
THE JEWS OF LIMERICK



On Thursday 7th January 1904, the remains of the stepmother of Fr. John Creagh, C.S.S.R., were removed from St. Munchin's Church, after requiem mass, to the railway station in Nelson Street, en route for Killarin Cemetery, Milltown Malbay. The business and private houses on the route were all draped and closed while the funeral was passing, and a large number of people from Limerick travelled to Milltown Malbay to attend the funeral⁽¹⁾.

Meanwhile, in Colooney Street, Limerick, the Tuohys and the Meissels, were preparing for the marriage of Fanny Tuohy to Maurice Meissel, that afternoon. The synagogue was decorated inside and out with coloured bunting and around 3.30 p.m. the horse drawn carriages began to arrive. A large crowd of people, Jews and Christians, gathered to see the bride⁽²⁾. Judge Adams, a local magistrate who was invited to the wedding ceremony, had this to say afterwards: "The Jews were a most respectable community. It was said that the Catholics were bigots, but here were the Jews given homes in a Catholic community and given full freedom for the practice of their religious beliefs"⁽³⁾.

On Monday, 11th January, Father Creagh, back in Limerick, put the final touches to his notes for his evening sermon to the men's Confraternity. At 7.55 p.m. the church was packed, for he had asked the men to come a bit earlier that evening. The congregation recites the usual prayers, and waits to hear what Fr. Creagh has to say. He tells the men that, as Christians, they are bound to love all men, even their enemies. He then launched into a tirade against the Jewish people, their alleged misdeeds in the world, but, particularly in Limerick. He told the men that the Jews crucified our Lord and that they persecuted and murdered the early Christians. He described them as the greatest enemies of the Catholic Church and claimed they were in league with the Freemasons and the Republican Government in France. (The French Gov-

by Des Ryan Part Two

ernment, at that time, was closing down religious houses and expelling priests and nuns, among them about 200 Redemptorists).

His main indictment was against Jewish trading methods, especially the instalment system and money-lending. He claimed the Jews were overcharging for their goods, not marking down repayments, and doing local traders and tradesmen out of business by importing goods from other Jews in London. Stating that the Jews did not mind who he sold to and, as an example of this, he told the men that a Jew had even tried to sell *him* the latest modern songs. As a backup to the trading accusations, he cited the number of cases brought by the Jews before the Mayor's Court of Conscience, for the years 1902 and 1903, which he said did not include cases in other courts⁽⁴⁾. (The Mayor's Court of Conscience was a type of free legal aid for those people who could not afford a solicitor. It was also used to recover small sums of money. It was said that the Jews used it because it would take them too long to recover their money through the normal procedure of the civil courts).

This attack took the Jews by surprise and caused consternation among them. Since the 1880s, they had been trading in Limerick⁽⁵⁾. At first they carried their goods on back-packs, later progressing to horse-and-car and they also used the railway system to go to country areas. In the city they were involved in the furniture trade, the mineral water trade, clothing, dentistry, and sometimes they traded under Irish names. They advertised regularly in the local papers, and had received letters complimenting them on their goods. They had, on occasions, given employment to local people⁽⁶⁾. Some of the people who bought from the Jews could not get goods from anybody else⁽⁷⁾.

Fr. Creagh's sermon led directly to assaults and a boycott against Jews, and they had to be given police protection. On Wednesday 13th January, the sermon was printed in the local press. The Jewish community were shocked and frightened by what they read. They knew from experience that talk like this could lead to looting and murder. Rabbi Elias Levin appealed to John Redmond and Michael Davitt for their help, sending Davitt a copy of Creagh's sermon. Redmond replied in a few brief words, stating that he deplored violence towards the Jews. Michael Davitt gave his reply in a letter to the *Freeman's Journal* denouncing what he saw as allegations of ritual murder, in Creagh's sermon. He said it was language like this that had led to the dreadful crimes in the Russian town of Kishineff, in April 1903. Davitt further accused Creagh of inciting the people of Limerick to drive the Jews from their midst. Davitt then suggested that Creagh turn his attention towards the taxes that the Irish people had to pay to England, or to try and induce them to save the money they spent on drink, adding that such policies would help to alleviate the poverty which he (Creagh) had deplored. He ended his letter by appealing to the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer to intervene⁽⁸⁾.

This was not the first time that Davitt had intervened on behalf of the Jews. In the 1880s he and Charles Stewart Parnell had condemned attacks on the Jews of Cork. At a meeting in London, in November 1890, he had appeared on the same platform as Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor, protesting against the persecution of the Jews in Russia. In May 1903, Davitt had been sent to Russia by the Hearst newspaper organisation to investigate a government-inspired pogrom against the Jews in Kishineff. In two days, 45 Jews



The grave of Samuel Sochat at the Jewish Cemetery at Kilmurry.

reason why they had been persecuted in every country in Europe was because they were seen as enemies of every country in which they settled. He denied Davitt's claim that he had accused the Jews of ritual murder. He claimed he had quoted from one of the greatest historians of the Catholic Church, L'Abbe Rene Rohrbracher, and referred to his book *Historic Universe-elle de L'Eglise Catholique*. Fr. Creagh urged the congregation to keep away from the Jews and not to harm them⁽¹⁰⁾.

But this advice came far too late, for some of the Jews had already been assaulted earlier that day. When News of these attacks reached the rabbi, he immediately sent a telegram to the Chief Rabbi in London, Dr. Harris, "Anti-semitic riots took place throughout the day. General boycott in force. Community in peril. Every member assaulted"⁽¹¹⁾.

The next day (Tuesday), a Jewish deputation, led by Saul Goldberg and including the rabbi, went to Bishop O'Dwyer's house. They were received by the bishop's secretary, who told them that Dr. O'Dwyer was ill, and would be unable to meet them. The bishop, through his secretary, asked the Jews to refrain from all press controversy, but gave them no commitment to censure Fr. Creagh⁽¹²⁾.

That night, at a meeting of the Women's Confraternity in St. John's Cathedral, Fr. Murphy, Spiritual Director of the confraternity in that parish, addressed the women on the subject of the Jews. He denounced the violence towards them, and said that "if the people owed money to the Jews they should pay it as they were bound to pay all their lawful debts. If it was their desire to get rid of the Israelites, this was the best way to accomplish it, and when this was done they need have no more dealings with them"⁽¹³⁾.

In the early days of February, it was rumoured that Fr. Creagh was leaving Limerick, but when interviewed he said that he was only going to Belfast to give a mission. It was reported that some wealthy Jews were going to buy Geary's factory, but these stories were denied by members of the local Jewish community. It was also rumoured that since the assaults had begun, some Jews had decided to give up their businesses and to leave Limerick⁽¹⁴⁾.

While in Belfast, Fr. Creagh gave an interview to the Belfast *Northern Whig* in which he said: "I have no animosity against the Jews as a race, and, as for the Jews in business, I am quite prepared to admit that there are many who are irreproachable. What people have been pleased to call my crusade has been directed only against a class of Jewish traders, who grind and oppress those who are unfortunate enough to get into their power. I have strongly

were murdered, 600 wounded, and 1500 homes and shops looted. The police made no attempt to stop the bloodshed and violence, and the local Orthodox Bishop drove through the town in his carriage blessing the crowd⁽⁹⁾.

Monday was the usual day on which members of the Jewish community collected payments on debts. As they went out collecting on Monday 18th January, they were met with a hostile reception. They were spat at, mud and stones, and on one occasion, sour milk was thrown at one of them. They were followed through the streets by crowds of people, estimated at 300 at one stage. Though it was mostly children who threw the mud and stones, the adult members of the crowd pulled and harassed the Jews as they walked through the streets. The police thought that things would have been worse but for their presence on the streets. They also gave credit to a priest, Fr. Fitzgerald, who had been collecting dues in Garvey's Range,

"His presence had a great effect on

the people", they concluded.

With the intervention of Davitt on the Jewish side, Fr. Creagh, instead of trying to calm the situation, felt confident enough to make another attack on the Jews. At a meeting of the Confraternity, on Monday 18th of January, he said he felt bound to reply to Davitt's letter. Having earlier noted that the *Munster News* had claimed that the church had, by arrangement, kept its doors closed, Fr. Creagh stated that on Monday and Tuesday evenings the church had been open for members of the Confraternity or those who intended to join it, and no one but such people had a right to enter the weekly meetings.

He added: "Only this rule was enforced on Monday and Tuesday nights last".

But before the next meeting began, he told the *Limerick Chronicle* reporter that the sermon was for members only. The *Chronicle* representative then left the church. The priest said in his sermon that the Jews had always been a danger to Christian people, and that the

deprecated any violence, and have always used, and shall always use, influence to prevent it. The Jews of Limerick need have no fear of violence⁽¹⁵⁾.

The months of February and March were relatively quiet, but there were a couple of incidents involving Jews. On the 5th February, four horse collars were stolen from the president of the Jewish community Max Blond, at his stables in Jesuit Lane. On St. Patrick's Day, a Jew named Samuel Recusson was assaulted in Henry Street. The effects of the boycott were also being felt. Customers stopped buying from Jews in the city, but they were still trading in country areas, even though extracts from Fr. Creagh's sermon were sent to those areas⁽¹⁶⁾. Some shops were refusing to sell food to the Jews, and their children were being given the silent treatment at school, when their classmates refused to play with or even speak to them⁽¹⁷⁾.

On Monday night 4th April, Rabbi Levin, on his way home to Colooney Street with some friends (the Vinegrands), came upon a group of boys in Carey's Road. (One of the boys, John Raleigh, had on St. Patrick's Day, thrown stones at the Rabbi and the Vinegrands, and they had reported him to his mother for throwing stones at their shop). Sensing danger, the Jews went to the other side of the road, but, as they crossed over they were showered with a volley of stones, one of which struck the rabbi on the ankle. Raleigh was arrested but denied the charge in court. His two solicitors were unsuccessful in defending him, and he was sentenced to one month's imprisonment⁽¹⁸⁾.

Being a juvenile, he was transferred to Mountjoy Prison in Dublin. This led to a public outcry on Raleigh's behalf. Because of his youth, Raleigh's sentence was felt to be harsh, and it was also noticed that none of the magistrates at the trial were Catholics. The two main religious denominations in the city, Catholic and Protestant, generally divided along sectarian lines. The Catholics supported Fr. Creagh and 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 that time, stemming from what the Protestants saw as the persecution of Dr. John Long, a controversial proselytizer, who had also been stoned, abused and assaulted. Dr. Long had been sent to Limerick in 1897 by the Irish Church Mission to Ireland. He opened a medical hall in Thomas Street which gave free medical service to all, but its ultimate aim was to convert Catholics to Protestantism. Naturally, this move caused friction, and some Confraternity men marched up and down outside the premises in an effort to intimidate Catholics and to

prevent them from going in. On 10th April, Marcus Blond, in a letter to *The Times*, defied anyone in Limerick to show how he had wronged or overcharged and said that his business was ruined since Fr. Creagh's sermon⁽¹⁹⁾.

Jews did not charge anymore for their goods than the rest of the shopkeepers in Limerick. An accusation also made against the Jews, said Bishop Bunbury, was that when they went to country districts, and found the head of the



The marble tablet on the wall of the burial house at the Kilmurry Cemetery.

On 15th April, the rabbi replied to the charge that there were no Catholic magistrates at John Raleigh's trial. He said that there was no one to watch Jewish interests either, and that if the Jews were going to suffer in Limerick, they were not going to do so in silence. They had obeyed for over two months the request of the Roman Catholic authorities not to engage in press controversy, in the pious hope that Fr. Creagh would be silenced⁽²⁰⁾.

Meanwhile, Dr. Bunbury, the Protestant Bishop of Limerick, entered the arena. At a meeting of the Protestant Synod in Dublin, Dr. Bunbury told the gathering that he had spoken to Rabbi Levin, who had assured him that the

house absent, they persuaded the children or the servants to accept goods. One item, in particular, was mentioned - tea. The rabbi had said the Jews did not sell tea, but he (Dr. Bunbury) had been told by a woman that there was some truth in it. Bishop Bunbury could not understand why Fr. Creagh's superiors did not stop his campaign against the Jews⁽²¹⁾.

At a special meeting of the Corporation, called to discuss Raleigh's prison sentence, the Mayor, after giving an explanation, was excused for not being at the trial. Dr. Bunbury's remarks about Limerick and the Jews were condemned. It was also agreed that a petition for the release of John

Raleigh be sent to the Lord Lieutenant, Earl Dudley. This appeal for clemency was denied. (In 1894, when speaking on the question of Jewish immigration, Earl Dudley, told the House of Lords that immigration would lead to a "lowering of the whole moral and social standard of the population of those districts in which (the aliens) settle. Those classes would become to some extent, non-English in character, in physique and in moral and social customs").

An English newspaper reporter in Limerick interviewed a woman who had been dealing with the Jews for eighteen years. She told him that they were not so bad to deal with, and were always willing to wait for their money, "which was more than the shops were. She added that the clothes they sold were good, but their footwear did not last long"⁽²²⁾.

The reporter also interviewed Fr. Creagh. When it was put to the priest that the Jews were suffering as a result of his sermons, he said: "I am sorry to hear anyone is suffering, but personally I don't believe it, as I am sure the Jews have money, and put on the worst side of the picture when they heard you were coming". To which the reporter replied: "They didn't know I was coming". Fr. Creagh went on to say that "the Jews are a curse to Limerick, and if I am the means of driving them out, I shall have accomplished one good thing in my life".

At a meeting of the members of the Jewish community on the 25th of April, it was agreed that their books and invoices would be made available to anybody who wanted to inspect them⁽²³⁾.

The Jews also denied that they sold tea on the weekly instalment system, and offered £5 to the Mayor if anyone could prove otherwise. This challenge was taken up by three of the residents in Colooney Street, who stated, in a **Limerick Leader** report of 27th April 1904, that they had bought tea from the Jews "on more than one occasion". They also expressed their willingness to accept the £5 offer.

On his return to Limerick from prison, in May, John Raleigh was met by a large crowd of people, who carried him shoulder high from the railway station to his home in Carey's Road, where he was presented with a silver watch and chain. In an interview the next day, he said that while in prison one of the warders had referred to him as "our Limerick Jewlayer"⁽²⁴⁾.

In a court case at the beginning of May in which Marcus Blond tried to recover some money owed to him, Judge Adams said that there was gross exaggeration on both sides with regard to the Jews. In reply to this, Fr. Creagh said that there was no exaggeration to his statements on the Jews. In the middle of May, a Jewish deputation arrived from London. They met with members

of the Jewish community and later they went to the Redemptorist Church to see Fr. Creagh⁽²⁵⁾.

At a meeting of the Confraternity the following Monday night, Fr. Creagh told the men "that the Jews now appear to regret the publicity they had given to the matter as it only resulted in exposing the more their usurious dealings. But the matter could not be allowed to rest in that easy manner and he was collecting data to prove his statements as to their system of

arrived in Limerick from Rome. Raus was a native of Alsace, a French province which was then under German control, and was well acquainted with the problem of anti-semitism. In April 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jew, also from Alsace, was wrongly accused of passing secrets to the Germans. In the ensuing campaign to prove Dreyfus's innocence, the church erroneously supported the army which had fabricated the evidence to convict him.



Houses at Colooney (now Wolfe Tone) Street.

usury". In June, Louis Kramer, a Russian Jew, who had spent seven months in Limerick, arrived in Boston, U.S.A. While being questioned by custom/immigration officials, he produced a letter saying that he had been a victim of anti-Jewish persecution in Limerick. The letter was signed by Julian Grande. Grande was the Irish Director of the Mission to the Jews, and had figured prominently in the press controversy, earlier in the year. On 24th June, the **Limerick Leader** carried an advertisement for the City Furnishing Co. (which was owned by a Jewish family) that two-thirds of its goods were Irish.

The last assault on members of the Jewish community in 1904 occurred on Sunday 17th July. David Wienrok and Louis Goldberg were coming from the Synagogue, when they were attacked by a man wielding a stick. He struck both of them on the back of the head, knocking them to the ground. The man was arrested and Wienrok and Goldberg were treated for their wounds at Barrington's Hospital⁽²⁶⁾.

In November 1903, the Limerick Redemptorists had held their fiftieth jubilee celebrations. On Friday evening, July 22nd 1904, the Rev. Mathias Raus, Superior General and Rector Major of the Redemptorist Order,

In a last attempt to end the boycott, Rabbi Levin made an appeal by letter to Raus to intercede in the affair and also requested the honour of an interview. It is not known if the Superior General ever replied.

In the municipal elections of October, some people objected to the Jews having a vote, on the grounds that they were aliens⁽²⁸⁾.

Fr. Creagh was still in the news, looking for more industry for the city, but he never produced further "data". The year ended with a reprint of an article from the **Derry People** in the **Limerick Leader**, titled "Jews and their Business Ways".

But the close of the year brought little comfort for the Jewish community and its leaders, especially Marcus Blond. He was born in Wexna, in 1865. Having been ordained a rabbi in his teens, he turned to trade when he came to Limerick in the 1880s. In 1897, he lived at 51 Henry Street, and was threatened with eviction by his landlord, to make way for a new tenant. He gives an account of what happened, in a letter to the **Limerick Leader**:

"Since I have adopted this ancient city as my residence, I have always seen the **Limerick Leader** as a defender of truth and justice. The readers

and subscribers of this valuable journal will, no doubt, share my opinion, no matter whose personality is concerned. The **Leader** always points with bold and truthful language who is right and who is wrong. I have only to mention one single case, which I am sure did not slip out yet from the minds of the readers of this journal, viz.: - The eviction of Miss Nora Piggot of her holding premises of Henry Street by Mr. Fitzmaurice. It was nobody else but the **Leader** defended Miss Piggot's right in a most strong language towards the evictor. With great skill and care the editor pointed out the case of this poor girl, who was evicted of her holding after having established her place, which was useless before. Now, Sir, what would you say if this very evicted tenant, this poor Miss Piggot, would become an evictor herself! And such is the case. I have been living in my house 51, Henry Street for six years, and always paid my rent of the house, and rates attached to same; as suddenly Miss Piggot appears with her money, and induces the landlord to accept a bigger offer of rent, sends me a writ of summons to leave my house at once I do not believe for a moment that the **Leader** will oppress my letter, if I do not suspect any remarks from the influential editor, but he will be good enough to let me have a small space to show the public how quick an evicted could become an evictor. Without awaiting any trials I have peacefully left the house I was in, and though Miss Piggot promised me some compensation for leaving quietly, her solicitor informed me lately that he is about to take proceedings for one month's rent due. Thanking you in anticipation, dear editor, I am, Sir, yours faithfully, M.T. Blond, 6, Harbour View, Limerick⁽²⁹⁾."

As far as is known, Marcus Blond was the only Limerick Jew to receive a prison sentence. In an argument with his wife the following year, he struck his father-in-law Moses Greenfield, fracturing the old man's arm. Blond was sentenced to two-month's imprisonment, but was released on bail pending an appeal. When the appeal was heard on 2nd of January 1899, the judge was reluctant to send a married man with a family to jail and so released him. The forthcoming marriage of Blond's son that February also helped. In 1904, Marcus Blond was president of the Jewish community, and had a grocery shop at 60 Henry Street. Unable to stand the insults and loss of trade, he sold his business and moved to Dublin, where he died in April 1905, at the age of 40.

In an article, published in the Irish Times on 17th June, 1985, Raphael

Siev related how his grand-parents were treated at the time of the outbreaks of hostility towards the Jews:

"My grand-parents put up the shutters after they were chased into the shop and the shop attacked. When the police came down to guard them on a rota system, my mother gave them tea; she was about 11. They had a lot of non-Jewish customers, but after Fr. Creagh's speeches, none came and none paid their small Christmas accounts and they lost all their business".

Raphael Siev's mother also recalled someone shouting "you Jew! you Jew! You struck out the eyes of our Lord".

The other leader of the Jewish community, Elias Bere Levin, was born in 1862, in Tels, Lithuania. He was ordained a rabbi in his teens. At the age of 19, he was appointed to his first rabbinical post, in Vilna. He came to Limerick in 1882. An intelligent man, he knew the value of the news media and used it when he felt that the Jewish community in Limerick was being maligned or threatened. During his 29 years in Limerick, he was assaulted a number of times. In 1898, a number of Jews, including the rabbi, were accused by railway officials of passing their tickets (when they had gone through the gate) to other members of the community who were outside the ticket gate. At the court case, a different story emerged. Apparently, the rabbi was bringing some friends who were visiting him, an old couple, their son, and another lady, to the railway station. The son, who had the tickets, went through the gate, but the rabbi and his friends were stopped. The rabbi, afraid the train was going to pull out, asked the old man's son to pass out the other tickets. An argument developed with the ticket collector. The rabbi and some other Jews were assaulted, including a Jewish lady. The rabbi was fined two shillings and six pence for causing an obstruction. Several other cross cases for assault were dismissed⁽²⁹⁾.

At the turn of the century, a Russian Jew, Alter Egar, arrived in the city. He presented himself as a timber merchant, and also as having a large drapery business in Odessa and other parts of Russia. He enlisted the rabbi's aid in securing lodgings. After receiving orders for timber from local merchants, and pretending he had lost his own money, he posted notices around the town offering a reward for the return of the money which was supposed to have been in a bag. On the strength of his appeal, he obtained money from the rabbi and other members of the community. No more was heard of Mr. Egar until he was arrested in Darlington, England, and returned to Limerick for trial⁽³⁰⁾.

While walking along the quay at Mount Kenneth, on the Dock Road, on

29th July 1905, the rabbi came upon two youths. He heard one of them say, "Here comes a Jewman, let's kill him", and with that, they picked up some stones and battered him. The rabbi reported the assault to the police, but did not want to press charges. The judge released the two youths owing to the fact that they had already been "chastised" by their parents.

Elias Levin left Limerick in 1911, moving to the Central Synagogue in Leeds, later transferring to Belgrave Street Synagogue. He died, in 1936, at the age of 74.

Father John Creagh left Limerick, in May 1906, to do missionary work in the Phillipines, N.W. Australia, and New Zealand. In N.W. Australia, he tried to stop the exploitation of pearl divers. Before he left Limerick, he was instrumental in the setting up of a savings bank for small sums of money, and also a workmen's clothing co-operative, and advocated more industries for the city. Though his intentions to help the poor were good, his singling out of the Jewish community as being the main cause of the plight of the poor was a mistake. After all, there were Christians who were exploiting their own people. As was pointed out, some of the people who dealt with the Jews could not afford to buy or get credit from Christian businesses. John Creagh was the spark that lit the fuse of a hostility which already existed. He died, in 1947, at the Redemptorist Monastery, in Wellington, New Zealand.

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