



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation#33

FRIDTJOF NANSEN

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Among Norwegians who have acquired international fame, Fridtjof Nansen is often named as one of the most illustrious. Some will remember him mainly as the great polar explorer, some as a scientist and some as a political and diplomatic figure. But Nansen probably reached his highest potential as a human-being working to help refugees and prisoners of war. He used his enormous prestige solely on behalf of the unfortunate, homeless, and suffering after **World War I**.

Born on the outskirts of Oslo on October 10, 1861, Nansen developed an ardent love for the outdoors as a young child. His sense of kinship with nature probably helped him determine his field when, at 19 years of age, he entered the University of Oslo to study zoology.

It was during his years at the university that he first experienced the Arctic and began to consider a journey across the ice-cap of Greenland. This expedition took place in 1888 and Nansen found himself an international celebrity. But his next polar expedition overshadowed the first. Based on his own **oceanographic theories** about ocean currents in the Polar Sea, Nansen deliberately allowed his specially constructed ship, Fram ('Frahm) to be frozen in the pack-ice, expecting it to be carried across the North Pole or at least get close to it. This expedition set out in the summer of 1893 and returned triumphantly three years later.

This expedition not only brought Nansen fame as a polar explorer. Based on scientific data collected on his expedition, he made significant contributions to the fields of meteorology, oceanography and zoology. The University of Oslo welcomed him as a professor of zoology in 1897 and of oceanography in 1908.

By this time he was already involved in matters of national political importance. Norway dissolved its union with **Sweden** in 1905 and Nansen used his international authority to get understanding and goodwill for Norway's cause from the rest of the world. His diplomatic efforts were so successful that he was appointed Norway's first minister to London in 1906 and led a delegation to Washington in 1917 during World War I.

After the war was over, Nansen's pity for the victims of the war spurred him into action. Working through the League of Nations, he helped repatriate thousands of war prisoners who otherwise might have died from exposure and starvation during the winter of 1920-21.

In **August 1921** he took on a task of even greater magnitude. Europe had millions of political refugees who needed help. Many of them were without passports or identification papers. Nansen introduced a new form of passport, the "Nansen Passport", which he induced more than fifty governments to recognize. He also negotiated with these governments to find homes and work for the refugees.

Nansen dedicated the later part of his life to the refugees. He was awarded the **Nobel Peace Prize** for his work in 1922 and donated the entire prize sum to the relief work. He also sacrificed his health. Worn out by an enormous work load, he died of heart failure in 1930. Or maybe it would be more correct to say that he died because his heart never failed.