

The Jews of Germany

By Devorah Kirsch

Part I: Antiquity to the Renaissance

The Jews of Germany have one of the oldest and most vibrant legacies of all Jewish communities. Their contributions to both Jewish and German societies have been enormous. Even their name lives on: the word *Ashkenaz* originally meant "Rhine," the chief German river on which lay several major towns. It later came to mean "Germany," where the north European Jews (including the Polish and Russian communities) originated. These are the ancestors of most American Jews.

The Jewish community of Germany dates as far back as Roman times, according to archeological evidence. In 321 and 331 C.E., Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor of Rome, issued edicts annulling certain privileges of the Jews of Cologne.

During this time of invasions, both Jewish and non-Jewish populations were wiped off the map, as the dying Roman Empire was overrun by barbarian tribes from the north. Nevertheless, Jewish communities continued to emerge all over the Alps, Danube, Rhone, Rhine, and Slavic regions.

The barbarians eventually settled into different parts of Europe and established feudal kingdoms. Feudal societies consisted of a king or nobleman who had indentured servants (called serfs) working on his land or estate.

During this time, the "Dark Ages," which followed the collapse of the Roman Empire, most of the general population lay in backwardness and misery. For the Jews, however, the intellectual level remained high. Because of this, they were needed for the middle class, which was conspicuously absent within these feudal societies. Jews became craftsmen, merchants, doctors, and diplomats.

One German tribe, the Carolingians, openly invited Jews to their land. Having

to rule over vast territories in which they were a minority, the Carolingians were glad to use Jewish talents. However, it was during the time of Charlemagne (727?-814) that German Jewry really began to flourish. Charlemagne and his son Louis the Pious, under the first German empire (*Reich*), granted the Jews full citizenship, allowing them to engage in commerce and agriculture.

The warm welcome was short-lived. As the Catholic Church spread its tentacles all over western Europe, the Jews became scapegoats, victims of random slaughter and the fickle whims of popes and rulers. During this time, the Middle Ages (500-1500 C.E.), Germany's strong tradition of anti-Semitism emerged.

The First Crusade, in 1096, was a watershed in Jewish-Christian relations. Pope Urban, determined to wrest Palestine from Moslem conquerors and place it under Catholic rule, incited Christians to a "holy war" with the Arabs. Peasantry and nobility alike welcomed the opportunity to destroy all enemies of the Church. The crusaders were further frenzied by the sermons of priests such as Peter the Hermit, who called on them to avenge the murder of their "Savior."

Town after town they roamed, en route to Jerusalem, pillaging and destroying Jewish communities in Worms, Mainz, and Cologne. Altogether, some 10,000 German Jews perished. In the Second and

Age of Faith

When Jews suffer the worst persecutions, their religious spirit reaches its peak. Medieval Germany may have contained one of the darkest chapters in Jewish history; however, it also produced one of the brightest in Torah scholarship.

By the tenth century, German Jews had settled all over the Rhineland, particularly in Worms, Speyer, and Mainz. Until then relatively unmolested, they were able to live a vibrant spiritual life. In addition, they were often granted autonomy by the local rulers; as a result, the role of the Torah scholar as Jewish leader increased, and the German Jews became superb codifiers of Jewish law.

The founder of Talmudic learning in Germany was Rabbi Gershom ben Yehuda, who was known as the *Meor HaGolah*, Light of the Exile, c. 965-1028). R. Gershom, who had studied in Pumbedisa, Babylonia, with R. Hai Gaon, established a yeshiva in

Third Crusades, which took place in 1144 and 1189 respectively, Jews were killed or forcibly baptized by soldiers on their way to the Holy Land. In some places the Jews were protected by local nobles and bishops; in others, they killed themselves rather than die or convert at the hands of the mob.

Jewish martyrdom reached a peak during these centuries. It is remembered in our prayers — in *piyyutim* (liturgical poems), in *Av Harachamim*, which is recited on Shabbos, and in *Kinos* (the liturgy for Tisha B'Av).

After the Crusades, the social, political, and economic life of the Jews in Germany deteriorated. They became chattel — human property — under the German emperor, who taxed them severely in exchange for very little protection. Jews were even required to supply the local rulers with material goods. Jewish merchants traveling from one town to the next were often easy prey for robber barons; sometimes they were even kidnaped and held for ransom.

Mainz, where he attracted Jewish youth from France, Germany, and Italy. In time, he was to breed generations of disciples and Talmudic scholars.

Rabbeinu Gershom is best known for two *takanos*, legal regulations, which were accepted as binding by European Jewry. They were a ban on polygamy — the taking by a man of more than one wife at a time — and a prohibition to divorce one's wife without her consent. Violators of these decrees were excommunicated; hence the decrees came to be called the *Cherem* (Excommunication) of *Rabbeinu Gershom*. In addition, R. Gershom wrote *piyyutim* and *selichos* (penitential prayers) commemorating the persecutions and forced conversions of his day. The most famous of these prayers is *Zechor Brit* (Remember the Covenant), which in many communities is recited on the eve of Rosh Hashanah.

Not far from Mainz and also on the Rhine, Worms too became a famous center of Jewish learning. It was there that Rabbi Shlomo (1040-1105), known to us as Rashi,

Their rights revoked, barred from owning land or joining craftsmen's organizations — guilds — many Jews turned to money-lending at interest (which was forbidden to the Christians). This trade further increased gentile hostility; the Jew became in their eyes a "demonic" usurer, one who robbed honest Christians.

Jews were accused of murdering Christian children to use their blood for Passover rituals. In addition, Jews were accused of conspiring with the Asiatic tribes who were at the time besieging Germany. When Ghenghis Khan led his Tatar horsemen through Russia, up to the East German border, rumors circulated that the Tatars were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. As a result, countless Jews were slaughtered.

The 13th century brought a special time of troubles for the population at large. Germany was a hodgepodge of city-states, each with its own ruling nobleman. After the death of Emperor Conrad IV, civil war broke out among the nobles, with each

asserting his independence. Without a central authority, the land fell into chaos. During this period, called the "Interregnum," the Jews, devoid of governmental protection, were made special victims of looting and murder.

Finally, in 1273, Rudolph of Hapsburg was crowned Emperor of Germany. After putting an end to the baronial squabbles, he reaffirmed the rights of Jews. He even ratified the papal decrees (called "bulls") against ritual murder and forced baptism. Nevertheless, blood libels and other injustices against the Jews continued; in 1285, the entire Jewish community of Munich was burned to death in its synagogue.

It is little wonder, then, that many Jews tried to leave. Many sought a better life in Poland. They took with them their dialect, a form of Middle High German. This gradually transformed into Yiddish.

In Rottingen, at the end of the 13th century, the Jews were accused of desecrating a holy wafer used in Catholic rites. In revenge against these "blasphemers," a nobleman named Rindfleisch and his followers stalked Germany, hunting Jews and ordering them to convert. Naturally, most of the Jews refused; as a result, over 100,000 died *at kiddush Hashem*, for the sake of G-d's name, and 140 communities were obliterated. In 1336-1338, an organized gang of ruffians called the *Armleder* (from the leather band they wore around their arms) attacked Jews in southwest Germany. In some places the Jews were protected; in others they were turned over

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studied before returning to his native Troyes in France. Of course, it is Rashi who authored the definitive commentary on the Torah, as well as an indispensable commentary on the Talmud.

During the second half of the 12th century, a group emerged called the **Chassidai Ashkenaz** ("German Chassidim"). They were small in numbers but qualitatively very important. The influence of these Chassidai Ashkenaz spread over most of Germany and part of France. (They are not to be confused with the Chassidic movement founded by the Ba'al Shem Tov, in Poland some 600 years later).

Founded by the Kalonymus family in Speyer, Worms, and Mainz, the Chassidai Ashkenaz tried to teach the love of God though **ahavas Yisrael** (loving one's fellow Jew), extreme piety and ethical conduct, and **kiddush Hashem**. In addition, the Chassidim stressed scrupulous observance of the commandments. The Chassidai Ashkenaz did much to boost the morale of the oppressed German Jews.

Most prominent among this sect was R. Yehuda HaChassid, whose work **Sefer Chassidim** stressed the importance of simple piety and faith. Another Chassid, R. Eleazar ben Yehuda (1165-1238?), became known for his halachic work **Sefer HaRokeach**.

Another great halachic authority was Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215-1293). Like Rabbenu Gershon, he was called "Light of the Exile," an exceptionally honorary title.

Rabbi Meir became known

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to the rabble by the ruler, in exchange for gold.

The year 1348 marked a particular disaster, not only for the Jews, but for the general population as well. Merchant ships from Asia arrived in Europe, bearing a disease that would be called the Black Death, or the bubonic plague. Within two years' time, an epidemic, exacerbated by general lack of hygiene, would wipe out over one quarter of Europe's population.

The Jews, less exposed to the filthy living conditions of the Middle Ages, suffered fewer deaths from the plague than did their gentile neighbors. However, they were accused of bringing it on by poisoning the wells and rivers, as well as the wafers used in Church sacraments. Consequently, they were slain by the thousands; over 200 Jewish communities perished.

Though Jewish massacres were commonplace all over medieval Europe, they were most widespread in Germany. In Strassburg, 1,800 Jews were dragged to the cemetery on Shabbos and burned alive. Their property was confiscated by the mob. Elsewhere, Jews were tortured to confess their complicity in spreading the plague. One group of Christians, called "Flagellants," because they would whip themselves out of penitence, urged the population to take revenge on the Jews for causing the plague. In Nuremberg, a prominent financial center during the Middle Ages, the Flagellants incited the populace to burn the local Jews in a large plaza later called *Judenbuhl*, "Jews' hill."

With so many Jews slaughtered or expelled, the financial institutions in Germany collapsed. Many nobles, needing revenue, appealed to the emperor to allow Jews back into their domain.

At last the nobles, clergy, and emperor met, and in 1356 developed a constitution, called the Golden Bull. In it, restrictive measures against Jews were enacted. Though Jews were allowed to return to the cities, they could reside only in special sections, called *Judengassen*, "the streets of the Jews." Guarded and sealed off from the rest of the population, they eventually formed what was to be called a "ghetto."

Jews were decreed to be property of the emperor, and were forbidden to emigrate. In addition, each Jew was required to pay a gulden annually as a tax.

By the 15th century, few Jewish communities in Germany remained. Most of the Jews had been expelled from large German cities; many ended up instead in the smaller towns, earning their living as small peddlers and petty merchants. They remained human property under the emperor — sometimes protected, other times relentlessly persecuted by the Church.

Many Jews tried to flee to Austria. When trouble began over a sect, the Hussites, which broke away from the Catholic Church, the Jews were accused of providing them with arms and money. As a result, massacres broke out, spreading into Germany and causing further expulsion of the Jews from different communities.

At the Council of Basel, clergymen met to correct the rampant Church abuses of the day. One of the topics discussed was the "Jewish problem." All the previous anti-Jewish measures were reenacted and strictly enforced.

Pope Eugenius IV (1431-1447) went even further. Under his decrees, Jews could not eat, drink, bathe, or reside with Christians, or sell the latter any medicines.

Jews were forbidden to build any more synagogues, and were forced to wear a distinctive badge and costume.

A Franciscan friar and papal emissary, John of Capistrano, so effectively incited mob violence that he was called "The Scourge of the Jews." He accused the Jews of murdering Christian children and profaning Catholic rites; soon Jews were banished from Bavarian duchies. In Silesia, the friar was particularly effective; several Jewish communities were destroyed.

The brutality of the 15th century climaxed in a town called Trent, where a Christian boy named Simon had drowned on Easter Sunday. When his body turned up at the home of a Jew, the child was reported murdered, thanks to the machinations of a Franciscan monk named Bernardino of Feltre. The Jews were incarcerated, tortured till they confessed, and afterwards burned at the stake. Jews were henceforth forbidden to live in the city. The clergy continued to spread the lie about the murdered child all over Germany; consequently, even more Jews were murdered.

By the end of the 15th century, Jews were being expelled from one German community after another. Although isolated communities still existed near the eastern border, the only major centers of Jewish life were in Worms and Frankfurt.

Amazingly, though the German Jews were in a sorry state, they managed to keep their faith in G-d; this faith alone had sustained them over the terrible past centuries. By the 16th century, social and intellectual changes had swept over Europe. During this era, the Renaissance, the science and literature of the Arab world had been discovered and brought into

European life. It was an age of "Humanism," where poets and philosophers, influenced by their Muslim predecessors, began to discuss new ideas, and challenge the existing authorities.

In Germany as well, this new current of ideas would manifest itself in political and religious changes. These changes would undermine the Catholic Church, as well as its grip over Germany.

In 1517, a monk named Martin Luther nailed to a church door his *Ninety-Five Theses*, enumerating the corrupt practices within the Catholic Church. Eventually Luther broke away and started his own style of Christianity, called "Lutheranism" (still followed by many Germans today). This period marked the "Reformation," the birth of the Protestant movement. Eventually the nations in northern Europe — England, Holland, and Sweden — followed Germany's example by breaking away from the Pope and forming their own brand of Christianity. The 16th and 17th centuries would be characterized by open warfare between the Catholics and Protestants. Nowhere was the open confrontation worse than in Germany, which lost a third of its population in the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).

Martin Luther was a vigorous man, who had tremendous influence over the German population. Besides his religious protests, he also translated the Bible into German, and preached social justice among the lower classes.

At first he sympathized with the Jews of Germany. In fact, he praised them, pointing out that it was only to the Jews that G-d had "shown such favor in extending them the Holy Word." However, his motives were the same as the

as Maharam of Rothenberg, the town where he eventually settled and opened a yeshiva. His brilliance attracted thousands of scholars, who themselves became rabbis and spread their teacher's works all over communities in Germany, Austria, and Bohemia.

Rabbi Meir was the leading Torah authority of his time. He consulted with rabbis and laymen alike on every conceivable matter, from religious law to business practices. He was also involved in the day's burning issues, such as forced conversions, taxations, and the ransom of Jews. As well as his commentary to the Talmud, he wrote numerous poems which were incorporated into the Ashkenazic liturgy for Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av.

He lived during one of the harshest periods for German Jewry. Finally, to escape the oppression, he tried to lead a group of Jews to the Holy Land. However, he was detained and held for ransom by Emperor Rudolph, who feared that the departure of Jews would eliminate revenue. Rabbi Meir forbade his followers to pay the high sum, lest ransom be practiced on other leading rabbis as well. He remained imprisoned in a fortress until his death in 1293. His body was then held hostage for an additional 14 years, until it was paid for by a wealthy Jew.

A famous disciple of R. Meir was Rabbi Mordechai ben Hillel, whose commentary on the Talmud is a necessary guide to halacha. Rabbi Mordechai was murdered during the Crusades.

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Catholics': to convert the Jews. When he failed to win them over with kindness, his attitude toward them changed for the worse. "Know, Christian," he wrote, "that next to the devil thou hast no enemy more cruel, more venomous and violent, than a true Jew." Luther even advocated the burning of synagogues and the Talmud. Mainz, the former center of Jewish scholarship, became the center of anti-Jewish literature, published with the help of the latest invention, the printing press.

In spite of Luther's wrath, however, the German Jews' lot began to improve. With the rise of commercialism, the Jews found themselves in demand. Emperor Charles V gave them full privileges. Jews dwelt in many German cities and principalities during the 16th and 17th centuries. In addition, new communities arose in the northwest portion of the kingdom. Hamburg, one of the principal ports of Northern Europe, attracted Portuguese

Marranos, and as early as 1577, their settlement had already achieved significance. Eventually, the Christians eased their restrictions, and by 1610 three small synagogues existed in the city. Many of these Hamburg Jews attained high positions.

A new age began to dawn on the German Jews. By the end of the 17th century, the overt religious persecutions had dwindled (though not disappeared). After centuries of misery and oppression, the Jews were rapidly reentering German society, and quite noticeably making their mark. However, both Catholics and Protestants had left theirs, built upon centuries of hatred and oppression. This anti-Semitism would emerge under the guise of German nationalism.

(Next month: From Emancipation through World War I: 1700-1918)

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"Between Me
and the people of Israel,
it is a sign forever."

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