

An American Blood Libel - It Did Happen

Stevens Faculty Forum – 11/05/08

I. Blood libels against Jews are false accusations that Jews use human blood in certain aspects of their religious rituals and holidays.

Although the first known instance of blood libel against Jews is found in the writings of Apion, an early 1st century pagan Greco-Egyptian who claimed that the Jews sacrificed Greek victims in the Temple, no further incidents are recorded until the 12th century, when blood libels began to proliferate in Christian Europe. Blood libel accusations have often asserted that the blood of Christian children is especially coveted, and historically blood libel claims have often been made to account for otherwise unexplained deaths of children. In some cases, the alleged victim of human sacrifice, child or adult, has become venerated as a martyr, a holy figure around whom a martyr cult might arise. A few of these have been even canonized as saints.

Although broadly discredited, these libels have persisted among some segments of Christians to the present time, and recently Muslims as well. Many popes have either directly or indirectly condemned the blood accusation, and no pope has ever sanctioned it, though the assertions are usually spread and promoted by local clergy.

II. Some historical examples of blood libels

Constantinople, 415

Socrates Scholasticus reported that some Jews in a drunken frolic bound a Christian child on a cross in mockery of the death of Christ and scourged him until he died.

Norwich, East Anglia, 1144

William of Norwich

March 20 (Passover), the first blood libel in Europe against Jews. Jews of Norwich were accused of both ritual murder and blood libel after a boy (William of Norwich) was found dead with stab wounds. The legend was turned into a cult, with William acquiring the status of martyr and crowds of pilgrims bringing wealth to the local church. In 1189, the Jewish deputation attending the coronation of Richard the Lionheart was attacked by the crowd. Massacres of Jews at London and York soon followed. On Feb 6 1190, all the

Norwich Jews were found slaughtered in their houses, except a few who found refuge in the castle. Jews would later be expelled from all of England in 1290 and not allowed to return until 1655.

County of Blois 1171

In 1171, [Blois](#) was the site of a [blood libel](#) accusation against its Jewish community that led to 31 Jews (by some accounts 40) being burned to death .

County of Flanders, c. 1250

An early blood libel against Jews appears in *Bonum Universale de Apibus* ii. 29, § 23, by [Thomas of Cantimpré](#) (a monastery near Cambrai). Thomas wrote "It is quite certain that the Jews of every province annually decide by lot which congregation or city is to send Christian blood to the other congregations."

Thomas also believed that since the time when the Jews called out to Pontius Pilate, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matthew 27:25), they have been afflicted with hemorrhages:

"A very learned Jew, who in our day has been converted to the (Christian) faith, informs us that one enjoying the reputation of a prophet among them, toward the close of his life, made the following prediction: 'Be assured that relief from this secret ailment, to which you are exposed, can only be obtained through Christian blood ("*solo sanguine Christiano*").' This suggestion was followed by the ever-blind and impious Jews, who instituted the custom of annually shedding Christian blood in every province, in order that they might recover from their malady."

Thomas added that the Jews had misunderstood the words of their prophet, who by his expression "*solo sanguine Christiano*" had meant not the blood of any Christian, but that of Jesus—the only true remedy for all physical and spiritual suffering.

Thomas did not mention the name of the "very learned" proselyte, but it may have been [Nicholas Donin](#) of [La Rochelle](#), who in 1240 had a disputation on the Talmud with [Yechiel of Paris](#), and who in 1242 caused the burning of numerous Talmudic manuscripts in Paris. It is known that Thomas was personally acquainted with this Nicholas.

Lincolnshire, 1255

Main article: [Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln](#)

The case of Little Saint Hugh of Lincoln is mentioned by Chaucer, and thus has become well known. A child of eight years, named Hugh, son of a woman named Beatrice, disappeared at Lincoln on the 31st of July. His body was discovered on the 29th of August, covered with filth, in a pit or well belonging to a Jewish man named Copin or Koppin.

On being promised by John of Lexington, a judge, who happened to be present, that his life should be spared, Copin is said to have confessed that the boy had been crucified by the Jews, who had assembled at Lincoln for that purpose. King Henry III, on reaching Lincoln some five weeks afterward, at the beginning of October, refused to carry out the promise of John of Lexington, and had Copin executed and ninety-one of the Jews of Lincoln seized and sent up to London, where eighteen of them were executed. The rest were pardoned at the intercession of the Franciscans (Jacobs, "Jewish Ideals," pp. 192-224).

Margraviate of Baden, 1267

At Pforzheim, Baden, the corpse of a seven-year-old girl was found in the river by fishermen. The Jews were suspected, and when they were led to the corpse, blood allegedly began to flow from the wounds; led to it a second time, the face of the child became flushed, and both arms were raised. In addition to these miracles, there was the testimony of the daughter of the wicked woman who had sold the child to the Jews.

A regular judicial examination did not take place; it is probable that the above-mentioned "wicked woman" was the murderess. That a judicial murder was then and there committed against the Jews in consequence of the accusation is evident from the manner in which the Nuremberg "Memorbuch" and the synagogal poems refer to the incident (Siegmond Salfeld, *Das Martyrologium des Nürnberger Memorbuches* (1898), pp. 15, 128-130).

Alsace, 1270

At Weissenburg, a miracle alone decided the charge against the Jews. According to the accusation, the Jews had suspended a child (whose body was found in the Lauter river) by the feet, and had opened every artery in its body in order to obtain all the blood. Again, supernatural claims were made: the child's wounds were said to have bled for five days afterward, despite its treatment.

Oberwesel, Lorraine, 1286

At Oberwesel, "miracles" again constituted the only evidence against the Jews. The corpse of the eleven-year-old Werner is said to have floated up the Rhine (against the current) as far as Bacharach, emitting radiance, and being invested with healing powers. In consequence, the Jews of Oberwesel and many other adjacent localities were severely persecuted during the years 1286-89. Emperor Rudolph I., to whom the Jews had appealed for protection, issued a public proclamation to the effect that great wrong had been done to the Jews, and that the corpse of Werner was to be burned and the ashes scattered to the winds.

Switzerland, early 1400s

The statement was made, in the "Chronicle" of Konrad Justinger of 1423, that at Bern in 1294 the Jews had tortured and murdered a boy called Rudolph. The historical impossibility of this widely credited story was demonstrated by Jakob Stammler, pastor of Bern, in 1888 (see "Katholische Schweizer-Blätter," Lucerne, 1888).

Tyrol, Austria 1462

At Rinn, near Innsbruck, a boy named Andreas Oxner (also known as Anderl von Rinn) was said to have been bought by Jewish merchants and cruelly murdered by them in a forest near the city, his blood being carefully collected in vessels. The accusation of drawing off the blood (without murder) was not made until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the cult was founded. The older inscription in the church of Rinn, dating from 1575, is distorted by fabulous embellishments; as, for example, that the money which had been paid for the boy to his godfather was found to have turned into leaves, and that a lily blossomed upon his grave. The cult continued until it was officially prohibited in 1994 by the Bishop of Innsbruck.

Trentino, 1475

Simon of Trent, aged two, disappeared, and his father alleged that he had been kidnapped and murdered by the local Jewish community. Fifteen local Jews were sentenced to death and burned. Simon was regarded as a saint, and was canonized by [Pope Sixtus V](#) in 1588. His status as a saint was removed in 1965 by [Pope Paul VI](#), though his murder is still promoted as a fact by a handful of extremists.

Castile, 1491

Main article: [Holy Child of La Guardia](#)

Christopher of Toledo, also known as Christopher of La Guardia or "the Holy Child of La Guardia," was a four-year-old Christian boy supposedly murdered by two Jews and three Conversos (converts to Christianity). In total, eight men were executed. It is now believed that this case was constructed by the Spanish Inquisition to facilitate the expulsion of Jews from Spain. He was canonized by Pope Pius VII in 1805. Christopher has since been removed from the canon, though once again, a handful of individuals still claim the validity of this case.

Hungary, 1494

In a case at Tynau (Nagyszombat, today Trnava, Slovakia), the absurdity, even the impossibility, of the statements forced by torture from women and children shows that the accused preferred death as a means of escape from the torture, and admitted everything that was asked of them. They even said that Jewish men menstruated, and that the latter therefore practiced the drinking of Christian blood as a remedy.

Hungary, 1529

At Bösing (Bazin, today Pezinok, Slovakia), it was charged that a nine-year-old boy had been bled to death, suffering cruel torture; thirty Jews confessed to the crime and were publicly burned. The true facts of the case were disclosed later, when the child was found alive in Vienna. He had been stolen by the accuser, Count Wolf of Bazin, as an easy but fiendish means of ridding himself of his Jewish creditors at Bazin.

Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 1690

The only child-saint in the Russian Orthodox Church is the six-year-old boy Gavriil Belostoksky from the village Zverki. According to the legend supported by the church, the boy was kidnapped from his home during the holiday of Passover while his parents were away. Shutko, a Jew from Białystok, was accused in bringing the boy to Białystok, poking him with sharp objects and draining his blood for nine days, then bringing the body back to Zverki and dumping at a local field. A cult developed, and the boy was canonized in 1820. His relics are still the object of pilgrimage.

Syria, 1840

Main article: [Damascus affair](#)

In February, at Damascus, a Catholic monk named Father Thomas and his servant were murdered. In this instance, also, confessions were obtained only after the infliction of torture.

Rhodes, 1840

Main article: [Rhodes blood libel](#)

The Jews of [Rhodes](#), then in the [Ottoman Empire](#), were accused of murdering a [Greek](#) Christian boy. The libel was supported by the local governor and the European consuls posted to Rhodes. Several Jews were arrested and tortured, and the entire Jewish quarter was blockaded for twelve days. An investigation carried out by the central Ottoman government found the Jews to be innocent.

Hungary, 1882

Main article: [Tiszaeszlár blood libel](#)

The Jews of the village [Tiszaeszlár](#) were accused with the ritual murder of a fourteen-year-old Christian girl, Eszter Solymosi. The case was one of the main causes of the rise of anti-Semitism in the country. The accused persons were eventually acquitted.

Bohemia, 1899

Main article: [Hilsner Affair](#)

Leopold Hilsner, a Jewish vagabond, was accused of murdering a nineteen-year-old Christian woman, Anežka Hružová, with a slash to the throat. Despite the absurdity of the charge and the relatively progressive nature of society in [Austria-Hungary](#), Hilsner was convicted and sentenced to death. He was later convicted of an additional unsolved murder, also involving a Christian woman. In 1901, the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. [Tomáš Masaryk](#), a prominent Austro-Czech philosophy professor and future president of [Czechoslovakia](#), spearheaded Hilsner's defense. He was later blamed by Czech media because of this. In March 1918, Hilsner was pardoned by Austrian emperor [Charles I](#). He was never exonerated, and the true guilty parties were never found.

Kishinev, Russia 1903

Main article: [Kishinev pogrom](#)

A anti-Jewish revolt was started by an anti-Semitic newspaper wrote that a Christian Russian boy, *Mikhail Rybachenko*, was found murdered in the town of Dubossary, alleging that the Jews killed him in order to use the blood in preparation of matzo. Around 49 Jews were killed and hundreds were wounded, with over 700 houses being looted and destroyed.

Shiraz, 1910

Main article: [Shiraz blood libel](#)

The Jews of Shiraz, Iran, were falsely accused of murdering a Muslim girl. The entire Jewish quarter was pillaged; the pogrom left 12 Jews dead and about 50 injured.

Kiev, Ukraine, Russia 1911

Anti-Semitic flier in Kiev, 1910: "Christians, take care of your children!!! It will be Jewish Passover on March 17.

In Kiev, a Jewish factory manager, Mendel Beilis, was accused of murdering a Christian child and using his blood in matzos. He was acquitted by an all-Christian jury after a sensational trial in 1913.

Kielce, Poland 1946

The Kielce pogrom against Holocaust survivors in Poland was sparked by an accusation of blood libel.

Massena Blood Libel

III. Massena, a village of about 11,000 people today, is situated in the township of the same name in the county of St. Lawrence on the extreme northern border of New York, just three miles from the St. Lawrence River. At this point the river forms the international boundary between the U.S.A. and Canada.

In the nineteenth century Massena was primarily a farming center with little to distinguish it except for its famous sulphur waters that attracted visitors from far and wide. The residents were almost all white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants. However, over time a steady trickle of French-Canadians came from across the border to settle there. In addition, a not insignificant number of Irish families settled in and around Massena after the disastrous Irish potato harvests of the mid 1800s. But with the opening of a large aluminum smelting plant at the beginning of the twentieth century, Massena's population suddenly increased and radically changed.

The plant required large numbers of laborers willing to do hard labor for long hours. Since most of the local people were not interested in doing such work, it was necessary to import laborers from abroad.

“The needed help was supplied by immigrants from all parts of Europe, especially the East and South. Alcoa’s recruiters brought many of them directly from the New York City docks to Massena, so that, by 1920, the village had a polyglot population with immigrants from more than fifty countries.

“The natives looked with distrust and dismay upon these alien faces and the strange tongues grated on their ears. For the most part, the newcomers were Roman Catholic and the natives feared that these immigrants, together with the French-Canadians and the Irish, would swamp them in a Catholic sea.”

IV. Jewish Community – small, about 20 families in 1920, Rabbi Berel Brennglass hired to serve as schochet, teacher, *baal tefillah*, and rabbi.

European trained rabbi, strong personality, came to upper NY State because he had TB.

“Rabbi Berel Brennglass was the spiritual leader of the Massena Jewish community from 1918 to 1941. In appearance he was a Lenin look-alike and sound-alike. A Van Dyke beard lent dignity to his 5’2” frame. Steel-gray hair protruded beneath a high yarmulke (skull cap), and discerning eyes stiloetted those who tangled with him. His words were powerful and commanding, and his demeanor was courageous and authoritative, as his adversaries in the Blood Libel incident of 1928 were to discover when he played a key role in the case. It is possible the outcome of that near-tragedy might have been disastrous in the hands of a lesser man.

“A more intimate picture of him reveals a loving family man devoted to his wife and four children. He was born in Troky, Lithuania, in 1876 and graduated from Slobodka Yeshiva outside of Kovno. He spent several years with his family in Cardiff [Wales] which imparted a peculiar Welsh accent to his English. Leaving the family there, he arrived in New York City alone in October 1915, when he was almost 40 years old. He regretted all his life that he had not made the move earlier so that he might have been able to prepare for the legal or medical profession.

V. Yom Kippur, Sunday evening, September 23, 1928

The day before that, late on Saturday afternoon [September 22nd], a four-year old girl, Barbara Griffiths, got lost in the woods and thick brush which, at that time, covered the edge of the village just a couple of blocks from her home. Quickly, search crews, family, friends, neighbors, went looking for her, but, when darkness fell, she had not been found. Naturally, there was great concern; autumn nights in Massena can be cold and damp. In those days, searches of this kind were largely conducted by the Volunteer Fire Department, which included several Ku Kluxers in its ranks.

A. Becomes nightfall – drama heightens, two state troopers in charge of investigation.

B. Rumor started that Jews use blood of gentile children for their festival ritual

C. Interrogated young Jewish man with limited mental capacity and a Jew who knew nothing about Judaism. Vagueness of answers.

D. Interrogate Rabbi Brennglass

“Whether or not the rabbi had heard anything of the ugly developments is not known, but, presumably, someone had alerted him. When Trooper McCann appeared at around noon, outside of his front door, some five blocks from the Town Hall-Police Station, the rabbi quickly denounced the trooper's impudence in disturbing him so shortly before *Kol Nidrei*. With righteous wrath, he sharply scolded the man for the incredible gall of raising the ancient and terrible charge of ritual murder. He refused to accompany him to the Town Hall but said that he would appear later to make a voluntary statement. Not long afterward he walked briskly down to the police station (located then, as now, in the basement of the Town Hall). When the Mayor and the trooper attempted to put questions to him, the rabbi quickly and vehemently turned the tables on them, demanding to know who was responsible for the contemptible libel. In no uncertain terms he denounced all who dared to accuse Jews of such heinous crimes in the 20th century, particularly in these enlightened United States. Certainly, all of them should hang their heads in shame.

“After delivering his angry-speech, the rabbi left abruptly. There is one report that he also called out to a mob of men who were hanging around the alley that led from Main Street to the police station. They should search for the little girl, he is supposed to have said, rather than pursue medieval calumnies against the Jews. It is said that both the Mayor, Trooper McCann and others loitering around the police station were abashed, at least momentarily, by the rabbi's skillful tongue lashing. It is entirely possible, however, that this little episode is apocryphal.

“About an hour or two later, around four o'clock on that Sunday afternoon, little Barbara Griffiths, who had inadvertently brought about all of this, wandered out of the woods and was noticed by someone along the highway, less than a half mile from her home. None the worse for her twenty-four hours in the woods, she was quickly reunited with her family.”

VI. Aftermath

“The true hero was Rabbi Brennglass, of sainted memory. Had Massena’s rabbi been of a different character, one shudders to think what might have happened. His magnetic, piercing eyes, neat Van Dyke beard, steel gray hair (partly hidden by an old-fashioned high *yarmulka*) made him an impressive figure. He knew what had to be said and was not afraid to say it. He had dressed down the State trooper who had come to his house to summon him to the police station, and, later on at the police station, he spoke to the Mayor and the troopers in no uncertain terms, He was a man of surpassing moral and physical courage, and his message came through in that volatile situation. I recall that after his beautiful rendition of *Kol Nidrei* (he was a talented *baal t’filah*, too) he addressed the congregation. Though I was only a child, I remember his charge to the community to stand up-as proud Jews and staunch Americans - against all anti-Semitism. He inspired all of us, old and young, and we emerged from the synagogue that night with our heads high and physically unafraid.”

VII. Disappointment at Silence of Gentile Neighbors

According to most accounts, the Jews of Massena had enjoyed relatively good relations with their non-Jewish neighbors until the 1928 Blood Libel. Nonetheless, Mr. Samuel Jacobs, a long time resident of Massena and a leader of the Jewish community there, could not help but express his disappointment at the silence of the gentiles of Massena when these horrific accusations were first made.

“One must here digress for a moment and express, even at this very late date [1979], the intense disappointment which the Jewish people felt at the silence of the good people of Massena. We know that many people, perhaps most, did not really believe any of this. Furthermore, relations between Jews and Gentiles had been excellent, and the Jewish people were an integral part of the civic and business life of this northern New York village. Nevertheless, that Sunday morning not a single minister or priest urged his congregants to refrain from listening to such rumors against the Jews, rumors which were so contrary to both Jewish and Christian religious morality, human decency, and the American concept of religious freedom. Surely, from their close relationships with Jews for over 30 years, the people of Massena should have known that

something like that was unthinkable. There was not only silence in the pulpits; not a word about the incident ever appeared in the *Massena Observer*. Would not an editorial word of apology by the editor have been in order? There seems to have been a silent consensus to hush the whole matter up.”

VIII. Summary

The 1928 blood libel incident in Massena did indeed occur. It was extremely serious, and the accusation was directed at the entire Jewish community. Who knows what the consequences might have been if the Griffiths girl had not been found. The libel itself was brought to the community by someone who had been raised abroad in an anti-Semitic environment. Unfortunately, the volunteer fire department contained a number of active Ku Klux Klan members. When put in charge of the search for the missing girl, they were all too willing to believe this evil accusation against the Jews.

The freedom and religious rights enjoyed by Jews in America encouraged Massena’s Jews to act decisively and effectively. And, of course, the community was most fortunate to have a man at its helm of Rabbi Brennglass’s caliber. He knew what had to be done, and he did it both forcefully and effectively.

Anti-Semitism is very much alive today, and it can strike anywhere. It is now rampant within the Muslim world. In two articles published in March 2002 by the Saudi government daily Al-Riyadh columnist Dr. Umayma Ahmad Al-Jalahma of King Faysal University in Al-Dammam wrote about “The Jewish Holiday of Purim.” He describes how blood is a necessary ingredient in the making of “very special pastries” eaten by Jews on Purim. “The columnist tells the story of the Book of Esther and concludes, ‘Since then, the Old Testament, the Jewish holy book, requires the Jews to glorify this holiday and show their joy. This joy can only be complete with the consumption of pastries mixed with human blood.’”ⁱ

ⁱ http://www.adl.org/Anti_semitism/arab/saudi_blood_libel.asp

Pictures to go with this article

There is a color picture of the Massena synagogue at

<http://www.kassianrealestate.com/graphics/adathisrealMEK/Adath%20Israel%20Front.jpg>

Pictures of the interior are at

<http://www.kassianrealestate.com/graphics/adathisrealMEK/adathisraelalbum.htm>

The synagogue is now for sale. (<http://www.kassianrealestate.com/webpages/Commercial.htm>)
Apparently, there is almost nothing left of the Jewish community.



Main Street, Massena, 1928. (Photo by A.J.Wescott, Wescott's Stationery, courtesy Town of Massena Historian's Collection)

Below is a picture of Rabbi Brennglass.



Rabbi Berel Brennglass conducted the bar mitzvah and marriage ceremonies of author Louis Greenblatt.