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The Approach of the Black Death in Switzerland and the Persecution of Jews, 1348-1349

by
Albert Winkler

When the Black Death first arrived in Europe in 1347, it struck along the Mediterranean coast of Italy and southern France. In the following year, the plague swept into central Europe following major trade routes deep into the interior of the continent. The pestilence was one of the most virulent diseases ever to strike the human community, and its impact was devastating, because perhaps a third of the population of Europe died in the next several years. People were dying at an unprecedented rate, and no one knew precisely what the contagion was or how to stop it.¹ A few communities took practical steps to stop the affliction, such as England, which attempted to block any commerce from the afflicted areas to prevent the arrival of the disease, but such efforts usually proved to be unsuccessful. Most contemporaries either believed that the malady was of supernatural origin, in which deity was punishing humanity for its sins, or that there was some kind of grand conspiracy by enemies of society to murder their adversaries. In some areas, suspicion fell upon the weak and disfranchised such as lepers and the poor, but, by far, the Jews were singled out as the main antagonists of Christianity and, therefore, were somehow responsible for the huge numbers of deaths in some great scheme of murder. To prevent the Jews from attacking society, the Christians often struck first to destroy them. The Jewish communities had long been the victims of abuse and violence, but the persecutions associated with the advance of the plague were the most severe they faced in the entire Middle Ages.

Cities and towns all over the German Empire—which at the time was more like a loose coalition than a unified state—participated in the pogroms against the Jews, and perhaps more than four hundred municipalities in that federation in 1348 and 1349 were involved in the destruction and expulsion of their Jewish communities.² The Swiss areas of the Empire were among the first

¹For recent books on the Black Death in English, see, Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346-1353: the Complete History* (Rochester: Boydell, 2004) and Joseph P. Byrne, *The Black Death* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2004). An excellent account remains, Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (London: Collins, 1969).

²Important works on the impact of the Black Death on Germany include: Alfred Haverkamp, ed., *Geschichte der Juden im Mittelalter von der Nordsee bis den Südalpen* (Hannover, Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2002); František Graus, *Pest-Geissler-Judenmorde*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1987); and Robert Hoeningner, *Gang und Verbreitung des Schwarzen Todes in*

regions to persecute their Jews and, to a certain extent, set the precedent of much that was to follow. The activities of the Swiss present a disturbing example of how late Medieval society dealt with the impending catastrophe, and how prejudice and fear contributed to the severe abuse of an easily and often-victimized minority. This paper will argue that the persecution of Jews in Swiss lands was a consequence of improper methods of judicial enquiry; dangerous precedents; cultural, economic, and religious animosities and jealousies; and a hysteria fed by the fear of impending doom. All of these factors were involved when Swiss towns decided to destroy their Jewish communities.³

By 1348 and 1349, the Confederation, around which the modern state of Switzerland later formed, was only in its early stages of development. The states of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden entered into a permanent alliance in 1291, which was the beginning step in the development of the Swiss Confederation. Before the outbreak of the plague, only Luzern had joined the Confederation, and that took place in the year 1332. After the approach of the pestilence, four other states soon became part of the pact. Zurich joined in 1351, Glarus and Zug became members in 1352, while Bern formally entered the league in 1353. At that point, the Swiss Confederation had become the important "Eight Old Areas" (*Die acht Alten Orte*). Because of its military success, this league of eight states was able to extend its power structure, which allowed it to expand geographically and eventually incorporate additional regions, into what became the modern state many years in the future. This study will concentrate on the areas which later formed Switzerland even though they were not yet formally a part of the Swiss Confederation when the plague approached.⁴

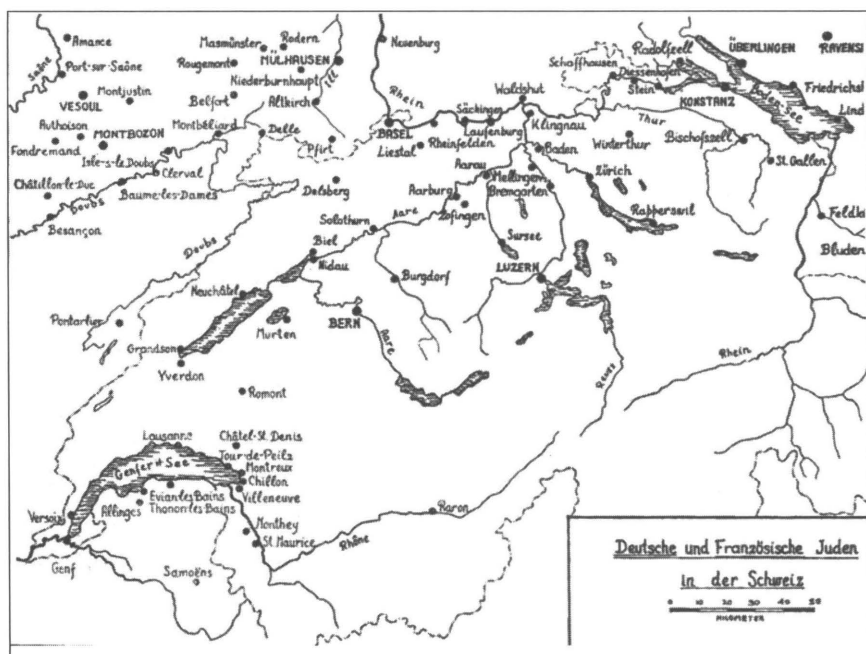
The earliest records indicate that Jews were in the Swiss lands starting in the mid-thirteenth century. They were first mentioned in the sources in Luzern around 1252. Shortly afterwards, in 1262 or 1263, some of them were also probably living in Bern. By the end of the century, the records showed that Jews lived in many areas including St. Gall, Winterthur, Zurich, Schaffhausen, Solothurn, Zofingen, Bischofzell, Rheinfelden, and Basel. In the first half of

Deutschland von 1348-1351 und sein Zusammenhang mit den Judenverfolgungen und Geisselfahrten dieser Jahre (Berlin: Groser, 1881). For an overview of the persecution of Jews in its early phases in Germany, see Albert Winkler, "The Medieval Holocaust: The Approach of the Plague and the Destruction of Jews in Germany, 1348-1349" *FEEFS Journal* 13 (2005):6-27.

³For classic histories of the Jews in Switzerland, see, Augusta Steinberg, *Studien zur Geschichte der Juden in der Schweiz während des Mittelalters* (Zürich: Schulthess, 1902) and Johann Caspar Ulrich, *Sammlung Jüdischer Geschichten, welche sich mit diesen Volk in dem XIII. und folgenden Jahrhunderten bis auf MDCCLX in der Schweiz* (Basel: np, 1768).

⁴The most comprehensive history of Switzerland in English is, James Murray Luck, *A History of Switzerland: the First 100,000 Years, Before the Beginnings to the Days of the Present* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1985).

the next century, Jews continued to appear in numerous Swiss areas, and they were mentioned as living in an additional seventeen towns, meaning that their presence was significant by the time of the Black Death.⁵



Jews in Switzerland in the late Middle Ages, *Germania Judaica* 2:758

The Christian community in the German Empire frequently hated and often persecuted their Jews during the late Middle Ages. Consistent with other areas of Europe, numerous people in the Empire had strong prejudices against their Jewish neighbors. Many Christians believed that the Jews had somehow inherited the sin of killing Jesus from their ancestors, and that the crime could only be washed away by the waters of baptism. As long as the Jews remained outside the fold of the Christian faith, they were viewed much like heretics who could be destroyed for their own good. The Jewish community frequently was blamed for many calamities of all natures that struck society. These people were blamed for everything from aiding the powers of evil causing diseases to break out, to starting fires, to murdering children and using their blood in some kind of Satanic ritual. The term “Jew” became almost synonymous with anything that was evil, cruel, dishonest, or underhanded. In almost all cases, the accusations were simply egregious lies or total fabrications. As an eminent

⁵Ernst Fraenkel “Schweiz,” in *Germania Judaica* 2 vols. in 3 ed. Zvi Aveni (Tübingen: Mohr, 1968), vol. 2 von 1238 bis zur Mitte des 14. Jahrhunderts, p. 757.

historian of anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages observed, the accusations against the Jewish community almost defied exaggeration because there was nothing "too monstrous to be told about a Jew."⁶

Some states, such as the kingdoms of England and France, had expelled their Jews decades before the arrival of the plague, and Jewish communities were often only tolerated in many areas because some Christian societies found them useful as moneylenders. The Jews were barred from many ways to make a living, and many of them survived only by dealing in rags or second-hand goods. Only a relatively few Jews were employed in granting credit. The Church's injunction against usury, which it defined as loaning money at interest, meant that financial markets in many areas of the German Empire and other areas of Europe were relatively weak or even primitive. While loans were available from some Christians, many people, rich and poor alike, found it necessary or convenient to go to the Jewish community for funds because the Jews often could offer credit. There were many fears and misapprehensions between members of the Christian and Jewish society, and, frequently, the main point of interaction between both groups related to money. Lending funds at interest was an insecure activity during the Middle Ages because many borrowers defaulted on their financial obligations. The insecurity of loans often forced lenders to charge high interest rates. An imperial decree of Germany in 1255 stated that Jews were not allowed to charge weekly interest rates on short-term loans in excess of 43 1/3%, and 33 1/3 % was the maximum annual interest that could be charged on loans held one or more years.⁷ While many Christian money lenders charged similar or identical rates, Jews were frequently resented as gouging their clients, and they were often referred to pejoratively as *Wucherer* (usurers or profiteers).

Only in the area of medicine did the Jews enjoy a relatively good reputation among many contemporaries. In fact, aside from loaning money, the practice of medicine was likely the most important profession for Jews when they interacted with the Christian community.⁸ Probably using such skills as a basic knowledge of hygiene to the greatest advantage, Jewish physicians sometimes were well received. These medical doctors also used such materials as herbs and poultices to help their patients, but this knowledge of natural substances probably contributed to the fear some people held against them. Many were concerned that anyone who could use substances to help could also use poisonous materials to do harm.⁹ This belief might have contributed to the

⁶Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: the Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), p. 52.

⁷Georg Caro, *Sozial- und Wirtschafts-geschichte der Juden im Mittelalter und der Neuzeit*, vol. 1 *Das frühere und das hohe Mittelalter* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1999), p. 424.

⁸Joseph Shatzmiller, *Jews, Medicine, and Medieval Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 1. See also John M. Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews: a History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001), p. 13.

⁹Klaus Plaar, "Gereinigt ist die Stadt: geläutert durch die Flamme"? *Studien zur Geschichte der Juden in Zofingen* (Zofingen: Verlag Zofinger Tagblatt, 1993), p. 46.

accusations against Jews who were charged with attempting to poison all Christians when the Black Death was approaching Swiss lands.

The advance of the pestilence was a crisis that caused many Christian communities of Europe to panic and to take forceful action against the most distrusted and feared persons in society, the Jews. In their distrust of the Jewish community, many Christians believed almost irrationally that the Jews were somehow responsible for the coming of the plague because they were poisoning various water supplies. In reaction, Jews were persecuted first in the south of France in 1348 and later in Spain in the summer of the same year. Later in 1348 and throughout much of 1349, pogroms also took place in the Swiss states and in other areas of the German Empire, where many of the persecutions were most severe. The Black Death followed the trade routes up the Rhone River of France and entered the Swiss areas from the west. As the Bernese chronicler, Conrad Justinger, rather poetically described, “the death came from the [direction of] the going down of the sun and went [in the direct of] the rising of the sun” (*Der sterbot kam von der sunnen undergang und gieng gegen der sunnen ufgang*).¹⁰ In a like manner, the persecution of Jews tended to take place in the western Swiss areas and then occurred later in the eastern regions. The plague probably arrived in Geneva shortly before 10 August 1348, and the pestilence appeared in Lausanne to the northeast roughly 90 days later, in early November. The two cities were about 60 kilometers apart, and this meant that the plague advanced at an average of only about two thirds of a kilometer per day. Clearly, the Christian communities had plenty of time, often months, to react to the approach of the Black Death because human traffic, which brought news of the plague, traveled much faster on the roads and over Lake Geneva than did the pestilence.¹¹

When the persecutions against the Jews broke out in Germany in the fall of 1348, the city council of Strasbourg took a keen interest in what was happening, and the leaders of the community sent letters to the various towns in the region asking them to explain what actions were being taken. The responses to these enquiries proved to be a boon to modern historians because these replies often include essential information on these pogroms and investigations which are unavailable elsewhere.¹²

The burning of Jews and the torture of their supposed Christian accomplices in crime had already taken place in the area of Savoy, France, just south of Lake Geneva, when those accused of crimes were examined at the castle of Chillon. This fortress was located on the shores of Lake Geneva about thirty kilometers from Lausanne, and the warden of the citadel wrote to

¹⁰Conrad Justinger, *Die Berner-Chronik* (Bern: K. J. Wyss, 1871), p. 111.

¹¹Benedictow, *The Black Death*, pp. 119-20.

¹²These responses have been published in *Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg Fünfter Band: Politische Urkunden von 1332 bis 1380* ed. by Hans Witte and Georg Wolfram (Strassburg: Trübner, 1896).

Strasbourg to explain what the courts had done there.¹³ Following a common Roman legal practice, many of the accused were “put to the question” (*ad quaestionem positi*) when they were examined. This phrase was a euphemism for the use of judicial torture when pain was inflicted on the witnesses to gain confessions.¹⁴ The use of torture in examinations was a highly questionable method for discovering the truth. When tormented, the witnesses would clearly say anything that their interrogators wanted to hear. The use of judicial torture was very questionable at best and provided no reliable information. The confessions reached by such means were probably little more than an attempt of the accused to avoid further torment. This meant that there was little if any truth to the stories of Jews poisoning water supplies, and the entire accusation may be called fabrications or even fables (*Märchen*).

The Jews in the nearby village of Villeneuve had been imprisoned at Chillon, and they gave their first unreliable confessions starting on 15 September 1348 when they stated that they had poisoned wells, springs, and food with the intent to kill and destroy all of Christianity (*Ad interficiendam et destruendam totam legem christianam*). A man named Balavigny from the town of Thonon-les Bains on the south side of Lake Geneva was arrested near Chillon, and he gave many statements on the nature of the grand conspiracy after he was “tortured briefly” (*positus ad questionem aliquantulum*). The record described Balavigny as a “Jewish surgeon” (*judaus chirurgicus*). This is consistent with the thesis that Jewish physicians were feared because they might have the ability to use their knowledge of the remedies to make poisons and do harm to Christians. Balavigny presented extensive testimony about the supposed attempt of Jews to poison Christians.



Judicial torture in Luzern. Diebold Schilling (Luzern). Nephew of Diebold Schilling (Bern).

¹³“Der Castellän von Chillon sendet Straßburg Auszüge aus dem Protokoll eines Judenverhörs.” *Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg*, 5: 167-76.

¹⁴In her translation of the document, Rosemary Horrox gave the statement in its literal sense, “put to the question.” However, she explained the true meaning of the term in a footnote. *The Black Death*, trans. and edited by Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 212-9. In his translation of a part of the document, Jacob R. Marcus more accurately rendered the phrase as, “put to the torture.” Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: a Source Book 315-1791* (Cincinnati: Sinai Press, 1938), p. 44.

He stated that he had received poison from Rabbi Jacob, who had been living in Chambéry, a town in the Rhone River Valley in the direction from which the plague was advancing, with orders to distribute the toxin in public water supplies to poison anyone using them. The instructions stated that various rabbis had ordered that such damaging substances be placed in water sources in many other places as well. These areas included a number of villages on the shores of Lake Geneva near Chillon. When Balavigny stated that another man, Mussus, the Jew, said he had placed poison in a well at Chillon, the water source was investigated and the substance was found. In a curious turn of events, the material was given to a Jew who supposedly “died because of it proving that it was poison.” (*Qui inde mortuus fuit probando ipsum toxicum*).¹⁵

Balavigny, speaking as a surgeon and, therefore, as someone who knew much about medicine, said that anyone would be infected who touched someone who was sweating and was sick from the poison. Also, the breath of such a sick person could infect others as well. This description of how the effects of the poison could be spread from person to person appeared to explain how a the toxin could devastate communities over great distances. The poison also seemed to have the same symptoms and properties as the advancing pestilence. He further implicated all Jews in a grand conspiracy because he stated that they all knew of the toxin and were guilty of its consequences. (*Et est certus quod alii judaei non possunt se de hoc excusare, qui sunt bene conscii et culpabiles de praedictis*). Balavigny stated that he thought the poison was derived from the basilisk (*de Basilico*) which was some kind of a reptile or a mystical, poisonous creature whose breath could be fatal. Another Jew, Iconetus, stated that he had no knowledge of the composition of the substance.¹⁶

Further confessions taken after numerous victims of interrogation had been tortured or threatened with torment seemed to confirm the theory that there was a major conspiracy among Jews to infect Christians. Once again, the Rabbi Jacob supposedly sent toxins to be used to poison water sources. The substance was variously described as being the size of a nut, a large nut, an egg, a human fist, or two fists. The color of the toxin was green, red, black, or white. It was placed in bags of thin leather big as a fist, two fists, or two fingers. Some of the material was also inside a cloth or in paper that was twisted in the shape of a cone. Aside from the statement from Balavigny that the substance came from a mythical creature, no one knew what the poison was, but it was described as some sort of powder. The material could be distributed by sprinkling it over the water. It could also be placed under a rock in a well, spring, or other source, supposedly, so the substance would seep into the water and infect anyone who used it.

¹⁵The reported testimony from Balavigny is found in “Judenverhörs” *Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg*, 5: 168-70.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 169-70, 173. See also, Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Greek and Roman Mythology: The Age of Fable* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2000), pp. 252-3.

A Jew named Mamson stated that he and many others were responsible for contaminating water supplies. Before Balvigny, Mamson, and others were executed for their crimes, they supposedly gave a broad confession which implicated every Jew over a young age. They stated that all Jews from the age of seven years knew of this plot to poison Christians, and none of them could be excused from complicity in the crime (*Omnes judaei a septem annis circum non possint super hoc se excusare, quoniam universaliter sciant omnes et sint culpabiles in dicto facto*). In another curious confession, a Jew named Aquetus (water person) said that the Jews well merited death (*Judaei bene meruerunt mortem*), and he should also be executed because he well deserved it. The officials at Chillon thought they had uncovered a large collusion involving all the Jews of the area. Many Jews from the towns and villages on the shores of Lake Geneva, from the city of Geneva to the west to the villages near Chillon on the east, were arrested, tortured for confessions, and killed. The means of execution was burning them to death. Reportedly, at least some of these victims called out from the flames, when they were about to expire, confirming that they were indeed guilty of disseminating the poison.¹⁷ At Lausanne, the executions were equally brutal. A Jew named Bona Dies (good day) confessed his duplicity in the crimes, and he was tortured on a wagon wheel (*in rota*) or similar device, which probably meant he was tied to the device, and the bones in his arms and legs were broken. The man lived four days and four nights all the time confirming his guilt as long as he was able to speak. In the county of Savoy, just south of Lake Geneva, many Jews and Christians who were judged as being involved in the crime were sentenced to punishment by burning and by being impaled (*Per judicium puniti et combusti et scitote*).¹⁸

All of these supposed confessions and all of the information given to the officials at Chillon were suspect. The statements varied considerably on the appearance of the poison, and only one person, Balavigny, seemed to have any knowledge of what it was. But his reference to a mythical beast shed no light on the nature of the substance, and any confession relating to a non-existent animal was highly questionable. This indicated that the entire proceedings was based on superstition and the irrational. Additionally, at least three of the accused Jews were named Aquetus which was indeed a rare Jewish name. It was ironic that persons with a name relating to water were accused of poisoning water supplies. Hysteria fed the persecution of Jews, and the Christian community felt a deep psychological need for a scapegoat or a means of combating the approaching plague. Unfortunately, the misleading proceedings at Chillon and other locations helped spread the fear of the Jews to other areas of the Swiss Confederation.

¹⁷*Urkundenbuch Strassburg* 5: 171-4.

¹⁸Rudolf von Orn an den Rat von Straßburg: machen Mitteilung über ihre Judenuntersuchungen [15 Nov. 1348] Lausanne, *Urkundenbuch Strassburg* 5: 164. Horrox translated the obscure term *scitote* as "impalement." Horrox, *The Black Death*, p. 211.

The pestilence approached the Swiss from the west and went east, and, similarly, the persecution of the Jews seemed also to go in the same direction. Solothurn probably became the first German-speaking city in the Empire to persecute its Jews. As a contemporary historian described, "In 1348 in the month of November the persecution of the Jews began. And for the first time in Germany, in the castle of Solothurn, all the Jews were burned" (*Anno predicto xl. octavo mense novembris incepit persecutio Iudeorum. Et primo Alamannia in castro Solodorensi cremati fuerunt omnes Iudei*).¹⁹

The persecution of Jews in Solothurn was probably instigated by a report from the city councilors of Bern, which stated that a Jew in their city had given testimony that he saw two other Jews, named Köppli and Kürsenner, place poison in a fountain in Solothurn. (*Ein jude . . . öffentlich verjach, das er . . . sach, daz Köppli der juden und Kürsenner der jude giftt leiten in den brunnen ze Solottern*).²⁰ While the statement that "all the Jews were burned" in Solothurn presented few details on the actual persecution, a judge, Burkart Senn von Münsingen, related how three former Jews, who had converted to Christianity, were treated in court. This adjudicator stated that two of them, a converted man and his wife, confessed in open court that they had carried poison and had placed it in a number of public fountains. The judge then gave the man, woman, and the other accused convert the choice of dying as Christians or as Jews. Each wanted to die in the Jewish faith. When these three people were tortured by being broken on the wheel, they confessed that they had been paid to carry the poison and that other Jews were involved in the crime. They also told the judge to warn the Christians that no one should trust any baptized Jew because all of them changed their religion because of evil motives. (*Das er mich hies die kristanheit warnen, daz nieman keim getouften juden solle getrüwen*).²¹ Apparently, even conversion to Christianity was no



Heretics being burned at the stake. This punishment was usually used on heretics. Diebold Schilling (Bern).

¹⁹Heinrich Truchsess von Diessenhofen, *Heinricus Dapifer de Diessenhoven 1316-1361 in Fontes Rerum Germanicarum: Geschichtsquellen Deutschlands*, (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1969) 4: 68.

²⁰"Bern an Meister und Rat [in Strasbour], [November 1348] *Urkundenbuch Strassburg* 5: 165.

²¹"Burkart von Münsingen an Straßburg," [Ende 1348] *Urkundenbuch Strassburg* 5: 167.

assurance that a former Jew would be safe from vicious and unfounded accusations.

The cities of Zofingen and Bern also persecuted their Jews in November 1348, and along with Solothurn, were among the first towns to strike at the Jewish communities in the German-speaking Swiss areas.²² In response to the warning that Jews were poisoning water supplies, the authorities in Zofingen apparently searched the houses of Jews in their community and claimed they had found poison. The city authorities of Strasbourg requested that a sample of the poison be sent to them, apparently, so the substance could be examined. But Zofingen refused, so the material could not be independently examined. No description of the toxin was given, but Zofingen maintained that it was indeed lethal because it was analyzed. "We tested the poison on dogs, pigs, and chickens, and they all died from it" (*Wir die gift versuoucht han an hunden, an schwinen und an huonren, also das si von der gift ellú tot sint*). To further convince Strasbourg that the material was poison, Zofingen stated that the substance was adequately tested "in front of an assemblage of trustworthy men" (*vor mangem biderman*)—whose names the city council failed to provide.²³ Very likely, if Zofingen had thought that its methods of testing the substance were completely reliable, then the city should have been willing to let others examine it. Possibly, the city council feared that its methods of assessing the material were flawed and wished to cover its mistakes.

Finding the poison among the Jews was insufficient evidence to indicate that they had used the substance. To elicit confessions, the authorities of Bern and Zofingen tortured the accused. "A few Jews in Bern and Zofingen were tortured with thumb screws [until] they admitted that they had put poison in many fountains" (*Dümelte men etliche Juden zů Berne und zů Zofingen die verjohent das sü vergift hettent in vil burnen geton*). Reportedly, "The poison was also found in the fountains" (*Vant men ouch die vergift in den burnen*).²⁴ Once again, the use of force gave the city authorities exactly what they wanted to hear, and they also reportedly found the questionable substance they were looking for in the water supply. The most thorough modern historian of the persecution of Jews in Zofingen at the time of the Black Death, Klaus Plarr, clearly stated that the Jews had been slandered (*verleumdet*) concerning the charge of poisoning water sources.²⁵

²²Augusta Steinberg overlooked the reference to Solothurn being the first city to persecute Jews. She stated, "In German [speaking] Switzerland the persecution of Jews [started] in Bern and Zofingen and [then] spread [to other areas]." *"In der Deutschen Schweiz ging die Verfolgung von Bern und Zofingen aus."* Steinberg, *Juden in der Schweiz*, p. 131.

²³"Zofingen an Straßburg," 23 December 1348, *Urkundenbuch Strassburg* 5: 166.

²⁴Jacob Twinger von Königshofen, "Chronik," *Die Chroniken der oberrheinischen Städte Strassburg*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1871), p. 760.

²⁵Klaus Plarr, "Gereinigt ist die Stadt, geläutert durch die Flamme"?: *Studien zur Geschichte der Juden in Zofingen* (Zofingen: Zofinger Tablatt, 1993), p. 39. The term *verläumdet* was italicized in the text for emphasis.

Apparently the attack on the Jews at Zofingen was less extensive than might have been expected. In fact, one source stated that only one female and two male Jews were tortured by being broken on the wheel and killed. "The others were saved on the order of the Lord, Duke Albert of Austria, who ordered them to be protected" (*Alii vero servati ad mandatum domini Alberti ducis Austrie, qui eos defendi mandavit*). The action of protecting the Jews proved to be largely unsuccessful over time because many of the Jews were killed later: "But this [action] profited little because within a year those who were saved had been killed" (*Sed hoc modicum profuit, quia infra annum sequentem occisi fuerunt*).²⁶

The Jews in Bern had already suffered from false accusations in the century previous to the approach of the pestilence. Probably in the year 1293 or 1294,²⁷ the body of a dead Christian boy; variously listed as Ruff, Ruof, or Rudolf; was found, and the murdered child had been killed in a most lamentable (*jemerlich*) manner. Apparently, the corpse was discovered in or near the house of a Jew named Jöly, and the suspicion of being involved in the crime fell on the Jewish community even though no evidence of a large collusion was presented. As the anti-Jewish Bernese chronicler, Conrad Justinger, explained, the Jews wanted to do nothing in the world but damage Christianity by any methods possible. (*Die doch in diser welt nüt tund denne wie si die Kristanheit geschedigen mit allen sachen*). The child was viewed as an innocent martyr to Christianity, and he was buried behind the altar in a church (*lüttilchen ze berne*). Reportedly, many miracles were associated with the child's remains, which seemed to indicate the holy nature of the boy. The Jews, "enemies of God and murderers," (*die gottes vigende und morder*) were arrested. Some of them were tortured and executed by being "broken on the wheel" and the rest were driven out of the city.²⁸ The Jewish community was forced to pay 500 Marks (silver coins approximately 8 ounces each) to the mayors (probably the small ruling council) as a penalty for the alleged crime. Additionally, the Jews had to pay the community 1,000 Marks, also the Jewish moneylenders had to surrender all property seized as payment for loans and all certificates of debt that related to the citizens of Bern.²⁹ The payment of these funds was a means by which the financial resources of the Jews were plundered, and these fines were probably a means of mollifying the Christians

²⁶Diessenhofen, *Fontes Rerum Germanicarum* 4: 69-70.

²⁷The early sources and histories that relate the story of the boy's death indicate that he was most likely killed in 1287 or 1288. More recent scholarship has viewed this as unlikely because the gravestone of a Jew was found in 1888 which dated from 1293. This would be impossible if the Jews were driven out shortly after 1288. See, "Bern" *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnall, 1902) 3: 86.

²⁸Conrad Justinger, *Die Berner-Chronik*, p. 29.

²⁹Moses Ginsburger, "Bern," in *Germania Judaica*, 2: 77; Steinberg, pp. 124-5; and Gustav Tobler, "Zur Geschichte der Juden im alten Bern bis 1427," *Archiv des Historischen Vereins des Kantons Bern* 12 (1889): 354-8.

and allowing most of the members of the Jewish community to escape with their lives.

The Jews were allowed to return to Bern in the following decades where they again faced severe persecutions when the Black Death approached. The accusations of well poisoning and the confessions exacted by torture have already been mentioned. These statements no doubt led to the execution of many Jews and the expulsion of the survivors, but the exact nature of the persecutions was poorly documented. Yet the city council of Bern described a surprising confession and accusation by a Jew while he was being burned to death. "When he was thrown into the fire, . . . he called out manly to



Jews killing the boy, Rudolf, in Bern. Diebold Schilling (Bern). Uncle of Diebold Schilling (Luzern).

them and spoke publicly to everyone who was there: . . . Know [this] that all Jews in all the lands around know of the poison" (*Do der in daz fúr wart geworfen, . . . do rúfft er menlichen zu ime and sprach öffentlich ze allen die da waren: . . . wissent daz alle juden in allen landen umbe die giffit wissen*).³⁰ Yet again, a Jew seemed to implicate all Jews in a plot to kill Christians. This kind of confession clearly helped feed the fears of many trying to find a way to turn the plague away.

Various towns and cities of the German Empire began to execute their Jews, and the reports of Jews poisoning water sources were also sent to Freiburg im Breisgau, Strasbourg, and Basel, cities that were protecting their Jews, with the recommendation "that they [the city council] should also burn their Jews" (*Das sū ire Juden ouch soltent verbürnen*).³¹ But the members of the governing body of Basel were unwilling to destroy the city's Jewish community or to persecute its members. The city council likely doubted the truth of the reports of Jews infecting public fountains, and the ruling assembly took steps to protect them. Apparently, a number of knights had been guilty of some kind of violence towards the Jews, and the ruling body took action and

³⁰"Bern an Meister und Rat [in Strassburg]," [November 1348] *Urkundenbuch Strassburg* 5: 165.

³¹Königshofen, "Chronik," *Strassburg*, p. 760.

banished these men from the city.³² By doing so, the leaders had unwittingly set in motion a backlash that led to the persecution of the people the council was trying to protect. The complexity of city politics had come into play in the decisions to save or to destroy the Jews of Basel.

During much of the later part of the Middle Ages, including the first half of the fourteenth century, the members of the guilds of the cities and towns of the German Empire were moving towards more power in civic government and the establishment of democracies. For the lower classes seeking more political power, progress was at times slow, uneven, and often dangerous. The citizens, as represented by the guilds, learned to recognize potential friends and enemies. The Jewish moneylenders were often among those feared by the lower-class workers who were seeking greater authority because of the loans to potential competitors for power. These funds frequently went to noble factions and Church leaders, and the money often gave these groups additional power that could be wielded against the guilds. This might have been a major reason why so much of the hatred aimed at the Jews in 1348 and 1349 came from the lower classes. As a prominent historian of the economic influence of the Jews has argued, "It is no accident that the great Jewish persecutions of 1349 came directly from the guilds and that [in] so many areas the burning of the Jews followed the overthrow of the patriotic [city] council" (*Es ist kein Zufall, dass die grossen Judenverfolgungen des Jahres 1349 recht eigentlich von den Zünften ausgingen, und dass so vieler Orten der Judenbrandt auf den Sturz des patriotischen Rats folgte*).³³

This was clearly the case in Basel in the early fourteenth century when the lower classes were seeking more power, and when these people believed that the loans from Jewish moneylenders were aiding their enemies. While at least some of the relatively poor workers probably received credit from the Jewish financiers as well, they apparently still thought that their rivals got more support and power through their loans. The attack on the city council of Basel in January of 1349 was no spontaneous mob action, and it was a clearly a planned uprising because the protestors advanced on the city hall organized and marching behind their militia banners. (*Ecce irruit populus cum baneriis ad palacium consulum*). The members of the council were alarmed and asked the people what they wanted. "They responded that they would not leave unless the banished [knights] were allowed to return" (*Responderunt se nolle abire nisi bannitis reversis*). The members of the city council probably believed they were under siege because they had to stay in the city hall until the expelled knights had returned. The people also demanded that the Jews would no longer be tolerated in the community, so the city council swore that no Jews would be allowed to live in the city in the next two hundred years. Not only had Basel

³²Moses Ginsburger, "Dei Juden in Basel," *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 8 (1909): 341-2.

³³Georg Caro, "Die Juden des Mittelalters in ihrer wirtschaftlichen Betätigung," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 48 (1904): 600.

arrested its Jews because of the clamor of the people (*pupuli timuerunt clamorem*), but the leaders of Freiburg im Breisgau and Strasbourg apprehended their Jews at about the same time.³⁴ Apparently, the decision to execute the Jews in Basel had already been made when the city authorities had them taken captive. Not only had the council sworn to ban the Jews from the city, but they agreed “to burn the Jews” (*die Juden zu bürende*) as well.³⁵

A new house was built on a sand bar near the mouth of the Birs Creek, where it emptied into the Rhine River east of Basel, for the purpose of killing the Jews of the city by burning them alive in the structure. Friday, 16 January 1349, was selected as the date for the execution. This choice of dates was probably no coincidence because this was the day of the week when Jesus was crucified, and many towns and cities killed their Jews on a Friday, Sunday, or on other religious days and holidays. The executions on Fridays probably meant that many Christians were taking symbolic revenge against the Jews whom many blamed for the death of their Savior. Also, the killings on religious holidays made it appear that the murders were part of the holy celebrations, which indicated that many Christians believed they were doing the work of their Lord by burning Jews alive.³⁶ The Jews were brought to the place of execution (*absque sententia*), and neither an official investigation had taken place nor a legal procedure had been undertaken. Clearly, old hatreds and prejudices were sufficient causes for the mass murder



Jews in the foreground are wearing the badge denoting their religion as ordered by the 4th Lateran Council in 1215. In the foreground, the Jews are involved in money lending and in desecrating the Host of the Holy Eucharist by stabbing it with a knife. In the background, Jews are being burned alive. Diebold Schilling (Luzern).

³⁴Mathias von Neuenburg, *Die Chronik* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1955), p. 265.

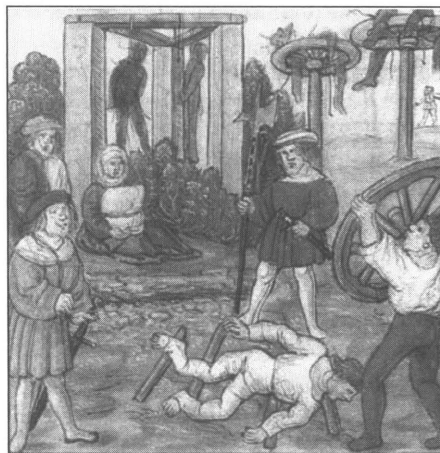
³⁵Königshofen, p. 760.

³⁶Alfred Haverkamp, “Die Judenverfolgungen zur Zeit des Schwarzen Todes im Gesellschaftsgefüge deutschen Städte,” in *Zur Geschichte der Juden im Deutschland des Späten Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit* ed. Alfred Haverkamp (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1981), pp. 35-8. Haverkamp lists the day of the week when the executions occurred.

of the Jewish community. Perhaps the most immediate reasons for the executions were the “clamor of the people” (*ad clamorem pupuli*) and the fear held by the members of the city council of what might happen to them if they continued to protect the Jews. The people of the Jewish community were led into the new building, the structure was set on fire, and “all the Jews of Basel were burned” (*Cremati sunt ... omnes Judei Basilienses*).³⁷

The only Jews who were able to escape death in the conflagration were those who chose to convert to Christianity at the last minute or those who were snatched from the flames before they were killed and baptized. A chronicler, Christian Wurstisen, writing over two centuries later affirmed that “many small children” (*Viel junger Kinder*) were taken from the flames and forcefully baptized against the desires of their parents.³⁸ The fact that Jews could be saved from execution by being baptized as Christians meant that their real crime was being Jewish and had nothing to do with the suspicion of poisoning wells. If the city authorities actually believed the Jews were attempting to kill Christians, then baptism would be insufficient to free them from the punishment for their crimes.

The numbers of persons saved from burning at that time probably was small, but being saved from death at that time was more of a postponement than a pardon to many because they were later executed. Basel renewed its persecutions in the summer of 1349 when four baptized Jews were arrested. Perhaps because the Jewish community had already been eradicated, the courts of Basel turned to converts to blame for the plague. As in the pattern established months before, these victims were brought to court and tortured by being broken on the wheel. They confessed that they had placed poison in the fountains of Basel (*Si die brunnen zu unserre stat etlich vergift hettent*), and that they had administered poison to the people of the city in other ways, including within butter. The suspicions went farther than converted Jews because a Christian man (*cristenman*) was also accused of poisoning wells, and he too confessed to the crime under the torment of being broken on a wheel.³⁹



Criminals being broken on the wheel. This punishment was usually used on murderers. Diebold Schilling (Luzern).

³⁷Mathias von Neuenburg, *Chronik*, p. 266.

³⁸Christian Wurstisen, *Bassler chronick* (Basel: Sebastian Henricperti, [1580]), p. 170.

³⁹“Basel an Straßburg,” 4 July [1349], *Urkundenbuch der Stadt Strassburg* 5:196-7.

The immediate cause of the outbreak of the persecution against the Jews in Zurich at the approach of the Black Death is the subject of some controversy. Early chroniclers, including Heinrich Brennwald and the Protestant Reformer, Heinrich Bullinger, stated that a four-year-old boy from the Zur Wyden family of shoe makers was murdered by the Jews. The Jews in Zurich “pressed the child [with nails] until he died. After they had taken his blood, they buried him in a stream at the new market [of the city]” (*Das mit gufen so lang stupfend, das es starb. Und nachdem si das blut von em empfiengent, begruben si das in dem bach zu Númerkt*). The stream was called the Wofbach (Wolfbrook). Sometime later, a boy named Walther von Wyl was playing on stilts with his friends and was crossing the stream when he found the boy’s body.⁴⁰ Suspicion fell immediately on the Jews, who were believed to use the blood of children in some kind of sadistic ritual, and they were punished for the crime.

There may be problems with the story. The historians who recorded it often lived long after the event. Both Brennwald (1478-1551) and Bullinger (1504-1575) wrote roughly two centuries after the Jewish persecutions of 1349 in Zurich, and earlier, more-contemporary sources make no mention of the murder. This lack of contemporary materials has led modern historians to doubt the story of the murder of the child.⁴¹ As was the case in many places, there were probably a number of motives for the persecution of the Jewish community in Zurich. Clearly, the Jews in Zurich were attacked at the same time as the other enclaves in the region, and the city authorities were no doubt aware of the accusations made against them elsewhere.

One of the earliest chronicles stated that the Jews were attacked because of the typical accusation of poisoning water sources, and the anonymous but early account gave a brief description of what happened to the Jews of Zurich. “In 1349 the Jews of Zurich were burned on St. Mathis evening [23 February] because it was said that they had placed poison in the fountains” (*Do von gottes gebürt 1349 do brand man die Juden Zürichs an sant Mathis abend; wo man sprach, se hettind gift in die brunnen getan*).⁴² The chronicle of Klingenberg was equally precise. “In the same year [1349] all the Jews of Alsace were burned in January and [also] at Zurich on St. Mathis day” (*Des selben jars wurdent alle juden im Elsass verbrennt im jenner, und ze Zürich umbe sant Mathis tag*).⁴³ The property of the Jews was confiscated. For example, the house of a man named Moses was in the hands of Rudolf Brun, the mayor of

⁴⁰Heinrich Brennwald, *Schweizerchronik* 2 vols. (Basel: Basler Buch- und Antiquariatshandlung, 1908-10) 1:179.

⁴¹Ulrich, *Jüdischer Geschichten*, pp. 82-4 and Steinberg, p. 134 accept the story as authentic, while Ginsberger and Brunschwig reject it. See Ginsberger “Zürich” in *Germania Judaica*, p. 946 and Annette Brunschwig, “Vom 13. Jahrhundert bis zur Französischen Revolution,” in *Geschichte der Juden im Kanton Zürich: von den Anfängen bis in die heutigen Zeit* ed. Ulrich Bär (Zürich: Füssli, 2005), p. 45.

⁴²*Chronik der Stadt Zürich* ed. Johannes Dierauer (Basel, Geering, 1900), p. 46.

⁴³*Klingenberger Chronik* ed. Anton Henne von Sargans (Gotha: Perthes, 1861), p. 12.

Zurich, in 1350. The Jewish women and children who had avoided execution were allowed to keep their property, and the debts owed to Jewish moneylenders were dismissed. The value of the confiscated property was probably significant. The surviving Jews were also banished from the city.⁴⁴

Numerous attacks took place against Jews in other Swiss communities including Asuel, Bernkastel, Fribourg, Luzern, Rapperswil, St. Gall, Stein am Rhein, Schaffhausen, and Sursee, but the list of known persecutions might be incomplete because many pogroms were probably poorly recorded.⁴⁵ As one Bernese chronicler summed up the extent of the killings, “All the Jews within one hundred miles [of Bern] were burned” (*Alle juden bi hundert milen verbrent wurden*).⁴⁶

Despite the destruction, there were efforts to save Jews. In the Swiss areas of the German empire, the most prominent figures in the attempt to save the Jewish communities were the dukes of Austria. Most prominent of these was Duke Albert II of Austria (Herzog Albrecht von Österreich, 1298-1358), the leader who stopped or postponed the destruction of Jews in Zofingen. The Duke’s attempts to save the Jews from persecutions were noted for their success and failures. He probably was the Austrian leader who saved the Jews of Vienna from the pogroms which destroyed so many Jewish communities at that time. Unfortunately, his attempts to save Jews in the Swiss regions were much less successful. Apparently, Duke Albert had the members of the Jewish community of Rheinfelden brought to the town of Baden for their protection (*causa defensionis*), but they were later murdered and burned (*occisi sunt et tandem cremati*).⁴⁷

The castle of Kyburg east of Zurich was a place of refuge for members of the Jewish communities under the protection of Albert II, but it also became the location of perhaps the greatest massacre of Jews in the Swiss areas in terms of numbers. The Jews came from the cities of Winterthur and Diessenhofen, and from “all the towns of the Duke of Austria, who protected them” (*Alliis oppidis ducis Austrie qui ipsos defendebat*).⁴⁸ These towns are thought to include the Jews from the town of Aarau in the Aargau Canton, which was under the Duke’s control at that time.⁴⁹

⁴⁴Brunschwig in *Juden im Kanton Zürich*, pp. 46, 48.

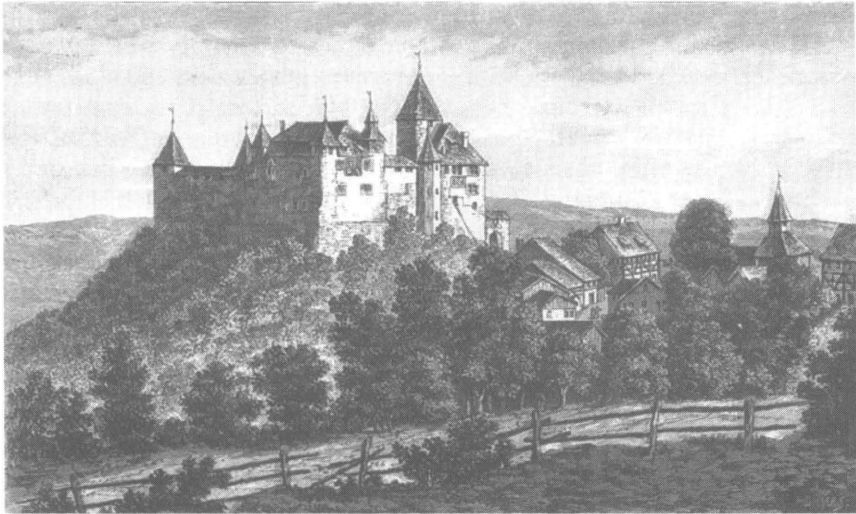
⁴⁵The *Germania Judaica* presents what is known about the Jews in the various cities and towns of the German Empire in an alphabetical listing.

⁴⁶Justinger, p. 111.

⁴⁷Diessenhofen, *Fontes Rerum Germanicarum* 4: 70.

⁴⁸Diessenhofen, 4: 70.

⁴⁹Graus *Judenmorde*, p. 164.



The castle of Kyburg as it appeared in the sixteenth century. Lehrer *Schloss Kyburg*, p. 4

Many of the Jews in Kyburg had probably been there for months because the persecutions first broke out in November of 1348 and the execution of the Jews at the castle took place in September of 1349. Apparently, there was considerable pressure placed on Albert to kill the Jews in the fortress. The imperial cities, most of which had probably already destroyed their Jews, no longer supported the policy of protecting them. They told the duke, who was protecting the Jewish communities in the counties of Pfirt and Alsace as well as in the castle of Kyburg, that he could either give the order to burn the Jews, or the cities would burn them under their own authority. Perhaps Albert thought that if the cities acted on their own that they would be asserting more autonomous strength than he desired. As Augusta Steinberg observed, he wanted to maintain the authority over his own lands and play the executioner. (*Sich sein Recht über sein Eigentum voll zu wahren, indem er selbst den Henker spielte*).⁵⁰ Whatever his final motive, he bowed to the pressure and ordered the Jews to be burned. (*Sed dux per suis iudices madavit eos cremari*). On 18 September 1349, the 330 Jews who had taken refuge in Kyburg were burned to death.⁵¹

There was little or no indication that any attempt to help the Jews in the Swiss areas was ultimately successful, and there were also only small hints that any compassion was shown to them. Eberhard II von Kyburg (1299-1357), a count of the Habsburg family in need of funds, drove the Jews out of Burgdorf in the night of 16 and 17 February 1349 and confiscated their wealth.

⁵⁰Steinberg, p. 134.

⁵¹Diessenhofen, 4: 70.

Apparently, Eberhard's only crimes against the Jews was to rob and banish them because they probably escaped otherwise unharmed.⁵²

The hope that attacking the Jews would stop the Black Death proved to be vain. Often months after the Jewish communities in the towns and cities were destroyed the pestilence struck. For example, Bern persecuted its Jews starting in November of 1348, but the plague first arrived in February of 1349. Basel destroyed its Jewish community in January 1349, and the pestilence first struck the city in May of that year.⁵³ The fact that the pogroms started well before the plague arrived has led some modern historians to argue that the approach of the Black Death had little to do with these persecutions, and that the attacks would have taken place even if there was no fear of the approach of the pestilence.⁵⁴ This argument overlooks the evidence indicating that the pogroms broke out precisely when there was a perceived threat of the approaching contagion, and it fails to consider the hysteria engendered by this menace.

Some chroniclers living at the time of the destruction of the Jews presented a multiplicity of reasons for the attacks. These historians were aware of the hatred of the Jews felt by many in contemporary society and of the accusations of well poisoning, but some of them also argued that greed was a major contributing factor to the attacks. Fritsche Closener (died in 1373) described the canceling of debts owed to the Jews and the division of their property after they were killed on 14 February 1349 in Strasbourg. He then added that money was the real poison that caused the Jews to be killed. (*Das was ouch die vergift die die Juden dote*).⁵⁵ Jacob Twinger von Königshofen (1345-1420) made a similar accusation relating to the pogrom in Strasbourg. He stated that "Money was also the reason why the Jews were killed" (*Das gelt was ouch die sache davon die Juden gedöted wurdent*). He added that, "If they [the Jews] had been poor, and the nobles had not owed them debts, then they would not have been burned" (*Wan werent sü arm gewesen und werent in die landesherren nüt schuldig gevesen, so werent sü nüt gebrant worden*).⁵⁶ Since many of the accounts relating to the destruction of the Jews in the Swiss areas also mentioned the canceling of debts owed to them and the division of their property, the observations by Closener and Königshofen that greed was involved in the persecutions may be applicable to the Swiss as well.

⁵²Tobler, "Juden im alten Bern," p. 359.

⁵³For a discussion of when the plague arrived in various areas of Europe see Jean-Noël Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européen et méditerranéens* (Paris: Moutin, 1975).

⁵⁴This argument was renewed recently in Iris Ritzmann, "Judenmord als Folge des 'Schwarzen Todes': ein Medizin-Historischer Mythos?" *Medizin, Gesellschaft, und Geschichte: Jahrbuch des Institutes für Geschichte der Medizin der Robert Bosch Stiftung* 17 (1998): 101-30.

⁵⁵Fritsche Closener, "Chronik," *Die Chroniken der oberrheinische Städte: Strassburg* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1870), p. 130.

⁵⁶Jacob Twinger von Königshofen, "Chronik," *Die Chroniken der oberrheinische Städte:*

The destruction of the Jewish communities and the expulsion of their inhabitants from the Swiss areas at the approach of the Black Death clearly meant there were much fewer Jews in those regions in the following years, but some began to return in the next decades. Basel suffered a devastating earthquake in 1356, and the city badly needed funds to rebuild. Since Jewish moneylenders were available, they were allowed to return, and they were present again in the city in 1361. But the Jewish community proved to be short lived, and the Jews were forced to flee the city after 1397 when yet another Jew had been accused of poisoning fountains of water. Only after four centuries were they allowed to return.⁵⁷ Jews returned to Bern by 1375 when Hug Heyman, a Jewish physician, was reportedly in the city.⁵⁸ Jews were again in many Swiss areas before the end of the fourteenth century. They were in Zurich in 1352, Fribourg in 1356, Schaffhausen in 1369, St. Gall in 1377, Luzern before 1381, Baden in 1384, Dissenhofen in 1396, and in Solothurn by the end of the century.⁵⁹ Since hundreds of Jews had been killed during the persecutions of 1348 and 1349, and many more had been driven out, the numbers of Jews in the Swiss lands were probably much smaller after their return than they had been previous to the pogroms.

The Swiss lands had demonstrated a severe lack of judgment in dealing with the approach of the Black Death. In desperation to stop the devastating contagion, which they understood poorly at best, the people in the Swiss areas struck at a segment of society that was poorly protected by the legal system and was victimized by vicious social and religious prejudices. Almost everywhere, the courts used torture to gain confessions of misconduct from the Jews, meaning that the statements gained were worthless and that they only reflected the prejudices of the investigators. The idea of some kind of grand conspiracy among the Jews to kill all Christians was clearly a fantasy created in an attempt to justify the destruction of the Jewish communities. The city council of Basel and Duke Albert II of Austria initially attempted to protect their Jews, but the force of public opinion was so strong against the Jewish communities that almost all the efforts to shield them ultimately failed. Clearly, the insecurities in Swiss society were extensive, and, unfortunately, the Swiss had a group of people at hand to blame for their problems. The hatred of someone different and the mistrust of the wealthy were also major factors in the pogroms. Setting a precedent that would be followed all over the German Empire at the advance of the plague, the people of the Swiss lands denigrated and then destroyed their Jews.

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⁵⁷Ginsburger, "Die Juden in Basel," pp. 345-59.

⁵⁸Tobler, pp. 359-61 and Erich Fischhof, *Die Stellung der Juden in der Stadt Bern im Mittelalter* (Tel Aviv: Olamenu, 1973), p. 128.

⁵⁹Ginsberger in *Germania Judaica* 1:47, 164, 258, 503; and 2:771, 734, 741, 947.