

A temple of pipes

– a story about The Danish Pipe Shop in Copenhagen, Denmark

By Nikolaj Liberoth Nielsen, youngest son of Steffen Nielsen

The Danish Pipe Shop is more of an institution in Copenhagen as being one of the oldest businesses on the famous pedestrian street in the center of the city. The late Steffen Nielsen ran the shop from 1969 until January this year. Now, in the hands of Steffen's family, the shop still stands strong – mostly due to an ongoing love affair with the talent of Danish pipe makers.

Steffen Nielsen died on Monday the 31st of January this year on his way to work. He didn't make it to the shop and took his last breath 50 meters away from the front door. This was not only a catastrophe for me personally as I lost my father and my best friend, but also because of the quick decisions we as a family had to take on behalf of the pipe shop. One choice was to close it and/or sell it. Another choice was to continue it in the spirit of Steffen. We made the last choice.

The beginning

My father, Steffen Nielsen, moved his way as a clerk into the tobacco shops of Copenhagen in the 1960's. Soon he became the first man at The Company of Poul Hansen located at the famous pedestrian street, Strøget, and in 1969-1970 he took over the shop. He never changed the shop's name – probably because the old Poul Hansen still worked in the shop and Steffen didn't have the heart to remove Poul's name from the shop windows. In the 1960's the shop was more a wine and tobacco shop, but Steffen Nielsen had a hunch that there was 'something happening with pipes'. He then decided to convert the shop to what the famous pipe connoisseur and writer Paul C. Olrik called a "Temple of pipes". And Steffen was right about the pipes. In the 1970's and 80's there was a significant progress in the market of selling pipes.

Steffen then developed a close friendship and business relationship to the upcoming and very talented pipe maker Erik Nørding. Especially the style of Nørding's freehand or *fancy pipe* was and still is a huge seller. Due to the connection with Nørding, Steffen was introduced over the years to other Danish pipe makers like Poul Ilsted, Anne Julie, Tom Eltang, and later again Poul Winsløw, P. H. Vigen, and Manduela. Also Jens Tao Nielsen – who Steffen knew from the 60's as they both worked at Wilhelm Jørgensen, one of the leading pipe shops in those days – became a known pipe maker through Steffen's shop among others.

At that time Copenhagen was home to many pipe shops such as W. Ø. Larsen, Pipe-Dan, Bjørn Thurman, Remo Sørensen, Paul Olsen, and others. Steffen had two employees and furthermore three helpers. In total he had around five employees in the 1970's and 80's. And me, I was a little kid in the 1970's and often I went to the shop with my father on Saturdays. I remember it being a lot of fun, and I used to make forts out of pipe boxes and tobacco tins in the basement.

Cornerstones

Every shop had its own clientele, and their signature pipe makers. The cornerstones of Steffen's shop were pipe makers like Poul Ilsted, Jens Tao Nielsen, Anne Julie, Sixteen Ivarsson and of course Erik Nørding together with classic brands like Georg Jensen and Stanwell. Steffen had always had a lot of international customers due to central placement of the shop with five minutes to the amusement park Tivoli and one minute to the town hall square, but the core of the business is and has always been the Danish and Scandinavian customers.

It was of huge importance for Steffen that everybody felt welcome in his shop no matter what kind of pipe smoker or person you were – some are all about the taste and some are all about the design and finish. Therefore he always had all kinds of pipes available for sale – from the cheaper pipes to the fine hand carved all in the same shop. Nevertheless the volume in both pipes and lighters were significant and still is. For instance, for many years Steffen's pipe shop was one of the top sellers in Scandinavia of lighters from Dupont and Dunhill.

Financial crisis and non smoking campaigns

In the late 80's and beginning of the 90's the shop suffered from the general financial crisis and business was almost gone because of a governmental initiative. Very close to bankruptcy Steffen had to adjust his business to the new situation. The handmade pipes were declining and in general the Danes were hesitant to spend money and the tourist stayed away from Denmark. Also the stop smoking campaigns that had started during the 80's had had their effect on

the demand for pipes. At that time fine shops like Remo Sørensen, Pipe-Dan and Paul Olsen either closed or moved to other and less expensive addresses in the outskirts of Copenhagen.

Now pipe makers like P. H. Vigen and Poul Winsløw couldn't sell their pipes in downtown Copenhagen as their outlets all of a sudden was non existing, but Steffen – as one of the only shops left – let them into his shop. Today Poul Winsløw is one of the shop's most valued local suppliers and his workshop is 30 minutes away.

But Steffen still had to cut down on expenses and had to let the staff go, and for a long time he ran the shop by himself. When business got more reliable Steffen hired Niels Popp. One could claim that there were too many pipe shops to a declining clientele, so it was survival of the fittest. Steffen was tempted to change the course of the shop and turn it into something else. But today I think his love for the pipe business, the customers and respect for the remaining suppliers made him keep it as it was. I remember talking with him and he always said "But where would Mr. Hansen go to get his tin of special tobacco – where would he find it then?"

Regarding myself I slowly moved from the basement to the upstairs to stand side by side with my father behind the desk. This was an ongoing source of income for me – from I was 15 running errands and up in my twenties when I was a struggling student. When I was 18 I had met most of the Danish pipe makers and I knew most of what was to know about the pipe business – all thanks to my father.

A new era

In the year 2001 The Danish Pipe Shop got its own webshop after kind pressure from Niels Popp. Ten years ago this was a very demanding and time consuming process, but Steffen and Niels did enjoy some successes with the website over the years. Overall the internet gave a boost to the small pipe makers and in general it has been a positive asset to the world of pipes.

With that said Steffen didn't get any younger and around his 60th birthday the family started to pressure him regarding retirement. The incident of the early 90's recession had cost Steffen and his wife all their savings, so he was torn between his love for the shop, pension money, and a lack of time together with my mother. Due to those reasons he didn't invest time or money in the development of the shop or the website, and within the last years they lost their pace. Furthermore the year 2005 was a sad year. The biggest pipe shop on Strøget in Copenhagen, W. Ø. Larsen, had to close down. Even though it was a competing business close to Steffen's shop, he didn't celebrate at all. In his mind, this could mean a smaller supply of pipes and other tobacco related products in Denmark.

Turning 70 in 2009 Steffen's mind was set on selling the shop, and he would try to do so during 2010 and 2011. In the autumn of 2010 he suffered from a tough pneumonia and on top of this the busy month of Christmas was hard on his health. Still on Christmas Eve he was well enough to walk all the stairs up to my apartment on the 3rd floor, so we thought he was regaining his strength. This was also proven by the fact that he was in business as usual after new years in 2011. However, on Monday the 31st of January he took the train to the central station in Copenhagen – just as he had done it in 40 years. Passing the town hall square Steffen fell and died at age 71 very suddenly – just 50 meters from his much beloved shop.

Keeping the shop

The death of Steffen was of course a shock and a great loss for the family and our friends. But in addition to this we had to make a very important decision about the shop. Should we sell it or keep it? Closing it became very difficult as we felt that it represented Steffen and everything he loved for 40 years. The customers, the staff, the suppliers, and not least the pipe makers and the obligation to keep their craftsmanship alive. The support from all our friends and customers made the decision to keep the shop easy. But a growing turnover in the last couple of years made it even easier.

We have hired a new man behind the desk, Arko – a true pipe smoker and a student at the University of Copenhagen. Also behind the desk you'll find the grandchild of Steffen, Daniel. The bookkeeping is taken care of by Louise – Steffen's youngest daughter, and the management is now done by Niels and me.

We have focused on a complete makeover of the web shop, www.danishpipeshop.com, and the response is surprisingly good. And we are trying to gather some of the old pipe making friends such as Poul Ilsted, Jens Tao Nielsen, Tom Eltang, and as a new initiative we will try to get a hold on young pipe makers from Sweden and of course Denmark. The response to this initiative has been very positive.

Everybody agrees that the internet is here to stay and important for the business. Still we think it's even more important for the Danish pipe enthusiasts that we still have a real shop where you can see and feel the pipes. We hope to combine these two things and we will stay true to the concept.

For me personally it has been a good experience to be back in the shop – as much as my regular job allows me to. Monday to Friday I work 40-50 hours in my job as a Sales- and Marketing Director in the graphic industry, but I still get a kick out of selling a pipe on my shift on some Saturdays in the shop. And we still sell 20-40 pipes a day and an amazing amount of tobacco.

What I think is very surprising is that we start up quite a lot new pipe smokers. This is both women and men who want to change from cigarettes to pipes. This fact and a rising interest from the Asian markets and customers one could think that pipes will get a boost like cigars did some years ago. A funny fact is that a Danish Facebook group called "People who point with pipes are always right" (In Danish: "Folk der peger med piber har altid ret") almost has 90,000 fans!

Our own Facebook group "The Danish Pipe Shop" just came alive a couple of months ago – and we have new friends every day. Yet a new initiative on the scene of social networks, which probably would make my father turn in his grave. Still I wish he could be alive to see the kind words on our wall from customers all over the world.

I look forward to seeing you in the shop, webshop or as new friends on Facebook.

Kind regards
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