

Curriculum Vitae Professor Dr Fridtjof Nansen

Name: Fridtjof Wedel-Jarlsberg Nansen

Life Dates: 10 October 1861 - 13 May 1930



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Fridtjof Nansen was a Norwegian zoologist, polar explorer and diplomat. He also used the popularity he gained through his scientific expeditions to help refugees. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922 for his humanitarian work after the First World War.

Academic and Professional Career

Fridtjof Nansen began studying zoology at King Frederik University in Kristiania (now Oslo) in the spring of 1881.

In 1882, he went to the Arctic for the first time. On a Norwegian seal hunter's ship, he reached the uninhabited and inaccessible east coast of Greenland. Although he was stuck in the pack ice for 24 days on this journey, his enthusiasm for the region remained unbroken. He decided to venture deeper into the island on further expeditions. Later he wrote about his first encounter with the Arctic: "This whole unknown world lured my young soul in."

From 1882 to 1886, Fridtjof Nansen worked as a curator at the Natural History Museum in Bergen. There he also wrote his doctoral thesis on the central nervous system of lower marine animals. From 1897 onwards, he was involved in oceanography, which was a newly emerging research discipline at the time. Nansen also undertook research trips to the North Atlantic, and he helped to develop equipment for marine research.

In 1897 he was appointed professor of zoology at King Frederik University in Kristiania. This chair was converted into a personal professorship of oceanography in 1908. In addition, he was elected rector of this alma mater, but he never assumed office.

From August to October 1888, Nansen and five companions crossed Greenland from east to west on dog sledges. Between 1889 and 1896, he also undertook various research expeditions to the Arctic. From 1893, he used the three-master “Fram”, which was specially designed and built for this purpose. At that time, he was already famous beyond the borders of Norway.

In 1893, he set out on a North Pole expedition. On 8 April 1895, he approached the geographic North Pole in an unprecedented way. Fridtjof Nansen and his companions did not return to Norway until three years later and were even considered missing for a while. Nevertheless, they did not reach it. Further expeditions followed later, for example, in 1900 and between 1910 and 1913 to the North Atlantic and in 1913 to Siberia. Fridtjof Nansen and his findings influenced many subsequent expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctic.

Fridtjof Nansen also made political appearances. For example, as part of Norway's quest for political independence. In 1905, he advocated the end of the Swedish-Norwegian personal union that had existed since 1814. He also helped in the enthronement of the then Prince of Denmark as Norwegian King. Furthermore, he worked as a diplomat in London from 1906 to 1908. There he also took part in negotiations for the recognition of Norway's sovereignty under international law. After the First World War, he served as High Commissioner for Refugee Affairs. The popularity he had already gained as a polar explorer proved beneficial in that capacity.

Nobel Peace Prize 1922

After the First World War, Fridtjof Nansen became involved in the newly founded League of Nations. In 1920, the League commissioned him to repatriate prisoners of war, of which there were still hundreds of thousands at the time. Nansen personally negotiated with the representatives of the respective governments and succeeded in bringing most of the soldiers home again.

Starting in 1921 as the League's High Commissioner for Refugees, he also sought solutions for the many refugees who had lost their homes in the war and were now living displaced in material hardship and without rights. Fridtjof Nansen's position in negotiations was difficult because many states refused to accept refugees. The introduction of the so-called Nansen Passport, which was recognised in 52 countries and gave many stateless refugees new prospects abroad, can be attributed to him.

Nansen also provided help in Russia. At the time, the country was scarred by the revolution and crop failures. Nansen organised mainly private donations to facilitate grain deliveries. An international aid committee was set up in Moscow in August of 1921 specifically for this purpose.

And finally, Fridtjof Nansen made a name for himself when he managed to solve another humanitarian problem in 1922: In this case, it concerned the consequences of the Greco-Turkish War. As a result, around one million Greeks were forced to leave their homes in Asia Minor. Supported by the League of Nations, Nansen mediated. Some of them were successfully relocated to

other countries; others were given a chance to stay in the motherland. In return, Turks who had lived in Greece until then were resettled in Turkey.

Fridtjof Nansen was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922 for his humanitarian work after the First World War.

Honours and Awarded Memberships

For his scientific work, but also for his political commitment, Nansen received numerous other awards, including the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav (1889), the Patron's Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society (1891), Cullum Geographical Medal of the American Geographical Society (1897), Vega Medal of the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (1889), Konstantin Medal of the Russian Geographical Society (1907), the Alexander von Humboldt Medal and the Grand Cross of the Imperial Austrian Order of Franz Joseph (1898).

Numerous scientific associations and societies appointed him as a member, including the Norwegian Academy of Sciences, Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences, Royal Geographical Society as well as the German Academy of Natural Sciences Leopoldina (1896).

Personal Details

Fridtjof Nansen was born on 10 October 1861 as the second son of the lawyer Baldur Nansen and his wife Adelaide Johanne Thekla Isidore Wedel-Jarlsberg in Store Frøen near Oslo, Norway. His older brother, born in 1859 and also christened Fridtjof, died in infancy. The younger brother Alexander was born in 1862. Nansen grew up in a rural environment and attended the Latin school in Kristiania. He was brought up religiously. From an early age, he was an enthusiastic sportsman. Despite a serious fall, which he survived almost unharmed, his passion for ski jumping and other winter sports remained unbroken. He went on to set several records in speed skating.

After the sudden death of his mother in 1877, his father sold the family home and moved to Kristiania with his two sons. There, Nansen graduated from high school in 1880.

On 6 September 1889, he married the singer Eva Sars, the daughter of Norwegian zoologist Michael Sars. The couple had five children: Liv (1893), Kare (1897), Irmelin (1900), Odd (1901) and Asmund (1903). Odd Nansen founded Nansenhjelpen, or Nansen Relief, in 1936 to provide safe haven and assistance for Refugees and Stateless Persons.

After the death of his first wife Eva, Fridtjof Nansen married Sigrun Munthe on 17 January 1919. He passed away on 13 May 1930 in Lysaker near Oslo, NO. After his death, the Nansen International Office for Refugees, founded in 1921, continued his work and was also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1938.

Since 1954, the Nansen Refugee Award Committee, headed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has awarded the Nansen Medal (later renamed the Nansen Refugee

Award), endowed with 100,000 US dollars. This medal honours persons or organisations who have rendered outstanding services to refugees.

Nansen's worldwide popularity is unbroken. His life and expeditions are documented in numerous book publications. The wooden ship Fram, which he used until 1914, is exhibited with the superstructure from 1902 in the Fram Museum in Oslo.