

## CHAPTER 6

For a while we were just getting used to the work, the other helpers, and the cats. Quite soon we found that we were making a useful contribution, not least as we had a car, and not many other helpers did! It was not long before we were being roped in to transport cats to the vets (the same Højby Dyreklinik as we were now using) and take the cattery leader to odd locations in and around Odense to collect cats and kittens who needed rescuing or rehoming. Every time that we went in on a Friday there were new cats to care for, and we soon found that during the summer and autumn months especially they were coming in faster than they could be rehomed. Naturally, with the extra numbers a different problem soon became evident; helpers wanted their holiday breaks and the work was falling more and more on a few shoulders, who felt duty bound to give up their own free time.

It was not long we were asked if we could take over the Friday mornings by ourselves, so that the leader could have at least one morning off. As there were the two of us, and we were used to being well-organised, we said yes and got our own key! We did not need to answer the phone, and were not supposed to get visitors as public open hours were only in the afternoon. Of course, we did anyway where people thought they had an urgent problem, so we managed to cope with that as well! We got into the habit of taking a packed lunch with us, and then after a rest and a chat with the leader and anyone else who came in after 1pm, we were off to shop at Bilka. Often enough with a little shopping list, and maybe an appointment to collect a cat from the vets before we finally went home.

I think that here I need to make a little digression concerning language; after we started to visit Denmark in the late 70's, I thought that I should learn the language. To do that, I went to a beginners Danish class for a year in Paddington in the 80's, and then to the next grade class in Euston for two years. Those were very interesting, but only once a week with other Londoners was not giving me much practice, so then I went to the teachers house once a week for about six months for private lessons. That was better, and explains why my early learnt accent is like a woman born in Copenhagen!) In fact Christine had lived nearly all her life in England, so her accent was very anglicised.) Then moving to Denmark a few years later I found that although I could read fairly well, I could hardly understand a word of the spoken language! As Myrtle had not had any teaching at all, we went back to the Town Hall and in the Information office found that as immigrants we were eligible for free Danish lessons at Studieskolen in Odense. That sounded great so, we took away the brochure and on the booking-in/orientation date went there to register for the next available course starting in August 1994.

At the orientation talk, we were rather shocked that the whole thing was conducted in Danish! It seemed that everybody else there had brought with them either a Danish 'partner', friend or adviser! Sixty year old's, no way! (But, going home, we thought, perhaps that is the Studieskole way, to teach by example and mimicry - wrong!) We duly completed the applications, ready to start in a few weeks after the summer holidays. Starting the first week we discovered that in fact the teachers took the easy way out, and used English a lot to communicate with the several different

nationalities - we got used to it, but we did not think that it was such a good way to teach, and we avoided using English as much as possible.

In the end, we stayed at Studieskole for four years, and enjoyed it immensely. As we were still working we chose the two evenings a week type course, and made several friends amongst the teachers and students. We were sufficiently good at the exams to get Level 1 and 2 passes, but the final result was not quite good enough to go on to Level 3 - a peculiarity of the system is that you cannot go to try again at Level 2 - that was the finish for us. We were now reasonably good at reading, but our writing is only understandable by friends! The same applies to speech. The main problems, as I see it, are four:-

1. There are 9 vowel sounds in Danish, and we just cannot hear the differences. I can mimic them fairly well, but Myrtle is not even as good as that. We knew that when we finished Level 2, so we took a short course in pronunciation, but despite the best efforts of the teacher, we hardly improved at all! At least, we did learn that we had a problem!

2. Where I went to school as a child, the idea that anyone there should learn any other language was not even considered. There were no classes even for special children, and what was worse (for me later in life when trying to learn Danish as great emphasis was placed on grammatical theory) not even English grammar was taught! However, don't get the wrong idea about the teaching - the teaching of English reading, writing and literature was thorough enough in the practical sense. So when I finished at that school and then went on to Technical School and Engineering College, I had to take a few months extra course in English just to pass the IEE membership exams.

Myrtle went to Grammar School where such things were taught, and she even had French lessons. Of course, they were only started for the children who were over eleven years of age; much too late for her to get more than a smattering, but at least she did have the idea that communication in other languages was possible. (Much the same thing still applies to the current English education system.) The result for me at least was that despite all the Danish lessons, I *still* can *only* think in English. My brain and communication centres are hard-wired that way, and can never change after 60 years of only English, and even after 10 years of trying in Danish. I can accept that, but Danes cannot grasp the concept, and there is the third problem.

3. The great majority of Danes grow up with an education system that teaches children at least one other language from a very young age. Together with films and television in English (even though more often American!), the sounds are there, as are the, often rather strange, subtitles. Thus their brains have been properly trained in a sort of 'double-think'. The fact that I haven't is just about intellectually possible for them to grasp, but emotionally difficult; rather like trying to explain the difference between red and green to someone who is colour blind.

4. This is the most difficult of all to explain, and verbal explanations, even to our friends, do not seem to 'take'. Consider the two countries, England (or Britain if you like) and Denmark. In one the population is about 60 million, and in the other, only about 6 million - one tenth. Further, consider the two languages, English and Danish.

For one the total population for which it is their normal language amounts to well over 500 million, and there are many more who are able to use it. For the other, the total population who really use it amounts to only a few more than the Danish population - about six million!

Even more difficult for a Dane to grasp is the fact that as an Englishman I have, all my life, been thoroughly accustomed to communicating readily with people who speak and understand English badly and/or strangely! The great majority of Danes find it impossible to really believe that anyone else can use Danish, so do not even try to understand. Only if a 'foreigner' speaks Danish *perfectly*, will they try to listen! A good example of this (although slightly less common in recent years) is the way that TV news programmes interview non-Danes. If the name looks foreign (Muhammed, Ali, Batchelor and so on) then even perfectly intelligible speech (at least to me) is automatically sub-titled!

Our friends have some grasp of the principle, but frequently expect more than we can give. For others, we find that when trying to write emails or letters in Danish, people simply ignore or laugh at them, so do not take them seriously. When speaking, little attempt is made to speak simply and slowly to us - the feeling is only too obvious that there is only one way to speak the language, and if you can't do that, then it's not worth bothering with you!

Just one example of that last sentence. When we first moved, we had to go to the local Council (Kommune) office to hand over a NHS document proving our entitlement to the reciprocal health care arrangements. We were directed to the appropriate official, who did not (?) speak English and was totally disinterested in trying to help as soon as we opened our mouths! This despite the fact that the Danish law states that residents etc who have another language, must be provided with help in their language. In the end, we were pushed into going to the County (Amt) office where the Lord Mayor helped us and said that she would tell off that official in no uncertain terms!

Generally we have no real problems, and manage with our limited Danish. Where we really have difficulty, we can always get a proper translation from our good friends, who can laugh with us at our mistakes. I suppose that the younger ones like to stick to English for the practice, and the older ones try to educate us in Danish!

Now we will move on to 1995. By then we were well into both our language studies, and our volunteer work with KVO (Kattens Værn Odense). Of course, with so many lovely cats to look after every week, it was not long before we *had* to have one of our own - our very first Danish cat! She was called Vibeke, and her story is next.

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