

The Hidden Culture in Diplomatic Practice

A Study of the Danish Foreign Service

By Mette Boritz

“The Ambassador’s receptions are celebrated for the host’s exquisite taste, which always delights his guests.” These words introduce a television commercial for Ferrero Rocher chocolates which is shown at regular intervals on Danish television. In the commercial we see an international company of people in full dress. In the glow of the heavy chandeliers, the guests are served by white-gloved servants bearing silver trays. This is the aspect of diplomats’ life that is most often presented to the outside world. The frequent entertaining in exclusive international settings is only a small part of diplomatic work, but it is in this part that we should look for the foundation of a distinctive diplomatic practice. When diplomats all over the world interact with other diplomats, they express a shared practice in the service of state policy. This practice comprises their language, forms of social intercourse, working procedures, dress, and even the diplomat’s personal conduct. This shared international practice, according to the diplomats themselves, has the explicit objective of facilitating interaction and communication between different cultures and national delegations. On closer study, however, we see that this practice has a significance for the diplomats’ own world and reality that goes far beyond this.

The aim of this article is to analyse the cultural meaning of diplomatic practice and to illuminate how the special forms of behaviour, dress, and so on become meaningful for relations between diplomats, and for a diplomat’s potential to succeed in diplomacy. The article is based on fieldwork and interviews with Danish diplomats¹ undertaken in the period 1995–96.

A diplomat employed by the Danish

Ministry of Foreign Affairs can expect to spend the major part of his career in foreign lands, stationed at one of the 101 Danish delegations scattered over the world. Every four or five years during his career, a diplomat is transferred to a new post. This post does not need to be abroad, however. The working world of the diplomats consists of two interdependent but separate parts: foreign service and domestic service. A transfer between these two parts is like a change from night to day. One year a diplomat, with his family, may be posted abroad as his country’s representative, provided with a chauffeur and servants.² The next year he may be at home in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Copenhagen, working like virtually any other civil servant. It is the life as a foreign emissary that is most important for the conception that people – and also the diplomats themselves – have of the reality of diplomacy. To understand the culture of Danish diplomats, however, it is essential to study the foreign service as a form of relative totality.

Diplomatic Etiquette

A good diplomat knows, for example, that gentlemen should not wear brown shoes and white socks after 6 p.m., and that ladies should not wear jewels or pearls in the afternoon. It is regarded as particularly impolite to look at one’s watch during a party, since the host might get the impression that the guest is bored. Among diplomats there are guidelines for every little act. In the many social events that are a vital part of diplomacy, everything appears to follow fixed forms. For example, a diplomatic dinner party, no matter where in the world it is held, will always end at 11.00 p.m. precisely. There are no departures

from that rule. As a little diplomatic joke, however, it is added that if the party is particularly successful and amusing, it may be prolonged to 11.15 – but not a minute longer. All the participants normally have a working day starting the next morning, and perhaps another dinner party the following evening. Every kind of social event has its own codes, and everyone familiar with them knows exactly what is expected of them when they are invited to a cocktail party, a reception, or a gala dinner.

A great deal of the rules of diplomatic behaviour are summed up under the term *protocol*. Protocol consists of rules or guidelines from which no diplomat should depart. Like mathematical formulae, there are rules, for example, for seating for every type of party. In diplomacy it is crucial that no one should be placed beneath his diplomatic rank³ (such as ambassador or chargé d'affaires) or status. The ambassador that has been longest in a particular place has the highest status in the group of ambassadors and should therefore have the best and most honourable placing among the ambassadors when the seating is arranged. Putting a guest in the wrong place is an embarrassing business for the host. It is rare today, however, for a diplomat to be so humiliated by an incorrect placing that he leaves the party directly; restoring one's honour by a duel, as they did in the eighteenth century, is now a thing of the past.

How do diplomats become familiar with all these rules and guidelines? Diplomats themselves like to say that diplomatic behaviour is merely something one knows. Yet this does not apply to newly appointed diplomats. Young newcomers have a great deal to learn before everyday diplomatic behaviour comes as automatically to them

as it does to their older colleagues. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs holds courses in etiquette and protocol for employees and their spouses. Foreign and Danish diplomats have also written books about diplomatic etiquette. Help can be found here, about the proper way to eat peas and artichoke, or about how to dress and conduct oneself at royal audiences. The only book of this kind that is really used among Danish diplomats, however, is the "Instructions" of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is a practical reference work containing information about everything from what a visiting card should look like to the dress to be worn for court mourning. In the diplomatic corps, however, the basic attitude is that etiquette is not something that can be learned from a book. In the eyes of diplomats, it should be ingrained in the body. Proper etiquette comes as a natural and taken-for-granted act that does not need any prior consideration and which certainly should not look feigned. A diplomat should preferably have his own instinct to tell him when his dress is not correct, when he has chosen the wrong seat or in some other way broken the rules of diplomatic etiquette. Only serious offences will be commented on, in a tactful manner. Diplomacy is a world where people are reluctant to speak negatively about anyone or anything. To draw discreet attention to something that is considered wrong, or to highlight it, anecdotes are told. Many elderly diplomats have an ability to speak almost exclusively in anecdotes. Through these anecdotes they do not say anything directly about the concrete event, yet they make their point without hurting or humiliating anyone. Like the edifying folk legends of bygone times, diplomatic anecdotes are

entertaining but simultaneously instructive reminders of what is regarded as right or wrong.

The golden rule among diplomats, in everything they say and do, is not to cause offence to anyone. Topics such as politics, religion, or disease are therefore unsuitable for dinner conversation. Instead it is wise to stick to more harmless subjects such as art, literature, film, or the weather. Diplomatic protocol leaves no doubt as to what is expected of a diplomat. It gives him a certain sense of security always to know what is expected and how to act in a given situation.

Diplomats themselves emphasize that their cultural practice is a necessity. The prescribed manners and diplomatic etiquette are a means to be able to move more easily among different cultures, and to ensure good relations between nations. Some diplomats would go so far as to describe the rules for behaviour and dress as the tools of their job. Their cultural practice, however, appears to have a meaning for the diplomats' everyday life that goes far beyond the interaction between foreign diplomats. The rules are important not just for the diplomat's international work; they are also an integral part of the diplomat's everyday life. All diplomats seem to dress the same, although this is not compulsory in everyday contexts. Dress for them becomes an inseparable part of being a diplomat, and of perceiving oneself as a diplomat. A dark lounge suit for men, or a smart skirt and an elegant blouse for women, are part of the daily uniform. During a long interview I had with a diplomat, when the conversation had turned to dress, he suddenly commented that he had just changed. On that very warm Danish summer day he had been

wearing shorts and a tee-shirt right up until the time for our appointment. Then he had put on long trousers, a newly ironed white shirt, and a tie. If he was to talk about diplomacy and appear in his daily role as diplomat, it was important to him that he should also look like one.

The elements of diplomatic practice, such as dress and manners, are properties that most diplomats are able to acquire through time. The special procedures, conditions, and tasks of diplomacy, however, obviously make much greater demands of a diplomat. Professional qualifications are required, and much is expected of the individual's personality, ability, and characteristics. These demands also seem to be an integral part of diplomatic practice and hence essential if a person is to conduct himself in the proper manner expected by other diplomats.

The Good Diplomat

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, an aristocratic title was essential for a diplomatic career. Today anyone with a university degree can apply for a position at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, although most of the employees generally have a degree in law or economics. Although blue blood is no longer required, diplomats constantly stress that the exclusive world of diplomacy is not open to everyone. If diplomats themselves define the qualities needed to do their work in the best possible way, they tend to produce a long list of properties that not only suit the work they do but also are regarded by the diplomats themselves as particularly praiseworthy. Ambassador Eigil Jørgensen (born 1921), for example, wrote on the occasion of the 225th anniversary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

A foreign minister and diplomat must have a kind of instinct which quickly informs him and – even before the matters are discussed – prevents him from ever making a blunder. He must have the ability to show himself to be open-hearted, even though he remains impenetrable; he must be reserved under a cover of spontaneity, dextrous even in the choice of his recreations. In conversation he must be varied, surprising, always natural and sometimes naïve. In a word: For all the twenty-four hours of the day he must never cease for a moment to be a foreign minister or diplomat (Jørgensen 1995:35).

The list of personal characteristics seems endless. We may mention truthfulness, accuracy, calm, patience, good humour, modesty, and loyalty. Together with intelligence, knowledge, acumen, wisdom, hospitality, charm, industry, courage, and tact, we almost have the perfect human being. Yet diplomats themselves do not stop there. For a good diplomat should also possess self-control, a capacity to formulate his thoughts, empathy, resourcefulness, the ability to read a situation, adaptability, an instinct for discreet flattery, a cooperative spirit, a sense of proportion, and a talent for making contact with people. A diplomat is expected to show nothing less than this multitude of skills and characteristics, and at the same time always to do so in a diplomatically correct way.

Special qualities have always been called for in diplomacy. As early as the sixteenth century, but especially in the eighteenth century, in the literature about diplomacy, there are countless similarities between the qualities ascribed in the past to diplomats and the properties that are said to be expected today. This continuity is regarded by diplomats as a sign that special qualities always have been and always will be required of diplomats. When diplomats ex-

pound on this, the qualities seem to have an eternal nature, and there is an almost mystical character in the way that the qualities are naturalized and collectively confirmed. There is however something different, something more than doing one's job in the best possible way, that makes the significance of the many qualities meaningful to the diplomats themselves. This meaning should be sought, for instance, in the diplomats' attempt to manifest and maintain themselves as an *élite*, not only in the eyes of the world around them but also in their own consciousness.

Diplomacy and the Study of the *Élite*

The concept of "*élite*" is normally used to describe certain fundamental features in organized social life. An *élite* can mean a group of people with the best position in a society, or it can be a minority of groups with influence over others, and which are recognized and regarded as superior by others. The anthropologist Carol Greenhouse (1983:113) points out that the concept of *élite* in Western society is often used in the sense of the *élite* having outright power over others. The *élite* exerts an influence on political life and decision makers. The *élite* can also have economic power or opportunities for financial gain. *Élite* as a concept generally refers to power, influence, and economic capacity. The primary interest of sociologists in particular, when it comes to research into *élite* culture, has been to see how much power the *élite* has and how it uses this power over other groups in a society.

If it were only power and economy that constituted an *élite*, however, it is doubtful whether diplomats could be reckoned as such. They have no direct power. They

participate in power when they help to negotiate treaties and agreements, and perhaps they leave a faint fingerprint on history when they do so. But it is the political power that dictates what the diplomat is supposed to achieve in the negotiations. Diplomats are, and have always been, subject to the whims and control of princes, governments, or ministers. In recent years, moreover, others have forced their way into the spheres which for centuries have been the exclusive preserve of diplomacy. In an age when the world has shrunk, ministers and officials from various government departments travel round the world themselves to take part in negotiations. News and events from the remotest parts of the world reach the newspapers and the television screens almost before they flow from the ambassador's pen. Nor is the personal economic capacity of diplomats remarkable. They are paid according to state salary scales, like all other civil servants, although they receive special supplements when they are posted abroad. At bottom, diplomats are merely a group of officials in the great mass of civil servants, the only difference being that they are obliged to serve abroad and to work with foreign policy. Although diplomats are often associated in other people's eyes with power and money, it is mostly other sides of diplomatic life that are called for if diplomats are to constitute themselves as the *élite* that they themselves believe that they are, and which they let other people believe as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

A major problem when studying *élite* culture in complex modern societies seems to be that the *élite* as a group does not always distinguish itself visibly in political or economic terms from other groups in the

society of which it is part. A close examination of diplomacy shows that the situation is different. The cultural practice of diplomacy is evidently of crucial significance for the way in which diplomats try to define and manifest themselves as an *élite*. That is why we need a broader definition of the concept of *élite* which can contain other aspects than power and wealth. According to the anthropologist George Marcus (1983), the concept of *élite* should not be regarded as unambiguous; it is instead a flexible term that he defines loosely as the rich, powerful, and privileged in any society, whether past or present. What characterizes some studies of *élites* is that researchers try to constitute the *élite* on the basis of something that the group possesses, such as power, money, qualities, or privileges. What helps to constitute an *élite*, however, cannot be sought only in the *élite* itself but just as much in their relation to society and in the demarcation and the position that the *élite* establishes in interaction with other groups. A certain degree of unattainableness and exclusivity in the eyes of the world can help to characterize a group as an *élite*. Diplomats themselves fondly underline that admission to their world is not granted to everyone. Most of them do not fail to tell outsiders that there are 1,500 applications each year for eight vacant positions; this is their way to stress that the exclusive world of diplomacy is only for those with special qualifications.

Another thing that appears to be of great significance for a group's definition as an *élite* is that the actions and behaviour of the *élite* are regarded as something coveted by everyone, something that other groups in society try to imitate in the belief that this is the proper way to do things. The *élite* itself

helps to reinforce this belief. The retired diplomat Preben Eider, however, writes in a book about etiquette:

Diplomacy is only a small, limited group in the international community. Yet the rules of etiquette, also called “protocol”, which have developed within this circle through the centuries, have proved to set the standards, with an infectious influence on the rules of behaviour in the rest of society (Eider 1990:170).

He thereby indicates that diplomatic practice is something that other people strive to emulate. The way in which diplomats do things is the way defined as correct by society.

It is highly significant for diplomats that they are capable of standing out as an élite, especially in the eyes of other people but also in their own eyes. But why is it so crucial to demarcate and manifest one’s position all the time? The explanation should be sought in the fact that the position of diplomats as an élite in society cannot be taken for granted, and that the world of diplomacy contains more than the impression of their reality that diplomats try to convey to outsiders.

Diplomats are sensitive to societal development and to competition from officials in other government departments. To legitimize diplomats as an élite, the special qualities that are part of their cultural practice are important. Ministers and officials from other departments travel round the world to attend meetings and negotiations, it is true, but diplomats make it clear that this only makes their presence even more essential. In their eyes, other officials and ministers rarely master the art of negotiation, and they do not know how to behave in an international context with the same

natural ease as diplomats. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the oldest government department in Denmark, and the employees let other people understand that it is also the most distinguished ministry, with the best people.

It is interesting that the diplomats consciously choose to emphasize a rather small part of their world and just as consciously keep silent about the rest. For being a diplomat proves to be far from as glorious as outsiders think. The divorce rate among diplomats is high and family life is under pressure. The children have to change school and find new friends time and again when a diplomat is moved from post to post. It is not easy for a spouse to find a job in a foreign city, and it can be difficult to maintain contacts with family and friends in the home country. On top of this there are the annoying little problems of everyday life abroad, such as the exotic diseases and the strange food, substandard drinking water and hygiene. Describing the diplomats’ world as it really is, with all its facets and day-to-day tasks, detracts from the attractiveness of diplomacy, as imagined by outsiders and as described by diplomats themselves. The everyday life of diplomacy can be described as commonplace, mortal, worldly, and prosaic.

Although life as a diplomat is far from being free of problems, there is something that makes the diplomats disregard all the “minuses”, as they call them in private. This something is evident in the picture that diplomats have painted of themselves, and in the social recognition and position that the élite receives from other people. Diplomacy envelops itself in mystery in order to preserve the perception of the world of diplomacy as something attractive. The

sense of being unattainable and elevated above ordinary life appears to be best preserved by saying as little as possible and letting people think what they want. Something very similar has been expressed tellingly by the anthropologist Inger Sjørsløv in her book about belief in God in Brazil:

Culture contains a recognition, a kind of common knowledge of how we people do what we do; a common reflection which takes place without words but which is embedded in the rituals. Occasional necessity means that the reflection sometimes has to contain a silence, a shared unspoken agreement not to say certain things out loud, so as to confirm and consolidate through this agreement the collective nature, the shared thinking that requires no explanation or justification (Sjørsløv 1995:77).

In the same way, diplomats appear to have developed a collective silence, a fence around their world, in order to preserve the image of themselves as special – as an *élite*. In the diplomats' own eyes, this image helps to make diplomacy attractive and special.

The Rank of Ambassador

The meaning of diplomats' cultural practice, however, should not only be sought in their definition and manifestation of themselves as an *élite* in relation to others. Among diplomats themselves, the rules of conduct and dress and the many qualities required of a diplomat serve as an important means of internal distinction. One reason for this may be found in the form of organization. It can be traced to the diplomats' internal competition for power, recognition, and position.

Like other departments, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a strictly organized bureaucracy. At the top of the hierarchy is the

politically appointed minister.⁴ It is regarded as an honour to work close to the minister or to be allowed to present matters personally to him. These matters are expected to follow a set path through the hierarchy.

The day-to-day running of the Ministry is managed by a permanent under-secretary who is not politically appointed. Under him come the heads of the three large "blocks" into which the Ministry is divided. Each block has a core consisting of a hierarchy of sections, each with its clearly defined sphere of operation. Each section has a section chief and a number of employees. The ministry of Foreign Affairs differs from other ministries, however, in that the majority of the 1,700 employees are stationed in embassies all over the world. All are moved around at regular intervals, not just between postings at home and abroad but also between the sections of the Ministry. Employees are constantly being shifted to new jobs and spheres of work. These reshuffles help to sharpen the internal competition between diplomats.

From the very start, a new employee in the Ministry is incorporated in the competition for the best posts and the best sections, as these are defined internally by the staff. The competition is not so much a matter of getting the most interesting jobs as of achieving personal recognition and status among one's peers.

Being appointed chief is an explicit sign of success in the world of the Foreign Ministry. All Danish diplomats seem to be concerned with the simple question of being or not being an ambassador or a chief. The days are passed when chiefs in the Ministry called on a servant to light the desk lamp, fetch a glass of water, or button

his galoshes. There is still a world of difference between those who reach the rank of ambassador and those who do not. A union representative in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes a situation from the everyday life of an employee in the internal newsletter:

Many of his coeval colleagues had stopped turning to him. He noticed that many people paid no attention to his opinions, since he obviously was not on the top team. Then came the happy event of his appointment, although at a rather late age in life, and the employees who had not greeted him started to say "good morning", and people listened when he spoke (Moltke-Leth 1994:3).

Far from all diplomats, however, can expect to be appointed as chief. The number of "other ranks" employed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has risen steadily since Denmark joined the European Community in the early 1970s, but there has not been an equivalent rise in the number of top posts. Everyone is entitled to hope and dream, however, and with the organization of the Ministry and the constant rotation of personnel, it is only at a late stage that it becomes clear to an individual whether he is likely to succeed in reaching the rank of ambassador.

Everything in the ministerial world seems to be hierarchically organized on the basis of the diplomats' culturally created scale. This is reflected, for instance, in the sections of the Ministry, in the geographical location of the embassies, and in the furnishing of the embassies. It is considered better to work with political matters than with trade and economy. If one cannot be posted to Bonn, it is better to be sent to Rome than to Vienna, not to mention Bucharest, New Delhi, or Kuala Lumpur. For

those who have been appointed as ambassadors, the competition is still not over. There is a hierarchy among Danish ambassadors, from those with the choice posts, such as Bonn, NATO, the United Nations, Washington, or the European Union, to those with the least important posts in the ministerial hierarchy (such as African countries). The difference between ambassadors is reflected not only in the posts. It is also manifested when the minister holds the summer meeting, for which all ambassadors return to Denmark. The minister and the permanent under-secretary are seated in the place of honour, and the others are placed around them in a hierarchy that is as natural as the pecking order in a hen-house. Those with the highest position sit closest to the minister. The further from the minister, the lower the position. Should there be a newly appointed ambassador who is not familiar with the rules of the game, who chooses a place that is inappropriate to his position, he will soon become aware of the error or be informed of his blunder.⁵

The general tendency is that most people in the Ministry aspire to the posts and offices that are generally esteemed among diplomats, rather than strive to attain what they themselves find most interesting. Few would dare to put their own interests above the opinions they learn in the corridors and canteens, those shared but unspoken ideas as to what is a good section or a good posting. To achieve recognition among one's peers it is necessary to follow the Ministry's norms and rules, to learn the forms of conduct, and to assimilate the values that apply in interaction between diplomats.

Elias on Élites

Norbert Elias's study (1983) of the court of Louis XIV contains a dimension that many sociological studies of élites appear to lack. He is not interested solely in the power and dispositions, but also in what the élite themselves find meaningful in these dispositions.

To understand individual positions, according to Elias, it is necessary to understand the figuration of which the individual is part. Elias's figuration theory may be explained by the metaphor of a chain dance. Although the chain dance exists as a super-individual community, it is nothing without the individuals that form it. An individual in a chain dance has the opportunity to choose his own steps, but without the plurality of people and their mutual dependence, the dance would not exist as a dance. The figuration theory has been criticized, for example, for not telling us who started the chain dance or who is the choreographer who decides the steps in a particular dance. The figuration is nevertheless a good tool to think with when one wants to understand how cultural practice is used as a means to distinction between diplomats.

What seems in large measure to characterize an individual diplomat is the desire to assert himself among his peers. All activity in diplomacy appears to arise from this eternal struggle to achieve respect and status within the group of diplomats. This struggle results in a high degree of uniformity, for only specific dispositions apply in the diplomatic configuration. For those who find themselves in this chain of interdependence it is crucial to be familiar with these dispositions.

The first thing a young diplomat does when entering the service is to acquire a

few new suits. This is to show not only that he is worthy of the job and committed to it; by his clothes he also shows an explicit wish to adapt to diplomacy and to do as other diplomats do, in the immediate hope of being perceived as an integral member of the corps. Similarly, one of the first skills that young diplomat learns is to be able to formulate oneself as other diplomats do, in perfect diplomatic language. Diplomats have their very own variety of officialese within the Danish civil service, a language to which they ascribe great importance. Young diplomats can tell enraptured stories about how amazingly skilled some of the older diplomats are at expressing themselves in a diplomatically correct way, and they all seem to aspire to emulate this, so that they can tread the right steps in the chain dance.

The fact that every diplomat tries to achieve the same expressions should not be viewed exclusively as an expression of coercion, although young diplomats are corrected, for example, when they try to use more up-to-date language in their letters. In diplomacy, adaptation to the world of the Ministry is a generally an expression of a conscious choice. A diplomat chooses uniformity in the hope that this will bring its reward and in the desire of achieving success in this way.

Position and Pepper Pots

Although all diplomats seem to endeavour to behave and act according to the same guidelines, not all are able to accomplish as much within the given framework. Not all diplomats are promoted to the coveted rank of ambassador. To improve one's personal position it is not enough to act with diplomatic correctitude. A diplomat must at the

same time try to elevate himself above the grey masses and make himself noticed within the bounds of the diplomatic figuration, in order to achieve the recognition and position that is so important. It is a delicate balancing act, however, to make oneself noticed in the right way, without transgressing the given standards of diplomacy. It would not be regarded as felicitous for a new employee to make a speech at the Ministry's Christmas dinner; this would not be the best way to make one's name known. Nor should diplomats dress too grandly or surround themselves with pompous or showy things. Diplomats who do so are referred to as "operetta diplomats", and other diplomats make it clear that such dispositions cannot be taken seriously. The attributes that are taken seriously are tact, correct behaviour, and an ability to choose one's words. Together with professional competence, these are the qualities that are rewarded. In addition, it is important always to obtain the best possible position in relation to one's colleagues, so that the diplomat can be entrusted with the matters that bring the most prestige and which simultaneously help to strengthen his own position. If one is given an important matter to handle, there is a chance that others will notice one's work and talents. This may be significant for the choice of the section or the country to which a diplomat is moved next. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs it is the custom that chiefs recommend good staff members to each other. A recommendation of this kind can lead to a diplomat's being asked to work with attractive political matters rather than, say, South American aid projects.

According to Elias, the use of etiquette, ceremonies, taste, dress, and conversation

all had the same purpose for Louis XIV's courtiers. These attributes were tools for the courtiers in their day-to-day competition to achieve status. This had to be manifested in all the things with which the courtiers surrounded themselves, such as their dress and the furnishing of their homes. In other words, the attributes selected by the courtiers was both a product and an expression of their position.

Among present-day diplomats, cultural practice is likewise an important means to achieve goals in the form of internal recognition and status. In addition, the etiquette, furnishings, clothes, and so on were also in large measure tools for maintaining the position that a diplomat had already attained. The seating arrangements and the protocol are visible proof of this. Diplomats in the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs not only live, think, and act on the basis of the ministerial hierarchies. They actually live in them as well. Many diplomatic dinner parties, visits, and the like take place in the home. According to the Ministry, therefore, the home should not be regarded as just a home. It is also a tool of the job. It is important that visitors should gain the right impression, both of the diplomat and of the country he represents. The home is supposed to give the impression of good taste, style, and class. Virtually everything in the homes and embassies in foreign countries follows the Ministry's furnishing standards: cutlery, coffee services, chairs, carpets, and the colours on the walls are carefully selected by arbiters of taste specially appointed by the Ministry. If one is familiar with the internal codes of diplomacy, it is possible to ascertain at a glance the position of any diplomat in a foreign posting. When diplomats are appointed to the

rank of attaché, embassy counsellor, secretary, commercial counsellor, chargé d'affaires, or ambassador, it is not just the salary grade and title that are changed. There is also a change in the number of rooms and bathrooms in the home and the contents of drawers and cupboards, all according to the Ministry's strict rules. An embassy counsellor must have eighteen stainless steel pastry forks of the Erik Rosendahl A/S brand. A commercial counsellor need only have twelve pastry forks, while an attaché is provided with only eight. The most distinguished ambassadors have three pepper pots while the others must be content with two.

"A duke must build his house in such a way as to tell the world: I am a duke, not merely a count," writes Elias (1983:63). In the same way, small nuances are significant between diplomats. An ambassador must live like an ambassador and have a large office, so that he can emphasize that he is an ambassador and not a mere counsellor. This internal marking of position is also essential for the diplomats themselves. If the status is not signalled in an institutionalized way, for example, through the furnishing standards or rules of protocol, then the diplomats signal it themselves. With the exception of the chiefs' offices, all the offices in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are exactly the same size and have the same government furniture. An older embassy counsellor may have his office next door to a young principal. If one can read the codes, however, one can quickly see the differences: Polish crystal, Persian carpets, or invitations to balls at foreign embassies in Denmark are all indicators testifying to connections or to foreign postings in a diplomat's career, thus hinting at the position he has reached.

Success

The Ministry's demands as to what is regarded as appropriate for a diplomat are an integral part of the diplomatic way of doing things. It is always tempting for a diplomat to let himself be enveloped and steered by this practice. According to the guidelines, there should never be any doubt about how an individual should behave and dress, or to what extent he is expected to outline his personal dispositions. The problematic thing about the rules, however, is that they do not provide any guidelines as to how a diplomat should act if he wants to succeed.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs tries to train people according to specific ideals and purposes. The aim of the education is to create good diplomats and to train them to do their work in the best possible way. Training in diplomacy is supposed to teach what the Ministry regards as suitable and expected of a diplomat. The desired qualities are significant for the way a diplomat interacts with and appears to other people. Education in diplomacy, in other words, is an almost mechanical training by the Ministry, which can be summed up as instilling a certain measure of knowledge and good behaviour which a diplomat is expected to display in the correct manner. Training in a diplomatic sense therefore does not mean the education of a person and the formation of a personality as expressed in the romantic ideal of education, of *Bildung*.

The romantic ideal of education derives in large measure from the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe was interested in the spiritual development of the bourgeois individual, as expressed, for instance, in his *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795) and *Faust* (1808–1833). The objective of education, according to Goethe, is to

create a complete and balanced person. True education has nothing to do with power, money, social status, or pleasures. For Goethe the interesting thing is not to think of the education of a statesman, a scholar, an artist, or a diplomat, but to think of the education of a human being. This is a life-long process that requires freedom – although this freedom is not unconditional – and experience, practice, and tuition. From this one learns to integrate everything in life, both the bright, cheerful moments and the bitter painful experiences. In the diplomatic sense, education is what is important for producing good diplomats; it has nothing to do with whether a diplomat as a person is able to integrate the successes and setbacks that he encounters on his way through life.

Education thus requires training and occasionally renunciation. Renunciation should not be regarded as something ascetic or moral, but rather as something one does to prepare for a richer life. Only by daring to lose oneself, as Goethe says, can one gain oneself – or gain a self. The rich, educated life which in Goethe's eyes was synonymous with the good life, is reward in itself. With determination and with the limits that the world sets for an individual's development, the eternal soul is always formed into an earthly individual. One gives up one's unlimited demands and yearnings to let oneself be confined in a particular vocation, and to make oneself at home in that vocation, with the satisfaction it brings to see that one's work goes well. In diplomacy, on the other hand, it is not sufficient to be content with work going well. Everything is geared to reaching the goals that all diplomats agree in defining as attractive, such as becoming an ambassador. If a dip-

lomat is to succeed in his own eyes, he must become an ambassador. Merely reaching that goal in this world is synonymous with living "the good life". Diplomats who are not granted this success therefore feel powerless and frustrated. Like everyone else in the Ministry, they have invested everything in succeeding, and they have believed right to the end that they too would attain the goal of their career. Most of them only find out at a very late stage that they might not make it. The waiting can be difficult. Ambassador Wandel-Pedersen writes in his memoirs of the time and his thoughts before he was finally appointed ambassador:

I needed new tasks, wanted to move on, and I thought it was time that I was appointed to the coveted class of chief of section, which means definitively reaching the top rank. The aforesaid chief ... was a sarcastic gentleman who made it clear to me that I should not have any illusions. I had to wait. Depressed and with wounded pride, I spent the next few weeks with my mother in her house at Køge Bay ... without being able to shake off the idea of my failed career. Had I overestimated myself so much? Was I good for nothing? (Wandel-Pedersen 1990:74).

The problematic thing in the world of diplomacy is that most diplomats appear to associate success in professional life with personal happiness. Even if one succeeds, this is far from being synonymous with becoming a happier person. A career as diplomat involves great personal cost. Many diplomats are so committed to their work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that they forget that there can be other sides to life than one's profession. After many years in their career, many diplomats discover that the world they are living in is in many ways hollow. On the surface everything looks perfect among all these fascinating, edu-

cated, and obliging diplomats. Diplomats tend to make many acquaintances but rarely true friends on their postings. They are constantly moving to new posts. An anonymous English diplomat is cited in the American Eric Clark's book about diplomacy as having said, "You'll never have friends, nor even your own doctor" (Clark 1974:64).

Conclusion

Diplomats know how they should behave in every situation. This requires people who, according to the diplomats, possess a long series of personal qualities enabling them to conduct themselves in the ideal manner prescribed by diplomatic protocol. This is an essential part of the diplomats' cultural practice. Diplomats themselves explain their forms of behaviour and the many personal qualities as absolutely necessary if they are to do their job in the best possible way. Diplomats' cultural practice, however, has much greater significance for the reality of the diplomats than the meaning that the outside world glimpses.

The meaning of diplomats' cultural practice should be sought in the way that they try to manifest and define themselves as an élite. By emphasizing that it takes special characteristics to be able to take part in international negotiations, diplomats try to assert themselves and legitimate their position in relation to other civil servants, even in a time when diplomacy no longer has a monopoly on participation in negotiations with foreign states. The sense of being an élite in the eyes of the world is evidently of great significance for the diplomats themselves. It also helps to make this an attractive world in their own eyes too. The social position and recognition that goes with

being an élite is felt to outweigh the inconveniences and problems associated with being a diplomat. To preserve the outside image of diplomacy as a coveted career, diplomats choose very deliberately to show off just one particular aspect of their reality, not to describe this world as it really is.

Diplomatic practice, however, is also of great significance for mutual relations between diplomats. Among diplomats there is a culture that is hidden from the outside world, with the diplomats' special way of doing things serving as a means of internal distinction. It becomes a tool in the diplomats' competition to attain internal recognition and status. The better a diplomat can perform in the diplomatically correct way, the greater is his chance of success in a diplomatic sense, arriving at the sought-after rank of section chief or ambassador. That is why all diplomats seem to aspire to display the same behaviour, wear the same clothes, and so on, in the hope that this will advance them in the competition for the best sections and the best postings. The forms of behaviour and the things with which diplomats surround themselves are not used only in the internal competition, however. By means of the diplomatic protocol and the material objects it is possible to manifest where in the hierarchy a diplomat is. This is reflected in the seating at table and in the number of plates, pepper pots, or guest rooms. For those who can read the codes, the number of pastry forks is a direct expression of rank and status in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Far from every diplomat is granted the chance to become an ambassador. Reaching this rank means *succeeding* in the sense understood by the Ministry. Success is not the same as personal happiness, however,

as many diplomats realize at a late stage in their careers. Life as a diplomat proves in reality to cost more and to be much less glamorous than the diplomats themselves would have us believe.

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Notes

- 1 The word “diplomat” is a very loose term. It covers a wide range of titles (e.g. embassy counsellor, ambassador, section chief, embassy secretary, principal, and chargé d’affaires) which vary depending on whether a diplomat is posted abroad or serving in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Copenhagen. The term “diplomat” is used here to denote all graduate employees of the Ministry with an obligation to serve abroad, whatever their title or position.
- 2 This, however, applies only to diplomats appointed as ambassador.
- 3 Each country has its own ranking order. In Denmark the royal family comes first. They are followed by a series of ranks, and within each rank the persons are classed in order. The first rank in Denmark includes the Prime Minister, the Speaker, Knights of the Elephant Order, and so on. Ambassadors are placed in the second rank.
- 4 A few years ago, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was given a second ministerial post. As a result there are now two politically appointed ministers, one in charge of foreign affairs, the other of foreign development. The minister of foreign development does not enjoy the same position among diplomats as the minister of foreign affairs.
- 5 It is possible to choose the wrong position because the meetings are only for ambassadors. Few officials below the rank of ambassador are allowed to attend. Many employees in the Ministry therefore know of the meetings only by hearsay.

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