Representation and Knowledge in Medieval and Modern Accounts of Jewish Ritual Murder*

Hillel J. Kieval

"Our language can be seen as an old city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of modern sections with straight regular streets and uniform houses."

—L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations.*

Introduction

On 29 March 1899 a nineteen-year-old woman named Anezka Hruzová from the Czech village of Malá Veznice, just outside of Polná, went missing. She recently had taken on work as assistant to a seamstress named Blandina Prchalová and had been in the habit—from early March until her disappearance—of walking every day from her home, along the Brezina forest, to Polná, where her employer had a house adjacent to the Jewish quarter.[1] Although Anezka failed to return home from work on the 29th, it was not until two days later that her mother, Marie, chose to notify the authorities. Marie Hruzová finally visited Polná on Friday, the 31st of March, discovered to her surprise that Anezka had not chosen to stay over in the town, and initiated a rudimentary, and unsuccessful, attempt to find her daughter. Returning home to Malá Veznice, she instructed her son to locate a policeman.

The policeman, with the aid of villagers, searched the Brezina woods for signs of the missing girl, but it was not until the following day—Saturday, April 1st—that they discovered Anezka's body beneath freshly-cut evergreen branches.[2]

The dead woman was found lying face-down on the ground, her bloodied head, wrapped in part of her torn blouse, rested on folded arms. She was naked from the waist down. Preliminary examination revealed numerous wounds around the head, which was spattered with blood, and the hair was completely matted together. Two local doctors (Michálek and Prokes) conducted a postmortem examination the same day. They made note of a large knife wound on the throat running diagonally from right to left and extending to the spinal column. They also found a wound at the nape of the neck caused by a blunt instrument, strangulation marks and numerous smaller stab wounds. Finally, the doctors declared the hymen to be intact, showing no signs of rape.[3] Three days later, a twenty-two-year old, unemployed, journeyman shoemaker—a Jew named Leopold Hilsner—was arrested on suspicion of murder. Although no evidence had been found to link the crime to Hilsner, his generally unsavory personality seems to have been one important factor working against him: he was a barely literate *Luftmensch* who at times exhibited bizarre behavior. Hilsner lived with his widowed mother in the basement floor of a house owned by the Jewish community, next door to the home of the seamstress Prchalová. Apparently Hilsner had also been in the habit of wandering about the Brezina woods; one Polná resident testified to having seen him there on the morning of March 29th, though not on the afternoon in question.

In the ensuing murder investigation and trials (the case eventually was tried twice), the boundary that separated the mundane world of "ordinary" events from the realm of myth and symbol collapsed, captivating in the process the imagination of millions of contemporaries. Press coverage, parliamentary interpolations, ideological tracts and forensic descriptions linked up with a growing discourse on Jewish criminality to reestablish connections to a type of "knowledge" about Jews that had for centuries been considered unfashionable if not downright disreputable. Hilsner's alleged crime was transformed from a simple act of violence to a mysterious cultural enactment, the fulfillment of a compelling religious ritual. The murder of Anezka Hruzová seemed to speak not merely to the danger posed by a particular individual to society, but of a more ominous threat embodied by the entire community of Jews. Remarkably, the Hilsner case constituted just one of a number of highly publicized murder trials against Jews that took place between 1882 and 1914 and which—breaking with nearly three centu-

ries of precedent—reintroduced the charge of Jewish ritual murder to the criminal and legal proceedings of the European state. Other major trials occurred in Tiszaeszlár, Hungary (1882–83), Xanten, in the Prussian Rhineland (1891–92), and Konitz, West Prussia (Poland after 1918; 1900–01). These, in turn, were sandwiched between two trials that took place in the Russian Empire: Kutaisi (1878–79) and Kiev—the famous Beilis affair—(1911–13).[4]

The modern, or "revived" ritual murder trial presents a compelling, if troubling, case for the convergence of myth, irrationality, traditional wisdom and rational discourse in the production of knowledge—as well as excellent material for the analysis of competing systems of knowledge and power in modern society. The events in question also offer a rare perspective on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in post-emancipatory Europe. The bitter confrontations between Jews and their accusers appear to have impinged unexpectedly upon the political and cultural landscape, disrupting the equilibrium of Jewish social and communal life, revealing a significant domain of cultural misunderstanding and suspicion, and calling into question the very premises on which Jewish emancipation had rested: the basic humanity of the Jews, their status as Europeans and the fundamental resemblance of Jews to non-Jews.

The narrative accounts of these affairs necessarily assume a variety of forms—newspaper stories, pamphlets and broadsheets, police investigations, scientific testimony, writs of indictment, etc.—and present a logical puzzle of dizzying dimensions. Individually, they can be said to comprise the perspectives of particular understandings and narrow interests; but in combination (and occasionally alone) they represent *coherent accounts*—what I choose to call the "social knowledge" of the events in question. They constitute what a group understands and remembers about an event, and their symbolic elements and internal, logical processes are designed not only to induce credence in their intended audiences but also to facilitate replication and transmission.[5] Since the trials in question have been understood by some to be "unnatural" intrusions of medieval persecutions and their attendant mental structures on to the domain of the modern and the rational, one inevitably needs to compare the modern accounts of Jewish ritual murder to their medieval precursors. When doing this, one needs to address three basic questions: What is the role of traditional religious knowledge (for example, Christian theology and symbolism) in the modern narratives of ritual murder? Are the modern accounts analogous to medieval versions of the "crime?" Finally, what is *new* about the modern depictions of Jewish criminality, and what might account for this novelty?

Medieval Narratives of Jewish Ritual Murder

England has provided the locus for two of the classic "events" of ritual murder in western Christendom: the death of St. William of Norwich in 1144 and the torture and murder of Young Hugh of Lincoln in 1255. Each episode has enjoyed a pride of place in subsequent historical chronicles in which religious symbols, group myths, communal wisdoms and remembered testimonies are woven together to form coherent and meaningful accounts. These stories, in turn, provide both historical authority and narrative models for the unraveling of future mysteries involving Jewish religious crime. Thomas of Monmouth's *The Life and Passion of St. William the Martyr of Norwich* was begun around 1150 and completed in 1173. Propelled by the need to demonstrate William's status as a saint, Thomas produced a hagiography that reads—in the words of Gavin Langmuir—"like a detective story."[6] The thirteenth-century historian Matthew Paris wrote what would become the dominant narrative account of the ritual murder of Young Hugh of Lincoln. The story is to be found in his *Chronica Majora*; it not only served as one of the major sources for Chaucer's "Prioresses Tale," as well as Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, but also has been employed—virtually without criticism—by modern historians of the period.[7]

For Thomas of Monmouth as well as for Matthew Paris the murders in question reveal themselves to be "Jewish" crimes from the perspectives of structure and symbol. The methods with which they were reported to have been carried out, the stylized ritual which they were said to comprise, suggested religious reenactment. They amounted to child sacrifices modeled on the crucifixion of Jesus. In Paris's description the Passion is replicated in the context of a contemporary conspiracy which conjures up, and ultimately distorts, the imagery of the Gospel accounts:

> They [the Jews of Lincoln] sent to almost all the cities of England where the Jews lived, and summoned some of their sect from each city to be present at a sacrifice to take place at Lincoln; for they had . . . a boy hidden for the purpose of being crucified. In accordance with the summons, a great many of them came to Lincoln, and on assembling, they at once appointed a Jew of Lincoln as judge, to take the place of Pilate, by whose sentence, and with the concurrence of all, the boy was subjected to divers tortures. They beat him till blood flowed and he was quite livid, they crowned him with thorns, derided him, and spat upon him. Moreover, he was pierced by each of them with a wood knife, was made to drink gall, was overwhelmed with approaches and blasphemies, and was repeatedly

called Jesus the false prophet by his tormentors, who surrounded him, grinding and gnashing their teeth. After tormenting him in divers ways, they crucified him, and pierced him to the heart with a lance.[8]

[56]

In this text the Jews seem to perform four distinct functions, including some not traditionally assigned to them. They act as the Roman governor Pilate who pronounces judgment on Jesus; they carry out tortures ascribed in traditional accounts to Roman soldiers; they perform new, though imitative, tortures of their own, for example piercing the body with their own wooden knives, forcing the victim to drink gall and calling him blasphemous names; and, finally, they organize for the purpose of criminal behavior. In other words, they play all of the roles of the traditional drama—with the exception of that of Christ—while they modernize two of them. The innovative behavior of the Jews takes the form of blasphemous revelry mixed with sadism on the one hand, and the propensity to criminal conspiracy on the other. The taunting, shouting, and individual tortures said to have been meted out to Little Hugh may have enjoyed conceptual plausibility as a somewhat distorted parallel to the Gospel accounts of the reactions of onlookers to Jesus' torture and execution, combined with scenes derived from imagined gatherings of heretics and witches. But what rendered plausible the charge of collective criminal conspiracy?

In Thomas of Monmouth's depiction of the death of William, the theme of crucifixion is introduced after the torturing of the victim has already begun:

> And thus, while these enemies of the Christian name were rioting in the spirit of malignity around the boy, some of those present adjudged him to be fixed to a cross in mockery of the Lord's passion, as though they would say, "Even as we condemned the Christ to a shameful death, so let us also condemn the Christian, so that, uniting the Lord and his servant in a like punishment, we may retort upon themselves the pain of that reproach which they impute to us."
>
> Conspiring, therefore, to accomplish the crime of this great and detestable malice, they next laid their bloodstained hands upon the innocent victim, and, having lifted him from the ground and fastened him upon the cross, they vied with one another in their efforts to make an end of him.[9]

The words put into the mouths of the Jews address the question of motive and are crucial to establishing the plausibility of Jewish criminal conspiracy. On an obvious level, they appeal to the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion for historical authority; but a more powerful level of

plausibility is established on psychological, rather than theological or historical, grounds. Jews are impelled to act, collectively, by the need to project on to their religious rivals (and persecutors?) the shame which they, themselves, normally are required to endure—"the pain of that reproach which they impute to us." Punishment as well as blame is misplaced in this psychology of revenge, as the child victim—united with Christ—receives the sentence of a horrible death that, by right, ought to have been the fate of the Jews.

Once the formal reenactment of the crucifixion is underway, the Jews inflict various tortures on the body of their victim, which either replicate or mock what had been done to the body of Jesus during his ordeal—thus the crowning of the head with thorns, the stabbing of the body with knives and the piercing of the heart with a spear. It is also clear from the medieval narratives, however, that the "Jewish" quality of the crimes derives from deliberate embellishments to the original crucifixion narrative. The murders of the two boys are understood to be "Jewish" acts also because of the special cruelty of the killings themselves. In Thomas of Monmouth's case, Jewish sadism comes on the heels of prayer and worship:

> After the singing of the hymns appointed for the day in the synagogue, the chiefs of the Jews assembled in the house of the Jew aforesaid suddenly seized hold of the boy William as he was having his dinner and in no fear of any treachery, and ill-treated him in various horrible ways.[10]

In Matthew Paris' account, the Jews disembowel Young Hugh after he is taken down from the cross "for what reason we do not know, but it was asserted to be for the purpose of practising magical operations."[11]

Gavin Langmuir has argued correctly that the separate theme of ritual cannibalism—specifically the consumption of the blood of the victim—appeared only in continental accounts of Jewish ritual murder, beginning with the Fulda case in 1235.[12] This is not to say that the literary presentations of the English cases do not themselves include involved discussions of "blood." Matthew Paris has the Jews of Lincoln beating Young Hugh "till the blood flowed." They take turns piercing the boy with a knife; dig a spear into his heart; and eventually disembowel the corpse. The Jews of Norwich, according to Thomas of Monmouth, "made the blood come horribly from the wounds they made." During the crucifixion ceremony, they "inflicted a frightful wound in his left side, reaching even to his inmost heart." And finally, "since many streams of blood were running down from all parts of his body, then, to stop the blood and close the wounds, they poured boiling water over him."[13]

Probably the most complex, layered and coherent of the classical accounts of Jewish ritual murder is that which emerged in the wake of the disappearance and death of Simon of Trent in 1475. The humanist physician Giovanni Mattia Tiberino (who himself had examined the corpse of the young boy) created a prose epic about the event—originally as a letter to the Senate of Brescia—which recapitulated the Jewish crime in chilling detail while it singlemindedly propagated Simon's martyrdom.[14] His *Passio beati Simonis pueri Tridentini,* described by R. Po-Chia Hsia as "the most influential piece of antisemitic propaganda surrounding the Trent ritual murder trial," appeared in at least eleven editions between 1475 and 1476 in such places as Rome, Venice, Mantua, Nuremberg, Cologne, Augsburg and Trent. A German edition was published in Trent in 1475, and a Latin poem by Tiberino—"I am the boy Simon"—circulated widely in Italy and in southern Germany.[15]

Tiberino's Latin prose blends New Testament themes, classical tropes and popular notions of Jewish usury with images of almost unspeakable barbarism (including explicit scenes of circumcision-cum-castration). Describing the abduction of Simon and his presentation to the Jews of Trent, Tiberino has the Jews literally yelling in excitement as they anticipate the tasting of Christian blood. The term used, the onomatopoeic "*ululare,*" (probably a reference to the prolonged cries of joy issued by Arab and Mediterranean women in public celebrations) connects Jews to the "barbaric" Orient and marks them off from the Christian West. The barbarity of the Jews, Hsia points out, "consisted not only in bloodthirstiness but also in the very sound of human speech."[16]

The boy's violent death appears, point by point, to shadow the passion of Christ, even if the nonsense words attributed to the Jewish conspirators bestow upon the entire scene unintended humor:

> Extending violently both of his sacred arms, in the manner of the crucifix, others, raising their weapons, sank them hard in the reclining sacred body; then, all gathered around, saying: *tolle Yesse Mina, elle parachies elle pasisen tegmalen,* that is, just as Jesus God of the Christians, who is nothing, we butcher this one, and thus confound our enemies in eternity.

In the actual moment of death, Simon reenacts the movements of Jesus: "lowering his head he gave up his holy spirit to the Lord."[17] Stepping back from the scene, Tiberino adopts the style of his classical hero Virgil and exhorts his readers:

> Behold, Christian faithful, Jesus crucified between thieves. Behold the Jews did this so as to have power over Christians. Glorious Simon, virgin martyr

and innocent, hardly weaned, and whose speech has not reached human eloquence, was extended crosswise by the Jews in contempt of our faith.[18]

The motives attributed to the Jews by Tiberino—to have power over Christians and contempt for the true faith—comprise a simplified amalgam of by now traditional explanations. Though less complex than the picture offered by Thomas of Monmouth, Tiberino's understanding of Jewish motives rests equally on the psychological plane. Jewish ritual murder is revealed to be a fundamentally symbolic, rather than political, act, and the "power" that is thereby demonstrated, a fictive, or imaginary, power. It is the vengeful act of a weak and subdued people, a projection onto the innocent victim of their own sense of shame.

In addition to offering coherent explanations for troubling crimes of violence committed against the family, and especially children, medieval narratives of Jewish ritual murder commented indirectly on important aspects of Christian worship and belief. In particular, they reproduced the experience of sacrifice that occupied a central position both in Christian theology and in the ritual of the mass. As R. Po-Chia Hsia has pointed out, the sacrifice of the ritual murder narrative is, in fact, a double sacrifice in which the Jews, too, end up losing their lives; and both sacrificial elements contain a message of redemption:

> By murdering the Christian family, Jews reenacted the Crucifixion, giving a historical event a salvific immediacy and power that the commemorative mass could not rival; by exposing the "crimes" of the Jews and avenging the "murders," sacrificing the evildoers to the offended deity, the townsfolk celebrated the triumph of Christianity and avenged and vindicated the historical Crucifixion of Jesus. A ritual murder discourse functioned as a form of *imitatio Christi*. Just as the Christian community dispensed justice, so, too, could pious Christians expect divine justice at the end of the world. . . . To German Christians of the late fifteenth century . . . the twin themes of murder-sacrifice and judgment must have represented the essence of the salvific message.[19]

Constructing Ritual Murder around 1900: The Polná Narratives

The medieval narrative accounts that I have considered have all taken the form of official, ex post facto reconstructions, such as chronicles and "histories." They have tended to be definitive in tone, presenting ostensibly unproblematic narratives from the perspective of an omniscient observer. In addition to describing and explaining the murders,

they have tied them to acknowledged structures of theological reasoning, offering the reader object lessons in the Christian rhetoric of salvation as well as emotional and psychological comfort. Modern literary sources, on the other hand, might more properly be classified as narrative fragments, the elements of a discourse that is still in the process of formation. In selecting newspaper accounts, trial transcripts, forensic medical examinations and the like, the modern historian, as it were, freezes the social construction of knowledge, pulling out cross-sections representing individual "voices" and tendentious interpretations.

If one follows the constitutive process forward from its earliest point, one begins to see how, when and under what circumstances the separate ingredients of a coherent system of knowledge are introduced, and how they function rhetorically and psychologically. In the early stages of an event of this kind, one or more narrative strands are formed, possessing their own internal logic and coherence and "determining" to a greater or lesser extent all that one side in a dispute has learned, understood and remembered about the crime. At a certain point in time a modern discourse of Jewish ritual murder emerges whose constitutive elements can be studied in comparison to one another or in the context of the larger narrative. For the Polná case, in which Leopold Hilsner was twice tried and convicted of (ritual) murder, discursive fragments can be found in the early accounts that appeared in the newspapers *Ceské zájmy* (radical nationalist in orientation), *Katolické listy* (Catholic), and *Národní politika* ("Old Czech"). These sources do not readily surrender the local production of knowledge, which occurred largely as oral transmissions and did not always find their way to the printed page. Traces of this "local knowledge" do nevertheless seep into written accounts, usually in the form of what "native informants" have to say about the events in question, but also implicitly as the "state of knowledge" on the scene before journalists and outside politicians have arrived.[20] Synthetic narrative accounts begin to take shape over the course of official investigation(s) and trial(s). The records of these proceedings, including writs of indictment, possess many of the characteristics of the medieval "histories." One might label them the partial knowledge systems, which, taken together, make up modern ritual murder discourse.

Katolické listy, a Prague daily with an antiliberal and anti-Marxist bent, began to report on the murder about ten days after the discovery of the young woman's corpse in the Brezina woods, which lay between the town of Polná and the village of Malá Veznice. What the paper finds interesting about the crime is the combination of "mystery" in which it

seems to be shrouded and the rumors—already rife at the local level—that one was dealing with a case of ritual murder. Already in its opening coverage of the story, on 11 April 1899, *Katolické listy* lays the rhetorical groundwork for a narrative account in which the accusing finger pointed inevitably toward a Jewish culprit. The mystery consists at first of three "facts": although the crime in question appears to have been particularly brutal and although the woman's body has been stripped of much of its clothing, the preliminary investigation has ruled out both robbery and rape as motives for the murder. A purse with four crowns still in it has been found near the crime site, and—here the paper hesitates to go into much detail—no evidence of a sexual assault was found on the body.[21]

Added to the cruelty, violence and apparent absence of conventional motive is the coincidence of timing: Anezka Hruzová was murdered during the week preceding Easter. In a somewhat detached fashion, the paper announced that suspicion locally has fallen on a Jew named Leopold Hilsner, described as an unemployed person who often wandered about in the woods and who claimed to get support from "Social Democrats in Brno."[22] *Katolické listy* does not report on the Polná case again for another five days; but, beginning with its extended coverage of 16 April, it will devote almost an article a day to the case for the next six weeks. (Similar coverage can be also found in *Ceské zájmy*, *Radikální listy*, and *Národní politika*). The story of 16 April adds several new details to the "mystery," each of which will acquire a pride of place in the evolving narrative reconstruction of Anezka's murder. The first involves testimony from the mother of the victim that, although money had not been taken from her daughter, a white rosary with a crucifix attached—which she always carried on her person—was missing. Why would a thief leave behind money but take a rosary and crucifix? The same day's report issued both a new theme and a closely related pictorial image that were to move quickly to the center of all subsequent discourse on the murder. First, it was argued by local observers—including two examining physicians—that significant quantities of blood were missing from both the body of the victim and the general crime scene. Second, while the most important wound on the body—a deep cut to the throat—might easily account for the absence of blood in the corpse itself, it could not explain why only an "insignificant" amount of blood was found in its immediate vicinity. The wound to the throat was said to be long and deep; to demonstrate this point, *Katolické listy*'s Polná correspondent describes the victim as having been *"zakoserovaná"* (kosher-slaughtered)![23]

The final theme introduced in this second report is that of multiple perpetrators. The belief that Leopold Hilsner did not act alone, but rather was aided in his crime by two other "foreign" Jews, appears to have been deduced either from evidence—such as a rope mark on the victim's neck (with which she was choked) or bruises on the arms and legs (indicating that she was held down and prevented from defending herself)—or from the testimony of eyewitnesses, who came forward once the investigation was already well underway.[24] Yet, as with other, ostensibly empirical observations—such as the "absence of blood," the missing rosary and the resemblance of the crime to Jewish ritual slaughtering of animals—the evidence of multiple perpetrators assumes an implicit, rhetorical function in modern ritual murder discourse. Presumably it would have taken at least two or three individuals to immobilize a healthy peasant girl long enough both to perform the "shochet's cut" and to draw off the victim's blood. Moreover, assigning guilt to a group of Jews rather than an individual calls to mind the traditional understanding of collective Jewish responsiblity for ritual murder, in other words, that the criminality in question is communal in nature. Finally, by characterizing the two other perpetrators as both "unknown" and "foreign," the emerging narrative makes unconscious allusion to knowledge that goes back at least as far as the thirteenth century, i.e., that the practice of ritual murder is coordinated by Jews throughout a wide radius.

By the third week in May, *Katolické listy* has sent its legal correspondent to Polná for on-the-spot reporting. He describes in his subsequent dispatches to Prague how he sought out the expertise and opinions of local residents and was given guided tours through the topical landmarks of the crime.[25] The paper had long since abandoned whatever critical distance it appeared to show at the start of its coverage in favor of aligning with generally acccepted, local knowledge of the mystery. In his story of 19 May 1899, the reporter offers the readers of *Katolické listy* a step-by-step reconstruction of Anezka's murder, which he claims to have heard from one of the members of the local judicial commission:

> When Anezka got to the top [of the hill], she began to walk slowly. The murderer grabbed her by the arm or by the throat, threw her down to the overgrowth, where a rope was tossed over her neck to prevent her from crying out. Her clothing was stripped down to her knickers, stockings, and shoes, and there in the thicket—six steps from the path—the act of cutting took place. The wound went from one ear to the other, straight and even above the Adam's apple to the vertebrae: precisely the way in which cattle are (kosher-)slaughtered. Whoever cut the throat of Anezka Hruzová was not performing the act for the first time; he knew what he was doing. The

position of the body pointed downhill, the legs, bent at the knees, tumbled uphill. All of the blood, therefore, must have poured out of Anezka Hruzová. The body when it was found looked like a white scarf, the head resting on the arms. Her face was to the ground. At a quarter to seven people already saw Hilsner in the town below, but the two foreign Yids did not return from Brezina. Perhaps they went to [Golchuv] Jeníkov or to Jihlava.[26]

This dispatch may represent the first relatively complete, imaginative reconstruction of the Polná murder that exists in print. What is remarkable about it is the virtual absence of religious symbolism: there is no stand-in for Jesus, no crucifixion, no mocking of God, no martyrdom. In its place stand raw brutality and an anatomically precise knowledge of animal slaughter. As a meditation on blood, this text—from a Catholic newspaper—has lost all connection to Calvary; sacrifice has been transmuted into slaughter, the altar into the cutting block. Similarly, what characterizes the crime as "Jewish" has little or nothing to do with the religious rivalry between Judaism and Christianity. If the telltale "signs of crucifixion" had identified the medieval murders as "Jewish" affairs, what defines the Polná case as "Jewish" can be reduced to blood and brutality, to the imagined "butcher's cut" of kosher slaughtering. The Jews, themselves, finally, are not religious adversaries; they are Yids.

If journalistic reconstructions constituted the first attempts at coherent narrative in the wake of Polná, Gustav Touzil's sensational booklet *Polná, 29 March 1899* represents the first comprehensive, mass-market portrayal.[27] Records from the Kutná Hora Regional Court identify Touzil as the editor-in-chief of two local newspapers, *Volné Slovo* and *Vesna Kutnohorská.* He had appeared before the court on numerous occasions to answer charges relating to the contents of his papers; in 1895, for example, he was arraigned on separate occasions for having insulted a parliamentary Deputy and for libeling the editor of the Czech national daily, *Národní listy,* Julius Grégr.[28] His booklet on Polná was published to coincide with the close of Hilsner's first trial before the Kutná Hora court. Roughly crafted as a detective story, it inevitably pointed—when all the "evidence" was sifted—to a Jewish ritual crime.

In Touzil's account the three themes of "butcher's cut," absence of blood and multiple perpetrators continue to serve as the rhetorical core that determines the logic and flow of the story. To this logical knot he adds both imaginative detail and dramatic tension, referring repeatedly to on-the-spot reconstructions of the crime by local experts and appealing to the honest sentiments and unshakable convictions of local residents. The reader is invited to revisit the discovery of the corpse, to remark in silence the presence of wounds around the head and neck

of the victim, to wait with breathless anticipation as the body—which had been lying face-down—is carefully turned over, and to join in the collective gasp as the horrendous cut on the neck is revealed. "In that moment," Touzil writes, "suspicion fell away from the Hruza family, and a single breath emanated from the frozen spectators; this was the verdict: This girl has been kosher-slaughtered (*zakoserovanê*)."[29]

All one needs to do, suggests Touzil, is to look and to listen. Look at the evidence gathered at the scene of the crime, at the manner in which the murder was carried out; listen with empathy to the "social knowledge" of the community. In one section of the book, entitled "Where is the Blood?," he marshalls the "scientific" testimony of the examining physicians, the resourcefulness of ad hoc detectives and the "common sense" judgments of local residents to arrive at the only possible conclusion. The reader might well have been skeptical of the doctors' opinion that the amount of blood found on or by the victim was "insignificant." Yet a local hunting guide, Antonín Dvorák [!], painstakingly scoured the area with his two English hounds, Lord and Piks—and found no traces anywhere!

> With this I mean to say that the blood was not hidden away in the woods; also, for what reason would someone somewhere collect blood in a waterproof bottle or skin? In order to bury it somewhere later, or to throw it into the water? The fishermen, however, with the gendarmes and the Prague detectives were unable to find even the smallest traces of blood.[30]

To where, then, did poor Anezka's blood disappear? On this point, Touzil explains, the people of Polná have many particulars and are absolutely convinced. From the simple country bumpkin to the urbanized intellectual, the conclusion is the same: wherever the blood of the murdered girl went, "Leopold Hilsner and his two companions know . . . and this pure, innocent blood cries out to heaven for vengeance."[31] Popular opinion itself is an arbiter of the truth for the populist Touzil, and this opinion—he writes—"calls out now to the Christian world like a resounding bell."[32] .

Touzil's presentation carefully depicts the physical and moral features of the supposedly Jewish characters in the drama and, in so doing, demonstrates the ways in which presumptions of physical and cultural "difference" bolstered modern understandings of Jewish ritual crime. Hilsner is described as a vagrant unable to hold a job, an unsavory character who was known to wander about through the Brezina woods, ingratiating and forward toward women. Witnesses came forward following Anezka's death with compromising reconstructions of past con-

versations. According to one family's account, Anezka had complained to them that Hilsner tried to follow her home from work, that he was always "looking" at her, but that she wanted nothing to do with him. Her mother claimed that Anezka had accused someone of "looking at" and "persecuting" her. Asked by the mother who this person was, she is said to have replied, "He's some ugly Jew . . . a cobbler . . . he scrutinizes [me] a lot, and who knows what he has in mind."[33]

Several weeks into the investigation, at least one witness remembered having seen Hilsner "in the company of two as-yet unknown, foreign young men [literally, "straplings"] at the edge of the Jewish town, running—virtually leaping—toward the foot bridge that leads to the Brezina woods." Hilsner and his two accomplices were said to have had lit cigarettes dangling from their mouths (an image of what, exactly?), and one of the strangers shoved a long, flat package into the inside pocket of his coat. Touzil explains that "it must have contained something long and narrow wrapped in paper."[34]

What did these strangers look like? One of them is described at length. He was

> of medium height, with a full face, Jewish features, and a sparse, black, two-week growth of beard; his face, in other words, looked as though he hadn't shaved for two weeks, and that where there should be a beard it was [just] black. Similarly, under his nose he did not have a fully-grown mustache, but only hair that had not been shaved recently. He was a youngish man, around twenty years old; he was knock-kneed, like bakers used to be [*sic*]; and he hobbled. He was wearing gray clothes and a long gray overcoat with a velvet collar [that went] down to his knees.[35]

The care with which Touzil draws the features of the stranger is admittedly a product of his desire to make the testimony as specific and, hence, credible as possible. But what he has provided in the process is insight into how he, or some of the residents of Polná, imagined a certain type of "Jewishness" to manifest itself. The "Jewish danger" lurked as an unkempt, unshaven, dark stranger, who was simultaneously sinister (black), deformed (hobbled) and effeminate (knock-kneed and unable to grow a beard). The long coat, the unshaven face, even the dangling cigarette, call to mind images of the *Ostjude*. It is possible that the residents of Polná associated Galician or Russo-Polish Jews with criminality; in any event, the descriptions of Hilsner's purported accomplices all emphasize a Jewish, physical distinctiveness tied to vague deformity and an aura of threat. There is a decidedly racial flavor to the Polná narratives that one does not find in traditional, medieval accounts.

The official writ of indictment against Hilsner, which was read aloud on the first day of the trial, represents yet another type of narrative reconstruction of the events of 29 March 1899. Sober, understated, and composed in the sometimes technical idiom of the Austrian legal system, the indictment seeks, first of all, to demonstrate that a crime of aggravated murder has been committed; second, formally to charge Hilsner with the crime; and, last, to lay the legal and rhetorical groundwork for a verdict of guilty. Consequently it is the most careful of the three texts to avoid rumor and speculation and to appear to base itself on the analysis of physical evidence. Its own sense of purpose militates in a way against the narrative form: hence, its reconstruction begins not with the life of Anezka Hruzová, nor with Hilsner and his propensities, but with the summoning of the local police and the discovery of the body. A painstaking description of the scene of the crime is followed by the report of the postmortem examination, a summary of selected eyewitness testimony and a listing of circumstantial evidence, all of which points finally and "conclusively" to the accused.

The indictment nevertheless reinforces the view that Hruzová's death involved a ritual murder. By its very sobriety and "scientific" grounding, it may have contributed more than the popular press toward bolstering this social knowledge. Its interventions are at times subtle and unobtrusive—identifying the knife wound to the throat as the main cause of death; reiterating that the murder was carried out in a particularly "gruesome and malicious" manner; or referring to the fact that beneath the corpse "an insignificant pool of blood about as large as a fist" was found (juxtaposed, admittedly, with descriptions of the victim's hair as being matted in blood and of the probable murder site as being strewn with blood stains).[36] At certain points the indictment pauses to give greater emphasis to such incriminating details. Quoting directly from a supplemental statement of the pathologists, for example, it makes the following assertion:

> Concerning the question posed to us, we declare that we found no signs of sexual assault on the corpse and claim, on the basis of external as well as internal examination, that the body of Anezka Hruzová was nearly completely emptied of blood [*skorem úplne vykrvácen; fast vollständig ausgeblutet*], that the traces of blood found in the vicinity of the corpse did not correspond to the amount of blood, which we certainly might have expected under such circumstances of death.[37]

The doctors Prokes and Michálek add another incriminating "finding" to their implicit case for ritual murder: they comment, "in hindsight," on "the circumstances in which the cut to the neck was carried out."

> We hold with certainty that the cut on the murder victim was made with her face pointing toward the ground; otherwise, if the cut had been carried out [with the body] face-up, the surrounding area and shrubbery would have to have been sprayed on all sides with a powerful stream of blood, which we did not find upon examination of the site. The place that was sprayed with blood was small and of limited dimension.[38]

Thus the indictment, grounded ostensibly in dispassionate observation and scientific authority, establishes an indelible link between the site of Anezka Hruzová's death and popular constructions of Jewish ritual murder. Its rhetorical power rests in its own medico-legal narrative technique, which omits at the outset references to causality, agency and motive (so central to traditional accounts of such crimes) in favor of a description of the "evidence." The matter-of-fact tone of the description, reproduced verbatim from the doctors' testimony, guides the reader (or listener) to certain inescapable conclusions. It is also noteworthy that the images conjured up in these reports correspond, ultimately, to the crassest of anti-Jewish stereotypes as reproduced, for example, in *Katolické listy*. One is led to accept the likelihood of a ritual killing on the strength of two hoary images: a body mysteriously "drained" of blood; and a slaughter conducted not only in such a way as to capture the victim's blood, but also in accordance with the butchering of animals. All this derived from forensic medicine.

Conclusion

In all ritual murder narratives Jews stand beyond the bounds of civilization. Whether they take pleasure in inflicting physical torture on innocent boys, bind the feet and slit the throats of young women, or cluck gutturally at the prospect of human blood, they embody barbarism if not monstrosity. Whereas medieval narratives tend to attribute this lack of humanity to psychological compulsion and religious guilt, the modern narratives seem content to let the mystery stand alone. Constructed along the lines of crime novels, they prefer not to speculate on motive: Jews are, or Jews do; the "facts" speak for themselves, even if the reasons are obscure. In consonance with the inductive methods of the social sciences, it is enough to reveal the "methods" of the crime, to eliminate alternative explanations, and the social knowledge of the community can provide the necessary conclusions.

It is worth noting that the medieval accounts, steeped as they are in a theological background, display some of the same elements of brutality, cruelty and barbarism that are held to be "Jewish" characteristics

in the modern proceedings. Similarly, traditional religious motifs are to be found in modern accounts. These, however, come principally in the form of hints, clues or inferences—the timing of the crime, a missing rosary, the distraught mother as a reflection of Mary—the barely audible echoes of a once-powerful tale. One finds no reference to Jesus or to the Crucifixion (for Touzil the main biblical allusion is to Cain!); nor is there anything approaching a redemptive hope or salvific message in the Polná ritual murder narratives.

What makes the Polná accounts "modern," however, is not so much what is left out as it is the logic of their organization and the authority to which they appeal. This is obviously the case in the writ of indictment, but even Touzil's booklet stands out in this regard: he organizes his account as a "scientific" expedition, a hunt for facts and clues; and he bases his case on appeals to the senses, the resourcefulness of *ad hoc* detectives, the common sense judgments of local residents, and, of course, "science"—the hallmarks, one might say, of modern sensibility and taste.

Finally, there is in the modern rendition of Jewish ritual murder a note of despair, bordering on nihilism, that stands in contrast to its general tenor of self-congratulation. Motive remains the weak link in the whole chain of argument, and in the end, in the absence of compelling theological symbols, it is unclear why Jews should murder and collect the blood of their victims. Moreover, there is little indication that "knowing" this secret about the Jews and acting on the knowledge does much for the community at large beyond "solving" a local crime. Hilsner is guilty because the reconstruction posited by conventional wisdom is "plausible"; and since one can demonstrate Hilsner's guilt, the "mystery" behind Anezka's murder is removed. But what is left? The crucifixion and the redemptive message of Calvary have been squeezed out by grotesque violence and acts of animal slaughter. Only ghostly references to religious culture remain. In their place stands what appears to be a not quite coherent racial code, a secular cautionary tale, that fails to console.

Notes

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1 For analyses of the Polná case, see: Artur Nussbaum, *Der Polnaer Ritualmordprozess: Eine*

kriminalpsychologische Untersuchung auf aktenmässiger Grundlage (Berlin, 1906); Georg R. Schroubek, "Der 'Ritualmord' von Polná: Traditioneller und moderner Wahnglaube," in *Antisemitismus und jüdische Geschichte* (Berlin, 1987), 149–71; and Frantisek Cervinka, "The Hilsner Affair," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 13 (1968): 142–57; repr. in Alan Dundes, ed., *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (Madison, 1991), 135–61.

2 Indictment against Hilsner, in *Prelícení s Hilsnerem pred porotou v Kutné Hore pro vrazdu v Polné* [The Jury Trial against Hilsner in Kutná Hora for the Murder in Polná] (Prague, 1899), 6–48; German translation in Maximilian Paul-Schiff, *Der Prozess Hilsner: Aktenauszug* (Vienna, 1908), 11–27; see also Nussbaum, Appendix 1: "Tatbestandsaufnahme vom 1. April 1899," 212–14.

3 "Sektions-Protokoll vom 1. April 1899," in Nussbaum, 216–19; for Nussbaum's analysis, ibid., 68–90. As reproduced in the writ of indictment, see *Prelícení*, 11–22; and Paul-Schiff, 12–17.

4 On the ritual murder accusation generally, see: Daniil Khvol'son, *Die Blutanklage und sonstige mittelalterliche Beschuldigungen der Juden: Eine historische Untersuchung nach den Quellen* (Frankfurt a. M., 1901), and Hermann L. Strack, *Das Blut im Glauben und Aberglauben der Menschheit mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der "Volksmedizin" und des "jüdischen Blutritus"*, 8th ed. (Munich, 1900) [Trans. as *The Jew and Human Sacrifice*]. For the accusation in its medieval context, see Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley, 1990): Chap. 9, "Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder," 209–36; Chap. 10, "The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln," 237–62; Chap. 11, "Ritual Cannibalism," 263–81; and Chap. 12, "Historiographic Crucifixion," 282–98.

There is no comprehensive study to date of the modern ritual murder trial, though monographs and article-length studies have been published for individual cases. The reader will be directed below to those pertaining mainly to the Hilsner Affair (Polná, 1899–1900).

5 My use of the term "social knowledge" stems from the point of view that what an individual or group understands and remembers about an event (particularly one that has been designated a "mystery") results from knowledge that is produced and transmitted in social settings. Such "knowledge" differs from both empirical observation and received tradition, though the two can serve as ingredients in its production. At the same time, the very concept of "social knowledge" calls into question the possibility of capturing either observed fact or received tradition that is unmediated by interpretation or lines of social communication.

I am indebted to recent work in both the sociology of knowledge and cultural anthropology. I tend to part company, however, with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (*The Social Construction*

of Reality [New York, 1966]) to the extent that they subordinate socially constructed knowledge to the *mechanisms* and institutional contexts of its distribution. I believe that my thinking on this subject is more closely attuned to that of Clifford Geertz, who writes that the true task of the sociology of knowledge "is a matter of conceiving of cognition, emotion, motivation, perception, imagination, memory . . . whatever, as themselves, and directly, social affairs." That is, "to analyze symbol use as social action. . . . To do so is to attempt to navigate the plural/unific, product/process paradox by regarding the community as the shop in which thoughts are constructed and deconstructed, history the terrain they seize and surrender, and to attend therefore to such muscular matters as the representation of authority, the marking of boundaries, the rhetoric of persuasion, the expression of commitment, and the registering of dissent." See "The Way We Think Now: Ethnography of Modern Thought," in Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York, 1983), 153.

6 Gavin Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder," 209. See the English translation by Augustus Jessop and Montague Rhodes James: Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich* (Cambridge, 1896).

7 Matthew Paris, *English History From the Year 1235 to 1273.* vol. III. Trans. by J. A. Giles (London, 1854), 138–41. For a critical appraisal of the work of Paris, see Langmuir, "The Knight's Tale," *passim.*

8 Matthew Paris, 138; a slightly different translation is offered by Joseph Jacobs, "Little St. Hugh of Lincoln: Researches in History, Archaeology, and Legend," in Jacobs, *Jewish Ideals and Other Essays* (New York, 1896), 193–95 (repr. in Dundes, 43–45).

9 Thomas of Monmouth, 21.

10 The acts of torture on William were said to have included the following:

> While some of them held him behind, others opened his mouth and introduced an instrument of torture which is called a teazle, and, fixing it by straps through both jaws to the back of his neck, they fastened it with a knot as tightly as it could be drawn. After that, taking a short piece of rope of about the thickness of one's little finger, and tying three knots in it at certain distances marked out, they bound round the innocent head with it from the forehead to the back, forcing the middle knot into his forehead and the two others into his temples, the two ends of the rope being most tightly stretched at the back of his head and fastened in a very tight knot. The ends of the rope were then passed round his neck and carried round his throat under his chin, and there they finished off this dreadful engine of torture in a fifth knot.
>
> But not even yet could the cruelty of the torturers be satisfied without adding even more severe

pains. Having shaved the head, they stabbed it with countless thorn-points, and made the blood come horribly from the wounds they made." (Thomas of Monmouth, 20–21.)

11 Matthew Paris, 139.

12 See Langmuir, "The Knight's Tale," 240; and "Ritual Cannibalism," *passim.*

13 Matthew Paris, 138; Thomas of Monmouth, 21–22.

14 R. Po-Chia Hsia offers an extended analysis of Tiberino's account in his recent book *Trent 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder* (New Haven, 1992), 53–60.

15 Hsia, 56.

16 Ibid., 54.

17 Tiberino, as quoted in Hsia, 55.

18 Ibid.

19 R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven, 1988), 41.

20 I have attempted to reconstruct the local production of knowledge of Jewish ritual murder in my article "Antisémitisme ou savoir social? Sur la genèse du procès moderne pour meurtre rituel," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 49, no. 5 (1994).

21 *Katolické listy,* 11 April 1899, 5.

22 Ibid.

23 *Katolické listy,* 16 April 1899, 6. On 26 May its readers were offered "intimate details" about the family of "the unfortunate Anezka Hruzová, murdered by means of kosher slaughtering (*koserácky m zpusobem zavrazdenê*)." See *Katolické listy,* 26 May 1899, 4.

24 Ibid. On 20 May 1899, the reporter for *Katolické listy* told of one witness who claimed to have seen Hilsner and "two foreign Jews" leaving the building of the German-Jewish school shortly before the murder was thought to have been committed.

25 See *Katolické listy* for 16, 19, 20, 21, 24, and 25 May 1899.

26 *Katolické listy,* 19 May 1899, 5.

27 The complete title was Gustav Touzil *Polná 29.3.1899: Popis vrazdy Anezky Hruzové a sensacního processu s Hilsnerem pred porotou Kutnohorskou* [Polná, 29 March 1899: A Description of the Murder of Anezka Hruzová and of the Sensational Trial of Hilsner Before the Kutná Hora Jury] (Kutná Hora, n.d. [probably September 1899]).

28 Státní oblastní archiv, Praha. *Katalog, KS Kutná Hora (1850–1897/98).*

29 Touzil, 19.

30 Ibid., 26.

31 Ibid., 26–27.

32 Ibid., 78.

33 Ibid., 38–39.

34 Ibid., 54–55.

35 Ibid., 55–56. The importance of the description warrants its reproduction in the original Czech:

byl prostrední postavy, v obliceji plny, zidovského vyrazu a mel "vyrazeny" cerny plnovous asi jen tak 14denní, vypadal teda tak v obliceji, jako by byl asi 14 dní neholen a ta místa, kde byl vous, vypadala cerná. Také pod nosem nemel zádného vyrostlého kníru, nybrz jen nedávno rezany vous. Byl to clovek mladsí, kolem 20 let stárí; nohy mel trochu ohutné v kolenech k sobe do x, jak mívají pekari a krok mel pajdavy. Saty

mel sedé, totiz dlouhy az po kolena svrchník sedavy, se sametovym límcem, nezapjaty.

36 *Prelícení*, 13–14, 20–22; Paul-Schiff, 13, 16.
37 *Prelícení*, 22; Paul-Schiff, 16.
38 *Prelícení*, 22; Paul-Schiff, 16–17.