

# **THE NORTHERNMOST JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE WORLD- TRONHEIM, NORWAY**

**Robert W. Case**

On a recent cruise to the North Cape of Norway, we decided to try to attend services in the Trondheim Synagogue, since we would be there on a Saturday.

First, I spent a considerable amount of time researching the history of the Norwegian Jews. The original Jews were Sephardi and Portuguese Jews who had fled the Spanish Inquisition in the 15th century. Many Jews who settled in Norway let themselves be baptized, since the king forbade anyone who was not Christian to reside in Norway.

King Christian IV in 1620 gave the Jews permission to live in Norway, and was granted freedom of religion and the right to live and trade freely in Denmark and Norway. However, this freedom was short-lived, and King Fredrik III instituted a form of a “visa” for Jews to enter the country in 1687. King Christian V further restricted the Jews, instituting a strict prohibition for any Jews entering the country, including fines and rewards for any person who informed against a Jew. This situation lasted for over 150 years, and in 1830 the attitude towards Jews was somewhat more lenient.

Finally, in 1844 the Justice Dept decided that “Portuguese Jews” would be permitted to enter freely. Jews started to arrive from Poland and Lithuania who did not have the money to go to America. The first Jewish community was established in Christiania (now Oslo). At this time there were 214 Jews in Norway, and 136 of them were living in Christiania. They kept to the orthodox tradition, although most were not very observant.

The numbers increased during the next 30 years, and at the turn of the century there were 1457 Jews. The population increased to 2000 mostly due to the persecution and general suffering in Europe. The population of Norwegian Jews never exceeded this number. Between 1915 and 1940, the Jewish Cultural life in Norway blossomed. There were several Yiddish theatrical groups, choirs, and Yiddish academic organizations. In 1910 the Jewish Youth Association (JYA) was established, becoming the most active and important organization within the Jewish community. In 1940, when Germany invaded Norway, the Quisling (Norwegian Nazi) government filled the newspapers with vicious anti-Semitic propaganda, and in 1942, 750 Jews were deported to Auschwitz. Only 25 survived. The rest of the Jews escaped to Sweden.

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After the war, approximately 950 Jews returned to Oslo, and were shocked to find that the synagogue and The Torah scrolls were unharmed. It had been used as a Storage place for Nazi literature and Jewish belongings. Confiscated during the war. *(This same scenario existed In Prague and Budapest!)*

TRONDHEIM, Norway is the third largest city in Norway. The Jewish community was started in 1851, after Parliament voted to admit Jews and allowed them full civil rights. A few Jews started to arrive from Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein, and by 1900 there were 119 Jews in Trondheim, and a few went even farther north, working on extending the railroad line from Oslo to north of the Arctic circle. Others became peddlers or small businessmen dealing primarily in textiles .For many years, the Jews rented quarters in which to hold services and run a *cheder*. They even had a kosher butcher!

By 1905, they were sufficiently established to found a congregation, and purchased a building. Within 15 years, the congregation had grown to 326 members. In 1924 they purchased the old railroad station in Trondheim, remodeled it, and dedicated it as a synagogue a year later. The synagogue seats 200 people, and the basement contained a grey stone mikve, which was used during the 20's and 30's.

All was well until the Nazi's invaded on April 9<sup>th</sup> , 1940. 250,000 German troops were stationed in Trondheim, and the Gestapo started to harass the Jews, and those that did not escape to Sweden, were imprisoned in Fasted concentration camp, and then transported to Auschwitz. The synagogue was confiscated in April of 1941, and was gutted and used for barracks and storage by the Nazi's. Only 12 Norwegian Jews survived the camp.

The Trondheim Jewish community today numbers about 130 people, about half are under 50, and approximately 30 children attend *cheder* .Most of the adults are either professionals, or in engaged in the textile business.

The Synagogue has been completely restored, and though officially orthodox, they have taken a few liberties in interpretation. The community has established that sundown is at 5:30 p.m. on Friday night year around, and the Sabbath ends at 6:00 p.m. Saturday. Services are only held on Friday, and there are no services during the summer months, since most congregants are traveling "on vacation". *Remember, during the period from the middle of June until the end of August, there is daylight around the clock !*

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When we attempted to visit the Synagogue, we did not realize that it “closed For the summer! We did, however, manage to get a photograph of the synagogue.



Photograph by Robert W. Case

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