

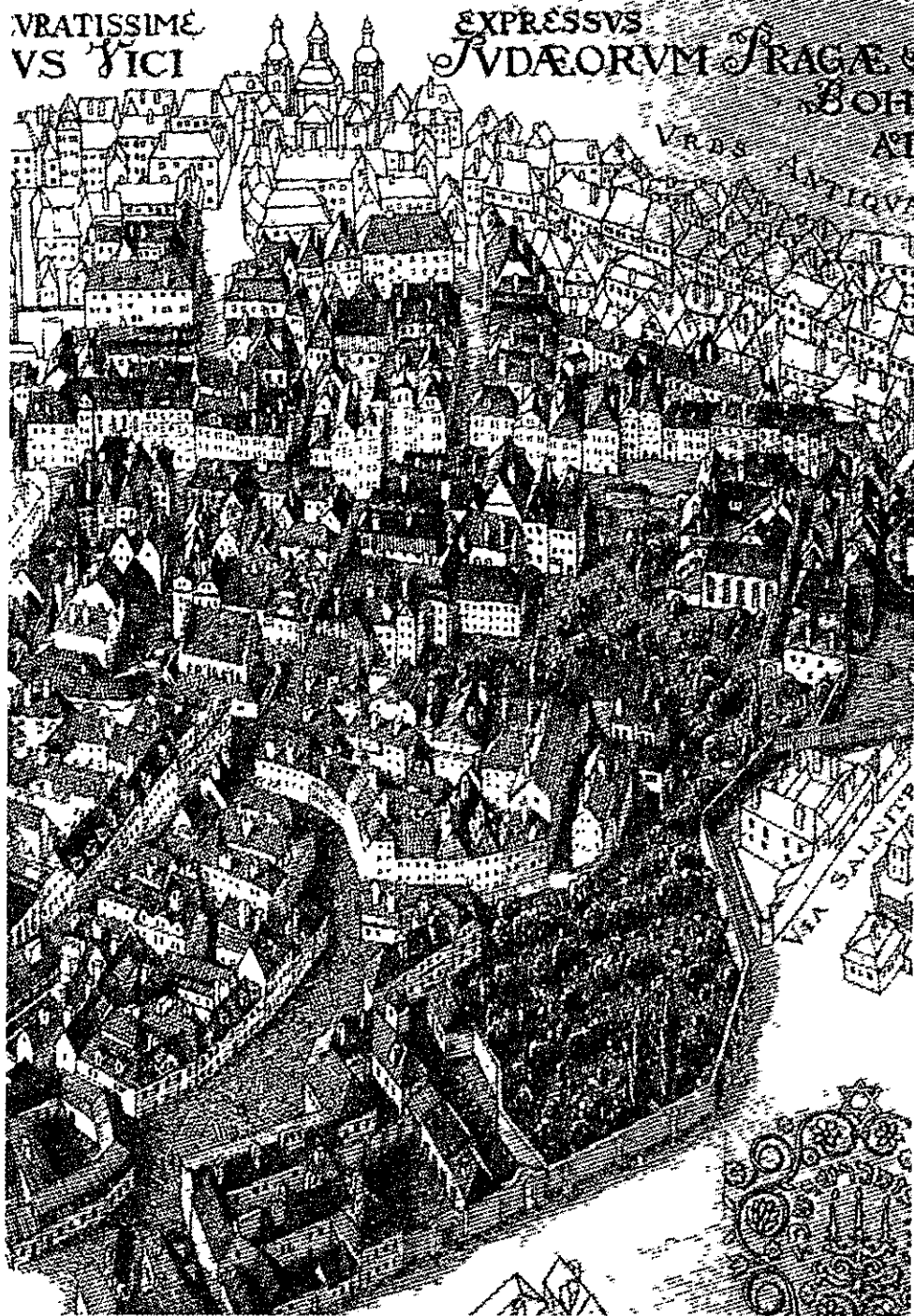
**THE DEATH OF SIMON ABELES**  
**Jewish-Christian Tension in  
Seventeenth-Century Prague**

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**The Third Annual Herbert Berman Memorial Lecture  
Center for Jewish Studies, Queens College, CUNY**

Cover illustration: Prague, circa 1493. Hartmann Schedel, *Das Buch der Chroniken*  
(Nuremberg, 1493).



Jewish Prague, 1804

## HERBERT BERMAN

**D**istinguished attorney, Jewish leader, and noted philanthropist, Herbert Berman worked tirelessly for a broad array of Jewish and civic causes throughout his life. A man of great spirit, his wise counsel was eagerly sought by clients, colleagues, community leaders, and government institutions. Each of the many causes he championed throughout the world benefited from his tenacious advocacy as well as his superb professional skills, generosity, honesty, and outspokenness.

A graduate of New York University and Harvard Law School, Herbert Berman was the senior attorney at the distinguished firm of Tenzer, Greenblatt, Fallon, and Kaplan. Yet, it was his altruistic work that was his greatest love next to his family. He sat on the boards of innumerable institutions, including the Board of Higher Education and Board of Trustees of the City University of New York, as well as on the University's Construction Fund. He was also a member of the Executive Committee of the CUNY School of Law at Queens College and a Trustee of the Queens Library Foundation.

With an unwavering devotion, Herbert Berman dedicated himself to Jewish causes. Above all, he was a leader in the field of Jewish education. He served on the Global Board of Trustees of Bar-Ilan University, from which he received an honorary doctorate. He was a member of the board of the Rabbi Yitzhak Elhanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University and of the Open University of Israel. He provided invaluable counsel to the AMIT network of educational institutions in Israel, an organization that his wife Daisy served as president.

Herbert Berman's commitment to justice for the Jewish people led to his work with the Conference of Material Claims against Germany, the World Jewish Congress, the World Jewish Restitution Organization, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and the North American Conference for Ethiopian Jewry. He served as an officer of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations and the Synagogue Council of America, as well as working for the America-Israel Friendship League, Bnai Zion, and many others.

Herbert Berman guided the establishment and growth of the Center for Jewish Studies at Queens College for over two decades. As chair of the Center's Advisory Board, he helped develop one of the outstanding programs in the country for Jewish scholarship, particularly for the study of the role of Jewish thought in American culture. His outstanding leadership and critical financial support were an inspiration to the faculty and students in the program. The Center greatly misses his vibrancy, his infectious enthusiasm, and his inimitable style. In his name, and with the support of his beloved wife Daisy, and his children Sara, Debra, and Nathaniel, the Center has established the Herbert Berman Memorial Lecture, which will henceforth be published annually and distributed widely to scholars and the broader community, as well as to local and national libraries.



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## Publications of the Center for Jewish Studies

### The Herbert Berman Memorial Lecture

Israel Singer, *Holocaust Era Assets: The Moral Perspective*, November 17, 1999

Elisheva Carlebach, *The Death of Simon Abeles: Jewish-Christian Tension in Seventeenth-Century Prague*, November 7, 2001

### Occasional Papers

Warren Harvey, *Maimonides' Political Philosophy and Its Relevance for the State of Israel Today*, The Dean Ernest Schwarcz Memorial Lecture, November 15, 2000

Geoffrey Hartman, *Holocaust Testimony, Videography and Education*, The Marvin and Celina Zborowski Endowment Lecture, May 2, 2001

### Queens College Journal of Jewish Studies: A Student Publication

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## FOREWORD

Each year, the Center for Jewish Studies at Queens College presents a series of public lectures of outstanding quality. We are proud to make some of them available to a larger audience.

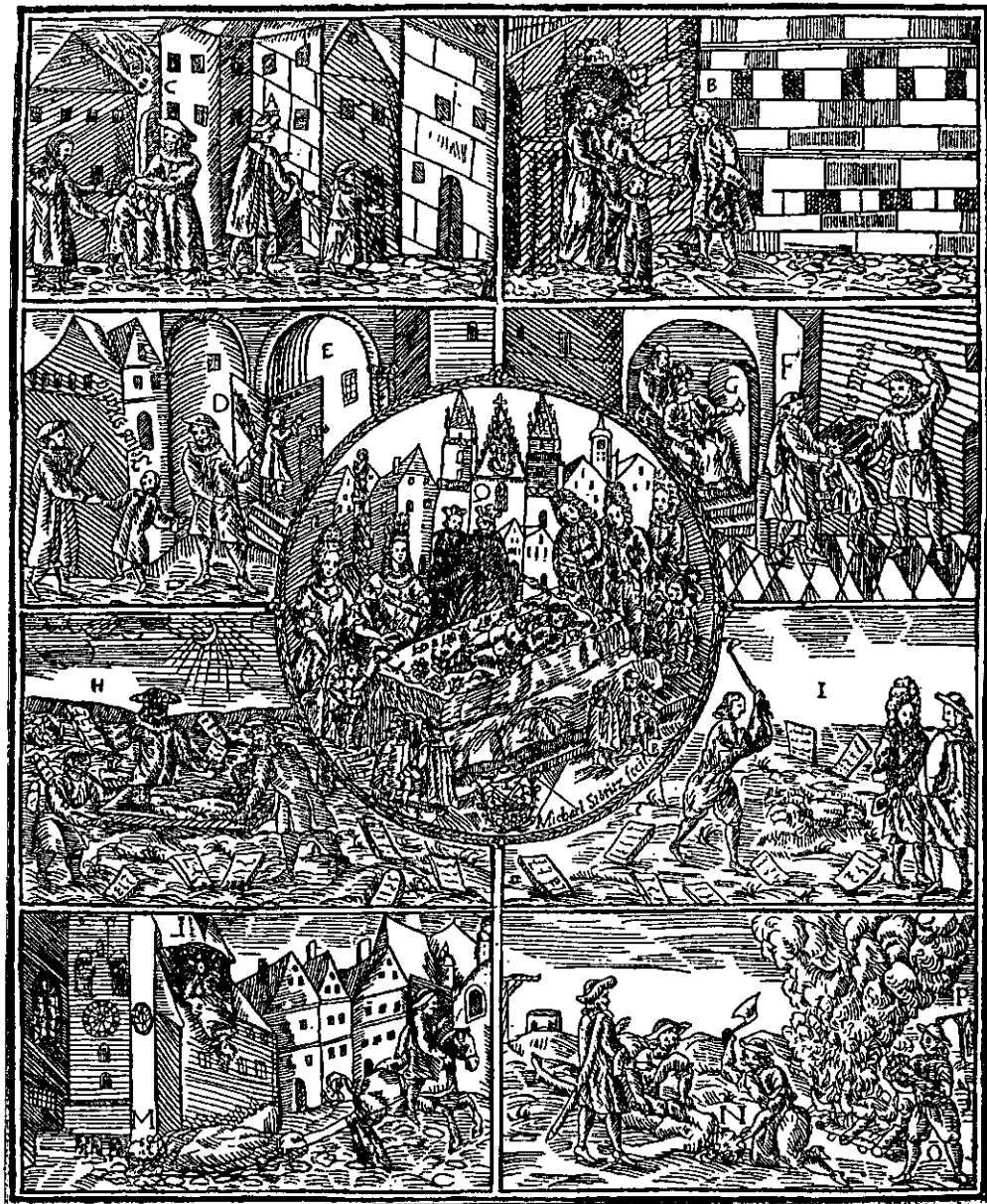
In this lecture, Professor Elisheva Carlebach explores a tragic though fascinating tale of murder and religious intrigue in late 17th century Prague. Simon Abeles, a Jewish youth, was prepared to convert, or so the city's Jesuits believed. But before he could complete the process, they discovered him dead. Without baptism, the boy was nevertheless buried as a Christian and beatified.

Simon's father, Lazar, and his supposed Jewish accomplice were accused of Simon's murder; despite their protestations of innocence, the men met different but very sorry fates indeed. Were they guilty as charged? Was a murder actually committed? What actually happened? How do we know? Deconstructing the *Processus Inquisitorius* (1696), the primary narrative source of the episode, Professor Carlebach carefully considers various possibilities and concludes that we may never know for sure. But she does suggest that with this story a new libel against Jews entered Jewish history: for the first time, a Jewish father is brought to trial not for the crime of murdering his child, but for the different crime of murdering him "out of hatred for the Christian faith."

This publication demonstrates how a superb historian plies her craft, and we are indebted to Professor Carlebach for her illuminating insights. The Center for Jewish Studies at Queens College expresses its gratitude to her for this essay and for having given the Herbert Berman Memorial Lecture on which it is based.

On behalf of the Center, I express my thanks and deep appreciation to Daisy Berman and family for underwriting the Herbert Berman Memorial Lecture and its publication, and for the family's abiding and generous support of the Center and all its activities.

Professor Benny Kraut  
*Director, Center for Jewish Studies*



A flysheet depicting the death and veneration of Simon Abeles. Michael Störiz, "Warhafftige Abbildung einer erschrecklichen Mordthat," n.p. 1694, from Georg Liebe, *Das Judentum in der deutschen Vergangenheit* (Leipzig, 1903), no. 68.

## THE DEATH OF SIMON ABELES

### Jewish-Christian Tension in Seventeenth-Century Prague

Under cover of darkness on the night of February 26, 1694, Lazar Abeles, member of a prominent Jewish family in Prague, was arrested and imprisoned in the dungeon of the Altstädter Rathaus. There, he remained in custody, chained, manacled, and in complete isolation. He stood accused of a most unusual crime: of murdering his own son, Simon, or Simele in the Yiddish diminutive, for expressing the desire to convert to Christianity. Young Simon Abeles had some contact with the Jesuits of Prague several months earlier, apparently expressing an interest in leaving home and preparing for conversion. While he awaited instruction in the Catholic faith the Jesuits remanded him to the care of a recent convert from Judaism. But Lazar Abeles succeeded in bringing his son back home, and the boy was never baptized.

Some months later, a Jewish informant, Josel Pass, notified the royal Statthalter that the boy was dead and had been buried without fanfare in the Jewish cemetery. Seeking evidence of foul play, the Prague court ordered the exhumation of the boy's body and its examination by the Charles University medical faculty. The protracted case led to the trial, torture, and death of Lazar Abeles, along with interrogations of his wife, household members, and other Jews, Christians, and converts. It ended with the identification of an alleged accomplice, Löbl (Raudnitz) Kurtzhandl, his public execution by excruciating torment, and the beatification of young Simon as a martyr for the Christian faith.

The case surrounding the death of Simon Abeles can serve as an introduction to the internal discord, political entanglements, and relations with neighboring Christians of the largest Jewish community in early-modern Western and Central Europe. It illuminates the intersecting strands of a society in tension: the feuding factions within the Prague Jewish community, the conflict between the Jesuits of Prague and the more pragmatic bureaucrats of the Habsburg court in Vienna, between the local Christians and local Jews, and between potential and recent converts and the Jewish community.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A fateful century separates the fabled city of Mahara"l (Rabbi Judah Loewe) and the Rudolfiner renaissance from the late-seventeenth-century Prague of the Abeles case. The creative confluence of cultures inaugurated by the tolerant Habsburg Emperor Rudolph II (1576-1612), in which Mahara"l and David Gans revolved within the same orbit as Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, would never again be duplicated in Prague.<sup>1</sup> That sixteenth-century world was destroyed during the

1. On the cultural interaction in sixteenth century Prague, see Noah J. Efron, "Common Goods: Jewish and Christian Householder Cultures in Early Modern Prague," in *Peace and Negotiation: Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* ed. Diane Wolfthal (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2000), pp. 233-255;

Thirty Years War. At its conclusion in 1648 the overall population of Prague had been reduced by half and the beautiful city lay in ruins. The triumphant Habsburgs instituted politically repressive measures, moving the Czech chancellery of the Empire to Vienna, their capital, and prohibiting the Czech diet from initiating any deliberation not sanctioned by the Emperor. They suppressed the Czech language and its literature, and outlawed all forms of Protestantism. Habsburg emperor Leopold I (1657-1705) provided great support for Jesuits; their mutual goal was the total Catholicization of Prague. The circumstances of Prague's Jews began to worsen considerably after the cessation of fighting and the ascendance of Jesuit influence in the second half of the seventeenth century.

The Jesuits merged Charles University, the eminent university of Prague, with their own Klementinum, the massive and forbidding-looking edifice that served as the fortress of their faith in Bohemia. After 1650, the now Jesuit university required every administrator, professor, and doctoral student awarded a degree to swear to uphold the basic tenets of the Catholic faith, ensuring the Catholic character of the university. The Jesuits oversaw educational institutions throughout Bohemia. It is difficult to overestimate the power and influence of the Czech Jesuits in the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> The Jesuits encouraged new religious cults, such as that of the fourteenth-century priest Johann Nepomuk. They exhumed his body, claiming that it had been miraculously preserved, and canonized him as a saint in 1729.<sup>3</sup> Their attempt to create a cult around the figure of Simon Abeles, then, fits perfectly into that context.

The triumphant Catholics instituted a reign of fear and intimidation that extended not just to Czech Protestants but to Bohemian Jews as well.<sup>4</sup> The number of Jews living in Prague had actually grown during the war from some 3,000 in 1600 to 11,000 by the late seventeenth century, making it one of the largest urban Jewish concentrations in the world. The expansion of Jewish life in the prewar years now gave way to restriction and contraction. Jewish residence was limited to the hazardously overcrowded ghetto, and Jews were now ordered to wear a distinctive ugly collar, a prominent ruff about the neck, to distinguish them from Christians.<sup>5</sup>

The conspicuous Jewish presence in Prague constituted a real threat to the underlying Jesuit message that the Catholic religion was the only true one. The existence of a Jewish community that had withstood infinitely greater trials than

on its material legacy, Otto Muneles, *Prague Ghetto in the Renaissance Period* (Prague: The State Jewish Museum, 1965).

2. On Jesuit influence over the politics and culture of Baroque Europe, see William O. McCagg, Jr., *A History of Habsburg Jews, 1670-1918* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 236, notes 12-14. On their extensive presence and power in the New World, see Oldrich Kaspar, *Los Jesuitas checos en la Nueva España, 1678-1767* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, Departamento de Historia, 1991).

3. The preceding account is based largely on Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 42-52. For a triumphalist Jesuit perspective, see William V. Bangert, *A History of the Society of Jesus* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), pp. 219-224, on the sweeping "success" of the post 1620s conversions in Central Europe.

4. Käthe Spiegel, "Die Prager Juden zur Zeit des dreißigjährigen Krieges" in *Die Juden in Prag. Bilder aus ihrer Tausendjährigen Geschichte* ed. Samuel Steinherz (Prague: Selbstverlag, Loge Praga des Ordens B'nai B'rith, 1927), pp. 107-186.

5. Both the new laws and the evidence cited in Efron, op. cit., testify to the close relations and similar appearance of Jews and Christians in Prague at least within the more worldly classes.

the Protestant Czechs and had nevertheless persisted, with language and culture intact, implicitly challenged the Protestants not to succumb so quickly to Jesuit pressure. The accusation of the fanatical murder of a potential convert by the Jews served to teach the hesitating populace that uncorrupted Jews secretly desired to convert but that their leaders prevented them from doing so.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequent years visited devastating natural calamities upon the community. In 1680, a plague swept through Prague, taking several thousand lives in the Judenstadt.<sup>7</sup> One cemetery could not provide sufficient space to bury all the people who perished in that year. The ghetto, though, was quickly repopulated. In 1689, just a few years later, and just a few short years before the Abeles accusation, a fire broke out that destroyed almost all the Jewish housing in the ghetto area.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the many months that it took to reconstruct the Jewish quarter, Jews rented space in Christian homes. Moses Bumsle (or Bunzel) Abeles, father of Lazar, and his family lived in a certain tavern during this period; his little grandson may well have come to know Christians more closely during this difficult time.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to such external pressures, and perhaps exacerbated by them, internecine strife marred Jewish communal life in late-seventeenth-century Prague. Several powerful families and factions formed alliances and squabbled bitterly over positions of Jewish communal leadership. Some of these rivalries were so intense that it was not unheard of for one Jewish leader to have another arrested and tortured just to get even or keep the rival out of power.<sup>10</sup> The communal registers often refer to arrest as a means of compelling one side of a judicial dispute to comply with the decision of the court. In civil cases, this meant a prison belonging to the Jewish court; in criminal cases, the local Christian jurisdiction remanded Jews to its own prisons.<sup>11</sup> Moses Abeles, a *primator* (communal leader), aligned himself with one of the prominent feuding Jewish factions.<sup>12</sup> The *pinkas ha-kehillah* (minute book of the community) from the troubled 1680s contains vari-

6. Egon Erwin Kisch, "Ex Odio Fidel..." in *Geschichten aus sieben Ghettos* (Amsterdam: Allert de Lange, 1934), pp. 63-77.

7. According to Vladimir Lipscher, "Jüdische Gemeinden in Böhmen und Mähren im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert," *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Juden in der Tschechoslovakischen Republik* [=JGGJR] 9(1938):76, 3529 Jews perished in 1680; by 1702 there were 11,617 Jews living in the Jewish quarter.

8. On the 1689 fire, see Jaroslav Prokeš and A. Blaschka, "Der Antisemitismus der Behörden und das Prager Ghetto in nachweisenbergerischer Zeit," *JGGJR* 1 (1929): 111-142; Joseph A. Polak, "Interpreting Catastrophe: Insights from the Halakic Literature on the Prague Fire of 1689," in *Celebrating Elie Wiesel* ed. Alan Rosen, (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), esp. pp. 96-99; Alexandr Putfk, "The Prague Jewish Community in the Late 17th and Early 18th Centuries," *Judaica Bohemia* 36 (2000): 56.

9. The name Bunzel derived from the place name Mladá Boleslav, Jung Bunzlau in German, Bunzla in Yiddish. Putfk, "The Hebrew Inscription," p. 29. Variant spellings of Bunzel, Bumsle, appear to be used interchangeably in primary sources.

10. Alexandr Putfk, "The Hebrew Inscription on the Crucifix at Charles Bridge in Prague: The Case of Elias Backoffen and Berl Tabor in the Appellation Court," *Judaica Bohemia* 32 (1996): 28-43, about the vicious lifelong battles conducted by the powerful Bohemian court Jew Abraham Aron Lichtenstadt against various Jewish rivals is a model of scholarly inquiry into this phenomenon.

11. Putfk, "The Hebrew Inscription," p. 43.

12. Lotharius Franz Fried, *Neupolierter und wohlgeschliffener Juden-Spiegel: Darinnen der Juden greuliche Verstockung und Blindheit...* (Mainz: Verlag des Authoris, 1715), p. 143, mentions several times that the clan "Baurianer" were mortal enemies of the Abeles clan. Lazar Abeles and his alleged accomplice needed to keep the murder secret not only from the Christians, "but also from the Jews, especially the Baurianer clan." According to Fried, "Lazar forbade Levi [Löbl Kurtzhandl] from burying the body in his cellar for fear that the Baurianer might discover it." On Fried, see below, p. 39.

ous references to lawsuits involving Moses Abeles or his son Lazar.<sup>13</sup> In 1693, the very year of the trial featuring Simon his grandson, Moses Abeles was involved in a complicated and acrimonious legal case that reached the old town court and then the appeals court in Prague.<sup>14</sup> Later, during the interrogation of Lazar Abeles, the inquisitor repeatedly asked whether his father Moses, the *primator*, knew of the little boy's death, a sure sign that the inquisitors hoped to implicate a Jewish elder in a conspiracy to kill the child.<sup>15</sup>

Exploiting this seething backdrop, the Jesuits pursued a relentless campaign to attract disaffected Jews away from Judaism to Catholicism. They found plenty of willing customers. From the decades after 1660, many legal cases attest to a high number of apostates from Judaism, many of whom publicly vented their frustration with their former co-religionists. These entries in the minute books are sometimes comical, as in the case in which an apostate sued a Jewish synagogue for taking a *parochet* (decorative cloth covering for the holy ark) which he had donated as a Jew, and hanging it backward as a sign of disdain for him. He sued to reclaim his donation, but the *parochet* was stolen before the case could conclude.<sup>16</sup> Most of the cases, however, had far more tragic consequences. In 1672, the heads of the Jewish community of Prague were collectively accused of murdering an apostate, Wenzel Winbersky.<sup>17</sup> The local and royal government adhered to a policy of collective and vicarious punishment for crimes allegedly committed by Jews against Christians. One of the arrested communal leaders, Hirsch Bloch Backoffen, died in jail in 1679. In that case, collective responsibility for the murder was clearly a libelous invention, and the authorities went straight for the heads of the Jewish community.

## METHOD AND SOURCES

Documents concerning the Abeles trial were printed and circulated shortly after the events. Yet conflicting narratives and divergent viewpoints constitute our only sources for the events that took place in Prague in 1694. Did Simon die of natural causes, as his parents and household members maintained? Was he the victim of parental child abuse, killed by a blow delivered in anger by a parent prone to violent outbursts? Or did the father deliberately murder the child because he had

13. References to Moses and Lazar Bumsle Abeles in the Prague archives appear as follows: (GAHJP= Microfilm no. in Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem) CAHJP, HM2/3215, fol. 39b, dated 23 Iyar 1682: Lazar Abeles summoned to (non-Jewish) court Leyb Fanta, threatening him with jail for non payment of a debt, and Fanta requested a delay so that he could hire a lawyer. In the same ms., fol. 68b, Lazar was involved in another dispute concerning a shipment of leather gloves. See also fol. 80b. In Simon Adler, "Das älteste Judicial-Protokoll des jüdischen Gemeinde-Archives in Prag (1682)" *JGGJČR* 3 (1931), Moses Bunzel/Abeles is party to disputes recorded on p. 220, no. 4; 222, no. 9; 244, no. 87. It is tempting to speculate that some of the testimony against the Abeles family in the trial concerning Simon's death may have been motivated by old rivalries.

14. Putfk, "The Hebrew Inscription," p. 35.

15. *Processus*, preface, i, (full citation below, n. 19) identifies Lazar Abeles as "the only son of the Jewish Primatoris of Prague, one of the most eminent Jews of Prague." The inquisitors asked Lazar, p. 19, "Did your father also know about the death?" and p. 20: Q: "Did your father know of this running away? A. My father knew nothing; I myself knew nothing of this, whether he was home [or not]."

16. S.H. Lieben, "Der Ramschak Chronik," *JGGJČR* 1 (1929):399, no. 67.

17. Putfk, "The Hebrew Inscription," p. 28. Moses Abeles was also among those falsely implicated in that case. See Tobias Jakobovits, "Die Erlebnisse des R. Berl Jetteles als Primator der Prager Judenschaft," *JGGJČR* 7 (1935): 16, n. 15.

remained steadfast in his wish to convert, as the local court and the Jesuits maintained?

I have not tried to unearth new facts, or draw conclusions concerning "what actually happened" in this brief format. Rather, I focus on one primary source in the light of several contemporary and later accounts. They provide an exemplary case study of the difficulties inherent in teasing the past out of texts that have been configured to present a specific narrative *ab initio*. Events and voices already obscured by the passage of time become even more difficult to reconstruct when they contain multiple layers of distortion, both intentional and accidental.

The most important printed source for the Abeles case remains the anonymous *Processus Inquisitorius* (Inquisitorial Proceedings), a collection of documents, including sworn affidavits, royal and local judicial decisions, transcripts of interrogations, along with commentary and frequent editorial interjections. This source was published with imperial support, and it favors the Jesuit perspective. Emperor Leopold I issued an explicit offer concerning the proceedings of the Abeles case to "whomsoever shall undertake to publish all the related documents, all assistance will be given to ensure that they obtain the most reliable account and sources. This is our order and our will."<sup>18</sup> The first edition of the *Processus* appeared in 1696, while a second edition appeared in 1728.<sup>19</sup> It is important to remember that at every stage of the proceedings, the civil authorities, whether local or imperial, made the arrests, conducted the trials, issued the rulings, and had complete control over the outcome.<sup>20</sup> That the Jesuit fathers were able to achieve complete satisfaction of their goals in the case testifies to their profound influence over the judiciary and the complete success of their role in the re-Catholicization of Prague by the late seventeenth century.

The unidentified editor of the *Processus* constructed his little book out of discrete and individual documents linked by a running narrative between the primary texts. He instructed the reader to regard each text as a clue toward solving a criminal mystery or as a puzzle piece, and not to reach conclusions until he has read all the evidence. With this invitation, the editor summoned the reader to become a partner in the reconstruction of the crime, allowing each reader to attain the satisfaction of having arrived at an independent conclusion based on the hard evidence. The reader thus became fully complicit and acquiescent in the underlying assumption: that a crime had in fact occurred, in the manner that the documents set forth.<sup>21</sup> Just in case the reader missed the point, the editor spelled out the entire case in the preface and sprinkled the text with leading remarks.

18. *Processus Inquisitorius*, preface, iv.

19. *Processus Inquisitorius* (Prague: Balthasar Joachim Endter, Nürnbergschen Buchhändler, 1696; Prague: Caspar Zacharias Wussin, 1728). (I have used the pagination of the latter edition for all citations except where noted). While a first glance yields the impression that the second edition is a reprinting of the first, a closer examination of the typeface and layout reveal that the 1728 edition is a completely new edition. The picture that appears in the first edition is of much finer quality than its poor reproduction in the second, but only the 1728 edition contains a portrait of the martyred Simon.

20. Putfk, "Hebrew Inscription," pp. 44-45, contains a detailed explanation of jurisdictional hierarchies in the Prague court system.

21. See e.g., *Processus*, p. 13, where the narrator assumes that a crime worthy of public attention had been committed, although the case had not yet been made.



Portrayal of Jews ritually killing Simon of Trent. Hartmann Schedel, *Das Buch der Chroniken* (Nuremberg, 1493), from Georg Liebe, *Das Judentum in der deutschen Vergangenheit* (Leipzig, 1903), no. 115.

Although the matter bears further investigation, I suspect that the editor may have had a specific literary model before him: the manuscript that commemorated the death and ritual murder trial of another martyred boy named Simon, the infamous Simon of Trent. The link between the Simons was made first by the Jesuits who prepared the funeral for Simon Abeles in *ipso festo Simonis Tridentini pueri, aequae à Judaeis quondam martyrizat...*, on the very day of the feast of the boy Simon of Trent, martyred by the Jews.<sup>22</sup> That ritual murder accusation against the Jews of Trent and Regensburg charged the Jewish communities with conspiring to kidnap and murder a Christian child in order to use his blood. The case led to annihilation of the Jewish community of Trent and put other communities into grave jeopardy.<sup>23</sup> For the purposes of our discussion, it is sufficient to

22. *Processus*, p. 67.

23. The records form the subject of R. Po-chia Hsia, *Trent 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

note here similarities in the construction of the narratives, original texts interlinked by an editorial voice. Both stories were told to justify the beatification of a little boy and to vilify local Jewish communities. At the time of the Abeles case two manuscripts of the Trent trial could be found in Vienna, one German and one Latin, and an additional one in Rome. Any of these might have served as a stimulus or model for the editor of *Processus*.

Unlike the overt miracle tales and openly religious works produced in the aftermath of the Abeles case, the *Processus* strives for a greater pretense of judicial objectivity. Nevertheless, this published record remains a manifestly tainted source. The Jesuits constructed the narrative, influenced the court officers to ask leading questions of naïve or terrified witnesses until they received the answers they expected, and manipulated every aspect of the case from start to gruesome end. It allows us to draw very different conclusions than those the seventeenth-century editors intended.

Historians of early-modern Europe have long grappled with the challenge of using both court records and inquisitorial dossiers as historical tools, and have mapped out some of their advantages and hazards. In her path-breaking book *Fiction in the Archives*, Natalie Zemon Davis has argued that legal documents strive mightily to shape crimes into "fiction," narratives that construct a suspenseful tale with characters and outcomes that suit the sensibilities of their creators, providing meaning or explanation.<sup>24</sup> Such testimony may be of limited value towards establishing an actual set of events. It could have been elicited by means of various pressures, from the administration or fear of torture, to the desire to please the powerful, or to say what the witness thinks the court wants to hear. People can lie brazenly, and lawyers can ask questions that deliberately distort the events or steer the witness away from the truth.

Despite the pitfalls, however, there are many valuable things we can learn from such sources. Purposeful shaping does not necessarily mean that the document is valueless to the historian. In the case of criminal trials, it allows us to understand how the shapers of the trial, and the society they represent, designated some individuals as the victims, some as the perpetrators, and others as believable witnesses. Some of the characters would never be given voice in any other document. If not for the court records we may never even have learned of their existence. In some cases, these records preserve the exact words spoken centuries ago.<sup>25</sup> Even in the case of inquisitorial court proceedings, where the prosecutors, judges, and executioners were often one and the same body, the rights of the defendant limited, and the outcome often a foregone conclusion, the notaries themselves were often trained to record the words of the proceedings with meticulous accuracy.<sup>26</sup> While justice was often perverted, the words spoken in the

24. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 4.

25. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, "Introduction: The Crime of History," in *History from Crime* ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. viii.

26. Regarding the entire corpus of Iberian Inquisitorial documentation, see the discussion in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 23-24.



courts were not necessarily so.

The editor of *Processus Inquisitorius* had every opportunity to present the best possible case to the court of public opinion.<sup>27</sup> Published in 1696, over a year after the final events described in the text, the book referred to the high standards of judicial procedure followed in this criminal investigation. Frequent editorial commentary attests to the importance in which the editor held his role as shaper of the narrative, and possibly as architect of the case itself. The fact that this redactor had complete control and omniscience in presenting the material allows us to assume that where gaps, weaknesses, and inconsistencies remain, they exist in spite of his very best efforts to eliminate such elements from the text.

### TESTIMONY AND CREDIBILITY

The first issue to consider when evaluating the credibility of the testimonies preserved in the *Processus* is the use of torture to extract the desired confessions. In this case, the inquisitors hoped to produce confessions to serve as evidence that Lazar Abeles murdered his son for desiring to convert. Torture was a common tool in the judicial system in many parts of seventeenth-century Europe, yet the Appellations Court, as well as the editor of the *Processus*, were aware that confessions extracted under torture were liable to distort or undermine the value of testimonies.

After the first interrogations of members of the Abeles household yielded nothing incriminating,

We [members of the Appellations College] began to deliberate carefully as to what means should be used to bring out the truth most effectively. Considerable difficulties were involved, first because no proper witness had materialized to date against Lazar Abeles, the father of the murdered child, much less some other person involved in the murder, only conjectures and presumptions. . . . [The Appellations College deliberated whether] it would be sufficient to subject one or the others to torture, and [raised the question concerning] the difficulty of admitting torture this early in the investigation, which could open the door to denial of everything that had been testified to earlier. . . . The Appellations College deliberated so carefully, because some opined that in previous cases of Jewish Inquisition, it had been far more effective to provide live confrontations with rebuttal witnesses than torture.<sup>28</sup>

Despite its acknowledgement of the compromising nature of torture in a trial, the *Processus* contains abundant references to instruments of torture,

27. The *Processus* differs from the account of Jesuit father Johannes Eder (cited below n. 101) which makes no pretense to objectivity. Putfk, "Jewish Community," p. 47, n. 209, discovered a Latin account by the preacher who converted Löbl Kurtzhandl, "Mirabilis Conversio Levi Kurtzhandl a Judaismo ad Catholicam fidem in Supplicio rotæ baptizati, qui hoc anno 1694 in Februario Simonem Abeles 12 annorum puerum Hebraeum Catechumenum nostrum ex odio fidelis occidit; a Sacerdote Societatis JESU Reum ad mortem disponente, conscripta." I have not yet seen this text, and therefore cannot yet comment on its relationship to the published *Processus*, and the possible role of its author, German Jesuit preacher Johannes Brandstätter, in shaping the published account.

28. *Processus*, pp. 25-26.

"Schaerfe," or the threat of it. The *Processus* reported that many witnesses made statements "freely and without coercion." The editor did not consider the threat of torture to be a means of coercion. In one instance the inquisitor warned Lazar Abeles that more torture would be applied.<sup>29</sup> The most flagrant example of its mis/use comes at the very end of the book, in the excruciating torture applied to the alleged accomplice, Löbl Kurtzhandl. The torture that ostensibly led to his conversion in the last moments of his life was also commonplace in seventeenth-century Europe. The use of torture or its threat as a routine means of extracting confessions must color any contemporary evaluation of the testimonies.

The alternative method used by the courts to confound uncooperative witnesses consisted of arranging a confrontation between a "cooperative" witness and a recalcitrant witness who had not yet been convinced to "tell the truth." One witness was brought face-to-face with the other in the hopes that the surprised party would say something incriminating in the emotion of the moment. Sometimes the inquisitors would conceal one of the witnesses while they interrogated another, and then bring out the first for an unexpected confrontation. Any sign of emotion in the startled witness was taken as an indication of guilt. When the inquisitors confronted Lazar Abeles with the exhumed corpse of his son, "he became pale, speechless, and frightened, so that he could barely speak." In response to the question put to him then, "he answered with great hesitation and stammering," and "could not speak coherently but babbled in such confusion that it was almost impossible to understand what he said." As a result of his facial expressions, "Because his brow, eyes, and expression in this preliminary first inquisition made a very bad impression, it was sufficient for the commissioners to set forth that Lazar knew of the wound in the temple, and that the Jewish outcry, that it [the wound] had been caused later by the hacking and shoveling of the corpse during the exhumation, could be overlooked."<sup>30</sup> Confronted with a young girl now being instructed in Christianity, Sara Uressin, who claimed to have overheard him beating his son, Lazar exhibited "fear and paleness."<sup>31</sup>

Before any evidence of his guilt had been introduced, Lazar was judged guilty by his facial expressions. Yet if a witness responded directly with no equivocation, this too proved his guilt. When nineteen-year-old Löbl Kurtzhandl forthrightly answered the questions put to him by the inquisitors, they attributed it to his legalistic cunning rather than to his possible innocence: "They took him by surprise in the hopes of abruptly bringing him into a contradiction, or even to confessing his misdeeds, but all to no avail. . . . His answers consisted mostly of simple negatives, out of evil spite, in order to avoid contradictions."<sup>32</sup>

The court manipulated witnesses in other ways as well. Sara Uressin, usually

29. *Processus*, p. 65. When a defendant answered that he had not committed the crime, and if he knew anything about it, he would talk rather than allow himself to be tortured, the editor quickly interjected "N.B. Here this inquisitor has already imagined torture," assuring the reader that it had not yet been applied, only threatened. In the interrogation of Lazar Abeles, *Processus*, p. 24, q. 54, and similarly, p. 32, q. 10, the interrogator warned Lazar Abeles, "Acknowledge the truth or we will use *Schärfe*." Hennele, the cook was threatened, p. 34, q. 11; Lea Abeles, p. 42, q. 11, p. 46, q. 21, and p. 47, q. 23.

30. *Processus*, pp. 8-9.

31. *Processus*, p. 32.

32. *Processus*, pp. 50-51.



dressed in Christian clothing as a catechumen, a trainee for conversion, was once again secretly dressed as a Jew, *auf Jüdisch gekleidet*, so that the Jews she confronted would not be aware of her true status.<sup>33</sup> They might have felt less threatened by her testimony had they known that she was a recent catechumen controlled by the Jesuits, therefore less reliable as an independent witness. It was directly after his confrontation with Sara that Lazar died or hanged himself in the jail, for reasons we may never know. Did he die of wounds inflicted during a torture session?<sup>34</sup> Or did he fear that the inquisitors would coach and suborn as many witnesses as it took to convict him of the crime they imputed to him? Did he in fact behave violently in the domestic setting and kill his son in an uncontrolled rage? It is impossible to know which, if any, of the charges against him rang true; how he died; and if he took his own life, what his reason may have been.

After Lazar's death, the legal proceedings ought to have ground to a halt. Guilty or not, he had been their chief target and now that he was dead there was no defendant left to prosecute. This moment constitutes a pivotal juncture. In what must be the most egregious instance of manipulation in the case, at the most critical and unexpected turning point in the entire proceedings, the inquisitors never informed his wife, Lea, of Lazar's death. Hoping to secure another victim in his place so that they could conclude their drama in accordance with the predetermined script, her inquisitors led Lea to believe that Lazar might be saved if she named another suspect, which she did. In a desperate attempt to save her husband's life, Lea implicated Löbl Kurtzhandl as a confederate in Lazar's crime. Lea's testimony is accompanied by explicit threats of "more torture," and "severe warnings to tell the truth." Since Kurtzhandl had not been mentioned in any earlier testimony, I read the remainder of the text as the condemnation of an innocent man who happened to be an acquaintance of the Abeles' passing through their home.<sup>35</sup>

Löbl Kurtzhandl ultimately played the role that had been designated for Lazar Abeles in the drama that the Jesuits had scripted. They were never able to find a shred of physical evidence to tie him to the death of Simon despite comically frantic efforts. In the same interrogation, Lea also miraculously remembered another witness to the entire death scene, a "Repp Lipmann" who had never been mentioned by the other household members either. Thus, the testimony that clinched the case by creating a victim, a motive, and a perpetrator, as well as producing an unrelated witness, was introduced as a consequence of fear of torture. The inquisitor admonished Lea: "You had the best knowledge of all, and you abetted it, don't deny it, say the truth or the Schärffer will be [re]appliéd." After sufficient time in the jail under the hands of her tormentors, Lea said what she thought the court

33. *Processus*, p. 37.

34. Kisch argued that since the *Processus*, p. 33, described his being held in foot shackles and a hand manacle, it would have been very hard for him to hang himself.

35. For examples of testimonies that make no mention of his presence, see p. 23, no. 48; p. 37, no. 2. The narrative begins to focus on Kurtzhandl on p. 49. The editor of *Processus* hedged in his final assessment of the case against Kurtzhandl: "Even if he hadn't been a perpetrator but only an onlooker of such a heinous child murder, according to Bohemian law... as well as in general law... he would have forfeited his life." *Processus*, p. 81. I discount the confession of Kurtzhandl, attested to only by Father Johannes Brandstätter, made as part of an attempt to plea bargain Kurtzhandl's execution.

wished to hear. She defended her complete innocence in the case: "I was the only one against it, and I fell into a faint as well . . . I did not help at all."<sup>36</sup> In the end, the members of the small Abeles family conformed to certain medieval Christian stereotypes: the violent and obstinate Jewish man, the pliant and weaker Jewish woman.<sup>37</sup>

The courts and local powers also sanctioned the tactic of ordering widely cast dragnets of sweeping arrests. The seizure and detention of "all Jews and Christians who had anything to do with [the case], or might know anything related to the case, or believe something, or have any conjectures or suspicions" must have annoyed and frightened many people who were prevented from going about their daily business. Some were merely called in for questioning and released, while others were arrested and imprisoned. They were given "many detailed interrogations, morning and afternoon, many days running with no interruption, so long as everything remained in recent memory, and without allowing any time for reflection on part of perpetrators."<sup>38</sup>

While some of these detainees may have stood firm, many others would have heeded the prompting of the inquisitors and said what was demanded of them in order to return home. The Christian "mason named Benekamp, rented a room in his house to a convert from Judaism now named Franz Kawka. Kawka had been entrusted with the care of Simon Abeles during the time he received instruction, a trust that he did not fulfill very well. When Benekamp was questioned, *despite a good deal of prompting*, he had nothing further to say in his examination other than that the boy had stayed in the home of Kawka several days, but he did not know why."<sup>39</sup> When the prosecutors hoped to unearth evidence of Löbl Kurtzhandl's guilt, "every dweller in his mother's tenement was rounded up. Later, every one of her friends and acquaintances [were arrested] in order to pressure her to reveal something sinister about the contents of the letter, all to no avail."<sup>40</sup>

Because this entire episode yielded no evidence, the embarrassed editor spared his readers details of the fruitless "confrontations" with the friends and neighbors. It provides a perfect example of excessive prosecutorial zeal and unwarranted incursion into private homes and lives.

Alongside manipulation and deceit, the courts used secrecy and isolation as a tool wherever possible, characteristic of courts that adhered to inquisitorial procedure. All arrests were carried out under the imperative of greatest secrecy. This could be accomplished only with the equivalent of highest approval from royal representatives. There were several reasons for keeping arrests secret. First, alerting the population of the Judenstadt might tip off family members and other suspects who would flee. Second, the court wanted to avoid mobilization of the Jew-

36. *Processus*, p. 59.

37. See Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1999), p. 41. The female image had changed by the early modern period to a stronger and more obdurate figure; see my *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500-1750* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2001), pp. 182-192. The story the Jesuits constructed around Simon conformed to older stereotypes.

38. *Processus*, p. 14.

39. *Processus*, p. 15 (my emphasis).

40. *Processus*, p. 59.

ish community against the developing charges in the case. Only a few, perhaps inadvertent, references remain to what must have been a very powerful Jewish effort to exonerate the accused from the charges against them, particularly in the case of Löbl Kurtzhandl where Imperial orders stayed the Jesuit sentence twice.<sup>41</sup> In addition to diplomatic channels that developed as the Jewish community found out about the case, the members of the *Chevra Kadisha* (Burial Society) provided initial resistance to the Jesuit narrative.

The Jesuit narrative received powerful support from the statements of the Charles University medical faculty. Since the entire case rested upon forensic evidence, university physicians conducting the autopsy and testifying at the post-mortem played a central role.<sup>42</sup> How standard a practice was the solicitation of expert opinions from the local university faculty in such a case? The sixteenth-century imperial legal code, the Carolina, mandated that legal cases too complex for the local magistracy be referred to the nearest university faculty. The legal opinions of the university professors carried great weight with the courts and nearly always decided the outcomes.<sup>43</sup> From the first statement of the physicians examining the corpse: "From this we learn that the boy did not die of an illness but of a blow," it appears that they had been specifically charged with countering the claim of the father that the boy had died a natural death.<sup>44</sup>

The physicians' initial resistance to the diagnosis of poison as the cause of death, as the informant claimed, lends some credibility to their subsequent finding. Still, given that any results consistent with an unnatural death would have sufficed for the prosecution, and that every faculty member had taken a loyalty oath to the Catholic regime, their conclusions may nevertheless have been compromised. The physicians claimed to have found two separate signs of violence: a head wound as well as a broken neck vertebra. They concluded that the boy must have died from a traumatic blow inflicted on him. The court pressured witnesses to come up with a course of events that could conform to this turn of evidence.

The Jewish delegation charged with defending Abeles argued that these injuries must have resulted from the process of digging up the body. The *Processus* angrily reported that the members of the *Chevra Kadisha* provided countervailing testimony to that of the physicians. "All the Jews who had any contact with the corpse in the course of the Jewish ceremonies, in the washing, dressing the corpse in the shroud, putting on the cap and other tasks of similar nature were

41. For references to the Jewish diplomatic effort, see *Processus*, pp. 8-9; the aside on p. 11; and the details, p. 74, of an appeal undertaken directly to the Emperor by Löbl Kurtzhandl's "friends," in which he claimed that he had been convicted without access to defense counsel, without a hearing, and without having made a confession. The supplication was presented by Frischel Schäßle Köchiles, a Prague Jew, and the appeals were successful in granting him two stays. The Yiddish *kloglid* (see below) also refers to the Jewish defense and the hopes of Löbl Kurtzhandl until his end that he might yet be saved. See Putfk, "The Hebrew Inscription," pp. 43-46, for a discussion of the judicial process in criminal cases. After being turned down by the local Appellations court, the Jews would have had to turn to the Emperor through the Bohemian Court Chancery in Vienna. There, they hoped that the powerful court Jews who resided in Vienna would exert their influence.

42. In the final summation of the case, the editor listed the medical testimony as first in importance. *Processus*, p. 79.

43. Peter Stein, *Roman Law in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 90.

44. *Processus*, p. 6.

most sharply questioned in the hopes they had detected signs of violence on the corpse, but they would not acknowledge anything of that sort in the slightest degree."<sup>45</sup> The account of Lotharius Franz Fried, a convert born in Prague, mentions another detail omitted from the *Processus*: that on March 1, days after the exhumation of Simon's body, the Jews came to the Rathaus to complain that the body had been exhumed without evidence of violence and demanded that it be returned for burial. It was this request that forced officials to convene the medical faculty to provide forceful evidence of foul play.<sup>46</sup> Their testimony provides a rare exception to the prevailing narrative in the *Processus*. Like the few other glimpses of an alternative explanation that entered the text, the editor contorted them to conform to the image of Jewish obduracy, and the countervailing Jewish account never interrupts the driving force of the Jesuit narrative.<sup>47</sup>

### HISTORY IN THE TEXT

The use of torture and deceit to intimidate witnesses and extract confessions is only one of the problems with the credibility of the version of the events presented by the *Processus*. While this is not the forum for a complete analysis of the text, we can at least indicate some of the most obvious internal problems with the narrative. At the same time, we must try to ascertain which details and circumstances ring true to the historical context.

The narrative unfolds with a denunciation by a Jewish informer, Josel Pass, whose full identity is revealed only at the end of the book. The denunciation refers to a Jewish youth named Simon Abeles, 12 or 13 years of age, who wished to convert to Christianity.<sup>48</sup> In order to prevent his conversion, his father had him forcibly returned to the Jewish quarter. When the boy persisted in his desire to convert, the father killed him by poisoning his wine. He then buried the boy secretly. The text of the denunciation contains detailed knowledge of the leading Jesuits of Prague, names of converts and Christians implicated in the case, as well as intimate descriptions of the topography of Jewish and Christian Prague. Any Jew who was not a paid or prompted informant could not easily have been privy to many of the details concerning the identity and correct titles of the Jesuits in the Klementinum. The informant "could not be found" in time to testify at any point in the trial.

The Charles University physicians who conducted the autopsy discovered no signs of poison, disproving the "information" contained in the denunciation. Few

45. *Processus*, p. 16. The initial report, p. 2, named "the Jew Jeruchin [Yeruchem in the Yiddish *kloglid*, family name Koranda, the cemetery caretaker], along with the attendant for the sick, Hirschel Kesseles, who had been called by Wolff Schmeiles, at the request of Lazar Abeles." They were charged with not reporting the death and not conducting a full-fledged funeral, but burying the boy secretly to hide the crime. If the child had been a minor as his father claimed, the simple burial would have been standard. In his reply at a later questioning, p. 19, Lazar Abeles named Moyses Rundniz and Joseph Kirchengatter as the men who washed and buried Simon. The *kloglid* also names a Yoseph; it may have been written by one of these men.

46. Fried, *Neupolierter*, pp. 151-52.

47. Fried, *Neupolierter*, pp. 157-158, provides a brief presentation of the counterevidence, which was entirely "overridden" by the commissioners in favor of the denunciation and the words of a long-term convert from Judaism, Fanta.

48. Simon's age remained under contention during and even long after the trial. See Fried, *Neupolierter*, p. 114.

substantive matters in Pass's denunciation are credible, including the assertion that his life would be forfeit if the Jews found out that he was the source of information. (In fact, he was a known informer who lived thirty more years in the Jewish quarter.) He seems to have entered the narrative solely to provide a pretext for the Jesuits to open the investigation. When "found" and questioned at the end of the case concerning the source of his information, he replied that he heard it from the "small children at play in the streets."<sup>49</sup> The shadowy R. Lipmann, introduced into the record by Lea's testimony, allegedly told Lazar Abeles that the entire Judenstadt already knew what he had done to his son: "Go out onto the streets and you will hear how your son died."

Where did these rumors originate, and why did the Jesuits focus on this particular Jewish boy? Over a decade after the plague of 1680 had ravaged the Judenstadt and carried away almost half its Jewish population, the death of a young Jew could scarcely have been cause for such alarm. Indeed, Lea Abeles testified that two of her four children died young, yet only her stepson Simon became the focus of a charge of murder. The claim that Simon had approached the Jesuits for conversion must be taken seriously, especially within the immediate historical context. The years of Simon's alleged contact with the Jesuits coincided with the greatest acceleration in the number of Jewish converts to Christianity in Prague.

Of all the institutions focusing on the mission to the Jews, the Jesuit Klementinum succeeded in attracting and maintaining the greatest number of catechumens from the Jewish community. Father Guglielmo Dworski excelled as a successful proselytizer. Both the Klementinum and Dworski played a key role in Simon's early contacts with the Christians in Prague. In one set of statistics cited by Putfk, over a third of the Jewish converts in the archdiocese of Prague, which covers much of Bohemia, were children under the age of fifteen. The Jesuits were particularly adept at attracting young adolescents who lived in settings marked by parental absence or conflict, then appealing to them with logical arguments about why Christianity was superior to Judaism. Simon most likely fell into this category, but he had not yet embarked on the process that would lead to baptism. Once Simon returned unbaptized to the Judenstadt and to his parental home, the Jesuits may have hoped for a second chance. News of Simon's death snatched this polemical victory from them. At that point they set into motion machinations that would accuse the Jews of deliberately killing him because of that earlier interest.

Many young Jews cultivated by the Jesuits ultimately became catechumens. Others regretted having run away from home and retreated to the Jewish community before their baptism.<sup>50</sup> Often, in cases where Jewish parents contested the claims that their children strongly desired to convert, court cases ensued in which

49. The denunciation, *Processus*, p. 2, Lit. B; examination of Josel Pass, age 42 at the time of the Abeles case, p. 64. Cf. Putfk, "The Prague Jewish Community," p. 60. I do not understand how Putfk considers him "the most reliable witness," (p. 58) nor am I convinced that Löbl Kurtzhandl was probably guilty of murdering the boy, although not for religious reasons.

50. See the detailed account of Jewish conversion in Putfk, "The Prague Jewish Community," pp. 37-55. Adler, "Das älteste Judicial-Protokoll," pp. 217-256, contains names of several Jewish families whose converted members played a role in the Abeles case. Members of the Kawka [Kafka] family are mentioned p. 220, no. 3; p. 229, no. 37; members of the Fanta family, p. 236, no. 59; p. 248, no. 99.

the two sides issued completely conflicting statements. Young Simon Abeles had ample reason to want to escape the harsh conditions of his home. As the extract from his father's testimony demonstrates, his home life could not have been very stable:

Question	Answer
1. What is your name?	Lazar Abeles
2. How old are you?	About 35 years old.
3. How long are you married?	15 years.
4. How many wives did you have?	Three wives [before the present]; this is the fourth.
5. Where is the wife with whom you produced the son who recently died?	She is out in Poland.
6. Why did you separate from her?	Because we could not stand each other.
7. How many children did you have with that wife?	Only this one was from that wife.
8. What was the child called?	Simon
9. How old was the child?	Approximately nine and a half years old. <sup>51</sup>

Simon's mother had been Lazar's third wife; Lea was the fourth. At the time of Simon's death, Lea had given birth to four children, only two of whom survived. Their tiny dwelling place also provided workspace for glovemaking activity as well as a meeting place for business contacts.

## IMAGES OF JEWS IN THE *PROCESSUS* *Women and Converts*

Christian and Jewish women figured prominently in the inquisitorial proceedings, although not as the primary defendants. They formed crucial links in the construction of the narrative, yet the editor assigned them the most weak and malleable roles. The first of these was Barbara, Christian maidservant to a recent convert from Judaism named Kawka. Her position as a servant relegated her to a marginal position in society; being employed in the household of a recent convert intensified her vulnerability. She turned out to be unstable both in her initial significant role in the case – she returned the boy to the Jews after he had been left for safekeeping with the convert – as well as in the subsequent attempt to have her

51. *Processus*, pp. 17-18. In this citation, as frequently throughout the text, the prosecution disputed the father's estimate of his son's age: "Because he buried the child without the customary proclamation, the way one would bury a child, the father made him out to be so young. It is, however, false..." Later accounts recalled a frantic but fruitless effort on part of the Jesuits to ascertain Simon's age as they attempted to reconstruct his life. "After manifold and exhaustive searching, one could not come to any certain ground, whether the books in which the circumcised children's names would be recorded [burned] in the great fire of 1689 in which eleven synagogues and the entire Jewish quarter lay in ashes, as the Jews falsely claim." Fried, *Neupolterter*, p. 114. The *pinkas* of the *Chevera Kadisha* of Prague from 1680 lists children and servants under the names of the heads of the household. Jewish Museum of Prague, ms. 287.



testify. She disappeared and could not be located despite (or because of?) orders by the Rath Commissariat and considerable powers of the Jesuits and the Prague municipal law enforcement personnel.<sup>52</sup> When this woman could not be located to testify, the authorities arrested another Christian woman, Catharina Kantorowa, in her place. The casual report of this arbitrary switch scarcely hints at the upheaval it must have visited upon these hapless lives.

The figure of a weak Christian woman who procured Christian children for use in malevolent Jewish rituals, the *avara mulier* who usually acted out of greed, played a prominent role in medieval ritual murder narratives. In later versions of the Simon Abeles story, Jews bribed the woman for thirty *weisse Meintzer Groschen* (white coins) with an explicit reference to Judas' betrayal of Jesus for thirty silver pieces.<sup>53</sup> The countervailing figure of a pious Christian woman appeared in the *Processus* as well, in the form of a Christian glove maker who claimed that she knew all along that young Simon had harbored a tendency toward Christianity. In the world of the *Processus*, the weak Christian women played far more important roles than the strong ones.

Lea Abeles, wife of Lazar, enters the narrative as a very secondary figure, arrested at the same time as just about everyone else in the household, including an eight-year-old boy. The court questioned them all, as well as her cook. However, as the editor of the *Processus* lamented, it was all to no avail, as they all answered similarly concerning the death of Simon.<sup>54</sup>

Unlike the interrogation of her husband Lazar, in which the inquisitors attempted to pin an anti-Christian motive onto his alleged abuse of the boy (the wicked Jew), in Lea's case, they implied that she participated in the boy's death because of her relationship to him (the wicked stepmother). Lea resisted this allegation vigorously:

**Question**

1. What is your name, and how old are you, how many husbands and children did you have?

**Answer**

Lea. I am 26 years old. This is my first husband. I had 4 children; two have died. I am married 8 years.

2. How did Simon relate to you and you to him?

The boy related very well to me, and I considered him like one of my own children.

3. If you had treated him well, he wouldn't have run away from you.

He never ran away. He was always home.

52. On Barbara, see *Processus*, intro., p. iv; p. 5. It is unclear if she is identical to the unnamed day-laborer mentioned on p. 15, accused of handing Simon to the Jews for money, who disclaimed all knowledge of wrongdoing. She was held under arrest for further questioning.

53. Fried, *Neupolierter*, pp. 133-34. Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, pp. 42, 170.

54. *Processus*, p. 11.

4. Why are you saying lies? The boy ran away once to Kawka and remained there several days and did not want to return home.

God forbid, other than that we sent him for a pint of beer, Kawka wanted to detain him, but he came running back right away.

5. Why do you want to continue to lie impudently, when the boy was brought back to the house by force, and Lazar beat him as well.

No, he did not beat him, may God punish me [if he did].

6. He also imprisoned him several days.

God forbid, he did not imprison him, I watched him.<sup>55</sup>

All the members of the Abeles household maintained under questioning that the boy had not been feeling well, had suffered a seizure and fever, and then died. After a second round of questioning, both Lea and her domestic servant, the young cook Hennele, stayed with their accounts, infuriating the inquisitors who were determined to prove that the boy had been murdered.<sup>56</sup>

Ultimately, unable to get cooperation from any of the witnesses who had lived in the Abeles household, the inquisitors fortuitously produced a young Jewish girl, Sara Uressin "approximately thirteen years old," her year of birth the year of the plague, 1680. Sara was unnaturally short, and she testified that her mother had been similarly afflicted. Her reference to her mother in the past tense indicates that she was probably an orphan. For her quarter year as a servant, she was paid one florin, as well as room and board. Given her multiple vulnerabilities — poor, orphaned, misshapen, shifted from one household to the next — it is no wonder that Sara was marked as a vulnerable prospect by the Jesuits; she became a catechumen. She testified that she had formerly served David Stummes, a tenant who rented a room in the same house as the Lazar Abeles family during 1693.<sup>57</sup> Conveniently, her testimony provided all the elements lacking from those of the other women in the Abeles household. Sara testified that she had not actually been in the house when the boy ran away, and had gotten her information "from the Jews."<sup>58</sup> When the child was brought home, there was an outcry and she ran there to see what was happening. Apparently, her brief period of service in the same building did not coincide with these events. When asked how she knew about the father's murderous intentions toward his son, she said she had heard it from the cook, whose name she did not remember. Sara testified that Lazar Abeles had beaten his son when he found out that Simon had run away from home and sought to become Christian. During his questioning, which focused exclusively on Sara's

55. *Processus*, pp. 41-42.

56. *Processus*, p. 25.

57. Stummes is a German translation of the Hebrew family name Ilem that appears in many Prague documents of this period.

58. *Processus*, p. 27, no. 9; p. 29, no. 6.

testimony, Lazar Abeles denied ever having seen this girl, as well as all of her assertions about his violent treatment of the boy and his alleged motives for so doing.

Lea Abeles was confronted by the contrasting testimony of her household servant, Hennele the cook. Hennele was the first witness to break down and admit to the version of the narrative advocated by the court. The text is unambiguous regarding how this was achieved: "Hennele . . . was given effective persuasion to acknowledge the truth, and after repeated examination and confrontation, she began at last to tell the truth about the murder of the boy."<sup>59</sup> Hennele's answers to the first questions she was asked bear citing because of the evidence they offer that she was threatened or tortured to produce the right answers:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Question</b>   | <b>Answer</b>  |
| 1. Hennele the cook, when the boy ran away and then returned home, were you already in service there?   | No, I was not in the house when the boy returned.  |
| 2. Remember well, was there another Jewish girl then serving at David Stummes' house in the house at the same time?                                     | Yes, you are correct, I was there when the father brought the boy home. <sup>60</sup>                    |
| Similarly,  |  |
| <b>Question</b>   | <b>Answer</b>  |
| 8. Say the truth, how did the boy die and who was present?  | The boy dragged himself around for about 8 days, then he went to his bed and the seizures came upon him. |
| 11. Your words are not believed. You had better tell the truth in a good way about how the boy died or we will use the Schärfe [instrument of torture]. | I will tell the truth. The father gave him something to eat and he fell down.                            |
| 12. What did he give him?   | He gave him a herring.   |

It is fascinating to note that both Lazar and Lea Abeles were ultimately undone in the interrogations by the most malleable possible figures, two terrified young girls, both of whom had no ties or protectors in the Jewish community. Both Sara and Hennele the cook were common figures in Jewish households, Jewish servants sent to work by their families who could not afford their keep or dowry. In addition to her official designation as cook, Hennele also minded the children; Sara was employed primarily for childcare. At one point Hennele implied (in the words of the editor) that if the Jews were to hear what she was saying, they would stop pro-

59. *Processus*, p. 33.

60. *Processus*, p. 33-34. [All italics in this segment indicate my emphasis.]

viding her with food.<sup>61</sup> In the interrogations, both girls occupied inverted positions with people who had once been master and mistress. Now they held the Abeles family's fortune in their hands. In Hennele's case, the inquisitors referred to her employers in a degrading manner in her presence, "Now cook, tell Abelessin to her face, what happened with the child." The confrontations allowed these marginal presences to occupy center stage, exercise power over those who had formerly controlled them, and possibly take revenge for past rough treatment. The editor of the *Processus* marveled at what they had been able to accomplish "after only one confrontation with a twelve year old girl."<sup>62</sup> After building her up throughout the trial as a reliable witness, the text allows a small acknowledgement of the effective use of an impressionable youngster.

Recent converts from Judaism form a second group depicted as an unstable element by the editor of the *Processus*. The Jesuits blamed the convert Kawka for failing to ensure that the boy who had demonstrated interest in leaving home and possibly adopting Christianity remained in his custody. When he was questioned as to how he knew that his son had been in the house of Kawka, Lazar Abeles replied, "The converted Jew Fanta came to me and told me that the boy was there."<sup>63</sup> Fanta, of course, denied any such role in the "betrayal" of the boy to his father. Instead, he portrayed himself as the one who had originally alerted the Jesuits to the possibility that Simon was a prospect to be cultivated for eventual conversion, and the Jesuits, who could not be bothered at the time, asked him to detain the child, which he was unable to do.

The *Processus* records the testimony of Fanta when he first saw the Abeles child in Kawka's home: "I went to Kawka on Saturday, and met the boy there, as he was sitting at the table. I asked him then, 'What are you doing here on "Schabas"?' The boy answered that his father had abandoned him - **he wished to be baptized** [emphasis in orig.]." Both Kawka and Fanta were members of prominent Prague families before their conversions. By preserving the Jewish reference to the Sabbath, the editor marks the convert with a throwback to his old life as a Jew. Even putting the interpretation of their actions in the light most acceptable to the Jesuits, it seems clear that both of these converts still maintained close ties to their former Jewish co-religionists and they did not seem very anxious to deliver Simon to the Jesuits, or to play any significant role in the Abeles case. Once he did his minimum duty, Fanta claimed to have lost touch with Kawka and had no further involvement in the case: "Since then I haven't seen the boy. Kawka is said to have traveled to Vienna after that, because a good patron had written to him that if he went there, he would help him; who that was, however, I do not know."<sup>64</sup>

### THE JEWISH COLLAR

Several times during her cross-examination, Sara Uressin mentioned that young Simon refused to wear the "Jewish collar," that he despised it, and that his lack of

61. *Processus*, p. 36.

62. *Processus*, p. 80.

63. *Processus*, p. 20, no. 38.

64. *Processus*, p. 21.

willingness to bear this Jewish sign proved that he was ready to leave the Jewish faith.<sup>65</sup> The Jewish family members do not mention this detail, nor does the only extant Jewish source. Let us detour a moment into the curious history of this legislated symbol of Jewish difference and the role it played in the *Processus*. Initially a fashionable accoutrement that originated in sixteenth-century Spain, the pleated collar eventually fell out of fashion, although some German Jews continued to wear it on Sabbath and holidays. In 1670, as part of a sweeping anti-Jewish initiative, Emperor Leopold ordered that all Jews of Prague over the age of twelve wear a broad, pleated, stiff ruff made of green or yellow linen. A contemporary description: "The Jewish ruffled collar which the Jews stiffen with blue starch and wear about the neck, and by means of it they are distinguished from Christians here in Bohemia; this ornament is called the Jews' collar." The collar caused many hardships to Jews who became vulnerable targets, particularly if they left the city for the countryside, as many did to earn their livelihood. Over the next years, wealthy and influential Jews petitioned to be exempt from this onerous obligation. Some succeeded.<sup>66</sup>

In 1691, a Jew who was not wearing the collar committed a crime against a Christian and a tremendous outcry ensued. The royal appellations court in Vienna ordered all Jews throughout Bohemia to wear the collar, not just those in Prague. Petitioners for exemption after 1691 came away disappointed. The Prague University archives record the petitions of Jewish medical students and doctors who requested exemptions from wearing the Jewish collar. To such a request from Dr. Moyses Burga Clava of 21 April, 1692, for example, the reply was a stark negative: "It is our long standing resolution, because of Jewish embezzlement and other secret practices, to continue to forbid them to appear in Christian clothing."<sup>67</sup>

Lotharius Fried, the former Jew, also emphasized the collar and empathized with Simon, perhaps from his own experience: "[The collar] was more difficult for Simon to tolerate than a yoke on a previously unyoked animal." Simon tried mightily to avoid wearing the collar, "this sign of difference between Jews and Christians as well as an affirmation of Judaism . . . . When forced nevertheless to don it, he did so with sighing, sour faces, and other expressions of displeasure as though he had been clapped into a pillory for punishment."<sup>68</sup> In 1692, the edict was refined and reworked but it remained in place. Perhaps the emphasis in the *Processus* and later Jesuit sources on the centrality of the collar in Simon's decision to convert represents a subtle argument to strengthen the royal decision-makers and local authorities to keep the law in place firmly and without exception. It certainly symbolized the growing pressure against Prague's Jews.

65. *Processus*, pp. 38, 48, 65.

66. Tobias Jakobovits, "Die Juden Abzeichen in Böhmen," *JGGJČR* 3 (1931): 154-170.

67. Guido Kisch, *Die Prager Universität und die Juden, 1348-1848* (E.p. 1935; Amsterdam, 1969), p. 112, doc. no. 2. In a similar petition, doc. no. 3, ad loc., Dr. Salomon Gumpertz requested the same exemption with similar results. The decree remained in force until Maria Theresa expelled the Jews of Prague in 1745.

68. Fried, *Neupolierter*, p. 115.

## POVERTY AND WEALTH

While the editor carped about "wealthy Jewish friends" of Abeles in the Judenstadt bringing their influence to bear on the case,<sup>69</sup> the nuclear family of Lazar Abeles does not appear to have enjoyed any of the trappings associated with prosperity. Descriptions of the household and business in the *Processus* and other sources show that the family lacked many of the comforts that might be thought to attend affluence. Perhaps the Abeles family had lived under better circumstances before the fire of 1689 destroyed most of the housing in the Judenstadt, or maybe such cramped circumstances characterized the living conditions of even well-to-do Jews. At the time of the death of Simon, Lazar lived in surroundings that were far from luxurious. The living conditions of the Abeles family, like most of the Jews in the Jewish quarter, were extremely crowded: "Q: How many houses and rooms did Lazar Abeles have? A: One residence with one room."<sup>70</sup>

When Lea Abeles confessed that Löbl Kurtzhandl had stayed overnight in their room, she felt compelled to explain the logistics of sheltering another person when beds and space were scarce: "You slept in my cook's bed, and I took the cook with me."<sup>71</sup> The dwelling beneath the Abeles' in which Sara Uressin had lived with her employer Stummes and at least one young child consisted of one room. Because of the overcrowding, privacy was scarce, and the Jewish streets served as a constant source of rumor and innuendo.<sup>72</sup> When questioned concerning his source of knowledge for the first denunciation of the Abeles family, the informer Josel Pass claimed that he had heard it "on the street," and the court accepted this as sufficient. Löbl Kurtzhandl was told that the entire Judenstadt already knew of his guilt, and this fact outweighed anything he might have to say to defend himself.

The Abeles family income derived primarily from a business centered on the making and selling of gloves, a competitive craft.<sup>73</sup> Some of the process took place in their already crowded tiny dwelling place. The Jew named "Lipmann . . . came often during the day and stiffened gloves."<sup>74</sup> Lazar Abeles apparently had his own stall in the Tandlermarkt where he sold gloves, according to the description of the informer: "Then I went off and came to the Tandlermarkt and went to see the glove stall of Lazar Abeles and found it padlocked."<sup>75</sup> A Christian woman testified that she had business dealings in gloves for the past eighteen years with Abeles, and that the boy "Simele" had come to her on errands for his father on a nearly daily basis. She claimed to have understood a conversation in Hebrew (probably Yiddish) "because of her many years glove dealing with Jews" in which the recent

69. "viel vermögenden Freundschaft..." *Processus*, p. 8.

70. *Processus*, p. 34.

71. *Processus*, p. 57.

72. Lipscher, "Jüdische Gemeinden," 76, reports that 11,617 people lived in the 314 houses designated for Jewish residence.

73. On Jewish craft guilds and other hand laborers, and their relationship to their Christian counterparts/rivals in Prague, see Tobias Jakobovits, "Die jüdischen Zünfte in Prag," *JGGJČR* 8 (1936): 57-145. In the early eighteenth century, the glovemakers were among the Christian guilds that claimed that their interests were being harmed by the continued presence of Jewish competition in Prague, p. 115.

74. *Processus*, pp. 53-54. This proximity led Lea to implicate Lipmann as well, who promptly confessed to witnessing everything.

75. *Processus*, p. 64.



convert Kawka demanded money from Lazar Abeles (implying that the convert betrayed the boy to his father for money.)<sup>76</sup> Abeles later acknowledged that he had asked this woman to enter Kawka's home to ascertain whether his son was there. The woman complied at the time, although she remarked under questioning that she and her husband had always felt that the boy had a strong inclination to Christianity. The interactions show how commercial ties often led to personal entanglements between Jews, Christians, and converts, and how years of trust could turn into betrayal in times of crisis. Personal and business interests overlapped through shared spaces, the participation of all family members, and the close business relationships between Jews and non-Jews.

### NEGATIVE IMAGES

The editor of the *Processus* laced the text with asides, remarks and various negative assumptions about Jews. All his material was animated by the theme that the Jews collectively were guilty as charged, and that they would go to extreme lengths to hide their guilt. After recording the text of a medical faculty report on the body, the editor praised the skill of the experts who were able to establish (despite the absence of evidence for the original charge of poisoning) that a violent death had occurred. "Now great obstacles stand in the way of investigating the true perpetrators. Daily experience in many past cases has shown how difficult it is to bring the obstinate Jews to acknowledge the truth. The Jews would rather endure every conceivable martyrdom than admit to their heinous crimes. This was to be feared even more in the present case, as it concerned the disclosure of such a secret: the deeply inborn hate for the Christian religion which brought them to commit *Meuchel-Kinder-Mord* [child murder]."<sup>77</sup> Jews who break down under torture or repeated "sharp" questioning during their incarcerations are breaking their "obdurate hebraic dispositions."<sup>78</sup> As to the original informer, the editor considered him "a rare example of a Jew entrusting a Christian with any information against his co-religionists."<sup>79</sup>

The editor's assumption of Jewish complicity in an anti-Jewish crime was deepened by his attribution of willful secrecy to Jews. The extremely overcrowded living conditions in the small space allotted to Prague's populous Jewish community also strengthened the impression of dark, furtive activities hidden within its densely packed spaces. After conducting a fruitless search of the building to which the inquisitors believed Kurtzhandl had delivered a secret missive, they concluded from their failure, "It is easy to discern how difficult it is to conduct an inquiry among the Jews because they have so many hidden corners [*weilen sie so viel Schlupfwinkel haben*]. Often, over twenty parties live in one house where the indications [names of addressees] are stuck one upon the other."<sup>80</sup>

When introducing Jews, the text never employs the appropriate honorifics

76. *Processus*, p. 16.

77. *Processus*, p. 14.

78. "verhärtete Hebraische Gemüth," *Processus*, p. 87.

79. *Processus*, p. 64.

80. *Processus*, pp. 50-51.

except where polemically desirable. Lazar Abeles' father Moses is introduced as a *primus* of the Jews in order to pin the alleged crime on the highest communal leader possible. Otherwise, the editor referred to Jews by first or last names, women by the feminine form of their family names. The editor's strategy is completely reversed when he refers to Christians. The Jesuits, the local Prague aldermen, and members of the tribunal, as well as the physicians and administrators of the medical school, are always called by the full title and all honorifics appertaining to them.

### ROOTS OF A LIBEL

Lazar Abeles, and subsequently his alleged accomplice Kurtzhandl, stood accused of a crime that had no analogue in the recent history of anti-Jewish discourse. No Christian child's body was found. The old canard that Jews needed the blood of a Christian victim for magical or ritual purposes was not raised here, nor were the defendants charged with performing the killing as a re-enactment of the Crucifixion in any direct sense. In this instance, Abeles the Jew was accused of killing his own Jewish child, an unusual departure from the standard anti-Jewish libels.

"The Jews would rather kill their own children than allow them to be baptized to Christianity" serves as a leitmotif throughout the documentation of the Abeles case. This accusation has deep roots in Christian martyrological thought. Christian chroniclers of the Crusades of 1096 and thereafter reported that Jewish parents preferred to kill their Jewish children than allow them to fall into the hands of Christians, presumably to be raised Christian. Jewish sources corroborate the martyrdom of Jewish children at the hands of their parents in these instances.

In her illuminating study, Mary Minty has shown that this particular aspect of martyrdom, *Kiddush ha-Shem* (martyrdom for the sake of Heaven) accorded with other Christian perceptions of Jews in several ways.<sup>81</sup> Christians perceived the killings as communally sanctioned responses to the prospect of forced conversion, rather than as the hysterical reactions of traumatized individuals. This confirmed Christian characterizations of Jewish law as brutal and harsh, and of Jews as filled with murderous hatred toward Christianity. On a popular level, biblical tales such as the "Massacre of the Innocents" helped Christians view the murdered Jewish children as "almost Christian," or even truly Christian, baptized by their own blood sacrifice. Rather than view them as Jewish victims of Christian violence, as the Jews did, Christians viewed these children as potential or actual Christian souls snuffed out by demonic Jewish cruelty. Tales of Jewish threats to kill potential converts circulated throughout the medieval and early modern period in Christian Europe. Ample conduits for this medieval narrative existed in late seventeenth-century Prague. Nevertheless, the Abeles case is the first I have found in which a Jewish father was brought to trial, not for the crime of murdering his child, but for the different crime of murdering him "out of hatred for the Christian faith."

In early modern German lands, when one parent converted from Christianity

81. Mary Minty, "Kiddush ha-Shem in German Eyes in the Middle Ages," (in Hebrew) *Zion* 59 (1994): 215-216, n. 24.



Simon Abeles as a Christian catechumen. *Processus Inquisitorius*, 1728, frontispiece. Courtesy of the Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

to Judaism, custody of the child(ren) was usually granted to the Christian parent out of concern for both the physical and spiritual life of the child. The fear that Jewish parents might kill their children rather than allow them to be baptized motivated legal decisions to remove from Jewish parental custody contested children who had been baptized against the will of one or both Jewish parents, as well as those who had expressed some interest in Christianity, even if they were well under the age of consent. In the early sixteenth century, noted jurist Ulrich Zasius collected and summed up the medieval opinions that supported his own beliefs: that the Jews were a bloodthirsty and brutal people who would kill their own children if the possibility of baptism loomed over the child. Zasius defined these children as "Holy Innocents," martyrs for Christ, transforming the Jewish child into a Christian martyr. Another late-fifteenth-century polemic employed the concept of baptism by blood, and Zasius perversely argued that by spurring Jews to acts of "Jewish martyrdom" Christians were in fact creating more "Holy Innocents" who would enter eternal life by their baptisms of blood. As Minty concludes, this logic transformed Jewish child martyrs into Christians. This is precisely the thinking that led to Simon Abeles' elevation to Christian martyrdom, beatification, and burial, although he had never been baptized.

#### REWRITING THE NARRATIVE: LATER VOICES *CONVERT LOTHARIUS FRANZ FRIED*

When Jewish Prague native Joseph Marcus (b. 1689) converted to Catholicism in 1714, he left his wife behind in the Jewish quarter, as she refused to convert with him. In a viciously anti-Jewish book written a year after his baptism, Marcus, now called Lotharius Franz Fried, complained that after his conversion he could find no peace in Prague until the Jesuits of Prague arranged for him to travel to a Jesuit seminary in Mainz. While he did not specify, it is likely that once his plans to convert became known, Prague Jews entreated or pressured him to reconsider. Such efforts would have been conducted clandestinely, but Fried's testimony reveals an exchange that must have taken place often enough between Jews and those who had decided to leave the fold. Jewish efforts would have been particularly strong in cases of a married man like Fried. If he refused to retreat from the path of conversion, they would have implored him at least to grant a divorce releasing his wife to remarry.

The words underneath Fried's elegant frontispiece portrait state that he had found grace, that his baptism bound him to Jesus, and that he now knew absolutely that there could be no salvation except through Jesus Christ.<sup>82</sup> His book, apparently written and published with the assistance of his Jesuit mentors, reads like an encyclopedia of medieval libels against Jews that the Jesuits hoped to resurrect. Fried retold the Jesuit version of the Abeles case in vivid and gushing detail; it

82. Fried, *Neupolierter*, T.p. The text framing the frontispiece portrait reads: "Lotharius Frantz Fried, geboren in Prag MDCLXXXIX. [1689] Bekehrt vom Judenthum und getauft in Mainz den XV April MDCCXIV [1714]." This would make Fried 25 years old at his baptism. The book bears a censor's imprimatur from 1715. There may have been an earlier edition; the censor's date allows us to establish time of completion of the book, just after Fried's conversion.



Lotharius Franz Fried, Prague native who converted out of Judaism. *Neupolierter und wohlgeschliffener Juden-Spiegel*, Mainz, 1715. Courtesy of the Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

takes up over fifty pages in his book. One example of Fried's elaboration on the *Processus*' narrative concerns the role of food. While the food consumed by Jews did not play a particular role in the *Processus*, the herring mentioned by the young cook assumed a greater role in Fried's account. To Fried, herring "prepared according to Jewish custom with onion and vinegar" represented primitive Judaism. Simon refused to eat such *Juden-Speiss* (Jew food), for he had developed a deep disgust for Jewish prepared foods, parallel to his refusal to return to the

faith of the Jews. Instead, he ate only plain bread, which had been baked by Christians. Fried claimed further that when Lea Abeles fainted upon seeing Simon dead, Kurtzhandl tried to revive her with the leftover vinegar from this fateful herring.<sup>83</sup>

The convert even managed to concoct a midrash on the name Abeles, comparing the martyr to the biblical Abel: murdered by a close family member, the voice of his blood calling as it flowed miraculously from his dead body; his father, like Cain, considering his sin to be too great to bear, became his own executioner, taking a rope to his godless neck.<sup>84</sup>

Significantly, Fried's book expanded upon the parallel between Simon Abeles and the other martyred Simon, the child of Trent. An oratorio commissioned shortly after the events of 1694, or perhaps to be performed at the funeral of Simon Abeles, created the same parallel between the Simons, demonstrating how the story continued to be reshaped for public consumption as the events were transformed from a complicated legal case into a Christian morality play in which the Jews were the evil malefactors.

### SKEPTICAL VOICES Wagenseil

Protestant Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633-1705), a contemporary who heard about the events that took place in Prague, used the Abeles case for utterly different ends than the Jesuits. His immediate exploitation of the Abeles report demonstrates how quickly the material could be manipulated to serve other polemical ends. Foremost Christian scholar of Hebraica in the late seventeenth century, professor at the beautiful University of Altdorf, Wagenseil had a typical attraction/repulsion relationship to Jews.<sup>85</sup> Wagenseil valued Jews only as potential converts and as teachers of Hebrew and Jewish texts. He could not conceal his disdain and distrust of actual Jews, and he urged the German princes not to tolerate them in their territories. Wagenseil's loathing for Jews living in Christian lands was equaled only by his dislike of Catholics. He particularly objected to their coercive methods of pressing conversion on Jews, which he believed to be completely counterproductive.

Wagenseil's presentation of the Abeles case is typical of his modus operandi. In the midst of a dry scholarly discussion of the administration of judicial oaths to Jews in Christian courts, he casually inserted: "According to this formula, an oath was recently administered in the matter of a new saint and martyr sanctified by the Roman Catholic church. The story is mostly unknown among Protestants, but it is important because the veneration of the holy grave grows daily. They speak of great miracles and wonder works, and its fame is spreading throughout the world."<sup>86</sup> Wagenseil wished to unveil the role of Catholic chicanery involved and

83. Fried, *Neupolierter*, pp. 141-42; 152.

84. Fried, *Neupolierter*, p. 144.

85. On Wagenseil, see Paul Gerhard Aring, "Wage du, su irren und zu träumen...": *Juden und Christen unterwegs: Theologische Biographien – Biographische Theologie, im christlich jüdischen Dialog der Barockzeit* (Cologne: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1992), pp. 22-63.

86. Johann Christoph Wagenseil, *Belehrung der Jüdisch-Teutschen Red- und Schreibart* (Königsberg: Paul Friedrich Rhode, 1699), p. 13. On p. 98 Wagenseil mentions a visit to Prague several years earlier.



so, he promised his readers, "I will tell you the entire story." Wagenseil then proceeded to cite large portions of the *Processus* verbatim so that his readers could take in the full flavor of this horrible anti-Jewish drama, conducted, as he dryly remarked, in full accordance with all legal requirements and sanctioned by the Emperor.<sup>87</sup> Only then did he distance himself by pointing out that the Jesuits proved themselves to be utterly ignorant of Jewish tradition. How was it possible, he asked, that in a city with such a great number of Jews, the Jesuits could remain so poorly informed of Jewish names and customs? "Anything to do with Jewish matters [in the *Processus*] is incorrect."<sup>88</sup> He launched into a bizarre commentary on Jewish proper and informal names in the text.<sup>89</sup> Kurtzhandl's name, he suggested, was probably "Lowel," not "Löbl." "Rep Lippman" ought to have been "Rabbi Lippman," or perhaps "rebbe." The word in the oath ought to have been "Herem" rather than "Kheran"; "Torah" should replace "Torach."

The Jesuits put too much stock in Simon's refusal to wear the Jewish Ruff. "I know plenty of Jews from all over the world who never heard of the Jewish collar, but that does not mean that they are any closer to Christianity. If the young boy had refused to attend Synagogue, or learn from Hebrew books, or observe the Sabbath, or wear his *arba kanfoth* [four cornered ritual garment], or had eaten meat and drunk wine with the Christians, that might have signified something." It was highly improbable that while he was being tortured Kurtzhandl cried out to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Far more likely that he made some declaration of faith in God, of which Wagenseil then cites several Hebrew alternatives.<sup>90</sup> Wagenseil's repetition of the entire story served his own polemical ends. He used it to demonstrate to his readers his superior knowledge of Jewish matters over the Jesuits, although his attention to a few details rather than to the core of the story strikes a bizarre note. Needless to say, Wagenseil's report expressed no sympathy for any of the Jews caught up in the inquisitorial dragnet.

### Egon Erwin Kisch

One of the first moderns to examine the sources critically, Prague journalist Egon Erwin Kisch (1885-1948) argued that the narrative of the *Processus* could be easily refuted from internal examination of the text, which contained so many contradictions as to make it untenable. To take several examples, the Jewish informer claimed that the boy had been poisoned. The housekeeper first stated that the boy had been ill for a few weeks, and then under pressure, she confessed that the father had given him something to eat and he dropped dead, apparently from poisoning. When the body was autopsied and no sign of poison found, the case ought to have been closed. Instead the medical personnel were pressured into doing two separate autopsies and come up with an alternative. They obliged with two: the blow to the head and the broken neck. The Jewish community asked the medical faculty

87. Wagenseil, intro. to *Belehrung*, p. 24.

88. Wagenseil, intro. to *Belehrung*, p. 29.

89. Wagenseil, intro. to *Belehrung*, p. 30.

90. Wagenseil, intro. to *Belehrung*, pp. 32-34.



Degradation of corpse of Lazer Abeles, I. Enlargement from Störiz, *Warhafftige Abbildung*.

whether any such marks could have resulted from the digging up of the body; their question was never answered. Another detail that struck Kisch was the difficulty any manacled prisoner would have had in hanging himself when he was chained hand and foot. Based on several other obvious manipulations of the truth, Kisch concluded in his brief but pioneering piece that the case was a fabrication from beginning to end. The recent article by Prague historian Alexandr Putfk has illuminated much of the background of the case, and concludes that perhaps Kurtzhandl did beat the child, but he did not intend to kill him, and it had nothing to do with Christianity.<sup>91</sup>

### THE YIDDISH LID

When I first heard that a Yiddish *lid*, a song or poem, about the case had been published in Amsterdam in 1695,<sup>92</sup> I assumed before I read it that it would strongly defend the innocence of the Jewish protagonists of all charges in the death of Simon Abeles. This source turned out to contain the most surprising material of

91. Kisch, "Ex Odio Fidel"; Putfk, "The Prague Jewish Community," pp. 55 ff.

92. Hayyim Druker, "Eyn neye klog lid benign fun rebbe rebbi Shimen," (Amsterdam, 1695). The title page indicates that this is not the first edition, as this improved edition was "better set into rhyme" than its predecessor, "which might just as well have remained at home." I thank the librarians of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University, for sending me a copy of the text. I thank Rachel Greenblatt of Jerusalem for bringing this *kloglid* to my attention and Professor Chava Lapin of Queens College, CUNY, for generously sharing her expertise in Yiddish with me. On the genre of Yiddish historical *lider*, see Khone Shmeruk, "The Martyrdom of Rabbi Shakhna: Cracow 1682," in *Gal-Ed* 7-8, (1985):57-69; Chava Turniansky, "Yiddish Songs as Historical Source Material: Plague in the Judenstadt of Prague in 1713," in *Jewish History. Essays in honor of Chimen Abramsky* eds. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven J. Zipperstein (London: Halban, 1988), pp. 189-198; Turniansky, "Yiddish 'Historical' Songs as Sources for the History of the Jews in Pre-Partition Poland," *Polin* 4 (1989): 42-52.



איין נייא קלאג ליד בניגון פון רבי  
רבי שמעון:

ליבן רבולי קואט איין הער גו אויפן • אונ'  
טוט רייט נייא קלאג ליד קויפן • וואס  
ניך האט פֿר לאשין בק"ק פֿרמג • ועלצט חזי  
ניט גסעהן ויין לעבן טאג • וואס פֿון איין בני  
קער חזי גקואן • רס אן זיין פֿאטער אונ' איין  
בזחור דא חריבר האט חזי לעבן גנאן • כות  
קדושי וואן איר גניסן • דרוק אווט חזי דו קויני  
געט ניט פֿר דריסן • (אונ' חזי עו בעסט  
גטעלט חזי רייק • חזי דא ערשט זיז היגן  
וואו אעגן כלייבן דער הייס • גליך ווארית  
ערשט זיין גטעלט • חזי ווייס רטעו קיינס  
געלט • דען זיח החבן ויך לו זאג בואן • חזי  
החבן לו פֿין חזי רעק ליד גטבון • דרוק ווער  
רזוויז איין פֿרטייח החבן • דיח אמה פֿר חזי  
סליכר טון חזי חזי גאגן • ווייטארט ווארן  
איר חזי חזי • לו קואן חזי חזי חזי חזי:

נרפס אמשטרדם

על ידי חייק דהקר:

בסעף ונהתי גטאיים בעתק זאק:



"Eyn neye klog lid," Amsterdam, 1695, title page. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

all. True to its origins as a genre, this *kloglid*, song of mourning and protest, did not only mourn the victims and memorialize the events, it served primarily as a song of protest.<sup>93</sup> While the *lid* opened in the most conventional and stylized manner – with an advertisement to buy it: “Gentlemen, come running to buy this new mournful tune (*kloglid*) about what happened recently in the holy community of Prague,” it vehemently contested one aspect of the Jesuit version of events in the *Processus* and other sources.<sup>94</sup> But that is an exception. In every other respect, the *kloglid* surprisingly agrees completely with the Jesuit account of events. This may be due to the fact that the author relied upon the publicly available Christian sources; or it may necessitate a fundamental rethinking of the events and the posture of Prague’s Jews.<sup>95</sup>

From the very outset, the Yiddish verses set a tone that accepted the basic premises of the Jesuit story, with only the values inverted. “What became of a bad child, whose father and a young man took his life as a result [of his evil], may the memory of these holy martyrs be for a blessing.”<sup>96</sup> In the Yiddish *lid*, the child Simon deserved to be killed due to his evil inclination toward Christianity. The true holy martyrs were his killers, who acted out of concern for the Jewish faith, and disregard for their own lives. The Yiddish text assumes the veracity of details in the Jesuit account disputed by the Jewish principles, such as the age of the child as twelve. It accused the boy of planning to violate the unity of God, and his father of conducting a reckoning and finding him deserving of this terrible punishment.

For all its affirmation of the basic Jesuit narrative, the Yiddish *lid* diverged on one key issue: it disputed the claim that Löbl Kurtzhandl had ever accepted baptism. This argument is the *raison d’être* of the Yiddish *lid*. Jesuit priest Johannes Brandstätter had stated that Kurtzhandl privately confessed the murder to him and later accepted baptism in the last moments before his death after being broken on the wheel. I cite the Yiddish account of Kurtzhandl’s final judgment, as it is the only dissenting Jewish voice.

He sat [in the jail] for over three quarters of a year. Water and bread did he eat. He fasted daily. One could have shoveled the lice from his body. For the plague of Egypt had fallen on him, he could not be freed of it. Still, he refused to part from his faith. He hoped and prayed to God. For the priests came to him day and night, demanding that he should convert. But he refused to pay heed to any of them, and he did not want to violate [his bond] with God. On the day of

93. On the history of the genre, see Ian James Bald, *The Klagelied: A Study of the German Secular Song of Complaint and Protest, 1450-1650* (Ph. D. thesis, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1936).

94. The author leaves only one clue in the *lid* concerning his role in the events of the Abeles case. When describing the exhumation of Simon’s body, he reported: “Two uncircumcised gentiles were present; they took the boy out of the earth. I the author had to twist and turn him until they cut his arteries. When they cut him open, blood ran from him. One doctor began to talk to the other; then they laughed with one another. They cut him open horizontally and vertically (*shesti ve-erev*),” (also a locution for the sign of the cross). “Eyn neye klog lid,” p. 2a.

95. At this point it is difficult to determine the author’s sources for the events which he did not witness, or even whether sources other than the official testimonies ever existed. Later Jewish authors often accepted the Jesuit account even on matters of blatant nonsense. See, e.g. Abraham Kahane, *Le-Toldot Yehude Behm* (Budapest: Ahim Kattsburg, 1925), pp. 36-37.

96. “Eyn neye klog lid,” Title page.

*Shemini Atzeret* 5455 [= autumn, 1694] he was brought before the commission, and they read before him the sentence from the Emperor, that the Appellation's verdict would be upheld. This broke his heart. He accepted more fasts because he was not being freed from the evil decree. He requested only one thing, to appoint undertakers to bury him but he was refused. Then he demanded that he be allowed to wear [Jewish style] shrouds. This one [request] was not refused and he was given a shirt and *kittel*. It was *Shabbos Bereshis* morning and we were very worried, for we thought that a rumor would begin and that someone would lose his life. It was about eight o'clock; there was a great hubbub. All the men of the court came and took the *bochur* [young man] R. Leyb [Kurtzhandl] out of jail. They made him lie on a horse, everyone beheld this. *Shema Yisrael* and *Hashem hu ha-Elohim* he cried out until they brought him before the gates. When they brought him outside the door they stripped him down to the skin. He was happy as though he were blessed. The head of the court began the proceedings and he begged forgiveness from everyone. Then he was *mosser moda'a*, and the wife and cook and rebbi [Lipmann] [word missing] their lives. When he had finished speaking, he was stretched out [on the wheel] for death. The executioner gave him forty-nine blows and then the *kadosh* [holy martyr] gave up his life. Throughout all these blows, he remained steadfast in his faith. When the blows had finished, his soul departed and they lay him on the [wheel]. . . . His place of burial is unknown.<sup>97</sup>

This ending directly contradicts the *Processus*.

As in the *lid*, the *Processus* confirms that upon hearing the final verdict, Löbl Kurtzhandl proclaimed his innocence. "I am not guilty of the blood of this boy. God, to whom I entrust all my affairs, will prove me innocent. If it nevertheless pleases the appointed judges to wash their hands in my blood, so be it. I do not wish to impose the blame on the Appellations College. Rather the unjust, lying witnesses, who, suborned by money conspired against me, are the sole reason for my damnation and my awful end."<sup>98</sup> The *Processus* confirmed that in his last days, Father Brandstätter subjected Kurtzhandl to unceasing conversion attempts. Some of the arguments are summarized in the *Processus*. All were to no avail, as Kurtzhandl continued to aver that he would die in the faith of his fathers. According to Brandstätter, he confessed to other inmates of the prison that he had committed the crime, and as a result of his conversion under torture, "He was buried on October 30 as a Christian in St. Paul's church."

## REFLECTIONS

The historical moment in which the editor crafted the *Processus*' narrative of the death of Simon is a terrifying one to contemplate. In it, we witness the birth of a new anti-Jewish libel (or the propelling of an older and neglected medieval tradition into early modern times) that contained the potential for grave and long-

97. "Eyn neye klog lid," pp. 4a-b.

98. *Processus*, pp. 85-86.



Degradation of corpse of Lazar Abeles II. Enlargement from Störiz, *Warhafftige Abbildung*.

enduring consequences. If Jewish parents could be accused of murdering their children to prevent conversions, no Jew in the Christian world could be safe. How serious was this threat? The child martyr created by the new narrative certainly meant good business for the Jesuits of Prague. In the years after the death of Simon, thousands of people visited the resting place of the young saint, baptized by his own blood. Shortly after the events, in 1694, engraver Michael Störiz prepared an illustrated flysheet that graphically depicted the *Processus*' account of Simon's death and beatification.<sup>99</sup> In 1695, Cristoforo Angelo Rotondo published a seventy-page oratorio dramatizing the case to the faithful, *Il neo-martire di Boemia*, complete with musical notes.<sup>100</sup> Jesuit father Johannes Eder himself told the story in Latin in 1696; it was published in a German version in 1698, and in Italian in Florence in 1705.<sup>101</sup> The *Processus Inquisitorius*, first published in 1696, was republished in 1728. Johannes Hammerschmidt assures the reader in his Jesuit chronicle that he has already described the entire story in his book on

99. "Warhafftige Abbildung einer erschrecklichen Mordthat," (n.p.: Magdalene Elisabetha Steinerin, 1694), reproduced in Heinz Schreckenberg, *The Jews in Christian Art: An Illustrated History* (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 256. The Museum of the City of Prague holds an anonymous oil color painting from 1695 based on the flysheet. Reproduced in Alexandr Patík and Olga Sixtová, *History of Jews in Bohemia and Moravia: from the first settlements until emancipation: exhibition guide* (Prague: Jewish Museum, 2002), p. 34.

100. "Il neo-martire di Boemia ò vero La conversione, e martirio di Simone Abeles, descritto in due oratorij, per musica..." (Prague: Giorgio Labaun, 1695).

101. Joannes Eder, *Virilis constantia pueri duodennis Simonis Abeles in odium fidei a judaeo parente Lazaro Abeles* (Prague: Typis Universitatis Carolo-Ferdinandae, in Collegio Societatis Jesu ad S. Clementem, 1696); German translation, *Mannhafte Beständigkeit des zwölffjährigen... Simon Abeles* (Prague: B.J. Endter, 1698); Italian translation, *Patimenti, e morte di Simone Abeles tormentado ed ucciso... da Lazzero Abeles suo padre in Prague...* (Firenze: P. Matini, 1705).



the history of the Teyn church, where Simon was buried.<sup>102</sup> If the story did *not* become a new template for anti-Jewish libel, it was surely not due to lack of effort.



In 1762, Jean Calas, a Protestant (Huguenot) merchant in Toulouse, France, was arrested under the suspicion that he had murdered his own son, who had been planning to convert to Catholicism.<sup>103</sup> Marc Antoine Calas was an adult, not a child, when he died; he lived at home because he suffered from depression. Melancholy was the likely cause of his suicide, but the fact that he had an established history of depression did not prevent the local Catholic authorities from arresting, torturing, trying, and executing his father for his murder. While the Calas and Abeles cases are not identical, strong and instructive parallels can be drawn. Catholics were still using the accusation of ritual murder by parents of children to strengthen their hold and eradicate dissenting minorities from their society.

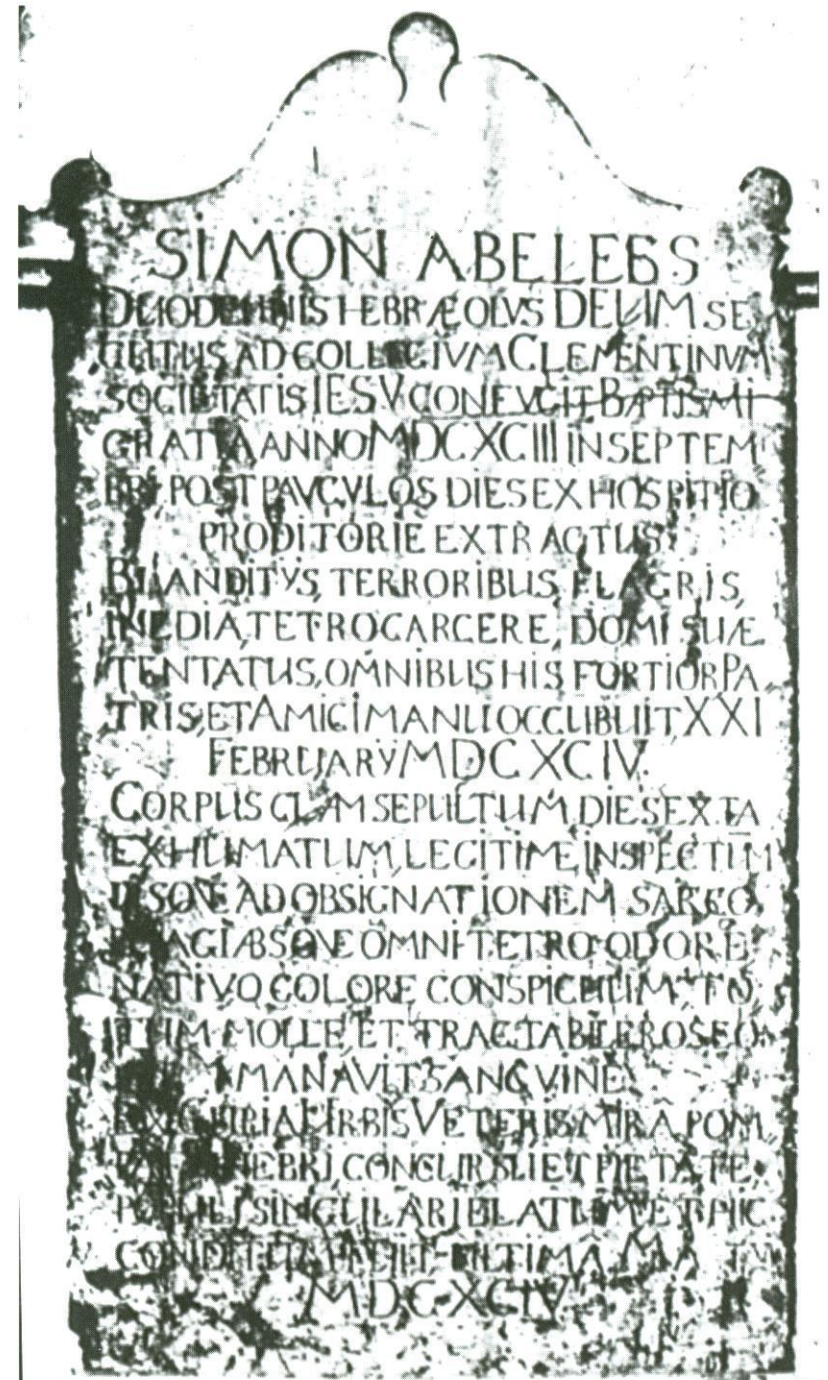
As in the Abeles case, an outsider who was not a family member happened to be in the house at the time of the alleged crime, buttressing the Catholic contention that the act resulted from a Protestant conspiracy. While no neighbors suspected any kind of religious motivation, very leading questions ultimately led most to testify to the Catholic theory. Marc Antoine Calas was buried as a Catholic martyr on consecrated ground despite the fact that no priest had ever given him communion, nor had he ever renounced Protestantism. His converted brother played a critical role in supporting the accusations against the family and portraying himself as a Catholic martyr. Each of these elements paralleled aspects of the Abeles case. But what a difference a few decades and a spirit of enlightenment made. François Marie Arouet of Paris, famously known as Voltaire, took up the cause of the father as an example of the fanatical church overstepping its bounds. Voltaire's campaign led to the posthumous rehabilitation of Calas and the reformation of the entire French legal system. In the case of Lazar Abeles, no such miracles occurred.<sup>104</sup>

Despite all we know about the larger context of Prague Jewry in the late seventeenth century and the abundant specifics of the case in primary sources, we will probably never know what really happened in the Abeles household the night that Simon died. Despite the Yiddish *lid*, I tend to think that if Simon was killed, it was the result of Lazar Abeles' violent temper gone too far. Abeles would have been a fool to premeditate the murder of a child in whom the Jesuits had already evinced an interest. The case took place at a time when many young people from the Jewish quarter converted or showed interest in leaving Judaism. Some continued to maintain ambivalent relationships with their former Jewish families, busi-

102. Johann Florian Hammerschmidt, *Prodromus gloriae Pragenses* (Prague: Wickhart, 1723), p. 30: "Quam historiam fusè describo in mea Historia de Teynensi Ecclesia." Another reference to the case appears on p. 99. I have not seen Hammerschmidt's history of the Teyn church.

103. For a complete account see David D. Bien, *The Calas Affair: Persecution, Toleration and Heresy in Eighteenth Century Toulouse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), esp. pp. 15, 123, 134; Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 273-284.

104. Kisch, "Ex Odio," p. 67, remarks on this parallel.



Tombstone of Simon Abeles in the Church of Our Lady of Tyn, Prague.



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ness partners, and friends. There are no indications that seventeenth-century Jews saw the deliberate murder of their children as a solution to the enticements of the world beyond the Jewish quarter. Yet the converts served as living evidence of the opposite poles of attraction and repulsion between Jews and Christians within seventeenth-century Prague society. While the case surrounding the death of Simon Abeles did not succeed in resurrecting the libel that Jews killed their children "out of hatred for the Christian faith," it surely illuminates an important moment in the history of early modern Prague and seventeenth-century Jewish-Christian relations.

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