

# The Danish Folk High School Adapts to a New World

American observers of the Danish folk high school movement have marveled at the humanistic bent of these remarkable institutions, and their seemingly anti-establishment romanticism. For more than a century, these schools have been unique in their approach to preserving Danish culture, while furnishing a free and open opportunity for Danish youth to explore national and world issues and problems.

These are schools without credits, without examinations, without grades or certificates of attendance, and often, for Americans, characterized by a fluid, non-restricting curriculum. To dwell on these features, and to allow oneself to be caught up in the romantic nostalgia of the movement, however, is to miss significant and startling developments which have occurred over the past decade. These developments reflect Denmark's struggle between the forces of modern urbanization and industrialization and its Nordic past.

The first Danish Folk High School, Rødding Højskole, opened in 1844 near the center of the Jutland peninsula. This location, close to a disputed German border, boded ill for the fledgling school, for successive changes in Denmark's southern boundary placed the school inside Germany for a time, before returning it to the Danish people. The second of the folk high schools, Askov, is probably better known. It was founded by the headmaster and teachers from Rødding when their former school was swallowed up by the Germans in 1865. The political

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turmoil of the early years shaped these schools, and the ones to follow them, in natural harmony with both the character of the rural Danes who began them, and the political and religious radicalism of the inspirator of the movement, Nikolaj Severin Frederik Grundtvig, pastor, poet, and educator.

Grundtvig railed at the "schools of death" which forced literate Danes to abandon their language for the stuffy but prestigious Latin of the formal schools, and at the insistence of both the Danish elite and the German occupiers of southern Danish lands that Danish was somehow inferior to German for the conducting of important business and social affairs. His cohort in the early days of the movement, Christen Kold, imbued the schools with a passionate religious flavor which has persisted in but a few of the schools to the present day. Their concern for the common people in Danish society, which at that time meant the common farmers, has survived to vitally influence decisions and curricula in these schools today.

### Winter—A Time to Study

Originally the folk high schools were structured to provide additional education to an agrarian population which was long on work experience but short on Nordic history, mythology, folk music and dance, and dialog on the major cultural and political issues of the day. Winter in Denmark, depressingly gray and cold, was a perfect time for farmers with no fields to tend to leave their homes and live together in a close human community, to learn from and about each other, and about their Nordic heritage. Especially, it was a time to learn without books, using their native Danish. Young Danes who had left formal schooling behind at the age of 12 or 14, and who had spent the intervening years becoming wise to the demands of a real and often grave world, found in the schools of

Grundtvig and Kold a new dignity and pride of heritage.

The early curriculum of the folk high school reflected the nationalistic spirit of Grundtvig and Kold. Students came for the winter to study Danish history, world history, geography, Danish language and literature, German, zoology, botany, geometry, drafting, arithmetic, physical training, singing, and "intelligence training"—the analysis of moral, psychological, or statistical subjects. At Rødding, much of that curriculum remains today. A typical folk high school, if there is one, offers world and national issues, Swedish gymnastics (a form of exercise, dance, and basic tumbling that is non-competitive, unlike the familiar competitive version in this country which requires special apparatus and sophisticated training and coordination), arts and crafts, language, and Danish literature, mythology, and language. English is taught in almost every school, French in most.

The more than 100 folk high schools are vigorously supported by the national treasury, which contributes 85 percent of the annual cost of operation, and underwrites low interest loans for the purchase or construction of buildings and land. The principal amount of the loan need not be repaid, thus the schools are only responsible for an interest payment each year at rates well below prevailing market standards. Students usually spend about \$200 a month during their stay in a folk high school as their share of the operating costs, but even this amount can be reduced, sometimes to zero, by "scholarships" provided by the student's home community, by generous unemployment benefits which are characteristic of the democratic socialism firmly entrenched in all of Scandinavia, or by other social benefits. The level of support tendered these schools is but one visible symbol of their importance in Danish society.

Folk high schools today resemble in many ways the original schools at Rødding and Askov. Many of the same buildings that were used in the

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*If you are interested in more information about Denmark's Folk High Schools order Professional Paper 1981-1, "The Danish Folk High School of the Seventies," by Samuel S. Corl, III, from the ASCD headquarters office. Copies are available at \$5 each; payment must accompany all orders under \$20.*



Students at the Kunsthøjskolen, in Holback, prepare to fire pots by the ancient method.

last century are used today. Students still conform to the three- or six-month course structure originated in the early days of the movement; they come in October, usually, and their stay ends either in December or March. Today's students bear little resemblance to those of the early years, however. While the early inhabitants of the schools were agrarian people, simple and always meagerly educated, today's student is typically younger (18- to 23-years-old on the average), has completed some or all of the curriculum in the Danish gymnasium, and is often using the folk high school to gain self-confidence or communal experience prior to moving into the business world or higher education. While a stay at a folk high school officially counts for nothing when applying for admission to the university or beginning industrial or business enterprise, most students are convinced that it is a worthwhile experience. Aside from being a welcome intercession between adolescence and adulthood, it seems to be a time for close and intense interaction with peers, for exploration of ideas in a very informal atmosphere, and a time for reflection and for absorbing the many benefits of existence in a close, warm, and nurturing human community. In addition it is, for some, a grooming forum for political radicalism.

There are almost as many different kinds of folk high schools as there are institutions in Denmark. The

schools range from the very conservative inner-mission schools sponsored by a wing of the official Danish Lutheran Church, to the avowedly political schools such as the Maoist "Red High School." There are folk high schools which are supported by the labor union movement, intended to educate their members and leaders. There are folk high schools for the elderly, and for the single parent, and for the amateur gymnast. Schools for the development of artistic and musical abilities exist under the same legal framework, and with the same government support, as one notable innovation in which students travel throughout the world. The only kind of folk high school not to be found in Denmark is one for the gifted youth—this conflict with egalitarian values is more than the government will support.

#### The New, Urban Dane

The profusion of "schools for purpose" is in part a testimony to the commitment of the Danish people to a diversity of interests and a democratic educational program, in part due to the astounding changes in the population these schools serve. The new, urban Dane is a result of the rapid industrialization of the country following the second world war. Denmark, once noted for its pork and dairy products, now exports these commodities at levels amounting to less than ten percent of its total na-



The giant windmill, constructed by students and teachers at Tvind, near Ullfborg, provides energy for the school and community.

tional product. Rising capabilities in industrial production, coupled with advanced agricultural methods, have pushed and pulled people away from farms and into the big cities of Copenhagen, Aarhus, Aalborg, and Esbjerg. Recent unemployment miseries have encouraged the Danish parliament to extend the formal schooling available to students from the typical nine years of common school to ten, with legislation pending to provide optional eleventh and twelfth years in every local community. The gymnasium, once reserved for the intellectual cream of Danish youth, now attracts an increasing proportion of the population which, as recently as 30 years ago, would have been working the fields.

Along with urbanization have come those problems all too familiar to American educators: drug use and abuse, alcoholism, depression and other mental illnesses, and urban

crime. Enrollment in folk high schools is, by tradition and by law, open on a first-come, first served basis, to any young person over the age of 18 who wishes to attend. This unrestricted enrollment pattern brings with it all of the problems of society to be faced by the students and staff of the schools. In fact, the naturally therapeutic community created by the folk high school movement was so effective in dealing with some less severe personal disturbances that it was necessary for the headmasters, at a recent yearly meeting, to agree to limit their enrollment of "social misfits" to 15 percent of the total student body. It is not at all unusual to find students being treated for alcoholism, and almost every school has a policy that frowns on drug use and prohibits drug abuse. High unemployment in Denmark has also affected the high schools, since unemployment benefits may be used to support one's stay in these institutions.

These changes in student body composition, and the alteration of the Danish social milieu, have also produced interesting changes in the curriculum of the schools. Once catering to students with very little formal schooling and much practical work experience, the folk high schools now welcome large numbers of students who are well-educated, literate, and well-informed, but who have little real-world activity to their credit. Coupled with the Danish penchant for seeking solutions to social problems in agonizing self-appraisal, this lack of real experience has encouraged a trend toward increased practical experiences built into the curriculum of the folk high school.

### **Tvind—A Remarkable Experiment**

Probably the most remarkable of the attempts to update the curriculum is found in the combination of schools at Tvind, in western Jutland. Most folk high schools enroll between 50 and 100 students each term. Until recently, Askov was the largest, with over 300 students living and learning together. Tvind, in 1977-78, claimed over 3,000 students in its three different schools.

Located on a windswept North Sea coastal plain are a teacher training school, a "continuation school" for young people between the ages

of 14 and 16, and a Traveling Folk High School. All are modeled more or less on the Grundtvigian notion of schools that are vitally involved in the culture and the issues and problems of society.

Students from Tvind schools raise most of their own food, have constructed the largest windmill in the world for generating electrical energy, assist in the operation of a school-owned Mediterranean cruise ship, have designed and built a fleet of fiberglass sailing craft, and rebuild and maintain buses and other vehicles that travel extensively in search of real, practical learning experiences for small groups of Danes.

At Tvind, as part of their training to become elementary school teachers, students spend one year in world travel, one year employed in the industrial work force, and two years in a heavily field-based teacher education program. All teachers at Tvind contribute that portion of their standard salary not required for self-maintenance to Tvind's coffers.

Life at Tvind is communal and spare. Teaching, even more than in the typical Danish folk high school, is a 24-hour, energy-sapping endeavor. While the Danish government contributes to the cost of food and housing for students, it has not, to date, been willing to underwrite travel expenses. Some student-teacher groups are away from Danish soil for up to two years. In the face of the significantly higher cost of this experiment in education, it is even more remarkable that Tvind attracts the large number of students that it does, and the communal requirements for teachers have not created a shortage of staff. There is a waiting list of Danes who are qualified and eager to join the Tvind community as teachers and students.

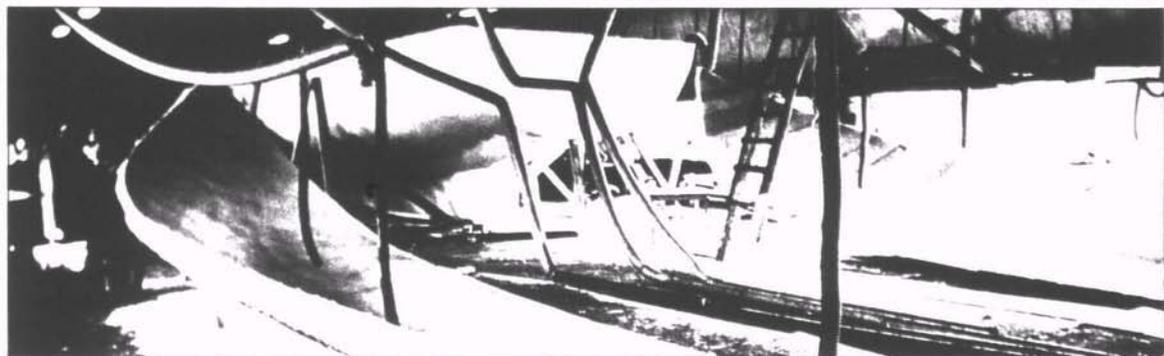
Tvind is much talked about, and sometimes maligned by more conservative or traditional Danes. Social democracy is not a Marxist movement, at least in the minds of most Danish adults, and the blatant neo-Marxist character of Tvind threatens many in Denmark. Beyond the accumulation of a large and potentially unmanageable capital account, however, Tvind has affected the Danish society in a number of significant ways. It is not unusual for classes from gymnasia in Denmark to visit Tvind, and for some of its milder

innovations to be infused into the public school curriculum. In recognizing the increasing importance of practical work experience for adolescents in Denmark's schools, educational leaders often cite Tvind as an example demonstrating the viability of such additions to the curriculum. Many of the folk high schools are also adding practical work experience to their programs. Building or restoring Danish farmhouses, construction of solar and wind apparatus for generating electric or thermal energy, and world travel are increasingly found under the auspices of heretofore traditional schools.

Another example of the influence of the practical work programs is the continuation school, an institution developed on the model of the folk high school, but intended for younger students. Ten thousand young people between the ages of 14 and 16 annually leave home to live in these continuation schools, supported by their local communities and by the national treasury. While these schools are not new in Denmark, their attraction of the disenchanted and difficult young person is a recent development, and is not well publicized either within or outside Denmark. About the same size as the adult version of the folk high school, these schools have taken the practical work curriculum even further. Continuation schools feature strong remedial basic skills programs, the Danish culture and Nordic history common in the folk high schools, and practical work courses in auto mechanics, machinery, and woodworking.

### **School for the Single Parent**

One other example of Danish folk high school attention to the unique needs of a changing population is the Family High School, located in Herning. This remarkable school, headed by a former settlement house administrator-couple, is designed especially for the single parent. The curriculum includes psycho-drama, child psychology, children's literature, genetics, and a variety of activities designed for both parent and child, and has a common school operated as part of its regular program, with two evenings a week devoted to school activities involving teachers, children, and parents. While there is not, as yet, practical



Fibreglass boats, constructed by students at Tvind, will be used by groups and students traveling the rivers of Europe.



Rødning Højskole, the original folk high school in Denmark, is as vital as it is picturesque. The thatched building (center) is the gymnasium (gymnastiks halle).

work experience as is found at Tvind, the Family High School is an example of the adaptation of a curriculum to fit a phenomenon new to Danish society, and especially challenging to the most committed of staff. This is especially significant in that Denmark has no specific academic or experiential requirements for teachers in the folk high schools, and the kind of students found at the Family High School would challenge the most talented of our American teachers and counselors.

Folk high schools do not use behavioral objectives, nor are they subjected to sophisticated evaluation procedures by state or national governmental agencies. The only requirement of their curriculum is that a portion of it be devoted to the discussion of major social issues and

problems. Danes assume that students are good judges of teaching talent, and when such talent is lacking, students will not enroll. It is ironic that in a socialistic milieu as carefully monitored and planned as Denmark's, their most cherished educational innovation is monitored by the forces of the free market. When folk high schools fail, they are replaced by new attempts at the education of young Danes. Only a handful of the early schools are still in existence, but the movement is as vital a part of the Danish society as it was under the watchful eyes of N. F. S. Grundtvig in 1844.

Although they cannot be transported out of their nurturing culture, we can learn from the folk high schools. They have been successful in illuminating the great social issues

of the day for young people in ways that our schools have never been able to do. Perhaps there is wisdom in making relatively short term, residential educational experiences available to young adults in our society in ways that are humanistic and non-threatening, without grades or tests or certificates. Perhaps there is wisdom, too, in a more direct linking of educational practice with the needs and the problems of the culture, as a means of avoiding the irrelevance and obtuseness of schools that speak a language different from that spoken in society. The folk high schools are what they claim to be—schools of people, of the common folk. They have all of the non-trappings of the common people, yet they have the tradition of the oldest of the world's monarchies.

To date the Danes seem to have found ways of hanging on to what is good in their culture, while struggling to adjust to what is inevitable. As in America, that struggle is not always comfortable, and its ends are not always either obvious or attractive. The folk high schools of Denmark, examples of significant and vital educational institutions within a social order, face uncertain futures, as that small nation struggles with the problems and promises of its future. If they are to survive they must continue to be responsive to the needs of the young Dane—as responsive, but in different ways, as the early schools of the 19th century. We need to watch them carefully, not only as romantic, humanistic schools, but as schools in the process of change, from which we can learn as we, too, struggle to find ways to make education more effective and vital. ■

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