

## A New View of Danish Culture

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### **Book Review of *An Introduction to Danish Culture* By Norman Berdichevsky**

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*An Introduction to Danish Culture* is an incisive up to date analysis of Denmark and Danish culture by former long term resident Norman Berdichevsky, an American from New York whose credentials include a PhD in human geography from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Berdichevsky acquired fluency in Danish during the time he lived in Denmark, from 1979-1985, and he remains in touch with the country and family living there. This book is a substantial contribution to the gaps in the English language literature about Denmark, covering the essential regional uniqueness of the country's constituent parts including the overseas outliers of the Faroes, Greenland and Bornholm, biographies of eleven important historical figures and contemporary personalities including the Queen and the late great much beloved Danish-American humorist Victor Borge. It examines the Danish language, differences between town and country, the special mind-set of "coziness" known as *hygge*, cuisine, the famous pedestrianized streets and a look at the great historical epochs of the Viking age and the little known border dispute with Germany over Schleswig-Holstein. Of special interest for Jewish readers are the chapters on the Virgin Islands (former Danish West Indies) and why Jews have had such a long and fortunate relationship with their fellow citizens.

Berdichevsky long standing love affair began with an actual one leading to marriage and his long term connection to the country. His earliest notions of Danish culture were formed as a result of '*a healthier approach to social relations, love of the outdoors, rejection of the hard-sell American approach to commercial success, anti-militarism, modesty and anti-snobbery*'. These were precisely the things that attracted him to Denmark but like other Americans, he discovered that there is also something "rotten in Denmark" as Hamlet became aware of. One can carry anti-snobbishness too far and many Danes including Hans Christian Andersen were driven from the country because by what is known as "*janteloven*", an attitude of "anti-achievement" that no one should excel too much because it puts others in a bad light.

Part I deals with the Danish geography and its interface with the country's economy, and transportation needs. Before its largest bridges were constructed to connect the main peninsula of Jutland to its two large islands, Fünen and Zealand, Berdichevsky explains how Denmark was a unique sea state dependent on a fleet of ferries that eventually became integrated with the railroads incorporating built-in railroad tracks on their decks. This innovation would allow the trains to enter and exit the vessel by rolling off onto the existing tracks.

Part II deals with culture itself, including language, pinpointing cultural tolerance as an important trait of the Danish people. An entire chapter is dedicated to the Jewish cemeteries around the provinces, with records of past Jewish enclaves and an explanation of why the Danish Jews largely assimilated as a result of tolerance. This is contrasted with the

difficulties today of a recalcitrant Muslim population living in ethnic enclaves and reluctant to integrate.

In a chapter dedicated to Danish-American relations, the author gives an account of the annual Rebild Celebrations to commemorate the American Independence Day. The venue is a 190 acre park outside the city of SkØrping, which was purchased by the Danish immigrant community of Chicago and donated to the Danish government. The idea for the initiative came from Max Henius, the son of a Polish Jew who in 1857 arrived in Denmark after a journey on foot from Poland, and later immigrated to the United States. The first time the Rebild Celebrations took place was August 5, 1912, and it attracted some 15 thousand people including the current monarch King Christian X, who actually received the deed of the property and turned it into the Danish American National Park.

This chapter also provides information on the American population who defined their ethnic origin as being 'Danish' in the last two censuses. Here are some examples of the factual information provided: most Danish-Americans are concentrated in California, Utah, Minnesota, Wisconsin Washington and among many Mormons in Utah and Nevada. Only some 30,000 Americans continue to use the Danish language at home. This same chapter ends with the perceptions of Denmark by the Americans who work there and speak the language.

Part III covers a selection of personalities which Berdichevsky elected to represent the best minds of Denmark. First on the list is world famous Hans Christian Andersen (1805-76), the writer of fairy tales and short stories (second only to the Bible in the number of translated works) with appeal both to children, Piet Hein (1905-96), a true Renaissance genius who was an innovative philosopher, mathematician, poet, inventor and designer, and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55), the philosopher who is often regarded as the father of existentialism. Lesser known figures are Arne Jacobsen (1902-71), the father of Danish design, who created the famous Egg Chair and many other iconic furniture pieces. In contemporary science the big name is that of the eminent physicist Niels Bohr (1886-1962) who won the Nobel Prize of Physics in 1922, and one of the founders of Quantum Physics who proved that an atomic bomb was possible. Another important personality is Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1871), a multifaceted thinker, clergyman and educationalist whose influence in Danish society led him to be considered the Father of the Nation. He strove to realize opportunities for the education of ordinary people, in an age when education was a privilege of the rich, and inculcated the values of social responsibility and social participation. We must not forget Karen Blixen, author of "Out of Africa" (1985), the big Hollywood hit film starring Meryl Streep, as it probably made Blixen the most well know Danish woman of all time.

Part IV, the last one of this book covers the topics of politics and history. Around the first millennium, Denmark was already an established monarchy under the Viking king Canute (ca. 990-1035), who also had a claim over England, Norway and parts of Sweden. Relations with Germany are another topic covered extensively, from matters related to border demarcation to the relations with the Nazi regime and the fate of the Danish Jews. Dr. Berdichevsky demolishes the myth from Leon Uris' book *Exodus*, that during the German occupation the Danish King Christian X wore an armband with the Star of David in solidarity to the Jews. More realistic and inspiring is the reality that thousand of Danes from every walk of life helped their Jewish countrymen at a moment's notice, a much more dramatic story than the myth of the king. The final chapter portrays the sibling rivalry that exists between Denmark and Sweden which he compares to a similar one between Portugal

and Spain, the two peninsulas that guard the entrance of Europe's two major inland seas, the Mediterranean and the Baltic.

This book is well illustrated with photos, cartoons and other things that help capture much of the content of the text. The high price is its only drawback, although this is probably due to the book's restricted niche market. In any case, for anyone interested in learning more about the Danish culture, it is a price worth paying. After all, this book does exactly what it says in its title. And does it quite well, providing a balanced and accurate description of the Danish culture.