



The History of the Danish Jews

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The History of the Danish Jews

In 1622 king Christian IV invited a group of Spanish and Portuguese Jews to Denmark. The king hoped that the well-educated Jews would contribute to a better economy. In return they would get certain privileges. Some decades later in 1684 the first Jewish congregation was founded in Copenhagen.

The same year as the congregation was founded the Jews were allowed to perform religious ceremonies in each other's homes. So that no one would know that others apart from the Christians were allowed to practise their religion the Jews had to meet in secret. About 100 years later the Jews got the possibility to gather in their own synagogue in Copenhagen.

During the 17th and 18th centuries special laws for Jews were passed which among other things decided where they might live and be occupied with. They were dismissed from the crafts and had to maintain themselves in petty trade dealing with tobacco, metal, second hand clothes and things like that. Some Jews also dealt with lending activities and trade in leather, carpets, fur, tea and cocoa.

At the end of the 18th century the Jews got more freedom. It got possible for Jews to attend public schools and study at the Copenhagen University. Mendel Levin Nathanson, a Jewish merchant and publicist in the city, started Jewish schools for both boys and girls. Some years later, compulsory schooling was introduced in Denmark. At the same time the Jews got more civil rights. They could among other things live where they wanted, travel freely in the country and got the possibility to follow all professions. In 1849 the new constitution meant that they became Danish citizens with full rights.

Between 1807 and 1814 Napoleon waged across Europe and many countries took part in the war, among others Denmark, who supported France. The Danish interference ended in disaster. The English bombed Copenhagen and the whole country was subjected to economic blockade, which meant that goods couldn't be sold to or bought from other countries. This resulted in a financial crisis. When the state went bankrupt in 1813 the Jews were denounced as scapegoats. It was said that they had brought money out of the country and the hatred against the Jews grew stronger. On September 3, 1819, a sign was put up at the Stock Exchange in Copenhagen where "all good and Christian citizens" were urged to "gather to expel the Jews, this plague out of the city". Windows in Jewish shops were shattered and also windows in Jewish houses. In the street where the synagogue was situated an old Jewish man was beaten and trampled on till at last he was saved by the armed forces. The disturbances lasted for about two weeks with constant assaults on Jews.



© Reproduction of Pieter Isaacsz Painting, Rosenborg Castle

Christian IV and his queen, Anne Catherine, circa 1612.



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A Jewish salesman in 1806.



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The picture illustrates the lives of the girls in the successful Jewish Nathanson family in Copenhagen, 1818. The artist who painted the picture is called Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg.

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King Frederik VI.

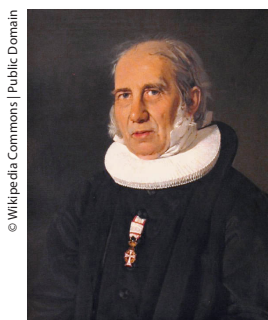
King Fredrik VI got the name "King of the Jews" during the disturbances, as he urged people to calm down, intervened against the uprising and saw to it that some of the perpetrators were convicted. Despite the king's intervention one could during the 19th century find articles with anti-Jewish elements in some Danish newspapers, for example it was said that Danes started to tire of "the foreign element", i.e. the Jews.

There were also attacks on certain persons. The well-known clergyman Grundtvig expressed himself against the Jewish author and journalist Meïr Aron Goldschmidt. Grundtvig meant that Goldschmidt with his different looks, faith and culture never could become "a proper Dane".

Towards the end of the 19th century Jews studied to become doctors, lawyers, researchers and scientists. Their efforts were appreciated and they held good positions in society. Proper education wasn't always enough. In some cases Jews had to be baptized and become Christians.



The picture shows the so-called Jewish feud 1819-1820. An old Jewish man is rescued from the agitated crowd.



Nicolai Fredrik Severin Grundtvig. Portraited by C. A. Jensen - Hans Jørn Storgaard Andersen.



Meïr Aron Goldschmidt.



Georg Brandes, a renowned Jewish Danish literary critic and scholar, is pictured in the magazine National, Ravnen 11 February, 1894.

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