

THE ROOTS

*The following excerpt from **Smoke and Ashes** by Barbara Rogasky explains the beginnings of prejudice against the Jewish people.*

The seeds of misunderstanding, ignorance and hate were sown long before Hitler. The Nazis would not have been able to succeed in their work of destruction if the foundation had not been formed centuries earlier.

In the early years of Christianity, Jews were called Christ killers, murderers of [Jesus]. The crime was so basic and horrible that they were believed capable of anything and everything evil. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, declared they were the Christian's most vicious enemy, second only to Satan himself. In the Middle Ages they were said to have poisoned the wells and caused the years of the plague that killed millions in Europe. Jews were believed to murder Christians, especially innocent children, in order to use their blood during religious ceremonies. This was the infamous Blood Libel, which the Nazis made good use of again hundreds of years later.

Thus the Jews rarely lived in peace for long. Whole communities were raided, ransacked and destroyed. Jewish children were taken from their parents to be raised as Christians. Jews were burned at the stake because they refused to give up their religion.

Strict limits were placed on what they could and could not do. At one time or another they were forbidden to be doctors, lawyers or teachers of non-Jews. They were not permitted to sell food to Christians or hire Christians to work for them. They could not be cared for by Christian nurses. They were not allowed to live in the same houses as non-Jews. They were forced to wear a special article of clothing or a cloth badge so that all would know they were Jews and could more easily avoid them.

Christians believed that lending money and charging interest—usury—was a sin. Jews came to fill an important need by taking on that job and making money available to non-Jews who requested it. The role expanded over the years, and Jews were used by those in power to collect taxes, supervise the peasant farmers of large estates, and act as a bridge between the ruling nobility and the people in matters of money and finance. It is probably the basis in history for such ideas as "All Jews are rich" and "The Jews control all the money."

Jews were expelled from country after country, among them England, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Germany. When they were not expelled, they often had to live in limited special areas—the ghettos. In Russia during the 1700s, they were restricted to a land area in the west of the country called the Pale of Jewish Settlement. The restriction was not lifted until almost two hundred years later, in the twentieth century.

Things did not improve very much, even closer to modern times. In Russia, the Ukraine and Romania, hundreds of Jews died in pogroms in which organized groups attacked defenseless Jewish communities, looted and destroyed them, and killed or maimed their inhabitants. Between 1900 and 1904, at least 50,000 Jewish lives were lost in such incidents.