

Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales, "Matador" and Danish Courage

By Norman Berdichevsky (May 2006)

I am an American who lived in Aarhus, Denmark from 1984-1990, a stone's throw away from the headquarters of the now famous newspaper "Jyllands-Posten" and got to learn first hand about the Danish folk character and the country's long history. Denmark has more than once faced the dilemma of standing alone to uphold fundamental democratic and humanitarian principles against overwhelmingly powerful political, military and economic interests.

The "Muhammad-cartoons saga" has once again forced Denmark into the unlikely position of heroically standing alone despite its inclination to follow the expedient example of so many others by taking the easy way of avoiding confrontations by appeasement, surrender to intimidation and blackmail.

A question frequently asked by foreigners is "How could the Danes have stood up to the Nazis and frustrated plans for deportation of the country's Jewish population to the internment and concentration camps?" Many observers see a parallel in the courage of the editors of Jyllands-Posten to print the "Muhammad-cartoons" satirizing political misuse of Islam to further terrorist ends yet in both cases, there was no initial or conscious desire for heroism or bravado.

Denmark's last military conflict was its brave defense against a combined Prussian and Austrian invasion of the country in 1864 over the issue of the disputed Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. The Danes had defended these territories before in 1848-51 and had been encouraged that either (or both) England and Sweden would not let the country's territorial integrity be violated by a major European power bent on expansion. Neither lifted a finger. Only Schleswig was defended as

Denmark had already declared it had no interest in preserving the allegiance of Holstein, an area populated wholly by German speakers who had indicated their desire to become part of a larger German Confederation.

The experience of fighting alone against overwhelming odds in the 1864 war, the resultant defeat, fatalities, enormous territorial loss and devastation caused by a war against two "super powers", left behind a profound distrust in diplomacy based on alliances with other nations and the ability of the military to defend the country. The pro-Danish population of Schleswig was put under German occupation for 56 years and only enabled to return to Danish rule by a plebiscite following World War I in which Denmark stayed neutral.

From the 1864 war on, a majority of the Danish electorate implicitly believed that pacifism and "international agreements" only could protect the country. Having emerged from the First World War as a beneficiary of territory that had been under German rule, the Danish government bent over backwards to placate German nationalism and the demand for revenge by giving the German minority every cultural right to organize and cultivate their language and traditions (just as it has done with the immigrant Muslims today).

This policy of not offending Germany was most dramatically illustrated by its situation on the eve of World War II. Alone among the Scandinavian nations, Denmark signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. It bent over backwards to provide full expression in every cultural and political issue of autonomy for its German minority. It kept its military strength at a minimum to avoid the specter of confrontation with Germany. During World War I during which Denmark maintained its neutrality, the number of Danish troops on the German border was almost triple what it was in April 1940 when the German forces launched a surprise invasion on April 9th, a day that like December 7th or September 11th stands out in the calendar of historical memory as a "Day of Infamy".

The Danish forces were given orders to surrender within four hours after the German troops had crossed the border. For the next three years, Danish politicians kept order by enforcing a policy of cooperation with the German occupying forces. King Christian X with the approval of the government made repeated radio broadcasts calling upon the population NOT to aid sabotage or interfere with the German occupying forces and war effort. Denmark signed the anti-Comintern Pact following the German invasion of the Soviet Union and in no way interfered with German recruitment of more than 5,000 Danish volunteers to serve in the "SS Danmark" Division sent to fight the Russians on the Eastern Front.

The government even lodge official protests against the United States and Great Britain for landings and the stationing of troops and military installations on the Danish possessions of Greenland and the Faeroe Islands as well as criticizing the actions of Danish captains and the crews of merchant ships that enlisted in the Allied cause instead of heeding the government's declaration to ships at sea to proceed to occupied Denmark or "neutral" Spanish or Italian ports.

The Danish minority in South Schleswig under German rule had observed the long columns of troops moving North and made the information available giving the Danish military advance warning of a few hours at least but no steps were taken to initiate necessary counter measures that would have delayed the invasion forces from making use of Danish airfields and harbor facilities in coordinating the simultaneous attack upon Norway which bravely resisted the invasion and caused the attacking forces severe casualties.

All these steps were taken by the government in the name of saving Denmark and Danish lives. Many Danes although shamed, felt that no other policy would have spared the country from devastation in the face of overwhelming German power, yet as the events of October 1943 proved, there were limits beyond which no ordinary Dane was willing to go when faced with the

attempt to deprive their fellow citizens – Danish Jews – of their lives and liberty.

Contrary to the still widely believed myth that the humanitarian action of ferrying almost the entire Jewish population of 6,000 Jews to Sweden had been stimulated by King Christian X's threat to wear the Yellow Star (never instituted in Denmark), it was the spontaneous decision of thousands of ordinary Danes that made the success of the operation possible. Many of them grasped at the chance to finally "do something" even if on a small scale to help compensate the much damaged image of the country as a "model German protectorate".

Nothing better illustrates this than the most popular Danish television drama "Matador" (the equivalent of our Monopoly game) that traces the fortunes of several families in the provincial town of Korsebæk located several hours rail or car journey from Copenhagen. Maude is married to Hans Christian Varnæs, the director of the local bank and is a model of an upper class Danish traditional housewife who is constantly concerned about looking her best and avoiding any unpleasantness. She often suffers from extreme emotional stress over the smallest inconvenience or problem in the management of the household or her children's minor escapades.

The bank's chief assistant is the affable Herr Stein, a Jew who, on occasion, visits the Varnæs home on business. When he is given the information that the Germans are about to deport the entire Jewish population of the country he is stranded and out of touch with developments in Copenhagen and arrives at the Varnaes home in desperation.

Only Maude is home but she unrepentantly seizes the opportunity to call upon others in her circle of relatives, friends, and her husband's employees to extend all possible help. Due to her quick presence of mind and initiative, a refuge and escape route is found for Hr. Stein.

This series in 24 hour long episodes has been shown and reshowed many times on Danish television and is the nostalgic favorite of many older viewers who lived through the war. No other television series has been so popular. It speaks to the viewers of the realities that the generation of the 1930s-1940s experienced and the unexpected strength that many of them found in times of adversity.

The Yellow Star myth (wholly without foundation in fact) stems from the novel (and film) "Exodus" and has even embarrassed the present Queen, Margrethe II, (the granddaughter of Christian X). She has even written in her autobiography that this story has caused her deep embarrassment. Its persistence is no doubt due to the difficulty of many people abroad in believing that such a "heroic" action stemmed from the determination of ordinary citizens, the same ones who had agreed that the government had done the wise and expedient thing by NOT resisting the German invasion of 1940.

The present case of the famous/infamous cartoons has much in common. Denmark has given its Muslim population the same safeguards and protection of other citizens. It has supported Muslim institutions and schools and instituted costly programs designed to ease their integration into Danish society by making allowances for Muslim customs such as dietary restrictions. A Palestinian-born Muslim (Naser Khader) has been elected to the Folketing (Danish Parliament) from the moderate-centrist det Radikale Venstre Party that has supported Danish policy in Iraq.

He is a moderate and like other Danes has been shocked and outraged by the provocation of several Muslim religious leaders (imams who have control of the state supported Islamic religious Council) who purposely defamed the country and spread false stories about the cartoons. The motivation for the cartoons was to parody the misuse by religious extremists of Islam to glorify radical extremists views, retard integration and encourage support for radical Islamist

policies in the Middle East, including adding their own fabricated extra and truly offensive cartoons.

What has entirely been missing from the coverage of Muslim reaction by the media is the decided split among Danish Muslims. Several hundred have contacted Khader to express their support of his brave stand and new organization of "Democratic Muslims" and believe that the imams have misused their power and that ordinary Muslims must support the democratic values of the host society in which they live. Also lacking in international coverage is the growing resistance of Danes who are not racist but have been stirred as in the heroic days of 1943 to stand up and be counted.

Some may have justifiably been motivated by fear but there is no doubt that not since the 1947 debate over the fate of the Danish-minded minority in South Schleswig, have so many Danes felt pride that they too, like Maude Varnaes, must take a stand. Danes have cancelled more than 100,000 vacation trips to Egypt and Turkey, the two most popular holiday sites in Muslim countries (where violent demonstrations and flag burning rioting in front of the Danish embassies occurred). This is clearly the case even though the ever ready Danish willingness to compromise has been present and both Prime Minister Fogh and the editors of Jyllands-Posten have apologized for any unintended offence.

The local imams of the Muslim Religious Community (Islamisk Trossamfund) in Denmark have attacked and defamed Nasser Khader who has received death threats. He has called on his supporters to defend the country and establish a rival Islamic community. It is indeed ironic that in a t.v. interview program last year in which 12 prominent Danes were asked to name their favorite Hans Christian Andersen story on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the great author's birth, Khader selected "The Emperor's New Clothes" and explained that he loves this story because it is still so accurate regarding the Middle East where all those around the

Emperor in government are too intimidated to offer realistic criticism. They know the Emperor is naked but instead flatter their ruler's vanity and illusions.

As in 1943, most Danes did not seek a confrontation with powerful forces unable to accept and coexistent with Danish tolerance and democratic values. Shock and disbelief followed the constant mob violence and hysterical attacks of hatred on Danish embassies and the repeated burning of Danish flags (Europe's oldest national flag). Expediency and the desire to avoid such a confrontation has led to support for apologies by the editor of the newspaper and even Danish Prime Minister Fogh but as the violence continues, there has been a growing realization that, like 1943, Danes cannot escape their proud heritage – even if against their initial hopes for avoiding confrontations. Like Andersen's story of the steadfast one-legged tin soldier in the fiery furnace, they must stand true to their values.