

The Schmooze Stories with a Yiddish Twist

LOOKING BACK: THE 1991 CROWN HEIGHTS RIOTS/POGROM

Note: The Yiddish word for “riot” is “mehume.”

by
Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe



Syosset, New York

This weekend (Aug. 20/21, 2016) represents the 25th anniversary of the Crown Heights Riots.

The summer (“zumer”) of 1991 was a scorcher in New York. Tensions were high. Unemployment was high, and services that the city provided were down (“arop”). There was little air conditioning (“luftkilung”).

According to nakedapartments.com, Crown Heights was an aristocratic neighborhood (“shkheyneshaft”), intended for Manhattan’s growing bourgeois population. With its brownstone building, beautiful tree-lined streets, and parks, Crown Heights became a premiere NYC neighborhood by the 1920s.

However, after World War Two and throughout the twentieth century, Crown Heights became a site of turbulent race relations. The area is infamous for the

Crown Heights Riot, which unveiled tensions between black and Jewish communities. Ultimately, it led to a more harmonious relationship between the two communities.

Here are the facts about the Crown Heights Riots:

- . NYC had its first African-American mayor (“birger-mayster”), David Dinkins. He famously referred to the City’s demographic diversity as “gorgeous mosaic.” Mayor Dinkins was heavily supported by the Jewish community. During the summer of 1991, rumor (“shmue”) was that Jewish minority in Crown Heights was expanding and buying up neighborhood property.
- . At 8:20 p.m. on August 19, a three-car convoy reached the integrated section of Crown Heights and was nearing the Jewish area. The lead and middle car crossed Utica Avenue and proceeded along President Street. The rear vehicle, driven by 22-year-old Yosef Lifsh, fell behind. Lifsh’s station wagon reached the Utica junction, a car driven by an African American ran a red light and collided into Lifsh’s car. Lifsh’s car went up onto the sidewalk (“tretar”) and struck two black children playing with their bicycles.

Lifsh attempted to pry the car off the children but his efforts were in vain. A mob began to attack him and the other two passengers in the car. A Hatzolah ambulance arrived on the scene and was pelted by rocks and bottles.
- . Seven-year-old Gavin Cato was killed. His cousin, Angela Cato, was severely injured. They both were children of Guyanese immigrants, who resided on President Street.
- . An angry (“broygez”) crowd (“oylem”) formed.

Violence ensued and a Hasidic scholar (“gelernter”), Yankel Rosenbaum, was stabbed to death. Yankel Rosenbaum was from Melbourne, Australia, and was doing research in New York towards his doctoral thesis. The topic: “Issues of conflict in the shtetl from 1882 to 1932.”

On the way to getting a haircut, a mob turned the corner of Union Street and New York Avenue. “There’s a Jew,” announced one of the hoodlums. They nabbed Yankel and beat him; he died in Kings County Medical Center.

- . Many people were beaten; vehicles were flipped and burned. The crowds intensity increased and racial epithets continued. A Jew who ventured outside was risking his life. And when blacks encountered a storefront with a mezuzah, they smashed the windows.
- . Police Commissioner, Lee Brown, called the situation as a standoff between 200 Hasidim and 200 blacks. At the scene of the accident, between 200 and 225 cops kept the groups apart.
- . Some blacks carried signs which read:
WHY WAS NOT ONE HASIDIC ARRESTED?

Prime Minister, Yitzchak Shamir, called Mayor Dinkins to inquire about the situation. Dinkins replied curtly that it was a domestic issue and none of his business. Shamir replied, “If Jews are being murdered and an Israeli flag is burned, this is very much my business.”

- . The riots resulted in nearly 200 injuries and extensive (“breyt”) property damage.
- . Yankel’s brother, Norman, became a vocal advocate

on his family's behalf. He blamed the inaction of Mayor Dinkins and other city officials for his brother's death.

- . In the eulogy at Cato's funeral service, Rev. Al Sharpton referred to Jews as "diamond dealers." Commenting on Cato's death, he said, "The world will tell us he was killed by accident...It's an accident to allow an apartheid." Giuliana called the riots a "pogrom."
- . Deputy Mayor, Bill Lynch, led a 2 1/2-hour meeting at P.S. 167 in Crown Heights. The meeting with 60 black and Jewish leaders and police was "emotional," not angry," he said.
- . As he was covering the Crown Heights disturbances in Brooklyn, newspaper columnist, Jimmy Breslin was severely beaten. The youths forced him from a taxicab, beat him, stripped him of his underwear, and robbed him. He was not seriously injured and said that he was saddened by the "hopelessness" of the lives of individuals who had attacked him.
- . Isaac Abraham (New York Post, 8/17/16) wrote, "The 25th anniversary of Yankel's murder deserves solemn commemoration. The decision to hold a neighborhood festival, replete with games, music, rides, arts and crafts, live entertainment and (nonkosher) food is disrespectful and totally misplaced. It does absolutely nothing to honor Yankel's memory or the truth of the riots."

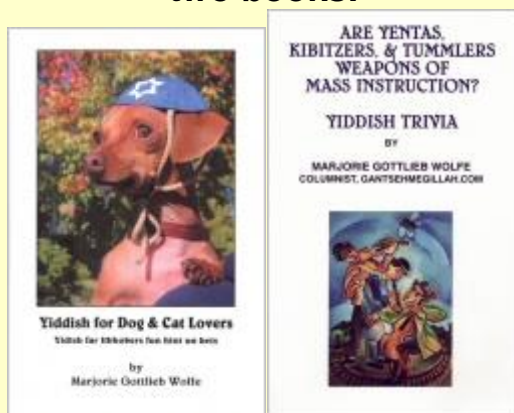
(Source: "The Bitter Truth About the Crown Heights Pogrom" by Hanoach Teller, Hamodia.com, 8/20/14)

- . According to Debra Nussbaum Cohen (Brooklyn 'pogrom'), "Today, one of the biggest sources of tensions is among Orthodox Jews, specifically modern Orthodox

newcomers and haredi Lubavitch residents who have long called the neighborhood home.”

Search for Stories Beginning with the Letter												
<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>G</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>J</u>	<u>K</u>	<u>L</u>	<u>M</u>
<u>N</u>	<u>O</u>	<u>P</u>	<u>Q</u>	<u>R</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>T</u>	<u>U</u>	<u>V</u>	<u>W</u>		<u>Y</u>	<u>Z</u>

Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of two books:



"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and "Are Yentas, Kibitzers, & Tumblers Weapons of Mass Instruction? Yiddish Trivia." To order a copy, go to her website: MarjorieGottliebWolfe.com

NU, what are you waiting for? Order the book!



[Yiddish Stuff](#)
[Jewish Humor](#)
[Schmooze News](#)
[More Majorie Wolfe](#)

[Principle](#)
[Jewish Stories](#)
[All Things Jewish](#)
[Jewish Communities of the World](#)

Site Designed and Maintained by
Haruth Communications