

FIRST DAYS IN DENMARK

Lis Dupont and her husband Jean were at the Copenhagen Airport waiting to meet the plane. To Josy and the children, alone in a new land with a strange language where they knew nobody, the Duponts were a welcome sight. They took the weary newcomers to their apartment, where they had waiting several bottles of chocolate milk for the children. (Later Josy learned that bottled chocolate milk was very expensive in Denmark, a real luxury.)

Then the Duponts drove them to the Missionshotellet in the center of town. Here the Fulbright Commission had reserved a room for them where they would live until their home for the year was ready. Leaving her and the children with instructions to phone if they needed anything, Lis promised to come back the following evening after work to look in on them. She would be at their disposal the entire year, she announced. She would be, as she put it, "the children's Danish Grandmamum". Her warmth, kindness, and help in practical day-to-day matters would prove invaluable for their entire time in Denmark, and her friendship ever afterwards.

They found the hotel room big. Its one window looked out into a dark alleyway, and from here Josy would occasionally catch sounds of milkmaids emptying buckets of dirty water into the yard. To her untrained ears it sounded provincial and somehow European. The room had a table and chairs, a large double bed and three small cots. For the next twenty-four hours they all slept without waking up, weary from the excitement and their long trip.

The next morning, after ordering breakfast in to the room, Josy took the children out for a walk. She found the streets crowded and bustling, alive with traffic. But what was so amazingly different was the traffic itself. Literally hundreds upon hundreds of bicycles, with only an occasional automobile among them, whistled past at break-neck speed. Crossing the street became an adventure, to be undertaken only when the traffic lights turned green.

Although this was already 1957, twelve years after World War II had ended, the city still had a post-war feel about it. Goods in the shop windows were sparse. The clothing of the pedestrians Josy saw appeared, for the most part, shabby, non-coordinated in color and style. One woman wore a heavy woolen brown overcoat patterned with large white polka dots. Many sported patches at the elbows and collars. Later she would notice that when groups met in restaurants, often their members would delay voicing recognition of newcomers until all coats, generally shabby and well-worn, had been hung up on racks. Then they would greet each other warmly and effusively, admiring one another's indoor finery, usually more presentable.

José and Josy had ordered a car for delivery in Denmark. It was a Ford Anglia, a tiny vehicle that, in heavy snows, of which there would be plenty, a few of the neighborhood boys would physically lift up out of the driveway and place on the street for them. The car had a horsepower of 4 and later, after they shipped it back to America, they would find that it had trouble going up very steep hills. At that point everyone except the driver would get out and walk the distance to lighten the load. But here in Denmark, a country with few hills – its highest named “Himmelberget” (“sky mountain”) just 300 feet tall – here the Ford Anglia did just fine. The arrangement was that, as foreigners, José and Josy could avoid paying tax on the car’s purchase providing they took the vehicle out of the country before a year was up. They found out that Danes pay a full 100% tax on automobiles, so few could afford them. Instead most went everywhere by bicycle.

Josy saw people carrying out errands on bikes that she never would have imagined possible. One man slid past cars and other cyclists weaving in and out among the crowds while holding onto a huge pane of glass under one arm. Another walked his dog while seated on his bike, the animal sprinting nimbly alongside him. There were bicycles for two, for three, for whole families. Some even had small wagons and carts attached behind them. A few sported hoods to protect them from the rain. But the overall impression was of one enormous, never-ending stream of pedallers, waves of cyclists bearing down on whoever was in front of them. The sight was mesmerizing.

That first day Josy came upon numerous small, out of the way canals and inlets of water turning up unexpectedly among the narrow streets. She found them utterly charming. “Even though this is only my first day here,” she commented to herself, “I know I’m going to miss this place once it comes time for us to leave back home for America.”

Now she headed towards the Fulbright Commission office to let them know she and the children had arrived and that José would be coming from. The Paris Atoms for Peace Conference the following week. The small two-story building that housed the Fulbright Office was just a block away from the hotel. There she met the staff, a charming friendly group headed by Mrs. Karen Fenow, a sophisticated matronly lady who spoke perfect unaccented English and welcomed her warmly. A house would soon be ready for them, she announced, and made an appointment for a staff member to take Josy to the northern suburb of Sorgenfri to see the place the following day. An engineer’s family would be leaving soon for their year in Bagdad, and they were renting their house out for the time. Although it was located at the opposite end of the city from Carlsberg Laboratories where José would be doing his research, it should nevertheless prove ideal for the coming year.

Thanking everybody warmly and leaving the Commission Office, Josy looked about for a place for lunch. There were numerous charming little shops and

restaurants all about, but one sign in English caught her eye. It was called “The English House” and it seemed easiest to start there on that first day in a foreign country.

Entering, she found the place almost deserted and hushed. Small tables for four, each containing as a centerpiece a small pot of violets, lent a charming, though extremely formal, high-class atmosphere. A gentleman in tuxedo welcomed her in Danish, indicating that he knew no English, then bowed and escorted them to a small table. Handing her a menu, he stood stiffly by and waited.

She studied the listings, trying to translate the prices from kroner to dollars. She had no idea what most of the food offerings meant. Moments passed in silence. The waiter began to shift from one foot to another, and her sense of discomfort slowly grew. Suddenly and without warning Marty reached over to the center of the table. Before she could reach over, he picked up the small pot of violets (the centerpiece) and turned it upside down. Flowers and dirt spattered onto the freshly laid tablecloth. The waiter gasped. Josy tried to apologize, but without knowing one word of Danish, found it impossible. Throwing her hands up apologetically, she rose quickly, pulling the children after her and left the restaurant. Behind her she heard words of consternation and a babble of voices, all incomprehensible, though she could well imagine what they must be saying.

“We’re going back to the hotel,” she told the children. “We’re going to take all our meals in our room from now on since you don’t know how to behave in a restaurant!”

But still another adventure awaited them. She was wheeling the stroller with Marty in it and the two girls walking beside her when they saw approaching them a very obese man. He toddled down the street, swaying from side to side, barely able to carry his own heavy weight. As he approached his eyes grew wide with delight. Apparently, the sight of three dark-eyed children in a land of blue-eyed blonds must have seemed a charming novelty to him. He smiled and made little whimpering noises. As he reached the carriage he stopped and clapped his hands together in delight. His eyes wide with admiration, he cooed charmingly in Danish, all admiration and wonder.

Suddenly, for no reason at all and certainly for none that Josy could fathom, Lois reached out and jabbed her finger into the midst of his fat round belly. She must have expected the sound that a rubber duck or a bathtub toy makes when it squeaks.

The man was dumbfounded. Throwing both hands high into the air, shaking from head to foot, he gasped, “Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!” fluttering his fingers back and forth.

Again, Josy had no idea what to do. Horrified, taken aback, yet unable to convey a single word of apology, she did the only thing she could think of.

“Come on, children,” she yelled, “Let’s run!”

And they left the poor fellow in a dither, gasping for breath as she sped them back to the hotel and inside to the privacy of their own room. She still thinks back to that embarrassing incident with shame and regret, yet to this day is unable to think what else she might have done to make amends or prevent the incident from escalating into open conflict.

For the remainder of the two weeks that they lived at the Missionshotellet, even for the most part after José arrived, they took their meals inside their room, feeling that the children were still too young and untrained at the table to control in public.

Once after José arrived and while they were still waiting for their house n Sorgenfri to be vacated, they went to a restaurant in the center of town. Though still September, the days were starting to get cold, and they sat at an outdoor terrace with heaters all around them. Preoccupied with getting settled, with the uncertainty of what José would find at the laboratory, and with the restlessness of the children, they finished their meal quickly, paid their bill, and left the restaurant. Three blocks later the waiter caught up with them. Panting and out of breath, he handed José his wallet. José had left it on the restaurant table full of money, passports, and vital papers. Not one item had been taken. They were to find just about every Dane they met during the coming year was as honest and outgoing as this one.