

Spotlight

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 70 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 Sheinberg (Shunberg) of Memphis; Benjamin (Bennie) Hurwitz (Horowitz) and Wolf Greenberg of Brooklyn; Aaron David Epstein, Harry Frohman, Hyman Krasner and Jacob Wexler, all from Chicago.

We do have some information about three of these young men. Most of it comes from the monograph *The Martyrs of Hebron, Personal Reminiscences 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, 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 Moshe 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 unspeakably 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 increasingly shocking news that the wires were bringing in from Eretz Yisrael, and to plan what must be done immediately for the relief of the victims. Rabbi Epstein, with that deep, unhealable wound in his heart, came to the meeting and rose to speak. There was a deep silence to hear what he would say.

"The Rabbi did not weep. There was no despair in his voice. He delivered no eulogy over the dead. He spoke of the living. He spoke hopefully, prophetically. Though we cannot help mourning for 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 Talmudical Academy (high school) associated with Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan (RIETS), continued his studies at RIETS, receiving *semichah* in 1928. Rabbi Gottesman describes him as "a jolly fellow, he participated in all the yeshivah movements and was a natural leader in all the student activities. Early in his high school days he distinguished himself in scholarship and particularly as a speaker. He was a born orator, a gifted debater, an eloquent, persuasive, charming public speaker. He was an extraordinarily rapid and clear thinker. He had unquestionably a very brilliant mind. He was admired by everyone who knew him at all, and was immensely liked by those who knew him well. He had no difficulty in obtaining a Rabbinic position — what with his thorough training, his fine wit, and talented oratory."

Rabbi Berman was not satisfied with his position as a Rav. "He desired to perfect himself," and therefore gave up his position to devote himself to advanced Torah study while he was still young. "And particularly he desired to study in 'the cradle where Jacob was raised.'" This was why he decided to go to Hebron.

"Very soon after his arrival in Hebron he had won the friendship and esteem of all his associates. He was liked and admired because of his character and because he was a *masmid*. He was devoted heart and soul to his studies.



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Hebron yeshivah students at Eshel Avraham in the city. All but one were killed in the massacre.

"His was a very generous nature. He was so well liked that he won the friendship in Hebron of the European young men. This was no easy thing for an American. The student from Europe and 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 terrific 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 unloosed passions 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 Hurwitz was born on May 4, 1910 in New York City. He attended the Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva elementary school. For high school he attended the Talmudical Academy (now affiliated with Yeshiva University) with his religious studies taken in the Teachers Institute (TI). He was very active in school activities and in his senior year was president of the Student's Organization (G.O.) and business editor

of the school yearbook, *The Elchanite*."

Benjamin's father, Rabbi Yekusiel 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!

Dr. Yitzchok Levine retired in 2008 from a 40-year career as a professor of mathematics at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey. He can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.



FROM GEDOLEI HADOROS BY HARAV YECHIEL MICHEL STERN

Harav Moshe Mordecai Epstein,
Rosh Yeshivah of Hebron.