

Jews in Eastern Europe

Massive Jewish settlement in Middle and Eastern Europe has been recorded since the end of the 11th century. The first arriving Jews were merchants (dealing between east and the west) who were referred to as Radhanites. They were fluent in many languages, including Arabic, Persian, Greek, Spanish, "Franklish" and "Slav". One of them was Ibrahim Ibn Yacub, who authored the first known extensive article about Poland, took a journey from his hometown - Toledo, in (Moslem) Spain, to the Holy (Christian) Roman Empire in 965 or 966 and then on to the Slavonic countries. The map below illustrates the migration waves of Jews into central Europe.

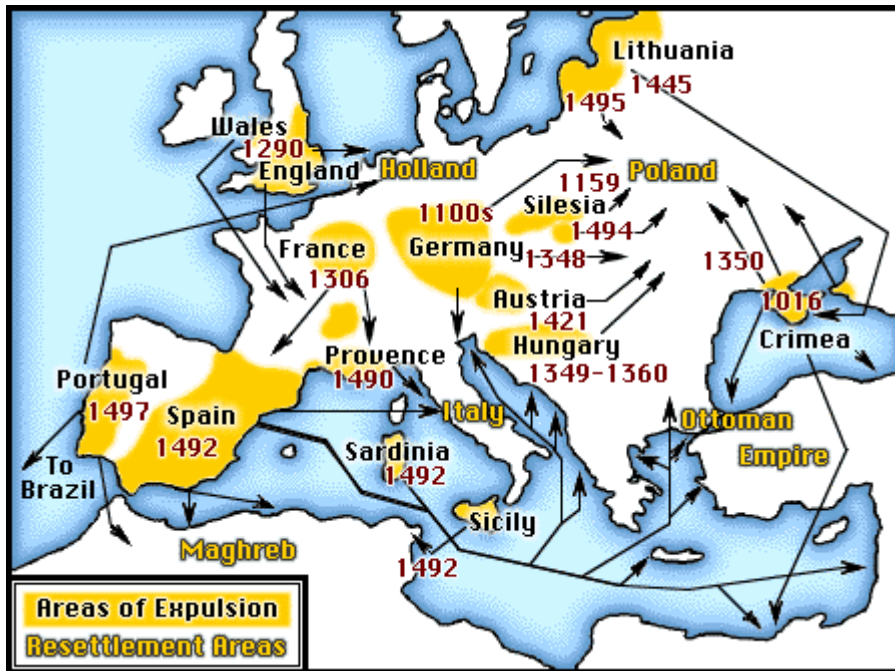


After the Mongol invasion in the 13th century brought death and destruction to Poland, Polish princes invited settlers from Germany in the hope of stimulating the economy. As the situation for Jews in Western Europe deteriorates during the 14th century, many move eastward. Communities are founded rapidly. By the year 1600 between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews live in 60 communities. (from "Beyond the Pale")

With feudal disintegration in Central and Eastern Europe, in the 13th and 14th centuries, some the rulers encouraged Jewish immigration. In the 14th and 15th centuries the Jews were mainly middlemen in trade between Poland, Hungary, Turkey and the Italian colonies on the Black Sea.

Jewish immigrants headed east to Poland during the reign of Casimir the Great, who encouraged Jewish settlement by extending royal protection to them. One of the first mentions of Jewish settlements was in Lwow about 1356. There are other mentions of Jewish settlement during that time in other areas.

In the 15th century Jews appeared in many cities in Great and Little Poland, Kuyavia, Pomerania and Red Ruthenia. In the 1450's Polish towns gave shelter to Jewish refugees from Silesia, which was then ruled by the Habsburgs.



Jewish expulsions and resettlement areas in Europe

With the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, more than 300,000 "Sephardic" Jews spread out throughout the Mediterranean world, with a large number of them being welcomed by the Ottoman Empire. Spain had been one of the centers of Jewish life at that time, a place where Jews had flourished for a thousand years (the first seven centuries under Moslem rule). Up to the 16th century most of those expelled Jews settled in the Turkish Empire, Italy, Britain & Holland, North Africa, and a few in the New World. The most fortunate of the expelled Jews succeeded in escaping to Turkey.



Welcoming of Sephardim Jews to Turkey in 1492 by Sultan Beyazit II. A painting by Mevlut Akyildiz.

In 1495, Jews were ordered out of the center of Krakow and allowed to settle in the "Jewish town" of Kazimierz. In the same year, Alexander Jagiellon, following the example of Spanish rulers, banished the Jews from Lithuania. For several years they took shelter in Poland until they were allowed back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1503. At that time Jews lived in about 85 towns in Poland. Their total number was around 18,000 in Poland and 6,000 in Lithuania, only 0.6 per cent of the total population of these two countries.

In the 16th and the first half of the 17th Jewish population grew considerably, up to 500,000 Jews in Poland, about five per cent of the total population of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. New arrivals were due to "Sephardic" Jews, who had been driven away from Spain and Portugal.

There is a persistent family story that the Ole(m/n)bergs are "Sephardic" Jews, who arrived in Poland from Spain/Portugal to via Holland, and possibly Germany, though the majority of Sephards arrived in eastern Europe via the Ottoman Empire. The foremost expert on Polish-Jewish names claims the name was, originally, Ailenberg/ Ajlenberg and derives from Oldenburg, Saxony, where there was a famous rabbi in the 1570's. There is no definite proof, yet, when the clan arrived in Eastern Europe.

In the 16th and 17th centuries the Jews were required to defend the towns they lived in either by service or by monetary contributions. Sometimes Jews fought on both sides, leading to family tragedies. During Poland's wars with Sweden (1655-60), Russia (1654-67) and Turkey (1667-99) Jews

provided recruits and participated in the city's defense. There are war stories about relevant places such as Buczacz, Trembowla (see also here) and Lwow (see also here).

In 1648 the Cossack uprising under Chmielnicki broke up. There was a breakthrough in the history of both the "Commonwealth" and Polish Jewry. The country was plunged into economic crisis due to the wars against the Ukraine, Russia, Sweden, Turkey and the Tartars, which Poland fought almost uninterruptedly between 1648 and 1717. As a result of Chmielnicki's revolt and wars against the Ukraine and Russia Jewish communities in the areas occupied by enemy troops were completely wiped out. Some Jews were murdered, some emigrated to central Poland and the rest left for Western Europe. The sharp drop of the Jewish population is estimated as to be 100,000-125,000 out of 500,000.

After 1717 there was a rapid growth in the number of the Jewish population, up to about 750,000 Jews in 1766 (ref. tax census), which constituted 7% of the total population of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. About 29% of all Jews lived in ethnically Polish areas and 27% in regions with a predominantly Ukrainian population. The population census conducted in Poland in 1790-91 shows a further increase in the number of Jewish inhabitants, about 900,000.

The first partition of Poland took place in 1772, among Russia, Prussia and Austria. At that time there were about 171,850 Jews (6.5% of the total population) in Galicia. In 1775 the authorities granted tax exemptions to those individuals who settled on uncultivated land. This may explain the spread of Jews to many Galician shtetls, around Krakow, Lemberg (Lwow) and Tarnopol. The same law forbade rabbis to wed those who had no permanent earnings. Consequently many poor Jews moved away from Galicia, mostly to the east.



The Pale of Settlement
(from "Beyond the Pale")

It should be noted that there were different regulations in the Prussian and Austrian partition zones. In the Prussian zone, according to the decree issued by Frederick II, the Jewish population was to be subordinated to the Prussian Jewish ordinance (*General Judenreglement*) of April 17, 1797. The right to permanent residence in towns was granted only to rich Jews and those engaged in trade. The poor Jews, the *Bettel Juden*, were ordered by Frederick II to be expelled from the country, and the Jewish self-government organizations were exclusively limited to religious affairs.

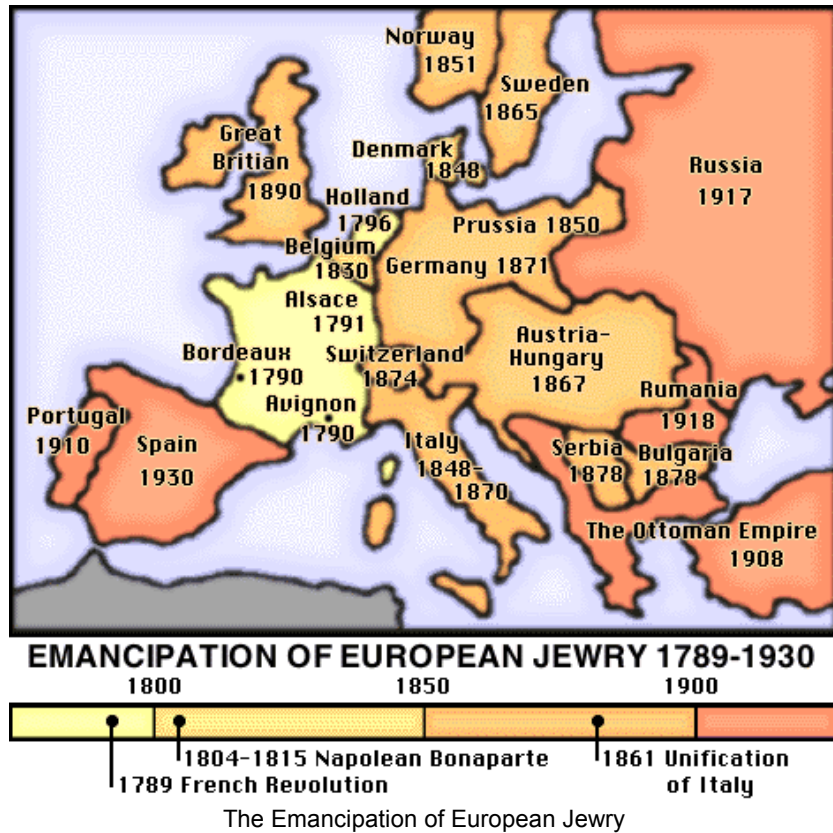
In the Austrian partition zone the attitude towards the Jewish question went through two stages.

1. During the initial period, the reign of Maria Theresa and the first years of rule of Joseph II, the distinction of the Jewish population from the rest of Galician society was retained and Jewish self-government was preserved, although the poorest Jews were expelled from the country. Those who remained were limited in their right to get married. Various occupations were prohibited to them and they were forced to pay high taxes. In the years 1782-3, the Jews in Austria were obliged to assume permanent family names.
2. In the second half of the reign of Joseph II the Jews were recruited into the army (1788) and then, on the strength of the grand Jewish ordinance of 1789 certain restrictions in relation to the Jewish population were lifted and attempts were made to make them equal with the burghers. In 1792, Leopold II, Joseph II's successor, changed the military duty of the Jews into a money contribution, while the decree ordering the Jews to wear Christian dress was never introduced in practice.

The Imperial Russian Empire also embraced Jews.

1. In 1791, the Russian Empress, Catherine the Great, established the Pale of Settlement and decreed that all Jewish inhabitants of her realm (with minor exceptions) must live within its borders. This restriction remained in force until 1917. During the Kosciusko Insurrection, and wars against Tsarist Russia in 1794, Jews supported the uprising either in auxiliary services or in arms.
2. In 1809 the Russian Government ordered all Jews to adopt fixed, inheritable family names so that they might be more easily identified for taxation and conscription. In other areas controlled by (Russia/Poland) the order occurred later, but was in place, more or less, universally by the early 1820's.
3. In 1827, Czar Nicholas 1 decreed that Jews, who had previously been exempt from military service, were now liable for up to 25 years of army service as common soldiers.

Many Jews refused to join the Tsarist Army, and they employed many methods to avoid induction including the use of false documents. Many young men simply ran away from their communities when their draft date approached. Jews were required to register all births, marriages etc. in the Synagogue to which they were assigned. After 1857, "crown rabbi's", who were usually not the spiritual leaders of the respective communities, kept the records.



As late as the middle of the 19th century, Russian Government officials complained about the frequent change of family names among Russian Jews who lived in different communities under different surnames.

Basic changes in the situation of Galician Jewry took place after 1848. Some Jews were quite active in the revolutionary movement of the period, which resulted in a Polish-Jewish reconciliation and Jewish emancipation. In the years following 1859 the Austrian authorities began to gradually repeal legal restrictions. In 1867-68 all citizens, Jews included, were finally made equal in the eyes of the law.

Return to Bad Times

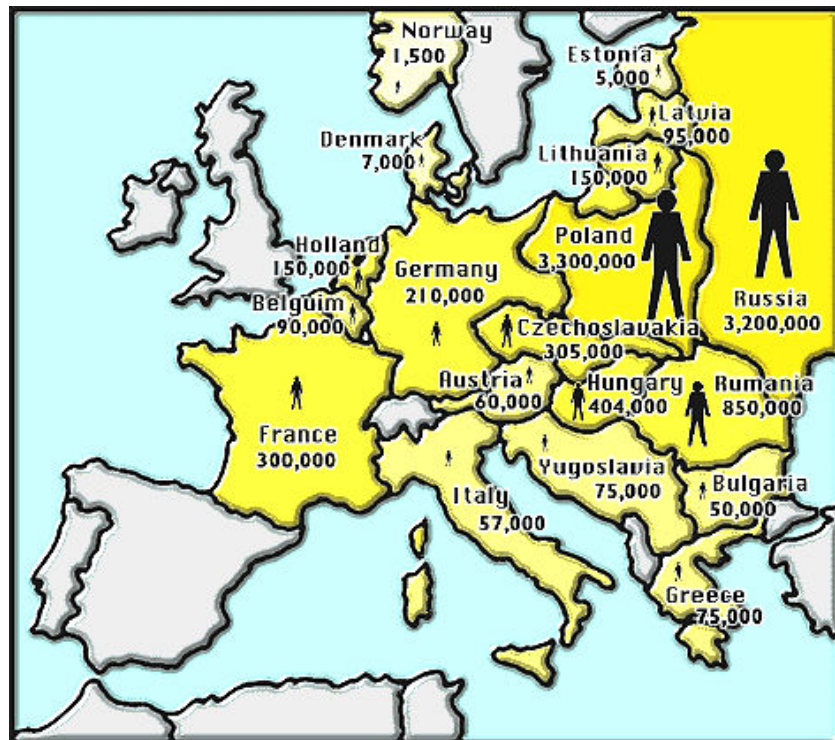


Map of pogroms and anti-semitic acts of violence in Russia and the Pale from 1871-1906

The difficult economic situation in Galicia caused violent actions (pogroms) against Jews, who due to the situation chose to emigrate elsewhere. Generally, Jews from Galicia sought work in other countries of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, sometimes in Vienna, and also in Hungary and the Balkan countries. Between 1881 and 1900 about 150,000 left elsewhere, and between 1900 and 1914 about 175,000 Jews from Galicia left for the United States of America. At the same time various Zionist movements emerged and some Jews made Aliyah to the land that would eventually become the State of Israel.

At the end of the First World War Galicia was annexed to Poland. The Jews expected to be autonomous but the Polish government never yielded in that regard. Rather, the situation of the Jews dramatically deteriorated and their rights were limited compared to other nationals. After 1924, various US laws reduced immigration to the USA. Jews looked for alternative ways to get out of Poland, in particular to Palestine. The British Mandate began to limit entry to Palestine, though many made Aliyah illegally or through the intervention of various organizations dedicated to supporting emigration of Jews from Eastern Europe to Palestine.

The fate of those Jews who remained in Western Europe, and the portions of Russia and Eastern Europe that was occupied by German forces, was doom in the Holocaust during the Second World War. About Six Million Jews, half of them (3 millions) in Poland and about 450,000 Galician Jews were murdered. Some authorities claim that the number is lower, but the experience of most families whose ancestors were affected by the holocaust, seems to be that the deeper one digs into family history, the more relatives one finds that vanished in the slaughter.



Jewish Population in Europe, 1939

(Most Images from fcit.edu)