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## Chapter II

### Developing a Sense of Identity

#### **Connecting with Scandinavia**

The Odenrantz family boarded a ship in Galveston and sailed through the Gulf of Mexico and along the East Coast to New York, where they transferred to the Scandinavian-American liner that would carry them across the Atlantic. "We had all kinds of weather on that long trip," especially on the last leg of the journey through the choppy North Sea; everybody onboard got seasick, but "Papa never lost a meal," Marguerite proudly recorded.<sup>1</sup>

The long journey provided opportunities for the children to hear again the familiar stories about their parents' childhood and youth, which held new interest now that they were about to visit the old countries. They had grown up looking at the portraits of Gustaf's mother and Frederikke's father that hung in the living room.<sup>2</sup> The elder Mrs. Odenrantz looked stern and dignified in a high-collared black dress and a lace cap tied under her chin, but she and her husband (a retired army officer of aristocratic background, who died a few years before his wife) had been indulgent parents to their only son. After graduating from the college-preparatory "gymnasium" in Uppsala, he had studied law for a while; when he tired of that, they bought a farm for him, and he tried his hand at agriculture until he decided that what he really wanted to do was study music in Copenhagen, where he had met his future wife. Frederikke's father, Ole Aarestrup Smith, the Lutheran pastor in a village on the Danish island of Funen, looked gentle and a little distant in the portrait that Louise inherited. He was fifty-four when his daughter was born; between his pastoral duties and his

passionate interest in music, he did not have much time for her, but she remembered helping him cultivate asparagus in the large rectory garden.

Listening to their mother's vivid, unsentimental accounts, the children must have absorbed knowledge about the home she had left and recognized the strong personality that she displayed even as a ten-year-old. Growing up with three older brothers, she had learned early to stand up for herself: "The [1864] war between Denmark and Germany was being fought close to our island. What they were fighting about I did not know, but I guess they did. When I fought, I knew why—for example, when my brothers stole the pears that I had picked early in the morning, long before they were up, and hidden under a gooseberry bush." She also had a strong sense of responsibility for her community and took part in a volunteer effort to supply Danish soldiers with hand-knit socks: "I could knit one big sock in two evenings, turning the heel and finishing off the toe all by myself. I knew that, if I did not handle the long needles fast enough, our country and homes might be lost."<sup>3</sup> Louise inherited her spirit of service and her practical approach. Both mother and daughter looked at the world around them, found ways to solve problems, and enjoyed being part of the process.

Frederikke passed on to her children her resentment that her parents had invested all their resources in the future of their sons. They had helped the eldest purchase a large farm in northern Jutland, where the youngest joined him to help out and learn agriculture. A third son studied medicine in Copenhagen and later practiced as a doctor in a town near his brother. According to the notes that Marguerite added to the transcript of her mother's memoirs, the family had to "skimp and save so there would be enough money for her eldest brother's farm, where he and his attractive young bride were trying to make a go of it." When Pastor Smith retired, he moved with his wife and daughters to the town of Svendborg, where Frederikke took piano lessons from a teacher, whose skills she soon surpassed. Her future looked like a choice between marrying one of the young men in the little town or staying home to take care of her aging parents, but, as Marguerite wrote, "Mother was always lucky." Her grandmother won a large sum in the Danish State Lottery and shared it with Frederikke, who decided to use

the money to fund her further musical education in Copenhagen. In 1872, at the age of eighteen, despite her parents' objections, she left home for the big city, setting an example of independence that her own daughters would follow.

The study of music was one of the few advanced education options available to women, who were not admitted to the University of Copenhagen until 1875 and did not have access to academic secondary schools. Frederikke took private lessons with professors from the Conservatory, which she paid for by giving lessons to beginners, and, by the time she met Gustaf, she had been supporting herself for several years. Marguerite described Gustaf and Frederikke as an unlikely couple: "Pappa was a tall, handsome man with large brown eyes. He was a great jollier and had a way with women. Mother was short and rather plump, with large blue eyes and long blond braids, which she coiled around her head like a crown" (in the same style that Louise later adopted).



Portrait of Frederikke as a young woman in Copenhagen

The portrait shows Frederikke's intelligent, determined face, her long braid, and her stocky figure, somewhat camouflaged by the then-fashionable bustle. The strength of her character may have been part of her attraction for Gustaf, who would depend on her steady influence for sixty years. Both sets of parents objected to the match—his because she was not an aristocrat, hers because he was a foreigner. The young couple might eventually have persuaded their parents to accept their spouses, but both were restless and adventurous. Copenhagen was full of agents advertising the increased speed and comfort of technically advanced steamships and promoting the opportunities offered by the United States. 170,000 Danes and an even greater number of Swedes left for the new world during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Gustaf and Frederikke saw emigration as a solution to their problem. They booked passage on a British steamer out of Liverpool and set off to seek fame and fortune in America and thus overcome their families' opposition. Although they stayed in touch with them, they never saw their parents again.

Twenty years later, Gustaf and Frederikke were returning to Scandinavia with their four children. After nine-and-a-half days on the Atlantic and the North Sea, they disembarked and caught the train to Linköping. The children must have found the cobbled streets of Gustaf's hometown and its towered medieval cathedral very different from their surroundings in rural Texas, where, a few weeks before, they had been roaming the countryside. Now, wearing the mourning clothes that Frederikke had ordered for them out of respect for the grandmother they had never seen, they had to move carefully among the heirloom furniture in the dark, high-ceilinged rooms of her house, minding their manners, and remembering to greet adults with a curtsey or a bow. Their grandmother's housekeeper had kept everything in perfect shape for their arrival, but she did not take kindly to fingerprints on the furniture she had polished so carefully. It was a challenging cultural encounter, but it gave the children insights into their father's background.

The children's knowledge of their parents' native tongues was minimal. Gustaf and Frederikke might have spoken Swedish and Danish with each other initially (the two languages are close enough that, with a little practice, speakers of one can understand

the other), but gradually English became the language of the Oden-  
crantz household. Fortunately, one of Gustaf's few living relatives,  
his cousin Jeanette, spoke excellent English. She became a special  
friend of Louise's, and she may have been the first to introduce the  
idea of attending college to the young girl from rural Texas. The  
two of them continued corresponding after the visit. In a 1904 letter,  
Jeanette thanked Louise for a picture of Barnard College (where she  
was in the middle of her first year) and hoped for further reports  
of her activities: "It gives me always a great pleasure to hear how  
my young relation is studying and how you are amusing yourself;  
oh, you will be very profoundly learned in a short time."<sup>4</sup> The let-  
ter mentioned that Jeanette had just read "a very amusing book,  
*The History of the United Netherlands* by Motley," which suggests her  
academic interests. Jeanette was probably "the pioneering aunt,"  
mentioned in an article about Louise in 1916, who had been "one  
of the first women to take the degree of doctor of philosophy at a  
Swedish university."<sup>5</sup> She was also an accomplished artist and may  
have encouraged her young relative to try her hand at water-colors.

After two months in Sweden, Frederikke took her children to  
Denmark while Gustaf stayed behind to wind up his affairs. They  
stopped in Copenhagen, which had expanded considerably during  
the final decades of the nineteenth century. Frederikke recognized  
some of the landmarks such as the Cathedral and the Royal Theater,  
but many elegant new buildings, inspired by Parisian models, had  
been built since she left. It was the first major city that Louise ever  
visited. She bought a collection of post-card-size pictures showing  
monuments, churches, theaters, and open squares dotted with gen-  
tlemen in top hats and ladies in long skirts carrying parasols, and  
wrote her name on the cover, "L. Odencrantz, 1899."

From Copenhagen, Frederikke and her children took the train  
and ferry to the city of Odense on Funen to call on the widow of  
her eldest brother, in whose ventures their parents had invested so  
heavily. He had died a few months earlier after losing his farm and  
fortune, leaving his widow and five children financially dependent  
on her brother, in whose home they were living. One of the Danish  
children, my grandmother Marianne, remembered opening the  
door, seeing her aunt and four cousins lined up on the stairs outside,  
and wondering how they were all going to fit into the modest

apartment. The start of the visit was awkward: Frederikke had come to claim her share of the inheritance from her father, which had been left in her brother's charge, and it had been a challenge for the widow to extricate the amount owed. Gradually, however, the tension eased. Louise made friends with Marianne, her near contemporary, and showed her the pictures of Copenhagen that she had bought. Before she left, she gave the booklet to her cousin, who saved it for the rest of her life as a memento of the encounter. None of the Danes spoke English, but Frederikke was able to interpret and probably entertained her nephews and nieces with stories about her life in America. Perhaps this was when the idea of emigrating first captured the imagination of eighteen-year-old Louis and fourteen-year-old Soren, both of whom left for New York a few years later. The two families stayed in touch after the visit.

The visit to Scandinavia gave Louise a new sense of identity. She developed an understanding of her roots in Sweden and Denmark and her connections to relatives there, but she had no doubt that her future would be in America—although she was not sure where exactly her parents would find a new home. They would definitely not return to Texas because of the climate, and rural Nebraska offered no educational opportunities. Finally, they decided they would go to Chicago, where they had lived for four years when they first arrived in the United States. Louise must have wondered why. She knew that they had left that city because they were unhappy there and attributed the death of their second daughter Petra in 1883 to its unhealthy conditions. But they were familiar with Chicago and knew that it had a large Swedish population (until 1960, Swedes ranked as the city's fifth-largest foreign-born group), who would provide music students for Frederikke and customers for the store that Gustaf planned to open. At the end of the summer, they booked passage on a liner bound for New York, from where they would take the train to Chicago.

### **Putting Down Roots in New York**

When the Odenrantz family arrived in New York in early October 1899, Gustaf had another malaria attack, from which he recovered faster than ever before. He and Frederikke concluded that New

York provided a healthier environment than Chicago and decided to remain—an abrupt decision with far-reaching consequences. As soon as he was well enough, they began exploring housing options. The Bronx had recently become a borough of New York City, connected to Manhattan by the Third Avenue El, and was being developed to accommodate the city's expanding population. There they found an apartment and moved in, arranging for their furniture, piano, books, and household goods stored in Houston to be sent by rail. What a difference from their previous home: No need to sleep under mosquito nets, place saucers of kerosene underneath the furniture, or collect rainwater on the roof for bathing—you just turned on the tap, and the water flowed!

One reason why the Odenrantz family chose the Bronx may have been the fact that one of the three public high schools created by the New York City School Reform Act of 1896 was located there. Known initially as the “Mixed High School” because it was co-educational, it was later named Morris High School. When Gustaf visited the institution, he was impressed that the Latin teacher pronounced the language like his teacher at *gymnasium* in Uppsala. (According to her portrait in the 1904 school yearbook, Miss Josie A. Davis was also an attractive young woman with gently curling hair and beautiful eyes, which may have influenced him as well.) Although the school year had begun almost two months before, he persuaded the principal, Dr. Edward Jasper Goodwin, to admit Louise to the ninth grade. She had been out of school since May and faced the challenge of catching up with her peers, but on her very first day, she made a friend, whom she would stay in touch with for the rest of her life, Mary O'Hara. (Marguerite mentioned in a 1964 letter that Mary had shared Thanksgiving Dinner with her and Louise.)

Louise was fortunate to attend what might have been one of the best public schools in the country. Dr. Goodwin was a charismatic leader and educational reformer, who saw the goal of high school as social and intellectual development rather than the accumulation of information. He advocated the use of the project method and the inclusion of electives in the curriculum, and he believed that teachers needed to be “cultured, broadminded and socially responsive,” and have a strong academic foundation in the subjects they taught.



90 percent of Morris High faculty had bachelor degrees (compared with the national norm of 50 percent), many from major universities and colleges.<sup>6</sup>

The magnificent building designed for Morris High School, which is now on the Register of Historic Buildings, did not open until after Louise had graduated; throughout her high-school years, classes were held on the top floor of an elementary school on 157th Street. The cramped quarters did not hamper school spirit, however. A member of the Class of 1904 described his experience fondly: "That little old school house recalls pleasant thoughts. It was presided over by Dr. Edward J. Goodwin, beloved by teachers and pupils alike. How fatherly he ruled, yet how sternly! ... Two things stand out clearly—one, the intimate and personal relations that existed between pupils and teachers. ...The other thing that stands out is the school spirit. Our school—how we loved it, how we worked for it, how we cheered our leaders on."<sup>7</sup>

Louise's older sister Tulla, who had graduated from high school in Houston, entered Columbia Teachers College in 1900. Fred and Marguerite, who enrolled in local elementary schools, probably missed the freedom to roam the countryside that they had had in Texas. Marguerite acquired a pair of roller skates, which enabled her to cruise the sidewalks of the neighborhood. Fred used to hang out at a factory near their home, where he would sit on a high railing watching other boys playing. They were a raucous lot, and, on one occasion, they made such a nuisance of themselves that the factory owner called the police. The big boys took off, but Fred did not get away in time, and the police brought him to the station and contacted his home. Marguerite returned from roller-skating in time to see her "rotund little mother with determined small steps" bringing her son back. "He'll just have to learn to run faster," was her only comment, but later she reported to the family that she had told the police they would do better if they spent their time catching burglars than arresting little boys. "Knowing Mother I bet she told them," Marguerite added.<sup>8</sup>

That incident may have contributed to the family's decision to look for a new home. Realtors had built brownstone homes and apartments in West Harlem in the hope of attracting middle-class residents; when demand failed to match supply, they lowered

rents. The Odencrantzes found an apartment on West 122nd Street in a neighborhood now designated the Mount Morris Park Historic District. It was more expensive than the flat in the Bronx, but Gustaf had opened a book-store, supplementing the rental income from the Nebraska and Texas properties and the return on the investment of their inheritance, which had supported the family in the initial phase of the New York life. The new apartment had more space than any of their previous homes and could accommodate the heirlooms from Gustaf's childhood home in Sweden, which had been shipped to America. The living room provided a cozy setting for family musical evenings and a place where Frederikke could teach the piano students she began to acquire.

The street outside was lined with trees, and the steep, rocky terrain of Mount Morris Park (renamed Marcus Garvey Park in 1973) only two blocks away could make you forget you were in the city. Frederikke liked to pose family pictures there, which she sent to her Danish relatives. She also included a photo of Gustaf with the row-boat he acquired. On Sundays, he often took her and the children out on the Hudson River. "I never saw a better oarsman than Pappa at fifty years of age; he pulled the boat with the whole family of six in it, with strong and fast strokes," Marguerite proudly claimed.



Gustaf was 58 in this photo, which Frederikke sent to her Danish sister-in-law.

The move to West Harlem meant a long daily commute for Louise. In order to catch the Third Avenue El, which stopped a block from her school, she had to travel by streetcar through East Harlem, which housed thousands of recently arrived southern Italians and Sicilians. This was the first neighborhood in New York known as "Little Italy," a name later given to other areas including the one that would become the focus of her research a few years later. From the carriage window, she would have seen decrepit tenement buildings, pushcarts lining the streets, and sidewalks crowded with pedestrians of all ages. Observing the contrast between those scenes and her home in West Harlem, where middle-class families lived in dignified houses with modern conveniences, must have been a formative experience. As Nicholas Butler, president of Columbia University, said, "The great city, and especially New York, is intensely cosmopolitan, and contact with its life ... during the impressionableness of youth is in itself a liberal education."<sup>9</sup>

At Morris High School, Louise followed the "Classical Course," which prepared students for admission to elite colleges. It included four years of English, Latin, and math; three years of history and either Greek, French, or German; plus a year of "psychology" and a year of either physics or chemistry. Over a period of five days in June 1903, she took the entrance exam for Barnard. The standard was high. For English, "the candidate is expected to read intelligently all the books prescribed ... [and] to have freshly in mind their most important parts ... a considerable amount of English poetry should be committed to memory." The history exam demanded specific knowledge as well as analytic skills: "Show how far Lincoln's phrase 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' can be applied to [either] Athenian democracy [or] the Roman Republic."<sup>10</sup> In addition to the required subjects, Louise took advanced tests in Latin, including Cicero, Virgil, advanced composition, and sight translation. The Barnard scholarship committee reviewed her blue books and awarded her a grant for the full annual tuition of \$150.

Frederikke had won a lottery when she was eighteen, which enabled her to go to Copenhagen to study music. Her daughter was even more fortunate, having arrived in New York just as the first public high schools opened and gained admission to an elite insti-

tution through a competitive entrance exam. She was fortunate as well in having parents who had the financial means to support her while she attended college and left her free to choose her own path. Most middle- and upper-class parents at the time saw marriage as their daughters' primary goal in life and discouraged anything that might get in the way, such as higher education. Frederikke and Gustaf had chosen to leave their homes for an uncertain future in the new world, and their only expectation for their children was that they make the most of the opportunities it offered.