



News from the Nations— In A.D. 1492

All Jews expelled from Spain

Following the expulsion order signed by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain on 1 May, the last Jews have now left Spain. The decree obliged all Jews either to convert to Christianity or to leave Spain by 31 July, although in practice this deadline was extended to 2 August. Ever since the end of May ships have been leaving Spain's Mediterranean ports of Valencia and Barcelona for Italy, North Africa and further east to various locations in the Ottoman Empire. Many others have taken temporary refuge in Portugal, where they have been given permission to stay for up to eight months while transport elsewhere is being organised. Of Spain's 230,000 Jews, it is believed about 50,000 have converted to Christianity, with the rest remaining faithful to their beliefs, despite the loss of everything. 12,000 have departed from Valencia alone in the past two weeks. Rather than grieving at their fate, in a final act of defiance they marched in a triumphant procession to their ships, singing as they went.

A SIGNIFICANT DAY

The extension of the date by which all Jews had to leave Spain until 2 August has more to it than meets the eye. This date coincides this year with 9 Ab, the traditional Jewish mourning day known as Tisha B'Av. This was the day on which the first Jewish temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the second temple by Titus. This day is a national day of mourning and fasting for Jews, commencing with the reading of the book of Lamentations. The custom of fasting on this day began during the exile in Babylon, being referred to in the book of Zechariah: "When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto Me, even to Me?" (7:5). It was thus appropriate that this latest blow to the fortunes of the Jewish people should have taken place on this day.

Jews who became Christians

During the years of persecution of the Jews of Spain by Christians, much pressure has been put on them to convert to Christianity. Many have done so, only to be regarded with great suspicion by Christians, who refer to them contemptuously as Marranos (pigs). They are widely accused of being secret Jews and are subject to being spied upon for evidence of their Judaism. Christians are asked to look out for various signs of Judaist practices, such as abstaining from work on a Saturday and wearing special clothes on Jewish holidays. The decree of expulsion has caused one particularly famous Jew to convert, Abraham Senior, a high official in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella, who was baptized three weeks ago, enabling him to keep his job.

FLEEING JEWS SUFFER

Sadly, some Jews seeking to find refuge overseas have suffered much at the hands of unscrupulous ship owners. In one case 700 Jews on a Corsican ship were stripped of everything they had and thrown overboard. Only three survived to tell the tale. There are many other stories of robbery, rape and murder, and also of Jews being abandoned at Italian ports instead of transported on to Turkey.

End of a long history

Jews have lived in Spain for over a thousand years, much of which has been a period of influence and prosperity unparalleled in their years of exile. They have been heavily involved in government and commerce, and have made major contributions in the fields of science, medicine, astronomy and philosophy. This period of Jewish prosperity began when the Arabs conquered Spain in 711 and established the most advanced civilisation in Europe, based at Cordoba and lasting some 300 years. After that, the Arabs gradually lost territory to various Christian kingdoms. The end of Arab rule came after the marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon brought about a united Christian Spain in 1479. In early 1492 the last vestige of Arab rule came to an end with the conquest of Granada, to be followed by the expulsion of the Jews. As the Christian kingdoms took over more and more territory, more and more Jews became their subjects. Despite the continuing benefits gained from the abilities of the Jews, persecution began, culminating in the just completed expulsion.

Columbus sails west—with Jews on board

After ten years of trying to get official backing for his scheme to sail west across the Atlantic in search of new sea routes to the Far East, Christopher Columbus has at last been able to set sail on his voyage of discovery. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella agreed on 17 April to back the project, and since then Columbus has been getting ships, crews and supplies together. On 3 August he at last set sail, in three ships with eighty-eight men. Several crew members are Jews recently baptized into the Catholic faith. Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy, but of Spanish descent. Significantly, the date for disembarking was moved from 2 August to 3 August, 2 August being a day for Jews to mourn and fast, and therefore inauspicious for those of Jewish descent to set out on a new enterprise. Columbus expects to reach India, but others, thinking of stories of Vikings hundreds of years ago reaching a hitherto unknown land across the Atlantic, wonder if he might instead find a new continent. How appropriate that Jews, albeit ostensibly converts to Christianity, should be amongst the first to reach a new land, given the way they have already spread throughout all the nations of the currently known world!

Death of the pope

The Vatican has announced the death of Pope Innocent VIII. His life typified the recent degradation of this office. In his younger years he fathered several illegitimate children, and his years in office have been dogged by accusations of corruption and nepotism. There is concern throughout Christendom at the growing corruption of the Church. How long before there will be a successful movement to break free from its domination?

The role of the Inquisition

There can be no doubt that the Inquisition has played an important role in bringing Ferdinand and Isabella to make their decree. The original Inquisition was established in Italy in 1231 by Pope Gregory IX in order to combat heresy, but it is currently largely defunct. However, at the request of the two monarchs, Pope Sixtus IV established the Spanish Inquisition in 1478. The chief inquisitor, Tomas de Torquemada, has been ruthless in trying to eradicate heresy. Officially the Inquisition has authority only over Christians, and, if it finds heresy proven, hands over the heretic for the state to punish. However, Torquemada has done everything he can to get at the Jews. Eleven years ago he arrested a convert from Judaism who, under torture, confessed to have secretly practised Judaism under the influence of a Jewish carpenter, Yuce Franco. Franco and other Jews were arrested, along with other converts to Christianity, and after months of torture confessed to the murder of a Christian child. They were handed over to the authorities for the death sentence to be inflicted. Torquemada then used this as a means of putting pressure on Ferdinand and Isabella to expel the Jews, saying that they were subverting Christian converts to Judaism to secretly practice their old faith. Eventually his pressure succeeded, resulting in the now completed expulsion.

Ottoman Empire welcomes Jews

The Ottoman ruler Sultan Bayezid II has thrown open the whole of his empire to Jews exiled from Spain. An order to this effect was proclaimed in all mosques last Friday. Why has he carried out this apparently benevolent action? He has stated that Jews are being persecuted for their belief in one God and their repudiation of idols, something which they have in common with Moslems. He also recognises that his empire is likely to benefit from the arrival of Jews, who number skilled craftsman, scholars, doctors, merchants and bankers amongst them. He sees Spain's loss as his gain. The chief rabbi of Turkey, Moses Capsali, in the meantime has issued an appeal, read out in all synagogues last Saturday, for Jews to contribute generously to a fund-raising campaign to provide for the needs of Jewish refugees arriving in the country destitute.

JEW'S QUESTION THE REASON FOR THEIR EXPULSION

Jewish leaders are asking why God has permitted them to be expelled from Spain in this way. Two reasons have been advanced. Don Yitzhak Abrabanel, a prominent figure at the court of the joint monarchs, but who accepted expulsion rather than convert to Christianity, claims it is a sign that the coming of the Messiah is near. Abrabanel, who claims to be a descendant of the house of David, and who is a scholar as well as a statesman, apparently sees the expulsion of Jews eastwards as indicating that the time has come for their restoration to their ancient land. Others think this expectation is premature and suggest that the Jews had become too wealthy and too much part of the establishment in Spain and thus in danger of assimilation. The recent years of persecution, culminating in the expulsion, will, it is argued, ensure that the Jews will retain their national identity.