

An Introduction (and Advanced Course) to Danish Culture

Talk by Norman Berdichevsky to the Danish Free Press Society, Grundtvig Hall, Vartov, Copenhagen, May 15, 2012
(an edited and abridged translation of the Danish transcript)

With my apologies to Rudyard Kipling for paraphrasing his famous quote about England, “What do they know of England who only England know?” I was only convinced of the validity of his remark upon being invited by the Danish Free Press Society to deliver an address on May 15, 2012. The subject of my talk was my recently published book “An Introduction to Danish Culture” ([Why I Wrote These Two Books](#) NER, June, 2011) and why the book is also relevant to a Danish readership and not just an orientation for foreigners. The audience agreed with the conclusion of my talk that knowing and appreciating one’s one culture and history enables one to understand how and why its uniqueness deserves to be preserved and the loss that would ensue if it were gone.

Lars Hedegaard: Our guest, Norman Berdichevsky is unusual in that he is an American and lives in Florida yet speaks Danish! He lived in Denmark for a number of years and taught geography at Aarhus Katedralskole. By his education, Norman is a cultural geographer and that is noted in his work. The evening’s starting point begins in Norman’s latest book, ‘An Introduction to Danish Culture’ that I have had the pleasure of reading and I recommend it highly. Even though I have read a great deal of Danish history and culture, I can say that in certain regards, Norman knows more than I do on the subject. It is unusually well written and can be bought for the meager sum of 200 Kroner this evening. Hurry, there aren’t many left. It is always exciting when someone from abroad comes and is able to provide new perspectives on our culture and history and I must say also gives a certain pride in us having grown up in this land. At the end of his talk, we will have coffee and a round of questions. I give the floor to Norman.

Norman Berdichevsky: Thank you for that recommendation and the invitation from Lars Hedegaard and the Danish Free Press Society to speak here this evening as their guest, and also for the VIP treatment I got – being driven from the airport in a taxi just like the Prime Minister or a sports star. It is for me a great honor and pleasure to use the same podium as have many outstanding foreign writers and freedom fighters such as Geert Wilders, Ibn Warraq, and Melanie Phillips.

I must admit that I was surprised when I learned that it was my book, "An Introduction to Danish Culture" and not the other one, "The Left is Seldom Right", also published in 2011 that was chosen as the subject for this evening's topic. That book is here and sells for only \$20 via Amazon and \$10 as an e-book!

I wrote the book on Denmark precisely in order to inform Americans about Danish culture and Denmark. Unfortunately, they have a well-deserved reputation for poor geographic knowledge about the rest of the world but I asked myself what could I present in order to teach the Danes about their own country?

As I am a Jew, a relevant speech occurred to me – that of Meir Aaron Goldschmidt's words from his famous address in May, 1844 at Skamlingsbakken in support of the pro-Danish movement in South Schleswig, *"I am a Jew; What am I doing among you?"* And then he answered his own question. *"I am your brother, Here is my hand; It can write and it can strike – Decide how it will be used!"*

To avoid any difficulties as Lars has experienced with the courts, I wish to stress that these words taken from the quote are to be understood only metaphorically! I don't have any weapons – just my two hands!

I am also glad to refresh my knowledge of spoken Danish. I have just come from a 10 day visit to Israel where I met with old friends and family and spoke Hebrew most of the time. I hope I don't come to mix the two languages up. They are both languages I am very fond of and have played a large role in my career and research interests. I was proud of the fact that I was given the task in 1987 from a committee of the Knesset to translate all the Danish electoral laws into Hebrew – this was thought of as part of a reform proposal to changes in Israel's electoral system – based on proportional representation; probably the most democratic but also the most impractical and unstable electoral system. An easier and more entertaining task was to translate Danish film producer August Bille's film – with the American title "Twist and Shout." Perhaps someone remembers this film – it was a good one and a lot more fun than the Danish electoral laws.

The idea to write the book stemmed from my reaction to the Mohammad Cartoon crisis. It was shocking for me that a large segment of the American press and media, and of course, first of all *The New York Times* as well as EU forums did not support Denmark. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of Denmark's, history, culture, traditions and tolerance must have known that the widespread misjudgments of the country were totally incorrect and misleading and a form of a spiritual pogrom.

The contributions of Danes to Western civilization and their many accomplishments made me anxious to work in instituting a “Buy Danish” campaign. I made all those I knew and through my contacts with *New English Review* for which I write an essay each month, to support the campaign and to know that the crisis was due to several extremists among the country’s Muslim imams who bore responsibility for misleading provocations.

When I had completed the book, I had learned much more than I had expected regarding Danish contributions to science, especially astronomy, physics, chemistry, and art, literature, philosophy, religion, architecture, navigation, exploration, agriculture, engineering, film, humor, music, dance, and sport.

Why begin with Tycho Brahe and astronomy? A is the first letter of the alphabet – I thought it appropriate to start with astronomy – as recommended by Lars Hedegaard and because I knew nothing about him when I began. Tycho Brahe was indeed the pioneer of modern science – he was the first to observe a super-nova and draw the conclusion in defiance of church doctrine that although God may have created the universe – it was not unchangeable but scientists had the obligation to observe and measure it carefully to explain how it behaves.

What then is my relationship to Denmark and how was it established? I was married to a Dane for 16 years. My son and three grandchildren live here and I am proud to call a half dozen Danes as my old and true friends.

I lived in Aarhus from 1978 to 1984 and taught geography for three years at a Danish gymnasium (junior college) – Aarhus Katedralskole, which, by the way celebrated its 800th anniversary a few years ago. So I consider myself a colleague of Grundtvig whose statue is kneeling outside in the courtyard – he graduated in 1798 from Aarhus Katedralskole. I have a close knowledge of the country’s history, language, humanist and Christian traditions, tolerance, respect for human rights, democracy, folklore and customs acquired during the seven years I lived and worked here.

As a writer, I felt that these experiences were sufficient for me to use in the form of a book for the benefit of a wider public. According to Lars Hedegaard, the Danish Free Press Society and other friends, my book could make a contribution to remind many Danes about their own country, heritage, honor and self-respect.

Where did my original interest in Denmark begin – even before Danish girls? – I was an enthusiastic viewer of foreign films in my youth and have always loved languages and literature. I believe that the movie theater still exists in Manhattan on Broadway and 95th

Street called the "Thalia." I remember that it was there, as a 16 year old, that I saw two films that made a very strong impression on me. They were Dreyer's *Ordet* (The Word) based on Pastor Kaj Munk's play and Martin Andersen Nexø's novel '*Ditte Mennesbarn*' (Ditte, Child of Man).

How could it be, I asked myself, that these two writers, just like Hans Christian Andersen could use such a small language as a canvas to paint such a great work – similar to the Hebrew language and the Bible? To give an impression of how little most Americans know about Denmark, whenever I asked friends and acquaintances – many with a higher education – what they regarded as the most translated work in literature's history, there was no one who could guess it was Hans Christian Andersen's most popular "Fairy Tales." You can find the most translated (into more than 120 languages) in the museum in Odense and even though Andersen is hardly popular in the U.S. today, his work is an integral part of the educational syllabus on literature in China and Russia!

In 1963 I travelled to Israel and met a beautiful Danish girl volunteer, Bente Elizabeth from Aarhus. We met each other in a kibbutz in Galilee, fell in love, and married. I remember that I had to "explain" to friends in the United States that my sweetheart was an authentic Dane even though she had dark hair (very much against their preconceptions), just as later the same issue arose when Anders Fog Rasmussen became Prime Minister – again a Dane with very dark hair. Whenever I mentioned Jutland (Jylland in Danish), my American friends didn't know anything about the geographic contours of Denmark and where Jutland was – they thought it must be an imaginary country in Disneyworld.

My book starts with the country's geographical situation and how ferries and bridges were created between Jutland and the islands. Next is a chapter on Denmark's wind power and the success it has brought in the creation of a mighty export branch. This is followed by my presentation of the special climatic, geographic and cultural characteristics in Faroes, Greenland and Bornholm and the special status of these regions and their peripheral character.

The next chapter deals with The Danish West Indies (The contemporary U.S. Virgin Islands) and how they came to be sold to the United States in 1917 after 60 years and several unsuccessful rounds of negotiations and almost comic episodes and scandals committed by three different Danish scoundrels. This chapter also illuminates the extraordinary role played by Sephardim (Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin) in the development of the islands' economy.

I then take up the Danish pedestrian streets which I have researched and written about in various topical magazines and how the project was originally rejected by the entire Danish

press who argued that Danes would never accept any limitation on the sovereignty of the automobile and that it would be simply unrealistic to expect that they would wish to imitate an urban model that was more suitable to the outdoor life of Mediterranean countries. By the way, the idea was also rejected as “typically American” because the architect who introduced the idea was an American who first tried it out in Kansas City. Of course, the press was proven totally wrong.

The book then turns to the second section on language, culture and social conditions. For most English speakers, their impression of Danish is that of someone speaking with marbles in his mouth. They claim they can't understand a word of Danish but when they see it as a text, they are often able to make out as many as half the words. I give the English reader a Danish text in which every word has a cognate (word of common origin) and challenge the reader to comprehend it.

(See pages 65 and 74 in the book for the text of the story in Danish and English respectively. During my Copenhagen talk, I read the short story in English and challenged the audience to immediately do a mental translation into Danish). Just to give the first sentence (among 20) as an example: Min far kom hjem med skib. (My father came home by ship).

In the next chapter, I visit the Jewish cemetery in the provincial town of Faaborg and interpret the Hebrew inscription on several tombstones. I report on how the Danish Jews living outside Copenhagen completely disappeared from the landscape and the possible ways that they assimilated.

Then I turn to the confrontation and polar opposites often expressed about the relationship of Jutland (Jylland in Danish) and Copenhagen. Can I see from a show of hands how many of you grew up in Jutland? (about a third or more of the audience). Copenhagen, more than any capital city with the possible exception of Montevideo in Uruguay, totally dominates the country's political power, economic and cultural center.

I am certain that the great majority of Danes know very little about the history of Danish-Americans and how they differed from other Scandinavian immigrants to America and the unusual and embarrassing episode in the state of Iowa in 1918 when the governor angrily advised Danish immigrants who were dissatisfied to return to Denmark. If you want to know more about this episode – read the book. I also go through the most difficult period of Danish-American relations during the Vietnam War.

When I was living in Denmark, I was proud to carry my photo I.D. card as a foreign resident with the right to live and work in the country. I was also clear about there being some Danes,

just as among every people, who have prejudices against others because of their origin, religion, skin color, race, sex, language and political views. I can certainly testify that while I lived here from 1978-85, the majority of prejudices expressed publicly were regarding Americans.

As an incentive to read my book on this matter, I will read from an article I wrote to the *Aarhus Stiftstidende* (daily newspaper), published 20 December 1981, to prove that the criticism of "Something is Rotten in Denmark" or USA must always be measured relatively with regard to the circumstances found in different societies to determine where immigrants can best thrive as trusted and valued fellow citizens and where they have the greatest chances to develop their skills on an equal basis.

I read my letter to the editor explaining how as a teacher of Geography, almost all the material recommended by the Ministry of Education to learn about American society appeal only to the most negative, crass commercial and vulgar examples found and portrayed by the mass media and sarcastic dramatizations such as the television series *Scum and Dallas* that were popular at that time. I mention that important American figures who came as immigrants just before or after the world wars such as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski were foreign born and continued to speak English with a strong accent and ask the audience a rhetorical question: Can you imagine in the near future a similar situation in Denmark where leading figures in public life will have such names?

I believe so. We can today hear Danes boast about their tennis star Caroline Wozniacki – as much beloved as the queen. I am certain that in the future there will also be ministers and other "stars" with foreign names but who will be authentic Danes in every way and just as authentic as any Larsen, Hansen or Rasmussen!

What do Americans who have lived here think of Denmark? That was the subject of three articles that appeared in the newspaper *Information* in 1981, "*Americans in Denmark – Who are They, Why did they come?*" Some were politically active on the radical Left – socialists, Vietnam war opponents, those who had supported the Black Panther Party, feminists, Jewish intellectuals and those who just wanted out of the "rat race." They felt themselves in exile like Emory, Carol, Bob, Thea and myself and all had, despite their belief that Denmark was a "saner or healthier society" than the USA, some critical observations after a residence of ten years or more that something was lacking in Denmark – that in spite of their many differences they felt that one had to be careful not to excel or work at too fast a pace because of the reluctance of many Danes to be exposed to competition.

(I quote from the article in Danish in *Information* relating the experiences of the individuals in their own words)

We should remember the words of Grundtvig from 1848. *"All those belong to a people who consider themselves as such – have an ear for its mother tongue and a passionate love for the fatherland."* If one thinks so, and if you love the Danish language and the Danish homeland, then you are Danish.

Chapter 11 deals with the immigration of Danes to the USA and their motives. The twelfth explores and explains the concept of *hygge* (roughly translated as coziness) and challenges the oft repeated claim that the Danes are the "World's Happiest People" – if only that were so! Many polls claim this as a fact but use statistics essentially based on economic and social well being which is not the same as happiness. I doubt the claim – in any case, many Danes are themselves surprised to discover that according to objective, accurate statistics, there is almost an identical frequency of suicides in Denmark as in the United States.

This question is also important because it is often exploited in the American political debate where Denmark is frequently represented as the archetypal West European social welfare state. Can *hygge* (coziness) exist simultaneously with *janteloven* (i.e. the envy many Danes feel about those who are better off than they are)? Was Shakespeare right when he wrote "Something is Rotten in the State of Denmark" or did he actually mean Sweden?

The third part of the book looks at eleven famous Danes – Piet Hein, Victor Borge, Grundtvig, Kirkegaard, H C Andersen, Arne Jakobsen and Danish Design, Arne Sørensen and the Dansk Samling (Danish Unity) movement, Queen Margerethe, Tycho Brahe, Niels Bohr and Karen Blixen.

I'll read now a brief excerpt in the original English text from the book on Hans Christian Andersen. Every salesman knows that it's worth giving the public of potential buyers a sample taste of the product....

(I read aloud an excerpt in English from the book on Andersen's significance as an opponent of terrorism and the need for writers to face the problem of evil. His work 'Det Utroligste' (The Most Incredible Thing) from 1872 places him among those great writers who opposed Nazism and Communism in the 20th century yet many Americans have a naive picture of him as a kindly old grandfather reading fairy tales. A groups of Danish scholars helped publish new editions of Det Utroligste as part of the Resistance Movement to the occupation in World War II.

I also take up and explain why the long lived myth about King Christian X and the yellow Star of David has persisted and refuses to die and disappear. Another chapter on Danish-German-

Jewish relations deals with the Danish minority in South Schleswig in the 1930s and the help they rendered to the Jews in the town of Flensburg. It was a completely unknown episode when I began my research. Flensburg became the only city in Nazi Germany where a large unruly crowd defied the Nazi S.A. guards in the streets and broke through their blockade to do business with a Jewish owned department store.

Some of my conclusions will probably be surprising or humorous for a Danish audience. Among these are:

Hans Christian Andersen's legacy for the Danish resistance movement in World War II.

Woody Allen's misuse of Soren Kirkegaard's philosophy.

What the Danes mean by the phrase "Swedish Conditions" and what the Swedes mean when they talk of "Danish conditions."

The fourth section of the book describes important historical events and epochs; first of all the period of the great Viking sea voyages and conquests that created a powerful Danish empire that crossed the North Sea to the British Isles and across the North Sea to the Baltic islands and coasts. This is recalled in the poem that speaks of Denmark's glorious past when *"You were once the master in the entire North, now you are called weak"* and makes one aware of a certain Danish schizophrenia with two national anthems.

In contrast to the one recalling the great mythical and powerful past is the modest one that sings of the country's more modest present, mild landscape and its mother tongue. The period of decline continued unabated and there are those Danes who welcomed the decline, reduction and weakness resulting in the loss of Norway, Southern Sweden (Skåne), Schleswig-Holstein, control over the Sound separating Denmark and Sweden, Iceland, the West Indies and perhaps Greenland and the Faroes in the future. They are always ready to place the blame on Denmark being weak and small and find fault with the great powers, Germany, Sweden, the U.S., Russia, Britain, the U.N., the EU, God or fate.

After that are two chapters on the long Danish-German conflict over the border that stretched from the Middle Ages to 1947 when the Danish government finally decided to end the debate without a new plebiscite.

It was Rudyard Kipling who wrote *"What do they know of England who only England know."* Those who know Denmark best are those who are most aware of what they would miss living somewhere else. They know that in other lands and climes and among other nations, they would miss much

that is typically Danish – they know what makes Denmark Danish and what will remain so even if the country is not as homogeneous as it once was! It is no longer a snailshell but it is their home they value and love and bound with tradition. This is what many Danish readers told me they were reminded of by reading my book.

I concluded my talk with a lengthy quote from H.C. Ørsted's comments in 1843, "*Betragtninger over den danske karakter*" (considerations of the Danish national character) – that the rolling hills and cultivated fields of a landscape manicured by the sustained effort of many generations of Danes, while not so breathtaking as a majestic mountain range or a striking waterfall, are just as individually distinct and characteristic of the people who nurtured it through the generations and are indeed worthy of respect.

Norman Berdichevsky's latest book is