

THE SHAMES OF CHRISTENDOM

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

PORTUGAL

The story of the Jews in Portugal resembles that of the Spanish Jews. They attained great affluence and influence. This provoked the jealousy of the mob and the Church alike. The latter continually pressed for the withdrawal of their liberties. Pope Gregory IX hurled threats at Alfonso III, but the latter took no heed, in spite of the fact that his father had been deposed by the Pope.

Succeeding sovereigns continued to employ Jews in high offices of the state. The Court physician was almost always a Jew. This popularity at Court became so marked that it resulted in 1449 in a popular revolt in Lisbon, where several Jews were killed; but it was not until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain that the full tide of misfortune overwhelmed the Portuguese Jews.

John II, under the whip of financial necessity, admitted Spanish refugees for eight months in return for the payment of a poll tax of eight crusades. He also contracted to provide them with ships to continue their journey when the period of privilege had expired. About a hundred thousand Jews took advantage of this agreement, but the perfidious King, having accepted payment, broke his contract. The ships were not provided until long after the promised time.

The wretched exiles lived in constant privation and peril. The lives of the men and the honour of their women were continually assailed. Their delay in the country was made the grounds of outrage. Children were torn from their parents, forcibly baptized and deported to the Island of St. Thomas to found a colony of "new Christians."

Many of these miserable little creatures, deprived of a mother's care, perished from neglect on the ships; many more became the victims of beasts of prey on this savage island. For their bereaved parents further anguish was in store. When ships were found for their departure, the mothers and daughters were outraged by the ships' crews before the eyes of the helpless men, and then flung overboard to perish in the seas. Those who escaped this fate by remaining in the country were enslaved. The mind shrinks appalled from the reading of the horrors endured by these people and the realization of the awful depravity of which the human heart is capable.

All Jews were expelled from Portugal in 1497 as a condition imposed by Ferdinand and Isabella of Castile before granting the hand of their daughter Isabella to Manuel II.

Manuel was opposed to this condition, and in order to render it ineffective, he ordered all Jewish children and adolescents between the ages of four and twenty to be taken from their parents and baptized into the Christian faith. He hoped by this means to retain some at least of the Jews in the country.

It is gratifying to know that there were at least some Christians compassionate enough to conceal Jewish children to save them for their parents.

Heart-rending scenes took place when the order was being put into effect. We read that some of the parents, rather than allow their children to be turned into apostates, slew them with their own hands. Some parents slew themselves as well, that they and their children might die together faithful to the religion of Israel.

So zealous was Manuel II for the conversion of the Jews that he ordered all emigrants to assemble at an appointed place in Lisbon. Twenty thousand gathered here. They were at once informed that they were now the King's chattels. They were imprisoned in a palace, and there left without food or drink. A baptized Jew was sent to reason with them; bribes, promises and threats were offered, but the Jews proved adamant to all attempts, and numbers were taken and forcibly baptized.

But even the zeal of Manuel had its limits, and when on April 19th, 1506, a merciless massacre of over two thousand Jews took place in Lisbon, that King seized the fanatical Dominican friars who instigated it and meted out exemplary punishment by the execution of the ringleaders.

The Inquisition was set up in Portugal in 1531 by the order of Pope Clement VII, and resulted in the continued exodus of great numbers of Marranos or Jews, who, although baptized, observed the Jewish faith in secret. King Sebastian saw a source of revenue in this, and exacted a sum of a quarter of a million ducats for the privilege of emigration, so that by the end of the sixteenth century very few Jews were left in Portugal, and the story of general persecution came to a close.

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