

Special Feature

An American Blood Libel – It Did Happen!

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from *The Blood Libel Case at Massena — a Reminiscence and a Review*, by Samuel J. Jacobs, printed in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Fall Issue, 1979, pages 465-474.

Samuel Jacobs, who now resides in Syracuse, New York, was the unofficial leader of the Massena Jewish community for many years. He was nine years old when the Massena blood libel took place.

Introduction

Any Jew with some familiarity with our history has heard of the infamous charges of blood libel that Jews have been accused of for centuries.

“The first recorded instance of a blood libel against Jews was in the writings of Apion, who claimed that the Jews sacrificed Greek victims in the Temple of Jerusalem. After this, there are no existing records of the blood libel against the Jews until the 12th century legend surrounding William of Norwich, first recorded in the Peterborough Chronicle. The libel afterward became an increasingly common accusation. In many subsequent cases, anti-Semitic blood libels served as the basis for a *blood libel cult*, in which the alleged victim of human sacrifice was venerated as a Christian martyr. Many Jews were killed as a result of false blood libels, which continued into the 20th century, with the Beilis Trial in Russia and the Kielce pogrom in post-World War II Poland.”¹

It was usually around the time of Pesach when our ancestors suf-

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fered terribly from the ridiculous notion that Jews kill Christians to use their blood as an ingredient in *matzos*. The idea is ludicrous, since anyone who knows anything about Judaism is aware that Jews are forbidden to consume any blood, animal or human. Yet, this scourge was promulgated for centuries and was often used as a reason to slaughter hundreds of Jews.

One would think that the accusation of Jews using the blood of non-Jews could never be made in the twentieth century in a civilized country like the United States of America. Nonetheless, there was such an accusation, in 1928, in Massena, New York!

Massena, New York

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.

“Massena, N.Y., was one of the first four towns created upon formation of St. Lawrence County in 1802. The town was named for Marshal Andre Massena, a French military figure who was considered to be one of the greatest of all marshals under Napoleon Bonaparte. He was born into a poor family in Nice, France, in 1758, and rose through the ranks of the French military. While he never set foot in the U.S., his notoriety among Northern New Yorkers was at its height when the town was being formed.

“Massena was a lightly-populated ‘Settlement in the Tall Pines’ in the 1800s, but then became St. Lawrence Co.’s industrial center in the 20th century. The Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), Reynolds Metals and General Motors each established plants and thousands of jobs, while utilizing the available low-cost hydropower generated along the Raquette, Grasse and St. Lawrence Rivers. The rechanneling of the St. Lawrence River in the 1950s accommodated the construction of the giant St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Projects.”

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

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was necessary to import laborers from abroad.

“The needed help was supplied by immigrants from all parts of Europe. 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-

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Canadians and the Irish, would swamp them in a Catholic sea.”

The Jewish Community of Massena

“Amongst the wave of immigrants from Europe were the founders of Massena’s Jewish community. They were all from an area composed of several hundred square miles which belonged at various times to Lithuania, Poland and Russia, and they were all seeking to escape the pogroms, conscription in the army, official governmental persecution, and poverty of their homelands.”

By 1912, there were enough Jewish men for a *minyan*, and services were conducted without a rabbi. Between the mid-teens and 1920, there were 18 to 20 Jewish families living in Massena. Records of their early meetings show that they were primarily Orthodox Jews who intended to remain true to the religious observances of their forefathers.

In 1919, they organized as a religious corporation under the name Adath Israel and purchased the Congregational Church building on the corner of Church and West Orvis Streets. The church spire was removed, and the building officially became a synagogue in 1920. Rabbi Berel Brennglass had been hired the previous summer to serve as rabbi — also *shochet*, teacher, and *baal tefillah*.

Rabbi Berel Brennglass

“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*, and discerning eyes looked daggers at 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 Yeshivah 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.

“Within two years, while he was working in Pennsylvania, his physician brother discovered that Berel had contracted tuberculosis and advised him to move to upstate New York. Saranac Lake at that time was noted for its tuberculosis sanitarium and he accepted the pulpit at nearby

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Tupper Lake. He returned to Wales to fetch his family, thereby perhaps becoming the only local immigrant to cross the ocean three times. Not long after they were all settled in at Tupper Lake, Berel answered the call to service in Massena.

“Eva Brennglass presented a different image than most of the women who emigrated from Eastern Europe. She had received an unusual education for a young girl of those times and was well versed in Hebrew, Yiddish, and the Jewish religion. At times, when her husband could not be reached, she was able to answer religious questions that arose amongst the congregation’s members.

“Even her method of cooking set her apart from the other wives. She had a working knowledge of sound nutrition, possibly a result of her frail health, which demanded it. She used salt and fats sparingly and knew how to prepare vegetables that other wives knew nothing about. Her brother-in-law in New York City looked after her physical condition, and at those times that she was away, her husband took over the cooking chores.

“For his services as rabbi, *shochet*, *baal tefillah*, and teacher, he was given \$23 a week and a house at 180 East Orvis Street, within walking distance of the schul. The remuneration was decreased to \$20.00 during the Depression. Yet, for more than 20 years, he was the driving force in the religious life of Massena’s Jews, unyielding in his demands

for adherence to tradition and Orthodoxy. In his early years in town, he was called Reverend. Later, after his leadership qualities and performance of duties had been established, he was granted the more distinguished title of Rabbi.

“When Eva died in 1941, Rabbi Brennglass retired and moved to New York City to live with his eldest son, Mark, until his death in 1966.”

The Blood Libel

Yom Kippur of 1928 began on Sunday evening, September 23. Samuel Jacobs, who was an eyewitness to the events described below, relates how the Jews of Massena came to be accused of a blood libel.

“The day before that, late on Saturday afternoon [September 22], 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 and 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 Klux Klan members in its ranks.

“It soon became apparent that the girl was lost beyond the incorporated boundaries of the village and police jurisdiction passed from the local to the New York State police. In those days, one or two State Troopers were stationed in places like Massena to uphold law and order beyond village and city boundaries. Some time on Saturday evening, the State police took over. Then, somehow, as the hours stretched toward midnight and there was no sign or clue to the girl’s fate, an ugly rumor was born, grew and spread. Its exact nature, its precise wording, changed from mouth to mouth, from minute to minute. There was an important Jewish holiday about to take place, wasn’t there? And wasn’t there something about blood, Christian blood, being needed in their rituals? Could there be some connection with the girl’s disappearance?

“We do not know who in the Jewish community first heard these frightening insinuations. Probably it was the president of the congregation, Jacob Shulkin, whose 21-year-old son William had been escorted home by the police. William, called Willie by everyone, was known to be mentally impaired. Yet, he had been questioned by the State police and what he told his father, though confused, was enough to alert the latter to a potentially dangerous situation for the entire Jewish community.

Jacob Shulkin immediately consulted by telephone with other leading members of the congregation and a meeting of the *baalei batim* took place in his

home late that night.

“What else was taking place on that frightening Saturday night is very unclear. One Jewish businessman claims that his cellar was searched. There is no evidence that other premises were thus entered, though some people say that men had gone along streets and back alleys and had shone flashlights randomly into the shop and cellar windows of Jewish stores.”

The Drama Heightens – Rabbi Brennglass Is Questioned

“The drama continued the following morning. The two troopers in charge of the investigation were advised by an unknown informant to question a man by the name of Morris Goldberg. One must assume that this suggestion was prompted by blatant anti-Semitism, because Mr. Goldberg was on the periphery of the Jewish community. He knew that he was a Jew; that was all. For the many years he was employed by Alcoa, he was, so to speak, their token Jew. In fact, he was interrogated while on the job at Alcoa. Knowing nothing of Judaism, he pleaded ignorance, but the clumsy way in which he phrased his answer somehow left a hint that there might be something to the ritual murder charge after all.

“The troopers reported back to Mayor Gilbert Hawes, who had irregularly assumed a leading role in the investigation even though legal responsibility was in the hands of the State police. Nearly everyone who remembers Hawes describes him as the very model of an ignorant, bigoted, small-town politician. The rumors that he had heard, combined with the enigmatic statements of Willie Shulkin and Morris Goldberg, convinced him that the whisperings of Jewish involvement had some basis. The time had come to go to the source, to call in the rabbi for questioning.

“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 close to *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, he made clear, 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 alleged 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.”

The Aftermath

“By the time the Jews arrived in the synagogue for the *Kol Nidrei* service at 6:00 p.m., everyone knew that the drama was over. With G-d’s help, all was well.

“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 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 tefillah*, 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 held high, unafraid.”

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. Jacobs cannot 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 have

The accusation was directed at the entire Jewish community of Massena.

been in order? There seems to have been a consensus to hush the whole matter up.”

Summary

The 1928 blood libel in

Massena did indeed occur. It was extremely serious, and the accusation was directed at the entire

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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 false 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.

We must be continuously on guard against all forms of anti-Semitism and do our best to thwart it. Not only can it happen here, but it *did* happen here.

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1. wikipedia.org

2. massena.ny.us

3. *Before Us: Studies of Early Jewish Families in St. Lawrence County, 1855 – 1920* by Joan Dobbie, Louis Greenblatt, and Blance Levine, published by Congregation Beth El, Potsdam, NY, 1981, pages 197 – 199.

4. *The Incident at Massena* by Saul Friedman, Lawrence Baron, Eleanor Dumas, Samuel Jacobs, Quarterly - St. Lawrence Historical Association, Vol. XXIV #3 July 1979, page 23.

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