THE PERCEPTION OF OTHERNESS AND THE VIEW OF DANISH SOCIETY THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ROMANIAN TRAVELLER

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Abstract:

Danish culture is famous for its open-mindedness and homogeneity. This accounts for the global interest in finding out which are the pillars underpinning it; consequently, many countries try to emulate their high living standard. In addition to this, the Danes are categorized, almost every year, with an enviable consistency, as the happiest people on the planet, which raises questions about how they manage to accomplish this. In this travel diary, I will try to capture all these elements and other secrets of the Danes. I invite you to enjoy my impressions from the Danish space.

Keywords:

Hygge, style, culture, trust, happiness.

From the perspective of the current research on cultural identity, the simple, common notes of a traveller when visiting a foreign country become a valuable asset. It is well-known how important travel notes were in shaping the history of ancient ages. Nowadays not only history, but also anthropology, psychology and sociology contribute to a better understanding of a community and of a nation, all united under a new science, called intercultural studies. Intercultural studies capitalize the results from all sciences previously listed. In addition, it takes into consideration the information extracted from the systematic research of language, literature, art and people. Gradually, a profile identity of a nation emerges.

In this context, modern researchers do not expect travel notes to age. Travel impressions are harnessed in a spontaneous manner, without premeditation, because this is what constitutes the concept, called "*the perception of otherness*".

Identity construction is based upon a triple perspective:

a) What we think about us (Introspection);

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b) What others think of us ("The perception of otherness")
c) What we think about others ("Ego identity").

The lines that follow are simple travel notes of a certain observer. These are the notes of a Romanian intellectual, remarks gathered from the direct contact with a culture and a civilization clearly much different from the one the traveler comes from. No matter how subjective these notes turn to be, they all represent the "perception of otherness", since the definition of identity construction is based on a subjective perception, marked by prejudices and clichés. The following reflections descend from direct contact with the Danish society, being systematized after some *sui-generis* criteria.

1. Aarhus, "Jutland's capital"

It was a warm day in August, when I arrived in Denmark, the smallest and at the same time, the oldest country in the Northern Europe. My destination was Aarhus, the second city of Denmark and the largest one in the Jutland peninsula.

I found accommodation at 200 meters from the main train station, at a small hostel, called City Sleep-In. My room had a great view, giving me the chance to enjoy the restless sea and hear the sirens of the large ships offshore. It was as if I had never left my home town, Constanta, a large array of similarities came to my mind.

Aarhus, also called "Jutland's capital", the largest and most important international harbor of Denmark, accommodates a large amount of containers, opening onto the Baltic Sea. Similarly, Constanta is Romania's largest sea, on the coast of the Black Sea. Both cities, Aarhus and Constanta, allow massive cruise ships to dock to shore, giving passengers, from all over the world, the chance to visit these cities, full of history. Aarhus is a long-established city, since the Viking times, with archaeological findings from the 8th century, B.C; whereas, Constanta is Romania's oldest city, its stating documents being from the 7th century B.C.

2. Main attractions in Aarhus

An unforgettable experience while staying in Aarhus, "the best commercial city in Northern Europe", was a tour to all the shopping centers and sightseeing sites.

I saw many wonders by walking on the famous one-kilometre-long pedestrian avenue, full of shops, bars, cafes, terraces - *butikker, barer, cafeer, terrasser*.

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Down the road, I noticed the Danish building style, with simple architectural lines. The buildings are not that high, with coppery colored facades that seem uniform, covered with brick, showcasing closed windows and well-kept balconies. You won't see balconies full of laundry to dry, like in Romania, for instance.

I was surprised to see that there were no curtains at their windows. Their interiors are rather simple, characterized by a minimalist style, with spacious rooms with cozy furniture, usually in white, making room for many books and various lamps. In general, Danes are modest about their own achievements, being more concerned with the welfare of their community than their own needs.

Arriving in the center of Aarhus, I couldn't help noticing Aarhus Domkirke, the tallest and longest cathedral in Denmark, built in the 13th century, which impressed me by its particular style.

The "City of Smileys", a perfect holiday destination, I wanted to spend my time in the Danish way, so I rented a bike for a ride by the beach and the Marselisskoven forest, a park well-known for its friendly deer, whom I fed. After admiring the deer, I started pedaling towards the memorable beach, giving the impression that the forest reaches the sea shore. In addition to the landscape almost untouched by human hands, I managed to see the end of the park, culminating with the famous summer residence of Queen Margaret the 2nd.

Another interesting walk was the one through the Old Town (*Den gamble by*), an outdoor museum where old buildings are displayed in their original form, which come from all over Denmark, not just from Aarhus. I could immediately think of our Village Museum, located in Bucharest. Designed as a town, the museum has a shopping street, a market, the city hall headquarters, canals, bridges and houses, arranged according to the period they originated from. It was a pleasure to see and meet people on the museum's streets dressed in the old time fashion.

In a modern city like Aarhus, displaying such a youthful energy, I was pleased to observe Danish flag flies everywhere, even on meals.

3. Danish "*hygge*"

Coming back to our small, but cozy hostel room, I bear in mind the scented candles, creating a lovely atmosphere, typical of the Danes, and well-known as "*hygge*". This concept doesn't have a straight-forward translation in English, but it is used in connection with comforting things

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and moments, depicting the art of creating privacy and coziness. *Hygge* includes the idea of presence, the sense of fellowship, being associated with family and close friends. As a matter of fact, Danes love candles and light them both in public places, such as restaurants, bars, offices and also, in their homes.

The Danish surroundings reminded me of the writer Hans Christian Andersen, which could recite by heart all Shakespeare plays, using his wooden dolls as actors. His most famous stories are: *The Little Mermaid*, *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Emperor's New Clothes*, where the latter reminded me of the Romanians, since we regard garments as highly important. From Hans Christian Andersen's tales, our thoughts jumped to Hamlet (Act I, Scene 4), with the famous verse, "Something is rotten in Denmark". Much truth lies in this verse, in the fact that it is rather difficult to get to know Danes and not so hard to integrate in their society.

4. The Danish lifestyle

Unlike the Latin nations, the Danes speak softly, discuss in a moderate tone, being self-contained, always showing a great sense of politeness to the rest of the world. They have a very fair way to behave in every situation and if there is no written code of proper conduct, they will seek to establish rules for every situation and obey the protocol in place.

In connection to their vast social equality, Danes show great trust in everyone and they don't need to build special relationships in order to achieve this level of trust. Therefore, I was able to speak freely to them and in a direct manner.

Everyone is equal in Denmark; all Danes are addressed in the same way, without special treatment to certain people. At first, this seemed impolite to me, as I was used to address unknown persons with "sir" and "madam", in a formal way. Moreover, in one of Romania's regions, children talk with their parents in a very formal manner. The Danes speak to each other as we speak generally in the family and that is very direct. On the other hand, I could observe that they are good listeners; they seldom interrupt others, are happy to say what they think and are willing to ask questions.

5. Danish culture

The Danes are well-known for their open-minded and homogeneous culture. It is characterized by values, such as: equality, understanding, trust, autonomy and ability to balance family life with work.

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Influenced by various factors, from the standard of living – material and social welfare – to the cultural standard, it is said that the Danes' happiness comes from a certain gene. Denmark is one of the countries that always occupy the top places on the list of countries with the happiest people. Currently, many countries are trying to emulate the high living standard of Denmark.

What I learned from the Danes is that happiness comes from within us and not from outside factors. In addition to that, I have discovered that happiness doesn't stand in a permanent state, yet the secret seems to be in the process of reaching this happiness.

6. Danish cuisine

Danish cuisine with its dishes is slightly different from the Romanian one.

A typical Danish lunch that I served there were sandwiches made from thin slices of rye bread garnished with onion rings, sliced radishes, cucumbers, tomatoes, parsley and remoulade mayonnaise. To my surprise, the Danes were using tableware, while I grabbed the sandwiches using nothing but my hands.

The main course was fish, marinated herring type crab with remoulade and fried slices of pork with roast beef. My Danish friends were surprised, seeing me, dipping my bread in the sauce. In addition, their lunch is set at the same time each day, at which time all interrupt their work, gathering and interacting with their colleagues.

At dinner I was served traditional Danish hot dishes: pork with red cabbage, fried fish, fried chicken, pork chops, dishes that Romanians would eat at lunch. Moreover, they are use to drink beer with ice cold snaps plus ("*akvavit*").

A specific dinner for the Danes is usually roast goose served at Mortensaften (November 10th), when it is celebrated St. Martin, the first Protestant reformer. A legend says that St. Martin hid in a barn and a goose, which revealed his presence, was killed and eaten for dinner.

The Danish traditional dessert is some kind of small donuts, called "*åbleskiver*", fried in a pan and served warm with jam and sugar.

As we are accustomed, as Romanians, to extend dinner invitations to our friends, the Danes do that as well. However, there is a slight difference, since punctuality is of high meaning for the Danes. I had the pleasure to get invited home at a Danish family, with two children, the mother having Romanian roots and the father being Danish. Here, I got to talk about the importance the Danes pay to the quality time spent with the family, in harmony. They also value the time spent in nature: cycling, outside walks, barbecues and sports. Moreover, we analyzed the issue of work-life balance:

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how much we can afford to work without consuming us. For some, work is a top priority, while for others; it is the free time spent with the family.

7. The Danish working and business environment

The Danes are happy to live in a balanced society, based on thoughtful and functional elements. They are satisfied with their work, registering one of the highest levels of happiness on Earth. Women are highly respected in society and at their workplaces, having wages equal to those of men and access to leadership positions. Another great advantage that the Danes have, especially as parents, is that they can benefit from flexible working hours so that they can maintain the balance work-family.

Danish welfare lies in flexible working conditions, free health system, social security, maternity or paternity leave and childcare, which is quite generous. All full-time employees, with no exception, receive five weeks of paid vacation. Again, their working environments are characterized by a high degree of flexibility, with the possibility of working long distance. Here we can find a similarity with the Romanians, because many computer scientists enjoy working from their own home desks.

Denmark has a well-educated population, with high-skilled and balanced negotiators, possessing excellent foreign language skills. Aarhus has one of the best business environments in the world, with companies that are eager to deliver forward-thinking solutions. Among others, Aarhus is also called the Capital of Wind Energy, accommodating numerous companies which design, produce and sell wind turbines.

Conclusion:

This travel diary aimed at revealing some of the secrets and traits of Danish culture. A number of characteristics underlying Denmark's foundation as a nation were presented as being their lifestyle, business environment and habits, among others. Resemblances and differences were identified between Latin and Scandinavian people.

As previously mentioned, the Danes are considered the happiest people on the planet. My journey in finding the formula of this happiness was full of great experiences and discoveries, as was my path in uncovering what lies at the foundation of the Danish culture.

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