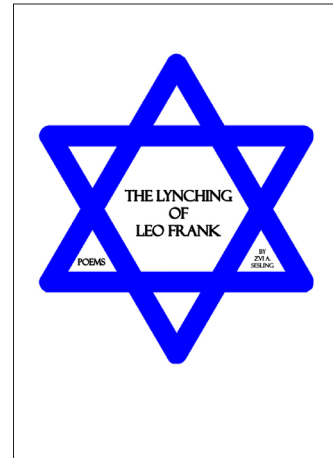


The Lynching of Leo Frank
Zvi A. Sesling
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REVIEW BY: *Neil Silberblatt*



Leo Max Frank (April 17, 1884 – August 17, 1915) was an American factory superintendent. Born to a Jewish-American family in Texas, he was raised in New York and earned a degree in mechanical engineering from Cornell University before moving to Atlanta in 1908. He became involved in Atlanta's Jewish community and was elected president of that city's chapter of the B'nai B'rith.

Mary Phagan – then only 13 years old - worked at National Pencil Company, where Frank was director. She was strangled on April 26, 1913, and found dead in the factory's cellar.

Leo was charged with, and – after a hasty trial (less than a month from the opening of the trial to conviction) – convicted of, her murder. Georgia's Governor commuted Frank's sentence from capital punishment to life imprisonment.

On August 16, 1915, Frank was kidnapped from prison by a group of armed men and lynched at Marietta, GA (Phagan's hometown). The new governor vowed to punish the lynchers, who included prominent Marietta citizens, but nobody was charged with Frank's murder. Ironically, Frank's lynching was the impetus for the creation of B'nai B'rith's Anti-Defamation League in October 1913. It also resulted in the exodus of around half of Georgia's 3,000 Jews.

In 1986, the Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles granted a posthumous pardon to Frank, but did not officially absolve him of the crime.

From these horrific facts – the stuff of Dreiser or Thomas Hardy novels – Zvi Sesling has woven this devastating series of poems. The poems begin - innocently enough - with recollections of (Sabbath & Passover) dinners and other meals with friends and family members. (In Jewish culture, food is never too distant from faith and observance. Indeed, we have detailed treatises on what may and may not be eaten.) From these recalled meals, Zvi moves on to the shul (synagogue) – situs of sins and forgiveness – including one (in Saint John, New Brunswick) now for sale.

Then, Zvi turns to the tragic story of Leo and little Mary. He captures in verse what cannot be fully captured in prose – the inexplicable (but, nevertheless, all encompassing) hatred which led someone (not Mr. Frank) to strangle Mary's young life, and which led others to later strangle Leo's.

The poems in this collection also concern other, more wholesale

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slaughter of Jews – not limited to an isolated lynching. Oceans of ink have been spilled – like wine poured out at Passover – over the atrocities of the mid-20th Century. Zvi's writing is a notable tributary, worth traversing.

The remainder of this powerful collection is concerned with the poet's wrestling with his Jewish identity – a fitting coda to a poetic eulogy for a man hung due primarily to his. For anyone interested in a dark moment of American history – or curious about how we find (or obscure) our identities (an issue not limited to those of a certain tribe) – this collection is highly commended.

When I read (and wrote my review of) this excellent poetry collection by Zvi Sesling, I could not imagine that torch-bearing (albeit Tiki torches) neo-Nazis and their sympathizers would march in Charlottesville, VA chanting "Jews will not replace us!" or uttering the hateful slogan "Blood and soil" (the Nazi etymology of which, I suspect, was unknown to many shouting or hearing that phrase). I could imagine even less that a sitting President would fail to immediately and vigorously condemn such actions.

These recent events make the memory of past events - such as the trial, hasty conviction and lynching of Leo Frank - all the more compelling. For we cannot begin to comprehend the horror of the present if we fail to grasp its antecedents. They do the same for Sesling's haunting poems based on those events. As Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It is not even past."