



# The Mystery of Jews in Limerick, Ireland

EXPLORING THE PAST, PRESENT, AND HARPS INSIDE THE STAR OF DAVID

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**D**espite my love of travel, for me, the statement "life is a journey" has reached almost cliché proportions. Deep down, where a few good men want to go, I feel that life is a search, a quest, and a struggle about irresolvable questions.

For my forthcoming trip returning to Ireland, my first since acquiring Irish citizenship (hence European Union citizen status), I have an unusual "Jewish question."

Why would a socialist mayor, an atheist from Limerick, a conspicuously Catholic city, support the reconstruction and funding of an obscure Jewish cemetery interred with Lithuanian Jews, who may have descendants in Atlanta?

Benjamin of Tudela, who traveled for 10 years in the sixth and seventh decades of the 12th century, recorded the existence of both small and large Jewish communities. I have put the Spanish part of his route on my bucket list, and have "The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela" on my shelf.

Though I will physically not be able to retrace "Travels with Charley" by John Steinbeck, somewhere from my reading I remember a line, that a trip begins before one leaves and ends before returning home.

## The Spark of Inspiration

The rich literature about Ireland at Emory University led me to books on the history of Jews in the Emerald Isle, as well as to a biography of Jim Kemmy, mayor of Limerick from 1991-1992, and 1995-1996.

Further research unearthed the Kil-murray Cemetery, in Castleroy, County Limerick, purchased a century ago by Lithuanian Jews probably from the Kovno province and the communities around Akmene not far from the Baltic Sea.

In the late 1980s, Limerick city officials had begun to refurbish the burial plots, cut the grass, erect identification signs and spend public money on the cemetery.

On Wed., Nov. 14, 1990 at 2:30 p.m., a formal ceremony celebrated the restoration of the Jewish "burial ground and prayer house," including the planting of trees, speeches, prayers, and the acknowledging of unknown Jewish souls with unique markings on two headstones.

Why had religious, civic, elected and administrative dignitaries, including the Chief Rabbi, the very Reverend Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, consecrated this space with an invitational event?

Obvious reasons abound. The 1904 Limerick economic boycott with its intense mistreatment of the local Jewish population was still within the records and memories of many.

The mutual suffering of Lithuanian Jews, coming from pogrom-riddled Russian *shtetls*, and the Irish efforts to rid itself of British controls had matured into a mutual respect for common sufferings.

## Learning from Jim Kemmy

The local Limerick interest in history, spearheaded by authors including Des Ryan and editor Jim Kemmy in the Old Limerick Journal explains even more connections.

Still the biography of Jim Kemmy by Brian Callanan suggests a deeper reason, an unexpected familial tie between Limerick and Lithuania.

Jim's paternal grandfather, Joseph, was a stonemason, as was his son Michael and his grandson, Jim. The craft was so developed that Limerick stonemasons traveled to Russia to assist Russian kiln-makers with proper stonework.

To date, I have not uncovered where six tradesmen including Joseph Kemmy, Paddy Bourke, Dennis O'Keefe, and Frank Kenny went in "Russia," somewhere after the Marquis of Salisbury issued Joseph a passport on Oct. 31, 1890.

Is it conceivable that westward-bound Lithuanian Jews disembarked from a steamer in the southern Ireland port of Cobh, while the returning ship carried half a dozen builders to communities and kilns near the Grainza Koziyova Station on the Vovonega Rostov railway in the Department of Lipetsk?

For what purpose were the "Limerick Six" going to Russia? Believe it or not, they were building kilns for the new pork curing industry to process bacon. Irish families like the O'Mara's had overseas businesses curing bacon in Russia.

At the same time, some Lithuanians, Riga Latvians, residents of Courland and *shtetls* deep inside the Pale of Settlement were voyaging to Ireland's urban areas such as Dublin, Belfast, Cork, and Limerick. And for what opportunities?

Some 1901 hand-enumerated census sheets record Hebrews as drapers, cabinet-makers, or peddlers. Historians write that some knocked on doors with wares as indigenous as Catholic holy cards of Mary and Jesus.

Of course, archival research at the University of Limerick in Jim Kemmy's four files marked "Limerick Jews 1953-1997" may uncover his grandfather's destination. Sure it will be rewarding when I plow through city archives or interview his brother in mid-May.

What of living descendants of families, which left Ireland and came to Atlanta, such as the Levitas family or the Clein clan?

Initial conversations with offsprings of Irish Jews such as attorney Elliott Levites and Billy Silver, M.D. have already made this search meaningful. Along with histories and stories, my upcoming first-hand research should prompt subsequent articles about Lithuanian-Irish-Atlanta Jews around the *fin de siècle*.

So what is my initial hunch? Why did Jim Kemmy care about the Jewish Cemetery in Castletroy?

It seems possible that westward-bound Jews getting off a ship near Cork one day late in the year 1890, came down a crowded gangplank onto a quay and accidentally bumped into a handful of stonemasons with their tools boarding the same White Star vessel headed to Russia.

Three or four months later, this same ship returned with a new load of frightened refugees and also a handful of tired stonemasons happy to be home. That same Lithuanian from the original voyage was there to meet relatives and spotted the Irish workers led by Kemmy, who also remembered the jostle from months ago.

Kemmy, ever the habitual friendly Irishman, fresh from working with Russians, spoke first, "Slainte." In a quieter, yet strong accent, the Akmene native, now Irish resident, said genuinely, "Shalom."

Jim Kemmy's grandfather may have met Jews in Russia and carried his friendship down through the years, despite the upsurge of anti-Semitism in the first five years of the 20th century, and other historical events associated with independence, wars, and troubles.

The headstones of two unknown Jews mark the mysterious roots of a Lithuanian-Ireland-Atlanta-Jewish connection, in that Limerick cemetery.

Each marker is decorated with an Irish harp inside the Star of David, which begs further questions; what secrets lie within those persons and symbols that have continued *L'dor va 'dor*?

*Tom Keating and Lynne, his wife, are members of The Temple. On a trip to Ireland eight years ago, they found the cottage, birth certificate and other papers of Tom's paternal grandfather.*