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# The development of the Danish immigrant on American soil

by

Sophus F. Neble

(Translated by Casey Black)

Is the Danish immigrant to the United States quickly naturalized?

This is a question people home in Denmark often ask me, and I will answer both yes and no.

Yes! In as much as it is a known fact that the Danish immigrant, to a higher degree than most other nationalities, takes advantage of his right to apply for "first papers" soon after his arrival.

No! In as much as many Danes, who have received these naturalization papers, never go so far as to get the last citizenship papers and therefore do not become full citizens. If the reason is that the naturalization papers were enough to gain voting rights in many (especially western) states and also gave rights to obtain the free government land, the so-called "homestead," I can't say, but it is a fact that many Danes in America, even people who have lived here a generation, have not received their final citizenship papers.

Therefore the Danish immigrant allows himself to a certain degree to be naturalized at almost any time. It is an honor for him to be a "soon to be" American citizen, and already, after just a few months residency in the country, he has announced his political color and chosen his party affiliation. Typically before each election, I receive bundles of questions from Danish immigrants about which of the two present large parties, democrats or republicans, correspond to left and right in Denmark! The party that one votes for the very first time, using the newly attained voting rights (usually not knowing anything about politics here), that same party remains the party which one adheres to. Besides the Irish, who especially dominate the elections in the United States and especially control the cities' administrations, I believe that Danes in the United States, to a larger degree than any other nationality, use their right to vote. Anyway, when we haven't managed to attain the political influence due us, then it is a lack of unity which has its roots in a national

peculiarity which, as Georg Brandes talked about at the Aarhus festival, is a special national Danish trait inherent in growing up in a small country, a national trait which many Danes brought with them to America and which unfortunately every now and then reemerges here in other conditions than the specifically political.

I have often gotten upset during a political election, when a truly clever and competent fellow countryman presents himself as a candidate for a position, to find good, really Danish-thinking men, who, while not exactly working against their fellow countryman's election, yet show a conspicuous apathy, while at the same time campaigning for an Irish professional politician. The reason for this is that, in reality, one can't stand to see a fellow countryman be made more of than one's self. If the very same countryman who tried to be "uppity" found himself in circumstances where he needed a helping hand, well then it is that very same fellow countryman who wouldn't help him get elected to public office who is immediately there with a helping hand. That's being fellow countrymen!

The way in which the Danish immigrant over here is very late – and where most are concerned – never really becomes naturalized is in their emotional lives. Danes can be found who have lived in America for more than the span of a generation, whose business and daily lives have been amongst Americans, and who despite an assumed outer skin, have remained Danish because they never have been able to throw off the cultural and emotional lives they once upon a time brought with them. These people will most often not acknowledge it. "What do we have to do with Denmark?" They will ask. "We cast off everything from home a long time ago. We are American citizens, our home is here, and our children are Americans." They will haughtily criticize the meager conditions back home and praise all the advantages which this land offered them; but, nevertheless, they are not Americans, and the same men who haughtily criticized the meager conditions back home will become enraged if others attack these very same conditions.

I remember a while ago, when in an article, one of "The Danish Pioneer's" reporters in Copenhagen criticized the Danish people and claimed that they bathed less in the winter time than people in other

countries and therefore called them unclean. This claim created great bitterness over here and brought in hundreds of protests to me. It was the same when, with respect to alcohol consumption, another employee called Danes the most drunken people.

In our emotional life, the great majority of us never become naturalized, and in our family life, although we never become so old, there remains to the end something Danish, even if it is just a picture of the country church where one was baptized and confirmed on the wall of the living room.

We become good, loyal citizens of the United States; but only the very fewest of us become Americans in the strictest sense of the word, and the best proof for this are our Danish Associations: a fraternal order with some 300 lodges and some 20,000 members in the most different areas of the country, women's associations with 130 lodges, two other large associations of societies, a number of widespread special organizations and our strong Danish church and People's Society as well as the Danish press, of which a single newspaper has more subscriptions than most of the largest papers in Denmark itself.

What I have said above counts, however, only for the Danish immigrants: the first generation Danes. I don't believe in a second Danish generation. We can build Danish high schools (højskoler), and we can get the elders to take an interest in them, but never the young who are born here. The youth will always consider being sent to a Danish high school as a burden, something that no one needs, and the Danish high schools here will always therefore need to carry on a struggle for existence which they will, in resisting, lose.

I remember a visit I once undertook to one of the Danish high schools over here. It was in the summer time, and the school was occupied by young girls, --- mostly daughters of Danish farmers ---. The school's superintendent believed in the possibility of preserving a sense of being Danish in the second generation, and it was with a certain pride in being able to contradict me that he showed me about the school. I joined in with all the young girls at mealtime. There were young, ruddy girls and typical Danish faces; the meal consisted of porridge and pancakes, typically Danish; not a single word of English was spoken at the table, and when later I was shown the

young girls' composition books in class, I was surprised to see how well most of them had learned to write in Danish.

The school superintendent thought that he had convinced me, but when I later walked away from the school and met on the road a group of the young girls who were no longer in *school*, then they were happily bouncing around with each other and were themselves, and they all were speaking English.

One may ask if I have ever met children of Danish parents here who were Danish. Indeed, I have met a few cases. I know, for example, a couple of Danish ministers who were born in America and who studied to become ministers in Danish colleges here. They generally speak correctly and probably write correctly, but neither of them have any knowledge of Denmark. They have become Danish because, in part, it has become a career path for them and also because of an interest in what it is to be Danish. Many parents have raised their children to speak, read, and write Danish, and they have done so well as children, but there are relatively few who have kept it up after they have grown up, and all efforts to maintain in the second generation what it is to be Danish will prove to be impossible for the reason that our children are born in America and feel pride in being Americans. None are prouder of being Americans than precisely those born of immigrants, of whom the very fewest, even when they are among Americans, will continue to be Danish.

To what degree has the Danish immigrant taken advantage of the possibilities he found here? Even though the great majority of Danish families have friends and relatives who live in the United States and we are visited over here by both journalists and authors who have written about us in newspapers and published books about America, most Danes immigrate here with total ignorance of the country and conditions. Nonetheless, many adapt surprisingly quickly to the conditions. As a rule they certainly find everything wrong, criticize what they don't understand, and talk about how quite different everything was at home. They learn first to say "all right" and so spit on their hands and grab hold. Most seek out Danish settlements so they can move among their countrymen with whom they can speak and get together, and these are the ones who become naturalized the latest.

In my opinion, the immigrant should get out and mingle among Americans as soon as possible in order to learn the language and adapt to conditions. This is so much easier for the Danish immigrant, who is preferred most among Americans of all nationalities. What matters most first and foremost is to become "Americanized," to adopt the American way of working, to look out for the chances that offer themselves. One must first become American and acquire everything good about them; one will certainly be able to find the Dane inside once again, for there is much that one never *can* be rid of and which by itself will make itself relevant. One need not give up everything one values, and it is my conviction that is precisely those here who do not who become the best Danes.

It has often been claimed that the possibilities for the Danish immigrant are no longer as good as they were before. This is not true; there are just as many possibilities for the hardworking and clever immigrant as there ever have been, and this is especially true for a particular class of immigrants, that is, the agricultural laborers. These are the ones who have taken the greatest advantage of the possibilities that presented themselves here, and in the different states there now live thousands of poor smallholders' sons who came to America with two empty hands and who now sit warmly indoors on well-kept farms. The majority of these people have kept their Danish nature, their Danish culture, but the whole way of getting ahead by which they made their way was American; they have kept the memories and the love of Denmark, but if you think that they sit out on their farms and long to trade the corn field for the clover field at home, then you're wrong; they are happy and contented here, proud of what they have accomplished and loyal to the America that gave them their chance.

But the Danish craftsman, one may ask, what are the possibilities for him now in America in an age where machinery is used to the degree it is in the United States? Has the Danish craftsman who came to America found possibilities to the same degree as the Danish agricultural laborer and has he managed to take advantage of them? And the office worker, the business man, and all the others who moved to the United States?

No, they all haven't, but I would claim that many have, and the great majority has done better than they would have if they had stayed in Denmark. In all bigger cities here, there can be found Danes in the leading businesses and industries, builders, manufacturers, and so on and so forth; and they almost all are people who are the sons of peasants back home, people who have worked their way up from simple laborers without any other stimulus to get ahead than their own diligence and talent, because the possibilities are and have been here and these men managed to take advantage of them. I could from my extended circle of acquaintances fill this book with examples of how a smallholder's son, who herded sheep on a peasant's field in Jutland, has become a leading builder in one of our larger cities, of how a trade apprentice from a small provincial town has become a banker and financed ventures worth millions, of how a smallholder's son from Funen has become a judge, of how a Danish dairyman has become a professor, of how a Danish merchant has become a well-known lawyer in our second largest city, of how a wool merchant from Jutland has become manufacturer of woolen products, and so on without end. It was because the possibilities were here and because these people were practical people who knew how to take advantage of them.

Most Danish immigrants to America come with their national peculiarities. Let's take, for example, the Danish craftsman. He comes here conscious of the fact that he is a journeyman from Denmark, that he has fulfilled his apprenticeship, and that he has proof of having learned his trade, and that no craftsman anywhere in the world is better than a Danish one! He visits the American workplaces and finds that after all it's some kind of terrible trash they do there. As a Danish-trained journeyman he almost feels ashamed for the work. However, he seeks work, gets hired, and finds out that he can't communicate with others, can't understand how to use the tools they use over here, even though they actually are far more practical. Here there is no lunchtime; just hang in there with your tongue sticking out. Instead of being practical and saying to oneself: "So that's the way it is here! This is where I have to make my future; now it's a matter of learning how to do it exactly like the

others do," he takes to criticizing and tearing down the work and the conditions and perhaps gives up on the whole thing.

The Danish craftsman, no matter how skilled he is, must adapt to the way work is done here, align himself with the conditions, and when he has done this, his skill as a Danish-trained journeyman in his trade will always work in his favor.

A Danish mason, who has built substantial buildings in Denmark and been considered a skilled construction worker, sought out with me a large construction site here in America. There was nothing he did not find fault with, and overall it surprised him that such a box didn't fall down before it was finished. The bricks were crooked and loose, the mortar was no good, and the way the mortar and stones were put together would have resulted in a fine in Denmark.

I pointed out to him that New Yorkers put up fifty story buildings that held together more solidly than any of the—at most—five story buildings in Copenhagen.

The man was a mason and a skilled mason who in America, if he had been practical, would have had a future. He ended up as an assistant in a nursery here.

Indeed it cannot be denied that here in America, from a Danish point of view, there can be found many poor craftsmen, but the fact is that every craftsman here is essentially a specialist in a particular thing. A profession, such as one conceives of the word in Denmark, doesn't exist in America, where for example, a man --- because he is a carpenter, should therefore be able to do all kinds of carpentry work just as in Denmark, and a journeyman mason who lays bricks, would be highly indignant if one, for example, asked him to put mortar on a wall.

A number of Danish sailors have taken to painting houses here in America. They are, after all, used to tarring and painting ships at sea and know how to use a brush. I know of many examples how such former sailors have become master painters and wallpaper hangers and have run substantial businesses, whereas really trained skilled and journeyman painters have never become anything other than journeyman painters in Denmark.

Many will object that craftwork therefore finds itself at a painfully lower level here, but this is in no way the case, and it is a

faulty belief one has in Denmark when one thinks that it takes four or five years for someone to learn how to apply paint on a house; and house painting and decorative painting in America are two different jobs.

There is something absolutely unhelpful to the development and transformation from Dane to American in sticking to the belief that there is nothing over here that lasts, that everything in the old world is far better, since in fact, almost everything here is far more practical than at home, and I believe that it would be of immense benefit for the young Danish craftsman and businessman who wants to build a future in Denmark if he were to travel to America and work here for a year in his craft or business, for this practical development combined with the undeniable skills he can gain in Denmark would be to his advantage throughout his life.

Even as I consider myself an American and recognize what I owe this country where now for over half a lifetime I have enjoyed citizenship and at the same time admire so many things in the United States, still at the same time no one should believe that it is my intention to advise people at home to move to America. The rule I have followed throughout my life, and which I have seen many, many examples for, is that things have gone well for immigrants and things have gone bad. I have seen things go wrong for the honest and diligent man just as it probably would have gone bad for him if he had stayed at home. And I have seen things go well for the many who understood how to exploit the possibilities. In contrast, if with these words I could reach those who believe that America is a land to which should be sent those who lack honesty, strength, and a will to work, then I would with far greater strength than could be put into this text, remind them that the worst that could happen to such people would precisely be to be sent to America, for there only a misery awaits them that would be far, far greater than one could imagine in a land like Denmark. Only he who is willing to start over again and has the persistence and strength to do so can succeed in America. In America, work ennobles the man, and many of our best Danes in America today began their careers in their day with a shovel in the street.

No parent can call down a more terrible punishment on their errant son who isn't making it in Denmark than to send him to America to fail.