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My Danish Heritage and the Privilege of Serving as U.S. Ambassador to Denmark

by Laurie S. Fulton

One of the things I miss most since leaving my post as U.S. ambassador to Denmark is not hearing anyone around me speak Danish or speak English with a Danish accent. It was an adjustment to realize that few people in America know much about Denmark. And so, I truly am delighted to be with you this evening for the Danish American Heritage Society Conference. *Tak for invitationen.*

I arrived to take up my post as U.S. ambassador in Denmark at about 9:15 a.m. on July 29, 2009—my flight was two hours late. By that time, I had been on the plane for 11 hours, in a dress. I stepped off the plane onto the jetway, not yet inside the airport. There, waiting to greet me were representatives from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the U.S. Embassy. They walked me into the airport terminal, telling me about the excited but grumpy Danish press corps who had been sitting at the airport since before 7 a.m., waiting for the arrival of the new U.S. ambassador. You can understand my concern about meeting a grumpy press corps who would convey their initial impression of the new U.S. ambassador to 5.5 million Danes.

As we stepped into the arrival gate lounge, I was surrounded by television cameras and microphones held out by the Danish journalists who had been waiting hours to interview the new U.S. Ambassador. Smiling, I said into the microphones, “Jeg er glad for at repræsentere President Barack Obama i Danmark.” The press seemed delighted that the U.S. ambassador greeted them in Danish. Thus began Day One of my incredible experience of being U.S. ambassador to Denmark.

Serving as President Obama’s ambassador to Denmark was an honor and privilege. I grew up in Scandinavian America, not too far from here, in eastern South Dakota. I have Danish heritage and had previously visited relatives in Denmark. My first visit to Denmark was on my twenty-first birthday—in 1970. I also enjoyed hosting Danish relatives who visited me in the United States. News appeared in the Danish press early in 2009, before it was announced in this country, that I was likely the next ambassador to Denmark. My relatives were
stunned—and then proud—that I would be the American ambassador to Denmark.

Each of you here tonight has special connections to Denmark. I would like to share with you my reflections on U.S.-Danish relations during my tenure as ambassador, and perhaps a bit about immigration and heritage. If I shared with you all the highlights during my time as ambassador, however, we would be here all night. Let me note that in my first five months in Denmark, I had visits from President Obama—twice! I also had visits from the First Lady, Oprah, then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and four other members of the Cabinet, as well as more than two dozen members of Congress, and even the Terminator. All of these VIPs came in the first five months!

As U.S. ambassador, my primary duty was to represent President Obama and the United States to the Danish government and the Danish people. While much of the substance of the relationship between our countries is directed by the President or the Secretary of State, there is much discretion given to the ambassador in conducting the relationship overall. As I testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee prior to confirmation, one of my goals was to meet as many Danish people as possible in their own communities. Meeting with Danish people as I traveled throughout Denmark provided an amazing opportunity to learn about the land of my forefathers—or morfar in my case.

A century ago, in 1910, my grandfather immigrated to the United States from mid-Jutland in Denmark. His name was Jens Jensen—and you can’t get much more Danish than that. Jens came to join his uncle Anton, who previously had immigrated to Iowa and then Minnesota. Jens’ parents, brother, and four sisters all remained in Denmark. When I knew him in the 1960s, my grandfather was a successful businessman with an automobile dealership and a farm implement dealership in Madison, South Dakota. He was active in community government, on the city council and the county commission. As did other immigrants, he faced challenges along the way, but I believe he achieved his American dream. When he arrived in this country, he was not able to speak, read, or write English. Like other newcomers, he learned quickly to speak it, but he never mastered the “J” sound and so he remained Yens Yensen.
In 1916, he joined the U.S. Armed Forces and fought in Europe during World War I. Denmark was able to remain neutral during the First World War. Although the Danish family initially had worried that Harald, the remaining son, would be conscripted, it was my now-American grandfather Jens who fought in that war. After the war, he traveled to Denmark to visit his family. In World War II, his sons, including my father, fought in the Army, Navy and Marines. Fortunately, all returned home safely. Following that war, my grandfather again returned to Denmark to visit his family. From my Danish relatives who were children at that time, I learned that they saw my grandfather as “the rich American uncle.”

Their memories cast my grandfather in a new light. In the mid-1940s in postwar Denmark, he was successfully middle-class American, while Denmark was poor from the depredations of war. Comparatively speaking, he apparently seemed rich to his Danish family. My Danish relatives still remember how they spent the American dollars he gave to each. From them, I gained not only a new perspective on my grandfather, but also on U.S.-European relations post World War II and the importance of U.S. assistance and the Marshall Plan.

When I was very young, probably not yet three years old, I remember a visit from my grandfather’s sister Ana from Denmark. For many years thereafter, she sent us a gift box every Christmas. We treasured her gifts, and today, more than 60 years later, the family still has most of them: yarn nisser or elves for the Christmas trees, Hans Christian Andersen storybooks, and silver spoons with motifs from his stories on the handles. My sisters and I especially treasured the books about the three Danish princesses, Med prinsesserne året rundt. We have them for every year from 1954 to 1963. They are worn and tattered, but I took them to Denmark with me and proudly displayed them in the library of the American ambassador’s residence. I told Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II and her sisters Benedikte and Anne-Marie that as a young girl thousands of miles away in South Dakota, I had grown up reading about them. We felt a special kinship with this faraway country of fairytales, Vikings, and princesses. Imagine my honor when I first met Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II to present my credentials from President Obama as his ambassador to Denmark. Imagine my incredible honor when in a departure audience, Her
Majesty presented me with the Grand Cross of the Royal Order of Dannebrog. The honor seems in many ways incredible. My great-grandfather Mads Frederik Jensen-Aale was a small farmer—a husmand in Danish—who grew up between Horsens and Nørre Snede in mid-Jutland. He was born in 1865 to a farm laborer and his wife, the youngest in a blended family. Like many in that era, his father had lost his land and so became a laborer, dependent upon jobs on the large estates. Mads began working to help the family at a very young age. Like many other Danes of that generation, as a young man, he hired on as a crewman on small Danish commercial ships, sailing among ports in the Atlantic, including a stop in the then-Danish West Indies, now U.S. Virgin Islands.

Mads returned to mid-Jutland, married and became a small landowning farmer. Mads became an active force in the movement to divide up former feudal estates into a dozen or so parcels of land, creating many small farms, and thus increasing the number of small landowners. Mads was elected to Parliament and served from 1918 to 1940 in Landstinget, the upper body in what was then Denmark’s bicameral parliament. (Today the Folketing is the unicameral parliament). There are two highlights about the class that entered the Danish Parliament in 1918. It was the first parliament to hold session in Christiansborg, where the parliament sits today. It was the first parliament to include women as members.

Mads was one of the parliamentarians involved in the land reform acts of 1919, which permitted the breakup of the formerly large feudal estates into smaller farms for individual ownership, hence permitting more Danes to own land. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former Danish Prime Minister and General Secretary of NATO, told me that in his view, even more important than the parceling of the estates was the mortgage-related legislation of the land reform acts, which enabled laborers like his great-grandfather to buy such a farm.

In 1970 on my first visit to Copenhagen, my grandfather’s youngest sister took us to visit the halls of Parliament at Christiansborg to see a portrait of the six gentlemen who sponsored the land reform acts. In a meeting with the Head of Protocol of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I mentioned having seen the portrait of these gentlemen in Christiansborg. Two weeks later, a letter arrived at the Embassy offering to loan the portrait of the gentlemen of the Land Reform Acts of 1919.
to the United States of America to be displayed in the ambassador’s residence while I served as ambassador. The huge portrait fit perfectly on a large wall in the Residence reception hall. I always greeted all my guests in front of that portrait. Danes loved seeing the portrait and knowing of my personal connection to Denmark. Americans loved it for the same reason. Visiting members of Congress, like former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Representative Steny Hoyer, were delighted that the American ambassador had an ancestor who was a member of the host country parliament. Every night when I came home and walked through the reception hall, there was my great-grandfather to greet me. I congratulate the Danes for being well organized and thoughtful!

Many of us think of Denmark as an agricultural society, and it is. But it also has a strong maritime history and culture. Living and traveling within Denmark, including to several of its beautiful islands like Fanø, Faerøerne, and Laesø, I developed an appreciation for the Danish maritime culture, when men went to sea, sailing to faraway places in the wide world, while women stayed home tending family and community. Perhaps the history of maritime adventure from the Stone Age to the Viking Age to the present day is at least in part responsible for Denmark’s global identity and outlook. Danish author Carsten Jensen wrote an epic novel, *We the Drowned*, which tells the story of seamen and their families in Marstal on the Danish island Aerø from the First Schleswig War of 1848 through the Second World War. I recommend this to any of you who want to know more about maritime Denmark. The nearly-700 page book interweaves tales of the seamen traveling to ports around the world with the challenges of those who stay behind in Marstal, trying to feed, educate, and raise families, not knowing when or if the ships and seamen will return.

Danes are great partners for America across the board, from business relations, to development of green energy and sustainable technology, to NATO and defense, to international law enforcement, counterterrorism, and global security. During my tenure as ambassador, the U.S. embassy was involved in two initiatives of which I am particularly proud. One was the Conference on the Role of Women in Global Security, which was co-hosted by the embassy and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 2010. The conference brought together the U.S. and the Nordic-Baltic countries as like-minded countries committed to improving the condition of women.
The mission of the conference was to identify best practices for assisting women in countries emerging from conflict to become active in their local economies, government, and security. Conference attendees were government ministers, military and civilian leaders from NGOs, business and academic spheres who met in workshops with others who had on-the-ground and lived-through-it experience. One result of the conference was NATO’s commitment to include attention on women in all its activities and NATO’s Special Representative for UN Resolution 1325, which recognizes the disparate impact on women in war and conflicts. The other initiative was Green Partnerships for Growth, which creates networking and business collaboration opportunities for entrepreneurial “green” growth sectors from the U.S. and Denmark. Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton kicked off its public-private aspect in May 2012.

In Operation Unified Protector in which NATO commanded airstrikes over Libya in 2011, the Danish F-16 pilots were second to none. Among my memorable experiences as U.S. ambassador was flying in a Danish F-16 on a remarkably clear July morning. We flew from Skrydstrup Air Force Base in Jutland across Langeland and buzzed the chalky cliffs of Møns Klint, then up the coast over Kastrup airport, over the ambassador’s Residence, and up over “Hamlet’s castle” at Kronborg in Elsinore. By the time we flew over northern Jutland, it had become incredibly foggy and I could not see the runway as we landed. This flight for me was not only an amazing physical and visual experience, but it also instilled an appreciation for the importance of inter-operability with our NATO partners and allies like Denmark.

During my term as ambassador, we worked closely with the Danes on a broad range of security-related issues, including fighting pirates off the Horn of Africa. Denmark frequently deployed naval frigates and crew, and often a Challenger plane to help provide reconnaissance. Denmark chairs the working group on legal challenges of the 55-member Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia, in which the U.S. also participates. We also worked closely with Denmark in anti-money laundering efforts and promoting ways for ex-pats to send home remittances while minimizing the risk that the money would go to terrorist causes. One particularly memorable example of our partnership was the rescue by U.S. Special Forces of two members
of the Danish De-mining Group from a land-based camp in Somalia in January 2011. One of those rescued was a young American woman named Jessica, whose health had begun to deteriorate. As we planned her rescue, the issue arose as to whether we would rescue her only, or also rescue her Danish colleague, Paul. We rescued both and Denmark was ecstatic. The US had accomplished a feat that a small country like Denmark knew it could not do on its own.

A remarkable Danish feat was celebrated in September 2013—the 70th anniversary of the rescue of the Danish Jews. Certainly many factors went into that success, and as the saying goes, timing is everything. By the time the Nazis decided to round up the Danish Jews, the vulnerability of the Nazi regime was becoming apparent. Yet the collective heroism of ordinary Danes in Copenhagen and in fishing villages in Zealand is unparalleled. Without any central organization of authority to direct them, when confronted with scores of Danish Jews trying to escape the Nazis, Danish villagers hid them, fed them, and helped find fishing boats to take them across to Sweden.

If I had to choose countries to have America's back, Denmark would be among those I would choose. My time in Denmark reinforced my perception of the Danish people as clever, collaborative, and pragmatic—not to mention that Danes always top surveys as the happiest people in the world. It was truly an honor to serve as the American ambassador to Denmark from 2009 until February 2013.