

Bildung and folk-bildung the Nordic way

By Lene Rachel Andersen

This is a true story about bildung and how it travelled to Denmark; Germans may know the German half of it, but then there is the Danish part...

Once upon a time in Weimar, there was a 19-year-old duchess whose young husband died. Among his last deeds, he bequeathed the duchy Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach to her until the older of their two sons reached the age of majority. Her name was Anna Amalia, she was a composer, an artist, and a patron of the arts, and she brought up the boys providing them with the best mentors she could find. And she had a dream: to make Weimar and the university town Jena a hotspot of philosophy, science, and the arts.

When the older son took over the duchy in 1775, they had hunted a remarkable 26-year-old for the young duke's cabinet, his name was Johann Wolfgang Goethe. 14 years later, by the time of the French Revolution, Jena had become the home of Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and several other prominent intellectuals.

As the Frenchmen stormed the Bastille yelling "Where is Pelosi?!!!" – no, wait, that was much later somewhere else, sorry about that – As the Frenchmen stormed the Bastille, the bourgeoisie across Europe—among them, many of those intellectual men in Jena—were ecstatic: Finally! A tyrant fell! Political freedom at last!

Then came the bloodbath, and people were appalled! Why could the Frenchmen not handle political freedom? Among the people who wondered was Friedrich Schiller...

Meanwhile, in Denmark, there was a young crown prince regent named Frederik who put an end to serfdom and became hugely popular among the peasants. Young Prince Frederik saw that industrialization was about to change even his own sleepy little country, and he realized that the country needed a modern workforce who could read, write, do arithmetic, and be good Christians. So, he established a school commission in 1789, their task: to come up with a plan for the education of all Danish children.

In 1791, rumor spread among Schiller's fans in Copenhagen that Schiller had died. It turned out to be fake news, but Schiller was seriously ill. Among his biggest fans in Denmark were Crown Prince Frederik's sister, Louise Augusta, her husband Frederick Christian II, Duke of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg, and minister of finance, Ernst Schimmelmann (who was on the school commission). Schimmelmann also happened to be the richest man in Denmark, and when he learned that Schiller was still alive, he sent Schiller a handsome sum of money to pay for medical treatment and to support him for three years.

Out of this came a correspondence between Schiller and Frederick Christian; letters that were shared and read by Louise Augusta and Schimmelmann and throughout the rest of this absolute top of Danish society. Unfortunately, the royal castle burned in 1794 and with it the original letters, but Schiller rewrote them and they are today known as *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*.

In the letters, Schiller explored why the French could not handle political freedom. His answer was that there are three kinds of people, only one of whom can handle political freedom:

- **The physical, emotional person**, who is in the throes of his emotions and cannot transcend his emotions.
 - To transcend our emotions, we need calming beauty, aesthetics that can align our emotions with the norms of society; we can then transform and become:
- **The person of reason**, who has aligned himself with the moral norms of society and has made the norms his own; this person cannot transcend those norms and expectations.
 - To transcend the norms, we need invigorating beauty, aesthetics that can shake us up and wake us up, and make us feel our emotions again, which allows us to transcend the expectations of others and become:
- **The free, moral person**, who can feel both his own emotions and what is right and wrong according to morality; because this person has transcended his own emotions and the expectations of others, he can now think for himself and is therefore free.

This developmental process is *bildung*, the result is *bildung*, and, according to Schiller, only the free, moral person can handle political freedom, because he himself is free.

As an absolute monarch like Frederik with a working school commission, reading Schiller, one would probably conclude two things: DO NOT let the uneducated without *bildung* get near the political power, and educate the entire people so that they have *bildung* enough to be loyal citizens of reason.

Due to the Napoleonic wars, Denmark went bankrupt in 1813 and the school commission did not deliver their plan for the Danish school system until 1814. In the plan was 7 years of mandatory education for all children. After the bankruptcy, Frederik has been ascribed the following quote: "We are poor now, must we also be stupid?" He never said that, but it captures the spirit of what was going on in Denmark in the beginning of the 1800s.

In 1802, a young Dane who had studied in Jena, Henrik Steffens, returned to Copenhagen and in a series of lectures introduced Romantic Nationalism to the Copenhagen bourgeoisie. Enlightened as they were, they were also spiritually starved, and Steffens' words about Geist in nature, Geist in culture, and a Geist in a people woke them up. Geist and Bildung became the new black.

In the audience was Steffen's 19-year-old cousin, Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, a student of theology. He soon became a pastor, and started reading all the books by Herder, Schiller, Fichte, von Humboldt, Hegel etc. he could get his hands on. Over the next decades, he realized that not just the bourgeoisie needed *bildung*; the peasants who were the true carriers of the Danish spirit needed *bildung* to become free, moral people too. Grundtvig therefore conceived of folk-*bildung* (*folkeoplysning*) and the Volkshochschule (*folkehøjskole*), a place where the 18-25-year-old young farmers could connect with their cultural heritage and learn how to take responsibility as citizens.

In 1844, the first such Volkshochschule opened in Schleswig, which was, at the time, together with Holstein, the personal property of the Danish king. The explicit purpose of the school was to promote Danish Geist among the ethnic Danish rural youth. Schleswig-Holstein was the most industrialized and wealthiest area under the Danish Crown, and many Danes feared that the Danish Schleswig-Holsteiners would pursue material wealth over Danish Geist and let the two duchies join the German Confederation. To make a long story short, the status of Schleswig-Holstein led to a war in 1848-51, and one in 1864 with Bismarck on the southern side. That cost Denmark one third of the landmass, and ethnic Danes came under German rule; to Danes everywhere, it was a devastating loss.

The irony here is that as much as the Danes feared and loathed their southern neighbor, the one thing that allowed Denmark to thrive even after this existential crisis was quintessentially German: *bildung*. We just tweaked it a bit and turned it into folk-*bildung*.

Particularly one Danish teacher figured out how to get the young farmhands interested in education: he told them stories. And once he had their attention, he let them ask questions. When they had asked a question, they were actually interested in the answer, and so he expanded their knowledge about Denmark, Europe, history, science, and much more. He also asked them questions. For the 1850s, letting young farmhands ask questions and asking them about their opinion was radical. And it became hugely popular.

In 1871, Bismarck more or less shut down the German workers' *bildung* / education associations; left was only the classes that would upgrade people's work skills and harmless cultural lectures after which questions were strictly forbidden!

Bismarck did so based on the rationale that if the workers know too much, they would cause a revolution. Not least thanks to Grundtvig, the Danish rationale was always the opposite: if the farmers do not know enough, they will cause a revolution.

The Danish concept of the folk high schools / *Volkshochschulen* was copied in Norway in 1864, in Sweden in 1868, and in Finland in 1889, and it is a historic fact that none of the Scandinavian countries has ever had a violent revolution. Instead, the farmers created cooperatives and the workers and employers created the Nordic Model.

Thank you, Anna Amalia—and take that, Bismarck!