2014

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Daily Life in Denmark in the 19th Century

by Sofie Krøgh Nielsen

The 19th century entailed a lot of change in Denmark. For instance, industrialization broke through and changed the landscape, society, and conditions of life; the 1849 Constitution abolished absolute monarchy so that the political scene was changed. The 19th century was also the century where nationalism started to blossom and the idea of one nation with one people and one language developed. Moreover, Denmark was reduced from a great power to a small state with the loss of Norway in 1814 and the duchies of Slesvig, Holstein, and Lauenburg in 1864. Finally, it was also a century of emigration, especially to the U.S. All these changes affected daily life in Denmark in the 19th century. The aim of this article is to give an idea of the kind of life Danish immigrants left when they came to the U.S., by exploring themes such as urbanization, employment and basis for living, social services, food, political rights, women’s rights, and the lives of children in 19th century Danish society.

From the Country to the City

In the 19th century, Copenhagen was, as today, the biggest city in Denmark, but it had only approximately 130,000 citizens around 1850. At that time, there were 72 market towns in Denmark, but only five of them had more than 5,000 citizens and most had fewer than 2,000. Today, more than 80% of inhabitants of Denmark live in cities. In 1840, around 80% of people in Denmark lived in the countryside and, until 1870, 75% of the Danish population still lived in the country. In 1916, by contrast, more than half of the population lived in cities, station towns, or suburbs.

The growth of towns was, of course, connected with the growth of the population. Until 1800, the population in Denmark was less than 1 million. In 1840, the population had grown to around 1.3 million and in 1916, the number was almost 3 million. In the same period, Copenhagen grew five times larger, to a population of 600,000 citizens. Many the market towns had a similar or even higher growth rate.

Unlike today, the growth of the Danish population had nothing to do with people immigrating to Denmark; even though 50,000-
75,000 people from Slesvig, Sweden, and Poland came to Denmark in this period, around 300,000 Danes also emigrated from Denmark, generally to the U.S. Nor does it have to do with how many children were born, as the birthrate stayed almost the same throughout the 19th century. The growth in the population was due primarily to a decrease in the mortality rate, especially among infants. As a result of the improved prospects for the survival of children, life expectancy rose across the board; a boy born in the 1840s could expect to live for 40.9 years while a girl was expected to live 43.5 years. Just before World War I, a newborn boy could expect to live 56.2 years and a newborn girl 59.2 years.

Several factors played a role in the lower mortality rate. For instance, people started to eat more nutritious food, especially potatoes. In order to combat cholera epidemics in the 1850s, water supplies and urban sewer systems were improved, leading to better health services and more hygienic living conditions. Increased knowledge about bacteria and the extension of hospital services to the entire country also helped people live longer.

Greater numbers of surviving children in the countryside was also a factor that influenced the flow of immigration to the U.S. Since only one son could inherit the family farm, it seemed attractive to younger sons to travel to the U.S. and acquire their own farm. Therefore, in order to save up money to emigrate, many young people moved from the country to the nearest market town for employment.

**Employment and Basis for living**

The greater part of the population in 19th century Denmark were farmers. Until the beginning of the 1880s, more than half of the population worked in farming, but this number started to fall notably with the spread of industrialization and the rise of cities. However, even in 1911, almost 40% of the population worked the land.

Since Denmark was dependent on farming, it is not surprising that so many Danes worked in the agricultural industry. The development of the Danish farming industry in the 19th century brought about, among other things, improvement of the land, new crops, orientation on livestock production and the foundation of co-operative dairies and slaughterhouses. These changes meant that, around WWI, one third of what was produced in the fields sufficed to feed the growing
number of people in Denmark. The rest of Denmark’s agricultural production was exported, especially to England. Farming was the greatest source of income for the country and provided the economic foundation for importing raw materials and other goods needed for different occupational sectors. Many of the products supplied by the farming industry were the basis for urban employment in breweries and distilleries, grain mills, and sugar factories. Moreover, the crops and products needed to be transported from the country to the city, which created jobs in the trade and transportation industry. Although Denmark could still be characterized as an agricultural country throughout the 19th century, modernization and urbanization were slowly but surely changing both the Danish landscape and the Danish way of life.

In the cities, craftsmanship and industry dominated the economy. Traditionally, the role of the market town had been to meet needs for commodities and services. In the 1840s, 25% of the Danish population found their living in the craft and industry sector, while in 1911, the number had grown to around 30%. However, in the cities, the number was of course much higher—on average, around 50% of people in a market town worked in a craft workshop or factory.

Until the first democratic Danish Constitution was adopted in 1849, the market towns had a monopoly on crafts and engaging in trade. Only a few trades, such as blacksmithing, were officially allowed in rural areas. In reality, however, a lot of illegal business went on. The Constitution prioritized freedom of trade; the first step was abolishing the import tax on bringing goods and commodities into town to sell, which happened in 1851. This meant that, little by little, the toll booths and the fences that surrounded market towns were torn down, as they no longer had a purpose. The next step came in 1857, when an ordinance mandating craft freedom was passed. Under this law, the guilds lost their rights to regulate production, prices, and entry into skilled trades. As a result, skilled craftsmen lost the social security and the professional self-assurance that the mandatory membership in the guilds had provided.

To give the workers time to prepare for the changes brought about by the democratization of craft guilds, it was decided that the law would not be put in effect until 1862. However, the masters and the skilled craftsmen spent the time trying to have the law changed and were therefore not prepared when it did come into effect. This
resulted in a lack of alternative effective organizations to look out for workers' interests over the next decade.

Merchants were not as affected by the guild ordinances as other trades since they were still protected by a zone around the town with a radius of 6.5 miles where they possessed exclusive trading rights. They had to accept that some trade and business with staple goods was going on in the country, but it was not until the 1880s, when the founding of the co-operative movement enabled people to engage in trade freely, that the merchants started to experience decline in their number and income.

In general, the cities did manage to create a means of existence for the thousands of people who came to town from a life without prospects in the country, in search of new opportunities. The growing population created a greater demand for food, clothing, and housing, which consequently resulted in a larger domestic market. However, the growing division of labor between urban and rural areas was the most important reason for the growing urbanization. The farming became more specialized and focused on specific products. This development prompted peasants to give up a self-sufficient economy and instead buy ready-made household products such as clothes and beer, as well as ready-made means of production, like building materials and tools.

Deserving or Undeserving Needy

As mentioned, when the guild ordinance became effective in 1862, the craftsmen lost many of the rights they previously had enjoyed through the guilds. However, in most crafts the guilds continued as associations—often with different social security arrangements, for example health care and poor relief. However, membership was now voluntary and many chose to save the membership fee. In addition, since the guilds no longer regulated the numbers of workers, many trade groups had difficulty maintaining wage levels due to an increased labor force.

The working classes in general were noticeably disadvantaged by these changes; it was now not just work-shy and lazy people who were affected. Many people willing to and capable of working could not, by their own means, survive even short periods of unemployment or sickness. Both the upper and lower classes agreed that something
needed to be done. The genuinely deserving had to be helped so that they could avoid getting the public poor relief, which entailed a loss of civil rights. The political environment at the time was dominated by fiscal conservatism, so direct economic aid was out of the question. Instead, the upper classes felt that enlightenment was the best solution, for which reason they encouraged practical enlightenment through financial education and general enlightenment through public lectures and lending libraries. They also introduced co-operative housing, so that an economic surplus would benefit the inhabitants of a building instead of enriching a slum landlord.

However, Th. Sørensen’s statistics about the standard of living around the 1880s revealed that this was not nearly enough. Even with full year-round employment, it was not possible for a normal unskilled family, either in a town or the country, to save up more than a few percent of their wages for old age or periods of unemployment or illness. 70-75% of a family’s income was used for food while 15% was used for housing and heat. With the decline in the real wage, the proportion of income spent on food fell too, especially in the towns, but in 1909, many of the farmworkers still used more than 60% on food. This meant that the economic liberals accepted the concept of “self-help” as the appropriate basis for social legislation regarding *Sygekasser* (illness benefits) in 1892 and *Arbejdsløshedskasser* (unemployment benefits) in 1907. Under this system, the state provided support for people with no means, but only those who had been responsible enough to pay into a collective social security arrangement.

Elder care was addressed in an 1891 law that granted all Danes over the age of 60 the right to a public old age pension on condition that their needs were not self-inflicted, that they had not been sentenced for any dishonorable deeds, or they had not received poor relief during the last 10 years. The size of the pension was determined by local authorities, who were not interested in giving out too much even though half of it was funded by the state. Despite this, it was a remarkable law for the time and Denmark was the first country in the world to give all citizens the right to old age pension. However, the public old age pension still entailed the loss of social status and some civil rights. The intention of the law was to associate public relief with unpleasant consequences, so that people would choose to avoid it if at all possible. The idea was that the genuinely deserving
could be cared for with help from private philanthropic associations or the so-called *frie hjælpekasser* (free relief funds), which since 1956 had drawn on a mix of private and municipal funding. However, this was not enough to cover what was needed, with the result that only the “undeserving needy”—and as few of them as possible—actually received public old age pensions in the early decades of the twentieth century.

**Hakkebøf, Frikadeller and Leverpostej – Food in the 19th Century**

Food is another area in Danish daily life that changed a lot during the 19th century. In this period, as for centuries prior, Danish food consisted almost exclusively of products that could be grown or produced in Denmark. In the first half of the century, hot meals were prepared over a fireplace in the kitchen. Meat or fish made up an important part of a hot meal, either boiled in a pot or fried in a pan on the fireplace, while bigger pieces of meat were roasted on a spit. However, it was rare that meat and fish were fresh – this was only the case during the butchering season. The refrigerator and freezer had not been invented yet, so meat and fish had to be preserved in other ways, such as salting and smoking. Therefore, salted herring, smoked ham, and salted or smoked pork were common foods.

Mincemeat was regarded as particularly fine food because it required good cuts of fresh meat that were chopped by hand with a knife. However, this changed with the invention of the meat grinder in the second half of the 19th century, which meant that lower quality meat could be used and processed very rapidly. *Hakkebøf*, ground beef patties, and *frikadeller*, a Danish version of fried meatballs, became everyday foods and are still common dishes in Denmark today.

Vegetables and fruit were served as a garnish for meat and fish. It was common to have a vegetable garden, even in town, if one's property had room for it. Otherwise, fruit and vegetables could be purchased from the market in the town square. People generally grew carrots, peas, beans, sea kale, asparagus, winged peas, salsify, caraway, herbs, and different varieties of apples and berries.

People ate fresh fruit and vegetables when they were in season, but like meat and fish, they also had to be preserved so people could get the vitamins they needed during the winter. Common forms of preserved vegetables included dried peas, pickled beetroots and dried
apples. In the second half of the 19th century, potatoes also became common as garnish for meat and fish – until then, they had mostly been used as food for animals. As means of transportation improved during the second half of the 19th century, the selection of fruit and vegetables also became broader. Similarly, dairy products and fresh meat became more accessible and affordable when co-operative dairies and slaughterhouses were established, beginning in the 1880s.

Bread has always been a staple of the Danish diet, along with cakes and cookies for special occasions. Until the middle of the 19th century, however, it was not permitted to have an oven in a house in town because the big stone ovens typical of the time were poorly insulated and a fire could suddenly run out of control. Therefore, the baker was the only one in town who had an oven. However, this did not mean that desserts were not produced in private households. Cakes like sneboller (snow balls), spruthakkelsner (squirted rolls) and hjulkager (wheel cakes) were boiled in a big pot of lard and sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. Likewise, Christmas klejner (much like crullers), which are still made today, were boiled in a pot of vegetable oil or lard. Moreover, pancakes and æbleskiver (a kind of pancake ball made in a special pan and well-loved in Danish-American communities today) could be baked in hot irons over fire.

When the cast iron stove with a built-in oven was invented in the second half of the 19th century, Danes were quick to adopt it and adapt their traditional recipes, as well as invent new ones. It quickly became common to have a cast iron stove instead of a fireplace. Having the oven built into the stove meant that the fire was enclosed and thus less of a hazard. If you cooked on the stove while baking, it became cheaper to bake, since most of the heat for baking was already generated while cooking. Many of the most popular Christmas cookies in Denmark today, including vaniljekranse (sweet cookies flavored with vanilla, popular in the U.S. as Danish butter cookies) and jødekager (a kind of cookie sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar), were actually invented toward the end of the 19th century following the invention of the cast iron stove. Besides a lot of new cake and cookie recipes, many other dishes that are still part of Danish cuisine originated in this period, such as flæskesteg med spred svær (pork roast with crisp rinds) and leverpostej, which is a kind of paté made of pork liver and baked in the oven.
Other foods from the end of the 19th century include *smørrebrød* (open-faced-sandwiches), which is rye bread covered with a range of toppings, such as sliced cold meat or eggs and decorated very elaborately, and *konditorkager*, fancy bakery cakes that often contained marzipan and whipped cream. Both *smørrebrød* and *konditorkager* were phenomena that began in Copenhagen and spread to the rest of the country during the 20th century.

**A New Democracy**

On June 5, 1849, the first democratic constitution of Denmark was signed and absolute monarchy was replaced with a constitutional monarchy. In Denmark today, a person must be 18 years old, have Danish citizenship, habitual residence in Denmark, and not be under guardianship in order to vote in political elections. In 1849, the rules were quite different; to vote you had to be male, of an unblemished reputation, have citizenship, be over 30 years old, be head of your own household, and have lived in the district for at least one year. If you had received public assistance, it had to have been repaid or canceled, and you must own your own house.

Popularly speaking, it was “the seven F’s” who could not vote, as all the old Danish words for the people who were not allowed to vote started with the letter F: *fruentimmere* (women), *folkehold* (servants), *fattige* (poor people), *fremmede* (foreigners), *fallenter* (bankrupts), *fholser* (fools), and *forbrydere* (criminals).

This meant that it was actually only 15% of the population who could vote, but that was still very democratic for the time. However, when the Constitution was revised in 1866, voting rights became even more limited. This revision included many conservative elements of the *Novemberforfatningen* (“the November Constitution”) of 1863, which had been an attempt to make a mutual constitution for Denmark and Slesvig but contributed directly to the outbreak of the Second Slesvig war in 1864. One provision gave the 1,000 richest men in the country two votes each for the Landsting, which led to a long political fight. It was not until 1915 that the Danish system gave all adults the right to participate in the election of the country’s political leaders.
**Women's Rights**

As was common elsewhere in Europe at the time, women had no political rights in 19th-century Denmark, nor many options for paid employment. The mid-19th century Biedermeier literary and artistic movement focused on the family and the home, reinforcing the idea that the home was the woman's domain, in which she should care for and raise children. Since the perception was that women had no business participating in politics, the 1849 Constitution did not assign any political rights to women.

However, some women objected. It is said that the fight for women’s political rights in Denmark started in 1850 with the author Mathilde Fibiger, who worked as a governess at the time, with the publication of her novel *Clara Raphael*. Published anonymously, the novel dealt with women’s emancipation. When Fibiger's authorship was discovered, her reputation was ruined. She continued to fight for women’s rights, but she felt like an outcast from society because so many people objected to her opinions. Nevertheless, she put women’s rights on the agenda and founded *Dansk Kvindesamfund* (the Danish Women’s Society) together with Frederik Bajer, a member of the Folketing. Mathilde Fibiger died of typhoid fever in 1872, but in the late 1880s, Bajer proposed giving women the right to vote in local elections. The proposition was passed in the Folketing several times, but the more conservative *Landsting* continued to reject female suffrage. Women were finally granted the right to vote in local elections in 1908 and national elections in 1915. When it did finally happen, it was also celebrated: on June 5th, 1915, 10,000-12,000 women gathered in the square in front of Amalienborg Palace to mark the fact that they were finally included in Danish democracy.18

**Children’s Rights**

Growing up in 19th century Denmark was also very different from today. Children from less wealthy families had to help out wherever they could, for example stacking firewood, carrying water, washing clothes, and cooking. In rural areas, it was common for a child to go out and serve as a maid or a farm hand, often from the age of 7 or 8. With new factories emerging in the towns, it also became common for children to work in them. However, a law from 1873 forbade children under the age of 10 from working in factories.
Even though children were an important source of labor for their families, they were also expected to go to school. In 1814, the government passed the first national education act, which enforced compulsory school attendance for every child in Denmark. The school was state-funded and the children went there for seven years, from around the age of seven until confirmation in church at age 14. In the country, the children went to school every other day so that they would still have time to help out with the chores at home. Teaching methods included learning by heart, examinations, and older students teaching younger students. Discipline was strict, often involving harsh physical punishment.

On one hand, children were taught subjects with practical application, like arithmetic, reading, and writing, which until 1875 had to be learned both in Latin and Gothic letters. On the other hand, they were taught subjects which focused on individual personal development, like religion and history. From the 1840s and onwards, the history that was taught reflected the nationalistic sentiments that were prevalent in Denmark at the time, due in large part to the conflicts over Slesvig and Holstein from 1848-1852 and in 1864. The emphasis was therefore on the long history of the Danish people. Denmark's defeat in the war of 1864 had a profound impact on Danish self-awareness. At the same time as Denmark was re-invented politically, Danishness was presented as something very special and different from Germanness.

In conclusion, daily life in Denmark at the beginning of the 20th century was much different than it had been in the early 19th century. The land had changed – it had new borders and many new cities. The population had more than doubled, new job opportunities emerged, and a new political system had given the people a voice. The conditions of life in general improved and different social services created more social security. The 19th century was truly a century that changed the way Danes lived their lives and laid the foundation of Danish culture and society today.

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"1800 tallet på vrangen." Danmarksradio (DR), 2006.

NOTES

1 Helge Paludan et al., *Danmarks historie – i grundtræk* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2002), 265.

2 Today the term market town is just a historical term, but in the 19th century if a town was to be called a market town, it must have a population density higher than the area around the town, the settlement must be permanent, there must be an economic specialization with weight on trade and workmanship and it must be a legal separate area with its own administration and special rights. The main differences between a market town and a village were therefore first and foremost the two last-mentioned factors: the economic specialization regarding trade and craft, and being a legal separate area.


4 The numbers are for the kingdom of Denmark and do not include duchies or colonies. Paludan, *Danmarks historie*, 267.

5 Ibid., 267.

6 Ibid., 275.

7 Ibid., 268.

8 Ibid., 268-269.

9 Ibid., 269.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 276.
12 Ibid., 280.
13 Ibid., 276.
14 If the public old age pension was received as aid for medicine or a disability, these civil rights were not lost.
17 Landstinget and Folketinget together made up Rigsdagen, or the Parliament in English, which was the legislative power. In general the Landsting was more conservative-minded than the Folketing and consisted of more wealthy men.