

Jonas Levi, A Jew

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The document presented below is a legal deposition given by an American Jew named Jonas Levi to a notary in Versailles. Dated toward the end of the War of Independence, it concerns Levi's misfortunes as he left Versailles to return to America.

Pre-Revolutionary Versailles was the seat of the French royal government and the diplomatic community. The central offices of many ministries were located there and normally attracted a considerable number of merchants, tradesmen, and artisans, among them some Jews. Thus it was natural enough that an American Jew in France should appear at Versailles to seek assistance.

Who was Jonas Levi? Apart from his deposition, he remains unknown. One may conjecture, based on the fact that Benjamin Franklin gave him some money, that he was a diplomatic courier or even a secret agent. More likely, Levi was only a *maladroit* private citizen, a *shlemiel*, who successfully petitioned for assistance from his country's ambassador. During these years, inflation was severe, and ninety-six livres may simply have been the price of a boat ticket home, a sum advanced by Franklin who was probably as glad to send him on his way as were the British!

We do, however, learn something about Levi from several remarks. When he needed an interpreter, he immediately went to a member of the local Jewish community. Does this imply that Levi, while waiting in Versailles to see Franklin, had been in contact with the Jews of the city? We cannot know, but it does appear probable; he found Daniel the engraver rather quickly. Levi's need for an interpreter is itself interesting. He got along well enough at the inn—one assumes in French—yet in Versailles he conveyed a different image. We also discern that Levi was a Jew of questionable piety. Despite his refusal to sign the deposition on the Sabbath, he did not appear reluctant to journey from Trappes back to Versailles (some eight or

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ten miles) or to make the deposition itself on Saturday. Levi, like many colonial American Jews, was willing to adjust his religious observances to novel circumstances.

It should be noted that both Jonas Levi and Daniel are identified in the document as Jews. The reference strongly suggests that the document was European; in Revolutionary America, a similar mention would have been less usual.

What happened to Levi was hardly unique in eighteenth-century France. In Lesage's picaresque novel *Gil Blas*, written only a half-century earlier, a nearly-identical incident occurs.¹ From Procrustes on, innkeepers and their cohorts have generally been considered scoundrels. Small wonder, then, that Jonas Levi, our trusting and unwarned *shlemiel*, fell victim to one of their wily pranks.

Levi as an individual is an unknown, but his type was not unknown. Jews turned up everywhere in colonial America—in all sorts of enterprises, adventures, embarrassments, and imbroglios. Like Levi, they were an exciting and often entertaining group.

JANUARY 29, 1780

The deposition of Jonas Levi, a Jew:

On the 29th day of January, 1780, Jonas Levi, an American Jew who had been captured by the English the previous year and sent back to France, appeared before the Notary.

He deposed that, on January 24th, he had been at the home of Dr. Franklin, who had given him a passport to return to America, as well as the sum of ninety-six livres;

Further, that yesterday, while passing through Trappes on the way to Nantes where he was to embark, it being noon, he entered an inn at Trappes (Barré), which is located about an eighth of a league on the road leading toward Trappes. The innkeeper was also a wagoner and lives in a new house;

Further, that, as he ordered his meal, it was proposed to him that three soldiers who were at the inn dine with him. Two of the soldiers were dressed in green uniforms with embroidered white cuffs and a white lining on their jackets, while the third had a blue uniform with similar white cuffs and lining;

Further, that he accepted this proposal and that the innkeeper and

¹ Alain-René Lesage, *The Adventures of Gil Blas de Santillana*, Book I, Chapter 2.

his wife also joined them. After the meal, when he noticed that it was getting late, he asked for the bill, whereupon he was told that he owed three livres and ten sols for the meal and six francs for the wine. Levi then took two livres and eight sols from his pocket, stating that he was a traveler and that was all he had, whereupon the three soldiers who dined with him tied his hands with an iron chain, searched through his coin-purse, and, in the presence of the innkeeper and his wife, took from him three gold louis and an écu [coin] worth six livres, which were put into the coin-purse of one of the soldiers;

Further, that, when he [Levi] complained that they had taken all of his money, they kept him until nightfall. Then, after escorting him a short distance along the road, they returned one livre and four sols to him so that he could continue his trip;

Further, that, when he entered another inn to stay the night and reported what had happened to him, he was sent to Chenid, the Swiss Guard at the gate of Trappes, who advised him to pursue his complaint at Versailles. This he proceeded to do, accompanied by M[onsieur]. Daniel, a Jew, who is an engraver living on Rue d'Anjou at the Moutier Arcade in Versailles. He made the deposition for Levi and served as his interpreter, inasmuch as Levi did not know French. (Both Levi and Daniel declared that they were unable to sign the deposition today, Saturday, as it was the Sabbath day, [four words struck through]; therefore, they signed after sunset.)

/s/ Daniel, engraver, serving as interpreter
 Jonas Levy
 [a third party]

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