

# The Jews, Fr. Creagh and the Mayor's Court of Conscience

**J**ewish immigrants from eastern Europe began arriving in Limerick in the early 1880s. Many of them came from a village named Achmeyahn, in Lithuania, part of the Russian Empire. They settled mainly in Colooney Street and Edward Street.

In the census returns for 1901, the majority list their occupation as pedlar or draper/pedlar, i.e. one who travels about hawking small commodities.

As the number of immigrants grew in size, serious divisions developed which led to a split in the community. Very little attention has been paid to these divisions or to what exactly caused them. Most of the emphasis on the Jewish community in Limerick has to do with the 1904 anti-semitic outburst.

How did this split in the community come about? Was it over money-lending, which was against the wishes of Dr. Herman Adler, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. Dr. Adler had spoken out against money-lending and had also issued a circular on the subject. Or was it, as a local magistrate, Judge Adams, believed, over some obscure point of

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by Des Ryan

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ritual? Whatever it was, it eventually led to the setting up of a rival Synagogue, and to a disagreement over the buying of the Jewish cemetery at Newcastle, Castletroy, in the parish of Kilmurphy, on the Dublin Road, also in 1902.

From documents available and newspaper reports of court cases involving members of the Jewish community it would appear that this rift in the community may have begun in the mid 1890s. In a court case in June 1895, Solomon Ginsberg sued another member of the community, a Mr. Graff, for money owed. When Mr. Ginsberg was asked by the presiding magistrate if there was a Synagogue in Limerick, Mr. Ginsberg replied that there was, to which the magistrate replied "There is a synagogue but no Rabbi".

Elias B. Levin (and his wife Annie), the community's Rabbi, came to Limerick in 1882, and in 1886 he lived at 36 Colooney Street. The Levins had a large family. The census return for 1901 showed that one of

their children, a boy named Samuel, was born in America in 1894. This accounts for the magistrates remark that there was a synagogue but no Rabbi. The census returns for 1901 show that he was back in Limerick in 1896, where he remained until 1911 or 1912.

Another case, which involved the synagogue, took place on November 2 1896, when a Jewish immigrant named Solden summoned Maurice King, a fellow Jew, for assault, which took place in the synagogue. A few days later this letter, denying that any assault had taken place, appeared in the *Limerick Leader*:

*To the Editor of the Limerick Leader:*

*Dear Sir - Knowing your usual courtesy to the readers of your influential journal, I wish through the same medium to draw the attention of the public generally to a report which appeared in last Friday's issue of your paper in the City Police Court proceedings, in which the reader could imagine of some disturbance it would have taken place in the Jewish Synagogue. I am to state that no disturbance whatever has at any time taken place in the above since its estab-*



Little Gerald Griffin St c.1980. Lentin's scrap business on left.

(Photo courtesy Des Ryan)

lishment. The parties which you mention do not belong to our members as the Synagogue is almost under supervision of our Chief Rabbi, Dr. Adler, and it is conducted by competent men at the time celebrating our ancient faith. Hoping I did not trespass upon your valuable space, I remain, Dear Sir, Yours faithfully

M. J. Blond  
50 Henry Street, Limerick.

Marcus Blond had been a Rabbi, but became a draper and grocer when he came to Limerick.

In a similar case for assault in July 1900, a boy called Solomons summoned Philip Tuohy, who was also of the same religion. Apparently Solomons was passing the Tuohy household at 74 Colooney Street when Tuohy's sister, who was standing at the door, called Solomons a robber. Solomons called her a "Skylark". Tuohy met Solomons a few days later and thumped and kicked him. Tuohy's excuse was that Solomons had knocked at their door and run away.

Mr. Gaffney, who appeared for Tuohy, said that there were rival factions in the Synagogue. Mr. Counihan, representing Solomons, said it was over a circular issued (in 1898) by the Chief Rabbi against money lending and that the Tuohys were moneylenders. Adjourning the case for a month, the magistrate commented that the Jewish community was always well behaved - but were they?

When Jewish immigrants first came here the Sabbath was observed by saying prayers in the house of Horace King at 6 Emmet Place and later on, at the House of Rabbi Elias Levin at 18 Colooney Street. Finally, a Synagogue was opened at 63 Colooney Street.

A report on a court case on 1 September 1900 shows that there was also a Synagogue in Charles Street, (St. Gerard Street). Although the evidence is conflicting, it appears that a row developed when another member of the community, Mr. Tuohy, entered the Synagogue at Charles Street without the permission of the President, Mr. Louis Goldberg. Seats were smashed, a gas jet was pulled from the wall by Mr. Goldberg's brother, who then struck Mr. Tuohy on the head and back with it.

In January 1901, there were 31 Jewish families living in Limerick. Tensions were brought to boiling point when the Goldbergs decided to move their Synagogue to 72 Colooney Street. This is confirmed in two letters written to the *Limerick Leader* by the opposing sides.

To the Editor of the *Limerick Leader*

Dear Sir - An invitation is going around the city in the name of L. Goldberg, "Hon. Sec." of the Hebrew Synagogue, inviting people to come at the so-called Synagogue at 72 Colooney Street. For our Christian neighbours and friends not to be misled I hasten to inform the public, through the courtesy and kindness of the city favourite Leader, that

there is no other authorised Synagogue, by our Most Rev. Dr. Adler, the Chief Rabbi of all Jewish Communities in the United Kingdom, except the one at 63 Colooney Street, at which H. Graff, Esq., is President, and Mr. Jaffe is Secretary. Trusting, dear Editor, you will be good enough to find space for this important matter, I remain yours faithfully,  
M. J. Blond,  
60 Henry Street, Limerick  
January 9 1901.

The second letter is from Louis Goldberg:-  
Dear Sir - Hoping you will find space in your valuable paper to make the public aware of the following fact:- the Synagogue of the Limerick Hebrew Congregation, 72 Colooney Street, will be opened on Friday next. The principal reason for establishing the above is not to associate ourselves with money lenders, and these are the full wishes of our Chief Rabbi, Rev. Dr. Adler. With regard to Mr. Blond's remarks, I don't see any justification in answering them. Thanking you in anticipation, yours etc.  
Louis Goldberg, Hon. Sec.  
Limerick 10 January 1901.

The Goldberg faction, which numbered at least ten related families, may also have had their own Rabbi. The census returns for 1901 show that Moses Velitzkin, his wife and three daughters, lived at 72 Colooney Street. He gave his occupation as being a Jewish Minister.

In January 1902, members of the Jewish community were in negotiations with William Nunan, a farmer from Ballyclough, to buy a plot of land just off the Dublin road to be used as a cemetery. This was finalised on 17th February and registered in the Deeds Office in Dublin on 24 June 1902. Prior to that the community buried its dead in the Jewish cemetery at Cork.

The buying of the land at Kilmurry caused further animosity in the community. By perusing the Deed of Conveyance we can see by the signatures appended to it just who were possibly opposed to the Goldbergs:

Aronove, Isaac	Jaffey, Benjamin
Blonde, Marcus Jacob	Jaffey, Sydney
Cropman, David	Jaffey, Marcus L
Cropman, Hyman S	Jerome, Solomon
Clein, Louis	Levin, Elias B
Graff, Barnet	Levin, Harry
Graff, Hyman	Maissell, Maurice
Griff, Philip	Maissell, Wolf
Gould, Barnet	Shockett, Barnett
Greene, Julius	Toohy, Philip
Greenfield, Moses Joseph	Tuohy, Wolf

These names also represent at least another ten families. Apart from the deed of conveyance, we also have copies of two letters which were printed in the *Limerick Chronicle* a month after the buying of the cemetery.

The Limerick Hebrew Congregation,  
72 Colooney Street, Limerick.  
March 14 1902

To the Editor of the *Limerick Chronicle*  
Dear Sir

I feel rather my task very heavy - what with your able leader - and Mr. J. A. Doyle, Solicitor's letter - and the rest of the able arguments and personalities brought forward by our opponents, but my only consolation is that I mean to disentangle the affair and put before the public the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and the truth is sometimes stranger than fiction. I shall not answer the question whether we are regulars or irregulars, or whether we have been paid out or not. There is one thing I can proudly say, that all the members belonging to our Congregation are all the oldest members in the city of Limerick, who have built up the Jewish Congregation, and this is not the first time in our Jewish history that our Tribe has had to make room for some upstarts. History only repeats itself.

Now with regard to the Jewish burial ground, I don't say that this was not a long felt want - for in fact I was the first to bring this scheme before the Jewish Community. I was the first Chairman, and through the zeal and hard work of a member of our Congregation (Mr. Julius Martinson) a sum of £41 was collected from the entire Jewish Community and I placed in a local bank the names of four Trustees - two of our Congregation - and it was resolved that a further sum of £24 be raised, and to go into the solicitor on Wednesday and hand him £50 on account and to draw a Deed, and the names of every member of both Congregations be mentioned, and two Governors to be elected from each Congregation, and on the following Tuesday these very gentlemen went behind our backs and signed the Deed and only mentioned the names of the members of their Congregation in the Deed, and made themselves Governors of the same, because they thought they will make an appeal to our Christian neighbours here in Limerick and to our brethren abroad, and they will easily get in £75 more. So what I say on behalf of our Congregation is simply this, when they are so independent that they could exclude more than half of the entire Jewish Community that they should be ashamed to ask for help from outsiders. I shall call for a witness their own solicitor if I wasn't in his office and offered him the money subscribed by my Congregation. It's all bosh what they state in the Deed, and is only to catch fish in muddy water, that the Burial ground is for the entire Jewish Community. If so, why were not the names of the 24 members of our Congregation mentioned in the Deed! Now, re letter in the *Jewish Express* I could make my oath and am willing to forfeit £5 to any charity, that this letter in the *Jewish Express* was not written by the President and Treasurer of my Congregation. The letter we wrote to the *Jewish Express*, of which we have a copy in our Letter Book yet, is exactly the same we wrote to the *Jewish Chronicle* and the *Jewish World*.



87 Colooney St (Wolfe Tone St) David Newman's premises in 1913. Shop renovated in 1996.

(Photo courtesy Des Ryan)

*Don't you think yourself, sir, that it would be madness for us to state such a falsehood and brand ourselves for liars, for our brethren in Ireland, any way, because they know thoroughly well that there is no Burial Ground in Limerick.*

*Sir, we thank you in anticipation for inserting this letter and give it the same publicity as you did to our opponents, and we promise you not to bother you again. Now that we have stated our case before the public, we confidently leave it to their intelligence.*

*I am, sir, your obedient servant, L Goldberg, Hon. Sec. Limerick Hebrew Congregation.*

*P.S. There is only one thing to which I'd like to draw the attention of the public, and that is:- There is £75 paid to Mr. Nunan, and £41 lying in the Munster and Leinster Bank, an additional £30 is subscribed in our Congregation towards that fund, so where is the necessity of making public appeal for money.*

*To the Editor of the Limerick Chronicle  
The Hebrew Congregation, Limerick.  
63 Colooney Street.*

*Dear Sir - In your issue of 18th inst. a letter appears signed by "L. Goldberg" in which he assures the public as to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, "as he terms it" re the Jewish burial ground which has lately been purchased by us (the above congregation), but it is obvious that he shrinks from repudiating the fact of his and his*

*few followers being paid out members, apprehending, no doubt, that by such an unwise attempt to outrage "truth", his own signature, coupled with those of his followers, "attested to at the time to the agreement drawn up as being paid out members, and henceforth no claim whatsoever upon the Limerick Hebrew Congregation", would be too condemning if forced to have it laid before the public. Since dealing with the "whole truth" it is rather surprising that he should have omitted enlightening the public as to the cause of their being "paid out". After certain disturbances which were brought before the public by the medium of the Police Court, and later on by appeal, the Magistrates decision being upheld, he and his party received a lump sum of money from us signing an undertaking never to have any claim against the Limerick Hebrew Congregation. It is now over two years since we had pledged ourselves to purchase a site for a Jewish cemetery in this city, but were always prevented by "truth" simply because we didn't appoint him entire master of the situation, and repose our dignities and rights in his self-asserted conscience. We were fortunate to receive a voluntary offer from a London gentleman to get the United Synagogues Council of London to buy the necessary site for all the Jewish inhabitants here, conditionally that the deed must be made out in their name as a provision that every Jewish inhabitant should be under the same rights whether he belonged to the original congregation recognised as*

*such by them and Dr. Adler, or to the opposition. We gladly fell in with this kind offer. But Mr. Truth and his party would not hear of it. Why? Simply because a course would naturally only give him the general right.*

*After repeated meetings a general meeting was held on February 23 and it was agreed Mr. Goldberg and his followers, who were also at that meeting, agreeing that the above congregation subscribe £45, and he and his party undertaking to pay £30 making up the necessary £75 required by Mr. Nunan. To bring negotiations to a close our undertakings were promptly carried out and our £45 lodged with Mr. S Jerome, the specially appointed treasurer for that fund, Mr. Goldberg and party failing to come forward with even as much as one penny. That will be convincing to the public how much importance may be attached to Mr. Goldberg's assertion as to his having offered £30 to our solicitor. We emphatically deny that statement. To make up the £75 we were obliged to borrow money in the Bank, having been notified by the owner of his intention to withdraw his offer altogether if not closed forthwith. Notwithstanding those facts, the deed was drawn up with a good will for all the Jewish inhabitants, an extract of the deed which appeared in one of your issues, proved, and we solemnly declare that we shall always carry it out to the letter, notwithstanding Goldberg and his party failing to subscribe, and instead, sending mischievous and false reports to the Press.*



*The trustees of the Limerick Jewish Burial Ground  
Mr. Stuart Klein and Mr. Louis Fine  
cordially invite you to attend an official ceremony  
by The Chief Rabbi, Very Rev. Rabbi Ehraim Mirvis,  
on Wednesday 14th November 1990 at 2.30 pm.  
to mark the completion of the restoration of the  
burial ground and prayer house, and to a  
reception afterwards at the Limerick University Club.  
R.S.V.P. — Mr. Louis Fine, 42 O'Connell Street, Limerick.*

**Invitation to the ceremony marking the restoration of the Jewish burial ground, 1990.**

*Re his offer of £5 to any charity if the letter which appeared in the Jewish Express was written by his President and Treasurer, we certainly are entitled to claim it for two noble institutions, viz, Barrington's Hospital and St John's. How does he expect the public to believe his oath that these two persons on whose authority the articles appeared in the press, did not write same wherein appears their names in black and white if the editor of the Jewish Express abused or forged their names, why not call the editor to account for it?*

*Now about his figures. We think the following lines will be sufficient. That Mr. Goldberg's figures are only in consistency with his mode of truth:- Site for cemetery, £150; two gates - Solicitors and Engineers fares £25; one Mortuary, which is necessary in accordance with our Rites £50; necessary sundries £10; total £235. Credit - Cash already paid £75; at the Bank £41; with the collectors £1.2s. Amount £117.2s. We borrowed in the Bank towards the £75, paid in £23. Deficiency £140.18s. which your readers can clearly see.*

*We trust as a matter of fair play, you will be kind enough to publish this letter as a whole congregation has been accused of false charges.*

*Thanking you in anticipation,  
We are faithfully yours*

*Signed: H. Graff, President*

*B. Jaffe, Vice President.*

*(Having given you both sides of the matter we do not propose to allow any further continuance of the controversy. The public must now be the Judges - Ed. Chronicle).*

In early January 1904, Fr. John Creagh (from Thomondgate), a Redemptorist priest, gave a sermon which was directed against the business transactions of this small community of Jewish immigrants. Fr. Creagh had spent a number of years in England during the 1890s and was a witness to the influx of thousands

of Jews from Eastern Europe.

Alarmed at the number of foreigners entering the country, the British government set up an Aliens Immigration Commission. As well as that, in 1899, they also set up a Select Committee of the House of Commons to investigate money-lending. The evidence given before the Committee brought to light many startling transactions, in several of which the leading actor was the notorious Isaac Gordon, who carried on a money-lending business in various centres, Limerick included, under the device of assumed names.

Was it these events that influenced Fr. Creagh to give his lecture on that fateful night in January 1904?

During the course of his sermon, Fr. Creagh stated that he had an authentic document from what was known as the Mayor's Court of Conscience (M.C.C.). The Court, which was held every Thursday in the old Town Hall in Rutland Street, was for small debts, the maximum being £2.00 (about €500.00 in today's terms). The Mayor (French for Magistrate) acted as arbitrator in these cases. If the debt remained outstanding, the Mayor's constables seized goods from the house of the person who owed the money and auctioned them to compensate the person to whom the money was owed. In most cases, arrangements were made to pay off the debt. On one occasion a bird-cage and some birds were seized. In a case against a former Mayor and historian of Limerick, Maurice Lenihan, a piano was seized. Quite a number of people and businesses in the city used the M.C.C.

Fr. Creagh made several allegations against the Jewish community. One of them was about the use of the M.C.C. He gave the impression that, during the years 1902 and 1903, the M.C.C. was used exclusively for the benefit of the Jews. The figures he quoted were 337 cases in 1902, that is an average of 6 to 7 cases per week, and 226 cases in 1903, an average of 4 to 5 cases per week. Today we have no way of proving if these figures were, as Fr.

Creagh felt, excessive and if they were excessive, what could have caused it.

Was it the South African War (1899-1902)? An article in the *Limerick Chronicle* in 1901 showed that some Limerick women, whose husbands were in the British Army in South Africa, were drinking their separation allowance money and neglecting their children. Previous to that, a child had died from neglect in the city.

Whether he had anticipated it or not, Fr. Creagh's sermon led directly to the harassment of the Jewish community and eventually to an economic boycott of some of the members of the community. It is said that during the following two years and because of this incident that a number of Jewish families (80 people including children) left Limerick.

In May 1998, I was given access to two ledgers from the M.C.C. These two books cover the years from 1895 to 1899 and 1909 to 1917. The crucial one, the book from which Fr. Creagh quoted, has gone missing or has been lost over the last ninety years. After going through the books, which cover a period of 14 years, I extracted the names of what I believe to be members of the Jewish community.

Listed below is the number of cases for those years in which members of the Jewish Community were involved, the first ledger beginning on the 25th April, 1895.

1895 - 2 Cases	1909 - 18 Cases
1896 - 31 Cases	1910 - 14 Cases
1897 - 32 Cases	1911 - 10 Cases
1898 - 25 Cases	1912 - 14 Cases
1899 - 3 to 4 Cases	1913 - 13 Cases
	1914 - 10 Cases
	1915 - 4 Cases
	1916 - 9 Cases
	1917 - 7 Cases

There are many ways of looking at these figures. One could say that there was a dramatic decrease in the number of cases being brought to the M.C.C. by members of the Jewish Community in 1899, and that Fr. Creagh might have got his figures wrong. On the other hand, if his figures are right, we can see a situation where the number of cases went from about 1 case per fortnight to between 4 to 7 cases per week by 1902/1903.

The sad thing about the Jewish community in Limerick is that they were victims of their own publicity. That is, the whole city knew that there were divisions in the community over the issue of money-lending and the buying of a cemetery for Jewish burials.

By December 1904, the Goldbergs had given up their Synagogue at 72 Colooney Street and the lease was taken over by the opposition - the Graff Faction and their supporters. It was these families who remained on in the city, some up to the 1920s, long after Fr. Creagh and the Goldbergs had departed. Also, the anti-Jewish outbreak of January 1904 did not deter new Jewish families from settling in Limerick.

As for the Mayors Court of Conscience ledgers, I'm sure they require more expert and further analysis.