

JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL JERSEY



Spring 2014

NEWSLETTER

Nissan-Iyar

Murder in Middlesex County

by Deborah Cohn

A woman called the JHSCJ offices several months ago, and asked whether our archives contained any documents pertaining to her family, which had lived on a farm in Middlesex County. We had no records in our files that would help her, but I became intrigued when she mentioned that some members of the family had been victims of a murder in 1915. I suggested that she research the story using the online newspaper archive of the New Brunswick Public Library (<http://newbrunswick.newspaperarchive.com>.) After our conversation ended, my curiosity led me to search for the information myself.

On Monday morning, November 29, 1915, *The New Brunswick Times* blasted a huge headline: "Family Wiped Out By Farm Hand Who Kills Five, Then Shoots Self." Horrified readers were greeted with the news that the bodies of six people had been found shot to death in a farmhouse on Hardenburg Lane in what is now North Brunswick. Among the dead were the owner of the farm, dairyman Samuel Weitzman, and his wife Sara, their daughter Beatrice Kigner, and her husband, David Kigner. Also among the dead were two farmhands, identified as John Gannas and Joseph Petrucha. The Weitzmans had purchased the farm only 14 months earlier, after Samuel Weitzman had sold his cigar store and newspaper stand in New York. The paper opined that "the tragedy is believed to be the most horrible in the history of this state."

The crime was discovered by local milk dealer Charles Wildgoos and Nathan Kigner, the brother of David Kigner. Wildgoos had picked up his usual order of milk from Mr. Weitzman on Tuesday morning, but when he returned on Thursday, he found no one about the farm. He had heard the family discuss a trip to New York, so he assumed that was where they had gone. His wife visited the farm Friday morning and found no one there. On Saturday, Wildgoos met Nathan Kigner and mentioned that his family had apparently gone away. This alarmed Nathan, and the two men went to the farm to investigate.

The front door of the house was unlocked, and when they opened it, the family dog ran out in a "half-starved condi-

tion." The men immediately concluded that "something terrible had happened", and called the police from a nearby home. The inside doors were locked, and the police had to break a window to gain entrance. They found the bodies of the Weitzmans and Mrs. Kigner in their beds. The room in which Mrs. Kigner lay showed evidence of a struggle, with disarranged furniture and bullet holes in the walls. In a third bedroom shared by the two farmhands, Gannas was found lying shot on his bed. The police determined that Petrucha had shot Gannas first, and then gone on to kill the family. David Kigner had apparently been awakened by the sound of the shots which killed his wife. He attacked and struggled with Petrucha, who then ran to the bedroom he shared with the other farmhand in order to reload his gun. David Kigner pursued him, and was found shot at the door of Petrucha's bedroom. Petrucha lay in his own bed, with a shot in his head and the revolver in his hand.

News of the crime spread quickly throughout the area, and by Sunday morning stories appeared in other local papers, *The New York Times*, and as far away as the *Orlando Sentinel*. A watchman was posted to keep the curious crowds away from the farmhouse. Meanwhile, the police began investigations regarding the farmhands and a search for others who might have knowledge of the crime. Mr. Weitzman and Mrs. Kigner had been seen in New Brunswick on Wednesday afternoon, when they brought 2 chickens to Rabbi Ratner to be slaughtered, and Mrs. Kigner had been seen by others at the farm later that day. The animals on the farm were in distress from lack of food for several days. The crime was therefore presumed to have occurred Wednesday night.

Despite the fact that Petrucha was found with a revolver in his hand and no robbery appeared to have taken place, other theories of the case abounded. Relatives of the family believed that someone outside the house was responsible. Efforts were made to trace the source of the revolver, because it was "not the type of gun... which might be expected to be the property of a farm laborer," and because there was concern that the number of shells found at the site exceeded the number of wounds found on the bodies. Police investigated the

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FROM THE ARCHIVES



1925: Schoolchildren in front of the Workmen's Circle Labor Lyceum, 53 New St., New Brunswick

Branch 208 of the Workmen's Circle, a progressive fraternal Jewish organization devoted to upholding the rights of the working man and the cultural needs of the Jewish masses, was founded in 1908 in New Brunswick with 15 charter members. The Labor Lyceum, which was built in 1923 at a cost of \$48,000, included a large auditorium and spacious meeting rooms. Much of the work was contributed by members who were themselves in the building trade. The Lyceum also housed a library, the Women's Auxiliary, the English-speaking Branch 1038 (which began in 1933), and several labor unions. The school taught Jewish history, Yiddish language and literature, and Jewish arts. At its peak period from 1913-1923, the chapter had more than 300 members. The Lyceum was demolished in 1960, and the Branch built a new Educational Center in Highland Park. The school continues today as the I.L.Peretz School.



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American Jewish Experience Lecture Series 2014

The American Jewish Experience Lecture Series will begin its 17th consecutive year in April. A complete schedule is given below. All lectures are open to the public. A donation of \$2.00 is requested at the door to help defray the cost of the series.

Series #1	
Jewish Family & Vocational Services 52 Concordia Shopping Center (intersection Perrineville and Prospect Plains Rds) Monroe Township	
Lectures are held on the 2nd Monday of the month* (*note date change in April and June) 10:00-11:30 a.m.	
April 7*	Marcia Midler <i>Bella Abzug: Feminist Firebrand, Passionate Politician, Force of Nature</i>
May 12	Stephen Eisdorfer <i>Joseph Seligman, Rabbeinu Tam, and the Rise of Jewish Banking in America</i>
June 11*	Ron Becker <i>Progressive and Utopian Jewish Communities in New Jersey</i>
July 14	Stephen Eisdorfer <i>Joseph Seligman, Shylock, and the Emergence of Institutional Anti-Semitism in America</i>
August 11	Jean Klerman <i>Louise Nevelson, Grand Dame of American Sculpture</i>
Sept. 8	Dr. Nathan Reiss <i>Following My Family's Footsteps to Poland</i>
Oct. 13	To be announced
Nov. 10	Dr. Joe Cohn <i>"The Thing" and Other Jewish Superheroes</i>

Series #2	
Highland Park Conservative Temple/ Congregation Anshe Emeth 201 South 3rd Avenue, Highland Park	
Lectures are held on the 3rd Wednesday of the month* (*note date change in April and October) 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 noon	
April 23*	Marcia Midler <i>Bella Abzug: Feminist Firebrand, Passionate Politician, Force of Nature</i>
May 21	Stephen Eisdorfer <i>Joseph Seligman, Rabbeinu Tam, and the Rise of Jewish Banking in America</i>
June 18	Ron Becker <i>Progressive and Utopian Jewish Communities in New Jersey</i>
July 16	Stephen Eisdorfer <i>Joseph Seligman, Shylock, and the Emergence of Institutional Anti-Semitism in America</i>
August 20	Jean Klerman <i>Louise Nevelson, Grand Dame of American Sculpture</i>
Sept. 17	Dr. Nathan Reiss <i>Following My Family's Footsteps to Poland</i>
Oct. 22*	To be announced
Nov. 19	Dr. Joe Cohn <i>"The Thing" and Other Jewish Superheroes</i>

MEMBERSHIP

Welcome to our newest member:
Elaine Jacob

Thank you to those who renewed their memberships on the Patron Level:
Steve and Roslyn Shaw
Ruth Bickhardt

LUNCH FOLLOWS H.P. LECTURES

For those who attend the American Jewish Experience Lecture Series in Highland Park, Jewish Family and Vocational Service invites you to join in a glatt kosher lunch immediately following the lecture. Please let JFVS know that you would like to stay for lunch by calling them in advance at 732-777-1940.

Nathan Straus and the White Peril

The American most responsible for ensuring a safe milk supply throughout the nation's cities was not a physician, scientist or politician, but a department store magnate: In 1923, Nathan Straus' battle against unsanitary milk, which he termed "the white peril," won him the accolade "most useful citizen in New York."

Born in Bavaria in 1848, Nathan Straus came to Georgia with his mother, brothers and sister in 1854. The Strauses moved to New York City after the Civil War, where Nathan and his elder brother Isidore became the sole owners and managing directors of the R.H.Macy department store. In 1914, deeply affected by the loss of Isidore on the Titanic, Nathan retired from business to devote himself full-time to public service and philanthropy.

Nathan's career in public service began earlier, in 1889, when he was appointed New York City's parks commissioner. In 1894, he received the Democratic Party's nomination for mayor of New York, an honor he declined. Three years later he was named president of the New York City Board of Health.

It was during the 1890s that Straus became especially concerned with the plight of New York's tenement dwellers. During the terrible depression winters of 1892 and 1893, he operated a chain of centers to distribute food and coal to the poor, and he built shelters to house the homeless. But his main concern was the high mortality of infants and children, which he became convinced was caused chiefly by their consumption of unsanitary raw milk.

Straus was sensitized to child mortality by the untimely deaths of two of his three children. Straus claimed that it was the sudden death of his own cow that first drew his attention to the relationship between raw milk and child mortality. After an autopsy revealed that the animal had tuberculosis, Straus worried that the animal might have passed the disease along to his family. Doctors, scientists and social reformers had long denounced the poor quality of milk available in the nation's cities, especially during the summer, and they blamed bad milk for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of American children. Straus saw a need to act.

Straus was convinced that the discoveries of Louis Pasteur offered the best hope for a remedy to the milk problem. He built his own plant to sterilize milk bottles and "pasteurize" (that is, heat) milk, and in 1893 at his own expense opened the first of 18 milk distribution depots throughout the city,

which sold his sterilized milk for only a few cents and made free milk available to those unable to afford even that.

Straus believed that ensuring safe milk should be a government responsibility. He tirelessly lectured civic groups and bombarded political leaders nationwide with missives describing the menace of raw milk. He carried the campaign abroad by building pasteurization plants in Europe and the Middle East to demonstrate the technique to foreign governments.



Nathan Straus

Straus' campaign, which he waged together with his wife Lina, was opposed by farmers and commercial milk distributors unwilling to undertake the expense of pasteurization; by some scientists suspicious of "newfangled" ideas; and by politicians reluctant to see government conduct social "experiments." But his views took hold as statistics showed that infant mortality rates in the areas around his milk depots dropped precipitously. In Manhattan and the Bronx alone, Straus was credited with saving the lives of thou-

sands of children. And considering the mortality rates in other cities that adopted his methods, the effects reached millions of children. By the early 20th century, cities and states began requiring milk pasteurization, and in the 1920s Congress enacted similar national regulations. In 1920, Straus donated his pasteurization plant to the city of New York and turned the milk depots over to public agencies.

The milk fight won, Nathan and Lina devoted the last decade of their lives to Zionist activities and promoting Jewish life in America. They helped underwrite the first nursing missions sent to the Holy Land by Hadassah and funded pasteurization plans, hospitals and other facilities in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Strauses ultimately gave nearly two thirds of their wealth to improve living conditions for Arabs and Jews in Palestine.

Nathan also helped found the American Jewish Congress, and in 1917 launched the Jewish War Relief Fund with the largest single financial contribution.

In 1923, Nathan Straus won an opinion poll to name the individual who had done the most to promote the public welfare in New York City during the previous quarter century. Said one admirer, Straus was "a star in the milky way of philanthropy, a man whose heart is bubbling over with the sterilized milk of human kindness."

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Thank you to our generous Life Members who help support our Archives Development Fund:

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Susan Marchand	Devorah Hilsenrath	In memory of Rabbi Yakov Hilsenrath

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whereabouts of a servant girl who was alleged to have threatened the family after trying to collect money from them, but she was proved to have nothing to do with the case. The farm hands had been hired through an employment agency in New York, and inquiries were made there regarding their backgrounds. A laborer named Makyar (Mike) Pomazan was identified by *The New Brunswick Times* as a "man of mystery" with connection to the murders. Investigators followed clues to Philadelphia, where they discovered that the victim believed to be Gannas had been incorrectly identified, and was in fact the mysterious Pomazan himself.

The Kigner and Weitzman families also came under much scrutiny by the police and the press. Weitzman had purchased the farm from Max Kigner, David's father. Hours after the murders were discovered, Samuel Kigner (David and Nathan's brother) was arrested and jailed overnight for removing papers from the Weitzman residence. He had given the papers, including the deed to the farm and a mortgage made out to Max Kigner, to his cousin, who had taken them out of town. It was unclear at the time as to whether the mortgage had been paid off.

At about the same time as Weitzman purchased the farm, David Kigner, who was then engaged to Beatrice, was co-owner of a furrier business. He borrowed money from his future father-in-law and invested it, along with Beatrice's \$2,000 dowry, into the business. The business failed only a few months after his marriage to Beatrice in July 1915. After he declared bankruptcy, David still owed money to Samuel

Weitzman, and Beatrice Kigner testified at the bankruptcy hearing that they were living with her parents because her husband was unable to support her.

Soon after the discovery of the crime, the bodies of Sara and Samuel Weitzman and David and Beatrice Kigner were sent by train to Long Island for burial. The bodies of the two workmen, Pomazan and Petrucha, lay unclaimed at the morgue in New Brunswick while the investigation continued for about three weeks. After following up numerous clues and red herrings, the prosecutor brought the case to the coroner's jury on December 29. A doctor testified that Petrucha's wounds were consistent with suicide, and that none of the other victims could have killed themselves—they must have been killed either by Petrucha or an outside party. Max Kigner testified that the mortgage on the farm had been paid off. Witnesses testified that relations between David Kigner and the Weitzmans were "very affectionate", and that no trouble between them had ever been noted.

Late in the afternoon of December 29, the jury returned a verdict "that one Joseph Petrucha did on November 24, 1915, willfully and feloniously kill and murder Sara and Samuel Weitzman, Beatrice and David Kigner, and Mike Pomazan." Petrucha was believed to have been either demented or violently drunk, but no motive for the murders was ever discovered.

Sources: *The New Brunswick Times*, November 29, 1915—December 23, 1915; April 1, 1916.

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