

History of the Jews in France

Roman Period - Medieval Period

A Jewish presence existed in France during the Roman period, but the community mainly consisted of isolated individuals, rather than an established community. After the Roman conquest of Jerusalem, boats filled with Jewish captives landed in Bordeaux, Arles and Lyons. Archeological finds of Jewish objects with menorahs imprinted on them date back to the first through fifth century.

Jewish communities have been documented in 465 in Vannes (Brittany), in 524 in Valence and in 533 in Orleans. Jewish immigration increased during this period and attempts were made to convert the Jews to Christianity.

In the 6th century, a Jewish community thrived in Paris. A synagogue was built on the Ile de la Cite, but was later torn down and a church was erected instead.

Anti-Jewish sentiments were not common in this early period, in fact, after a Jewish man was killed in Paris in the 7th century, a Christian mob avenged his death.

During the 8th century, Jews were active in commerce and medicine. The Carolingian emperors allowed Jews to become accredited purveyors in the imperial court. Jews also became involved in agriculture and dominated the field of viticulture; they even provided the wine for Mass.

Middle Ages

The First Crusade (1096-99) had no immediate effect on the Jews of France, however, in Rouen, statements were made by the Crusaders justifying their persecution of Jews across Europe.

After the Second Crusade (1147-49), a long period of persecution began. French clergyman gave frequent anti-Semitic sermons. In some cities, such as Beziere, Jews were forced to pay a special tax every Palm Sunday. In Toulouse, Jewish representatives had to go to the cathedral on a weekly basis to have their ears boxed, as a reminder of their guilt. France's first blood libel took place in Blois in 1171 and 31 Jews were burned on the stake.

The situation deteriorated during the rule of King Philip Augustus. Philip was raised believing that Jews killed Christians and, therefore, held an ingrained hatred toward the Jews. After four months in power, Philip imprisoned all the Jews in his lands and demanded a ransom for their release. In 1181, he annulled all loans made by Jews to Christians and took a percentage for himself. A year later, he confiscated all Jewish property and expelled the Jews from Paris; he readmitted them in 1198, only after another ransom was paid and a taxation scheme was set up to procure funds for himself.

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council forced Jews to wear a badge in the provinces of Languedoc, Normandy and Provence.

More anti-Jewish persecutions took place in the western provinces during the rule of Louis IX (1226-70). In 1236, crusaders attacked the Jewish communities of Anjou and Poitou and tried to baptize all the Jews, those that resisted were killed. An estimated 3,000 Jews were murdered.

In 1240, Jews were expelled from Brittany and the famous disputation of the Talmud began in Paris. The Talmud was put on trial and was subsequently burned in 1242. Despite the persecution, Jews managed to remain active in money-lending and commerce. Jews expelled from England were also admitted into France. Again, in 1254, Jews were banished from France, their property and synagogues were confiscated, however, after a couple of years, they were readmitted.

Phillip IV the Fair ascended to power in 1285. In 1305, he imprisoned all the Jews and seized everything they owned except the clothing on their backs. He expelled 100,000 Jews from France and allowed them to travel with only one day's provisions. Phillip IV's successor, Louis X, allowed the Jews to return in 1315.

A Jewish presence was first mentioned in Besancon, in eastern France, in 1245. Jews left the town in the 15th century, and returned only after the French Revolution. Jews were first permitted to reside in Belfort, the capital of the Belfort region in eastern France, in the 1300s. By the time of the Nazi occupation there were 700 Jews in the town, of which 245 were killed.

Between 1338-1347, 25 Jewish communities in Alsace were victims of terror. Massacres in response to the Black Plague (1348-49) struck Jewish communities throughout the east and southeast. The Jews of Avignon and Comtat Venaissin were spared similar fates because of intervention from the pope. Further bloodshed spread to Paris and Nantes in 1380. The culmination of all the persecution and bloodshed was the definitive expulsion of Jews from France in 1394.

Despite all the expulsions and persecutions, Jewish learning managed to thrive during the middle ages. Both Il-de-France and Champagne became centers for Jewish scholarship and other centers of learning grew in the Loire Valley, Languedoc and Provence. In the north, talmudic and biblical commentary, as well as, anti-Christian polemic and liturgical poetry were studied. Whereas, in the south, grammar, linguistics, philosophy and science were studied. Also, in the South, numerous translations were made of religious materials from Arabic and from Latin to French.

One of the foremost Jewish scholars during the Middle Ages was Rashi, who started his own yeshiva in France. His biblical commentary is one of the most popular and widely known works today.

16th - 18th Centuries

Large numbers of Marranos, secret Jews, from Portugal came to France in the mid-1500's. The majority of them did not remain faithful to Judaism and assimilated into French society. This was the first time since 1394 when Jews were allowed to legally live in the kingdom of France.

After the Chmeilnicki massacres in 1648, more Jewish settlers, fleeing the Ukraine and Poland, came to Alsace and Lorraine. An influx of immigrants came to southeast France, when the Duke of Savoy issued an edict declaring Nice and Villefranche de-Conflent free ports.

The communities of Avignon and Comtat Venaissin flourished in the 17th century. Jews became involved in commercial activity and frequently attended the fairs and markets. Success spread to other nearby communities; including the Jewish community of Alsace, who exploited the facilities given to the Marranos, "Portugese Jews."

Jews began resettling Paris in the 18th century. Two groups of Jews came to Paris: southern Jews mainly of Sephardic descent from Bordeaux, Avignon and Comtat Venaissin and Ashkenazim from Alsace, Lorraine and a couple other northern cities. The wealthier Sephardim settled on the Left Bank, while the Ashkenazim settled on the Right. Paris's first kosher inn opened in 1721 and its first synagogue opened in 1788.

Anti-Jewish laws began to be repealed in the 1780's, such as the "body tax" which likened Jews to cattle. About 500 Jews were living in Paris and about 40,000 in France at the time of the French Revolution.

The French Revolution

After the French Revolution, citizenship was finally granted to the Jews of France. The Sephardim received citizenship in September 1790 and the Ashkenazim received it about six months later. Jews were given civic rights as individuals, but lost their group privileges.

During the Reign of Terror (1793-94), synagogues and communal organizations were closed down, along with other religious institutions.

Napoleon considered the Jews, "a nation with a nation," and he decided to create a Jewish communal structure sanctioned by the state. Hence, in 1806, he ordered the convening of a Grand Sanhedrin, composed of 45 rabbis and 26 laymen. The Grand Sanhedrin paved the way for the formation of the consistorial system, which were religious bodies established in every department of France that had a Jewish population numbering more than 2,000. The consistorial system made Judaism a recognized religion and placed it under government control.

Despite the new found freedoms, anti-Jewish measures were passed in 1808. Napoleon declared all debts with Jews annulled, reduced or postponed, which caused the near ruin of the Jewish community. Restrictions were also placed on where Jews could live in an effort to assimilate them into French society.

The Restoration

The Jews did not receive the Restoration with any hostility. Jewish educational institutions were established. In 1818, schools were opened in Metz, Strasbourg and Colmar. Other Jewish schools were opened in Bordeaux and Paris. The Metz Yeshiva, which was closed during the Revolution, was reopened as a central rabbinical seminary. The seminary was transferred to Paris in 1859, where it continues to function today. Judaism was given the same status as other recognized religions.



During the 19th century, Jews were extremely active in many spheres of French society. Rachel and Sarah Bernhardt are two Jewish women who became famous acting at the Comedie Francaise in Paris. Bernhardt eventually directed plays at her own theater and was given the title "Divine Sarah" by Victor Hugo.

Jews became involved in politics; for example, Achille Fould and Isaac Cremieux served in the Chamber of Deputies. Jews also excelled in the financial sphere, two leading families were the Rothschild and the Pereire families.

In the field of literature and philosophy, well-known Jews included Emile Durkheim, Marcel Proust and Salomon Munk.

While the situation improved for Jews in France, the Damascus Affair served as a rude awakening. Accusation of a blood libel in Damascus led to an outbreak of anti-Jewish disorders in France in 1848. General unrest led to attacks in Alsace and spread northward, Jewish houses were pillaged and the army had to be sent in to resume order.

The 1870 war transferred the Jewish communities of Alsace and Lorraine from French control to German control, a major loss for the Jewish community.

An upsurge of anti-Semitism began in the late 1800's. Anti-Semitic newspapers were circulated, including Edouard Drumont's *La France Juive* (1886), which became a best-seller. Jews were blamed for the collapse of the Union Generale, a leading Catholic bank.

In this atmosphere, the infamous Dreyfus case was tried. Captain Alfred Dreyfus was arrested on October 15, 1894, for spying for Germany. He received a life sentence on Devil's Island off the coast of South America. The government chose to repress evidence, which came to light through the writings of Emile Zola and Jean Jaures. Ten years later, the French government fell and Dreyfus was declared innocent. The Dreyfus case shocked Jewry worldwide and motivated Theodor Herzl



to write the book "The Jewish State: A Modern Solution to the Jewish Question" in 1896. The Dreyfus case also led to the French law in 1905 separating church and state.

Early 20th Century

At the turn of the century, Jewish artists were extremely prominent, including Modigliani, Soutine, Kisling, Pissarro and Chagall.

France faced an increase in Jewish immigration in the early 1900's. More than 25,000 Jews came to France between 1881 and 1914. Immigrants hailed from all over Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Although, for many of the immigrants, France served as a transit point rather than a final destination.

The advent of World War I halted Jewish immigration and also put an end to anti-Semitic campaigns because of the need for a unified front. France was able to regain Alsace and Lorraine and many Jewish families were able to reunite once Alsace and Lorraine became part of France.

During the inter-war years, Jewish immigration from North Africa, Turkey and Greece increased once again. Immigration from Eastern Europe also skyrocketed, many came after the pogroms in the Ukraine and Poland. The trend continued especially after the United States prohibited free immigration in 1924.

The Federation des Societes Juif de France (FSJF) was established in 1923 to take care of the needs of the French Jewish community.

Holocaust

The Germans invaded France on May 10, 1940, and Paris fell on June 14th. Two weeks later the armistice was signed and France was divided into unoccupied and occupied zones, and Alsace-Lorraine was annexed to the Reich. A Vichy government was set up in France. An estimated 300,000 Jews lived in France prior to the invasion.

Between September 1940 and June 1942, a number of anti-Jewish measures were passed, including expanding the category of who is a Jew, forbidding free negotiation of Jewish-owned capital, confiscating radios in Jewish possession, executing and deporting Jewish members of the resistance movement, establishing a curfew, forbidding a change of residence, ordering all Jews to wear a yellow badge and prohibiting access to public area.

The Vichy government established a Commissariat General aux Questions Juives in April 1941 that worked with German authorities to "aryanize" Jewish businesses in the occupied zone. French Jewry was represented in the Union Generale des Israelites de France (UGIF) during the occupation. Non-French Jews living in France were treated differently than French Jews during this period. Non-French Jews were rounded up for deportation by the French police, whereas French Jews were rounded up by the Gestapo, who did not trust the French authorities to do so.

In March 1942, the first convoy of 1,112 Jews was deported to concentration camps in Poland and Germany. An infamous roundup took place on July 16-17, 1942, when 12,884 people from Paris and its suburbs were arrested. Another notorious round-up occurred on August 15, 1942, when 7,000 foreign Jews were arrested and handed over to the Germans. Between 1942 and July 1944, nearly 76,00 Jews were deported to concentration camps in the East via French transit camps, only 2,500 returned. Of those deported, 23,000 had French nationality, the rest were "stateless."

France's major transit camp, Drancy, located outside Paris, was established in 1941. A number of other transit camps were created throughout France and were run by the French police. Drancy was designed to hold 700 people, but at its peak in 1940 it held more than 7,000. Drancy served as a stopping point for thousands of Jews en route Auschwitz.



Gurs Transit Camp

There were also concentration camps located inside France, such as Gurs, which opened in June 1940. By 1941, it housed about 15,000 inmates, including foreign Jews; many perished there from malnutrition and bad sanitation. More than 3,000 Jews died in these internment camps. When Germany occupied all of France in late 1942, most of the inmates were sent to concentration camps in Germany and Poland. After the deportations ended in mid-1943, only 1,200 prisoners remained.

It is estimated that 25 percent of French Jewry died in the Holocaust.

Post-Holocaust Era

France became a haven for postwar refugees and within 25 years its Jewish population tripled. In 1945, 180,000 Jews were living in France, and, by 1951, the population reached 250,000. An influx of North African Jews immigrated to France in the 1950's due to the decline of the French empire. Subsequent waves of immigration followed the Six-Day War, when another 16,000 Moroccan and Tunisian Jews settled in France. Hence, by 1968, Sephardic Jews were the majority in France. These new immigrants were already culturally French and needed little time to adjust to French society.

Today more than 600,000 Jews live in France, 375,000 live in Paris. There are 230 Jewish communities, including Paris, Marseilles (70,000), Lyons (25,000), Toulouse, Nice and Strasbourg.

Two of the major problems facing French Jewry are assimilation and anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism has been present throughout France's post-war history. After the Six Day War in 1967, anti-Israel stances were taken by de Gaulle and his government. Anti-Israel propaganda was published in May 1968 by the New Left and supporters of Palestinian terrorism; a number of physical clashes broke out between Jews and Arabs in certain quarters of Paris. This atmosphere led to increased aliyah of French and Algerian Jews in the late 1960's.

In the late 70's, a spate of racist and anti-Semitic attacks were carried out against Jewish monuments and cemeteries. On October 3, 1980, a bomb exploded outside a Paris synagogue, killing four people. Terrorism and anti-Semitism continued to be a problem in the 1980's and 90's, as many synagogues, cemeteries and restaurants were vandalized and desecrated. Few of the perpetrators have been apprehended.

In the late 1990's, Jews were concerned about the rise to power of the National Front political party, who espouses anti-immigration and anti-Semitic views.

Besides for problems with anti-Semitism, France has had difficulty owning up to its role in the Holocaust. It has taken many years to apprehend and try French war criminals. In the 1980's, a trial was held against Klaus Barbie, who received a sentence of life imprisonment. In 1994, Paul Touvier, who was responsible for the massacre of seven Jews in Lyon during World War II, was tried and condemned to life in prison. A third trial, in 1997, tried Maurice Papon, a senior official

responsible for Jewish affairs in Bordeaux. Papon's trial was different than the other two because the other two were killers, whereas Papon was a bureaucrat, who signed the death warrants for 1,560 French Jews, including 223 children. Papon was found guilty for crimes against humanity and was sentenced to ten years in jail. The trial served as a pretext for reexamining France's role in the Holocaust. Debate arose about the Vichy regime's involvement in rounding up, deporting and murdering French Jews.

Restitution for stolen era artwork from France is another issue of controversy. In 1998, France finally created a centralized body to investigate Holocaust restitution cases for heirs and descendants of those whose property was confiscated during World War II. France's national museum is trying to track down the owners or heirs to more than 2,000 pieces of unclaimed artwork in its possession. It is estimated that over 100,000 pieces of artwork were taken from Jews and others in France alone; Jewish art collections in France were among those coveted by the Nazis.

On December 11, 2005, a memorial to 86 Jewish victims of Nazi physician August Hirt was unveiled at the Jewish cemetery in Cronenbourg.