

THE JEW ACCUSED: THREE ANTI-SEMITIC AFFAIRS (DREYFUS, BEILIS, FRANK) 1894-1915

Albert S. Lindemann, Cambridge University Press, 1991. 301 pages.

Reviewed by Murray Citron

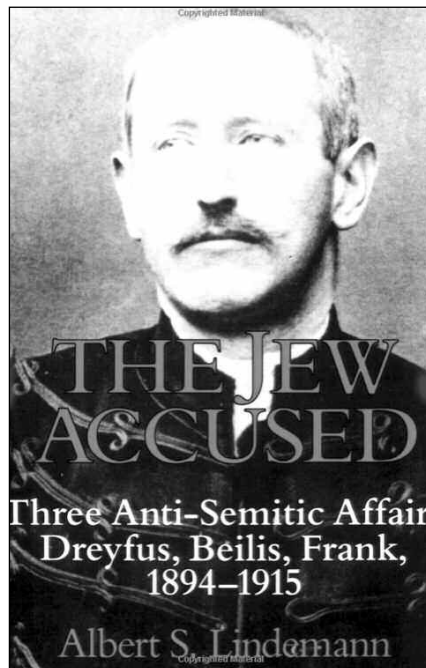
In 1894 Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, was arrested and charged with espionage. It was said that he sold military secrets to Germany. He was convicted the same year by a military court. After a long, sensational and complicated series of legal procedures, he was cleared in 1906, and returned with a promotion to service in the army.

In March 1911, in Kiev, a thirteen-year-old Ukrainian boy was murdered. Mendel Beilis, a Jew who worked in a brickyard near where the body was found, was charged with ritual murder—the old accusation of killing a child in order to drain his blood for use in baking *matzoh*. The case went to trial in 1913. The jury acquitted Mendel Beilis, but still agreed that there had been a ritual murder.

In April 1913, fourteen-year-old Mary Phagan, a white girl, was found murdered in the basement of an Atlanta pencil factory where she worked. Leo Frank, an American-born Jew who managed the factory, was convicted of the murder and sentenced to death. There was widespread concern about the quality of the evidence. Frank's lawyers made fourteen applications for a new trial, which were defeated on technical grounds. In 1915 the governor of Georgia commuted the sentence to life imprisonment. Two months later Frank was lynched.

Albert S. Lindemann, a history professor at the University of California, published this book in 1991, on the eve of the centennials of these events. We are now living in the interval between the Dreyfus centennial and the Beilis and

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Frank centennials.

The Dreyfus case is the most famous of these affairs, but the others also echo. Beilis moved to America after the First World War and wrote a book, *The Story of my Sufferings*. The case was the theme of Bernard Malamud's 1966 novel *The Fixer*, and the movie based on it. Harry Golden wrote a book about the Frank case, *A Little Girl Is Dead*, and there was a fairly recent TV documentary about it involving Alan Dershowitz.

Lindemann explains what he means by an anti-Semitic affair. For a trial to become an affair, as he uses the term, it must "engage powerful and also conflicting emotions in large numbers of people over an extended period." The people on both sides see themselves as seeking justice, though they mean opposite things by that concept. Most important, the trial must take on ideological implications, so it develops "into something more than a strictly legal issue of innocence or guilt." Participants see themselves as involved in a "larger struggle."

Lindemann describes his book as "a work of comparative history."

It starts with "the rise of the Jews" in the nineteenth century. There was a "remarkable population explosion" of Jews in Eastern Europe. Some families became wealthy. Jews entered professional, cultural, and political life. Lindemann surveys the forms and extent of this participation, which varied from country to country. There follow two chapters for each of the three affairs—one about the situation of Jews in the country involved, the other about the trial and its affair, and the politics and personalities that became involved. The book is admirably short for the amount of fact and analysis it gives.

History is full of ambiguities. Trials are full of ironies. When history glares through trials, the ambiguities and ironies light each other up.

Dreyfus

The Dreyfus affair raised passions and debate about the future of France. It seems not to have begun with anti-Semitism. Dreyfus was a member of a wealthy, conservative, assimilated family. He was convicted by a military court and publicly degraded and stripped of his rank before being sent to Devil's Island. At the ceremony mobs shouted, "Death to the Jews."

Two years later, in 1896, Colonel Georges Picquart became the new head of military intelligence. He was a conservative Catholic officer who did not like Jews. Nevertheless, he reviewed the evidence and concluded that another officer was guilty and that Dreyfus was innocent. His superiors rejected his conclusion, but he persisted, at much risk to his career. French opinion became divided between "Dreyfusards" and "anti-Dreyfusards"

It is now well known that Alfred Dreyfus himself was not a "Dreyfusard." He had confidence in his military superiors, and in the legal process and family influence, to correct what he considered to be a mistake on the part of the military. He was a French patriot, and did not sympathize with political or

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journalistic agitation. Lindemann quotes him: "I was only an artillery officer, whom a tragic error prevented from pursuing his normal career. Dreyfus the symbol...is not me."

It is less known that Emile Zola, author of the famous *J'Accuse!* pamphlet, remembered as "a shining hero of the Dreyfus affair ... a courageous humanist and opponent of anti-Semitism," had a record of anti-Semitic writing from a leftist perspective. Lindemann quotes from his novel *L'Argent*, based on accusations about Jewish financial conspiracies: "It is indeed Jewry as a whole, that stubborn and cold-blooded conqueror, marching toward the sovereign kingship of the world's nations, that it has bought, one by one, with its omnipotent gold."

In Lindemann's analysis, Zola's reason for getting involved was not to fight for justice on behalf of Jews, but "to counter what he believed were reactionary, Jesuit, and militarist conspiracies." Zola's *J'Accuse!*, published in 1898, breathed life into the campaign on behalf of Dreyfus, but Dreyfus himself, either as a man or as a Jew, was secondary. The right-wing reaction to Zola's intervention brought about anti-Jewish riots throughout France, and mobs again shouting, "Death to the

Jews." At the same time, French Marxists claimed that Jews were using the Dreyfus case to clear themselves of blame for financial scandals in which they had been involved.

Also in 1898 another officer, Captain Cuignet, discovered that a document used against Dreyfus had been forged by a Colonel Henry. Henry was arrested and committed suicide. Cuignet, like Picquart, was a right-winger generally hostile to Jews, but believed in telling the truth. Their discoveries ultimately led to the vindication of Dreyfus, though it took eight more years.

Through all this, anti-Semitism spoke from the left and the right. Edouard Drumont was a writer who worked both hands. In 1886 he had published a best-seller called *La France Juive*, a two-volume work describing the supposed machinations of Jews to take over France. He established an anti-Semitic newspaper, *La Libre Parole*. One of his friends was Theodore Herzl. When Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* appeared in 1896, he gave it a favourable review.

Beilis

The Beilis affair was the only one of the three that was unambiguously anti-Semitic from the start. The Russian Empire was the land of pogroms, the Pale of Settlement, and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Nevertheless, Beilis was able to get competent legal help. Protests came not only from the West, and not only from Jews. The defence and the Beilis family received financial and editorial support from V. V. Shulgin and N. Pikhno, both of them reactionary, anti-Semitic journalists. Judicial authorities complained about the weak case that was being put forward against Beilis. Their comments give the impression that they thought it was giving anti-Semitism a bad name.

The affair illustrates the inefficiency that led to the fall of Czarism. The Imperial authorities did not realize that a Ukrainian jury, whatever it thought of Jews, would not mind making the central

government look foolish. Still, the verdict did support the main point that the government wanted to make, that Jews were wicked people.

Frank

Among the various subcultures of Jews around the world, that in the Old South must have been one of the strangest. Jews were few in number. Most came from Germany. They accepted the attitudes of the society in which they lived. Those who could afford to, owned slaves, even Rabbis, who used scripture to justify slavery. After the Civil War, Jews supported segregation. In the early 1900's Maryland sent a Jewish senator to Washington. He was a white supremacist.

Leo Frank was a rich Jew from New York who ran a factory where poor white women worked. He was a strict manager and his photographs show him to be unattractive in appearance. The murder of a young girl raises passions. Recent events in Canada have shown that miscarriages of justice happen. Anti-Semitism may be involved, but it is not essential. There was evidence against Frank. The Atlanta press rapidly came to the conclusion that he was guilty. If he had not been a Jew he would still have been a "Yankee."

Frank's lawyers at his trial relied on the Jewish reputation for non-violence. They argued that the crime was so vicious it must have committed by a violent, primitive brute—code for a black man. The prosecution's key witness was Jim Conley, a black man with a bad reputation who would be the prime suspect if Frank was acquitted. Frank's lawyers attacked the prosecution for trying to make this "dirty nigger" look so "slick."

Hugh Dorsey, the Georgia Solicitor-General, who led the prosecution, had a Jewish law partner, and a record of being friendly with Jews. Governor Slayton, who commuted the death sentence, also had a Jewish law partner. Dorsey was elected Governor shortly after the trial.

Evidence that came out after the trial is now thought to point to

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Conley as the guilty party. The lynching prevented an appeal review. In 1986 the State of Georgia pardoned Frank retroactively on this ground, but said his guilt or innocence could not be decided.

Conclusion

The book studies three similar events that took place within a few years of each other in different countries. This is about as close as history can get to what science tries to do: a controlled test. Scientific tests lead to scientific princi-

ples and then to verifiable predictions. Lindemann's object is different: "My belief is that a calm, balanced, and unflinching effort to understand anti-Semitism and anti-Semites is in the long run the best defense against the views they try to propagate."

This raises a philosophical issue. Academics like to believe that understanding overcomes evil. Professor Lindemann's book is informative and interesting. It is calm and balanced. It shows that Dreyfus and Beilis were helped by

legal process, but does not show how understanding would have defeated lynch law. Lindemann mentions things that happened later in the twentieth century, but does not show how any degree of understanding could have prevented them. Winston Churchill said that there are some opinions that it is not useful to argue with.

The last two sentences of *The Jew Accused* are: "Clio, the Muse of History, is deceitful. The lessons we sometimes think we have learned from her are no lessons at all." ♦

WHAT'S NEW: MEMOIRS OF A SOCIALIST IDEALIST

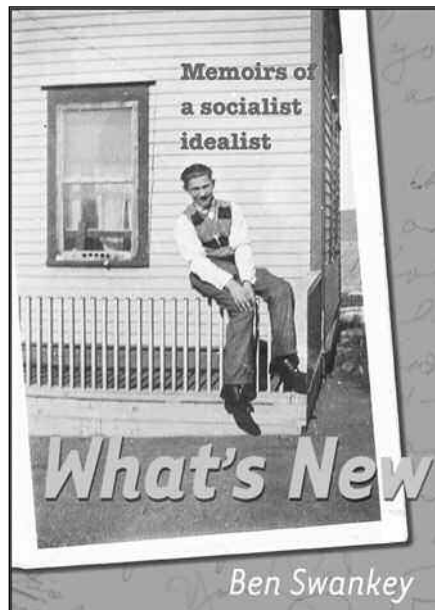
Ben Swankey. Trafford Publishing, Victoria, 2008. 205 pages.

Reviewed by Tim Pelzer

Lifelong political activist Ben Swankey is best known for the books, pamphlets and articles that he authored during the 1960's, 70's and 80's dealing with everything from the Fraser Institute to the history of the Vancouver Longshoremen's union. *What's New: Memoirs of a Socialist Idealist* is his fascinating political memoir.

Swankey recounts how his political activism began when he was 18 during the Great Depression. The Dirty 30's, with its mass unemployment, poverty and police repression, convinced him that socialism was the only humane alternative for society. In 1932, he joined the Young Communist League (YCL) in Edmonton and a few months later was elected leader of the organization's Northern section. That same year he joined the Communist Party of Canada (CPC).

Unable to find paid employment, Swankey worked full-time for the YCL and other workers' organizations. He helped organize marches calling for unemployment insurance and other measures to alleviate suffering. Swankey provides a vivid picture



of the miserable conditions that existed during the 1930's for the working class and unemployed, where he says at least 40% of the work force was unemployed.

Swankey also reveals the brutal nature of the class struggle during the 30's. He describes police attacks on peaceful demonstrations where he witnessed the RCMP clubbing men, women and children who were demanding unemployment insurance. He himself was framed by the police on a number of occasions and jailed. In June 1940, the federal government outlawed the CPC and sent Swankey and other Communist leaders to prison

camp, where they were interned with Italian and German fascists. The authorities allowed Swankey to enlist in the army in 1942.

Swankey was elected provincial leader of the Alberta Labour Progressive Party (LPP) in 1946, a decision he regrets today. Communists formed the LPP in 1943 after the CPC was banned in 1940. Swankey recounts how he worked long hours for little pay and how his wife had to work to help support their family of two. "During the Alberta years, my life was a constant round of trips, meetings, rallies and conferences," he writes. Between 1945 and 1956, he ran six times as a candidate in provincial and federal elections.

The anti-Communist witch hunt launched by Western governments, combined with the rising prosperity of the postwar years, meant that Swankey's energies went into "trying to minimize the decline of the LPP," he writes. Despite obstacles and its small size, the Communist Party/LPP played an active role in the province. The Party reached its peak of support in the 1948 provincial elections, when its 30 candidates polled 4% of the vote. As the Cold War accelerated, the Party vote dropped rapidly.

Swankey says that despite the conflictive relationship between socialists (in particular the CCF) and Communists, he was able to establish a cordial, constructive relationship with the Alberta CCF. He frequently met privately

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with the province's two CCF leaders, Bill Irvine and Harold Bronson.

He was personally shaken by Nikita's Krushchev's announcement of Stalin's crimes in 1956. "I had formed an uncritical and idealistic mental picture of the Soviet Union and Stalin. I was also a victim of Stalin's propaganda machine," he writes. Swankey recounts how after a visit to the Soviet Union in 1957, he spoke publicly about the positive and negative things he saw during his trip. A group of leaders called for his expulsion from the Party.

After he spoke about Stalin's crimes at two public meetings in Edmonton, William Kashtan, Party Labour Secretary at the time, sent him a letter that said, "You have no damn business speaking about these things without consulting me first." Swankey said he was so angry he threw the letter in the garbage.

By the mid-50's, the LPP's shrinking membership and support base meant the Party could no longer finance three full-time employees in the province. Living on the brink of poverty and seeing no future for himself, Swankey resigned as Party leader in 1956. A former friend from the 30's who owned an asphalt plant offered him a job selling roofing

supplies in BC. Swankey said that the job offer could not have come at a better time, because well-known Communists in the 50's had few job prospects. "The RCMP in this period went around to employers who hired known communists who were on the Mounties 'subversive' list and advised employers to drop them," writes Swankey.

The last third of *What's New* deals with Swankey's life in BC. After moving his family to Burnaby, BC in 1957, Swankey went on to work at a number of other jobs, including selling insurance and radios, to help him build a career as a writer and labour educator. As anti-Communist hysteria subsided, he worked for various unions.

Swankey formed a close personal and political friendship with former popular Vancouver Alderman Harry Rankin in the early 1960's, serving as his campaign manager several times. Apart from the books, articles and pamphlets he wrote, he also penned Rankin's weekly columns that used to appear in the *Pacific Tribune* and other papers for 20 years. With Rankin, he went on to help form the Committee of Progressive Electors in 1968. He was also involved in the fightback against the restraint program imposed by the Social Credit government in the early 1980s. He provides a good account of that turbulent period.

What is refreshing about *What's New* is Swankey's candid honesty and critical perspective. While he cites the contributions the CPC made, especially during the 1930s, when they were the most active and outspoken leaders of the unemployed and workers, he also cites the sectarian errors they made that cost them dearly. He blames early Communist attacks on the CCF for undermining relations between both parties. The CPC leadership labeled the CCF as "social fascists" and "agents of imperialism" and did everything they could to undermine the new party when it was first formed in 1933. "Our leadership believed the [Communist]

party wouldn't get anywhere until the CCF was defeated ... As a result, many in the leadership of the CCF took a strong stand against anything that the Communists did."

The CPC supported the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact in 1939 and opposed the war effort against Nazi Germany until the Soviet Union was attacked in 1941. At the time, the Party embraced Stalin's line that the conflict between Germany and the Western powers was an imperialist war. The Party lost members and public support for this decision because people had viewed it as the principal political force opposing fascism.

In 1945 elections, the LPP called for the election of a Liberal Labour coalition. "The idea was to defeat the CCF, take its place and make gains with the Liberal Party", he writes. "It was a stupid thing to expect, one of the biggest mistakes the party ever made ... It was a hell of a thing to explain to people that they should align themselves with the people who interned us."

Swankey said he regrets having supported the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. He also laments opposing a reform group that tried to take over the CPC's BC branch in the late 60's. While still a committed Marxist, Swankey's differences with democratic centralism and other issues led him to leave the CPC in 1991. He continued his activism in the seniors' movement, the Council of Canadians, and Veterans Against Nuclear War.

Swankey, today 95, confined to a care home after a stroke, continues his activism in the form of writing and lecturing. "We are fighting today to retain the gains we have won in the past, such as medicare, and to make new gains wherever possible. We have an important role to play in the global struggle for social justice", he writes.

What's New is an absorbing read as well as a valuable historical work that deserves to be widely read. ♦

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