

SWITZERLAND

The passport for people with no country

In 1922, explorer Fridtjof Nansen gave stateless refugees a passport. About 450,000 were issued.

WHERE	Geneva
WHO	Fridtjof Nansen, a Norwegian explorer who created a passport for stateless refugees
WHEN	1921 to 1938

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

After the First World War, borders moved and governments fell. Many people were left with no passport. In 1921, the Soviet government took away the citizenship of Russians living abroad. That left some 800,000 refugees with no country. Without papers, they could not cross borders, and many were trapped.

The League of Nations, an early world group, asked Fridtjof Nansen for help. Nansen was a Norwegian scientist and polar explorer. He was the first to cross the inland ice of Greenland. He had also brought home about 450,000 prisoners of war after the fighting. He also led relief during the Russian famine of 1921 and 1922. In 1921, he became the first High Commissioner for Refugees.

> **for his leading role in the repatriation of prisoners of war, in international relief work and as the League of Nations' High Commissioner for refugees**
>
> NOBEL PRIZE MOTIVATION FOR FRIDTJOF NANSEN, 1922

A simple document

In July 1922, Nansen called a conference in Geneva. Governments agreed on an ID paper for refugees with no country. It soon became known as the "Nansen passport". It let refugees travel across borders.

At first it was for Russian refugees. In 1924, it was widened to Armenians. In 1928, it covered Assyrian, Bulgarian and Turkish refugees too. By 1942, governments in 52 countries accepted it.

800,000

Russian refugees whose citizenship was cancelled in 1921

52

countries whose governments honoured the passport

450,000

passports provided, Wikipedia says

A name that lasted

By then, his office had cared for hundreds of thousands of refugees. It used methods that later became standard: care, return home, new homes and a place in society. Nansen died in 1930. The work went on under the Nansen International Office for Refugees. In 1938, the office won the Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts.

Wikipedia lists the composer Igor Stravinsky and the writer Vladimir Nabokov among those who held one.

No one issues Nansen passports today. Countries and the United Nations now give travel papers to refugees.

How it unfolded

- **1921** Nansen becomes the League of Nations' first High Commissioner for Refugees.
- **1922** A conference in Geneva agrees on the first identity certificate for refugees.
- **1928** The passport is extended to Assyrian, Bulgarian and Turkish refugees.
- **1930** Nansen dies. The Nansen International Office carries on his work.
- **1938** The office wins the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nansen passport era ends.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

One piece of paper gave people back the thing they had lost: the right to move.

Nansen did not wait for perfect rules. He asked governments to accept a simple document, and many did.

OUR TAKE

A small paper certificate gave hundreds of thousands of people the chance to start again.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Fix the small barrier first

Refugees without papers could not cross borders, so he gave them a paper.

Try this: Find one form or rule that blocks someone you know. Help them past it.

2 Bring people to one table

He called governments to Geneva, and they agreed on one document.

Try this: Invite the people involved in a problem to one conversation.

3 Start with one group, then widen

The passport began with Russian refugees and later covered others.

Try this: Test an idea with one group. Extend it when it works.

4 Lend your name to others

A famous explorer used his reputation to help people who had no standing.

Try this: Use your skills or your name for someone who has none.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A passport can be a promise that someone still belongs in the world.

Sources

Nobel Prize Outreach
Fridtjof Nansen – Biographical

Nobel Prize Outreach
Fridtjof Nansen – Facts

Wikipedia
Nansen passport

Fact-check note: The Nobel Prize pages and Wikipedia agree on the main story. The story is placed in Geneva, where the 1922 conference was held (Wikipedia), but Nansen was Norwegian. The citizenship decision of 1921 and the figure of some 800,000 refugees are from Wikipedia. Nansen's appointment: the Nobel biography says the League's Council set up the High Commission for Refugees in June 1921 and asked him to run it; the Nobel facts page says he became the first High Commissioner in 1922; the story says 1921, following the biography. The Geneva conference of 3 to 5 July 1922 and the extension to Armenians (1924) and to Assyrian, Bulgarian and Turkish refugees (1928) are from Wikipedia. Countries honouring the passport: the Nobel biography says it was "eventually recognized by fifty-two governments"; Wikipedia says 52 countries by 1942. About 450,000 passports provided is from Wikipedia and is attributed in the story; the Nobel biography separately says Nansen repatriated 450,000 prisoners of war, which is a different figure that happens to match. The first-to-cross-Greenland claim is from the Nobel facts page ("the first to cross Greenland's inland ice"). Nansen's death in 1930 and the 1938 Nobel Peace Prize for the Nansen International Office are from Wikipedia and the Nobel pages. The pull quote is the Nobel Prize motivation for Nansen's 1922 Peace Prize, on the Nobel facts page. The names of Igor Stravinsky and Vladimir Nabokov come from Wikipedia's list of notable holders; that list carries a notice that it needs more citations, and Stravinsky is cited there to a Norwegian National Archives

exhibition we did not open, so the story attributes it to Wikipedia. The famine relief (1921 and 1922) and the description of his office's methods and the hundreds of thousands of refugees it cared for are from the Nobel biography ("methods that were to become classic: custodial care, repatriation, rehabilitation, resettlement, emigration, integration"). The UNHCR history page returned 403 and could not be opened. The pin shows Geneva. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.