

# The Danes Worldwide Archives 1932-1992

by Henning Bender



Max Henius (1859-1935). (Photo: Sophie Nielsen).

The sixtieth anniversary of the Danes Worldwide Archives is no ordinary occasion – it marks the anniversary of the *world's oldest emigration archives*. It has always been the responsibility of the Archives to collect and provide information based on the records, manuscripts and photographs of those people who, at one time or another, emigrated from Denmark. The Archives exists today because many of those emigrants, their families and descendants wished to preserve their history by donating material to the Archives and because there has been a continuing interest in emigration history. Today the Danes Worldwide Archives can provide information about some 500,000 Danes who emigrated and counts among its users their over 2 million descendants. Added to this number are, of course, those researchers who have a special interest in emigration history. Such research is complicated by the fact that, in spite of the large percentage of the population they represented at the time of emigration, those who chose to leave their homeland often became a “forgotten people.” In their countries of destination, they were part of a small group, one of many ethnic minorities of little historical interest in their own right.

It is the task of the Danes Worldwide Archives to stimulate interest in the history of those Danes who chose to lead their lives outside Denmark. The problems involved in carrying out such a task are reflected only too well in the turbulent history of the Archives. This history includes the story of a charismatic man of vision – Max Henius – who took the initiative in founding the Archives and who wished to preserve his own story as well as those of his contemporaries. But it is also the story of how interest in this material and in the Danes Worldwide Archives declined, as many of those who had emigrated during the emigration “boom” died. Finally, it is the story of how interest in the Archives re-emerged as the descendants of Danish emigrants throughout the world began to seek their roots.

### Max Henius and the Danes Worldwide Archives

Max Henius (1859-1935) was made an honorary citizen of the city of Aalborg in northern Jutland, the mainland peninsula of Denmark, on his seventieth birthday on June 16, 1929. This honor was bestowed, not so much because Max Henius had been born in Aalborg – he had left the city at the age of 17 – but because, in the eyes of the Danish public in 1929, he was the uncrowned king of Danish-Americans and the prime mover behind the annual American Independence Day celebrations held at Rebild National Park, a few miles south of Aalborg. Aalborg, a town which prided itself on being Denmark's most “American” city, wanted to recognize his achievements. The city also wanted to be known for its American spirit of progress as well as its straightforward way of doing things, ability to make

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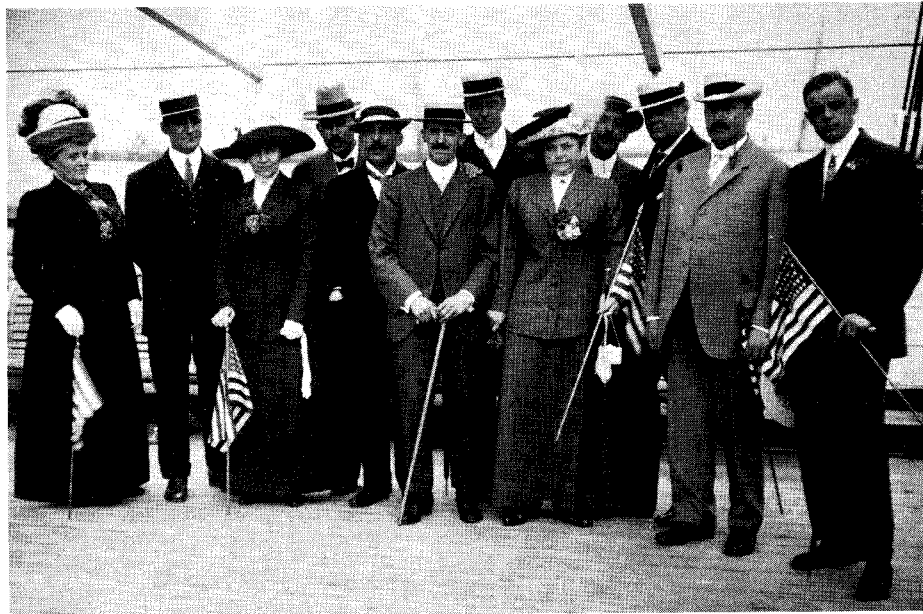
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quick decisions, modern buildings and industrial growth. Max Henius and Aalborg's energetic mayor from 1925 to 1945, Marinus Jørgensen, spoke the same language. Both had an unusual talent for inspiring others with their zeal. Added to this was the fact that, in Aalborg, Max Henius' father, Isidor Henius, had made the Henius name synonymous with industrial growth.

At the age of 17, Isidor Henius (1820-1901) emigrated from Thorn, Poland, to Aalborg, where in the mid-1800s he founded Denmark's first modern distillery. This factory was sold to a Copenhagen syndicate in 1881 which meant that Max Henius could not follow in his father's footsteps as head of the company. Having completed his education in chemistry in Germany, Max sought his fortune in Chicago. Together with a German friend, he started the Wahl-Henius Institute for Fermentology in Chicago in 1886. Here they introduced the revolutionary, new methods of growing yeast developed at the Carlsberg Laboratory in Copenhagen on which modern brewing technology was based. The Wahl-Henius Institute became the most important training school for brewers in the United States, and in the 1890s, the Institute implemented successful improvements in Chicago's water and milk supply systems. Max Henius was appointed to a number of honorary public positions, met many public figures and traveled widely. He set something of a record in his day by crossing the Atlantic Ocean no fewer than 94 times in his lifetime. Little by little, the virtually omnipresent Max Henius became a well-known personage in Danish-American circles.

Max Henius had never become involved in the more popular forms of Danish-American organizational work: in the Danish churches, societies and lodges. His contacts included a small group of intellectuals who gathered around "the round table" in Wilken's restaurant in La Salle Street. "The Circle" met there, and well-known guests from Denmark could count on a hearty welcome there when they visited Chicago. The founding in 1906 of the "Danish-American Association," whose purpose was increasing awareness of the work of Danish-Americans in the United States and in Denmark through meetings and cultural exchange, was a natural extension of the La Salle Street get-togethers. The association was never very successful; membership never exceeded 500, and throughout its ten-year lifetime, it was severely criticized by all other Danish organizations in the United States for what was referred to as "aristocracy of the spirit." In spite of this, the association left its mark by setting up The American-Scandinavian Foundation in 1910, supporting a number of publications about the history of Danish-Americans and, finally, initiating the Independence Day celebrations which continue to this day.

When Mayor Marinus Jørgensen met Max Henius in 1929, the city of Aalborg had just purchased the estate known as Sohngaardsholm, built by



Docking in Copenhagen aboard *Oscar II*. 1912. Max Henius is fifth from the left.

Isidor Henius in 1886 as his private residence. The purchase was made because the city wished to acquire the estate's land, while there were no immediate plans for occupying the manor house itself. Both Marinus Jørgensen and Max Henius had a certain interest in seeing the building put to some good use, an interest which led to their reaching an agreement. Max Henius describes this in a letter to the Aalborg City Council of January 10, 1930:

For some time there has been a desire to find a permanent location for the many manuscripts, memoirs and letters concerning Danish emigration to America and the efforts of Danish-born Americans in the development of virtually all aspects of life in the United States, in other words, a true archives should be created, where Danes and Danish-born Americans can find information about Danish-American conditions. Such an archives would also be of great significance in the compiling of the history of Danish-born Americans, a task which no doubt will be undertaken in the coming years. It has occurred to me that Aalborg, which is probably visited by a larger number of Danish-born Americans than any other city in Denmark, should be the home of such a Danish-American archives. In addition, the municipality owns a building which would be especially appropriate for such use, namely, Sohngaardsholm.<sup>1</sup>

Although the idea was completely new – this was the first mention of a Danish-American archives in Denmark – the plan was approved by the City Council just ten days later, on January 20, 1930. The Aalborg City Council rid itself of Sohngaardsholm at no additional expense, and even had some hope that the new Danish-American Archives would attract wealthy American tourists to the city. For his part, Max Henius was given an honorary residence in the building, and his furnishings, records and library formed the basis of the first archives. “The Dan-America Archives Society” was registered as a non-profit organization in Illinois in April, 1930. It was in this way that Danish-Americans secured their own historical archives.

### The Archives at Sohngaardsholm

The official transfer of ownership of Sohngaardsholm to The Dan-America Archives Society on July 5, 1930, took place on the condition that the manor house should be used as an archives, a library and, possibly, a museum. The operation of the archives was ensured for the first four years by a donation of \$10,000 made by the Danish-American, William S. Knudsen, a director of General Motors in Detroit, while the expense of renovating and furnishing the building was covered by a number of Aalborg firms. In Chicago, an archives committee was set up, and under the leadership of head librarian, J. Christian Bay, this committee began to collect documents and books from Danish-Americans, while a Danish archives committee, headed by editor-in-chief Roger Nielsen of Copenhagen (formerly of Chicago) took over the management of the archives. Chicago librarian, Svend Waendelin (1894-1956), was hired on January 1, 1931, and immediately upon his arrival in Aalborg, he began to catalog the already extensive collection of books and other documents. The work of the archives had, in fact, been underway for a year and a half when it was officially opened by Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning on July 3, 1932. The name had been changed to Danes Worldwide Archives in order to emphasize that the work involved emigration worldwide and applied to all Danish emigrants, not only the large number who had emigrated to the United States.

So far, so good – but if the Danes Worldwide Archives was to survive for more than the initial four years, it was calculated that a capital of at least \$50,000 was required. Max Henius planned to raise this amount by canvassing in the United States, but on November 15, 1935, before this plan could be carried out, he died following a traffic accident near Aalborg. Max Henius’ funeral service was conducted at Sohngaardsholm at which time Roger Nielsen stressed that

...while the Rebild celebrations will cease – coming generations will



Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning at the dedication of the Danes Worldwide Archives on June 3, 1932.

seek out the Archives in Aalborg, the source of the pioneers – the Archives that were Henius' great plan and which he successfully established with such enormous energy.<sup>2</sup>

The Rebild celebrations, however, did not cease – but the Danes Worldwide Archives had to wait many years for those “coming generations,” and waited just as long for a stable economic basis. On the occasion of Danish King Christian X's 10th Jubilee in 1937, a fund was set up in the United States in support of the Danes Worldwide Archives. In spite of the fact that it was said to be a “question of honor” for all Danish-Americans to contribute to this fund, the initiative resulted only in slightly less than \$5,000 from 607 contributors.<sup>3</sup> The amount of \$5,000, bequeathed to the Archives in Henius' last will and testament, was added to this. The interest earned on this sum of \$10,000 – and from 1938, an annual grant of \$500 from the Danish government – formed the financial basis of the Danes Worldwide Archives for many years. The amount could often barely cover the salary of the archivist. The situation worsened when war broke out in 1939. On April 9, 1940, Denmark became an occupied country, and connections between Denmark and the countries of destination of those who had emigrated were completely cut off. The work of the American archives committee came to a halt and with it the collection of materials that had taken

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place in the U.S. throughout the 1930s. On December 15, 1943, Sohngaardsholm was seized by the German forces, the Danes Worldwide Archives lost its home, and the books and other documents were packed away in the basement of a manor house outside Aalborg. The work of the Archives lay dormant during the war years and continued to do so for a number of years to come.

### The wandering archives

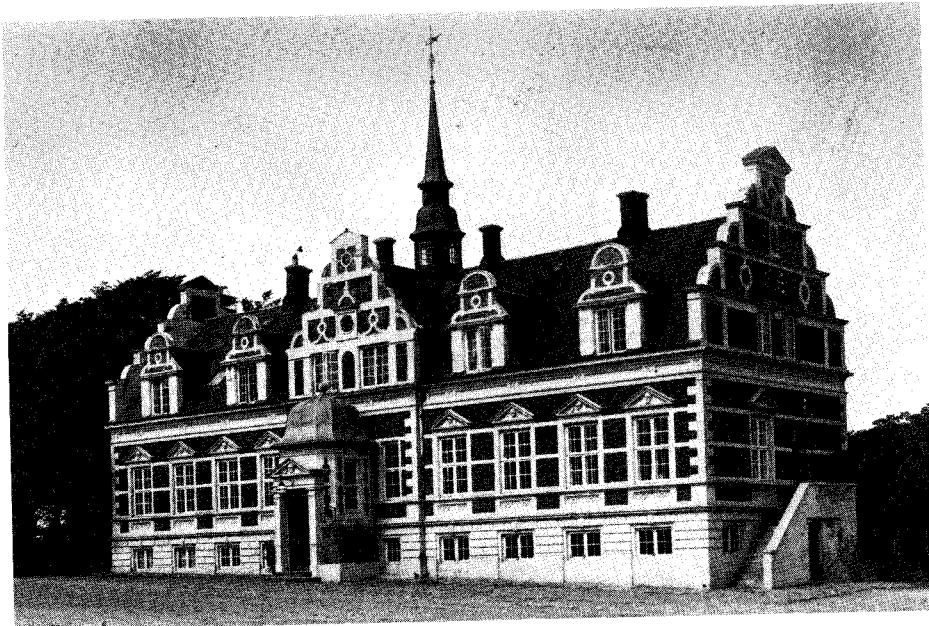
The desire to reopen the Danes Worldwide Archives at Sohngaardsholm at the end of the war in 1945 was never realized. For one thing, Sohngaardsholm housed refugees and prisoners of war up until 1948 and, for another, the Danish board of the Danes Worldwide Archives had privately agreed already in 1944 that the Archives should be moved to Copenhagen.

When in 1949 the Aalborg City Council requested that the Archives move back to Sohngaardsholm, the request was therefore refused. An offer from Dansk Samvirke<sup>4</sup> to move into suitable facilities in their building in Copenhagen, at no expense to the Archives, had already been accepted. Dansk Samvirke and its 10,000 members could guarantee the Danes Worldwide Archives both "customers" and financial support from all over the world. In addition, some felt that it was more appropriate for the Archives to be located in the nation's capital than in Aalborg where "the location of the Danes Worldwide Archives is rather inconvenient for students and others who are interested in its material."<sup>5</sup>

On September 1, 1950, the Danes Worldwide Archives reopened after a period of seven years – but the following seven years in Copenhagen were not happy ones. The Archives noted a total of 100 visitors, and its economy continued to go downhill. The Archives was given notice on August 1, 1955, after Dansk Samvirke had decided to install a *paying* lodger in their attic rooms. The Archives then moved to a basement in the Copenhagen suburb of Hellerup. Sven Waendelin died the following year on June 14, 1956. Thus ended 25 years of devoted service to the Danes Worldwide Archives for which he received little more than a symbolic wage.

It was at this point that the board of the Archives seriously began to consider closing down. Aalborg, however, which had no cultural institution of national significance, was still interested in keeping it open. Sohngaardsholm had, in the meantime, been taken over by others, but the city was willing to put an apartment in a new area in the southern part of the town at the disposal of the Archives free of charge. The Archives moved back to Aalborg, where it reopened under the leadership of Tyge Lassen on July 1, 1957.

This was, of course, not the best of solutions. There was scarcely room



Sohngaardsholm. Built in 1886.

for the collection, which already filled 500 meters (over 1600 ft.) of shelf space in the 68 square meters (approx. 730 sq. ft.) of floor space in the apartment, and there was no room for expansion or for users. Barely 100 users a year visited the Archives during this period, and the fact that it survived at all can only be attributed to the enthusiasm of the head of the Archives, Tyge Lassen. After his death in 1964, former president of the Rebild Society, Holger Bladt, became head of the Archives. When he died in 1976, his widow and close assistant, Inger Bladt, took over as head of the Archives, and she held this position until 1983. It is of some significance that the number of genealogical inquiries began to increase from year to year. Those "coming generations" were, finally, coming to life!

An increasing interest in history has been noted in various areas since the early 1970s. The 1970s marked the establishment of historical archives in communities throughout Denmark – likewise in Aalborg in 1974. The Aalborg Historical Archives was among the first to hire a professional archivist, the reason being that the new archives, together with the Danes Worldwide Archives, was to create a scientific environment for the university established in Aalborg that same year.



## The apprenticeship

Bank Director Eigil Hastrup served the Danes Worldwide Archives as chairman of the board of directors from 1976 to 1983, and he was eager to strengthen the Archives. Having been the prime mover behind the establishment of a university in Aalborg, he now wanted to see the Danes Worldwide Archives connected in some way to this institution of learning. This would, on the one hand, ensure the position of the Archives as a national, government supported Archives and, at the same time, add a dimension to the teaching of history at the new university which other Danish universities did not have. Lengthy negotiations were held, and in the meantime, the Danes Worldwide Archives was kept afloat by contributions made by the chairman's bank.

All goals appeared to have been reached when the Danes Worldwide Archives celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1982. The Archives moved into its current home in the old, but well-suited, centrally located main library building in Aalborg where it shared 1,800 square meters (approx. 19,375 square feet) of space with the Aalborg Historical Archives. The Municipality of Aalborg paid the rent, while, for a trial period of 5 years, 50% of the amount of wages and other operational expenses was paid by the university and the remaining 50% was shared equally by the County of North Jutland and the Municipality of Aalborg. The university was given a majority of positions on the board of directors in what was known as "The Danes Worldwide Archives at the University of Aalborg." At the end of the trial period, the Archives was to become a part of the university or another public institution. The Danes Worldwide Archives had lost its independence, but had apparently been guaranteed far better means for carrying out its activities than ever before.

A new board of directors for the Archives was appointed in 1983 with Professor Mogens Baumann Larsen as its chairman, and on January 1, 1984, a new chief archivist, Helle Otte, was hired. Helle Otte took on her new responsibilities with admirable energy, and the Danes Worldwide Archives became for the first time a truly professional institution. A Danish-American bibliography was published as well as books on Danish emigration to Brazil and Australia; a Danish Emigration Historical Society was founded, and in 1985, the society initiated the publication of the Danish language journal, *Emigranten*. New contacts to Danish emigrants and other researchers were made on study tours to the United States, Brazil and Australia. Helle Otte succeeded in giving the Danes Worldwide Archives a professional profile. At the same time, the number of users increased to the 200 to 300 noted in the Archives' first years. A similar number of inquiries was received by mail and telephone.



Inger Bladt, head of the Danes Worldwide Archives from 1976 to 1983.

In spite of the success of this trial period, the promised status was not granted – the Danes Worldwide Archives did not become a government supported, national archives! In accordance with the original agreement, both county and municipality cut off financial support in 1986 and 1987, respectively. Surprisingly, the University of Aalborg also withdrew its support at the end of 1988. This apparent change of heart may have been due to the fact that the teaching of history at the university had been given a lower priority than it had enjoyed five years previously. In any case, the resulting lack of funds led to the firing of the entire staff of the Danes Worldwide Archives. The idea of continuing the Archives on the basis of contributions from Danish-Americans was put forward, but was probably never realistic, and this meant that the Municipality of Aalborg was now the sole “owner” of an Archives housed in a municipally-owned building, but with no money and no staff. The municipality wished, once and for all, to find a permanent solution to the position of the Archives in Aalborg, and, as of January 1, 1989, it was, therefore, combined with the Aalborg Historical Archives. At the same time, the Municipality of Aalborg agreed to support the Archives financially with the amount previously paid by the

University of Aalborg. The Danes Worldwide Archives and the Aalborg Historical Archives, which up to this time had shared a building, now became two parts of the same entity with a joint board of directors and chief archivist and with the name, "The Historical Archives." Most important of all, the municipal funds made it possible to hire Birgit Flemming Larsen as assistant archivist for the Danes Worldwide Archives. With a persistent claim to its identity and to the tasks and purpose assigned to it in 1932, the Danes Worldwide Archives had, once again, survived. Not only did the Archives survive – it thrived – new sponsors came forward in support of its efforts, and there proved to be financial advantages to the joint operation of the two archives. Contrary to expectations, the Danes Worldwide Archives was able to *increase* its activities after January 1, 1989.

### The Danes Worldwide Archives today

Today it is safe to say that the Danes Worldwide Archives has solved those problems which so often plagued its existence in the past. Financial stability has been achieved – today grants are provided by various foundations and firms and, not least, by the European Commission.

The publishing activities initiated by Helle Otte have continued and increased. The book, *Danish Emigration to Australia*, published in 1988, was followed by *Danish Emigration to New Zealand* (1990) and *Danish Emigration to Canada* (1991) and, finally, by the current publication, *Danish Emigration to the U.S.A.* The success of these books is a clear indication that there is a widely felt need to study the history of those Danes who emigrated. At the same time, the books have helped to establish good, lasting contact with all those who share an interest in emigration history. Publication of the annual, Danish-language journal, *Emigranten*, has not been continued. The Danish market is simply too small, and knowledge of the Danish language among the descendants of emigrants too limited, to make this endeavor worthwhile. It is felt that the interest of those who wish to study Danish emigration history will be met with the English-language series, *Danish Emigration to...*

The publication of these books, together with the growing interest in history and the increased resources of the Danes Worldwide Archives, gained in coordinating its work with that of the Aalborg Historical Archives, has greatly increased public interest in the Archives and the work carried out there. Interest in the work of the Archives has never been greater, and statistics show that approximately 1,500 inquiries, equally distributed among those who come to the reading room and those who write or contact the Archives by telephone or telefax, are received annually. A collection of books, photographs and manuscripts documenting the his-

tory of Danish emigration and the history of Danes outside Denmark make it possible to answer these inquiries. It is also important in providing user assistance that the Archives have access to a comprehensive collection of parish registers and Danish census statistics, as well as complete lists of the names of Danes who emigrated in the years from 1868 to 1940. Although these lists are available in several other places, wide use is made of those at the Danes Worldwide Archives, where a computerized database is currently being created. This database is expected to be completed in 1993, thus enabling future generations to uncover their Danish roots with even greater ease.

The increased use made of the Danes Worldwide Archives in recent years is also reflected in an increase in donations of historical material. In Denmark there is a great interest in collecting, copying and registering the letters written by emigrants to those they left behind – letters often hidden away in cupboards and drawers, if they haven't already been discarded. Source materials such as these letters are obtained primarily through close cooperation with Denmark's 450 regional historical archives who also assist the Danes Worldwide Archives when a user needs further information regarding a particular area which may have been the home of his or her ancestors. Outside the borders of the country, special efforts are made to explain to emigrants and their descendants just how important it is that the sources of their history are preserved – and that careful thought should be given before old letters, records, books and photographs are discarded. This means, of course, that there must be archives prepared to preserve and register this material.

### The future

It will *not* be necessary to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the world's oldest emigration archives – as has been the case on all previous anniversaries – by protesting the deplorable state of affairs and future prospects of the Danes Worldwide Archives. On the contrary, the situation of the Archives has never been better, and today it is not only an institution on a par with similar institutions in most other European countries, it is part of an integrated organization in Aalborg with *no* danger of being closed down. One cannot help but wonder why the Danish government, as opposed to the governments of other European countries, has not chosen to support the only national archives whose influence reaches beyond national borders in exploring the history of our emigrated countrymen. More important, however, is the fact that the Municipality of Aalborg has taken this national task upon itself by ensuring the financial and professional future of the Danes Worldwide Archives. Today the Archives can base this future on a quickening of interest among Danes in the history of their emigrated coun-



The home of the Danes Worldwide Archives in Aalborg, Denmark. 1989.

trymen – an interest which is growing at the same time as the descendants of Danish emigrants awaken to a need to find their own roots in Danish communities and families.

It is the heartfelt wish of the Danes Worldwide Archives that, in future, Danish immigrants throughout the world will succeed in organizing Danish immigrant archives, thus making possible the preservation of historic sources where this history was made. The Danes Worldwide Archives will continue to coordinate this worldwide endeavor via the exchange of copies of material and registers. Only when the gaps in the overseas network are too large should relevant materials be *deposited* in Aalborg – certainly a better solution than allowing the materials to simply disappear.

The collection, registration and storing of basic information about Danish emigrants and their stories is best carried out in two places. First of all, where the emigrants themselves settled and spent their lives – secondly, in the country they left behind and to which they sent their letters. This two-fold registration, coordinated on a worldwide basis, making use of modern information technology, would give us an overall view of Danish emigration history. Not until such cooperation is implemented will the Danes Worldwide Archives truly live up to its name. A start has been made with the establishment of The Association of Migration Institutions – an organization set up to coordinate the efforts of European emigration institutions and similar institutions all over the world.

#### Notes

The information in this article was gathered from the many sources available at the Danes Worldwide Archives. The following archives were of particular interest: Det danske Udvaldte arkiv (The archives of the Danish Emigration Archives), 1930- ; Max Henius' private archive as well as the archives of J. Christian Bay, Roger Nielsen and Erik Jensen; the archives of the Danish-American Association 1909-1917 and the Jacob A. Riis League 1918-1919 as well as the archives of Rebild National Park 1909-.

1. Max Henius' Archive (Danes Worldwide Archives, Aalborg, Denmark).
2. From an article in the newspaper, *Aalborg Amtstidende*, November 15, 1935.
3. Christian den 10's Jubilæumsfond (King Christian X's Jubilee Fund), 1937 (Danes Worldwide Archives, Aalborg, Denmark).
4. Dansk Samvirke (Danes Worldwide) was founded in 1919. The association has as its aim the strengthening of connections among Danes at home and abroad and the providing of information about Denmark. Dansk Samvirke works closely together with the Danes Worldwide Archives.
5. The Roger Nielsen Archive (Danes Worldwide Archives, Aalborg, Denmark).