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Defining an Immigrant

by Helle Mathiasen

Before emigrating in August 1965, I had already experienced America while a child living in Denmark. My first American memory is the smell of Wrigley’s Doublemint gum. I also remember the green gum package containing the thin, shiny silver paper with the jagged edge you had to remove in order to touch the delectable candy. For me, as a child, chewing gum was America. I was born in Vangede in 1940, the year the Germans invaded Denmark. During much of the five-year Nazi Occupation, our family lived in Sydhavnen, in Copenhagen, on Sjælør Boulevard number 3, in a one-bedroom apartment. My father, Harry Nikolaj Mathiasen (1915- ), was a radio repairman and factory worker, and my mother, Aase Mathiasen (1919-1997), a housewife. The five years of the Occupation were hard; there was rationing and certainly we had no money for luxuries. However, we were lucky enough to have a good fairy named Tante Emma, from Racine, Wisconsin. Emma Jensen (1882-1970) was the foster sister of my father’s mother, Maren Mathiasen from Brønderslev. Emma was the first family member to emigrate to America. The earliest photograph we have of her is from 1916, when she was living at 1014 Milwaukee Avenue, Racine, Wisconsin. At that time she had married Jean Christensen, a Danish man she met after emigrating. My father never saw Emma, nor did any of us meet her before she left for Glencoe, Illinois and later Racine, Wisconsin. But starting during the nineteen-thirties, and continuing into the War years and after, Emma Christensen mailed care packages to our family which introduced us to the smells, tastes, and sights of America.

Gifts from Tante Emma included gum, bubble gum balls, books, toys, handbags, clothing, fabric, and flowered handkerchiefs. Once we received a package with a blue suit for my father which he wore even though it was flashy and American and gave off that smell of Wrigley’s Doublemint gum. I remember Tante Emma’s handwriting; it was shaky and her style a mixture of Danish and
American idioms. Emma and my mother corresponded for many years, even though they had never met. Both were faithful letter writers. None of their letters have survived. Doubtless Tante Emma provided the earliest defining experience for my emigration, though I did not know it at the time. In his novel Remembrance of Things Past, Marcel Proust tells us that his childhood returned to him when he encountered madeleines. My childhood impressions of America come back to me when I smell Wrigley’s Doublement gum.

In 1957, at seventeen years of age, I was offered the opportunity to become an American Field Service exchange student for a year. I jumped at this chance for adventure. This program was started by ambulance drivers during World War I with the aim of improving international understanding and preventing future wars. I became an AFSer in the tenth year after the program began. Stephen Galatti (1888-1964), a former Harvard quarterback who had served in World War I, directed the program then. I met him several times. As I recall, my interview with the AFS committee, I hear myself talking animatedly about my love of traditional jazz, especially the music of Louis Armstrong, and I think this enthusiasm got me the scholarship. I was placed with Charles A. Sleeper and his wife, Shirley Sleeper, a family living at 5524 Bellflower Boulevard, in Lakewood, California. Their daughter, Kathy Stiff, a year my senior, was to be my foster sister for the year 1957-58. Charlie Sleeper was an insurance salesman and Shirley

Emma Christensen (Tante Emma)
Sleeper, a housewife. They belonged to a Protestant church and that became important to my introduction to American culture.

As a high school student in 1957, I was ill prepared for the dramatic change from Gentofte Statsskole, a junior high and high school called a gymnasium of 500 students in a well-to-do suburb of Copenhagen, to Robert A. Millikan High School in Long Beach, California, a school with over a thousand students. For example, where my Danish gymnasium had a small area for parking bicycles, Millikan had a huge lot for parking cars, shiny, lollipop colored hot rods, with flames painted down their sides. On the other hand, I was well prepared for some of the academic subjects offered at Millikan, such as French, but had never heard of American history or Senior Problems, nor taken driving lessons and tennis at school. A major difference between my Danish and American schools was the lack of fixed classrooms at Millikan. We migrated from room to room to meet with a different teacher for what seemed like very short periods. Crowded hallways and toilets frightened me in the beginning. Different from the Danish high school population, the student body at Millikan was diverse. These American students were not the upper crust of the white Danish bourgeoisie but rather young people of various colors and ethnic backgrounds. I had come from the duck pond to the salad bowl.

During my childhood and youth, Denmark was a homogeneous country; it has only lately become multi-cultural, a transformation not without some pain for both the immigrants and the native Danes. However, as a young person, I was immediately fascinated with the multicultural groups of different teenagers I encountered. They were friendly people whose conversation I could barely make out. The biggest problem in social acculturation is language. I had studied English with British-trained, university-educated teachers since my eleventh year, but the American language was another matter. It took me weeks to lose my Oxford English tendency to say barth instead of bath, and harlf parst three instead of three thirty, just to mention some examples. I soon learned that it only takes a little ridicule for you to realize your difference and to attempt to fit in with the crowd. Hence I changed from a British to an American pronunciation which was to be changed back again to British when I re-entered the Danish school system.
I thought the classes easy, but found the new subjects, such as American history and Senior Problems, intriguing because they were so unfamiliar. I think it is fair to say that little was taught about American history and culture in the Danish schools of the fifties. Our ignorance of this Continent was as appalling as the ignorance about Denmark I noticed in my interactions with my peers at Millikan. In Senior Problems we studied the concept of prejudice, a new concept for me. I understood that prejudice was bad, and that it applied to the way we thought of other races and religions. Another important idea of the culture of the time was maturity and immaturity. One of the worst things you could say about someone was that she/he was immature. Prejudice and immaturity, I guessed, went hand in hand. Having grown up in little Denmark, fundamentally a Lutheran country with a state church headed by the monarch, I was used to one faith, not the several Christian denominations to be found in Lakewood alone. Prejudice was unknown to me as an individual; as to maturity, I am sure I failed that test at seventeen.

Another major difference and a real puzzler was the variety of after school activities, mostly the numerous clubs, many of which invited me to join as their token foreigner. And the parties—there were so many of them: barbecues, pool parties, pajama parties, and beach parties. I became familiar with the pop culture of the fifties, including the songs of Pat Boone, Perry Como, Elvis Presley, and watched movies like *The Ten Commandments* and *South Pacific*. Astonished by the plenitude of food at parties and drive-in fast food places, I soon got fat on malted milk shakes, fries, and cheeseburgers. As I reread my letters from the AFS year, I recall a whirlwind of dates and parties, and telling my parents I was the luckiest girl in the world.

The dating customs of my fellow teenagers confused me, however. What did it mean to date someone, to be going with someone, to be pinned, or to wear a boy's football jacket? Why did some girls wear a boy's school ring on a chain around their necks? What did it mean to "make out?" What was "petting" and what did they understand by "going all the way?" Uninitiated into sex as I was, it took me most of the year to untangle this web of mysterious teenage relationships. Social acculturation also included learning to shave my legs and armpits, to sleep wearing curlers and bobby pins.
at night, and to wear fluffy, lacy petticoats, ankle-length wool skirts, sweaters in bright colors, bobby socks and saddle shoes. Most difficult of all, it was not *comme il faut* to wear the same clothes two days in a row; I used my imagination to create new outfits each morning before the carpool came to take me to school.

There were many helpful peers and elders at the high school where I was a senior. Two in particular stand out in my memory: my benevolent advisor, who struggled but never learned to pronounce my first name and left it “Hilly,” and my favorite teacher, Miss Eleanor Weiherman. I thought she was refined and kind. She awakened my interest in American poetry by giving me a volume of Robert Frost poems, which I still have. Frost’s poem, “The Road not Taken,” has always moved me: “I shall be telling this with a sigh/Somewhere ages and ages hence;/Two roads diverged in a wood,/And I—/I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference.” Certainly Miss Weiherman’s encouragement to read and write English and American spurred me to matriculate as a graduate student in English at the University of Copenhagen where I received my *cand. mag.* or Master’s in English and Ancient Greek Language and Culture in 1966.

My mother had made sure that I continued classical piano lessons while in Long Beach. I taught piano to the children of Mr. Kohn of the Millikan faculty. But soon I gave up piano in favor of amusing get-togethers with other teenagers. The American Field Service office had placed me with a Lutheran family with strong church going habits. This was another new experience for me. My Danish family attended church only for the major events of baptism, confirmation, wedding, and burial. But at the Sleepers we went twice a week; in addition, I was invited to join the youth group. One memorable encounter with young Californians was a four-day camp organized by the Girls’ Athletic Association at Milliken High. I was fortunate to be invited to join in this adventure. We students from Milliken were driven to Big Bear Lake near San Bernardino for a four-day experience of camping with teenagers from both our church and a black congregation from Los Angeles. We had a wonderful time singing, praying, talking, hiking, and playing practical jokes on each other. For instance, we surreptitiously put laxatives into the food of “the enemy” in the other cabin. Later, we
would joke about this camp, calling it a "moving experience." We prayed and sang together, and I taught these kids Danish songs, including "Altid frejdig naar du gaar". I spoke in public at the camp, at church, at school assemblies, at clubs and organizations, to adults and young people, sometimes answering questions such as "How do you kiss in Denmark?" "Are there polar bears in the streets of Copenhagen?" These activities developed my social skills, speaking skills, and general sense of responsibility as a representative of Denmark in the United States.

I believe the biggest difference between the educations I received at Gentofte Statsskole and at Robert A. Millikan High School was that the Danish gymnasium was oriented towards academic skills whereas the California high school was oriented towards life skills and team work. The American high school offered more adult supervision and support, more tests on the material studied, and more sports. And most of all, the American high school had all those extracurricular activities which offered something for everyone.

I always enjoyed getting together with my foreign peers, the other "AFSers," There were twelve, from twelve different countries, including Argentina and Turkey. We had a special bond. I felt closest to a boy from Norway, a Finnish girl, and a boy from Sweden. Now, forty-five years later, I still keep in touch with Madeleine from France and Carmen from Spain. Interestingly, only one other person among these twelve besides me emigrated to America.

On our AFS sponsored bus tour from California back to New York at the end of the year, we visited numerous cities and hospitable families across the American continent. In Washington, D.C., we were introduced to President Dwight D. Eisenhower at the White House. His courteous reception of us foreigners symbolized for me the courtesy and generosity I had experienced in California and on the bus tour. Optimism, friendliness, and material wealth, these were, I thought, American national characteristics. This country was the "good guys," having freed Europe from the tyranny of fascism just a decade before. However, in Washington I also experienced the negative side of American culture when I saw signs in public buildings enforcing segregation of the races. These
demonstrated the reality of prejudice which I had taught at Millikan was a vice. The nineteen fifties also saw the initial stages of the Cold War and the early efforts at desegregation. Unfortunately, I was too immature to realize the political complications that made up American culture.

Returning to Copenhagen from beach parties, the Everly Brothers, "Sugartime," "The Purple People Eaters" and Pat Boone's "Love Letters in the Sand," hamburgers drive-ins, those wonderful cars and good times to my Danish climate, family, and friends required a change of mindset. And Readjusting to the Danish system of education was a challenge for Ida, Kirsten and me, three AFS girls returning to Gentofte Statsskole from three American high schools. Our Danish English teacher demanded that we drop the "okays" and our American accents. But all of us excelled in English conversation. After a year's maturation, I discovered a genuine interest in all my subjects and my grades went up. After graduating from the gymansium, and doubtless inspired by Miss Weiherman and a love of Anglo-American culture, I decided to enroll as a graduate student in English at the University of Copenhagen. First Tante Emma and then the American Field Service year were major motivating factors behind my choosing to go to the University of Copenhagen. My year abroad had changed my life.

Matriculating in 1960, I joyfully signed up for a now defunct course called "Filosofikum," where we read the history of philosophy, especially logic. In studying English, I had a tremendous advantage at Copenhagen University because of English language skills acquired as an American Field Service exchange student. During my years as a graduate student, I supported myself by teaching English at the Extension Branch of Copenhagen University, at the Municipal Continuing Education Schools, and the Workers' Educational Union. I also had several tutoring jobs. Having participated in clubs at Millikan, I accepted election to the Student Council at Copenhagen University as representative for the English students. In 1963, I was on the organizing committee for a major international conference of Northern European student leaders. This choice became the defining cause for my emigration, because through this event sponsored by the Student Council of Copenhagen I met a young Fulbright student from Yale University,
Joseph Stephen Alpert, who became my husband in 1965. He did not smell like Wrigley's Doublemint gum, but he had energy and charm and wore white cotton socks and penny loafers. And I loved his talk talk talk about everything under the sun.

After studying four years at Copenhagen University, I became disillusioned with the educational methodology used there. The curriculum depended heavily on the history of the English language, grammar, the phonetics of Otto Jespersen, a pioneer in the field, and translation from Danish to English and English to Danish. We were taught a great deal of grammar and history of the English language. I still remember "The Wanderer," "Beowulf," "Piers the Plowman," "Gawain," and Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales." They have remained among my favorites. However, the emphasis on word for word translation diluted my enjoyment of these masterpieces. I would have liked to read more Old British Masters, including Shakespeare than the one play we worked on for an entire semester. I disliked grammar, finding many of the lectures uninspiring. Luckily, we imbibed a small amount of American literature through the seminars given by visiting American Fulbright professors, such as, John W. Aldridge and Leon Howard. Through them I discovered Faulkner and Hemingway. The best lectures of our Danish professors were given by Professor C.A. Bodelsen on his favorite poets: Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and T.S. Eliot. Miss Ingeborg Nixon introduced us to the then new British literature, for example, Kingsley Amis, Allan Sillitoe, and Iris Murdoch. There were two big examinations, one after two years and then the final exam. And we wrote a thesis for this Master's degree; mine discussed the novels of Ann Radcliffe. Doubtless the education we received at Copenhagen University was thorough, and, in its own way, complete. My Greek minor supplied me with a rich appreciation of ancient cultures and languages that I still cherish.

A Cand. Mag. or Master's degree from Copenhagen University was insufficient for a teaching job at an American university. For this reason, while still in Copenhagen, I took the GRE exam, wrote up an exposition of the English courses I had taken at Copenhagen, and applied to several universities in Boston for admission to their doctoral program in English. Boston University and Tufts University offered me tuition scholarships and teaching
assistantships. I became a graduate student at Tufts in 1965, the year of my emigration and marriage. My choice of dissertation topic was especially influenced by my immigrant status: I chose to study the seventeenth-century English Puritans in Massachusetts, the earliest emigrants from Europe to this continent who arrived on the Mayflower in 1620. I particularly studied the theocracy in Boston, transcribing a large number of sermons by John Cotton of the First Church of Boston as noted down by merchant Robert Keayne in an original notebook owned by the Massachusetts Historical Society. I researched the work of Perry Miller, Edmund S. Morgan, and Bernard Bailyn. Reading John Calvin, the works of David D. Hall, John Demos, and Samuel Eliot Morrison was largely enriching. I studied the Antinomian Crisis in Boston and developed strong sympathy for Anne Hutchinson, an American Puritan who walked the road less traveled.

As a new immigrant graduate student just off the boat, I walked into a classroom filled with Tufts University engineering majors to teach "The Road not Taken" and "Birches." As a T.A., I taught grammar and writing to these Tufts undergraduates, two sections per semester, while taking the ten courses required for the Ph.D. I graduated from Tufts University with a Ph.D. in English in 1974. In my soul I have often thanked my Millikan High English teacher and my boring old grammar professor at Copenhagen University. Teaching American university students was and remains a huge challenge. But I am grateful that none of them, and there are thousands, as I began teaching in 1960, has ever remarked on my accent or that I am an immigrant. In many ways, the structured yet innovative system of higher education in this country agrees with me more than the less structured and mentored system I knew in Denmark. We test students a lot here, and perhaps supervise them too much, but we get them through the curriculum and out into the real world. After teaching undergraduates at various universities in Massachusetts, California, and Arizona, I now have the good fortune to teach literature and medicine to medical students and residents in the Medical Humanities Program in the College of Medicine at the University of Arizona. I have pioneered this Program with the help of many colleagues and friends, and with gratitude to my earliest teachers in Denmark and the USA.
I became an American citizen in 1974. Our daughter Eva Elisabeth Alpert, born in Copenhagen, and son Niels David Alpert, born in Boston, are Americans, but nurture a sincere love for Danish culture. We travel to Denmark often. In the United States, my adopted homeland, I often seek out Danish connections, such as, the Danish American Heritage Society. It is possible to love two countries and cultures at the same time. I love visiting Denmark yet am always glad when I land at Kennedy or Dallas/Fort Worth or O'Hare for now I can be a little freer, more creative, and more active. I think I understand Americans better now, after all these years. I wish college students here knew more about the world outside of Arizona and the U.S. I wish more Americans would realize how lucky they are to be citizens of this powerful nation. We know now that an American passport is a valuable document. However, learning the true value of things as compared to their mere price is a life long process. As a privileged emigrant and immigrant, I choose to appreciate the distinct beauties of "little Denmark" and of "the most powerful nation on earth." Most definitely, I remember my parents, Tante Emma, all my teachers and mentors, my husband and children with gratitude for the many kinds of inspiration they have provided.