

Sporty Events

It was always impressive to see a large steam engine entering the central station in Copenhagen – that had something to do with travelling. For Frederik Hansen, it marked the end of his journey to the Olympic games in Berlin. Two of his friends, Torben and Michael, who had not had the occasion to join him there, received him at the platform, for which occasion they had bought platform tickets.

“How was it?” was the inevitable question.

“Difficult to give a comprehensive answer to,” Frederik said. “But it is just 5 minutes past noon. If you have the time, shouldn’t we discuss it further over a lunch in Tivoli?”

“I have plenty of time, but no money for it,” Torben said – he had recently lost his job and was searching for a new, not an easy task in these days.

“I have no time, but I just take it,” Michael added. As a journalist, his working time was flexible, but his working area was local politics, which in no way was connected to the Olympic games.

“Be my guest,” Frederik told Torben so loudly that also Michael heard it and immediately felt included by the invitation.

The three friends were until recently, when Torben was fired, working together as journalists at a Copenhagen daily news-magazine, which also was the reason for Frederik’s stay abroad – he was covering the sports events.

The friends helped Frederik with his luggage, which mainly consisted of two big suitcases. It was necessary to bring an ample amount of clothes for the different occasions. Frederik himself carried just a small bag and let the friends earn their lunch.

At the end of the platform, they were expected to show their tickets. They got no occasion to do so. A small uniformed man saluted Frederik as they approached. “Mr. Hansen, I enjoyed your reports from Berlin. It was a great event for our national pride,” he said.

Frederik wondered how a totally unknown person could address him by name. “Thanks, but I was just reporting what our sportiers were doing, I am no athlete myself.”

“But you covered the events brilliantly. When shall the young persons come home?” the old man continued, his grey and thin goat-beard oscillating while he talked.

“Prepare for a big reception on this platform at five p.m. today,” Frederik continued in passing the old fan. By now, many more passengers were pressing from behind. Even if Frederik had wanted, this was no suitable place for a conversation; besides, he only wanted to get away from the smoking engine.

Tivoli lies across the central station and had just opened the gates as they came out. Frederik bought entrance for them all and they went to a pavilion not far away. There he ordered a standard, not too expensive lunch. They asked for different beers. Danes are very proud of the different beer sorts and adhering to some special brand, as if this selection is underlying their personality.

“Great finally to be able to enjoy a Tuborg,” Frederik said as if he had suffered great demands in the past weeks.

“That I don’t understand. You just come back from the homeland of beers,” Torben argued.

“You are, of course, right, and I have tried many brands, many more than this establishment can turn out with, but give me a Tuborg and I know that I am home. I sort of grew up with it.

“I can only hope that your stomach, in particular your liver, shall not grow with it, too!” Michael added. They all laughed.

“From tomorrow, I shall have three weeks on water, but please let me enjoy a Danish beer today,” Frederik answered and since he was paying for all, they obeyed and changed the subject.

Frederik changed the tune and became more serious. “We journalists were taken great care of, almost too luxury. We were not supposed to have any contact with the local people. But I have relatives in Berlin and visited them a couple of times. That was

most impressive, much more than the Olympic games themselves, and the most frustrating is, that I cannot report it."

His friends indicated curiosity and connected this to a remark that their bottles were empty. Frederik ordered the same selection and prepared for what should be a one-beer-long monologue.

"Unlike most of the journalists, I have a family in Berlin. My aunt married a German before the Great War, and they have 3 children, two boys and a daughter. So I did, of course, visit them when possible."

"Excellent," Michael already interrupted, "that set some local colour on your visit."

"It sure did. But when I said 'when possible' you should understand that formally, it was impossible. We were, in fact, heavily guarded and when we were not in the stadium, there were a lot of other programmes, meant to induce positive regards towards the new Germany. It was quite difficult to get away from these excursions. The first time I wanted to visit my family, the lady who was set to guard me asked where I was going. I told her in French – I pretended not to understand German – that I just wanted to stroll around in the city and then, without asking if I wanted it or not, she made a guided tour out of it. Fortunately, I did not betray my intended goals, which I postponed for another occasion. I managed to sneak away twice but was observed as I approached the hotel for the second time and bluntly told that I was not supposed to walk around without the 'guide,' as my personal spy was entitled. Then I understood that any further attempt to evade my surveillance would endanger my family and I stayed away."

"But then, your family must have wondered why you did not return," Torben argued.

"Indeed they did, but not for very long. They were very smart and sent the youngest of their children, the daughter Theresa, to meet me one morning as I left for the Games. I managed to tell her a sentence in German before my guide curiously appeared and then I said some words in French as if I did not know the language – as I mentioned before, I always spoke French with my guide. Anyhow, Theresa turned away and that was the last I saw of her. For all what I had been told, it was better that way."

"You are making us curious," Michael concluded. Torben was just moving uncomfortable without indicating other curiosity than how his next beer would taste.

"In short," Frederik continued, "I was seeing two Germanys on my journey, the glamorous official one and its opposite. The official one is what I described in my articles from Berlin, so I guess you know that."

"Not quite," Michael said. "I am a writer, it occupies me fully. I have no time to read. But somehow, I have got an impression how the New Germany has raised on the ruins after the Great War." That opened for Torben's muteness:

"Indeed. Since Mr. Hitler took over as a chancellor, unemployment has disappeared and the average German has regained his national pride."

"Has any of you been to Germany?"

Both of his friends shook their heads.

"Then you ought to be interested in the other version, which I plan to tell you about," Frederik concluded. The two friends did not object but remained silent.

Frederik understood that it would be too expensive in restaurant beers to give them a comprehensive story and decided for an abbreviated report. "You should know that Germany, our Southern neighbour, has derived into a dictatorship. It is a repressive police state, persecuting what is considered enemies of the state. Chronically ill patients are left to die because only the strong and healthy are idolised and in order to save money on the health care system. The unemployment was artificially removed by paying massive official projects on borrowed money ..."

"I don't care 'how,' important is 'that'," Torben interrupted.

"Projects relating to military aims. Germany is now a state full of soldiers. One day, these soldiers might invade our beloved Denmark. Is that also of no concern to you, Torben?" Frederik asked.

"I do not believe it is that bad," Torben said. "In my party, they have sent people to Germany who tells a totally different story."

"The official story I mentioned before," Frederik commented. "These poor observers obviously had no relatives who actually lived there."

"But if it is so bad, why do everybody among the authorities agree that living conditions in Germany have improved tremendously under Mr. Hitler?" Michael argued.

"It is not necessarily the truth what the authorities agrees about!"

"... said Frederik Hansen," Torben supplemented. "So here we have the opinion agreed about by the vast majority of the authorities and there we have the one that Frederik's aunt told him about. Which one do you prefer to believe?"

Frederik realized that it was now his time to enjoy a beer while his friends exchanged laurels to the ruling power.

"There can be no doubt that Mr. Hitler has changed the living conditions of his compatriots to the better," Michael said.

"What is freedom without something to eat? Just 7 years ago, you couldn't buy a bread for a million Mark," was Torben's conclusion. "I can talk a word about the condition of being unemployed, with full rights to speak from an empty mouth."

"I hope it is not that empty - don't you get some unemployment assistance?" Michael wanted to know.

"I do, but that is because I am Danish and we journalists have a rather good union. But the unemployed Germans had little income to nourish them. Therefore, Mr. Hitler now enjoys broad public support."

Frederik shook his head when he heard that. "Please feel free to ask if you want to hear a different statement."

Michael cruelly replied: "We heard it already."

Fortunately, the lunch was nearly finished. Torben consumed the last peace in silence. "But thanks for the invitation. It was nice to see you back," he said upon swallowing the final bite."

Frederik asked for the bill, paid it and then said: "Would you please help me out to a taxi?" He tried to conceal the disappointment.

"Of course," both friends said energetically. Undoubtedly, they were feeling sad about having insulted their host; on the other hand, there were limits to what they were prepared to hear from his mouth. They went back to Tivoli's main entrance and back towards the main station where taxis were waiting for customers.

"By the way," Frederik said, "I shall be back here in a few hours to receive the sportiers, although few will notice if I am missing. But it will be great to have a few hours at home to collect the thoughts. Thanks anyhow for meeting me."

They parted.

In the afternoon, Frederik returned to cover the reception of our new heroes. He then wrote an article of what people wanted to hear about the Olympic games in Berlin 1936. He also wrote an article about what nobody wanted to hear and, as expected, nobody wanted to print it.

Seventy years later, his grandchild wrote another article about another menace looming over the immediately approaching history. Unfortunately, another sporting event distracted and again, nobody wanted to hear the warnings. History repeats itself, and public memory is short-lived.

August 7, 2006
John Schou