



# The Land of the Living: The Danish Folk High Schools and Denmark's Non-Violent Path To Modernization

*Steven Borish*

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## **The Land of the Living: The Danish Folk High Schools and Denmark's Non-Violent Path To Modernization** Steven Borish

The Land of the Living is a study of the Danish folk high schools, a remarkable alternative school form that has endured in Denmark for nearly 150 years. The existence of the folk high schools today allows the Danish citizen to undertake a direct, personal experience in free education. For a limited period in his or her life, any Danish citizen can enter a folk high school and encounter a variety of new ideas, people and places. Beginning with a year's total immersion in three folk high schools, Steven Borish embarked on a personal journey through Danish society. His journey took him from the fields and small towns of Jutland to the busy streets of Copenhagen, and enabled him to see Denmark as few foreigners ever have. Combining his anthropological sensitivity with the broader outlook of the historian, he came to ask a unique and unprecedented set of questions about the path to modernization taken by Danish society. The author's inquiry is centered around an historical puzzle: Why did the same modernization process that was so often accompanied by violent repression elsewhere take place more peacefully and non-violently in Denmark? His research took him back to the remarkable Danish Land Reforms of the late 18th century, and to the life and work of a major prophetic figure, N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872). "The schools for life," the "People's Enlightenment," "the living word": these are some of the ideas set forth by Grundtvig, who in 1830 first proposed the establishment of a new type of school in Denmark. Professor Borish's description of these events provides a living example of how the people of one small country responded to a series of political and economic crises with a non-violent political revolution that enabled them quite literally to "rise from the ashes." Yet the author presents this historical analysis not as an end but as a departure point for understanding the Danish present. In an unusual blend of cultural analysis and personal observation, he brings contemporary Denmark alive for the reader with his description of today's folk high schools. This well-researched and meticulously documented study represents the first definitive account of Danish society to be written by a non-Dane. Its creative use of techniques from anthropology and related fields is certain to attract favorable attention from all those interested in the problems of social and historical analysis.

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