The Damascus Blood Libel (1840)

THE ALLEGED CRIME

In the morning of Wednesday, February 5, 1840, the Catholic monk Thomas left his monastery in Damascus. In the afternoon, it is known that he entered the Jewish Quarter of the city to hang some announcements about the auction of the house of a deceased Christian woman. Towards nighttime, when Ibrahim Amara, the monk's Greek assistant, saw that his teacher did not return, he went to look for him, but also did not return. After searching for them, Jean Bowden, the secretary of the French consulate in Damascus, rushed to inform the French consul Ulises Ratti-Menton of what had happened, and by the time they reached the Convent a large crowd had already gathered around it, shouting "It is the Jews! The Jews killed him!"

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

Both the French dignitaries and the local ruler, Sharif Pasha, immediately accused the Jews of the terrible crime. That Saturday, the police broke into the homes of the Jews and forced them to start opening graves to search for the bodies of the disappeared monk. The Jews were very agreeable to cooperating with the authorities. The community rabbi, Hakham Yaakob Antebi, requested that any Jew who knows anything about the disappearance of the monk should testify. One of the Jews volunteered in good faith that he had seen father Thomas in the Jewish quarter, near Shelomo Negrin's barber shop, posting an advertisement. The police went to the scene to corroborate this testimony. They found the advertisement in question, and this was enough for them to immediately arrest the poor barber as a person of interest. Negrin denied any connection to the allegations. But it did not matter.

THE BLOOD LIBEL

The incitement against the Jews had already begun, and the Christians spread the rumor that the monk and his servant were murdered by the Jews “to use their blood in the matzot of Pesach.” This ridiculous accusation further incited the mobs. And to definitelly solve the mistery of the disappearance of the monk, the French and local authorities proceeded to the next phase: torture. The first victim was the barber Shelomo Negrin, who was severely beaten. The torture methods were absolutely gruesome. The suffering was so unbearable that, in a desperate attempt to stop the torture, the barber confessed to everything they coached him to say, and even agreed to confirm the existence of accomplices. The tormentors wanted to get their hands on the most prominent members of the Jewish community, so they could then blame the entire Jewish community for the alleged crime. Thus, Rabbi Moshe Abulafia, David Harari, Yitzchak Harari, Yosef Harari, Aharon Harari, Yosef Laniado, Yehudah Desalonica and later Yitzchak Picciotto, ended up being arrested too.

TORTURED TO DEATH

All of the defendants denied the allegations. But the French consul intervened and demanded that these Jews be tortured “until they confessed what everyone already knows they did.” Unable to withstand this horror, all of them ended up admitting to whatever trumped-up accusations that were hurled at them. The torturers also forced these individuals to accuse Rabbi Jacob Antebi and the most important merchant in the Damascus community: Mr Meir Farhi (the greedy local authorities wasted no time in confiscating all his property and businesses). Rabbi Antebi was also cruelly tortured , but with incredible strength of spirit he resisted and neither confessed to anything nor incriminated any other people.

ANIMAL EVIDENCE

Meanwhile, the authorities found some animal bones in one of the sewers of the Jewish quarter and asserted that these must have belonged to Father Thomas. The Jews asked that the bones

be sent to a European university where these would surely be identified as animal bones, but the French consul refused and hastened to organize a funeral for “the remains of Father Thomas”. The animal bones were buried in a glorious ceremony, and on the headstone it was written that this is the grave of a holy martyr “killed by the Jews.”

DON’T FORGET THE CHILDREN!

David Harari and Yosef Laniado died while being tortured. The barber was exonerated for having given the first forced confession, the one that justified the arrest and torture of the other Jews. Rabbi Moshe Abulafia, who also had been brutally tortured, was forcibly converted to Islam under death threats (later, he returned to Judaism. His son was the famous Ribbi Isaac Abulafia. See here). The other nine prominent members of the Jewish community were charged with murdering Father Thomas and were sentenced to death. Complaints from the European Jewish community soon began to be heard, partly thanks to the fact that Ytzhak Picciotto was Austrian, and one of his relatives, Eliyahu Picciotto, was the Austrian consul in Aleppo, Syria. Eliyahu moved heavens and earth to report the injustice that was being carried out on behalf of the French government. But at first, the local authorities of Damascus were not moved. They actually decided to double down, and then ordered the arrest and incarceration of 63 children from the local Jewish school. The authorities announced that the children would be released only when the entire Jewish community would finally confess their crime and provide the evidence of the ritual crime of which they had been accused.

INTERNATIONAL SCANDAL

All this caused a great outrage in the Jewish communities in Europe. The most prominent European Jews such as Moshe Montefiore, the Rothschild family and the Jewish lawyer Isaac-Jacob Adolphe Crémieux, who later served as the Minister of Justice in France, questioned the procedure and the torture and exerted great pressure for releasing the prisoners

sentenced to death. In the end, the international political pressure worked, and the local authorities had no choice but to announce that the death sentence had been canceled. The defendants were released on August 28, 1840.

SMOKE SCREENS

After some time, it came to light that early in the investigation two merchants had testified that they witness a violent altercation between the monk and an Arab-Muslim mule merchant, three days before the monk's disappearance. The merchant had at the time attacked the monk and had vowed to kill him. The monk's assistant had grabbed the merchant by the neck and began to strangle him, while Father Thomas walked away cursing the Arab and his religion.

The infamous Damascus Blood Libel ended without any other person ever being accused of the crime, and without any of the corrupt prosecutors being held accountable, arrested or punished.

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