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Orleans Witch-Hunt

The setting, appropriately enough, was Orléans, the provincial French city saved by Joan of Arc—who was burned as a witch in 1431. And the tale told by some Orléanais was calculated to make a pulp-magazine editor rub his hands in glee. Late last month, or so the story went, a worker accompanied his wife on an afternoon shopping trip to d'Orphée, a small boutique owned by Henri Licht, an Orléans Jewish businessman. The wife entered alone and when, half an hour later, her impatient husband went in looking for her, he was told by Licht that no woman answering his wife's description had ever been in the shop. At that, the irate husband called the police who made a thorough search of the shop and discovered not only the missing wife, but two other women, bound and drugged in the basement. Soon, the entire city was buzzing with the news: the quiet, bespectacled Monsieur Licht was actually the mastermind of a narcotics and white-slave ring that specialized in kidnaping comely Christian Orléanaises.

The story, of course, was a complete fabrication. The Orléans police had received no reports about missing women, nor had they found any bodies in Licht's boutique. And, in fact, it turned out that the inspiration for the white-slave story had come from a recent issue of *Noir et Blanc*, a notorious scandal magazine which claimed to have uncovered a Jewish "plot" in Grenoble. Similar rumors, apparently also modeled on the *Noir et Blanc* article—and possibly planted by an organized anti-Semitic group—cropped up in Le Mans and Paris, but failed to catch on.

Gossip: But in Orléans the story spread like wildfire and was quickly embellished by such "facts" as the existence of subterranean passages connecting Jewish shops and submarines piloted by Israelis who peddled women to Arab harems. Understandably, the Jewish merchants at first took the rumors for no more than malicious gossip. But then, three weeks ago, people began to gather in front of the accused shops, whispering and poking their heads in the doorways to yell "sale Juif [dirty Jew]." The Jewish shopkeepers reported a drop of more than 60 per cent in their business. And when women customers did come in, it was either in groups of two or three or accompanied by their husbands.

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of the entire affair was that officials in Orléans refused to help squelch the rumors before they got out of hand. One police officer, flooded with frantic phone calls, assured people that "the shops are under surveillance." The mayor, apparently

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worried about upcoming national elections, suddenly decided to take a "vacation." And the local bishop, called on by Jewish leaders to denounce the rumor, would only promise "to pray for the Jews of Orléans."

By last week, after the affair had come to the attention of the national press in France, business in the Jewish shops started to return to normal, and a number of Orléanais were saying that they "had never believed the story anyway." But the incident left the Jews of Or-



Skoursky: 'How it all begins'

léans badly shaken. "The terrible thing," Licht told NEWSWEEK's Richard Z. Chesnoff, "is not so much the story itself but the fact that our neighbors were ready to believe it." To some Jews in Orléans, the latter-day witch-hunt was proof of the strong undercurrent of anti-Semitism which still exists in many parts of France. Others were ready to lay the blame on Charles de Gaulle. Recalling the former President's remark that Jews are "an elite people, self-assured and domineering," they claimed that this kind of talk had made it respectable for Christians to display their latent anti-Jewish sentiments.

Anger: Whatever the explanation, the slander campaign conjured up for many French Jews memories of the Nazi era. "I'll show you what I think when something like this happens," said Leon Skoursky, the 38-year-old Jewish owner of an Orléans clothing store. Then, shaking with anger, he took a crumpled yellow Star of David with the word *Juif* printed on it from his wallet. "I got this

as a gift from the Nazis when I was 10 years old," Skoursky said. "I carry it wherever I go so I don't forget. When this thing happened in Orléans, I took it out, looked at it and said to myself: 'This is how it all begins.'"

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