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THE LEGACY OF THE 1840 DAMASCUS AFFAIR

by Alain Farhi

In 1840, European inspired anti-Semitism triggered persecution of wealthy Sephardic Jews living peacefully in the Old Jewish quarter of Damascus. This event which was labelled *The 1840 Damascus Affair* changed their lives and those of their descendants for centuries to come.



Father Tommaso and his servant ca 1840
"reproduced in 1892"

European anti-Semitism often took the form of pogroms and blood libel accusations around Passover. Jews were accused of using the blood of Christian children and adults in the making of matzah.

These accusations seldom reached the Jewish communities in the Muslim world, where they, along with non-Muslim monotheist neighbors, enjoyed a special status of *dhimmi*¹ with limited rights but freedom to manage their own religious affairs.

In late 1553, Suleiman the Magnificent, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, banned blood libel accusations. These were leveled occasionally by Greek and French diplomats who promoted the commercial interests of their merchants against the local Jewish ones.

Jews in Europe have been subject to waves of anti-Semitism from Christian rulers, the clergy and local populations who suffered during the Middle Ages from famine, diseases such as the bubonic plague, and other disasters. Anti-Semitic sentiments were based on fake news and conspiracy theories. The Damascus Affair was one such incident that divided the attitude of the Western powers into two camps. The Catholics actually believed the affair whereas Protestants took the reverse attitude, and there was definite polarization.

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However, in 1840, a new false accusation of ritual murder was leveled against the wealthiest and leading families of Damascus: the Abulafia, Antebi, de Picciotto, Farhi, Harari and Laniado families. Its repercussions attracted worldwide attention from the European powers and its resolution a year later transformed the Sephardi communities of the Middle East and North Africa for decades to come. By the end of the 19th century, the community subsequently became impoverished.

On February 5, 1840, Father P. Tommaso, a Cappuchin friar who was born in Sardinia, and Ibrahim, his Muslim servant, were seen arguing in Damascus with a local merchant who felt defrauded. Tommaso and Ibrahim were never seen after that encounter. Some bones were found in a sewer in the Jewish Quarter and accusers claimed they were of the victims. A request to send the bones for examination was denied and the Jews were found guilty. The authorities also seized 63 Jewish children so as to extort the hiding place of the victims' blood from their mothers. The bones were later identified as animal bones.²



Mohamed Ali, Viceroy of Egypt

Since Tommaso was a French protégé living in the Ottoman Empire, the investigation was assigned to Sherif Pasha, the Damascus governor and son of Mohamed

Ali³, the Egyptian ruler of the region, and to Count Ulysse de Ratti-Menton, the French consul in Beirut.

Ratti-Menton convinced Sherif Pasha that the Jews were responsible for the alleged ritual murders and, as a result, was given full investigative powers. Ratti-Menton, based on an extracted confession from a barber (Salomon Negrin) of complicity but not participation, rounded up eight Jewish men including Salomon Hayek; Murad el-Fattal; Jacob Antebi, the chief rabbi of Damascus; Aaron Harari; Aaron Stambouli; Joseph Lañado; Moses Abulafia; Moses Salonici and Aslan Farhi (son of Raphael), Joseph and Murad Farhi. They were arrested and harshly interrogated by Jean-Baptiste Beaudin, a French diplomat seeking more confessions. Rabbi Antebi and Lañado died under torture while Abulafia converted to Islam to avoid death.

On February 14, Raphael El Mouallem Farhi, banker and head of the Farhi families of Damascus, was placed under house arrest with his servants in a government house for 90 days. On March 23, 1840, Mayer Farhi (my direct ancestor) was arrested and imprisoned. He was 55 years old and had an estimated 500,000 piasters net worth. The ghurush or piaster is the Arabic spelling of the *kurus* which was the currency of the Ottoman Empire. A bribe of 24,400 piasters (£244) was offered by his wife Deborah to spare him 1,000 lashes of flagellation in prison.

Ratti-Menton published in European newspapers the alleged confessions. In the meantime, the Muslim population raided the Jobar synagogue, destroyed *sefarim* and attacked properties in the Jewish Quarter. Finally, the Ottoman police intervened to stop the Muslim attacks on Jewish residents.

Apparently, Ratti-Menton was a known womanizer with little success among the Jewish women. To seek

revenge, he sequestered more than a 100 women and children in a school in an effort to get them to pressure the husbands and fathers to confess. Allegedly, Aslan Farhi who was the son-in-law of Rabbi Jacob Antebi confessed to the murders under torture.

One new suspect, Isaac de Picciotto, an Austrian citizen, sought refuge with the Austrian consul Giovanni Gasparo Merlato. His family had been granted Austrian nationality in 1802 when they became consuls of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Levant. Isaac asked Merlato's help in denouncing the French actions and preventing Mohamed Ali,³ the viceroy of Egypt, from acquiescing to the death penalty requested by the French diplomats via Sherif Pasha. Caspar Merlato, the Austrian consul, took the case to the Hapsburg monarchy in Vienna after failing to convince the British and French consuls in Alexandria.



Sir Moses Montefiore

After the publication of the news in the Austrian and European press about the mistreatment of the Damascus Jews, the Jewish communities in England and France put pressure on Britain's foreign minister, Lord Palmerston,⁴ and France's prime minister, Adolphe Thiers to act. Britain stood at the height of its imperial power. Lord Henry Palmerston dominated British foreign policy from 1830 to 1865. His aggressive gun boat philosophy of governing toward foreign nations succeeded in turning the tide of European public opinion, which was initially indifferent to the plight of the Damascene Jews.

This led to the creation of a multi-national negotiating team headed by Sir Moses Montefiore⁵ and Adolphe Crémieux,⁶ a French lawyer. They traveled to Alexandria and negotiated with Mohamed Ali for the release of all the imprisoned Jews in Damascus. While the French Catholic newspapers backed the blood libel accusation, the Anglican Church newspapers treated them as "mendacious calumny." The relationship between Montefiore and Crémieux was strained before

they reached Egypt. They often held separate negotiations with Mohamed Ali.

Montefiore and Crémieux arrived in Alexandria with their wives on August 4, 1840 and stayed for almost a month while waiting for audiences with Mohamed Ali.

Mohamed Ali, the Viceroy of Egypt who had conquered and ruled Syria kept evading the meeting. Lord Henry Palmerston threatened to send the British Navy. Finally, on September 4, 1840, with a bribe of 60,000 piasters, Ali agreed to release (not pardon) the Damascene Jews still in prison.

After their stay in Damascus to liberate the prisoners, Montefiore and Crémieux continued their travel to Constantinople where, with the help of the Damascus British consul Charles Henry Churchill, the Austrian consul Giovanni Gasparo Merlato, Danish missionary John Nicolayson and Arabic-speaking scholar Solomon Munk, they sought an audience with Sultan Abdulmecid I.

Finally, on November 6, 1840, the Sultan issued a royal decree banning all blood libel cases in the Ottoman Empire, calling them a slander against the Jewish population.

During Adolphe Crémieux's stay in Damascus, he discovered the economic status of the poorer Jews in the region and noticed especially that they were barely educated, and the fortunate ones were educated only in Hebrew and Arabic. Upon his return to France and after another Jewish crisis in Italy in 1858 (the Mortara Affair⁷), he helped in the creation of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in 1860 to safeguard the human rights of Jews around the world. L'Alliance created a network of schools to give a French education to Jews in the Middle East. That French education helped the Jewish community to be Europeanized and allowed for an easier integration when forced to emigrate from Arab lands.

In 1870, as the French Minister of Justice, Crémieux gave French citizenship to the native Jews in Algeria with many emigrating later to the Middle East where they pursued a French education for their children. That French education was very helpful in the 20th century when they ultimately moved to Europe and the West.

In general, one of the consequences of the 1840 Damascus Blood Libel was the beginning of the decline of Jewish political power in Syria. The Christian

community took over many of their appointed positions in the Ottoman government. The wealth of the Jewish community was later dramatically reduced by the financial default of the Ottoman Empire in 1875 on its national bonds, many of which were held by the Jewish bankers of Syria.

The Damascus Blood Libel continued to be a source of political discourse in the Eastern European countries and czarist Russia due to the spread of another anti-Semitic conspiracy theory known as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The fraudulent document published in 1903 by Russia's secret police served as a pretext for anti-Semitism in Europe. It attempted to show a Jewish conspiracy, agreed upon at a secret rabbinical conference, with the goal of Jewish world domination and the reduction of Christians to slavery or mass extermination.

The Damascus Affair of 1840 had brought Middle-Age era blood libel accusations to the Jews of the Ottoman Empire who had never experienced such anti-Semitism. By bringing the European powers to their defense, the status and plight of the local Jewish communities contributed to their protection as dhimmis by the Ottoman Sultan. The most beneficial legacy was the educational reforms brought in by l'Alliance Universelle Israélite which gave them a European secular education in French, Italian as well as in Arabic and Hebrew. From Greece to Egypt, local trade and international business were transacted primarily in French and English. Many businesses sent their sons to Europe as trade representatives and they needed to know French. As a result, many Jews attained high position in real estate, legal, finance, industry, wholesale and retail commerce as well as government and elected positions. When the second exodus from Arab lands occurred in the middle of the 20th century, these middle-class Jews were ready for an easier integration into their newly adopted countries.

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2. Ronald Florence. *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840* (University of Wisconsin Press; First Edition, 2004)
3. Alon Hilu. *Death Of A Monk* (Harvill Secker, 2006)

Endnotes:

¹Editor's Note: *Dhimmī* is a historical term for non-Muslims living in an Islamic country with legal protection. The word means "protected person." In exchange for the jizya tax, the regime protected the individual's life, property, and offered freedom of religion and community autonomy to manage their own affairs.

²[The Damascus Blood Libel \(jewishvirtuallibrary.org\)](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-damascus-blood-libel)

³[Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Ali_of_Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Ali_of_Egypt)

⁴[Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_John_Temple,_3rd_Viscount_Palmerston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_John_Temple,_3rd_Viscount_Palmerston)

⁵[Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Montefiore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Montefiore)

⁶[Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolphe_Crémieux](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolphe_Crémieux)

⁷ In June 1858, on the orders of Pope Pius IX, the papal police took Edgardo Mortara from his Jewish family. The boy had been secretly baptized by a Catholic servant.

Alain Farhi is a retired businessman with a passion for genealogy. He started tracking the Farhi families in the early 1980s and now covers many families of Middle East origins and beyond. His [Les Fleurs de l'Orient](https://www.farhi.org/) website currently numbers over 147,000 families and 325,000 names. The majority of these families are Sephardim, together with Ashkenazim and Karaites, as well as Christians, Moslems and other religions. The site includes many personal documents and links to resources. Farhi has been a speaker at several IAJGS conferences and Zoom lectures. He has published articles in Avotaynu (USA), Shemot (UK) and AJOE (France). Farhi is one of the founders of the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy, member of the Committee of NebiDaniel Association (France), administrator of the Sephardic Heritage DNA Project at Family Tree DNA and a lifetime member of the Palm Beach, Florida, Jewish Genealogy Society. Born in Egypt and educated in France, Farhi chose the United States as his country of adoption but has also lived in Singapore, Belgium, Switzerland, Taiwan and London. He is married with two children and four grandchildren. A list and links of his speeches and published papers can be found at https://farhi.org/documents_webmaster.htm