

100 Years Later...

# A Jew's Lynching

## The Leo Frank Saga

*It launched the Ku Klux Klan and the Anti-Defamation League. It inflamed a community and ignited a nation. It brought out the worst in people and the best in people....*

*It is the tragic story of Leo Frank – and it happened in America.*

*Zman conducted an investigation—meeting with relatives, community activists and lawyers who dedicated their lives to fight for justice—about the Leo Frank trial and lynching that sent shockwaves through the Jewish community, which reverberate even today.*

- Shimon Rosenberg
- Chaim Rivkin
- Rachel March



August 6, 1913. The atmosphere in the streets is fraught with tension. Frenzied hordes march around government buildings, wielding rifles and other weapons. They surround the courthouse where the trial of a Jew falsely accused of murdering a young Christian girl is taking place.

"Hang the Jew or we'll hang you!" the crowds shout raucously, brandishing their weapons.

"Kill the Jews who killed our savior!" resonates in the street.

The atmosphere is reminiscent of the medieval pogroms of Europe. Rabble-rousing sermons by local priests and other anti-Semitic leaders have ignited the passions of the ignorant masses. And the minority of rational, level-headed

individuals are simply too intimidated to take a stand against the blatant injustice and rabid anti-Semitism. It is just too risky.

It reads like an old-world legend from the Middle Ages, but incredibly, this happened in the twentieth century in *the United States* – land of the free and home of the brave.

The city was Atlanta, capital of Georgia. The frenzied hordes wielding rifles and other weapons were red-blooded American citizens. The government building they surrounded was the Fulton County Superior Court House of Atlanta.

The governor of Georgia, a respected and popular man, was trying desperately to keep the situation under control. He called in the National Guard and the military to protect Jewish neighborhoods. Privately, he prayed that justice prevail and that he would not

have to use force. However, he did not, at that point, fathom how deep the hatred ran and how inflamed the passions had become. Neither did he know the steep price he would pay for trying to help the hapless Jew.

Then, just like now, the Jews of Atlanta felt safe and secure as American citizens with equal rights to pursue the American dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They lived under the illusion that their non-Jewish neighbors regarded them as equals, and that anti-Semitism was relatively non-existent in America. Then their illusion was shattered. Abruptly, they were faced with the shocking realization that even after doing their utmost to assimilate into the American melting pot, they were no less immune from virulent anti-Semitism than their openly Jewish relatives in the *"alte heim."*

This past August 17 marked the 96<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that dark chapter in American history, when an innocent Jew named Leo Frank was lynched by a group of Americans, not exclusively by low-class, uneducated street ruffians, but by the elite of Atlanta society, including elected officials and judges. Frank was lynched after being falsely accused, despite all the evidence pointing to a black man as the perpetrator. And this was in an era when racism against blacks was rampant. Whenever there was any kind of discrepancy between a white man and a black man, it was always the white man who prevailed—except, of course, if the white person happened to be Jewish.

*Zman* headed south on a fact-finding mission to the Jewish community in Atlanta to speak with community leaders, relatives and others well-read in the Leo Frank saga who have invested much effort clearing Frank's name decades after his brutal murder.

## Jewish Atlanta of Long Ago

In the years prior to the Leo Frank saga, Atlanta was home to a small Jewish community which was nevertheless considered the largest in the southern states. The Jews there lived calm, peaceful lives and



Leo Frank.

rarely encountered anti-Semitism.

The first Jews in Atlanta arrived in the 1840s and were mostly of German origin.

"Jews were very accepted in the south," says Sandy Berman of the Breman Museum. "They were small in number, and there already existed a group of stereotyped, second-class citizens – the blacks. There was no reason to relegate anyone else to second class. Jews played a prominent role in politics, and while Jews and the non-Jews did not mingle socially – they had their own separate country clubs – they did interact with each other in business. All told, Jews were really a part of the fabric of the community."

Dale Schwartz, the prominent immigration attorney, describes that era:

*Jews were very influential in Atlanta. They quickly climbed the ladder of success, from peddlers to the owners of Rich's – the largest department store retail chain in the southern part of America.*

*In 1913, before the Leo Frank incident, Atlanta boasted a powerful and*

## The Sources

*We would like to take this opportunity to thank four individuals who were most helpful in our efforts to unravel the tangled web of stories and events leading up to Leo Frank's tragic lynching and its aftermath. They opened their archives and their personal memories to us, as well as providing photos and documents relevant to the article.*

*Cathee Smithline from Wyckoff, New Jersey, a great-niece of Leo Frank who has, over the past 30 years, devoted herself to gathering information about anything related to the case, especially the inside information known to the Frank family and passed down from generation to generation. Cathee's grandmother, Marian Frank Stern, was Leo's sister. Her mother, who is 93 years old, was Leo's youngest niece.*

*Sandy Berman, archivist of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, a department of the Jewish Federation in Atlanta, is one of the main researchers of the Leo Frank case. Berman, whose father worked as the accountant for the Telshe yeshivah in Cleveland, Ohio, is a descendent from the prominent rav, Rabbi Abba Werner, zt'l, the chief rabbi of Finland and later Rav of Machzikei Hada'as in London. Since 1985, Berman has been collecting documents, newspapers, photos and items related to the*

*saga and has established a special department memorializing the Leo Frank incident, a department which has garnered much interest around the world. Berman has ensured that this vital piece of American history will not be forgotten.*

*Dale Schwartz, a member of the bar of the United States Supreme Court and the Supreme Court of Georgia, is a world-renowned attorney who specializes in immigration and refugee issues and runs a large law office in downtown Atlanta. He is a professor of immigration in the prestigious Emory University School of Law and a longtime activist for Jewish interests. He also serves as the honorary director of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Mr. Schwartz was instrumental in the discovery of an eyewitness to the Christian girl's murder and then testified that Leo Frank was not the murderer.*

*And last but not least, Charles Wittenstein, southern counsel (retired) for the Anti-Defamation League, is a long-time advocate for Jewish interests who dedicated 10 years of his life to fighting for the exoneration of Leo Frank and refused to give up despite suffering several setbacks. Wittenstein was a leading attorney during the civil rights era in the south. He led many famous cases for the ADL and also represented the NAACP and other organizations. We are also grateful to Mr. Wittenstein's wife and son Robert, both of whom shared with us much of the history of Jewish life in Atlanta.*