

Blood Libel Accusations

Blood libel accusations refer to unfounded allegations leveled at Jews primarily during the Middle Ages in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, that all Jews were “Christ killers” and that they would kidnap Christian children at Passover time (or for Christians, Easter time), kill them, and use their blood as an ingredient in their matzot. Additional charges were made that Jews would steal the leftover wafers of bread from the Holy Communion and eat them in order to devour the “flesh of Christ” and thereby crucify him afresh. Such false accusations often led to violent acts that resulted in mistrust, fear, hate, and the deaths of many Jews.

A good example of the results of the blood libel accusations is given in Chaim Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev*. Here are given several references in lament to the death of Asher’s grandfather, who unluckily forgot that it was the eve of Easter and was subsequently killed by a drunken Orthodox Christian peasant in 20th century Soviet Russia as he made his way home from the synagogue. Although no motive is explicitly given in the book, it is implicitly understood that the impetus behind this murder was the blood libel accusations that existed so strongly at the time and in that region.

Although blood libel accusations are almost non-existent today, they have persisted as recently as the early 20th century, culminating in the famous trial of Mendel Beilis¹ in Kiev, Ukraine (1911-1912).² The worldwide attention given to this trial and its resultant decision that Beilis was not guilty effectively won for the Jews international recognition that blood libel accusations had no foundation. However, no single court case, no matter its implications, could change the fears and prejudice of all individuals. In consequence, many Jews today tell of how, when they were children, they would have to avoid their Catholic and Orthodox friends around Passover for risk of being ganged up on and beaten – of course, after Passover they were all friends again.³

Blood libel accusations not only changed the way Jews conduct their lives around Passover time, but they also influenced the way the Seder is performed. For example, one of the original customs of the Seder was to keep the front door open throughout as a sign of welcoming to anyone wishing to join in the Passover celebration (although it was strictly forbidden for Gentiles to participate). However, fear of Passover evening raids by local Orthodox Christians led to the shutting of doors. It was no longer practical or safe to continue this tradition. Yet the Jews were determined to do the best they could, so for a very short time just after drinking the third cup of wine, they would open the door to symbolically welcome the prophet Elijah. This tradition has persisted into the present day for most Jewish families.

Another example of a change to the Seder that was affected by the blood libel accusations was the allowance by some rabbis of white wine as opposed to red wine during the Middle Ages. Although the use of white wine has always been, and still is, highly discouraged, a concession was granted so as to diminish the significance of the redness of the wine. In essence, the rabbis wished to create an obvious divide between the

¹ Shari Schwartz ed. *Scapegoat on Trial: The Story of Mendel Beilis* (New York: CIS Publishers, 1992)

² Silverman, Rabbi Morris, ed. *Passover Haggadah: New Translation with explanatory notes and original readings* (Hartford: Prayer Book Press, 1959) 44

³ Levin, Meyer. *An Israel Haggadah for Passover* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, no date)

symbolism of the wine of Passover and the wine of the Orthodox Christians' Holy Communion. They also wanted to relieve any claims that they were symbolically drinking the blood of Jesus and thereby "crucifying him anew."