

POLISH-JEWISH RELATIONS: A COMPLICATED HISTORY

Material from a presentation by M.
Benjamin Thorne, Jan. 14, 2009 at the
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Poland in the Middle Ages

- ▣ Jews evicted from Spain and oppressed in other areas (11th – 14th centuries)
- ▣ Many of them went to Poland
 - Poland had lost population and economic activity due to 13th century Mongol invasions
 - Relative to Western Europe Poland more tolerant
 - ▣ No inquisition, torture
- ▣ Jewish/Polish/Ukrainian communities:
 - Cooperate economically when times were good
 - Jews were scape-goated when times were bad (eg., economy, Black Death)

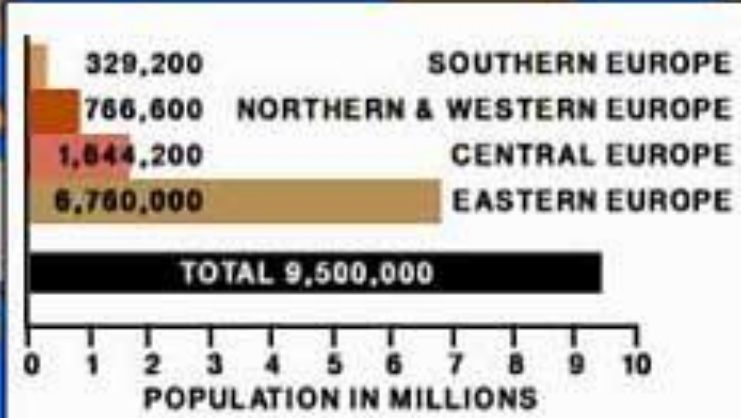
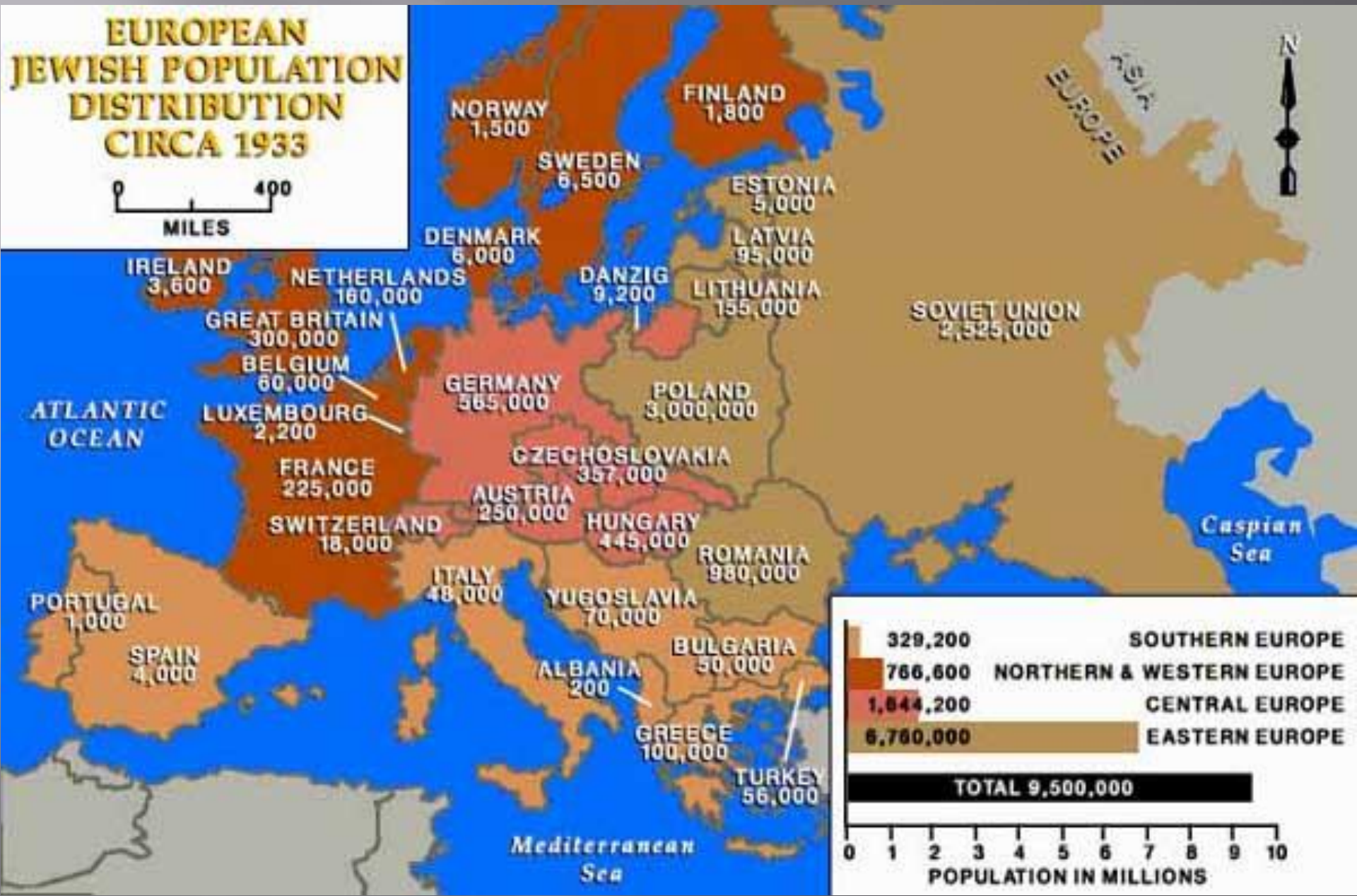
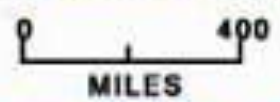
Poland After WWI (1914-1918)

- ▣ Pogroms frequent
 - Great Depression
- ▣ Nazi Germany defeats Poland in 1939
 - Jews moved into ghettos in cities
 - Fierce resistance fought in Warsaw ghetto
- ▣ Holocaust took its worst toll in Poland
 - Most left for United States or Israel after World War II (1939 – 1945)

In “100 Voices” why do Jewish Cantors choose to go to Poland?

- ▣ Largest Jewish community in the world before WWII [large migrations beginning in 13th century]
- ▣ Periods of unprecedented freedom and development of a distinct Jewish culture that influenced & informed Polish culture
- ▣ Periods of oppression and violence that coincide with political and economic upheaval [scape-goating]
- ▣ Illustrative of religious beliefs in:
 - Unknowable g_d manifests in the world
 - Responsibility to the world
 - Focus on education and law
 - Atonement and forgiveness

EUROPEAN JEWISH POPULATION DISTRIBUTION CIRCA 1933



NORWAY 1,500
 SWEDEN 6,500
 FINLAND 1,800
 ESTONIA 5,000
 DENMARK 6,000
 LATVIA 95,000
 IRELAND 3,600
 NETHERLANDS 160,000
 DANZIG 9,200
 LITHUANIA 155,000
 GREAT BRITAIN 300,000
 BELGIUM 60,000
 GERMANY 565,000
 POLAND 3,000,000
 LUXEMBOURG 2,200
 FRANCE 225,000
 CZECHOSLOVAKIA 357,000
 SWITZERLAND 18,000
 AUSTRIA 250,000
 HUNGARY 445,000
 PORTUGAL 1,000
 ITALY 48,000
 YUGOSLAVIA 70,000
 ROMANIA 980,000
 SPAIN 4,000
 ALBANIA 200
 BULGARIA 50,000
 GREECE 100,000
 TURKEY 56,000

ATLANTIC OCEAN

Caspian Sea

Mediterranean Sea

ASIA
EUROPE



Contemporary Poland

- ▣ Today, Poland's Jewish population numbers only 5,000 to 10,000 out of 38,116,000. [3.3 million before WWII]
- ▣ Most Poles know little about the history of Polish Jews, or even ever met a Jewish person.
- ▣ Attitudes towards Jews in Poland run the gamut from extremely positive to overtly anti-Semitic, with many somewhere in the middle.

100 Voices: A Journey Home

- ▣ The film follows cantor Nate Lam, of L.A.'s Stephen S. Wise Temple and father of the film's co-writer and co-producer, as the 72 cantors he gathered from around the world perform at the Warsaw Opera House, the largest theater of its kind in Europe. They also appeared at the Krakow Philharmonic, participated in Poland's annual Jewish Cultural Heritage Festival and conducted the first Jewish service at Auschwitz-Birkenau. *LA Times*
- ▣ The cantors were on a mission to help the revival of Jewish culture in their ancestral land, in which Jews were all but eradicated in the Holocaust. Most all the cantors the filmmakers focus on are sons of Holocaust survivors, and the film follows them to their families' towns and cities in which the Jewish presence has been almost if not wholly eradicated. *LA Times*
- ▣ In the old days, the best cantors — Jewish clergy who specialize in the musical interpretation of prayer — were stars. Many dressed to the nines and had entourages that followed them in the street and crowded into temple to hear them sing. *NY Times*

Europe Today

