued to improve his English skills after the arrival in Nebraska by subscribing to American newspapers and attending church services in English. This shows that Hans Jorgensen, while being at Barkan’s Contact Stage, very early on took steps towards the Acculturation Stage. One indication of this was that one year after arrival he applied for “First Papers,” the initial step in becoming an American citizen. When reading his letters from that period one also discovers more and more English words and an Anglofication in the structure of sentences.

In 1914, four years after his arrival, the letters reveal a linguistic confusion so noticeable that it is possible to demonstrate the presence of English linguistic elements in his vocabulary. This tells us that Hans Jorgensen very much was in contact with the American society and therefore had entered the Acculturation Stage.

In 1918 all members of the family take yet another important step toward the American society in that they all become American citizens. Through citizenship the family gains access to a variety of rights that give them the ability to influence society equally with other American citizens and at the same time feel that they themselves are a part of it. This means, on a structural level, that the family in principle has become integrated; officially they have
become Americans but in reality they are Danish-Americans. The term Danish-American is appropriate because it indicates an equality of status but at the same time the term shows that they are not totally identical with "real" Americans, the so-called Anglo-Americans. The Jorgensen family has now actively and legally become a part of the American society and culture; not under the same conditions but on equal term with the Anglo-Americans.

Through different jobs Hans Jorgensen remained in contact with the American society all his life and the letters show that through work, language and habits he was open toward the United States and its possibilities. In 1921 the family lived in California and in a letter Hans Jorgensen writes to the relatives in Denmark he mentions all the material goods he would not have if he lived in Denmark: "I like it", he writes in English and continues in Danish (now translated to English) by explaining why: "... in California I'm a day-laborer. It's hardly the same as being a tourist but I would rather be a tourist in Denmark and day-laborer in America than vice versa. Here I have my own car which I drive to work in every day; I guess that wouldn't be possible in Denmark."

There are many things that indicate that Hans Jorgensen did not take steps toward the Adaptation Stage but remained at the Acculturation Stage all through his life: The letters show that his focus remained predominantly toward Denmark. Nor is there anything that indicates a considerable degree of adaptation to the American culture patterns, it seems rather that he constantly confirmed his close ties to Danish culture: All through his life he participated in religious activities in the Danish congregations at the places where the family lived. His personal network was also based on Danish relations and he and his wife Rosa Jorgensen kept on celebrating Danish traditions and customs.

We do not know that much about Rosa Jorgensen and her integration process. According to the few letters she wrote to her Danish relatives and the information I got from reading letters where she was mentioned, one gets the impression that she—compared with the rest of the family—had the hardest time fitting in. Unlike her husband she did not speak any English when the
family came to the United States and according to herself, her English skills were poor for many years.

The decade 1910–1920 is a time when Rosa Jorgensen often writes about all the things she misses about Denmark. First in 1920 when the Jorgensen family moves from Montana to California one senses a positive change in Rosa Jorgensen’s mood. The climate and fertile landscape seems to have uplifted her and could have inspired her (if it had not happened before) to open up and start fitting in.

In 1921 Rosa Jorgensen found job as a fruit picker, apparently her first job, and started seeing other people than Danes. One also detects an improvement in her English skills—both verbally and grammatically. This together with other matters indicates that Rosa Jorgensen entered the Acculturation Stage and remained there in all of her life. Like her husband her focus was predominantly toward other Danes, but she interacted functionally with the American society in a positive way.

On the other hand we have the Jorgensen daughters. Their integration processes are marked by much more dynamism compared to their parents. This was caused by the fact that they, right from the beginning in the educational system, were in direct contact with representatives of the core culture. It is also important to point out that they jumped over the Contact Stage and went directly to the Acculturation Stage; that goes especially for Lilly and Agnes Jorgensen who were born in USA. Shortly after their arrival in 1910 the two oldest daughters Edna and Ruth Jorgensen, ages five and seven respectively, started in public school; two years later in 1914 the letters show that they were well-integrated in the school system and doing very well. Both in school and at home they spoke English with each other and tried deliberately to fit in. There were afraid of being different and tried to avoid that in many ways. For example they asked Rosa Jorgensen to make them English sandwiches instead of Danish open-faced smørrebrød. In 1916 when the family moved from Nebraska to Montana both Edna and Ruth continued to progress in school and ended among the top five in spelling in their classes.

The third sister Lilly Jorgensen started in school in 1918 at the age of six, and came like her two older sisters in direct contact with
represents of the core culture. According to Lilly’s letters and memories she entered the Adaptation Stage at a very early age. Her focus very was early on toward the dominant American society and culture and less toward her parents’ and sisters’ homeland.

In 1921 the youngest sister Edna Jorgensen also starts in school. At that time Lilly is in second grade while Edna and Ruth have started in High School. In 1922 they are chosen to represent their High School at a type-writing competition. Besides showing that the sisters had talent this also shows that they fit in and were accepted by the system as equal skillful members of the society. Letters from the two women in that period indicate that they too had entered the Adaptation Stage: For example were they fluent in English and had non-Danish-American friends. After graduating from High School in 1925 both sisters start working. Ruth became a nurse and in 1927 Edna married a Dane by the name of Henry Emil Jorgensen.

The letters show that in the period 1920-1927 all four sisters experience changes that are much more progressive than those of their parents which resulted in a direct approach toward a deeper involvement in the core society. School attendance confirms this together with improving English skill, and non-Danish-American friendships. Like the two oldest sisters both Lilly and Agnes went to High School. After graduation Lilly went on to becoming a teacher while Agnes opened a flower shop.

From around 1913 up until the present time all four girls seem to have been in close interaction with the American society. All four had a Danish heritage in common which does not seem to have been a hindrance to them. On the contrary they lived with a “Danishness” that was closely tied to the elements of American culture. Elements which seem to have gained more and more influence as older they got. We know for certain that that was the case of Ruth Jorgensen who, after visiting Denmark in 1947, admitted to the fact that she preferred the niceties of American life compared to the life of her Danish relatives where her kind of niceties seemed to have been missing entirely. Ruth Jorgensen is the one who most explicitly explains the differences between the culture the family left and the culture she and her sisters gradually adapted to. In 1947 during a
visit to her relatives in Denmark Ruth Jorgensen writes to her sisters and American friends:

We could not be satisfied to live on a little Danish farm which looks most picturesque with low waving straw-thatched roof..., tiny flower-filled windows, and the little cobblestone farmyard enclosed by the joined buildings. Never a window opened but that the aroma from the cows' home is wafted in - never a window or door opened but that the flies are all over.... Maybe ours has become too artificial a manner of life, I don't know, but it does nevertheless seem to me that there is nothing to be said for a bathtub in every home, and perhaps even the luxury of a washing machine. Why should a house like this one here [her uncle's house where she lived during her stay, built in 1925, as a parsonage], not boast a bathtub and one more point with running water other that the kitchen sink. Running water unless otherwise specified refers only to cold. And that is considered a rare luxury. I like the niceties of American life. Many of the niceties to which we are so sensitive seem to be missing entirely here. Even among the more privileged group, sturdy healthy young men and women do not seem to feel the need of deodorants - baths among the stronger sex are hardly a weekly affair. [To explain the differences further she writes that the Danes] also seem to live closer to the arts that we do in our highly developed machine age.... Our Uncle in Verninge [A Danish village on the island of Fyn] has a lovely Venus de Milo about 20 inches high in the living room, a very nice thing, but I can just imagine what a sensation even a modest one would create in any of our more ordinary homes. Our Uncle has in his living room, as the dominant theme, a large oil painting of a nude woman sitting, back half turned, done in greens, and it is very well done. I don't know how long it would take me to become quite unconscious of her, but I don't think most of my American friends would understand nor appreciate such a display.7
The quotes show that the life of Ruth Jorgensen was not the same as the lives of her Danish relatives. The same goes probably for her sisters too. For many years they had been under the influence of American culture. An influence that made an impact especially on the daughters because they were not to the same degree as their parents a part of the culture from which the family migrated. The sisters did though remain in close connection with their Danish roots through all of their lives and confirmed the bonds to the ethnic group by marrying men of Danish descent, keeping contact with their Danish relatives and by celebrating Danish traditions. As a family the daughters carried on the same customs even as adults, for example the Danish Christmas Eve customs, to which the new in-laws according to the letters most interestingly seem to have adjusted.

When applying Barkan’s model to the letters of the Jorgensen family in order to determine the stages at which they ended up the result reveals a rather complex truth. For even though that we can detect a range of changes that can be characterized as integration among the six family members it is also possible to detect different degrees of adjustment within the stages: Hans and Rosa Jorgensen belonged by the time of their death to the Acculturation stage while their daughters — probably all four — were at stage 3, the Adaptation Stage.

This superficial presentation of the original thesis I hope does enough to show that when using Elliott R. Barkan’s definitions we can first and foremost establish that none of these individuals ever assimilated. How could they when assimilation most accurately represents the point at which individual members of ethnic groups have shed the cultural, linguistic, behavioral and identificational characteristics of their original group as well as disengaged from the associational, or structural, activities that have set them apart from others.

The big question now is: What about all the other Danish immigrants about whom we have read were assimilated quite rapidly? With help from Barkan’s theories or at least other non-statistical methods I’m convinced, that this important piece of
history will be revealed in a new, more complex and equally fascinating and interesting light.

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Stilling, Niels Peter and Olsen, Anne Lisbeth: A New Life, Udvanderhistoriske studier nr. 6, Danes Worldwide Archives, 1994, p. 17.
5 A 914.
6 The Jorgensen Collection – JOR, The Danish Immigrant Archive at Dana College, Blair, Nebraska.
7 JOR 992 13-1-14x, The Danish Immigrant Archive at Dana College, Blair, Nebraska.