Jewish Life in Europe Before the Holocaust

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Jews were living in every country of Europe. A total of roughly nine million Jews lived in the countries that would be occupied by Germany during World War II. By the end of the war, two out of every three of these Jews would be dead, and European Jewish life would be changed forever.

In 1933 the largest Jewish populations were concentrated in eastern Europe, including Poland, the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Romania. Many of the Jews of eastern Europe lived in predominantly Jewish towns or villages, called shtetls. Eastern European Jews lived a separate life as a minority within the culture of the majority. They spoke their own language, Yiddish, which combines elements of German and Hebrew. They read Yiddish books, and attended Yiddish theater and movies. Although many younger Jews in larger towns were beginning to adopt modern ways and dress, older people often dressed traditionally, the men wearing hats or caps, and the women modestly covering their hair with wigs or kerchiefs.

In comparison, the Jews in western Europe—Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium—made up much less of the population and tended to adopt the culture of their non-Jewish neighbors. They dressed and talked like their countrymen, and traditional religious practices and Yiddish culture played a less important part in their lives. They tended to have had more formal education than eastern European Jews and to live in towns or cities.

Jews could be found in all walks of life, as farmers, tailors, seamstresses, factory hands, accountants, doctors, teachers, and small-business owners. Some families were wealthy; many more were poor. Many children ended their schooling early to work in a craft or trade; others looked forward to continuing their education at the university level. Still, whatever their differences, they were the same in one respect: by the 1930s, with the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany, they all became potential victims, and their lives were forever changed.

Key Dates

SEPTEMBER 1791
JEWS EMANCIPATED IN FRANCE
The term "emancipation of Jews" means the removal of all legal discrimination against Jews and the granting of rights equal to those of other citizens in a country. In September 1791, the National Assembly of France granted rights of citizenship to Jews who took a loyalty oath. France was in the vanguard of the emancipation movement. For example, Jews were only later
emancipated in Greece (1830), Great Britain (1858), Italy (1870), Germany (1871), and Norway (1891). Although civil equality for Jews was thus guaranteed by law, European Jewry remained beset by antisemitism and social discrimination.

**JUNE 24, 1922**

**JEWISH POLITICIAN ASSASSINATED IN GERMANY**

Walter Rathenau, one of the most prominent Jewish political figures of the Weimar Republic, is assassinated by right-wing radicals. Rathenau, the president of the General Electric Corporation of Germany (AEG) since 1915, became foreign minister of the Weimar Republic in 1922. As a Jew, he was hated by right-wing groups particularly for his policy of fulfilling the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and his normalization of relations with the Soviet Union. His murder is indicative of the right-wing antisemitic campaign blaming Jews for Germany's defeat in World War I.

**MARCH 9, 1936**

**POGROM IN PRZYTJK, POLAND**

Violence erupts in Poland. Three Jews are killed and more than sixty wounded in the town of Przytyk, Poland. In the days following the attack, the pogrom spreads to neighboring towns. Before the pogrom is ended, almost 80 Jews are killed and over 200 wounded. Violence against Jews is widespread throughout central Poland between 1935 and 1937. Anti-Jewish pogroms take place, for example, in Czestochowa, Lublin, Bialystok, and Grodno.

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