



# DENMARK

# PORK



## Theme Texts

**Why do you eat the way you do?**

**Who produces your food?**

**Why is much Danish food produced by low-paid Eastern Europeans?**

### 1. A Taste of Europe

The borders in Europe are opening. Culture, labour and foods are moving across nations in every direction. Danish pigs are transported in trucks to Germany and the Czech Republic to be fattened and slaughtered.

Rumanian and Ukrainian workers travel to Denmark to earn money.

Traditional Danish dishes such as roast pork and meatballs are competing with spaghetti Bolognese and tzatziki.

This exhibition offers a taste of Europe in more than one sense. *A Taste of Europe* is part of a broader EU exhibition project examining why we eat the way we do. It takes a look at European dietary habits and our responsibilities as consumers. The exhibition presented at The Workers' Museum centres on the pig. This animal has played a major role in the production and export of Danish food, and to many, pork represents a traditional, national food.

The exhibition will also take a look at the people who work with the pigs. Open European borders and special provisions have meant that nearly half of the workers employed on Danish swine farms today come from Eastern Europe. The exhibition examines the quality of life and the

working conditions of some of these new workers in the Danish labour market.

The issue of foreign agricultural labourers is not a new one. Many of the conflicts we see today between Eastern workers, farmers and the trade unions resemble the problems brought up in debates at the beginning of the 20th century concerning the so-called “sugar-beet Poles”. The exhibition therefore provides an historical survey of the role played by Eastern European workers in Danish agriculture.

## **1.2 Why Do You Eat Pork?**

Liver paste, meatballs and roast pork. Fried pork and bacon. Pork chops, crépinettes, pork rissoles and sausages. Pork has been absolutely central to Danish eating habits for many years, and Danish bacon has been a very important export item.

There are many reasons why we eat so much pork in Denmark. The industrialisation and rationalisation of agriculture and slaughterhouses increased the annual production of pork from half a million pigs in 1881 to 27 million in 2010. Pork has become an inexpensive, everyday food. At the same time the emergence of refrigerators and other technological developments have made it possible to store and prepare fresh meat. Today health and environmental considerations also play a role when consumers choose their supper at the frozen-food counter.

Tradition and culture combined with intensive marketing have established roast pork and meatballs as traditional Danish dishes. But the national preference for pork is now challenged by religious considerations and animal welfare issues. How do you like your pork?

### **3. Modern Swine Farming**

In 1969 there were 124,000 swine farms in Denmark. Each farm had an average herd of 65 swine that the farmer cared for himself – in some cases assisted by a farmhand. These were small farms where the farmer lived together with his family, and where ideas were soon translated into action.

Today there are only about 6,000 swine farms in Denmark. While the average herd size is 2,200, the largest farms have herds of more than 10,000. The large farms usually have many people employed, including trainees, ordinary farmhands and managers. These farms are large, industrialised, high-tech production units where hygiene and computer control help ensure stability and a standardised product.

To be a swine farmer today is a risky enterprise as these farmers are under heavy economic pressure. They juggle large amounts of money and must be ready to run risks in order to continue to develop. At the same time the farmers are subject to steadily increasing control which many of them view as a bureaucratic wall of resistance to their trade as a whole. “We get the feeling that they just want to get rid of us”, says a Danish swine farmer, and this is hard to understand in a business that traditionally has contributed significantly to the Danish economy.

For many years swine farming was one of the most important export trades in the country. Today lower production costs abroad have resulted in many farmers sending their animals to the Czech Republic or Germany to be fattened and slaughtered.

#### **4. Danish Farmers and the East European Workers**

Despite increased industrialisation there is still a need for agricultural workers. But for the past ten years, according to the farmers themselves, it has been difficult to find qualified Danish farmhands, and a massive recruitment of Eastern European labourers has consequently been established. Since the mid 1990s, a growing number of Ukrainians have entered the country as agricultural trainees. In recent years new Eastern European EU countries, for example Rumania, have also provided a recruitment basis for Danish farms and agricultural schools.

It is not known how many Eastern Europeans are employed in Danish agriculture, but the trade unions estimate that upward of half of all farm workers today are foreigners.

To some farmers the Eastern Europeans have simply been an inexpensive work force, efficient and undemanding. Others have developed strong personal ties to the foreigners and have wanted to provide their trainees with a professional education that might also result in a better functioning business for the farmer himself.

#### **5. The Eastern Europeans**

Why do several thousand Ukrainians and Rumanians every year choose to leave their homeland – their children, sweethearts, parents and friends – in order to take up employment on a Danish swine farm?

“Because of the money”, many of them will probably say. High unemployment rates, low wages and inadequate social security make millions of Eastern Europeans seek employment in Western Europe and Russia every year. One in seven Rumanians live below the poverty level,

and more than two million Rumanians work outside their own country. Each year these emigrants send home two billion Euros. The Rumanian economy is in many ways dependent on this support but also suffers from the fact that so many qualified workers leave the country. The same is true of Ukraine where more than six million people have left the country over the past 10 years.

Active recruitment efforts by Danish farmers and agricultural schools have contributed to this emigration. It has been further stimulated by special political provisions for Ukrainians who for a period of years were given a free stay at a school in Denmark as a form of economic assistance to Ukraine – provided the stay formed part of their agricultural education at a Ukrainian university.

There are also many who travel abroad to try something new, to meet new people, see new places and learn new things. Many of them know somebody who has previously been to Denmark and can help them get here. They have heard stories of life in Denmark where material goods mean freedom, and where new friendships can be formed. For some the time in Denmark lives up to their expectations – for others, it doesn't.

## **5.2 Inga**

Inga is 36 years old and from Ukraine. She first came to Denmark in 1999 as an agricultural trainee. She has now lived in Denmark for more than 10 years and is manager on a large swine farm in southern Jutland.

Inga came to Denmark to earn money. She had been educated as a veterinarian at a Ukrainian agricultural university, but could find only piece-meal jobs where the wages were insufficient to provide for herself

and her son. One of her cousins had earned good money during a period of agricultural training in Denmark, and an acquaintance, who had likewise worked in Denmark, helped Inga write an application to a Danish farmer.

But Inga's first experience on a Danish swine farm was not a good one. She came to a "crazy farmer" who was easily angered and frightened her. A Ukrainian girlfriend and this friend's Danish farmer helped Inga to transfer to Ivar, for whom she has worked ever since. Today the two of them are close, and she is one of Ivar's most trusted assistants.

Inga had not planned to stay in Denmark. She had a young son in Ukraine who was living with his grandmother. But one year led to the next. Inga returned to Ukraine several times, but each time she came back to Denmark, because it proved too difficult to earn enough to live a decent life in her homeland. For the money she earned in Denmark, she was able to buy a house in Ukraine for her family and secure her son's education.

According to Inga herself, she has made no plans: "I have not been thinking – it just happened. I always say to myself – a little more." Today she can't imagine going back to Ukraine and starting all over. Besides, she now has a Danish boyfriend, Einer, with whom she is expecting a child. Inga's future lies in Denmark.

### **5.3 Teodora**

Teodora is 26 years old and from Rumania. She and her husband George (aged 26) both came to Denmark in February 2010 as students at the Grindsted School of Agriculture. Today they work on a swine farm on the island of Als.

Teodora had studied international economics at a Rumanian university. But after two years of maternity leave, following the birth of their daughter Alexia, she and George decided to go to Denmark to work and earn money for their mutual project: a house for their small family. In Rumania they had until then lived outside the city of Iasi together with her parents and brother – six people sharing her parents' house with three rooms and a kitchen.

Today Teodora and George live in a small house outside of Nordborg together with Teodora's sister Lore (aged 22) and Lore's boyfriend Alex (aged 23). Lore and Alex came to Denmark from Rumania as early as 2008 and had spent two good years with a Danish swine farmer.

Afterwards Lore wanted to study at the School of Agriculture along with Teodora and George, but the farmer under whom she trained was very unpleasant, and there was no support to be had from the school or the recruitment agency that had arranged her contact with the farmer.

Teodora's employer brought Lore and Alex into contact with the farmer they now work for as farmhands and are paid 75 DKK an hour. It is not much money, but to Rumanians it is ten times what they would earn at home. Because of the pay, Teodora and Lore accept working in the pigsty even though it is not the job of their dreams. The girls would rather work in a shop, or start their own hair or nail parlour. But doing farm work for a start is an easy way to enter the Danish labour market, and for some it may in time become a profession they like.

## **5.4 The Vulnerable**

Inga has experienced both good and bad times during her stay in Denmark. Today she has reasonable living and working conditions. Not all are that fortunate. These photos tell the story of Eastern Europeans who live under extremely poor conditions in a sort of parallel world in trailers or old, ramshackle buildings. They work many hours and are paid a very low wage. They have no social safety net and find it difficult to understand the Danish labour market. Many of them are afraid to consult the trade unions for fear of being fired.

## **6. The Trade Unions**

The trade unions are among the Danish players with the closest contact to the Eastern Europeans. This is due to the trade unions' own interest in finding scabs: Rumanians and Poles who are willing to work for a pay far below the minimum wage of a Danish agricultural labourer.

In Denmark there is no minimum wage regulated by law. Instead the trade unions and the confederation of employers negotiate wages, and they often agree to keep them at a relatively high level. But few agricultural workers and employers are organized, and after the opening of the EU borders, Eastern Europeans who are willing to work for an hourly wage of just 20-30 DKK have been coming to Denmark. To Eastern Europeans this is still twice the wage they can earn at home, but for Danish workers whose living expenses are higher, it is a catastrophe.

The trade unions find it difficult to even get in contact with the Eastern Europeans. They work on isolated farms with no representation and often are not interested in talking to the union people when they come to inform them of their rights and explain Danish working conditions. The

Eastern Europeans are well aware that their primary advantage is that they are inexpensive. If they had to work for a wage negotiated by the unions, they would run a high risk of being fired.

Sometimes the conditions become too severe for the Eastern Europeans who then approach the union in order to get help to find decent housing or get paid for working after hours. In such situations, when people are at their most vulnerable and have nowhere else to go, the individual, local union man must take on the responsibility.

## **7. The Recruitment Agencies**

Organized recruitment has been a decisive factor in connection with the influx of Eastern Europeans to the Danish swine farms.

Farmers, agricultural schools and private recruitment agencies have actively sought to bring Eastern Europeans to Denmark. The reason for this is that farmers and agricultural schools were lacking agricultural workers and students, and the recruitment agencies saw a golden opportunity to make a profit.

Some agencies have honestly tried to establish contact between employers and workers. Others seem to have pursued pure profit with no consideration of the human consequences. They have not hesitated to compare Ukrainian workers to robots that are best suited to monotonous, manual labour. Or they have charged exorbitant fees to establish contact. Thus, many Eastern Europeans are heavily in debt even before they reach their place of employment in Denmark. This makes them extremely vulnerable to abuse, since they cannot afford to leave even if they live under miserable conditions.

## **8. The State**

Danish legislation stipulates the conditions for how Eastern Europeans can work in Denmark. Special provisions make it possible for Ukrainian and Baltic agriculture students to come to Denmark as trainees and have their school education paid for by the Danish state. This was intended as a form of economic support that would allow the primitive Eastern European agriculture to learn from the industrialised Danish agriculture. This has been widely criticized as exploitation of cheap labour rather than a real educational provision. The Danish Immigration Service, which was charged with administering the provision, has also been criticized for inadequate control of documents and excessive periods of waiting for cases to be examined.

In recent years EU legislation has had a major influence on labour market developments. For citizens of the new Eastern European EU countries, open borders have increased their possibility of seeking employment in Denmark. After the temporary provisions of 2004 were phased out in May 2009, the Danish state has had practically no way of controlling the conditions under which Eastern Europeans are employed. Therefore the question that now remains is whether the trade unions and employers together can succeed in accomplishing this task.

To the politicians it is very much a question of whether they want to give priority to the administrative agents of control, such as the police, tax authorities and working-environment inspectors, who can back up the trade unions in their struggle to fight unjust wage arrangements.

## **9. The “Sugar-beet Poles”**

To have Eastern Europeans come to work in Danish agriculture is nothing new. A hundred years ago, for a period of about 40 years, Danish agriculture was more or less dependent on Polish farm workers, the so-called “sugar-beet Poles”, several thousands of whom came to Denmark as migrant seasonal workers. They got this nickname because the majority of them came to work in the sugar-beet fields of Lolland. Here they tended and weeded the sugar beets during spring and summer, harvested them in the fall and then returned to Poland for the winter.

As is the case with European labour migration today, the presence of the Polish seasonal workers around 1900 was due to both a demand for and a supply of labour. The migration of Danish workers from country to city, combined with changes in agricultural production, created a need for the import of seasonal labour. At first the farmers sought to satisfy this need with Swedish workers, but soon switched over to using Poles instead.

The first Polish labourers came around 1893 and in the following decades were succeeded by several thousand seasonal workers who wanted to get away from unemployment, poverty and political oppression in their homeland. The seasonal migration culminated in 1914 when 14,452 Poles were employed in Denmark. Subsequently the First World War and various initiatives by the Social-democratic party to fight the growing Danish unemployment put a stop to the immigration of Polish workers.

### **9.1 A Hard and Backbreaking Job**

*Imagine an endless, flat field full of sugar-beet roots. The mud on the ground is hard in the chill of the morning. You are surrounded by twenty girls and women who walk or sit bending over, each hacking at the*

*ground with her small, beet hoe. Your clothes are wet, for it rained yesterday, and in your living quarters it is hard to dry clothes. Behind you walks the overseer, the man who took you from your home in Poland via Germany to Lolland where you now have to work yourself to the bone from 5 in the morning to 7 in the evening for the next six months. He shouts “Forwards – Backwards” and stomps hard on the ground with his high boots.*

In 1906, in the Lolland-Falster region, 27.8% of all farmhands were Poles. They were mainly young women between 15 and 24 years of age who weeded, thinned and loosened the beets, placed them in straight lines and chopped off the greens. Polish women were especially well suited to this monotonous, backbreaking work, it was said.

In 1906 the daily wage for the Polish women was 1.15 DKK an hour. This was 25% less than the hourly wage of a Danish woman, and for the men the difference was even greater. But in contrast to the Danes, the Poles were given food in addition to their daily wage in the form of one litre of skimmed milk and 12 kilos of potatoes a week.

About 10% of the Poles' wages went to the overseer who was their primary contact person while they were in Denmark. The overseer was usually a Polish-speaking German who served as both recruiter and supervisor. He paid out the girls' wages and held complete power at the barracks where they lived. The overseer was often hated, and there were many accounts of brutal treatment and cheating with wages.

## **9.2 “Small, Filthy Holes” – Life in the Polish Barracks**

*In 1911 a young Polish woman came to Lolland. She tells of her life in one of the many barracks built especially for foreign workers. Here thirty girls lived in one room. Walls, windows and floors had holes in them, and there were rats running around the room. Water was in short supply, and in the wintertime the girls washed themselves with snow.*

There were substantial differences between the living quarters offered to the Poles. Some were given a small room in a stable or an outhouse, while others were put up in barracks built especially for them. These conditions were generally criticized, and an investigation carried out by the Ministry of the Interior cautiously stated that they left much to be desired.

The Federation of Trade Unions was less diplomatic. In an investigation made in 1906, it described the housing offered the Poles in terms such as these: “The room looks like a coach house and lacks light” – “The room is dark and damp” – “Small, filthy holes” – “The rooms are very small, there is just about room for the beds and a chair” – “The living quarters look like a pigsty”.

Nevertheless many Poles seemed relatively satisfied with the conditions. In an inquiry made by the trade unions in 1907 involving 44 farms, 77% of the Poles described their conditions as “good” or “pretty good”. This should probably be seen in relation to the harsh conditions they were used to at home, and it is worth noting that almost one in four of the Poles found their treatment “bad” and in the case of one specific farm even “brutal”. There were thus great differences in the conditions offered the

Poles – a situation they actually shared with many Danish farm labourers around 1900.

#### **4) The Poles and the Danes**

“Rotten Po-lak” or “Polish riffraff”. Such words of abuse were experienced by many of the Poles in Denmark, even after being here for many years. These epithets expressed the conflicts that arose between the Danes and the foreign workers.

The Poles were a minority group in the Danish society. The first-generation Poles spoke a different language, had another religion and other customs than the Danes. The Catholic church came to play a special role in this situation. The Catholic priests acted as spiritual advisers, representatives and interpreters. For many of those who remained in Denmark, the church as well as Polish schools and associations became the places around which the life of the Polish community revolved.

Gradually the Poles and the Danes became adjusted to one another. From being perceived as competitors in terms of wages and work, the Poles were increasingly included in local societies and trade unions. Among the Danes there was a growing respect for the industriousness and frugality with which the Poles fought their way up through society with the result that from the 1930s on, many of them were able to become independent and could afford a house of their own.

#### **5) “Only Together Are We Strong”**

*“Are you in need of a friend you can trust, then go to your local Social-democratic union. It takes care of unfairly treated, foreign workers.”*

Thus wrote the federation of trade unions, led by Thorvald Stauning, in a proclamation to the Polish workers in Denmark in 1913. The slogan “Only Together Are We Strong” conveyed the message that Danish and Polish workers were fighting a common battle against inequality and injustice.

The Danish federation of trade unions thus presented itself as a friend to the Poles. It had not always been that way. In the years prior to 1907 the conflict between Polish and Danish workers often ran deep and was irreconcilable, and as late as 1906, the Social-democratic party had decided to promote a ban on the import of Polish labour.

But in 1907 a change occurred. Inspired by a meeting at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, it was agreed that bans on immigration were futile. Instead the strategy was to ensure that both immigrants and Danish workers were organized and had decent wages and working conditions. These were the thoughts underlying the 1913 proclamation.

But the First World War once again brought a more national orientation. The ideas of regulating the import of workers and giving Danes first claim to jobs gained headway. During the 1920s, fewer and fewer seasonal workers came to Denmark, and in 1929 the recently formed Social-democratic-Radical government instituted a total stop to the import of labour.

