

observers have argued that fear of Jewish sexuality explains the special vehemence and irrationality of Hitler's anti-Semitism,⁷⁹ and related fears unquestionably played an important role in Nazi propaganda against Jews.⁸⁰ Even among Jewish observers the sexuality of Jewish males and their alleged special attraction to non-Jewish females have been perennial topics. The longed-for *goldene shikse* (golden Gentile girl) is a central theme in best-selling fiction by American Jews⁸¹ and appears even in such unexpected places as the life of Chaim Weizmann, the Zionist leader and first president of Israel.⁸² It played a key role in what many consider the most important outburst of anti-Semitism in American history before World War I.

The Leo Frank Affair

In the spring of 1913 Leo Frank, the manager and part owner of a pencil factory in Atlanta, Georgia, was accused of murdering a fourteen-year-old employee, Mary Phagan. The case developed dizzying complexities, but what caused special excitement in the Frank case were intimations of sexual perversity on his part. (He had allegedly killed Mary when she refused to give into demands for "perverse" sex.) Another peculiarity of the case was that a black employee of Frank's, Jim Conley – most likely the actual murderer – testified against Frank, and Conley's testimony was accepted against that of Frank, which represented an almost unprecedented development in the South, where the word of a white was almost always accepted over that of a black.

Many in the North concluded that Frank's arrest and conviction were the result of anti-Semitic prejudice. On the other hand, many in Georgia believed that Frank, with powerful evidence against him (Conley's testimony was only one element of it), was using his wealth and his connections to escape the hangman, once he had been convicted. The case became much envenomed with the entry of Tom Watson, a popular politician in Georgia, who may be described as the closest approximation in American history before World War I to someone who used anti-Semitism as a political device. He charged that "a gigantic conspiracy of Big Money" was at work to free a rich "Sodomite." He described Frank as belonging to "the Jewish aristocracy," adding that "it was determined by the rich Jews that no aristocrat of their race should die for the death of a working-class Gentile."⁸³

Frank's innocence was less clear at the time of the trial than many accounts

⁷⁹ Johnson, *History*, 475.

⁸⁰ Cf. Dennis E. Showalter, *Little Man, What Now? Der Stürmer in the Weimar Republic* (Hamden, Conn., 1982).

⁸¹ Cf. Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York, 1969); Mordecai Richler, *Joshua, Then and Now* (New York, 1980).

⁸² Jehuda Reinharz, *Chaim Weizmann: The Making of a Zionist Leader* (Oxford, 1985), 367–72.

⁸³ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (Savannah, Ga., 1972), 382.

have suggested. Similarly, anti-Semitism seems to have been of marginal importance in both his arrest and conviction. Many who were not anti-Semites firmly believed in Frank's guilt. More important in explaining the widespread hostility to Frank in Georgia were his northern origins, his wealth, and his position as "capitalist exploiter" in a factory with mostly impoverished southern women as employees. His Jewishness mixed into each of these in ways that are impossible to untangle. But it seems clear that, as was the case with Dreyfus, Frank's stiff and distant personality had a great deal to do with the way his accusers jumped to conclusions. Similarly, his odd physical appearance, his strange reticences, and the contradictions of his initial remarks to the police – to say nothing of the damning and graphic testimony of Conley and others – made it easier for people to continue to believe him guilty. His trial was not quite the travesty of justice that many have believed it to be, but on the other hand, there were enough holes in the prosecution's case that Frank's guilt was not demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt.

But the notion of innocence beyond a reasonable doubt was not one that much spoke to a large proportion of Georgia's population from 1913 to 1915, and it did not speak loudly enough to his jurors. Many were convinced that a sexual pervert, a "monster," had been caught by the police and deserved to be put to death. When Frank's lawyers launched a series of appeals, hoping to commute his sentence and ultimately to prove his innocence, "Mary's people," the common people in Georgia, saw only scheming, high-priced lawyers and Jewish money used to bribe politicians and influence newspapers.

At the last hour, after repeated and fruitless appeals to higher courts, the governor of the state, John M. Slaton, commuted Frank's death sentence, provoking outrage and violent demonstrations. Slaton received over a thousand death threats; it was widely believed that he had either given in to Jewish pressure or had been otherwise corrupted by Jewish money. The truth was that he had made a careful study of the trial and perceived many flaws in the prosecution's case that even Frank's lawyers – who were among the best legal minds in the South – had somehow missed.

Outside of Georgia, as the case gained national visibility, widespread sympathy for Frank was expressed. He received at final count close to a hundred thousand letters of sympathy in jail, and prominent figures throughout the country, including governors of other states, U.S. senators, clergymen, university presidents, and labor leaders, spoke up in his defense. Thousands of petitions in his favor, containing over a million signatures, flowed in.

But this sympathy was not enough to save Frank's life. In July 1915 at the prison farm where he was incarcerated, a convicted murderer cut Frank's throat with a kitchen knife. Only the speedy intervention of a surgeon, himself serving a life sentence for the murder of his wife, saved Frank's life.⁸⁴ Scarcely

⁸⁴ Golden, *A Little Girl*, 286–7.