

DENMARK 1993



CHARLES GANNON © 2022



INTRODUCTION

Having read Karen Blixen's famous book *Out of Africa*, listened to some classical music composed by Niels Gade, Carl Nielsen and other composers, and having read a little about Denmark in general, I decided to make a two-week visit to this small nation of islands in July, 1993. However, I made absolutely no effort to learn any of the language before this journey, knowing that Danish is particularly difficult to pronounce and master, and that English is spoken by almost everybody in the country. All I did was to acquaint myself with a few of the letters, some of which are unfamiliar to us or are pronounced differently in Danish. They are:

Å, å: *aw*, as in 'awful'.

Æ, æ: when long, as in *ai* of 'air'; when short, like *e* in 'get'; before *r*, like *a* of 'hat'.

Ø, ø: as in the German word *Öster* or in the French word *peu*.

R, r: guttural, as in German or French.

Y, y: as in the German word *über* or in the French word *tu*.

Once again I am grateful to Andrew Robinson, my trusted proofreader.

1 – COPENHAGEN

Monday, 4 July 1993

It was still bright when the plane dropped down through the thick blanket of cloud that covered the Danish island of Sjælland (Zealand) as we approached the capital, København ('Merchant's Port') – better known as Copenhagen. We touched down at 9.15 p.m. and shortly afterwards I made my way to the arrivals hall in the fine modern airport. While waiting for my luggage, I changed some money into the local currency in double quick time; I discovered that there were about ten kroner to the Irish pound.

Having asked a couple of questions at the tourist information office, I found my way to the number 32 bus stop. After a short while a bus appeared and I paid a little over 14 kroner for a leisurely journey to the city centre. Although the suburbs in general looked clean and impressive, I did see some graffiti daubed on walls here and there. The route was circuitous and it took about forty minutes for the bus to arrive at its destination, the Rådhuspladsen (Town Hall Square). As it approached the stop, a number 2 bus pulled up behind. I jumped out, transferred to it and continued my journey to the capital's youth hostel, where I planned to stay the night.

When we approached it, the driver kindly told me when to get off the bus, and a couple of French lads brought me to the large and impressive building. I had to wait a while until the reception desk was manned, for the staff were busy attending to their accounts. To fill in the time, I wrote my diary and tried to telephone home, though with no success. At last I booked in, paid 60 kroner for the night and found my way to a sparse dormitory containing four beds. When I had finished writing my diary entry, I retired to bed shortly before midnight.

Monday, 5 July

Although I had been very tired when I had gone to bed the previous evening, I had slept badly. At first a young boy in the dormitory began to snore; later a fellow entered noisily, climbed up to the bunk bed above me and, when asleep, snored loudly. I eventually managed to doze off to the sound of the dawn chorus, then another fellow barged in and, like the other two, began to snore.

I soon became fed up with the cacophony and rose before seven o'clock. I washed, shaved and, half an hour later, joined a long queue for breakfast. As I quickly discovered, this was the best thing about the hostel: for just 35 kroner I could help myself to as much food as I wanted. Noticing how much the other people piled on to their trays, I took orange juice, muesli, yogurt, coffee, bread, a slice of crisp bread, and a small warm roll. The Danes certainly knew how to make good bread! On the bread I put thin slices of cheese, salami or jam.

Afterwards, when ready, I went to the reception desk and booked for another night – perhaps unwisely. I also purchased a Copenhagen Card, which entitled me to

three days' unlimited travel on buses and trains, as well as free admittance to museums, etc., for just 250 kroner.

I then set off and walked to the bus stop. Although it was a fresh, sunny morning, though a little windy and cool, I felt that it would be a good day for sightseeing and taking photographs. I caught the number 2 bus and travelled back to Rådhuspladsen, where I had a brief look at the Town Hall. Having studied my map and got my bearings, I turned up Frederiksberggade (Frederiksberg Street), one of the pleasant old-world pedestrianized streets, and made my way to Nytorv (New Square), which I discovered was very elegant. I was surprised to see so few people in such a touristy part of the city; it was uncannily quiet and relaxed.

From here I found my way to the 'Use-It' office, where I asked about a cheap single room and managed to book a private room in a house for the following night for just 100 kroner. I also made some enquiries about train connections and helped myself to some free literature about the city.



Østergade (East Street), on the Strøget route, Copenhagen

I then returned to Nytorv and followed the Strøget route: several attractive streets lined with old houses, though there were many reminders that one was in the twentieth century such as shops and cafés. The various streets were also pedestrianized and quite touristy. However, it did feel good to be in the old part of the city already. Unfortunately, most of the places that I had hoped to visit were closed, such as two important churches: the Helligånds Kirke and Skt Nikolaj Kirke.



Kongens Nytorv

I finally reached the large and impressive Kongens Nytorv (King's New Square), where I admired the equestrian statue of its creator, King Christian V, and the Royal Theatre, which was closed. The Charlottenborg Palace next door, a rather ugly building completed in 1683, also looked as if it was closed to the public; I just wandered up a staircase to have a brief look around.



Nyhavn

From here I walked to Nyhavn (New Harbour): a pretty canal leading to the sea that was full of old-fashioned boats and yachts. Flanked by fine old buildings, it was very pretty and photogenic. Judging by the people, the cafés and the advertised boat trips, the area looked extremely touristy. At the inlet of the canal I sat down and relaxed, photographed the pleasure boats and inhaled the fresh sea air. By now I felt a little tired; it had passed midday and I was beginning to think that I should find some lunch.



Amaliegade

I pushed on, however, turned up the Skt. Annæ Plads (Saint Anna Square) and walked along the imposing Amalienborg Palace, where I just missed the changing of the guard. The architecture here was on the grand

scale. I walked over to the nearby Frederikskirke and, as the church was actually open, I went inside. Although not very large, the interior was quite magnificent. I



The Frederikskirke and Kastellet

rested here for a short time, admiring the fine architecture, then left. I held the door open for a couple of English girls whom I kept bumping into for the rest of the afternoon. I met them again at an elaborate fountain in the park surrounding the Kastellet, a large fortress built by King Christian IV, and photographed them using their camera. Shortly afterwards the three of us found ourselves gazing at the famous Little Mermaid statue, which was not far away. It was nice to see it, but it was something of an anti-climax. Unsurprisingly it was being photographed by a large group of tourists, many of whom were Americans. I relaxed here for a while, then walked through the Kastellet complex, which proved to be quite attractive. The buildings here were quite unusual.



The Little Mermaid

When I approached the Skt Pauls Kirke nearby, I passed some rows of orange-coloured terraced houses of interesting design. Near here I found an empty but very

clean restaurant that offered pizzas for just 20 kroner, so I stopped and lunched on one, together with a drink. I emerged from the restaurant later feeling better.



Rosenborg Slot, exterior and interior

Turning back in the opposite direction, I now made my way to the Rosenborg Slot (Castle) and Kongens Have (King's Garden). The formal gardens were quite impressive and the palace looked quite unusual. As it was open, I produced my card and entered free of charge. It was quite an interesting place with a fine collection of period furniture, along with some clocks, many mediocre paintings, and several magnificent ceilings. The palace was full of old-world character. The large upper room was the most impressive one of all – no doubt it was a throne room. I noticed that the floor shook noticeably when one walked on it.



View of Copenhagen from the Rundetårn

When the palace closed at four o'clock, I left and relaxed in the garden. When it became too cool, I set off again. I now worked my way back to the narrow streets of the old town. I stopped at the Trinitatis Kirke and, curious to see inside, entered it.

From here I had access to the Rundetårn (Round Tower). I climbed a spiral ramp, stopping briefly to see the main body of the church through a glass door. As the church was being repaired, this was all that I was able to see of it. I finally reached the top of the tower, where there was an impressive view looking down over the city. However, the vista was not as impressive as that of Prague, for there were too many modern buildings to be seen. On the way down, I stopped to buy postcards, stamps, and had a look at an exhibition of African works of art.

Back out in the street I found a fellow on stilts entertaining an amused crowd of onlookers. He had a good sense of humour and made fun of the people passing by.

Following the recommendations of my new literature from Use-It, I now found my way to a nearby restaurant that specialized in Danish food. The meal that I ordered turned out to be quite disappointing: two huge hunks of roast pork, a tiny slice of bread and a small dish of red cabbage: very unbalanced. I asked for a small bottle of mineral water to go with it. As the meal cost 59 kroner, I was annoyed to think that I could have had a proper dinner in the hostel for 55 kroner.

I left after I had written three postcards in the restaurant. In Rådhuspladsen I went into a fast food restaurant and got myself a slice of apple pie and a cup of herbal tea. When finished, I posted my cards and caught the bus back to the hostel. I had a shower of sorts in one of the better showers upstairs, and then sat in the lobby, writing my diary. A young Finnish lady sat beside me and started chatting; she spoke English perfectly with a pronounced London accent. She was a teacher and had a large group of young people with her; they all played wind instruments and had been taking part in a competition in the Netherlands. They had arrived here late and were now waiting for pizzas to arrive.

I talked to the lady for a while, returned to my writing, then retired to bed at about midnight, tired.



Tuesday, 6 July

As I was so exhausted after the previous day's sightseeing, I slept solidly throughout the night, despite all the comings and goings. I took my time about getting up and was down for breakfast soon after eight o'clock. Once again, I ate as much as I could and got good value for my money.

Before leaving, I checked out and left my rucksack in a locker down in the basement. When I went outside, the sunshine I had seen earlier had gone, for by now it had turned cloudy. I walked down the road a little, then hopped on a number 2 bus when one arrived. After a short journey I got off at the Gothåbsvej S-train station. This would be my first experience in travelling on the trains here. I showed my card to a man in the ticket office and walked down to a platform marked Hillerød. A train pulled in immediately and I boarded it. Although it looked a little old, it was clean and comfortable inside. It travelled at an unhurried pace, stopping at all the stations. After a while the suburbs of Copenhagen petered out and countryside began to appear; it was pleasant but unremarkable. The train finally reached the small town of Hillerød at about ten o'clock.

Discovering that the bus station was nearby, I hopped on to a bus with some other young people and travelled towards Frederiksborg Castle, the main attraction here. As the bus skirted the town, we had to walk back towards the centre to get to our destination. It was easy to find the seventeenth-century Renaissance castle, founded by King Christian IV, because of its high towers. The exterior now looked rather grim under a grey sky.



Frederiksborg Slot (Castle) and its chapel, Hillerød

I stopped at the impressive gate, with the date 1609 displayed above it, and took some photographs. I then crossed the courtyard and made for the entrance, where I showed my Copenhagen card and bought a printed guide in English for 25 kroner. I quickly discovered that the interior of the castle was far more impressive than the outside. The chapel, which had escaped a major fire in 1859, and which I saw almost immediately, was truly magnificent; it was certainly the *pièce de résistance* of the entire building. Of chief interest to me was the little Compenius organ in the gallery above the altar. Built in 1610 by a famous organ builder named Esias Compenius of Brunswick, it still had its original mechanism, including its wooden pipes and hand-operated bellows. I had been familiar with the sound of this instrument since my mid teens, when a friend of my father had given me a recording of seventeenth-century music played on it. Unfortunately I could not hear it now; all I could do was admire the handsome little instrument. I took some photographs of it and the chapel, then went to see the rest of the rooms. A few of them were original, dating from before the fire of 1859, but the rest were relatively plain and given over to collections of furniture and countless paintings, most of which depicted members of the nobility. At first these rooms were quite interesting, but gradually my interest began to wane as there was so much to see. However, I did take note of some of the clocks; two longcase or 'grandfather' clocks made in London were particularly handsome.



The Compenius organ and the great hall above the chapel, Frederiksborg Slot

The great hall above the chapel was huge and opulent, but it was a reconstruction of the original one. When examined carefully, some of the details did not look quite right. From the windows could be seen the lake and gardens at the back of the castle. When I eventually finished my visit, I looked at these briefly and, as it was cold and windy outside, I left. I then walked to the pedestrianized town centre, which was quite pleasant, and stopped for a simple and relatively inexpensive lunch of tea and sandwiches in a clean and tidy restaurant. Across the road was an Irish pub, with a collection of traditional artefacts in the window. The interior was dark and a large advertisement for Guinness was prominently displayed.

From here I made my way back to the station and waited for the next train to Helsingør, known in the English-speaking world as Elsinore and made famous by

Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. I now bought a banana and sat indoors as it was raining. After a short delay, a train pulled into the station and I boarded it. This was not one of the small S-trains, but a plush conventional one. During the unremarkable journey northwards I dozed off and woke up when we arrived at Helsingør. I followed the yellow signs to the buses and hopped on one, which set off immediately. I soon saw Elsinore Castle (now called Kronborg Slot) in the distance and got off one stop later. I walked to the entrance, moving quickly as it was quite chilly and threatening to rain. Like Hillerød, this castle's exterior looked rather grim; indeed, it was quite ugly.



Kronborg Castle, Helsingør; the chapel and the King's chamber

As my card did not grant me free admission here, I was obliged to pay 20 kroner to see the chapel, the 'casements', and the royal chambers. I went to the chapel first; it was simple though quite beautiful. Fortunately the place was not crowded, which I fully expected it to be. The décor here was quite magnificent and not overdone. I next headed for the royal chambers, which I admired for their simplicity and Dutch influence. The castle lacked the heaviness that I had encountered at Hillerød, probably because it dated from a later period; the walls were all painted

white and the rooms were uncluttered. As I had not expected to like this place, I was agreeably surprised. The ballroom or great hall was huge; I quite believed its claim to being the largest room of its type in northern Europe.

I took my time about viewing these fine rooms as I could see that it was raining outside. When I finally emerged, it was bucketing down. I made a quick dash for the so-called 'casements' (dungeons), where I discovered that I would have to wait until 4.30 p.m. for a guided tour. As I didn't really care if I saw this part of the castle or not, I felt like leaving, though it was too wet outside. Although I had a raincoat, I was wearing sandals. In the end I waited and joined the guided tour. It was not as bad as I thought it would be; a girl gave a short introductory speech in Danish and English, which was humorous and made the Danes laugh, then told us which way to go. The place was quite dark and damp, and was lit solely by oil lamps. It was not long afterwards when we emerged to some welcome sunlight.

I now hurried through the picturesque medieval town centre on my way back to the train station. I managed to see the place before the rain started again, but had to wait some time in the station for a train back to Copenhagen. As the train left at 5.44 p.m., I realized that I would be unable to return to the hostel for a meal before 6.30. Instead, I travelled all the way to the Copenhagen central station and had a look at the restaurants there. After a certain amount of dithering, I finally went into the best one and joined a long queue for the fish buffet: basically a choice of fish and bread that made up the famous *smørrebrød*. I also piled on some salad. By now I was ravenously hungry; although I took a large helping, I still felt that I could eat something else and so chose one of the very rich desserts. The bill came to over 100 kroner, which I thought was rather expensive. At least I had tried some typical Danish food, though in truth I had found it rather unsatisfactory. I realized that I could have got a cheaper and more filling meal in another restaurant nearby.

I left and walked to Rådhuspladsen, where I caught the number 2 bus to the youth hostel. There I collected my rucksack and telephoned the lady whose apartment I would stay in tonight. By now it was nine o'clock – the time that I had promised to be there. I walked back to the bus stop (I was tired by now and wished that I could stay put!) and, after a short wait, caught the number 2 bus once again. This time I went farther and travelled across the Inderhavnen, or inlet from the sea, and approached the Christiania district of the city. I got off at Prinsessegade and found the apartment without too much difficulty. The area was seedy and the building was grim, but the inside of the apartment was smart, clean and very quiet. It was, in short, idyllic. The young lady was pleasant; I paid her on the spot and booked for two nights. My little room was very neat and attractive. The bathroom was very narrow, but there was a shower, which I used immediately.

Refreshed, I did a little repacking, wrote some of my diary and went to bed at about 11.30. I soon fell into a deep sleep.