

# Rabbi Levin of Colooney Street

by Pat Feeley

IN HIS Tour through Ireland in 1790, C.J. Bowden recorded that there were seven Jews in the city of Limerick but no synagogue. Two years earlier a German Jew, Jacob Schweitzer, resident at Ballingarry, County Limerick, married a Cork Jewess, Fanny Levy, at the Protestant Church, Ballingarry. The Schweitzers had a flour mill in the district, still known as Schweitzer's Mill. There is no knowledge of any other Jews living in County Limerick in the eighteenth century.

Half a century passed before another Jew is mentioned in Limerick history. In the month of May in the Famine year of 1847 Bobby (Abraham) Genese died in the city and was buried in a Christian cemetery. His brother, Solomon was living in Dublin at this time and he had his brother's body exhumed and reinterred in the Jewish cemetery at Ballybough in Dublin. The 1861 census showed a solitary Jew living in Limerick, and the 1871 census listed two in the county borough. By 1881 the number of Jews in the city had risen to four.

Of the immigrant Jews who came to Ireland in 1878, about twenty families went on to settle in Limerick, many of them living in Edward Street and its environs. After the promulgation of the May Laws in 1881, the persecutions and pogroms, which had been taking place sporadically in Russia from the second decade of the century, became more savage. The Jews who fled to Ireland at this time were mostly Lithuanians and they settled in Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Londonderry, Dundalk and Lurgan. Most of them knew no trade but peddling, so they took to the streets and roads hawking bundles and trays of goods, selling clothes, shoes, pictures, books and so on to customers on the weekly instalment system.



The arrival of the Jews, as seen by a Victorian artist.

Among the Jews who arrived in Limerick in 1882 was Elias Bere Levin. He was born in 1862 in Tels, Lithuania, and was ordained a rabbi at nineteen. The first rabbinical post secured by Levin was in Vilna, where he made a reputation as an expert sofer or scribe. When he arrived in Limerick he found the tiny Jewish community riven with doctrinal differences and divided into two groups; some of the disputes even spilled over into the civil courts. But in their daily business lives that Jews were law-abiding and peaceful.

So, it came as a shock when an anti-Jewish riot took place on Easter Sunday morning in April, 1884. A crowd surrounded the house of Lieb Siev, stones were thrown through the windows and Siev's wife and child were hurt. Eventually police constables arrived and dispersed the crowd. It seems that the incident was caused by a maid

servant who saw her employer slaughtering fowl in Jewish ritual fashion. She told others of what she had seen and some townspeople seemingly saw it as an act of wanton cruelty. The Jews were unaware of the cause or reason for the attack which seemed to them spontaneous and unpremeditated. Two of the ringleaders were sentenced to a month's imprisonment with hard labour, while the Mayor of Limerick, Alderman Maurice Lenihan, (the journalist and historian) declared at the trial that there was no evidence that the Jews had offered any affront to their fellow citizens and he condemned the attack.

The *Cork Examiner* also condemned this outburst of anti-semitism in a country that 'has long been honourably distinguished in its tolerance towards the Jews'. There were other cases of molestation but they seem to have been prompted not so much by religious animosity as by a desire not to pay debts owed. Nevertheless, there were constant annoyances and these coupled with a threat of boycott caused many members of the community to move to Cork in May 1884. But when the boycott did not materialise some of them went back to Limerick.

The Jews' communal life was also marred by sectish religious disputes. Much of the trouble was resolved when the total Jewish community agreed to place itself under the jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbi, and the Rev. Elias Bere Levin was appointed Reader and shochet in 1886.

Rev. Dr. Hermann Adler, as Delegate Chief Rabbi, paid a visit to the city on August 14, 1888, when the congregation comprised eight families, 35 people in all. On a second pastoral visit on December 1, 1892, he found 90 Jews, principally of Lithuanian origin. But the general condition of Limerick Jewry at that period was not a happy one: in August, 1892, two Jews had been waylaid near Limerick and beaten up. On November 24th, 1896, the house of Moses Leone was stoned. But, despite these setbacks, the little community continued to increase in size. Around the middle of the 1890s its number was about 130.

Though most of the Jews worked hard and led quiet, inoffensive lives, the community was still dogged with internecine conflict. One row on December 9, 1899, involved Marcus Joseph Blond, then residing at Harbour View, and his father-in-law, Marcus Greenfield. The case came before the City Petty Sessions on Friday, December 23, 1899 and was reported in the *Limerick Leader* of the same date. In the evidence given, it was stated that Blond and his wife had a quarrel and her father, Marcus Greenfield, interfered. Blond then caught hold of his father-in-law by the right wrist and broke the bone of the forearm with a blow. Blond, a native of Wexna, Lithuania, and an ordained rabbi who had turned to trade when he came to Limerick in the 1880s, was sentenced to two months' imprisonment, with hard labour.

In the early days there was no regular place of worship and prayers were said at Emmet Place and 18 Colooney Street (Elias Levin's home). Late a synagogue was opened at 63 Colooney Street. On February 17, 1902, half a statute acre of land was bought for £150 from William Nunan at Newcastle, Kilmurphy, beside the Dublin road and just outside the city.

By 1903 a Board of Guardians and a Society for Relieving the Sick had been established. In June, 1903, Alderman John Daly, a former Mayor and an old Fenian, presided at a function where a presentation was made to

B. Weinrock, a founder of the local Zionist Society, who was leaving for South Africa. The editor of the *Limerick Leader* was a guest speaker. Thus, it seemed as if the Limerick Jews were putting down roots and getting settled. Those who had been resident in the city for a number of years had learned to speak English and begun to mix with the native population.

The Jews of the city were still generally engaged in the smaller branches of retail trading, as milk vendors and as travelling drapers in the rural districts. Four were small wholesalers from whom the immigrant newcomers usually bought their goods. In December, 1903, the *Limerick Chronicle* carried a long descriptive piece on a Jewish wedding. This excited a lot of talk and undoubtedly a certain amount of envy at how some of the foreigners had prospered in a comparatively short period of time.

At the weekly meeting of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family, Fr. John Creagh, a Limerick-born Redemptorist priest and Spiritual Director of the Confraternity, preached his first anti-semitic sermon on January 11, 1904. He accused the Jews of deicide, of persecuting and murdering Christians, of usury, of being 'leeches' living off the poor, of being the enemies of Catholicism and of being in league with the Freemasons who drove the Redemptorists out of France. He concluded by warning the people to have no transactions with them. This sermon led directly to assaults on Jews and to stonings and beatings.

Rabbi Levin, who with Marcus Joseph Blond was to prove amongst the most courageous in a rising sea of hate and anti-semitism, wrote a letter to Michael Davitt on January 15th asking for his support. In 1903 Davitt had been sent to Russia by the Hearst papers to investigate the Kishineff Massacres. He stayed only a short time at Kishineff but long enough to thoroughly investigate the facts of the case. His conclusions were summarized in his letters to the *New York American* and in more detail in the book which he published on the subject after his return under the title *Within the Pale*. The book was an eloquent plea for justice for the Jews and an indictment of the connivance and overt encouragement by Russian government officials of anti-semitism.

Levin in his letter said how they had lived in Limerick for a quarter of a century in perfect peace and harmony with their Christian neighbours, that Fr. Creagh's accusations were devoid of 'any particle of truth', and warned against a boycott and 'a regular anti-semitic riot'.

Davitt wrote a strongly worded letter to the *Freeman's Journal* in which he pointed out that it was a 'unique glory' of Ireland that it had never resorted to 'counter religious persecution' and that the country had no history of anti-semitism. Quoting from Creagh's sermon, he denounced the allegation of ritual murder and said that it was language like this that led to the dreadful crimes at Kishineff. He accused the Redemptorist priest of inciting the workers against the Jews by playing on their poverty instead of attacking some of the root causes of poverty and finished by appealing to Bishop O'Dwyer to stop the anti-semitic crusade.

Davitt's letter did not restrain Fr. Creagh but only spurred him into making more violent anti-semitic speeches. In two sermons preached on the following Monday and Tuesday nights at the Redemptorist Church, Fr. Creagh launched into the most savage attacks on the Jewish people. He claimed that the Jews were always and ever the enemies of Christianity, that the only reason why they had been persecuted in every country in Europe was because they were seen as the enemies of every country where they settled. He denied that he had insinuated ritual murder but then went on to quote, 'one of the greatest historians of the Catholic Church'. l'Abbe Rohrbracher, who did exactly that in his book *Historis*



Rabbi Elias Bere Levin.

*Universelle de l'Eglise Catholique*. Translating from this work, he recounted for the congregation tales of child murder carried out by devious, vicious, satanic Jews. He finished the sermons by attacking Davitt for his interference and by advising the people to boycott the Jews without offering them any violence.

Elias Levin also wrote to John Redmond, leader of the Irish Party, who replied in a brief note stating that he had 'no sympathy whatever with the attacks upon the Hebrew community in Limerick or elsewhere' and expressed the hope that the 'good sense and spirit of toleration of the Irish people will be sufficient to protect them from any wrong'.

Levin was one of a deputation that went to see Dr. O'Dwyer to ask him to intervene in the anti-semitic campaign. The deputation was received by the bishop's secretary and, although we do not know what exactly was discussed, it would seem from a letter the rabbi wrote to the *Limerick Chronicle* on January 21 that the Jews were asked to avoid public controversy, to dampen down newspaper comment, and that in return the bishop would stop Fr. Creagh's crusade. This was the gist of Levin's brief note to the *Chronicle* in which he also said that since the charges made by Fr. Creagh were directed not against the Limerick Hebrew Congregation but against the whole Jewish race, he did not consider it particularly incumbent on him to reply.

The Jews carried out their part of the agreement and there is comparatively little comment from the Jewish side during February and March. The boycott, however, continued and by April Jewish shopkeepers and traders were in dire straits. Marcus Joseph Blond, wrote to *The Times* on April 10, 1904, describing how he had with unceasing hard work established himself comfortably and enjoyed a nice trade until Fr. Creagh 'spoke hatred and animosity towards the Jews'. He now had none of his previous customers; in fact his business was nil. He defied anyone to say whom he had wronged and said that the Jews had never got a fair chance to defend themselves or place their case properly before the public. Blond had a shop in Henry Street and was one of the better off members of the community but he had to sell stock, fixtures and goodwill for a bagatelle and leave for

Dublin after four months of the boycott. Within a year his travels and torments had come to an end. On April 2, 1905, he died in Dublin at the age of forty.

On the streets incidents and assaults continued. On April 4 the rabbi himself was stoned by a group of boys. A young lad of fourteen, John (Johnny) Raleigh was subsequently sentenced to a month in jail for the offence. This led to a public outcry on the boy's behalf: a special meeting of the Corporation was called and a memorial requesting clemency was drafted to the Lord Lieutenant. Raleigh served a month in Mountjoy and on his return to Limerick in May, a large crowd turned out to welcome him home. He was cheered when he alighted from the train, taken shoulder high by his admirers to his home and presented with a silver watch and chain. (Johnny Raleigh later became a republican, a building contractor, a property owner and a life-long friend of Eamon de Valera.)

It was the boycott that was really biting. Customers stopped buying from Jews and those who did not could expect a visit from a Confraternity man or one of the "Fathers". A few brave Catholics refused to be intimidated and some Colooney Street residents also remained on friendly terms with their Jewish neighbours, but they were a very small minority. Those who owed money for goods purchased on the instalment system found that they had popular and clerical support in refusing to repay. Native shopkeepers and traders, who were undoubtedly influential in instigating and maintaining the campaign from behind the scenes, were pleased to see their rivals going to the wall. Some shops refused to sell even the necessities of life to the Jews.

Levin, watching his congregation break up and depart under the insidious pressure of the boycott, broke silence in April, first in a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* and then in a letter to the *Limerick Leader*, which had quoted his letter to the *English Jewish paper*. In his letter to the *Leader* Levin stated that the Jews had 'obeyed for over two months the request of the Roman Catholic authorities' who had asked them to withdraw from the press controversy 'piously hoping that the same authorities will call to order the reverend preacher who is daily inciting the poor innocent people against us'. But now they had 'come to the conclusion, if we are to suffer

for our religion like our ancestors ... let us at least not perish in silence, let our names be inscribed in the bloody civilization and tolerance of Limerick of the twentieth century'. It was a brave if futile attempt to stem the now fast flowing tide of anti-semitism.

The two main religious denominations in the city generally divided along sectarian lines: the Catholics supported Fr. Creagh and the boycott; the Protestants were on the side of the Jews. The Protestant stance was not without self-interest, for there was bad feeling between the two religious groups in the city at the time stemming from what the Protestants saw as the 'persecution' of Dr. John Long, a controversial proselytizer, who had been abused, stoned and assaulted by the Catholic population. Then there was the old inter-sectarian rivalry, which the burgeoning, militant nationalism and a growing feeling that the old regime was crumbling, made the Catholics more aggressive. There was, of course, a small number of people of both religions who took independent, personal stands.

The Redemptorists had first appeared in Limerick in 1851 at a mission in St. John's Cathedral. The mission staff were a cosmopolitan group — Austrian, Dutch, Russian, Pole, Belgian and Scottish. The foundation followed as a direct result of the mission and the site for the monastery, and church was acquired in 1854. The first superior of the order's Limerick house was Fr. Louis (1816—1882).

In November, 1903, the Limerick Redemptorists had held their fiftieth jubilee celebrations. On Friday evening, July 22, 1904, the Rev. Mathias Raus, Superior General and Rector Major of the Redemptorist Order, arrived in the city by train on a journey from Rome, a little after seven o'clock. Raus was a native of Alsace, France, and did not speak English. With him came Fr. Magnier, Consultor General at Rome, who thirteen years previously had been Spiritual Director of the Confraternity and Rector of the community at Limerick. The timing of the visit and the prestigious positions of the visitors was significant and gave Limerick a central place in the order's jubilee celebrations.

When the train carrying Raus and Magnier arrived at Limerick Station the Confraternity men, wearing medals, ribbons and chains of office, 'sent up salvos of welcoming cheers'. The Boherbuoy Brass and Reed Band headed a procession of Confraternity members marching in 'perfect order' before the foreign ecclesiastic. Up to 8,000 people lined the streets from the railway station to Mount St. Alphonsus, the order's house, where an address was presented to Raus by the Mayor, Michael Donnelly, on behalf of the Corporation. He replied in French and his address was translated into English by Fr. Magnier.

The County Limerick-born Magnier addressed meetings of the Arch-Confraternity on the following Monday and Tuesday nights, speaking of Rome and of the life of the Pope and praising the men for their dedication to the Confraternity. The assembled members gave him the Confraternity salute, all standing with right hands uplifted. Mr. J.F. Barry, J.P., an ex-Mayor, presented him with an address on behalf of the Confraternity. The raised hand salute was also given to the Superior General who, from reading between the lines of a newspaper report, seems to have been somewhat taken aback by the intensity of emotion. Fr. Raus praised what he called the 'great army' of 7,000 men and boys which was 'a spectacle for angels and men and would delight their Holy Father, the Pope'. He went on to say that before leaving Rome he had been empowered by the Pope to give the Papal blessing to the Confraternity members of the Holy Family and he proposed to do this on the Monday night to the members of that division, on the Tuesday night to its division's members and on the Wednesday night to the boys.

It was a week of great religious excitement and fervour and, as the bells pealed and the cheers echoed through

**TOWN HALL.**

LIMERICK, 20TH APRIL.

DEAR SIR,

A Requisition having been presented to me to call a Special Meeting of the Corporation to adopt a Memorial to the Lord Lieutenant on behalf of John Raleigh, sentenced to one month's imprisonment on 14th inst., and as such Meeting could not be properly held before the 25th inst., I have decided, in view of the importance and urgency of the matter, to summon a Meeting of the Whole House Committee to be held in the Council Chamber on this (Wednesday) Evening at Seven o'Clock sharp, when I hope you will be present as it is also considered desirable to avail of the occasion to refute certain statements injurious to the character and good name of the Citizens of Limerick that have recently been given to the public.

Yours faithfully,

**M. DONNELLY, Mayor.**

**Notice of the special meeting of the Limerick Corporation.**



Colooney Street, the city's Little Jerusalem, the Rabbi Elias Bere Levin sat down to write an appeal to the visiting ecclesiastic. The letter was a respectful, plaintive plea to the leader of the Redemptorist Order to end the boycott and call off the boycott of hatred led by Fr. Creagh. The rabbi also requested a meeting with Raus.

**THE HEBREW CONGREGATION OF LIMERICK,  
SYNAGOGUE CHAMBERS,  
63, COLOONEY ST.**

The Memorial of the Reverend Elias Bere Levin, 18 Colooney Str. Limerick on behalf of The Hebrew Community in Limerick.

Memorialist is the Jewish Minister at Limerick and as such entrusted with the spiritual, and to some extent temporal welfare of his people.

To the General of The Redemption Order now visiting Limerick.

Up to a very recent time the Jews of Limerick have had no cause to complain of any unjust or oppressive treatment from their Christian fellow Citizens, and enjoyed the same facilities as every other citizen, and for which the soul of Ireland has always been remarkable, namely that trade was not to be obtained by Religion or politics, but by fair and honourable dealings, and that every honest trader could count on the support of those who differed from him in religion, or politics, just as much as those who agreed with him.

Unfortunately this has of late changed, and now, though we still trade with our Christian fellow Citizens, they no longer trade with us, and treat us with ill will, and occasionally the rougher element has used actual violence towards us, and our debts due to us for goods sold, are practically now irrecoverable.

I do not think it deemable in the interest of the good feeling which I respectfully urge your Excellency to restore, that I should enter on any explanation of the causes which produced for us—terrible result.

There are a small number of our people, who, seeking refuge in Ireland (which is famous all over the world for its hospitality to strangers, and its uplifting the cause of the oppressed) now deprived by circumstances over which they have no control, from earning the bare necessities of life.

I respectfully ask your Excellency, that during your visit to Limerick, you will be pleased to point out to the Catholic Citizens of Limerick that a Jew is one of God's creatures entitled to their brotherly love and consideration which is at the root of all true religious feeling, and practise those things it may be just that the Christian shall give such preference to those of his own religion, though the fact that we are Jews should not prevent them also dealing with us.

I regret I have to say to your Excellency that at present it is useless for a Jew to keep open his shop for any trade, for though the Catholic people who were their customers will no longer deal with them, under the mistaken idea that in so depriving us of our means of living, they are complying with some religious requirement of which they would be breaking the requirements if they were to trade with us.

I therefore ask your Excellency, during your stay in Limerick, to address such remarks on this subject to your people, as will remove from them the idea, that we are under the ban of your Church and will give them to understand, that there is no objection from any religious grounds to them dealing with any honest trader, whether Christian or Jew.

If your Excellency would accord me the honour and pleasure of an interview, I shall avail myself of the honour with very great pleasure, and shall call on you whenever and wherever you name, either alone or accompanied by one or more of our Elders.

*owing to the mistaken views  
of our Christian fellow  
Citizens that they are  
forbidden by their religion  
to deal with us.*

*Respectfully yours*

*Elias Bere Levin*

*18 Colooney Street*

*Limerick*

*Jews Minister*

*at Limerick*

Part of Rabbi Levin's letter.

It is necessary to the very existence of my little flock, only Twenty-four families, that their trade shall be restored and relieved from the terrible blight which has now fallen on it, owing to the mistaken view of our Christian fellow Citizens that they are forbidden by their religion to deal with us.

Respectfully Yours  
Elias Bere Levin  
18 Colooney Street  
Limerick.

Jews Minister  
at Limerick

It is not known whether Fr. Raus ever replied to the letter, but the appeal certainly fell on deaf ears. The boycott lasted two years and drove out eighty members of the community from Limerick leaving less than forty behind. Elias Bere Levin left Limerick for Leeds in 1911, where he ministered as shochet, Reader and spiritual head of the Central Synagogue. He later transferred to the Belgrave Street Synagogue. He died in 1936.

#### SOURCES

- Tour through Ireland by C.J. Bowden (1791).
- A Short History of the Jews in Ireland by Bernard Shillman (1945).
- The Jews of Ireland by Louis Hyman (1972).
- East End Jewish Radicals 1875-1914 by William J. Fisherman (1975).
- Michael Davitt by Francis Sheehy-Skeffington (1967 edition).
- Israel in Europe by G.J. Abbott (1907).
- The Limerick Leader, December, 1899.
- The Limerick Leader, January, 1904.
- The Limerick Leader, April, 1904.
- The Limerick Leader, July, 1904.
- The Limerick Chronicle, December, 1903.
- Two Hundred Years with the Redemptorists (1933).
- Interview with Michael McInerney, journalist and writer, April, 1979, who also made available a number of unpublished manuscripts and letters.