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Michael Stanislawski: A Murder in Lemberg

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Introduction

THE ASSASSINATION of Yitshak Rabin on 4 November 1995 sent shockwaves throughout the world, both because of the sheer horror of the event and because it was immediately feared that it might cause a new explosion of violence in the Middle East. The most immediate fear (which I confess feeling myself, watching the events unfold in real time on television) was what would happen if the assassin turned out to be a Palestinian? Within minutes, a huge sigh of relief could be felt everywhere from Jerusalem to Washington, when it was confirmed that the murderer was one Yigal Amir, an Orthodox Israeli Jew who killed the prime minister out of politically and religiously based opposition to his peace plan.

Almost immediately, however, the truth began to sink in within Israel and Jewish communities everywhere else: A Jew had killed the prime minister of Israel! How could this have happened? How could the religious and political divides within Israel have descended to this low? How could a Jew kill another Jew for political and religious reasons?

In the weeks and months that followed, Israel mourned as it had never done before, and Orthodox rabbis and Opposition political figures who had preached that the late prime minister was a traitor began a painful process of self-examination, reassessing their previous pronouncements, pondering as never before the relationship between words and action, theory and reality. The mourning and the self-examination continued, but barely six months after Rabin's murder, his Labor Party lost the elections to the Likud Party, and Benjamin Netanyahu, one of Rabin's sharpest critics, became the new prime minister of Israel.

As a new political reality settled in, and soon a second Intifada

broke out, unprecedented violence between Arabs and Jews once again began to dominate the news from the Middle East, just as did the continuing strife between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia and between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Religious warfare seemed once more to be normal, even normative, in the modern world.

And so the question of how a Jew could kill another Jew for political and religious reasons receded into the background. But not for me. The Rabin assassination only gave me added incentive to study in depth an earlier, almost unknown, case of an internal Jewish assassination that had intrigued me for years but about which I was unable to get enough information: the assassination of Rabbi Abraham Kohn, the Reform rabbi of the city of Lemberg, in Austrian Galicia, during the Revolution of 1848. First and foremost, I had for years been fascinated by the largely untold story of non-Orthodox Judaism in Eastern Europe, including substantial figures and institutions that paralleled both Reform and Conservative Judaism. This was a story that needed to be told in its own right, to break the stereotype of East European Jewry and underscore its religious diversity in the nineteenth century—and how much more so because that diversity, and the tensions it created, had led to the murder of one of its leaders out of religious and political motives. But whatever archival material existed would necessarily be in L'viv, the Ukrainian name for the city known in German and Yiddish as Lemberg, as Lwów in Polish, and L'vov in Russian, and that city had been annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939, which meant that its archives, like all others in the USSR, had essentially been closed to researchers in Jewish, Ukrainian, and Polish history and culture, as well as most aspects of Russian history, until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Now, the independent Ukrainian state was beginning to open up its archives to researchers, but what chance was there that the materials I needed would have survived all the wars and disasters that had befallen that part of the world since 1848?

Fortunately, during my years of graduate study I had spent a good deal of time at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute,

and through old friends who had become leading figures in Ukrainian history both in North America and now, in Ukraine itself, I was able to make contact with the chief archivist of the Central State Historical Archive in L'viv, and he and his staff diligently combed through the records and found the goldmine I had been hoping for: the entire police and court records regarding the assassination of Rabbi Abraham Kohn in September 1848!

And so this book became possible: the story of an extraordinary and largely unknown event in modern Jewish history. On 6 September 1848, Rabbi Abraham Kohn, the Reform rabbi of Lemberg, the capital of Austrian Galicia, was assassinated. Earlier that day, while the family cook was preparing the evening meal, an Orthodox Jew snuck into the Kohn kitchen, pretended to light his cigar on the flame of the stove, and stealthily poured arsenic into the pot of soup simmering on the stovetop. When the family sat down to eat dinner, they consumed the poisoned soup. Quickly they all fell ill, doctors were summoned, but they were able to save only Mrs. Kohn and her older four children: the forty-one-year-old Rabbi Abraham Kohn and his infant daughter Teresa were dead. The local authorities immediately ordered an investigation, and they quickly discovered the alleged assassin, one Abraham Ber Pilpel, who was tried and convicted for the crime, which led to a long and convoluted court appeal that lasted for several years.

This remarkable episode has not quite been a secret until now, although even most professional Jewish historians do not know about it, and there has been an element of a cover-up in some treatments of the story. Thus, probably the most frequently consulted source about the Jewish community of Lemberg or Rabbi Kohn, the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, deliberately and rather shockingly obfuscates the facts, writing, "After Kohn and his son [*sic!*] died from food poisoning, murder was suspected. The authorities ordered an investigation, and the leaders of the Orthodox sector, [Jacob Naphtali Herz] Bernstein and Hirsch Orenstein, were arrested. After a time, both were released for lack of evidence."¹ As we shall see, there was never any doubt in anyone's mind that this was not "food poisoning" but quite clearly an

assassination, and the evidence about the crime was so extensive that the deliberations about its perpetrators and their punishment went on for three years.

This is the first book in any language devoted to this murder and its investigation, although it builds on a small number of earlier analyses in Polish, German, Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. These earlier studies, however, got crucial facts of this case wrong, largely through no fault of their own: The documents necessary to an accurate and dispassionate account of this assassination and its aftermath, used here for the first time anywhere were, as already explained, buried deep in archives hidden from the public for over fifty years.²

To tell this fascinating but extremely complex story, I will have to weave together several substories into one comprehensible narrative. First, the history of the southern region of historic Poland and Ukraine known as Galicia in which L'viv is located, and its extraordinary complicated religious and ethnic makeup, including that of its third largest population, the Jews. Second, the history of the city of L'viv/Lemberg/Lwów/L'vov itself, and then specifically that of its Jewish community, which became, in the period under consideration here, not only the largest Jewish community in Galicia but also in the Austrian Empire as a whole. As a result of its size, location, and the cultural forces that engulfed it, the Lemberg Jewish community was marked by a fascinating divide not only, as one would expect, between traditional Orthodox and Hasidic Jews but also between Orthodox Jews and modernists, the latter themselves divided between "enlighteners" either not particularly concerned about religion, those still devoted to traditional Judaism, and those supportive of the new Reform movement, which was still being formed in Germany and, by extension, in German-influenced Jewish enclaves elsewhere. Moreover, the Lemberg Jewish community was ruled by a lay leadership that, like communal leaderships everywhere and at all times, was dominated by the rich, but here the rich, too, were splintered among many fault lines, both economic and ideological. Next, I must summarize the story of the emergence of

centers of nontraditional Judaism in Eastern Europe, from Riga, Vilnius, and St. Petersburg in the north to Budapest in the south, and then focus on the amazing success story of the Reform Temple of Lemberg, as well as the astonishingly popular school attached to it, which, in the heart of East European Jewry in the 1840s, enrolled almost 750 children—a number that even I, a professional historian of that culture for the past thirty years, did not believe when I first became aware of it! And then the life story of Rabbi Abraham Kohn, a gentle and scholarly man, born in Bohemia to a poor Jewish family who, by dint of hard labor and great intelligence, made his way first to a local gymnasium and thence to Prague, where he attended the famous Charles University and then was ordained as a (traditional) rabbi, before taking up the rabbinic post in the small Austrian alpine town of Hohenems, where he served with great distinction. In Hohenems, he gravitated to the newly emerging Reform tendencies in German-speaking Jewry. Based on his success in Hohenems, he was invited to serve the rapidly growing “progressive” Jewish community of Lemberg, where, as he built up a huge temple and school and was appointed official rabbi of the city by the Austrian authorities, he incurred the wrath of the Orthodox Jews on religious grounds, and the even more extreme enmity of the richest (and also Orthodox) members of the community who made their fortune through administering the tax collection system of the Jewish community—especially the special taxes on kosher meat and on Sabbath and holiday candles incumbent on all Jews. These taxes were opposed by Rabbi Kohn and others, both traditional and modernist, as discriminatory and unfair. The opposition to his religious and political views led, several years before his assassination, to both verbal and physical attacks against Rabbi Kohn and members of his family. As a result of these attacks, he was tempted to leave the city and move to somewhere safer and more congenial to the religious modernism he had come to embrace. But he stayed in Lemberg both because of his loyalty to his congregation and because he soon became frontally involved in the great Revolution of 1848, which engulfed Lemberg as it did so many other cities in Western and

Central Europe. Abraham Kohn became one of the leaders of the revolutionary camp both in Lemberg and in Galicia as a whole, including in delegations that traveled to Vienna to present the revolutionary demands to the central imperial government and to the emperor himself. A central plank in the revolutionaries' platform was the emancipation of the Jews of the Austrian Empire, including Galicia, and the abolition of the special Jewish taxes. We shall see how this public effort contributed to increased attacks against Rabbi Kohn at home in Lemberg, and how these attacks were strengthened and buoyed by the rise of the Reaction in Vienna and the provinces, resulting ultimately in the murders of Rabbi Kohn and his youngest child in September 1848. Finally, we shall chronicle the completely unknown story of the drawn-out investigation, trial, and appeals of the men, all Orthodox Jews, arrested either for his murder or for the conspiracy to commit that murder.

As I weave together this extraordinary story, I will try to keep in mind how foreign almost all of these matters are to my imagined readers. I truly believe that this is not only a fascinating story in and of itself but also one with abiding importance to all those interested in the modern history and culture of the Jews, with all of its grandeur and successes, as well as its abundance of tragedy and violence—including internal violence, ultimately stretching from the assassination of Rabbi Abraham Kohn in 1848 to that of Prime Minister Yitshak Rabin in 1995.