

Chapter Two: Kaj Munk as a Journalist

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Kaj Munk wasn't a journalist in the traditional sense. He didn't follow the rules of the "news triangle". That is, that you always start an article with the most important information, that you try to be objective and never ever present your own point of view. He broke all of these rules in all of the articles he wrote.

But he had other qualities that are essential in good journalism. He was very observant, he had an intuitive sense of what was of topical interest and he was very inquisitive. His articles are a mix of commentary, observation and his own unique Kaj Munk brand of humor, Christianity and a lack of respect for authorities.

Kaj Munk wanted to be a journalist when he was a teenager. In his autobiography *Foråret så sagte kommer* (1942) he writes that he visited the local newspaper one day to tell them that he had heard that an old woman had fallen into the moat around the Christianssæde manor house in Lolland. They weren't immediately interested but then he dramatized the story a little and it was printed.

He had an article in a local newspaper *Maribo Amtstidende* April 15, 1913 with the title *Rottejagten* ("A Rat Hunt"). The story itself is fiction so it doesn't really count in this context but it is probably the first thing he managed to get printed in a newspaper. He comments: "How proud I was to see myself in the paper!" (Actually, he creates a little confusion about which article **was** his first because in the addition to his autobiography, *Med Sol og Megen Glæde* (1942, 50-54), there is an article called *Gud er Kærlighed* ("God is Love") from 1916 which he calls his first article).

He writes in his autobiography that these episodes made him want to become a journalist. So he went to his beloved foster mother, Marie, and begged her: "Let me become a journalist! Let me try and get an apprenticeship at a newspaper, Nakskov Tidende." But his foster mother just looked at him and contemptuously said: "Become a journalist! We have decided that you are going to the university so there is nothing to discuss" (Munk 1942a, 169).

In the following years he got an education, a job and a wife. He wrote lots of poems and plays but almost nothing journalistic until 1931. He did have an article in the local news paper *Ringkøbing Amts Dagblad* in 1925, where he defended a priest who had changed the baptismal service (Munk 1925).

1931 was an incredible year for him. His first child was born, he had a breakthrough with the play, *Cant*, and his newspaper career took off. He had met the nonconformist priest Drewsen Christensen who invited him to write for his parish magazine, *Dansk Folkeliv*. Drewsen Christensen made him an offer he couldn't refuse. He would receive no pay, have very few readers, but he could write whatever he liked. Their meeting was decisive because the articles he wrote here were seen by the editor of the large

Danish newspaper, *Jyllandsposten*, who asked him to write regularly about religion for the paper. This started the avalanche of articles he wrote until the German occupation and censorship nine years later put a stop to it.

His first article for *Jyllandsposten* was typical of him and his indifference to public controversy. He was asked to write an obituary notice about a respected Danish professor called Harald Hoeffding. Kaj Munk wrote a very unusual obituary notice where he was extremely critical of the newly dead professor. He called him among other things fussy and irritable, and called his ethics conventional and superficial (Munk 1931b). The readers were furious and wanted Kaj Munk fired.

But for Kaj Munk it was all-important to be truthful. The truth bites, scratches and strikes. The truth is not for cautious people, he said.

He wrote to *Jyllandsposten* to say that if they lost too many readers because of his article they were welcome to dismiss him. They did no such thing and probably gained more readers out of it.

He wrote for *Jyllandsposten* for several years but from the beginning he also wrote for many other newspapers. That same year he travelled to Berlin to visit the theatres. He wrote about his impressions in the newspaper *Politiken*. The trip was paid for with some money he had been given by The Danish Union of Journalists and his letter of response to them shows his ambivalence towards journalists. He wrote:

The damn journalists. I write a fantastic play, "An Idealist", which they criticize thoroughly. The wonderful journalists! God bless them! Then they gave me some travelling money. (Munk 1931a).

In a more serious moment he complained in a letter to *Jyllandsposten* that he didn't like journalism. It was too superficial and it took him too long to write the articles. But he didn't mind their fees.

In 1931 he became with one stroke a very successful playwright and therefore sought by the press. But he avoided them and wouldn't let them photograph him. That of course only made them hunt him all the more. However, ambivalent as he was about the press, he was a very prolific writer; during his career he wrote more than 600 articles. Apart from that he wrote a weekly sermon, plays, poems, hymns and books.

Early in 1932 he again provoked the readers of *Jyllandsposten* when he decided to modernize the Christmas Gospel making Joseph a bricklayer driving his pregnant girlfriend to the hospital in an old Ford. This resulted in demands for a case of heresy being brought against him.

He used his journalism and writing talent as a weapon in many different regards. In 1933 he threw himself into the defense of a priest called Otto Larsen. Otto Larsen had written a book wherein he suggested that The Gospel needed to be brought up to date if it was to interest modern society, and that the miracles of Christ were not to be believed. Kaj Munk did not agree with Otto Larsen, but he admired his honesty. So when the bishops threatened Otto Larsen with dismissal Kaj Munk fought for him. However Kaj Munk couldn't save Otto Larsen who lost his job. It is interesting to note that at the same time *Ordet* – Kaj Munk's miracle play – was being performed and debated by everyone.

Also in 1933 he went on a sabbatical and travelled for a couple of months through Europe to Jerusalem. He spent around ten days in each country and sent his impressions home in the form of travel articles to *Jyllandsposten*. When he returned home the articles were published as a book called *Vedersø-Jerusalem Retur* (1934).

These articles are the closest he ever came to traditional descriptive journalism. Of course he can't refrain from giving his own point of view, but still the articles give a very good impression of the conditions in Europe at the time.

In his article about Germany he quotes different people he has talked to such as an old lady, a priest, a scientist, an artist, a farmer and a worker. He also quotes the German newspapers, the prices in the shops and gives a quick overview of the political situation in the country and German foreign policy. Now this is very close to traditional journalism. About Hitler he is questioning, and describes him having a face alight with a lack of intelligence. Kaj Munk asks: Is he a keeper of the peace or is there the clink of knives in his background? (Munk 1934, 38).

His article about Austria also takes as its starting point the international political situation where Hitler is threatening to take over Austria. Kaj Munk is always good at leveling a complicated situation so that anybody can understand it. Here he does it by describing a flirtatious encounter between a young Nazi woman and an Austrian man, who supports Dolfuss (Munk 1934, 39-40). Otherwise the article is his impression of travelling through the Alps.

In his article about Rome under Mussolini he says that all laziness has been banned and everybody, even the dogs are wearing muzzles (Munk 1934, 46). His article about The Vatican is a masterful mix of fact and fiction as he lets Peter visit The Cathedral. Kaj Munk comments critically on the Catholic Church as he lets Peter laugh at the might and splendor of the Pope (Munk 1934, 59-60).

In several of the articles he puts forward the question: what is best, democracy or dictatorship? In 1933 his answer is: dictatorship by vote of the people. It is important to him that the German people voted Hitler into power. In the last article in the series he praises Hitler for the murder of Röhm (Munk 1934, 147). It is Kaj Munk's opinion that Hitler did it for Germany's sake and that he acted strongly and wisely.

His admiration for Hitler soon began to dwindle. In 1936 Hitler passed the discriminating special laws for Jews. Kaj Munk wrote an article called *Det kristenfiendske Tyskland* ("Germany – the enemy of Christianity") (Munk 1936) where he thoroughly criticized the laws. This resulted in a very strong reaction from Germany. The German Foreign Ministry complained to the Danish government. The Ministry for Church Affairs told Kaj Munk's bishop to order him to apologize to the Germans. Kaj Munk angrily refused and said: "From Jesus the Jew I have learnt that when one fights for a principle one will often have to be incautious, provocative and hurtful."

In 1936 he also criticized Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia/Ethiopia in articles and the play *Sejren*.

In 1937 he again used his journalism to fight for a priest. Pastor Laier in Hjallerup in Jutland used colorful language in church and he was also an accomplished sculptor. There had been complaints over his language and his art. He had among other things

made a large, very realistic sculpture of Jesus on the cross. The complainants didn't like that he showed Jesus disemboweled. Kaj Munk fought for Laier's right to tell the truth in all its horror. Laier was eventually dismissed. The final straw was when he fashioned sculptures of the disciples, modeled on the faces of the Parish Council. The foreman's face was put on Judas.

There is no limit to the different topics he wrote about. He wrote about the swimming girl Jenny Kammersgaard (Munk 1937a), he wrote obituary notices, and he wrote reviews. For example, he authored three articles about the communist Norwegian playwright, Nordahl Grieg, whom he had great respect for as an artist. He wrote about his play *Nederlaget* ("The Defeat"): "this is not communism it is art." (Munk 1937b).

His obituary notice about the famous Danish author Henrik Pontoppidan, who became an atheist, was very harsh. He wrote: "There are vessels of honor and dishonor, but Henrik Pontoppidan's vessel was empty." (Munk 1947).

In 1938 he was so provoked by the persecution of the Jews in Germany and Italy that he wrote an article in *Jyllandsposten* called *Aabent brev til Mussolini* ("Open Letter to Mussolini") (Munk 1938a) where he appealed to Mussolini to stop the persecution. The same year he also wrote the play *Han sidder ved Smeltediglen* ("He Sits at the Melting Pot") (Munk 1938b) that condemns the discriminatory treatment the Jews were being subjected to.

The plight of the Jews engaged him deeply. He received many different reactions from people after the "letter" to Mussolini. Some of the reactions were very critical of him. He answered them in another article ("Skyld eller ikke Skyld – Hjælp Dem" (Munk 1938d)) where he wrote about the situation of the Jews being so desperate that he was ready to ask anybody – even a thief or murderer – for assistance if that would help them. He wrote that in the name of human dignity and Christian charity we have to do all we can to help.

He wrote several articles criticizing the treatment of the Jews. When the Danish government stopped performances of "He Sits at the Melting Pot" in southern Jutland so as not to antagonize the Germans he wrote an article called "Cowardice will get us nowhere".

Kaj Munk expected the war to come to Denmark and warned of it several times. In May 1938 he confronts the issue of whether a Christian can go to war and makes a case against pacifism. His argument is that if one sees perversions being committed it is a Christian deed to kill the pervert (Munk 1938c).

In January 1940 he writes an article with the title *Dagen er inde* ("The Day has Come") in *Jyllandsposten* (Munk 1940a) with the same theme. He says that when you see innocence and weakness threatened with violence and murder God teaches us to defend them without further thought. He praises the Danes who at this time went to Finland to help them defend themselves against the Russians.

The occupation of Denmark in April 1940 made him very sad. But already in May he writes an article about the times being a test of the Danish people, that it is up to the people whether the country will become free again. In September he writes that something actively Danish ought to happen in Denmark now. He is violently against

the Danish policy of cooperation which he criticizes in an article (Munk 1940b) by writing “we have tried to buy life too cheaply”. From then on he writes very few articles as his access to the newspapers was censored. His message of resistance against the occupation was primarily expressed through speeches, poems, plays and sermons.

His plays had made the theater-going public sit up and listen but his articles were read by a wide spectrum of the Danish public and when Kaj Munk was murdered by Nazis on January 4, 1944 I am quite sure it was just as much because of his journalism as his art.

This book is also about censorship and more topically the Mohammed cartoons. Kaj Munk believed in ‘publish or perish’ and I am convinced that he would have defended the right to publish the Mohammed cartoons.

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Chapter Three:

Kaj Munk in and between the World Wars. Official and Political Censorship.

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I. Censorship related to written and unwritten rules.

Democracy emerged gradually in Denmark

It is often said and written that Denmark's constitution launched democracy and civic rights. However the transition to democracy as we understand it today was gradual. The Constitution of 1849 permitted men over 30 years of age to vote, provided they had their own household and never had accepted social security benefits from the government. Parliamentary, as form of democracy, was introduced in 1901.

It was not until 1915 that women were allowed to vote.

The Constitution's §77 explicitly secured freedom of speech:

Any person shall be entitled to publish his thoughts in print, in writing, and in speech, provided that he may be held accountable in a court of justice. Censorship and other preventative measures shall never again be introduced.

Kaj Munk came close to the truth about this when he said: "In Denmark, everything is taken into account – except the reality."¹

Examples of limits of freedom of speech

When Kaj Munk attended high school the general rule was employed that students did not speak at general assemblies. The original paragraph of the Constitution upheld that anyone on financial aid or not head of a household was not permitted to vote.

In Toreby Parish an incident occurred while Kaj Munk was a high school student at Nykøbing F. Katedralskole between 1914-17. Kaj Munk attended an election meeting in Øster Toreby School. It was here he opposed the then social democratic representative to the Parliament, Valdemar Olsen, in such a way that the then mayor of Nykøbing Falster, H. P. Jensen, because of the impact of this impertinence, asked Kaj Munk's school principal to have a word with his students to advise them that they were not welcome as active participants at election meetings (Nielsen 1984).

1 According to Arne Munk, son of Kaj Munk, quoted during 'provstikonvent' (convention of pastors) at Toreby Vicarage 24 November 1987.