

LIFE IN THE GHETTO

Living in the ghetto was compulsory for all Jews. They could live nowhere else, whereas Christians could live anywhere, but there. The ghetto was thus fixed by law as the exclusively legal district for Jewish residence.

For a thousand years the Church had been urging Christians to have as little as possible to do with the Jews. Until the 16th century it had been only partly successful. There were several reasons why the ghetto came into being just at that time.

- 1) The Edicts of Expulsion from Spain and Portugal, considered the most advanced European states of that day, spread the idea that Jews ought not to be permitted to live in Christian society. Spain's example even bore fruit in a land as distant as Lithuania.
- 2) The middle of the 16th century also witnessed a revival of bigotry. Protestantism came into existence, and Luther, in his later years, went to extremes in advising the extermination of the Jews. At the same time, Catholicism was fighting the new Protestant heresies with its Counter Reformation movement. The Church branded the new religious movements as being born under Jewish influence. Thus both branches of Christianity made the treatment of the Jews as social undesirables, a test of religious zeal.
- 3) Moreover, the old economic source of trouble for the Jews gained in intensity. Many Christians had long desired that their Jewish competitors be expelled. In other instances, Christian princes, or the patricians who ruled over many important cities, felt that they could ill afford to deprive themselves of the income which the presence of Jews brought into the treasury. Since in Germany and Italy, each city or district could follow an independent policy, some of their rulers yielded to the popular and ecclesiastical pressure to expel the Jews,

while others compromised by putting their Jewish subjects into a ghetto.

Jewish life from the 15th century on was the result of the interplay of these forces. The important Jewish community of Regensburg was expelled in 1519, fundamentally because a number of rival princes could not agree as to who was entitled to the income from the Jews. In Florence the ruling Medici family considered it advantageous to itself to permit a number of Jews to settle in their city. In Venice the question whether the Jews should be expelled or permitted to stay was debated for a long time. The ghetto was a compromise between these two possibilities. Still, during the 16th century, there were several occasions when it looked as though the Jewish population would be told to go. However, Venice was a commercial city, and its rulers saw the advantages which the Jews of near-by cities, such as those in Turkey, brought to the Ottoman Empire. The Jews, therefore, were permitted to stay under fewer restrictions than anywhere else. As for the Jews of Frankfort, they were under the protection of the German emperor. Consequently, they were not expelled but were placed within the walls of a ghetto.

The fate of the Jews of Rome depended largely on the character of the reigning pope. In general they lived in comparative peace. During the 15th century and the age of humanism, they had been especially well off. But then came the period of the Counter Reformation. A number of popes reacted to the rising tide of Protestantism by showing great zeal for the Roman Catholic Church. Paul IV was an especially zealous churchman, and he made it his duty to lead in making Jewish life as difficult as possible. In July 1555 he issued a particularly vicious anti-Jewish decree. No amount of effort on the part of the Jewish community could save them from imprisonment within a ghetto's walls.

The worst section of the town was usually the one set apart for Jewish habitation. In Rome the ghetto was near the Tiber River which frequently overflowed, leaving a layer of filth, and causing perpetually unhealthy conditions. Everywhere, the ghetto was too small for the number of people

forced to be confined within its walls. Houses ended up being situated very close to one another. Plus, in order to expand, additional stories had to be added to existing homes, making them several stories taller than in other parts of town. The streets were narrow, and the tall houses prevented the sun from penetrating the dark, unsanitary alleys.

The few streets or alleys which constituted the ghetto were walled up to prevent free entry or exit, and the windows of Jewish homes which looked out on streets outside the ghetto were boarded up as well. One or more gates at the ends of the Jewish streets permitted the residents to leave their district. These gates were locked at night and guarded by non-Jewish watchmen. After a specific hour in the evening, no Jew was permitted to remain outside the ghetto, and no Christian could remain within it. The gates and guards presumably protected the ghetto against marauders, but mobs of attackers often managed to break inside and wreak havoc on the inhabitants.

Not only were the Jews forbidden to adorn themselves with expensive clothing or ornaments, but they were ordered to wear peculiar, peaked hats and yellow badges. As soon as a Jew would venture outside the ghetto, he would become the butt of ridicule and assault by the town's ruffians. In practice, the ghetto regulations about exit and entrance were not always strictly enforced. Italian Jews, especially, enjoyed some freedom. On Shabbos afternoons they would often take walks along the river banks, or the less crowded city avenues.

The descendants of those who had been Europe's merchants, and then its bankers, were now reduced to a much lower economic level. At this time period Christians had already taken over the profitable occupations of trade and moneylending. The two main occupations now open to Jews were the trade in secondhand goods and the lending of small sums of money in exchange for a pledge of an article (pawnbroking). Within the ghetto, rooms used for sleeping at night became workshops during the day. There women repaired the old clothes and other articles bought by the men, and the men then sold them for a very low profit.

Every ghetto had a number of families who managed to escape the grinding poverty of most of the inhabitants. One or two might be physicians, for well-to-do Christians still persisted, despite the prohibitions of the Church, in seeking out the services of Jewish doctors. A small number of other Jews also rose, through their business acumen, to become financial advisers to the local bishop or prince. Still others, able to amass sufficiently ready funds, were able to lend larger sums of money to various well-heeled Christians of the upper class. An example of such a Jew was Mordecai Meisel of Prague. His financial ability brought him to the attention of the emperor, who did him the honor of borrowing money from him. But, when in 1601 Meisel died childless, the emperor simply confiscated all his wealth. It was thanks to the wealthy Jews of the ghetto, though, that the Jewish community was able to pay the onerous taxes that were annually imposed upon them. Without such payments the Jews would have been deemed useless to the rulers, and would be subject to banishment and exile.

The poorer Jews recognized their dependence upon the few wealthy families in their midst, and entrusted them with the overall rule of their communities. The structure of the ghetto was on the whole similar to that which had existed during the Middle Ages. There was a community head, the Parnas, and a community council, the Gabbaim, who were elected. The voters, though, were limited to those who could afford to pay taxes. Usually these voters elected a committee which, in turn, selected the members of the council. This indirect method of election enabled a small number of families to perpetuate their rule over the community. The council supervised the functioning of the communal institutions - the shul, the school, various charities, and courts of Jewish law. These institutions in turn enforced whatever rules were adopted for the governing of the ghetto, and the relations between the ghetto and the outside world. The council also had the power to decide how much each individual should pay in taxes, since the taxes delivered to the ruling non-Jewish authorities had to be paid in a lump sum.

The sordid districts in which the Jews lived, the miserable houses which were their homes, their precarious life on the edge of poverty, the grinding burden of heavy taxes, and the constant threat of expulsion or attack, made the inhabitants of the ghetto ever conscious of the utter hopelessness of improving their lot. Their religion was all they could turn to for a measure of comfort. In the study of Torah, Talmud, and Midrash men could forget time and place. Their hopes were centered not upon any earthly rulers, who were either hostile or greedy, but on the promise of a Messiah who would come to redeem them. In the meantime, they could only hope and pray, study and observe, labor for their families, and derive whatever joy they could out of the simple cycle of their daily lives.

Celebrations in the close communal quarters of the ghetto were associated with the social events that clustered about the Sabbath, the holidays, and the important occasions in the life of the individual. Joyous celebrations enabled the oppressed Jews to bring happiness into their miserable lives. Each holiday had its distinctive games for the children, appropriate foods and dishes, and special melodies and ceremonies to entertain and occupy all levels of society. Personal and family events also occasioned other gatherings for festivities - especially celebrating weddings.

Unfortunately, repeated efforts to proselytize were still heaped upon the Jews by the Church. They often invaded the synagogue where they continued to heap abuse upon the Jewish religion. Zealous monks refused to permit the Christian population to forget the presence of the Jews behind the ghetto walls. Often with a mob at their heels, they would make their way into the Jewish district, sometimes even into the synagogue itself, and there hurl threats and abuses upon the Jews for determinably holding on to their Jewish faith. The Roman ghetto was the worst off, for there the pope felt duty bound to institute regular preaching to the Jews. Every Shabbos afternoon, $\frac{1}{3}$ of the ghetto's population of men, women, and children had to appear at a church located at the very edge of the Jewish district. Fines were imposed if the proper number failed to show up, and punishment was meted out to any inattentive person. The preacher, frequently an apostate

Jew, would take his text from the portion of the Torah read in the synagogue that morning, and in his message seek to win converts to Christianity by casting contempt upon Judaism. This went on for centuries.

Most local Jews were impervious to these sermons, but there were unfortunately a number of converts during the ghetto period who did opt to leave Judaism and convert to Christianity. Some succumbed to the lure of a freer life and one of greater opportunities. Others felt compelled to convert, as every pretext was employed to bring Jews to baptism against their will. The most common convert was the one who could not bear the grinding poverty of the ghetto and was willing to be supported at public expense. The Church maintained homes in which converts were both fed and housed, sometimes for the rest of their lives. Those homes were known as Houses of Catechumens, homes for the newly converted. These houses were maintained by a special tax imposed upon the synagogues of the Papal States.

One ghetto which did enjoy some measure of peace was the one in the Bohemian city of Prague. This ghetto was under the direct rule of the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire who was also the king of Bohemia. Sometimes, however, this was unfortunately a source of danger. In 1561, Emperor Ferdinand I suddenly took an oath to expel the Jews from Prague. They were saved by the heroic efforts of Mordecai Zernach, a prominent member of the Prague community, who hurriedly journeyed to Rome and succeeded in persuading the pope to free the emperor from his vow.

Thus even during the Renaissance, Jews continued to live confined and precarious lives, never knowing what new laws might ultimately be passed against them.