

**Ulf Haxen**

**David Simonsen 1853 - 1932**

Simonsen, David Jacob, 1853-1932. Judaic scholar, philanthropist, collector of books. Born 17 March 1853, died 15 June 1932 in Copenhagen. Buried at the Jewish cemetery (Mosaisk Vestre Begravelsesplads). Parents: broker Jacob Simonsen and Rose Hahn. Married 1879 to Cora Salomon 1856-1938. Daughter of silk- and cloth merchant Heyman Joel Salomon and Therese Oettinger. Simonsen came from an old Danish-Jewish family. His paternal great-great grandfather came from Köhten by Halle and immigrated to Denmark in the 17th century. Together with Meyer Goldschmidt Chajim Køhten founded the first Jewish community in Copenhagen, which, for about 30 years, held services at Goldschmidt's apartment in the neighbourhood 'Strandkvarteret'.

When Simonsen was 20 years old (1873), he wrote a prize paper at the University of Copenhagen on a topic concerning Hebrew and Arabic syntax. Later that same year he was admitted to the famous Jewish theological seminary at Breslau where he graduated in 1879. He was offered a fellowship there, and was later encouraged to apply for a senior position at Ramsgate, subsequently Jew's College, in London. Simonsen preferred to return to Denmark, however, where he was the first native Dane to be appointed rabbi by the Jewish Community in Copenhagen. When Chief Rabbi A.A. Wolff died in 1892, Simonsen succeeded him, but already in 1902 Simonsen retired from his position. In 1903 he was appointed titular professor.

David Simonsen was an enthusiast for the scientific understanding of Judaism, Wissenschaft des Judentums, that emerged in Germany.

For the remainder of his life, Simonsen studied a wide range of Jewish subjects such as religion, history, philology, the history of books and literature and published a series of short monographs and articles in international journals. One of his more expansive works was his monograph: Sculptures and inscriptions from Palmyra in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek described and explained (1889), an interpretation of ancient Aramaic tomb inscriptions, which he wrote at the request of brewer Carl Jacobsen.

Simonsen became the driving force in a number of learned Jewish societies; e.g. in Mekize Nirdamim ('resurrector of the sleeping') a society for the publication of old major Hebrew works and in Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums. Simonsen became a member of the Academic Council at the newly founded Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and on the occasion of his 70th birthday a Festschrift was published (1923). The range found in his written works also characterised his private library, which he acquired over 60 years and which at the time of his death contained around 40,000 items. His book

collection was a library designed for his own use 'to suit his studies and personal inclinations'. After his death the greater part of his large book collection came into the possession of the Royal Danish Library, and the Hebrew and Judaic books were maintained as one library under the name of Bibliotheca Simonseniana. After World War II this large acquisition gave rise to the foundation of an independent Department of Judaica. Since then, the collection has grown and is now of international importance. The Department of Judaica ceased to exist as an independent department in 1996.

In the early 20th century Simonsen was very active in organising help for the numerous victims of pogroms in Eastern Europe, and during and after World War I he played a prominent part in the extensive relief work by helping Jewish prisoners of war get in touch with their relatives and by bringing together divided families.

At his death, Simonsen left an archive of nearly 200,000 documents and letters that throw light on his many-sided activities, an invaluable historical source that the Royal Danish Library has not yet registered and made electronically available.

## **Lis Hygum Thomsen**

### **Extremes Meet and Argument Arises**

Between 1874 and 79, Marcus Rubin, who later became the manager of the Danish National Bank, corresponded with his childhood friend David Simonsen, who at the time was studying at the university and later at the seminary in Breslau. They exchanged ideas, especially about religious questions, but also about the emerging anti-Semitism that Simonsen perceived in Central Europe with a great deal of concern. The letters reveal the young men's differences in personality: the deeply religious, philosophical and tolerant Simonsen and the rational thinker, and at the same time quick-tempered, Rubin. The correspondence ended abruptly when Rubin fell madly in love with Simonsen's fiancée Cora. He was kindly but firmly rejected by Cora, but in a highly emotional letter to Simonsen he declared his love for Cora. Apparently, the affair ended their friendship.

## **Morten Ruge**

### **A World Forever Lost**

In 1918 one of the happy graduates in Copenhagen was the Russian-Jewish Betty Hurwitz. After graduation she went to Germany where she qualified as a language teacher and met her husband, the Polish-Jewish engineer Abram Durczyn who had an excellent job in a German company. When Hitler came into power, the lives of the couple who by now had a son, Miki, changed completely. The letters that Betty wrote in 1938-42 to her former classmates in Denmark convey a moving picture of the many shocking fates resulting

from the Nazi reign of terror. The first letters were mailed from Berlin and described the uncertainty and sorrow in the wake of Abram Durczyn's deportation to Poland and the difficulties she faced in Berlin. The letters reveal a woman with a strong will, and a hope, perhaps naive, that all would be well when her husband returned to Berlin. However, things turned out differently, as Betty was forced to join her husband in Warsaw. From 1940 the letters came from Warsaw, and despite the harsh conditions, Betty tried to focus on the positive, especially in her son's progress at school. After December, the letters came from the Warsaw Ghetto. The last letter from Betty Durczyn was dated 14 July 1942. The family was deported to Treblinka. From here no letters came.

## **Tove Thage**

### **The Human Alphabet**

The article throws light on an unknown female photographer, Louise Melchior, who was born in 1849 and died in 1934 in Copenhagen. It was the discovery of a series of photographic negative plates and a matching register that sparked the search for the story behind them. Louise Melchior was born the third child of merchant Mortiz G. Melchior and Dorothea, née Henriques. She remained unmarried, and in the early 1890s she built a house, Villa Melchior, on Strandvejen in Taarbæk. Louise Melchior belonged to a family of keen amateur photographers, including her father's brother I. B. Melchior, one of the earliest and most skilled amateur photographers in Denmark. We do not know who taught Louise Melchior photography, however. The collection of photographs illustrates domestic life in and around Villa Melchior - "country" life in a wealthy, bourgeois Danish-Jewish environment, where educated and artistically conscious women lived and created or carried on a kind of visual salon. The photographs depict summer life, outings to the surrounding countryside, children at play, and the ships in the Sound. The title "the human alphabet" refers to the index of the hand-written register, in which the photographs are ordered alphabetically according to family names.