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Jewish Lives Across Europe: Community, Persecution, and Resilience

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Introduction

This book follows Jewish lives across Europe over a millennium of settlement, creativity, exclusion, catastrophe, and renewal. It is a history of communities as much as of individuals, a study of how people organized daily life and sacred time, earned livelihoods at the margins and the center of economies, and navigated shifting regimes of law, tolerance, and hostility. By tracing continuities alongside ruptures, we explore how European Jewish history cannot be told solely as a story of persecution any more than it can be limited to a chronicle of intellectual achievement; it is both, and it is the texture of ordinary experience that binds these threads. The chapters move from medieval towns and market villages to imperial borderlands and modern metropolises, drawing on human stories that illuminate the meanings of belonging and difference.

Our approach is cultural and social. We ask how kehillot—self-governing communal structures—shaped education, charity, justice, and mutual aid. We follow diasporic networks that connected scholars, traders, printers, and families from the Rhineland to the Baltic and from Iberia to the Ottoman Balkans. We attend to language as a vessel of memory and exchange—Hebrew and Aramaic in learning and liturgy; Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), Judeo-Italian, and other vernaculars in streets, homes, and song. Institutions matter here, but so do kitchens, workshops, and marketplaces; we read the world through responsa and pinkasim alongside cookbooks, lullabies, and letters.

Geographically, “Europe” in these pages is both a place and a set of moving frontiers. It includes kingdoms and city-states of the medieval West; the Italian peninsula and German lands; the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its successor states; Habsburg and Romanov empires; the Netherlands, France, and Britain; and the Ottoman provinces within Europe, from Salonika to Sarajevo. Across these regions, Jews forged livelihoods as peddlers and printers, court factors and weavers, port intermediaries and physicians. Migration—forced and voluntary—stitched these spaces together, creating kinship corridors, commercial circuits, and scholarly republics that endured even when borders hardened.

Because exclusion has been an abiding presence, we examine the legal and social mechanisms that constrained Jewish life: special taxes and badges, residential segregation and guild restrictions, blood libels and professional quotas, pogroms and modern racial ideologies. Yet even within constraint, communities fashioned capacious worlds—synagogues and study halls, burial societies and dowry funds, theaters and newspapers, political clubs and philanthropic associations. The twentieth century brought devastation on an unprecedented scale, culminating in Nazi rule and the systematic destruction of European Jewry. We confront this rupture directly while

insisting on the historical continuities that made survival, rebuilding, and cultural transmission possible both during and after the catastrophe.

Our evidence comes from diverse archives and genres: communal ledgers and court records; rabbinic correspondence and printed pamphlets; travelogues, newspapers, and autobiographies; melodies notated and melodies remembered; photographs, architecture, and material culture; and oral histories and testimonies.

Methodologically, the book balances microhistory and comparison: close readings of a single family's ledger in Kraków or a printer's catalog in Amsterdam are set against broader patterns of migration, law, and economy. Wherever possible we follow named people—a weaver in Lviv, a spice trader in Salonika, a seamstress in Łódź, a composer in Vienna, a teacher in a displaced persons camp in Munich—so that structures can be seen through lives lived within them.

The chapters proceed broadly in chronological order while pausing for thematic constellations that cut across eras and regions. We begin with routes and settlements, turn to the making of institutions and households, then follow exchanges of ideas and goods that knit Jewish Europe together. We track the emergence of modern movements and the hardening of modern hatreds, mass migration and urban creativity, war and social remapping, annihilation and resistance, and finally the complex work of mourning, rebuilding, dissent, and cultural renewal under new political orders. Throughout, the through-line is resilience—not as a romantic gloss, but as a set of practices: mutual aid, learning, devotion, humor, adaptability, and the stubborn labor of community-making. This is a book about continuity, disruption, and the human capacity to reimagine life together.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Early Diaspora: Routes into Medieval Europe

The story of Jewish life in Europe does not begin with the word "medieval." It begins much earlier, on the dusty roads of the Roman Empire, in the harbor districts of Ostia and Alexandria, in the synagogue mosaics of Hammam Lif and Dura-Europos, and in the writings of men like Philo of Alexandria and Josephus Flavius, who tried to explain their people to a wider world. By the time the so-called Middle Ages dawned, Jewish communities had already been present in European provinces for several centuries, and the networks that would carry Jews into the Frankish kingdoms, the Visigothic Peninsula, and the Italian city-states were already old. Any account of Jewish Europe must therefore begin with a longer view, one that reaches back to the first centuries of the Common Era and traces the slow, uneven, and sometimes dramatic movements of Jewish populations into the lands that would eventually be called Christendom.

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the armies of Titus is often cited as the hinge upon which Jewish history turned. It was certainly a catastrophe of enormous proportions, one that reshaped Jewish worship, identity, and geography. But the diaspora itself was not born in a single moment. Jewish communities had existed outside the Land of Israel for generations before the Roman siege. The Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE was an ancient memory and, more practically, a precedent. By the first century CE, Jews were scattered across the eastern Mediterranean, from Antioch to Rome itself. The historian Josephus, writing from within the Roman world, estimated over a million Jews in Egypt alone, a figure modern scholars consider exaggerated but that speaks to the visibility and density of these communities. Rome itself had a Jewish population large enough to attract the attention, and occasionally the irritation, of the imperial authorities.

What is crucial to understand is that the Roman Empire, for all its later association with Christian persecution, provided a framework in which Jews could move, trade, worship, and organize with remarkable freedom. Roman roads, Roman law, and Roman citizenship created the infrastructure of diaspora life. Jews traveled along well-worn commercial routes that connected the eastern Mediterranean to the western provinces. They carried with them not only goods but texts, customs, and communal habits. A merchant from Antioch arriving at the port of Puteoli in the first century would have found, within a generation or two, a recognizable Jewish quarter in Rome, complete with its own synagogues and communal leaders. The label "synagogue" itself, Greek in origin, tells us something important about the early Jewish engagement with the broader Greco-Roman world. Jews spoke the languages of their neighbors, adopted local architectural styles for their houses of worship, and participated in the

civic and commercial life of their cities while maintaining distinct religious practices.

The northward movement of Jewish populations into what is now France, the Rhineland, and the Iberian Peninsula was not a single migration but a series of overlapping movements, each driven by different combinations of opportunity, trade, and political upheaval. The Roman legions themselves were one vector. Soldiers, camp followers, and merchants accompanied military campaigns into Gaul and across the Rhine. Inscriptions from the Roman period found in places as far apart as Cologne, Budapest, and southern France attest to Jewish presence in these frontier zones. Whether these individuals settled permanently or moved on with the legions is often impossible to determine from the surviving evidence, but the cumulative picture is clear: Jews were not strangers to the European provinces in the early centuries of the Common Era.

The fourth century marks a turning point, not because Jewish life suddenly changed in character, but because the legal and religious landscape of the empire shifted beneath it. Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 CE and the subsequent establishment of Christianity as the favored, and eventually the official, religion of the empire altered the terms on which Jews lived throughout Europe. The emperor Theodosius II, in the early fifth century, issued a series of laws that would become templates for later European legislation regarding Jews: restrictions on holding Christian slaves, limitations on the construction of new synagogues, and the prohibition of intermarriage. These laws did not immediately transform daily life, but they established a legal vocabulary of differentiation and constraint that would echo through the centuries. Jews were to be tolerated, sometimes protected, but always marked as distinct and subordinate within a Christian empire.

It was in this period of late antiquity that the two great branches of European Jewry began to take shape. The term "Ashkenazi" would later be applied to Jews of the Rhineland and northern Europe, while "Sephardi" referred to those of the Iberian Peninsula, though its roots lay in the Hebrew word for Spain, Sefarad. In their earliest forms, these labels described geography and liturgical tradition rather than the sharply distinct identities they would later become. The Jews of Roman Gaul, for instance, prayed in a rite that shared features with both Babylonian and Palestinian traditions. The famous poet and scholar Eleazar ben Killir, writing in tenth-century Tiberias, would later compose liturgical poems for the Rhineland community, but the cultural exchange was already flowing in both directions long before his time. The point is that in the early medieval period, European Jewish communities were not yet hermetically sealed from one another. Letters, travelers, merchants, and scholars carried ideas and practices across vast distances, and the boundaries between regions were porous.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE and the subsequent fragmentation of political authority created new conditions for Jewish life. The great cities of the empire

shrank, trade routes shifted, and the map of Europe was redrawn by a bewildering array of Germanic kingdoms, Byzantine provinces, and emerging polities. For Jews, this was a period of both disruption and adaptation. The documentary record thins out considerably in the fifth and sixth centuries, a reminder that much of what we know about early Jewish Europe depends on the survival of sources produced by Christian authorities. Papal letters, conciliar decrees, and hagiographic texts occasionally mention Jews, often in the context of disputes over synagogue construction or intermarriage. These documents, frustratingly fragmentary as they are, reveal something important: Jewish communities persisted, even in the shadow of political collapse.

Merovingian France offers one of the earliest and most detailed pictures of Jewish life in post-Roman Europe. The Frankish kings, particularly Clovis and his successors, inherited Roman legal traditions regarding Jews but adapted them to their own political needs. Jews in Gaul appear in the sources as merchants, physicians, and occasionally diplomats, moving between the Frankish court and the Mediterranean world. Gregory of Tours, writing in the sixth century, tells stories of Jewish neighbors in cities like Arles, Marseille, and Clermont-Ferrand with a mix of curiosity and hostility that would become a hallmark of Christian writing about Jews for centuries to come. One famous episode concerns a Jewish woman of Clermont who refused to convert and was subsequently killed by a Christian mob, an event Gregory records with apparent satisfaction. These anecdotes, however colored by the author's perspective, provide rare glimpses into the texture of Jewish-Christian relations in early medieval Europe.

The Visigothic kingdom in Spain presents a more dramatic and troubled story. The Visigoths, originally Arian Christians, converted to Catholic Christianity in 589 CE, and the subsequent legislation against Jews grew progressively harsher. King Sisebut, in the early seventh century, ordered the forced conversion of all Jews within his realm, a decree that set a precedent for later Spanish policies of coerced religious conformity. Those who converted, the *conversos* or *anusim*, faced the impossible position of practicing one faith while being suspected of another. The Council of Toledo, meeting repeatedly throughout the seventh century, issued a series of laws that restricted the rights of Jewish converts, forbade them from holding public office, and sought to prevent intermarriage between old Christians and new ones. Spain, even before the Muslim conquest of 711, had become a proving ground for the politics of religious coercion that would shape European Jewish life for centuries.

Italy, that great crossroads of Mediterranean civilization, maintained a continuous Jewish presence from at least the second century BCE, if not earlier. The catacombs of Rome, with their Jewish symbols and inscriptions, testify to a community that was both integrated into Roman urban life and deeply committed to its own traditions. As the empire declined and fragmented, Italian Jewish communities adapted to a patchwork of rulers, from Lombard kings to Byzantine governors to the rising power of the

papacy. The southern Italian communities, in particular, maintained close ties with Jewish centers in the Byzantine Empire and the Land of Israel, creating a cultural corridor that would later facilitate the exchange of liturgical and scholarly traditions. By the early medieval period, Italian Jewry was already diverse, reflecting the peninsula's own political and linguistic fragmentation. Roman Jews spoke a form of vernacular Latin that would eventually become the foundation of Judeo-Italian, one of the many hybrid languages that Jews developed across Europe.

The Iberian Peninsula and the Rhineland, though separated by the Pyrenees and the length of France, were connected by overlapping networks of trade and kinship. Jewish merchants in Barcelona and Narbonne traded with their counterparts in Provence and the Rhineland, moving goods and money along routes that had been active since Roman times. The Muslim conquest of Iberia in 711 CE, and the establishment of al-Andalus, created a new political and cultural reality for Jews in the peninsula. Under Islamic rule, Jews in many parts of Spain enjoyed a degree of legal protection and cultural freedom that contrasted sharply with the increasingly restrictive atmosphere of the Christian north. This period, often romanticized as a "golden age," was in reality more complex: Jews served as translators, physicians, and administrators, but they also faced periodic violence and the uncertainties of shifting political alliances. The cultural flowering of Sephardic Jewry in the centuries that followed cannot be understood without reference to this early and formative encounter with Islamic civilization.

In the Carolingian Empire of the eighth and ninth centuries, Jews occupied a specific and sometimes surprising niche. Charlemagne and his successors employed Jewish merchants as intermediaries in trade with the Islamic world, a pragmatic arrangement that recognized the commercial networks Jews had built over centuries. Letters of safe conduct, trade privileges, and diplomatic correspondence attest to the role Jews played in connecting the Frankish kingdoms with the Mediterranean economy. The famous merchant Isaac, whom Charlemagne reportedly sent as an envoy to the caliph Harun al-Rashid around 797 CE, is perhaps the most celebrated example, though whether this particular episode occurred exactly as described is less important than what it reveals about the expectations and realities of Jewish diplomatic and commercial activity in the period.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, recognizable Jewish communities had taken root across much of Europe. In the Rhineland, cities like Mainz, Worms, and Speyer became centers of Ashkenazi Jewish life, each developing its own scholarly traditions and communal institutions. The Jews of these cities spoke early forms of Judeo-German, which would eventually evolve into Yiddish, one of the great vernacular languages of European Jewry. In the Islamic zones of Iberia, cities like Córdoba, Granada, and Toledo hosted communities of scholars, poets, and courtiers who wrote in both Arabic and Hebrew, producing works of biblical exegesis, philosophy, and liturgical poetry that would influence Jewish intellectual life for centuries. In Italy, communities in

Rome, Otranto, Bari, and the southern port cities maintained their own distinct traditions while remaining connected to the broader Mediterranean Jewish world.

What tied these scattered communities together was not a single political authority or a shared language, but a web of religious, commercial, and scholarly connections. Rabbis corresponded across great distances, exchanging legal rulings and theological arguments. Merchants traveled with letters of credit and goods that carried them from one Jewish quarter to the next. Pilgrims journeyed to the Holy Land, and some never returned, while others brought back stories and sacred objects that enriched the communities they left behind. The Cairo Geniza, that extraordinary cache of documents preserved in the storeroom of a Cairo synagogue, offers a window into this interconnected world, revealing letters, contracts, and lists that trace trade routes from North Africa to the Rhineland and from India to the Italian coast. Though the Geniza reflects Egyptian and broader Mediterranean networks more than European ones specifically, it illustrates the kind of long-distance connectivity that characterized Jewish life across the medieval world.

The routes of the early diaspora were shaped by geography as much as by politics. Mountain passes, river valleys, and coastal roads determined where Jews could travel safely and where they could establish permanent settlements. The Mediterranean coast, the Rhône Valley, the Danube corridor, and the overland routes through the Alpine passes all served as channels of Jewish migration and trade. Coastal cities like Marseille, Genoa, and Venice attracted Jewish traders from an early period, while inland towns along major rivers offered opportunities for settlement and commerce. Jewish communities tended to cluster in areas where trade was most active, where rulers offered some degree of protection, and where existing Jewish populations could provide a foundation for newcomers. This pattern of settlement along commercial arteries would persist for centuries, shaping the geography of Jewish Europe well into the modern period.

It would be misleading to suggest that the early medieval period was a time of uninterrupted harmony between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors. Hostility toward Jews was a recurring feature of Christian society from an early date, rooted in theological difference, economic competition, and the anxieties of a society in flux. Popular accusations, such as the claim that Jews were responsible for the death of Christ, provided a framework for periodic violence and social exclusion. The First Crusade of 1096 brought a wave of anti-Jewish violence to the Rhineland, as crusading mobs attacked communities in Speyer, Worms, and Mainz, killing many and forcing others to choose between conversion and death. These events, which lie just beyond the chronological scope of this chapter and will be addressed in detail in later sections, nevertheless cast their shadow backward, revealing the fragility of Jewish life even in periods of relative stability.

Yet alongside vulnerability, there was persistence. Jewish communities rebuilt after

violence, adapted to new political regimes, and maintained their traditions even under pressure. The ability to read, interpret, and transmit sacred texts gave Jewish communities a portable homeland of sorts, one that could survive the loss of physical territory. A rabbi in Mainz in the eleventh century could trace his intellectual lineage back to scholars in Sura and Pumbedita in Babylonia, and by extension to the academies of the Land of Israel, linking his community to a chain of learning that stretched back over a millennium. This devotion to text and tradition, transmitted through schools, synagogues, and the rhythms of liturgical life, was one of the most powerful forces sustaining Jewish communities through centuries of upheaval.

The early diaspora was not a single journey with a clear beginning and end but an ongoing process of movement, settlement, adaptation, and renewal. Jewish communities in medieval Europe inherited the networks, languages, and traditions of late antiquity even as they developed new ones suited to their particular circumstances. By the time the High Middle Ages were well underway, the foundations had been laid for the rich, varied, and often troubled history of Jewish life in Europe that the following chapters will explore. The routes were mapped, the communities established, and the traditions alive, even if the road ahead would bring challenges no one could yet foresee.

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