

Davitt and the Limerick Jews

by Pat Feeley

Michael Davitt was known to the Limerick Jewish community at the turn of the century as the man who had been assigned by the Hearst newspapers to report for the American public on the Jewish pogrom at Kishineff in May of the previous year. His findings were later published in the **American**, a New York journal, and in more detail in a book **Within the Pale**.

It was understandable, therefore, that the Limerick rabbi, Elias Levin, should write to him for help after Fr. John Creagh's first anti-semitic sermon which was followed by attacks on members of the local community. He enclosed a copy of the sermon in his letter, and said he would leave it to Davitt to decide whether the outburst was motivated by religious prejudice, or local trading jealousy, and warned that it could lead to a general boycott or "a regular anti-semitic riot".

Davitt replied immediately in a letter to the **Freeman's Journal**. The Catholic Irish, he said, had the distinction of never having persecuted the Jews, something that was acknowledged by the Chief Rabbi of London on a visit to Dublin some years previously. This reputation was now being altered as a result of Fr. Creagh's sermon in which he had accused the Jews of killing the early saints of the Church and of shedding Christian blood everytime they got a chance. He warned that it was allegations like these, including the insinuation of ritual murder, that led to the massacre at Kishineff. Rather than preach "a cowardly vendetta" against the Jews, the Reverend Creagh, Davitt said, should address himself to English rule in Ireland which levied £12,000,000 in taxes on the people and to excessive drinking which impoverished and degraded them. (1)

The reaction in Limerick, undoubtedly orchestrated by Fr. Creagh and the Redemptorists, was hostile. The men of the Confraternity supported Fr. Creagh and condemned Davitt's "interference". A meeting of the Delegate Board of the Congregated Trades did the same.

There were also unsigned letters in the same vein to the local papers. In one letter a person claiming to be an English Protestant living in Limerick

said that Fr. Creagh deserved the thanks of the community for highlighting Jewish trading practices which further impoverished the poor, who were paying on the double for what they bought.

Another letter from a "Confraternity Man" said Davitt was ignorant of the situation in Limerick and that Fr. Creagh was right to warn his congregation against "Jewish usury and extortion".

Davitt's suggestion that Fr. Creagh should devote his energies to combatting intoxication showed he was out of touch, as Fr. Creagh had been a constant campaigner against after-hours drinking. If Davitt was hoping to turn the people against the Redemptorists, he was wasting his time, as they had been in the city for fifty years and were well regarded by the people. (2)

"Anti-Vendetta" wrote that Davitt when he was editor of the **Labour World** (a London publication) had frequently condemned Jewish sweatshops but he now seemed to be supporting the dumping of their products on the Irish market. For him to say that Fr. Creagh was stirring up a vendetta against the Jews was nonsense.

However, the strongest defence of the priest came, appropriately enough,

from Fr. Creagh himself in another sermon to the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family. He said he deprecated the violence that had occurred and had not advocated it. In his rebuttal of Davitt he quoted extensively from two of the "greatest historians" of the Catholic Church - Pastor and Rohrbracher. One can only hope that they wrote more objectively about other aspects of history than they did of the Jews, as the extracts quoted were the most outrageous, anti-semitic nonsense imaginable.

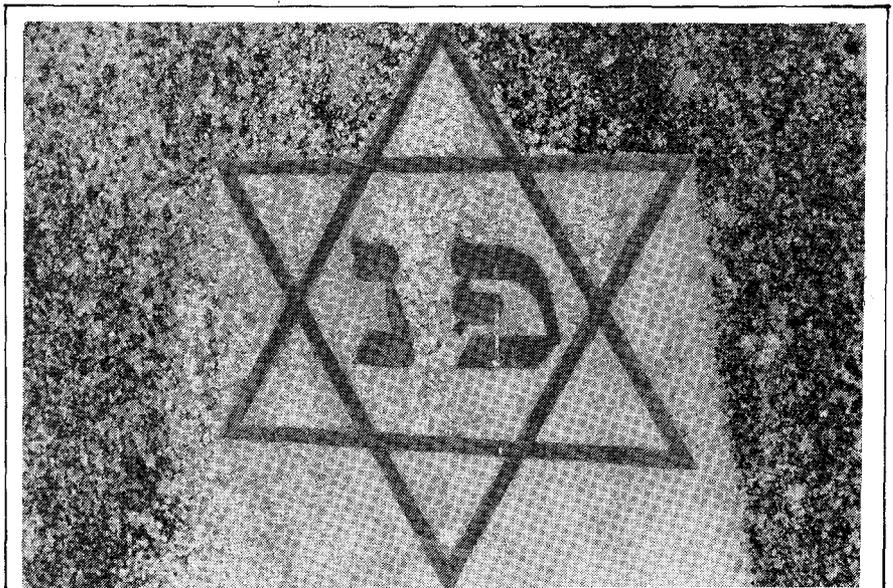
In this sermon he also blamed the 'Jews and the Free Masons' for engineering the expulsion of some religious orders (including the Redemptorists) from France. It would seem from what he said that there was an element of retribution for this in his attacks on the Limerick Jews.

Davitt did not intervene a second time. Why? We do not know. This was a pity because, as events were to show, the Jews needed a champion. He was, of course, involved in bigger national issues and was embroiled in other controversies.

As a result of the publicity which the sermons and the physical violence attracted, the campaign against the Jews entered a silent phase - the boycott.

SOURCES

- (1) **Freeman's Journal** 18/1/1904.
- (2) **Limerick Leader** 25/1/1904.



The Star of David on a headstone at the Jewish Cemetery, Kilmurry.