

The History behind the Irish-Jewish People

THE BLEND OF TWO CULTURES

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SPECIAL FOR THE AJT

I went to Ireland recently to answer an unusual Jewish question: Why had a mayor of Limerick renovated an obscure Jewish cemetery that has only eleven graves?

Before I spent twenty days on the Emerald Isle, including two in this west coast city, The Atlanta Jewish Times had published, in its May 2nd issue, my pre-trip answer, titled "The Mystery of Jews in Limerick, Ireland."

Sunday night of the eleventh, all-day Monday of the twelfth, and Tuesday morning of the thirteenth of May 2014, I toured the streets of Limerick. I paid homage to the eleven tombstones as well as the cemetery prayer house, researched archives, and most importantly, shared stories with Des Ryan, preeminent historian of Limerick's Jewish past, and Joe Kemmy, brother of the former mayor Jim Kemmy, who has been deceased since the mid-1990s.

My original hypothesis explaining the actions of the socialist, atheist, mayor, during his two administrations, could not be verified during this meaningful first-hand visit.

I had thought that Jim's grandfather, Joseph, had traveled to Russia in the 1890s as a stonemason and had met Jews within the Pale of the Settlement. This possible familial explanation could not be validated, since the passports, the travel itineraries, and the references of immigrants from Lithuanian shtets traveling to Limerick had not surfaced.

I have continued to study documents, to review notes from contacts in Ireland, and to speculate where Joseph Kemmy went in Russia. Evidence may appear someday, but I have tabled this question until I uncover more facts.

Why did Jim Kemmy care about the 1902 Jewish cemetery? For now, my best educated guess is the following: When he lived (1936-1997), Jim Kemmy was the sort of man, leader, historian, and politician who genuinely cared about people. He was for the underdog, the little person, and the oppressed.

The cemetery received attention from members of the Limerick Civic Trust, as well as Jim Kemmy, a county official, and other community groups. These efforts to refurbish, finance, and

respect the Kilmurray Cemetery in Castletroy, County Limerick began as early as 1984, when Kemmy was still an alderman.

When the rededication occurred on November 14, 1990, Kemmy missed it because of his compulsory attendance at the Dail in Dublin. Kemmy was there in spirit along with all the other dignitaries. And, he would have cherished the Medal of the City of Jerusalem, which he received from the Israeli ambassador in 1996, yet he was too close to his end to get all caught up in the special honor that recognized his lifelong dedication to labor causes.

I was definitely moved when his brother Joe shared the heirloom, after he, Des Ryan and I had toured the cemetery, which, ironically, had just been mowed.

For now, I am less intrigued with my question or the medal, than I am with a symbol which appears on top of two modern granite tombstones.

One burial stone was erected by the Limerick Civic Trust in June 2001, the other by the Dublin Holy Burial Society in September 2001. Both have in bold letters:

**"HERE LIES THE REMAINS
OF AN UNKNOWN
JEWISH SOUL"**

Yet above these three lines is a special symbol, a Star of David with an Irish harp inside it. The same Jewish star, or Shield of David, with an Irish harp appears on the plaque on the prayer house wall, citing the dedication by the "Chief Rabbi Very Rev. Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis."

So far, no one can explain the origin of this merged symbol, nor its designer, date, or religious-historical meaning.

Michael Kemmy, great grandson of Joseph, was named after Jim Kemmy's brother and father. He is currently a master engraver in Limerick and is responsible for engraving the two tombstones.

I have continued my correspondence with the Kemmys, Mr. Ryan, and others, since I hope to learn more about this recently displayed logo.

Besides the graves with a rarely-used, four-stringed harp within a six-



pointed Magen David, there are two other graves that may be equally important for future Irish Jewish research in Atlanta.

One mentions the name Lois Fine and the other mentions Stuart Clein. Living relatives of the deceased are in Limerick. So, I visited Fine's Jewelry Shop on O'Connell Street, and spoke to Mr. Peter Clein, a well-known barrister.

The Clein's are a part of the lineage that has evolved into the Silver family here in Atlanta. And thus there is direct evidence of Lithuanian Jews, who came to Limerick and stayed long enough to have families and life cycle events. One family member is buried in the Kilmurray Cemetery, another is practicing law, and all the while a local offspring is practicing medicine in Atlanta.

For those interested in further research, I suggest looking at the memorabilia, which are displayed in The Irish Jewish Museum on Walworth Road in Dublin. Imagine my surprise when I saw the Star of David with an Irish harp facing in another direction on its brochure.

For genealogy in Ireland, there is only one magus opus - The Irish Jewish Family History Database - a 16-volume compendium, by Stuart Rosenblatt of

Dublin. This collection is available in the National Archives and in four other locations. Perhaps the Limerick volume, which I have held, might add the Star of David and Irish harp as its future logo and unifying sign.

I also await Des Ryan's extensive writings on Jews in Limerick from the beginning of the nineteenth century (1811-1903). When published in The Old Limerick Journal in December 2014, the writings will be available to Emory and to The William Breen Jewish Historical Museum.

For my own part, I know I am eager to have this special symbol of my two cultures engraved on an item for our family. It will remind us of my grandfather's Irish roots in Banemore County Limerick; my Irish citizenship that I obtained in 2007; and my conversion, as well as my remarkable search about the mysteries of Limerick Jews.

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.