



Frankfurt, Germany

Frankfurt (technically Frankfurt am Main) is the largest city in the German state of Hesse and the fifth-largest city in [Germany](#). Evidence of a Jewish community in Frankfurt can be traced back to the 12th century.

In the Middle Ages
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In the Middle Ages

Evidence of a Jewish community in Frankfurt, a city on the Main river in western Germany, dates to the 12th century. At that time, a small group of Jewish merchants from Worms settled in the town, and quickly flourished and grew wealthy. Jews had been in Frankfurt prior to this period as well, but never as official residents – Frankfurt had long been a market town, and Jews visited to trade there as early as the tenth century.

The prosperity of the Frankfurt Jews, however, was short lived. The year 1241 marked the first of what would be many massacres and expulsions of the small community. In this first attack, which was sparked by the refusal of a Jew to convert to [Christianity](#), more than three-quarters of the city's 200 residents were killed. The remainder quickly fled the city, but returned by about 1270, when Emperor Frederick II, upset at the loss in tax-revenue from the wealthy Jewish community, ordered strict penalties against anyone who attacked Jews. The community once again grew rapidly, and although forced to pay crippling taxes, was protected against any physical persecution.



Frankfurt's Jewish cemetery, which dates to the 13th century (photograph circa 1853)

The outbreak of the Black Plague in 1349, however, changed the Jews' protected status. Jews were killed and expelled throughout Germany and Europe, and Frankfurt was no exception. The community was completely massacred, and many Jews chose to burn down their own houses while still inside rather than face death from the angry mob.

Because of their important economic role, Jews were invited back into Frankfurt once again in 1360. Their lives in the city, however, were regulated more strictly than ever, culminating in the forcible relocation of all the Jews of Frankfurt to a [ghetto](#) (*Juddengasse*) in 1462.

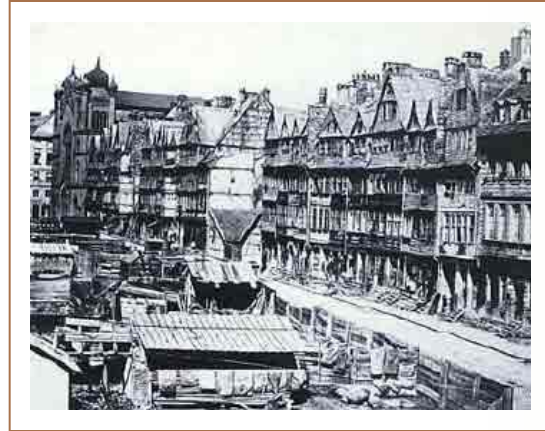
Originally containing just 110 inhabitants, the community developed quickly, and consisted of 3,000 by 1610. Because the area of the ghetto was never expanded, Jews subdivided their houses and built extra stories to accommodate the exponential growth. The community soon became a center of [Ashkenazi](#) Jewry – the [yeshivas](#) in the city attracted students from all over Europe, and the community grew very wealthy.

In 1616, another [pogrom](#) came through the community. Indeed, affluence was a necessity, for the only way the Jewish community continued to exist in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries was by paying enormous tributes in exchange for protection.

In 1624, the two centuries of peace came to a crashing halt as the ghetto was raided and plundered by a mob of artisans and petty merchants, led by Vincent Fettmilch. The group was unhappy with the prominent position of the Jews, and many also owed money to the Jewish [moneylenders](#). Unlike the previous expulsions, however, this one ended happily for the Jewish residents of Frankfurt. The emperor outlawed the rioters, put their leaders to death, and ceremoniously returned the Jew to the ghetto on the twentieth day of the [month](#) of [Adar](#), which has been celebrated in Frankfurt ever since as “[Purim Winz](#)” (“the [Purim](#) of Vincent”).

Toward Modernity

In 1711, the ghetto burned to the ground after an accidental fire spread out of control, but the homes and businesses were quickly rebuilt, and the Jews returned to their isolation. The traditional unity of the Jewish population, however, soon began to decline, as controversy over the [Enlightenment](#) and the conflict between Rabbi [Jacob Emden](#) and Rabbi [Jonathan Eybeschutz](#) spread throughout Europe. The rich families that had long controlled the community saw their influence begin to decline; these families,



The Frankfurt Judengasse in 1890



The “[New Synagogue](#),” built outside of the traditional ghetto area

identifiable by the crests hanging outside their homes, lost their influence to the [maskilim](#), who advocated secular education and emancipation. The only exception was the Red Shield, or Rothschild family, which maintained its importance, and became even more prominent in later years.

When, in 1806, Frankfurt was incorporated into [Napoleon's](#) Confederation of the Rhine, the Jews' lot improved, at least in the eyes of the advocates of emancipation. The spread of the ideals of the French Revolution led to the abolition of the ghetto in 1811.

Despite setbacks in 1819 due to the "[Hep riots](#)," Jews received rights equal to those of non-Jews in 1824. Frankfurt had by now become a center of the [Reform movement](#), the ascendance of which led to a widening rift between the [Orthodox](#) and [Reform](#) communities. The latter was led during much of the nineteenth century by philosopher [Abraham Geiger](#); the former, which accounted for only ten percent of Frankfurt's Jewish population in 1842, was revived by [Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch](#), who founded the Orthodox "[Israelitische Religionsgesellschaft](#)" ("Israelite Church Society") in 1851. The community continued to grow and become wealthy; members of the Rothschild family in particular became known for their [philanthropy](#). Several orthodox yeshivas were established, as was a Reform Institute for Jewish Studies, which featured lectures by the scholar [Martin Buber](#).

By the 1900s, Jews in Frankfurt were extremely prosperous and influential. They became active both in business and politics. Many of the Jews fought for Germany in World War I.

Frankfurt & the Holocaust

In [1933](#), a [boycott](#) was targeted at the Jews, and in the subsequent years, more and more restrictions were placed on the Jewish community. On November 10, [1938](#), the biggest [Orthodox](#) and [Reform synagogues](#) were burned to the ground. Many Jews emigrated from Frankfurt, and most of those who did not were sent to the [Lodz](#) ghetto, and eventually to the [Dachau](#) and [Buchenwald](#) concentration camps. In 1933, 30,000 Jews lived in Frankfurt; in [1945](#), only 602 remained.

The Community Today

After the war, a new community was established, consisting of a small number of mostly assimilated [Holocaust](#) survivors and [displaced persons](#) (DPs). The DPs came from across Eastern Europe, most of whom planned to immigrate elsewhere but were forced to stay in camps, sometimes for years. After [Israel](#) became [independent](#), and the [United States](#) adopted the Displaced Persons Act, the Jews were finally free to go and most left.

"Some stayed for a variety of reasons," Tobias Freimuller, deputy director of the Fritz Bauer Institute, explained. "Because they were too old, too sick, because they couldn't speak English or [Hebrew](#), or maybe because they ended up starting a small business or

found another way to start making money.” Most were not originally from Frankfurt, so the community was essentially starting off fresh.

In 1949, West Germany passed legislation to compensate Holocaust survivors. Freimuller called it “a signal in front of the German elite, the press, and the people that Jewish life would be protected.”

In 1989, immigrants from the recently disbanded Soviet Union increased the size of the community. Today, most of the Jews live in the West End, and are self-employed, particularly as shop-keepers and real-estate brokers. [Anti-Semitism](#) is negligible; instead, [assimilation](#) is the community’s dominant social problem. The city has one large synagogue, three smaller ones, and a prayer room at the airport.

There are few remnants of Frankfurt’s Jewish community left today. The ghetto has been gone for more than a century, but the spot on which it stood is still accessible. Not far from the Zeil – the pedestrian mall running through the city’s center – on Bornestrasse, is the stretch of land on which the Frankfurt Jews lived for more than 400 years. The Bornestrasse synagogue and the Rothschild home were both destroyed, but plaques mark the spots where they stood.

The Westend synagogue, on Freiherr-vom-Stein-Strasse, is the only Jewish building in the city with a history. The large grey building was built early in the 1900s, and was the only synagogue to survive [Kristallnacht](#). Near the synagogue is Frankfurt’s Jewish community center, a huge building adorned with large iron [menorahs](#) and stone tablets. The building features concerts, lectures and information on all things Jewish in Frankfurt.

The Jewish museum on Untermainkai is located in a house that once belonged to the Rothschild family, and features high-tech resources as well as priceless artifacts, including Moritz Oppenheimer’s famous portrait of [Mendelssohn](#) and Lessing. But the most famous part of the museum is the scale-model of the Frankfurt *Juddengasse*, reconstructed using the blueprints made in 1711 after it was destroyed by fire. The intricate model includes 194 buildings. In 2020, the museum completed a \$58 million expansion that includes a new Frank Family Center containing artifacts from [Anne Frank’s](#) family (Frank was born in Frankfurt), such as silverware, porcelain and artworks that surviving family members in [Basel, Switzerland](#), kept throughout [World War II](#).

In 2021, a new center for Jewish studies – the Buber-Rosenzweig-Institute for Modern and Contemporary Jewish Intellectual and Cultural History – has opened at Goethe University. The program is named for [Martin Buber](#) and [Franz Rosenzweig](#), who established the Free Jewish Teaching House in Frankfurt.

Today, approximately 6,600 Jews live in Frankfurt out of a total population of 753,000. Despite the city being safe, with less [anti-Semitism](#) than some other parts of Germany, many residents, especially from the older generation, feel a certain level of anxiety and believe they need to be prepared to leave at any time. Others believe they live in the “safest place for Jews to be, because the whole world is watching Germany.”

Sources: "Frankfurt." [Encyclopedia Britannica](#).

"Frankfurt." [Encyclopedia Judaica](#).

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