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HISTORICAL JEWELS OF LIMERICK

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How eight Jewish families left Limerick after shameful pogrom of 1904

ACHAEL KEALY

Limerick has much to be proud of in its long and colourful history; it is a city that has provided the world with some of the finest cultural, industrial and political contributions to society, from a Pulitzer-winning author to the inventor of the submarine. But like any grand old city, it has seen less illustrious moments, and on such occasion was the Limerick pogrom.

In more recent years, the action

has been referred to as a boycott, as nobody was seriously injured, unlike the slaughter that took place during the Kishinev Pogrom in Russia. It has also been noted that many people, including the Royal Irish Constabulary, worked hard to protect Limerick Jews from attack. However, the event was more than a concerted effort to halt commercial activity.

It was not simply a case of choosing to purchase goods elsewhere. People were chased through the streets under a barrage of rocks and stones; businesses were ruined; police protection was required; entire

continued page 24



A Jewish shopkeeper in Ireland, pic from Irish Jewish Museum



an early 1900s Catholic parade



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from page 23

families left the city, never to return. Neither title - Pogrom or boycott - seems to suitably address the events of 1904.

As Europe was carved up by the monopolising powers in the early years of the 19th century, many Jewish communities in the Russian Empire found themselves subject to harsh legislation, forced exile and vicious rumours, as they were demonised for all of society's ails. The usual allegations were levied against them - "Christ-killers" - along with a new, more virulent strain of rumour-mongering and propagandising. They were accused of sacrificing Christian children, exploiting workers for their commercial means and fomenting revolution.

As Jewish people in Eastern Europe became increasingly vilified, ostracised and fearful, they left for safer havens; many travelled to Britain and the United States, some to Ireland. In 1904 the Jewish population in Limerick was tiny, comprising about 25-35 families, mainly from a small village in what we now recognise as Lithuania.

Simon Sebag Montefiore, the famed historian and writer, recalls from family lore his ancestors' arrival in Limerick: upon disembarking at Cobh, Cork, they were told that New

York was "the next parish". The group - including Mr Montefiore's great-great-grandfather, Benjamin Jaffe - settled mostly in Colooney Street, now Wolfe Tone Street. Many are listed in census records as pedlars, or small-time traders of household goods, garments and trinkets. They often sold goods by instalment, collecting weekly payments from housewives. Writing in *History Ireland*, Kevin Haddick describes Limerick in the early 1900s as "wretchedly poor", a garrison town with "many of its menfolk away fighting the Boers... their wives and children were virtually on the breadline." The instalment system provided the poor with a valued alternative to the often unattainable prices in high street stores such as Todds.

Many of the Jewish community could read and write; they worked hard, built their small businesses and established a synagogue and a cemetery. Rabbi Elias Bere Levin, an expert scribe, became the group's spiritual leader. RIC Constable McAvoy observed that Jews in Limerick "are examples of sobriety, industry and good conduct. They never break the law."

According to historian Sharon Slater, the city was, at this time "immersed in religion" and overwhelmingly homogenous "(in) a population of over 30,000 souls, a mere 3,000 were not Roman Catho-

lic." For the most part, however, Jewish and Christian people got along with little friction.

There were a few notable exceptions: on Easter Sunday, 1884, a mob attacked the house of Lieb Siev, injuring his wife and children. The assailants were apparently objecting to the family slaughtering chickens in preparation for Passover. The event was roundly condemned by the Mayor and local newspapers. In 1892 two Jewish men and their wives suffered an unprovoked assault on Military Road (now O'Connell Avenue), and in 1896 another Jewish household was stoned.

By the early 1900s the two communities had integrated well, so much so that a civic function (attended by local dignitaries) was held in 1903 to mark the departure of a leading Jewish member of society, B. Weinrock, to South Africa.

On the 7th January 1904, Fannie Toohey and Maurice B. Messell were married at the synagogue in an upstairs room of a house in Colooney Street. A reporter from *The Limerick Chronicle* was invited to the Jewish ceremony, and he duly gushed about the exotic tableau of carriages, candles, canopies and crushed glass.

Entitled 'Strange Nuptial Rites', the piece is a typical example of the almost zoological approach to the 'Other' in turn-of-the-century west-



O'Connell Street, Limerick at the top of which two Jewish men and their wives suffered an unprovoked assault

ern press. The writer drew a sharp contrast between the ordinary Limerick on-lookers and the invited guests: "At the Synagogue, inside and out, were large crowds, the difference between them being that whereas those outside wore poverty's motley, those inside were clad in fine broadcloth, and silks and satins". It has been suggested that this report may have prompted a backlash within the Catholic populace, culminating in the infamous sermon of Fr John Creagh on the 11th January 1904.

The Catholic Church was at its most powerful in Ireland, and practiced a stridently disciplined religion, with stern lectures dispensed from the pulpit. Mass was a fundamentally necessary ritual; to save one's soul, to maintain one's reputation, and also, in a time before radios in every home, as a form of weekly entertainment.

It was into this curious category of religious theatre that Fr John Creagh fell. Educated at St. Munchin's, he moved fast through the ranks of the clergy, becoming the director of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family (attached to the Redemptorists) by the age of 32. Photographs show the demagogic priest to be thin-lipped, with narrow, closely-set-together eyes staring from beneath a black peaked biretta.

"His preaching was irresistible," recalled one contemporary. "He spared no one, and the people just loved it, regularly spilling out of the church and onto the street."

On the 11th January, in what Simon Sebag Montefiore called "a grotesque parody of anti-Semitism", Fr Creagh began his sermon by rehashing some of the most poisonous myths surrounding Jewish people. "They are the greatest enemies of the Catholic Church," he thundered. "They crucified Our Lord, and murdered the



Fanny Goldberg remembered a violent attack by a big burley man with a black shillelagh shouting, 'I'll kill those bloody Jews'

early Christians. They would kidnap and slay Christian children if they dared." He complained that Jewish settlers had come to Limerick in rags, and now clothed themselves in silk. He railed against their methods of commercial activity: "They have wormed themselves into every form of business... they forced themselves and their goods upon the people". His vicious tirade whipped the Confraternity into a frenzy - hundreds of people poured out of the church in search of the newly-found cause of all their suffering.

Dermot Keogh, author of *Jews in 20th Century Ireland*, wrote that "the Jewish community immediately sensed the menacing mood of the crowd turned mob and remained locked in their homes as the church militants passed by." Windows were broken and stones were hurled: only one brave dissenter and the arrival of the police prevented the ugly situation from turning dangerous.

On Monday - the day the pedlars normally collected their instalments - there was, according to the *Limerick Chronicle*, "considerable excitement." The paper records that the businessmen were subjected to

"groaning and hissing, on the part of women, boys and girls, some of who threw dirt at, and spat on the Jews".

Jewish traders found that their credit with wholesalers was suddenly called in. On the other side, they were unable to collect their regular instalments, and so had no income. There was no recourse available in the courts - Judge Adams decided that judgements in matters between Jews and Christians would be unwise at that time. Dermot Keogh wrote that many Jewish people were refused service in shops, and their children ostracised in schools. Soon the families were reliant on donations from sympathisers in Britain.

Unlike traditional boycotts, violence was never far away in the early months of 1904 in Limerick. Police records detail allegations of stoning, stalking and intimidation of Jewish people. One report relates to a parish priest in Shanagolden interfering with the sale of blankets from a Jewish trader to a poor herdsman's daughter. The girl recalled the priest berating her: "I will get you out of the parish for dealing with the Jews".

Fanny Goldberg later remembered a violent attack by "a big burley man with a black shillelagh... shouting, 'I'll kill those bloody Jews'". Her father sustained a serious head injury while his friend, David Wienronk, suffered a broken leg. Mr Wienronk's wife, Sophia, "a small little creature" was later set upon by a group of men, who beat her head against a wall.

The national and international reaction was mixed. Rabbi Levin wrote eloquent letters to various leaders, calling for support and protection. Michael Davitt, the nationalist hero, had turned journalist and political writer in later years. Having recently reported on the atrocities in Kishinev, he quickly and

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Fr John Creagh, a demagogic Redemptorist priest: "His preaching spared no one, and the people just loved it, regularly spilling out of the church and onto the street."

publicly responded: "I protest as an Irishman and as a Catholic against the barbarous malignancy of anti-Semitism which is being introduced into Ireland under the pretend regard

for the welfare of the Irish people."

Creagh met this criticism with even more virulently anti-Semitic outpourings from his pulpit. On the 18th January he began his speech

by ostensibly discouraging violence, but continued to spew racist slurs and incitements: "Let us defend ourselves before their heels are too firmly planted upon our necks."

*Let us defend
ourselves before
their heels are too
firmly planted
upon our necks*

The Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr Edward Dwyer, denounced Fr Creagh's bile-filled sermons, but it had little effect as the priest reported to the Redemptorist Fathers. The Church of Ireland bishop, Dr Thomas Bunbury, defended the Jews of Limerick, using his position to dispel some of the more vitriolic myths being propagated.

Others encouraged and supported Fr Creagh's boycott, including Arthur Griffith – the founder of Sinn Féin – who published an article in his United Irishman denouncing Jews as "parasites of industry". In April, fifteen-year-old John Raleigh was arrested for striking Rabbi Levin with a stone, and sentenced to one-month imprisonment in Mountjoy Prison. Upon the boy's release, he was met by a large crowd of sup-

porters who lifted him onto their shoulders, cheering him the whole way home.

The violent actions of the few are well-documented, but it should be noted that they did not represent the many. One 'Galballyman' penned a letter to Fr Creagh: "So you low cur, had you nothing better to tell your people than to set them against the poor unfortunate Jews? You are a disgrace to the Catholic religion, you brute."

Jacob Joffe, a member of the Jewish community in Limerick, did not believe the majority of 'ordinary people agreed with the boycott. He explained in the Jewish Chronicle that "there exists in many parts of Ireland... a class of people who, brought up in the chains of Catholicism and trained to unquestioning and unreasoning obedience to all dicta of their priests, need but a slight stimulus to excite them, and to rouse them from their erstwhile friendly attitude, to one of defiance and frenzied hostility."

In the end, the campaign of oppression and constant threat of violence proved too much for some: according to a police report, by 1905, eight Jewish families left their homes, never to return. Of the 26 who initially remained, their circumstances were "greatly reduced". The Jewish population of Limerick continued to decline in subsequent years. Those who left continued to serve as indus-

trious members of society: their descendants include political aide Saul Goldberg, well-known Cork businessman Louis Goldberg, former Lord Mayor of Cork Gerald Goldberg, the afore-mentioned writer Simon Sebag Montefiore, novelist David Marcus and his brother, the film director Louis Marcus.

In 1906, Fr Creagh was given charge of a new mission in the Philippines. He was roundly applauded by local papers and his send-off was immense, with parishioners queueing up to shake the hand of the man who had led Limerick into one of the darkest periods in its history. His supporters were loyal to the end, praising "his indomitable efforts to rescue the working classes of Limerick from the grasp of foreigners." He died in New Zealand in 1947.

The Chief Rabbi of London, upon visiting Dublin in the 1890s, declared that Ireland was the only land in Europe in which his race had not suffered persecution. Unfortunately, after the events in Limerick in 1904, this was no longer true.

However, some comfort can be gained in the words of Irishman and former President of Israel Chaim Herzog (whose father, a rabbi, spoke fluent Gaelic). Some hundred years later, on a visit to his homeland, he insisted that Ireland was "the most tolerant land in Europe." It is an honourable mantle, one that Irish citizenry should strive to deserve.

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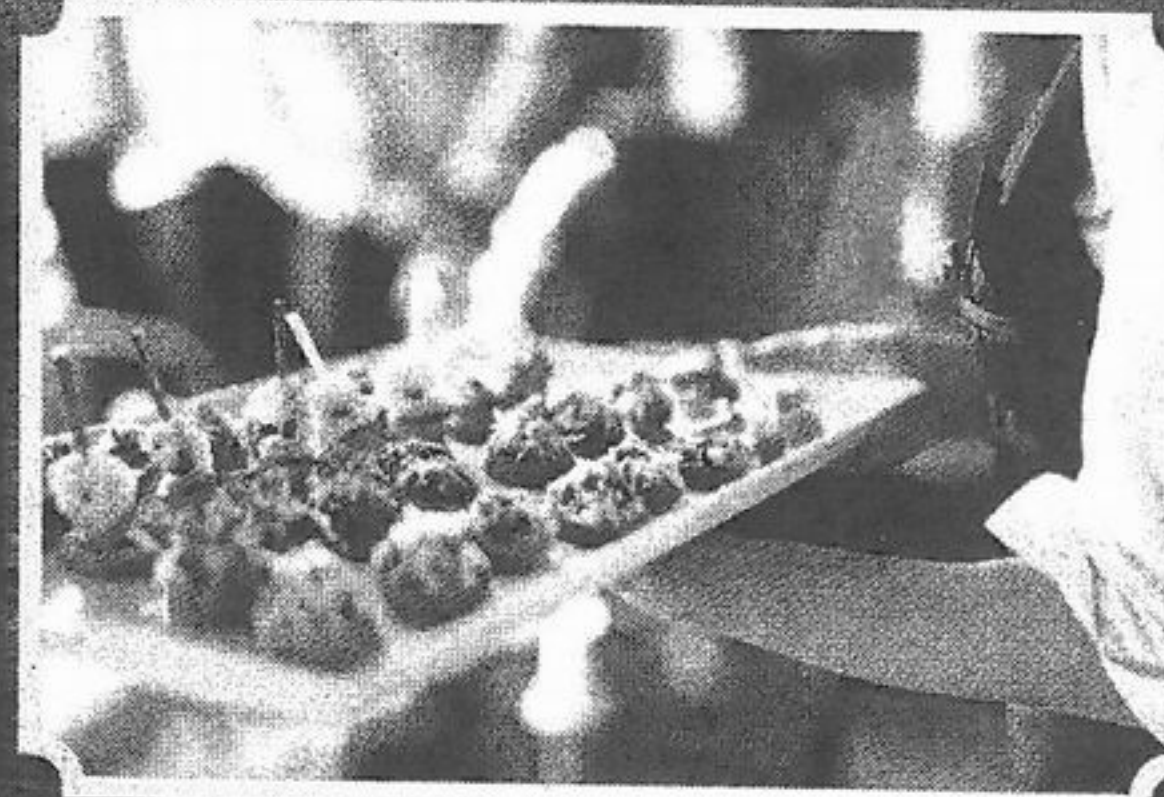
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