

Højskolen: Adult educational utopia?

Introduction

My first research field in Denmark, which was conducted on a nine-month Sabbatical leave from Monteith College, Wayne State University (April 1969-January 1970) was the unique Danish educational environment, the folkehøjskole. My project in summary was an inquiry into :”the relation of the folk highschool to the Danish educational system”. How is an explicitly alternative educational environment connected to the explicitly conventional, established educational system? Between the lines of the official research project was a curiosity about the Danish folkehøjskole as an educational utopia, a type of school which was in practice for over a century and was therefore no longer qualified as an ”experimental college” as was our home base, Monteith, in Detroit.

My method in the field research was to be that of standard anthropology: ”participant-observation”. I and my family (wife and two sons, 2 and 6 years old) were to move into a folkehøjskole for an entire term, four or five months in duration, so I could observe and take part in the school’s life from the arrival of a new group of students, and notice the formation and growth of a community until its dispersal.

The first few months of research were exploratory. I made contacts to several folk high schools where I interviewed a few willing students. English was the language of the conversations. I interviewed several students at Krogerup højskole near Copenhagen and attended several course sessions, not making much sense of them. I also made a more interesting two-day visit to Askov højskole in mid- Jutland. In July our family attended a two-week family course at the Danish labor movement’s school in Esbjerg, where I taught a course in American folk music and my wife, Kenar, an accomplished potter, taught ceramics. The summer school program included day-care workers who took charge of the children. By July I had learned enough Danish so I could read the newspaper in the barber shop. I read about both the successful American landing on the moon and Senator Edward Kennedy’s automobile accident at the bridge on Martha’s Vineyard.

In September our family moved into an apartment at the folkehøjskole, Magleås (pronounced Mao’ lay us) where Kenar would teach ceramics, and I would teach English, music appreciation, and social science to forty students, a small majority of whom were women. Our children were often entertained by the students, and vice versa. What follows in this essay are selected passages from memories and notebooks. The field notes should document my presence in the residential school, but perhaps not my analytical powers which were faulty then and now as I rewrite them forty years later for the Monteith Reunion in September 2009.

Breakfast at Askov (May 1969)

If the road to hell is paved by good intentions, the road to literature is paved by first impressions. In my earliest exploration of the Danish folk highschool as an

ethnographic field, I arranged a two-day visit at Askov Højskole, sometimes called "the Harvard" of Danish højskoler. Askov Højskole was over a century old in 1969. When the Prussian military forces occupied South Jutland in 1864, the southern border of the Danish state became a stream called the Kongeå. Askov lies just to the north of that meandering stream. Askov then was a significant cultural site, marking both the højskole ideal and the border guard for Danish identity. Everyone who heard that I was going to study Danish højskoler said that Askov was a "must" for my research.

Askov offered a three-month summer course for about 80 young people (18-ca 28). I knew at least one member of the group, and he helped make the arrangement with the school principal for the visit. The group was itself newly arrived and the students were getting to know each other. I was to stay in one of the guest rooms in the main building, apart from the students' bedrooms, so I was neither participant in, nor observer to, the intimate life of the school's student population.

My most vivid memory from the first 24 hours was the relatively brief breakfast in the dining hall. A line of tired students, most of them with freshly shampooed hair, could choose between a huge variety of dairy products that were unknown to me. Yogurt in several flavors, something called "ymer", "tyk mælk" and a dry brown crumb-like substance that was sprinkled onto the cold, wet dairy products. Many heaped dried oats into the bowl and covered them with milk, sugar, or tyk mælk. There were several kinds of bread, brown (rygbrød) and white (franskbrød) and several kinds of cheese, some to slice some to spread, and several kinds of jellies. There were even thin slices of chocolate to place onto the slice of bread after it was buttered. Butter, Butter, Butter. "smør". That was the summary of the choices. After serving themselves, the students walked to a chair to sit at one of the, maybe, 12 long wooden tables.

The bowls for the breakfast were made of heavy ceramic iron ware, and the spoons were likewise heavy stainless steel. Then I began to hear the breakfast music at Askov. Thick yogurt did not dampen the volume of the music. The dipping of the spoons and the scraping of the bowls were orchestral and memorable. The acoustics at Askov's ancient dining hall were ideal for the purpose. Eighty hungry students put away a lot of Danish dairy foods before they poured coffee or tea into their cups. It was the sound of heavy spoon on heavy bowl that made the strongest and most lasting impression. I was struck by how little conversation there was at the tables. A few requests to pass the butter or pass the sugar did not stretch my limited knowledge of Danish speech. I learned though that a request for butter sounded in English as "May I borrow the butter?" (Må jeg låne smørret?)

The breakfast at Askov, which offered a large number of choices for the consumers within, nevertheless, a limited set of tastes presented me with what became a lasting image of Danish educational culture. The breakfast at Askov was primarily a menu of dairy products. No bacon and eggs, no fried potatoes, and certainly no bagels and lox. Bagels were unheard of in Denmark until the 1990's, except among ex-patriot Americans.

Movie at Magleås (October 1969)

Our residence in Magleås from September 1969 until January 1970, made the breakfast ceremony everyday routine. I remember the sounds more than the tastes. Re-reading the Magleås journal, I saw no reference to breakfast. I described as well as I could the school's membership, but after one month there were many students whom I had not gotten to know. The more rebellious students, whom I did quickly get to know, were a minority and more visible, as hippies, and seemed therefore more active. My notes speak familiarly of less than ten, and they were the school's rebels.

At the start of October the entire school population of teachers and students (about 50 in all) was expected to attend the viewing of a new television documentary film, "Højskole 69", at an evening program. The school principal was to lead the program and the discussion afterwards. Here is a selection from the lengthy passage in my journal, October 1.

"A big night last night. A pivotal event in my "career" with the højskole. There was a TV film on the højskole which we all watched in the fordrag hal (lecture hall). Poul (the Principal) was definitely the leader of the experience. He jotted notes on the blackboard throughout the film, on the reverse side so we couldn't read. His presence was felt throughout the entire program. Immediately after the "slut" on the screen, he shut off the set and began to question the students about the film's technique. Why a pause of music in the middle? To give the viewer a recess. The patience was getting tired. I wanted to demand free criticism & discussion of the film. Kenar cautioned me but she was burning too. Also Yonnie the American from Antioch. We are so sensitive to the gestures of authority, we radical Americans. Perhaps with our ignorance of the language, we respond more to gestures, to symbolic actions than to the words themselves. Poul wanted to keep the discussion only on the plane of technique, of the operations so to speak. The content and its "relevance" to the people was not the problem. Finally I spoke out in a mixture of Danish and English. He blew up and I guess he terrified the students. He was angry. "Why don't you take over?" he said. I said that wasn't my intention. The question was rather of defining the problem to be discussed. Who shall say what the problem is? I answered him. I insisted that we relate the content of the film to our own experience at Magleås. That would be the only way to learn from the film... (pp43-6)

As I re-read this rendering of the incident 40 years on, I cannot help but perceive the clear influence of Monteith College on its perspective. We always encouraged self-reflection in our teaching and in our learning. It was the spirit of the historical Socrates, not that of the mythological Narcissus, that Monteith College had at the top of its pædagogical agenda. That was the gist of the "experiment" at the College and that which we are celebrating this weekend.