

## Kristina Comes Home

*Dennis Smith*

The first time I looked out over the North Sea was in the early 1960s as a young missionary. The occasion was at the fishing and resort community of Blokhus, where high sand dunes give a commanding view of the beach. As is usually the case, a stiff wind was blowing in off the water.

Some observers say that inhabitants of this part of the country lean to one side—as do the trees and bushes, actually. The climate has created a tough and hardy people. But it has also bred a desire to find greener pastures, which was the case in the mid to late 1800s when this area was fertile ground for the images of Zion planted by early Mormon missionaries. Between 1850 and 1900, over eighteen thousand Danes joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and immigrated to Utah.<sup>1</sup> The lion's share of them came from this area, called Vendsyssel. On a map of Denmark, you will see it as the triangular northern tip of the country—all of the region north of the provincial capital city of Aalborg.

My mother's grandmother, Kristina Beck, was one of those eighteen thousand. She left the country with her parents in the spring of 1868 as young girl of sixteen years, together with a younger sister, two younger brothers—one an infant of four months, and her maternal grandmother. Her grandfather, for unknown reasons, remained in Denmark. Kristina was never to see him again.

As I stood there on the sand dunes looking out on the sea that had been so mysterious to so many for so many years, an unexpected bond was forged with my great-grandmother, whom I had never known. She had passed away

---

DENNIS SMITH is a noted artist who lives in Highland, Utah. His numerous works include the sculptures in the Relief Society "Monument to Women" garden in Nauvoo, Illinois.

six months before I was born. Strangely, though, as the wind whipped over the marsh grass at my feet, I could almost read Kristina's thoughts from a hundred years earlier. She must have been torn between the world of her youth and the world of her passions out there beyond the horizon and must have known she would almost surely never see her grandfather again. Leaving Denmark must have been difficult. Though I didn't realize it at the time, that image of Kristina, balanced between two worlds, would remain with me and become a major focal point in my own life.

Returning from my mission in 1964, I resumed my studies in art at Brigham Young University with an emphasis on sculpture, strongly influenced by my exposure to the figurative art of Scandinavia, which had made a strong impact on me during my two and a half years as a missionary. After a year of graduate work, I applied for and was accepted for study at the Danish Royal Academy in Copenhagen in the fall of 1968, where I lived for a time in a tiny rooftop flat with my wife and our family then of two small children. We eventually returned to Utah and settled in Alpine, close to my grandfather's farm, where as a young child I had lived in the same log cabin that Kristina had homesteaded with her Danish husband, Louis, a hundred years earlier.

Somewhere along the way, my evolving feelings for the image of Kristina had resulted in my creating a small sculpture of her in bronze. Almost totemic, it showed her standing on the dunes as I had always pictured her in Denmark, hands at her side and her hair blown straight back by the unrelenting wind that had formed around my own consciousness as a young missionary.

This image was so pervasive to me that several years later I repeated it again, this time as a full-scale figure six feet in height, modeled in clay, but not cast in bronze for lack of funds. This project took place during the time when the new Museum of Art was being built on the campus at BYU. A close friend, Neil Hadlock, who was teaching sculpture at the university, was also involved in the design of and selection of work for the sculpture garden that was to be created adjacent to the museum. He was interested in acquiring a casting of the Kristina sculpture for the garden. A proposal was made that enabled the casting to be completed. When the museum garden opened, Kristina had a prominent place in the landscape along with the works of several other Utah artists.

Not long after these events, I was asked by Ford Stevenson, a former missionary companion, to serve on the board of the Danish Scholarship Organization, newly formed through a private endowment from Leo Jacobson for the purpose of developing positive relations between the people of Utah and Denmark. Through this endowment, prominent Danish cit-

izens were invited to Utah to speak at the university. When they came, Ford often asked me to come to the sculpture garden and tell them the story of Kristina.

Several years passed, and in about 1997, informal discussions began in the LDS Scandinavian community as to how the 150th anniversary of the first arrival of missionaries to Denmark might be commemorated. This subject became the locus of some discussion within the Danish Scholarship Organization; and during one such discussion, I proposed that I would be willing to donate a casting of the Kristina sculpture to be placed somewhere in Denmark if those in charge were interested.

The idea met with a positive response and was soon adopted by "Denmark 2000," a nonprofit organization that had been formed to develop some sort of commemorative event. The main question now was where it might be held.

In 1911, a group of Danish-born Americans instituted a yearly celebration called the Rebild Fest to commemorate Danish-American relations. It would be held every year on American Independence Day on a parcel of land set apart specifically for that purpose and located in the beautiful Rebild hills in the middle of Jutland, about thirty kilometers south of the city of Aalborg. The Rebild Fest has been held every summer since that time, even during the war years. It attracts as many as twenty thousand people each year and is the largest Fourth of July celebration held outside the United States. The Rebild Hills have, in fact, been set aside as Denmark's first and only national park, which is visited by about four hundred thousand people annually.

The Denmark 2000 group felt that Rebild would be a perfect setting for the placement of Kristina, and through connections generated by the Danish Scholarship Organization, the right people were contacted. When notified about the proposal, Harald Nielsen, the president of the Rebild National Park Society, was enthusiastically responsive to the idea; and plans were made to place the sculpture in a permanent location near the entrance of the park during the Rebild festivities in July of 2000.

But then some of the Danish visitors who had been to BYU and had seen the Kristina sculpture, among them Uffe Elleman Jensen, Denmark's prior foreign minister and one of the country's most prominent citizens, suggested they would like to see the sculpture in the capital city of Copenhagen, where it would receive even more exposure. It was felt that an appropriate place, such as adjacent to the harbor where emigrants had boarded ships to the states, might be acquired; and overtures to the city were made, with positive results.

But this development left promoters of the Rebild site disappointed, and

a potential conflict was in the offing. During a meeting of the board of the Danish Scholarship Organization, this conflict was discussed and solutions explored. It was even suggested that a second casting of the piece might be made, but that seemed redundant and inappropriate. At one point, someone suggested the idea of a different piece in both places, and all eyes turned toward me.

I said I would give it some thought, and I left the meeting perplexed but determined to try to come up with something. It didn't take long. On my way home from the meeting, I realized how I might be able to solve the problem—and I could hardly wait to start on it.

That night, I fashioned from wax a little sketch of a piece, no more than seven inches high, which came to me so simply that I at first distrusted it was the right thing. But when I looked at it in the morning, I knew it was what I wanted to propose.



*"Mormon Emigrant Family"  
sculpture at Rebild Park, Denmark  
Photo by Maurine C. Ward*

Loosely based on Kristina's family, the sculpture showed a father with his arms enfolded on one side around a young daughter and on the other side around his wife holding a small infant, much like Kristina's own four-month-old little brother who had died while crossing the Atlantic ten days before entering the harbor at New York and was then buried at sea. There is another

er brother about twelve years old at the front of the composition. All of them look forward with a look of determination and hope.

One final figure of an old woman, a grandmother, is included. But she is looking backward rather than ahead. Her gaze is directed toward the past—her husband and homeland left behind. The majority of her life behind her, she would never be able to adopt the new language. The sound, the scents, and the memories of her life would hang heavy for her through her final years. She would be the link between the past and the future, the carrier of heritage.

When I showed them the sculpture, the Denmark 2000 committee and, later, the supporters of positioning the sculpture at Rebild Park responded favorably to the family concept. A fund-raising effort was begun to cover the costs of casting, shipping, and installation. A program was developed that would allow people of Danish



*Grandmother*  
Photo by Maurine C. Ward

ancestry to have a cobblestone with the names of their Danish ancestors engraved, together with the name of the town or area they had emigrated from and the year of their emigration. These would be placed around the bases of the sculptures at Rebild and Copenhagen. The fund-raising program was successful and is still ongoing for those interested in having names of their immigrant progenitors added to the monuments.

The Mormon Immigrant Family sculpture was modeled in clay and cast in bronze over a ten-month period and was completed in the spring of 2000. Both the Family and Kristina sculptures were then crated and shipped by surface freight across the Atlantic, arriving in time for their unveilings in July.

The Family sculpture was unveiled first, late in the morning of 4 July, directly prior to the formal Rebild Fest program that took place in the after-



*Dennis Smith at the pre-unveiling for the  
Mormon History Association Convention  
Rebild Park, 29 June 2000  
Photo by Maurine C. Ward*

noon. The United States ambassador and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Swett, who are both members of the Church, were present for the unveiling. Apostle and Sister Russell M. Nelson, as well as many Danish and American dignitaries and a crowd of several hundred people, were also in attendance. Elder Nelson addressed the gathering. Mrs. Swett, the ambassador's wife, also spoke and unveiled the sculpture.

The sculpture of Kristina was unveiled two days later on the afternoon of 6 July at Amerikakaj in Copenhagen, the area of the harbor where for many years emigrant ships departed for the United States. Addressing the gathering in Copenhagen were former Prime Minister Uffe Elleman-Jensen, Stake

President Johan Koch, and Mayor Soren Pind. Elder Russell Nelson, whose ancestors came from Denmark, also spoke and unveiled the sculpture.

Arrangements were made for a large sailing ship to be positioned in the harbor directly behind the speakers. Immediately after the sculpture was unveiled, a group of local Church members dressed in period clothing boarded the ship, which then left the harbor as everyone sang the familiar Mormon hymn, "God Be with You Till We Meet Again," a moving tribute to our pioneer immigrant forebears. All those present will long remember the hymn and the occasion.

I was fortunate to be able to have many family members in attendance at both gatherings. All my children were there, together with their spouses;



*Unveiling of “Kristina” at Amerikaj in Copenhagen.  
Left to right: Mayor Soren Pind, Uffe Elleman Jensen, LDS Stake President Johan Koch,  
Ambassador Richard Swett, Dennis Smith, Russell M. Nelson, unidentified.  
6 July 2000*

*Photo courtesy of Dennis Smith*

and most special, my father and mother, who were both eighty-one, were able to make the trip. My mother, who grew up on the farm in Alpine with her grandmother, Kristina, was so touched by the pilgrimage that for the whole time while we were in Denmark, she could barely talk about it without tears welling up.

On the day before the unveiling at Rebild, we were able to travel north of Aalborg to the small town of Flade, where Kristina’s family lived at the time of their emigration in 1868, and also to Hjørring, from where my father’s great-grandfather had emigrated in 1854. By late afternoon, we were at the west coast, looking out on the North Sea from the same sand dunes I had stood on so many years before as a young missionary in 1962.

As the northern sun hung red on the edge of the sea for what seemed like hours, I watched my mother roll up the cuffs of her pants and wade into the surf. I couldn’t help but wonder what it all meant—in broader terms than even Kristina could have imagined almost a century and half earlier—



*Luana Smith  
wading in the North Sea  
Photo by Dennis Smith*

for her granddaughter to be here again, back at the place of Kristina's beginning.

That image of my mother standing on the edge of the sea seemed immensely profound to me at the time—reflecting what it means for us to be separated from loved ones beyond distant shores.

I watched my mother wade in the surf, and I wondered about birth and death and the more-mysterious thoughts we all harbor about crossing over—like Kristina must have wondered—and of the hopes we all hold dear of maybe going home someday to a place we struggle here to even comprehend, let alone remember.

### Notes

1. Ford Stevenson, "Church Marks 150 Years in Scandinavia," *LDS Church News*, 15 July 2000.



*Site of the Fourth of July Celebration at Rebild Park.  
Photo by Maurine C. Ward*





*Sculpture photos by Maurine C. Ward*