

## **Jews in Austria**

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Although Roman records show Jews accompanied Roman legions into what is now Austria,<sup>1</sup> they would not have been Roman citizens. Jews refused to worship the gods of the Roman Empire, so Roman society rejected them. In fact, Rome's destruction of Jerusalem in 136 CE caused the Jewish dispersal, or Diaspora. For nearly 1700 years, Jews were denied citizenship unless they converted to Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Their livelihood, and sometimes their lives, depended on an ever changing legal status, on the church's teachings, and on the Christian community's temperament.

### **The Middle Ages (500-1600 CE)**

After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and in response to anti-Jewish violence, Judaism focused on ethical behavior. Jews studied and interpreted the Law and developed the "rich social and intellectual inner world [that] allowed them to face hostile external reality."<sup>3</sup> Many important Jewish texts were written during the Middle Ages. Yet in Austria and elsewhere in the Holy Roman Empire (800-1806) much of the public record of Jewish life consisted of restrictions against Jews: laws prohibited Jews from manual labor, from owning property, from employing Christians, and from attending schools and universities. Laws forbade Jews from becoming lawyers, medical doctors, civil servants, teachers, and from serving in the military.<sup>4</sup> There are no public or private records of crimes committed by the Jewish communities or individual Jews of Europe which justify these laws.

Church art, sermons, and teachings also inform us about Jewish-Christian relations. The Catholic Church has apologized for the destructive rumors spread about Jews in sermons and for the anti-Jewish church laws passed through out the centuries.<sup>5</sup> One subject for harmful sermons was usury: lending money at interest. Church law forbade Christians from engaging in usury. However, borrowing money became essential for the development of business communities in Europe. Barred from other work, Jews became moneylenders. Christian businessmen who borrowed from Jews learned from sermons that Jews were the "devil's children," evil and greedy. The clergy preached Jews murdered Christian children as part of Jewish rituals. Not only did Christian churches erroneously teach that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, they also taught that Jews desecrated the host (wafer in Catholic Mass) to kill Christ again.<sup>6</sup>

In the Holy Roman Empire's German speaking lands, local priests often determined how strictly rules against Jews were enforced. As a result, conditions varied from place to place. Jews frequently moved to escape persecution and then became known as "shiftless."<sup>7</sup> In 1215, Pope Innocent III ordered Jews to wear a yellow badge to set them apart from their Christian neighbors wherever they went.

### **Jewish Communities in Vienna**

By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Vienna's German-speaking Jewish community was the largest in Europe and a leading center of Jewish learning. Jews were entrusted with important posts such as administering taxes and the mint. But when Jewish immigration to Vienna from Germany increased, so did hostility toward all Jews.<sup>8</sup> In 1257 the Vienna's City Council voted that male Jews had to wear a cone-shaped head dress and women yellow scarves on their heads.<sup>9</sup> After 1320, Viennese Jews were charged a special tax.<sup>10</sup> From 1347-1350, Christians massacred thousands of Jews throughout Europe, including Austria, because

they were rumored to be spreading the “Black Death,” or plague, by poisoning wells.<sup>11</sup> In 1420, Albert V (also the Holy Roman Emperor)<sup>12</sup> ordered the destruction of the Viennese Jewish community, then numbering from 1400 to 1600. Jewish property was stolen. Poorer Jews who were unable to escape were “set adrift”<sup>13</sup> on the Danube River. On 12 March 1421, 270 remaining Jews refused to convert to Christianity and were burned to death outside the city walls.<sup>14</sup> Other Austrian cities also expelled Jews.<sup>15</sup>

In 1555, Pope Paul IV required all Jews in Europe to live in ghettos and wear patches meant to shame them.<sup>16</sup> Although Vienna had an official Jewish ghetto after 1625, in 1670 King Leopold I expelled all Jews from Austria.<sup>17</sup> The law forbidding Jews to live in Austria remained in force until 1848.<sup>18</sup> Although Austrian kings allowed Jews with important jobs to remain, only their eldest sons could marry, a restriction meant to keep the Jewish community small.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Enlightenment**

Emperor Joseph II instituted legislative and administrative reforms to protect his rule and discourage a revolution like those in France and America. However, because his reforms came from the government rather than from the people, as in a democracy, historian Evan Burr Bukey believes Joseph II increased his subjects’ dependence on the state to make decisions for them. Austrians became less inclined to question or criticize their government.<sup>20</sup> As a result, when reforms became unpopular or seen as inadequate, Austrians looked for a scapegoat for their country’s problems. Since Jews benefited from reforms allowing more freedom of religion, they were suspected of exerting undue influence over their government. As a result, Jews were increasingly blamed for national problems.<sup>21</sup>

Actually, Joseph II’s views about Jews were influenced by the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment questioned church authority and superstition and taught that reason, knowledge and education contained the solutions to society’s problems. Enlightenment thinkers applied these concepts to problems caused by anti-Jewish church teachings. They concluded that aspects of Jewish “culture” which Christians disliked came from persecution and forced isolation in ghettos.<sup>22</sup> With this in mind, in 1782 Joseph II lifted almost all restrictions on Jewish occupations and dress. He also increased educational opportunities for them as well, hoping to create a pool of highly skilled citizens to help modernize his empire.<sup>23</sup> Although many Jews welcomed these changes, others saw them as an attempt to end the Jewish religion and culture.<sup>24</sup>

No longer barred from owning private property or from employing Christians, Austrian Jews built factories and developed commercial ties with other countries. Jews attended universities and became doctors, lawyers and journalists because these professions were open to them, unlike the civil service from which they were still barred.<sup>25</sup>

Thirty-five thousand Jews fought against Napoleon for the last Holy Roman Emperor Franz II. After the empire was dissolved, as Franz I of Austria, the emperor reduced the rights of Jews once more. Despite this disappointment, during his reign Jews built a prayer house (1811), the first Jewish school (1812), and the first synagogue in central Vienna (1826). By 1830, the 1600 Jews residing in Vienna supported a charitable organization for children and widows.<sup>26</sup>

## Nationalism

After the Revolution of 1848-1849, Austrians ratified their first constitution. Like the American Constitution seventy years earlier, it contained no restrictions on civil, political, and property rights based on religion.<sup>27</sup> Although restrictions were reinstated in 1851, not all Austrians were pleased with their government's liberal turn.<sup>28</sup> Austrian-German nationalists were disappointed that the revolution had not created a united German state. Wanting a "pure" German society, they resented the Jewish immigrants who came to Vienna from other parts of the empire to enjoy the new freedoms.<sup>29</sup> The high number of Jewish students at University of Vienna, the only Austrian university which admitted Jews, was another source of resentment. German-nationalist students feared Jews and Czechs (another hated minority), would take all the good jobs. This gave rise to antisemitic and anti-Slavic German student organizations.<sup>30</sup> Hungarian nationalists, on the other hand, wanted to separate themselves from their German-speaking countrymen.

In 1867, Emperor Franz Joseph created the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary to keep Hungarian nationalists from breaking free of the empire. Its constitution granted Jews full citizenship. In addition, the empire annexed semi-autonomous regions such as Galicia, where a large number of Jews lived. As a result of these changes, the Austro-Hungarian empire's overall Jewish population rose, becoming second only to Russia's. From this period until World War I (1914-1918), large numbers of Jews, especially Galician Jews, immigrated to Vienna to escape dire poverty and antisemitic violence.<sup>31</sup>

In Vienna, the Jewish population increased from 6,217 to 99,444 between 1857 and 1890. The increase in Vienna's non-Jewish population was comparable. However, German nationalists focused both anti-German and antisemitic hatred on Jews, especially the Galician (Polish) Jews. The German nationalist's organizations' became increasingly virulent, especially the antisemitic university student organizations.<sup>32</sup>

The success of some Jews in finance and industry resulted in German nationalists blaming all Jews for the capitalist destruction of the rural ideal of German life. Ironically, the working class Jewish influence on the labor movement and in establishment of the Socialist Democratic Party caused Jews to be associated with international Marxism, as well. Jewish influence in the arts and sciences and their success in journalism became a symbol of the "Judaizing" of German-Austrian culture.<sup>33</sup> No group was more hated than Galician (Polish) Jews. Even German-speaking Jews viewed the newly arrived Galician Jews with disdain for their "foreign" dress (kapotas and peyos), their lack of secular education, and their poverty. Galician Jews were blamed by their co-religionists for the increased antisemitism before the outbreak of World War I.<sup>34</sup>

Surrounded by German-nationalist rhetoric's purposeful exclusion of them, Jews discovered their own nationalism. If their non-Jewish neighbors could not be proud of the cultural contributions which Austrian Jews like the Strauß family, Mahler and, later, Schönberg made in music alone, Jews could certainly be. In 1849, the *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde* was founded. This cultural organization would oversee religious and charitable activities until the Nazis closed it in 1942.<sup>35</sup> The first Jewish students' society *Kadimah* was founded in Vienna in 1882. Although Zionism was more popular among Eastern European Jews, much inspiration came from Theodor Herzl who had attended the University of Vienna.<sup>36</sup>

In World War One, 300,000 Jews fought for the empire, hoping to finally prove they were good citizens, even willing to risk their lives for the emperor. Instead, at war's end they would be blamed for losing the war and for the end of the empire itself.<sup>37</sup>

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