

THE GROWTH OF ANTI-SEMITISM IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Life in Christian Europe for the Jews definitely took a turn for the worse by the end of the 11th century, and particularly during the 12th century. The Crusades were a watershed event in the history of the Jews, and all latent hostility against them now broke out in full force.

For one thing Jews were no longer indispensable as merchants. Already during the 10th century the Venetians were especially active in pushing Jews out of commerce. One of their doges even appealed to the Christians of Europe, in the name of Christianity, not to trade with and through Jews. The Crusades then completed this process of substituting Christian for Jewish merchants. On the one hand, the crusading spirit made it unsafe for Jews to be on the commercial highways, and it also destroyed much Jewish capital. On the other hand, the Christians had now conquered for themselves a route to the East, so they were no longer dependent solely upon the Jewish merchants. Consequently Jews were now reduced to the status of disliked competitors.

As the Christian merchant class developed in wealth and numbers, many Jews were driven to seek other sources of livelihood. Agriculture was closed to them because they could have no serfs and could own no slaves. The feudal system was a fully Christian operation. It was too late for them to become artisans, since by this time artisans were forming themselves into guilds, and the guilds refused to admit Jews into their closed societies. In France and Germany the majority of Jews now turned to the petty trades and whatever small artisanship was still open to them.

There was one important field of economic activity which was thrown open wide to Jews - the lending of money at interest. For centuries after the barbarian invasions there had been no real need for money. Things not grown by a landowner, nor manufactured by serfs or slaves, were obtained

through barter. Extra money needed for building churches or castles, or for waging wars, could be borrowed, at some interest, from wealthy monasteries. When European life became more settled, human wants increased, and merchants needed capital. Many Jews, now being crowded out of commerce by their Christian competitors, decided to use the wealth which had accumulated during years of mercantile activity to lend it instead to princes or to Christian merchants. Even some churches and cathedrals were erected with money borrowed from Jews. At about this time the Catholic Church began to propagate the theory that any interest, however small, was to be considered usury. Since no Christian was to lend money to another in the hope of gain, which was considered a grave sin, it led to the Jews to fill in this void. Thus Jews thus came to be the pre-eminent lenders of money during the Middle Ages.

Jews now took the place of bankers and helped foster both private and public undertakings. Money in general was scarce then, and the risk in lending it was quite great. Consequently, the legal rates of interest were often quite high. The Church seized upon this unfortunate turn of events as proof that the Jews desired to bring misery upon their neighboring Christians. This only added to the natural dislike of a debtor for his creditor. And thus the hatred for the Jew only grew. In time, when banking became a firmly established and highly respected business, and its risks were not nearly so great, Christian bankers began to displace Jews, too, in moneylending. Now banking no longer seemed to be quite so disreputable an endeavor.

The increased power of the kings and emperors of Christian Europe brought about another change in the position of the Jews. Jews used to be free to move where they liked. The king or emperor would extend to them protection wherever they went. As Jews gradually became part of the rapidly growing towns where they served as moneylenders, they, more than anyone else, remained under royal protection. The Jews were more than willing to pay for it. Under the feudal system every human being

belonged to a certain class and had to have a distinct relationship to an immediate superior. The Jewish population was thus classified as a semi-serf population. They were not attached to the soil as a regular serf, but instead became wards of the royal or imperial treasury. Just as the ordinary serf was expected to give part of his labor to his overlord's field and was otherwise completely in his lord's hands, so the Jew was expected to give part of his financial labor to his overlord's treasury and was otherwise completely in his power. A Jew could never move without his lord's permission. The lord could also impose upon the Jew a tax of any amount. In this way emperors, kings, and other nobles who "owned" their Jews actually profited from the Jews' money lending activity. The Jews were like a sponge which the nobility would use to dip into the purses of the general population, and then squeeze dry into their own. Emperors and kings gave protection, but in return the Jews lost their freedom of movement, their right to their own property, and their status as free men.

All the above factors - the Church's fear of divergent opinions, Christian merchants greed for the control of trade, being put in the position of defenseless creditors, and the nobility's greed - led during the 11th and 12th centuries to a most dangerous situation for European Jewry. By the time the Third Crusade was over, at the end of the 12th century, the majority of Jews were no longer prosperous, nor did they have any peace. The Jews were viewed as complete outsiders by the local populations. Though they had contributed so much to civilization, they were nevertheless considered to be hostile enemies. By the end of that era, the Christians of Western and Central Europe were determined to either expel the Jews or to destroy them. They were only saved by the fact that the rulers of Europe still needed them. Thus instead of eliminating their resident Jews all at once, they did so gradually and over a long period of time.

The first outward sign of separating the Jews from the rest of the population was to enforce the wearing of a special Jewish badge. While

this was originally an Islamic idea, Church dignitaries now considered adopting such a law themselves. In 1215 Pope Innocent III called for the 4th Lateran Council to officially adopt the regulation that all Jewish males above the age of 13, and all Jewish women above the age of 11, had to wear a yellow patch, front and back, on any garment worn outside. Otherwise there was no way to distinguish between a Jew and a Christian. This yellow badge was to be a mark of shame and to further separate Christians from Jews. Some Jews circumvented this rule by paying enough into the royal treasury to gain an exemption. Yet another law was on the books now further separating Jews from the general population.

The most insidious attack against the Jews came in the form of the false accusation of the blood libel. This accusation, that Jews used the blood of Christians for ritual purposes, first appeared around the time of the Second Crusade. Jews were accused of having kidnaped, tortured, and then crucified a Christian, then of drawing off his blood, distributing it among neighboring Jewish communities, and finally of using it in the preparation of matzos for Pesach. The “martyr” would eventually be raised to sainthood, and the “guilty” Jews would be massacred. This insidious accusation against the Jews would take hold of the popular imagination and would reappear throughout history, even into modern times.

The first blood libel accusation made its appearance in 1144 in Norwich, England. It then reared its head in 1171 in Blois, France and resulted in the destruction of that entire Jewish community. It soon became an almost annual occurrence in Germany toward the end of the 13th century, in spite of the attempts of even some Christians to refute it. In 1236 enlightened Emperor Frederick II called a conference of learned Jewish converts to Christianity to testify that the accusation was a lie. And several years later Pope Innocent IV issued a Bull in which he announced that the accusation was not to be believed. All to no avail. The blood libel accusation had caught the imagination of the common people and could not be eradicated.

Another charge, believed from the 13th century onwards, was that of host desecration. This was the belief that the wafer used during communion, and which Catholics believed turned into the body of Christ upon consumption, was stolen by Jews to be used in secret ceremonies of “torture” - whereby the Jews would repeatedly stab the wafer in the belief that Jesus’ blood would then flow freely, in a reenacted crucifixion. For Christians this calumny was utterly blasphemous. For this, too, the Jews were killed and their property taken away.

Eventually the cumulative effect of all these attacks upon the Jews resulted in their expulsion from the countries in which they lived. Philip Augustus of France was the first to do so - in 1182. First he stripped them of all their worldly possessions. Then in 1198, realizing that he could use the income which he would derive from the money lending Jews, he invited them to come back and resettle in the very same places from which they had been originally driven. This pattern was to repeat itself time after time over the next two centuries. By the end of this time period Christians had learned to look upon the Jews as being untrustworthy and suspicious and as people who could be easily brutalized. The story of the Wandering Jew thus came to be true. The Jew had lost his sense of home and community and could no longer feel safe and secure wherever he dwelled.