

HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

As a result of the conquests of their biblical homeland by Persians, Greeks, Assyrians and Romans, Jews were scattered throughout Europe. However, the Hebrew Bible created unity among the Jews even though they settled far from each other in very different cultures. They continued to pray in Hebrew, even as they took on the languages of the different host nations. They also continued to follow the laws and religious observances of the Bible. They carried with them their customs, religious rituals and beliefs.

At first, anti-Jewish feelings were primarily a religious matter. Christianity was a child of Judaism and considered one of its branches or sects. Jesus was a Jew who quoted from and interpreted the Hebrew Bible. Yet, the dilemma for early Christians arose from the refusal of other Jews to accept Jesus as the messiah. There had been Jewish groups that had accepted earlier messiahs. None of those groups, however, had broken with Judaism until this one. That break began soon after the death of Jesus with the teachings of Paul. He sought to gain non-Jewish followers for Christianity. Paul accomplished this by dropping the requirements of conversion: Christians would no longer have to follow the dietary and ritual laws of Judaism. He also abandoned the requirement of circumcision considered by Jews to be the biblical mark of the "covenant of Abraham." Paul's followers became the new Christians, separated from the parent religion, Judaism.

When the Jews tried to drive the Romans out of their homeland, the Roman armies destroyed the holy Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This dealt a crushing blow to the Jewish religion, as Jews were driven from their country and dispersed or scattered all over Europe. New Christian communities on the outskirts of the Roman world were unaffected by the destruction of the Temple. Their separation from Judaism widened even more.

Europe gradually became Christian through wandering Christian missionaries like Paul. In the 3rd century A.D., Christianity had achieved such success that it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Jews were a small minority. They were considered foreigners and outsiders, strangely different. Some church officials even accused them of being agents of the devil.

The Jews continued their religious and social practices and, consequently, set themselves apart from Christian society. Christians were no longer instructed in the Hebrew Bible and often forgot the roots they shared with Jews. Jews persisted in praying in Hebrew, reading from right to left. Christians saw Hebrew as a collection of symbols having to do with witchcraft. Jews ate different foods and refused to eat what Christians ate, pork, for example. Christians saw these differences as mysterious and evil. Jews celebrated the Sabbath on Saturday rather than Sunday. Christians called this witch's or devil's Sabbath.

As they had for thousands of years, Jews practiced circumcision as a sign of their "covenant with God." Christians saw this as an evil custom somehow related to the sign of the devil. Eventually, Jews dressed differently. They maintained traditional customs, like growing long beards, while modern practice changed to shaving. Jews became stereotyped in their physical appearance.

Throughout the Middle Ages, local governments discriminated against Jews, denying them the right to own land or hold public office. Medieval unions (guilds) refused membership to Jews so that they could not work in many occupations. The effect of this prejudicial treatment and isolation was to force Jews into commerce, and many became merchants. Although the majority remained poor, some became wealthy. Because the Church prohibited money lending, Jews were among the first bankers. This historical condition would foster a stereotype of Jews as money lenders. That stereotype would increase persecution, especially in economically hard times.

From the 12th to the 20th centuries, Jews were persecuted, tried and murdered on the basis of many myths. The myth that Jews murdered Christian children, for example, was created in Norwich, England, around 1150 by a superstitious priest and an insane monk when a Christian boy was found dead. The boy was probably killed by an outlaw. The two clergymen invented the story that this murder was part of a Jewish plot to kill Christian children. The myth became more mysterious and complicated when the story that Jews required the blood of Christian children to make unleavened bread (matzos) for Passover was invented and added to it. Even some saints had supposedly accused Jews of murdering Christian children for their blood. Such stories spread across Europe and the Nazis would later manipulate them and other legends to stimulate racist anti-Semitism.

From the late Middle Ages on, anti-Semitism was expressed in many ways. Jews were expelled from cities or forced to live in restricted areas. Jews were excluded from various occupations and denied citizenship. However, in the second half of the 19th century, Europe became more democratic. The full or partial emancipation of the Jews was achieved in Prussia, France, England and other nations. This meant that Jews officially were granted limited or full civil rights by governments. Also, some economic and social restrictions were gradually removed by law. However, anti-Semitic feelings and beliefs lingered. Myths, superstitions and deep-seated beliefs still clung to Europeans and had become part of the fabric of their civilization. Occasionally, anti-Semitism exploded into violence.

The 19th century saw the beginnings of an anti-Semitism not based on religion but on theories that Jews were a separate "race." At the time, "race" meant a group of people set apart because of genetically inherited characteristics such as skin color. Some even believed that cultural characteristics such as beliefs, customs and behaviors were inherited by members of a race.

By distorting Jewish history, 19th century racists labeled Jews as wanderers who inherited their "rootlessness" through their "blood." Thus, their nature was determined by heredity and unchangeable. Wanderers were strangers; and as in the Middle Ages, people feared strangers. They saw them as dangerous criminals, wrapped in mystery and evil. Hate-mongers claimed that for the safety of Christian children, Jews had to be avoided. Or, better yet, they urged that Jews should be kept at a distance or driven out of Christian communities. There was no other choice—character was inherited, it could not be changed. Such a theory, pretending to be scientific, was adopted by Hitler and others who transformed theory to practice in the Holocaust.

Poor farmers and struggling urban people were suffering from the effects of the industrial revolution of the 19th century. Many lost their land. Many lost their jobs. Many lost their status and prestige. Worse, growing numbers of them could not feed their families or provide shelter for them in the new environment of the city slum. Nothing was certain any more. Some blamed their situation on the "rootless Jew" who became a scapegoat. They repeated the stories about the "rootless wandering Jew" and the ritual murders. They harped on the Jews as merchants and bringers of urban, commercial civilization.

Anti-Semites in the 19th and 20th centuries inflamed fear and hatred that had lurked beneath the surface. The myth of a world Jewish conspiracy was fostered by a notorious forgery called *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This book claimed that the Jews of the world were plotting to take over the governments of Christian countries and, thereby, added fuel to the fire.

The myths and stereotypes of Jews were based on deliberate lies and ancient superstitions. It did not even matter if anti-Semites knew Jews who did not fit the stereotypes. Because they are based on irrational fear or resentment, stereotypes reject specific evidence. The real world does not matter when fear, superstition and resentment are at work.

With an ancient tradition of religious hostility to draw upon, racism brought together fake scientific theories and anti-Jewish stereotypes. It offered solutions to economic and social problems and promised a hope for a better future once the offending group was removed from society. Without critical thinking or questioning, frequently in blatant defiance of Christian morality, educated and uneducated people accepted the stereotypes and the mythology with terrifying results.

A definition of anti-Semitism might be: hostility toward Jews as individuals, toward Judaism as a religion, toward the Jewish people as a group. Throughout history, it has expressed itself through religious prejudice, social exclusion, economic boycotts, restrictive laws, physical attacks, killings and exiling of identifiable Jews.

Different Types of Anti-Semitism

- Religious anti-Semitism: Through the Middle Ages, the persecution of the Jews was based on religious differences (rituals, belief in Jesus as the messiah, etc.). If Jews would convert to Christianity, they would be accepted. If they did not convert, they were segregated, expelled or killed.
- Secular anti-Semitism: Beginning around the 18th century, as Europe became less religious, Jews suffered social and economic discrimination. They were forced to live in restricted areas, denied citizenship, excluded from various occupations, etc. Even if they converted to Christianity, Christian communities would not accept them.
- Racial anti-Semitism: By the late 19th century, Jews were seen as an inferior and dangerous "race." Racists argued that, like blue eyes, historically determined cultural traits such as business skills were passed on through the genes. The "logic" of this thinking leads to extermination.

Summary: The history of anti-Semitism can, thus, be summed up as described by Raul Hilberg in *The Destruction of the European Jews* as

- Religious: You may not live among us as Jews.
- Secular: You may not live among us.
- Racial: You may not live.

Reading 4A

INTERVIEWS WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER FROM 1925-1945

Read each question first. Then, follow along as the text of the interview is read aloud in class. Finally, be prepared to discuss the questions.

Questions

1. Does the man in the interview see himself as German or Jewish?
2. What does the man mean when he says anti-Semitism in Germany is a "protest against poor economic conditions"?
3. Why does the man refuse to leave Germany in 1935?
4. Why do you think the man finds the events of 1935-1938 so unbelievable?
5. What is the significance of the story of the guard at Auschwitz?

(The following interview is based on actual interviews with three German Jewish victims of the Holocaust who survived. The father is a composite of the three.)

INTERVIEW WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER, 1925

Q: Can you describe your family?

A: My family has lived in Berlin since 1795. My ancestors knew the great Moses Mendelssohn, the finest German Jew. My grandfather fought against the French in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, and my father fought them in the Great War (World War I). He was decorated with the highest military honor, the Iron Cross. My older brother and uncle also fought in that war; my uncle lost a leg and my brother was blinded in a poison gas attack. Members of my family have been great German patriots devoted to the *Reich* for 125 years.

Q: What is your occupation?

A: I run the newspaper my father edited. My family and I supported Kaiser Wilhelm before the war through our newspaper, but now we feel we must give loyalty to the Weimar Republic. It stands for all that is best in Germany: freedom, tolerance, reason, justice and international peace.

Q: Do you belong to a synagogue?

A: Yes. But it is a matter of personal choice. My religious persuasion is not important. I am a good German—first, last and always. A very good German.

Q: Do you think there is anti-Semitism in Germany?

A: Yes, but it is unimportant and less than anywhere else. True Germans are not anti-Semitic. They believe in the values of their forefathers: tolerance, reason, equality, like Goethe, Lessing and Mendelssohn. Any German anti-Semitism is a protest against poor economic conditions. It will pass—this is an enlightened country, civilized and free. A land of laws and great traditions. We Germans are the most advanced, humanitarian people on earth.

SECOND INTERVIEW WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER, NOVEMBER 1935

NOTE: Between April 1933 and November 1935, the Nazi government passed many anti-jewish laws.

Q: With all the laws passed since 1933, how has life changed for you and your family?

A: Life under Hitler's government is more difficult for Jews. My children cannot attend the public school any more; my newspaper has been shut down; our non-Jewish friends don't see us much any more; we cannot fly the German flag; I have had to release our non-Jewish maid; and I am earning money sweeping floors.

Q: Do you think you will leave Germany?

A: No. This cannot last. Anti-Semitism has come before and gone away. Germans will not allow such discrimination for long. We are sometimes harassed on the streets by SA hoodlums, but there has been nothing like pogroms or mass violence. They are burning books, not authors. It will pass—how long can Hitler last?

THIRD INTERVIEW WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER, SEPTEMBER 1938

Q: Because of the curfews and other restrictions, much more has changed in your life. For example, you are in new living quarters. Do you mind?

A: We have had to adapt and adjust to a new life. My family of four plus another family of four are living in two rooms. This has not been easy. We share a small bathroom and sleep on the floor. But we manage.

Q: What else has changed?

A: We have lost most of our savings because the government has seized Jewish bank accounts and property. Food is now rationed to us. We are forbidden to attend certain public places of entertainment; parks and public transportation are closed to us.

Q: Have you experienced any more harassment?

A: Yes. Sometimes on the streets one of us will be ridiculed, pushed or struck. The police are now under SS control, so they are usually no help. Yesterday, our neighbor was forced by some SA men to wear a sign saying he was a Jewish pig. When he went to the police, they forced him to wear a second sign saying he would never complain again.

Q: Have your attitudes about Germany changed?

A: Only about some Germans. This is unexplainable. Germany seems to have gone berserk. It is not the country I know as Germany. Violence has increased in the streets, book burnings occur regularly, people are arrested with no explanation and held indefinitely. I do not understand it. Concentration camps in the land of Goethe and Lessing? The land of Beethoven and Bach? My family does not understand. We still have hope—no one has been beaten or murdered in my family. We at least know clearly what is permitted and not permitted. They are burning books now; five hundred years ago they would have burned the authors.

FOURTH INTERVIEW WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER, 1945

Q: The war is over. You are alone, that is, without your family, here in the Landsberg Displaced Persons (DP) Camp. How did you get here?

A: In January 1945 I was in Auschwitz. The Germans forced us onto the road and we ran, in the cold, for three days. I wound up at a camp called Mauthausen in Austria and from there was marched to Landsberg work camp. I was nearly dead: starving, with dysentery and lice, exhausted and even unable to get out of my bunk. I looked out the barracks window and saw a tank with a white star on it. The Americans had arrived.

Q: What did you think then?

A: No one thought any more. We were frightened or beyond fright. The Americans ordered us out. They couldn't believe their eyes—we looked like skeletons, emaciated, smelled of filth, disease, excrement and death. Some prisoners even had their flesh falling off their bones. The Americans made us strip—like the Germans had—and sprayed us with disinfectant. They fed us, gave us medical care and took down the barbed wire. Landsberg became a DP camp.

Q: Have you remained here since May?

A: No. I returned to Berlin to look for my family and then came back here.

Q: Are you alone?

A: No one is alive. In January 1942 Jews had to give up all warm clothing. My wife contracted pneumonia and died within a week. My son was taken away a few months later. He died in a slave labor camp in Poland. My brother was sent from Dachau to Auschwitz around the same time. Since he was nearly blind from his World War I experience with poison gas, he was sent immediately to the gas chamber when he arrived in Auschwitz. I believe the same gas that blinded him, or one like it, killed him at last. My uncle, who had lost a leg, was also sent to Auschwitz but died in the boxcar en route. I learned these things from people who survived Auschwitz. While we were still in Berlin, my daughter died in my arms of malnutrition in 1943, just before I was deported to Auschwitz. I had hoped my son had survived, or my brother—or someone. Now I don't know why I survived—what is left to live for?

Q: Are you angry?

A: Yes, angry—but at whom? I don't know. What good is anger, what good is life if it is lived alone?

Q: How do you feel about Germany and the Germans?

A: I don't know. A guard at Auschwitz used to discuss Goethe, the poet of humanity, and German philosophy with us. Then he would leave the discussion to "process" a train transport. That means he would go to send thousands of people to their deaths. Then he would return to our discussion. How could this be? They had gone beyond burning books and *did* burn the authors. Philosophy and mass murder? Art and medical experiments on human beings? Beethoven and gas chambers? Buchenwald concentration camp was built around the Goethe Oak where the poet used to sit and write! Germans are beasts—they are poets. How could they do it—make us so alone? I don't know . . .

Reading 11B

LEGAL BRIEF: LIFE UNWORTHY OF LIFE

The man with the whip who stood calmly on the platform directing human traffic in "Arrival at Auschwitz" was the infamous Dr. Mengele. He and several other doctors were in charge of the selection process when prisoners arrived. They also supervised the selections that were carried out regularly at the roll calls and in the barracks. The purpose was to weed out "excess" or "unnecessary" people who were "non-productive." The term used by the Nazi doctors for these people was "life unworthy of life." It was borrowed from a medical book written in 1920 and became the phrase that allowed physicians to conduct horrible experiments on human beings and decide who would live and who would die. "Life unworthy of life" also best captures the heart of the Nazi philosophy toward the Jews and other unfortunate groups who became the victims of the Third Reich.

As early as 1933, respected physicians were involved in a program of sterilization—making people incapable of reproducing. The victims of this program were people whom the doctors decided were mentally deficient. The doctors' endorsement of this program then led to their support of the Nazi proposal for the killing of mentally and/or physically handicapped children, and then, mentally and/or physically handicapped adults in the so-called "euthanasia" program. "Euthanasia" is usually defined as "mercy killing." In Germany, in 1933, the term was applied to people who were considered "unworthy of life." The doctors believed that mental illness, drunkenness, other mental and physical disabilities could be passed on genetically. What mattered most to them was the so-called health of the "Aryan race." Consequently, they saw it as their duty to remove those who would, according to their theories, "weaken the race" through reproduction. Over 450,000 people were sterilized or killed in special institutes and hospitals before the program was ended. These places were often equipped with gas chambers.

After 1941, a state policy of "euthanasia" and forced sterilization easily changed into a state policy for mass murder. This policy was carried out in death camps like Treblinka and Auschwitz. Those subjected to gassing in the "euthanasia" program during the 1930s were said to have received "special treatment," *Besonderhandlung*. The same phrase would be used as a euphemism, a substitute word to hide the real meaning, to refer to gassing of Jews in death camps. The doctors who had formerly worked in the special hospitals of the "euthanasia" and sterilization programs now appeared at the death camps. The first step for them was to assist the SS commandants of camps to reduce the "excess population" of their camps. But soon, doctors like Dr. Mengele, his superior, Dr. Wirths, or the internationally known Dr. Clauberg were selecting people as guinea pigs for horrible experiments.

- Mengele tried to discover what determined eye color in twins by killing them and then dissecting the eyes.
- Wirths conducted experiments on women by unnecessarily removing portions of the uterus to examine what he called "pre-cancerous growths."
- Clauberg injected poisonous substances into the wombs of women and subjected men and women to radiation of their genitals, presumably for cancer research.
- A German pharmaceutical company sponsored a program in which German doctors injected people with typhus. The doctors later killed the victims by injecting a poisonous drug into their hearts. The bodies were then dissected for experimental research.

None of these experiments furthered medical research—yet, even if they had, the inhuman treatment of the prisoners was unjustifiable.

How did thousands of medical doctors become involved with the murder of the Jews? Were they forced? Were they threatened? Or did they truly believe the racial theories of the Nazis?

German doctors were not forced to participate in the sterilization, the "euthanasia" or the mass murder programs. They were not threatened if they refused (as some did). Some seemed to have believed in the Nazi genetic theories. Many tried to impress their superiors or gain favor with politically powerful Nazis by doing research about breeding a "super-race" (biological engineering). Rarely had doctors had such opportunities for human experimentation. To experiment with animals and write or lecture about it was one thing, but to experiment directly on humans was quite another—a shortcut to acclaim and a more "glamorous" type of research. All hoped to advance their careers; a few were fanatical Nazis.

Despite this career building, each of those thousands of doctors had taken the Hippocratic Oath and had pledged to "heal the sick" and protect life: "I will follow that method of treatment which . . . I consider for the benefit of my patients and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous. I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel . . . I will . . . benefit the sick and abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption."

Having solemnly taken that ancient oath, how was it possible that those physicians participated in the selections at Auschwitz and the other camps? Was that participation "deleterious" and against the benefit of human life? And was participating in medical experiments literally giving "deadly medicine"?

Historians have suggested some partial explanations for the behavior of the Nazi doctors. *The first of these explanations comes from understanding the nature of "Planet Auschwitz."* It was, in almost every sense, another world. In such an environment, all established codes of right and wrong were abandoned. Accepted moral values and ethical rules—standards of behavior—were not applicable. Personalities seemed to change to match the environment. At Auschwitz, anything was possible.

Reading 5B

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ADOLF HITLER

Adolf Hitler was born in Linz, Austria. His mother seems to have been a kind woman. His strict father was an Austrian government worker. Hitler was almost constantly fighting with his father. Against his father's wishes, he went to Vienna as a young man to study art. He was refused entrance into an art school. Impoverished, he became one of Vienna's unemployed eking out a living painting post cards. Living in a flop-house, a cheap men's hotel, in Vienna, he began to listen to street corner anti-Semitic speakers. He later said he learned "the truth about the international Jew" in Vienna.

Hitler enlisted in the German army when World War I broke out and claimed, in his autobiographical *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), that he was astonished to discover that Germany had lost the war in 1918. After World War I, unemployed again, he moved to Germany where he joined the newly-formed German Workers Party in 1920. After Hitler failed to seize the government of Bavaria, a state in Southern Germany, in 1923, it seemed as if his political career was over. Nevertheless, turning to legal methods of gaining political power, Hitler worked behind the scenes to rebuild his party. In the 1925 presidential elections, Hitler convinced the World War I commanding general, Erich von Ludendorff, to run on the Nazi ticket. The Nazis failed miserably as Hindenburg was elected with an overwhelming majority. In 1932, Hitler himself ran for president. Although he was defeated by Hindenburg, Hitler received over 36 percent of the popular vote, more than thirteen million votes.

For many reasons, Hitler's support had grown between 1925 and 1932. He was among the first to employ modern techniques for election campaigns. His use of fast cars and airplanes allowed him to speak to thousands of people each day. His professional propagandists and film makers used radio and film to create an image of *Der Fuehrer*, The Leader, as confident, strong and concerned. He was unmatched as a public speaker and took great pride in his ability to manipulate and intimidate people. In the end, it was not what Hitler said to crowds of thousands that mattered but how he said it. Slogans and carefully staged meetings and rallies gave the country the impression that he could do no wrong and knew exactly what Germany needed.

In 1933, President von Hindenburg and his political advisors perceived Hitler as an uneducated gutter politician. Yet, they believed that only Hitler could bring a stop to the violence in the streets often caused by Nazi Brown Shirts (SA men). Convinced that he would be able to control Hitler, Hindenburg appointed him chancellor on January 30, 1933. Hitler was 44 years old.

By March 1933, it was clear that Hindenburg had been seriously mistaken about controlling Hitler. The chancellor used a variety of methods to gain total power and govern Germany as a dictator. He manipulated the mass media. He invented a Communist conspiracy which he claimed was directed at dominating Germany. In order to save the country from this Communist threat, he said, the civil rights guaranteed by the Weimar Constitution had to be eliminated. Even Hindenburg seemed to believe in the conspiracy theory.