

Simone Monnier Clay, 2005

## **The Ashkenazic Communities of Europe**

There has been a Jewish presence in France since the Roman period. At first, the Jews living in Gaul consisted of individuals who worked for the Roman forces or traders, who were conferred Roman citizenship and were granted freedom of movement. Otherwise, life was hard throughout the Empire for the average citizen as war was a constant and resulted in the enslavement of numerous people. The people were oppressed by heavy taxation and the Romans enriched themselves freely from other countries.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by Titus in the year 70 C.E., although the majority of the population remained in the Middle East<sup>1</sup>, a large number of Jews was sold within the Roman provinces and, apparently, some captives were brought to Bordeaux, Arles and Lyons. A number of Jews who came from Judea and Babylon settled in the Rhineland, the Balkans, Central Europe and Eastern Europe and lived mainly among Christians (these people became known as Ashkenazic Jews, from the Hebrew word *Ashkenaz* which refers to Germany and developed the language known as Yiddish.) A group of Jews went to the Iberian Peninsula, especially following the Mohammedan period, and lived eventually mostly among Moslems. These Jews became known as Sephardim (*Sepharad* meaning Spain in Hebrew, and this group developed a language referred to as Ladino.) Jews immigrated throughout Gaul and Brittany as well and settled in Vannes and Nantes. However, a large number of Jews remained in the Middle-East (the Mizrahi Jews), establishing centers of learning where the oral tradition was recorded in the *Mishnah* and they enjoyed a period of scholarship that lasted until the Patriarchate was abolished by Theodosius II (401-450)<sup>2</sup> whose goal was the advancement of Christianity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chaim Raphael, *The Road from Babylon. The Story of Sephardi and Oriental Jews*. N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1985. P. 33. "Of eight million Jews in the world, it is thought that Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor might each have had more than one million, with a similar number in Babylonia, and many more in the Iranian plateau, Yemen and Ethiopia."

<sup>2</sup> "The eldest son of Aelia Eudoxia and Eastern Emperor Arcadius, Theodosius was heavily influenced by his eldest sister Pulcheria, who pushed him towards Eastern Christianity."  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius\\_II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius_II)

The Romans affirmed their superiority through religion and order, but they often dominated through violence and cruelty. For the average citizen, life was hard throughout the Empire; war was quasi permanent, and enslavement was common. The people were oppressed by heavy taxation and the Romans took from other countries whatever they could transport. But although the Jews living in Judea were subjugated, Jews were conferred Roman citizenship and enjoyed freedom of movement. And the same applied to the emerging Christian groups. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, Christians were rejected and persecuted by the Romans. At first, they were considered to be a Jewish sect because Christians accepted the teachings of a Jew known as Joshua ben Panthera or Jesus in Greek. The beliefs of Christianity were disseminated across the Roman Empire through various gospels attributed to Jesus' apostles. These beliefs were in conflict with Pagan<sup>1</sup> Sun Worship and with Judaism as well. Those who followed the old religions felt antagonized by the new religion and proselytizers who preached that the world was going to be consumed by fire, and that all who did not accept Christian views, were destined to eternal damnation. In spite of these early religious conflicts Bernhard Blumenkranz states that "the struggle of Christianity against Judaism is not inevitable, necessary, nor essential. Rather, it is a product of general conditions emerging out of internal and external politics and sociological facts."<sup>2</sup> And, precisely because of political and sociological factors, the struggle between the two religions continued to widen as the Church began to define itself and the Jews of the Diaspora formed their own communities.

Following the disintegration of the Roman Empire, Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths (474-526), preached tolerance and he defended the rights of the Jews living under his rule. Then, as the Merovingian Gaul was converted to Christianity, Clovis (481-511) also protected the Jews living within his dominion. As the power of the Church increased during the early Middle Ages, so did oppression. In 600 C.E., under Pope Gregory I, the papacy became the supreme authority of the Roman Church, and the Pope established the doctrine of "*religio illigitimo*" (or illegitimate religions). Jews were pressured to convert through the restriction of religious activities as well as political and economic inducements.<sup>3</sup> However,

---

<sup>1</sup> The Pagans were followers of polytheistic religions.

<sup>2</sup> Bernhard Blumenkranz "*Augustin et les Juifs, Augustin et le judaïsme. Recherches Augustiniennes I*". Paris La Haye: Monton, 1960, pp. 225-241.

<sup>3</sup> Eli Barnavi, ed., "*A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People*." N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1992.

although not allowed to attain equal status to Christians, Jews were still supposed to be protected from violence.

During the early Dark Ages, numerous tribes descended south. The Ostrogoths reached the Bosphorus; the Franks invaded Gaul; the Visigoths tribes (the Goths of Western Europe) settled in the Aquitaine region of Gaul while others pushed on to Spain. Western Europe underwent geographical and political changes. Religious anti-Semitism in Spain dates to the time of the Goth invasion. In the sixth century, one of the Visigoth kings, Leovigild converted to Catholicism, establishing his new religion as state religion and one of his successors imposed a Visigoth common law on his subjects, which included restrictive laws and taxes leveled against the Jewish population. Jews could not hold public office and marriages between Jews and Christians were outlawed. Until the end of the Visigoth rule, Judaism was not tolerated in Spain.

During the sixth century, as the Roman Empire was coming to an end politically, and Jewish immigration increased in Western Europe. At that time, Jews settled in Paris and a synagogue was built on the Ile de la Cité. Later, as efforts were made to convert Jews to Christianity, the synagogue was destroyed and a church was erected on the same location. All through that period, Jews were allowed to practice the profession of their choice. They could practice medicine and were active in commerce, agriculture and viticulture. Later, the Carolingian emperors allowed Jews to become purveyors in the imperial court.

Within the Roman Empire, Christianity won official recognition under Emperor Constantine who defeated the Roman Emperor Licinius in 313, ending the persecutions against the Christians. Pressured by his mother, Helena, Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire. Traditionally, the relationship of the Roman emperors and religion had always been intertwined. Since Augustus, emperors were considered to be sons of gods (or half gods.) This means that the Empire itself was at the center of religious interest and worship. In 325, Constantine, who was a deified emperor and not yet a Christian, convened the Council of Nicea (the first Ecumenical council) – which was attended by about three hundred bishops - in order to settle an Arian dispute over the nature of Jesus. At the council of Nicea, the changes brought to the Christian faith were supposed to make it more acceptable to the masses and to help convert the masses. Some of the modifications were opposed to the practices of Judaism. For example, the day of the Sun was declared the Roman

Sabbath. Also, a number of ancient patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, were recognized as saints (each granted a power linked to an ancient god), a custom that was to be continued throughout the history of the Church, and the glorification of these saints became an integral part of the Catholic calendar. The gospels were scrutinized at the Council of Nicea - several were selected to form the Christian Bible, and the others were rejected. The creed of the Church was formulated at that point, and it became the basis of the faith of the universal Church. At the council, the attending bishops voted Jesus a full deity, and the Trinity was declared. (Trinitarianism is the belief that one God embodies three persons or three units. Ancient Egypt had a divine trinity of father, mother, and son in Osiris, Isis, and Horus, who were perpetually reborn through the Pharaohs. Other Pagan religions of Asia believe in Trinitarianism as well). Helena had a great influence on the transformation that took place within Christianity during that period of time. She triggered a tradition of pilgrimages and hunts for relics that brought her to Jerusalem. Helena was not a tolerant person, and she did not hesitate to resort to torture to force people to produce the relics she wanted, relics that became an intricate symbol of various churches. At Nicea, the bishops were all “encouraged” to sign the Creed penned by the Council. And with the signing of the *Edict of Milan*, Constantine assumed the position of Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire and declared Christianity to be the empire’s official religion.

With Constantine – who converted on his deathbed, the cross (his sword) became the focal point of Christian cult and symbolism, and the Church emerged as an ever-growing political power.

When Constantine died in 337, the Roman Empire was divided between his three sons: Constantine II became emperor of the western lands, Constans was granted the center, and Constantius the east. All other princes of royal blood were executed, but for the children, Gallus and Julian. The division weakened the Empire, and the succeeding invasions of tribes from the north and from the east further precipitated its demise. Succeeding the legalization of Christianity, from the reign of Constantine to that of Charlemagne, Western Christendom was organized into a political entity renamed the "Holy Roman Empire" with its capital moved from Rome to Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle). Eventually, the establishment of the “Holy Roman Empire” led to a symbiotic alliance between the Popes, Charlemagne and his successors.

French kings became the defenders of the Church of Rome as they underwent a rite of coronation, a *sacre* that gave them sacerdotal powers.

The hierarchical organization of the Church was its strength and it had already begun by the second century, emulating the political organization of the Roman Empire. Within the Church's administration, the area of jurisdiction of the bishop corresponded with the administrative unit of the Roman government – the *civitas* (or ecclesiastical diocese). The bishop was an administrator of churches and monasteries and he was a defender of the faith,

The power of the bishop was not reducible to the strength of his support at court, to his family, and to his good relationship with his supporters at home. Essentially he was considered the agent of God's will in his community, and the core of his power lay in this control of the sacred.<sup>1</sup>

With the move toward the Middle (Dark) Ages, Europe became increasingly controlled by the Church and focused on religion – as interpreted by Rome. In 534, Roman law was codified and it incorporated limitations on Jews – as requested by the Church. At the same time, Jews living in Palestine (as the Romans had renamed Judea) and in Babylon witnessed the emergence of the Talmud, and Babylon retained its authority on Jewish law for a long time through the *geniza* papers. Torah teaching and Torah study took place in centers such as Usha (near the city of Haifa), Sura, Nehardea and Pumbedita (Babylonian academies). A rabbinic court (known as the Sanhedrin) was established in Usha, which was granted by the Roman civil, and sometimes criminal, jurisdiction. In Usha, the Jewish calendar was fixed and there, Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi compiled a code of Jewish law, which became identified as the Mishnah (The Study Book) and led to discussions recorded in the Talmud. But, as these centers were flourishing, a new faith was spreading throughout the region, through military conquest, under the leadership of Mohammad (570-632). In less than a decade, Mohammad's armies swept towards India as well as through Syria, Palestine and Egypt on their way to conquer the remainder of North Africa. The Arab conquest divided the Jewish communities into two branches: one living within a Moslem majority – which eventually incorporated Spain - and the other living among Christians.

---

<sup>1</sup> Patrick J. Geary, "*Before France & Germany. The Creation & Transformation of the Merovingian World.*" Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. P. 135.

Following the rise of Islam and the Moorish conquest of 711, the Visigothic rule of Spain came to an end, and with it a temporary end to religious intolerance. In France, however, Charles Martel, a Frankish king, arrested the Moorish invasion at the Pyrenees. When Charlemagne, his grandson, ascended the throne, many wars of conquest followed. Eventually, his empire covered most of the territories known as Western Europe. Toward the end of the eighth century, he organized the administration of his provinces under the supervision of the aristocracy. On the whole, Jews did not participate in the establishment of the feudal system, although there are isolated cases where some leaders were of Jewish origins or even converts to the Jewish faith. Jews were mostly merchants, traders, treasury officials, moneylenders, tax collectors, and there were physicians. In spite of various restrictions, the life led by the Jews gave them more freedom than “the serfs who were bound to their manor.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the Christian Diaspora, the Jewish communities came to depend largely on the will of the bishops, and following the legalization of Christianity, from the reign of Constantine to that of Charlemagne, Western Christendom was organized into a political entity that was renamed the "Holy Roman Empire." The capital of the Roman Empire was moved from Rome to Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle in Western Germany). Eventually, the founding of the “Holy Roman Empire” led to an alliance between the Popes, Charlemagne and his successors. French kings became the defenders of the Church of Rome and underwent a rite of coronation, a *sacre* that gave them sacerdotal powers.

As a result of the new policies, and because the two groups were moving in different directions, the gap between the Christian and Jewish communities increased progressively and became more and more complex. The Church controlled government, justice and education within the Christian communities. The Jewish communities were united by common faith, and by the teachings of the holy books, the Torah and the Talmud. The divisions between the Christian and Jewish communities and the use of different holy books led to the creation of Yeshivot within the Jewish communities. These became an important factor in the development of Jewish thought and education. Also, because of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, to serve the needs of the Diaspora, the service of the Synagogue had to be regulated, and the Jewish prayer book was codified. The liturgy of the Synagogue developed from the ceremonies of the Temple and it evolved into two main streams. In France, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Max I. Dimont, “*Jews, God and History.*” New York: Signet, 1962, p. 214.

Palestinian rite was practiced during the early Middle Ages until it evolved under the influence of the Ashkenazi rite practiced in northern France and along the Rhine. The Synagogue became the center of Jewish education and there, Jewish law (*kehillah*) reigned supreme. With the Babylonian and Palestinian teachers as authorities, the problems and questions faced by various Jewish communities were solved by correspondence. The learning institutions of Sura, Pumpaditha and Nehardea of Babylonia flourished until the twelfth century and served as centers of Jewish authority where Jews living throughout the Diaspora could ask for answers to various problems. Eventually, the Responsa correspondence constituted a large collection of legal material.

Aside a separation based on religious practice and the organization of communities, Jews were identified by kashrut and language. In addition, under Frankish rule, toward the end of the ninth century, Yiddish (which is a blend of a medieval German dialect, some old French and Hebrew) began to develop in Northern France and Italy as a result of contact with German tribes. Another important factor that separated the Christian and Jewish communities are two distinct calendars. Christians observe a solar calendar with the day of rest recognized on Sunday, and Jews follow a lunar calendar with its own set of holidays and with the day of rest celebrated on Saturday. All these differences resulted in cultural isolation and the formation of a semi-autonomous Jewish community, and led to tension due to hostility and fear.

As far as the Carolingian rulers and Charlemagne were concerned, it could be said that they were philo-Semites. Charlemagne tried to remain free of clerical bias and even took a stand against Pope Hadrian in his anti-Jewish policies. Charlemagne, who had converted to Christianity and had been crowned in 800 by the Pope as the Holy Roman Emperor was rather progressive. He was illiterate but admired education, and he realized that the trade connections established by Jews throughout the Mediterranean were important to his economy, He encouraged the establishment of Jewish communities in the south of France. In fact, as stated in studies conducted by Arthur J. Zuckerman, the Carolingian sovereigns granted the Jews a domain close to the Mediterranean seacoast, between France and Spain, near Narbonne, and a Jewish prince was brought to France by Pepin the Short – Charlemagne's father. The prince was Natronai-Makhir, a Davidic exilarch from Bagdad, who

became the first patriarch (nasi) in 768 as a vassal of the Carolingian rulers, and the land bequeathed to him was mostly land confiscated from the Church.

This act of Pepin and his sons called forth vigorous remonstrance by Pope Stephen III, but to no avail. Makhir received a Carolingian princess as his wife, apparently Alda the sister of Pepin. Their son was William Count of Toulouse, in whom flowed together the two mighty dynastic streams of David and Arnulf. Makhir-Theodoric, aided by his son William, in time, extended Carolingian supremacy across the Pyrenees, although set back temporarily by the debacle of 778. By 791, Makhir could announce "mission accomplished" for a long stretch along the seacoast of Spain. A privilegium of Charlemagne in that year confirmed the status, dignity, and power of the Jewish principate in southern France on both sides of the Pyrenees. The possessions of the Nasi of Narbonne, a veritable seigneur in town and environs, and the holdings of the Jews there, are shown to have remained largely intact until the eleventh century despite the contrary evidence of documents which are exposed as forgeries.<sup>1</sup>

In 825, Louis, Charlemagne's successor as Holy Roman Emperor, issued a Charter of Protection to Jews. It encouraged trade and relaxed political restrictions, allowing for some juridical autonomy.

Across the Pyrenees, in Spain, for a while, Jews and Moslems lived in harmony<sup>2</sup>. By the tenth century, Abd al-Rahman became caliph<sup>3</sup> of Spain and introduced Greek and Persian works that had been translated into Arabic. The Jews settled in the Iberian Peninsula found their intellectual life stimulated by the scientific methods and the literary forms of the Arabs and they were exposed to classical philosophy. The elite among the Sephardim (Sephardic Jews), such as the poet Judah Halevi (c. 1075-1141) wrote in a complicated Hebrew influenced by Arabic metric and rhetoric. Intellectually, at the time, Jews were more advanced than their neighbors, and they developed a literature unique to the Jewish community written in a flowing Hebrew, and eventually, many works were written in Yiddish. One of the most famous scholars who lived in the north of France was Rashi<sup>4</sup> (1040-1105), known for his Biblical commentaries and his beautiful command of old French. In fact, in Spain, for about five hundred years, Jews lived among Moslems in relative peace, but with the *Reconquista*, as

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur J. Zuckerman. "A Jewish Principedom in Feudal France, 768-900." N.Y. and London: Columbia University Press, 1972, p. 373.

<sup>2</sup> Menahem Mansoor, "Jewish History and Thought: An Introduction." Hoboken, New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House, Inc. 1991, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup> Head of the Arabic dynastic kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> Rashi is an acronym for "Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak.



Castille and Aragon extended their borders southward, massacres were recorded in the south of Spain between 1010 and 1013.

In France, Jews faced hardships as well, following accusations of blood libels, sixty to eighty people were killed within the realm of the King of France in 1010. But for the most part, violent acts of anti-Semitism were rare until the dividing schism that took place under Pope Leo IX in 1054 C.E. and resulted in the separation of the Catholic Church from the Orthodox Church. This division heightened religious conflicts and religious paranoia. In Spain, the golden age of the Jews declined with the invasion of the Almohades from North Africa who were trying to convert people to the Muslim faith. As a result, many Jews retired to the south of France, and theologians of renown chose to settle in that area. For a while, Talmudic academies flourished in Lunel and Narbonne. But, this did not last. Hoping to regain control of Jerusalem from the Muslims, Pope Urban II proclaimed the First Crusade in 1095. Western Europe, including the Frankish tribes, responded to his call. During the First Crusade (1095-1099,) German Crusaders slaughtered thousand of Jews along the Rhineland on their way to the Holy Land. The flourishing Jewish communities of Worms, Mainz and Cologne - where Jews had flourishing communities settled among German tribes - were devastated. In one day alone, 1,000 Jews were killed in Mainz. In Worms, King Henry IV tried to chastise the perpetrators of the massacres, and, in 1103, he placed the Jews of Worms under imperial protection and even released from their vows all who had been baptized by force. During the Second Crusade (1146-1147), encouraged by the monk, Peter of Cluny, new massacres took place in France in spite of the intervention of the king, while in the Rhenish cities; life became unendurable for the Jews as another monk named Ralph incited mobs. The abbot Bernard of Clairvaux intervened to protect the Jews. He argued, “that the scriptures enjoined the dispersal, not the killing of Jews [he] confronted Ralph at Mainz and persuaded him to give up preaching and return to his monastery”.<sup>1</sup> In England, in 1190, most of the Jewish community of York was massacred while some choose to take their own lives.

Kings condemned these attacks, and sometimes even the Pope raised his voice, but the rioters faced no punishment or reprisals. As a result, widespread anti-Semitism continued along the Rhine during the eight Crusades that took place between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Jews were expelled from Aragon and France (areas under the king’s control) in 1254, with

the cancellation of all debts owed to them, and this illustrates a new form of “economic” anti-Semitism that was to be repeated in Western Europe until the Renaissance. In England, Jews were expelled in 1290 and were not allowed to return for about four hundred years. The expulsion of Jews from various European countries resulted in a shift of the center of world Jewry from Western Europe to Eastern Europe with a large concentration of Jews in Poland. The result of the violence was that the spiritual life of the Jews was expressed in isolation and developed in an environment independent of the surrounding communities. The Crusades had a deep impact on European philosophy and religious attitudes. The Crusaders who returned from the Middle East had been exposed to eastern ideas and philosophies. Various sects started to appear in Southern France, such as the Waldenses (Waldensians) in Lyon, which developed in the second half of the twelfth century and, in a modified form, has managed to survive to the present day. There were the Albigensians (or Catharists) who built a fortress in Albi, and whom an inquisitor, Bernard Gui, referred to as “Manichean heretics.” In 1209, Pope Innocent III ordered a crusade to march against them, and this led to the eventual establishment and canonization of the Inquisition<sup>2</sup> as a tribunal affiliated to the Dominican order.

For the Jews, the situation continued to deteriorate. Under religious pretenses, King Philip Augustus held Jews as hostages and demanded a ransom for their release. In 1181, under an edict, all loans owed to Jews were cancelled and claimed by the king. He also confiscated all Jewish property and expelled the Jews from Paris-only to call them back in 1198. In 1215, at the Fourth Lateran Council, in order to better protect the Catholic faith against its presumed enemies, a definition of the Christian community was promulgated. It “stated the essential conditions of membership for all Western Europeans for the next three centuries.”<sup>3</sup> It has been described as “the first attempt by a council inspired by the papacy to legislate for the Christian life as lived by the lay folk....”<sup>1</sup> But at the same time, the Lateran decrees made a clear distinction between Catholics and Jews in particular. “The last three canons required Jews to distinguish themselves from Christians in their dress (Jews had to wear an identifying badge,) and prohibited them from holding public office, and those who

---

<sup>1</sup> R.I. Moore. *“The Formation of a Persecuting Society.”* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1987, 1990, p. 31

<sup>2</sup> The Inquisition was a court established in 1233 by Pope Gregory IX to investigate and punish heretics. It was known as the ‘Congregation of the Holy Office’.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, p. 6.

concerted to Christianity from continuing to observe any of their former rituals, to prevent them from avoiding the penalties of infidelity by means of false conversion.”<sup>2</sup> When the next council was held in Toulouse, in November 1229, it saw the formation of a persecuting society when it was decreed that a permanent Inquisition should be established. At first, the Inquisition was a tribunal that tried Christians gone astray, and books. In fact, since the Albigensians used the Bible as the principal source for their preaching, the Catholic Church ordered immediately that the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible should be prohibited to the laity, and the Talmud was put on trial because it presented an interpretation of the Pentateuch from a Jewish perspective, and it was accused of explaining the life of Jesus in a manner that did not correspond to the teachings of the Church. Under the rule of Louis IX (1226-1270,) the controversy surrounding the Talmud became heated, following mainly accusations levelled by Nicolas Donin of La Rochelle (a Jewish convert to Catholicism who joined the Franciscan order,) and in 1240, several rabbis were called to the court of Louis IX to debate Nicolas Donin publicly: [Yechiel of Paris](#), Moses of Coucy, Judah of Melun, and Samuel ben Solomon of Château-Thierry. Earlier in 1240, in response to Donin’s accusations and encouragements, Jews were asked to leave Brittany. Then, Crusaders attacked the Jewish communities of Brittany, Anjou and Poitou -- Jews had to convert or be killed. An estimated 3,000 Jews were murdered and some 500 people were converted to Shristianity.

The same cycle of expulsion continued in 1254, as Jews were banished from France and their possessions confiscated. They were readmitted in 1256. In 1305, it was Philippe the Fair who expelled about 100,000 Jews from France and his brother who allowed them to return in 1315.

In 1320, the fundamental idea of the crusade shifted to the lower classes, and a peasant crusade took place in the south of France and the north of Spain called the Shepherds’ (the *Pastoureaux*) Crusade. During that crusade, acts of violence against minorities reached a hysterical level. The Shepherds attacked castles, towns, clerics and Jews. Pope John XXII ordered the archbishop of Toulouse to withdraw his support from them and urged the *sénéchal* of Toulouse to oppose them. The *sénéchal* tried to restore order and had a cleric executed for the killing of four Jews. But even the archbishop feared the Shepherds. Finally, they were

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Peters, “*Heresy and Authority in the Middle Ages*,” London: 1980, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> Moore, p. 7.

defeated by the *sénéchal* of Carcassonne. Many historians have tried to explain the reasons for the shepherds' behavior. Mostly, their violence seemed to be centered on the idea of the Crusade and a result of the expulsion of Jews from France in 1306. At the time, King Philip IV of France (*Philippe Le Bel*), who wished to fill his coffers, claimed all debts owed to the Jews and began collecting them as his own. This was poorly accepted by the masses, and in their minds, debts, Jews and king became intertwined. The next time Jews were expelled, in 1321, it was implemented through popular violence as people schemed to seize the property of lepers and Jews. According to Malcom Barber, the Shepherds attacked Jews because they "were the only non-Christians within reach."<sup>1</sup>

The Inquisition expanded in this negative environment, giving way to new theories. According to David Nirenberg, "there emerged in the first half of the fourteenth century... an irrational fear of conspiracy which had previously been repressed in the European mentality: a belief that certain groups, whether Jews, lepers or witches, were conspiring to destroy society."<sup>2</sup> The theory of conspiracy was repeated in books produced by the Church with the purpose to malign Jews. Jews were also attributed physical characteristics (e.g. Jews have devil-like horns,) and they were accused to hate gentiles. These were official lies useful to intimidating propaganda where the truth becomes unimportant and logic no longer applies.

Between 1309 and 1417, the Catholic Church underwent another schism. The papal headquarters were moved from Rome to Avignon. It was the result of a disagreement between Pope Boniface VIII and France's Capetian King Philip IV. During the presence of the popes in Avignon, Jews were expelled from the Parisian area by Charles VI, in 1394, during the Hundred-Year War with England (1337-1453). Then again, between 1338 and 1327, Jewish communities were victims of terror, and this time in Alsace where massacres took place because of the Black Plague (1348-1349). There were also violent revolts led by peasants who looted nobles' houses and castles. At a symposium held by "Frontpage", when asked to explain anti-Semitism, Phyllis Chesler proffered that, "when people are suffering, feel deserted by G-d, feel utterly powerless, but also feel they can do nothing about this – blaming and scapegoating a vulnerable "other" is a way of feeling powerful but without having to do

---

<sup>1</sup> Malcom Barber, "The Pastoureaux of 1320." *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 32 (1981): 143-166.

<sup>2</sup> Nirenberg, p.4.

anything risky and without really solving one's problems."<sup>1</sup> Also, between the 12th and the 14th centuries Europe had began shifting from an agrarian and feudal society into an urban society and the result was the rise of a middle-class. Businesses sprang up in the expanding cities and they required guilds to protect workers' rights, but Jews were not allowed to join these guilds. In addition, the Church played a central role among the guilds and confraternities that organized all celebrations around the holidays recognized by the Church. Passion plays, miracle and mystery plays depicting bible stories were performed in front of churches. During Holy Week passion plays were staged. They raised feelings of hatred and vengeance to a peak as well as accusations of blasphemy and heresy. For the reason that, as Christians were reenacting the events leading to the crucifixion, they believed that Jews were recreating the same event with opposite designs. This led to accusation of ritual killings. Jews were satanized and accused of ritual sacrifices of Christian children and other atrocities such as spreading the plague by poisoning wells. These accusations stemming from deep bigotry led to repeated slaughter (or *Juddenschlacht*, meaning "the slaughter of Jews"). Now, films depicting the life of Jesus, that are played annually around Easter, have replaced the passion plays. The most recent example of this type of movie is Mel Gibson's *Passion of The Christ*, which perpetuates stereotypes and projects a terribly violent death meant to outrage the public – although various Churches defend it as religious inspiration. However, in spite of violence, Jewish learning did thrive during the Middle Ages. The regions of Alsace, Lorraine, Champagne, Ile-de-France and Languedoc became centers for Jewish learning. Around that time, a German whose family had settled in Strasbourg, Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1394-1468) invented the printing press (c. 1440) and books became published in large quantities making the Jewish holy books available to all Jewish communities.

In Spain, violence broke out during the Reconquista. Moslems and Jews were forced to convert or to leave the country, and 'pogroms'<sup>2</sup> took place in 1391 including a large-scale massacre in Cordoba. where most of the Jewish population was exterminated. Jews were pressured to convert, and many did convert, more out of fear than out of conviction, as people were compelled to go to extremes in order to survive. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, Jews and Moors were discriminated against in almost equal fervor during a sequence

---

<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Chesler, Ph.D. "[Leftist Anti-Semitism](#)" *FrontPageMagazine.com* – September 19, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> An organized massacre, usually condoned by the authorities.

of events. In 1371, a Spanish council named the *Cortes* passed a legislation that required all Jews to wear a round yellow patch sewn on their clothes over the heart. In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella signed an edict to force the Jews of Spain to convert or to leave the country forever. At that time, Jews comprised about four percent of the Spanish population. Between 150,000 and 200,000 Jews living in Spain chose to leave the country. They went to Portugal, North Africa, France, the Netherlands, Poland and the newly discovered Americas.

In Spain, religious anti-Semitism was followed by racial anti-Semitism - or ethnic anti-Semitism. Because, if at first, the Church affirmed that a Jew had a soul in need to be saved, during the fifteenth century, the highest religious authorities sanctioned the persecution of *converso* families. In 1473, *auto-da-fés* (“acts of faith”) were held in Toledo and Valladolid and all *Conversos* were either killed or expelled from these cities and their possessions were appropriated by the Church and the crown.

With the expulsion from Spain in 1492, Jewish life in the Iberian Peninsula came to an end, and a large number of Jews left Spain and Portugal to settle in North Africa, France and the Near East. And if the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon (1452-1516) and Isabella of Castile (1451-1504) brought stability to both of their kingdoms, it also brought an end to the Golden Age in Spain. The Inquisition - a state-controlled Castilian tribunal, founded by papal bull<sup>1</sup> in 1478 – was soon established throughout Spain. It had the task of enforcing the practice of Christianity. Originally, it was intended to insure the sincerity of the *Conversos*, and Tomas de Torquemada, became the most notorious of the Inquisition's prosecutors. However, it is difficult to establish the number of Jews and *Maranos*<sup>2</sup> executed by the Inquisitors. According to Cecil Roth who published an article in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, and who quotes another chronicler, “up to 1525, when *Moriscos* (ex-Muslims) first began to suffer, the number of those burnt in person came to 28,540, those burnt in effigy 16, 520, and those ‘penanced’ around 304,000, a total of almost 350,000 condemned for Judaism in less than fifty years. Later figures have to include those burnt or condemned in the Spanish colonies overseas, and in Portugal and its colonies, including Brazil.”<sup>1</sup>” At the time of the expulsion decree, some Jews chose to join Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) in his voyages of discoveries (1492,

---

<sup>1</sup> A bull was an official document issued by the Pope.

<sup>2</sup> The baptized Jews of Spain who were later accused of practicing Judaism.

1498, 1502) and followed him to the New World. As a result of the Spanish expulsion decree, Judaism could no longer be practiced anywhere within the Iberian Peninsula, and Jews did not return to Spain for over 400 years. But violence within Christian Europe was a constant, and anti-Semitism followed the Jews wherever they settled. After the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula and the Chmeilnicki massacres of 1648 in Ukraine, a large number of Jews settled within the ghettos of the north and south of France.

But why did the Jews have to endure so much aggression? For a long time, religious anti-Semitism was rooted in Christian theology and in Christian education. The Church pressured the leaders of Europe to use their authority to convert the Jews living within their realm, and as Christian accusations expanded under the centralization of the churches and religious communities, Jews found themselves increasingly isolated. Jews did settle around synagogues but in addition, Jews were increasingly relegated to confined areas especially after the Black Death epidemic. In Germany, Jews were restricted to “*Judengasse*” (or Jewish streets) and had to enter cities through gates reserved for animals and pay entry taxes required for animals.

In a number of French cities, Jews lived in specific quarters (five areas were allocated to the Jewish population of Paris, such as *Villejuif*). In Italy, the first Jewish ghetto was established in Venice in 1516. In 1555, Pope Paul IV issues a bull (*cum nimis absurdum*) that restricted Jewish religious and economic activities throughout papal lands and required that all Jews live in ghettos. Jews were allowed to enter professions considered socially inferior and had to restrict dealings with Christians to the selling of used clothes. Eventually, they could practice a little money lending, as banking was controlled by the Medici family and a branch of the Franciscan order. Still, in addition to religious prejudice, anti-Jewish sentiments were expressed that were economic in nature when Jews were successful in their endeavors in spite of living in a restrictive environment.

The Jews of Italy experienced constant harassment as they were expected to attend various masses and listen to sermons. At times, children were also taken forcefully from their families to be baptized and could be reunited with their parents only if they converted as well. In 1559, Pope Paul IV placed the Talmud on the list of banned books (*Index librorum prohibitorum*). Religious and cultural anti-Semitism spread under these conditions and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 8, cols 1380-1407. And Enc. Jud., vol. 15, col. 240.

history of the Jews from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries is one long struggle between Jewish communities and the Holy See.

Several theories arise about medieval violence and intolerance toward Jews and other minorities. In “*Communities of Violence*,” David Nirenberg quotes Carlo Ginzburg and Lester Little who saw “anti-Jewish violence as an outlet for psychological tensions generated by the creation of a monetary economy.”<sup>1</sup> However, Nirenberg strongly disagrees with their argument. He contests long-durational historical claims about persecution of the Jews. Instead, he opts for a more localized history –i.e., a history that examines instances of violence against Jews in their specific and immediate context. More importantly, he seeks to dismantle the hypothesis (advanced by Ginzburg and Robert Moore) that there are fundamental continuities between “collective systems of thought across historical time”-- between medieval anti-Semitism, for instance, and the Nazi genocide. On the other hand, as a psychiatrist, Dr. Rubin sees such expressions of violence as a result of “all kinds of neurosis – anxiety, repressed anger, low self-esteem, insecurity ... as well as neurotic defenses; displacement, projection, rationalization, alienation.”<sup>2</sup> And eventually such dynamics produce a devastation that is expressed “in various forms of intensity from subtle neurotic manifestations to blatantly and murderously psychotic acting out.”<sup>3</sup> The rebellion resulted in several murderous attacks against Jews (not expected to result in reprisals) as well as attacks against castles and cities (which were expected to trigger reprisals) and this reflects a widening gap between peasants and townspeople - who were distrusted – and Jews were identified with townspeople.

During the late Middle-Ages, dissent grew within the Church, as several men, such as Martin Luther, accused it of abuse and corruption and this led to the establishment of Protestantism. One of the problems was the king’s increased control of ecclesiastical patronage and another was the administration of clerical benefices. For instance, in France,

---

<sup>1</sup> David Nirenberg, “*Communities of Violence. Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages.*” Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 48. Quoting: Carlo Ginzburg, “*Ecstasies*,” p. 38 and Lester Little, “*Religious Poverty*,” pp. 54-57.

Currently, there is much debate about Ginzburg and Robert Moore’s approach to the history of anti-Semitism.

<sup>2</sup> Rubin, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Rubin, p. 23.



“Francis I and his son Henry II used their unprecedented powers of appointments to fill the ranks of the episcopacy with their clients, relatives, and political allies. In Francis’s reign (1515-1517), for example, of the total of 129 bishops he appointed, 102 were either princes of the blood or members of the nobility of the sword, that is, members of the most powerful as well as oldest noble families of France. And the fact that so few of these bishops met the requirements of the Concordat of Bologna regarding theological training clearly indicates that their commitment was to the monarchy rather than to the church.<sup>1</sup>

A number of ideas raised by the French ‘pre-reformers’ were similar to those of Martin Luther (1483-1546) who posted on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1517, on the door of the church of Wittenberg, a protest against the “*Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.*” These 95 Theses resulted in his excommunication from the Catholic Church and gave impetus to the Reformation<sup>2</sup>. As a result, during the Council of Trent, which concluded in 1563, and was upheld by every Pope until modern times, Catholic leaders called for the destruction of all “heretics”. This meant, the Protestants of the Reformation<sup>3</sup>, Jews, non-heterosexuals and other undesirables. Protestantism had resulted in the dissolution of the unity of the Catholic Church, and the Holy See took a stand against all of the various Protestant groups. Then, all Protestant branches took a stand against the Jewish communities. In some Protestant territories, ordinances were passed to make them *Judenrein* (free of Jews), and in several cities, at times, the Jewish quarters were subjected to mob raids, such as in Frankfurt-am-Main between 1612 and 1616. In his book “Shakespeare and the Jews,” James Shapiro discusses the status of the Jews in Elizabethan England, where they were demonized and seen as people who need Christian blood for their rituals. As a result, except for a few exceptions, Jews, who had been expelled from England in 1290, were not allowed to return until 1656. And, if the Inquisition did not take hold in Protestant England, the wars of religion led to acts of Parliament that were as cataclysmic as any *auto-da-fé*. Caught between religious and political intrigues, Jews and “Papists” did not dare openly claim beliefs that were not those of the court. The Calvinist Dutch Republic adopted a different attitude from that of other Protestant countries, and religious tolerance was adopted since the country had already attracted a large number of

---

<sup>1</sup> Mack P. Holt, “*The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*,” Cambridge University Press, 1995. p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> The Reformation was a reordering of Christianity and the sundering of the social unity that it had once provided to European culture. It took place between 1500 and 1650.

<sup>3</sup> Changes brought to the teachings of the Catholic Church which ended in the separation of the Catholic and Protestant Churches.

Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal. In Protestant England, officially, there were few Jews since they had been officially expelled in 1290 and not allowed to return until 1656.

In France, the French followed the teachings of Jean Calvin (1509-1564) who published *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536, where he preached a theocentric doctrine that spread throughout France, Switzerland, Holland, England, Scotland, and among the Puritans who are a branch of the Calvinist-Presbyterian Church. At the same time, The Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) was founded by Ignatius Loyola who felt that the development of spirituality should be very organized. The Jesuits became a world power by 1559 making the education of the laity and the common clergy their special goals. They were under the authority of the Pope, and they represented the principal strike force of the Counter-Reformation.

Just as Germany, in an attempt to re-establish religious uniformity, France violently fought Protestantism during the French wars of religion between 1562-1598, and the Church “submitted itself to an inner reformation that expressed itself not only in a tightening of church discipline but also in an increased severity towards Jews and non-Catholics<sup>1</sup>. But if Germany eventually accepted Protestantism, France forced the Huguenots out of the country. This triggered an uprising of peasants (the *Croquants*) who were tired of being oppressed by the nobility and taxed by the Church. In 1598, Henry IV tried to reestablish religious unity with the Edict of Nantes but a number of restrictive laws were passed against the Huguenots as had been done centuries earlier against the Jews, and the sixteenth Century saw an increase in witch-hunting and also the emergence of modern racism, sexism, and skepticism.

The Council of Trent, which took place under Pope Paul III and concluded in 1563<sup>2</sup>, was upheld by every Pope until modern times. It was a stand against reform within the Catholic Church and called for the destruction of all "heretics". This meant all groups that did not follow the teachings of the Catholic Church. However, the Calvinist Dutch Republic adopted an attitude of tolerance, which was quite different from that of other Protestant countries. But, with the coming of the Renaissance, society became increasingly man-focused with a new focus on the arts and classical knowledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World*. New York: Atheneum, 1978, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup> The Council of Trent was held three times: 1545-1549, 1551-1552, 1562-1563.

In answer to the Reformation, a Counterreformation took place in Poland, the country where a large number resided by the end of the Middle Ages. In 1555, Poland adopted religious tolerance as an official policy. Therefore, the Polish Jewish community continued to thrive there until the eighteenth century, and then, Jews were confined to *shtetls*, anti-Semitism developed, and pogroms succeeded one another. According to Rabbi Ken Spiro,

We have to keep in mind the historical pattern that we see constantly in Jewish history. The places where the Jews will do the best are almost always the places where the Jews will suffer the worst in the end. You'd expect there'd be places that would be good for the Jews and other places where Jews would have a rough time. But that's not what happens. The best of times and the worst of times tend to happen in the same place. ...in Spain, ... in Poland, ... in Germany. It's one of the great patterns in Jewish history ever since the Jews were invited into Egypt and then enslaved there.<sup>1</sup>

At best, throughout Western Europe, Jews suffered severe economic and personal restrictions in most of the countries where they lived until the enlightenment. In her memoirs<sup>2</sup>, Glückel of Hameln wrote about the precarious life of the Jews in northern Germany during the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries. It is a fascinating book where the author describes how she raised her children and ran a business during a time of war and restrictions. She describes much of the Jewish contribution to the economy of northern Europe, and how Jews lived in a restrictive society. Another story with a tragic ending was that of Süß Oppenheimer,<sup>3</sup> a *Court Jew* who worked for the duke of Wurtemberg between 1730 and 1740 and was hang after the duke's death after a trial that plunged Germany into a great deal of turmoil (That story was used by Goebbels to create a propaganda movie that came out in 1941). During the eighteenth century, Jews were still deprived of much of their autonomy and constantly had to resort to changes in order to survive, as stated by Shira Schoenberg. Absolutist governments in Germany Austria and Russia deprived the Jewish community's leadership of its authority and many Jews became "Court Jews." They gave economic assistance to the local rulers, using their connections with Jewish businessmen to serve as military contractors, managers of mints, founders of new industries and providers

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Ken Spiro, "[The Jews of Poland](http://www.aish.com/literacy/jewishhistory/Crash_Course_in_Jewish_History_Part_49_-_The_Jews_of_Poland.asp)." *Jewish Literacy Homepage*.  
[http://www.aish.com/literacy/jewishhistory/Crash\\_Course\\_in\\_Jewish\\_History\\_Part\\_49\\_-\\_The\\_Jews\\_of\\_Poland.asp](http://www.aish.com/literacy/jewishhistory/Crash_Course_in_Jewish_History_Part_49_-_The_Jews_of_Poland.asp)

<sup>2</sup> "*The Memoirs of Glückel of Hameln*" Translated by Martin Lowenthal.

<sup>3</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger, *Jud Süß*.

to the court of precious stones and clothing.<sup>1</sup> Jews had to wait for the Enlightenment to experience modifications in social behavior.

### Bibliography

- Almog, Shmuel, ed. *Antisemitism Through The Ages*. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1988).
- Barnavi, Eli. ed., “*A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People*.” N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1992.
- Blumenkranz, Bernhard “*Augustin et les Juifs, Augustin et le judaïsme. Recherches Augustiniennes I*”. Paris La Haye: Monton, 1960.
- Dimont, Max I. “*Jews, God and History*.” New York: Signet, 1962,
- Geary, Patrick J. “*Before France & Germany. The Creation & Transformation of the Merovingian World*.” Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Hay, Malcolm. *The Roots of Christian Anti-Semitism*. (New York: Freedom Library Press, 1981).
- Marcus, Jacob R. *The Jew in the Medieval World*. New York: Atheneum, 1978.
- Nicholls, William. *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate*. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993).
- David Nirenberg, “*Communities of Violence. Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*.” Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Peters, E. “*Heresy and Authority in the Middle Ages*,” London: 1980
- Philippe, Béatrice. *Etre Juif dans la société française. Du Moyen Age à nos jours*. 1999.
- Raphael, Chaim. *The Road from Babylon. The Story of Sephardi and Oriental Jews*. N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Seiferth, Wolfgang S. “*Synagogue and Church in the Middle Ages: Two Symbols in Art and Literature*.” N.Y.: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970.
- Zuckerman, Arthur J. “*A Jewish Princedom in Feudal France, 768-900*.” N.Y. and London: Columbia University Press, 1972.

---

<sup>1</sup> Shira Schoenberg, *Jewish Virtual Library*.  
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/Haskalah.html>