

# I

**EXPANDING HORIZONS**



ILL. 1. Nielsen was born in Sortelung, outside the village Nr. Lyndelse. This map, published in 1886, shows the location shortly after the time when Nielsen lived there. The house in which he was born was situated in the field to the south of the Frydenlund farm. A few hundred metres east of the house was the brickworks where he worked as a child, and behind it was the clay pit where the small lake is today, just below the place name Sortelung. To the right of the lake was Arvensminde, where the family moved in 1873 when Nielsen's birthplace was demolished. The third childhood cottage, Petersborg, which is now a museum, was on the main road south of Nr. Lyndelse.<sup>1</sup>

# A PLACE IN THE WORLD

On the island of Fyn, Nielsen grew up in a family of many children near the village of Nr. Lyndelse, which lies south of Odense. In his memoirs, *My Childhood*, he describes his upbringing largely from a child's perspective. It is a story of a world that expands both geographically and spiritually. It is from the child's immediate surroundings that he absorbs and expands his horizons. But we also need to understand what he was surrounded by. It is a specific place where he takes part in the social life that unfolds around him. The country life of 150 years ago seems familiar to us, but it is also a time and a society that no longer exists. This is where he spent his first fourteen years. Having had such a childhood, what do you take away with you?

Taking *My Childhood* as a starting point, which is a nostalgic review from a sixty-year-old's perspective and world of experience, it is largely a 'whole world' that is portrayed. It is complete in the sense that it forms a coherent world view, and in the sense that it is a representation without major fractures or conflicts. It is a manageable world on a small geographical scale, where a traditional but socially well-defined life is pursued. The perspective he takes in the memoirs could be described as a modern retrospective on a pre-modern way of life.<sup>2</sup>

But this is not the whole picture. It is also a world in the process of becoming modern, where the old village communities are being replaced by democratically elected parish councils, where tenant farmers are disappearing, where the public administration is monitoring the citizens, where all children attend school and where the manors and towns establish industries. It is a world in which German-born farm bailiffs and German migrant workers are among the closest neighbours and an immediate part of everyday life.

Musically, it is a world in which traditional dance music plays a central role. Nielsen had direct access to it through his father, Niels Jørgensen, who was a musician. But it is also a place where the trade in music publications and the knowledge of a common European musical culture are part of the music and repertoire, in terms of both new dance melodies and the music played by the local orchestra, Braga. Fyn was an integral part of Europe.

It is a well-organised world, but at the same time there is an undercurrent of social dynamism. There is a clear social stratification, which seems to be a natural part of the world, but also a hierarchy, a power relationship. In Nielsen's memoirs

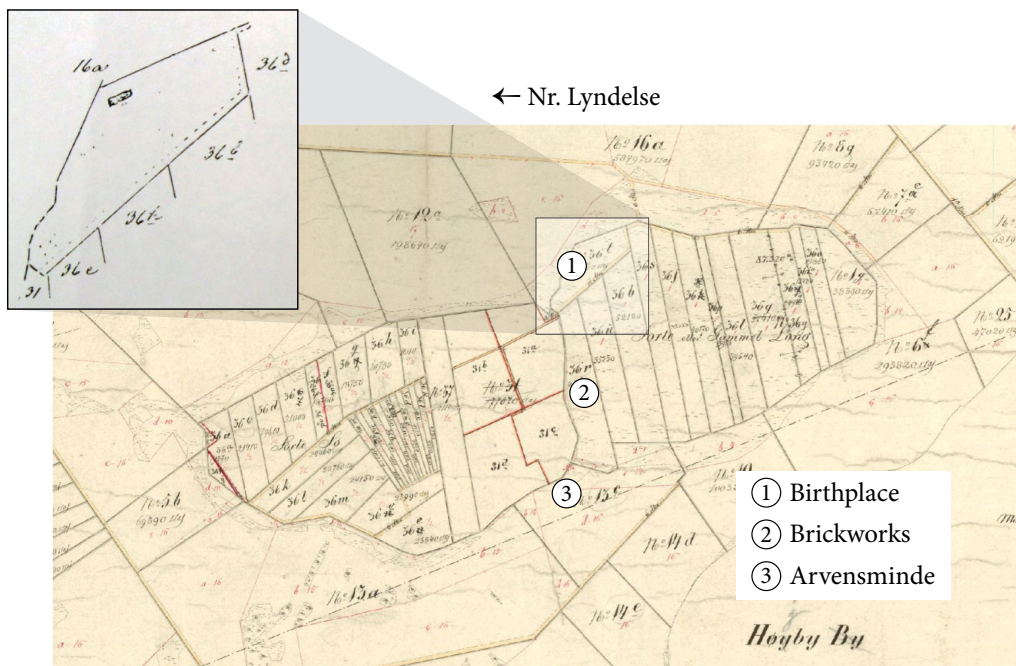
there is no resentment of social differences and poverty, but rather an acceptance of them as a condition. He also reflects the fundamental view that people's nature, their 'value', is independent of their social status. It is the adult Nielsen who speaks here. The qualities of the poor and the rich are presented in terms of their human nature, and Nielsen shows a receptiveness that recognises good qualities even in the very poorest. This reflects a self-esteem he has gained from his relatively poor upbringing. As a result, he has an ability to relate to both high and low. There are stories that he would rather talk to the coachman than to members of high society, yet there is also a photograph showing that during his holiday in Skagen, Nielsen went over to greet the King, who was staying at the royal summer residence, Klitgaarden.

The 'new' is in the making. It is a time when there is a clear sense that opportunities exist if you have the will and the ability. But the upbringing also provides a profound experience that progress does not come of itself. On the one hand, Nielsen sees his parents' generation, made up of common people who remain in the region and social conditions in which they were born. On the other hand, his mother represents a conscious social distancing from the miserable environment in which she grew up. And with the future prime minister Klaus Berntsen as a local role model, Nielsen is able to see how, through hard work, something new can be created, as is the case with the so-called high school and the private independent school movements.

Social mobility presupposed physical mobility. If you stayed in your home region, you ended up like your relatives as a smallholder, a small skilled workman or a farm labourer. If you left the region, you might be able to fulfil your dreams. It is no coincidence that of the twelve siblings in Nr. Lyndelse, one died as an infant, the eldest brother Peter emigrated to Australia, and Sophus, Anders, Albert, Julie and Lovise to the United States.<sup>3</sup> Two of Carl's sisters died young of tuberculosis and a third did not live long either. In addition to Carl, his brother Valdemar remained in Denmark. Valdemar was admitted to a teacher's college and then became a teacher in West Jutland and a member of parliament for the Social Liberal Party (Det Radikale Venstre). If you believe in fairy tales, it seems natural to set out in search of happiness and a better life. For Nielsen, this happened several times. Odense was the first step on the way.

## The Place

Nielsen experienced the place where he grew up as a slowly expanding world. As he describes in *My Childhood*, his world at first constituted the most immediate boundaries: the fields, the brickworks, the stream, the neighbour, his siblings, his parents. As he grew older, it included Nr. Lyndelse, the neighbouring farms such as Frydenlund and the manor of Bramstrup. Later it included the 'region' where his family originated, but it was still a rather limited area that included the nearest villages in



**ILL. 2.** Sortelung. The map used from 1859 to 1895 shows the area as it was when Nielsen lived there. North is to the right. Sortelung itself is an elongated area, about 1,300 metres long and 400 metres wide. To get to Nr. Lyndelse you have to follow the road that leads straight to the village, about a kilometre and a half south-west. Nielsen's birthplace was on cadastral plot 36t. A surveyor's drawing from 1857 shows the exact location of the cottage in the field where Carl Nielsen lived. The brickworks were on 36r and Arvensminde, his next home, was on plot 13c.<sup>4</sup>

both directions. To the south, on the other side of Nr. Søby, the village of Heden is the furthest outpost, the 'region' ending just before the manors of Brahetrolleborg and Egeskov. To the west were the neighbouring villages of Fangel, Bellinge and his father's hometown of Brylle. To the north, Odense was only just included, but it was already a place worth visiting. To the east it covered the area around Højby. The 'region' was oriented towards Odense, and neither Faaborg nor Svendborg were perceived as towns with which the locals had any connection.

Nielsen was born in the summer, on 9 June 1865. He grew up in a small cottage in the area of Sortelung, between the villages Nr. Lyndelse, Højby and Lumby. On old maps the area is called 'Sorte' or 'Gammel Long' at the northern end and 'Sorte Sø' (black lake) at the southern end.<sup>5</sup> The lake was drained around 1800, although it was still a marshy area, with a peat bog in the middle of the old 'Sorte Sø'. In the northern part, 'Sorte Lung', clay was dug for the brickworks, which was moved to different places over the years. Both 'Long' and 'Lung' are the old forms of the name of the plant heather – that is, it was a low-lying area covered with heather, a moor. Nielsen's

home was on the western edge of the bog, in a field by the road that runs through the area. Today there is a small memorial stone, an information board and a few tables where you can sit and have a cup of coffee.

The cottage was isolated, although it was by no means an uninhabited area. In 1870 there were twenty-two dwellings on Sortelung, eight of which housed two families. A total of 121 people lived there of which about half were children; half of the men were day labourers or labourers, three were farmers and some were skilled craftsmen; virtually all of the wives listed their occupation as farm wife. As well as being housewives, the women also did occasional work on the farms – as did Nielsen's mother, Maren Kirstine Johansen. The two that stand out are a millwright and a musician, Nielsen's father.<sup>6</sup>

My birthplace stood in the middle of a field. It was an old grass field that was rarely ploughed up, and then only to be laid down as grass again. No road led to the cottage, but there were two footpaths, one of which went east across 'the sluice' [Dømmesrenden], where there was a bridge and a road leading to a brickyard a few hundred yards away. The other path went to Frydendal Farm, which belonged to Bramstrup Manor estate. Frydenlund was only a few minutes' walk from our cottage, and Bramstrup about half a mile farther west on the Odense-Faaborg road. These four places – our home, the brickyard, Frydenlund, and Bramstrup – were the four corners of the world in which my brothers and sisters and I grew up.<sup>7</sup>

In his memoirs, *My Childhood*, written in the spring or summer of 1927,<sup>8</sup> Nielsen pays little attention to the other inhabitants of the area. The memoirs must be read as the elder Nielsen's selective presentation of what he considers important to preserve for posterity. In this way he prepares the story for later generations to tell who Nielsen was. The impressions he wants to convey are his experiences of nature or particular people, often with a strong sensuous touch. Children were often left alone at home while their parents worked. Nielsen describes such a situation, when the mother comes home at lunchtime, as a momentous experience:

Four of us small brothers and sisters were lying one day on the grass; the sun was strong and we were both hungry and thirsty, as my mother was haymaking at Bramstrup Manor in the neighbourhood. She came home in the dinner-hour, but as we were all lying on our backs and, I suppose, dozing, we were not aware of it until she stood over us, stooped down between us with a big smile under her white haymaking hat and said, 'Just look what I've got for you!' She had brought from the manor some warm apple fritters dipped in caster-sugar and a bottle of something to drink, whether beer or milk I cannot remember. Sufficient to say

that the way my mother's image, the sun, the sky, the grass, and the food flowed together in sheer bliss – this can never be forgotten. Then off she went, brisk and cheerful, saying, 'Now be good little boys and girls and I'll be back before dark.'<sup>9</sup>

What is unusual is not that the children are alone at home, but that there is good food and sunshine. This is contrasted with an episode he recounts when his father was away for a week or so playing music, and his mother had nothing in the house but a jar of yellowish horse fat, which they spread on bread and seasoned with salt.<sup>10</sup>

There was a waterhole near the cottage, known as the Well, where Nielsen almost drowned as a child. They played and fetched water, and the children explored the stream *Dømmesrenden*, which in the summer consisted only of puddles; here they also found snail shells and sticklebacks, and tumbled up and down the slope. The stream follows the road to *Sortelung*. There was a bank around the garden and some cherry trees. The plot where the cottage stood was quite large, about a hectare of land, but as they only rented the house, it was not their pasture that surrounded the dwelling. They kept chickens and a pig, and at *Arvensminde*, his next childhood home, they also had some goats.<sup>11</sup>

The brickworks played an important role in Nielsen's childhood. Not only was it an exciting place to explore on Sundays when there was no work to be done, but it was also a place where he was involved in brick cutting from an early age. The task involved using an iron tool with handles at either end to cut off the rough edges of the air-dried raw bricks before they were placed in the kiln. It was considered a real job for which the boys were paid; they were given a canvas apron, tools and a small three-legged sloping table on which to work. It was an outdoor job and they worked their way through stacks of ten bricks so that they were easy to count when the foreman checked the day's output in the evening. Carl's description suggests that he saw it as a kind of game, trying to keep up with his brother Albert, who was two years older and both more skilled and faster. They were allowed to keep some of the money to save for toys, wooden shoes or a new cap. It was not only Carl and Albert who did this kind of work, but also his other brothers and a number of boys from *Sortelung*. It is not entirely clear how old they were, but they were probably around 8–10 years old, and when they were not at school they worked in the brickworks.<sup>12</sup>

But the brickworks are also important in another way, for it was here that the wider world was already present as part of the microcosm of childhood. Every year a group of German workers would arrive from the county of *Lippe-Detmold*, a small principality to the south-west of Hanover, which had a strong brickworks tradition. Three of them can be named: *Conrad Stuckenbrock*, *Conrad Siekmann* and *Wilhelm Grotegut*. In the years between 1854 and 1868, each of them took over the position of master of the brickworks, leading a team of seven or eight workers.<sup>13</sup>