

## COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS IN DENMARK

More often than not, whenever they tried to use the few words they knew in Danish, José and Josy were met by the following response: “No, no, let us practice our English on you.”

As a result, during the year they lived in Copenhagen they never did learn the language. But they found themselves with several curious experiences, often because of this.

Soon after they moved from the Missionshotellet into their rented house they looked up a cousin of their friend Dr. John Sonne whose address he had given them before they left the United States. Immediately she took charge of what she considered a matter of the first priority.

“You must learn to say your home address in Danish,” she told them, “and you must learn to pronounce it correctly.”

They followed an unrelenting two-hour session where she had them practice it over and over again. They lived at “Kvaedevej 64” in the northern suburb of Sorgenfrie. “Kvaede” in Danish means “quince” and “vej” is the word for “street”, while the number 64 was “firetres” (or “feer-tres” as is got sounded out).

What gave them the most trouble was the sound of “Kvaede”. John’s cousin insisted it must come from the back of the roof of the mouth, in a kind of high-pitched soprano singsong.

“You must be understood,” she persisted. “Suppose you get lost. A policeman has to be able to understand you so he can get you back home.”

Then she made them practice by repeating a Swedish phrase using the same sound: “roedegrod mit floede”. It was the name of a dessert consisting of berries and cream. Wrinkling their noses while reaching deep into their stomachs, they practiced sucking in their breaths to produce a shrill guttural sound. This eventually helped them get it right.

“You must remember,” John Sonne’s cousin told them, “Danish is not so much a language as a throat disease!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Many of their problems with the Danes, however, came not so much from mispronunciation as from misinterpretation.

One situation that came up regularly was with the laundry company they used. After being assured that the management spoke perfect English, Josy instructed them to wash the entire load of weekly laundry without ironing anything but José’s shirts. These she asked them to starch lightly. Invariably, week after week, the entire batch arrived back neat and clean, but the only things ironed were

the baby's diapers. These had been wrapped in special tissue paper, folded over, tied with a ribbon, with the diapers stiffly pressed and starched. No matter how many times Josy called to correct the problem, nothing ever changed during their entire stay in Denmark.

\* \* \* \* \*

In 1957 they found only one store (and that a tiny one) which might qualify as a supermarket. That is, it sold a variety of foods. The usual practice among the Danes at the time was to go to one shop for meats, another for produce, a third for dairy products (except for eggs, which were unexplainably sold at the bakery), etc., etc. Some items were difficult to classify, as José and Josy soon found out. The day after they moved into the house Josy went to the butchers to buy meat for a pot roast. Inside a refrigerated glass cabinet she spotted what appeared to be liver pâté.

"That would make a nice treat to start out the meal," she thought.

That night she spread it on crackers and served it first. After one bite José exclaimed, "What is this?"

It turned out to be chocolate icing for cake. What it was doing for sale among the meats in the butcher shop they never did find out.

Another time Josy wanted to buy sour cream to mix with the cottage cheese they were having for dinner. She asked for it at the dairy shop, only to be met with a severe shake of heads and both women behind the counter struggling to answer her, "No! No! All cream here good, not sour."

Armed with her small English-Danish dictionary she finally got across the idea of what she wanted. Suddenly the light of recognition dawned as one turned to the other and cried, "Ah, 'ymer'!"

One evening late in April they decided to go see the American film "A Star Is Born" with James Mason and Judy Garland. It was playing in a movie house they had never been to before, and they headed out toward the general area of the theater before stopping to buy gas and ask for directions.

"Yah, yah, that's easy," the attendant assured them. "You follow this same road here," and he pointed to the street out front, "and watch your speedometer. When the number says fifteen kilometers exactly, you will be in front of the theater. Just watch your speedometer. Fifteen kilometers exactly!"

Taking care to follow his directions accurately, they proceeded on their way. Fifteen kilometers later they found themselves in the midst of a dense forest. They were halfway to Elsinore. Retracing their route, after several wrong turns, they eventually found the place. It was much closer to the gas station than expected.

Several days later when José drove into that same gas station to buy gas, he told the attendant, “You know, your friend who waited on us last time gave us bad directions. He told us the wrong way to the movies.”

“Yah, he told me,” the fellow responded, shaking his head sadly. “He felt very, very bad. He tried to help you, but his English not so good. He meant ‘five’ kilometers, not fifteen. But he forgot how to say ‘five’ and he didn’t want to disappoint you!”

\* \* \* \* \*

One spring morning when the weather showed signs of thawing, Josy bundled up in a short, hooded parka instead of her usual full-length overcoat and headed for the center of town. There, between errands, she stopped at a vendor’s wagon in the main square across from Town Hall to buy a hot dog for lunch.

As she was paying, the vendor began a whole string of conversation in Danish.

“Do you speak English?” she asked him slowly, as she had grown used to do whenever verbal communication broke down.

“Yah,” he mused, passing his hand slowly back and forth across his chin. Finally, after a long silence he turned to her, raised his finger, shaking it, and yelled, “Lady, your trousers is broken!”

It turned out that the seam at the back of her slacks had begun to tear.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were other situations where being a foreigner interfered with understanding of local customs. One such occasion occurred when Josy was returning home one night after dropping José off at the downtown train depot. He was on his way to Germany for a lecture conference, and as they arrived at the station it began to snow.

Knowing how fast what looked like a casual snowfall could turn into a blizzard, he told her not to wait with him until his train pulled out, but to head back home immediately. Now as she was driving past Copenhagen’s main downtown shopping district a policeman whistled for her to stop. Glancing at her driver’s license he realized she was a foreigner and addressed her in halting English.

Her infraction, it appeared, had been to drive with the car’s headlights on. Even though it was night outside and completely dark with heavy snow falling, this was considered a violation in the center of town. There was enough light reflected from the shop windows and street lamps, he told her, to preclude driving with car lights on. Nodding in bewilderment, she thanked him for not giving her a ticket,

turned off the lights, then drove away, waiting till she was outside the shopping area to turn them on again.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was another time she got into trouble driving. One afternoon, with the children in the back seat, she drove into downtown Copenhagen, arriving just at rush hour. She was on the way to pick up José at the laboratory on the south side of town and had to pass through the town center to get there.

One of the children (she never found out which one) picked that moment to start a fight in the back of the car. Screaming for them to settle down, she continued to steer. Suddenly some sixth sense made her slam on the brakes. Glancing around out the windows, she found herself facing empty air. The wheels of the car had caught onto the tracks of a railroad trestle, and there they were, five feet above the ground, perched atop it. Down below rush hour traffic swirled wildly, as whistles shrieked and hysterical voices screamed in Danish. It took the fire department and several policemen, all motioning and gesticulating wildly, to get the car down to street level again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still another ride they would never forget took place in late March, when it was still wintry and cold. By that time Josy was involved in a couple of car pools, one with the family of another Fulbrighter whose seven-year-old son attended the Bernadotte School with Malva. George was the child's name, and at this point he was suffering from a broken arm. That afternoon it was her turn to pick up the children from school. With Lois and Marty in the back of the car, she got Malva and George and proceeded to pick up José from the lab. They reached Carlsberg Laboratorium about 5:30, and José got into the car, taking the wheel. Then they headed back to Sorgenfrie.

The cold was bitter, and everyone sat bundled up in coats, several sweaters underneath, scarves, hats, mittens, galoshes. Under all this George wore a sling for his broken arm.

They had proceeded only five minutes or so when George announced, "I got to make."

Turning in her seat and viewing his heavy layer of clothing dubiously, Josy asked, "Is it urgent, George?"

"No, I can wait," he replied.

"Are you sure?" she asked again.

"Oh, yes, I can wait," came the answer.

About ten minutes later he made the announcement again. “I’ve got to make.”

“O.K., we’ll stop somewhere,” José answered, but George replied, “No, it’s O.K. I’d rather wait.”

This kept on every so often until they finally got to Lyngby, a neighborhood just five minutes from home.

“I’ve got to make,” George announced again, “and this time it can’t wait.”

“Very well,” José replied, and he pulled the car into the parking lot of a large restaurant inn (or “kro”, as it was called in Danish).

While he waited in the car with the other children, Josy escorted George inside. The place was already busy with diners. Customers filled most tables, while waiters scurried back and forth between the dining area and the kitchen, paying scant attention as she led George to the restrooms.

Inside the men’s room he went, while she stood outside waiting.

Several minutes passed and still no sign of George. It suddenly occurred to her that he must be having a terrible time with his arm in a sling, peeling off all those layers of heavy clothing.

“Somebody really has to help him,” she thought, and slowly pushed the door open.

At that very moment the headwaiter happened to be passing by, carrying a tray of dishes over his head. As he turned the corner, he spotted Josy peering into the men’s room. He almost dropped the tray. With a cry, he ran to summon aid. The next thing she knew, shouting waiters and various other restaurant personnel were around her, waving admonishing fingers, some actually shaking their fists. As on previous occasions, because of her lack of proficiency in Danish she was unable to explain.

Then amid all the commotion George came out. With no trouble at all he had unbuttoned his coat and sweaters, removed his scarf and the glove on his good hand, and attended to business. He had apparently experienced no trouble at all. Now he was adroitly dressing himself, which made her look all the worse. She slunk out of the place pushing George impatiently ahead of her to the sound of jeers behind her. Never after that did she dare show her face in the “kro” again.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had already had a problem with a pediatrician whose lack of English led him to confuse the expression *small pox* with *chicken pox*. Josy decided it might be better to use the services of somebody else better equipped in English.

Just before leaving for his lecture trip to Germany, José had gotten her the name of a Danish pediatrician who was doing research at Carlsberg. He had met

Dr. Hansted personally and found him to be reasonably capable and adept with English.

Indeed, no sooner had Josy got home from the train station after dropping José off that snowy night than she found Marty running a fever of 103 degrees. Alarmed, she immediately phoned Dr. Hansted. By now it was six o'clock. The winds were whistling fiercely outside, and the snow had already piled up against walls and window-sills, making even outer doors hard to open.

A woman answered the phone. After indicating that she needed to use English, Josy asked, "May I please speak with Dr. Hansted?"

"Dr. Hansted is having dinner now," she was told, "and cannot be disturbed.

Josy identified herself as José's wife and insisted that Dr. Hansted had promised her husband to speak to her if necessary.

"Yes, this is an emergency," she insisted.

Finally he came to the phone.

She explained who she was and apprised him of the situation.

To this he answered, "Well, you know, Madam, I'm in the middle of my dinner, and I'm going to the opera tonight so I really cannot be disturbed."

Near hysteria at this point, she indicated that her child had a high fever, and with her husband away, a snowstorm raging outside, and being a foreigner, she had no idea where else to turn.

"I'll be happy to see your child tomorrow, Madam," he replied, "but not tonight. I'm due to meet friends at the opera, and I'm late already. Bring the child to my office at Carlsberg tomorrow morning."

"But what do I do in the meantime?" She was almost screaming by now.

"In the meantime," he told her, "I can give you three pieces of advice, Madam. First, undress the child. Second, open. Your windows. And third, stop giving him aspirin."

Unable to believe her ears, Josy asked him to repeat. He did, in exactly the same words.

"Now if you'll excuse me, Madam," he concluded, "I really must get back to my meal or I'll be late for the opera." And he hung up.

In despair Josy ran out of the house to the Sheilines, an American family living across the street, and got the name of another pediatrician who came immediately and tended to Marty.

Days later, when José returned from his trip, Josy recounted the incident.

In the laboratory next day he approached Dr. Hansted.

"Your wife was quite upset, I could tell," the pediatrician replied, "but I think I gave her excellent advice. Most mothers, you know, overdress the children, especially in this cold Danish climate. It's not necessary, really. And they keep their houses too warm. So I told her to open the windows."

Speechless, José finally found his voice to ask, “But what about the aspirin?”

“Ah, the aspirin. Why, I was going to see the child the following day anyhow,” Dr. Hansted replied, “and I didn’t want her to mask any symptoms! Aspirin can mask symptoms, you know.”

Then, turning back from his desk he added coolly, almost as an afterthought, “She never did bring the child to see me, did she?”