



010901 Orientation

Let me just start by saying that I have had an amazing time this week. The International Office at DTU (my school) set aside this week as a time for the new students to figure out the school, their courses and to get the opportunity to meet each other. So, there were seminars like the one that I mentioned about how to survive in Denmark, Danish classes for those who opted for them and social activities. There are students here from all over the world and I have enjoyed the opportunity to talk with people from such diverse backgrounds. For example, on Wednesday there was a "build a hot air balloon" competition (this is an engineering school) followed by a cookout. I wound up having this animated conversation about renewable energy sources and nuclear energy with guys from Germany, Iceland and Pakistan as we sat with our beers and brauts. No one seems very amused by Bush's decision not to sign the Kyoto agreement on global warming. On another occasion, Isabella from Paris and I tried to explain to a Pakistani what it means when you make "quotes" as you speak. It is something that is done here and in the rest of Europe as well. You know, like if you say that US chocolate is "good". Then there are the guys from Finland with their thick accents and there are two Thai women who are just all smiles and who are here with the goal of using their new knowledge as a means to clone humans. In the end, most of the graduate students are very interesting. Especially the female graduate students.

Other activities that we had this week included a canal tour of Copenhagen and a big dinner for which all of the groups each cooked a dish. There were traditional Danish foods such as cream and potatoes and a delicious pear "cobbler". I have made friends with the international counselors who are all Danish and I keep asking them what exactly is Danish food. For, on the street you see a very fair share of pizza places, Mc D is of course here, great Turkish restaurants which you also saw all over Germany back in the 80's, but no "Danish" restaurants. You do however see lots of cafes, bakeries and shops with great dairy products. What I am gathering is that Danish food is not as exotic or distinct as Indian or Chinese, but rather just certain traditional dishes that are served especially during the holiday season. Much like apple pie and turkey in the US where our diet is essentially a conglomeration of foods from the world over, but we have specific dishes for certain holidays. Did I mention that the Danish dairy products and chocolate are far superior? I got these chocolate biscuits from a grocery store on campus on a whim to change a 100 Kr note and they turned out to be wow, ya really good. Hungry?

We had Danish courses every morning for 3 1/2 hours each day. Jeg kan taler lidt dansk. It has been like drinking from a fire hose, but the class was very good and will now continue for the next month at night after our other courses are over. The problem is that as soon as I open my mouth, any conversation with a Dane immediately switches to English since it is easier than my bad Danish. As my Danish gets better, I am going to have to insist that Tove begins to speak to me only in Danish or I will not learn the language. So communicating with people is not an issue, but reading in the grocery store is. The grocery store is not as exotic as the ones in Yantai, but still an adventure. I mean, I can go up to the lunch meat section and begin to guess which packets contain mad cow

beef or safe chicken, but I am never sure. I need more grocery store vocabulary. One thing that I do know for sure is that the prices here are higher than those in Boston. Not significantly higher, we are only talking a quarter here or a dime there. But, when you are living on a monthly stipend and you are a big eater, the additional costs add up quickly. Plus you must pay for each plastic bags that you use to carry your groceries home. I usually only buy one, but I have found out the hard way that just because I am strong enough to carry all of the groceries does not mean that the bag is.

The seminar that I mentioned in the last email about how to live with the Danes really did not help with figuring out the "dos" and "dents" of Danish society. The speaker teaches at a Folk High School which is a school where adults go for several months for personal development. The speaker knows a lot about the Danes, but my Danish friends were embarrassed by some of the speaker's statements, so perhaps some of the information that I am relaying should be taken with a grain of salt.

What I found to be interesting was the statistics that the speaker told regarding relationships in Denmark. Marriage is seen as something that occurs later in a relationship as a confirmation rather than at the start. Therefore, a lot of people will move in together and start a family long before (in some cases 20 years) before they decide to get married. Actually, my Danish friends have all said that they could not imagine marrying someone who they did not live with first. Plus, there are government subsidies for single women with children. But once a marriage occurs, the benefit is taken away. What can occur then is "serial cohabitation" where one relationship may not work out and so the parent and child will eventually move in with another single adult when a new relationship starts. This is seen as beneficial to the children because there are always two "parents" present in their lives. The idea of a late marriage is also seen as beneficial because then the two people are held together by love rather than by a piece of paper.

The children are raised with the goals of being responsible and independent. Obedience is also important, but it is low on the list. It is seen as being better to question the system and it is not uncommon for students to question their teacher's syllabus in high school and to make recommendations. Children are seen as adults once they are 18 years old. The parents may stop directly supporting the children at this age because they then support them through their high taxes. Unemployment benefits or scholarships are then seen as the means of supporting the new adults.

The taxes are high here in Denmark and weigh in at about 45 to 50 percent of most peoples salaries. However, the money that goes to the state comes right back out in the form of public programs. Health care is universal and free. Plus all students who go to university are given scholarships to cover tuition. Therefore, as one Dane explained, all that you then need to pay for is your rent, food and automobile which is why grocery prices are a little higher than the US. How many people in the US would be willing to pay 10 percent more on their taxes if it meant free health care and that they would not have to worry about paying the terribly expensive tuition at the local university? However, my friend Karsten from German tells me that they have the same sort of

programs there, but for less taxes. So, maybe the system isn't as good as it sounds, after all. I am hoping that my friend Michele in Germany can shed some light on the subject for the next issue.

The only Danes that I have really gotten to know are Tove and her daughter Anna Maria as well as the international councilors from school. All are great people. The Danes will tell you that they are a quiet lot who will mind their own business. Some people have described the Danes as a tribe who are hesitant to let in outsiders, but once they get to know you they will be very friendly. This has been the case with the store clerks who I have interacted with who were all very nice and helpful. The Danes are also rigid abiders of rules. I was warned when I first arrived that I had to wait for the walk signal at the traffic light. Sure enough, crowds will wait at the light, even if there aren't cars in sight. It is funny to watch people walk as if on a grid because they only cross at the zebras (cross walks). I will let you know what I think of the Danes once I have interacted with more of them this week as my classes start.

I have been walking to school this week and taking the busses. The public transportation is great, but expensive. Busses cost \$1.75 per ride without a clip card or \$1 with one. Not a fee to be taken lightly. The trains are more expensive, but I only need to catch the bus. Therefore, most students walk or take their bikes which are everywhere. There are even special bike lanes on most roads that include turn lanes and their own traffic lights in the busier parts of the city. I hope to find a used bike on Monday thanks to Tove's used bike connection. Otherwise, I will splurge for a new one this week.

I have four classes this semester which does not sound like a lot, but since each class has eight hours allotted to it, the number is a significant time investment. My worst day is sure to be Wednesday when I have differential equations, for the second time in my life. But, it is a required course and it meets from 8 till 12 and then again from 1 till 5. Just to make sure that I am brain dead, I then have Danish classes from 5:15 till 8. Fortunately, I have Thursday free of classes so that I can recover.

There is more to ramble about, but since this "short" email has already gone on for long enough, I will end here.

Take care,

Jeff

ps. OK, I knew that I would catch a little flack over this one, so let me explain what I meant about not advertising at first that I am from the US. What I mean is that we all have impressions of what a people are like. I always considered the French to be very snobby, but my friends Isabella and Florence are very nice. (what does it mean when a Parisian keeps winking at you? :)). I would just rather that people make their first impression of me by who I am rather than solely by the fact that I am from the US with whatever that means to them.

pps. The classes here really are four hours long. Uggggggg. Did I mention that they meet twice a week?

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