

THE JEWS OF LIMERICK



he census figures for Limerick City and county in April 1881 disclose that there were only four Jews living there, and it was only after that date that they began

to arrive in greater numbers. The Jews came to Ireland to escape murder and persecution in the Russian Empire. On March 1st 1881 the Czar Alexander II was assassinated in St. Petersburg by a group of revolutionary terrorists. There was one Jew among them whose job it was to provide a hideaway. The Russian authorities used the assassination as an excuse to enforce repressive laws which mainly affected the five million Jewish population.

In May 1882 the new laws, officially called the "May Laws", though the government preferred to call them "temporary rules", were introduced. Under these laws the Jews had to prove that they had been living on the land before May 3rd of that year. Few Jews owned land, as most of them were lease-holders, and very often the terms of the lease were verbal, so that when local officials from the nearest town came looking for proof of ownership there was no documentation to show. When they failed the test the Jews were expelled from the land and villages where they had lived all their lives.

The towns became overcrowded with thousands of hungry and homeless Jews. A close adviser of the new Czar was heard to remark: "A third of the Jews will emigrate, a third will be converted, and a third will die". (1) Many Jews were uprooted, beaten and murdered, some fled to Ireland and other countries.

The earliest record of a Jew in Limerick was around 1790, when there were seven Jews living there. Then in 1847, during the Famine, a Jew named Bobby Genese died in Limerick; his body was buried in a Christian cemetery, but his brother who was living in Dublin, had the body exhumed and re-interred in the Jewish cemetery in Dublin. During the Famine, the

by *Des Ryan*



The hanging of the killers of Alexander II.

Rothchilds, an English Jewish family, contributed money for the relief of hunger among the Irish people. (2) In 1871 there were two Jews in Limerick.

The population of Limerick in the 1880s was about 38,000 and there were twenty-two religious denominations, including the Jews. The Jews who came to Limerick were a mixture of Poles and Lithuanians, some of the latter coming from the village named Achmeyahn. They settled mainly in Edward Street and Colooney (now Wolfe Tone) Street.

The Jews saw that there was an opening for door-to-door sales and they took advantage of it. It was later stated, rightly or wrongly, that many Limerick people would rather pay all on credit than pay in cash, and that "the Jews gave credit to all and sundry". (3) The Jews met in one of their own houses to hold religious ceremonies. In 1882 a young man, aged twenty, Elias Bere Levin, an ordained rabbi, was posted to Limerick. Eventually a synagogue was opened at 63 Colooney Street.

The first serious attack on the Jews came on Easter Sunday 1884, just as the city was preparing for the visit of Michael Davitt, one of the Land League leaders, who was to be made a Freeman of Limerick on that Monday. Easter had always been a time of anxiety for the Jews, who celebrate the Feast of the Passover around the same time as the Christian holiday of Easter. Many pogroms had occurred in East Europe during this period.

On Good Friday, a Jew named Jacob Barron innocently left off a firework in Edward Street. The local people regarded it as an insult to engage in such activity on that day. On Easter Sunday morning, Lieb Siev and his wife (who were living in the same house as Barron) were preparing for the traditional dinner which was held at the end of the Feast of the Passover. Siev took a chicken out to his back yard and cut its throat. This act was carried out in accordance with the religious law which forbids a Jew to eat meat with blood on it. These two incidents led to an attack on the house. At 5.30 p.m. that evening a crowd of about 100 people gathered outside Siev's house, shouting abuse and throwing stones. All the windows and a glass door were smashed and a stone also struck Siev's daughter. Lieb Siev and his terrified family were trapped in the house for nearly two hours before the police arrived.

Another explanation for the trouble was given in an article by Gerald Goldberg in the *Crane Bag* (Vol. 6, No. 1), titled "Ireland is the only country ... Joyce and the Jewish Dimension". He wrote: "One reason offered for the excesses which then took place was that certain Jewish traders had not closed their shops on St. Patrick's Day." (St.

Patrick's Day had not yet become a national holiday).

The police, who were stationed about 300 yards away in their Colooney Street barracks, maintained that they heard nothing until someone came down and told them what was going on. (4) Six young men from the Carey's Road area were arrested; two of them were jailed for a month each. Two weeks later one of the witnesses at the trial, Barron, was attacked in Carey's Road, but was saved from a beating by a young girl who brought him into her home to protect him from his attackers. When this case came up for hearing, one of the magistrates, Mayor Maurice Lenihan, said that "the Irish should be the last persons in the world to persecute anyone. For centuries they had been persecuted for their religion, and those who had suffered so much should feel for others". (5) It was also accepted that some people were taking advantage of the instalment system to rob the Jews of their property.

An editorial in one of the local papers went on to say that the Jews went about their business with "intelligence and integrity", and "it needed but the cry so often heard before in other cities - that the presence of the Jews was a standing insult to Christians - to light the torch of persecution". It ended by saying that it would be better "to warn the unwashed crowd which thronged the courthouse", that the Jews were entitled to protection just as much as "the highest citizen in the land". (6)

In August 1888 the British Chief Rabbi, Rev. Dr. Hermann Adler, paid a visit to Dublin in an effort to resolve some problems among the members of his community there. On August 14, he visited Limerick to meet the eight Jewish families then living in the city.

Gradually the Jews began to settle down in Limerick; some were even asked to do jury duty, but were afraid to do so on the grounds that if anyone were convicted, the Jews would be blamed. On Sunday August 27th 1892, Benjamin Jaffey, his wife and children, his brother-in-law and his wife were walking down the Military Road (now O'Connell Avenue), when they were attacked by three men. Jaffey and his wife were knocked to the ground and kicked. When Jaffey's brother-in-law went to Mrs Jaffey's assistance he was also assaulted. A passer-by who witnessed the attack intervened and saved them from further attack.

In the same year there was an outbreak of cholera in Hamburg. The Jewish immigrants in Germany were blamed for spreading the virus. In September at a meeting of the Rural Sanitation Board for Limerick city and county, one of its members, Dr. J.F. Shanahan, made reference to the outbreak in Germany. He was concerned

that the virus might be brought to Limerick by foreign vessels. He said that it was an established fact that the cholera in Hamburg had been brought in by a certain class of immigrants, and that there was a colony of them (Jews) in Limerick. He added: "It is notorious that these very good people, as they are, go very inoffensively but industriously amongst our people selling them certain materials and articles of clothing and there may be a great danger of these articles being imported in some of these ships from infected ports." (7)

The doctor was especially worried that Jews or consignments of clothing destined for Jews in Limerick might be contaminated, and would slip through the inspection at Tarbert. It was agreed that all ships coming up to Limerick would have a double inspection, one at Tarbert and one at a new inspection station at Green Island.

In the *Limerick Chronicle* on September 8th, Rabbi Levin, writing from his home at 28 Colooney Street, replied to Dr. Shanahan's remarks:

"As a member of the Jewish community, I beg to say that rags or goods are not imported by the Jews. The articles we sell are purchased by us at establishments in the city, and therefore the view expressed by Dr. J.F. Shanahan at the meeting of the Rural Sanitary Board, on the 3rd inst., should not excite any apprehensions, as the gentleman can, if he kindly makes inquiries find that I am only telling the facts. Allow me to add that it was never known that disease was propagated by the Jews, inasmuch by our religion, we are bound to maintain the greatest cleanliness both in our food and in our dwelling. It is also a fact which may be proved by the registers of Europe, that owing to these sanitary habits by our people, the death rate amongst the Jews is far less than amongst others."

Dr. Adler paid a second visit to Limerick in December 1892, when the Jewish community had risen to ninety people. The year 1896 would give the Jews of Limerick a foretaste of what was to come in 1904. After a sermon on the Crucifixion, given in Killaloe, Co. Clare, "the passions of the people were aroused to such an extent that the few Jews who came there as usual on their business, instead of meeting with the customary friendly greetings, were in some instances, shunned like lepers, in others beset by a wild infuriated mob". A letter was written to the Bishop of Killaloe by Jacob Jaffe, and the situation calmed down. (8)

On the morning of November 24th 1896, a fight broke out in the docks between union men and non-union men. The police were called, but they came under attack. After reinforcements arrived from William Street Station, the disturbance was quelled.



The Jews fleeing Russia after the pogroms.

Leaving the scene two dockers were coming up Colooney Street, and decided to vent their anger on a Jew named Moses Leone. They smashed the windows of his house. One of them was heard to say: "These dirty Jews should not be allowed to live at all". (9) Later on that day Rabbi Elias Levin was attacked by other dock labourers for giving information to the police about the attack on the house. (10)

During the month of May 1898, a tailor's strike took place in Limerick. The public, the press and the Trades' Council were in sympathy with the strikers. With no sign of the dispute being fixed, some of the employers applied to the Master Tailors' Association in Britain for some Jewish tailors in an effort to break the strike. The Association wrote to the Amalgamated Society of Tailors in Manchester asking the union to supply "a few Jew tailors to go across and settle in Limerick". In an account of the dispute the **Limerick Leader**, in its edition of 5th. September 1898, gave the reply of the secretary of the Society, M. Zietlin, who stated: "I wish you to understand once and for all that the Jewish workers will not be the tools of unscrupulous employers, who wish to exploit and sweat our English or Irish brothers ... we have informed all the Jewish tailors throughout the country not to be misled by any offers and under no conditions to go to Limerick".

As Limerick entered the twentieth century, the Jews felt reasonably safe

and secure, and were making a living for themselves and their families. They were engaged in the grocery trade, furniture, clothing and mineral water business. In January 1900 Leopold Greenberg, editor of the **Jewish Chronicle** and one of the Zionist leaders in England, visited Limerick, and met the local Zionists. The Zionists were a group of people who considered that the Jews would never be accepted fully as citizens of the countries in which they lived, and their aim was to return to Palestine, which was then part of the Turkish Empire, and create a Jewish state.

On February 17th 1902, half a statute acre of land was bought for a cemetery at Kilmurry, just outside the city. A Board of Guardians and a Society for the relief of sick members of the community was also set up. In June 1903 a reception was held at the Treaty Hotel, Thomas Street, for Bernard Wienronk, who was emigrating to South Africa. Wienronk was a Zionist, and was one of the best workers in the community for the Zionist cause. Alderman John Daly, a former Mayor and an old Fenian, was asked by the community to preside. One toast was proposed by Alderman Daly to "Israel a Nation" and another by Solomon Goldberg to "Ireland a Nation". (11)

As 1903 was coming to a close, preparations for an attack on the Jews and their trading methods in Limerick were being made. At one of the last

meetings of his sodality in December, Father John Creagh, a Redemptorist priest and Spiritual Director of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family, told the members that he would address them on a special subject at the next meeting in the New Year. But he found during the meeting on January 4th 1904 that he was unable to do so due to the investiture of the prefects for the coming year. After the investiture ceremony Fr. Creagh, speaking from the pulpit said he had only six minutes left to address them, and if he were to do so on the particular subject to which he intended to refer, it would keep them until after 11 o'clock, because it was a subject which, when begun, he would trash it out and do it full justice.

He said that he knew there was a great deal of speculation upon the subject which he intended speaking on. In order to deal fully with the matter, he announced that the meeting on the following Monday night would begin at five minutes to eight, in order that it might give him more time, because he could tell them he had startling revelations to make. The papers he had in his possession would, he thought, startle them when he would read them. He had the information from the most reliable sources he could get. Next Monday with the blessing of God he would go on, and if he could not give them the whole subject he would continue every week until he finished and when they heard what he had to tell them, they would certainly be sur-

prised, he concluded. (12)

Fr. John Creagh was born in Limerick in 1871. He was educated at C.B.S. and at the age of fourteen he joined the Redemptorist Order. Growing up in the city he witnessed the growing Jewish community. At the age of seventeen he was sent to Liverpool. He was ordained in 1895, and became a Professor of Sacred Scripture and Theology. He spent some time in Belfast and Esker, Athenry, before returning to Limerick. In 1903 he was appointed Director of the Arch-Confraternity and during his period of office he became one of the most controversial priests in the city.

In May 1903 a young lad of sixteen, a member of the Confraternity, drowned himself. It was said he had received a summons for non-attendance at the weekly sodality meeting, and was about to be expelled from the Confraternity. The story was published in the local press and Fr. Creagh felt compelled to defend himself. He said in an interview that there was no connection between the boy's death and the summons. (13) Again in 1903 Fr. Creagh became involved in an anti-drink campaign. On Sundays he would go around the city to make sure the public houses were closed. He would also go to the courthouse and demand to know why the full penalty of the law was not imposed on publicans who transgressed. In September he gave some lectures on Protestantism. But it was his campaign against the Jews, that was to write the names of Fr. John Creagh and Limerick into the history books for all

time.

As well as suffering attacks from the local population, the Jewish community had their own internal problems. They were just as quick to bring members of their own community to court, as they were to bring any other people. In one case in April 1889, Benjamin Jaffey summoned Hyman Barron for the recovery of £40, and Barron summoned Jaffey for cutting two tablecloths and tearing a shawl at Abbeyfeale on February 27th. It was also stated that the latter refused to pay it. Soon afterwards Barron went to the synagogue and created a disturbance which led to him being physically ejected. (14)

It would appear from contemporary reports that the Barrons were a thorn in the side of their fellow Jews. In November of the same year, Jacob Barron, summoned the Rabbi Elias Levin for assault. Barron had gone to buy some meat at Dunne's shop. The rabbi came in to kill a beast, and an argument developed between the two men. The magistrates dismissed the charge against Levin and also his counter charge against Barron. (15)

One of the most serious problems they had was the setting up of a second synagogue. On a pastoral visit to Ireland in September 1898, Dr. Hermann Adler, the British Chief Rabbi, issued a circular against money-lending. He had already spoken against the practice, in 1892, telling the Jews of Ireland to be of "scrupulous honesty and integrity" and to abstain from

anything that might cause "hurt or harm to your fellow citizens". (16) This circular caused a division among the Limerick Jews. Those who were lending money would not give it up. This led to insults and assaults among the community and to the setting up of a second synagogue in Charles Street (now Gerard Street) which was moved to 72 Colooney Street in January 1901. (17)

The divisions among the Jews prompted Judge Adams to write to the **Jewish Chronicle** in March 1902. He stated "... the Jews of the city form a little community ... and are a most industrious and well conducted body, at once respectable and respected. Unfortunately, they have got up a very bitter feud among themselves. Two rival synagogues confront each other, and the feeling between the parties is so strong that more than once it has given rise to assaults which have been investigated in ... court". He expressed the belief that the feud had arisen from some obscure point of ritual. (18)

The rifts were to continue well into the new century. And, though relatively few of the Jews were money-lenders, they were to engage in that occupation long after Dr. Adler's visit and Fr. Creagh's campaign: two of them were still lending money in the city up to the 1940s.

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Colooney (now Wolfe Tone) Street.