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Anton Kvist Danish-American Poet: His life and his works

by Birgit Flemming Larsen

Anton Kvist was born in 1878 in a small village in the northern part of Jutland in Denmark. In his home at Valsted there was a large group of ten siblings, and already as a six year old boy Anton had to work as a shepherd boy at the same time as he started to go to school. His father was a bricklayer, and so were a few of his brothers. At the age of sixteen he followed the family tradition and became a bricklayer's apprentice. In 1898 he came to Copenhagen to work as a bricklayer. Here in 1900 far away from his family and the familiar surroundings he wrote his first poem, dedicated to his mother.

The same year he started his military service at the Kronborg Castle in Elsinore. Apparently he did not like the hard military life. He wrote an article for the Copenhagen newspaper *Social-Demokraten* – the Social Democrat in which he complained of the abusive treatment of the drafted soldiers. That cost him a three week stay in prison. ¹ After having finished his service the "America Fever" struck him, and he decided to immigrate to America together with his friend and colleague Johannes.

They landed in Boston in 1902 and proceeded to New York. Kvist had a difficult time. Because of an attack of malaria he was not able to work, and he spent many nights on benches in the parks of New York. Luckily he had the address of a Danish friend in Nebraska who was willing to help him and sent him a train ticket to Omaha. He spent the next three years in the Midwest and earned his living by among other things building chimneys for the wooden houses of the pioneers in Nebraska. He also found time for poetry writing, and in 1903 he experienced to see one of his poems on print in *Revyen*, a Danish weekly newspaper in Chicago. (*Jeg savner noget denne vaar*) (*I am longing for something this spring*).

Many years later he said in a newspaper-interview in Denmark – about 20 years ago my first poem appeared in "*Revyen*" in Chicago. I was

thrilled to see this little modest lyric product on print. I felt like a happy suitor who finally had got a Yes from the mouth of his beloved.

The winter of 1905-1906 he enrolled at Grand View College as a student. Here he met Benedikt Nordentoft and Carl Peter Højbjerg who were professors at the college at that time. Both of them prompted him to continue his writings. After his winter at Grandview Kvist decided to move to Chicago, and here he met his wife to be, Laurette Røgelhede, a Danish-born girl from Aalborg who quite recently had immigrated to the US. Laurette worked as an organist in the Danish St. Stephen's Church, where the Danish author and pastor, Adam Dan, served as a minister.

In these years the Danish settlement in Chicago on the Northwest Side in the area called Humboldt Park was thriving. The Dania Club built their new headquarters here in 1912; the Danish St. Ansgar's Lutheran Church was founded here, as were several other Danish churches and organizations. It was a golden age for the Danish Chicago colony, and the North Avenue became known as the "Danish Broadway."

Enok Mortensen, the Danish-American author, gave the following description of Chicago in one of his novels:

Half of the store signs on North Avenue displayed Danish names. There were more than a dozen Danish bakers; there were banks which changed crowns; there were restaurants which served open-faced sandwiches; there were food stores which sold liverwurst and pork sausage and Danish cheese. And there were saloons where one could curse in his mother tongue and drink himself to a thumping good hangover in Aalborg Aquavit. In the neighborhood were located all the Danes' meeting places. Seven of the ten Danish churches in town were there. In this area lay also all the club rooms, several secret societies, the lodge "Denmark", the Scandinavian Social Democrats' Sick Insurance Society of 1895, the Youth Club, the Gymnastic Club, and the choral societies, in all a good fifty organizations of widely different types. ²

Laurette and Anton had met each other in the Youth Club where Anton lived in his first Chicago year. They soon got married and

stayed in Chicago for the rest of their lives. It was easy for Kvist to find a job as a bricklayer in the rapidly growing city, and from 1917 to 1929 he had his own business in Chicago. In between he worked as an editor of the Danish-American Newspaper *Dansk Tidende*.

About 25 years after his emigration Anton Kvist visited Denmark for the first time. He was invited to give a speech at the 4th of July Celebrations in Rebild about Thomas Jefferson. After his return to America he initiated his tours round the states to visit Danish settlements and Danish societies to tell about Denmark. His travels were encouraged and supported financially by Danish-American Dr. Max Henius, an enterprising businessman of Chicago and an important figure among the Chicago Danes. The purpose of the travels was to collect accounts of pioneers' lives among the Danes he met.

These accounts were later published in the book *Den Gamle Pioner Fortaeller*.³ The book was a great success, and it has become a classic among the publications about Danish-American emigration history.

The year 1930 brought Anton Kvist back to Denmark again. This time he spent several months there. He visited 65 Danish towns and gave lectures about Danes in America. Anton Kvist became a member of the Danish committee for the planned World's Fair which was going to take place in Chicago in 1933, and he was a very efficient editor of the Danish World's Fair Magazine.

Laurette and Anton Kvist had two children, the son Rune and the daughter Elva. Rune Kvist joined the forces during WW2 and died in 1949 of his injuries. Elva Kvist married an Irish-Scottish-American and moved to Wisconsin. Already in 1943 Anton Kvist lost his wife, but before that they could unite in joy over their Grandchildren.

The Danish National Committee in Chicago (an umbrella organization of the Danish societies in Chicago) donated a flight to Denmark to the Danish-American poet on the occasion of his 70th anniversary. This time Anton Kvist again was invited to speak on the 4th of July at Rebild, and this time the Danish-American Society in Aalborg Denmark made him a member of honor. Just before he left Chicago to fly to Denmark, Anton Kvist had been announced

Knight of Dannebrog by the King of Denmark as an appreciation of his great contribution among emigrated Danes.

In 1954 Anton Kvist visited his homeland for the last time to celebrate Christmas with his family in Denmark.

In the 1960s The Danish National Committee in Chicago took the initiative to start a money collection among Danes in Chicago in cooperation with the Danish weekly *Den Danske Pioner* with the purpose of erecting a monument in Denmark in memory of Kvist. They succeeded in collecting the necessary money, and in July 1964 a bust was inaugurated in a park in Aalborg. The monument was made by the Danish-American artist Chr. Warthoe, a.o. known for his statue *The Islandic Girl* a copy of which should be at Grandview College. On the pediment of the Kvist monument a verse is engraved by the Danish-American author and librarian Jens Christian Bay in Chicago, who was one of Kvist's very good friends. Anton Kvist could not himself be present at the unveiling ceremony. The poet was high up in his 80s, his eyesight had deteriorated, and he was almost blind, but members of the Danish Kvist family attended the ceremony, and the Mayor of Aalborg forwarded a telegram with greetings from those present to the Danish Home in Chicago where Kvist at that time lived. The telegram is still kept in the Anton Kvist files at the Home. Kvist had moved to *The Danish Home* in Chicago in 1959, and he spent the rest of his life there, until he died in 1965. The old poet is buried on *Union Ridge Cemetery* in Chicago.

The works of Anton Kvist

The earliest form of Danish-American literature is found in the letters written by Danish immigrants to family and friends in Denmark. Those letters often describes the immigrant's loneliness and nostalgia. Some immigrants became writers of poetry as well as fiction using their own experiences as immigrants as themes for poems and short stories of a very diversified quality. Kvist was one of them. He had – as you have heard – never received much education and to make his living he had to work as a bricklayer most of his life. His writings were a spare-time activity, and his poetry is a dominating part of his works.

Was he a good poet??

The leading Danish-American writer

The most significant poet among Danish Americans

The Grand Old Man of Danish-American Poetry

These are terms used about Anton Kvist by contemporary critics and colleagues. Many of Kvist's poems favor the themes of *homeland, homesickness, longing, sadness*. These poems have a fundamentally lyric tone and are very tradition bound and retrospective. He is often inspired by the history of Denmark, but also by memories and impressions of his childhood. He writes out of love to homeland and nature and he does it with sensitivity and a great sense of beauty.

Also longing and sadness were inspiration for his homeland poems. Maybe Kvist never had developed his gift for poetry, had he stayed in Denmark and not been placed in a situation calling for both longing and sadness. The experience of being a stranger in a new environment awakened love of the abandoned homeland in many hearts. ⁴ The homeland poems can vary very much. Some describe the generalized feelings of homesickness where the objects of longing are listed such as in this poem:

Hail ancient Denmark

Ancestors' earth

Heath and Sound

Groves of beech

Song of Larks

Glistening Loam

Stream of Memories

Mother and Home

Learning to feel at home in the social setting of a new country is difficult, and homesickness is a prominent feeling that poets are able to express – not least Kvist. The theme of nostalgia pervaded the life of the immigrant in spite of pride in and gratitude for social betterment. One of Kvist's poems describes the feeling of longing in this way:

Tæres Du af længsel, følg Din længsels lyst

Bort fra savn og længsel til en bedre kyst

Glem dog ej paa færden, mens Du stævner frem
Længsel ud I Verden, bliver til længsel hjem.

*If you are torn by longing, then follow the bent of your heart
Away from want and hardship to a better land apart.*

*But don't forget on your journey, wherever you may roam,
Longing for far adventure turns into longing for home.* ⁵

Anton Kvist has lived between two countries, not only in practice but also spiritually. He felt it was his special task to keep the contact with Denmark and make other Danish immigrants understand that if you did *not* erase your past, but let your past and present life interplay with each other, you would experience much bigger spiritual values.

But he certainly also writes poems where his deprivation is felt as personal and specific – where he longs to climb once more to the door of the cottage where his cradle stood to kiss and comfort his grey-haired mother. ⁶

Kvist was very conscious of the intolerable conditions of the workers in the town and the tenant farmer in the countryside. He spoke out against oppression of any kind, against injustice and against unfairness with an ardent passion. ⁷ Contemporary critics have compared him with the two Danish poets and writers Johan Skjoldborg and Jeppe Aakjær, and Kvist was a great admirer of both.⁸

Fyr og Flamme (Enthusiasm) was the title of his first collection of poems to be printed in 1910. This collection holds mostly labor songs with social criticism. Here he writes out of veneration for those who make an endeavor to improve society and out of an empathic compassion for the unhappy and depressed.

Kvist was a member of the Scandinavian Workers in America during his first years in Chicago. The organization published a four-page weekly *Gaa Paa – Folkets Røst (Onward – Voice of the People)* which existed from 1903-1925. It was originally a socialist newspaper published by a Norwegian American. ⁹ Anton Kvist wrote his first article for the newspaper in 1911. ¹⁰ Furthermore he was a member of the Karl Marx club from 1908-1909.

Seven years later came the collection *Fred og Fejde (Peace and Strife)* which mostly holds poems about the homeland and political songs.

From 1910 to 1948 Kvist published five collections of poems, and his writings must have appealed to his audience, as they all sold very well.

Anton Kvist was often asked to write poems for specific celebrations and his homeland poems and his occasional songs and ballads were largely acknowledged by Danish Americans in Chicago. He wrote numerous poems for anniversaries, birthdays and other family occasions.

Why the success among his countrymen in Chicago? Maybe Kvist was inspired by the Danes' diligent and almost devotional endeavor to maintain their Danishness in this golden age of the Danish Chicago colony where so many clustered together in the same neighborhood -and Kvist was able to express these feelings in verses.

Apart from the verses, the songs and the ballads Kvist also wrote many short stories, articles and tales to a variety of Danish-American newspapers and magazines. During his lifetime numerous writings by Kvist appeared in the Christmas Annuals that were so popular in the first quarter of the 20th century – not only in the Danish America but also in Denmark.

A great deal of his production has been set to music, and many of his songs were up until the sixties presented at the 4th of July celebrations in Denmark. In this specific year of 2005 when we celebrate the 200th anniversary of Hans Christian Andersen, it might be appropriate to mention that Anton Kvist in 1955 wrote a poem about Hans Christian Andersen. He actually wrote it sitting by the Hans Christian Andersen statue in Lincoln Park in Chicago. Kvist sent the poem to be published in a newspaper in Denmark. Unfortunately the poem was delayed; it did not arrive until after April 2 which was the birth date of Andersen. The newspaper returned the poem to Kvist, and it never was published.

Conclusion

Will the works of Anton Kvist appeal to modern readers?? Maybe and maybe not. Probably not. Of course there will be an interest in his writings from scholars dealing with the studies of ethnic

literature that expresses the double consciousness which is inherent in the immigrant situation.

For an individual, emigration and immigration mean changing homeland, natural and cultural environment, and language. Conflicts arise between preservation and integration or even assimilation. Immigrants regardless of time and place have a common experience of relating to two cultures simultaneously, and therefore they often live their lives with a double perspective.¹¹

It might be considered to compare and contrast the works of Danish-American emigrant poets and writers with the works of the emigrant writers among the recent immigrants to Europe. In spite of different historical frames of reference, there will be obvious similarities in the presentation.¹²

¹ Mogens Knudsen, "Anton Kvist: Danish Editor, Poet and Bricklayer in a Norwegian Milieu" paper presented for the Chicago History Committee of NAHA. 1985. NAHA archive material, P1243, Northfield, Minnesota.

² Enok Mortensen, *Saaledes blev jeg hjemløs*. Holbæk, Denmark, 1943. p. 197.

³ Published in Denmark by Berlingske Forlag

⁴ Dorothy Burton Skårdal, *The Divided Heart*. University of Nebraska Press. Lincoln. 1974.

⁵ Anton Kvist, *Lurerne kalder* Copenhagen. 1927, p. 19. Translated by Dorothy Burton Skaardal.

⁶ Skårdal, *op.cit.*, p. 268

⁷ Stig Pilgaard Olsen, "Danish-American Literature" in *Danish Emigration to the U.S.A.*. Aalborg, Denmark. 1992.

⁸ Emanuel Nielsen in *Den Danske Pioneer*, October 22, 1953.

⁹ Odd Stein Granhus, "Socialist Dissent Among Norwegian Americans" in *Norwegian-American Studies*, Volume 33, 1992.

¹⁰ Anton Kvist, "Til de stridslystne" in *Gaa Paa*, September 30, 1911.

¹¹ Ingeborg R. Kongslien, "Immigrant Literature" in *Norwegian-American Essays*. 1996 edited by Øyvind T. Gulliksen et al. Oslo. 1996.

¹² *Ibid.*

The Danish Emigration Archives in Aalborg holds the Anton Kvist collection with manuscripts, writings and a huge amount of correspondence. The Royal Library in Copenhagen holds a collection of 15 manuscripts and miscellaneous writings, some of which have been published in Danish-American magazines.