

Episode 4: "The Murdered Jewess"

Transcription

An actor reads from "Rubenstein, or the Murdered Jewess: Being a Full and Reliable History of this Terrible Mystery of Blood":

Actor 1: On a cold December morning, a farmhand chancing to walk across a cornfield in East New York, about two and a half hours ride from the city, came suddenly upon the frozen corpse of a beautiful young Jewess. The clothing was considerably disordered, and the body itself was cut in a terrible manner with a knife.

The poor fellow, nearly beside himself with surprise and terror, ran back to his employer's house and gave the alarm. The police were at once notified, and the proper detective officers were detailed to work up the case. Suspicion pointed to a Jew named Pesach N. Rubenstein as the guilty party, and he was arrested. Public excitement and curiosity were immediately raised to fever heat, and the trial was set down for an early date. It commenced on the last day of January, 1876. The following is the testimony in full.



Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to episode four of The Dybbukast, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? This is Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk. In this episode, presented in collaboration with The Contemporary Jewish Museum, we'll be exploring two murder pamphlets, "The Murdered Jewess Sara Alexander: Life, Trial and Conviction of Rubenstein the Polish Jew," read by actor Julie Lockhart, and "Rubenstein, or the Murdered Jewess: Being a Full and Reliable History of This Terrible Mystery of Blood," read by actor Clay Steakley.

Published in 1876, both pamphlets tell the tale of Pesach Rubenstein, a Jewish immigrant who was convicted of killing his cousin, Sara Alexander, and disposing of her body in a cornfield. The case was a sensation in the press and took hold of the popular imagination. Dr. Eddy Portnoy, academic advisor and director of exhibitions at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and author of *Bad Rabbi, and Other Strange But True Stories from the Yiddish Press*, discusses the real history behind the pamphlets and its implications as the first significant intersection of Jews, the local and national press, and the American judicial system. At the start of the episode, you heard a selection from the beginning of one of the murder pamphlets. In just a moment, you will hear the first words of the other.

And now episode four of The Dybbukast: "The Murdered Jewess"



Actor 2: *We now lay before the reader a full account of a shocking murder — that of Miss Sara Alexander, the beautiful Polish Jewess, who was foully murdered in an East New York cornfield. The crime was one of the most shocking that has ever occurred in the metropolis or its vicinity.*

A cousin of the dead girl to whom she was very much attached was arrested. And the discovered fact of her near maternity, coupled with the expected arrival of the prisoner's wife from Germany, furnished the only clue there was to the horrible deed.

Aaron: Eddy, thank you so much for joining me today.

Dr. Eddy Portnoy: Thanks for having me, Aaron. Happy to be here.

Aaron: So we're talking about some murder pamphlets. There were four that were published about the case of Pesach Rubenstein. We're featuring two of them. These pamphlets were a type of pulp literature. They'd been around for a long time and were especially popular in the 19th century. Tell us more about them.

Eddy: These were sort of mostly 8 to 16 page pamphlets that were often illustrated and described, typically in lurid detail, well-known murders that took place in the United States. Obviously at the time there's no radio, TV, internet. Print media is the only thing available. And some of them are, I guess you could say, enhanced. Sometimes the writers make things up.

Actor 1: *Both were pale, with lips compressed and eyes haggard. And as they halted and looked at each other, their hearts appeared to be like open books. Every feeling, every emotion could be read. She had the knife, with which her own lifeblood was to be shed, thrust into her bosom and, drawing it forth, she held it toward her companion. He trembled violently, his knees smote together and he was all together like a man intoxicated.*

Aaron: It's obvious these pamphlets were not written by people who knew about Jewish beliefs and practices. They contain some false information. They show a lack of knowledge of how Jews live and worship. What's an example of this?

Eddy: One of them shows him praying on his hands and knees, with his hands clasped before him. So this is obviously how a Christian prays and not at all how a Jew prays.

Actor 2: *Our artist has graphically sketched him while at prayer. And from the illustration, a better idea can be gained than any description can give.*



Aaron: Now that we've heard a bit about the pamphlets, can you give us a detailed overview of the story contained within the particular ones we're exploring?

Eddy: in 1875, a body was found in a field in East New York. East New York is in Brooklyn, and, at the time, in 1875, it was a farm. Now it's not.

Actor 1: *On December 14, he found the body of a woman in a cornfield, on the ground, behind a stack of corn. These stacks were at the lower end of the field, near the fence, the farthest off from the plank road. There was a shawl lying by the side of the body. The corpse was about two feet from the base of the corn stack. The body lay on the back and was all cut about the neck. Witness went and informed Mr. Wessel, who, in company with two other men, went and viewed it.*

Eddy: A farmhand had found her and he went to the police and told them. They came, investigated, took the body away to the morgue. They didn't know who it was. There had been no reports of anyone missing in Brooklyn. And so they sort of deduced that this person must be from Manhattan.

Actor 2: *The police were puzzled. No report had been received of any late disappearance from the neighborhood. Nevertheless, the region was scoured. All during Tuesday afternoon and evening, the police station was thronged, and officers say that not less than 2000 persons saw the body. No one could identify it, and the conclusion was arrived at that she was a stranger in the village.*

Eddy: So what they did was, they put an advertisement in the newspaper, which was actually very common at the time, claiming that a body had been found, and they wrote a description of it. Now at the same time, a woman who worked for a particular family on the Lower East Side had gone missing. Her name was Sara Alexander. And her brother went to the Rubenstein family where she worked. And he said, you know, have you seen Sara? She didn't come home from work yesterday. And they said, no, she was here until such and such a time and then she left. We haven't seen her since. So her brother also put an ad in the newspaper, looking for a missing person and describing her.

Actor 3: *The New York Sun, December 14th, 1875. A girl missing since the afternoon of the 12th, age 17 years, stout middle height, face dark, dressed in a light colored dress with a black overskirt, striped shawl, small gold earrings with red stones. Any information will be received by J.P. Alexander, Number 30, Essex Street.*

Eddy: Coincidentally, the two advertisements appeared on the same page in the same paper, and they described the same person. The father of the Rubenstein family happened to get that paper. He saw the advertisements and he went to the police station and said:

Actor 2: *That girl is Sara Alexander of Number 30, Essex Street. She was a good religious girl. She did not stay away from home, and if she was murdered away out there, some ruffians must've dragged her away.*

Eddy: So the police came to the home and began to interview everyone to find out where she had last been seen. And while they were interviewing with everyone, one of the sons came in. His name was Pesach Rubenstein.

Actor 2: *On Monday, the son with great perturbation of manner told them that he had had a dream the previous night. He dreamed that Sara Alexander was lying murdered alongside of cornstalks 10 miles outside of the city. She was murdered by an Italian and the knife was close beside her.*

"She wants me to bury her," he said.

Eddy: And the police were like, oh, that's kind of interesting. Would you come to the morgue and identify her? And so when they asked him to do that, he freaked out, said absolutely not. And when they saw his reaction, they forced him to go to the morgue.

Actor 1: *The prisoner was brought into the morgue immediately after the post-mortem and was shown features of the body. Asked the prisoner if he recognized the body as Sara Alexander. He said he did and appeared nervous and excited. About 30 persons were present*

at the time. When he came round to look at the body, he assumed an attitude of horror. He drew up his hands and drew back.

Eddy: In 1875, that suspicion was enough to arrest someone. So they arrest him and put him in jail for the murder of Sara Alexander. Pesach Rubenstein is put on trial. It's a huge trial that people wait in line to attend. It's extremely popular. It's written about in every newspaper in New York City, and stories about this are published in almost every newspaper in the United States.

Actor 4: *New York Times, February 3rd, 1876. The trial of Pesach N. Rubenstein, the Polish Jew, for the alleged murder of his cousin Sara Alexander in the cornfield at East New York was continued yesterday. The prisoner came in at a few minutes before 10 o'clock, looking precisely as he had looked ever since he had been in custody: pale, haggard, idiotic, corpse-like, and filthy.*

Eddy: The police, they interview all of these streetcar drivers and ferry conductors, and they determine that he brought her out to this field in East New York and murdered her.

Actor 2: *Harry Lee, conductor of a Broadway and East New York car, remembered having carried from the South 7th Street ferry to Howard's Hotel in East New York on Sunday night, a short, beautiful young woman, who was principally noticeable because she wore no bonnet or hat and let her single braid of hair swing down her back unconfined, save by a fillet at the crown. This was deemed of importance as, if correct, it helped to explain the absence of a hat from the scene of the murder. A swarthy Polish Jew of forbidding mien, who entered the car just after the young woman and seated himself on the opposite side near the front door, also attracted attention. He seemed fidgety, turning often and peering out of the window, but he cast no glance of recognition toward the young woman. When the car reached Howard House, the terminus of the road, the man and woman joined company and disappeared in the direction of the Jamaica Plank Road.*

Eddy: She was five months pregnant, and Pesach Rubenstein's wife was on her way over to the United States from Poland. This was his motive.

Actor 1: *The man is married. His wife is away in a foreign land. The young woman is with him, constantly nurses him in his sickness and is his continual companion. An illicit affection springs up between them and the natural result follows. An exposure will ruin the over-confiding woman; not only her, but will forever damn the man with his own peculiar sect.*

Eddy: He's found guilty, sentenced to hang, but starves himself to death in prison before he can actually be hanged.

Actor 2: *His hands twitched convulsively and, presently, foam began to issue from his lips. For a few moments, the heavy breathing continued, but the respirations gradually came more slowly, and the man died before the arrival of a physician.*

Eddy: In the wake of this trial, the entire trial transcript is published as a book for popular consumption.

Actor 5: *The trial and result of the case of The People of The State of New York against Pesach N. Rubenstein has excited considerable comment. It may well be considered one of the most remarkable cases of circumstantial evidence which has arisen. The result was a*

conviction. Notwithstanding, an alibi was sworn to by 12 witnesses. The scientific testimony also presents a feature of much interest. It was thought to embrace sufficient elements of importance to the profession to justify publication - April 12th, 1876.

Aaron: And along with the published trial transcript, there were, of course, the somewhat more imaginative murder pamphlets.

Actor 2: *"It is no good to try to hide or escape anymore," says she to him. "And so, let us kill ourselves."*

Actor 1: *"You're right, my dear. But the God of our fathers will punish us in the other world."*

Actor 2: *"No matter. Better that than to meet the cruel, unpardoning vengeance of our own people. Of course, it is of little matter to the Gentiles, but you know how it will be with the Hebrews."*

Actor 1: *"Suppose we do kill ourselves," he argued. "It will be all found out after we are dead, and all the punishment that would have been meted out on us will be visited upon them."*

Actor 2: *"What are we to do then?" asked she in despairing tones.*

Actor 1: *For at least 10 minutes, there was a deep silence during which each contemplated the other with a peculiar and inquiring expression of countenance. At last, she broke the suspense with the words:*

Actor 2: *"I will be the sacrifice. Even as our father, Abraham, would have sacrificed his only son, Isaac, upon the altar, so shall you sacrifice me. My life shall save yours and my death shall be the atonement. It shall put aside the disgrace that would otherwise sink our families into ruin."*

Eddy: In addition, a song called "My Name is Pesach Rubenstein" was written and published. Unfortunately, the music and lyrics are not extant, so we don't know what that's like. It was just written about. It's just an interesting idea that this trial and the story behind it became so popular that it elicited all of this literature and music. And what's really amazing about it is that Jewish historians freely ignored it to a large degree because it was embarrassing. Obviously, you know, Jews like to show themselves in the best possible light for a variety of reasons, and this story did not show them in a particularly good light. Even though it's obviously an individual, it shouldn't reflect on the entire community, but apparently they felt it did. And so it was really kind of, you know, an amazing story to stumble upon. And it was really the most significant interface between Jews and American media in the country up until that point.



Aaron: Why do you think this particular case made such a splash and became so widely known?

Eddy: I think, to a certain degree, it was because of the exoticism of Pesach Rubenstein. You know, one interesting thing is, he's the first Jewish murderer to be sentenced to hang in America. He was such a unique figure. He was deeply religious. He still wore traditional religious garb: long coat, hat, had very long Payot.

Actor 2: *He presented a curious, grotesque appearance with his locks and straps on, and his long black hair turned under in rolls about his head.*

Eddy: And one interesting aspect of this is that, four years prior, in 1871, a Jewish man by the name of Jacob Rosenzweig was put on trial for second degree manslaughter. This is also a very interesting story. Just in a nutshell, he was an abortionist. A woman accidentally died in his care, and that had never happened to him, and he didn't exactly know what to do. So, he went to the local morgue and said, I need to bury this woman who died in my care. And they said, well, you need a death certificate. And he decided that he didn't want to get a death certificate because he thought that he might get in some sort of trouble. So what he did instead was he packed the woman's body in a trunk and tried to mail it to a random address in Chicago. So, not to get distracted, but he got caught. And he was Jewish, but he was, even though he had a sort of heavy Yiddish accent, he was fairly well assimilated. He didn't dress differently. He didn't act differently. He was a doctor — not really a doctor, he claimed to be a doctor. And in all of the reporting on that trial, there was very little focus on the fact that he was Jewish.

Actor 4: *New York Times, October 28, 1871. At the opening of court yesterday morning, the prisoner's counsel said that the period had now arrived when, as the prisoner believed, the cloud which had rested on his reputation would be cleared away when, in the temple of justice, away from the popular clamor, he would be declared not guilty.*

Eddy: I think that because he sort of seemed like, you know, an aspiring American, you know, and dressed like everyone else, spoke English like everyone else, they left it alone. But with Rubenstein, while he was in prison, he prayed much of the day. The Jewishness was so much on the face of everything, that it was impossible to avoid.

Aaron: And the pamphlets go to some great lengths in both the illustrations and descriptions to portray Rubenstein's religious practices.

Eddy: They show him with Tefillin on his head and arm. They show him, you know, with the fringes hanging. And I suspect this is probably the first time that a large scale audience in America saw images like this of Jews.

Actor 2: *On his forehead and on the inside of his arm at the elbow were firmly fastened two small cubes of wood, about two and a half inches thick, with a margin at the bottom of half an inch and a covering or case fitting over the cube and resting on the margin. On each of the cubes are written in Hebrew The Ten Commandments. The straps were bound so firmly as to interfere somewhat with the circulation of the blood but the devoted Hebrew endured it as a duty.*



Aaron: The murder took place, as we've discussed, in 1875. I would love to hear some details about the Jewish immigrant population of the country at that time.

Eddy: There are about 100,000 Jews in the United States at the time. The majority of them are in New York. You know, one interesting aspect of American Jewish historiography is there's been this kind of neat segmentation made of German Jews who allegedly came before 1880, and Eastern European Jews, all of who came en masse beginning in 1881 and,

you know, sort of overwhelmed the entire Jewish community with Yiddish culture and, you know, everything that they brought with them. And this is how they began — you know, this community — began to dominate American Jewry.

This is not entirely accurate. You do have a growing Jewish community in the Lower East Side. You have growing numbers of Eastern European Jews — Polish Jews, mostly from Northern Poland, who have immigrated to the United States. This was the Rubenstein family. The first Yiddish newspapers began publication in 1870 and 1871, which is an indication that you have more and more Eastern European Jews arriving.

That notwithstanding, German Jews were already ensconced and had already been — some of them had become economically better off. And there were a number of English-language Jewish newspapers, and also a German-language Jewish newspaper, that were in existence at the time. And interestingly, they kept very quiet about the Rubenstein trial. They were clearly very, very embarrassed about it, and they didn't want more news of this story to come out.

Aaron: So there is a certain desire among Jews of the time, understandably, to make sure that the public perception of them is unsullied. I'd love to hear about the nature of that perception. Can you give an example of how some Jews were viewed and treated?

Eddy: There's one interesting thing that gets mentioned in, I think it's 1867, in response to another article that appeared that claimed the Jews had been denied the ability to buy insurance. It was an instance of antisemitism, and it was someone who wasn't Jewish who was writing and saying, you know, these are people who would make fine citizens.

Actor 3: *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch, April 21st, 1867. We seldom or never hear of the failure of a Jewish merchant. Jews are very rarely accused of crimes, and the community is not charged with the support of Hebrew vagabonds and paupers and almshouses and prisons. All of these speak very highly for the Jews and show them to be orderly and well-behaved citizens.*

Aaron: So it makes sense, given the desire to grow a positive public perception of this sort, that, as you already said, the Jewish newspapers that could have been read beyond the Jewish community mostly stayed away from the Rubenstein case. What about more internal communication within the Jewish community itself?

Eddy: Interestingly, the one Yiddish newspaper that was in existence when the trial took place had four full newspaper pages about the Rubenstein trial. In addition to that, they have really some lurid images that were taken from some of these murder pamphlets that they also print. So this is the difference between Yiddish-speaking Jews and English-speaking Jews: English-speaking Jews fear that if they print something in their paper, anyone could read it because it's in English, whereas a Yiddish newspaper can print whatever it wants because only Jews can read Yiddish.

Aaron: I want to understand, and for those listening to understand, about Yiddish and English and what was going on in America at the time. Of these Jews who were engaging primarily in Yiddish, were they also able to read and speak English or was it kind of one or the other? Just help me understand what that might've looked like.

Eddy: You know, it depends on the person. In the 1870s, you basically learned English by the seat of your pants. By the late 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century, you constantly see advertisements in Yiddish newspapers for English classes in night school. That's a very common phenomenon. But in the 1870s, that's not something that existed to any significant degree. So if you learn English, you basically learned English on the street. And, you know, I think that if you had more money, you maybe were able to hire a teacher. But if you didn't and, you know, most immigrants didn't, you really just learned on your own. So Jews who lived and worked in their own neighborhoods that were heavily Jewish sort of remain in the Yiddish sphere. They weren't required to speak English all the time so they didn't. But Jews who were peddlers, who were traveling salesman, who sold things door-to-door, who maybe had pushcarts or shops, they interacted with all kinds of different people. And the linguistic common denominator was English. They do the best they can and they muddle through. In the case of Pesach Rubenstein, they had to bring in translators to the court and the court didn't really know what to do, and they brought in German translators. So you had German translators trying to translate Yiddish to the courtroom.

Actor 1: *All the conversations with P.N. Rubenstein that day were in the Jewish language. Can't give precise words P.N. Rubenstein used when he made reference to what might've happened to Sara. Counsel for prisoner here directed the witness to write the precise words used in the Jewish language in order that it may be submitted to an interpreter for translation. The witness wrote as desired on a slip of paper.*

Eddy: None of the cops are Jewish in the story. I think that the one cop who figures most prominently is German and he's German because he's the one who is able to communicate with Rubenstein more easily. He is the authority figure and he is the figure that the writers invest with the kind of moral rectitude of society.

Actor 2: *Detective Zundt is a stout, well-built and quite a young man and has shown great energy and skills since he has been connected with the detective force. His knowledge of German makes him a valuable acquisition. He is very popular with all those with whom he comes in contact as a friend, and we predict for him a useful and prosperous career.*

Eddy: Rubenstein is painted as the opposite of that. So that's part of the othering of Rubenstein as a Jew.

Actor 2: *When Detective Zundt visited Rubenstein after the latter was convicted, he found him sitting on his bed in his stocking feet. He talked over the case with him pleasantly, but Rubenstein became excited as Zundt was about to leave and offered to shake hands with him. Rubenstein jumped up and, flourishing the arm on which was his "tvillym," which was bound about his forehead, arm and forefinger, he shouted, "You have brought me to the gallows. I curse you to death. My blood will haunt you the world around. It will haunt your wife and children and all of your blood." Zundt then took his leave.*

Before the cursing took place, Rubenstein had been praying. Zundt, when speaking of this occurrence, said, "I would rather that he would curse me than shake hands with me as I consider the curse a compliment."



Aaron: Given all that we've discussed, what direct effects, if any, did this story, which reached so many, have on Jews of the time?

Eddy: A Yiddish paper that began publishing in 1876 called *Yidishe Gazeten* was a weekly newspaper. There are articles in there that talk about how Jews were attacked in the streets. People threw rocks at them and yelled, Rubenstein, Rubenstein. So, they may have gotten rocks thrown at them anyways, but it wouldn't have had Rubenstein attached to it, and it may have been a more likely event because of the Rubenstein trial. So certainly Jews did suffer to a certain degree because of this trial and the notoriety that it received.

Aaron: In addition to, as we've already covered, not really publishing about it broadly, how else then might some members of the Jewish community, especially those Jews who are more overtly assimilated into American society, have tried to distance themselves from the case?

Eddy: I think it's *The New York World* that has an article that had to be a plant on the part of German Jews, claiming that Polish Jews were completely different from German Jews and were a kind of wild growth on the body of Jewry.

Actor 3: *The New York World, 1876. The Polish Jews, as already said, are ultra-rabbinical in sentiment and practice. They accent the interpretations put by the rabbis upon biblical laws and consider them of binding force. This leads to the observance of many grotesque customs which, while they may be keeping with the letter, are often in opposition to the spirit of Mosaic Law. The Polish Jews believe that all laws given to their race were intended for all times and places, whereas the progressive Israelite claim that certain laws were intended to be operative in Palestine only.*

Aaron: You mentioned earlier that in spite of how huge the case was, Jewish historians largely ignored the story in the years that followed. Can you elaborate on that?

Eddy: You know, I started to look through all kinds of sources to try and find information about this story. So, one of the things I found was in the autobiography of Abraham Cahan, who was the editor of *The Forverts*, which is the largest and most successful Yiddish newspaper in history. He came to the United States in 1881, and he wrote that when he first arrived, everyone was talking about the Pesach Rubenstein case. So what's incredible is this is five years after the Pesach Rubenstein case and yet everyone is talking about it. Another article I found was in *The Forverts* itself. It was in 1910. There was a retrospective of 50 years of Jewish life on the Lower East Side. And one of the things it mentioned was one of the biggest episodes was the Pesach Rubenstein trial; that it completely overwhelmed the entire community, everyone talked about it, everyone knew about it. It was a huge, huge event.

I went to the American Jewish History section of the library, and I just began pulling books off shelves and running my finger through the indexes, looking for Pesach Rubenstein, or other people who were important in the trial. And I looked through probably 40 or 50 books. And I found three that mentioned the trial. One of them was a large, general history of American Jewry. It had two sentences about it. Another one was about Jews on the Lower East Side that had a paragraph about it. And then the third one was a history of the Jews of Brownsville, and that had the most of any book I'd ever seen. It had a page and a half. It dawned on me that this was a major event that had just gone missing.

Aaron: What do you think is lost when such parts of our history are obscured or hidden?

Eddy: The Pesach Rubenstein story doesn't and shouldn't reflect on all Jews. He's one guy who committed a murder and, no matter how horrible that is, not every Jew is implicated in that. To blame all Jews for a murder is the root of antisemitism. That's the root of Jew hatred. In a way, you kind of lose a portion of your humanity, no matter how horrible it is. Like, this person was still a member of the Jewish community. He's still Jewish. And although he's a criminal, his exploits warrant documentation.

Actor 1: *Of all the forlorn, wretched creatures that ever entered the precincts of this abode of criminals, Rubenstein was the most forlorn. He resembled a vivified mummy more closely than a living man. When he was placed in the cell, he flung himself down upon the low pallet furnished him for a bed and gave vent to his feelings in the wildest and most terrible manner. He beat his breast with violence and uttered exclamations in Hebrew, declaring his innocence and abusing those who testified against him or had been in any way connected with bringing his crime home to him.*

Eddy: In the 1980s, Jenna Weissman Joselit and Robert Rockaway both wrote histories of the American Jewish mob. And they both told me that they received significant pushback by the organized Jewish community. They were asked not to publish these books because it was considered an embarrassment. So, you know, this kind of thing still goes on; I mean, that there's a certain component of the organized Jewish community or certain types of Jews who say this shouldn't be publicized in any way. If you subscribe to the idea that all Jews are responsible for these actions, okay. But all Jews are not responsible for these actions. They're just — this is just part of history.

Actor 2: *On sufficient evidence, Rubenstein was found guilty, and the time devoted to his trial gives assurance that his case was carefully considered. After the evidence was all taken however, it did not require long to decide upon a verdict, but after about an hour's consideration, they answered as one man to the awful word, guilty, and briefly, though solemnly, Judge Moore passed sentence upon him.*

Eddy: This is a murder that took place in Yiddish, and the victim and the perpetrator were both Yiddish speakers, and when people think of Yiddish, murder is not one of the things they think about. I think they think about things like *Fiddler On The Roof*. That's kind of where it goes, but Yiddish culture is a broad universe and everything takes place in it, even murder. And that's horrible, but it exists. And, as an historian, you have to deal with these things.

Aaron: I appreciate the provocation you're presenting us with — that, if we are interested in that actual historical record, we can't simply present that which is in the light in an effort to hide our darkness.

Eddy: Connected to that is the fear that these crimes will be attributed to other Jews. And so, Jews think about that, especially older generations of Jews. You know, my parents, whenever they would be announcing some crime on TV, you know, my mom would be like, oh, I hope it's not a Jew. You know, there's always that fear that, you know, because you're part of this small minority group that's put upon, that's been oppressed and, you know, victimized by genocide — there's always that fear that you'll be blamed for the actions of one community member. And that is — that's happened. That has occurred throughout history.

Aaron: Right. Less than a decade before the Rubenstein case, there was what was believed to be the first lynching of a Jew in America.

Actor 4: *New York Times, August 17, 1868. Nashville, Tennessee. Last night at 12 o'clock, a party of about 15 masked horsemen rode into Franklin Williamson County and broke open the store of a Jew named Bierfield. The latter attempted to escape by flight and was fired upon. He fell dead, pierced by five bullets. The affair occurred just after the close of a circus exhibition, and many people were in the streets, some of whom interfered but could not prevent the assassination.*

Eddy: Obviously, if Jews were embarrassed about the story of a Jew murdering a Jewess, who knows what would have occurred had it been someone else.

Aaron: And maybe in part because of these dangers, the focus has been on other kinds of stories.

Eddy: If you read Jewish historiography, it tends to be about rabbis, scholars, writers, artists, people in theater, people who've achieved great success. Success is so important in Jewish culture and in Jewish history as well. This is what gets written about. And so I thought to myself, wow, you know, there is a huge component of the Jewish population that — they were just utter failures, or they fell into situations that were just completely awful.

When I've given lectures on my book, invariably someone in the audience at the end says, you know, why would you want to talk about this stuff? It's terrible. And, you know, that's the attitude: This is embarrassing to me; this reflects poorly on me; you shouldn't write about this. But in addition to that, I get people in the audience who very happily raise their hands and say, my grandfather was in Sing Sing for 20 years. I mean, you know, the idea that all Jews are smart and successful is absurd, but that's — that is a popular perception that people have. You know, some Jews might like to believe that. You know, it's a nice idea but it's totally wrong.

Aaron: What I'm hearing is: a kind of giving of the full measure of a people's humanity, right?

Eddy: Yes, absolutely.

Aaron: We are actually poorer if we only are talking about the achievements and the successes because it doesn't allow us to actually have the full breadth of experience that human beings have.

Eddy: That's exactly right.

Actor 1: *He did not awaken until about 10 o'clock the next morning, and then, rising, he made a thorough examination of himself and his clothing to make sure that his hideous work of taking away all telltale traces of his crime was complete. It was. In the sunshine, he failed to discover the slightest signs of the night's work, and then he coolly went about his business and awaited whatever might turn up. But, the nemesis of justice was following his devious pathway. In a few days, the heavy hand was laid upon him. Step by step, he was traced on the fatal day. Strangers he little expected came forward and recognized him as the man, and the inexorable law condemned him to his well-deserved death.*



Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of The Dybbukast. Selections from the murder pamphlets were read by Julie Lockhart and Clay Steakley. Additional readings were performed by Rebecca Rasmussen, Diana Tanaka and Mark McClain Wilson. Scholarship was provided by Dr. Eddy Portnoy. Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S.. The series is edited by Mark McClain Wilson.

Thanks to Judaism Unbound for featuring this episode of The Dybbukast also on their podcast feed. And of course, thank you to the Covenant Foundation for supporting the launch of The Dybbukast and our development of related resources. Speaking of which, please visit us at theatredybbuk.org/podcast, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page. New episodes of The Dybbukast will be available every second Friday of the month. This episode was presented in collaboration with The Contemporary Jewish Museum and was produced by theatre dybbuk.

Actor 2: The coroner's inquest was held on Wednesday and the above facts elicited. And at half past one o'clock, the jury returned the following verdict: "We find that the deceased, P.N. Rubenstein, came to his death from incipient pulmonary tuberculosis, hastened by deprivation. And further, we commend the kindness and attention which was shown him by the sheriff and his subordinates."