

The Black Death and the Jews 1348-1349 CE

In 1348 there appeared in Europe a devastating plague which is reported to have killed off ultimately twenty-five million people. By the fall of that year the rumor was current that these deaths were due to an international conspiracy of Jewry to poison Christendom. It was reported that the leaders in the Jewish metropolis of Toledo had initiated the plot and that one of the chief conspirators was a Rabbi Peyret who had his headquarters in Chambéry, Savoy, whence he dispatched his poisoners to France, Switzerland, and Italy.

By authority of Amadeus VI, Count of Savoy, a number of the Jews who lived on the shores of Lake Geneva, having been arrested and put to the torture, naturally confessed anything their inquisitors suggested. These Jews, under torture, incriminated others. Records of their confessions were sent from one town to another in Switzerland and down the Rhine River into Germany, and as a result, thousands of Jews, in at least two hundred towns and hamlets, were butchered and burnt. The sheer loss of numbers, the disappearance of their wealth, and the growing hatred of the Christians brought German Jewry to a catastrophic downfall. It now began to decline and did not again play an important part in German life till the seventeenth century.

The first account that follows is a translation from the Latin of a confession made under torture by Agimet, a Jew, who was arrested at Chatel, on Lake Geneva. It is typical of the confessions extorted and forwarded to other towns.

The second account describes the Black Death in general and treats specifically of the destruction of the Jewish community in Strasbourg. In this city the authorities, who attempted to save the Jews, were overthrown by a fear-stricken mob led by the butchers' and tanners' guilds and by the nobles who were determined to do away with the Jews who were their economic competitors and to whom they were indebted for loans. Thus in this city, at least, it was not merely religious bigotry and fear of the plague, but economic resentment that fired the craftsmen and the nobles to their work of extermination. Those people of Strasbourg, who had thus far escaped the plague and who thought that by killing off the Jews they would insure themselves against it in the future, were doomed to disappointment, for the pest soon struck the city and, it is said, took a toll of sixteen thousand lives.

The confession of Agimet is found in the Appendix to Johann S. Schilter's 1698 edition of the Middle High German chronicle of the Strasbourg historian, Jacob von Königshofen (1346-1420). The second selection is taken from the body of Königshofen's history. This account merits credence, not only because Königshofen was an archivist and lived close to the events of which he writes, but also because he incorporated considerable material from his Strasbourg predecessor, the historian F. Closener, who was probably an eyewitness of the tragedy. The third selection is an epitaph of an otherwise unknown Jew who died a victim of the plague in 1349. Obviously, Jews, too, were not spared by this dread disease. The epitaph in the original Hebrew is in poetical form.



I. *The Confession of Agimet of Geneva, Châtel, October 20, 1348*

The year of our Lord 1348.

On Friday, the 10th of the month of October, at Châtel, in the castle thereof, there occurred the judicial inquiry which was made by order of the court of the illustrious Prince, our lord, Amadeus, Count of Savoy, and his subjects against the Jews of both sexes who were there imprisoned, each one separately. [Jews were sometimes imprisoned separately to prevent suicide.] This was done after public rumor had become current and a strong clamor had arisen because of the poison put by them into the wells, springs, and other things which the Christians use-demanding that they die, that they are able to be found guilty and, therefore, that they should be punished. Hence this their confession made in the presence of a great many trustworthy persons.

Agimet the Jew, who lived at Geneva and was arrested at Châtel, was there put to the torture a little and then he was released from it. And after a long time, having been subjected again to torture a little, he confessed in the presence of a great many trustworthy persons, who are later mentioned. To begin with it is clear that at the Lent just passed Pultus Clesis de Ranz had sent this very Jew to Venice to buy silks and other things for him. When this came to the notice of Rabbi Peyret, a Jew of Chambéry who was a teacher of their law, he sent for this Agimet, for whom he had searched, and when he had come before him he said: "We have been informed that you are going to Venice to buy silk and other wares. Here I am giving you a little package of half a span in size which contains some prepared poison and venom in a thin, sewed leather-bag. Distribute it among the wells, cisterns, and springs about Venice and the other places to which you go, in order to poison the people who use the water of the aforesaid wells that will have been poisoned by you, namely, the wells in which the poison will have been placed."

Agimet took this package full of poison and carried it with him to Venice, and when he came there he threw and scattered a portion of it into the well or cistern of fresh water which was there near the German House, in order to poison the people who use the water of that cistern. And he says that this is the only cistern of sweet water in the city. He also says that the mentioned Rabbi Peyret promised to give him whatever he wanted for his troubles in this business. Of his own accord Agimet confessed further that after this had been done he left at once in order that he should not be captured by the citizens or others, and that he went personally to Calabria and Apulia and threw the above mentioned poison into many wells. He confesses also that he put some of this same poison in the well of the streets of the city of Ballet.

He confesses further that he put some of this poison into the public fountain of the city of Toulouse and in the wells that are near the [Mediterranean] sea. Asked if at the time that he scattered the venom and poisoned the wells, above mentioned, any people had died, he said that he did not know inasmuch as he had left everyone of the above



mentioned places in a hurry. Asked if any of the Jews of those places were guilty in the above mentioned matter, he answered that he did not know. And now by all that which is contained in the five books of Moses and the scroll of the Jews, he declared that this was true, and that he was in no wise lying, no matter what might happen to him. [This Jew does not seem to know that the books of Moses and the scroll of the Jews are identical!]

II. The Cremation of Strasbourg Jewry St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1349 - About The Great Plague And The Burning Of The Jews

In the year 1349 there occurred the greatest epidemic that ever happened. Death went from one end of the earth to the other, on that side and this side of the sea, and it was greater among the Saracens **than** among the Christians. In some lands everyone died so that no one was left. Ships were also found on the sea laden with wares; the crew had all died and no one guided the ship. The Bishop of Marseilles and priests and monks and more than half of all the people there died with them. In other kingdoms and cities so many people perished that it would be horrible to describe. The pope at Avignon stopped all sessions of court, locked himself in a room, allowed no one to approach him and had a fire burning before him all the time. [This last was probably intended as some sort of disinfectant.] And from what this epidemic came, all wise teachers and physicians could only say that it was God's will. And as the plague was now here, so was it in other places, and lasted more than a whole year. This epidemic also came to Strasbourg in the summer of the above mentioned year, and it is estimated that about sixteen thousand people died.

In the matter of this plague the Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells-that is what they were accused of-and for this reason the Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany, but not in Avignon, for the pope protected them there.

Nevertheless they tortured a number of Jews in Berne and Zofingen [Switzerland] who then admitted that they had put poison into many wells, and they also found the poison in the wells. Thereupon they burnt the Jews in many towns and wrote of this affair to Strasbourg, Freiburg, and Basel in order that they too should burn their Jews. But the leaders in these three cities in whose hands the government lay did not believe that anything ought to be done to the Jews. However in Basel the citizens marched to the city-hall and compelled the council to take an oath that they would burn the Jews, and that they would allow no Jew to enter the city for the next two hundred years.

Thereupon the Jews were arrested in all these places and a conference was arranged to meet at Benfeld rAlsace, February 8, 1349. The Bishop of Strasbourg [Berthold II], all the feudal lords of Alsace, and representatives of the three above mentioned cities came there. The deputies of the city of Strasbourg were asked what they were going to do with their Jews. They answered and said that they knew no evil of them. Then they asked the Strasbourgers why they had closed the wells and put away the buckets, and there was a great indignation and clamor against the deputies from Strasbourg. So



finally the Bishop and the lords and the Imperial Cities agreed to do away with the Jews. The result was that they were burnt in many cities, and wherever they were expelled they were caught by the peasants and stabbed to death or drowned. . . .

[The town-council of Strasbourg which wanted to save the Jews was deposed on the 9th-10th of February, and the new council gave in to the mob, who then arrested the Jews on Friday, the 13th.]

THE JEWS ARE BURNT

On Saturday - that was St. Valentine's Day-they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about two thousand people of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. [Some say that about a thousand accepted baptism.] Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash that the Jews possessed and divided it among the working-men proportionately. The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt. After this wealth was divided among the artisans some gave their share to the Cathedral or to the Church on the advice of their confessors.

Thus were the Jews burnt at Strasbourg, and in the same year in all the cities of the Rhine, whether Free Cities or Imperial Cities or cities belonging to the lords. In some towns they burnt the Jews after a trial, in others, without a trial. In some cities the Jews themselves set fire to their houses and cremated themselves.

THE JEWS RETURN TO STRASBOURG

It was decided in Strasbourg that no Jew should enter the city for a hundred years, but before twenty years had passed, the council and magistrates agreed that they ought to admit the Jews again into the city for twenty years. And so the Jews came **back again to** Strasbourg iii the year 1368 after the birth of our Lord.

III. *The Epitaph of Asher aben Turiel, Toledo, Spain, 1349*

This stone is a memorial
That a later generation may know
That 'neath it lies hidden a pleasant bud,
A cherished child.
Perfect in knowledge,
A reader of the Bible,
A student of the Mishnah and Gemara.
Had learned from his father
What his father learned from his teachers:
The statutes of God and his laws.



Though only fifteen years in age,
He was like a man of eighty in knowledge.
More blessed than all sons: Asher-may he rest in Paradise -
The son of Joseph ben Turiel-may God comfort him,
He died of the plague, in the month of Tam muz, in the year 109 [June or July, 1349].
But a few days before his death
He established his home;
But yesternight the joyous voice of the bride and groom
Was turned to the voice of wailing.
[Apparently he had just been married.]
And the father is left, sad and aching.
May the God of heaven
Grant him comfort.
And send another child
To restore his soul.

Source: Jacob Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook, 315-1791*, (New York: JPS, 1938), 43-48

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