

Emanuele D’Antonio, *Il sangue di Giuditta. Antisemitismo e voci ebraiche nell’Italia di metà Ottocento* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2020), pp. 160.

by Ulrich Wyrwa

Ritual murder accusations, the charge that Jews kill people in order to use their blood for ritual purposes, are among the most intensively studied topics in Antisemitism research and involve a variety of contrasting interpretations. In addition to explanations that emphasize the continuity of the insinuations and their religious motives, other interpretations emphasize their novel manifestations in the context of the social upheavals that started in the nineteenth century. Still others pursue the socio-psychological dynamics of rumors or underline the role of antisemitic activists. Detailed local studies are available on individual incidents, including two studies on a case in the small West Prussian town of Konitz in 1900 that were published in the very same year, and came to contradictory conclusions on the basis of the same sources.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary observers of the nineteenth century also followed these accusations closely and vehemently opposed them. First and foremost among them was the Alliance Israélite Universelle, which regularly reported on ritual murder charges in its column “False Accusations.” We can even observe the emergence of a European public sphere on the occasion of two cases: Damascus in 1840 and Tiszaezslár in Hungary in 1882.

Between these two events lay a case in a small town in northern Italy that has so far gone unnoticed and which the Italian historian Emanuele D’Antonio has now investigated: an allegation from 1855 of ritual murder in Badia Polesine, a town in the province of Rovigo in the Kingdom of Lombardo-Venetia, which at the time belonged to the Habsburg Monarchy. Having presented the Jewish reaction to this ritual murder accusation in issue 14 of this journal in 2018, D’Antonio has now published this small but precise monographic study of the case.

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Nonn, *Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder. Gerücht, Gewalt und Antisemitismus im Kaiserreich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002); Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher’s Tale: Murder and Antisemitism in a German Town* (New York-London: Norton, 2002).

On June 17, 1855, 22-year-old Giuditta Castilliero from Masi disappeared. Her family belonged to the peasant lower classes of that small village in the province of Rovigo on the Adige river. Before she disappeared, Giuditta had gone to the neighboring small town of Badia together with other villagers. When her absence was noticed, the family became restless and the father wanted to file a missing person's report the following day. However, the authorities initially assumed that the girl had run away on her own. A week later, she turned up again, and first went to her aunt. Now she told them that she had been kidnapped in Badia by the local Jewish businessman Caliman Ravenna and taken somewhere else. There she had allegedly been held captive by a group of Jews who wanted to kill her in order to draw her blood. In fact, there was already another little girl—already bleeding from a cut—there in the darkened room with her. However, a Catholic servant had saved her and let her escape. When Giuditta showed the wound on her arm to neighbors and officials, they believed her.

After describing this story according to the sources, D'Antonio provides insight into the Jewish history of the small town of Badia, as well as the successful career of the entrepreneur and citizen Caliman Ravenna. After Giuditta Castilliero's return, the ritual murder legend spread in Badia, and a group of residents gathered in front of Ravenna's house and threatened him. The local police broke up the small march, but one landowner in particular continued to fuel the antisemitic rumors. Although Ravenna had strong support from fellow Catholics in the town, the authorities were convinced that Giuditta Castilliero's elaborate story was too sophisticated to have been invented by an uneducated, illiterate peasant girl. When a medical examination of the wound also confirmed her testimony, Caliman Ravenna was arrested. Immediately afterwards, antisemitic agitation intensified in the province, so that the local government in Rovigo now also took action. However, after initial doubts arose about Giuditta Castilliero's statements and a Catholic lawyer from Badia, Alessandro Cervesato, interceded on Ravenna's behalf, the case also reached the Habsburg governors of the kingdom of Lombardo-Venetia in Venice, who in turn, as Emanuele D'Antonio precisely describes from the sources, were concerned about the potentially seditious character of the quickly spreading antisemitic movement. They ordered further

investigations and when, in this context, news of a theft became known in the small town of Legnago, twenty kilometers north-west of Badia, which, as it turned out, had been committed by the same Giuditta Castilliero, the story she had told collapsed. She was arrested and sentenced to six years in prison and Caliman Ravenna was released.

In addition to the exact reconstruction of the case and its legal reappraisal, Emanuele D'Antonio also traces the public debate about this rumor of ritual murder, which was spread above all by a magazine published in the city of Udine, located in the north-east of the kingdom of Lombardo-Venetia. Other newspapers, however, not least the most important daily newspaper in Lombardo-Venetia, the *Gazzetta di Venezia*, emphatically rejected the accusations and gave Jewish authors in particular the opportunity to defend themselves. In this direction, D'Antonio analyses in detail the resistance on the part of the Jewish communities, which in turn were strongly and effectively supported by the aforementioned Catholic lawyer Cervesato.

The Badia case, as D'Antonio summarizes in his conclusion, triggered a moment of Antisemitism in the kingdom of Lombardo-Venetia in the summer of 1855 that temporarily undermined relations between the state, society, and the almost emancipated Jewry of Habsburg Italy, relations which were based on civic tolerance. The case was solved by the alliance between the state and the efficient Jewish resistance.

In his conclusion, D'Antonio also takes up an article published two years after the case in the French journal *Archives israélites*, which explores the question of the economic motives that may have been behind the rumor of the ritual murder of Badia, which D'Antonio himself only briefly touched upon at the beginning. The French newspaper published an article by a correspondent from Venice who reported that Giuditta Castilliero had previously worked in Badia for one of Caliman Ravenna's debtors, the notoriously antisemitic landowner Carlo Canova, and that she may have picked up the prejudices against Jews and the ritual murder rumors from him. Thus, D'Antonio concludes that Canova, whose Antisemitism stemmed from his anti-modern aristocratic ethos, was instrumental in spreading

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the ritual murder rumors. With this thesis, which is only stressed in his conclusions, D'Antonio convincingly sets himself apart from the interpretations that primarily emphasize the religious aspects of the ritual murder legend.

Finally, it may be added that the bibliographical references occasionally contain some inaccuracies.

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