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Escape to Trivial Tourism: a Student's Experiences at the Danish Folk High School in Germany

1. Introduction

In the European arena there are many different forms of adult education. Folk high schools (called “folkehøjskoler” in Danish) are one of them. They are aimed at young adults preparing for university. Nevertheless they are open to any adult regardless of their age or nationality. Thus, a reflection upon folk high schools' proposals can be placed within the growing field of “gap year” activities, as well as within the field of intercultural education.

I will present and analyze a part of the 3 month experience I had as a student of the only Danish folk high school to be found in Germany. This visit was possible thanks to the Danish Foundation Cirius which covers the costs of education for students coming from the new EU member states. Choosing this location I expected the school to be more international than other domestic ones. I wanted to know how cultural problems might interfere with all of the school's activities and to discover for myself what the impact of foreign students and the 'place' itself would have upon the curriculum.

Studying in a school where teachers do not have any standardized knowledge to transfer, where the weekly-settled programs can be negotiable as well as rules of coexistence makes students ponder as well as rethink their previous educational experience. The problems of what the folk high school is for, and what it means for students to be there were alive in everyday discussions in the school and were crucial for me personally. Reflection upon these issues accompanied my stay in Jaruplund and was an inspiration for further written inquiries and a literature search after my return.

2. Purpose

The aim of this paper is a pedagogical reflection upon the activities and goals of the folk high school nowadays. This reflection is based upon the reality offered to students.

Rationale

It is not the personal value nor impact upon students' lives (which was significant to me and my interlocutors) that will be considered here, but the answer to the question of why the folk high school works as it does. It is worth reiterating that studying at the Jaruplund school had a vast impact on students' attitudes towards life and their future plans. Studying there was important and students got the chance to develop an intrinsic motivation for further learning, and I must state that it is not my intention to depreciate neither the methods nor school practice at any point in this paper.

Every semester different people come to the school. The group I was part of was unique but the range of problems and phenomena to deal with them will be the features out of which the picture of the contemporary condition of this kind of education will be drawn. Though only a single unique winter course in this particular school will be analyzed, the meaning of things which people agreed or disagreed upon can be shared in broader contexts.

3. Method

In this paper a detailed account of the kind of key events that transpired during the stay at the school will be given. Subsequently, the source of the problems, meanings and if possible the historical background of its beginnings will be appraised. The collection of these discoveries will be the basis upon which the history of the current attitude to pedagogy in the folk high school will be reconstructed. Even though the selection of key events will be as objective as possible (mostly taken from chronicles made by students), it is obvious that presented together they will change into a narrative story – this means a more subjective view.

4. Presentation of the school

The first folk high school was established in Denmark in 1844¹. Jaruplund højskole was founded in 1950 and is situated by a small lake. Jaruplund is the Danish version of the village's name which on maps is called Jarplund. It lies close to Flensburg (Flensborg in Danish) in the Schleswig-Holstein region (Sydslesvig in Danish). There are more than 85 folk high schools in Denmark but the Jaruplund højskole is the only one found in Germany.

Some of the schools offer specialized programs focused upon sport, art, languages or trips, and which cause differences in prices, but most of them combine several different courses within their program. “Some Folk High Schools focus upon creative activity, some focus upon sports,

¹ Folk High School, Wikipedia, Retrieved 13.12.2006 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_high_school#History

academicism or communication, while others cover everything.”² The program in Jaruplund consists of modules among which one can find art, music, philosophy, outdoor activities, the Danish language, culture, archeology and regional trips etc. Furthermore, in the school building one can find among other facilities a cinema, a computer lab, a sauna, as well as a gymnastics hall.

In January 2005 21 students came to the school. Only 2 of them were from Denmark, 4 from Lithuania and 15(!) from Poland. The youngest student was 17 but the oldest was over 60. Among the students there were people who spoke no foreign language at all, while a few spoke Danish or German.

5. Examples

The following samples from a short history of Jaruplund school life gives insight into the school's curriculum as well as its approach to problems. These examples also help to understand how 'Danishness' is constructed and how its validity is often shown.

5.1 The Nightingale Musical

The main event during the first month of staying in Jaruplund was “The Nightingale Musical”. In the Winter Course's Chronicle it was described as follows:

*“The old man H.C. Andersen had his 200th birthday this year. It was decided, that we were to make a musical based on one of his fairy tales – The Nightingale. [...] The biggest problem was singing – our musical talents were somewhat smaller than the teachers' ambitions. [...] We showed The Nightingale three times: first for the children from the Jaruplund kindergarten, then (which was the most stressful) for højskolen Østersøen which visited us especially to see the show, and at the end we visited a secondary school in Helved.”*³

A fact that is not mentioned above is that all the songs were in Danish.

This project exposed that, even though students finally succeeded in singing in Danish, English was established as the basis of communication in the school. Previously only Danish and German were used. Thus an English course appeared as an emergency and it was led successfully by the trainee who fortunately could also speak some Polish. This was of great help. Even though the team of

² What is the Danish Folk High School Course?, retrieved 13.12.2006 from <http://www.folkehojskoler.dk/english.aspx>

³ “The winter course chronicle” 2005, unpublished

teachers consisted of 5 people, this number could temporarily increase when new needs appeared. Learning Danish for example was so hard that a Polish immigrant was invited to lead the course. Besides this, the teachers evaluated the students' skills and gave up conducting some advance classes in music and decided to start some very basic ones.

It seemed that the aim of implementing the Danish language and culture collapsed at the very beginning of the course. The teachers' team was forced to establish bridges e.g. a common language between their program and the almost homogeneous group of students. Therefore, a question about the reason for inviting that many people from one country arose. Surprisingly, Danish folk high schools, according to teachers I talked to, are not popular among young Danes. If somebody decides to attend any of them, they usually choose the "expensive ones", because they offer long-distance and long-duration travel. Moreover, the prices of trips offered by schools are much lower than the ones that can be found in tourist agencies. Scholarships from Cirisus for international students just cover the basic costs of studying. More traditional schools had to open themselves up to sponsored foreigners in order to survive. Before the Winter Course of 2005 the Jaruplund højskole received applications mainly from Poland. Therefore there was no possibility to make the group of students more diverse.

5.2 Danish morning songs

Classes started after breakfast. The teacher responsible for each day's activities rang the bell to gather everybody into the main room. While waiting for latecomers, students were singing a few songs. All songs were all from a special songbook called "Den Blaa Sangbog". Students followed the teacher in regards to pronunciation and the meaning of the text was unveiled after singing or by a short introduction.

The songs were mostly old and were about peasants, God, being together with other Danes etc. Danes were singing these songs with commitment regardless of their age or status (student, teacher or guest) in the school.

With time it was explained to the students that the songs collected in songbooks historically played an important role when the Danes were resisting Germanization. One teacher, when asked about these old-fashioned songs, said that the morning songs are the only things that had survived from Grundtvig's ideas. It seems to be an exaggeration, because the core of the idea of the folk highschoools was not to have any exams. Grundtvig maintained that it had to either resign from

exams, or from the idea of folk high schools.⁴ Nevertheless, these schools serve different people nowadays. Danes are not peasants any longer, they do not need emancipation to have access to culture and democracy. Some of them are farmers but it is more a question of choice rather than a burden. Hence, young Danes do not need neither an assimilation nor emancipation program in the sense of Grundtvig's project.

Singing old Danish songs survived probably because on the one hand this part of the assimilation (to Danish culture) is directed towards international students nowadays. On the other hand, retired Danes, who attend short courses more frequently than before, are interested in experiencing some sort of community in this way.

5.3 The poster

In front of the main staircase in the school students are faced with an old poster protected by a glass panel. The only understandable part of it was the name of the city Flensburg written in the Danish way. The main sentence was “I 1000 år var du Danmarks by. Du barn af Danmark, bliv dansk påny”. After some time students could translate this sentence and discover a meaning that may be seen as nationalistic: “For a 1000 years you were a Danish city. You, Denmark's child become Danish again.”

It was a kind of exhibit, a remembrance from the campaign before the plebiscites about the national status of the region dating back to 1920. This fossil, shown without any comment within the environment of the school, can be recognized as a symbol which places this folk high school within the tradition of democratic struggle between nations. The school stands on one side of the expired conflict. This poster also shows that some Danes think that there is nothing strange in the fact that they built the school in Germany. Going beyond the problem of international law, they have the right to place their school near Flensburg, because this is their land.

5.4 Excursions

On the school's Internet site one can read:

“Regional workshops

Discovering the borderland between Germany and Denmark. During weekly excursions we try to have a closer look at the culture and art of the region. Design in Kolding - German Expressionism at the Nolde Museum – Gothic and Baroque art at the Gottorp castle – the Viking Age in Hedeby. Three cultures – German, Danish and Frisian - meet each other in the region. Differences between

⁴ „Grundtvig”, Bron-Wojciechowska, A., PW Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1986, p.76

the German and Danish models of society are studied during visits to social institutions, schools and kindergartens. The regional workshop is a cultural-political study trip to Sønderjylland and Slesvig-Holsten.”⁵

There were many trips around the region. There were weeks when students traveled by school bus almost every day to visit places, institutions, interesting people etc. Museum staff in the region were usually bilingual, as well as people in other places. As students were exposed almost only to the Danish language and they traveled by bus without looking at maps, they were often confused as to which side of the border they were on.

As a result students on the one hand could sometimes be a little bit confused but on the other they could experience the vivid life of the Danish minority in Germany. It can be understood as a self-sustaining relationship. Perhaps, the minority would not be as animated if the students were not to play the role of a mirror. Students experience the Danish culture probably more intensively than the inhabitants of the region. For example, the taxi drivers from Flensburg do not even know where the Danish folk high school is, though it was not very far from the center.

5.5 Short courses

As it has already been mentioned above, young Danes are not very interested in spending time in folk high schools in general, unless schools offer attractions at competitive prices. However, Danish society is getting older and there are plenty of retired people who want to stay active. Folk high schools offer short-time courses for them. The teachers from Jaruplund told students that the short courses that are focused on this age group are the future of folk high schools. Therefore, usually during weekends, the school deals with the coexistence of two different groups of people in its building. Even though this offers a chance to learn something from each other, this process pivots around small conflicts, mostly because both groups try to live normally. Problems include noise in the evenings and in the mornings, more diverse food when guests visit, differences in desserts etc. Students do not feel equal, because apart from conflicts they have to deal with their own assumption that it is worse to have all costs covered by the government rather than pay themselves.

The problem “Who does the school belong to?” in the micro-scale could be understood as a communication problem. That means that the problem is, if not solvable, at least temporary, because nobody except the teachers will stay there for years. However, teachers have declared (even if it was just a joke) that they know what the future of the folk high school is. Young, demanding and

⁵ <http://www.jaruplund-hoejskole.de/show.php?id=61> 09.2006, Translated from Danish by Małgorzata Zielińska

choosy students, even if international, are in decline. The schools are more widely open for people deeply interested in the classes, because their money will decide whether the schools survive.

5.6 The trip to Africa

The winter course was supposed to finish with a one-week excursion. In the report written by a Danish student and approved by others before being sent off, we can find the following description:

“The program for 2005 included a visit to Berlin and Hamburg. We never went. Not even Copenhagen was on the list of cities to be visited?! A Danish school! Someone probably has a clever answer as to why. I don't really know why the trip to Berlin was even up for discussion – but it was! We decided one thing one day (not Berlin but Copenhagen and the south of Sweden), and the next day the school, in spite of a very clear wish from the pupils, decided to offer us a trip to Tunisia instead.”⁶

As a result, the Danish students objected to taking part in the trip. During the week before the trip to Tunisia two specialists in Islamic and Arabic dances were invited to give us an insight into the Muslim culture. Students were divided into groups and chose places to visit in Tunisia and prepared information about them.

The problem with choosing a place to visit and its result can be considered and explained within the wider context of previous experiences and decisions taken throughout the course. Danish folk high schools from the perspective of Polish students can be seen as a place where everything is negotiable. Anything can be taken from the agenda and changed. It would be hard to invalidate that it was not true. However, the scale of changes e.g. choosing English as a common language, depended mostly on a close, almost homogeneous group of students. As a result it was signaled that the planned trip to Berlin was not an attraction, because Berlin lies too close... to Poland. Copenhagen was unknown to the Poles, but too expensive to spend a whole week there. Besides, the teachers were probably tired of trying to present 'Danishness'. The need for a happy and not too expensive end to the course was broadly but not completely shared.

The trip integrated the participants well. Being between the hotel, markets and ruins of the Roman Empire without knowing the language, visitors were generally isolated from the locals. Trying to find out about places worth seeing in Tunisia, surprisingly all groups chose mostly Roman ruins.

⁶ Jaruplund Højskole, 2005 by student T. Iversen (Denmark) Unpublished report

Then, trying to escape from the ruins, everybody went shopping to 'medinas'⁷. The exposure to the aggressive selling customs in 'medinas' ensured the maintained belief in huge differences between people. It was impossible to become neutral or anonymous in such an environment. Thus, the new sense of 'togetherness' constructed out of the visible difference between We (the Europeans) and Them (the Arabs). Finally, it appeared that only in the hotel restaurant, on the superficial grounds of folk dancing, were the students competent enough to accept⁸ the cultural differences.

6. Interpretation

The history of the course includes the whole history of the idea of folk high schools. On the other hand, it can be understood as a drift towards attractions. The day-to-day inter-cultural education (socialization and cultural exchanges between students) in Jaruplund, which sprang from the assimilation project of Danish folk high schools (in general), was temporarily replaced by the impression of a kind of limited multiculturalism: We, equal Europeans, can live together in peace with all our differences (multiculturalism), because these differences are trivial compared to the ones between us and non-Europeans (limitation). It is not even important if multiculturalism is understood as a politically organised and subsidized order or just as a (future) condition of societies nowadays⁹, because – for those who choose certain schools – educational tourism offers a foretaste of the 'melting pot', being a narrower version of it. The notion that schools should prepare people for their future life in a multicultural society has been reached, because the curriculum was drastically reduced, becoming entertainment. Simultaneously, other cultures were reduced to trivial folklore.

7. Conclusions

Danish folk high schools – influenced by changes in Danish society and by the neo-liberal evaluative approach to educational institutions – are changing. They have started to offer attractions to clients with education becoming a side-line to the clients' entertainment. Similar changes (e.g. university fees, differences in curriculum depend upon the wealth of students, the need of quasi-market competition with profit-oriented organizations) are observed in many countries. It appears that these processes can influence a schools' approach to cultural education even in the unique realms of adult education which folk high schools still seem to be.

⁷ Medina is the Arabic name for the old part of the city where many small shops are placed

⁸ Compare with acceptance as the first stage on the ethno-relativist approach in the Milton J. Bennett developmental model of intercultural sensitivity in Bennett, M. J. and Deane, B. R. (1994). A model for personal change: Developing intercultural sensitivity. In E. Cross et. al. (Eds.) *The promise of diversity*. Irvin, New York, 1994.

⁹ The origins of the term multiculturalism are explained in "Wielka szansa czy iluzja: wielokulturowość w dobie ponowoczesności" Możejko, E. [in:] "Dylematy wielokulturowości" red. Kalaga W., Universitas, Kraków 2004

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