Postscript to the Hebron Massacre Revisited
Among those slain in 1929 were eight Americans — including the Chicago-born nephew of Rav Moshe Mordecai Epstein, the Rosh Yeshivah of the Hebron Yeshivah

Dr. Yitzchak Levine

Last week’s Hamodia featured an interesting article on the Hebron massacre of 1929. This article presented hitherto unknown facts about what happened during this infamous incident of Jewish martyrdom.

There is something else about the Hebron massacre that many are unaware of, namely, that a number of Americans who were learning in the Hebron Yeshivah at the time were also killed. On Aug. 27, 1929, The New York Times ran a front-page article under the banner, “8 AMERICANS LISTED IN 'HEBRON DEAD.'” The subhead continued: “Attack on Rabbinical College was ‘savage’ — 18 Killed in Banker’s House; WOMEN AND CHILDREN SLAIN.”

The paper reported the victims as William Zev (Wolf) Berman of Philadelphia; David Shneiberg (Shnebarg) of Memphis; Benjamin (Bennie) Hurwitz (Horowitz) and Wolf Greenberg of Brooklyn; Aaron David Epstein, Harry Frumman, Hyman Krasner and Jacob Wexler, all from Chicago.

We do have some information about these young men. Most of it comes from the monograph The Martyrs of Hebron, Personal Reminiscence of Some of the Men and Women Who Offered up their Lives During the Massacre of August 24, 1929 at Hebron, Palestine and Some of Those Who Were Spared, by Leo Gottesman, Rabbi of the West Side Congregation of New York. 1930. (This short book was republished in Pioneer Settlement in the Twenties, Arno Press, 1977, pages 7-91.)

Aaron David Epstein
Aaron’s father, Rav Ephraim Fischel Epstein, was a Rav in Chicago. His uncle was the famous Rav Moro Mordecai Epstein, the Rosh Yeshivah of the Hebron Yeshivah. Aaron’s older brother had died in a fire. While Rabbi E. Epstein never got over this terrible tragedy, he took some consolation and particular delight from the reports that his brother sent him regarding Aaron’s excellent progress in learning.

Rabbi E. Epstein happened to be in New York on the Monday following the massacre in Hebron. Rabbi Gottesman describes how this bereaved father reacted to the terrible news that he had lost a second son:

“I have known many examples of heroism and courage, but none to equal that of this most unfortunate of fathers. Though stricken unreasonably by this fresh and unequalled grief, he set a wonderful example of fortitude that very day to all Jewry.

“There was a meeting that Tuesday night in the Hotel Monterey. The leading Rabbis of New York were gathered to discuss the immediate, dangerously shrinking needs of the dead, he said, it is of living Jewry we must think. We have not suffered a defeat. This is only another repercussion in the explosive history of our people. We must go on and on. It is the law and the nature of our people. And he called upon the Rabbis assembled there, and upon all Jewry, not to be discouraged, not to be downhearted, but to plan for a greater future, whatever sacriﬁces may be necessary.”

William Zev (Wolf) Berman (1906-1929)
William Berman, a 1923 graduate of the Volozhin Yeshivah, was close friends with the student from America were unequal elements: they were as wide apart in most things as might be expected from people from different planets. Yet William Berman overcame this terrible distance, so hard for others to span, and associated with the European students as one of them, as a pal.

“When William had settled himself comfortably in Hebron and found that he liked it vastly, he wrote to his parents in Philadelphia. The result was that his younger brother was sent to Hebron to join him. And while William fell a victim to the unforgotten passion of the Arab mob on the stormy Sabbath of the 24th August, his parents may console themselves that the younger brother escaped when the murderers took him for dead.”

Benjamin (Bennie) Hurwitz (1910-1929)
“Benjamin’s father, Rabbi Yekuel Raphael Hurwitz, had learned in the Volozhin Yeshivah in Europe. Three days before Bennie was murdered he wrote a letter to his father in which he said in part:

“Terrible, terrible, terrible. How terrible are the happenings that occur daily in Jerusalem, our Holy City in our Holy Land. Things happen here that do not occur in the galus. There are attacks on the Jews, the government ignores them … and the world is quiet.

“The main problem which disturbs the Jewish and Arab minds and which causes the arguments between them is the question of the Kosel. On Yom Kippur of this year it all started. The English could not wait three hours for the sun to set; they had to desecrate our holy place on this holy day. Their needs were ‘holy’, but the Kosel, the last vestige testifying to our glory in ancient times, is not holy All the Jewish communities protested, but the British ignored them and ruled in favor of the Arabs.”

May these young men, and all others who have died during our bloody history al pi kiddush Hashem, never be forgotten!

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