

CHAPTER XXV

THE JEWS OF LIMERICK IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

It is not till the middle of the nineteenth century—a break of forty or so years—that a Jew appears again in Limerick. On 30 May 1847, Bobby (Abraham) Genese died there and was buried in a Christian cemetery, but his body was quickly exhumed and reinterred at Ballybough; his brother, Solomon,¹ was living in Dublin at the time. The 1861 census showed a solitary Jew in Limerick city and the 1871 census listed two in the county borough. By 1881, the number of Jews in the borough had risen to four.²

With the coming of Lithuanian Jews to Ireland in 1878, about twenty families settled in Limerick, living in Edward Street and its environs, and mostly trading in books and pictures. They kept to themselves, except for business, and the public knew little about them save insofar as minor congregational disputes came before the courts or were put to arbitration by M. King, President of the congregation. So it came as a great shock to them to find an angry Gentile crowd surrounding the house of Lieb Siev on Easter Sunday morning in April 1884. Stones were flung through the windows and Siev's wife and child were hurt. Eventually constables arrived and dispersed the rioters. It appears that on Holy Thursday a maid-servant had seen her employer slaughtering fowl in Jewish ritual fashion, and there were townspeople who considered this an act of cruelty; the Jews had no inkling of the wrath and resentment which provoked the apparently spontaneous and unpremeditated onslaught on the Siev home. Two ringleaders were sentenced to a month's imprisonment with hard labour, and Alderman Lenihan, Mayor of Limerick, declared at the trial that there was no evidence that the Jews had offered any affront to their neighbours nor could the conduct to which they were subjected be tolerated in a civilised

country. The *Cork Examiner* wrote: 'This country has long been honourably distinguished by its tolerance towards the Jews. Its conduct in this respect was peculiarly creditable in a country in which Catholic enthusiasm is so strong. . . The Jews will never be convinced of the truth or beauty of Christianity by battering in their doors with stones. Haud ignora mali—not ignorant of persecution and its evils, our own race ought to be especially careful to avoid its infliction'.³

Other Jews were molested in Limerick, but the prompting was not so much religious animosity as a devious attempt to avoid the payment of petty debts. Nevertheless, the constant annoyances, and a threat of boycott, impelled many members of the community to move to Cork in May 1884. But the boycott did not materialise and some of them went back.

As Delegate Chief Rabbi, the Rev. Dr. Hermann Adler paid a pastoral visit on 14 August 1888, when the congregation comprised eight families, 35 souls in all; on a second such visit on 1 December 1892, he found 90 souls, principally of Lithuanian origin. The condition of the community had begun to give cause for anxiety: two Jews had been waylaid near Limerick in August 1892, and beaten up, and on 24 November 1896, the house of Moses Leone was damaged by stone-throwing. The Limerick Jews now numbered 130.

Petty altercations disfigured their communal life for several years, feeling between the two rival bodies sometimes running so high as to involve the civil law, but at last unity reigned and a single congregation placed itself under the jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbi; the Rev. Elias Bere Levin (1862–1936), who had settled in Limerick four years previously, was authoritatively appointed Reader and shochet. On 17 February 1902, ground for a cemetery was bought from William Nunan in fee simple, free of rent, for £150;⁴ it was in Newcastle, in the parish of Kilmurray, and half a statute acre in area. The transaction was negotiated by Hyman Graff, Barnett Graff, Solomon Jerome, Max L. Jaffe, Wolf Moizel, Benjamin Jaffe, Moses Moizel,⁵ Sidney Jaffe, Marcus Joseph Blond, David Cropman, Philip Graff, Barnett Shochett, Barnett Gould, Lewis Klein, the Rev. Mr. Levin, Marcus Greenfield, Hyman Cropman, Isaac Arinon and Wolf Toohey.

Prayers were first said in a private house in Emmet Place, then at 18 Colooney (now Wolfe Tone) Street; finally, a regular place of worship was opened at 63 Colooney Street. By 1903, a Board of Guardians and a Society for Relieving the Sick had been established and, now more fluent in English, the Jews began to mix with the rest of the population. For seven years they had lived in peace and harmony with their Christian neighbours, contributing each to the other's charities. At a gathering in June 1903, to make a presentation to B. Weinronk, founder of the local Zionist society, who was leaving for South Africa, Alderman John Daly, a former Mayor, presided, and the editor of the *Limerick Leader* spoke.

The Jews of Limerick were generally engaged in the smaller branches of retail trading, as milk vendors and travelling drapers in the rural districts; four were small wholesalers, from whom the immigrant newcomers usually obtained their goods. They were 'a well-conducted section of the community', as the Chief Secretary for Ireland described them, 'engaged for the most part in small trades and dependent for their livelihood on the good-will of their customers'.

Then suddenly, on 12 January 1904, panic struck them. Father John Creagh, of the Redemptorist Order, preached a sermon, indicting their methods of business, accusing them of shedding Christian blood, going so far as to charge that they would 'kidnap and slay Christian children' if they dared, in fact repeating the stock-in-trade of anti-Jewish agitation. Leopold Bloom's aside in Stephen Dedalus's ear in the *Eumaeus* episode,⁶ 'That's the juggle on which the p.p.'s raise the wind on false pretences' probably alludes to the parish priest's virulent sermon. How little Father Creagh's slanders mirrored the community's inward-turning lives is plain from a contemporary report of an entertainment given two years before, in his home, by the President, Marcus Joseph Blond, to all the members on a celebration of the Feast of Lights: an address by the Minister, responded to by senior congregants, the recitation of Scriptural passages by one of the President's daughters, the chanting of Hebrew melodies by the other.

Arthur Griffith (1872-1922), leader of the Sinn Féin nationalists, whose policy Leopold Bloom⁷ is said to have inspired, supported Father John Creagh in the *United Irishman*, demanding freedom

for the Irish peasantry from the international moneylenders and profiteers. Griffith's antisemitism, which seems to have stemmed from inherent xenophobia rather than from principle, was denounced by Fred Ryan, the economist, who declared in the first issue of *Dana*, of which W.K. Magee ('John Eglinton') and he were co-editors, that Irishmen who were claiming freedom for themselves could ill afford to refuse it to others.⁸

Jewish trading for weekly payments was the alleged ground for Father Creagh's attack, but, if so, the Roman Catholic shopkeepers of Limerick, who followed suit to a man, should have been the target no less. Standish Hayes O'Grady (1832-1915), venerable editor of the *All-Ireland Review*, answered the fulminations against Limerick Jewry of a correspondent calling himself 'A Black Northman'. 'The Jews', he retorted, 'have not taught us these vile tricks and dishonest shortcuts to wealth; we had them and practised them all long before he [*sic*] came, and are at them still, and would be at them were we to expel the whole race of Jews en masse tomorrow. If there were no Jews in Ireland, our own Irish Christian usurers . . . would be at just the same bad work, only without competitors'. O'Grady has only praise for the 'more calculative heads' of the Jews; for the fact that they do not drink, and for the way they 'concentrate upon the game with an intensity of purpose of which we are incapable'.⁹

The Jewish view was put forward by a correspondent signing herself simply 'A Jewess'.¹⁰ 'I won't comment on the assertion that "the Jews are killing Limerick"', she wrote; 'that thirty five families can destroy a town of a good many thousand inhabitants is, perhaps, rather a compliment than an insult'. She demands to know on what grounds the 'Black Northman' condemns Jews as parasites. Spain, the reader is reminded, drove out all Jews. 'Will you, or any of your anti-Semitic correspondents, hold up the Spain of to-day as an example of prosperity and progress . . . or compare her to the Spain of the Moors, when the great Jewish Doctors . . . flourished?'

It is enlightening to compare Leopold Bloom's¹¹ remarks on Spain and the Jews, and to recall both John Toland's¹² observation on Portugal and the Jews, and Joyce's¹³ reference to him in *Finnegans Wake*:

'—Jews, he softly imparted in an aside in Stephen's ear, are accused of ruining. Not a vestige of truth in it, I can safely say. History,—would you be surprised to learn? proves up to the hilt Spain decayed when the Inquisition hounded the jews out and England prospered when Cromwell, an uncommonly able ruffian, who, in other respects has much to answer for, imported them. Why? Because they are practical and are proved to be so'. 'A Jewess', firmer and more aggressive than Bloom, demands: 'Let 'Black Northman' prove that any Jew in Limerick resorted to illegal or immoral means. . . and then let him explain by what right any individuals or any Government. . . should persecute. . . thirty five families because even a dozen persons of the same faith have sinned'.

The attack on the Jews of Limerick was an attempt to make them suffer for the supposed wrongs of Redemptorist Fathers expelled from France, an expulsion for which the French Jews were being blamed. In a second, no less poisonous, sermon, Father Creagh endowed the Jews with the most diabolical character imaginable, and enjoined on his hearers 'not to deal with the Jews', which was interpreted to mean not only not to buy from them but also to repudiate debts incurred. With two or three exceptions, the community was pauperised. The Protestants of the city espoused its cause and opened relief funds, but this only intensified the rancour of the Redemptorists and of the Community of the Holy Family. The attack mounted, and, through no fault of their own, the Jews became a kind of buffer between two antagonists; they asked that no further subscriptions be canvassed among Protestant sympathisers, and the anti-Jewish campaign in the Press was ignored.

On 18 January, six days after Father Creagh's first tirade, the Jews of Limerick were, the Rev. Elias Bere Levin¹⁴ reported, 'insulted, assaulted and threatened with the most menacing language'. Let us adduce Bloom's impassioned protest against antisemitism in the *Cyclops* episode of *Ulysses*¹⁵: 'And I belong to a race too, says Bloom, that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant. . . Robbed, says he. Plundered. Insulted. Persecuted. Taking what belongs to us by right'. The Minister showed great courage and leadership when the Jewish community was besieged in his home.¹⁶ Soon after, an economic boycott was

ruthlessly enforced, and the rapidity with which the petty Jewish tradesmen became penniless scarcely corroborates the lucrative business practices—or malpractices—which were alleged.

Father Creagh's invective and the boycott that he instigated were generally condemned. 'The rabid Jew-baiters of the city should be taught that they are many miles from Kishineff', wrote the editor of *Irish Truth* on 22 April. 'Galatea', in a letter to the *Limerick Daily Express* on 14 April 1904, wrote: 'As a member of the Catholic Church, I wish to protest against the views of Father Creagh of Limerick with reference to our Jewish population. Such narrow-minded bigotry does not express the sentiments of Catholic Ireland and, I am sure, many will join with me in condemning the utterance of one who, by education and Christian teaching, should know better than to publicly preach against a race of people who, as every Irishman knows, are good citizens, hospitable neighbours, staunch and true friends, and whose generosity and charity to all, independent of creed, should make many of us, who profess to follow the teaching of Christianity, blush. I felt ashamed of my religion to-day (the only time I have done so) when I thought the exponent of such views could be a teacher of Catholicity'.

O'Grady, in his issue of 23 April, under the caption 'Stoning a Rabbi—Crusade Against the Jews at Limerick', printed a short news item recording that 'John Rahilly, aged 15, was charged with being one of a number of boys who. . . stoned the Rev. Elias B. Levi [*sic*] and two of his companion Israelites'. The judge, declaring his determination to stop such outbursts, sentenced the boy to a month's imprisonment. O'Grady goes on to comment editorially that the affair 'reveals a scandalous state of things, which is a disgrace to the whole country'. With vehement outspokenness he adds: 'It is publicly stated that the persecution originated in a fierce anti-Jewish sermon preached by a Roman Catholic priest in Limerick. Whether this be so or not, it is difficult to believe that the priests and the Bishop of Limerick could not put an end to it if they tried. . . These Limerick Jews seem to be a very harmless body, neither money-lenders nor extortioners; just traders trading in clothes, and selling the same at no more profit than is permitted. . . It is certainly high time for the Church of the people to exert its authority over the people, and end this vile persecution'.¹⁷

In a spirited letter to the *Freeman's Journal* of 18 January 1904, Michael Davitt, founder of the United Irish League and colleague of Parnell, defended the Jews against the blood-libel. 'There is not an atom of truth', he wrote, 'in the horrible allegation of ritual murder, here insinuated, against this persecuted race. Again and again to their eternal credit, the Popes of the Middle Ages condemned this invention of sordid purpose or of blind hate, as untrue, un-Christian and reprehensible, and no Pontiff has ever sanctioned the circulation of these abominable stories, the dissemination of which has led to the slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent lives throughout Europe in past times. I protest, as an Irishman and as a Christian, against this spirit of barbarous malignity being introduced into Ireland, under the pretended form of a material regard for the welfare of our workers'. Davitt went further: 'The Jews have never done any injury to Ireland. Like our own race, they have endured a persecution, the records of which will for ever remain a reproach to the 'Christian' nations of Europe. Ireland has no share in this black record. Our country has this proud distinction—freely acknowledged by Jewish writers—of never having resorted to this un-Christian and barbarous treatment of an unfortunate people'. Davitt,¹⁸ whose sympathies for the Jews never flagged, also visited the Dublin home of Elyah Wolf Moisel,¹⁹ whose kinsmen the Moizels (*sic*), the Tooheys, and the Graffs were involved, to express his sorrow and indignation at Father John Creagh's behaviour.

John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, was as vehement: 'I have no sympathy', he wrote,²⁰ 'with the attacks upon the Hebrew community in Limerick and elsewhere. I feel sure that the spirit of tolerance of the Irish people will be sufficient to protect them from any wrong'. For the moment, however, neither intervention had any perceptible effect.

The chief victim of the persecution was Marcus Joseph Blond himself. A native of Wexna, Lithuania, he was ordained a rabbi in his teens, but turned to trade when he settled in Limerick in the 1880s. Now, his business was ruined and he had to sell stock, fixtures, and goodwill for a bagatelle. Writing to *The Times* on 10 April 1904, he puts his case with engaging simplicity: 'It took me all these years, with the greatest pain and trouble and working un-

ceasingly until I established myself comfortably and enjoyed a nice trade, until, all of a sudden, like a thunderstorm, spoke hatred and animosity against the Jews, how they crucified Lord Jesus,²¹ how they martyred St. Simon,²² and gradually in one month's time, I have none of my previous customers coming into my shop. In fact, my business is nil at present. Would you call my trade a national evil? I defy anyone in this city to say whom I have wronged, what did I overcharge. . . Since the beginning of the crusade of Father Creagh against the Jews we never got a fair chance to defend ourselves or to put our case rightly before the Public'.

The boycott²³ lasted two years and drove out eighty members of the community from Limerick; fewer than forty were left.* But the superiors of Father Creagh came to understand that religious persecution had no place in Ireland; they disowned him and he was withdrawn from Limerick.²⁴ So ended a sad but uncharacteristic and atypical episode, but the congregation did not recover, either numerically or economically, from the evil impact.