

## Antisemitic Rumours and Violence in Corfu at the End of 19th Century

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### Abstract

*At the beginning of April 1891 a Jewish girl was found murdered on the ground floor of a Jewish residence in Corfu. Rumours raged on the island: Was this about a love story or, with a stretch of imagination, a story about sex and crime? Or was this murder evidence of the culmination of a family drama which unfolded at the girl's house, committed by her-supposedly-adoptive parents? Perhaps she was not Jewish, but Christian, and was murdered by the Jews in order for them to fulfil their religious needs? Upon discovery of the body the local police began spreading the rumour of ritual murder, while the first coronary report confirmed it. Local and Athenian newspapers spread it beyond the island's community, while local politicians maintained it for their own political agenda. On the other hand, judicial authorities upheld the innocence of the Jews accused. Military forces sent by the government desired to protect the secluded Jewish district. As such, not only did the antisemitic sentiment go beyond the borders of the island, but also led to the migration of a large portion of the most important Jewish community of the Ionian islands and to its final downfall wrought by the unheard of local violence, bringing death, injuries and material destruction.*

The subject of the present paper is inspired by the blood libel that took place in Corfu at 1891, which constitutes one of the most significant antisemitic events in Greek history.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, this paper briefly discusses the long term representation and the social position of the Jews on the island of Corfu, taking into account the various persons in power. Continuing, after a brief outline of this specific blood libel, using primarily the long and analytical report of the prosecutor Theagenis Kefalas, this paper examines the factors that contributed to corroborate the rumour of ritual murder (amid numerous other rumours) of a young girl by the Jews of the island and to its development into antisemitic violence of such proportions. This rumour – aside from causing deaths, injuries, moral and material degradation – led to a complete breakdown of the Jewish community.

Therefore, this paper examines the reasons for which the “good Corfu, the sweet island, which is admired by all those who visit for its nature's beauty, for the serenity of its customs, for its civilization and its humanitarianism which

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<sup>1</sup> Georgios Margaritis, “Ellinikos antisemitismos: mia periigisi, 1821, 1891, 1931”, [Greek Anti-Semitism. An Overview, 1821, 1891, 1931], Praktika Epistimonikou Symposiou (3-4 Apriliou) O Ellinikos Evraismos [Conference Proceedings of the Scientific Symposium [Conference Proceedings (3-4 April). Greek Jewish Population], (Athens: Association of Modern Greek Civilisation and General Education Studies, 1999), 15-31.

render the island an exceptional place to live” is transformed into a “theatre of a real civil war.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Jewish presence in Corfu: a long history in a short version**

The oldest testimony about the Jewish presence on the island comes from Benjamin of Tudela, who in 1147 visited the island and met a Jewish inhabitant, when the island was under the rule of King Roger of Sicily.<sup>3</sup> During the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Corfu was under the rule of Charles I of Anjou, many Jews already resided in Corfu.<sup>4</sup> During the rule of the Angevin (1267-1386) the Jews’ position was “pitiful and tear-provoking” according to the historiographer of the island Ioannis Romanos, although less so than that of the rest of the Jews in Europe.<sup>5</sup> The Angevin rulers made public numerous statutes (1317, 1324, 1328, 1332, 1365, 1373, 1380) to defend the Jews and partly relieve them from their hardships.<sup>6</sup>

To continue, for more than four centuries (1386-1797) Corfu was under the rule of the Venetians, who were characterized by an equivocal and erratic behavior towards the Jews, depending on financial circumstances.<sup>7</sup> In cases of serious financial difficulties, they would lax the often severe and frequently inhuman measures, to achieve financial assistance by the Jews in numerous occasions, but also their support during the siege of the island by the Ottomans in 1716.<sup>8</sup>

During the Venetian rule, a large group of Jews was added to the ‘Greek Jews’ of the island. This group had been persecuted in 1492 by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. Another, even larger group of Jewish refugees who had been expelled from Apulia in 1540 by Don Pedro of Toledo, viceroy of Naples, was also added. The newly arrived Spanish and Italian Jews built their own synagogue, in which the Italian element was predominant. The two synagogues, the old Greek one and the newly founded one, were in permanent conflict.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “O antisimitismos en Elladi” [Anti-Semitism in Greece], *Ephimeris*, April 10, 1891. *Ephimeris* was an antigovernmental newspaper and represented the liberal party. See Kostas Mayer, *Istoria tou Ellinikou typon* [History of the Greek Press], vol. 1, (1790-1900), (Athens, 1957), 129-140.

<sup>3</sup> Pearl Preschel, *The Jews of Corfu* (unpublished Ph.D, New York University, 1984), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 14; Ioannis Romanos, “I evraiki koinotita tis Kerkyras,” [The Jewish Community of Corfu], *Ioannou Romanou Istorika Erga* [Historical Works by Ioannis Romanos], ed. Kostas Dafnis (Corfu, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Romanos, “I evraiki koinotita tis Kerkyras”, 388-389.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 389-391; Preschel, “*Jews of Corfu*”, 16-17; Andreas Mustoxidis, *Delle cose corciresi*, (Corfu, 1848), 445-450.

<sup>7</sup> Elli Yotopoulou-Sisilianou, “Oi Evraioi tis Kerkyras epi Venetokratias” [The Jews of Corfu during the Venetian Rule], *Chronika*, (November – December, 2010) 3-8, [Republished excerpt of her book, *Embassies of Venetian ruled Corfu (16th-18th centuries) General State Archives – Archives of the Prefecture of Corfu*, (Athens, 2002)].

<sup>8</sup> Romanos, “I evraiki koinotita tis Kerkyras”, 391-394.

<sup>9</sup> Katherine Elizabeth Fleming, *Greece. A Jewish History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), (here the Greek translated version by Nikos Gasparis, *Athens: Odysseas*, 2009), 68-69.

The ‘privileged’ attitude of the Venetians towards the Jews, though totally circumstantial, displeased the Christians. The latter demanded and succeeded in making the Venetians establish tough statutes for the Jews of the island; these included making them wear a discernable sign abreast and forbidding them to own or purchase land.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, they tried to ghettoize the Jews, without much success, since the Jews of Corfu never lived in a ghetto in the strict sense of the term.<sup>11</sup>

The community of Corfu continuously and persistently made petitions to the Venetian authorities to spatially restrict the Jews, because “the establishment of the Jews among the Christians and indeed close to churches causes great discomfort to God and loyal subjects.”<sup>12</sup> In the end, the Christians’ petition was accepted. Indeed, in 1622 a statute was made public according to which the Jews could abandon their district only with a written permission.<sup>13</sup> From the above, the adverse attitude that the Venetian authorities had towards the Jews is apparent. The tension that characterized the communal and inter-religious relationships with the Orthodox population of the island also becomes evident. Even so, the Jews of Corfu, as those of the rest of the Jews of the Ionian Islands during Venetian rule managed not only to survive but some of them also managed to thrive in financial activities as businessmen, particularly as usurers.<sup>14</sup> In that way they contributed, to a degree, to the development of the financial life of the island.<sup>15</sup>

Only under the rule of the French (1797-1799 and 1806-1814)<sup>16</sup> did the Jews acquire equal political rights, along the lines of the French Revolution. However, they lost these privileges once again during the British rule (1815-1864). The Jews were excluded from holding public offices and the right to vote and speak in court, while in 1852 it was decided to exclude the Jews from politics.<sup>17</sup> Living at the social margins they frequently were on the receiving end of disdain and hatred from the Christian majority.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Romanos, “I evraiki koinotita tis Kerkyras”, 395-397.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 397; Preschel, “*Jews of Corfu*”, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Yotopoulou-Sisilianou, “Oi Evraioi tis Kerkyras epi Venetokratias”, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Romanos, “I evraiki koinotita tis Kerkyras”, 399-400.

<sup>14</sup> Christos Dessylas, “I symvoli tis evraikis koinotitas Kerkyras stin anaptiksi domon exrimatis pistis” [The Contribution of Corfu’s Jewish Community in the Development of Structures of Monetary Faith], *Chronika* (July-August 2008), 3-8. About usurers in the Ionian Islands during Venetian rule, see, Spyros Garsparinatos, *I Venetokratia sta nisia tou Ioniou Pelagous* [The Venetian Rule in the Islands of the Ionian Sea], (Athens: Private Publish, 2009), 322-324.

<sup>15</sup> William Miller, *Istoria tis Fragkokokratias stin Ellada, 1204-1566* [The Latins in the Levante. A History of Frankish Greece (1204-1566)], (Athens: Ellinika Grammata 1990), 609-610.

<sup>16</sup> During the intermediate period (1800-1806) Corfu and the other Ionian islands were under the Russo-Ottoman administration, known as “Septinsular Republic”.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Pierron, *Juifs et Chrétiens de la Grèce Moderne. Histoire des relations intercommunautaires de 1821 à 1945* (Histoire et Perspectives Méditerranéennes), (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 28. For a more general overview of the history of the Ionian State during the English rule, see Panayotis Chiotis, *I istoria tou Ioniou Kratous apo tis systaseos autou mechri enoseos (eti 1815-1864)*

A short report from the *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*<sup>19</sup> in November 1845 on the Jews of Corfu, described this specific situation very clearly: “The Greeks hate them, and seize every opportunity for injuring and ill-treating them; so that their situation would be very pitiable, if the English did not take them under their protection. Twenty years ago no Jew dared show himself in the streets during the holy week; but things have changed since that time.”<sup>20</sup>

George Fitzmaurice’s, Earl of Orkney, impressions about the hostile attitude of the Orthodox Christians of Corfu towards the Jews are similar. Some were considered descendants of Judas Iscariot, whose house and country villa was still thought to exist in Corfu. Thus, it was customary that Christians throw great quantities of crockery onto the roads from the window and the top of all the houses in Corfu. This practice was considered similar to stoning Judas.<sup>21</sup>

This hate was also partly based on the stereotype of the Jew usurer, because the privilege of money lending was granted to some rich Jews with a high concentration of money in their hands.<sup>22</sup> In addition there were also rich Jew merchants,<sup>23</sup> involved in the wealthy commercial activities of the Ionian Islands.<sup>24</sup> They contributed to the stereotype of the “rich Jew”, which would have serious repercussions until the end of the century but also until 1944.

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[History of the Ionian State for its Establishment till the Union (1815-1864)], 2 vol., (Zakynthos: I Eptanisos).

<sup>18</sup> In relation to the hegemonic presence of the Orthodox element in Corfu, it is noteworthy that in 1827 the Corfiot bishop Makarios indicated in his official report to the Senate 819 Greek churches on the island. Spyridon Papageorgiou, *Istoria tis Ekklesias tis Kerkyras apo tis systaseos autis mechri tou nyn* [History of the Church of Corfu since its Establishment till today], (Corfu, Aspioti: 1920), 195.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume3/nov1845/news.html#Corfu>

<sup>21</sup> George William Hamilton Fitzmaurice (the 6th Earl of Orkney), *Four Years in the Ionian Islands. Their Political and Social Condition. With a History of the British Protectorate*, ed. Viscount Kirkwall, vol. 2, (London: Chapman, Hall, 1864), 47-48. Similar are the memories of the officer François Victor Lamare-Picquot at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Hubert Octave Pernot (ed.) *Nos anciens à Corfou: souvenirs de l'aide-major Lamare-Picquot (1807-1814)*, (Paris: F. Alcan, 1918), 81.

<sup>22</sup> Sakis Gekas, “Credit, Bankruptcy and Power in the Ionian Islands under British Rule, 1815”, *History of Insolvency and Bankruptcy from an International Perspective*, eds. Karl Gratzner, Dieter Stiefel, (Huddinge: Södertörn Academic Studies, 2008), 83-118 (93-94); Sakis Gekas, “Business Culture and Entrepreneurship in the Ionian Islands under British Rule, 1815-1864”, *London School of Economics (LSE) Working Papers in Economic History*, 89/5 (Available: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/22332/1/WP89.pdf>).

<sup>23</sup> Sakis Gekas, “Thesmoi kai eksousia stin poli tis Kerkyras sta mesa tou 19ou aiona” [Institutions and Authority in the Town of Corfu in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century], *Istor* 15 (2009): 149-186 (160). See also Albert Mousson’s comment on the wealthiest houses of Corfu, which belonged to the Greeks, Albanians and Jews who through their diligence and cleverness managed to climb up the progress financially. Albert Mousson, *Ein Besuch Auf Korfu und Cefalonien im September 1858, Vortrag gehalten den 18. Februar* (Zürich: Schulthess, 1859), 12-13.

<sup>24</sup> Sakis Gekas, “The Merchants of the Ionian Islands between East and West. Forming local and international Networks”, *Spinning the Commercial Web. International Trade, Merchants, and Commercial Cities, c. 1640-1939*, eds. Margrit Schulte Beerbuhl, Jörg Vögele, (Frankfurt/M., Berlin, al.: Peter Lang, 2004), 43-63; Gekas, Sakis, “Business Culture and Entrepreneurship in

In 1864, after the great efforts especially of the young educated Ionians,<sup>25</sup> the Ionian Islands were added to the mainland of Greece. Already since the period of the Ottoman ruling, tensions and animosity were evident in the relations of the Greek Orthodox population with Jews.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, according to the Greek Constitution, the Jews had equal rights with the rest of the citizens of the state, a fact applauded by the Jewish population of the island.<sup>27</sup> King George of Greece was characterized by tolerant attitude towards the Jewish population of Corfu and had a particularly warm relationship with the archi-rabbi Moise Levy.<sup>28</sup>

However, three decades after the unification of the Ionian Islands to Greece, the political equality that was given to them did not seem to have materialized. The newspaper *Estia* dedicated a coversheet article in which the situation of the Jews in Corfu was analysed. According to that article, “their social position as citizens did not improve at all.” Specifically, it was upheld that while we frequently and boastfully declare political equality the Israelites in our country, as things are today, are truly Greek citizens only in burdens that are enforced by the state. Regarding the issue of rights that title is for them completely useless, or to be honest, sometimes brings forth danger”.<sup>29</sup> According to the writer, in the past thirty years there was no Israelite in the Greek Parliament, nor were there Israelites that had even low public positions. For the Jews of Corfu even the right to vote was totally useless, since they became victims of threats made by political clans.<sup>30</sup> In particular the fact that the Jews of Corfu has voting rights caused threats and outbursts of rage from the Orthodox who refused to come to the electoral centers.<sup>31</sup>

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the Ionian Islands under British Rule, 1815-1864”, *London School of Economics (LSE) Working Papers in Economic History*, 89/5 (Available: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/22332/1/WP89.pdf>).

<sup>25</sup> Athanasios Gekas, “Class and National Identities in the Ionian Islands under British Rule”, *The Making of Modern Greece: Nationalism, Romanticism, and the Uses of the Past (1797-1896)* (Publications King’s College London. Centre for Hellenic Studies), eds. Roderick Beaton, David Ricks (Farnham, Burlington: Ashgate, 2009) 161-174. Georgios Leontsinis, “Koinoniki kai politiki allagi sta Eptanisa (1780-1817 peripou)” [Social and political Change in the Ionian Islands” (1780-1817 approximately)], *Zitimata Eptanisiakis Koinonikis Istorias* [Matters of Eptanesian Social History], ed. Georgios Leontsinis (Athen: Tolidi, 1991), 281-335, 497-533.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Efthymiou, *Evranoi kai Christianoi sta tourkokokratoumena nisia tou notianatolikou Aigaiou. Oi dyskoles pleures mias gonimis synyparksis* [Jews and Christians in the Turkish-occupied Islands in the Southeastern Aegean. The difficult Aspects of a fruitful Coexistence], (Athen: Trochalia, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> “Les Iles Ioniennes”, *Univers Israélite*, October 2, 1863.

<sup>28</sup> Pierron, “*Juifs et Chrétiens*”, 30.

<sup>29</sup> G. Mavrogiannis, “I dithen isotis” [The Supposed Equality], *Estia*, February 26, 1895. *Estia* promoted the ideas of the conservative party of Deliyannis, which was favorably disposed towards Greek Jews, for political and financial reasons, while Charilaos Trikoupi’s opposition party endeavored in every way to turn the Jewish vote to their side. See Eftychia Liata, “The Anti-Semitic Disturbances on Corfu and Zakynthos in 1891 and their Socio-political Consequences”, *The Historical Review*, 4 (2007): 157-169 (160).

<sup>30</sup> Mavrogiannis, “I dithen isotis”.

<sup>31</sup> Gunnar Hering, *Ta politika kommata stin Ellada 1821-1936* [The political parties in Greece, 1821-1936], vol. 1, (Athens: Cultural Foundation of the National Bank, 2004).

Taking into account the political, social and historical context of the Jewish community in Corfu as described so far let us now move on to the events of 1891, which shocked the whole of Corfu, which, according to the *Government Gazette* (n. 313, 1889), had 82.853 inhabitants at the time.<sup>32</sup> The Corfu town itself had around 17.000 souls in 1865.<sup>33</sup> Concerning the Jewish population of the town and the surrounding districts, the demographic and non-demographic sources vary between 2384 and 6000 inhabitants, including foreign Jews.<sup>34</sup>

### **“A Jewish Maiden massacred in Corfu”<sup>35</sup>**

Vita Sarda, Solomon’s son, was born around 1840 on the island of Corfu. He was a tailor and lived with his wife, Loukia Eliezer, on the third floor of a building in an alley in the Jewish quarter.<sup>36</sup>

On the 1st of April 1891 his 8 year old daughter, Rubina, left the house to play and she didn’t return. After an absence of numerous hours, the worried parents went to the police station to report her disappearance. Kangas, the public teller of the island, disseminated the news of the day; namely the disappearance of Rubina, Sarda’s daughter. Most town residents initially believed that the news was an April fool’s day joke, but it was soon proved that the disappearance of the girl was a true fact.<sup>37</sup>

According to the prosecutor Kefalas’ report entitled ‘Regarding the behaviour and actions of the Police and its affiliated institutions and persons in Corfu during the Jewish incidences’,

once the news of the maiden’s disappearance was disseminated the whole Jewish (district) was mobilized in and outside their district in order to find the youngster (...), an immense crowd of Christians was coming into the Jewish

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<sup>32</sup> See Andreas Idromenos, *Synoptiki Istoria tis Kerkyras* [Short History of Corfu], (Corfu: S. Lantzas, 1930<sup>2</sup>), 132.

<sup>33</sup> Michail Chouliarakis, *Geographiki, dioikitiki kai plythismiaki eksesiksi tis Ellados 1821-1971* [Geographical, Administrative, and Population Development of Greece], vol. 1, (Athens: National Centre for Social Research, 1973), 163.

<sup>34</sup> Sakis Gekas, “The Port Jews of Corfu and the ‘Blood Libel’ of 1891. A Tale of Many Centuries and of One Event”, *Jew and Port Cities, 1590-1990. Commerce, Community and Cosmopolitanism*, eds. David Cesarani, Gemma Rommain (special issue, *Jewish Culture and History*, 7/1-2, 2004), 171-196 (177).

<sup>35</sup> *Ephimeris*, April 3, 1891.

<sup>36</sup> Yorgos Chaniotis, “I evraiki koinotita tis Kerkyras (1860-1939) entos kai ekτος tis ‘Ovriakis’” [The Jewish Community of Corfu (1860-1939) inside and outside the Ghetto], *Praktika tou A Symposium Istorias tis Etaireias Meletis Evraikou Ellinismou. Oi Evraioi ston elliniko choro. Zitimata istorias sti makra diarkeia* [ Historical Symposium’s Proceedings of Society for the Study of the Greek Jews. The Jews in Greek Territory. Questions of History in the Long Term. Thessaloniki 23-24 November 1991], eds. Efi Avdela, Odette Varon-Vassard (Athens: Gavriilidis, 1995), 63-73.

<sup>37</sup> Nikolaos Spandonis, “I Evraiki” [The Jewish], *Acropolis*, May 14, 1891. *Acropolis* was a liberal newspaper and represented progressive political ideas. See Kostas Mayer, *Istoria tou Ellinikou tyπου* [History of the Greek Press], vol. 1, 187-209.

district for the sake of curiosity, police officers were also looking for her, while relatives and friends of the Sardas' family were coming into their house awaiting news about the lost Rubina...<sup>38</sup>

It is clear that the calm life of the town at this point started to get disrupted completely.

According to the same prosecutor's report, shortly after midnight on the 1st/2nd of April Vita Sarda together with some other Jews went to a café meeting point. On his way behind the partly ajar door of a Jewish house, he found a bloodstained sack with Rubina's dead body, which he moved to his house. Police constable Michael Kouvaras, seeing Sarda run, carrying the bloodstained sack with the girl's dead body, immediately disseminated that "they are the murderers". Kouvaras testified exactly that to the investigators (judicial magistrate) who, however, not having been convinced of the father's and the other accused Jews' guilt regarding the murder of Rubina did not proceed to incarcerate them. That was enough for the police officers to disseminate to the whole town that "the Jews had murdered the youngster, that they had caught the murderers red handed, that they had delivered them to the investigating (judicial) authorities but that these authorities turning a blind eye had set them free". The police officers in fact wrote Kouvaras' text before the interrogating authority, after he dictated it, and gave copies to Christians in order to "scandalize and irritate them towards the Israelites".<sup>39</sup>

This specific blood libel,<sup>40</sup> as any blood libel within this complex symbolic context,<sup>41</sup> had already obtained the metaphor of a sacred drama, where everyone had to play their predetermined roles: The innocent Christian martyr<sup>42</sup> as a sacred offering, the Jewish assassin and the conscientious

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<sup>38</sup> Friends of the People Association (hereafter F.P.A.), Deliyannis Archive (hereafter D.A.), File BVI/ 106, Document 1 (15.12.1891).

<sup>39</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 1.

<sup>40</sup> The blood libel of Corfu was not an isolated incident of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A series of blood libels had preceded it, beginning with that of Damascus (1840) and Rhodes (1840). The Tiszaeszlár blood libel (1882) became particularly widespread due to the death of a 14 year-old Christian girl which shocked Europe. See Jonathan Frankel, *Damascus Affair: Ritual Murder, Politics, and the Jews in 1840*, (Cambridge, New York, Oakleigh: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1997); Jonathan Frankel, "Ritual Murder in the Modern Era. The Damascus Affair of 1840", *Jewish Social Studies, New Series*, 3/2 (Winter, 1997), 1-16; Yitzchak Kerem, "The 1840 Blood Libel In Rhodes", *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies Division B: History of the Jewish People*, (Jerusalem: Word Union of Jewish Studies, 2000), 137-146; Andrew Handler, *Blood Libel at Tiszaeszlár* (Boulder and New York: Colo, 1980); Hillel Kieval, "Antisémitisme ou savoir social? Sur la genèse du procès moderne pour meurtre rituel", *Annales HSS*, 49/5 (1994), 1091-1105; Robert Nemes, "Hungary's Antisemitic Provinces: Violence and Ritual Murder in the 1880s", *Slavic Review*, 66/1 (Spring, 2007): 20-44.

<sup>41</sup> David Biale, *Blood and Belief. The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> It is noteworthy that in the case of Corfu, in contrast to majority of the previous cases where the victim was of the male sex, the victim was a girl.

representative of authority, who took on the role of the avenger and who, in this case, was the whole body of police officers.<sup>43</sup>

To continue, Vita Sarda and her son, Solomon, were arrested and interrogated. The whole Sarda family was kept under house arrest. Konstantinos Zavitsianos, at that time a lawyer and later the head of the Greek parliament, together with the prosecutor Theagenis Kefalas, asked for further in-depth investigations to be carried out. Despite the opposition of the police, they order their release.<sup>44</sup>

These rumours, spread by the police all over the town, were backed by the medical report of doctors Elias Politis, the police doctor Demetrios Papanikolas and the municipal doctor Frankiskos Thermoyannis, in which it was certified that the fatal wound was “that on the neck” and that “in the body of Rubina there was not a drop of blood”.<sup>45</sup>

According to the prosecutor Kefalas

from that moment on, those who had the most to gain by stirring the whole city against the Jewish element, shouted that the murdered girl was Christian, that her blood was drawn by the Jews, to be used for their Mazot, without which they could not celebrate Easter, that the judges and prosecutors and all military authorities were bribed to take care of the Jews, setting the murderers free for the sake of future elections.<sup>46</sup>

All this turned the city’s Christian population against the Jews, even when the aforementioned medical report was revoked by a famous doctor and other scientists from Paris, who certified that

there was no doubt that Rubina did not die of bleeding, i.e. by the shedding of blood, but by wounds that she had suffered on the head by a blunt object (a stick or something), not a sharp one. They also certified that the wounds around her neck occurred after her death and that the blood could have flowed only minimally or not at all.<sup>47</sup>

The now apparent clash of the city’s official authorities, i.e. the police, on the one hand, and the judicial authorities, on the other, led the latter to proceed to interrogations of the police officers... “in complete secrecy”, from which it was confirmed that “they were the main force behind the dissemination of the

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<sup>43</sup> Eutychia Amilitou, “Erotas kai thanatos sto gketo. I alli Zakynthos tou Gr. Xenopoulou” [Love and Death in the Ghetto. The other Zakynthos by Gr. Xenopoulos], *Nea Estia*, 150/1738 (October 2001): 403-445.

<sup>44</sup> Chaim Sarda, “Ta gegonota tis Kerkyras to 1891” [The Events of Corfu in 1891], *Chronika*, 95 (May-June 1987), 25. The author is a nephew of the murdered Rubina.

<sup>45</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Spyridon Papageorgiou, *Sfazousin oi Evraioi Christianopaidas kai pinousi to aima ton*; [Do the Jews murder Christian Youngsters and drink their Blood?], (Athens: M. Saliveros, 1902), 25-26.



above false rumours.”<sup>48</sup> For this reason, police constables Christos Lavranos and Dimitrios Agathos were convicted to incarceration by the court. While up to that time the interrogations were led by the interrogator in the Jewish district, in the presence of the prosecutor and the police officer Napoleontas Pierris, the deputy police officer Nikolaos Alavanas and the chief constable Antonios Pilos, from that moment on every interrogation occurred in ignorance of the aforementioned officers, which consequently gave an impetus for new defamations against the interrogatory and judiciary authorities that they were covering up for the guilty Jewish murderers.<sup>49</sup>

Since the aforementioned hearsay was coming from an official source it had prestige and power. To continue, it was repeated by various individuals of any class, some in a gullible manner, some on purpose, from the upper to the lower class, doctors and lawyers, landowners, merchants, tranters particularly in politics re-circulated the above-mentioned rumours, which being considered useful in serving their personal aims, and used their aims to eradicate Jewish elements from Corfu from which they had much to gain.<sup>50</sup> Immediately, violence against the Israelites began, which was secretly encouraged by the political party of the opposition (the Liberal Party):

Groups of citizens came into the Jewish district injuring, beating, calling the Israelites names or shooting them. Others (Christian citizens), when coming across others (Jews) outside the Jewish district, would threaten them and hitting them with any object spreading fear and terror which caused despair to the Israelites and forced them to abandon their homeland.<sup>51</sup>

Other Christians threw the Jews boarding ships to depart for foreign lands into the sea, destroyed their monuments – in that sense also practising symbolic violence – others publicly advocated against the Jews in squares, coffee houses, taverns, and wherever there were groups of citizens, where those belonging to the opposition has a primary role. Such individuals, twisting every governmental effort to keep peace, and adopting every false rumour that could ignite the spirit of the people, regularly sent texts and short articles to Athenian opposition newspapers in order to create a general evil mood. All these anti-Jewish actions occurred “before the eyes of the police officers” who were inside the Jewish district (at least in theory) in order to defend the Jews and apprehend guilty individuals, but who covered for the actions of the latter, encouraging them with such an attitude. Despite powerful military forces patrolling the Jewish district, assaults against the Jews continued.<sup>52</sup>

The local and Athenian press had frequent, if not daily, correspondence on the Jewish affairs of Corfu, which expanded to include neighbouring areas,

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<sup>48</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

particularly Zakynthos. The plethora of (usually) contradicting information about the Corfu blood libel contributed to the reinforcement of the rumours of R. Sardas' ritual killing by the Jews, as it will be shown later on in this paper. However, these rumours were not the only ones initially circulating around the island, and later on around the whole of Greece.<sup>53</sup>

A few days after Rubina's death, the journalist Nikolaos Spandonis from Athens was sent to Corfu "to research the authenticity" of the story and to "fully report" to the whole Greek population, because of the measure that the government had taken to forbid news by telegrams from Corfu<sup>54</sup> in order to stop misinformation and panic.

### **A colourful collective imagination or the diversity of rumours**

The rumour of the ritual murder was not the only one. There were many other rumours, especially because a murder is always a fascinating story, and the murder of a child even more so. Regarding the various rumours and "theories" circulating at the time, there is no way of assessing in which order they started, which fact is less important.

The first array of rumours was connected to "stories of love" or with even greater imagination to "sex and crime": that a young man was in love with Rubina but it was not reciprocated and that he murdered her in revenge. Another version was that Rubina would tease men sexually and that an egg-seller tried to have full sexual contact with her and, in rage at her refusal, he killed her. Or that she had been, unwillingly, taken to a brothel, had resisted and was subsequently killed.<sup>55</sup>

A second array of rumours surrounded the family drama of Rubina. She was reported as having "bad morals"; being "locked in" to an order of Sisters of Mercy,<sup>56</sup> had been beaten by her father (or by her mother)<sup>57</sup> until she was unconscious; and finally killed in error.<sup>58</sup> Or, alternatively, she was rumoured to have been the family Sardas' unloved stepdaughter and that the father

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> *Paliggenesia*, April 8, 1891.

<sup>55</sup> The issue of rape was the first to become known in the broader readership, while, according to the physician Elias Politis, Rubina "was hurt on her behind, but still maintained her virginity". Nikolaos Spandonis, "Anakriseis 'Akropoleos' epi ton Kerkyraikon tarachon, Meros A. Synenteusis meta tou iatrou k. Politou. Leptomereiai nekrotomis" ["Interrogations by *Acropolis* on the Incidences in Corfu. Part I. Interview by the Physician Mr. Politis. Details of the Autopsy"], *Acropolis*, May 12, 1891.

<sup>56</sup> Nikolaos Spandonis, "Synenteusis para to archiepiskopo ton Latinon" ["Interview by the Archbishop of the Latin"], *Acropolis*, May 13, 1891.

<sup>57</sup> *Ephimeris*, April 9, 1891.

<sup>58</sup> For the widespread dissemination of this rumour in Corfu's society, cf. the brilliant study of Eutychia Liata, *I Kerkyra kai i Zakynthos ston kyklona tou antisemitismou. I 'sykofantia gia to aimá' tou 1891* [Corfu and Zakynthos in a tornado of Anti-semitism. The ghezera of 1891], (Modern Greek Research Institute, 89), (Athens: National Research Foundation, 2006), 29.

murdered her out of pure hatred. Newspapers reported a wide variety of theories.<sup>59</sup>

The third array of rumours was around the accusation of ritual murder: that the murdered girl's name was in fact Maria Desylla and she came from Ioannina; that Vita Sarda employed her as a maid (the Jewish master exploiting a defenseless Christian girl syndrome); that his plan from the beginning was to ritually sacrifice her at a later date;<sup>60</sup> or that Rubina, with the permission of the Sardas' family, was sacrificed by the Jewish community for ceremonial reasons; or, a daring and even more absurd version, that Rubina as a Jew was murdered by Christians with the aim of making it seem as if the Jewish community at Corfu had committed a ritual murder.<sup>61</sup> The detailed description of the injuries in such a way as to evoke ritual murder intensified; indeed, it was this version which monopolized attention relatively quickly.

In one of the initial relevant articles that were published in an Athenian newspaper about Rubina's murder we read: The dead body

has many injuries incurred by a sharp object on the chest and the arteries, by a needle on the forehead, while some injuries on the face and the hands are covered with lime. It is indeed difficult for one to explain the reason why the despicable malefactors used such ways to kill the young innocent girl. The mystery becomes more obfuscated when it is taken into account that while the Jew, to whom it is said that the massacred maiden belongs, said that he had 5 children, while from the official announcement of the rabbi it results that he had 4. Consequently, the murdered maiden is Christian, going by the name Maria Dessyla, orphan of father, kidnapped in Ioannina in order to be mercilessly sacrificed; a tradition which is considered by many to be a custom of the Jews. But that rumour is falsified by the announcement of the mayor of Corfu, which certifies that the maiden is Jewish, as can be seen from the archives of the arch-rabbi.

The editor of the article continues by saying that he cannot believe that “a religion, even Judaism, allows such garish customs and that the race of Jews cultivates such customs in Greece” concluding that even that specific

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<sup>59</sup> Spandonis, “I Evraiki”. According to the letter, the interrogator, Elias Cagadis, sent to the Prime Minister Theodoros Deliyannis it seems that he also believed in this version. However, without sufficient evidence of the guilt of Rubina's relations, this view was only made known to the prime minister confidently. F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 30, letter on 14.6.1891.

<sup>60</sup> *Ephimeris*, April 9, 1891.

<sup>61</sup> Spandonis, “Anakriseis ‘Akropoleos’ epi ton Kerkyraikon tarachon, Meros B. Oi anakriseis tou kerkyraikou laou” [Interrogations by *Acropolis* on the Incidences in Corfu. Part II. Interrogations by Corfu's Population], *Acropolis*, May 15, 1891. *Acropolis* throughout the events in Corfu remained antisemitic continuing to publish articles, in which it challenged the Jewish identity of the murdered girl and, along the same lines, the government's ability to solve the murder case. Cf. indicatively, *Acropolis*, May 5, 1891.

superstition is that the Israelites partake of the Christian blood of a boy, never a girl.<sup>62</sup>

Of these three different categories of rumours (sexual topics, family drama, and ritual murder accusations) it was the third that dominated. Apparently – at that time – there could not be any other rumour more interesting. Family drama as a motive was just too private and could not have interested the mass of the society a lot. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century sexual affairs were a real taboo and did not matter as a topic for the large society of a Greek provincial place. On the contrary, the rumour about a possible ritual murder had the best characteristics for a rumour to be spread out quickly for several reasons, as detailed below.

The whole issue initially took on huge proportions against the Jews of the island. An initial attack on the Jewish district on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April ended up in an uprising, resulting in the Jewish district being closed off by military forces after the order of L. Vlachos, mayor of the city. This exacerbated the already tenuous situation, since the Christians started to have the impression that the government was protecting the guilty Jews.<sup>63</sup>

After a month of repeated disruptions and the renewed invasion of Christians into the Jewish district, military forces were sent from Patras, supervised by Notaras.<sup>64</sup> The Prime Minister himself, trying to appease the people, ordered Corfu's newly appointed prefect, G. Bouklakos,<sup>65</sup> to appeal to the people to maintain peace<sup>66</sup> and urged him to work towards preventing the emigration of the Jews.<sup>67</sup>

However, the emphasis given to this issue outside Corfu's society was also noteworthy. Indeed, there had been reactions in other Greek places, mainly on Zakynthos, where there was also a strong Jewish community.<sup>68</sup> In Zakynthos, in spite of the Greek military assistance ordered from the Peloponnese – there was spreading agitation, on Good Friday (19.4.1891). During the traditional

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<sup>62</sup> *Paliggenesia*, April 8, 1891.

<sup>63</sup> Costas Dafnis, *Oi Israïlites tis Kerkyras. Croniko epta aionon* [The Israelites of Corfu. A seven Century Chronicle], (Corfu, 1978), 19.

<sup>64</sup> *Ephimeris*, May 2, 1891.

<sup>65</sup> Bouklakos replaced the previous prefect, L. Vlachos, who stated that health reasons had made him resign. F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 21.

<sup>66</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 3. Letter on 2.5.1891.

<sup>67</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 7. Draft of the letter of 8.5.1891. In his response to the Prime Minister, Bouklakos mentions that the migration wave has not been stopped, and that lower class Jews have started evacuating the location because of the ardent circumstances. F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 10, Letter on 10.5.1891. The meeting he had with archirabbi Da Fano, during which he received the latter's assurances that he would try to convince the Jewish population to remain on the island obviously did not help. F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 10, Notification letter of Bouklakos to Diliyannis on 15.5.1891. F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 7. Cf. also Liata, "Corfu and Zakynthos", 87.

<sup>68</sup> Spyridon De Viazis, "I evraiki koinotis tis Zakynthou epi Enetokratias" [The Jewish Community of Zakynthos during the Venetian Rule], *Parnassos*, 14/10 (June 1892) 624-637, 14/11 (July 1892) 662-670, 14/12 (August 1892) 723-735.

procession of the Epitaph, an event which assembled approximately 7000-8000 Christians (including politicians and military authorities) several different groups of “fanatic city dwellers” tried to break into the Jewish district. In panic, the responsible military guardsman ordered guns to be used. Due to this, five Christian citizens were killed, five were hurt and property damage,<sup>69</sup> vandalism and terror.<sup>70</sup> According to the letter found in the Deliyannis archive, which describes the incident in detail, three classes of the people were involved in the vandalisms of Good Friday. The first, and greatest, part was organised by the opposition, the second by thieves and robbers and the least part was organised by those who were religiously spurred by honesty and stupidity and helping the offenders without realising what they were doing.<sup>71</sup>

The Zakynthos events, and particularly those of Corfu, caused a general outcry against Greece from abroad. Governments of European States sent statements to the Greek government expressing their grave concern about the turbulent situation in Corfu and about the tragic living conditions of Corfu’s Jews, because of their confinement in the ghetto for more than 3 weeks.<sup>72</sup> In those statements it was requested that the government intervene immediately and effectively to rescue the Jewish population.<sup>73</sup> The violence against the Jewish community caused ardent protestations evident in the European press, for which, Nikolaos Spandonis upholds that “it becomes an abhorrent force, a force that kills the truth and justice, carried out because of the power of Jewish gold.”<sup>74</sup> In that way, he directly states the purposefully skewed presentation of Corfu’s situation by the “Semitic leeches, which fattened up by feeding on the blood of Europe.”<sup>75</sup> To appease the negative opinion about Greece<sup>76</sup> the then

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<sup>69</sup> For the destruction of their property the Jews of Zakynthos put forward the issue of compensation by the state, due to the lack of state protection. According to a report of the Legal Council, this petition is not invalid since - according to International Law – any civilized state has the obligation to protect the property of all its subjects, including those of foreign origin. F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106. Document of the Judiciary Advisor of Zakynthos to the Ministry of Internal Affairs on 29.8.1891.

<sup>70</sup> For a detailed outline of the events on Zakynthos cf. Freiderikos Karrer, *Ioudaismos kai Christianismos kai ta en Zakyntho symvanta kata tin Megalin Paraskevin* [Judaism and Christianity and the incidences of Zakynthos during Good Friday], (Zakynthos: Phoskolos, 1892), 67-289; *Kyrioteri symvanta tis nison Zakynthou 1874-1907 ypo Dionysiou Kladi, tou iereos Panayoti* [The main incidences of Zakynthos 1874-1907 by Dionysios Cladis, of the Priest called Panayotis], ed. Ioannis Demetis, (Zakynthos: Trimorfo, 2004), 163-169; Liata, “*Kerkyra kai i Zakynthos*”, 48-58.

<sup>71</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 20, Letter by an unknown sender to the countess Aspasia Roma on 23.4.1891.

<sup>72</sup> F.P.A., BVI/106, 8, Letter written by the ambassador of Austria-Hungary in Greece on 28.4/10.5. 1891.

<sup>73</sup> F.P.A., BVI/106, 9, Letter written by the ambassador of England in Greece on 28.4/10.5.1891.

<sup>74</sup> Nikolaos Spandonis, “Ta evraiofylla tis Eyropis” [Europe’s Jewish Tabloids], *Acropolis*, May 13, 1891.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

ambassador of Greece in London, Ioannis Gennadios, condemned the behaviour of Corfu's inhabitants in an article, entitled "The Greek Ambassador on the Jews in Greece", published in the Daily News on the 13/25 May 1891.<sup>77</sup> Gennadios spoke with disdain about the Ionians

who reminded us that the medieval Venetian tradition has not been eradicated on Ionian Islands. Even if the incidences, which sadden us all, could be seen as a burst of popular sentiment, we strongly believe that they could not be found in any other part of Greece.

Finally, he upheld that the greater part of the Greek people was innocent, while - along the same lines - they felt outraged and ashamed of the occurrences on the Ionian Islands.<sup>78</sup> Polyklas demanded that the government retract the statements made by Gennadios, to restore the reputation of inhabitants of Ionian citizens,<sup>79</sup> which never happened.

### **Ritual murder accusation: religious, financial and political aspects of the issue**

These kinds of rumours and accusations towards Jews were not unknown in the Greek-orthodox community, especially during the last quarter of the 19th Century and well into the 20th century. The soil was always fertile. The history of different European countries<sup>80</sup> and of the Greek population in Greece and

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<sup>76</sup> On the part of the Jews, see indicatively the work of German rabbi and historian Markus Horowitz, *Korfu. Vortrag, 28. Mai 1891*, (Frankfurt/M.: Kauffmann, 1891), who publishes for the broader audience a series of documents that the Greek authorities and the archi-rabbi Da Fano, which certified the Jewish origins of the murdered girl, condemning in that way the incidences in Corfu.

<sup>77</sup> Part of Gennadios' text is republished, translated into Greek, in the local newspaper *Rigas o Feraios* (May 25, 1891), with comments by Polyklas.

<sup>78</sup> *Ephimeris* (May 2, 1891) considers the behaviour of Corfu inhabitants worthy of criticism since the latter "managed to create an anti-Semitic issue in Greece". The article continues in a particularly ardent anti-Ionian style by stating that Corfu's and Zakynthos' inhabitants, after the Venetian and British occupation, are characterised by "sneaky and inhuman flaws and [...] urges" that are of European, not Greek, origins. So, "they filled the whole of the Hellenic population with bitterness and shame with their attitude and they placed the stigma of dishonesty on its forehead, which only barbaric antisemites of Europe carried till that moment". See also Liata, "Corfu and Zakynthos", 65-68.

<sup>79</sup> *Rigas o Feraios*, June 2, 1891.

<sup>80</sup> Rainer Erb, "Die Ritualmordlegende. Von den Anfängen bis ins 20. Jahrhundert", *Ritualmord. Legenden in der europäischen Geschichte*, ed. Susanna Buttaroni, Stanislaw Musiat, (Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2003), 11-20; *The Blood Libel Legend. A Casebook in Antisemitic Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes, (Madison/Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1988).

especially in the Ottoman Empire)<sup>81</sup> always proved it. Taking the bloody events of Corfu as an impetus Petros Kassimatis published an antisemitic work<sup>82</sup> in the same year which (mainly is based on the book of Henri Desportes<sup>83</sup>), set out to prove the veracity of the ritual murder accusations against Jews. Among the numerous cases of presumed ritual murder in Greece and in other places he mentions two more almost unknown blood defamations on the island, aside from the blood defamation of Corfu in 1891. The first is dated from 1812 during French rule, when three Jews were condemned to death after being charged with performing human sacrifices of Christian children,<sup>84</sup> and the second is dated from 1815 “when a youngster becomes a victim in the temple of the Jewish Moloch.”<sup>85</sup>

This specific book is dedicated not only to “the souls of the numerous victims of Jewish fanaticism and superstitions”, but also “to the strength of the truth of the fighter, Ioannis Martinos, archimandrite.” From the introduction of the work we see that Martinos was “the first from the clerics of the Free Greece that had the noble courage to fervently and publicly denounce the religious and bloodthirsty orgies of the Jews”, honouring the whole body of clerics.<sup>86</sup> Martinos was not only using the ordinary religious arguments (Jews as god-murderer), he was also fighting against them, against the “humanlike tigers” and “Antichrists”, as he characteristically called them as enemies of the Greek nation and the whole mankind: “If these monsters could rule the whole world, they would transform the planet into a massacre.”<sup>87</sup>

In this antisemitic frenzy there was also the other side, not only in publishing circles but also in the Orthodox Church. The works of Georgios Zavitsianos<sup>88</sup> and Spyridon Papageorgiou,<sup>89</sup> as well as the pro Semitic stance and effort of Dionysios Latas, archbishop of Zakynthos during 1884-1894,<sup>90</sup> constitute

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<sup>81</sup> See the prestigious work of Abraham Galanté, *Histoire des Juifs de Turquie*, 9. vol., (Istanbul: 1985, re-edition) who dedicates a separate section entitled “*calomnies du meurtre rituel*” for every Jewish community in the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>82</sup> Petros Kassimatis, *Aima, Evraioi, Talmud, itoi apodeikseis thriskeutikai, istorikai kai dikastikai peris tis yparkseos ton antropothysion par' Evraiois, epi ti vasei ton ergon pleiston syggrafeon kai idia tou syggrammatos tou Henri Desportes 'Le mystère du sang'* [Blood, Jews, Talmut, religious, historical and juridical Evidence about the Existence of human Sacrifices among the Jews based on Works of numerous Authors, and particularly of Henri Desportes work 'Le mystère du sang'], (Athens: A. Kollarakis, N. Triantafyllou, 1891).

<sup>83</sup> Henri Desportes, *Le mystère du sang chez les Juifs de tout les temps* (préface d'Edouard Drumont), (Paris: Librairie Albert Savine, 1890).

<sup>84</sup> Kassimatis, *Aima, Evraioi, Talmud*, 155-156.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, preface.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>88</sup> Georgios Zavitsianos, *Aktis Photos. O katadiogmos ton Evraion en ti istoria* [Ray of Light. The persecution of Jews in History], (Corfu: N. Petsalis, 1891).

<sup>89</sup> Papageorgiou, *Sfazousin oi Evraioi Christianopaidas*.

<sup>90</sup> Dionysios Latas, *Drasis yper tou Israilitikou ethnous kai gnomai peri Ioudaismou diakekriomenou Ierarchou tis Neoteris Ellinikis Ekklesias aoidimou archiepiskopou Zakynthou diatypotheisai en to theio yp' autou kirigmati kai en tois syggrammasi autou* [Action for the Nation of Israelites and Views on

characteristic examples. Zavitsanos dedicates his work “to the souls of the martyrs of fanaticism and bigotry, with the belief that this work contributes to eradicating this wound from the world to allow brotherly affection to take over”. His work was written due to the examined blood defamation of Corfu. “Even though Corfu is characterized as the most civilized of the Greek provinces because of the mildness of its inhabitants’ character and their relevant tolerance towards religions,”<sup>91</sup> Corfu was perturbed by the latent passions of Christians, which were misrepresented by “the foreign governments which governed the place for centuries.”<sup>92</sup> As such, it is explicitly declared that antisemitism in Corfu’s society is foreign, and not a product of the Greeks, and particularly the Ionian, thought and tradition. In the pages that follow the author endeavors to collate arguments, documents and statutes that prove the false and unsubstantial nature of the accusations of human sacrifice against the Jews.

Almost a decade after the Jewish incidences in Corfu, Papageorgiou published (1902) the speech he had given at the Athenian literary association “Parnassos” in 1901, which also aimed at disproving the defamations regarding the Jewish human sacrifices. This aim seems to have been achieved to a large extent, since -as the speaker himself noted in the preface of his published text- many members of the audience discarded their mistaken perceptions about the Jewish human sacrifices, while the beliefs of others were – if not totally discarded – but significantly shaken.<sup>93</sup>

Dionysios Latas is an example of a high ranked cleric who fought against the defamations that those of similar religion to his (Christianity) spread against the Jews, because of the Jewish affairs of Corfu. Convinced of the contribution of the Jewish people to global cultural heritage,<sup>94</sup> he often posed the rhetorical question to his co-religionists: “is it correct and just that the sons of this nation, which has offered so many services to humankind, to turn against others, hate and persecute?”<sup>95</sup> Along the same line, as the editor of the religious newspaper *Sion* (1881-1891), he published articles defending the Jews,<sup>96</sup> while he participated in the international religious conference in 1893 in Chicago, USA, as a representative of the Greek Orthodox Church where he publicly denounced the accusations of human sacrifice against the Jews; such accusations were prevalent in Europe and the East. He clearly declared that “spreading such defamations against followers of a monotheistic faith is

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Judaism from the blessed Cleric of the Modern Greek Church, Archbishop of Zakynthos as stated in his divine Preaches and in his written Works], (Zakynthos, 1932). See the introductory chapter entitled “*The services of the Nation of Jews to humankind*”. The author is the archbishop’s nephew and carries the same name as him.

<sup>91</sup> Zavitsianos, *Aktis Photos*, 2.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Papageorgiou, Introduction.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, see the introductory chapter “*Biography of the blessed archbishop of Zakynthos D. Latas*”.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-74.



against Christian teachings.”<sup>97</sup> In addition, he explicitly condemned the custom of setting Judas on fire on Easter day; “setting an effigy of a human on fire, an effigy which is on purpose made disproportionately to ostensibly satisfy the passions of Christ”, a process which often came with foul words and brutal abuse of the Jews, characterising it as “cruel, barbaric and despicable custom” and an act of passion against the Jews.<sup>98</sup>

Indeed, the personality of archbishop Latas and his persistent fight against antisemitic practices in Greece constituted a notable exception at that time. Despite the official published condemnation of the ritual murder accusation from the official Greek church,<sup>99</sup> after the beginning of the Corfu affair, the Greek Orthodox Church, and the low ranks of the clergy in particular were harboring an intense anti-Jewish mood and in essence left the path open for the manifestation of anti-Jewish popular traditions in the halls of the Church,<sup>100</sup> such as the widely spread (until recently in many areas of Greece) practice of burning an effigy of Judas that they used to construct a day or two before, using a sack full of hay or old clothes to which they gave the form of a human body and on the top put a pumpkin most frequently filled with gun powder. They hung this effigy on a tree outside the temple or on a gallow which was raised in a way as to allow them to work off their hatred in various ways. Unfortunately, this hate was fed by church psalms against the “betrayers” of Christ. They threw stones at the effigy, they beat it with sticks, they spat curses and foul words at it, and the most restless would stab it, making sure to make it as despicable as they could.<sup>101</sup>

However, there were, aside from the religious aspects not of the murder per se, but of the emphasis given to it, also financial and political reasons that pushed antisemitic manifestations to the edge.

A telegraph to the French newspaper “Liberal” mentioned that a large part of the lower class spurred on the uprising against the Jewish population in the

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 67, 69.

<sup>99</sup> “Egkyklios peri tou ouk exesti tois pistois pyrpolein omoioima tou Iouda en ti eorti tis lamproforou anastaseos tou Sotiros Iisou Christou” [“Circular concerning the prohibition of burning the effigy of Judas during the Celebration of the glorious Resurrection of Jesus Christ”], *Sylogi Egkyklion Ieras Synodon [Circulars’ Collection of the Holy Synod]*, ed. Stephanos Giannopoulos, (Athens: A. Kallarakis, 1901), 405-406.

<sup>100</sup> For the often difficult relationships between Orthodox Greeks and Jews, which often impeded on the integration of the latter into Greek society, see Yitzchak Kerem, “The multicultural Bankround of Greek Jewry. Factors in their Diversity and Integration in Modern Greece”, *Minorités religieuses de la Grèce contemporaine, Mésogeios*, 20-21, ed. Georges Drettas, (Paris: Herodotos, 2003) 57-79. For a Jewish perspective on the matter see Zvi Ankori, “Greek Orthodox-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective. The Jewish View”, *Greek Orthodox Review*, 22 (1977): 17-57.

<sup>101</sup> Giorgos Thomas, “To Pascha ton Ellinon kai to... ‘martyrio’ tou Iouda” [The Easter of Greeks and the... ‘Torture’ of Judas], *Chronica*, 220 (March-April 2009), 26-27 [Published in *Thessalia*, April 26, 2008].

hope to drive them away and take back the jobs that had been given to them because they worked at lower rates.<sup>102</sup> The content of this telegraph is particularly understandable if we take into account the poverty and the particularly difficult financial situation<sup>103</sup> in basically rural<sup>104</sup> Greece which led to bankruptcy in 1893.

However, Corfu's politician Georgios Theotokis holder of an important position in the "Neoteric Party"<sup>105</sup> who was known for his antisemitic attitude during the Corfu incidences, did not concede the importance of the financial aspect of these incidences for his co-religionists. In one of his interviews to Nikolaos Spandonis he declared that his "*co-citizens are noble and would never humble themselves to persecute the Jews for such unworthy reasons*". Furthermore, he upholds that the "*Jews are not so rich, neither are they noteworthy as land owners nor do they harass us as businessmen in the exporting trade*". He concluded by saying that "*the inhabitants of Corfu, in whom the sentiment of love for their country is deeply rooted, that it is only because the Jew is not Greek if a hatred towards him is present*".<sup>106</sup>

Iakovos Polylys<sup>107</sup> also does not admit the existence of financial reasons for the antisemitic outburst in Corfu, as he upholds that the Jews of the island do not play a role in the industry, and that they only partly do control the trade of olive oil, since Christians are also involved in it. Conversely, like Theotokis, he upholds that the Jews "*were not real Greeks*".<sup>108</sup> The fact, so says Polylys, is that they did not speak Greek, that their children were not frequent in Greek

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<sup>102</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 45 (no date).

<sup>103</sup> Charilaos Tricoupis, *The Finances of Greece (On introducing to the Hellenic Chamber the Budget for 1888, on November 4<sup>th</sup>/November 16<sup>th</sup> 1890)*, (London: Harrison, Sons: 1887).

<sup>104</sup> Sokratis Petmezas, *I elliniki agrotiki oikonomia kata ton 19o aiona. I periphereiaki diastasi* [The Greek rural Economy during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The peripheral dimension], (Iraklio: University Press of Crete, 2003).

<sup>105</sup> Theotokis' grandson, also a politician, Georgios Rallis, has written on his life and works. See Georgios Rallis, *Georgios Theotokis. O politikos tou metrou* [Georgios Theotokis. The measured Politician], (Athens: Foundation of the Hellenic Parliament, 2006).

<sup>106</sup> Nikolaos Spandonis, "Anakriseis 'Acropoleos' epi ton en Kerkyra tarachon. Meros A. Synenteuksis meta tou k. G. Theotoki: Ai kat' autou katigoriai. Aitios ton tarachon o k. Dilyannis. Prosorini isychia." [Interrogations by 'Acropolis' on the Disruptions in Corfu. Part I. Interview of Mr. G. Theotokis: The Allegations against him. The Perpetrator of these Disruptions is Mr. Deliyannis. Temporary Quiet], *Acropolis*, May 12, 1891.

<sup>107</sup> On the life and work of Polylys, see Yorgos Valetas, *Polylys. All the Literary Works and Critiques*. (Athens: Pigi, 1963<sup>3</sup>). In the beginning Polylys was part of the neoteric party of Charilaos Trikoupi; under this office he was elected as Member of Parliament four times. In 1884 he withdrew from the party of Trikoupi and turned to the conservative party of Theodoros Dilyannis, but in 1890 he approached the party of Trikoupi once more. In 1892 he abandoned politics. With Georgios Theotokis, he is considered the most antisemitic politician of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>108</sup> Nikolaos Spandonis, "Synenteuksi meta tou k. Iakovou Polylya" [Interview with Mr. Iakovos Polylys], *Acropolis*, May 13, 1891. To conceptualise the term of country in relation to Orthodox religion see *Kodon* "Country for the inhabitants of Corfu is, and always has been, the highest sentiment which was enough to preserve its Greek and Orthodox soul also in those days during which its body was submissive to foreign forces and foreign political systems."

schools,<sup>109</sup> that they did not accept Greece as their homeland, put them in solitary confinement which attracted the orthodox populations' repulsion. In addition, Polyas accuses them to transfer “the money that they earned from Greeks to foreign banks”, which is considered anti-patriotic given the particularly difficult financial circumstances which were present in Greece during the last quarter of the 19th century. Furthermore he considered it a mistake that the Jews dared blame the Christians for the murder.<sup>110</sup>

On part of the Jews, the prestigious Dr. De Semo also does not believe in the existence of financial reasons for the bloodthirsty developments in Corfu. He upholds that – except for two cases – the Jews of Corfu do not have significant influence on the banking business, as it the case in other European countries, neither do they have their hand in industry, and, except for some tailors, are not artisans.<sup>111</sup> As for the common people, “women have the specialty of mopping the houses which does not cause financial hardship to Christian women, because none of them take on that arduous job.” Jewish men were mostly porters who were always hired by Christians, while the *homme d'équipe* was always a Christian. De Semo considers the superstitions about human sacrifice as the main reason for the antisemitic incidences.<sup>112</sup>

However, even though the most important political and social figures of the local Greek and Jewish society doubted the existence of financial reasons for the outburst of antisemitic incidences, those reasons were valid.

Specifically, during that time there was a feudal system in Corfu and the Christian landowners rented their mainly olive) fields to farmers (Christian citizens as well) in exchange for money. Frequently, the farmers could not pay the lease and had to take a mortgage, often from Jewish citizens of the island, which were described as usury and therefore Jews were hated by the Christian farmers. Very often, Christian farmers could not pay the high interest at the same time as the lease. Therefore the farmers had to go to court and quite often, were put into jail “*along with the real criminals*”, where the conditions were

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<sup>109</sup> It is about a category which keeps returning the public speech of Greeks with intense regularity. See indicatively, *Documents on the history of the Greek Jews. Records from the Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, ed. Photini Constantopoulou, Thanos Veremis, (Athens: Kastaniotis, 1999), 113-114.

<sup>110</sup> Nikolaos Spandonis, “Synenteuksi meta tou k. Iakovou Polyla” [Interview with Mr. Iakovos Polyas], *Acropolis*, May 13, 1891.

<sup>111</sup> However, the exceptional work of Gekas, demonstrate not only the existence of a significant number of Jews labourers, but also the existence of a significant number of craftsmen und merchant, who belonged to the middle class of the island. See Sakis Gekas “The Port Jews of Corfu and the ‘Blood Libel’ of 1891: A Tale of Many Centuries and of One Event”, *Jew and Port Cities, 1590-1990. Commerce, Community and Cosmopolitanism*, eds. David Cesarani, Gemma Rommain (special issue, *Jewish Culture and History* 7/1-2, 2004), 171-196 (177-183).

<sup>112</sup> Nikolaos Spandonis, “Ti legoun kai oi Ioudaioi: Ouchi to symferon. Ouchi i politiki alli prolipsis i kyria aformi. Synenteuksis meta tou iatrou B. De Semou ” [“What the Jews also say. It is not best Interest. It is not Politics but the Superstition is the main Reason. Interview with B. De Semou, Physician”], *Acropolis*, May 13, 1891.

miserable. According to a proverb of Corfu “*it is far better to be a criminal than a farmer*”. The landowners and the Jews were considered responsible for the miserable situation in which the farmers found themselves, as well as for their exploitation.<sup>113</sup>

A number of citizens benefited from the massive migration of the Jews; among those were police officers, friends and relatives of Corfu’s mayor, Michail Theotokis, the brother of Georgios Theotokis and also adherent of the liberal party, as well as priests and church followers. According to the report of Kefalas, who denounces the police force to participate in auctions. Policemen indeed took on “the role of official auctioneers in the central market, where they were selling the belongings they had bought from the departing Jews at heavily discounted prices.”<sup>114</sup>

Furthermore, did political reasons contribute to the outburst of antisemitic incidences in Corfu. The allegation was attributed to the Jews that “due to their powerful social organisation, they manage to push through their political views in the governments and to acquire privileges and significant political power.”<sup>115</sup> For this reason, Iakovos Polylas was displeased with the audacity that the Jews began to show; for that reason, he demanded restrictions for the Jews, as he did not want them to have more privileges than the Christians.

We do not deny that we fight the Jews. In fact, we consider this an essential part of our mission. We fight them in order to restrict them... We should not permit the Jews to have more privileges and rights than the Christians anymore.<sup>116</sup>

In this case, it was known that the Jews almost in union voted against Georgios Theotokis' party, and against his brother Michail Theotokis. On July 7<sup>th</sup> 1891 communal elections were. The electoral run was predicted to be difficult and therefore every vote were of particular importance. For the party in office (Deliyiannis’ conservative party) the candidate for the mayor’s office was Constantinos Vassilakis, who had a great part of Corfu’s people (including the Jews)<sup>117</sup> on his side. The candidate for the opposition (the liberal party) was Michail Theotokis who with promises or threats tried to gain the people’s

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<sup>113</sup> Kaiti Aroni-Tsichli, “To agrotiko zitima Kerkyras meta tin enosi tis Eptanissou me tin Ellada mesa apo ta pafletia tis epochis” [The Agrarian Question of Corfu after the Union of Ionian Islands with Greece after the Pamphlets of the Time], *Epistimoniko Synedrio, I Enosi tis Eptanissou me tin Ellada, 1864-2004. Praktika* [The Union of Ionian Islands with Greece, 1864-2004. Conference Proceedings], vol. I (History), eds. Eleni Gardika-Katsiadaki, Eleni Belia, (Athens: Greek Parliament, Academy of Athens/Research Centre of the History of Center for Research of the History of Modern Greece, 2005), 593-607.

<sup>114</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 1.

<sup>115</sup> Spandonis, “Ti legoun kai oi Ioudaioi.”

<sup>116</sup> *Tolmiros*, July 15, 1885 (apprenticed in Gekas, “The Port Jews of Corfu”, 188).

<sup>117</sup> The Jewish population of Corfu was grateful for the supportive attitude of Deliyiannis’ party during the troubles on the island and therefore wanted to vote for his candidate.

support. His followers put in great efforts to persuade the Jews to abstain from the elections in order to prevent Vassilakis to win the elections.<sup>118</sup>

From the moment that the Jews could not be persuaded to vote for Theotokis, his followers created an intimidating situation, which would make the Jewish population to leave the island. This turned out to be an effective strategy. So, the behaviour of the Corfu's mayor can be obviously explained, who was

totally absent from recent developments and did not work at all to restore order, while the Jewish district was guarded by military forces, reinforced by police constables, all judges were appointed as temporary interrogators, the judiciary, administrative and military authorities were constantly present in the Jewish district. Conversely, friends and family of the mayor collaborated for the annihilation and disappearance of the Jews, while the local newspapers who had the same political beliefs published any false rumour.<sup>119</sup>

In any case, the pre-electoral atmosphere was so tense and charged,<sup>120</sup> that the interrogator Cagadis in his confidential letter of the 14<sup>th</sup> of June to the Prime Minister declared that he finally postponed taking any penal measures against Rubina's family, although he considered it responsible for her murder, because that "could influence public order particularly on the eve of elections, by stirring religious fanaticism for the elections, a sentiment which did not cease to exist and can be manifested at the slightest provocation."<sup>121</sup> It becomes apparent that this specific blood libel had escaped its initial religious dimension, serving financial and political purposes of the local, and not only local, society.

### *En lieu of an epilogue*

The communal elections of the 7<sup>th</sup> of July showed M. Theotokis as winner. A big part of the Jews had already left the island. Of the total of 5.000, 2.000-3.000 Jews migrated<sup>122</sup> to Great Britain, Austria, Italy,<sup>123</sup> mainland Greece and particularly Athens and Chalkis and to various areas of the Ottoman Empire, mainly Smyrne and Constantinople. Even if this figure is overrated it is certain that the Jewish community of Corfu, one of the biggest in the Greek state, was

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<sup>118</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 34. Letter of Theagenis Kefalas to the Prime Minister on 5.7.1891.

<sup>119</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 1.

<sup>120</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 33. Letter of the Prefecturer Bouklakos to the Prime Minister on 28.6.1891.

<sup>121</sup> F.P.A., D.A., BVI/106, 30.

<sup>122</sup> Dafnis, "*Oi Israilites tis Kerkyras*", 29.

<sup>123</sup> Yitzchak Kerem, "Corfiote Triestians. A Jewish Diasporic Community from Greece in the 19th and 20th Centuries", *Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*. Division B, vol. III, (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1994), 187-194.

shrunk demographically, financially and culturally and could not reproduce the numbers it had lost.

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