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159

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57

Folder
617

The Jews of France: 1789-1940, 1940.

"THE JEWS OF FRANCE: 1789-1940"

The Dramatic Story of the Jews of France from the French
Revolution to Vichy.

By
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, November 17, 1940

There are two thousand years of Jewish history surrounded by the oldest Jewish centers in the Old World. The settlement of the Jews in France date back to the days of the Roman Empire. The experience of the Jews in France over this long period of time is not unlike the experience of other Jewish communities during the same period of time. That is to say that a manifold experience, checkered, uncertain, insecure, full of lights and of shadows, periods of rest and peace alternating with periods of persecution and exile; periods of prosperity and great achievement alternating with periods of adversity and degradation.

Whenever conditions in the country became unsettled, whenever the country was swept by war or civil strife or plague or crusade or other disasters, then the lot of the Jews in the country became extremely difficult. Whenever long periods of peace, tranquility settled upon the land, the condition of the Jewish people became one of peace and tranquility. That, of course, is common to Jewish experience in Europe throughout the Middle Ages up to the very present.

Jews in France were occasionally expelled and then recalled. They were expelled either as a result of the sudden waves of religious bigotry or as was more frequently the case, as a result of the impoverishment of the royal exchequer.

Thus the Jews were exiled from France in 1182. After all their property was confiscated, they were permitted in 1198 to return to France. They were again expelled in 1306, and nine years later, were again permitted to return. The final expulsion took place in 1394, just about a century before the catastrophic expulsion of the Jews from Spain. While they were never officially recalled, never officially permitted to return, as was so frequently the case in other countries, the Jews finally came back in small numbers and penetrated through the country all through the succeeding centuries. With the connivance of public officials or as the result of indifference on the part of , the Jews returned to France, and by the close of the French Revolution, there was a large

Jewish community in France, particularly in the South of France, and another in the region of Alsace Lorraine.

From the tenth century on, we have evidences of increasing literary activity among the Jews of France. Scholarship, rabbinic studies, scientific studies began to develop among the people, and we soon come upon some luminary - very great figures in Jewish history among the Jews of France. Thus, for example, in the eleventh century we come across the name of Rashi, the great commentator of the Bible, and Rab Tamm the great codifier in Jewish Law. We come upon the name of Gershom, "The Light of the Exile" who became the supreme authority for the Jews of Occidental Europe. It was he who finally outlawed polygamy and one-sided divorces, from Jewish life.

And in the North of France there developed a whole school, a very keenly trained Talmudic School of scholars known as the Tosaphists whose philosophies and scholarship is printed on every page of the Talmud.

In the South of France a great center of Jewish scholarship developed - which became a sort of bridge between Mohammedan Spain and Christian Europe. The Jews in the southern part of France became, in a sense, a mediary between Arabic culture and Christian Europe. A great school of translators grew up, the most famous of whom were members of the Ibon Tibbon family who translated works of the Arabic people like science, grammar into Hebrew. They translated their philosophical works into Hebrew and made them accessible to the Hebrew reading Jews of Northern Europe. And so Jewish life developed in France. The Jews lived there, at times persecuted, at times tolerated. At no time were they regarded as the equal of the non-Jews, and at no time possessing the rights of citizenship. That, of course, was the status of the Jews throughout Europe.

A great change in the status of the Jews of France came with the French Revolution. The French Revolution, as you know, marked the end of feudalism in

and of the Middle Ages. The French introduced the great revolutionary principle of the Rights of Man - the rights of the human being as a human being which could not be invaded by the state or by the church. And it wasn't long before that same principle of the "Rights of Man" came to apply also to the Jew. If man qua man is entitled to certain rights, certainly the Jew is entitled to those same rights. Thus preparatory work had been done prior to the French Revolution to prepare them for greater toleration. Even before the Revolution some of the colleges had been offering prizes for essays on the improvement of the lot of the Jew. It is of interest to know that a Catholic Priest won one of these prizes and he became a champion of Jewish rights. He later on became one of the leaders of the French Revolution who whole-heartedly championed the cause of the Jews.

On September 27, 1791, just about one hundred and fifty years ago, the French National Assembly passed a bill which granted full civil and political equality to the Jews of France. This is the first time in the history of Europe that this had taken place. That date - that event marks a turning point in the history of the Jewish people. The armies of the Republic as they swept through Europe, as they carried the battle cry "Liberty, Fraternity, Equality" - wherever they went, these served as inflammable cries. And the ghetto walls began to crumble in Germany, in Holland, Italy, especially where the armies of Napoleon came through.

So a new day began for the Jews of Europe as the result of the French Revolution and the victory of the Napoleonic armies. It was France that put an end to the Middle Ages for the Jews of Western Europe. And those libertarian sentiments carried on all through the nineteenth century. There was retrenchment at times. After the defeat of Napoleon, for example, there set in a reaction, an attempt to restore the disabilities of the Middle Ages....But by the time of 1870 the Jews of Europe possessed equal rights and equality with all other peoples of

Western Europe. That situation continued on until 1933, when the Nazis came into power. Just as 1789 is a Red Letter day in Jewish history marking the beginning of Jewish emancipation, so 1933 is a Black Letter day marking the beginning of re-enslavement of the Jewish people in Europe.

By 1870 the Jews of France had reached an important position of affluence and of influence - and then something happened, - the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Whenever a country is defeated in war, that country seeks a scape-goat. It needs someone to blame for some personal grievance, as it were, and it also needs something to salve its sense of national hurt and humiliation. No nation likes to acknowledge actual defeat. It is easier to say that it had been betrayed. As the result of the French defeat in ^{the} war of 1870-71 and the establishment of the Republic, certain forces within France turned definitely anti-Semitic - particularly the Monarchists who never reconciled themselves to the establishment of the Republic, and the Clericals of France who disapproved of and resented anti-Clerical legislation passed against them became the centers of intensive anti-Jewish propaganda. And that propaganda was clearly stimulated by Germany which was always the home of anti-Semitism in Europe. It was the cradle of the most virulent anti-Jewish ^{po} propaganda.

Through the chancelleries there developed in Germany, fostered by Bismarck, - when he turned reactionary and began to fight democracy - the discovery that it was a very helpful thing to use anti-Semitism as a club and to attack liberalism by branding it as Jewish - the present-day tactics of the Nazis, as it were. And throughout that decade and after, there appeared in Germany a whole anti-Semitic literature of the most poisonous kind. And much of that literature penetrated into France and was seized upon by the Monarchists and Clericals, so that by 1881, there appeared in Paris a weekly called "L'Anti-juif" against the Jew. Soon an anti-Semitic Daily made its appearance in France. In 1886 the famous anti-Semite, Edouard Drummond, whose anti-Semitic book "La France Juive" went through a hundred editions in a few months. France also began the publication of a Daily, "La Libre

Parole" - anti-Semitic through and through. Just about that time the Panama Canal scandal broke over France. It was France who first attempted to build the Panama Canal. The first company for the building of the Canal whose Frenchmen had invested hundreds of millions in France went broke. This brought about a terrible economic crisis in France. And here again the Jews of France were blamed for this.

All this acted as a sort of background for the famous Dreyfus Affair. The Affair is all too well known to you to need recounting. It was in this affair that the Jewish artillery officer was accused of selling military information to the German Government. This was seized upon by all these anti-Republican and anti-Jewish forces in France in an effort to discredit the French Republic, in an effort to destroy it. Drefus of course, as you know, was convicted on false evidence and was sentenced to life in prisonment at Devils Island where he remained for five years during which time his friends, his devoted wife, his brother and many of the great literary figures of France rallied to his support charging that a great judicial miscarriage of justice had taken place. An innocent man had been convicted. His conviction served the sinister forces which desired the destruction of the French Republic. This became the cause celebre. The whole of the French people were cleft in twain, as it were. They were divided between the Dreyfusards and the anti-dreyfusards. Then Emile Zola came to the defense of Dreyfus and his famous denunciation, "J'Accuse", he stripped the cloak of those forces who were using this innocent man to destroy the French Republic. A new trial was held. He was again convicted. But sentiment and agitation was carried on until a complete vindication was made and he was pardoned. In 1906 he was cleared and re-instated by the Court and put in the army.

This Affair had tremendous repercussions in general life. In Jewish life it served notice on the Jews of France and in Western Europe that they were

not as secure as they thought they were. Even in homes of enlightenment anti-Semitism could strike the deep roots of intolerance and inequality that lay beneath the surface. They still breathed the medieval passions of intolerance and hate. It was as a result of this Dreyfus Affair that a Jewish reporter, Theodore Herzl, wrote his famous book, "Judenstaat", and called upon the Jews of Europe to begin to bethink themselves of a Jewish Homeland because they were not as secure in their homes as they thought they were. In 1897 the first Zionist Zionist Congress was held in Basle.

Suddenly the Clericals and the Monarchists ran to cover. The Republic seemed to be firmly established. France continued as the most liberal, the most tolerant nation in Europe. The Jews in France advanced in culture, in affluence, in influence in every field in French life up to 1940. The French Jews produced great statesmen, great scientists, great philosophers, great artists, great journalists and great editors too numerous to mention. Perhaps the greatest philosophic minds of the last one hundred and fifty years were Jews. French industry, French trade, French commerce flourished. Railroads were built with Jewish capital...The French Jews fought bravely in the World War. Hundreds of them were decorated for their bravery. It seemed that the the Jewish group was harmoniously integrated into the total life of France.

Then the war of 1940, and just as in 1819 in Germany, anti-Semitism surged to the center. France was defeated and someone must be blamed for defeat. The French militarists would never blame themselves. If victories are won - then of course it is the generals who do it. If the war is lost, it is the politicians who lost it. That was Hitler's great thesis. He salved his people with this statement: "We were stabbed in the back". So the present leaders of France now in control of the Vichy Government are endeavoring to find scapegoats. They are find it, as they have already given evidence that they intent to find it - of the course the Jew of France.

There was a Jew who was a Premier of France - Leon Blum - maybe we can pin the blame on him. There were a number of Jews in the French Cabinet - maybe we can blame it on them. In the meantime, let us appease the Nazis. We can win favor with the Nazis by throwing the Jews to them as the first victims. That is an old Nazi anti-Jewish trick - and let us impose it on the Jews of France. And that is what the Vichy Government has been doing ever since it came into power. It could not become racist like the Nazis. It could not accept the racial program of the Nazis. After all, France is made up of a hundred different races. They could not use the cry of race purity. The Jews, however, must be expelled and driven out of every position of influence, out of the army, out of political life - just as the Nazis had done. And the Vichy Government has passed edicts to that effect and is steadily forcing upon the Jews of France the same status that Germany has forced upon its Jews, upon the Jews of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and all the countries which have come in the orbit of Germany. This ^{is} most unfortunate not merely for the Jews of France, but for France itself and for mankind.

It is one thing to go to war, but another thing to keep itself from sacrificing its ideals. France, for centuries, has been one of the few champions of freedom and human rights in Europe. Men throughout the world have come to love France for its steady championing of liberty and the rights of man throughout the ages. This miserable government has dragged the French tradition into the mud; has trampled upon the great ideals for which millions of Frenchmen spilled their blood in numerous battles. We are ashamed of the Vichy Government. Of course it will not last. A people does not destroy its basic spiritual traditions in four or five weeks. France will recoup. France has always evidenced an amazing capacity both for spiritual and physical recovery. France someday will return to the broad highway of its history. The French people have not yet been heard from...The French people will yet speak. And when they do speak, their accents

will be the accents of the French Revolution - Liberty, Fraternity, Equality. I do not doubt but that the present measures passed by the Vichy Government are but ~~xx~~ the symptoms of the malaise of a shell-shocked government, frightened, confused, blundering - no knowing which way to turn.

More than a half century ago, following the defeat of the Franco-Prussian war, when anti-Semitism began to spread in France, the eminent historian, Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, who wrote his famous work, "Israel Among the Nations", said this to his fellow Frenchmen - and I know of nothing more appropriate that can be said:

"As a Frenchman, the author is one of those who are convinced that France ought to remain true to her traditions of justice and liberty. They are the only glory and the only wealth which the fortunes of war cannot wrest from her. The more severe the trials that she has undergone, the more menacing the dangers that await her, the more essential is it to her honor that she should remain herself and not belie, in the eyes of the nations, those great ideas which she was the first to proclaim. To abjure them would be not only an act of apostasy, but a forfeiture of her place in history. A France that should stoop, more than a century after 1789, to abridge religious and civil liberty and to establish among her inhabitants distinctions based upon name or birth, would no longer be the France that the world has thus far known...

"Antisemitism is consistent with neither the principles nor the genius of our nation. It came to us from the outside, from countries which have neither our spirit nor our traditions. It came to us from across the Rhine, from old Germany, always ready for religious quarrels, always imbued with the spirit of caste; from New Germany, all inflated with race pride and scornful of whatever is not ~~E~~ Teutonic.."

France ought to take these words to heart today - which we hope and pray that she will. We hope and pray that France will emerge from this, her last defeat, again strong, great and tolerant.

- 1) 2000 - Same experience - Rest & Persecution - common to most Ages.
- Unsettling councils.

~~From 10C. on -~~

Occasionally expelled - recalled - to fill royal coffers

1182 - 1198

Final. 1394. Slow penetration.

1306 - 1315.

From 10C. on - literary life - Rashi (11C), Rab. Tam, grandson

Gershon - Polygamy + one-sided divorce; Tosafists

Provence - Science, Philosophy - Grammar - Translation. Gersonides (14C)

- 2) Change - French Rev. - Epoch - Foundations - Rights of Man

- Even before - Academy of Metz - 1781. Essay - Abbé

Moreau

Sep. 27 - 1791 - Fr. Nat. Assembly - full civil & pol

equality.

Annus of Young Republic - "Liberty, etc. - Vanguard

of J. emancipation.

Napoleons - Holland - Italy - Germany - Shettos

New Day; Till 1933! Nazis - Steady Advance!

machine plane. By 1870

- 3) Sanhedrin 1806-7. Assembly of notables - Paris - 12 members

Sanhedrin approved -

Org. Community life - "consistoires"

- Steady progress in culture, wealth & influence

- 4) 1870. Defeat - Estab. of Republic. Monarchists & Clericals

unreconciled - Discredit = Jew. = German

Anti-clerical laws passed - Jews are behind it.

German Influence - Antisemitism - Bismarck

1881 - "L'Antijui" - weekly - disfranchisement

1886 - Edmond Drumond - "La France Juive" - 100 ed.
"La libre Parole" . An. in full swing

Panama Canal Scandal

1894. Background for Dreyfus Affair - Artillery Captain -
sold military secrets - Ant. saw their chance
guiltily. Ag. taken.

Dreyfusards - Anti-dreyfusards

Zola - 1895 - "J'accuse" - stupid cloak

1899 - new trial - again convicted - pardoned.

1906. cleared by Supreme Court. - Re-convicted

Wrecking of J. Post. - Herzl -

st. up to 1940 - Academie Française & others. Every Field

Georges Clemenceau

Holmes - Messier - Offenbach - Dalkas - Worms

Munk - Rosenberg - Reinach - Danziger

Bergson

Andre Maurais - Bloch - Hag - Bernstein

Ses. de Porto-Riche

Edm. & Dreyfus

Rachel - Sara Bernhardt -

Bank & Industry -

Journalist - Editors

Leon Blum - Premier

6/ 1940 - Defeat. Blame. * Vichy - Inst. & Nazis
Not Rce - Culture - Restoration - Shame.

(Intro)