

Esteemed President of USJ, dear hosts, dear graduates

It is a great honour for me to be here with you today and be able to address you all.

Last week, on June 5th, my small country, Denmark, celebrated the 175th anniversary of its first democratic constitution. This constitution, which came about in 1849, granted the population freedom of expression, press, assembly, and religion.

It also granted the right to vote to everyone. Or, as a matter of fact, not to everyone. At that time, the right to vote was given to all men more than 30 years old, who were the head of their own household, who did not have a criminal record, and who did not receive any kind of poverty support. In fact, a major part of the population was not yet included: Poor people, maids and farm servants, criminals, and mentally ill people. And women. So, actually, only 15% of the population was given the right to vote.

As you can hear, the constitution at that time was not really what we would today call democratic. In fact, it would take almost 70 years before women were allowed to vote—this happened for the first time in 1920. So, you could argue that this was a flawed constitution.

Nevertheless, at the time there were some very visionary persons who were paving the ground for what was later to happen. Among the founding fathers of the Constitution was a guy named Grundtvig. He was a Lutheran Pastor and a politician, a big poet and an important thinker. He was quite controversial at the time, developing many new ideas. He saw that for the Danish people to become enlightened and empowered democratic and active Danish citizens, there was a great need for education. A big part of the population, especially in the countryside, only went to school for a few years before moving to serve at the farms as day workers or maids.

Grundtvig conceived the idea of what is today known as the Folk High Schools. At these schools, the farm workers, women and men alike, would come to stay for maybe three months in the low season of agriculture. They would listen to teachers telling them about the history of Denmark and the world, politics, philosophy, art, and democracy. And they would sing together. Every day, they would also do physical exercise—both mind and body needed strengthening.

An educational revolution started, and the Folk High Schools flourished all over the country. The farm workers, young women and men, would save whatever small money they had to be able to go just once to one of these schools.

One of them was my great-grandmother, Margrete, born in 1889. She had gone to a normal country school half-time for 7 years. She came from a quite conservative Christian family, and she did not know much more about the world than what could be found within 5 miles of the farm where she was serving. But then she managed to go 2 months to a Folk High School, and that changed her life. It opened her eyes to the world, she became engaged in society, politics and art, and she later brought up her 5 children as open-minded, curious and courageous human beings. I am sure she was very happy and proud when, for the first time, she was allowed to vote in an election.

This happened with families all over the country, and little by little, shway shway, a population of active Danish citizens emerged. The clue was education.

Many years later, after the Second World War, when Denmark had been occupied by Germany for 5 years, democracy had to be reinvented. At that time, another great thinker called Hal Koch, who was also both a politician and Lutheran pastor, wrote a book entitled “What is Democracy?”. His main point in this book was

that democracy is not just a set of political institutions and regular general elections. Democracy is a way of life. And it requires a culture of dialogue where everybody is free to express themselves. Where we can disagree, even struggle with each other, but always in a peaceful way.

This culture of dialogue does not come about by itself. It requires education. Each generation must educate young people to become strong, wise, empowered, active, democratic citizens. Otherwise, the democratic culture will disappear.

The thoughts of Hal Koch have become the founding text for the Danish Youth Council, which has taken on itself to be an umbrella organisation gathering all kinds of youth organisations, scouts, environmental organisations, sports associations, and political youth organisations in one room. The single aim is to educate all these young people as democratic citizens.

This started 175 years ago in Denmark. It has been a long journey, and those who started it never got to see the fruits of it themselves. But they were sowing important seeds for what was to come later. And the journey is not over yet. Even in Denmark we still have a long way to go, and democracy is frequently challenged. In fact, the journey never will be over. It is always our responsibility to keep democratic education alive, even if we are not going to live long enough to see the fruits of it.

And for this reason, I am really pleased and honoured to speak to all of you. As teachers, you have now become teachers of democracy and active citizenship. By going back to your schools, to your young people, you have the opportunity – and responsibility – to help sowing the seeds of democracy and active inclusive citizenship among your students and help them to become champions of dialogue, living democracy as a way of life. And remember, even if it looks very hopeless, and there are no signs that things are changing in a good direction, never lose hope. Each one of you can make a small difference, sow small seed for change that maybe not today, maybe in 20 years, will help pushing things in a better direction.

I congratulate each and every one of you on your graduation, and I wish you good luck and a lot of enjoyment on your journey of strengthening young people as champions of democracy and citizenship.

God bless all of you.

Thank you.