

# **Jews in Austria**

Jan-Ruth Mills

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 teachings of the church, and on the temperament of the Christian community.

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

In response to anti-Jewish violence and the absence of the temple in Jerusalem, Judaism focused on ethical behavior, on learning and interpreting the Law, and on 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 this period, yet in Austria and elsewhere in the Holy Roman Empire (800-1806) much of the public record of Jewish life consists of restrictions: laws prohibited Jews from manual labor, from owning property, from employing Christians, and from attending schools and universities. Laws forbade Jews from being lawyers, medical doctors, civil servants, teachers, or serving in the military.<sup>4</sup>

Church art, sermons, and teachings also inform us about Jewish-Christian relations. These often address the subject of usury: lending money at interest. Church law forbade Christians from engaging in usury. 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. Clergy preached that murdering Christian children was part of Jewish rituals and that Jews desecrated the host so they could kill Christ again.<sup>5</sup> Christian churches once taught that Jews were responsible for Jesus' death, although the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant denominations worldwide have now discredited this myth.<sup>6</sup>

In the German speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire, local priests often decided how strictly rules against Jews were followed. As a result, conditions varied from place to place: Jews frequently moved to escape persecution, and then became known as "shiftless."<sup>7</sup>

Although small numbers of Jews lived in many towns in Austria, the by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the German speaking community in Vienna, the largest in Europe, was a leading center of Jewish learning. Jews held important posts administering taxes and the mint, but hostility increased as more Jews came from Germany.<sup>8</sup> A special session of the Vienna city council in 1257 voted that Jews not only had to wear a cone-shaped head dress along with the yellow badge the church required after 1215.<sup>9</sup> After 1320, they had to pay a special Jewish tax.<sup>10</sup> In 1420, Albert V, also Holy Roman Emperor, ordered the destruction of the Viennese Jewish community, now numbering perhaps 1400 to 1600. Poorer Jews were set "adrift" on Danube while others were forced to convert. From 214 to 270 Jews refused and were burned to death outside the city walls on 12 March 1421.<sup>11</sup> Other Austrian cities also expelled Jews.<sup>12</sup>

## **First Jewish Ghetto in Vienna**

In 1555, Pope Paul IV required Jews to live in ghettos and wear patches meant to shame them. The Jewish merchants of Vienna's first official ghetto, established in 1625, helped supply the army during the Thirty Years War and expand the city's commercial interests. In 1670, during a peaceful interlude, King Leopold I expelled all Jews from Austria. The expulsion order would remain in force until 1848 for all of Austria.<sup>13</sup> Marriage restrictions were imposed on the small number of Jews allowed to remain in Vienna to serve the court.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Enlightenment**

Emperor Joseph II, wanting to create a modern state and avoid the revolutionary spirit challenging other European monarchs, instituted many legislative and administrative reforms. Some historians believe he only increased his subjects' dependence on his authority by choosing reforms rather than allowing a more democratic process.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, influenced by the

Enlightenment, Joseph II reasoned that the hated “characteristics” of Jews resulted from persecution and isolation. Assimilated, educated Jews would create a pool of educated subjects.<sup>16</sup> In 1782, he published the Patent of Tolerance, lifting almost all restrictions on occupation and dress for Jews. While secularized, assimilated Jews, welcomed these reforms, others saw them as an attempt to destroy the Jewish religion.<sup>17</sup>

Nor were all other Austrians pleased with the changes. Catholics resented the church’s diminished authority. Others wanted more or different reforms than those the emperor chose. They suspected Jews of manipulating him, believing Jews benefited most from the reforms: without the restrictions on private property or profession, new Jewish manufacturing concerns flourished and Jews joined professions previously unattainable for them. Rationalist Austrians who could no longer hate Jews for religious reasons hated them for their perceived ability to interfere in the political and economic affairs of the country. Jews increasingly became scapegoats for Austria’s national problems.<sup>18</sup> After a disappointing loss of rights under Franz I, the Jewish community in Vienna built a prayer house, a Jewish school, and finally the first synagogue. By 1830, the 1600 Jews residing there supported a charitable organization for children and widows.<sup>19</sup>

## Nationalism

Jews contributed significantly to the Revolution of 1848-1849. Austria’s first constitution, like the American Constitution ratified 70 years earlier, contained no restrictions on civil, political, and property rights based on religion.<sup>20</sup> Many Jews moved to Vienna to enjoy these freedoms, although some rights were rescinded by 1851.<sup>21</sup> Austrian-German nationalists, disappointed that the revolution had not created a united German state, resented the influx of Jews into “their” capital city.<sup>22</sup> Increased Jewish and Czech attendance at universities exacerbated German-nationalist students’ fears that no jobs awaited them on graduation, giving rise to antisemitic and anti-Slavic German student organizations.<sup>23</sup>

In 1867, in response to the threat Hungarian nationalism posed to the empire, the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary was created. Its constitution granted Jews full citizenship. But the resulting annexation of Galicia, formerly a southern province of Poland, increased the number Jews in the empire as a whole, making it second only to Russia’s. Many Galician Jews migrated to Vienna to escape dire poverty, increasing the Jewish population of Vienna from 6,217 to 99,444 between 1857 and 1890. As Peter Black, the biographer of Austrian Nazi Ernst Kaltenbrunner explains, the prevalent anti-foreign sentiment, mixed with religious antisemitism, was transferred to Jews. The success of some Jews in finances and industry resulted in German nationalists blaming all Jews for the capitalist destruction of the rural ideal of German “volkisch” life. Ironically, the influence of working-class Jews on the labor movement caused Jews to be associated with international Marxism, as well. Jewish influence in the arts became a symbol of “Judaizing” of German culture. The increased number of Jews in the populace was associated with liberal triumph in government.<sup>24</sup>

In the midst of increased nationalist feelings throughout Europe, Jews discovered a sense of nationhood themselves. If their non-Jewish neighbors could not be proud of the cultural contributions Austrian Jews like the Strauß family, Mahler and, later, Schönberg made in music alone, they could be. The Israelitische Kultusgemeinde, a cultural organization that oversaw religious and charitable activities, founded in 1849, continued to oversee religious and charitable activities until 1942, when Austrian Jews who had not found refuge would be murdered en masse. Increasingly, Zionism attracted university students who formed the first Jewish national students’ society, Kadimah, 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>25</sup> But even Austrian-German Jews viewed the newly arrived Galician Jews with disdain for their “foreign” dress (kapotas and peyos), their lack of secular education, and their poverty. They blamed Galician Jews for the increased antisemitism before the outbreak of World War I.

Three hundred thousand Jews would fight for the empire during World War One, hoping to prove themselves good citizens at last. Unfortunately, they found themselves blamed for the war’s loss and for the dissolution of the empire they had fought to preserve.<sup>26</sup>

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- 1 <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Austria.html>
- 2 Bauer, Yehuda. *The History of the Holocaust*. New York: Franklin Watts, 2001, 19, 24
- 3 Bauer, 24
- 4 Pauley, Bruce. *From Prejudice to Persecution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992,13-24.
- 5 Pauley, 14
- 6 "Nostra Aetate:Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions." Second Vatican Council, 1965.
- 7 Pauley, 13
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14
- <sup>9</sup>Pauley, 14
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid,
- <sup>11</sup> Pauley, 14. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Austria.html>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://jcrelations.net/en/?item=836>
- <sup>13</sup>Pauley, 15-16
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Austria.html>
- <sup>15</sup> Bukey, Evan Burr. *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era, 1938-1945*. U North Carolina: Chapel Hill, 2000, 5
- <sup>16</sup> Pauley, 17
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17, Bauer 38
- <sup>18</sup> Bauer, 37. Pauley, 20
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. 20
- <sup>20</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Austria.html>
- <sup>21</sup> <http://jcrelations.net/en/?item=836>, Pauley, 21
- <sup>22</sup> Buckey, 6
- <sup>23</sup> Black, Peter R. *Ernst Kaltenbrunner: Ideological Soldier of the Third Reich*. Princeton U, Princeton, 1984, 15
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, 17
- <sup>25</sup> Pauley, 21, 55
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid. 66