

# Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson

## 12 Jews in Greenland

Translated by Jonathan Adams\*

**Abstract:** There has never been a Jewish community as such in Greenland, but over the years there have been Jewish visitors who have lived there for a period of time: journalists, nurses, meteorologists, and American and Danish servicemen. Furthermore, the first vessel in the Israeli navy began life as an American coastguard ship that patrolled the Greenlandic coast. This article tells some of these stories and concludes with a short addendum on (the lack of) antisemitism in Greenland.

**Keywords:** Antisemitism; Greenland; history; Jews.

Jews in Greenland. It sounds perhaps rather strange, almost like a coincidence. Indeed, it *is* only coincidence and a spirit of adventure that brought Jews to Greenland. Nonetheless, for a short while the country could boast of having the northernmost *minyan* in the world, namely the one assembled at Thule Air Base next to the village of Dundas (Pituffik) at 77° north. It was thus located much further north than, for example, the congregation *Or HaTzafon* (Light of the North, affectionately known as “The Frozen Chosen”) in Fairbanks, Alaska, that some people claim to be the most northerly in the world.

We know even less about the whereabouts of Jews in Greenland than we do in Iceland.<sup>1</sup> There were certainly Jews among the first Dutch whalers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At least, the Jews of Amsterdam participated in the valuable whale-oil trade and owned some of the ships that took part in the whaling. However, in order to find unequivocal reports of Jews in Greenland we have to head to the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> On Jews in Iceland, see Vilhjálmur Örn Vilhjálmsson, “En islandsk jødisk annal, 1625–2003,” *Rambam: Tidsskrift for jødisk kultur og forskning* 12 (2003): 102–16.

## A Zionist in Aasiat

The German-born journalist and globetrotter Alfred J. Fischer<sup>2</sup> and his wife visited Greenland in 1955. His friends in London said to him before his departure, “You’re not going to find any Jews in Greenland!” They were wrong. Fischer did find a Jew, in the town of Aasiat (Danish: Egedesminde) at the southern end of Disko Bay. He described his visit to the town’s hospital:

The friendly Danish doctor, Dr Schmidt, took me round the various departments. Finally we reached the children’s section, whose inmates were an amusing mixture of Mongolian types with slanting eyes and blond, fair-skinned babies revealing their partly Danish parentage. With some astonishment, I noticed the nurse, whose features showed neither Danish nor Greenlandic characteristics. Dr Schmidt introduced her: “Miss Rita Sheftelovich [Scheftelowitz] from Copenhagen.” Sheftelovich sounds no more Danish than François sounds English. Moreover, Miss Sheftelovich regarded my wife and me with the same curiosity with which we looked at her. In the afternoon we met her again, since one inevitably meets everyone at least two or three times a day in Egedesminde. Without any further ado, Rita now enquired in English whether by any chance we happened to be coreligionists.

Rita Scheftelowitz told Fischer that both of her parents had come from Russia to Denmark.<sup>3</sup> The family was Orthodox and she became a Zionist at a young age. Her plan was to emigrate to Israel where she wanted to work in one of the children’s homes run by the Women’s International Zionist Organization. She had come to Greenland to work as an intern in a place that was completely different to Denmark, but she had also been driven by a sense of adventure when, like so many other young Danes, she had headed to Greenland to experience the midnight sun and the rugged natural beauty. Rita invited the Fischers to her room for tea and canned pineapple, “brought from the southern countries to the proximity of the North Pole,” as Alfred J. Fischer put it. Rita Scheftelowitz said goodbye to the Fischers with the words “*LeShanah Haba’ah b’Yerushalayim*” – next year in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fischer briefly mentions his visit to Greenland in his biography: *In der Nähe der Ereignisse* (Berlin: Transit Buchverlag, 1991), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Rita, who today is called Rita Felbert and lives in Copenhagen, has informed me that her mother actually came from Poland and her father from what is now Lithuania.

<sup>4</sup> The Wiener Library, London: Press Cuttings, Denmark (Greenland): Typed manuscript (dated 1957) with the title “Encounters with the Jews near the North Pole. Report from Greenland” (4 pages). The sections have the following titles: “I. In Egedesminde prior to Jerusalem, Nurse Rita Sheftelovitch is the first Jewish girl in Greenland,” “II. The Chemnitz Family are proud of their Jewish grandfather from Poland,” and “III. The World’s northernmost minyan.” It has

Forty-seven years later in an interview with the author, Rita Scheftelowitz, then Felbert, remembered her time in Greenland as if it were yesterday, and not least her encounter with the Fischers in the autumn of 1955. She had been given a contract for one year and sailed to Greenland on the ship *Umanaq*. On board were also officials from the Greenland Office who were to oversee conditions in Greenland and check on the tuberculosis patients who had received treatment at the Øresund quarantine hospital in Copenhagen.

When Rita arrived in Aasiat, nearly the whole town was standing on the quayside as the ship docked. And so began a busy year for Rita, working as a nurse both in the small hospital in Aasiat and in the outlying settlements. She sailed to these settlements scattered along Disko Bay in the ship *Bjarnov*, and in January when the sea had frozen she visited her patients by dog sled accompanied by hunters. On one occasion the temperature was  $-37^{\circ}\text{C}$ . On one of these trips, she took a sick child back to the hospital in Aasiat. In the winter of 1955–56, a measles epidemic devastated the small town. It took the lives of many of the inhabitants, who had no immunity to the virus. Those who had already been weakened by tuberculosis or other diseases were easy prey. Much of Rita's work involved caring for the sick and trying to prevent the disease spreading to the outlying settlements.

There was also time to enjoy oneself in Aasiat. Rita made many good friends among the Greenlanders and joined in the town's activities. Keeping kosher was not too much of a problem either. She abstained from eating meat (*fleyshik*) and, of course, there was plenty of fish. Supplies and mail arrived twice during the long winter – tossed out of an aeroplane onto the ice outside of the town. The last delivery included a care package for Rita from her mother, containing *matzah* among other things.

Rita wanted to return to Greenland and was just about to agree to a two-year contract working at a children's home in Nuuk, but her plans changed. She took some courses and in 1959 travelled to Israel on *Ulpan*; she worked for two years in Tel Aviv before marrying and returning to Denmark.<sup>5</sup>

When Rita returned to Denmark in 1956, the ship that she was sailing on called in at the naval station Grønnedal (Kangilinnguit). Here she met her relative Gunnar Siefert (later a painter), who in 1955–56 was doing military service there with the Greenland Commando. Driven by a spirit of adventure, Gunnar

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not been possible to discover whether Fischer's manuscript has ever been published in English, but his story about Rita Scheftelowitz was published in Switzerland (most likely in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, for which Fischer had been writing since the 1930s) under the heading: "Jüdische Begegnungen in Nordpolnähe" (Jewish encounters near the North Pole).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Rita Felbert, 30 June 2003.



**Figure 12.1:** Rita Scheftelowitz at a dance party (*dansemik*). Here she is dancing with Golo, her Greenlandic interpreter. Photo: Rita Felbert's private collection.

had applied to be sent to Greenland after finishing school. One of his more enjoyable duties at Grønnedal was to turn over the very few jazz LPs on the record player at the local radio station and broadcast them. So one of the first disc jockeys in Greenland was a Jew. Gunnar came close to an early and unhappy end in Greenland, when the house he slept in was destroyed by an avalanche. By a stroke of luck, he was not in the building at the time, but twenty years later four Danes were killed when an avalanche came crashing down in the same place.<sup>6</sup>

## Chemnitz the Jew

In Nuuk, Alfred Fischer met Jørgen Chemnitz, an interpreter for the Danish civil service in Greenland. With pride, Jørgen told Fischer about his grandfather from Poland. According to Jørgen, he had arrived in Greenland on a merchant ship

<sup>6</sup> Telephone interview with Gunnar Saiset, 1 July 2003.

after a voyage of six weeks. The climate in Greenland was too harsh for him and he was already ill and bedridden with pneumonia when the last ship left for Denmark. Therefore, he had to spend the winter in Greenland, where he gradually recovered. The following year he decided not to return to Copenhagen after all, but instead married the kind Greenlandic woman who had taken care of him during the winter. Chemnitz thus became the founding father of the influential Chemnitz family in Greenland. Fischer wrote about his newly discovered Jewish Greenlandic twist:

The Chemnitz family has given Greenland its intellectual elite. One nephew represents the first native clergyman with academic training. True – none of them belong to the Jewish faith any more. On the other hand, there is no member of the Chemnitz family who is not proud of his Jewish origins and who would not take pleasure in recounting his strange family history.

However, despite what Jørgen Chemnitz had insisted to Alfred Fischer in 1956, later generations of the Chemnitz family know nothing of any Jewish origins. The fact of the matter is, their ancestor, Jens Carl Wilhelm Chemnitz, came to Greenland in 1834. He was probably born on Als but his family originated in Holstein with links to Mecklenburg. The first Chemnitz in Greenland, who was not a Jew, was employed by the Royal Greenland Trading Department as a cooper.<sup>7</sup>

## Ten toes in the ice

In 1929, Fritz Loewe, a Jewish meteorologist, arrived in Greenland with his colleague and friend, Alfred Wegener, who was world-famous for his theory of continental drift. The expedition went to the interior of Greenland where one of their tasks was to measure the thickness of the ice sheet using the newest methods and instruments. After three trips into the interior, a group of researchers and thirteen Greenlanders set off for a fourth time, carrying supplies for colleagues who were at the camp called *Eismitte* (“Ice-Centre”). However, all the Greenlanders but one gave up and returned to the west coast. Wegener, Loewe, and the Greenlander Rasmus Villadsen struggled on with all the supplies they could carry, in temperatures that plummeted to -54 °C. When they reached the *Eismitte* camp, Fritz Loewe’s toes were frostbitten and his colleague had to amputate them with scissors and a penknife. Loewe survived but had to spend

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<sup>7</sup> Pastor Jens Christian Chemnitz, nephew of Jørgen Chemnitz, kindly informed the author of the Chemnitz family’s correct genealogy, 19 June 2003.

the winter of 1930–31 at *Eismitte*. Alfred Wegener and Rasmus Villadsen, however, attempted to return to the west coast but never reached their destination. In 1934, Loewe had to leave Germany with his family, first fleeing to England and later settling in Australia where he became a professor. He went on to establish Australia's first department of meteorology at the University of Melbourne.

## Thule Air Base

During his journey in 1955, with the aim among other things of finding Jews, Alfred J. Fischer also visited the world's most northerly *minyán* at the Thule Air Base. He flew there from Kangerlussuaq (Søndre Strømfjord) and encountered a strange, modern micro-society almost entirely composed of men, complete with its own radio station and a brand new television station that they were overjoyed with. From 1954 onwards there was a Jewish congregation on the base that was always able to gather about fifteen men for Sabbath services. There was a sort of reserve rabbi working at Thule: a law graduate and lieutenant from New Orleans called Maurice Burk. Fischer met Burk in the elegant "Officers' Club." Burk told him everything about the most northerly *minyán* in the world. The congregation had originally been founded by a certain Captain Robert Holt, a theology student from the Christian Science movement. His Hebrew skills were said to be so exceptional that many people did not even realize that he was not actually Jewish.<sup>8</sup>

After finishing his studies at Tulane Law School in 1953, he became first lieutenant in the Judge Advocate General's Department of the US Air Force. In December 1954 he was deployed to Thule. It was Maurice Burk's idea to hold a Passover *Seder* in 1955 and it turned out that there were many more Jews in Thule than he had realized. He had not even met all of them until the *seder*. They had *matzah*, food, and wine as well as *haggadot* flown to Thule, and the

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<sup>8</sup> See note 5. Alfred Fischer described Burk thus: "A lawyer by profession – he works in the Army's legal department. Burk will find the hardship of his year in Thule far easier to bear than many others, since he regards his Jewish activities as a real mission. He comes from New Orleans, of an Orthodox Jewish family. As a child he attended the *cheder*. His mother was a native American, while Maurice's father immigrated from Pinsk and is supposed to possess more Jewish knowledge than many a rabbi." By "native American" Fischer did not mean that Burk's mother descended from the indigenous peoples of North America, but rather that she belonged to an old Jewish family in the United States.

*seder* was held in the largest room at the base.<sup>9</sup> The Danish commander in Thule, Eigil Franch Petersen,<sup>10</sup> was also invited to the *seder*.



**Figure 12.2:** The Passover Seder in Thule in 1955. Maurice Burk from New Orleans reads aloud from the Haggadah. Photo: Maurice Burk's private collection.

Alfred J. Fischer also described some of the Jews he met at the Thule Air Base. One of the first men he met was Kleinmann, a twenty-two-year-old from New York, who ran the bookshop. When he arrived at Thule as an Orthodox Jew, the Protestant priest at the base made sure that he never had to work on the Sabbath and he had kosher food sent in from New York, even tinned *gefilte fish*.

Another soldier, Robert J. Mezistrano, a Sephardi Jew born in Casablanca, was according to Fischer something of a linguistic genius. He spoke Arabic, French, Italian, English, and German, if not even more languages. His parents were originally from Istanbul. There was also another Holocaust survivor at

<sup>9</sup> Information from a letter from Maurice L. Burk to the author, 9 April 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Eigil Franch Petersen, later rear admiral and head of Greenland's defence. He was rapidly promoted through the ranks because he had fought alongside the British and Americans at the Normandy landings in 1944. He later did service at Grønneidal.

the base, Louis Helish (originally Lutz Helischkowski),<sup>11</sup> who had been deported from Berlin with his family to Theresienstadt. His father was murdered in Auschwitz, but Lutz, his younger sister, and mother survived and emigrated to the United States in 1945. Lutz had had eighteen different jobs before he joined the army. In uniform he returned to Berlin where he married a Jewish girl, also a survivor.

In total, there were fifty-three Jews at the Thule Air Base when Alfred J. Fischer visited. Together with them and fifteen others who were stationed in Søndre Strømfjord, he participated in a *Rosh Hashanah* service led by Rabbi Kalman L. Levitan from New York. Fischer described Rabbi Levitan's sermon to the congregation:

In beautiful, moving words he related the story of the call made upon Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac to the situation of the men in Thule, encouraging them to take a positive view of their fate in light of divine providence.<sup>12</sup>

Upon his arrival back in New York, Rabbi Levitan wrote to Maurice Burk's brother, Dr Kopel Burk:

This letter is merely to inform you that he is well and in good spirits. The rigours of his duty assignment are not conducive to the easiest kind of living, but it should please you to know that he has adapted to his circumstances without forgetting his Jewish responsibilities. Meeting, knowing, and serving him has been both a pleasure and privilege for me.<sup>13</sup>

The Thule Air Base was no dream posting for a young American soldier. This can clearly be seen in contemporary American films where being deployed to Greenland was usually portrayed as a punishment. For many of the Jewish men, the Sabbath and High Holy Days provided a welcome opportunity to take more time off. However, the highpoint of Maurice Burk's stay in Greenland was probably not Jewish life but rather Bob Hope's visit to Thule in December 1954. His Christmas show was filmed and broadcast on television across the United States,

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**11** Lutz Helischkowski's name is on the list of survivors from Theresienstadt, see Bořivoj Spilka, *Terezín Ghetto 1945* (Prague: Repatriační odbor ministerstva ochrany práce a sociální péče Republiky československé, 1945), 175.

**12** See note 5.

**13** Letter from Kalman L. Levitan, Chaplain (Capt.) USAF, 3650th Military Training Wing, Sampson Air Force Base, Geneva, New York, 18 October 1955, to Dr Kopel Burk, Staten Island, New York. Rabbi Kalman L. Levitan was a rather unusual chap; he was also a poet and published his poems in miniature books of exquisite quality, which due to their rarity today change hands for a small fortune. His most famous works were *The People of the Little Book* (Palm Beach Gardens: Kaycee Press, 1983) and *Tongues of Flame* (Palm Beach Gardens: Keycee Press, 1989).



indeed across the globe. Other celebrities performed alongside Bob Hope, such as Anita Ekberg and numerous men, including the Jewish actors Robert Strauss and Peter Leeds.

## A ship with history

Just as a small curiosity that links the histories of Greenland and Israel, we finish by mentioning that the State of Israel's first naval vessel *Eilat* (later *Matzpen*, "compass") had originally been an American coastguard ship that had been launched under the name *Northland* in 1927. The ship, reinforced to sail in ice, was used for patrolling the Bering Sea. In 1941, the ship was sent along with other American vessels to the coast of Greenland to protect Danish interests, among other things. On 12 September 1941, the crew boarded the Norwegian trawler *Buskø* which was being used by the Germans as a weather ship and for transporting spies. This was the first American naval victory of the Second World War and the first action by the Americans, before they officially entered the war. In the wake of this victory, the crew of the *Northland* captured three German spies who were busy building a secret radio station on the coast. The crew of the *Northland* also sank a German submarine and a German ship that was transporting spies to Greenland in the summer of 1944. In 1946 the *Northland* was sold to an American company supported by Jewish organizations. A year later it sailed to Palestine carrying Holocaust survivors under a new and more fitting name, *The Jewish State* (*Medinat haYehudim*).<sup>14</sup>

## Addendum 2018

It is difficult to imagine that antisemitism is something that hardworking Greenlandic fishermen and hunters and their families have been too bothered about. Antisemitism was apparently first discussed in Greenland in 1935 in the newspaper *Atuagagdliutit*,<sup>15</sup> in a translated article by the Copenhagen bishop Hans Fuglsang-Damgaard (1890–1979). The bishop later became well known for his pastoral letter written after the German capture and deportation of the Danish

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<sup>14</sup> The information about *USCGC Northland* is from the US Coastguard's homepage < [http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-cp/history/Northland\\_1927.html](http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-cp/history/Northland_1927.html) > (now defunct). See also < [https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/pdf/iip/history/The\\_Coast\\_Guard\\_and\\_the\\_Greenland\\_Patrol.pdf](https://www.navcen.uscg.gov/pdf/iip/history/The_Coast_Guard_and_the_Greenland_Patrol.pdf) >.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Fuglsang-Damgaard, "Antisemitisme," *Atuagagdliutit*, 1 December 1935, 67–69, < [http://timarit.is/view\\_page\\_init.jsp?pageId=3772907](http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageId=3772907) >.

Jews in 1943. In his letter, he denounces antisemitism in no uncertain terms and describes it as irreconcilable “both with the biblical view of the Jewish people and the Christian commandment of charity and with democratic principles of justice.” The letter was signed by all the bishops in Denmark and read out in the country’s churches on 3 October 1943.

There is one further example of antisemitism, but it is probably better understood in a Danish, than a Greenlandic context. In a report about antisemitic incidents in Denmark, published by the Jewish community (*Det Jødiske Samfund i Danmark*) in 2013, we read that “a suspected Greenlandic man walks past the Copenhagen synagogue and says to a guard standing in front of the synagogue, ‘All Jews must die. There is a bomb in the synagogue this evening – and all the Jews in the synagogue this evening are going to die.’ The police were called and they picked up the presumably Greenlandic man who was clearly intoxicated.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Rapport om Antisemitiske hændelser i Danmark 2013*, 14, < <http://mosaiske.dk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AKVAH-rapport-2013.pdf> >.