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A Danish Lad in America

by Fred Delcomyn

“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” So said L.P. Hartley in *The Go-Between* (1953). Looking back on myself as a young immigrant child in Detroit at mid-century, the phrase seems especially apt. In my past I was quite literally in a foreign country.

What events do you remember from when you were eight? Birthday parties? Christmas? A trip to the zoo? Probably those and a lot more. For an immigrant boy, other events also stand out. I remember my first softball game. The physical education class at Guest Elementary School was outdoors on a warm fall day, organized into two teams. At first I had no idea what was going on, but I soon learned where to stand and what to do as the game progressed.

Eventually, it was my turn “at bat,” a concept I was just coming to grips with. I had watched my classmates, so I had some idea of what to do as I stood there, bat in hand, waiting for the pitcher to toss the ball toward me. The smack of the ball against the bat was satisfying, but not nearly as satisfying as winding up on second base with a double. The batters following me were not able to get hits, so off into the field we went, with me feeling pretty good about the enterprise so far.

That did not last. When it was my team’s turn at bat again, I headed back out to second base since that is where I had been when the previous inning ended. Naturally, my mistake was soon corrected. I do not recall any particular cutting remarks about the kid who did not even know how to play baseball, but I do recall the deep embarrassment I felt at the time. This feeling was all too common during that first year in America.

I was born in Copenhagen. I had Danish aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins, even a younger brother and sister, to say nothing of friends. But in 1947, two years after the end of the Second World War, my parents decided to abandon those links to the country of my birth and immigrate to the United States, uprooting the entire family to embark on an adventure with an uncertain end.

Even long afterwards, it was never entirely clear to me what drove them to do this. The official story that we kids got later in life was that the political situation in Denmark after the war was intolerable. In my parents’ view, too many politicians and other public figures who

had cooperated with the invading Germans were treated too kindly, “forgive and forget” being the order of the day. One cousin, who I asked about this many years later, thought that job opportunities (or lack thereof) for my father might have been a factor. In the end, though, she was as mystified as I was. But we were leaving Denmark, that was for sure. If we had not been able to get permission to enter the United States, we would have gone to Australia. (When I was in college I occasionally amused myself by trying to imagine what I would have sounded like with an Australian accent.)

None of that mattered to an almost eight-year-old, of course. I cried at the thought of being separated from my best friend Kirsten, who lived next door. I suppose my school friends were intrigued at the thought of where we were going, but none of that made much of an impression on me at the time. The teachers at school were sympathetic and helpful. They gave me a copy of the slim book that my schoolmates would use the next year when they started learning English. I did not look at it as we prepared for our journey, but it was a kind gesture.

Eventually the time for departure came. Two days after my eighth birthday we boarded the MS *Batory*, a Polish passenger ship bound for Southampton, England, and then New York. A family of five, setting off for an unknown future with limited resources. Currency restrictions at the time limited cash to fifty US dollars per person. Even in 1947, that was not a lot of money.

I do not recall much about the journey. I did spend a little time looking at the English book (studying would have been too grand a term for what I did). Not that it really did me much good, but it gave me something to do. I also remember that two days out we hit a storm. I was seasick. My siblings were seasick. My mother was seasick. Nearly everyone on the ship suffered – except for my father. He had been in the Danish merchant marine before marrying my mother, and he had not lost his sea legs, so he helped see us through the ordeal.

We arrived in New York about a week after leaving Denmark. I distinctly remember the fascination of seeing my first black person on the docks, and my mother’s stern warning not to stare. It was hard not to, never having imagined that a person could have a skin color so different from that of every other person I had ever seen. We stayed in a hotel that first night, then embarked on yet another adventure as we flew to Detroit. This was an adventure for most of the other

passengers as well, since air travel then was not nearly as common as it is now. The pilot even had to urge passengers to return to their seats when we all crowded to one side of the plane to look at Niagara Falls when we flew over that landmark.

We went to Detroit because, fortunately, we were not entirely on our own in this new land. My father's older brother Ted had emigrated to the United States in the 1930s and had established himself in Detroit. By the time we arrived he had an American wife and two children, ages seven and four. He sponsored our application for immigration with a guarantee of employment for my father at the Good Humor Ice Cream Company where he worked.

We stayed at my uncle's house until we could find a place of our own. My uncle had a modest brick home in a nice residential neighborhood on Turner Street. As nice as it was, my memories are dominated by how confusing everything was. My uncle's wife and my cousins spoke no Danish at all, so communication was virtually impossible when the Danish adults were not around. Everyone tried to help these foreign strangers who were suddenly sharing their home, but when you don't speak the same language, it makes for many more than the usual awkward moments.

Over the course of that summer, as we kids struggled to learn English and the ways of Americans, my parents were busy as well. My father got a job at General Motors as a machine repairman. On the strength of that, and maybe some help from my uncle, they bought half a duplex on Meyers Road. We moved in before school started in the fall.

We had picked up enough English in three months that my five-year-old sister and I could start school. My sister had no trouble. She was the right age to start kindergarten along with all the other neighborhood kids her age. As an eight-year-old, the place for me would have been third grade. But obviously I had no background in the American school system and it was not clear to anyone just what I knew and what I did not. After some discussion between my mother and school officials, I was placed in the first grade. The plan was that I would advance to the next grade as soon as I had mastered the material in the grade I was in, out of sequence with normal procedures.

The plan may have been sound pedagogically, but it did not help the eight-year-old immigrant kid adapt and blend in. I was tall for my age, and I vividly remember the uncomfortable feeling of sitting at a

desk in a room full of kids all of whom were nearly a head shorter than I was. This did not last forever, of course, and by the end of the year I had caught up to within half a year of my age peers. (At that time, it was possible for kids to start kindergarten either in September or in January depending on when they turned five, hence the half year.)

Fitting in was not restricted just to us kids. I learned many things besides the rules of softball, and some of them were as foreign to my mother as they were to me. For example, I recall explaining American playground slang to my mother. The incident started at school as the kids were lining up to return to class after recess outdoors.

Boy (approaching me in line): "Cuts?"
Me (in confusion): "My name isn't Cuts."
Boy (in exasperation): "No, I mean can I get in line in front of you!"

I have no idea what my response was. What I do remember is coming home and telling mom all about the new word I had learned, diagramming on a piece of paper the concept of a person getting in line in front of someone else. I am sure that the boy who asked me was as astounded that I did not know what he meant as my mother was at the idea that someone might ask a classmate to take a place in front of him in line.

Mom, of course, had to deal with many more things than schoolyard slang. My siblings and I were oblivious to nearly all of it. As an adult now looking back on the circumstances of that early year, I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for her. But one decision did have a strong effect on my life then and later.

Current ideas about bilingualism suggest that it is beneficial for children who grow up in dual-language households to continue to speak both languages. We are told that to keep the languages separate in their minds it helps the kids if one language is always used by one set of people (parents, other relatives) or in one place (in the home) and the other language always used by others (strangers, friends) or in other places (outside the home). In our circumstances, however, my parents elected not to follow this practice.

My brother was only seven days past his second birthday when we left Copenhagen. At an age when most children are just beginning to grasp the concept of language and to use it to communicate, he was suddenly thrust into an environment in which people were using

sounds entirely strange to him. His response was to stop talking entirely if there was anyone not in his immediate family around. This was not an unreasonable reaction as he tried to sort out what all these strange new sounds meant. But it worried my mother a lot, and she took him to a physician to see if something was wrong with him. The doctor's well-meaning advice was for my parents to speak English as much as possible, everywhere and all the time, both to us kids and to each other. Naturally, at the beginning this was simply not possible, so English and Danish were conflated and confused in our minds to some extent. For altogether too many years, I had to stop to think what the English word for clothes hanger was, because in my mind it was always *bøjle*.

I do not know if all this contributed to my brother's language difficulties, but I certainly remember him red-faced and in tears because of it. In one incident, he had bought a small toy and was quite proud of the fact that he had used his own money to buy it. But when he explained this to the neighborhood kids, he said, "I bought this with my own *penge!*" using the Danish word for money. Their lack of understanding was not overcome by his repetition of the word and he was far too young to realize what the problem was.

In later years I came to realize that this emphasis on English even at home helped in part to explain an incident from a few years after we had arrived in the United States. After the first year, we moved to a house of our own, one that was across the street from the new elementary school my sister and I attended.

I was in fifth grade when one day I was summoned from class to the principal's office. A Danish family had moved into the school district, and the mother was trying to register her daughter in school. She spoke very little English, and since the principal knew I was from Denmark, he summoned me to act as interpreter.

So here I was, ten years old, just two years removed from the land and language of my birth, but to my embarrassment I found I could say almost nothing. Since we lived just across the street, I offered to run home to fetch my mother, who would be able to interpret. I dashed home, explained the situation, then ran back as fast as I could, a boy on a mission. When I returned to the principal's office out of breath, I managed to stammer out, "*Min mor kommer!*" (my mother is coming). I'll never forget the enormous sense of relief I felt when she finally walked through the door.

How could I forget to speak my native tongue in only two years? I really had not, of course, as my subsequent experiences as an adult back in Denmark showed. Aided by the fact that we spoke only English at home by that time, I had suppressed the knowledge. Like many immigrant kids, I was ashamed of my parents. It took me many years to realize that, but it is a common enough occurrence. They dressed funny (at least at first), they did not understand many American customs, and they spoke with funny accents. Understanding and speaking Danish was what they did, so it was something I would not do.

I do not want to give the impression that everything from those early years was struggle and embarrassment. I remember many happy hours spent with my best friend Jimmy playing in vacant lots in the neighborhood. These wonderful places, often full of small trees and shrubs, were lots the developer of the neighborhood had not sold yet, and were open and unfenced for us to play in. For kids who liked being outdoors, it was like a playground made just for us.

The past is indeed a foreign country. Although many of us may have inhabited that same country, we each will have experienced it differently. For an immigrant kid, that experience is uniquely different than the experience of his native-born peers.

All children strive to fit in and must separate themselves from their parents as they grow up. But these natural processes are quite different for an immigrant than for a native-born kid. For good or ill, the immigrant experience will shape a child in ways that a native-born person may find hard to imagine. Danish and American culture and values have many similarities. For that reason, a Danish immigrant will find it easier to adapt to American culture than an immigrant child from Asia or the Middle East. But make no mistake. The foreign country of the past that is inhabited by an immigrant is quite different from the past experienced by his native-born peers.