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COULD LEO FRANK BE LYNCHED TODAY -- OR TOMORROW?

The Atlanta Jewish community expressed its "gratitude" to the State of Georgia for recently issuing an official pardon to Leo Frank, lynched in 1915./p

"Gratitude?" Now, that might be going a little too far. It would have sufficed to simply acknowledge that Georgia had reversed an injustice which Georgia had itself perpetrated. But there is more to the Leo Frank story than that. The whole story should be told because it has special meaning for anti-semitism in America today. /p

Leo Frank was convicted of murdering a teen-aged girl named Mary Phagan, on the basis of no particular evidence. Frank, a factory superintendent and president of the Atlanta B'nai B'rith, was then lynched by a mob with little resistance from the State. This was followed by widespread mob attacks on Georgia Jews, half of whom fled the area./p

But that was only the beginning. Frank was lynched in August, 1915. In November of that year, the second Ku Klux Klan was founded on a mountaintop outside Atlanta. The timing was not a coincidence. The thirty four men who gathered to bring the modern KKK into existence were all members of the Knights of Mary Phagan, an organization which

had been formed to make sure Leo Frank died for that girl's murder./p

The Knights of Mary Phagan had been formed under the sponsorship of Tom Watson, who had run for President on the ticket of the Populist party. Watson launched his campaign to convict Frank, and later applauded his lynching, with this statement: "Frank belonged to the Jewish aristocracy and it was determined by the rich Jews that no aristocrat of their race should die for the death of a working-class Gentile."/p

Watson published a national magazine in which he regularly attacked Negroes, Jews and the Catholic church. But he also supported revolutionary causes, and the primary targets of his attack were urban-controlled banks and big business./p

Attacks on the banks and urban business monopolies were the heart of the Populist tradition. There is a direct connection between that Populist tradition and certain current events in the Midwest, with their own anti-semitic overtones . The Populist party, whose strength lay in the Midwest and in the Southern rural Bible Belt areas, was essentially an economic reform party, bitter about the shift of power from the farm areas to the financial centers of the Northeast. And its hatred was directed towards the "conspiracy" of the urban moneymen against the farmers./p

Well, "in those days" it was easy to build the Jews into the center of such a "conspiracy." They were urban and at once mysterious and highly visible. They were "the bankers": The "Rothschild/Loeb/Schiff" litany was already an anti-semitic tradition. Watson used it. The second KKK came out of the same populist, rural impulse. So did Henry Ford in his own Midwestern attack on the Jews./p

Now we have the stories about the desperate farmers of the Midwest forming angry groups, in the Populist tradition, to once again attack the urban financial institutions. And we have the stories about the local demagogues who are once again trying to build anti-semitism into the thinking of these angry groups. /p

At first, the apparent differences between America today and the America of Leo Frank 70 years ago seem reassuring. According to our best information, if you had asked Americans then whether Jews had too much economic power, at least four of ten would have said "yes," compared to little more than one out of ten today. Beyond that, the spectacular increase in educational achievement since 1915, the dramatic integration of Jews into the American society, the general civil rights temper, and the growth of the communications system would make the conviction of Leo Frank an improbability today, his public lynching a virtual

impossibility. It would not be so unlikely for him to be killed today, but it would be done covertly, with no one's public approval./p

However, a review of the whole Leo Frank story reminds us of similarities which should at least keep us awake. The same phenomenon, however much weaker, appears today: a bitter rural population blaming the urban banks; and local demagogues trying to use anti-semitism to fan the flames. The appeal of the second KKK later extended also to city workers, unemployed and feeling displaced; and anti-semitism was used for the same purpose./p

The Leo Frank case and its role in the rise of American anti-semitism reminds us that while this society is happily much different than it was 70 years ago, there are some durable phenomena related to anti-semitism which should keep us alert -- and should keep us aware of our stake in the general health of the American society./e