

On Living as an American Expatriate in Denmark, by Thomas E. Kennedy

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"The expatriate life, for me, has been a good one, although it does complicate one's identity. There is no doubt that living in another country, more important in another language, changes your view of things. I know that I will never become completely Danish, yet somehow I also know that I am not quite completely American anymore either. And just as I could never find it in my heart to surrender my American citizenship, I don't think I could bear to leave Copenhagen for more than the few visits I make to the States each year.

As a writer I worked for years in the United States and never published a thing. Not until I had been living in Denmark for a while did I begin to write things that interested American publishers. And I think this was at least partly thanks to the opportunity of viewing my native culture through the lens of the new one – because at first I was still writing fiction about American characters in American settings. Only after my fifth book of fiction did I venture to set a novel in Denmark and include Danes among the characters – a challenging and liberating experience, casting Danish sensibilities into English. After that I wrote a novel through the eyes of a Chilean torture survivor and a 40-year-old Danish woman, who is the book's central consciousness – I don't know what that might say about the changes I've been going through. There was not even a single American in that novel..."

"In the early 1970s, the so-called summer of love had long since gone sour, replaced by violence, drugs, guns, racial and political animosity. I had a girlfriend on East 2nd Street between Avenues B and C – Alphabet City – and because she had a dripping faucet, one of her neighbors emptied a rifle through her door one day. Miraculously neither she nor her 5-year-old nephew, standing right behind the door, were hit. But seeing those bullet holes in the door, combined with my own couple of experiences of people shoving guns into my face, ignited my wish to try life in Europe – a wish, admittedly, that had long been fueled by my reading: Dostoevski, Camus, Huxley, Balzac, Flaubert, Gide, Orwell, Grass, Mann, Mansfield, Hemingway, et al. – and most notably James Joyce with his Dedalus proclamation in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile, and cunning." Seditious stuff! But the censors who came after Joyce were apparently more interested in his "obscenities."

Following the Alphabet City shooting, my girlfriend grew troubled. What had attracted me to her was the simple clarity of her nature, her slender, freckled confidence and level-headed healthiness. After the bullets, she developed the conviction that I was bribing the mailman to spy on her and that she was in telepathetic contact with Yuri Geller. Today, in Denmark, it is standard practice to offer psychological crisis help after such an experience. I don't know if any of the States do that now, but there was no such offer back then in laissez-faire New York.

Right about then I was working for an international organization which sent me to Copenhagen to attend a conference. My first evening here, out alone sampling the good Danish beer, I lost my way amidst the dark, narrow, winding streets, my footsteps echoing on the cobblestones, and I felt quite relaxed. I thought, Here is where I want to live...."

"But it was not only the peace, not only the Danish beer, virtually everything about Copenhagen attracted me: the elegant old buildings, the thousand-year history, the people, their calmly

friendly manner, the Danish smile, and the Danish distance as well – I liked the fact that Danes grant a perimeter of solitude. This is a contrast to the open-hearted jovial welcome that Americans tend to extend to new-comers.

Another thing that won me was the Danish light – the light nights of summer and the big sky, especially compared to New York City where the sky is mostly just another tall, thin building amongst tall thin buildings, but also the profound darkness of winter with its quiet, moody beauty and the many candles that Danes light against that darkness. At the height of summer, the day starts a little before three a.m. and ends around ten at night; in deep winter, the day starts near ten a.m. and ends around half-past three in the afternoon.

Perhaps those short winter days are particularly attractive to a writer. They give a quiet and a peace that is conducive to meditation. But best are the summer evenings, yellow skies that take long, slow hours to fade into a pale, ever-darkening blue with the streets going dark more quickly than the sky. It is like the Magritte painting, “Empire of Light” – a dark street scene beneath a daylight-bright sky, one of his many paradoxical pictures (is it night or day?); but here in the north that paradox is plain reality.

The impact of the changing seasonal light, in fact, inspired the four-novel progress I published under the collective title of the Copenhagen Quartet (2002-2005), each new novel “embedded,” if you will, in one of the four Danish seasons. [Those four novels are being republished, world-wide, by Bloomsbury USA – the first two volumes are now available – *In the Company of Angels* (2010) and *Falling Sideways* (2011) – the third will be out in 2013 and the fourth later.]

And I recall walking one summer afternoon at the end of the ‘70s along the bank of one of the street lakes on the north side of Copenhagen and seeing there, lying alone and unafraid on the sloping grass, a purely naked young woman sunning herself, wearing – as Ferlinghetti put it – only a very small bird’s nest in a very existential place, eyes closed in the warm pleasure of the light, and that remains for me in memory a symbol of the northern Europe which drew me to it.”

“The easy acceptance of the body and human sexuality in Denmark, in most of Europe, seems to me also an aspect of the mind-set upon which Danish society is built. Most Danes would smile incredulously to learn that not until 2003 did the American Supreme Court declare unconstitutional the laws in 13 States prohibiting consensual homosexuality (and/or assorted acts of heterosexual “sodomy”); here same-sex marriages and consensual sexual behavior have been a human right for some time.

This sense of openness, fairness, mutual personal respect has produced a social system by which, for example, comprehensive medical care is provided to all in an equal manner. Education, through university, including medical school, is provided equitably and free of charge. In fact, university students here receive a small salary from the state, for to study is considered an effort on behalf of the public good. By contrast, on the day of writing this, I saw an article in the New York Times subtitled, “Millions of college students will have to shoulder more of the costs of their education under federal rules imposed last month.”

“There are also humane laws governing employment conditions, working hours, and firing procedures – you can’t just kick someone out here – and well-organized unions for everybody, with tax-deductible union dues.

The death penalty is unconstitutional, as it is in all Member States of the European Union. How sad to think that for one brief shining moment in the US there was a moratorium on executions – until a psychopathic killer in Utah challenged the system and demanded his right to face the firing squad, thus unleashing a system over the past decades by which many hundreds of people have been exterminated by gas, electricity, bullets, noose, and lethal injection – some percentage of them, as indicated by DNA technology, innocent...”

“One of the aspects of the Danish society that initially surprised me is the amount of free time one has. When I lived in the U.S. it was standard practice for private employers to provide one week’s vacation per

year for the first three years of employment, doling out extra weeks over the course of the next 20 years up to four weeks. In Denmark, when I learned I would have six weeks vacation a year right from the start, I was stunned: Impossible! I thought. How will we ever get anything done? Which now sounds to me like a slave asking how he'll ever manage without his manacles. In fact, the Danes are an industrious people. They work hard and get the job done with lots of time left over to play – or to follow an avocation. With the job that I left four years ago, after a couple of decades, to become a full-time writer, I had seven weeks holiday and two weeks personal-development time a year with a two-thousand dollar annual travel budget. I worked a 36-hour week, and like all Danes I had a five-day weekend for Easter, and a number of other three- and four-day weekends as well as three days off for Christmas. This made it possible for me to manage two careers – a full-time executive job as well as my literary career which by itself would not have provided sufficient income to give my family a good life.

And I do like the way Danes celebrate their holidays – particularly with that most sublime of creations, the traditional Danish lunch, a table laden with anywhere from five or six to 20 or more delicacies: a variety of herrings (marinated, pickled, curried, sherried, fried, smoked), smoked eel, boar paté, fish fillets breaded and fried, raw lean chopped beef with raw egg yoke and onion, roast pork with crackling, cod roe boiled or smoked, smoked cod livers, the eggs of various fishes, shrimp, liver, heart, meat drippings, fried onions, remoulade sauce, red cabbage, cress, chives, half a dozen excellent breads with butter – actual butter, not “spread,” and a variety of cheeses of the cow, the goat, the sheep, including if you are lucky one so old it is tinged pink and delicately radiates your gums as you eat it, demanding to be chased with strong beer and a chilled aquavite – also known as “snaps,” from the German, to snap it down.

I like the rituals of the lunch, too. The initial formality that slowly gives way with the beer and snaps. The ritual of the skål – raising the glass, looking each person at the table in the eye, saying “Skål!”, taking a sip, “presenting” the glass again with a slight, formal nod, then proceeding with the herring. Fish must swim, the Danes say, raising their snaps glasses with the taste of herring on their tongues. Such rituals are valuable to a society, to a culture.

Some people complain that Danes drink too much, and no doubt some do. The minimum drinking age is fifteen! [Since raised to sixteen, then to eighteen.] A lawyer-colleague recently told me, “Everytime I have a beer I feel like a new man. The trouble is, that new man wants a beer, too.”

But in fact, beer and snaps is a ritualistic drink which is part of the traditional social fabric here. At Christmas time, for example, Danes take drink with their meals to celebrate a combination of things – not really so much the Christian feast as the winter solstice, the closeness of family and friends and the belief that the long, dark Danish winter is not death, but rather the beginning of the birth of spring. At that very dark time of year – and it does get dark, Shakespeare chose his setting for Hamlet well – ritual is important: the mellowing of the spirit, the so-called living light of burning candles on the living Christmas tree, the joyous dance around it by all present holding hands in a circle, the calm peaceful stillness in the streets of Christmas Eve in this city of a million souls is awe-inspiring: The city stops. The quiet is sacred. This darkest night of year wraps around you, wherever you are, in the heart of your family, surrounded by friends, even alone, the silence is calming, beautiful in its mystery...”

“Perhaps the most essential quality of Danish is the way in which Danish speakers employ irony, understatements so dry that even an outsider who speaks the language might miss them. Irony – and perhaps especially self-irony – is an important component of the Danish language and nature, just as it is important here not to be too enthusiastic. Danes value calm and understatement.

And irony is not to be confused with sarcasm – a mean-spirited cousin of the more playful irony in which one speaks in reversals: “Lovely weather,” a Dane might say when it is cold and rainy. Or, “That wasn’t the worst dinner I’ve ever eaten” to mean it was delicious. Or if something is very unclear, a Dane might say, “Klart nok,” meaning literally, “Clear enough,” although the message is, “Murky.”

Recently I heard a Danish fellow describe a pleasant experience by saying, “It was not pure suffering,” and once, in a Danish serving house late at night, I heard a Danish fellow try to express in English his admiration for a woman by saying, “You are not the ugliest woman I has ever seed.” In some parts of

the country, in northern Jutland for example, I am told that if a person goes to the doctor and says, "I think I have a kind of uncomfortable feeling in my stomach," he must be rushed to the hospital.

Self-irony is important here just as self-seriousness is bad form. You have to be able to laugh at yourself. If a Dane falls in the street, he or she will likely laugh or smile. But more likely than not, one or several hands will reach to help.

The special character of the language and the near untranslatability of some Danish can be demonstrated by rendering a very literal version of some of the most Danish of things, the songs of the poet Benny Andersen, for example: The refrain of one of the best-loved of them would translate literally: "Life is not the worst thing one has/And soon the coffee is ready." And, "Nina comes naked from the bath/While I eat a cheese sandwich." Of course, in Danish, these lines rhyme, but something simple and sound about the sentiment expresses an essence of the Danish joy of life.

There are other things that sound utterly mad in translation. For example, a not uncommon thing to hear in response to the giving of a gift is, "Hold da kæft, er du rigtig klog?" Which literally means something like, "Shut your mouth, are you really stupid?" I guess the spirit of it is, "You must be stupid to give me such a wonderful gift!"

It is also enchanting how direct Danish can be: In English, we have the delicate word "brassiere" whose Danish equivalent, "brystholder," is literally, "breast holder." The Danes do not believe in calling a spade a shovel. Some words are rather poetic, though: Midwife in Danish is literally "earth mother" (jordemor). Nor does Danish tend to prettify itself with Latinate words: A dentist is a "tooth doctor," gingivitis is "tooth meat infection" and a vagina in common Danish parlance is a tissekone – literally, a "piss-wife." The "lavatory" or "sanitary arrangements" are the "toilet" – nor do you "go to the bathroom" in Danish; you go "on the toilet." But Danish can also be circumspect. To be in "vældig godt" humor (very good humor) or to have "a couple under the vest" is to be pretty drunk.

The Danish language is not one that you would be likely to study without good reason: James Joyce, for example, studied Danish to be able to read Ibsen in original (at that time, Norway was a part of Denmark and Danish its official language.)..."

"Not until I felt comfortable enough with my Danish that I could attend a party without reverting to English did I really begin to get a feeling for the Danish psychology, the Danish use of irony and understatement and the humor, and begin to feel at home here. I have known a couple of expatriates who lived here for years seeming essentially uninterested in Denmark, as though that which is different here is an affront to their own national characteristics, people who did not like where they were and do not like where they are now, clustering together in isolation, cheating themselves of an immersion in the Danish culture and language..."

"I wish that some of the wonderful phrases in Danish would be adopted by English. Consider a term like "kærestesorg" – literally "sweetheart sorrow" – an expression to denote the sadness one feels when a love affair is over or in danger. In fact, "sweetheart sorrow" can be an acceptable excuse for a late school assignment or for missing a day of work. I think that gives an idea of the humanity here."

"This is still a country in which health care is provided via the public budget for everyone. Where education is available to all. And where if you are broke, the society will give you a hand. These are three basic things which seem to me requisites to a true civilization."

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