

The Readmission of Jews into Brandenburg (1671)

Abstract

As occurred widely in late medieval and Reformation Europe, the Brandenburg Jews had been expelled from the land in 1573 in a wave of intolerance that accompanied the transition there from Catholicism to Lutheranism. Landowners and courtiers indebted to Jewish financiers often found such expulsions convenient. In 1671, Brandenburg-Prussia's government under Frederick William, seeking to implement an ambitious program of post-Thirty Years War economic development, readmitted fifty Jewish families under the terms spelled out in the edict below. Oliver Cromwell, for different reasons, had followed a similar path in England a few years earlier. Christian merchants and other townspeople, sometimes goaded by anti-Judaic clergy, often opposed the Jews' presence. Hence, this edict warns town magistrates to protect the Jews from discrimination and other forms of abuse.

Source

Edict on the Admission of Fifty Families of Protected Jews; but They Are Not to Have Synagogues

Dated May 21, 1671

We, Frederick William, by Grace of God Margrave in Brandenburg, High Chamberlain and Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, etc.,

hereby make public announcement and graciously notify all whom it may concern that We, for particular reason and at the most submissive request of Hirschel Lazarus, Benedict Veit, and Abraham Ries, Jews, have, for the furtherance of trade and traffic, decided to admit a number, to wit, fifty families of Jews from other places into Our Land of Electoral and Mark Brandenburg and most graciously to extend to them Our special protection. We hereby do this, under the following conditions:

1. We declare the admission of the said fifty Jewish families, whose names, their numbers, and the place in which each has settled are most shortly to be made known by Us in a regular announcement, into Our said Land of Electoral and Mark Brandenburg, also into Our Duchy of Crossen and the incorporated Lands, in the following fashion: that they are authorized to settle in the places and towns most convenient to them, and there to hire, buy, or build rooms or whole houses and residences, but under condition that anything they buy shall be sellable again, and what they build must be left to Christians again, perhaps after the expiration of a certain number of years, their expenses, however, being refunded to them.
2. These Jewish families shall be free to trade and traffic, conformably with Our Edicts, in the whole Land of this Our Electorate and Mark of Brandenburg, Duchy of Crossen and incorporated Lands, whereby We further expressly permit them to keep open stalls and booths, to sell cloths and similar wares by the piece or the ell, to keep large and small weights (but they are not to overreach anyone in buying or selling), without payment to the public scales or the magistracy where it keeps the heavy weights, to deal in new and old clothes, and further, to slaughter in their houses and to sell what is above their needs or forbidden to them by their religion, and finally, to seek their subsistence in any place where they live, and also elsewhere, especially in respect of wool and spices, like other inhabitants of this Land, and to sell their wares at the annual and weekly markets.

3. But as We have reminded them, above, of Our Edicts, so they must continue to conduct their traffic in accordance with the Imperial Statutes relating to Jews, and consequently abstain from all forbidden traffic, especially, as far as possible, traffic in stolen articles, not to injure the inhabitants of this country, nor anyone else, by unfair dealing, not intentionally to defraud or overreach any person, not practice usury with their money, but content themselves with the rate of interest which We have sanctioned to the Jews of Halberstadt, as also the Halberstadt procedure shall be followed with them if they have purchased stolen goods.

4. They are to pay customs duties, excise and milling fees like Our other citizens, without any preference, but since they are resident in Our Land they shall be exempted from the body-tax paid otherwise by all Jews in transit, but, lest other Jews who do not belong to their number pass through tax-free under this pretext, each family is to pay eight Reichsthaler a year protection money, and one golden gulden, like the Halberstadt Jews, whenever one of them marries; as to other taxation, they must reach an equitable agreement with the local magistrate, and, should this prove impossible, they are to report the case to Us, and We will then take suitable steps.

5. Although, however, We have taken the said fifty families under Our special protection, they must submit themselves in civil cases to the jurisdiction of the Burgomaster in charge of each place, whom We particularly and personally charge with this office, but if anyone has a complaint against any of the Jews, this is always to be made in writing. But should criminal cases arise among them, these are to be brought immediately to Us; the magistrate of each place is to see that this is done.

6. They are not to be permitted to have synagogues of their own, but may meet in one of their houses and there conduct their prayers and ceremonies, but without giving offense to Christians, and shall abstain from all offensive language and blasphemy, under pain of severe punishment, and they are hereby permitted to keep a slaughterer, and a schoolmaster to instruct their children, under the same conditions as in Halberstadt.

7. For the rest, they shall everywhere behave and conduct themselves honorably, peaceably and soberly, and above all, they shall take good heed that they do not take any good coinage out of the country and bring bad in. Similarly, they are not to take gold or silver church plate to other places, but to sell it for the proper prices in Our currency, and should anyone bring them for sale silver stolen from one of Our subjects, or should they learn in any other way of the existence of any such silver, they are bound to report, not only the silver, but also the persons concerned, and meanwhile to take charge of the person bringing it to them for sale.

8. The magistracy of every place in this Our Electoral Mark of Brandenburg, Duchy of Crossen, and incorporated Lands in which any Jews of the above fifty families wish to settle is not only hereby graciously and earnestly commanded to receive the said Jews willingly and readily, to give them all friendly assistance in establishing themselves and also all protection, in Our name, but also to treat them equitably in respect of their allocation of taxation, not to permit anyone to abuse or ill-treat them, and to treat them like any other citizen and in accordance with the tenor of this, Our Letter of Protection, and, in particular, to assign to them a place for the burial of their dead, against payment of an equitable fee.

9. Insofar now as the above Jews fulfill all the requirements made of them, as above, and all their promises, We will afford them Our gracious protection and patronage for twenty years from the above date, and We also graciously promise, in Our name and that of Our heirs, if We think fit, to continue this also after the expiration of the said period, but, if not, We reserve to Ourselves and to them the right to withdraw Our protection from them after due enquiry even before the expiry of the said twenty years.

10. Should – which may God forbid! – war break out in Our Lands in these twenty years, the said Jews shall be free, like Our other subjects, to take refuge, with their families, in Our fortresses, and they are to

be received and tolerated there.

Accordingly, We command all Our subjects and servants of whatever rank or status that they shall for twenty years from this date on allow the said Jews to pass freely and securely everywhere in the whole of Our Electorate and other lands, to attend the public fairs, depots, and places of trade, to offer all their wares for sale publicly, and to give them facilities without let or hindrance for honorable trade and such traffic as is not forbidden, and not to molest them. Furthermore, all magistrates and officers of law are to give them all due assistance for which they ask and to offer them the same hospitality as they give to others, under pain of Our highest displeasure and also of a fine of fifty gulden in gold, and more if We think fit. In token whereof We have signed this Privilege and Letter of Protection with Our own hand and confirmed it with Our Seal of Grace.

Potsdam, May 21, 1671

Frederick William

Source: C.A. Macartney, ed., *The Habsburg and Hohenzollern Dynasties in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, in *Documentary History of Western Civilization*. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 259-63. Introduction, editorial notes, chronology, translations by the editor; and compilation copyright © 1970 by C.A. Macartney. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Source of original German text: Christian Otto Mylius, *Corpus Constitutionum Marchicarum, Oder Königl. Preußis. und Churfürstl. Brandenburgische in der Chur- und Marck Brandenburg, auch incorporirten Landen publicirte und ergangene Ordnungen, Edicta, Mandata, Rescripta [et]c. : Von Zeiten Friedrichs I. Churfürstens zu Brandenburg, [et]c. biß ietzo unter der Regierung Friederich Wilhelms, Königs in Preußen [et]c. ad annum 1736. inclusive / ... colligiret und ans Licht gegeben von Christian Otto Mylius*. Berlin und Halle, Zu finden im Buchladen des Waysenhauses, [1737]-1755 [Part 5, Sec. 5, Chapter III, No. II], pp. 121-26.

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