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The Danish-Born American Newly Arrived in the Cities

by

Carl Antonsen

(Translated by Ann Marie Rasmussen)

To begin this little essay, which can only amount to a few scattered remarks because of its place and its general nature, I want to repeat some of what I was able to say in a speech in Aarhus on Danish-American Day on July 4, 1909:

“Speaking as I undoubtedly am on this occasion to those whose longing to travel has been or soon will be focused on America; I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the United States is not a paradise, not the utopia about which C.H. Winther and H.C. Andersen sang. America is the Promised Land only for those who make it that themselves by means of hard, disciplined, and patient work. There are opportunities in America that a Dane will not find at home, but on the other hand there are difficulties that are hard to imagine for those who have not experienced them. America is no land for those whose willpower is weak. For that reason, I cannot caution strongly enough against transplanting young people of weak character from Danish to American soil. Only where there exists a strong desire to leave and a strong will to overcome all obstacles, the will to start from scratch, only then should there be talk about immigration.”

Most Danish immigrants are probably from rural areas, and it is perfectly natural and quite reasonable that they should choose to settle again in the countryside. On the other hand, those who come from the cities--the artisan, the office worker, the clerks who work in trade and retail--quite naturally make their way to cities, and especially the big cities. That is where things are happening, where big changes are taking place. At this point the first great obstacle rises up: *language*. It is amazing how many skilled and hardworking young Danes end up in New York without the slightest knowledge

of the English language or with such defective knowledge of it that they are virtually helpless. Their only recourse is to turn to their fellow countrymen, whose sensible advice can only be: "Learn the language!" Of course, an artisan can sometimes "get in" with the help of a countryman and begin plying his trade with little or no knowledge of the language. But how could that be possible for an office worker or clerk? For him to give satisfaction in his new job and earn even small wages he must be able to manage the language. If he cannot do this, then his training in his line of work is completely worthless, at least in the short run.

And then he may be told that he should go to a farm, for this will give him the best opportunity to learn the language, and this advice is truly the best he could receive. Not only is there usually demand for men willing to work on farms, because American youth continue to take refuge in the big cities, but also the wages there are usually decent. The newly arrived immigrant generally has a sound and serious view of life and therefore is not inclined to throw away his money or squander it (in any case life on a farm offers very few opportunities for that sort of thing). For him every shining dollar stands for four shining Danish crowns, so he will usually save up a nice nest egg, and by the time he feels he can manage the language, he can leave the farm and return to the city to try his luck. A season or two spent on a farm is not a bad education. The work is hard but the way of life is healthy and humble, and through it the character of many a man has acquired a note of gravity and frugality that has been of the greatest importance for his future existence.

But the leap from office worker or sales clerk in Denmark to farm laborer in the United States is great, and it should not surprise anyone that only a tiny fraction of immigrants have the courage to make this leap. Usually the newly arrived immigrant is more willing to lend his ear to those voices advising him to accept any kind of job at all in the big cities until he can find employment in his line of work. But the misfortune in this case is that he often becomes involved in things that are difficult to get out of again. He does a job and works under circumstances from which he can learn nothing and he does not attain the knowledge that is the most important for him: the language. Things that were supposed to be temporary

easily become permanent. He meets and works with people who have foundered and given up. Under such circumstances it is difficult to maintain one's energy, courage, and enterprising spirit.

This is especially true of those who work as casual farm labor, those who do janitorial work in Danish "saloons," those who work as "bartenders" (that is to say those who serve drinks), those who wait tables in Danish places, and the like. Many of our so-called "better" Danes, for example those with a college education, junior officers, the sons of civil servants, and other "sons of good families," have cultivated the 'noble' profession of waiting tables and unfortunately many never moved beyond it. I do not mean to imply that there is anything demeaning about these occupations--indeed no honest work in America is demeaning--just as there is nothing dishonorable about those whose craft this is or those who have worked their way up to self-employment through such occupations. I am speaking only of those who started out in what they thought was a purely temporary line of work in order to make a living while learning the language and who over time lost sight of their original goal.

This is also true of the newly arrived immigrant who takes work in a factory as an unskilled laborer in order to remain in the big city that is dear to him, believing he will quickly learn the language. He will be so intensely busy with the work assigned to him that he will have little or no opportunity to converse with his co-workers, many of whom, by the way, are "in the same boat" as him. Soon he will discover that if he does not wish to attend evening school (luckily these offer easy admission to non-native speakers) and dedicate himself to studying hard in his free time, he won't make it. Instead, he will become one of the many who never escape the eternal treadmill.

I have presented these remarks so emphatically and seriously because the way one enters into or begins life in a new society often determines the entire course of one's existence.

Once the newly arrived immigrant has made it far enough to manage in the new language, a hundred doors open for him. There is room in America's cities for skilled men who *can* work and *are willing* to do so. The huge amount of manpower that is absorbed

year after year in mysterious ways, and that would ruin any other country, is evidence supporting this claim. Each man who desires it *will* find his vocation and as the years pass, happiness and satisfaction increase, as a rule, because of the successes achieved.

Naturally it cannot be said that everyone can start right away in exactly the line of work he desires or in his original line of work. In very many cases the chief accountant or head clerk at home started out as an office "boy" or as a messenger; indeed his first job at the firm in question may well have been window washer! Many a shop assistant whose specialty was women's lingerie and who now may well be one of the firm's upper management, was happy when he long ago got his foot in the door and started at the bottom, packing saucepans or selling tin soldiers. As I said before, it is wonderful in our great and mighty America that no honest work is considered demeaning or dishonorable. The rule is that those who hold the highest positions started *at the absolute bottom*. Not only do they therefore know every single detail of the business, but they also know well every single person's job as a link in the chain, and they have the huge advantage of knowing the working conditions of each of their employees. They themselves have been "through the mill." They themselves have performed the work that Jack and Harry now do. They themselves have lived on the wages Jack and Harry now receive. Let us set aside that their standards are exacting and that they are demanding. The positions they currently hold prove that they lived up to the demands they faced. They know from experience what can be accomplished and what should be accomplished and they are far more capable of acting fairly than a mere theoretician who has not started on the bottom rung of the ladder.

Because no work is dishonorable the first steps to supporting oneself are much easier to take in America than at home, where people are more concerned with "their dignity." Here, it is not uncommon that a man in a tight place takes on any kind of work to survive. The only thing that is considered shameful is if a man would rather idle about, unemployed, in the city square than undertake work that lies outside of his skills and training when at the moment these have nothing to offer him. No one has any use for

idlers. Does a man's dignity suffer if he takes a job outside of the line of work he has learned? Far from it! Rather, he rises in the esteem of his fellows. The fact that he "gets going" proves that he has *backbone*, the most important quality for a man who does not want to drown in the big city. The lawyer's principal clerk, who for the moment is without a job, is not embarrassed to work as a coachman. Neither he nor his wife is shunned by society because of this. None of their old friends look away when they meet because *his* coat is more worn than it used to be or because *her* hat and cape are not the latest fashion. If the opportunity arises, well, then this man will become a lawyer's principal clerk again, if he hasn't discovered in the meantime that he possesses special talents as a painter and can "make more money" doing that. Then he will leap without blinking to the occupation of painter. Surely it is obvious that a person nurtured on these ideas since childhood *cannot* be destroyed but rather is confident that he can take care of himself if he is in a tight spot. Work is ennobling, that is his motto!

We have all known people who did not find their place in life, but we are so prejudiced that at home in Denmark not one out of a thousand adult men would even consider giving up his line of work in order to try something else. Yet this is an everyday occurrence in America, and I am personally convinced that it is an important factor in the happiness of many people.

If an office worker or a dry goods shop assistant lands in America and immediately finds a job in a bank or in a dry goods store, well, he sees himself as a lucky guy, and as a rule his friends will agree with him.

At first such a circumstance does seem to be fortunate and to offer security for the future, but I am not sure that this is really the case. Too much luck in the beginning is not healthy—impediments and struggle *build character*—and the tougher the problems in the first year or two, the more opportunity the young man will have to show what he is made of. Experience is the best teacher! Developing willpower, energy, and the ability thus acquired to overcome all obstacles during those first hard years is an experience that will pay interest a thousand times over in the years to come. That is why almost all of our most important and successful men tell stories

about their first, hard years and straitened circumstances. They love to linger over these old, often bitter memories, not out of pride or out of stupid arrogance over having come so far, but in grateful understanding that precisely these struggles, these difficult years, were necessary to develop the qualities that lay within them and therefore were necessary for them to attain what they have achieved. Who knows if they would have arrived in port so well if they had only known smooth sailing?

It is certain the first years of struggle teach the newly arrived immigrant one thing: the ability to understand the value of money! Standing alone in a foreign country without a penny to one's name and without the vaguest notion from whence the next penny will come is a practical, if not particularly pleasant way of having that lesson knocked into one, and it is much harder to forget than the lessons one reads in books. In reality, the secret of the success achieved in the United States by the majority of our decent and cheerful countrymen is simple: they have learned *thrift*. Though I may risk being accused of philosophizing or of poaching in the preserves of our economists, still it must be said that what really matters is not what a man *earns* but what he *saves*. The man who earns ten dollars and spends eleven will quickly go to the dogs, whereas the man who earns five and saves one is slowly, but surely, advancing towards prosperity. This is so crystal clear that it might seem ludicrous to even mention it, but it is no secret that our young Danes who come from the cities, especially from the big cities, cannot count a tendency towards thrift among their otherwise excellent qualities. Living in Denmark is delightful but all the happy times, the sociability, the hundreds of places to entertain oneself, the thousands of cafes brimming with song and music provide so many temptations and so one's wallet grows lighter and lighter. When payday arrives the cash box is nearly empty; perhaps small amounts have been borrowed here and there. I once knew a carpenter journeyman who regularly, every Saturday night, redeemed his Sunday clothes from the pawn shop and caroused the entire day, and then proceeded just as regularly to pawn his Sunday clothes again on Monday in order to be able to "vegetate" for the rest of the week. A first lieutenant I knew never had a penny on the 4th or the

5th of the month. At that point, he would borrow what he needed for the rest of the month and repay the debt on the first. Inevitably, within a few days he didn't have a penny left. And the wheel kept turning round and round in that manner.

Of course, if a Dane maintains such tendencies over here, he won't do one whit better here than he would have at home. He'll earn a little money, and spend a little more money, and not advance at all. But in a foreign country he quickly grasps that life is not a bed of roses. Perhaps he has experienced the kind of education I alluded to earlier. He realizes that he has to hold on to those pennies in order to achieve economic freedom. The times are over when he stood with empty pockets and no idea where to lay his head and he promises himself that those times will not come again. He wants to be situated so that should sickness or unemployment strike, he has a few dollars to tide him over. And so the young man who does his work, lives a quiet, industrious life, and builds plans for the future, will soon feel that what he needs most is a *home*. He will find a girl and marry. People often marry very young in America, and in almost all cases they are happy. The young man has set a goal and instead of wasting money on fun and games he makes a payment, month after month, on his own little house. One fine day he will own it debt free, and that will be a happy day for him and his family. The working class and middle class in America contain more families who own their *own homes* than in any other country in the world.

At the beginning I said that this article would consist of scattered remarks, and scattered they surely are!

Nevertheless, these remarks share a core truth. Incentive, industry, skill, and above all else thrift are, in my experience, more necessary in the United States than in any other place in the world if a man wants to make his way and advance.

Yet on the other hand, the man who has these qualities and develops them further will go farther economically in the United States than in any other country in the world.