

THE JEWS OF PORTUGAL

Master's Thesis Abstract

by

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The roots of Jewish emigration can be traced to the days of the Roman Empire. Various reasons, including relative proximity, made the Iberian Peninsula one of the regions Jews opted to settle. Portugal emerged as an independent nation in the 1100's. Despite the discriminatory laws gradually adopted in the neighboring Spanish provinces, Portugal managed to maintain its policy of tolerance towards Jews until the end of the 15th century.

In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella, the monarchs of Aragon and Castille conquered the southern province of Granada from the Moors. Granada was the last Arab stronghold on the peninsula. The conquest awakened strong popular sentiments marked by a heightened sense of Christianity and nationality. Both Muslim and Jewish communities became vulnerable to the Christian hostilities. Tomas de Torquemada, the Spanish Inquisitor General, took advantage of the popular mood and persuaded Ferdinand and Isabella to expel all heretics from Spanish soil. By March, the Edict of Expulsion was announced and Jews began their exodus.

Many Jews sought refuge in Portugal. The country's history of tolerance was the primary reason, but there were other factors such as linguistic and cultural similarities.

The latter would facilitate the assimilation process.

The mass immigration of Jews into Portugal made the nation susceptible to internal upheaval. As thousands of Jews crossed the border, the delicate balance that had hitherto existed between Christians and Jews became more fragile. A large number of the Christian population was alarmed by the newcomers. Anti-Semitism was not a foreign sentiment to the Portuguese Christians who resented the prominence of the Jewish community and the mass immigration augmented these sentiments.

Portugal's King John II disregarded the popular mood and welcomed the refugees in exchange for a fee. however, this arrangement was only to be temporary for the majority of the refugees. Only the wealthy or highly skilled immigrants were given permanent residence in Portugal. Four years later, his successor, King Manuel compromised the fate of the Jewish community one more time.

Lacking a male heir, the king decided to marry the oldest daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella. He hoped the marriage would create a peaceful alliance between the Spanish and the Portuguese dynasties and the offspring of the marriage would eventually rule over the entire peninsula. The Spanish monarchs agreed to the marriage proposal but demanded that King Manuel expel the Muslims and Jews from Portugal. The King was concerned about losing such a vital source of intellect and wealth. consequently, he decided to circumvent

the contractual clause and resorted to unscrupulous tactics.

King Manuel proclaimed that all Jews had to leave Portugal within a ten month period, unless they converted to Christianity. Once baptized, they would be considered New-Christians and he would not be violating the marriage contract. The king had assumed that the majority of the Jews would select baptism in order not to be uprooted. He was wrong. To prevent the departure of Jews from his country, he ordered all children between ages of four and fourteen to be forcibly baptized and given to Christian families. Fearing separation from their children, many families accepted baptism.

As the deadline approached, thousands of Jews arrived in Lisbon ready to leave the country. The ships that the king had promised to make available to them were not there. Instead, they were met by Christians who forced them to convert to Christianity. King Manuel realized that the measures he had used were unethical and introduced legislation to prevent further persecutions against Jews. Shortly after his death, his son had the Inquisition introduced in Portugal.

It is not likely that Portugal's policy of tolerance would have been drastically altered had it not been due to pressure from Spain. Although anti-Semitism existed in the country, it was not until the mass immigration of Jews into Portugal that this shift became evident.