

# A Lynching in Georgia

By ELI N. EVANS

**R**ICHARD KLUGER has written the best novel yet about the Jews who settled in the South. Using the actual 1913 murder trial of Leo Frank as the critical event, he traces the history of the Jews of Savannah, Ga. from the viewpoint of Seth Adler, a German Jew who arrives from New York in 1878 wearing the Congressional Medal of Honor his father won for dying for the Union in the Civil War. Adler apprentices as a lawyer and eventually becomes one of the defense counsel in the trial of Noah Berg, who is accused of murdering a 14-year-old girl found strangled in the basement of the factory he manages.

Disconcertingly, the novel is almost two separate books. The first half, narrated by Seth, carries the story to the murder; the second half is an account of the trial as described in the memoirs of Seth's daughter, Judith. The novel also concerns the founding and history of a company that sells a soft drink called "Jubilee" (which the natives call "Juby"),

based on the history of Coca-Cola. It is at a "Juby" bottling factory that young Jean Dugan is murdered.

Included in Seth Adler's introduction to the South are a delicious belle named Amanda, slave beatings, hogmeat, rednecks who teach him to shoot doves and eat whole bobolinks in one gulp, and the fiery Georgia populist Tom Watson. The fictional account includes the real Watson's transformation in 1907 from populism to bitter racism and anti-Semitism,

which after the trial, whipped the Georgia mob into a bloody frenzy. When Noah Berg/Leo Frank is pardoned, 25 men break into Milledgeville State Prison and take him 125 miles to hang him from the big oak tree in front of the house where Jean Dugan was born.

With insight and humor, Kluger delineates Seth's personality change from Northern immigrant to Southern Jew, through descriptions of Southern smells, Jesus-loving friends and Seth's slow adoption of the accents and cadence of his new home. It is courageous terrain for a Yankee writer and Kluger does surprisingly well, though he has a tendency to catalogue every flower in Savannah and use every Southernism there is, from "diddly-squat" to "ain't worth a pitcher of warm spit." It is no criticism to say that Seth Adler, like Richard Kluger, has a Yankee view of the South: the book is written in a Southern context, but it is not of the South; and it is more a Jewish novel than a Southern one.

In the second half, Kluger marshals the skills of legal dramatization that were honed in his previous book, "Simple Justice," and captures the ambience of the trial: crowds line the streets screaming "Hang the Jew"; the judge walks into the courtroom showing the jury a red-ink newspaper headline that reads "State Adds Links to Chain"; the murder victim, dumped into a coal bin, clutches a phony note describing her assailant; women pack the sweaty courtroom for three weeks in July to hear 250 witnesses; fans flutter during the salacious testimony

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# Lynching

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from a host of witnesses.

While the book is true to the atmosphere and much of the testimony of the actual Frank trial, the variant passages are disturbing — not because the novelist has any obligation to the truth, but given the book's obvious commercial potential and the remoteness of the 1913 events, many people may confuse Kluger's version with the real one.

Kluger paints Noah Berg as a lecher confessing to a sexual encounter with a stenographer in his office. In the original trial the Georgia prosecutors tried to establish that Leo Frank was a "pervert" (or as Tom Watson actually wrote, "this filthy, perverted Jew from New York"), by using

trumped-up testimony — from girls he had fired, from a well-known Atlanta madam and from a well-rehearsed Negro janitor, who changed his story three times—that Frank often had girls up to his office for immoral acts.

The author adds an additional sexual dimension to the story by painting the innocent "little Mary Phagan" of the original trial as the more worldly Jean Dugan, with a "precociously developing body . . . one girl speculated she may have been molested by her stepfather . .

Jean went out with older men." In the real trial, Leo Frank said under oath that "the story as to women coming into the factory with me for immoral purposes is a base lie, and the occasion that he claims to have seen me in indecent positions with women is a lie so vile that I have no language with which to fitly denounce it."

Noah Berg in the book is not

the upstanding, earnest German Jew and community leader that Frank was in real life: "Noah Berkowitz . . . came from Polish-Russian Jewry whom the defenders of Nordic purity found so deformed and loathesome . . . who changed his name to something less provocative." He is "a limp spirit" who marries Naomi Klein, "whose family sold sheets throughout the state to the Ku Klux Klan." Leo Frank married Lucille Selig, from a highly cultured and well-to-do Atlanta family, manufacturers of chemical products.

In fact, it was Frank's Brahmin Jewish background that struck such terror in the minds of the East Europeans across the South: if the best and most assimilated Jews could be framed and lynched, what chance would the rest have? And it gave Tom Watson the yeast to tie Leo Frank to "Wall Street bankers" and an international conspiracy: "Frank be-

longs to the Jewish aristocracy," Watson bellowed, "and it was determined by rich Jews that no aristocrat of their race should die for the death of a working girl."

Over the past 60 years there has been just a handful of novels written about Jews of the South, and the Frank case is one of the reasons why: Southern Jews learned to keep a low profile; they were conditioned by an instinctive wariness against passing for white in that mysterious underland of America. Northern Jewish writers have been too preoccupied with the world of their fathers to worry much about the Jews on the periphery. Perhaps Richard Kluger's provocative fictionalization of the Frank trial and lynching is an appropriate first step toward dispelling the phantoms that have held back novels about this fascinating aspect of Jews in America as one example of the varieties of the white experience in the South. ■

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## **MEMBERS OF THE TRIBE**

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