

## LESSON 1

# Life for Jews in Europe

### A. Persecution and Anti-Semitism Throughout History



*Massacre of the Jews of York, 1190*



*The Jewish ghetto in Rome. This painting by Ettore Roesler Franz shows a typical street scene.*

Jews faced many periods of hardship and peril throughout history. They often experienced **persecution**<sup>1</sup>, including violence and forced **expulsions**<sup>2</sup>. In some instances, such as during **pogroms**<sup>3</sup>, they suffered from widespread, violent attacks and massacres. The severity of this treatment varied depending on the time and place.

For example, during the **Black Death**<sup>4</sup> in the 14th century, many people blamed Jews for the disease, leading to attacks against them. In Spain and Portugal, Jews faced even more serious problems. The **Spanish Inquisition**<sup>5</sup> persecuted Jews who refused to accept the Christian faith, and Jews were eventually forced to leave Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1497. This expulsion lasted several centuries and was not lifted until 1868.

Other major attacks on Jewish communities throughout the ages included:

- Roman persecution and expulsions spanned several centuries (about 140 BCE–170 CE).
- The Crusades killed many thousands of Jews on their way to the Holy Land (1095–1291).
- The Islamic Almohad Caliphate mistreated and killed many of its Jews who refused to accept Islam (1130–1269).

1 **persecution:** hostile and unfair treatment

2 **expulsion:** forcing people to leave a place or country

3 **pogrom:** an organized, violent attack against a Jewish community

4 **Black Death:** a devastating plague that swept through Europe in the 14th century, spread by fleas on trading ships

5 **Spanish Inquisition:** a period starting in 1478 in Spain when the Church investigated and persecuted people suspected of secretly practicing non-Catholic religions

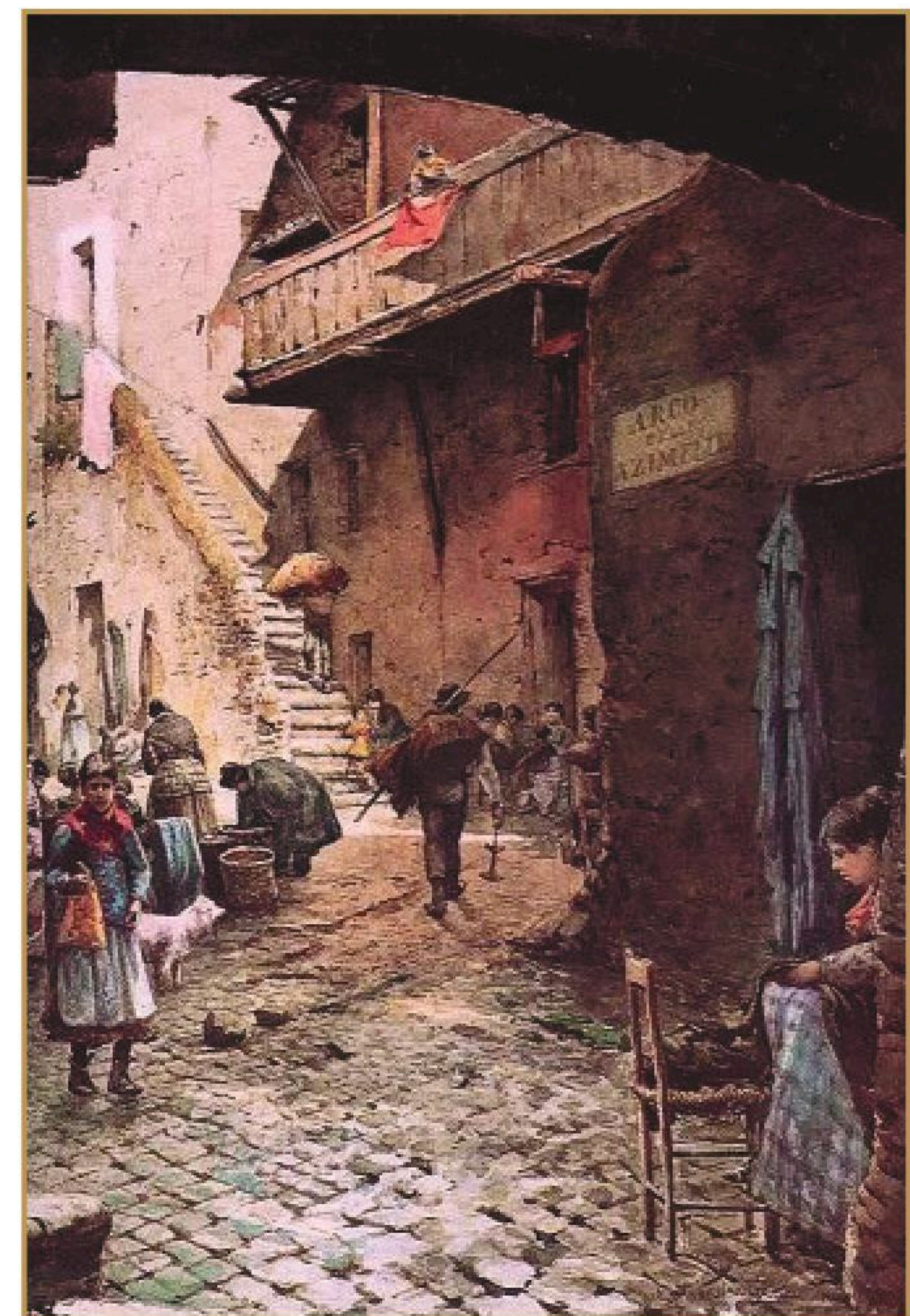


## B. The Jews of Europe

Even after the Dark Ages gave way to a brighter, modern era, religious persecution continued. In the period from the 1650s until around 1800, Jewish life in Europe was shaped by a variety of factors that differed significantly from one region to another. Despite these regional variations, certain key aspects of Jewish life were shared across many areas. These common experiences related to their living conditions, economic roles, cultural practices, and the impact of societal attitudes toward Jewish communities.

In many parts of Europe, especially in Eastern Europe and Italy, Jews lived in separate neighborhoods called **ghettos**. A ghetto was a specific area within a city or town where Jewish people were required to live under strict regulations and separation from the general population. These areas, established by authorities to **segregate**<sup>6</sup> Jews from non-Jews, were often overcrowded and dirty, and Jews had to follow strict rules.

Jews faced many legal restrictions, including which jobs they could have and the property they could own. For example, Jews were often not allowed to own land, which meant they could not farm or buy homes like others.



A painting by Ettore Roesler Franz depicting the entrance to the Jewish ghetto in Venice

### DISCUSSION

#### Living Conditions

What do you think were the biggest challenges faced by Jews living in ghettos, and how might these conditions have affected their daily lives and community dynamics?



Additionally, Jews were often excluded from participating in local government or holding public office, which kept them from being involved in **civic life**<sup>7</sup>. These restrictions were part of broader efforts to segregate and control Jewish communities.

## C. Economic and Social Conditions

Because of laws that limited their job choices, many Jews were forced to work in specific areas, such as:

- Trade: Buying, selling, or exchanging goods and services
- Finance: Managing money, including lending and investing
- Crafts: Skilled work like tailoring or metalwork

<sup>6</sup> **segregate**: separate by race or other characteristic

<sup>7</sup> **civic life**: the activities and responsibilities people have as members of their community or country. This includes participating in local government, voting in elections, holding public office, and being involved in decisions that affect everyone.



Jews often acted as **intermediaries**,<sup>8</sup> helping to connect buyers with sellers and different businesses. This was important for local economies because it helped make sure that trades and deals happened smoothly. However, the Jewish intermediaries faced unfair treatment and were sometimes **exploited**.<sup>9</sup>

The economic situation for Jews varied greatly. Some Jewish communities did well and were relatively prosperous, while others struggled with poverty and harsh conditions, especially in the ghettos.

Jewish communities typically managed their own affairs through leaders and **communal councils**, which were groups responsible for making decisions and overseeing communal matters. They addressed religious, legal, and social issues within their communities.

Councils also set up charities to help those in need. These organizations provided support for the poor and sick, playing a key role in taking care of their community members.

### D. Relations with Non-Jews

The relationship between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors varied greatly between locations. In some places, Jews and non-Jews got along well and lived peacefully alongside each other. In other areas, conflict and problems were common.

Even though Jews often faced restrictions on the jobs they could engage in, they still played important roles in the local economy and society at large. They interacted with non-Jews through business and social activities, which was important for both their own community and the wider society.

Overall, life for Jews in Europe at this time was marked by a complex mix of community resilience, religious dedication, economic adaptation, and external pressures. Eventually, modern ideas began to spread that helped pave the way for significant relief for Jews from historic discrimination and allowed greater integration of Jewish communities into European societies, an idea known as Jewish **emancipation**<sup>10</sup>.

#### DISCUSSION

#### Relations with Non-Jews

How do you think the relationships between Jews and non-Jews varied across different regions?  
What factors do you think influenced whether these relationships were cooperative or conflictual?



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8 **intermediaries**: go-betweens; brokers between two parties

9 **exploited**: taken advantage of

10 **emancipation**: the freeing of people from subjugation





Define each term.

persecution	
expulsion	
pogrom	
Black Death	
Spanish Inquisition	
ghetto	
segregate	
civic life	
intermediaries	
exploited	
communal councils	
emancipation	





### Questions

1. Throughout the years, Jews suffered from mistreatment and persecution. List four major attacks on the Jewish people that occurred between the 11th and 15th centuries. Include the dates.

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2. The Jews of Europe were forced to live in ghettos and also had to abide by strict regulations. Give two examples of these strict laws that Jews often faced.

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3. Economic conditions for the Jews in Europe were often difficult due to the laws that limited their job choices. List three specific areas in which the Jews worked.

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4. The Jews of Europe managed their own affairs through their leaders and communal councils. Explain what the communal councils did for their communities.

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5. Relations between the Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors varied greatly by location. In some areas, there was conflict, while in other areas, Jews and non-Jews lived in peace. List two ways in which Jews and non-Jews interacted with each other.

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