10

(Ane) Margrete Jensdatter: Old Age and Rural Poverty

(Ane) Margrete Jensdatter was born poor, grew up poor and died poor.[1] Tang Kristensen provided the following short biography of her in *Jyske Almueliv*:

> Margrete Jensdatter er født i Skødstrup nord for Århus den 22. september 1813. Hendes fader hed Jens Hansen og var skomager og husmand. Bedstefaderen var ansat ved hoffet, og hendes fader var legebarn med kong Frederik den Sjette. Så blev han oplært til skomagerprofessionen og rejste på håndværket. Altså kom han også til udlandet, og da det var svære krigstider, kom han med i mange krige. Omsider kom han hjem til Danmark, kom til Århus og bosatte sig så i Skjødstrup. Kammerherren på Vosnæsgård gav ham jord til at bygge på, og så blev han gift med kammerherrens kokkepige. Han stod sig godt med dem på gården, og havde hele tiden deres arbejde. Særlig udmærkede han sig ved at have mange bøger og være så god til at fortælle. Han fortalte så forskrækkelig mange historier om forgjorte

prinsesser og kunde en masse gamle viser. Nu har Margrete boet i Mejlby i 64 år. Hun blev gift, da hun var 30 år, med indsidder Kristen Jensen Ottosen, og har nu (1895) været enke i 26 år. Hun har haft 6 børn, hvoraf de 4 endnu er levende. Endnu er hun så rask, at hun fornylig gik til Randers og tilbage på én dag og var blot dagen efter noget stivbenet. I fjor var hun på høstarbejde 7 halve og 3 hele dage, og i år har hun været ude at luge roer og tage kløver fra. Hun har aldrig været syg undtagen én gang, kolden ryst hende nogle falle gange, og så forleden år, hun havde influensa. I mange år har hun gået omkring som hvedebrødskone, og går stadig på arbejde, når nogen vil have hende. Hun får nu 130 kr. årlig i alderdomsforsørgelse og kommer da ret pænt ud af det. Hendes viser og historier har hun også lært af omstrejfende kræmmere, der kom til den gård, hvor hun tjente, og lå om natten, for der havde de meget deres tilhold. Hun var jo så nem til at lære, og sad og hørte dem fortælle om aftenen, og om morgenen gav de hende desuden 4 skilling for at smøre deres støvler, så hun havde god lige af de folk. Hendes moder, Birte Nielsdatter døde, da hun var i hendes fjerde år. Flere af hendes æventyr er optegnede af Lærer J. Jakobsen i Mejlby og trykte i "Skattegraveren" (JAT vol. 6, 287-8).

[Margrete Jensdatter was born in Skjødstrup north of Århus on September 22, 1813. Her

father was named Jens Hansen, and was a cobbler and a cotter. Her grandfather was employed by the court, and her father was a playmate of King Frederik the Sixth. He was trained as a cobbler and traveled off to ply this trade. He wound up going abroad and, since there were a lot of wars at the time, he participated in a lot of wars. After a while he came back to Denmark, he came to Århus, and settled in Skjødstrup. The chamberlain at Vosnæsgård gave him some land to build on, and then he married the chamberlain's cook. He had good relationships with the people at the farm, and he always got work from them. He was unusual in that he had a lot of books, and was very good at telling stories. He told an incredible number of stories about cursed princesses and knew a lot of old ballads. Margrete has now lived in Mejlby for sixty-four years. She married day laborer (*indsidder*) Kristen Jensen Ottosen when she was thirty years old, and now, in 1895, she has been a widow for twenty-six years. She had six children, four of whom are still alive. She is still so healthy that she recently walked to Randers and back in one day and was only a bit stiff in her legs the next day. Last year, she worked seven half and three whole days during the harvest, and this year she has been out weeding beets and pulling up clover. She has never been sick, except for once when she was racked with shivers, and then the year before last she had influenza. She worked for many years as a

> wheatbread woman, and she still goes to work when people want her. She now receives 130 crowns a year in old age assistance and she comes out of that quite well. She learned her ballads and her stories from wandering peddlers who came to the farm where she worked, and they stayed there at night because they often visited there. She was so easy to teach and she sat and listened to them tell at night, and the next morning they'd give her four shillings as well to put fat on their boots, and so she got quite a bit out of those people. Her mother, Birte Nielsdatter, died when she was four years old. Many of her fairy tales were recorded by Teacher J. Jakobsen of Mejlby and published in *Skattegraveren.*]

Margrete's grandfather and father's nested biography, telling of their friendship with Danish royalty, sounds suspiciously like a fairy tale. It should be no surprise that Margrete, like her father, was remarkably adept at telling fairy tales. The closeness she suggests between her father and the six year younger King Frederik can also be seen as a symbolic expression of the warmth that many rural Danes felt for the King, for it was he who eliminated the much-hated *stavnsbånd.* It also makes for a good story. Beyond her father's skill at storytelling, it is worth noting his apparently extensive (at least by rural standards) library, an indication that reading was an important part of Margrete's early childhood.

Family Background

To say that Margrete came from poverty and remained mired in poverty her entire life would not be an understatement. But it would also be misleading. Poverty spanned a wide economic range, from the absolutely destitute to those simply getting by, and had many different faces. Margrete was certainly poor for much of her life, but by combining public old age support payments with occasional day labor in the fields and rent from lodgers, the last years of her life were on the more comfortable end of the spectrum of rural poverty. As far as income was concerned, Tang Kristensen felt that, "hun ... kommer da ret pænt ud af det" [she comes out of it quite well]. The same cannot be said for the beginning of her life, which was marked by economic and social uncertainty. Seen retrospectively, then, Margrete's economic and social trajectory traces a slightly upward curve. However surprising as it may sound, her life can be seen as an example of a best-case scenario for women born onto the lowest social and economic rungs in the mid-nineteenth century. For many others on these lowest rungs, the trajectory was plainly downward.

Piecing together Margrete's life is difficult, given the scarcity of records concerning her and her parents. But that very scarcity confirms the marginal nature of her existence, a marginality based both on gender and economic class. The best—and only records—that attest to Margrete's life, apart from Tang Kristensen's recordings of her stories, are the census and church book records. Like so many of her cohort, without the fortuitous intervention of Tang Kristensen, she would have been utterly forgotten, another one of the many creative yet poverty stricken individuals who lived their lives in anonymity and whose existence was barely recorded by the emerging bureaucracies of the late nineteenth century.

The very beginning of Margrete's life was difficult, born as she was to a single mother. Although "illegitimacy" was not uncommon in Denmark in the early nineteenth century, and did not carry with it overwhelming social stigma for either parent or child, it still meant poorer nutrition and fewer opportunities (later schooling, earlier work) for the child. Most women eventually married the father of their children (or a man who agreed to be named as the father of the children), as did Margrete's mother, and this could mitigate the most pressing aspects of the poverty associated with households headed by single women. In a new age where self sufficiency had become the norm, as opposed to the closely circumscribed communities prevalent during the manorial period a century earlier, it was impossible to run even the smallest household without at least two adults, and so even single parents with children were desirable spouses. Although most single parent households were headed by a woman, the high rate of maternal death in childbirth (a phenomenon that Tang Kristensen had experienced first hand) also meant that there were households in which children lived with a single father. Most men who found themselves in this position quickly hired housekeepers or entered into marriage agreements to bring stability to the household. It is unclear whether Margrete's father followed this pattern when his second wife Bodil died, or whether he soldiered on alone.

Margrete's father, Jens Hansen, was born in 1762, and spent most of his early adulthood as a hired hand. As with all young rural men, he was conscripted into the army, appearing in the 1787 census as both a hired hand and a "land soldat"—a conscript—living at a farm in Råby (Råby sogn, Gjerlev herred, Randers amt). Under the estate bondage (*stavnsbånd*), all men living in rural areas between the ages of four and forty were bound to their birth manor, and could only leave with the permission of the manor lord. They had to be listed on

the local enlistment rolls (*lægdsruller*) and young men were conscripted from these rolls into the national militia (*landmilits*), generally serving six to eight year stints. For every sixty barrels of assessed *hartkorn* value, the manor had to provide one soldier.[2] During their service, the men continued in their employ at the farms, but were required to muster for military exercises every Sunday at the church, prior to services. The soldiers were commanded by mercenary German officers who were renowned for being cruel and for screaming at their charges in barely intelligible (at least for the Danish conscripts) German.

Jens may have been conscripted as early as age twenty, around 1782, six years before the *stavnsbånd* was eliminated. In 1788, the conscription of soldiers changed from one based on manorial tax assessments to a more standard one based on population, but military service was still reserved only for peasants. This reform was part of a larger reform of the Danish military, and the number of conscripts jumped enormously to replace the mostly German mercenaries that the Danish Crown had employed previously to act as the first line army. Despite what Ane Margrete had said in her autobiographical comments, Jens would have escaped anything approaching combat during his six-year army stint, as Denmark was not involved in any major wars until several decades later. The only combat engagement of Danish troops during the last decades of the eighteenth century was in 1788, when the Danes were forced into battle with the Swedes at Kvistumbro near Gothenburg in Sweden. The battle lasted a single day and was the only battle of the war.[3]

Jens appears again in the 1801 census, at that point married to Maren Sørensdatter, his first wife. Neither the Skødstrup church books nor the Råby church books include a record of their marriage, and so it is possible that the two returned to Maren's birth parish, wherever that might have

been, to get married. Although the census records provide but scant information, Jens is listed as a smallholder without any land (*indsidder*) and a cobbler. Because he is no longer listed as a soldier, one can assume that he was no longer active in the military. Maren is listed simply as his wife. At the time, both were thirty-nine years old and they had no children, an unusual state of affairs for a married couple that old. It is possible, although not terribly likely given Jens's military service, that they had had children who by then were grown and had left home.

If the story that Margrete recounts about Vosnæsgård in her biography is accurate, Maren would have been the cook at Vosnæsgård, and the house that Jens owned would have been the one built on land he received from the manor. Another possibility is that Jens received his land from Vosnæsgård later, perhaps around the time that he married his second wife, Bodil Nielsdatter. His marriage to Bodil probably came soon after the death of Maren, if he followed the prevalent patterns of the time. Unfortunately, it is impossible to ascertain when Maren died. To confuse matters further, it is unclear when and in what capacity Jens served at Vosnæsgård. Since he owned a house when he lived with Maren, he probably worked as a day laborer at the manor, and not as a hired hand. It is also unclear when and how he learned to be a cobbler. He is listed in the census records as a cobbler (*skomager*) and not a clog maker (*træskomand*), a distinction of some importance, since cobblers were only allowed to work outside of market towns with special dispensation from the county commissioner (*amtmand*). Like many day laborers who had a skill, this sideline (*bierhverv*) would have provided him and his family with a crucial second or bridge income, leveling the otherwise uneven cash flow that came solely from day labor.[4]

Vosnæsgård was one of the largest local employers, situated nine kilometers to the east of Mejlby, and

approximately four and a half kilometers north of Skødstrup. It was a largish manor farm, and employed over thirty hired hands in 1845. It figures prominently in several of Margrete's story even though the family background that Margrete proposes—a background that is nearly impossible to confirm, yet one that includes fanciful brushes with not only the aristocracy but also royalty—is suspect, even if parts of it are plausible. The chamberlain (*kammerherre*) who gave her father the land for his smallholding could have been Poul Rosenørn Gersdorff (d. 1810), who was both diocesan councilor (*stiftamtmand*) and privy councilor (*gehejmekonferensråd*). A far more likely candidate benefactor is his successor, Councilor (*kammerråd*) Jørgen Mørch Secher, who purchased the manor in 1808. It was not unusual for a manor lord to give loyal employees land, in an effort to keep them nearby once they started raising families. A cynical interpretation of the partitioning of the manorial fields proposes that the landowners agreed to it in part to keep a large, well trained, yet poor, workforce close at hand. Secher did parcel out many of Vosnæsgård's fields, and this supports the theory that Jens received the land from him. Irrespective of the veracity of this part of Margrete's story, her earliest life history as she tells it should be seen as the narrative refuge of a child—and later an adult—who grew up without her mother amid abject poverty, but was steeped in the tales of an indulgent father eager to entertain his daughter with fanciful descriptions of distant lands, magical encounters, princes and princesses.

(Ane) Margrete was born on September 22, 1813 in Skødstrup town, the daughter of Bodil (Bodild; also called Birte) Nielsdatter and Jens. Bodil died only five years later, on July 17, 1818, at the age of thirty-three, when Margrete was only four years old. It is impossible to ascertain with any certainty when, or if, Bodil and Jens got married (although if they did get married, it was after Margrete's birth), and how

many brothers and sisters—as well as stepbrothers and sisters, if any—Margrete had, as the census skips several important years. [5] To complicate matters, the church books for Skødstrup parish are incomplete from 1809 to 1814, exactly the years in question.

Margrete's mother Bodil was born and raised in Skødstrup. She had an older sister Maren, who married and settled in Skødstrup, and an older brother Las, who probably died in childhood. By the time she was sixteen, her father had acquired a smallholding with land, probably as a result of the partitioning of the manor farms at the end of the eighteenth century. Her mother, however, was dead, her older sister had married and moved away from home, and her brother was either dead or working in a different district. To get a little extra money, she and her father took in an old, demented lodger, who was supported through the local poverty assistance rolls. One can only surmise that Bodil left home soon after her sixteenth birthday to work at Vosnæsgård as a kitchen girl, where she met Jens. In all likelihood, after the change in owners at Vosnæsgård, she and Jens moved into their new house built on land granted to them by Councilor Secher.[6] Since they were not yet married (and perhaps never got married), they probably had a legally binding engagement contract, which would allow them to live as husband and wife.

Although it is hard to piece together Margrete's early childhood, apart from the fact that she lived with her father, there are occasional pieces of information that help locate her in the social landscape. In 1828, she was confirmed in Skødstrup church, and was listed there as the "illegitimate" (*uægte*) daughter of cobbler and smallholder Jens Hansen and "the woman" (*fruentimmer*) Bodil Nielsdatter. She received a relatively high grade (*meget godt*) for her knowledge of the catechism, but only a fair grade (*godt*) for her behavior. That she managed to get confirmed suggests two things: first, that

she could read (not surprising since her father apparently owned many books) and second, that she must have been in regular attendance at the local school up through her fifteenth year. The church records also indicate that she was vaccinated against pox in 1818. Childhood vaccination was part of a nationwide effort to use the parish minister's local knowledge and social networks to insure that children were, if not well-cared for, at least protected against the very worst illness for which there was a vaccine, namely small pox. As with most poor girls her age, Margrete immediately entered the workforce after her confirmation.

The next bureaucratic record related to Margrete is a brief entry in the departure list (*afgangsliste*) for 1829 for Skødstrup parish, where the minister recorded that she had left the parish for Brandstrup in Hjortshøj parish; while she does not appear on the arrival list (*tilgangsliste*) for that parish, this is not surprising, as ministers were relatively lax in using these lists. Many ministers felt that the lists were a throwback to the *stavnsbånd*, and while they were an important resource for establishing questions of residency, particularly in regards to poverty assistance, the overworked ministers had little motivation for keeping these records as strictly as birth, marriage and death records (Nørr 1981).

Margrete apparently moved around quite a bit within the local district during the next several years, appearing in the 1834 census as a hired girl at a farm in Haarup in Todbjerg parish. Her future husband, Christen Jensen, was, at that time, a hired hand at another farm—this one a copyhold—in Balle, in Mørke parish. By 1840, Christen had moved to a farm in Mejlby, working for the widow Ane Pedersdatter on her farm, while Margrete had moved to the farm "Dyrgaard" in Mejlby, one of the larger farms in the parish, and worked as one of the six hired hands at the farm. Since leaving home eleven years earlier, she had become a weaver and accordingly, the

census listed her as a weaver (*væverske*) rather than simply as a hired girl (*tjenestepige*). This change in status represented an incremental step up on the lowest rungs of the economic and social ladders, and guaranteed Margrete a source of stable income.

By 1845, Margrete had met Christen, since the census lists her as living in Mejlby along with her son Jens Hansen Christensen, who was born on October 26, 1841. Her housing situation was clearly worse than before. She may have been forced off the farm where she worked once she had become pregnant, because the census listed her as living with a cobbler, his wife and their son who were receiving poverty assistance. It is likely that these two families were housed in one of the local poor houses (*fattighuse*), houses set aside by the parish for people in need as part of the emerging poverty assistance programs. These houses were ramshackle affairs, usually acquired by the parish in the aftermath of bankruptcies or foreclosures. Margrete was still listed as a weaver in the census, but clearly the birth of her child out of wedlock had started her on a downward trajectory even from her fairly low starting point. Importantly, Margrete was able to halt this downwards slide.

In the church records, Margrete indicated that Christen was the father of her boy, a recognition which followed strict dictates requiring women to reveal the identity of the father of a child born out of wedlock. This requirement was primarily intended to prevent these children from becoming the financial responsibility of the parish if at all possible. But this formal recognition also meant that the future for the little family began to look better, and Margrete and Christen were engaged in April 1846, most likely after Christen had been able to save enough money to acquire a house. On June 20, 1846, the two were married in Skødstrup and moved to a small house without land. The 1850 census lists Christen as

an *indsidder*, a term used for tenants and owners of small houses that had no land, and as a hired hand.[7] By this point, they had had another son, Jens Christensen, also out of wedlock. The church records in January 1846 note, "moderen ugift fruentimmer og væverske i Mejlby, som udlagde den samme ungkarl Christen Jensen som var fader til hendes første drengebarn" [the mother, an unmarried woman and weaver in Mejlby, who identified as the father the same bachelor, Christen Jensen, who was father to her first son]. The two boys were joined in 1849 by a sister, Ane Magdalene Christensen, in 1851, by another brother, Martinus Christensen and, in 1854, by yet another brother, Christian Christensen. Christian died in April 1855, only thirty-two weeks old. In 1857, the church records record yet another birth that, despite some ambiguity, appears to be another son, also named Christian Christensen. He too died, this time after only eleven weeks. While a tragedy for the family, the deaths of these two infant boys were not uncommon in rural Denmark. Poor nutrition, hygiene, and shelter among the poorest families guaranteed that the infant mortality rates would remain high up through the beginning of the twentieth century (Løkke 2002). Even though infant mortality was high, the emotional trauma of seeing one's children die was immense, and the sorrow associated with these little lives cut short resonates throughout Margrete's storytelling.

Despite the poverty and sorrow that marked their lives, the house afforded Margrete, Christen and their family a degree of stability, and acted as an excellent base from which the children could step up onto the next higher rungs of the economic and social ladder. The oldest boy Jens eventually became a master joiner, a major increase in his social and economic status. Tragically, the stability that Margrete and her family enjoyed with the house did not last, as Christen died in 1870 at the age of fifty-five. The church records give no

indication of the cause of death, but early death was not uncommon in the late nineteenth century, particularly among day laborers. Again poor nutrition, coupled to exhausting work in harsh weather, pervasive alcoholism, and infection all contributed to this state of affairs (Løkke 1997). By 1880, Margrete was living with her son Jens and his family in a house that he had acquired. It seems likely that her son had sold the house that his mother had inherited from her husband to purchase the new house, and had made a subsequent *aftægt* agreement with her. Records from the cadastral survey (*matrikelstyrelse*) reveal that, in 1874, Jens established a house with a miniscule valuation of 0-0-0-3/4. The house had a small garden, and the plot of land covered a total area of three hundred three square meters (approx. 3,030 square feet). The house was in the eastern part of the town, just west of the road, and is shown as house 32 (*matrikel 32*) on a map from 1876.

By 1890 Jens and his family had decided to move, perhaps to a more spacious house. Margrete found herself once again living with people who were not in her immediate family, but this may not have been a drastic turn for the worse. Her housemates were a joiner and his family, and it is likely that the joiner was one of her son's journeymen. His residence in Margrete's house probably reflected an incremental increase in her standard of living, since he would have paid her rent. By 1901, things had changed once again. The joiner and his family had moved out, and a day laborer and his family had moved in. At least with this change in lodgers, Margrete had someone her own age living with her, as the lodgers included an elderly widow like herself. Margrete died on May twenty-eighth, 1902, at the age of eighty-eight. According to the probate records, there was nothing in her estate to be distributed. Ownership of the house was not in

question, because her son Jens owned it, the result of the earlier *aftægt* agreement.

The Local Environment

Mejlby (Øster Lisbjerg district, Randers county) is six kilometers west of Hornslet in a hilly area. The highest point in the parish is the ninety-three meter high Bastruphøj, and there are several small forests along its eastern border. Mejlby is the only town of any considerable size in the parish and, at the time Tang Kristensen visited Margrete, even Mejlby was nothing more than a small collection of houses, a church, a co-op, and a few craftsmen. The settlement dates back to at least 1300, when it was named Methalby. The only noteworthy historical aspect of Mejlby is that Erik Ploughpenny's daughters inherited Mejlby as part of a larger estate after his death (~1263). This estate was later deeded to Øm monastery, a large and famous Cistercian monastery (Trap 1958, 1059-61).[8] Otherwise, Mejlby, like so many other small towns in Jutland, was of little economic, political, historical or religious note: it was neither a station town, nor a particularly noteworthy stop on the mail route; it was not an unusually productive center for agriculture; and it did not play a significant role in any of the myriad political changes that swept the country during the nineteenth century.

There were several large farms in the parish, but nothing approaching the large manor farms found in other parishes in Jutland. The largest farms included the *proprietær* farms Krannestrup (13.5 barrels of *hartkorn*), Ogstrup (13 barrels *hartkorn*), Bygballe (12.9 barrels *hartkorn*), and Kalstrup (between 6.5 and 17 barrels *hartkorn*). This last farm was partitioned in 1915. Other farms included Mejlgård and Dyrgård. The nearest manor farm (*gods*) was Rosenholm, in

nearby Halling parish.[9] Vosnæsgård in neighboring Skødstrup parish, however, figured to a much greater degree in Margrete's storytelling.

Vosnæsgård belonged, at the end of the fifteenth century, to Oluf Jepsen. By the turn of that century, the farm had passed into the possession of Ebbe Strangesen and, after his death, it passed into the ownership of his brother Claus Strangesen. In the seventeenth century, the farm came into the possession of the Gyldenstierne and Rosencrantz families, perhaps two of the most powerful aristocratic families in Danish history. In 1668, Eric Rosenkrantz at Rosenholm was granted an independent judicial district (*birk*) at Vosnæsgård, which continued to hold juridical power until 1819. By that time, the *birk* of Vosnæsgård and Rosenholm had been folded into one large jurisdiction. Vosnæsgård was a large enterprise: when Iver Rosenkrantz deeded the farm to Joachim Gerdsdorff, the farm alone was valued at seventy barrels of *hartkorn*. The value of the property that tithed to the manor was a whopping five hundred fourteen barrels. Later in 1808, when it was sold to Secher, this latter valuation had increased to six hundred twelve barrels. As mentioned, Secher partitioned the farm, and when he sold the farm to Ditmar Frederik Ladiges in 1811 for 550,000 rixdollars, the valuation of the farms tithing to the manor had dropped by more than half to two hundred seventy-four barrels.

Together with Todbjerg parish, Mejlby parish constituted a pastorate under the deanship of Øster Lisbjerg. From 1884 until 1914, the dean was Jørgen Gad Olsen Brix, who also served as the minister in Skjødstrup parish. He was deeply involved in questions concerning education, and was a strong and outspoken minister (Grohshenning and Hauch-Fausbøll 1932, 127-8). Although Margrete was confirmed in Skjødstrup, it was long before Brix's tenure. Far less is known about the ministers in the parish who presided over her birth

and christening (Henrik Peter Rattrup, minister 1779-1822) and her confirmation (Barthold Larsen, minister 1822-1835). The same also holds true for Mejlby, a call that seemed to be of little or no attraction. When Margrete arrived in Mejlby around 1840, the minister was Jacob Hee (minister 1828-1853). He was succeeded by Frederik Christian Gleerup Haar (1853-1867), who was succeeded by Carl Peder August Kofod (minister 1867-1881). The town church, old as it is, was of little note and was more or less completely rebuilt during Kofod's ministry. The church was rededicated in 1874. Kofod left Mejlby in 1881, and was succeeded by H. Vilh. Bülow, who left in 1890. Kofod and Bülow were both from wealthy families. From 1890-1903, the minister was H. Andreas Gerhard Gad, a grocer from Helsingør.

Mejlby, unlike many small rural towns, had a school dating back to the early eighteenth century. In 1717 and 1718, King Frederik IV established a series of "cavalry districts" (*rytterdistrikter*) on the royal estates. Each of these districts, in turn, was to have a school for the children of the peasants living on the estate. Since Mejlby belonged to one of these estates (Dronningborg in Randers county), it became the site of one of the two hundred and forty "cavalry schools" (*rytterskoler*). In Dronningborg rytterdistrikt, there were a total of ten schools, the first four established in 1722 (Spentrup, Borup, Gimming and Harritslev), and the next six established in 1723 (Ødum, Voldum, Raasted, Hallendrup, Kristrup and Mejlby) (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 127). The last of the teachers for the local cavalry schools, Jens Sørensen, became the first teacher for the local public school (*folkeskole*) once the school law was passed in 1814. He remained as teacher in Mejlby until 1865, and was followed by Jens Jakobsen, who stayed in the post until 1907.[10] This succession is noteworthy since it means that only two teachers taught all the youth of

Mejlby during the most tumultuous century in modern Danish history.

The constancy of teachers in the school also meant that one of the most contentious issues for most parish boards was essentially absent in Mejlby. In fact, the only real issues that the teachers brought before the board during the course of the century concerned the repair and modernization of the schoolhouse (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 134-8). The local parish board, consequently, could concern itself with other matters.

The parish board, like all parish boards, was established in the wake of an 1841 ordinance that required that local governing boards (initially called *sogneforstanderskab*) be established in each rural community. The Mejlby-Todbjerg board was, like so many of these boards, comprised almost entirely of farm owners. In addition, it had two ex-officio members, Pastor Hee from Todbjerg and Agent Nyholm from Skaarupgård, one of the largest manor farms in Todbjerg parish. Even though the board's opinions were strongly weighted toward the landowners, the discussions and the decisions of the board had significant impact on the contours of daily life for everyone in the parish, including day laborers and craftsmen such as Margrete. She may not have been able to influence the board members directly, but decisions they made on questions of infrastructure, taxation and assistance were certainly felt in her daily life, some for the better, and some for the worse. In turn, her stories reflect an awareness of these decisions, reveal her opinions on these changes in the social and political landscapes and may, to some degree, have fed back into the decision making process. Politicians are loath to ignore the sentiments of their local constituents.

One of the more pressing matters for the parish board—as it was for all parish boards—was the disposition and

organization of poverty assistance in the parish (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 105). The parish districts were largely constrained by national legislation concerning the parameters of local poverty assistance, yet discussions of whom qualified for assistance and the nature of that assistance were often debated by the parish board. The decision of whether to appoint a beggar bailiff (*tiggerfoged*) also accrued to the parish board (Jørgensen 1940). Although protocols from the parish board for the last decades of the nineteenth century were lost in a fire, the protocols for the first three and a half decades, through 1878, still exist. These protocols offer an interesting glimpse into the pressing issues of the day for small towns such as Mejlby and scores like it around Jutland.

On December 2, 1859, the parish board agreed that the total amount of poverty assistance was to be set at four hundred thirty rixdollars or approximately six hundred forty-five crowns. In addition, in-kind donations of grain, the most significant component of poverty assistance in mid-century, were calculated against assessed *hartkorn* value. For farm owners, each barrel of *hartkorn* was taxed one quarter measure of rye and one quarter measure of barley. In addition, it was assessed a monetary tax of three marks. For smallholders, the taxation was set at eight shillings per measure of *hartkorn*. For those who did not have property, the following rules were established: craftsmen and people with other commercial undertakings were evaluated as best possible; for hired hands, farmhands were taxed one mark, hired girls and muckers twelve shillings and hired boys eight shillings (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 100-101). In addition to the local monetary and in-kind collections, Jens Iversen Lang established a fund of five hundred crowns for the local poor in 1844. In 1895, Niels Jensen and his wife established a secondary fund of one thousand crowns. Neither of these funds was significant by itself (even though taken together they more than doubled

the parish monetary set-aside), but the funds did offer the parish flexibility in distributing monetary assistance. Despite the charitable intentions of the donors, the funds also reflected just how small the amount of private philanthropy dedicated to poverty assistance really was, and echoed the general consensus in parliament that private support would always be inadequate to address the needs of the poor.

In mid-century, the board was focused on two major events: first, the quartering of occupying troops, which placed a significant strain on the local farmers, and second, the dissolution of villeinage.[11] The local parish board, along with a royal agent, was charged with the valuation of the villeinage and the appropriate monetary compensation to the manor farms for the loss of this work. Other items for the parish board included discussions of noise ordinances since young men and women were apparently disturbing the peace at night (1859), a request from the district that Mejlby purchase firefighting equipment (a request that the parish board denied), and a request by the minister for more sports fields near the schools (1859) (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 100).

The parish board was also charged with the valuation of real property for taxation purposes, an undertaking that led to numerous complaints from local citizens in 1865. The actual taxation of various people in Todbjerg-Mejlby provides interesting insight into wealth distribution in the area—the highest taxed were Forpagter Helms (1900 rixdollars) and Proprietær Kabell at Edelslund (1850 rixdollars) (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 102-3). The miller at Todbjerg mill was taxed four hundred forty rixdollars, the tailor three hundred thirty rixdollars, while the farmers who did not reach the level of *proprietær* or *forpagter*, were taxed in a range from four hundred rixdollars to one thousand rixdollars.[12] These highest taxed individuals were a small handful of no more than seventeen individuals. In 1873, taxation was rationalized and the

previous emphasis on property tax was shifted more toward income tax. Wage earners were taxed at a rate of one percent, while landowners were taxed at a rate of seven rixdollars, two marks per barrel of assessed *hartkorn* value (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 103).

Transportation infrastructure was one of the parish board's most important topics of concern. In 1841, national legislation was enacted that led to sweeping changes in the way that roads were built and maintained. Prior to that time, all peasants were required to work on behalf of the local municipalities to develop, repair and maintain the roadways. With the new ordinances, this work was contracted out to the greatest extent possible and, as a result, larger scale and more efficient projects could be attempted. In 1843, the Mejlby parish board decided that many of the local main roads needed significant improvement, and they launched a campaign to widen them, cover them with gravel, clean the drainage ditches and build stone curbs. Along with improvements to the roads such as these, the advent of rail transportation and the extension of rail lines into Jutland represented a major change in transportation infrastructure.

The rail line built north and east from Århus toward Grenå in 1876 passed a good seven kilometers to the east of Mejlby. This routing was not initially going to be the case. In 1874, the parish board was invited to participate in discussions concerning the route for the rail line, and they sent as their representative Minister Kofod. The parish council had offered to pay five thousand rixdollars toward the establishment of a line from Århus to Ryomgård on the condition that a station be built in Todbjerg. In 1875, the rail commission called the first of these obligations, but the Todbjerg-Mejlby parish board responded that they would only pay the promised monies if their conditions were met. Numerous private citizens had also offered funds to the

commission on a similar basis. The rail commission balked at the parish board's request, as they had no intention of building a station in Todbjerg. Interestingly, the private individuals who had pledged funds attended a meeting to arbitrate their dispute with the railway commission, and several of them agreed to fulfill their obligations even though a station was not to be built in Todbjerg (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 104-5).

The decision by these individuals to support the rail line highlights the at times divergent interests of the community versus those of individuals. While it made little economic sense for the parish to support a line that skirted the parish, farmers on the eastern side of the parish might have felt that support of the rail line could still give them a significant economic advantage. It is also possible that the ones who capitulated to the commission's demands were cowed by its authority. The railway commission probably argued that a commitment was a commitment, conveniently overlooking their own breach of trust. In any event, the decision of the railway commission to situate the rail line and the station several kilometers to the east had a long-lasting negative impact on the development of the parish.

Rural poverty

Although only a few miles separated Mejlby and Hornslet Mark, where Kirsten Marie Pedersdatter lived, there was a world of difference between the two women's lives. For much of her life, Margrete was perched precariously on the border between self-sufficiency and real poverty, a borderline that she crossed only once during her life, but one that must have felt ever present.[13] Even when she could support herself, her standard of living was low. Whether or not she carried the

stigma of being a recipient of parish poverty support, like all day laborers, she was poor.

The life of a single mother, reliant on day labor and piecework was grueling and terrifyingly insecure. Although Margrete did not give a detailed account of her everyday life to Tang Kristensen, one can interpolate from other contemporaneous accounts, particularly the memoirs of Karoline Graves (Graves 1921 and 1978), what it must have been like. The workday started early and ended late—in the summer, it stretched from sunrise to sundown. During harvest time, Margrete would work in the fields, mostly binding sheaves of newly harvested grain. At other times of year, she could rely on work helping with the planting or, once beets had become a common crop, weeding (Østerbye 2000, 53). Though threshing was reserved for men, Margrete could count on a fair amount of work even during the winter months since she was a weaver.[14] Like most weavers, she probably had agreements with several nearby farms, particularly since most hired hands (as opposed to day laborers) were paid primarily in cloth.[15] Margrete only appears to have landed on the rolls of the local poverty assistance board once in her life, a time when she was unmarried but already mother to her first child. The census for 1845 lists her living with an elderly couple and their son, who are listed as "*fattiglem*," a standard designation for those living on poverty assistance. The house is almost certainly a parish poor house (*fattighus*), and Margrete's presence there suggests that she had been housed there as well. Interestingly, she was not listed as a welfare recipient (*fattiglem*), and so she was probably supporting herself and her child by weaving, only receiving housing from the parish. Since she had to care for her child, she would have had little opportunity to hire herself out as a day laborer.

Up through the nineteenth century, poverty legislation was a topic of considerable debate in the parliament and the parish boards. One of the main topics of these debates concerned marriage age. Numerous proposals were floated to legislate a minimum marriage age as a means to combat the increasing phenomenon of poor families headed by young men who did not have the experience, capital, or land necessary to support their families. The legislators recognized the delicate balance between the social reality of young men and women falling in love and having children on the one hand, and the inability of young men (primarily) to secure enough capital to buy a smallholding and attain a degree of economic independence on the other hand (Jørgensen 1940). Members of parliament were keenly aware that if the minimum marriage age was set too high by legislation, the rate of illegitimate births would increase, and precipitate a worsening of exactly the problem that they were trying to mitigate. The debates concerning this problem continued long up through the century, with the inadvertent result that the number of illegitimate births remained relatively stable, and the underlying problem of unwed mothers who required assistance was not addressed in a consistent or substantive manner.

Single women with children were singled out as a particularly vexing problem, with almost everyone recognizing that these women needed compassionate and substantive assistance. This recognition of the problem and the subsequent attempts to address it were surprisingly recent additions to the debates over poverty, despite nearly a century and a half of legislation dealing with poverty assistance. Poverty assistance laws were first enacted in 1708. These early laws eliminated the earlier reliance on begging as the primary form of assistance and instituted a new policy of public assistance. But the laws were ineffective as they relied on

voluntary donations and private philanthropy. Nevertheless, the laws did set a precedent for the general contours of poverty assistance up through the early twentieth century. Most important among these precedents was the overriding concept of local assistance for the local poor (Jørgensen 1940, 5).

With the profound changes in economic organization presaged by the land reforms and the elimination of estate bondage, coupled to the increasing call for local input into domestic affairs, the Crown agreed at the beginning of the nineteenth century that the poverty assistance laws needed reform. In 1803, a new poverty assistance law was promulgated. Jørgensen sums up its impact as follows:

> Det vedblev kommunens pligt at forsørge sine egne fattige, og man fastholdt at samfundet måtte komme alle til hjælp, der ikke selv kunne ernære sig. Endvidere skaffede man de nødvendige bidrag til denne forsørgelse ved at udskrive en særlig skat, der tilsyneladende var en frivillig gave, men i virkeligheden en tvungen bidrag, hvis størrelse fastsattes af det offentlige, og som kun inddrives ved udpantning (Jørgensen 1940, 40).
>
> [It continued to be the community's responsibility to care for its own poor, and it was established that society had to help all those who could not support themselves. In addition, the necessary funds for this assistance were raised by instituting a special tax. This contribution was supposedly a voluntary gift, but, in reality, it was an

> obligatory contribution, the size of which was determined by the authorities, and which could be collected by lien.]

The shift toward taxation as a means for guaranteeing a minimum revenue stream was a siginificant change, and had an immediate positive impact on the plight of the poor.

This initial law, however, turned out to be inefficient and, during the following decades, it was repeatedly brought up for revision, debate and attempted overhaul first by the assemblies of the estates of the realm (*stænderforsamlinger*) and later by the democratically elected parliament. When the constitution was drafted, the right to poverty assistance was included in the very body of the document: "Den, der ikke selv kan ernære sig eller sine, og hvis forsørgelse ikke påhviler nogen anden, er berettiget til hjælp af det offentlige, dog mod at underkaste sig de forpligtelser, som loven herom påbyder" [Whomever cannot support himself or his family, and whose support does not accrue to anyone else, is entitled to support from the authorities, although on the condition of accepting those obligations that the law sets forth] (chapter 8, paragraph 89). Despite these constitutional guarantees, there was little agreement on how to enact them. On the one hand, there was a widespread willingness to combat the worst aspects of poverty. On the other hand, there was an overly cautious approach to the "free rider" problem, informed by an underlying suspicion that the poor were either out to game the system or suffering from some form of moral or spiritual laxity. Accordingly, the poverty laws were remarkably strict, and often included severe limitations on civil rights in return for the meager assistance that was offered.

One of the earliest, most profound changes to the poverty laws concerned the marriage rights of those who had received poverty assistance. In 1824, on the basis of a divorce

involving a member of the military, the law governing marriage was amended so that any person who had received poverty assistance and had not repaid that assistance, had to seek permission from the local poverty assistance board before getting married. In the words of the law,

> …ingen af dem, som ville indlade sig i Egteskab, nyder eller fra den Tid deres Forsørgelse som Børn ophørte, har nydt nogensomhelst urefunderet Understøttelse af Fattigvæsenet, da i modsat Fald Egteskabet ikke kan tilstædes, med mindre den administrerende Direktion for Fattigvæsenet, naar Mandspersonen er forsørgelsesberettiget i Kjøbenhavn, og ellers Sogne-Commissionen for det Fattigvæsen, hvori Manden er forsørgelsesberettiget, erklærer, at der for Fattigvæsenets Vedkommende intet findes imod samme at erindre (Jørgensen 1940, 55).

> […none of those individuals who intend to enter into matrimony who are receiving or, since the cessation of childhood benefits, have received any form of non-refunded support from the poverty assistance board, may enter into such a matrimonial arrangement unless the administrating directors of the poverty assistance board, in cases where the man is eligible for support in Copenhagen, or otherwise the parish commission of the poverty assistance board in the community where the intended man is eligible for support, declares that the poverty

> assistance board has nothing against said union.]

If Margrete was a recipient of poverty assistance in 1845, the law would certainly have affected her ability to marry a year later in 1846: either she or Christen would have had to repay the obligation. The law was essentially repealed in 1857, a reform that marked the beginning of a series of debates over poverty assistance in the latter part of the century. These debates eventually led to a more progressive and nuanced approach to the complex problems of both rural poverty and an emerging urban poverty that accompanied the reorganization of the social and economic landscapes.

One of the most important changes to poverty assistance that sprang directly from these early debates in the 1860s and 1870s came at the end of the nineteenth century in the form of the old age assistance law of April 9, 1891 (*alderdomsunderstøttelsesloven af 9. april 1891*). The law was premised on an extension of the existing poverty assistance laws, and its general thrust was that any one over the age of sixty who needed help could receive public assistance without any of the impact on civil rights or property rights that followed from normal poverty assistance (Jørgensen 1940, 209). While Margrete may have missed out on some of the earlier reforms to the poverty assistance laws, she was more or less right in time for this one (give or take eighteen years). As a result, her old age was one that, "hun kom ret pænt ud af" [she came out of quite well].

As Margrete got older, her economic trajectory nudged upward, and she got further and further from the world of the destitute. She was no longer raising small children, but rather running a household along with her husband. As her children grew and left home to work or to learn a craft, the economics of the household stabilized. But the contours of

her daily life probably changed little, and the type of work she did remained constant. She continued to weave during the winter months and assist in the running of a very small farm during the other months. According to her own accounts, she also continued to work as a day laborer during the harvest, planting and weeding seasons.

When her husband died in 1870, Margrete's financial status was thrown once again into turmoil, although her son the joiner clearly came to her aid. It is probably at this time that Margrete took up work as a wheatbread woman (*hvedebrødskone*).[16] As standards of living inched upward, and as the commerce laws were relaxed, bakeries began springing up outside of the market towns. While many of these were associated with mills, others were not, and were established in small villages such as Mejlby. In either case, these rural bakeries had to rely on a distribution network to get their bread and cakes to customers, and this is where the *hvedebrødskoner* came in. By 1885, Mejlby had its own bakery and the need for women to bring the bread and cakes to customers—or to sell it door-to-door—was on the rise. Margrete, who clearly was not afraid of hard work, became one of many women who either supplemented their income or derived all their income from this contract work. Because of her excellent health, she was also able to continue to work in the fields. When Margrete died soon after the turn of the century, she had managed to pull herself out of poverty, support herself and her family, and sidestep an early death, the constant companion of the lowest classes. Still, Margrete's life had no fairy tale ending.

Overview of (Ane) Margrete's Repertoire

Certain features of Margrete's repertoire stand out. She was a prolific teller of folktales, and she is included in

Holbek's study of the fairy tale (1987, 126-7). Many of her stories cross the generic divide between folktale and legend, and it can be difficult to make clear genre distinctions between some of them. She was also a good singer, although her ballad repertoire was by no means extensive.

In her legends, mound dwellers and elves play a prominent role. She also tells several stories that include the helpful guardian spirit, the *nisse*. Witches and ghosts also figure prominently in her stories, and their threat is usually counteracted by the local minister. Margrete also told stories in which cunning folk played a major role, although her attitude toward cunning folk was ambivalent. She told several stories that included extraordinary details about folk beliefs and practices. She did not tell many humorous stories, but rather tended to tell stories that explored aspects of the harshness of life in rural areas. Her fairy tales and stories of buried treasure might have offered her a narrative respite from the conditions of everyday life.

A statistical analysis of the legends in her repertoire reveals only a few departures from what one would expect for an elderly widow from the lowest economic classes of rural society (Tangherlini 1994). In particular, her legends tend to end with a positive resolution with far greater frequency than her cohort (58% as opposed to 37.8%). This positive narrative outlook aligns with the positive resolutions that one finds in fairy tale, the genre which she was most adept at telling. Ministers also appear in her legends with much greater frequency than one would expect (25.8% as opposed to 14.8%). While she used place names less frequently than other legend tellers (but only marginally so), her use of personal names was significantly greater than most (54.8% versus 31.7%). Most other elements appear with a frequency that either is close to that of the repertoires of her cohort, or

so low for all informants as to be hard to measure with any statistical precision.

First and Second Meetings—1889

Tang Kristensen first met Margrete on a trip in late 1889. The trip, which lasted from October twenty-fifth through November twenty-first, was another of his major field trips. Visiting nearly forty-five towns, his route described a rough figure eight along the east coast of Jutland, stretching from Kolding to Århus. He collected from forty-three informants, whose stories span one hundred and eighty-five pages of field notes.

Tang Kristensen was introduced to Margrete by a Teacher Jacobsen in Mejlby, who had previously sent various recordings from Margrete for use in the journal, *Skattegraveren.* Although Margrete was a good singer and storyteller, she was not the most prolific storyteller that he encountered on the trip. Tang Kristensen did mention that she was pleasant, and that she could sing ballads: "Han var dog meget flink og viste mig hen til den gamle Margrete Jensdatter, der boede i den søndre Ende af et gammelt Hus i Byen. Af hende havde han faaet nogle Meddelelser, som han havde sendt mig, og det var særlig derfor, jeg gik til Mejlby. Hun var helt flink at have med at gjøre, saa jeg fik af hende baade Historier og Viser" [He was nevertheless quite nice and showed me the way to old Margrete Jensdatter who lived in the southern end of an old house in town. He had gotten some recordings from her that he had sent me, and it was in fact because of that that I had gone to Mejlby. She was very pleasant to deal with, and I got both stories and ballads from her] (MO vol. 3, 281). His second meeting with Margrete came several days later during the same field trip: "Dagen efter var jeg ude hos Rasmus

Peter Mortensen, der var Røgter paa Dyrgaard i samme Sogn, og han var helt flink til at fortælle, men havde jo ikke godt Tid til at sidde over mig. Jeg kom da tilbage til Byen og var atter inde hos gamle Margrete, der igjen havde en hel Del at meddele mig" [The next day I was out at Rasmus Peter Mortensen's place, he was a feed master at Dyrgaard in the same parish, and he was quite willing to tell, but he did not have much time to sit with me. So I came back to town and once again went in to old Margrete who once again had a great deal to tell me] (MO 3, 281).

The two sessions, separated only by a day or two, represent a fairly exhaustive snapshot of Margrete's repertoire at the time. The first session encouraged Margrete and, despite a rough start, a rapport developed between her and Tang Kristensen. The second session started with greater ease and Margrete was more talkative than she had been during the first session.

Third Meeting—1894

Five years passed before Tang Kristensen's third meeting with Margrete in July, 1894. Describing this meeting, he writes, "Derfra gik jeg over til Mejlby, hvor jeg naturligvis var inde at hilse paa Lærer Jakobsen, og saa gik jeg hen til Margrete Jensdatter, der boede i den søndre Ende af et langt Hus. Hun var nu 81 Aar og var helt god til at fortælle. Hos hende fik jeg da nogle Sagn og et Æventyr, samt Træk af Almuelivet" [From there, I walked over to Mejlby where I naturally went in to greet Teacher Jakobsen, and then I walked over to visit Margrete Jensdatter, who lived in the southern end of a long house. She was eighty-one years old now and was a very good storyteller. At her place, I got some legends and fairy tales along with some descriptions of

peasant life] (MO vol. 4, 31). The trip was a short one by his standards, likely because it was during the summer months when people had less time to sit and talk to him, his route describing a small southward loop from Hadsten, south to Århus. The trip lasted no more than a week (MO vol. 4, 31), during which time he visited only six places, and collected from only seven informants.

Fourth Meeting—1895

Tang Kristensen's last meeting with Margrete came during his first photographic excursion with Peder Olsen in August, 1895. It was on this first photographic "shake down cruise," that Olsen and Tang Kristensen also photographed Rasmus Kjær and his sister, Kirsten Marie Pedersdatter. Tang Kristensen made no mention of collecting from Margrete during this visit, but did mention that "paa hende blev der ofret 2 plader" [We sacrificed two photographic plates on her] (MO vol. 4, 71).

Notes

[1] Ane Margrete appears to have dropped the use of the name "Ane," and accordingly she is referred to throughout this chapter as Margrete.

[2] The original value was twenty barrels of *hartkorn*. This was changed in 1733 with the establishment of the *stavnsbånd* to sixty barrels.

[3] The battle took place on September 29, 1788. If Jens Hansen was conscripted in 1782, and only served one six-year stint, he could not have participated in that battle. It was not

uncommon for soldiers to be reenlisted during the *stavnsbånd* for up to twenty years, but this could not have applied to Jens, as the *stavnsbånd* was eliminated by the end of his first tour of duty, and the military regulations were reformed.

[4] For an additional discussion of the life of a day laborer, and the importance of secondary income, see the the chapter on Jens Peter Pedersen.

[5] The census was taken in 1787, before Jens was married, again in 1801, and then it was suspended from 1801 until 1834.

[6] Assuming that the story that Jens received land from Vosnæsgård was accurate, and the theory that the land was granted as part of the partitioning of the manor by Secher is correct.

[7] The annotation of *indsidder og tjenestekarl* is a bit surprising. One would have expected him to be listed as an *indsidder og daglejer*, as most *tjenestekarl* lived at the farm they served.

[8] See also the discussion of property being deeded to Øm monastery, particularly Fuldbro Mill, in the chapter discussing Peder Johansen.

[9] See the discussion of Rosenholm in the chapter on Kirsten Marie Pedersdatter.

[10] There is a short autobiography of Jens Jacobsen in *Mejlby Sogns Historie II* (Poulsen and Jørgensen 1942, 146-8).

[11] Villeinage was abolished by ordinance on July 4, 1850. However, it took many years for all villeinage to disappear from Denmark.

[12] *Proprietær* was the terms for the owner of a large farm (*proprietærgård*) that did not reach the valuation level of a manor farm (*gods*). A *forpagter* was someone who leased a very large farm.

[13] Here, I use the term "real" poverty to described those whom the poverty assistance boards deemed to be poor, and in need of assistance.
[14] Weaving usually took place between Christmas, when people had finished carding and spinning, and May first, when farm hands and other hired hands were paid (Graves 1921, 84).
[15] A common wage for a farmhand was six lengths (*alen*) of homespun and six lengths (*alen*) of canvas. One *alen* was approximately two feet. In her discussion of weavers, Graves provides an excellent overview of the process of weaving, and a schematic of a common loom (Graves 1921, 86-9).
[16] Also known as a *bassekone* (Graves 1921).