

STANDPOINTS

There is great diversity among Danish Jews,
and consensus is a rare phenomenon.

Differences exist on the cultural level,
for example between the old, Danish Jewish
families and those of immigrants
from Eastern Europe.



Press-Photo

SJUF convention in Copenhagen, 1938.

A BROAD SPECTRUM

There are varying opinions on questions of religion, schooling and marriage in the Danish Jewish community. These can be important clues to the cultural identity of a new Jewish acquaintance and establishing his or her standpoint in relation to oneself. In many cases, these attitudes are stages on the road to integration and assimilation.

Although Jews are often seen as a homogeneous group, Danish Jews like other Jews, have many different attitudes towards the importance and influence of their Jewish-ness on their lives and how they choose to express their Jewish-ness. There are large differences in background, occupation, political orientation and in life-styles.

The number of Danish Jews is based on the official membership list of The Jewish Community in Denmark which is smaller than Birdlife Denmark. Jewish non-members live their Jewish lives in societies and within their private circles of family and friends or possess a private, inconspicuous Jewish identity.

Religious standpoints range from
disbelief to traditionalism
to orthodoxy

Meeting each other

The Union of Scandinavian Jewish Youth “Skandinavisk Jødisk Ungdomsforbund (SJUF)” was established in 1919 with the purpose of promoting contact between Jews in Scandinavia. Countless Jewish marriages have resulted from the organisation’s conventions, balls and banquets. The association still exists, and more than 300 young Jews participated in the 2003 SJUF convention.

Cultural Jews

A large group of Danish Jews do not consider themselves religious, but see themselves as “Cultural Jews”. Jewish holidays and festivals are celebrated with friends and family, they are interested in Jewish history, art and culture and have many Jewish acquaintances.



Anna Cordelier Fischer (1816-1861), approximately 40 years old and newly wed, "but to her father's sorrow with a Gentile." Drawn by her brother Philip August Fischer. Reproduction.

Mixed Marriages

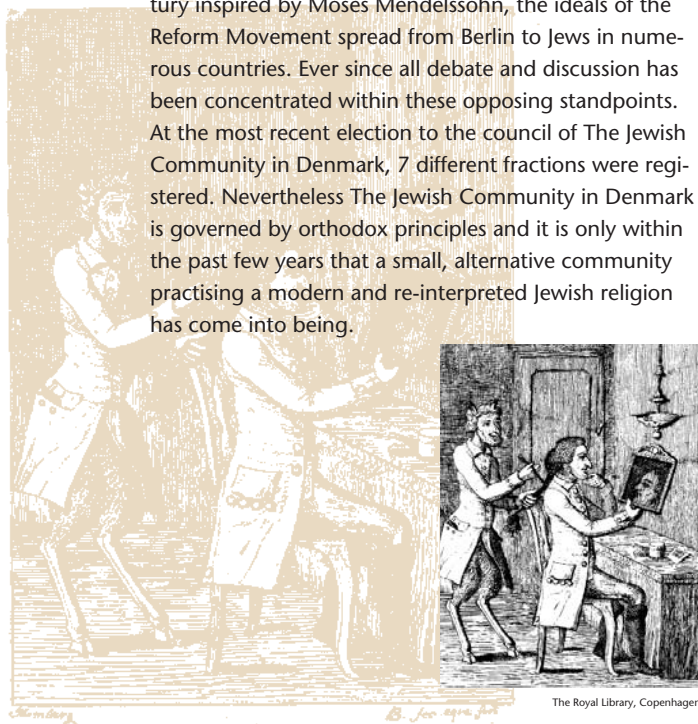
In 1798, King Christian VII granted the permission for the first mixed marriage between a Jew and a Christian. Their children though, had to be educated in the Christian faith.

In their own peaceful way
the numerous societies,
clubs and movements reflect
the diversity of Jewish identity in Denmark

RELIGIOUS STANDPOINTS

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Jewish community in Copenhagen was divided by conflicting standpoints. Those in favour of reforming religious practice were at odds with more conservative elements in the community. Such conflicts were not a Danish Jewish phenomenon. Towards the end of the eighteenth century inspired by Moses Mendelssohn, the ideals of the Reform Movement spread from Berlin to Jews in numerous countries. Ever since all debate and discussion has been concentrated within these opposing standpoints. At the most recent election to the council of The Jewish Community in Denmark, 7 different fractions were registered. Nevertheless The Jewish Community in Denmark is governed by orthodox principles and it is only within the past few years that a small, alternative community practising a modern and re-interpreted Jewish religion has come into being.

There are numerous versions of standpoints in relation to the Jewish faith. However Jewish identity is based on more than the religion itself. Religion is not the most important common denominator for the Danish Jews, whose religious standpoints range from disbelief to traditionalism to orthodoxy. Only a minority live the traditional Jewish life often described in books on Judaism and Jewish practice. However the religious universe contains a number of concepts and significant meanings, which provide a cultural reference even for non-practitioners.



The Royal Library, Copenhagen

The wig controversy

The internal debate on the reformation and modernisation of the community at the end of the eighteenth century became public. The elders within the community refused to call upon those members that wore the modern wig at the reading of the Torah in the Synagogue. These members reacted by denouncing the elders to the Danish authorities. The controversy was finally settled by compromise two years later.

Satzgren. Haarzofse. Juden



Hasomir on a picnic.

Social life

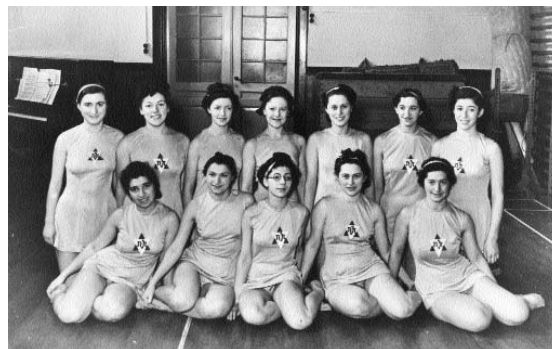
The singing association Hasomir had its roots in the Yiddish community in Copenhagen, and was dedicated to singing Jewish songs. The members of the association sang at annual picnics and concerts, especially in Yiddish, but also in Danish, Hebrew, Swedish and Russian. The association existed from 1912 to 1979.

CULTURES WITHIN THE CULTURE

Denmark is a country of associations and clubs. It is therefore hardly surprising that Jewish life in Denmark is also association-orientated. There is a bridge club, a Yiddish salon, Zionist organizations, trade guilds, a sports club, a Jewish radio station, a genealogical society, a society for Danish Jewish history, peace movements, a Polish-Israeli club, youth clubs and so on. Their activities range from relief work, parish politics, the production of Jewish periodicals, the holding of film festivals, seminars, bazaars as well as various celebrations and festivals.



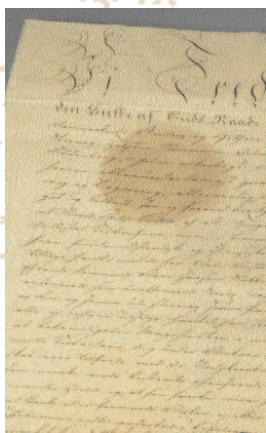
Yiddish theatre in Copenhagen. A performance of August Strindberg's "The Father" 1913.



Hakoah's female gymnasts, 1934.

In their own peaceful way the numerous societies, clubs and movements reflect the diversity of the many Danish Jewish standpoints. The need to meet with like-minded people is easily understandable. However these societies, clubs and movements also reflect diversity within the Danish Jewish community. The Eastern European immigrants established their own societies where they felt at home as did the later Polish immigrants.

These societies can be interpreted as elements of a united Jewish universe, providing an informal forum for meeting Jewish friends in relaxed and homely surroundings; yet for the insider they reflect an internal fractionation.



A permit granted in 1788 to Israel Philip Eichel “of the Jewish nation”.

A permit for a Jew

We, Frederik VI hereby proclaim that, at the request of Brene Cantor Getzel, Jewess of Copenhagen, her daughter's husband, Aron Samson Goldtzicher, Jew of the city of Altona, has been granted the permission to reside in Copenhagen and practice his trade as a goldsmith. And as requested by her on his behalf, he has been granted the right to open a small shop.
Issued in Husum April 12th 1713.

A permit for a Jew

We, Frederik VI hereby proclaim that we are graciously pleased to permit Abraham Levi, Jew from our city of Altona, permission to reside in Copenhagen and earn his living producing chocolate and selling tea, coffee and snuff on the condition that he does not engage in trade at the expense of others.
Copenhagen March 8th 1715.

Jews were allowed to practice their religion as discreetly as possible

Prohibition on Christian servants

... As from the named date if any Jew is found to have Christian servants in their employment, they shall be, whatever their standing, expelled from the city and country and their Christian servants face punishment ...
Issued at Frederiksberg Castle January 6th 1725.

Military service

In 1809, Jews on par with their fellow citizens were conscripted for military service.

COMMON STANDPOINTS

Nowadays the law provides a common standpoint for the Danish Jews. This, however, has not always been the case. In the beginning, the Sephardic Jews were granted special privileges until the state realised the beneficial work potential available among non-Sephardic Jews. From 1651, residence in Denmark required a letter of safe-conduct, which contained a specific work permit. In 1726 additional conditions were required such as a capital of at least 1,000 Danish Rigsdaler or the obligation under guarantee to erect a number of buildings or a factory for the manufacture of “various woollen products”. However, Jewish immigrants in the town of Fredericia were not bound by these economic conditions, as it was felt it might be detrimental to the desired immigration and development of the town.

Jewish immigrants in Denmark were subject to severe restrictions. Admittedly, Jews were allowed to practice their religion, preferably as discreetly as possible, in order not to offend the general public. Christian theologians attempted regularly to convert Jews to the Christian faith by seeking them out and commanding them to attend services. Economic incentives were also used as a lure to conversion. Some Jews did convert either due to conviction or to improve their possibilities in society.

With a new law in 1814, most of the old restrictions disappeared, as Jews born in Denmark or with valid residence permits were granted equality with their fellow citizens. In exchange, however, the Danish Jews had to accept the Danish authorities' supervision of their schools, inheritance laws and marriage contracts. From then on the Jewish community was required to keep a register on the lines of parish registers, and all Jewish youths had to take a mandatory religious test on par with the Christian Communion. Jews were no longer members of a Jewish nation but Danish citizens of Jewish faith.

With the adoption of the Danish Constitution in 1849, the discrimination of Danish Jews was reduced further. Amongst other rights, the Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion for all of the country's citizens. Twentieth-century Jewish immigrants were subject to the same general laws on immigration, naturalisation and social welfare as all other immigrants. Polish Jews were the first Jewish immigrants to Denmark that were accorded refugee status and for whom the Danish Welfare State provided lodgings, language lessons, economic aid and other forms of help.

The acquisition of a Danish passport is still remembered as a wonderful, festive occasion by the Danish Jewish children of Eastern European immigrants.

Education

In 1799, Jews were granted permission to enrol at certain public schools without having to be baptised.

Education

In 1805, *Friskolen for Drengbørn af den mosaiske Tro* "The School for Boys of the Mosaic Faith" opened as a result of M. L. Nathanson's reform efforts. The school's main purpose was to teach poor Jewish boys Danish and arithmetic and give them the qualifications they needed to survive and advance in Danish society. In 1810, M. L. Nathanson was among the founders of another school, *Carolinekolen for Piger*.

IDENTITY AND CHOICE

Until recently being Jewish was a fate that had to be accepted for better or worse. For a majority of Danish Jews, their Jewish-ness is just one of many aspects of their identity and possibly less important to them than their occupation, political orientation, nationality and life-style. It is quite likely that to many Jews, their Jewish identity is less important than their Danish identity, their profession as a Latin teacher, involvement in politics or being a diligent sports dancer. On the other hand, being born with a Jewish grandfather may be vastly important to one's identity and self-perception even though one has no ties with Judaism.



A class photo from Carolinekolen, 1930.

Most of the old restrictions disappeared in 1814



At the Jewish evening school on Fælledvej, the children were taught Yiddish. It was very important for their parents to uphold Yiddish culture and language. A team from 1926.

Who, then, is Jewish? The orthodox tradition defines a Jew as a person who is born of a Jewish mother or who has converted to the Jewish faith. Thus, children of Jewish fathers and Gentile mothers are not technically Jewish, and are therefore not automatically members of the Jewish community. These children form a large group in a country where many Jews live with Gentile partners.

On the other hand, there exists a group who are Jewish according to law and tradition but for whom this identity is of little or no importance. Some can feel that the outside world is keeping them captive in a Jewish identity they themselves reject.

The numerous avenues of identity open to Danish Jews are not just due to integration and assimilation. In a modern society, Jews as well as Gentiles contribute to an ongoing cultural development within which composite and diverse identities thrive.

The only common denominator
is the elusive Jewish identity
– this aside, diversity ruled
among Danish Jews.

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